Disaster Management Framework
Primary Care

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Approved by:	Chief Executive Officer
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Acknowledgements

Healthy North Coast acknowledges the Traditional Custodians of the lands across our region and pays respect to the Elders past, present and emerging. We recognise these lands were never ceded and acknowledge the continuation of culture and connection to land, sky and sea. We acknowledge Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples as Australia's First Peoples and honour the rich diversity of the world's oldest living culture.

Healthy North Coast acknowledges the enormous contribution of a number of Primary Health Networks (PHNs) who have developed excellent Disaster Management Frameworks in recognition of our role in a changing climate. We would like to specifically acknowledge North Western Melbourne PHN and Western NSW PHN for their Frameworks which helped to inform the basis of Healthy North Coast's thinking in the development and design of our approach.

Healthy North Coast would also like to recognise the work of the NSW PHN Disaster Management Network, formed following the 2019/2020 bushfires and generously coordinated by the Nepean Blue Mountains PHN, for their enormous collegial support of the ongoing work in the disaster preparedness, response and recovery space. We are stronger and more resilient together.

Healthy North Coast is an independent, not-for-profit organisation proudly delivering the PHN program in North Coast NSW. We are committed to improving the health of our communities through quality primary health care. The PHN program is an Australian Government initiative.

While the Australian Government helped fund this document, it has not reviewed the content and is not responsible for any injury, loss or damage however arising from the use of or reliance on the information provided herein.

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Contents

1. Purpose

The Disaster Management Framework supports Healthy North Coast (HNC) to prepare for, respond to, and recover from disasters that have a health impact on communities in our region. It is the foundation for a coordinated effort to ensure the North Coast primary health system interfaces and coordinates with the broader health system to respond to and mitigate adverse health consequences for communities.

The framework underpins the role Healthy North Coast plays as a funded entity of the Australian Government, and its critical role in providing support and guidance to primary care in planning for and responding to natural disasters as well as supporting improved outcomes for communities impacted by disasters.

2. Background and Context

Disasters that require a health response are part of our operating environment. For the North Coast, the most significant threats include bushfires, cyclone /east coast lows, flooding and significant landslips.

Climate change

The climate is changing, and global modelling indicates that further change is already locked in. The World Health Organisation has described climate change as the 'biggest health threat facing humanity'.[1] Certain areas are predicted to experience more severe impacts than others, with Northern NSW identified as a disaster hotspot.[2] Local Government Areas (LGAs) in our region are consistently ranked among the top 5 most affected by fire, flood and storms for both frequency and severity in NSW.[3] This situation is predicted to intensify in coming years. Rural and regional areas are at greater risk of escalating social and economic costs of future natural disasters due to higher levels of social disadvantage, fewer services and supports, geographic barriers and lower levels of economic opportunity.

Long-term impacts

Healthy North Coast recognises that climate change will create a significant health challenge on the North Coast over the coming decades. By 2050 it is expected that the costs of natural disasters will reach $73 billion dollars per year, with at least half of these costs attributable to social costs arising from natural disasters including mental health issues, exacerbation of chronic disease, increased rates of family violence, alcohol and drug misuse and increased social and economic disadvantage. There are additional social costs that are harder to measure and therefore not quantified in this

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[1] World Health Organisation (2021), https://www.who.int/news-room/fact-sheets/detail/climate-change-and-health#:~:text=Climate%20change%20%2D%20the%20biggest%20health,caused%20by%20this%20unfolding%20crisis.

[2] The Conversation (2016), https://theconversation.com/natural-disasters-are-affecting-some-of-australias-most-disadvantaged-communities-68165

[3] Sewell, T., Stephens, R., Dominey-Howes, D., Bruce, E., & Perkins-Kirkpatrick, S. (2016), *Disaster declarations associated with bushfires, floods and storms in New South Wales, Australia between 2004 and 2014.* Scientific Reports (6). https://www.nature.com/articles/srep36369

projection including impacts on health and wellbeing, community connectedness and the broader impacts of deaths and injuries.

