



**Te Kāwanatanga o Aotearoa**  
New Zealand Government



**ELECTORAL  
COMMISSION**  
TE KAITIAKI TAKE KŌWHIRI

# **Introduction to inter-agency protocols for New Zealand's 2023 General Election**

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## Purpose

1. This document introduces the inter-agency protocols for New Zealand's 2023 General Election. They have been developed by the Electoral Commission, together with the Ministry of Justice, the Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet (DPMC), Government Communications Security Bureau (GCSB) and the New Zealand Security Intelligence Service (NZSIS). The document sets out the principles in accordance with which these protocols have been prepared, and which guide the approach to the General Election.
2. The protocols clarify the relationship between the Electoral Commission and government agencies by setting out respective roles and responsibilities for the delivery of, and support to, the General Election.<sup>1</sup> Collectively, the Electoral Commission and government agencies are committed to ensuring the integrity of the electoral system. The protocols address specific areas for where clear guidance is required:
  - a. A **protocol on the management of election disruptions**, which outlines the approach taken by the Electoral Commission and government agencies to mitigate and manage hazards and threats which could disrupt the General Election; and
  - b. A **protocol on communications related to the 2023 General Election process**, that outlines which government agencies will officially communicate with the public to support participation in the election, the approach for responding to public enquiries, as well as principles that will be followed for addressing misinformation and disinformation during the election period<sup>2</sup>.
  - c. The **principles and protocols for the GCSB and the NZSIS in relation to the 2023 General Election**, which sets out the processes that would guide any response by the intelligence agencies to foreign interference or cyber security threats to the election.
3. This introduction, along with the protocols, will be distributed to government agencies and local Civil Defence Emergency Management groups for use in the run up to and throughout the General Election.<sup>3</sup> Ministers, political party secretaries, other relevant entities, and the public will also be able to access the protocols through the Electoral Commission website to ensure a consistent understanding of election planning and delivery.

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<sup>1</sup> For the purposes of this document and subsequent protocols, 'government agencies' means agencies in the public-sector, including public service departments, other state services, and agencies in the wider state sector. This is consistent with the definition that the Te Kawa Mataaho State Services Commission uses in its '[He Ārahitanga Pōtitanga Whānui 2023 General Election Guidance 2023](#)'

<sup>2</sup> Election period is from 27 September 2023 when Overseas and Dictation voting starts through to the declaration of official results.

<sup>3</sup> As well as distributing the documents through business-as-usual email channels, officials will be made aware of the protocols through key inter-agency groupings.

## Context

4. The 2023 General Election will be one of the largest public events in which New Zealanders will participate during 2023. The General Election will involve the dissolution of Parliament, interruption of parliamentary business, and an election process undertaken in accordance with constitutional conventions and legislation such as the [Electoral Act 1993](#).
5. The Electoral Commission is responsible for conducting parliamentary elections in New Zealand. As an Independent Crown Entity, the Electoral Commission is independent from policy direction from ministers but seeks to work effectively with government agencies to provide visibility of electoral events and any support requirements.
6. Planning for, and responding to, emergencies is a key aspect of election preparation and delivery. The COVID-19 pandemic, as well as recent natural hazard events and national security incidents have illustrated the need to plan for a broad range of contingencies. These include challenges at the national level, as well as more localised events which, nevertheless, can impact more broadly on voting outcomes.
7. With regards to national security, recent international experience suggests that New Zealand needs to proactively manage risk of interference in our electoral system. Threat and risk assessments, planning, and monitoring are key to ensure both the safety and security of New Zealanders taking part in elections, but also the underlying integrity of the event. Work is being undertaken by the Electoral Commission and government agencies to protect electoral systems and processes.
8. These challenges extend to the information domain, where democracies are facing an increasing challenge in upholding freedom of expression while strengthening resilience to the harms of misinformation and disinformation, particularly on social media.<sup>4</sup>
9. While the General Election process is complex, its high profile provides an opportunity to improve public participation and engagement in the election and further reinforce New Zealand's democratic values.

### General principles

10. The separate protocols (listed on page 1) provide guidance around state sector cooperation and support to the Electoral Commission for its delivery of the 2023 General Election across of a range of areas. Underpinning these guidelines are some overarching principles.

