

SHORT NOTE

Emergency Services Review

The following is the text of a letter dated 12 September 1996 from the Department of Internal Affairs sent to the Society in reply to our submissions on the government review of Emergency Services.

In December 1995 then Minister of Internal Affairs, the Hon Warren Cooper, wrote to you advising that the Emergency Services Review Task Force, chaired by Sir Somerford Teagle, had presented its report and that the Government was seeking comment on the report before making decisions. A good response was received to the Minister's invitation for comment.

Since then officials have analysed the Task Force's recommendations, considered other related reports and undertaken further consultation. This consultation targeted key sector organisations.

I can now advise that last week Cabinet considered a paper on the analysis of the Task Force's recommendations and consultation. As a result, Cabinet has agreed to the following principles as a basis for an overarching emergency management framework:

- 1 comprehensive and integrated emergency management systems;
- 2 the all hazards approach;
- 3 structures underpinned with appropriate technical information and expertise;
- 4 recognition and involvement of volunteer organisations;
- 5 declarations made at the most appropriate level of government by elected representatives;
- 6 individual and community responsibility and self-reliance; the owner of any property be responsible for its reconstruction;
- 7 routine events and emergencies are best handled at the local level wherever possible.

Cabinet also agreed that responsibility for establishing and maintaining the emergency management framework identifying the principles, roles and responsibilities of all agencies involved in the sector and the required capacities, be accepted as part of the core business of Government in line with its "Community Security" and "Maintaining and Accelerating Economic Growth" Strategic Result Areas.

The principles give direction and will provide a foundation for the way emergency services operate in New Zealand in future. In particular, they include an "all hazards" approach to emergencies based on the assessment of risk to the community, whether from natural causes such as earthquakes or floods, major human or animal epidemics, or from other threats to public safety such as hazardous substances, chemical spillage or pollution. They also include a move to "comprehensive and integrated emergency management systems" that are orientated to reducing hazards and preventing loss of life or property, as well as ensuring the most effective means of responding to emergencies when they occur. These principles are widely accepted overseas and several countries are moving towards their adoption.

Cabinet noted the Task Force's and officials' proposals for changes in both central and local government structures to give effect to the above principles. Officials have been directed to report back in February 1997, on establishment of a proposed new ministry (replacing the Ministry of Civil Defence). The responsibilities of the proposed ministry are expected to be new overarching policy advice, oversight and co-ordination of purchase and audit functions, and a limited operational function.

Officials have been directed to consult with local government and first tier emergency service providers on the development of the Emergency Management Group (EMG) model proposed by the Task Force, as the means to implement the agreed principles at the local level. They will then report back to Government with a view to approval of the EMG model.

In approving the new principles, Government wishes to assure stakeholders that no criticism is intended of existing civil defence and emergency services arrangements. Rather, what is proposed is an expansion of the role of civil defence and better co-ordination with the emergency services, aimed at achieving the most effective management of emergencies on an all hazards, comprehensive and integrated basis.

For local authorities the new arrangements are intended to underscore their primary role in assessing local risks and in emergency situations, co-ordinating local emergency services such as police, fire and ambulance services. This reflects the fact that experience here and overseas has shown that most emergencies are managed best at the local level, with backup from other areas or central government if required.

The intention is to move forward in a way that preserves and builds on existing experience and professionalism. Extensive consultation between central and local government and with all service providers, will be required. The Department of Internal Affairs in conjunction with the present inter-departmental officials committee, will now discuss with sector groups mechanisms for the necessary consultation.

It is anticipated decisions on structures will be made in early 1997. However, transition to new structures may take several years and the process will be carefully managed to maintain the ability of present civil defence and other emergency service structures to respond to any emergency that may arise.

Yours sincerely

David Bull
for Secretary for Internal Affairs