Core Competencies for Emergency Management Practitioners in Ireland

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1.0 **About the EMII and the Research Team**

The Emergency Management Institute Ireland (EMII) is Ireland's national professional body for emergency and crisis management practitioners, promoting excellence in preparedness, response, recovery, and resilience.

This research was funded by EMII as part of its commitment to advancing evidence-based practice, professional development, and collaboration between academia, government, and practitioners to strengthen Ireland's national resilience.

Further details on the EMII may be found at: https://emii.ie/

Professor Caroline McMullan is a Full Professor of Business and Society: Risk and Crisis Management at DCU Business School. She has led numerous national and EU-funded projects on risk communication, horizon scanning, weather and climate services, digital innovation in emergency management, and professional education in disaster management. Her research is widely published in leading international journals, contributing to global understanding of preparedness, resilience, and risk communication. Nationally, Professor McMullan has shaped Ireland's approach to risk governance as the architect of the methodologies underpinning the National Risk Assessments (2012, 2017, 2020, 2023), as well as developing and leading the DCU MSc in Emergency Management (McMullan and Brown, 2015).

She is Director of Education, Research & Government Liaison at the Emergency Management Institute Ireland (EMII) and serves on national advisory bodies including the Government Task Force for Emergency Planning, the Board of the National Directorate for Fire and Emergency Management, and the Irish Coast Guard Strategic Advisory Group Board.

Dr Gavin Brown is an Assistant Professor of Business and Society: Risk and Crisis Management at DCU Business School. He has contributed to several national and EU-funded projects on disaster risk reduction and resilience, including collaborations with Met Éireann to develop evidence-based weather and climate services for Ireland.

Dr Brown serves as a Board Member of the Emergency Management Institute Ireland (EMII) and is a member of the Society for Risk Analysis. He has published in leading international journals, including Safety Science, the International Journal of Disaster Risk Reduction, and the International Journal of Emergency Services.

Kate McLoughlin, a member of the Principal Emergency Services (PES) in Ireland, was the researcher on this project. Kate conducted the literature review, developed the theoretical framework, and contributed to the data analysis for this project while undertaking her MSc in Emergency Management at DCU Business School. Her research formed a key component of the project's academic foundation. Kate's research was sponsored by the Emergency Management Institute Ireland (EMII).

2.0 **Introduction**

Ireland's system for managing major emergencies is well established through the Framework for Major Emergency Management (MEM), which provides the structures and processes for delivering a coordinated response at local and regional levels. The MEM Framework operates within the overarching Strategic Emergency Management (SEM) Framework, which sets out the national structures and coordination arrangements for emergencies requiring a whole-of-government response. Together, these frameworks ensure a consistent and integrated approach to systematic emergency management (see Figure 1), encompassing risk assessment, risk management, planning and preparedness, response, and recovery.

Figure 1: Systematic Emergency Management
Provided by the National Directorate for Fire & Emergency Management

Unlike other jurisdictions with established emergency management systems, such as Canada, New Zealand, and the United Kingdom, Ireland lacks a nationally validated framework of competencies for emergency management practitioners. This research, commissioned by the Emergency Management Institute Ireland (EMII) and conducted in partnership with Dublin City University (DCU), seeks to address this gap.

The study identifies, validates, and presents a nationally relevant Core Competency Framework for emergency management practitioners. It draws on international literature, global good-practice frameworks, and the active participation of practitioners from across Ireland's emergency management community. The resulting framework defines the knowledge, skills, and behaviours required for effective performance across all sectors, including public, private, and voluntary organisations.

2.1 Key Outcomes

- The study produced the first validated competency framework for emergency management practitioners in Ireland.
- Sixteen core competencies were confirmed as essential, encompassing two broad domains: Skills and Abilities (14) and Knowledge and Understanding (2).
- The framework establishes and underpins the EMII Core Competency Wheel, illustrating the balance of leadership, decision-making, ethics, collaboration, and systematic knowledge required of emergency management practitioners in Ireland.

