

Emergencies (Alerts and Warning Systems) Commissioner's Guidelines 2026

Notifiable Instrument NI2026–325

made under the

Emergencies Act 2004, s 11 (Commissioner may make guidelines).

1 Name of Instrument

This instrument is the *Emergencies (Alerts and Warning Systems) Commissioner's Guidelines 2026*.

2 Commencement

This instrument commences on the day after it is notified.

3 Commissioner's Guidelines

I make the Commissioner's Guidelines relating to the use of the Alerts and Warning Systems at Schedule 1.

4 Revocation

This instrument revokes NI2025-274 *Emergencies (Alerts and Warning Systems) Commissioner's Guidelines 2025*.

Wayne Phillips
Commissioner
ACT Emergency Services Agency

03/07/2026

**ACT EMERGENCY SERVICES
AGENCY**

COMMISSIONER'S GUIDELINES

relating to

**the use of Alerts and Warnings by the ACT
Emergency Services Agency**

2026

1. PURPOSE

- 1.1 To provide Commissioner's Guidelines to describe the ACT Emergency Services Agency (ESA) arrangements for the provision of public information and warnings related to the Agency's four operational Services in an emergency as articulated under sections 8 and 11 of the *Emergencies Act 2004* (the Act).

2. BACKGROUND

- 2.1 Under section 8(4)(h) of the Act, in the exercise of the ESA Commissioner's functions, they must emphasise the importance of communicating information, advice and warnings to the community during an emergency. For the Commissioner's Guidelines this will apply to the ESA's hazard owners.
- 2.2 Under section 11 of the Act, the ESA Commissioner may make guidelines for the strategic operation of each of the emergency services. The guidelines may make provision in relation to the planning and conduct of joint operations, areas of the ESA to be operated jointly, operation of joint areas of ESA, and to the strategic organisation and operation of each of the ESA Services that the Commissioner considers appropriate.
- 2.3 Under section 12 of the Act, the ESA Commissioner may delegate their functions under the Act or another Territory law to a public servant, a member of an emergency service, a police officer, or an emergency services support volunteer. The ESA Commissioner's functions under these guidelines can be delegated to the Assistant Commissioners, the four emergency services Chief Officers for the ambulance service, fire & rescue, rural fire service and the state emergency service, and Incident Controllers.

3. IMPORTANCE OF WARNINGS

- 3.1 The community's expectation for information, alerts and warnings is increasing. Alerts and warnings play a critical role in empowering people to make informed and life-saving decisions in the event of an emergency or disaster. To ensure people have access to clear, succinct and timely messages, the ESA must continue to deliver timely, targeted and tailored warnings, for all hazards.
- 3.2 The provision of accurate and timely warnings is a priority action in any emergency, equal to any other aspect of the operational response. This applies to any hazard, whether it is a natural hazard such as fire, flood or heatwave, an incident of public safety and security, or a health-related event such as a pandemic. Across Australia, Commonwealth, state and territory governments and their emergency service organisations and statutory bodies hold responsibilities for issuing warnings. Community members and organisations also play a shared role in communicating warnings.

4. WARNING RESPONSIBILITIES

- 4.1 Under the Act, the ESA Commissioner is responsible for community education and awareness about emergencies and improving community preparedness for emergencies. The Commissioner also has a responsibility to communicate information, advice, and warnings to the community as described in paragraph 2.1 during an emergency.
- 4.2 The ESA Commissioner has designated under the *Community Communication and Information Plan* that the Chief Minister, Treasury and Economic Development Directorate (CMTEDD) will be responsible to ensure arrangements are in place for the coordination and deployment of ACT Government resources for the provision of community communication and information.

5. THE AUSTRALIAN WARNING SYSTEM (AWS)

- 5.1 The ESA has implemented the AWS, which is a nationally consistent approach to information and warnings during emergencies like bushfire, flood, heatwaves, severe weather and other significant emergencies. The ACT Government accepted the *Royal Commission into National Natural Disaster Arrangements 2020* recommendation that all states and territories urgently implement the AWS.
- 5.2 In the ACT, the AWS builds on pre-existing warning frameworks and applies to bushfire, flood, severe weather, heatwave, hazardous materials and other less frequent events.
- 5.3 Using the AWS the ESA will:
- warn targeted areas of the ACT community of potential or imminent threats from emergencies; and
 - provide those warned with clear direction on steps they should take to stay safe and be informed.

