

Exercise Evaluation Report

NORTHLAND SAREX 2026

Location: Baylys Farm, Waitangi

Date: 17th to 19th April 2026

**Report
version:** FINAL

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NZSAR Evaluator

Executive Summary

The 2026 Northland Police District annual SAREX was held at Waitangi on the weekend 17th to 19th April 2026.

The focus of the SAREX was a multi-agency SAR response to a mass rescue incident. The scenario of the exercise was based on a cruise ship tender overturning in the Bay of Islands.

Agencies involved included Northland Police SAR squad, RCCNZ, Red Cross, Northland LandSAR group, Far North LandSAR group, Coastguard, surf lifesaving and AREC.

It is very probable that all these organizations will be involved in a mass rescue operation, but seldom that they all train together.

It was a complex SAREX to plan and to manage, considering all the agencies and the number of “victims” both on land and in the water.

Very few of the participants left without learning about the SAR response in this sort of incident. It was a particularly valuable exercise with a number of learnings for each of the organizations.

The recommendations identified by the evaluator reflect many of the learnings. Of note however is that recommendation 3 is a mirror of a recommendation made from the evaluation report of the 2025 SAREX. That being for the Northland District to obtain projectors and screens or large monitors to display the workings of each of the functions within the IMT.

As happened during the last two SAREX;’s, and will happen operationally, without these displays the IMT members lose situational awareness.

It was also timely reminder of the value of Mass rescue plans. During this exercise the Mass Rescue Plan was not referred to and there was no understanding of how the SAR response fits within this District plan. It is appreciated by the evaluator that Nationally, the mass rescue plans are being reviewed and updated.

The Northland District again demonstrated its strong support of the Northland SAR community by the attendance of the Far North Area Commander who attended and opened the exercise

Each of the agencies reported high value in this exercise, the desire to maintain the relationships developed during the exercise to support the partnerships that exist.

The evaluator noted the value in this exercise. It was a complex planning process and the work of the planning group and SAREX management group is acknowledged.

The Northland SAR community is far more capable to respond to a mass rescue incident as a consequence of the learnings from this exercise

Recommendations

Recommendation 1

That in a Multi-Agency response, integrate all responding agencies with a representative in the Operations function team rather than a simple liaison role.

See findings. Objective 1

Recommendation 2

That the Mass Rescue Plan, and in particular the SAR response within this plan be a subject during the Police SAR Squad training.

See Findings Objective 1

Recommendation 3

That the Police Northland District support SAR management with projectors and monitors or large screens to display maps, asset locations, radio logs and plans to enhance situational awareness during any operation.

See findings Objective 3

See also recommendations from the 2025 SAREX evaluation.

Recommendation 4

Dedicate a radio log keeper (within intel function) to monitor radio messages for key information.

See findings Objective 3

Recommendation 5

To Integrate the AREC group with the LandSAR radio group.
See findings Objective 3

Recommendation 6

All landSAR groups and police squad refresh radio protocols during their training sessions.

See Objective 3

Introduction

The Northland District SAREX for 2026 was held at Waitangi during the weekend of 17th to 29th April 2026.

The planning team consisted largely of Police SAR squad members.

The exercise had a clear purpose, to test the multi-agency SAR response to a mass rescue incident in the Northland District

The location of the SAREX was ideal and reflected the districts risk of a mass rescue incident.

Clear objectives for the SAREX we set including initial actions and early deployment of assets, media management and public information and inter-agency cooperation and interoperability.

The KPI's for these objectives were clear, concise and achievable.

The ICP and staging area was at the woolshed of Bayly's Farm, Waitangi.

The personnel for the IMT were pre-selected, with mentors attached to each of the functions. The IMT were selected on the needs to test existing IMT staff and to expose some to IMT roles.

The balance of experience and not so experienced IMT members was well balanced. The selected incident controller was experienced and very capable in the role, allowing the IMT to gel very well.

The exercise began at 1600 hrs. on the Friday night, involving the IMT only. This timing was manipulated by the SAREX controller to reflect the initial action process.,

This allowed the IMT to spend time to develop the initial plan without the pressure of responding assets immediately. This allowed the IMT to test the processes on the IMT as a whole and of the functions within the IMT.

The Plan that was developed was actioned on the Saturday morning when the SAREX scenario started.

Assets were tasked, deployed and subsequently re-tasked throughout the day, as the scenario unfolded.

Fifty "victims" were identified. Forty-Two were located during the day, before the exercise was finished. The tasks developed by the IMT would have had teams in the location of the remaining eight in the next operational period.

