# Government policy – local government’s role in fire services

## Local Government currently plays a large role in rural fire services

New Zealand’s fire services are organised currently in urban and rural sectors. Local government is a key player in delivering and funding rural fire services. Local government, along with the Department of Conservation and the New Zealand Defence Force, provides around 40 per cent of the funding for Rural Fire Authorities.

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| Service | Operated by | Funded from |
| Rural fire services | * 40+ Rural Fire Authorities (mostly councils, the Department of Conservation, and the NZ Defence Force). This includes Enlarged Rural Fire Districts (which are amalgamated Rural Fire Authorities and includes councils as stakeholders and funders). * Rural Fire Authorities have paid staff, volunteers and contractors. * National Rural Fire Authority (part of the New Zealand Fire Service Commission) coordinates rural fire. | * Local Government through rates. * Rural Fire Fighting Fund (contributions from the NZFS Commission from the fire service levy and the Department of Conservation). * Department of Conservation. * Forest owners and land holders through levies. * Cost recovery from people responsible for rural fires. |
| Urban fire services | * The New Zealand Fire Service (NZFS) Commission, with paid staff and volunteers. | * The fire service levy (a levy calculated on property and motor vehicle insurance). |

## From mid-2017 local government will no longer operate rural fire services

When New Zealand’s urban and rural fire services are unified from mid-2017 into Fire and Emergency New Zealand, local government will no longer operate or separately fund rural fire services.

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| Service | From mid-2017 operated by | Funded mainly from |
| Urban and rural fire services | * Fire and Emergency New Zealand. | * The amended and updated fire levy – calculated on material damage, not just fire damage; with a different levy rate for the residential and non-residential sectors; including third party as well as comprehensive motor vehicle insurance. |

## The change will deliver 21st century fire services for New Zealand.

New Zealand’s fire services have not fundamentally changed since the 1940s. The intent of this change is to set up:

* “fit-for-purpose” 21st century fire services that are flexible, modern and efficient; and
* fire services that work well, are funded appropriately and that value the workforce and volunteers.

**Local government still responsible for civil defence and resource management**

Local government retains its civil defence and resource management functions. Having one unified fire services organisation will make the interaction between fire services and other emergency services easier.

## Local authorities will continue to fund rural fire until mid-2017

Local authorities will continue to be responsible for funding rural fire services for their own communities until the new organisation, Fire and Emergency New Zealand, commences in mid-2017.

## Multiple funding streams for rural fire replaced by one main funding source

Rural fire services are currently funded in several ways. From mid-2017 Fire and Emergency New Zealand will fund rural fire services in the same way as urban fire – through the fire levy.

The fire levy will become the main source of funding for the new organisation and the levy base will become broader as a result of the new funding arrangements. There will no longer be a need for multiple, separate, funding streams for rural fire services, such as cost recovery, the Rural Fire Fighting Fund, current rural fire funding, and levies on forest owners. Nor will there be a need for communities to fundraise for their local fire services.

There is currently a Rural Fire Fighting Fund in funding reserves. The new organisation will have to determine how it will operate its funding reserves to manage big fires.

## Local government will pay the fire levy on insurance of its assets

Local government will contribute to fire services, like any other property owner, through the fire levy. Local authorities generally have insurance for their assets. Assets could include buildings, cars, and other infrastructure. Each local authority, like any other property owner, decides which assets it insures and for how much.

## The fire levy has an exemptions system for some types of assets

The current list of properties that are exempt from the levy (under Schedule 3 of the Fire Service Act 1975) will be removed under the new legislation. Any new exemptions from the levy will be set by regulations. The Department of Internal Affairs will release a public discussion document in mid-2016 seeking input on what exemptions may be appropriate.

## Local authorities will no longer recover the cost of fires

All rural fire services will be delivered by Fire and Emergency New Zealand from mid-2017. The main source of funding for the new organisation will be the fire levy. Local authorities will no longer need to recover the costs of fighting fires from the person responsible for the fire.

The deterrent effect of the cost recovery model will be covered by Fire and Emergency New Zealand’s broad range of compliance tools, from education and guidance to prosecutions.

## New penalties and offences regime will replace the old “cost recovery model”

A new offences and penalties regime is included in the Fire and Emergency New Zealand Bill to deter misconduct without the need for recourse to cost recovery.

## Paid staff working full time on rural fire will transfer to Fire and Emergency New Zealand

There are about 150 paid staff who work full time in the rural fire sector, for Rural Fire Authorities, or Enlarged Rural Fire Districts. Staff employed solely on fire work are expected to transfer to Fire and Emergency New Zealand when it is established from mid-2017. Employers will be fully involved in the transition planning affecting the workforce (paid and volunteer).

## Consultation to work out arrangements for other local authority fire staff

Local authorities have some staff who perform other unrelated work for the local authority and some fire work. A process will be established to work through arrangements for other staff by agreement. Employers will be fully involved in the transition planning affecting the workforce (paid and volunteer). If a local authority chose to make a staff member redundant the organisation’s usual redundancy provisions and processes would apply.

## No change expected for contract fire services staff

It is expected that Fire and Emergency New Zealand would continue to use contract fire services staff in the future.

## Volunteers to be in direct relationship with Fire and Emergency New Zealand

Volunteer support and sustaining volunteerism are core to the reform. The relationship is one of engagement (not employment), and one that respects the democratic rights of a volunteer. The relationship should also honour, strengthen and build-on community strengths and relationships to lead to better delivery of services, greater inclusion and participation, and effective mobilisation of communities who come together to protect and serve their community.

Agreement on how best to transition to the direct engagement model for urban and rural volunteers will be given a priority in the first stages of transition design. New investment in volunteers reflects the 80 percent of the fires services workforces that are volunteers, however does not detract from the support given to the paid workforce.

