

Media Release

New authority will deliver for Canterbury

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Earthquake Recovery Minister Gerry Brownlee says the establishment of the Canterbury Earthquake Recovery Authority (CERA) will provide leadership and coordination of the recovery effort following the February 22 earthquake.

"Numerous factors were considered in determining the best way to provide leadership and certainty for the rebuilding and recovery effort," Mr Brownlee said.

"Lessons learned from international experience and the response to Canterbury's September 4 earthquake led us to today's announcement, which will result in a faster decision making process, but also the required coordination of local and central government, the residents of greater Christchurch, Ngāi Tahu, the non-government sector and business interests.

"As Minister for Canterbury Earthquake Recovery I look forward to working with all these parties to make the rebuilding of Christchurch, and the wider region, something we can all be very proud of," Mr Brownlee said.

"Today's announcement is the result of a consultative approach between senior local government officials and central government, and reflects the many business and community groups who have voiced their support to us since February 22 for a single authority to manage Canterbury's rebuilding process."

Mr Brownlee said CERA would have wide powers to relax, suspend or extend laws and regulations which would be used responsibly and for clearly defined purposes related to earthquake recovery.

"These are essentially reserve powers and there will be checks and balances on the use of these powers so the public can have confidence they are being used wisely and with restraint."

He said the public could take confidence from a number of key elements of CERA's structure:

- a four person independent review panel to be chaired by a retired High Court judge to assess all legislative and regulatory changes CERA seeks to make;
- a cross-party forum of local Members of Parliament to provide advice;
- a forum of Canterbury community leaders to ensure CERA reflects issues important to local people;
- a number of appeal rights, with appeals to be heard swiftly by the High Court; and
- CERA will be subject to the Official Information Act.

Mr Brownlee said many of powers in the proposed CERA legislation, which will be introduced to Parliament in the coming weeks, were based on those put in place when establishing the Queensland Reconstruction Authority following the state's devastating floods in January.

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Functions relating to working closely with affected communities and collecting and collating information about infrastructure and other property, and community services, come from the Queensland Reconstruction Authority Act 2011.

Powers that relate to CERA's ability to acquire, hold, deal with and dispose of property and the Minister's ability to call-in the powers and functions of a local authority or council organisation are also based on those outlined in the Queensland Reconstruction Authority Act.

Mr Brownlee said despite CERA's powers being based on an existing governance structure put in place to tackle rebuilding following a major natural disaster, the public needed to have confidence those powers would be used judiciously.

"The review panel will provide the valuable function of independent scrutiny so the public can have confidence that CERA is carrying out its role appropriately."

He said CERA's immediate role was to establish and maintain a close working relationship with local government; engage with Ngai Tahu, business groups and the wider community; coordinate and prioritise recovery planning by central government agencies; and provide him with support as Minister for Earthquake Recovery.

"As we establish the office in the weeks ahead we'll be opening official lines of communication with all these groups and gathering the information necessary to assess the best approaches to long-term recovery," Mr Brownlee said.

"A key early step will be the appointment of around 20 individuals to the Canterbury Earthquake Recovery Community Forum. This cross section of the many interest groups across the region will be an important conduit for the community to express what's important to them in developing the plan for rebuilding Canterbury."

Mr Brownlee said he hoped to announce the community forum's membership within three weeks.

"I'm confident we've developed a structure that has the necessary powers to get things done, will have the involvement of all parties who should be involved, and the means to overcome some major challenges in the months and years ahead.

"In short, I'm confident we can now get on with the process of rebuilding Christchurch and the wider Canterbury region."

CERA will be based in Christchurch and will in-part be staffed by secondees from government ministries with a direct interest in the recovery process. The department's eventual headcount will depend on a number of things, including whether it contracts out some services or establishes its own functions.

CERA's interim chief executive will be Deputy State Service's Commissioner John Ombler. Mr Ombler will be responsible for establishing the department's organisational structure and recruiting some key staff. In the meantime the State Services Commission has begun the process of appointing a permanent chief executive, which it hopes to complete within five weeks.