At its conclusion the teams were demobilized back to the baylys farm and the scenario concluded.

Background to the Exercise

This exercise was planned and developed as a consequence of the real risk of a marine based Mass Rescue operation within the Northland District.

Dates, location, organizing agency(s), key people

The SAREX was held in the Waitangi area of the Bay of Islands, Northland between the 17th and 19th April 2026. The planning team lead was Pablo RUST of the Northland Police SAR squad, assisted by Kelly GANDER, the District Search and Rescue Assistant Coordinator.

Participating organizations

The SAREX was attended by

Northland Police SAR Squad.

Far North LandSAR group

Northland LandSAR group.

RCCNZ

Surf lifesaving

Coastguard

AREC

Red Cross

Police media team

Exercise aim

Validate and Improve police led coordination of a multi-agency SAR response to a complex maritime incident involving mass casualties. Ensure safe, efficient lawful and consistent performance across operations, media management and inter-agency cooperation.

Exercise objectives

SAREX Objective 1: Initial Police Actions and Early Asset Deployment

Objective Statement: *Police provide an effective, timely, and well-coordinated initial response upon first notification of the capsized vessel, rapidly identifying required resources, initiating critical early actions, and deploying assets in a manner that maximizes the likelihood of preserving life.*

KPI's to achieve objective 1:

- Timeliness of initial acknowledgement and activation
- Early risk assessment
- Identification of critical assets
- Rapid deployment of first wave assets
- Initial search strategy and tasking
- Early interagency communication
- Safety in survivability considerations

SAREX Objective 2: Media Management & Public Information (PIM)

Objective Statement: *Police lead the media narrative, maintain a single authoritative voice, and prevent unauthorized commentary that could harm operations, families, or reputation.*

KPI's to achieve objective 2:

- PIM activation and spokesperson control
- Initial media contact
- Statement and updates
- Unauthorised commentary prevention
- On scene media control and access
- Accuracy and consistency across channels
- Stakeholder updates (Family/community)

SAREX Objective 3: Objective 3: Inter-agency Cooperation & Interoperability

Objective Statement: *Police and partner agencies operate as one team with clear roles, shared situational awareness, interoperable communications, and mutual respect.*

KPI's to achieve objective 3:

- Role clarity in liaison integration
- Shared common operating picture and information flow
- Radio/Comms interoperability (AREC support)
- Joint briefs/debriefs and task synchronisation
- Logistics and resource sharing
- Cultural safety and professional conduct

Exercise Scenario

SAREX Training Scenario

- **Exercise name:** *Operation BAYLY*
- **Location:** Baylys farm / local coastal area
- **Agencies involved:** Police SAR, Land Search & Rescue Northland + Far North, AREC, Coastguard, Surf Life Saving, RCCNZ, RedCross, St John's, Police Media
- **Mayday/ Call comes in to I/C via RCCNZ: Approx 1500 Friday 17 April**
- **IMT Prep:** 1600 – 1900 Friday 17 April
- **Scenario exercise date:** Saturday 18 April – commence 0700 hours

MAYDAY TRANSMISSION (Formal Maritime Format)

RCC to relay mayday to Police on-call SAR and advise assistance required.

“MAYDAY, MAYDAY, MAYDAY

This is Cruise Ship Tender from Ocean Wanderer, Cruise Ship Tender from Ocean Wanderer, Cruise Ship Tender from Ocean Wanderer

Position: Lat 35°13' S, Long 174°10' E (Brampton Reef, Bay of Islands)

Nature of Distress: Vessel struck reef, taking water, now sunk

Assistance Required: Immediate assistance required

Persons on Board: 50

Other Information: EPIRB activated

Over”

This scenario was followed by a number of injects throughout the day directing IMT to land and seas based searches.

Findings

This was a particularly well planned and executed SAREX in which all of the participants gained knowledge, learned or reinforced skills and knowledge.

Findings for each of the Objectives

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The initial action planning period was engineered by the SAREX planners to take place on the Friday late afternoon.

This allowed the IMT to set themselves up, create an IMT environment for the scenario and complete an initial action plan without the pressure of waiting SAR teams and crews.

This allowed the action plan to be delivered at the scenario beginning to all teams and crews without any delays. This also gave the opportunity for 1 IMT to do a handover to a second IMT on the Friday evening.

There was no reference made during this exercise to the Northland District Mass rescue Plan. Many of the Police SAR squad were not aware of the Mass Rescue Plan. The evaluator considers that that should have been essential.