## Local leadership of volunteers will continue be important

The Government has recognised the importance of local leadership, by agreeing that “the existing leadership functions to manage volunteers be continued (including deputies)”.

## Local firefighters will still come together much as they do now

The Government decision to set up Fire and Emergency New Zealand included agreement that volunteers would still come together in a way much like a Brigade or a Volunteer Rural Fire Force does presently. Government also noted that the identity and role of the local fire services is important, and will be retained.

During the consultation on the Fire Services Review, stakeholders said any new model needed to recognise the differences between rural and urban fire delivery. The approach being taken to transition design is a strength-based approach, for example, seeking to retain those things that are working well across our fire services. These principles will be used when working through what Fire and Emergency New Zealand will look like and how it will seek to operate in the new environment.

There will be a plan for working through these issues with the people directly affected and the wider group of stakeholders involved.

The details of exactly how local Brigades and VRFFs will operate in the new organisation will be worked out with input from stakeholders and guidance and decision-making from the new Board.

**Local committees will assess risks and needs for their communities**

Fire and Emergency New Zealand will have a series of local committees to advise it on the risks and needs of the local communities. During the consultation in 2015 on the shape of New Zealand’s fire services, stakeholders said they wanted the benefits of a national organisation that retained the ability to be responsive and flexible to community risks and needs.

The local committee members will be appointed by the Board of Fire and Emergency New Zealand and there will be a process developed for deciding who sits on the new committees.

Given the importance of local committees, their function will be mandated in the legislation. Funding has been allocated to set up the committees and support their ongoing activity. Fire and Emergency New Zealand will decide how many committees are needed and their boundaries. It will provide support for the committees and have operating guidelines that set out how the committees will work and how they will interact with Fire and Emergency New Zealand.

The local committees will advise Fire and Emergency New Zealand so that fire services for communities are funded according to risk and need.

Many of the Enlarged Rural Fire Districts have been very successful at forming good relationships with their local authorities and could form a model for how the new committees will operate. One of the principles of the reforms is to build on what is already working well.

**Fire and Emergency New Zealand will set boundaries for the committees**

Fire and Emergency New Zealand will decide how many committees are needed and their boundaries. There will be public consultation on the boundaries. Fire and Emergency New Zealand will be responsible for both urban and rural fire services, so in the longer term, the urban and rural fire boundaries may no longer be needed.

## Firefighting assets will be available for Fire and Emergency New Zealand

Merging into one organisation means the current 40-plus fire services organisations need to make their assets (fire engines, firefighting equipment, etc) available for Fire and Emergency New Zealand to perform its mandated fire and emergency functions. The legislation will make these assets available to Fire and Emergency New Zealand to use from its first day.

## Principle of keeping assets in the community that provided them

Assets obtained by fundraising or community donations would remain in use in that community. Those assets should continue to be used in that community/region using the philosophy that assets obtained for a community should be retained by the community.

## Achieving consistent standards across New Zealand’s fire services

The levy will remain the main source of funding for the new organisation. New money is being made available to support the transition to Fire and Emergency New Zealand and this will provide funding to address short-falls in rural requirements, support for volunteers and to establish a larger organisation for the sector.

The current standard for appliances, equipment and training provided by NZFS may not be what a community requires. Over time, and with the support of the Local Committees, the risks and needs of communities across New Zealand will be better informed and this will help Fire and Emergency New Zealand to agree standards for the services that it provides to New Zealand.

## Conservation and Defence continue their role in fighting fires

The Department of Conservation and the New Zealand Defence Force have people who sometimes fight fires, and may carry out other mandated emergency services, on their land and other land. The Department of Conservation is currently responsible for fire services in DOC areas and the New Zealand Defence Force is currently responsible for fire services in Defence areas.

DOC and Defence staff will not transfer to the new organisation, and operational activity will continue much like it operates today.

Fire and Emergency New Zealand will agree its operational relationship with each of DOC and Defence in a three-year service agreement. DOC’s current funding or contribution (including the current contribution to the Rural Fire Fighting Fund) will remain the same until the operational service agreements take effect. The operational service agreement with Defence will set out Defence’s financial and in-kind contribution to the new organisation.

## Industrial brigade system continues

The current industrial brigade system will continue and will be promoted to property owners and occupiers, such as forest owners and airports. Industrial Brigades will be renamed Industry Brigades in the new legislation to reflect the Brigades involved.

## There will still be a framework for controlling fire activity on private land

There is currently a permit system to enable controls on the use of fire on private land. Fire Controls will be detailed in the regulations that support the new legislation. The Department of Internal Affairs will release a public discussion document in mid-2016 seeking input from stakeholders on how the permit system should work once Fire and Emergency New Zealand is set up.

## Fire and Emergency New Zealand to have an effective reduction strategy

The new organisation will be required to have an effective fire reduction strategy, with both reduction and compliance activity. Fire and Emergency New Zealand will work with stakeholders to develop this strategy, and will ensure it has the resource and capability for these functions.

To help deter unwanted behaviour, and to reduce the incidence and consequence of fires, Fire and Emergency New Zealand will have a broad range of compliance tools, from education and guidance to prosecutions, so it has a tool that is appropriate for the level of unsafe behaviour.

## Fire and Emergency New Zealand responsible for fighting forestry fires

Fire and Emergency New Zealand will not levy forestry separately to the fire levy anymore. The expanded and updated fire levy will be the main source of funding for the new organisation. Fire and Emergency New Zealand will be responsible for fighting forest fires, and funding those services. Fire and Emergency New Zealand will work with those forestry owners who have an Industry Brigade to determine the respective roles and responsibilities.