Our conduct of elections is a fundamental expression of New Zealanders' democratic values

11. New Zealanders place value in our enduring tradition of free and fair elections and express a high level of trust and confidence in elections.
12. Protecting and ensuring the integrity of the electoral system is a core responsibility of

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<sup>4</sup> Misinformation is information that is false or misleading, though not created or shared with the direct intention of causing harm. Disinformation is false or modified information knowingly and deliberately shared to cause harm or achieve a broader aim. The Government approach is outlined on the DPMC website, available at: <https://www.dPMC.govt.nz/our-programmes/national-security/strengthening-resilience-disinformation>.

government. The protection and preservation of our democratic institutions and practices is fundamental to our integrity as a nation.

## **New Zealanders are aware of and are encouraged to participate in the 2023 General Election**

13. In support of our democratic values, we work together to ensure New Zealanders are aware of the election and understand how to participate. The conduct of elections is supported by effective community engagement and communication by the Electoral Commission. Government agencies also work to support this awareness wherever possible.

## **The Electoral Commission is responsible for the conduct of free and fair elections**

14. The Electoral Commission is responsible for administering elections impartially, efficiently, and effectively. The Electoral Commission acts independently in performing its statutory functions and duties.
15. The Chief Electoral Officer is responsible for election planning and delivery and for decisions on electoral conduct. In carrying out this role, the Chief Electoral Officer provides government agencies with visibility of election planning, and can also request advice, assistance and information from any government department or state enterprise to support the delivery of elections.
16. External communications concerning the conduct of parliamentary elections should be delivered by the Chief Electoral Officer as the lead on electoral conduct. (This is further outlined in the *Protocol on communications related to the 2023 General election process*).

## **Government agencies support the conduct of elections**

17. The Electoral Commission is supported by government agencies.
18. Any such support should be provided with due reference to agencies' and public servants' existing obligations as well as general principles guiding their conduct, including political neutrality, fairness and integrity. These principles come into sharper relief during an election period. The work of government must always be carried out impartially, and in a manner that cannot be perceived as reflecting party interests. The Public Service Commissioner's ['He Ārahitanga Pōtitanga Whānui 2023 General Election Guidance 2023'](#) reinforces those principles.
19. All government agencies should share with the Electoral Commission, wherever practical, any information that could have a material impact on the conduct of elections.

## **Responses to disruptions throughout the election period are effective, coordinated, and proportionate**

20. Elections can be impacted by a full spectrum of incidents, from health pandemics to earthquakes to public unrest, at the local, regional and/or national level.
21. Any response to an incident will be well coordinated, focused, and proportionate to the disruptive event. The way in which this will occur is further outlined in the *Protocol on the management and response to election disruptions*.

## Governance Arrangements

22. Clear governance arrangements have been established to ensure the delivery of the General Election is well managed. These arrangements align with the principles noted above and are shown in figure one on page 5.

### Internal Electoral Commission governance

23. The Chief Electoral Officer ensures the Electoral Commission delivers electoral events. He is also a member of the Electoral Commission Board, which is responsible for overseeing the Commission's work and ensuring it meets its objectives.
24. The 2023 General Election process is managed through a 2023 General Election Programme Board. This internal Electoral Commission Board oversees the Electoral Commission's operational delivery programme.

### Senior Officials Committee

25. A Senior Officials Committee for the 2023 General Election has been established, chaired by the Chief Electoral Officer, to ensure support to the General Election is effectively coordinated across the Commission and government agencies. This Committee ensures that agencies' roles and responsibilities are clearly defined and are consistent with existing public sector governance arrangements, including the ODESC System.<sup>5</sup> The Committee provides guidance on election support activities that are conducted across agencies in support of the election.
26. The Committee's membership includes senior representatives from the Ministry of Justice, DPMC, the National Emergency Management Agency, GCSB, NZSIS, Te Puni Kōkiri, New Zealand Police, and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Trade. Other agencies can be invited to the Committee on an as-needed basis.

### Risk and Security Working Group

27. At the operational/delivery level, the Deputy Chief Electoral Officer chairs a Risk and Security Working Group. Agencies represented on the Working Group support the Commission with the development of the risk management approach for the General Election. The Working Group generally consists of staff drawn from the agencies represented at the Senior Officials Committee, along with additional agency subject matter experts to address specific risks and issues.

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<sup>5</sup> The ODESC (Officials' Committee for Domestic and External Security Coordination) system was previously known as the National Security System. However, we are moving away from that terminology due to the new definition of national security found in the National Security Strategy, as ODESC continues to perform a crisis management function across all hazards/all risks.

Figure 1: Governance arrangements for delivery of GE 2023