This report summarises the research process and outlines its implications for policy, education, and professional development

2.2 Context

The increasing frequency and complexity of crises, including climate-driven disasters, cyber incidents, and pandemics, require highly competent professionals who can coordinate national and multi-agency responses, often in evolving, pressurised situations. Internationally, competency frameworks have proven valuable in aligning education, recruitment, and performance assessment within the emergency management profession – see Table 1.

Table 1: A Comparison of International Competency Frameworks

COUNTRY	FRAMEWORK / LEAD BODY	KEY FOCUS
CANADA	Public Safety Canada – Emergency Management Competency Framework (2022).	Knowledge, skills, and attitudes across preparedness, response, and recovery.
UNITED KINGDOM	Emergency Planning Society Core Competences Framework (2011).	Professional standards for emergency planners.
UNITED KINGDOM	UK Government: Developed by The Workforce Development Trust in partnership with the UK Resilience Academy. National Occupational Standards for Resilience and Emergencies (2025).	Guide recruitment, training and skills needs analysis as well as performance activities in organisations with statutory and non-statutory responsibilities in emergency planning and disaster preparedness.
NEW ZEALAND	Civil Defence Emergency Management Framework (2009).	Capability across prevention, preparedness, response, and recovery.

Ireland's MEM and SEM frameworks specify organisational roles but not the competencies individuals require to fulfil them. Consequently, training and job specifications vary widely.

The EMII study aims to develop a unified foundation to support:

- **Recruitment consistency:** providing clear expectations for roles.
- **Professional development:** enabling targeted CPD and performance appraisal.
- **Education alignment:** guiding curriculum design and accreditation.
- **Policy coherence:** ensuring national-level understanding of emergency-management capability.

3.0 Research Design and Methodology

3.1 Research Question

What are the core competencies that emergency management practitioners in Ireland should possess?

3.2 Study Design Overview

The research adopted a four-phase mixed-methods approach, combining quantitative surveys and qualitative focus-group discussions to achieve both breadth and depth.

PHASE	PURPOSE	PARTICIPANTS	OUTCOME
PHASE 1: Document Analysis	Identify a preliminary list of competencies from the academic and practice literature.	Research Team.	157 competencies.
PHASE 2: Initial Questionnaire	Identify which competencies from the literature are relevant to Ireland.	12 EMII Board members.	157 ⟶ 96 competencies shortlisted.
PHASE 3: Focus Group	Refine, define, and group competencies; reach consensus on terminology.	7 EMII Board members.	96 ⟶ 31 competencies.
PHASE 4: Final Questionnaire	Validate final competencies with full EMII membership.	64 responses (54 % response rate).	31 ⟶ 16 validated core competencies.

This staged design enabled triangulation and cross-checking of quantitative data with qualitative insights, thereby strengthening reliability and validity.

3.3 Ensuring Data Trustworthiness

QUALITY CRITERION	APPROACH USED
Reliability	Standardised survey software (Qualtrics), clear instructions, consistent procedures.
Validity	Competencies derived from peer-reviewed sources and international frameworks.
Triangulation	A combination of quantitative and qualitative data across the four phases.
Ethical Integrity	Informed consent, confidentiality, and secure data storage in accordance with GDPR.
Participant Representation	Mix of public, private, and voluntary sector respondents (ensuring diverse perspectives).

The rigorous application of the quality criteria provides assurance that the final 16 competencies embody both academic rigour and professional consensus.

4.0 Validated Core Competencies

The 16 competencies which emerged from the research represent a balanced integration of the behavioural, cognitive, and technical dimensions necessary for professional practice in Ireland.

1 **Critical Thinking**

A disciplined intellectual process involving innovation in decision-making in complex environments through the careful analysis and examination of available data to inform problem-solving and lead to action (Cwiak et al., 2017).

