Exercise Evaluation Report

Wellington SAREX 2026 Operation 'Cruise'

Location: Wellington Police District

Date: 27th February- 1st March 2026

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Evaluator(s): *Nick Coyne, NZSAR Evaluator*

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Executive Summary

Wellington Police SAR carried out a full-scale back country exercise late February early March 2026. The aim of the exercise was to examine the increasing trend in cell phone and satellite messaging for SAR communications, file management, and clue management including how that informs planning.

The exercise also gave the opportunity for a significant number of SAR practitioners from both the Wairarapa and Wellington groups to collaborate and explore parts of the Eastern Tararuas where operations have occurred. Many in the IMT were new to their roles and this was an opportunity for a 'learning' experience.

This evaluation aligns with the objectives and KPI's established pre-SAREX. These included the effectiveness of information management, testing the communications infrastructure when introducing satellite communications in addition to radio, intelligence processing (including field) and its effect on planning. There was also a focus on how the master file supports further search phases.

When reading the 'findings' it needs to be acknowledged the IMT were operating out of the Wairarapa SAR base at Hood aerodrome. This ICP is mostly resourced for paper-based recording systems while Wellington is more digitally orientated. For the police using this base as a designated ICP for Police-led SAR operations, it is evident that a lack of Police infrastructure (network, printer) would negatively impact a response. Outcomes may have differed between the ICP's particularly when accessing resources and maintaining situational awareness.

This exercise showed some stress points in the management system that included information flow from satellite messaging to the centralised log and from Comms to Ops. These stress points represented potential to lose information and it is important to have them addressed.

Another area highlighted was how the file could be enhanced by better and additional recording in how intelligence influenced the search area and on change overs. Both of these aspects in the file would better support an extended SAROP. Event level safety was considered and communicated to the field teams.

There is more detail and rationale for the recommendations on the above contained in the 'Findings'. A summary of recommendations is found below in Section 1.

This was a successful exercise that employed capable people both in the field and the IMT. It achieved it's aim by emphasising areas for improvement and showcasing existing good practice.

1. Recommendations- more detail is given under findings

On the increasing trend in usage of cell phones and satellite messaging for communications, consider:

Minimising what devices and platforms are used in the field based on usefulness and advantages. If using satellite enabled cell phone texting, teams to sequentially number messages entering Google Messages and have a designated operator for this platform. If using In Reach, review how these devices can be identified by user; and within the SARTrack log, identify message device origin.

Review the usefulness of WhatApp for field teams.

Consolidate a communications plan into one document and ensure the communication plan is followed within the IMT and the field.

Using radio as the primary communication device.

For situational awareness alerting IMT managers of the potential location conflict when using multiple devices in the field.

On clue management in the field and how that informs planning, consider:

Advising field teams their message and field information recording (including their notebooks) are part of the search file and as such the standard needed in the case of any SAROP review.

On file management (written tools and recording), field information informing planning and performance across operational periods consider:

The Incident Controller proactively managing the IMT to identify and alleviate developing stress points and add capacity where and when needed.

When operating any digital management system, that includes paper-based files, that the paper-based files are ordered, legible, consistent in style and organised to a high standard that enables referencing easily.

Operatives within the IMT maintaining personalised resources in addition to generic tools, proven to help them in their roles.

Review the record keeping within the clue log on GR, on the Intel/ Planning interface and display the information collection plan within the ICP. Any information analysis could use and record a reliability index when appropriate.

The Wairarapa ICT unit (AREC) building technical expertise capacity to counter vulnerability when operating in a digital/ computer-based environment

Including a full CIMS chart as per operational period, reviewing the Master file Intel heading and dividing the file as to operational periods.

Enabling the Police to access their networks when operating from the Wairarapa SAR Base.