6. ISSUING WARNINGS

- 6.1 The ESA supports Lead Response Agencies (LRAs) to develop and maintain their operational procedures for the AWS and issuing of warnings in the ACT. The LRAs are responsible for individual hazards, which include:
- ACT Ambulance Service – Heatwaves.
 - ACT Fire & Rescue – Hazardous materials (covered under the ‘Other’ AWS hazard type) and grass and bushfires in urban areas.
 - ACT Rural Fire Service – Grass and bushfires in rural areas.
 - ACT State Emergency Service – Floods and severe weather.

- 6.2 The ESA publishes warnings to the ESA website as the primary way of displaying information to the community in the ACT. Warning information is also published to ESAs community facing channels and the Hazards Near Me - NSW phone application.

The ESA also uses a range of other channels to communicate warning information to community. These include radio, television, AusAlert, Emergency Alert (EA), and third party republishes of warnings.

6.3 Use of AusAlert and Emergency Alert

AusAlert and Emergency Alert (EA) are national telephony-based warning systems used in Australia to send voice messages to landlines and messages to mobile phones within a defined area, about imminent or actual life-threatening emergencies.

- 6.4 In the ACT, AusAlert and EA are not the primary tools for issuing warnings and are reserved for critical situations where there is:

- a threat to life and/or property; or
- the community is required to take urgent action due to the time and scale of the potential impact.

- 6.5 Unlike EA, AusAlert is intrusive and at the ‘Critical Alert’ level will override silent and don’t disturb settings on sim enabled devices compatible with the system. For this reason, ‘Critical Alerts’ are used only where significant impact is expected or occurring. For all other AusAlerts, the ‘Priority Alert’ level is used, which does not override silent or do not disturb settings in a device and can be opted out of.

- 6.7 Detailed instructions and guidance on issuing alerts and warnings is contained within the ESA Warnings Handbook, system specific procedures and relevant Warning Procedures. This material is reviewed and tested annually to ensure it is operationally ready.

- 6.8 Both the ESA and ACT Policing have direct access to AusAlert (from 1 October 2026) and EA. If other directorates in the ACT require use of these systems to issue warnings a request can be made to the ESA Commissioner. This process is documented in the ESA Warnings Handbook.

7. AUTHORITY TO ISSUE WARNINGS, AUSALERTS AND EMERGENCY ALERTS

- 7.1 Authority to issue warnings in the ACT is aligned with the three AWS warning levels as delegated by the ESA Commissioner. Approval authority in the ACT escalates with each of the warning levels as follows:

- a. **Advice** – An advice message is the lowest level warning and is used to advise the community that an incident has started or when it has been brought under control. This can be approved by the LRA responsible for the hazard. This will be approved by an Incident Controller, Duty Officer, or Chief Officer of the service responding to the hazard.
- b. **Watch and Act** – The escalating nature of this warning level may require community members to take action. The warning must be approved by the Incident Controller or Chief Officer or relevant delegate from within the Service agency (as per their procedures).
- c. **Emergency Warning including AusAlert and Emergency Alert campaigns** – An Emergency Warning is the highest of the three warning levels and requires the community to take immediate action. An Emergency Warning could also trigger the need for an AusAlert or EA campaign to better communicate the immediate call to action. For this reason, authority to issue an Emergency Warning, AusAlert or EA sits with the ESA Commissioner. If the Commissioner is unavailable, authority is delegated to the Chief Officer(s) or one of the three ESA Assistant Commissioners. If all are unavailable, approval to issue an Emergency Warning AusAlert or EA is the responsibility of the Incident Controller.

- 7.2 The mechanism for approving an Emergency Warning, AusAlert or EA campaign, is undertaken through the ACT's Warning Approval Line, where practical.
- 7.3 This will be used for unforeseen and quickly escalating hazards that occur in the ACT. Use of the Warning Approval Line is outlined in the relevant procedure that governs its use.

8. CROSS BORDER WARNINGS

- 8.1 The ESA is responsible for developing and maintaining cross border warning arrangements with relevant NSW partner agencies. This includes warnings for bushfire, flood, severe weather, heatwaves and hazardous material emergencies that affect cross border communities to ensure they receive consistent warning information.
- 8.2 Detail regarding cross border warning arrangements for each hazard type are detailed in the relevant LRA Warning Procedures.