Risk assessments were completed. A manager of the safety function was appointed early and was able to identify risks for the whole scenario. The Risk function manager was a landsar person and needed to consider and identify risks of other responding agencies. This was completed after discussion.

Critical assets were identified.

Representatives of the agencies of these assets were attached to the IMT as liaison personnel for their respective agencies. This led to some IMT members not being situationally aware without that direct input from these agencies.

All of the assets were deployed within a good time frame

The initial action plan was largely followed. However, later on there were a few tasks that had been given that were not reflected in the plan, almost becoming task driven as opposed to objective driven.

Some discussions were had in regard to ensuring tasks related to the strategies of the plan.

Communication between the agencies became a bit problematic. Some agencies tasking their assets without the knowledge of the operations function manager.

Survivability considerations were raised through our normal channels with a survivability expert. The participants learnt that RCCNZ also have a computer-based system to assist with an assessment of survivability.

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A Pim Manager was appointed. This manager managed all PIM functions including media management and appointing a spokesperson. (Incident Controller).

Initial media contact was made (again engineered by the planners) and regular media releases were made by the Pim manager for the Incident Controller.

A media strategy was part of the field teams briefings which advised that all media to be directed to the IMT.

A media representative went into the field and interviewed field staff. The response was appropriate, with that representative directed to the ICP.

That same media representative was able to access the red cross facility and take pictures of the victims. In an actual operation this would be controlled by cordons, but it was a lesson well learnt by the participants. This was reinforced in the Media workshop on the Sunday morning.

Updates from the IMT were regular

SAREX Objective 3: Objective 3: Inter-agency Cooperation & Interoperability

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KPI's to achieve objective 3:

- Role clarity in liaison integration
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- Radio/Comms interoperability (AREC support)
- Joint briefs/debriefs and task synchronisation
- Logistics and resource sharing
- Cultural safety and professional conduct

It was clear what the roles and expectations of each of the agencies were, and the lines of control. This was achieved by the initial briefing by the incident controller. This incident controller demonstrated very good incident control behaviors and maintained control throughout the scenario.

Barriers existed with the information flow. Some key field radio messages were not picked up by the IMT, resulting in key decisions not being made and a lack of situational awareness.

This was caused by a lack of information displayed, and a lack of dedicated computer operators within the IMT. In other words, there was nobody within

the IMT to monitor radio messages being relayed through the SARtrack computer platform.

There was sufficient information displayed to all IMT functions, despite it being available. Displays such as the information collection plan, radio log, up to date mapping showing tasks currently on and tasks completed.

Radio communications technically were good, with good reception in most places.

However initially not all communications were going through the radio function. LandSAR used the radio operators, however Coastguard and Surf lifesaving were using the liaison representatives. This led to confusion about an essential task, some believing it had been completed when in fact it had not been.

IMT briefings were regular and involved all agencies. Tasks were well managed.

Logistics was well managed.

Cultural Safety and professional conduct was demonstrated, particularly when dealing with deceased victims. Some questions were raised during the scenario debrief of the appropriate actions when to recover the deceased persons which are on land as opposed to continuing to search for live people.

The majority of the issues identified in these findings were also identified during the scenario or were identified with the subsequent debriefs.

The recommendations made in this report reflect most of those learnings.

Other findings.

This SAREX was opened by Police Inspector Ricky Whiu, the Far North Area Commander. His attendance demonstrated a strong commitment to Search and rescue by this district.

Local Police staff also attended in the reconciliation role, working alongside Red Cross.

Conclusions

Objective 1

Initial Police Actions and Early Asset Deployment.

Objective MET

All of the IMT participants learned from the experience working in the IMT during this scenario.

The IMT was particularly well led by the Incident Controller.

Several issues were identified as in the evaluator's findings, and most were rectified during the scenario.

Objective 2

Media management and Public Information

Objective MET

This is a difficult objective to make realistic in a training scenario-based exercise, however with the scenario followed by the Sunday workshop activity, all the participants gained knowledge and skill in dealing with media.

Objective 3

Inter-agency Cooperation and Interoperability.

Objective PARTIALLY MET

The personnel within all the agencies demonstrated a real willingness to work together to achieve a common goal.

However, despite that willingness, individual agency processes did not always allow that in practice.

Having the representatives of these agencies sitting just outside the IMT as liaison meant that the IMT did not always have their views in front of them. Integrating the agencies into the IMT could have achieved that.

Comments by a representative of one agency that the CIMS structure wasn't a structure that worked is inconsistent with SAR good practice in any of the agencies involved.

Briefings and de-briefings were well managed as was the resource management and professional conduct.