Examination of the Emergency Response and the Crisis Response within the National Resilience System

Please note: the Institute has used the May 2025 *National Resilience System Handbook* as the primary document for explaining how the National Resilience System works. DPMC advises that the *Handbook* is intended to be a living document and will be updated on a six-monthly basis.

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1.0 Introduction

In April 2025, NEMA published a discussion document, *Strengthening New Zealand's emergency management legislation.* Hon Mark Mitchell outlined his ambition for the proposed legislative changes to include:

- making it clear who has control in an emergency, resulting in faster decisions made by the right people

- enabling better cooperation with iwi Māori, businesses and communities

- having lifeline utilities and other agencies plan and work together more effectively, reducing disruption to essential services

- better consideration of the things that matter to people, including animals, taonga, and other cultural heritage.

The Institute made a submission in response to the April discussion paper. We have developed a series of papers, which aims to further contribute to the dialogue on how to improve our ability to withstand the impacts of emergencies and crises.

The emergency management system in Aotearoa New Zealand is set out within various legislative and policy instruments. Primarily these lead back to the National Emergency Management Agency (NEMA). NEMA is a departmental agency that operates autonomously. It has its own chief executive and is currently hosted by the Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet (DPMC). The hosting responsibilities for NEMA will transfer from the DPMC to the Department of Internal Affairs (DIA) from 25 September 2025.[1] NEMA undertakes preparatory, mitigative and responsive functions within the current system, whereas DPMC coordinates crisis responses.

The current settings are a useful launching point – but as we move towards a more uncertain world, we should take every opportunity to reflect on, review, refine, and reshape our emergency management settings. At the time of writing, the Minister for Emergency Management and Recovery is undertaking a review of the current settings, which the Institute welcomes. It remains to be seen how this will pan out and the Institute is keen to track progress.

This paper intends to offer a descriptive analysis of the existing National Resilience System, which provides oversight over the two different types of responses: the emergency response arrangements and the crisis response arrangements. Importantly there is no hierarchy and responses tend to evolve organically as the need arises.

Cabinet has recently agreed to a new Bill, titled the Emergency Management Bill. It has currently been sent to the Parliamentary Counsel Office (PCO) for drafting and will replace the Civil Defence Emergency Management Act 2002.[2]

1.1   Purpose

The aim of this paper is to describe how New Zealand responds to emergencies and crises. It is part of a series that explores risk and uncertainty. The full set of papers is as follows:

1. *Working Paper 2025/13 – The Language of When Things Go Wrong: Exploring how the terms 'emergency' and 'crisis' are used in legislation*

2. *Working Paper 2025/14 – Examination of the Emergency Response and the Crisis Response within the National Resilience System* (this paper)

3. *Discussion Paper 2025/02 – How to Tell the Difference Between an Emergency and a Crisis and Why it Matters*

1.2   Why is this important?

Emergencies and crises are increasing in number and scale and are becoming increasingly interconnected.[3] See Figures 1 and 2 below.

Figure 1: States of emergency declared per annum (local and national), 2002–2025

Source: McGuinness Institute, *Nation Dates,* 5th edition, December 2023[4]
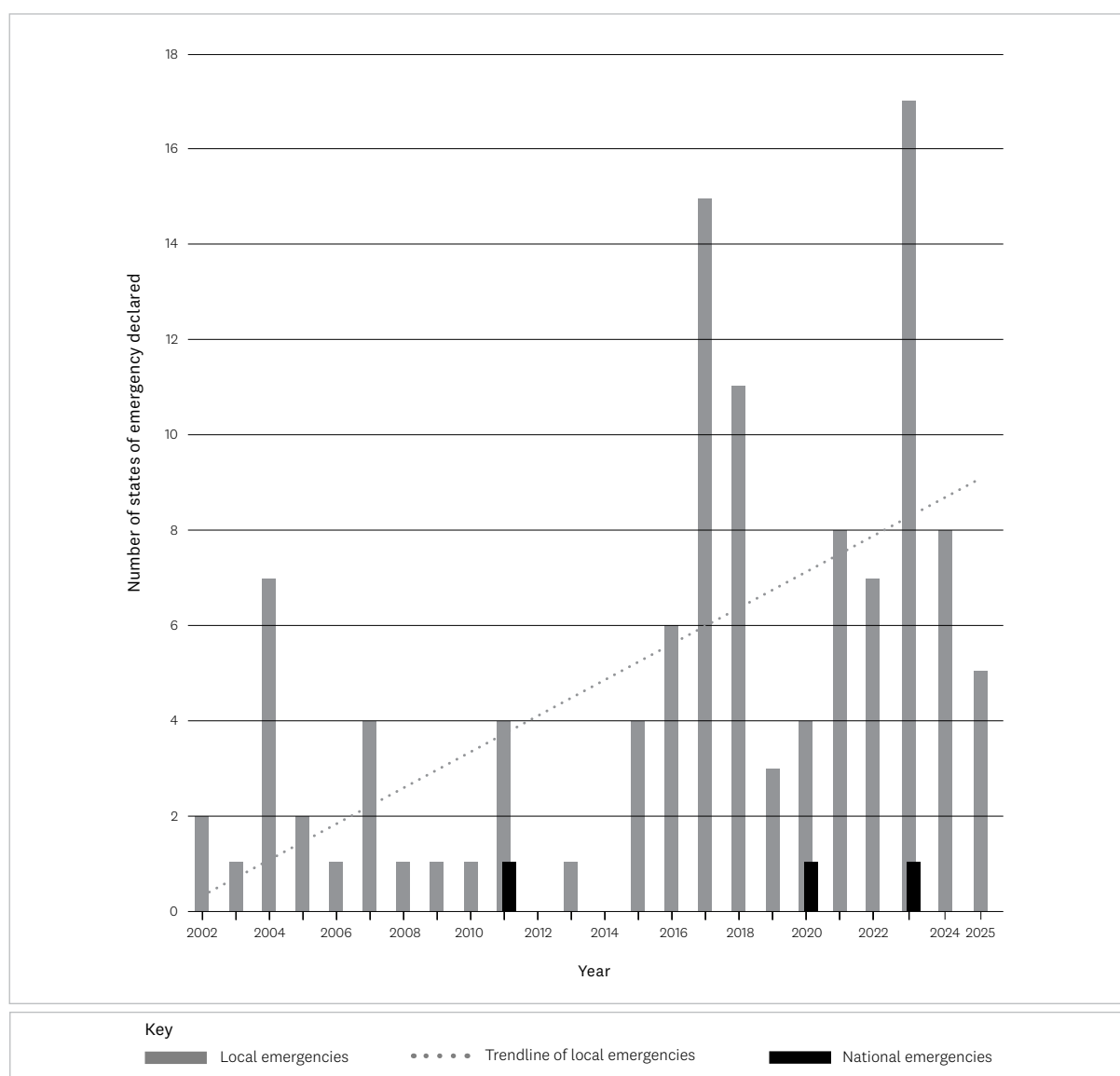
Figure 2: Illustrating the fragility of an interconnected system during Cyclone Gabrielle

Source: DIA, *Report of the Government Inquiry into the Response to the North Island Severe Weather Events*, March 2024[5]
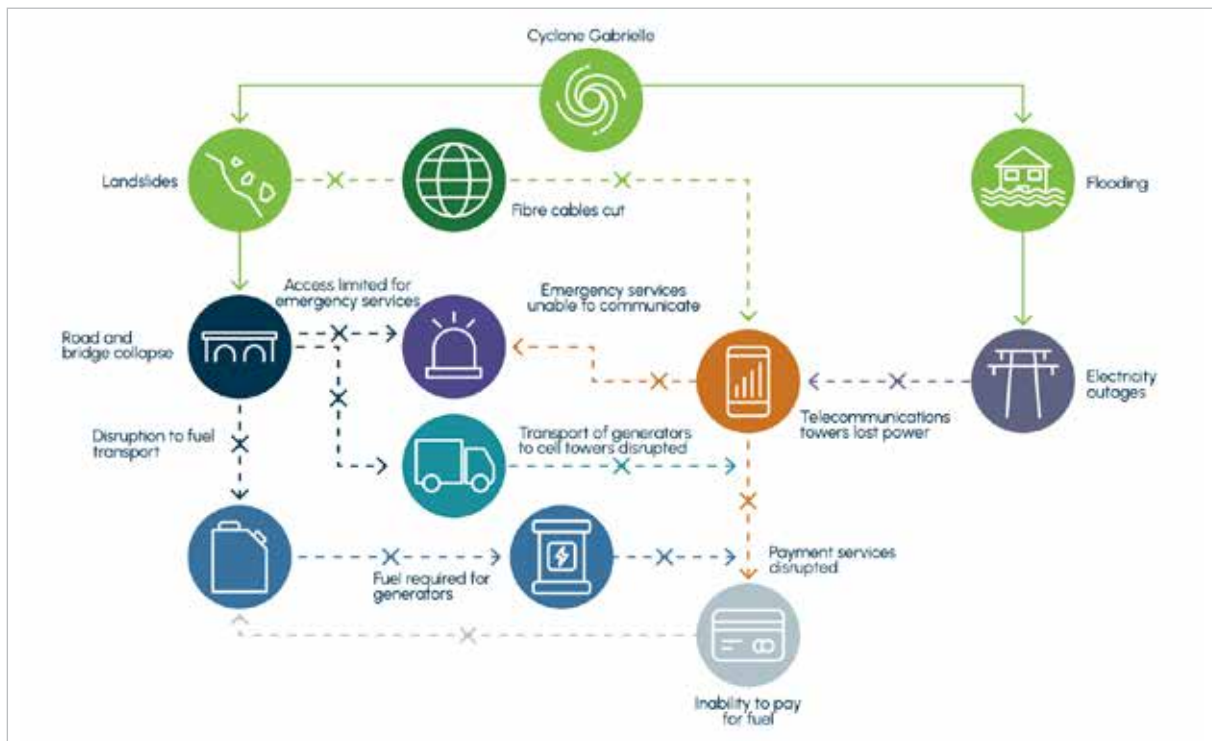
2.0 The National Resilience System

Below is a brief overview of the institutions and frameworks discussed in this paper.

As shown in Figure 3 below, the National Resilience System comprises the various systems that need to function collectively to improve resilience to our most serious hazards and threats, under the strategic leadership and stewardship of the Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet. The system covers national security, hazards, strategic crisis management and emergency management.[6]

Figure 3: National Resilience System

Source: DPMC, *National Resilience System Handbook*, May 2025[7]

2.1   Two key institutions

There are two primary bodies that engage with the National Resilience System.

1. DPMC, the Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet, deals with some aspects of emergency management, as well as focusing on crisis management. DPMC manages the National Hazards System, the National Security System and the Officials' Committee for Domestic and External Security Coordination (the ODESC system), shown in Figure 3 above.

