



# Disaster Management Framework

## Primary Care

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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 significant contribution of our health partners, the Northern NSW Local Health District and Mid North Coast Local Health District, Aboriginal Medical Services, and our Primary Health Network (PHNs) peers who have supported and guided the ongoing development of our disaster management practice.

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Healthy North Coast is an independent, not-for-profit organisation proudly delivering the PHN program in the North Coast of 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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# Disaster Management Framework

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## 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'.<sup>1</sup> Certain areas are predicted to experience more severe impacts than others, with Northern NSW identified as a disaster hotspot.<sup>2</sup> 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.<sup>3</sup> 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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<sup>1</sup> World Health Organisation (2021), <https://www.who.int/news-room/fact-sheets/detail/climate-change-and-health#:~:text=Climate%20change%20D%20the%20biggest%20health,caused%20by%20this%20unfolding%20crisis>.

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

<sup>3</sup> 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 as part of the coordinated response led by NSW Health. 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 Northern Rivers Floods
- 2025 Ex-Tropical Cyclone Alfred
- 2025 NSW Mid North Coast Severe Weather Event

## 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 include:

- 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 32,767 square kilometres from the Queensland border in the north to Port Macquarie in the south. The population in the region is 540,976 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 38, 378 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. Primary Health Networks are included as participating organisations under the Health Services Functional Area organisation structure. Depending on the scale of the event, the Australian 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 supporting NSW Health to lead the health response per the relevant EmPlan. 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.<sup>4</sup>

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

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

health service' in responding to emergencies, from the immediate and acute phase through to long-term recovery.<sup>5</sup>

In 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<sup>6</sup>. 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.<sup>7</sup>*

From the 1<sup>st</sup> of July 2025, the Australian government funded PHN's with the equivalent of one senior manager role to be focussed solely on disaster management. The purpose of this role is to:

- **Coordinate:** Support and coordinate the primary care contribution to health emergency preparedness and coordination processes to identify primary health needs and build preparedness and resilience.
- **Build capacity:** Assist local primary care providers in emergency planning, response and recovery.
- **Continuity of access:** Make plans to support local primary care providers continuing to operate during emergencies e.g. by arranging alternative premises.