Healthy North Coast plays a key role in supporting community in times of disaster and in recovery thereafter. This framework sets out our approach to preparing for, responding to, and recovering from emergencies that may have an impact on the health of our community, whatever their scale and impact.

Disasters

Healthy North Coast recognises the important link between communities, government and other response structures in ensuring effective disaster response, recovery and long-term resilience. Healthy North Coast takes an integrated all-hazards approach to disasters where the functions and actions of HNC apply to all types of hazards, natural and man-made. These include but are not limited to bushfires, floods, storms, heatwaves, earthquakes, tsunamis, communicable diseases such as pandemics, and terrorism.

Healthy North Coast has supported community through a range of disasters over recent years. These include:

- 2019/20 bushfires
- COVID-19 global pandemic
- 2021 Mid-North Coast floods
- 2022 North Coast floods

3. Healthy North Coast Overview

Healthy North Coast works alongside community members and health professionals to improve access to well-coordinated quality health care. We work with our partners in the state and federal government and the non-government sector to transform the healthcare system and reduce health inequalities.

HNC priorities are:

- Better mental health and emotional wellbeing
- Closing the gap in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander health
- Improving our population's health and wellbeing
- Building a highly skilled and capable health workforce
- Improving the integration of health services through electronic and digital health platforms
- Improving the health and wellbeing of older people
- Strengthening community alcohol and drugs treatment services

The HNC region covers 35,570 square kilometres from the Queensland border in the north to Port Macquarie in the south. The population in the region is 520,000 with high rates of older people and disadvantage. The organisation also covers the Arakwal, Birpai, Bundjalung, Dunghutti, Githabul, Gumbaynggirr and Yaegl Nations which number approximately 25,000 people (ABS 2016). Healthy North Coast covers the geographic regions of mid-north coast and far north coast of NSW.

Figure 1 Healthy North Coast footprint

4. Role of Primary Care and PHNs in Disaster

In the event of a natural disaster, state and territory governments have primary responsibility for protecting life, property and environment within their jurisdictions. Depending on the scale of the event, the Commonwealth Government provides financial assistance and non-financial assistance, including deployment of the Australian Defence Force (ADF) to support local recovery efforts.

Primary care has an important role to play in disasters. Primary care providers often share the disaster experience with their local community affording them a deep understanding of the health care needs and real-time effects of the disaster in the community[4].

Primary Health Networks do not have a formal role in state and territory disaster management arrangements, however, the role of primary care in natural disasters has been considered widely. The Royal Australian College of General Practice (RACGP) recognises that general practice is the 'linchpin of Australia's health service' in responding to emergencies, from the immediate and acute phase through to long-term recovery.[5]

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[4] RACGP (2020), GP experiences in disaster healthcare. https://www1.racgp.org.au/ajgp/2020/march/general-practitioners-in-the-field

[5] RACGP (2017), Managing emergencies in general practice. https://www.racgp.org.au/download/Documents/e-health/Managing-emergencies-in-general-practice.pdf

The 2020 PHN Cooperative White Paper The role of Primary Health Networks in natural disasters and emergencies clearly articulates the benefits of PHN representation in formal emergency management arrangements. It notes that while Commonwealth and State agencies hold responsibility for on-the-ground disaster management during natural disasters or health emergencies, PHNs are well placed to coordinate a strong primary health care response that can deliver care where and when it is needed, reducing pressure on the acute sector and ensuring an organised and effective response[6]. The White Paper further states that 'it is essential that disaster management is integrated and coordinated between all key stakeholders and the role of primary health care and PHNs is recognised and supported by all levels of government.'

This statement for the inclusion of primary care in disaster arrangements is further supported by the Recommendations from the Royal Commission into Disaster Management Arrangements (2020) which states:

> *Australian, state and territory governments should develop arrangements that facilitate greater inclusion of primary healthcare providers in disaster management, including: representation on relevant disaster committees and plans and providing training, education and other supports.*[7]

Implementation of the Royal Commission recommendations is likely in the near future.