2 **Leadership**

Leadership encompasses proficiency in coordination, incident command and consensus building (Marks and CEM, 2005), as well as the ability to demonstrate resilience, motivate others, and assume responsibility (Van Wart and Kapucu, 2011).

3 **Effective Decision-Making**

A necessary skill, frequently required under time constraints due to the volatile nature of emergency management. This includes resisting physiological or emotional interference (Wooten and James, 2008), adjusting actions rapidly in chaotic environments (Tyler and Sadiq, 2019), and applying structured decision-making frameworks to understand the underlying context (Kapucu and Van Wart, 2008).

4 **Situational Awareness**

The ability to convert circumstances into a comprehended operational picture that can be clearly communicated. This involves continuously analysing available information as it emerges (Wooten and James, 2008; Kapucu and Van Wart, 2008).

5 **Problem-Solving**

Although not consistently identified as a standalone competency in the literature, problem-solving is frequently cited in relation to leadership, decision-making, and critical thinking. It is closely linked to critical thinking and supports effective performance under pressure (Blanchard, 2003; Feldmann-Jensen et al., 2019).

6 **Developing and Maintaining Stakeholder Cooperation**

The ability to coordinate with stakeholders, communicate effectively, build collaborative relationships (Tyler and Sadiq, 2019), and negotiate shared solutions through mutual understanding and conflict resolution (Hurtes, 2016; Blanchard, 2003).

7 **Debriefing**

Discussed in the Emergency Planning Society Framework (Emergency Planning Society, 2011) as a process for setting objectives, evaluating outcomes in exercises or incidents, gathering feedback, and using lessons identified and learned to inform future practice.

8 **Information Management**

The ability to gather, assess, and utilise information for effective decision-making. This includes evaluating the reliability of data sources (Knopf, 2003), managing information channels (Lovecek et al., 2015), and protecting sensitive or classified data (Olsén et al., 2023).

9 **Abiding by Professional Ethics**

Involves ethical decision-making guided by moral values, professionalism, and integrity (Cwiak et al., 2017; Feldmann-Jensen et al., 2019), ensuring people are treated fairly and with dignity while maintaining public trust (Knopf, 2003).

10 **Oral Communication**

Described in the literature as including active listening, group speaking skills (Cwiak et al, 2017), and the ability to convey and interpret auditory and non-verbal inputs to ensure meaning is communicated clearly (Hurtes, 2016; Knopf, 2003).

11 **Knowledge of Systematic Emergency Management**

Refers to knowledge of the phases of emergency management: planning, preparedness, response, and recovery, as outlined by Alexander (2002) and Haddow (2011).

12 **Feedback & Continuous Improvement**

Recognised as a competency involving openness to learning, actively seeking input to improve performance (Knopf, 2003; Wooten and James, 2008), and using feedback to drive continuous professional development (Cwiak et al., 2017; Feldmann-Jensen et al., 2019).

13 **Flexibility and Adaptability**

The ability to adjust behaviour in response to changing circumstances. It includes composure under pressure, acquiring new behaviours, and taking on unfamiliar tasks when needed (Kapucu and Van Wart, 2008; Knopf, 2003; Tyler and Sadiq, 2019).

14 **Collaboration**

The willingness and ability to work with others toward shared objectives. It involves managing group dynamics, being receptive to others' ideas (Tyler and Sadiq, 2019), and coordinating resources effectively (Hurtes, 2016; Olsén et al., 2023).

15 **Goal Setting**

Involves articulating a clear mission, aligning team efforts, and evaluating plans based on defined objectives (Competency Framework, 2011). This competency also includes the communication of goals and crisis management tasks (Lovecek et al., 2015; Hurtes, 2016).

16 **Knowledge of Ireland's Emergency Management Frameworks**

Emergency Management Practitioners in Ireland require an understanding of Ireland's Strategic (SEM) and Emergency Management (MEM) Frameworks, including the terminology, structures, and applications. Practitioners must be able to reference and apply these frameworks with confidence in planning and operational contexts.

