

25 August 2025

MDC Submission on Building New Zealand's Long-Term Resilience to Hazards (Submission is on an online form)

Question 1: What is your feedback on the issues and opportunities outlined in the briefing? Are there any you think we should explore further or new ones we have missed?

Manawātū District Council acknowledges the comprehensive scope of the briefing but considers that several critical issues require further exploration and others have been overlooked entirely.

MDC seeks greater clarity on multi-level governance coordination mechanisms. The briefing acknowledges the need for whole-of-society approaches but fails to adequately address the complex coordination challenges between central government, regional councils, and local authorities. Research demonstrates that successful resilience requires sophisticated governance arrangements that go beyond simple hierarchical models. MDC questions how the proposed frameworks will avoid the coordination failures that have historically undermined disaster response effectiveness.

MDC considers that the briefing's treatment of local government capacity constraints requires substantial expansion. While infrastructure deficits are acknowledged at a national level, the document underestimates the institutional capacity challenges facing councils. Research shows councils face "significant barriers to planning for and delivering climate adaptation action" including lack of mandate, technical evidence deficits, and severe resourcing constraints. The Council questions how national frameworks will address these fundamental capacity issues.

The briefing document does not highlight the need for robust frameworks that identify and address differential vulnerability within communities. Research demonstrates that elevated levels of social vulnerability correlate with low levels of community resilience. MDC questions how the briefing's generic approach will address place-specific social dynamics, particularly in rural communities facing unique vulnerabilities including social isolation and dependence on climate-sensitive industries.

Similarly, while community-led solutions are mentioned, the briefing does not highlight the need for robust frameworks for participatory resilience measurement. MDC considers that New Zealand's Community Resilience Indicators Project demonstrates the superior effectiveness of "community-centred approaches to measure community resilience" using participatory methods.

MDC recognises that this Briefing is intended to guide discussion and inform future policy development and seeks clarity on how subsequent policy frameworks and strategies resulting from this briefing will explicitly incorporate and align with existing regional and local hazard and climate impact assessments. This integration is essential to ensure that national resilience efforts build upon, rather than duplicate, established regional knowledge and effectively reflect place-based risks and priorities. The Council encourages the development of clear mechanisms to facilitate coordination and knowledge-sharing between national, regional, and local levels to enhance coherence and enable practical resilience building on the ground.

Question 2: Do you have any views on the definition of national resilience outlined on page 5 of the briefing?

MDC supports the broad definition of national resilience provided on page 5 of the draft briefing. We agree that national resilience should be understood as the ability to absorb, adapt to, recover from, and transform through shocks and stresses. The definition's emphasis on being ready before hazards strike, responding effectively when they do, and learning from each event to build stronger systems is highly appropriate.

MDC supports acknowledgement that resilience "does not mean being immune" to hazards but rather managing their impacts and adapting to a changing world to minimize harm. We appreciate that the definition highlights the interconnected nature of our economic, physical, social, and environmental systems, and the crucial role of informed, prepared communities in a resilient nation. This aligns with our local experience that effective resilience-building requires coordination across all sectors and well-prepared citizens at the community level.

Question 3: Please provide any other feedback you have on the draft briefing.

MDC considers the briefing's approach to multi-level governance fundamentally inadequate for effective implementation. The document presents an oversimplified view of governance arrangements that fails to address the coordination challenges that have historically undermined disaster response effectiveness in New Zealand.

MDC also questions how the proposed national frameworks will avoid creating unfunded mandates for local government. Research demonstrates that effective resilience requires substantial investment in local institutional capacity, yet the briefing lacks concrete mechanisms for addressing the technical expertise and resource constraints facing smaller councils.

MDC considers the briefing's approach to community engagement insufficient. While community-led solutions are mentioned, the document lacks robust participatory frameworks for genuine community empowerment. International best practice demonstrates the superior effectiveness of Community-Based Disaster Risk Reduction (CBDRR) models that enable long-term community ownership. MDC seeks clarification on how communities will be empowered to build their resilience to hazards, rather than merely consulted. Research and experience show that participatory approaches to resilience measurement produce more meaningful and actionable outcomes than top-down assessments.

In response to the mention of increase in wildfire risk in the briefing document, MDC signals that widespread radiata pine afforestation can exacerbate wildfire risk by increasing fuel loads and landscape continuity, particularly where large contiguous blocks are established without risk controls. MDC recommends national policy to require wildfire risk management plans for exotic/carbon forests (with FENZ/Scion guidance), to use spatial design to break fuel continuity (species mix, buffers, mosaics, defensible space near settlements and lifelines), and to set stewardship obligations over the full crediting/rotation period (access, fuel-breaks, maintenance). These steps align with New Zealand evidence on afforestation–wildfire interactions and the observed increase in Very High/Extreme fire-weather days.

MDC underscores the need for practical funding mechanisms and policy tools to implement resilience measures. While early investment is cost-effective, upfront costs pose equity and affordability challenges—especially for smaller councils with constrained rating bases. We

support prioritising high-benefit, risk-reducing investments and careful distributional analysis, and recommends dedicated central-government funding streams (e.g., contestable funds or co-funding) to accelerate action in high-risk areas. Recognising the limits of traditional cost-benefit analysis for resilience, MDC seeks enhanced decision frameworks—building on Treasury’s Living Standards Framework and the Natural Hazards Platform—to capture long-term economic, social, and environmental returns and strengthen business cases.

Finally, MDC considers that without addressing these fundamental issues, the briefing's ambitious vision risks becoming another example of policy aspirations divorced from implementation realities. MDC emphasizes that effective resilience cannot be built through national strategy documents alone but requires sustained investment in local institutional capacity, genuine community partnership, and governance frameworks that recognize the complex, place-based nature of disaster risk and response.