The goal for Healthy North Coast's involvement in disaster management is to ensure that primary health care services have improved capacity to prepare for, respond to and recover from adverse impacts of disaster and other emergencies and that by supporting community-led approaches, communities across the North Coast are resilient, well connected and have high levels of mental health and wellbeing.

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[6]PHN Cooperative. The role of Primary Health Networks in natural disasters and emergencies. https://www.nbmphn.com.au/Resources/About/The-Role-of-Primary-Health-Networks-in-Natural-Dis

[7] The Royal Commission into National Natural Disaster Arrangements. (2020), https://naturaldisaster.royalcommission.gov.au/publications/royal-commission-national-natural-disaster-arrangements-report
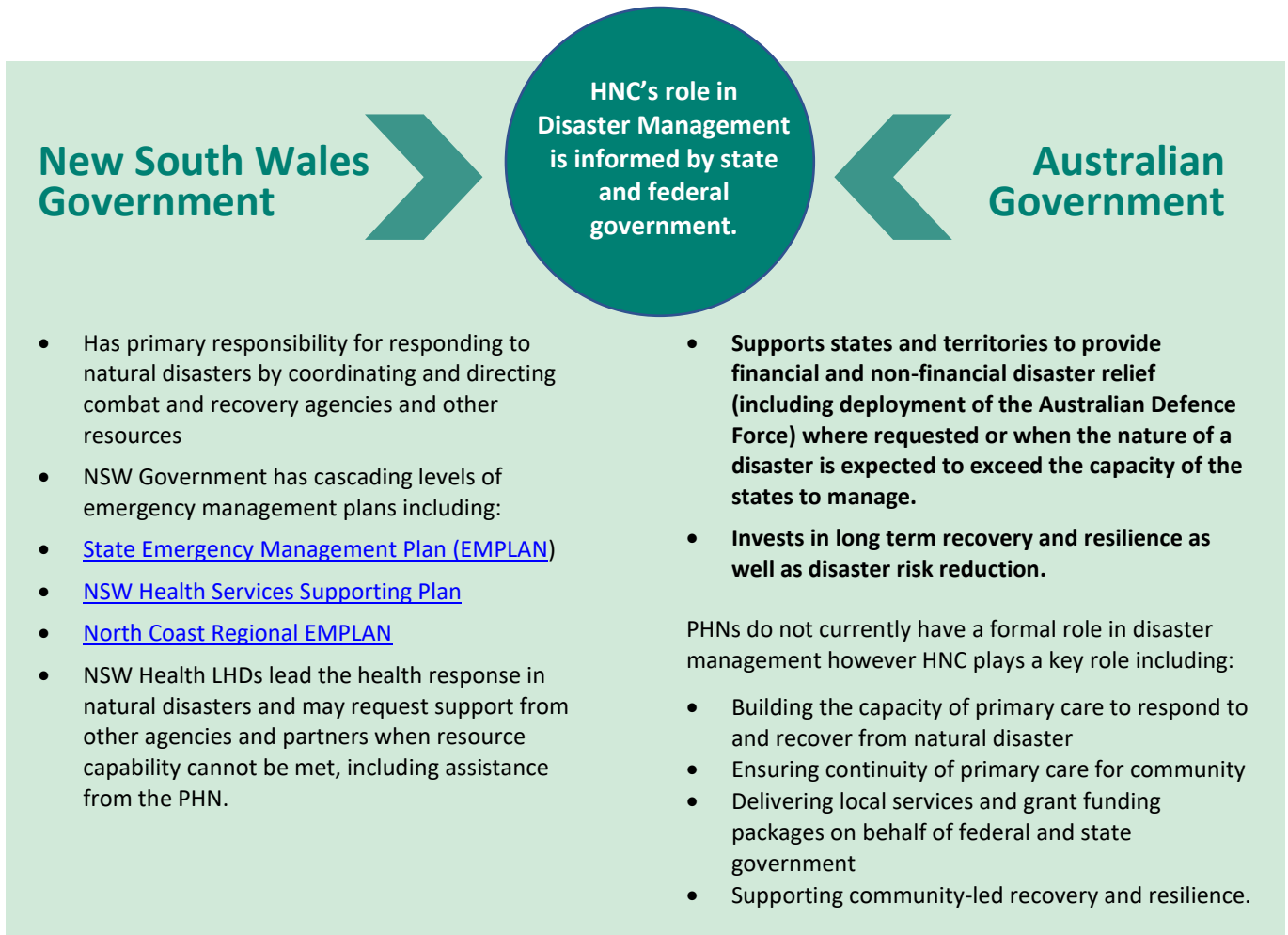
New South Wales Government

