The 20 District Health Boards are funders and providers of publicly funded services for the population of a specific geographical area. DHBs are required to undertake their functions according to population health objectives set out in sections 22 and 23 of the Disabilities Act 2000.

Public health services are centrally funded by the Ministry of Health, but are delivered by the 12 DHB-owned public health service providers. Public health service providers focus on 'core public health services' including environmental health, communicable disease control, and health promotion programmes. Many of these services include a regulatory component performed by statutory officers appointed under a variety of legislation.

Health services are provided by Hawke’s Bay DHB on the Chatham Islands, which lie 800 kilometres east of New Zealand.