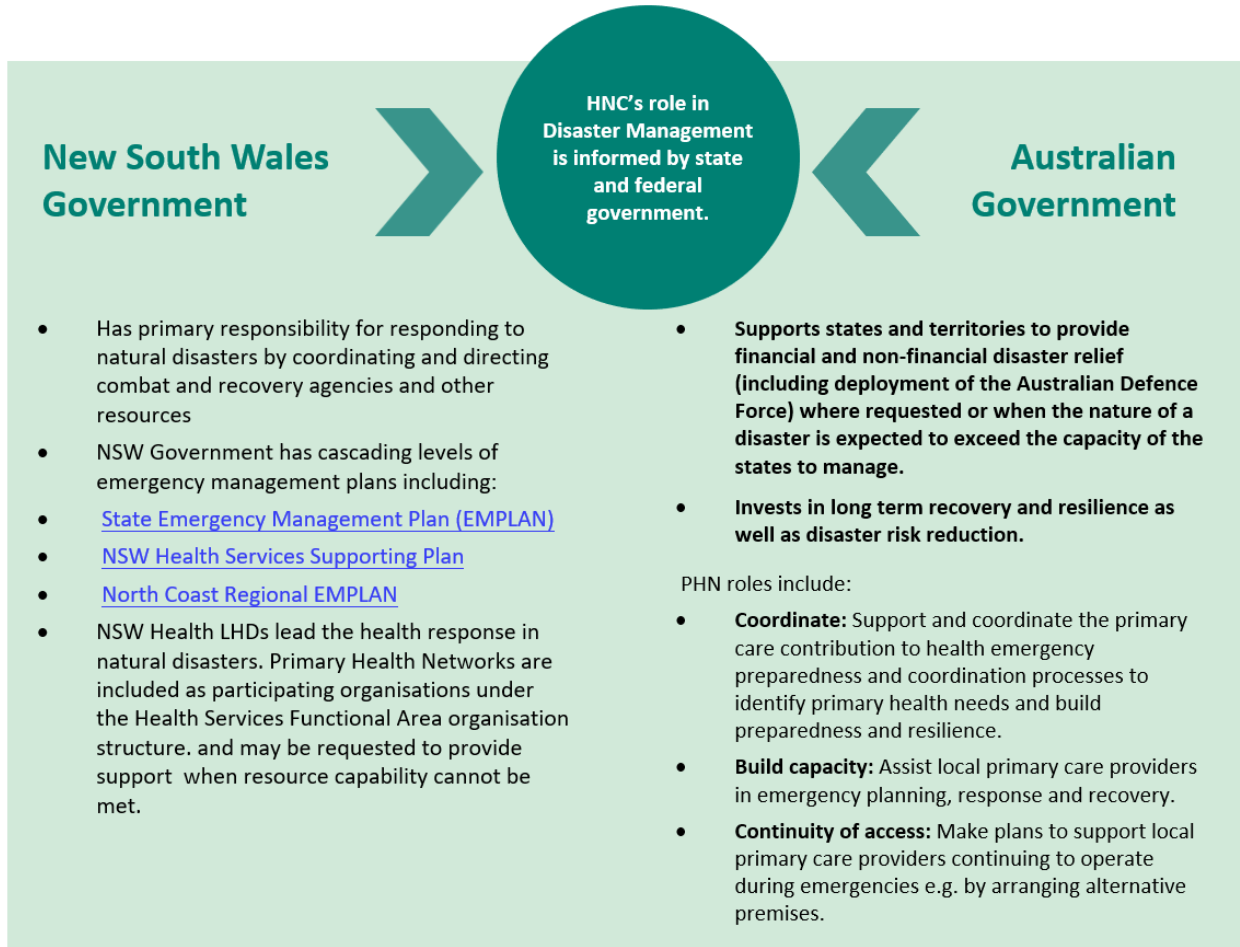
In line with principles of continuous improvement, Healthy North Coast remains committed to reviewing and improving disaster management practice, to ensure that primary health care services have improved capacity to prepare for, respond to and recover from adverse impacts of disaster and other emergencies 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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<sup>5</sup> RACGP (2017), Managing emergencies in general practice. <https://www.racgp.org.au/download/Documents/e-health/Managing-emergencies-in-general-practice.pdf>

<sup>6</sup> PHN Cooperative. The role of Primary Health Networks in natural disasters and emergencies. <https://www.nbmpn.com.au/Resources/About/The-Role-of-Primary-Health-Networks-in-Natural-Dis>

<sup>7</sup> The Royal Commission into National Natural Disaster Arrangements. (2020), <https://naturaldisaster.royalcommission.gov.au/publications/royal-commission-national-natural-disaster-arrangements-report>