2. Introduction

The Wellington Police District held its 2026 land based SAREX on the eastern side of the Tararua range inland from Masterton in the Wairarapa. The operational area centred on Cone ridge and its eastern and western watersheds. The northern boundary was the Hector River while in the south, Coal Creek and the upper reaches of the Tauherenikau River. This full-scale backcountry search was managed by an IMT located in Masterton at the Wairarapa SAR Base, approximately twenty-five km from the search area. The field response included both Wellington and Wairarpa field teams. A staging area was established at the Waiohine Campsite for deploying teams.

The SAREX plan was based on a search approximately fifteen years previous involving a group of Polytech students and their instructors. The circumstances leading to the students becoming lost were as follows. The instructors had placed themselves at the front and rear of the group. Along cone ridge the students lost contact with the instructors. This loss of contact and being in an area where there are multiple decision points led to the group's discoordination.

Operation Cruise's scenario used a situation where on Thursday 26th February, a group of eight Canadian tourists from a cruise ship berthed in Wellington became disorientated after losing contact with their local guides on Cone ridge, while participating in an organised tramp. The guides over-nighted at Totara Flats hut and conducted their own search the following morning but failed to locate the missing party by mid day Friday. A Police SAR response was activated soon after with teams deployed on the late Friday and early Saturday. An IMT was established at 1700hrs Friday. A feature of the scenario was that within the group of eight lost there were two 'ghost' subjects. This provided the flexibility for the SAREX planners to extend the operation in case the other six were found early during the exercise.

The scenario had the potential to be driven by 'out of the field' enquiry however many of the informants were non contactable during the initial response. Four of the group were found using sound and field information on Saturday afternoon. One subject had a lower leg injury but remained mobile. The remaining two subjects were found later using Canadian consular resources and a fictious mobile locate. Apart from the Friday deployment weather conditions were agreeable. Some teams found their task terrain difficult.

Recognising the increased satellite communications capability of commonly held devices there was design in the SAREX to explore the functionality in a SAR environment. WhatsApp was used to organise and give a first briefing to field teams. Field and the IMT communication used VHF radio channels, text messaging and email.

Responding agencies were the Police, LandSAR and AREC; with the IMT coordinating eight field teams. 'New to role' personnel featured in the IMT, field teams and the communications unit.

The exercise culminated in a hot debrief that was marked by open disclosure of pre and post SAREX documentation to all those involved.

3. Background

3.1 Background to the Exercise

There is a reasonable likelihood of a land-based search or rescue occurring in the Eastern Tararua Range given its proximity to a number of population centres in the Wairarapa and Wellington city, easy access and many formed tracks and huts. The area selected for the SAREX contains a number of intersecting walking tracks and huts that are popular with tourists and others. Activities in the area are fishing, hunting, tramping, running and day walking.

Topography is steep and very exposed to weather systems. The SAREX area ranged from 200m to 1080m, however the highest point in these ranges is over 1500m. The vegetation is principally determined by altitude with lowland forest on foothills, beech forest across mid-slopes and subalpine scrub and tussock on upper ridges. While drier than the western Tararua's it is more prone to cold and strong winds from the northwest.

Below are the bases that underpinned the aim of the 2026 SAREX:

- An increasing usage of cell phones and satellite messaging for communications within SAR Ops.

And identified issues within past SAROps on:

- File management, written tools and records
- Clue management in the field and that informing planning.

3.2 Dates, location, organising agency(s), key people

The exercise was conducted from Friday 27th February to Sunday 1st March 2026. The field operation centred on Cone ridge and its eastern and western watersheds in the eastern Tararua's. The IMT were located in the SAR Building, Hood aerodrome, Masterton.

A SAR response was initiated on early afternoon Friday, the 27th February.

The organising agency was the NZ Police.

Key people were-

Sergeant WESTRUPP, Jonathan (Police)

DSARAC Theodore, Geoff (Police)

JOHNSTON Murray (Wairarapa LandSAR Chairperson).

3.3 Participating organisations

NZ Police, LandSAR, AREC.