2. NEMA is the National Emergency Management Agency and is a departmental agency hosted by DPMC, as explained on page 5. NEMA leads the Emergency Management System, which supports the Director of Civil Defence Emergency Management (CDEM) and the Minister for Emergency Management and Recovery to carry out their functions and powers under the CDEM Act.[8]

It is important to note that while we have identified these two as the primary agencies, the management frameworks (as will be shown) empower lead agencies to act in specific situations.

2.2   Three key frameworks

There are various documents that fit into the different systems which govern the policy around crisis, emergency and incident response in Aotearoa New Zealand. It is important to note that the frameworks and processes are not a one-size-fits-all approach but are instead designed to be adapted and applied to the specific context and nature of the situation being addressed. For the purposes of this paper, three frameworks are discussed.

The legislative framework

The Civil Defence Emergency Management Act 2002 and its associated secondary legislation is the authoritative source of mandate that establishes the processes and bodies relevant to the system. The most important of these is the National Civil Defence Emergency Management Plan Order 2015.

Figure 4: Key legislation
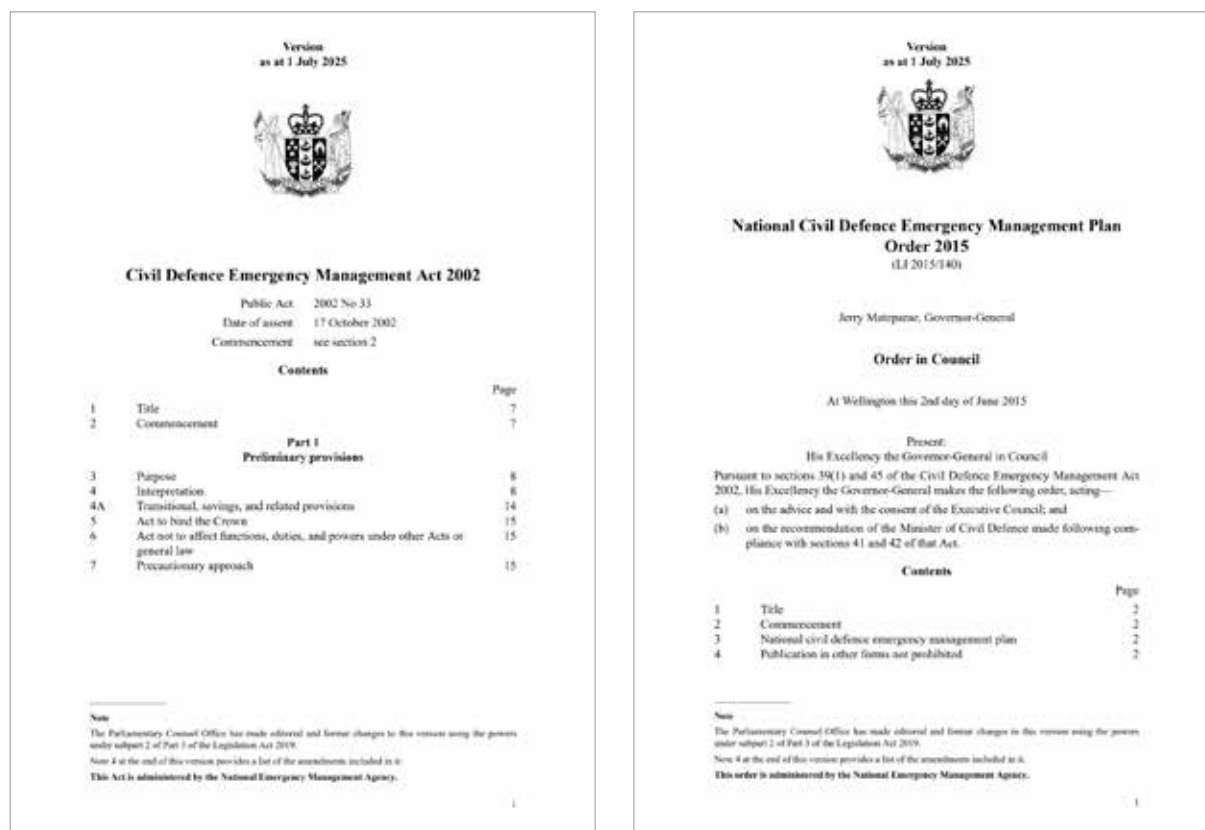
The National Resilience System (NRS) framework

The *National Resilience System Handbook* is published and prepared by DPMC and explains the governance processes that take place when a crisis arises. It includes a discussion on how the ODESC system operates in practice. See Section 4.0.

The Coordinated Incident Management System (CIMS) framework

The aim of the CIMS framework is to put in place an effective coordinated incident management system.

This version of CIMS is the result of a collaborative effort by New Zealand emergency management agencies and is endorsed and published by the Officials' Committee for Domestic and External Security Coordination (ODESC). The current version of CIMS was overseen by the CIMS Steering Group, chaired by the Ministry of Civil Defence and Emergency Management, and included 17 other agencies that were represented on the CIMS Steering Group at the time of publication.[9] See Section 3.0 for more detail.

2.3 Two assessment processes

There are two separate processes – considerations of whether an emergency exists (or not) and whether a crisis exists (or not). Figure 5 illustrates what happens in theory and Figure 6 illustrates how the system operates in practice (using the COVID-19 pandemic as an example). Note that each event or circumstance will result in its own unique profile, as no two situations will be the same.

We note that these diagrams represent the Institute's view of the current system and hope to further clarify this in the paper's final form.

Figure 5: Overview of how a response to a new or emerging event or circumstance is considered under New Zealand's National Resilience System

Source: Adapted from DPMC, *National Resilience System Handbook*, May 2025, and DPMC's website[10,11,12]
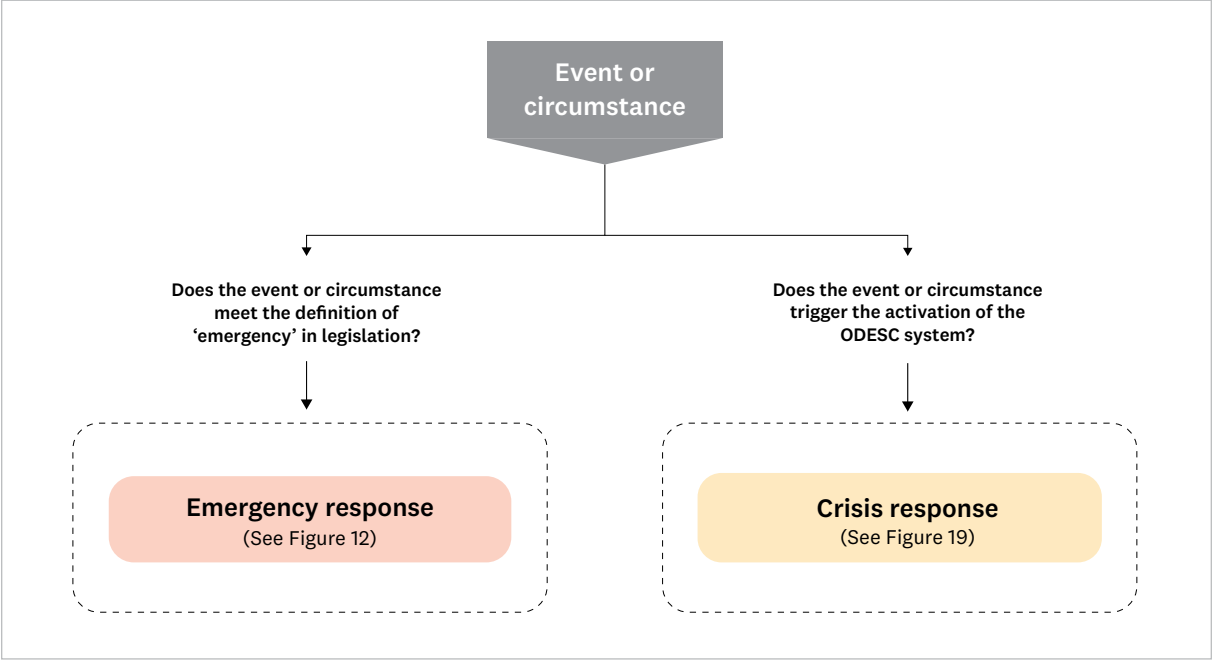
Figure 6: Emergency and crisis responses to the COVID-19 pandemic

Source: McGuinness Institute, *COVID-19 Nation Dates,* 2nd edition, September 2024[13]

Emergency response	Crisis response

1 Jan 2020

23 Jan 2020
Chair of ODESC briefed on system readiness and risks for managing a potential pandemic.

27 Jan 2020
DPMC activates the National Security System. A Watch Group meets for the first time.

31 Jan 2020
ODESC meets for the first time, MOH confirmed to be lead agency.

6 Mar 2020
ODESC Chair directs NEMA to activate National Crisis Management Centre.

11 Mar 2020
The Quin established to lead all-of-government response, MOH no longer fulfils the lead agency role.

25 Mar 2020
State of National Emergency declared. Director of Civil Defence Emergency Management fulfils the role of National Controller.

Apr 2020
ODESC stops meeting regularly; it did occasionally meet in the second half of 2020 to discuss specific concerns.

13 May 2020
State of National Emergency expires.

30 Jun 2020
National Crisis Management Centre deactivated.

1 Jul 2020
COVID-19 Group established within DPMC to coordinate, and where necessary lead, the all-of-government response. This replaces the Quin and the National Crisis Management Centre.

1 Aug 2022
Responsibilities begin to transition away from an all-of-government response, COVID-19 groups' functions begin to be transferred back to health sector.

29 Mar 2023
COVID-19 Group disestablished, functions fully transferred to the health system.

3.0 The CIMS framework

The National Civil Defence Emergency Management Plan Order 2015 notes that responses to emergencies are based on the CIMS framework:

> The purpose of the CIMS is to achieve effective co-ordinated incident management across responding agencies by—
>
> (a) establishing common structures, functions, and terminology to be used by agencies in incident management, yet within a framework that is flexible, modular, and scalable so that it can be tailored to circumstances specific to any level or type of incident; and
>
> (b) enabling agencies to develop their own processes, procedures, and training for the execution of the CIMS.

The CIMS framework is published in the CIMS publication dated August 2019 (see Figure 7 below). It traverses topics from the foundations of CIMS, supporting protocols and systems, CIMS functions, application of CIMS, and various other information about CIMS in the broader system.[14] This section discusses some key parts of the guidance it contains, leaving the escalation parts to later in the paper.