9. SUPPORT TO EXTERNAL HAZARD OWNERS

- 9.1 On occasion, the ESA may receive requests to issue alerts and warnings on behalf of external agencies. These requests will be assessed on a case-by-case basis, with the ESA issuing alerts and warnings where appropriate and in line with the ESA Warnings Handbook. External agencies that require assistance to send alerts or warnings using ESA capabilities must maintain their own procedures and policies for these requests.

10. WARNING CAPABILITY READINESS AND REDUNDANCY

- 10.1 Testing of warning capability is critical to ensure systems and processes are operationally ready and the community is familiar with their use in the ACT. The ESA aims to undertake alerts and warning testing periodically, even in the high-risk weather season, if conditions are suitable. This raises the profile of alerts and warnings within the ACT community, avoiding complacency, and assists with training of public information and engagement staff.
- 10.2 Backup arrangements for AusAlert and EA exist if primary access through fixed connections is unavailable. In the event fixed line infrastructure is unavailable EA can be accessed via secure modem on the 4G Mobile Networks.
- 10.3 In the event of extensive system failure, the ESA will manage the warning cycle through manual backups to ensure the community still receives warning information.
- 10.4 Alternatively, the ESA Commissioner may also request other jurisdictions (principally NSW agencies) to issue warning messaging for the ACT through AusAlert and or EA.

11. ALERTS AND WARNINGS ROLES DURING EMERGENCIES

11.1 Role of the Incident Controller

The Incident Controller is responsible for managing the incident, including:

- a. Establishing the necessary roles to undertake and manage the incident, including the activation of an Alerts and Warnings Operator and a Public Information Officer
- b. Defining the extent and type of message to be delivered
- c. Gaining authorisation to issue the alert or warning
- d. The activation of supporting emergency management functions.

- 11.2 The management of significant incidents and the alert or warning process will be undertaken at ESA Incident Management Facilities (ESA HQ Fairbairn) to provide the necessary supporting personnel and infrastructure. The ESA Training (ESAT) facility precinct at Hume can be used as a back-up under the Agency's business continuity planning. The ESAT precinct also houses the back-up Communications Centre.

11.3 Role of the Public Information Officer

The PIO will support the Incident Controller in the management of alerts and warnings and will coordinate the arrangements to manage the public information requirements associated with the incident.

- 11.4 These arrangements must commence with the initial decision to use the alert or warning and include the provision of public information through other media channels to support the warning issued.
- 11.5 An alert or warning may have an impact on E000 and Access Canberra call centres, and these functions need to be notified, and where necessary supported with appropriate information and advice.

12. ALERTS AND WARNINGS GOVERNANCE

- 12.1 The governance arrangements for the implementation of the Alerts and Warnings Systems are supported through the ACT Public Safety Communications Steering Committee (ACT PSCSC). This has been established to provide strategic direction and project oversight to ensure reporting, policy arrangements, deadlines and deliverables are met.
- 12.2 Management of the ESA Alerts and Warnings systems and infrastructure are undertaken by the ESAs Emergency Management and Collaboration, Branch (EM&C), which is responsible for:
- coordinating and managing policies dealing with the use of ESA
 - alerts and warnings systems in ACT
 - reviewing this guideline and its associated procedures
 - system testing and acting as the contact point for maintenance
 - capture of EA costs including measures for accountability; and
 - record-keeping and reporting.
- 12.3 The ESA Alerts and Warnings Handbook consolidates warning process for all hazards into a central document. This outlines alert and warning symbology and warning levels, the nested warning approach, Australian warning principles, cross border arrangements, warning approvals and workflows for disseminating warnings within the ACT.
- 12.4 The ESA Warnings Handbook is supported by a set of hazard specific operational procedures and used to document how and when other technology is used to provide warnings in the ACT, including the AusAlert and EA systems.
- 12.5 Training**
- Ongoing training and familiarisation on the use of alerts and warnings systems will be provided to ESA and LRA staff by the ESA EM&C Branch ahead of the high-risk weather season. This will incorporate a mix of face-to-face and on-line training.