3.4 Exercise aim

The exercise aim had five major components:

To **safely** conduct a SAR exercise **that examines the increasing trend in usage of cell phones and satellite messaging** for communications, **file management** (written tools and recording), and **clue management in the field** and **how that informs planning**.

3.5 Exercise objectives

Four broad objectives were established with a number of key performance indicators. These were:

Objective 1: Information is effectively managed and communicated during the response to:

- *Support the Operations function*
- *Maintain coordination of the field teams*
- *Maintain safety*
- *Utilise various forms of communication*
- *Maintain situational awareness.*

Objective 2: IMT and field team communications follow SOP's– Field teams communicate and process information consistent with standard operating procedures (SOP's).

- *Clue processing – The IMT is provided with thorough information from field teams of any clues located*
- *The information provided by field teams should confirm that they have processed the clue and/or clue site as per standard procedure.*

Objective 3: Test communication infrastructure in SAR environment.

- *Communications between the IMT and the field teams, in particular how InReach devices and cell phones are utilised and managed to assist in maintaining communications*

- *IMT and field team communications follow SOP's.*

Objective 4: The IMT record and processes information consistent with the CIMS Intelligence Cycle and file management supports ongoing operations.

- *The clue information is processed effectively by the Intelligence function and used effectively by Planning to inform decisions*
- *IMT decision making tools are fit for purpose (CIMS)*
- *Information and intelligence is effectively collected, recorded and organised*
- *File management operates at a level that supports the search management in the current and upcoming operational periods.*

3.6 Exercise Scenario

Pedro Baker is the owner / operator of '5 Tuis Scenic Adventures'. He has operated the business for four years and it specialises in providing tourists with outdoors experiences. Pedro takes small groups of paying customers into the wilderness to experience New Zealand's incredible natural beauty. Pedro is sixty-seven years old and moved to the Wairarapa four years ago from the South Island to start the business in retirement. Pedro is known to be a bit rough around the edges but the tourists enjoy his colourful stories and no-frills approach.

On Thursday, 26 February 2026 Pedro picked up eight Canadian tourists who had booked a scenic tramp with '5 Tuis Scenic Adventures'. They were all from a boutique cruise ship called Sea Champion 7 that had docked at Wellington Harbour on Wednesday, 26 February 2026 and was due to leave at 0800hrs on Saturday, 28 February 2026.

They had booked an overnight tramp with Pedro, with the plan to go from Waiohine Gorge Camp to Totara Flats Hut via Cone Saddle and Cone Ridge. They were to spend the night at Totara Flats Hut before returning to the Waiohine Gorge Camp carpark via Waiohine Track beside the river.

Pedro had arranged the help of a friend's grandson for this trip. Lank Button is a nineteen year-old local who was helping Pedro with the trip for some cash. Lank hasn't had any formal training in this kind of work but does have some outdoors experience through going on some hunting trips.

Timeline:
Thursday, 29 February 2026
1100hrs Group arrives at Waiohine Gorge campsite and commences tramp.

1320hrs Group arrives at Cone Saddle, has lunch break.

1350hrs Group leaves Cone Caddle north along Cone Ridge track. Lank is at the front, while Pedro is at the back. Lank loses sight of the group behind him. Pedro is much slower than expected at the back of the group and is feeling particularly out of breath. Pedro also loses sight of group as they move much faster ahead of him.

1830hrs Lank arrives at Totara Flats Hut and awaits the group.

2000hrs Pedro arrives at Totara Flats Hut and meets Lank there, but the rest of the group has not arrived. Together they await the arrival of the group, but the group does not arrive.

Friday, 30 February 2026

0600hrs Pedro and Lank split up at Totara Flats Hut. Lank backtracks along Cone Ridge Track on Cone Ridge Track all the way back to Waiohine Gorge campsite carpark, while Pedro goes to the carpark via the Totara Flats / Lower Waiohine Drive track.

1200hrs They arrive at the carpark at similar times. Neither has encountered the rest of the party.