The validated framework, represented in the Core Competency Wheel, demonstrates that professional competence in emergency management relies on cognitive judgement, interpersonal capability, and technical knowledge. Respondents emphasised the interplay between leadership, ethical conduct, and collaborative coordination, competencies that underpin multi-agency crisis management.

Respondents gave high priority to critical thinking, decision-making, and situational awareness, illustrating the need for adaptive reasoning rather than prescriptive rule-following.

The prominence of stakeholder cooperation and collaboration underscores the multi-jurisdictional, networked nature of modern emergency management in Ireland.

5.0 **The Core Competency Framework**

The 16 validated competencies were organised within the Core Competency Wheel, which illustrates the cyclical relationship between personal skills, professional abilities, and knowledge foundations.

5.1 **Structure of the Framework**

The Core Competency Wheel, see Figure 2, integrates two domains:

• **Skills and Abilities** – representing what emergency managers do: how they think, lead, communicate, and adapt.
• **Knowledge and Understanding** – representing what they know: frameworks, systems, and contextual awareness.

Grounded in a professional ethos of leadership, ethics, and collaboration, the competencies work together to ensure effective performance during all phases of the emergency management cycle.
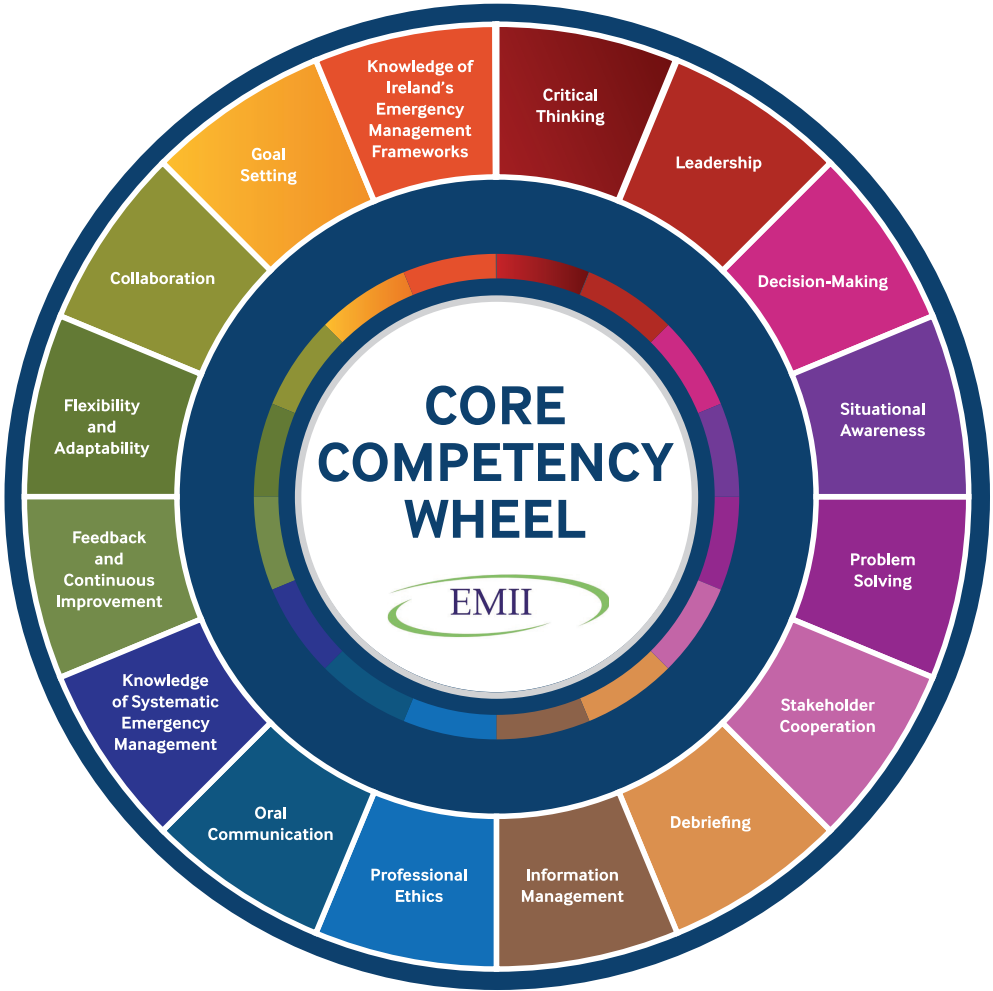