The publication resembles similar documents in comparable jurisdictions, and aims, on the whole, to describe:

> how New Zealand agencies and organisations use the CIMS framework to manage incident responses of any scale, the respective functions of the response structure, the levels of response and the relationships between them, and how such a response can be structured at each level.[15]

Figure 7: Coordinated Incident Management System (CIMS)

Source: NEMA, *Coordinated Incident Management System (CIMS)*, August 2019[16]
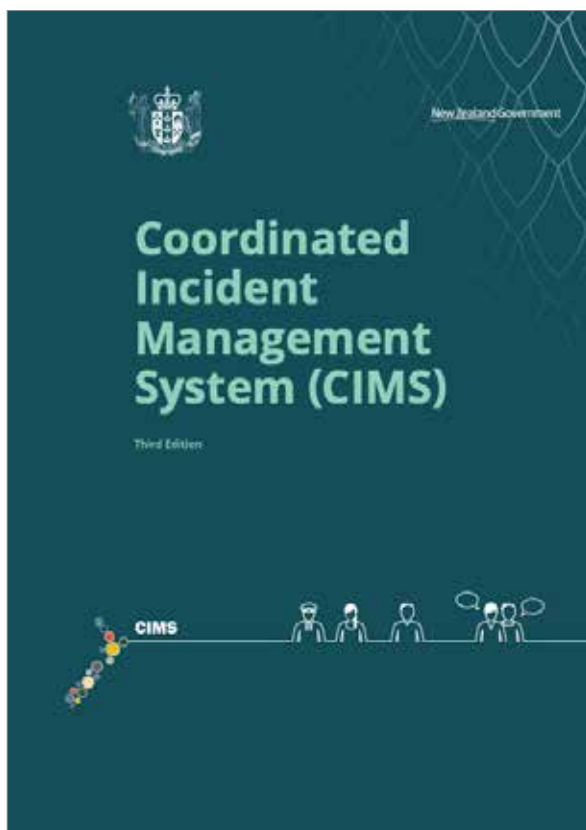
CIMS' purpose is to enable effective cross-organisation responses through establishing common 'structures, functions and terminology' in a flexible framework to allow for changing circumstances, and provide frameworks to organisations for agency-specific response development.[17] It lists examples of incidents in which CIMS is engaged, including biosecurity incursion, environmental damage, missing persons (Search and Rescue [SAR]), fire, food safety, mass maritime arrivals, business continuity disruption, pandemic, public disorder, transportation, crime and terrorism, and technological failure. This is a broad ambit.

With regard to the 4Rs of emergency management (reduction, readiness, response and recovery), CIMS focuses on response but is also relevant to readiness and recovery. All CIMS-based responses apply the principles:

- Responsive to community needs | Urupare ki ngā hiahia hapori

- Flexibility | Ngāwaritanga

- Unity of effort | Mahi ngātahi.

And the following characteristics define CIMS:

- Common structures, roles and responsibilities

- Common terminology

- Interoperability

- Management by objectives (see the CIMS publication for a list of objectives)

- Consolidated planning

- Integrated information management and communications

- Coordination of resources

- Designated response facilities and locations

- Manageable span of control.

The document also goes into the roles of lead and support agencies, and the processes for engaging iwi and Māori. It specifies the relationship between command (vertical application of authority within a team or unity) and control (authority applying horizontally across teams). Other policy settings include Unified Control and recovery responses.

The document describes an incident management structure, including how to establish the appropriate structure during an emergency situation; put in place an incident management team; and set up incident management facilities (Coordination Centres) at various levels.

Figure 8: How CIMS distinguishes between response levels

Source: NEMA, *Coordinated Incident Management System (CIMS)*, August 2019[18]

Response Level	Description
National	Includes national organisations' Coordination Centres and headquarters, and national level sector coordinating entities and clusters. Coordinated from National Coordination Centres (NCC).
Regional	Includes Civil Defence Emergency Management (CDEM) Groups, District Health Boards (DHBs), inter-regional DHB coordination, police districts, fire regions and regional organisation offices. Coordinated from Emergency Coordination Centres (ECC).
Local	Includes local authorities, DHBs and organisation offices at the local (district/city) level. Coordinated from Emergency Operations Centres (EOC).
Incident	The first level of official response. It includes first responders. Coordinated from Incident Control Points (ICP).
Community	The public, including individuals, families/whānau, community groups and businesses that participate in the response.

The CIMS publication states:

The National Security System [now the National Resilience System] is activated by the Government for events that are nationally significant, or complex enough, to demand a coordinated strategic approach at the national level. The National Security System is part of Governance arrangements at the national level. While the National Security System understands the CIMS structure, it does not form part of the CIMS response levels and can be activated without CIMS. It is discussed in more detail in Appendix D.

The National Crisis Management Centre (NCMC) is a facility used to support the National Security System in the coordination of all-of-government responses. National agencies may also use the NCMC as their NCC in a combined or individual manner.[19]

Notably, the CIMS and NSS (now NRS) systems are separate. Inevitably there is a link between them but it is nuanced. This will be discussed in more detail below.

The CIMS publication has a dedicated section on incident classification and clear parameters for identifying incidents. The document records that 'the classification of an incident provides organisations with a common language with which to communicate the complexity and severity of an incident and the likely level of response required to manage it'.

There are two useful tables which outline the actual incident classifications and the descriptors:

Figure 9: Incident classifications

Source: NEMA, *Coordinated Incident Management System (CIMS)*, August 2019[20]

		Severity			
		1 Minor	2 Moderate	3 Major	4 Severe
Response level	National (N)	N1 A minor national level response	N2 A moderate national level response	N3 A major national level response	N4 A severe national level response
	Regional (R)	R1 A minor regional level response	R2 A moderate regional level response	R3 A major regional level response	R4 A severe regional level response
	Local (L)	L1 A minor local level response	L2 A moderate local level response	L3 A major local level response	L4 A severe local level response
	Incident (In)	In1 A minor incident level response	In2 A moderate incident level response	In3 A major incident level response	In4 A severe incident level response

		Severity			
	Examples of aspects to be considered	1 Minor	2 Moderate	3 Major	4 Severe
Category – Consequences/ impacts	Health and life, infrastructure, culture, community, Treaty obligations, reputation, trade, economy, environment, shelter and accommodation, recovery	A small number of the population in the area are / would be / could be impacted	Some of the population in the area are / would be / could be impacted	Many of the population in the area are / would be / could be impacted	A majority of the population in the area are / would be / could be impacted
Resources	Capacity and capability to manage (e.g. availability of technical expertise and resources, responders) and finances available	Manageable within available resource and capacity	Requires some allocation of resource	Resource limits and capacity are full	Resource limits and capacity are exceeded
Public, political and media interest	Degree of expected public, political and media interest (i.e. local interest only, through to global interest), and at what level it should be managed	Minimal to no interest Routinely managed	Some degree of interest Senior leadership and executives are engaged	Significant degree of interest Elected officials and ministers are engaged	Global interest Elected officials and ministers are engaged
Response and recovery characteristics	Containment, stability, location, spread, number of entities involved, urgency, novelty (e.g. a new event, agencies working with unfamiliar partners etc.), disruption, decisions required, timeframe / expected duration, cost	Familiar/routine/ predictable Known solutions to familiar/routine/ predictable problems	Mostly familiar/routine/ predictable with some degree of irregularity Known solutions to known but irregular problems	Mostly irregular with some degree of familiarity and predictability Mostly known solutions to irregular and possibly unknown problems	Unfamiliar/ unprecedented/ unpredictable Unknown solutions to unknown problems

The CIMS publication then goes on to explain the process in more detail. The Controller determines an incident classification, and this classification is then communicated to all responders and support agencies. If responses need to escalate or de-escalate, a record is made. The document acknowledges the need for flexibility and that there are inevitably grey areas in what is ultimately just a guide. It records that at a governance level, 'in a large response or for a complex incident, the National Security System may be activated to coordinate the highest level of oversight'.

Figure 11 overleaf outlines layers and roles of governance, including political and senior management spheres.

Importantly, CIMS is considered the primary framework for coordinating the emergency response[22] (see Section 4.0 for more detail on the emergency response arrangements).

Figure 11: Layers of governance

Source: NEMA, *Coordinated Incident Management System (CIMS)*, August 2019[23]

Governance Layer	Who (e.g.)	Role
Political	Ministers, mayors, chairs, councillors, CDEM Group Joint Committees	• Communicates and influences the strategic direction outside the operational response at a national, regional or local level. May act as spokesperson. • Executes legislative authority (e.g. declaring a state of emergency). • As elected officials, may be held accountable by communities for the overall response outcomes.
Senior Management	Controller's immediate superiors, higher commanders, Chief Executives / executive managers, CDEM Group Coordinating Executive Groups	• Has oversight, assigns resources, and may impose constraints (e.g. deadlines, cost and resource limits) and assign objectives. • Assigns resources; may influence or assign objectives. • Communicates and influences the strategic direction outside the operational response. • Interacts with and is accountable to Political Governance. • May be accountable for the outcomes of the response (in particular the lead agency).

4.0 The emergency response arrangements

Figure 12 outlines the Institute's understanding of how the current system responds to new and emerging events and circumstances through an emergency lens.

Figure 12: Emergency response

Source: Adapted from DPMC, *National Resilience System Handbook*, May 2025, and DPMC's website[24,25,26]

Does the event or circumstance meet the definition of 'emergency' in legislation?

Emergency response

An event or circumstance is classified as an emergency when it aligns with the definition of 'emergency' in legislation (CDEM Act 2002):

emergency means a situation that—

(a) is the result of any happening, whether natural or otherwise, including, without limitation, any explosion, earthquake, eruption, tsunami, land movement, flood, storm, tornado, cyclone, serious fire, leakage or spillage of any dangerous gas or substance, technological failure, infestation, plague, epidemic, failure of or disruption to an emergency service or a lifeline utility, or actual or imminent attack or warlike act; and

(b) causes or may cause loss of life or injury or illness or distress or in any way endangers the safety of the public or property in New Zealand or any part of New Zealand; and

(c) cannot be dealt with by emergency services, or otherwise requires a significant and co-ordinated response under this Act

No

It is not considered an emergency.

Note: This does not mean the event or circumstance will not be managed. Instead, it will likely be managed by department/s and/or at a local level. (*NRS Handbook* p.21)

Yes

The event or circumstance is considered an emergency.

It is managed by a lead agency/agencies.

The Coordinated Incident Management System (CIMS) is commonly used as it establishes a framework of consistent principles, structures, functions, processes and terminology for response and the transition to recovery. (NRS Handbook p.34)

During a state of national emergency, the Director of CDEM (a statutory officer appointed by the Chief Executive of NEMA) becomes responsible for directing and controlling resources that are made available for emergency management and gains access to various emergency powers, such as the power to require evacuations, close roads or requisition resources. In practice, these functions and powers are generally delegated to the National Controller. The emergency management roles and responsibilities of agencies at the national level are described in the National CDEM Plan Order 2015. (*NRS Handbook* p.22)

The Emergency Management System builds resilience to emergencies through the Civil Defence Emergency Management Act (CDEM Act) 2002. NEMA is the steward, operator and assurer of the Emergency Management System, and in some cases may be lead agency for emergencies involving meteorological or geological hazards and infrastructure failures.