HNC's role in Disaster Management is informed by state and federal government.

Australian Government

- Has primary responsibility for responding to natural disasters by coordinating and directing combat and recovery agencies and other resources
- NSW Government has cascading levels of emergency management plans including:
- State Emergency Management Plan (EMPLAN)
- NSW Health Services Supporting Plan
- North Coast Regional EMPLAN
- NSW Health LHDs lead the health response in natural disasters and may request support from other agencies and partners when resource capability cannot be met, including assistance from the PHN.

- **Supports states and territories to provide financial and non-financial disaster relief (including deployment of the Australian Defence Force) where requested or when the nature of a disaster is expected to exceed the capacity of the states to manage.**
- **Invests in long term recovery and resilience as well as disaster risk reduction.**

PHNs do not currently have a formal role in disaster management however HNC plays a key role including:

- Building the capacity of primary care to respond to and recover from natural disaster
- Ensuring continuity of primary care for community
- Delivering local services and grant funding packages on behalf of federal and state government
- Supporting community-led recovery and resilience.

Figure 2: Overview of Federal and State Disaster Management arrangements

NOTE: The 2020 Royal Commission into Disaster Management Arrangements made a number of recommendations in relation to primary care. Once implemented, PHNs may have a formal mandated role in disaster management*.

5. Framework Development Process

This Disaster Management Framework is informed by organisational insights arising from the Northern NSW floods in 2022 and supports learnings from the bushfires of 2019/20, the Mid-North Coast floods in 2021 and the COVID-19 pandemic. Key staff were invited to participate in focus groups about the organisation's response to the 2022 Northern NSW floods. Staff considered individual, team and whole-of-organisation perspectives with a frame for each of 'what worked well, what didn't work well, what could be done differently'. A thematic analysis of the responses yielded insights that informed the review of HNC's existing framework and identified organisational

development needs, including business improvement as well as training and development and role clarity.