Figure 2: Core Competency Wheel

Appendix A provides full-size version of the Core Competency Wheel, reproduced at a larger scale than the in-text figure.

6.0 **Application and Impact**

6.1 **Policy and Governance**

- Establishes the first national baseline for emergency management competence in Ireland.
- Provides a foundation for standardised job descriptions, career progression, and certification.
- Aligns Irish professional expectations with international good practice while remaining context-specific.

6.2 **Education and Training**

- Enables universities and training providers to align curricula and assessment criteria with validated competencies.
- Informs learning outcomes, graduate attributes, and CPD programmes.
- Encourages development of simulation-based and scenario-driven training focused on core skills such as decision-making and stakeholder coordination.

6.3 **Employers and Practitioners**

- Clarifies expectations for performance and professional behaviour.
- Supports competency-based recruitment, appraisal, and promotion processes.
- Promotes reflective practice through debriefing and feedback loops.

6.4 **Future Research**

- Offers a robust empirical foundation for sector-specific studies (e.g., public-health, cybersecurity, or environmental risk management).
- Provides a benchmark for longitudinal evaluation of professional development outcomes.

7.0 **Limitations and Scope**

The framework focuses on generalist emergency management roles rather than specialist technical functions. While this ensures broad applicability, it excludes niche expertise areas (e.g., radiological response, health epidemiology). Additionally, competency validation relied on perceived importance rather than direct performance observation. Despite these limits, the study offers a rigorous foundation for national policy and future adaptation to specialist domains.

8.0 **Conclusions**

The EMII research delivers Ireland's first practitioner-validated Core Competency Framework for emergency management practitioners. Its development followed a transparent, evidence-based, and consensus-driven methodology that aligns Ireland's approach with leading international practice.

Key conclusions:

1. Emergency management in Ireland requires a clearly articulated, shared understanding of professional competence: competence being a combination of knowledge, skills and abilities or attitudes.
2. The sixteen competencies articulated capture the essential combination of cognitive, interpersonal, and knowledge-based capabilities.
3. The framework supports national consistency across education, recruitment, and professional development nationally.
4. It strengthens Ireland's capacity to coordinate complex emergencies through common language and expectations.

By rooting the framework in practitioner consensus and evidence-based analysis, the EMII-DCU partnership ensures it reflects the realities of Irish emergency management practice, inter-agency cooperation, adaptive leadership, ethical decision-making, and lifelong learning.

This 16-competency structure is not an endpoint but a living framework, designed to evolve as Ireland's emergency management landscape changes and as new and emerging risks arise, ensuring that the nation's professionals remain prepared, capable, and resilient in the face of future crises. The competency framework developed through this research positions Ireland alongside the global community of nations that have established clear professional expectations for emergency management practitioners. This framework paves the way for the development of professional standards that more precisely define the performance criteria and conditions under which each competency is demonstrated.