4.1　Civil Defence Emergency Management Act 2002

The Civil Defence Emergency Management Act (CDEM Act) 2002 lays out the legally defined processes, frameworks and powers in pursuit of civil defence and emergency management. However, it is important to keep in mind that Cabinet has recently agreed to replace the 2002 Act with the Emergency Management Bill.

The current Act contains various parts, including powers, functions and appointments of key people, CDEM planning and management duties, the specifics of states of emergency, and powers in relation to CDEM. Under the Act there are two important pieces of secondary legislation which also feed into the broader ecosystem. These are the Civil Defence Emergency Management Regulations 2003, and the National Civil Defence Emergency Management Plan Order 2015. The Regulations cover technical aspects regarding the Civil Defence logo and specifics about states of emergency. The Plan contains a much more detailed overview of the practical aspects of CDEM, including the existence of NEMA and ODESC, and outlines the role of lead agencies. The existing policy and frameworks used across agencies can be found in these legislative instruments.

4.2　NEMA

NEMA is the primary agency for emergency management in New Zealand. While NEMA itself is not engaged in every incident, its website is the proverbial source of truth for on-the-ground emergency management and civil defence. NEMA states that its role is to 'provide leadership in reducing risk, being ready for, responding to and recovering from emergencies'.[27]

NEMA replaced the previous Ministry of Civil Defence and Emergency Management.[28] It is a departmental agency hosted by DPMC, and also coordinates with the National Crisis Management Centre (NCMC).[29] NEMA's role is to support and advise the Minister, and it is 'steward, operator and assurer' of the emergency management system.[30]

4.3　National Disaster Resilience Strategy

The strategy was published in April 2019 by the Ministry of Civil Defence and Emergency Management, now NEMA. Interestingly it was ranked 25/195 for transparency in the McGuinness Institute's GDS Index (see GDS Index assessment in Appendix 1, Figure A1.1 and the Institute's GDS Index web page).[31] The strategy notes that it:

> provides the vision and strategic direction, including priorities and objectives for increasing New Zealand's resilience to disasters. The detail of how those objectives are to be achieved sits in a roadmap of actions, alongside other related key documents including the National CDEM Plan and Guide, the National Security Handbook, CDEM Group plans, and a range of other supporting policies and plans.[32]

Figure 13: National Disaster Resilience Strategy

Source: NEMA, *National Disaster Resilience Strategy,* April 2019[33]
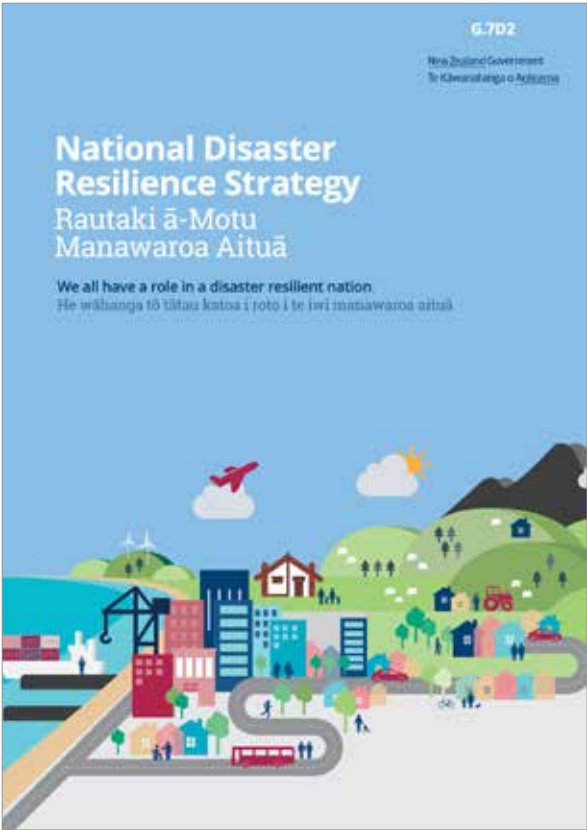
4.4   The relationship between NEMA, the National CDEM Plan 2015 and other plans

Figure 14: The Guide to the National Civil Defence Emergency Management Plan 2015

Source: NEMA, *The Guide to the National Civil Defence Emergency Management Plan 2015*, revised 24 June 2025[34]
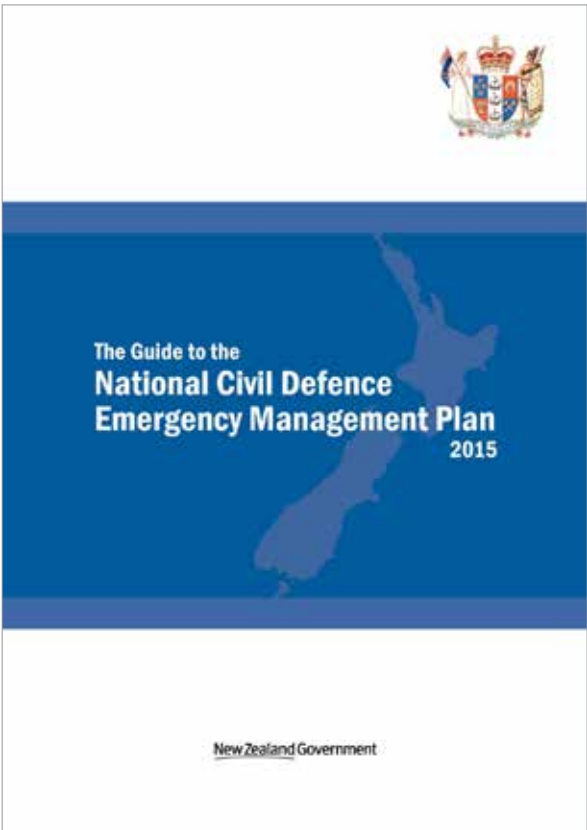
Figure 15: National Civil Defence Emergency Management Plan Order 2015 Schedule: National civil defence emergency management plan

The National Civil Defence Emergency Management Plan Order 2015 (the National CDEM Plan 2015) is used by NEMA in its role as lead agency for the management of emergencies resulting from geological or meteorological hazards and infrastructure failures. The National CDEM Plan 2015 includes a Schedule that sets out the National Civil Defence Emergency Management plan. This plan is supported by *The Guide to the National Civil Defence Emergency Management Plan 2015* (the *Guide*). The *Guide* was revised on 25 June 2025 and is 321 pages long.[35] It notes that while the National CDEM Plan 2015 is strategically focused, the *Guide* is operationally focused, with an emphasis on what must be understood and done. Importantly, the two documents support, but do not otherwise replace or replicate, agency planning and standard operating procedures.

This is explained in Clause 6 of the National Civil Defence Emergency Management Plan Order 2015 Schedule:

Scope of this plan

This plan—

(a) is a statement of the frameworks, objectives, principles, roles, and responsibilities across the 4 Rs that—

    (i) are in place on the date that this plan is made; and

    (ii) apply across agencies and CDEM Groups; and

    (iii) take account of existing statutory responsibilities of agencies and CDEM Groups across the 4 Rs to manage hazards and risks; and

(b) applies to any emergency requiring CDEM at a national level, including—

    (i) a state of national emergency; and

    (ia) a national transition period; and

    (ii) an emergency requiring co-ordination and support at the national level; and

(c) is supported by The Guide, which—

    (i) augments this plan; and

    (ii) includes additional material that enables this plan; and

(d) may be amended in accordance with section 47 of the Act.

The *Guide* states:

> The National CDEM Plan 2015 and Guide are supported by three supporting plans issued by the Director of CDEM pursuant to Section 9 of the *CDEM Act 2002*. Supporting plans developed by NEMA are designed to operate within the framework and structures described in the *National CDEM Plan 2015*.
>
> Supporting plans have been developed in response to the identification of a specific sector, hazard, or location-specific set of consequences that require additional planning.
>
> The following supporting plans have been developed:
>
> * *National Tsunami Advisory and Warning Plan*
>
> * *Wellington Earthquake National Initial Response Plan*
>
> * *National Fuel Plan*[36] (see GDS Index assessment in Appendix 1 Figure A1.2).

In addition to these three supporting plans, there also exist lead agency hazard-specific emergency plans that support agency planning.

4.5   Catastrophic Event Handbook

Figure 16: Catastrophic Event Handbook

Source: NEMA, *Catastrophic Event Handbook*, December 2024[37]

NEMA published the *Catastrophic Event Handbook* in December 2024. However, it was not released to the public until 12 February 2025. It states:

> The Handbook has been developed in conjunction with many agencies, and it is one of the outputs from NEMA's wider Catastrophic Planning programme.
>
> The Handbook is a milestone for New Zealand and it provides a blueprint to respond to the most severe disasters. It outlines roles and responsibilities by agency, across 11 workstreams in order to manage an All-of-Government response to a catastrophic level event.
>
> The Handbook takes a hazard-agnostic approach to the response and recovery aspects of a catastrophe. It is scalable, and it allows for hazard-specific plans to be developed under this framework, such as the

National Space Weather Response Plan.[38]

Importantly the *Catastrophic Event Handbook* does not replace the functions of CIMS during a response; CIMS remains the primary framework for coordinating the emergency response. Instead, the *Catastrophic Event Handbook* is a supporting document that aims to 'coordinate multi-agency effort and collate information to enable efficient decision-making. Wherever possible, the workstreams have been aligned with CIMS, for efficient integration into a national response.'[39]

Figure 17: The Catastrophic Event Handbook within the national planning framework