6. HNC Internal and External roles in Disaster Management

The Disaster Management Framework is one of a suite of guidance documents that set out roles and responsibilities for responding to disasters that affect HNC business operations. The documents guiding our internal and external roles are outlined in Figure 3 below.
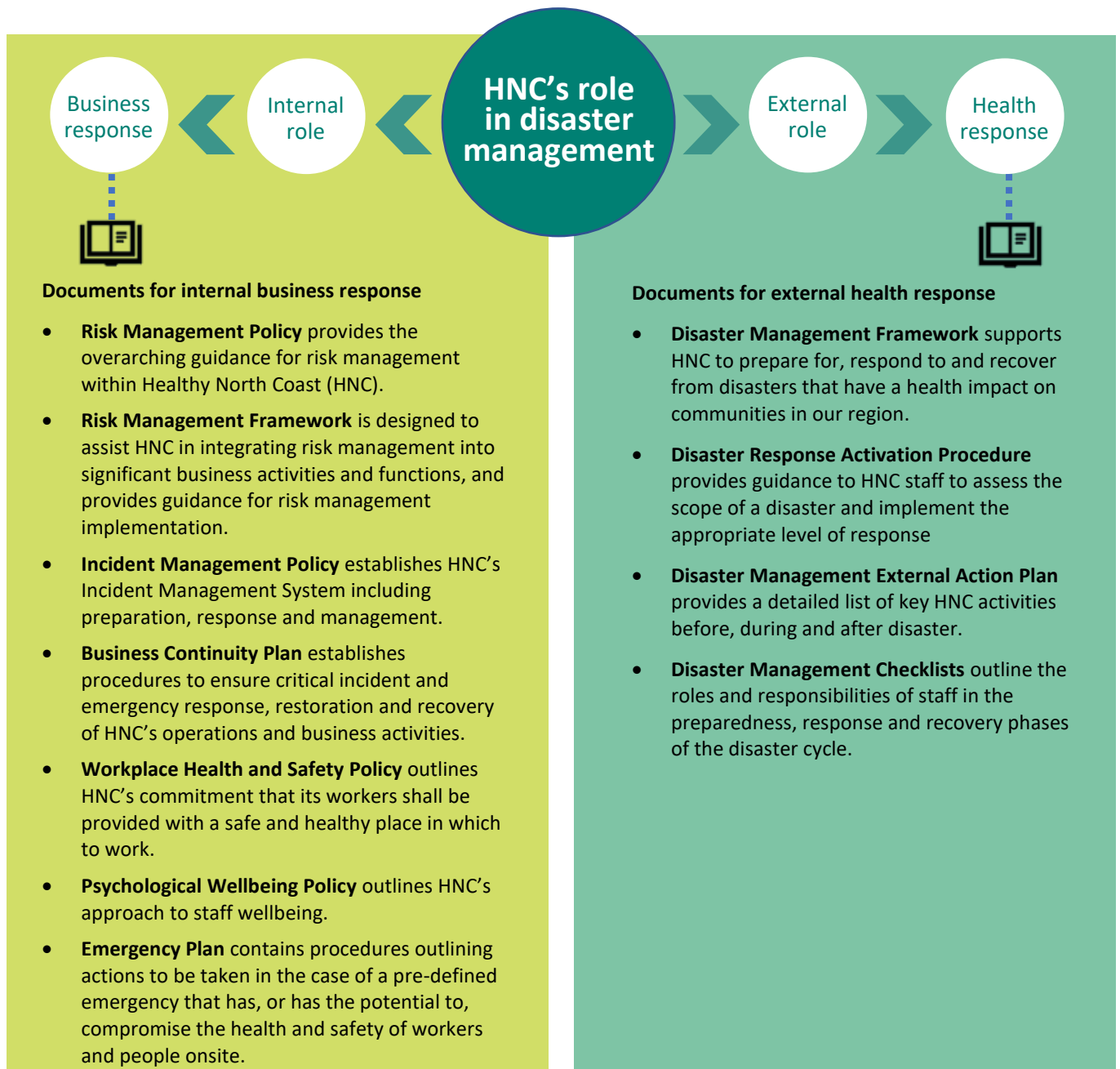

Documents for internal business response

- **Risk Management Policy** provides the overarching guidance for risk management within Healthy North Coast (HNC).

- **Risk Management Framework** is designed to assist HNC in integrating risk management into significant business activities and functions, and provides guidance for risk management implementation.

- **Incident Management Policy** establishes HNC's Incident Management System including preparation, response and management.

- **Business Continuity Plan** establishes procedures to ensure critical incident and emergency response, restoration and recovery of HNC's operations and business activities.

- **Workplace Health and Safety Policy** outlines HNC's commitment that its workers shall be provided with a safe and healthy place in which to work.

- **Psychological Wellbeing Policy** outlines HNC's approach to staff wellbeing.

- **Emergency Plan** contains procedures outlining actions to be taken in the case of a pre-defined emergency that has, or has the potential to, compromise the health and safety of workers and people onsite.

Documents for external health response

- **Disaster Management Framework** supports HNC to prepare for, respond to and recover from disasters that have a health impact on communities in our region.