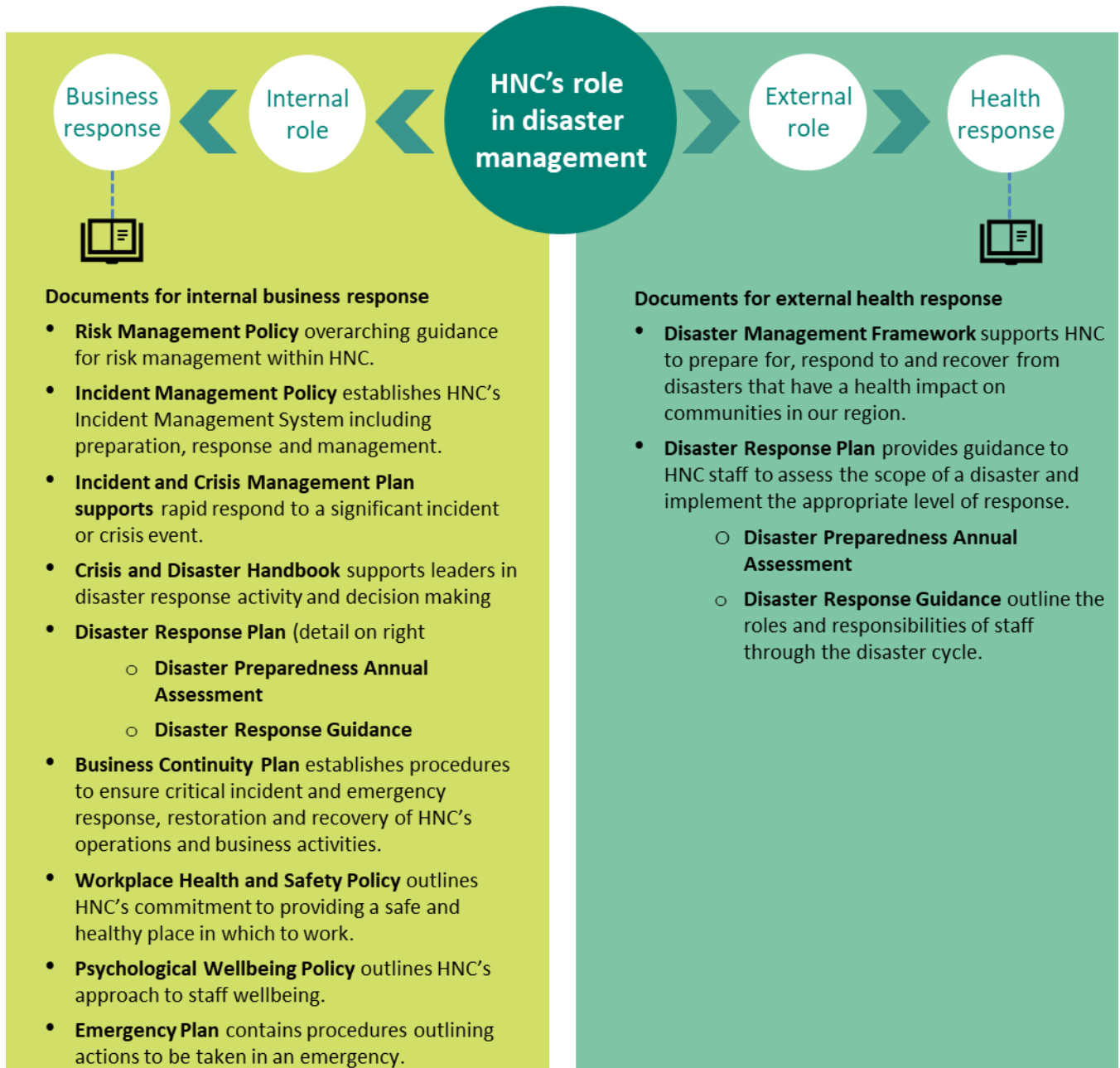
## 5. Framework development process

This Disaster Management Framework is informed by organisational insights arising from the 2022 Northern Rivers Floods, and supports learnings from the bushfires of 2019/20, the Mid-North Coast floods in 2021, the COVID-19 pandemic and 2025 weather events (Ex-Tropical Cyclone Alfred and NSW Mid North Coast Severe Weather Event).

## 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.

*Figure 3: HNC's key crisis documents*



## 7. 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 a 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 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.

## 8. 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.

This matrix has been contextualised to HNC's operations and considers five factors adapted from the incident classification criteria in AIIMS-4 (Australasian Inter-service Incident Management System)

The severity ratings minor, moderate, major and catastrophic reflect common terms used in risk assessment, with detail within the table articulating implications for HNC.

The severity rating assigned to the disaster will provide context for response decision making, internal/external communications, and agency/partner interactions.

## 9. Crisis Management Team and Disaster Surge Workforce Activation

Depending on the scale of the disaster, Healthy North Coast may activate the Incident Management Team (IMT) and/or Crisis Management Team (CMT) and Disaster Surge Workforce (a temporary operational group that supports HNC external disaster response activities). 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.

## 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 NSW Health 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.

## 11. Monitoring, reporting and review

This Framework and associated operational plans are reviewed annually by the Integrated Community Wellbeing Directorate. In the event of a natural disaster, the Integrated Community Wellbeing 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                               |   |
|---|---|
| Legislation, Standard and/or Government Directive | <a href="#">State Emergency Management Plan (EMPLAN)</a><br><a href="#">NSW Health Services Functional Area Supporting Plan</a> |
| Policy  | <a href="#">Organisational Resilience Policy</a>  |
| Procedures  | <a href="#">Disaster Response Plan</a>  |
| Forms & Templates                                 | N/A   |
| Supporting Documents / Resources                  | <a href="#">Crisis and Disaster Management Handbook</a>   |