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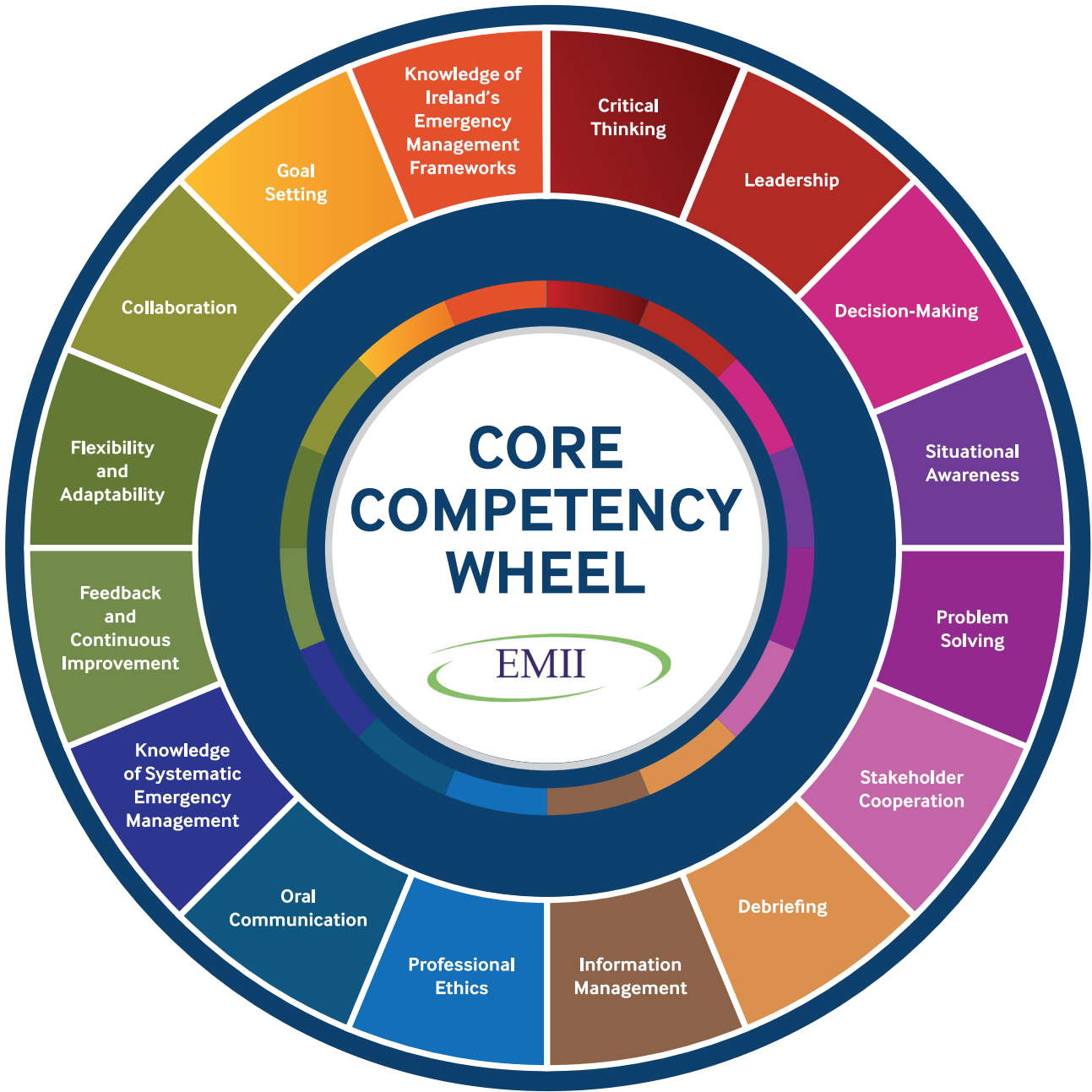
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Appendix A

CORE COMPETENCY WHEEL — EMII

- Critical Thinking
- Leadership
- Decision-Making
- Situational Awareness
- Problem Solving
- Stakeholder Cooperation
- Debriefing
- Information Management
- Professional Ethics
- Oral Communication
- Knowledge of Systematic Emergency Management
- Feedback and Continuous Improvement
- Flexibility and Adaptability
- Collaboration
- Goal Setting
- Knowledge of Ireland's Emergency Management Frameworks