Details of the lost party:

LOST PARTY 1	LOST PARTY 2	LOST PARTY 3
Nic Back Sex: Male DOB: 24/07/1977	Bruce Maxbolt Sex: Male DOB: 02/04/1980	Otis Redblue Sex: Male DOB: 07/04/1975
Nigel Hoopstock Sex: Male DOB: 01/08/1975	Megan Maxbolt Sex: Female DOB: 03/06/1980	Tobias Stockleberry Sex: Male DOB: 09/09/1969
Nic and Nigel are best friends.	Bruce and Mergan are a married couple.	

GHOST LOST PARTY

The following two lost parties are ‘ghosts’ and not played by real people. They exist to allow Exercise Control to control the actively exercise direction. For example, if the actual lost party actors are located very early then these ‘ghosts’ will be used to extend the exercise and ensure the field teams have a reason to remain searching / in the field until Sunday morning. They can be reported as found to the IMT at any point via simply advising that they arrived at a place of safety having self-rescued / walked out.

Chase Flipgrape Sex: Male DOB: 03/06/1985	Pledge Flipgrape Sex: Female DOB: 24/06/1985 Chase and Pledge are a married couple.

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4. Evaluation Methodology

4.1 The agreed outcomes of the evaluation activity

A report with recommendations based on the objectives and their KPIs. See appendix.

4.2 Evaluation scope

To measure how well the exercise meets the stated aim through its supporting objectives and KPI's.

4.3 Aspects of the exercise observed, what was not observed

Pre SAREX organisation was shared via WhatsApp which included messages between the planners and operatives. These messages also contained planning documents. WhatsApp was also used during the exercise by field teams to send photos of activity and conditions.

The initial briefing to the IMT and its functioning during four shift changes was observed. This included a focus on the logistics function (comms) as to the recording and relaying of messages. Field team debriefs and the hot debrief was also observed.

Deployment of field teams was via a remote staging area. This aspect of the exercise and field operations were not observed. However, the radio log, photos (via WhatsApp), interviews and debriefs gave some awareness of effectiveness.

Conversations were undertaken with all the IMT functions, team leaders, and the subjects, as to decision making, field conditions and search techniques.

Notes were also taken during the hot debrief.

4.4 The process followed in preparing and submitting the report

The planning documents, that included the aim, objectives and KPI's, were supplied prior to the exercise. The objectives and KPI's were matched with the objectives by the evaluator for evaluation purposes and used as measures against the objectives and the SAREX purpose.

Evidence was collected against these KPI's by interviews, observation, notes taken at the time, photographs, the radio and other logs.

A search for previous Wellington Land SAREX reports between 2020 and 2025 was also undertaken by accessing the NZSAR website. Four previous reports were found applicable to the groups involved and have been referenced where appropriate.

Where observed practice deviated from commonly accepted 'better practice', comparisons were made with the LandSAR competencies, Response Guidelines, Emergency Management and SAR course standards and material.

A draft report was submitted for comment to the Police SAR Coordinator and relevant personnel. The final version contains what the evaluator and the acting Police SAR Coordinator consider appropriate.

4.5 Other information: Nil

5. Findings:

Objective 1. Information is effectively managed and communicated during the response:

KPI 1.1 To support the Operations function.

Operations is supported by information flowing to it by Planning and Intelligence via the IAP and it receives field information to which it needs to manage. The evaluator looked at these communication links for effectiveness.

Intelligence/ Planning to Operations

Actionable intelligence was communicated verbally (recorded elsewhere) and captured in the seven scenarios that were developed and displayed in the operations room. Operations tasked to the most likely. This appeared well managed and effectively influenced operations.

Operations to field teams' communication flow and management

For the initial IAP, field teams were deployed from a staging area using pre printed tasks and a written GSMEAC briefing. Once teams were deployed the staging area function ceased. At this point all communications and track logs were captured on SARTrack. The radio log was duplicated on 'Radio Message' forms and placed into an 'In Tray' and when read moved to a 'Read Tray'. At times the volume of forms entering the 'In Tray' over whelmed the operations team human capacity. Many of these forms were routine however highlighting messages (by a designated person in Comms or Ops) regarding important information eg clues, would reduce the workload. Other additional options would be to have the messages time ordered in the tray and then taking a step further onto team clip boards.