Source: NEMA, *Catastrophic Event Handbook*, December 2024[40]
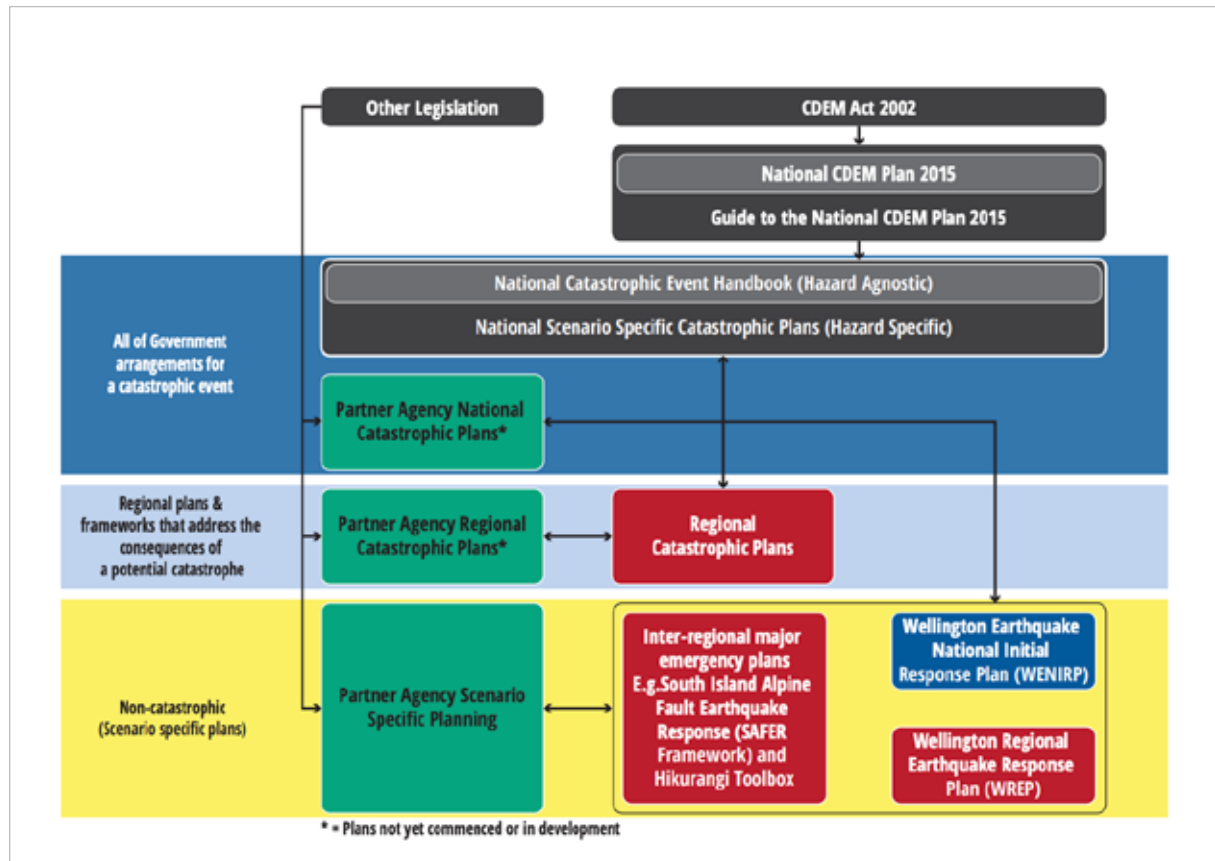
4.6   Overview of the emergency response arrangements

Figure 18 below provides a general overview of the emergency response key documents.

Figure 18: Overview of the key documents relating to the emergency response arrangements
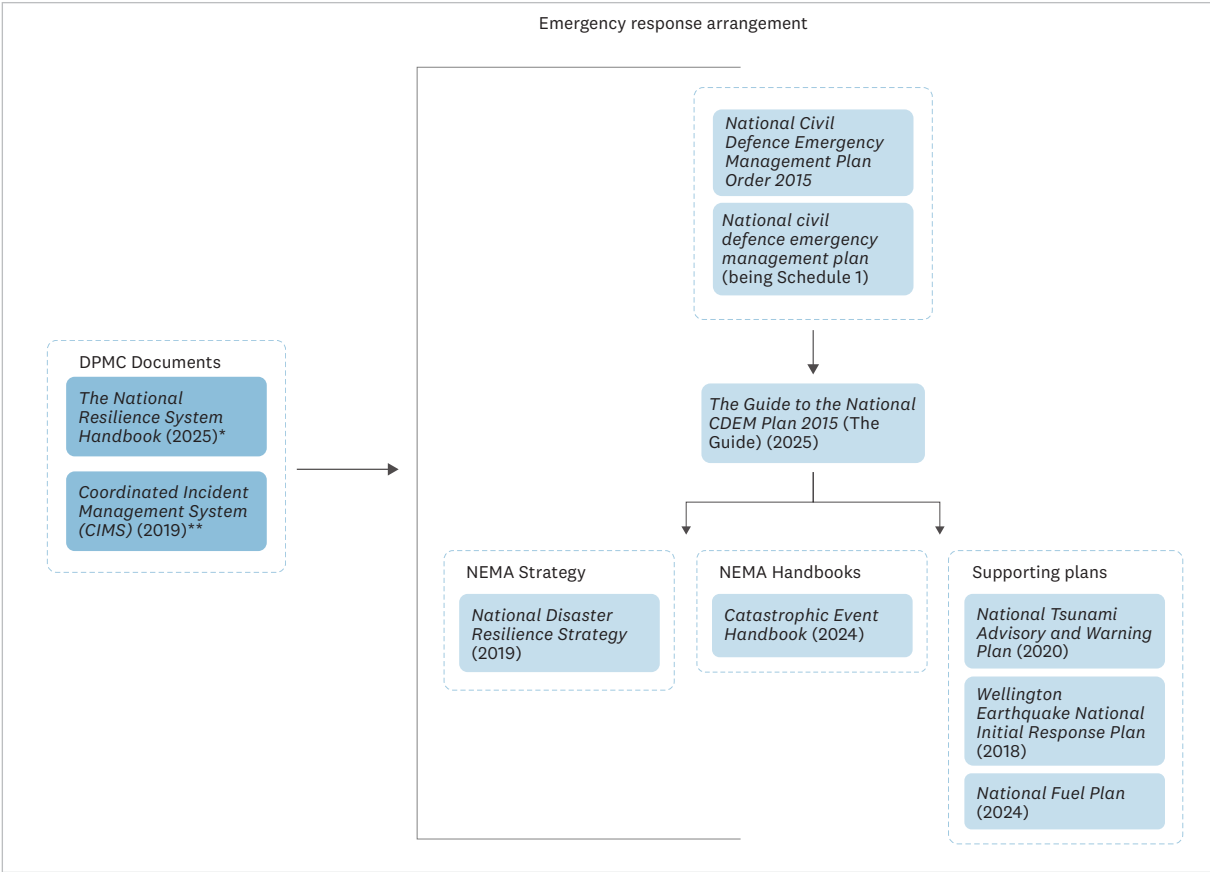
*   The *Handbook* notes that the document is intended to be a living document and will be updated on a six-monthly basis.

**   The *CIMS* document notes that with the publication of the 2nd edition, it was decided that CIMS should be reviewed every five years.

5.0 The crisis response arrangements

Figure 19 outlines the Institute's representation of how the current system responds to new and emerging events and circumstances through a crisis lens.

Figure 19: Crisis response

Source: Adapted from DPMC, *National Resilience System Handbook*, May 2025, and DPMC's website[41, 42, 43]

Does the event or circumstance trigger the activation of the ODESC system?

Crisis response

An event or circumstance may trigger activation of the ODESC system. The ODESC system provides strategic crisis management, coordination, and governance for crises arising from all hazards and all threats. It is an escalated decision-making model, with three tiers of meetings (Ministers, Central Government Chief Executives, and Tier 2 Senior Officials). When determining what level of meeting is required, who should attend, and what decisions may be needed, the national risk management objectives will be considered. Meeting attendees operate as a collective rather than solely representing their agency, and focus on the crisis at the strategic level and with a national interest. The lead agency as well as any lower tier of meetings (if convened) will provide advice to meeting attendees, who will apply their collective judgement and experience to assess the strategic implications of the crisis, and response options.

Activation of the ODESC system

DPMC, together with the lead agency (if there is one), determine whether to activate the ODESC system. There is no single definition used for 'crisis' in the New Zealand context; rather a crisis is the event or circumstance that meets one or more of the below thresholds for consideration:

1. Unusual features of scale, nature, intensity or consequence.[1]
2. Conveys significant challenges for sovereignty or nationwide law and order.
3. Suggests multiple or inter-related problems – creating national or systemic risk.
4. Involves a high degree of uncertainty or complexity.
5. Is beyond the ability of one lead agency to manage.[2]
6. No pre-defined lead agency.
7. Concurrency of events (impacting system resources).
8. Is an emerging issue that might meet the above criteria in the future, and would benefit from proactive management.

No, ODESC is not activated

The event or circumstance is not considered a crisis at this time but it may still meet the definition of an emergency under the legislation.

Yes, ODESC is activated

A lead agency/agencies will be decided, depending on the situation. See Appendix 3 of the *National Resilience Handbook* for the list of strategic crisis response lead agencies.[3]

Example:
Hazard/threat: Infectious human disease (pandemic)
Lead agency: Ministry of Health (MoH)

Hazard/threat: Wildfire
Lead agency: Fire and Emergency NZ

Hazard/threat: Geological (earthquakes, volcanic hazards, landslides, tsunamis)
Lead agency: NEMA

The Officials' Committee for Domestic and External Security Coordination (ODESC) provides strategic crisis management, coordination and governance for crises arising from all hazards and threats and is led by the Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet.

Notes for Figure 19

1. Declaring a state of national emergency does not automatically require activation of the ODESC system. However, in some events (e.g. the 23 February 2011 Christchurch earthquake, the COVID-19 pandemic and Cyclone Gabrielle), the ODESC system was required because of the strategic and national nature of the event.

2. It is possible to have the ODESC system activated at the same time as a state of an emergency being in operation. This happened during the early stages of the COVID-19 pandemic.

3. ODESC is a coordination body; it is not a lead agency.

5.1   DPMC and ODESC

DPMC's role is as 'steward and overall lead of the National Resilience System'.[44] As system leaders, they focus on risks to resilience and integration across the system, ensuring effectiveness, leading the framework across government, driving implementation of strategy, providing assurance to Ministers and decision-makers, delivering the National Exercise Programme and leading coordinated government responses through activation of the ODESC system.[45] The CE of DPMC is the agency head of the ODESC system, the Officials' Committee for Domestic and External Security Coordination.

