# Background – the fire services review

## Fire services have not changed for a long time

New Zealand’s fire services have not fundamentally changed since the 1940s. Following the large Ballantyne’s fire in 1947, all urban fire brigades were brought under the Fire Services Act 1949. A national urban fire service was established on 1 April 1976 under the New Zealand Fire Service Commission, but the largely independent volunteer brigade structure was retained. In the rural sector, the Rural Fire Authorities were largely set up by the Forest and Rural Fire Act 1947 following the disastrous 1946 fire season. The last significant change in rural fire services occurred in the late 1970s, with the passing of the Forest and Rural Fires Act 1977.

Some change has occurred in the rural fire sector, with the voluntary merger of rural fire districts into Enlarged Rural Fire Districts (ERFDs) from the mid-1990s. The National Rural Fire Authority was established in 1991, part of the New Zealand Fire Service Commission, to provide national leadership and coordination in the rural sector.

## Role of firefighters has changed significantly since the 1970s

Firefighters now respond to a wide range of emergencies, including medical callouts, flooding, spills of hazardous substances, and road accidents. This “non-fire” activity now takes up more time – about 60 per cent – compared to responding to either building fires or vegetation or forest fires.

## Independent Fire Review Panel set up in 2012

In 2012 the Government tasked the Hon Paul Swain to lead a panel to look at how New Zealand could have 21st century fire services that operated seamlessly with other emergency services providers. The panel reported back at the end of 2012.

There was a favourable response to the [Swain report](http://www.dia.govt.nz/pubforms.nsf/URL/FireReviewPanelReport_7Feb2013.pdf/$file/FireReviewPanelReport_7Feb2013.pdf) from stakeholders who acknowledged that change was needed.

Cabinet accepted the recommendations of the Swain report in 2013 and implementation of some recommendations began. However progress on legislation was interrupted by the election being brought forward in 2014.

## Cabinet asked for a wider review to build on the Swain report

In response to the favourable reaction to the Swain report Cabinet asked for a wider review to look at additional issues such as funding and overall effectiveness. The current fire services review began in late 2014 and builds on the work done by the 2012 panel.

The panel lead by the Hon Paul Swain was constrained by its scope and by timeframes, but it was driving in the same direction that has been picked up in the current Review.

## Growing need for change and support from stakeholders

In the three years since the Swain report, there has been growing awareness that the problems facing the fire services will have greater impact in the future unless addressed. During this Review process there has been a groundswell of support from stakeholders for change, and a growing appetite for substantial change.

There is an increasing understanding of risk management and of the need to ensure that fire services can respond to the risk profile of particular communities or industries and adjust as these risk profiles change over time. The public profile of a firefighter is of someone who responds to emergencies and sometimes fights fires – not the other way around.

There is a growing awareness that with an ageing population and increasing urbanisation, the pool of potential volunteers is under pressure, particular in small rural towns. Volunteers make up 80% of our firefighting workforce – more commitment to volunteer firefighters is crucial to strengthen our overall ability to respond effectively to all communities.

Stakeholders also cited the following problems:

* changing legal, societal, and role expectations of firefighters
* variable leadership and lack of coordination within and between fire services
* inconsistent investment for some communities needs
* cultural differences generating operational coordination problems.

## Review was tasked with developing fit-for-purpose 21st century fire services

The objectives of the review are to ensure New Zealand’s fire services are modern, efficient, have a sustainable volunteer firefighter base and meet the needs of both urban and rural communities.

Fit-for-purpose 21st century fire services are:

* flexible and adaptable
* coordinated with strong leadership
* able to provide a consistent and effective service
* contributing through partnerships to strong local communities.

## Discussion document released in May 2015 for public consultation

The Discussion Document released on 27 May 2015 was developed after many conversations earlier this year with stakeholders including workforce representatives, rural services, city brigades, forest firefighters, the Department of Conservation, ambulance services, police and civil defence – to name a few. The Discussion Document proposed three options for new governance and support options for fire services, and two options for a new funding model.

The consultation produced a wealth of feedback on the principles or the key elements that are important to stakeholders – the change must ensure that fire services meet local community needs and risks, and have strong community engagement with local decision-making about the fire services. Alongside that there was an early, strong and clear message from stakeholders that more support for volunteers is key to improving our fire services.

## Move to *unified fire services with regional committees*

After considering the feedback from the consultation, and further talks with stakeholders, a new governance and support model was developed. The new model will unify New Zealand’s urban and rural fire services into a new fire services organisation. The new organisation will have regional committees to provide the regional voice in the delivery of services locally.

Cabinet approved the new model in November 2015. Decisions on how to fund the new model are still to be made. Legislation is planned to be introduced into Parliament in 2016, and the new organisation is planned to be set up from mid-2017. Stakeholders will be involved in planning the transition to the new organisation.