During busy periods there were delays of up to an hour and a half for teams wanting a re-task, which indicates a stress point. Adding a further person within a led and structured operations team would help. The IC is ultimately responsible for managing these aspects.

Recommendation:

When there is a paper flow between comms and operations use colour to highlight non routine messaging. Also consider time ordered message forms and organised on team clip boards.

The Incident Controller to be aware of stress points with the IMT structure and add capacity when indicated.

Logistics to operations

Logistics for deploying the teams was pre arranged. The demobilisation plan was displayed on the team board and there was good support for this. During the SAREX the main logistical function was in the ICT with communications. The support given through the radio log and SARTrack functionality was effective but limited. The log showed some missed messages between the cell phone texting and the centralised log. With a change over of SARTrack operators message forms changed to A4 printouts. While this overcame illegible handwriting on some forms it potentially added complexity for the operation when sorting message priority. Having consistency in the style of message forms would be useful. Further comment is made under Objective 3.

While the evaluator acknowledges the Lower Hutt Police Station ICP is better resourced to operate in a digital/ computer-based environment it needs to be noted that this SAREX relied on a single person for technical expertise. When operating at the Wairarapa SAR Base this represents a vulnerability. The freezing of the SARTrack program on the Saturday afternoon also reinforces the need to have technical support on hand.

Recommendation:

Message forms to have a legible style and type consistency.

The Wairarapa ICT unit (AREC) build the technical expertise over a number of people for setting up and for operating in a digital/ computer-based environment.

KPI 1.2 To maintain coordination of the field teams

While overall field activity was focused and coordinated there were times when Planning and Operations lost team's locations. A number of reasons presented for this. The GPS update cycle difference between In Reach and VHF radio hand helds (30/15 minute respectively) gave team positions in conflicting locations. An influence on this is the need for a VHF signal to trigger a repeater.

Other factors were the unordered nature of the message 'In and Read' trays and possibly the alphabetical task denotations that doesn't allow immediate recognition of task to team. Ordering messages as per the KPI 1.1 recommendation would help.

Operations took a number of steps to regain control by asking for a 'summary of tasks' and setting up a screen in the room to duplicate SARTrack mapping. While this helped there was a significant lag and introduced a loss of focus going between the screen and the paper map. Using a more tactile approach such as a pin board or acetate overlay could have helped.

Recommendation:

Where multiple location devices are being used in the field IMT managers to be made aware of the potential location conflict.

When working in differing ICP's, Operations managers to consider using a range of personalised as well as generic tools that help them in their role.

KPI 1.3 To maintain safety

The event level safety plan was contained in the full briefing document and the change over GSMEAC briefings. Including the more specific NZSAR forms for safety plans etc would enable reviewers to quickly identify subject matter.

At team tasking level there is little evidence of safety concerns being transferred between these shifts e.g. Neill Creek conditions. This highlights the importance of teams being able to listen to radio traffic (which is not an option when using cell phone texting and In Reach) and field information being transferred to new tasks when appropriate.

Recommendation:

Nil.

KPI 1.4 In utilising various forms of communication

The Communication plan consisted of using satellite capable texting from cell phones, In Reach and VHF via two repeater sites. There also would have been simplex radio capability between teams. This plan was spread over a number documents that included team radio, cell phone identifiers and the ICP phone contacts. In Reach directly linked to SAR Track via an email function and was centrally logged. The text messaging was routed through Google messages then cut and pasted into the log. While messages could be tracked to the team some messages missed being logged. A possible solution would be for teams to sequencely number their texts eg W5 M3. It also reinforces the need for teams to record messages in and outwards in their note books or similar.