One of DPMC's business units is the Risk and Systems Governance Group. The Group is responsible for leading across government to ensure there is effective and proactive management of nationally significant risks and crises. Its focus is on building and strengthening New Zealand's long-term prosperity and resilience. The group is made up of a Strategic Crisis Management Unit (SCMU), the National Risk Directorate, the Governance Directorate and the Joint Office.[46]

The Strategic Crisis Management Unit (SCMU) leads, coordinates and supports the Officials' Committee for Domestic and External Security Coordination (ODESC) system. It works with central government agencies to strengthen their readiness capabilities, to potentially minimise consequences to nationally significant crises, and to ensure more effective responses at the strategic level.[47]

The SCMU provides stewardship and secretariat support for the ODESC system architecture, and is often the first port of call for agencies concerned about emerging risks. A SCMU staff member is on call 24/7 to be alerted to be emerging and actual crisis situations. SCMU's responsibilities include:

*   providing thought leadership to guide the ODESC system through considering issues and identifying risks both before and during crisis events,

*   convening the right level of meetings and ensuring decisions are being taken at the right level (escalating decision-making as needed),

*   supporting the Prime Minister and the Chairs of each tier of ODESC system meetings to enable them to take well-informed and timely decisions,

*   conducting ODESC system debriefs once a response is deactivated and following completion of National Exercise Programme activities, which engenders an ODESC system culture of continuous improvement and enhances agencies' readiness.[48]

5.2   NRS Handbook

Figure 20: National Resilience System Handbook

Source: DPMC, *National Resilience System Handbook*, May 2025[49]
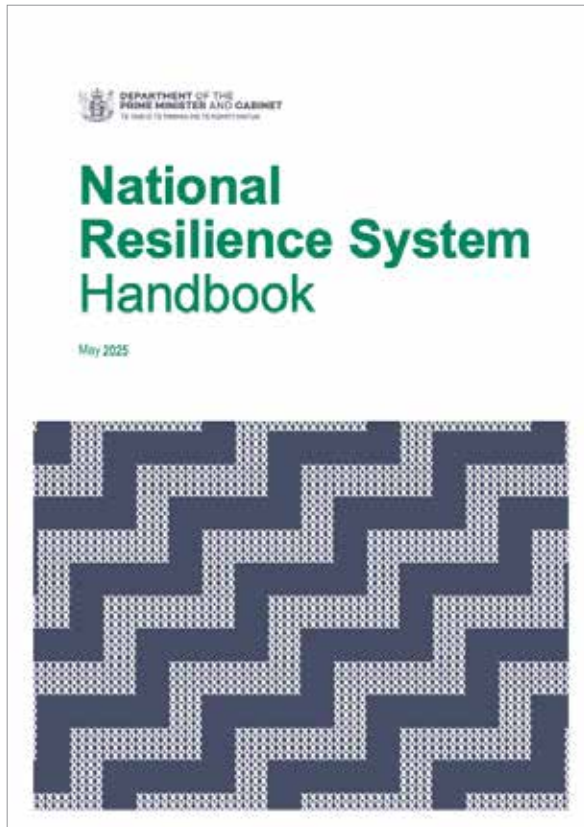
There is a broad ecosystem contemplated in the *National Resilience System Handbook* (*NRS Handbook*), which also goes into detail about the structure and the processes involved.

The *NRS Handbook* was published in May 2025 and replaces the previous National Security System guidance published in 2016 (which remains referred to in CIMS). The *NRS Handbook* 'provides a broad overview of the National Resilience System and contains the central government arrangements used to respond to strategic crises'. It is intended for use by government officials involved in the system.

The *NRS Handbook* is divided into three parts:

1.   New Zealand's National Resilience System: this examines the broader context, including the national risk system architecture, objectives and the framework, including how different agencies fit into the system.

2.   New Zealand's strategic crisis response arrangements: this includes more specific direction about DPMC, the lead agency model, support agencies and the ODESC system in practice.

3.   Appendices.

In addition to DPMC as the overarching body, government agencies have a role in the system including risk management. There are also various boards, committees, sub-boards and groups functioning within the ecosystem:

Figure 21: National Resilience System ecosystem

Source: DPMC, *National Resilience System Handbook*, May 2025[50]

National Resilience Governance Structure

National Hazards Board
National Emergency Management Agency
Fire and Emergency New Zealand
Ministry for the Environment
Ministry of Health
Department of Internal Affairs
Ministry for Primary Industries

National Hazards Board + National Security Board
Ministry of Transport
New Zealand Defence Force
Ministry of Business, Innovation and Employment
Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Trade
New Zealand Police
Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet

National Security Board
New Zealand Security Intelligence Service
New Zealand Customs
Ministry of Defence
Government Communications Security Bureau
The Treasury

National Hazards
Senior Officials Group

National Security
Senior Officials Group

Chaired by the Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet

The *NRS Handbook* outlines the lead agency model, which has been in practice since 2001. A lead agency is that which has the primary mandate for managing a risk, incident or threat. The model is aimed at ensuring leadership certainty in crisis, proper assignment of functions, early warning capacity, quick responses and clarity in communications. The *NRS Handbook* states that:

> the lead agency concept is based on the principle that incidents, emergencies and crises will be handled first at the lowest level possible, escalating when needed. In many cases, incidents can be managed within the resources of a single department, or at a local level. If incidents or emergencies require the support or involvement of multiple agencies, or are more serious or complex, wider whole-of-government response systems are used.[51]

It goes further into the relationship between NEMA's mandate and system and when the ODESC might become involved.

With specific response processes well-traversed in the respective publications, this section of the paper intends to outline the relationship between incident responses. It aims to answer these questions:

1. How are particular emergencies or crises categorised?

2. What is the threshold for NRS governance?

In the interests of a succinct and direct examination of the relationship between emergency escalation processes across agencies, this explanation will be brief.

The *NRS Handbook* says that in response to strategic risks, government uses the national risk management objectives outlined in the document. The same three-tiered escalating decision-making and governance model is used in the ODESC system as well (three tiers above the lead agency). This is represented by the following figure.

Source: DPMC, *National Resilience System Handbook*, May 2025[52]
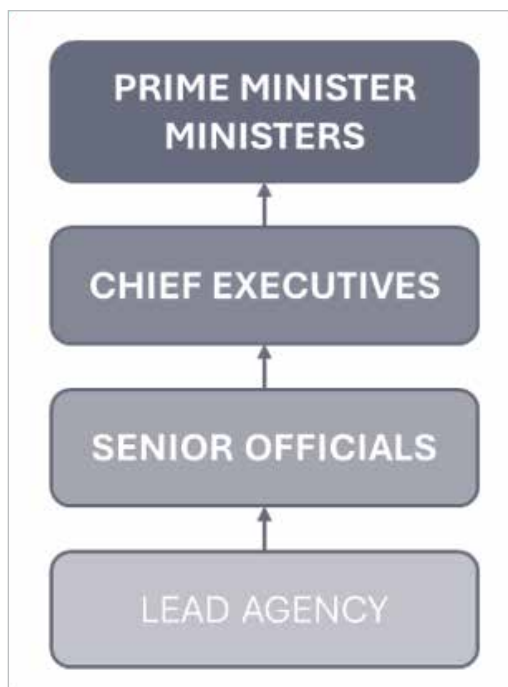
It says that 'the Prime Minister is the lead decision-maker in the ODESC system, although in practice crisis events are usually able to be managed and coordinated before they need to escalate to the Prime Minister or Ministers for decisions'.[53]

If Ministers do get involved, bespoke processes can be arranged to respond to the situation. Prior to that, the three-tiered decision-making model allows agencies to 'provide advice and assurance to the Prime Minister and Ministers' on a range of important factors, including accurate identification of risks, consequences, resourcing, gaps in capability and information flow.[54] Communication with the public is also considered.

The Prime Minister is also the Minister for National Security and Intelligence.[55]

The ODESC system in practice is shown in Figure 23 overleaf, and is explained in more detail in the *NRS Handbook*.

Source: DPMC, *National Resilience System Handbook*, May 2025[56]
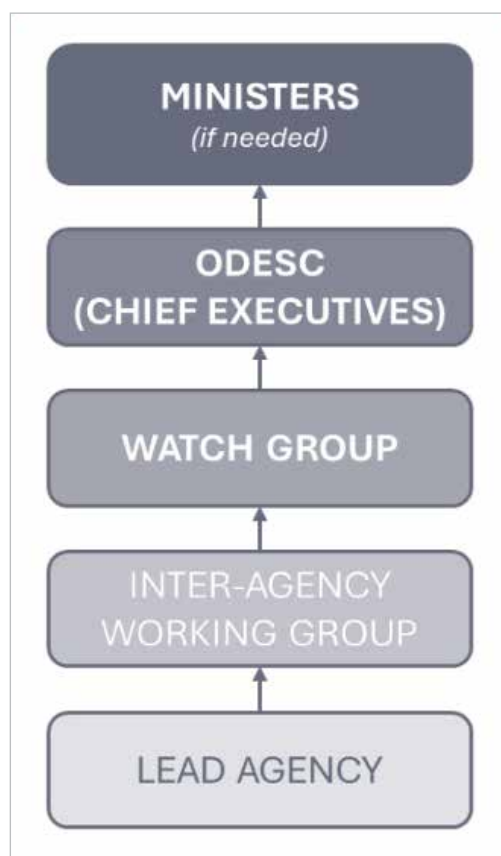
Importantly, and as the focus of this section, the *NRS Handbook* outlines the threshold for central government leadership – activation of the ODESC system. This is set out in full below:

Threshold for central government leadership – activation of the ODESC system

A comprehensive all-hazards, all-threats approach is taken when considering what may constitute a strategic crisis and when the strategic crisis management arrangements should be initiated (referred to as ODESC system activation). There is no one single definition used for 'crisis' in the New Zealand context; rather, a crisis is an event that meets one or more of the following criteria (collectively referred to as the triggers to consider ODESC system activation for crisis response).

- Unusual features of scale, nature, intensity or consequence.
- Conveys significant challenges for sovereignty or nationwide law and order.
- Suggests multiple or inter-related problems – creating national or systemic risk.
- Involves a high degree of uncertainty or complexity.
- Is beyond the ability of one lead agency to manage.
- No pre-defined lead agency.
- Concurrency of events (impacting system resources).
- Is an emerging issue that might meet the above criteria in the future, and would benefit from proactive management.

As an emerging or actual crisis occurs, and depending on the scale/nature of the situations, agencies are expected to consult with either the Chair ODESC (Chief Executive, DPMC), the Chair Watch Group (Executive Director, Risk and Systems Governance Group) or the Strategic Crisis Management Unit at the earliest opportunity to determine whether there is a need to initiate coordination through activation of the ODESC system. Activation occurs in consultation with the lead agency.[57]

6.0 Observations

The Institute welcomes the government's review and reform of the emergency and crisis systems.

Our key observations are:

1. The emergency response arrangements compared to the crisis response arrangements is not configured with each other in mind, but there is a definite demarcation between each of them.

2. The DPMC ecosystem, including NRS, ODESC and all the other bodies, are concerned with strategic risk and crisis response. This is shown by the wording of the threshold in the NRS. In comparison, the NEMA ecosystem deals with emergencies (as those are legislatively defined) and incidents that are more on the ground.

3. It is important to note that emergencies are not always crises; crises are not always emergencies, and incidents may not be either. The two spheres of governance – that is, the emergency response arrangements compared to the crisis response arrangements – are well established.

4. Agency-led frameworks are intended to ensure that those best placed to address crises and emergencies are able to do so.

