

Backing our firefighters:

National's three-point plan to fix Fire and Emergency New Zealand

More than 14,000 firefighters, including volunteers, paid staff, and frontline enablers, work hard every day to keep our communities safe, often leaving paid jobs or loved ones to respond when the public calls for help.

The service of our firefighters is one of the strongest expressions of community in New Zealand. They deserve more than our thanks; they deserve an organisation that is as reliable and prepared as they are. Nine years after Fire and Emergency New Zealand was created, frontline firefighters still face equipment and training shortages, and an organisation that has shown itself to be unable to respond to the demands and pressures of the front line.

National backs our firefighters, and we know that things can be much better. Fire and Emergency New Zealand can, and should, do better to support their volunteers.

National initiated an inquiry into Fire and Emergency New Zealand's fleet following confusing and contradictory evidence, years of delays, and regular reports from firefighters about trucks breaking down or being unavailable. There is widespread acknowledgement that the situation is not acceptable.

National will reset Fire and Emergency New Zealand by backing firefighters and restoring accountability.

A re-elected National Government will:

1. Restore accountability and reset Fire and Emergency New Zealand;
2. Support volunteer firefighters by requiring Fire and Emergency New Zealand to provide additional mental and physical health support;
3. Back the front line with the tools they need to do their job.



1. Restoring accountability and resetting the organisation.

Fire and Emergency New Zealand is a Crown agent governed by a board and accountable through the Internal Affairs portfolio. There are too many layers of bureaucracy and accountability separating the front line from Government.

The Board model has not given Ministers, Parliament or the public the clear line of sight and accountability they need over our national fire service. Firefighters need confidence that decisions about stations, training, staffing, health and safety, rural capability and major capital projects are being made for the right reasons and delivering tangible outcomes.

Similarly, the public need confidence that the money collected through their insurance levies is reaching the frontline.

Fire and Emergency New Zealand responds to structure and vegetation fires, floods, storms, motor vehicle accidents, hazardous substances, rescues, medical events and national emergencies. It is a core part of New Zealand's emergency response system and should be governed as one. A departmental agency model, similar to the National Emergency Management Agency, would retain professional operational leadership while creating a direct and visible line of accountability to the Minister for Emergency Management and Recovery.

National will:

- Clear unnecessary bureaucracy by removing the Fire and Emergency New Zealand Board, reorganising it as a departmental agency accountable to a Minister, similar to the National Emergency Management Agency;
- Make Fire and Emergency New Zealand directly accountable to the Minister for Emergency Management and Recovery, leaving operationally independent decision-making with fire and emergency professionals;
- Direct Fire and Emergency New Zealand to develop and implement a turnaround plan; and
- Meet all costs of this package of reforms within baselines.

2. Supporting volunteer firefighters.

More than 11,000 volunteers serve communities from over 600 stations. They step forward when their communities need them most. Many volunteers serve alongside paid firefighters at fires, crashes, floods and traumatic incidents, wear the same protective equipment and face the same risks.

Volunteer firefighters put themselves in harm's way for their communities; they deserve to be looked after if they are injured or harmed as a result of their service. That is why National will require Fire and Emergency New Zealand to provide better mental health and injury support for its frontline volunteers.

Volunteer firefighters can already access treatment and rehabilitation through the public health system and ACC. ACC provides a range of support, including cover for qualifying physical injuries, mental injuries caused by a covered physical injury, and treatment injuries. It can also provide weekly compensation to eligible volunteers where a covered injury prevents them from doing their usual paid work.

These protections are important, but National believes the support should not stop there.

National will require Fire and Emergency New Zealand to provide an additional safety net for operational volunteers affected by event-based mental injury and gradual process injuries arising from their service. This will help them access treatment, rehabilitation and financial support when their service affects their health or ability to work, through private insurance funded by Fire and Emergency New Zealand. Mental injury support is particularly important in rural communities, where volunteers may respond to incidents involving family or friends.

National will:

- Require Fire and Emergency New Zealand to provide private insurance covering event-based mental injury and gradual process injuries for operational volunteers, giving volunteers and their families greater support and financial security.

3. Backing the frontline with the tools they need to do the job.

Firefighters should have confidence that they have the tools for the job. They need to know that the truck in the bay will be available when the alarm sounds and that their equipment is safe and fit for purpose.

Fire and Emergency New Zealand has bought hundreds of Type 1 and 2 appliances since 2017. Additionally, they have ordered over 100 Type 3s and five aerial appliances. Serious failures in both acquisition and introduction to service have meant that less than half of Type 3s, and no aerial appliances, have entered regular operational service. The most recent Type 3s were ordered in 2019 but none of the 30 appliances are currently operational.

The answer is not simply to place another order. Appliances already purchased need to be accepted and put into use. Future purchases need to be transparent, follow due process, and not be delayed by constant design changes. More consideration should be given to off-the-shelf products.

Fleet renewal must also become continuous. A fire appliance should last 20-25 years, but that relies on Fire and Emergency New Zealand continually renewing fleet each year so there are no spikes of over-age appliances in use.

Additionally, the current state of live fire training is unacceptable. Too often, new recruits are seeing their first fire when responding to a real callout. Live fire training must be a priority for Fire and Emergency New Zealand.

National will:

- Ensure Fire and Emergency New Zealand get all currently ordered Type 3, 5 and 6 appliances delivered, accepted, and into operational use;
- Direct Fire and Emergency New Zealand to develop a long-term fleet management plan, with a 10-year procurement programme that makes better use of existing funding and brings average fleet age within expected limits;
- Use that plan to secure production slots in advance and establish a predictable replacement cycle, maintaining fleet age limits and avoiding costly, ad hoc purchasing;
- Direct Fire and Emergency New Zealand to prioritise a plan to restore full live fire training (not just gas prop) for all recruit training courses;
- Work with emergency services to modernise axle mass rules, cutting red tape to allow fire appliances to operate with the equipment and water firefighters need to save lives; and
- Allow Fire and Emergency New Zealand to prioritise operational capability over emissions profiles for frontline operational vehicles.