It should also be noted that the satellite communications go via a third party and jurisdictions that screen for words against their national policy for transmission e.g. words that can connect with terrorism, suicide, anti social behaviour etc. Some of these words could be used in a SAROP. These third parties also exert control and their networks can become overloaded. Another caution is the delay in messages being sent and received. There was a documented delay of 25 minutes during the SAREX but delays could be longer. In a WhatsApp transmission there was a 3-hour delay. At least one team's text was not received by the IMT.

While not on the communications plan, teams were using WhatsApp in the field. This was not being monitored. Also, some of the teams while briefed to the ICP cell phone numbers for voice calls sent texts instead. Again, this was not being monitored.

HF radio through WINLink provides email and data communication which remains independent of third parties and could be considered as part of a future communication plan.

Recommendation:

Consolidate a communications plan in one document such as on the NZSAR website

Ensure the communication plan is followed within the IMT and the field

Teams to record messages in their notebooks and on recording devices. These to be readily available in the case of a SAROP review

Use radio as the primary communication device.

KPI 1.5 To maintain situational awareness

Situational awareness was compromised through the IMT message handling system and the lack of discipline in using the communications net. However, the ability to send photographs and video calls via satellite enabled cell phones has a number of benefits. The IMT can see the conditions that field teams are operating in and medical advice can be 'on site' virtually.

The evaluator saw some evidence where the use of digital tools only compromised situational awareness.

Recommendation:

Comment on this is made under the preceding KPI's and those contributing to Objectives 3 and 4.

Objective 2. IMT and field team communications follow SOP's– Field teams communicate and process information consistent with SOP's

KPI 2.1 Clue processing – The IMT is provided with thorough information from field teams of any clues located.

When comparing the clue log with team note book entries there is relevant information contained in the notebooks that does not appear in the clue log. There could be a number of reasons for this. Either the information wasn't transmitted or if it was it didn't make it to the clue log. In the latter that could be due to an oversight in the message handling on either the radio, In reach or Text.

The clue log contained a mix of six figure and 14 figure grid references. It is assumed teams GPS mark the clue sites in case revisiting is necessary or photos are georeferenced. Apart from this the clue log contained sufficient information for follow up in successive periods.

The detail in team notebooks varied between teams. Some wrote all communications while others used very little.

These discrepancies point to the importance that good record keeping in the field is equal to that in the IMT.

Recommendation:

All teams maintain a high level of record keeping infield

14 figure GR are recorded in the clue log

Team notebooks (and recording devices) become part of the search file – if not already included.

KPI 2.2 The information provided by field teams should confirm that they have processed the clue and/or clue site as per standard procedure

On interview teams indicated awareness of maintaining clue site integrity and infield processing. Matching boot prints to track users, taking photographs and piecing together discards for age and completeness are examples of functioning at a high level.

Recommendation:

Nil.

Objective 3. Test communication infrastructure in SAR environment

KPI 3.1 Communications between the IMT and the field teams, in particular how InReach devices and cell phones are utilised and managed to assist in maintaining communications.

The communications infrastructure relating to InReach was by email that directly connected with SARTrack. This was then inputted into the log. During the SAREX that structure appeared reliable apart from message delays. There appeared to be In Reach text in Google messages. Depending on how the account is set up the message may not identify who the message is from, unlike the protocols surrounding cell phones where numbers were attached to owners. This could lead to confusion of origin.

Cell phone satellite enabled texting was used extensively with teams using two platforms. Conventional texting was directed through Google messaging and WhatsApp. The latter was not included in the field communication plan. During the SAREX it was used by the Exercise Control and some field teams used it for sending photographs of field conditions and clues etc. At least two written taskings were sent to field teams using this medium by the ICT. WhatsApp was not being monitored or directly recorded into the log. However, its usefulness and familiarity with the field teams shows viability.