5. Each situation is likely to be unique, so it is often in the interests of an efficient response to remain flexible and allow for continual adaptation.

6. The system is unnecessarily complex. The Institute staff have found it difficult to understand and navigate. We remain concerned that our understanding of the system, as contained in this paper, may be incorrect or misleading.

7. Although we have been told that there is no hierarchy, the distinct systems and guidance are somewhat inevitably linked as part of different agencies and controls. For this reason we believe every publication by DPMC and NEMA should include a map of key legislation and the documents that are in operation – with revision dates on the cover page of each.

8. At least two documents are set to be reviewed in 2025. The *NRS Handbook* notes that it is intended to be a living document and will be updated on a six-monthly basis, and the *CIMS* document notes that with the publication of the 2nd edition, it was decided to review CIMS every five years. Figure 18 illustrates that many of the key documents are out of date and importantly do not align with the latest approach outlined in the *NRS Handbook*. When you see the system in its totality as illustrated in Figure 18, it is obvious that there is an urgent need for alignment across the whole system. Without alignment, there is a real risk that when an emergency or crisis eventuates, the system will not operate smoothly.

9. There is a real concern with NEMA moving to DIA that the lack of alignment will become more of a problem. This means the system needs to be redesigned to work with these changes.

10. Given that the whole system has pivoted to resilience, we consider all documents should be updated to contain the terminology in the National Resilience System and the *National Resilience System Handbook*.

7.0 Summary

Emergencies and crises are increasing in number and scale, making it important to have clear, robust systems in place so New Zealand can respond to them quickly and effectively as required. This paper describes how New Zealand's emergency response arrangements and crisis response arrangements operate in practice.

This is important for three reasons:

1. As we have seen during the COVID-19 pandemic, the integration of how emergencies and crises interact is an important part of understanding the machinery of government (which includes various legislative and policy instruments).

2. The Institute acknowledges that the number of emergencies and crises are increasing; we also see that they are very different and require different approaches to manage. We support the distinction between the two, but are also aware that they may become increasingly interconnected as we navigate the future. For example the climate crisis is likely to result in a significant increase in climate emergencies (e.g. flooding, fires and droughts).

3. The Civil Defence Emergency Management Act 2002 is likely to be replaced later this year with the Emergency Management Act. The Bill is currently with the Parliamentary Counsel Office (PCO).[58] Understanding how the current system works is key to exploring ways it could be improved. To this end, the Institute has also prepared a discussion paper, *Discussion Paper 2025/02 – How to Tell the Difference Between an Emergency and a Crisis and Why it Matters*, outlining suggestions on how the existing system could be improved.

Abbreviations

CDC	Civil Defence Centre
CDEM	Civil Defence Emergency Management
CIMS	Coordinated Incident Management System
ECC	Emergency Coordination Centres
EOC	Emergency Operations Centres
IMT	Incident management team
NCC	National Coordination Centre
NCMC	National Crisis Management Centre
NEMA	National Emergency Management Agency
NSS	National Security System
NRS	National Resilience System
ODESC	Officials' Committee for Domestic and External Security Coordination
SAR	Search and Rescue

Glossary

The following terms are from the Interpretation section of the Civil Defence Emergency Management Act 2002. The National Civil Defence Emergency Management Plan Order 2015 includes a Schedule that sets out the National Civil Defence Emergency Management plan. The Schedule defines a number of key terms, which for completeness are listed separately overleaf. Neither piece of legislation defines 'crisis' (other than in terms of the National Crisis Management Centre [NCMC]) or mentions the *National Resilience System Handbook* or the *Catastrophic Event Handbook,* or refers to the NRS (previously called the NSS). This illustrates the level of work that is required to align recent changes in public policy with the legislation.

A: Excerpts from the Civil Defence Emergency Management Act 2002

Emergency
means a situation that—

(a) is the result of any happening, whether natural or otherwise, including, without limitation, any explosion, earthquake, eruption, tsunami, land movement, flood, storm, tornado, cyclone, serious fire, leakage or spillage of any dangerous gas or substance, technological failure, infestation, plague, epidemic, failure of or disruption to an emergency service or a lifeline utility, or actual or imminent attack or warlike act; and

(b) causes or may cause loss of life or injury or illness or distress or in any way endangers the safety of the public or property in New Zealand or any part of New Zealand; and

(c) cannot be dealt with by emergency services, or otherwise requires a significant and co-ordinated response under this Act.

Emergency services
means the New Zealand Police, Fire and Emergency New Zealand, Taumata Arowai, and providers of health and disability services.

Hazard
means something that may cause, or contribute substantially to the cause of, an emergency.

Health and disability services
means services as defined in section 4 of the Pae Ora (Healthy Futures) Act 2022.

Lifeline utility
means an entity named or described in Part A of Schedule 1, or that carries on a business described in Part B of Schedule 1. Part B of Schedule 1 includes:

1. An entity that produces, supplies, or distributes manufactured gas or natural gas (whether it is supplied or distributed through a network or in bottles of more than 20 kg of gas).

2. An entity that generates electricity for distribution through a network or distributes electricity through a network.

3. An entity that supplies or distributes water to the inhabitants of a city, district, or other place.

4. An entity that provides a waste water or sewerage network or that disposes of sewage or storm water.

5. An entity that provides a telecommunications network (within the meaning of the Telecommunications Act 1987).

6. An entity that provides a road network (including State highways).

7. An entity that produces, processes, or distributes to retail outlets and bulk customers any petroleum products used as an energy source or an essential lubricant or additive for motors for machinery.

8. An entity that provides a rail network or service.

National significance

includes, without limitation, any case where the Minister or the Director considers that—

(a) there is widespread public concern or interest; or

(b) there is likely to be significant use of resources; or

(c) it is likely that the area of more than 1 Civil Defence Emergency Management Group will be affected; or

(d) it affects or is likely to affect or is relevant to New Zealand's international obligations; or

(e) it involves or is likely to involve technology, processes, or methods that are new to New Zealand; or

(f) it results or is likely to result in or contribute to significant or irreversible changes to the environment (including the global environment)

Recovery

means the co-ordinated efforts and processes used to bring about the immediate, medium-term, and long-term holistic regeneration and enhancement of a community following an emergency.

Risk

means the likelihood and consequences of a hazard.

State of emergency

means a state of national emergency or a state of local emergency.

B: Excerpts from the National Civil Defence Emergency Management Plan Order 2015

4 Rs means—

(a) reduction (identifying and analysing risks to life and property from hazards, taking steps to eliminate those risks if practicable, and, if not, reducing the magnitude of their impact and the likelihood of their occurrence to an acceptable level); and

(b) readiness (developing operational systems and capabilities before an emergency happens, including self-help and response programmes for the general public and specific programmes for emergency services, lifeline utilities, and other agencies); and

(c) response (actions taken immediately before, during, or directly after an emergency to save lives and property, and to help communities recover); and

(d) recovery (the co-ordinated efforts and processes used to bring about the immediate, medium-term, and long-term holistic regeneration and enhancement of a community following an emergency)

Agency

means a government or non-government organisation or entity (other than a CDEM Group) with responsibilities under this plan

The Guide

means *The Guide to the National Civil Defence Emergency Management Plan* that is issued by the Director under section 9(3) of the Act

Lead agency

means the agency with the primary mandate for managing the response to an emergency, as specified in Appendix 1.

Support agency

means any agency, other than the lead agency, that has a role or responsibilities during the response to an emergency

C: The Guide to the National Civil Defence Emergency Management Plan 2015 (revised 24 June 2025)

CDEM sector

CDEM sector means those agencies with responsibilities under the CDEM Act 2002, including local authorities, CDEM Groups, government departments, emergency services, and lifeline utilities

Appendix 1: GDS Index profiles

Figure A1.1: National Disaster Resilience Strategy | Rautaki ā-Motu Manawaroa Aituā

Source: McGuinness Institute, *Government Department Strategies Index Handbook*, April 2025[59]

GDS05–01

National Disaster Resilience Strategy | Rautaki ā-Motu Manawaroa Aituā

Purpose

'New Zealand is a disaster resilient nation that acts proactively to manage risks and build resilience in a way that contributes to the wellbeing and prosperity of all New Zealanders.' (p.3)

Strategy (to achieve the purpose):

The approach is to implement a package of initiatives to manage risks, improve rapid response services, and integrate and support community perspectives. Examples include implementing emergency management system reforms to improve how New Zealand responds to natural disasters and emergencies, and improving local government planning, including long-term plans, annual plans and asset management plans. (p.34)

Key data

Publication date:	April 2019
Duration:	2019–2029
Number of pages:	52
Signed by:	Crown (Minister of Civil Defence)
This GDS replaces:	*National Civil Defence Emergency Management Strategy* (2008)
Jointly held with:	Not applicable
Transferred from:	Not applicable
Strategy map:	Yes, p.3
Legislation:	Required (see Civil Defence Emergency Management (CDEM) Act 2002, s 31) and cited in the GDS

McGuinness Institute analysis

Duration

5 years left

2019 — 2029

Scope of subject matter

Wide scope

Climate intelligence

No mention — Mention only — Basic response — Detailed response

Transparency Scorecard

25 out of 195 GDSs

1 out of the 5 GDSs in DPMC

2 out of the 24 GDSs in the Finance and Government Administration Sector

		Score	Out of
1:	**Opportunities and Threats**		
1.1	Identifies potential opportunities	4	4
1.2	Identifies potential threats	3.5	4
1.3	Contains a clear statement describing the problem	7	8
2:	**Capabilities and Resources**		
2.1	Identifies current and future capabilities	3.5	4
2.2	Identifies capabilities it does not have but needs	3.5	4
2.3	Identifies current and future resources	2.5	4
2.4	Identifies resources it does not have but needs	1.5	4
3:	**Vision and Benefits (Purpose)**		
3.1	Provides a clear aspirational statement as to what success would look like	6	8
3.2	Identifies who the beneficiaries are	1.5	4
3.3	Describes how success will be measured	3.5	4
4:	**Approach and Focus (Strategy)**		
4.1	Breaks down the purpose into a number of strategic goals/objectives	4	4
4.2	Identifies a range of strategic options	2	4
4.3	Describes the chosen approach	3	4
4.4	Highlights the risks, costs and benefits	2.5	4
5:	**Implementation and Accountability**		
5.1	Identifies who is responsible for implementation	3	4
5.2	Identifies who will report on its progress	2.5	4
5.3	Explains how progress will be reported	2.5	4
5.4	Discusses whether the GDS will undergo a review	3	4
6:	**Alignment and Authority**		
6.1	Discusses predecessors to the strategy and identifies any lessons learnt	3.5	4
6.2	Aligns with its department's SOI	0	6
6.3	Aligns with its department's annual report	6	6
Total		68.5	96

