

Earthquake-prone buildings: priority buildings

Priority buildings – what are they?

The concept of ‘priority buildings’ was introduced in the national system for identifying, assessing and managing earthquake-prone buildings which came into effect on 1 July 2017.

The system categorises New Zealand into three seismic risk areas: high, medium and low. The seismic risk areas are used to set time frames for identifying and remediating earthquake-prone buildings.

Priority buildings are certain types of buildings in **high** and **medium** seismic risk areas that are considered to present a higher risk because of their construction, type, use or location. They need to be identified and remediated within half the time allowed for other buildings in the same seismic risk areas.

Priority Buildings: A guide to the earthquake-prone building provisions of the Building Act provides detailed guidance on these buildings. It is available at: www.building.govt.nz/managing-buildings/managing-earthquake-prone-buildings/

Categories of priority buildings

Priority buildings that are prescribed in section 133AE of the Building Act 2004

Certain hospital, emergency and education buildings are prioritised in the Building Act because of their function. They include:

- hospital buildings that are likely to be needed to provide emergency medical and ancillary services in an emergency;
- buildings likely to be needed as an emergency shelter or an emergency centre in an emergency; **or** that enable emergency response services to carry out their jobs in an emergency;
- buildings used for education purposes that are regularly occupied by at least 20 people.

Priority buildings identified with community input

Territorial authorities may need to identify priority buildings on thoroughfares with high pedestrian and vehicle traffic. If so, they will consult with the community using the consultative procedure set out under the Local Government Act 2002. Territorial authorities may also use this consultative process to identify priority buildings on routes of strategic importance. The community is consulted to identify the thoroughfares or routes; then territorial authorities identify the priority buildings on those thoroughfares or routes.

The following buildings or parts of buildings could be considered priority buildings:

- parts of unreinforced masonry (URM) buildings that could fall in an earthquake onto thoroughfares with sufficient vehicular or pedestrian traffic to warrant prioritisation
NB: A URM building has masonry walls that do not contain steel, timber or fibre reinforcement. URM buildings are older buildings that often have parapets, as well as verandas, balconies and decorative ornaments attached to their facades (front walls that face onto a street or open space).
- buildings that could impede transport routes of strategic importance (in terms of an emergency response) if they were to collapse in an earthquake.

Territorial authorities must consult the community to identify public roads, footpaths or other thoroughfares with priority buildings. A territorial authority may choose not to identify routes of strategic importance, for example, if there are alternative routes for emergency response.

Territorial authorities identify priority buildings and determine whether they are earthquake prone

There are several different starting points for territorial authorities when identifying priority buildings, based on what information they already hold about buildings in their area (the *Priority Buildings* guidance has more detail).

However, in broad terms, territorial authorities use the EPB methodology (set by MBIE's chief executive and available at www.building.govt.nz) to identify potentially earthquake-prone buildings. They should do the following:

1. Check whether any buildings in the district meet the characteristics of priority buildings set out in section 133AE of the Building Act, and carry out any public consultation needed to help identify them.
2. Identify any of these buildings or part of buildings that are **potentially** earthquake prone using the EPB methodology.
3. Then request building owners provide engineering assessments and, using the EPB methodology, determine whether particular priority buildings or part of these buildings **are** earthquake prone.
4. If buildings are determined as earthquake prone, notify the owners and specify the deadline (shorter time frame for priority buildings) they have to complete seismic work.

Time frames for identifying and remediating priority buildings

Fig A. Time frames for territorial authorities to identify potentially earthquake-prone buildings

Seismic risk area	Priority buildings	All other buildings
High	2.5 years	5 years
Medium	5 years	10 years

Fig B. Time frames for owners to do seismic work on earthquake-prone buildings

Seismic risk area	Priority buildings	All other buildings
High	7.5 years	15 years
Medium	12.5 years	25 years

NB Priority buildings don't have to be identified in low seismic risk areas. In these low seismic risk areas, the time frames for all buildings are 15 years to identify and 35 years to remediate.

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