The transfer of messages from Google Messaging to the log was done by cut and paste. As noted under KPI 1.4 there is room for human error in this process. In SARTrack there is capacity to add columns into which message device origin can be inputed e.g. column for cell phone text, another for InReach. Along with message numbering this would help identifying omissions. Another measure that could be taken would be to have a designated operator for Google Messaging. This would ensure replies to texts which did not always occur during the SAREX. Currently there is no interface between these programs but that could change in the future.

Recommendation:

Review how InReach devices can be identified by user when texting

Teams to number messages sent by text

Review the usefulness of WhatsApp for field teams

Establish greater discipline in how devices and what platforms are used based on a written communication plan form

Minimise what devices and platforms are used in the field based on usefulness and advantages

Add columns in the SARTrack log to identify message device origin

Have a designated operator for Google Messages.

KPI 3.2 IMT and field team communications follow SOP

The SOPs were outlined in a manual, on a whiteboard and in the team briefings. Apart from some field teams being confused on what phone number to call or text and using a platform (WhatsApp) not detailed in their comms plan, there appeared to be no other issues.

Recommendation:

As for recommendation in KPI 3.1: Establish greater discipline in how devices and what platforms are used based on a written communication plan form

Objective 4. The IMT record and processes information consistent with the CIMS Intelligence Cycle and file management support ongoing operations.

The Intelligence cycle includes an information collection plan, its outputs in terms of actionable intelligence and review. During the SAREX the cycle was followed where the Intelligence function used a collection plan, had outputs that were transmitted in written and verbal form to Planning.

KPI 4.1 The clue information is processed effectively by the Intelligence function and used effectively by Planning to inform decisions

There was no evidence of information gaps between that gathered and that considered. Planning used this information to construct their scenarios and searched to those scenarios. At the beginning of the third IMT shift a searchable area was identified by using interview information. Although there was sound rationale, no written record linking the information to the area was written. This could be recorded in the IC's decision log or documented in the reweighting of scenarios based on evidence. However, the IMT focus shifted when other intel came in from the Canadian Embassy as to a lost party's location. The evaluator mentions this as an example of taking information and making it actionable intelligence and is to be commended.

Although it didn't hinder in this SAREX having a displayed information collection plan would help give opportunity for others to contribute direction. Reweighting of scenarios (that identify areas) based on evidence should also have a written record.

Recommendation:

Consider a displayed information collection plan and reviewing the record keeping on the Intel/ Planning interface.

KPI 4.2 IMT decision making tools are fit for purpose (CIMS)

Time lines, association charts, clue logs, information collection plans, interviews with found subjects and other investigations were used during the SAREX. The links between Intel, Planning and Ops were immediate and responsive. The use of a reliability index particularly for interview information and sightings could be considered.

Recommendation:

Consider using a reliability index when appropriate.

KPI 4.3 Information and intelligence is effectively collected, recorded and organised

The collection and recording of information happened on computer logs, word files and whiteboards. The search master file was available early in the search to guide the collection and organisation of information. Although white boards were not photographed regularly the master file provided that prompt and it is assumed in a search this would be standard practice. Further comment on the file is under KPI 4.4

Recommendation:

Nil.

KPI 4.4 File management operates at a level that supports the search management in the current and upcoming operational periods.

The IMT comprised mostly of Police. They found difficulty in accessing LandSAR forms from their computers- many were not LandSAR members. Identical forms (but with the NZSAR logo) can also be accessed on the NZSAR website by non LandSAR members. IMT members were asking for these forms and accessing may help support managing current and future periods. The forms flow diagram replicating the search process and the Management Guidelines could be particularly helpful.

Another hinderance for the Police was not being able to access their networks via the ICP's Wi- Fi. There was a level of frustration on this point which could become critical during a SAROP.

While the IMT structure was briefly described on the whiteboard IAP it did not give sufficient information for an incoming team. This structure was not updated between shifts which adds disconnects. The evaluator recommends that each shift should have a complete CIMS structure that includes names against functions and their contacts. This provides a quick reference when details are needed from past shifts. This form would, when filed, identify a shift change and break the master file into operational periods.