Source: McGuinness Institute, *Government Department Strategies Index Handbook*, April 2025[60]

GDS05–05

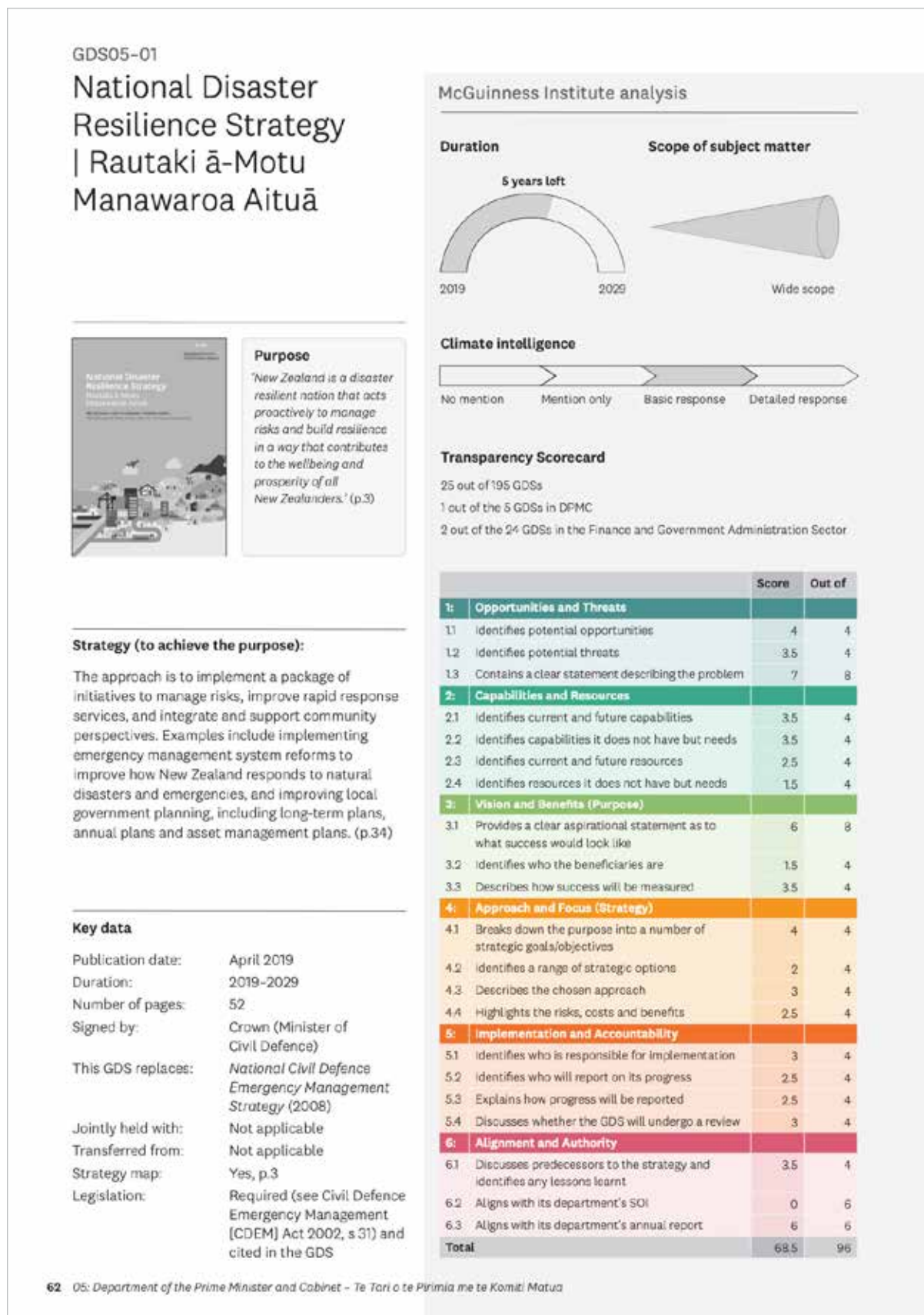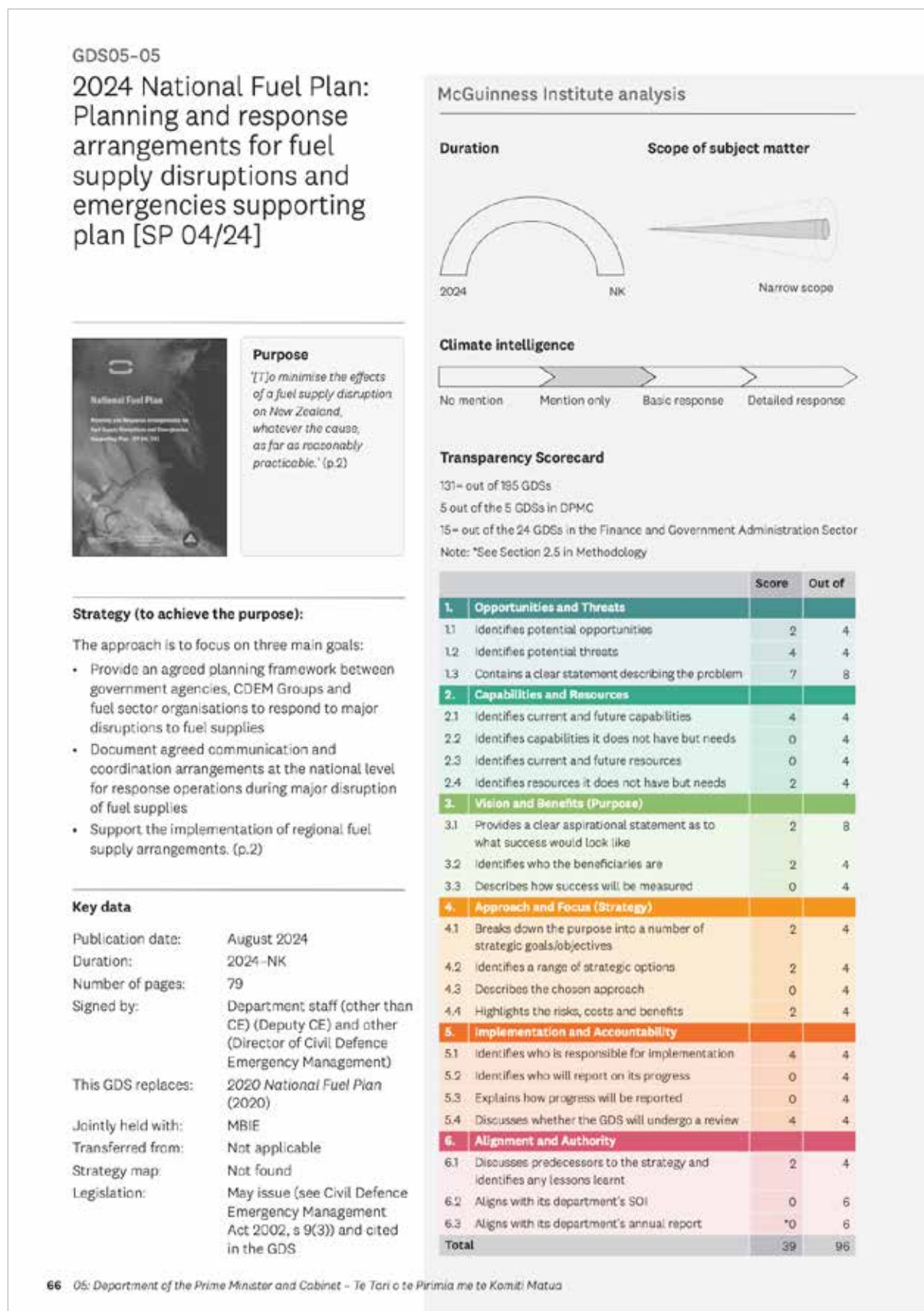## 2024 National Fuel Plan: Planning and response arrangements for fuel supply disruptions and emergencies supporting plan [SP 04/24]

Purpose

'[T]o minimise the effects of a fuel supply disruption on New Zealand, whatever the cause, as far as reasonably practicable.' (p.2)

Strategy (to achieve the purpose):

The approach is to focus on three main goals:

- Provide an agreed planning framework between government agencies, CDEM Groups and fuel sector organisations to respond to major disruptions to fuel supplies
- Document agreed communication and coordination arrangements at the national level for response operations during major disruption of fuel supplies
- Support the implementation of regional fuel supply arrangements. (p.2)

Key data

Publication date:	August 2024
Duration:	2024–NK
Number of pages:	79
Signed by:	Department staff (other than CE) (Deputy CE) and other (Director of Civil Defence Emergency Management)
This GDS replaces:	2020 National Fuel Plan (2020)
Jointly held with:	MBIE
Transferred from:	Not applicable
Strategy map:	Not found
Legislation:	May issue (see Civil Defence Emergency Management Act 2002, s 9(3)) and cited in the GDS

McGuinness Institute analysis

Duration

2024   NK

Scope of subject matter

Narrow scope

Climate intelligence

No mention   Mention only   Basic response   Detailed response

Transparency Scorecard

131= out of 195 GDSs

5 out of the 5 GDSs in DPMC

15= out of the 24 GDSs in the Finance and Government Administration Sector

Note: *See Section 2.5 in Methodology

		Score	Out of
1.	**Opportunities and Threats**		
1.1	Identifies potential opportunities	2	4
1.2	Identifies potential threats	4	4
1.3	Contains a clear statement describing the problem	7	8
2.	**Capabilities and Resources**		
2.1	Identifies current and future capabilities	4	4
2.2	Identifies capabilities it does not have but needs	0	4
2.3	Identifies current and future resources	0	4
2.4	Identifies resources it does not have but needs	2	4
3.	**Vision and Benefits (Purpose)**		
3.1	Provides a clear aspirational statement as to what success would look like	2	8
3.2	Identifies who the beneficiaries are	2	4
3.3	Describes how success will be measured	0	4
4.	**Approach and Focus (Strategy)**		
4.1	Breaks down the purpose into a number of strategic goals/objectives	2	4
4.2	Identifies a range of strategic options	2	4
4.3	Describes the chosen approach	0	4
4.4	Highlights the risks, costs and benefits	2	4
5.	**Implementation and Accountability**		
5.1	Identifies who is responsible for implementation	4	4
5.2	Identifies who will report on its progress	0	4
5.3	Explains how progress will be reported	0	4
5.4	Discusses whether the GDS will undergo a review	4	4
6.	**Alignment and Authority**		
6.1	Discusses predecessors to the strategy and identifies any lessons learnt	2	4
6.2	Aligns with its department's SOI	0	6
6.3	Aligns with its department's annual report	*0	6
Total		39	96

66   05: Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet – Te Tari o te Pirimia me te Komiti Matua

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