- **Disaster Response Activation Procedure** provides guidance to HNC staff to assess the scope of a disaster and implement the appropriate level of response

- **Disaster Management External Action Plan** provides a detailed list of key HNC activities before, during and after disaster.

- **Disaster Management Checklists** outline the roles and responsibilities of staff in the preparedness, response and recovery phases of the disaster cycle.

Figure 3: HNC's key crisis documents

Guiding principles

HNC has developed a set of guiding principles that will inform our work in planning for, responding to and recovering from natural disasters.

- **Coordination and integration:** The services people need, including health services, are part of one service system that must be provided in a coordinated and integrated manner.
- **Sustainability:** Responses should make use of and enhance existing services as much as possible to ensure sustainable support for those affected.
- **Community-driven:** Plans for recovery must include representatives of those who were affected by the event in every stage of the recovery process.
- **Flexibility:** The response and recovery process must remain flexible to support the range of needs of all those affected as they arise.
- **Training and professional development:** Those providing services must be appropriately trained, supported, and have access to regular supervision and secondary consultations. Where possible, service providers should be brought together in shared learning and networking environments, including face-to-face.

7. Disaster severity scale

The North Coast of NSW is accustomed to severe weather. Not all severe weather leads to natural disaster, and not all disasters require HNC to stand up disaster management procedures. The disaster severity scale supports staff to assess the severity of an event and assess the appropriate level of response.

	MINOR	MODERATE	MAJOR	CATASTROPHIC
Impact	Very localised	Generally localised	Widespread and possibly severe	Extremely large-scale event
Response	Limited/no input from HNC	May require some assistance	Coordinated government agency response with assistance required	Coordinated state and commonwealth agency response with significant assistance required
Plans and procedures	Standard operating procedures	Crisis Management Team activated	Crisis Management Team and potentially Disaster Response Hub activated	Crisis Management Team and potentially Disaster Response Hub activated. Plans potentially unable to meet demand
Resource	Limited organisational input	Some assistance required	HNC assistance required	Organisational and local resources unable to meet demand
Recovery	Very few challenges	Targeted activities	Region-wide programs to support recovery	Request for support from Commonwealth and respond as required

Please refer to the Healthy North Coast Disaster Response Activation Procedure for detailed instructions regarding disaster response activation.

8. Crisis Management Team and Disaster Response Hub Activation

Depending on the scale of the disaster, Healthy North Coast may activate a Crisis Management Team (CMT) and Disaster Response Hub. Activation is governed by a series of decisions that evaluate the likely risk, impact and consequence of an incident that may affect HNC's communities, staff or business operations.

Please see the Healthy North Coast Disaster Response Activation Procedure for the disaster response activation flow chart.

9. Disaster Response Hub

Where there is a major or catastrophic disaster, the Crisis Management Team will stand up the Disaster Response Hub, a temporary operational group that supports HNC disaster response activities. Staff with appropriate skills and content knowledge can apply for secondment to the Hub to undertake the key roles* outlined below:

Disaster Communications Lead (Internal)
Key Responsibilities:
- Undertake daily monitoring and surveillance for emerging risks via BOM, RFS and other key sites
- Provide briefing of event status and impact via a situation report (SitREP) to every CMT meeting
- Share SitREP on internal Teams channel
- Draft internal communications for changing whether warnings for release by Corporate Services via HRA
- Post daily all-staff CMT key issues and initiatives to Teams channel
- Monitor staff chat across teams for issues and report to Hub coordinator
- Take phone, email and web enquiries & action via directorates. LOG actions & report CMT
- Scan community lead social media sites for health and wellbeing issues and report to directorates and via CMT
- Scan Teams channel for any local intel and escalate. Manage comms on teams

Disaster Communications Support (external)
Key responsibilities:
- Provide dedicated communications support to Operations, Communications and Digital Services (OCDS) team
- Undertake daily media monitoring
- MP briefings
- All tasks as required by OCDS team