The Intel section has a heading 'Information Collection Plan' but the collection plans seen during the SAREX contained the results as well. In this case the heading could give a better guide as to what is expected from Intel and its contents. Modifying the heading could help guide the contribution. The evaluator also recommends including a full communications plan under logistics.

Currently the file is unbroken for an extended search that may cover days of operations. Reconfiguring to a daily record could help review and finding information.

The evaluator found file management potentially of a high standard where the headings captured content and help guide the IMT. Altering the current practice should be done cautiously and trialled during training.

Recommendation:

Include a full CIMS chart as per operational period, reviewing the Master file headings and dividing the file as to operational periods

Enable the Police to access their networks when operating from the Wairarapa SAR Base.

Other comment

In reviewing previous evaluations Wellington SAR has up taken a number of recommendations. A recommendation in 2025 was to make better use of alternative comms especially when deploying into areas with limited VHF coverage. While this was in the 2026 SAREX design, its execution highlighted some key learnings and the relevancy of some previous recommendations.

2025

Appoint a dedicated person (ideally in Operations) to manage and feed information from SARTrack to the IMT to avoid missed communications and Intel.

Ensure contingencies are available or at least running alongside computerized methods to maintain situational awareness.

2023

Consider getting posters highlighting Incident Management Roles and have the posters displayed in the operations Room of the SAR Base.

Consider a prompt card for IMT that if search teams are camping out over night, they are given an update on the search and the weather forecast for the following day.

2022

Wherever possible ensure IMT handovers done in person to capture a full appreciation of the situation.

2021

Appoint a Comms Manager who participates in and contributes to IMT meetings.

6. Conclusions

The exercise was well supported by more than 60 Police, LandSAR and AREC personnel from both Wairarapa and Wellington SAR groups. Most, within the IMT, were new to roles and this engagement provided experiential learning and team building opportunities for them as well as for field teams. Teams were well briefed and explored the exercise objectives with some enthusiasm.

The outcomes achieved the core components of the exercise aim. Satellite cell phone enabled texting, In Reach, WhatsApp and Star Link (mini) were used extensively along with VHF radio communications. This tested the Comms infrastructure and showed up potential problem areas to be addressed. While clues sites within the field were well managed the variability of team note book entries could provide an avenue for information loss. Within the IMT, the system of file management particularly around message forms, shift changes and documenting decision rationale needs some attention. Robust record keeping and having IMT capacity remains a focus.

This exercise was well organised, had substantial organisational support and examined the SAREX's aim intent.

7. Appendix

7.1 SAREX Aim and Objectives with KPI's

SAREX AIM	To safely conduct a SAR exercise that examines the increasing trend in usage of cell phones and satellite messaging for communications, file management (written tools and recording), and clue management in the field and how that informs planning.
Objective 1	**Information is effectively managed and communicated during the response.**
	KPI's
Communications are effectively managed to:	• Support the Operations function • Maintain coordination of the field teams • Maintain safety • Utilise various forms of communication • Maintain situational awareness.
Objective 2.	**IMT and field team communications follow SOP's– Field teams communicate and process information consistent with SOP's.**
	KPI's
	• Clue processing – The IMT is provided with thorough information from field teams of any clues located. • The information provided by field teams should confirm that they have processed the clue and/or clue site as per standard procedure.
Objective 3.	**Test communication infrastructure in SAR environment.**
	KPI's

- Communications between the IMT and the field teams, in particular how InReach devices and cell phones are utilised and managed to assist in maintaining communications.
- IMT and field team communications follow SOP.

Objective 4	The IMT record and processes information consistent with the CIMS Intelligence Cycle and file management support ongoing operations.

- The clue information is processed effectively by the Intelligence function and used effectively by Planning to inform decision
- IMT decision making tools are fit for purpose (CIMS)
- Information and intelligence is effectively collected, recorded and organised
- File management operates at a level that supports the search management in the current and upcoming operational periods.

Operational Area of SAREX