Staff Logistics and Wellbeing
Key responsibilities:
- Support People, Planning and Performance (PPP) team to monitor staff impact and attempt to contact all staff who have not registered their status to the organisation. Escalate concerns to Hub Coordinator/Directors

- Report on connectivity issues and work with CMT to provide access to equipment or other technology supports to bring staff back online quickly
- Monitor the return to work of staff and report to CMT
- Ensure staff availability and return to work is updated daily
- Support PPP to develop HRA messaging
- Identify staff unaffected by disaster and who have capacity are effectively utilised
- Engage with and provide assurance to staff unaffected by the disaster

Administration Support and Logistics
Key responsibilities
- Provide secretariat support to the CMT
- Provide PPE and other critical equipment to staff and stakeholders
- Ensure CMT has access to Disaster Response Kit
- Coordinate distribution of hard copy collateral into communities
- Monitor fleet status (fuel and availability)
- Provide support to DRH staff.

  * These seconded roles may change depending on the nature of the disaster.

Staff seconded to the Hub are required to have prior approval from their manager and will need to ensure that their substantive workload can be managed by team members. Secondment to the Disaster Response Hub will be time-limited and only continue for as long as the CMT is in operation. Staff seconded into the Hub may be eligible for acting higher duties.

10.   Disaster Management Model

The Disaster Management Framework is structured around the four phases of emergency management: preparedness, response, recovery and prevention (PPRR).

Disaster Cycle

The cyclical nature of this model is important as it highlights that managing emergencies happens all the time, not just during 'the season' (for floods and bushfire, for example). It also shows the way the phases blend into each other and overlap rather than being discrete categories.

It is useful to be familiar with the four phases as they are part of the everyday language of the disaster management sector and inform the design and allocation of responsibilities in disaster management planning.

Figure 6: The cycle model for prevention, preparedness, response and recovery

Preparedness: In this phase, Healthy North Coast will undertake annual desktop scenario exercises, build and support organisational awareness of the disaster season and liaise with commissioned providers and the primary care sector to support preparedness. Potential emergencies are monitored and assessed based on risk/threat.

Response: During this phase, HNC will stand up the Crisis Management Team (CMT) and enact plans to respond. HNC may receive external direction to support response efforts (e.g., from NNSW LHD or the Australian Government). Depending on the scale of the event, the response phase may require significant staffing resourcing. Throughout this time, HNC will regularly communicate with staff, commissioned providers, general practice and community (as appropriate).

Recovery: For HNC, this phase sees coordination of support for disaster-affected communities. Depending on the scale of the event, this could include commissioning additional services and initiatives and supporting primary care to provide continuity of care to community with a view to restoring emotional, social and physical wellbeing. Recovery may be ongoing for many years. Formal organisational mental health debriefs for key personnel involved in the disaster should occur.

Prevention: While some recovery supports are still being delivered during the prevention phase, there has been a shift back to business as usual. This is the time for HNC to debrief, review and revise disaster management guidelines and contribute to external debriefs, where relevant. HNC will also work to reduce the severity of impact of future events by investing in community and sector resilience and improving adaptability to climate change.

Please see Appendices for roles, responsibilities Checklists and key activities in the Preparedness, Response and Recovery phases of the disaster cycle.

11. Monitoring, Reporting and Review

This Framework and associated operational plans are reviewed annually by the Healthy Communities Directorate. In the event of a natural disaster, the Healthy Communities Directorate will undertake an internal review of operations, incorporate learnings into the framework and update training modules where appropriate.

HNC's Community Advisory Council, Aboriginal Advisory Council and Clinical Advisory Council will be provided with an overview when reviews occur.

12. Supporting Information

Related Information – Located on HRA	
Governing Policy	N/A
Procedures	Disaster Preparedness Procedure Disaster Response Activation Procedure Disaster Response Procedure Disaster Recovery Procedure
Forms & Templates	N/A
Supporting Documents / Resources	Disaster Management Action Plan_Appendix A Crisis Management Team Terms of Reference