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National Emergency
Management Agency

Submission to the Independent Review of Commonwealth Disaster Funding

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Submitted by: Latrobe City Council

Q1. What experience have you had with Commonwealth disaster funding support?

Latrobe City Council (LCC) and its teams have gained valuable experience with Commonwealth Disaster Funding support, particularly in response to recent significant events such as bushfires and severe storm damage events stretching from 2019 to 2022. We have successfully prepared reimbursement claims documentation, navigated complex application processes, and secured recent commitments for over \$18 million in Category A and B funding.

Our team has been actively involved in relief and recovery efforts, including support activities, community engagement, and the establishment of Relief Centres and Community Recovery Committees. We have diligently gathered data, reconciled costs, and submitted comprehensive applications for immediate works funding. Our commitment to effective disaster recovery and rebuilding is evident in our utilisation of Commonwealth funding support – it could not occur without it.

LCC consistently manage the disbursement and acquittal of many streams of discretionary grant funding from both state and federal governments, including jointly funded programs such as the Black Spot Road Safety funding. None of these funding streams will remove funding because an on the ground emergency response did not stop to take a metadata enabled photo in a specific position, before commencing works. The scale of recent events has required a large coordinated in house and contractor led response to re-open roads. LCC has had legitimate works deemed ineligible due to contractors not being familiar with these post-disaster evidentiary requirements. The difference is stark to discretionary grant streams which are more focused on project outcomes than specific pre-construction evidentiary requirements.

The timeframes do not scale with the size of the disaster. We could have a single landslip or 200 landslips from an event and be required to meet the same timing deadlines. Yes, a variation could be sought but without certainty in the guidelines it relies on agency discretion and adds uncertainty to a disaster response.

The National Disaster Funding arrangements places a significant administrative burden on local governments. They are responsible for managing the funding application process, ensuring compliance with reporting requirements, and navigating complex financial procedures. The administrative workload can divert resources and attention away from crucial recovery activities, potentially slowing down the overall recovery process.





Without detailed up to date experience in navigating the complex process, it is overwhelming and financially risky to commence reconstruction efforts post disaster – the emphasis should be on addressing the immediate need of disaster affected communities with the trust of government.

Navigating the complex system of recovery support can be traumatising for community members. Delivering recovery support in a more accessible way, adopting case management services, and more effective communication can improve the recovery process for our community.

Q2. How could Commonwealth funding support communities to reduce their disaster risk?

Access to disaster recovery funding is very much appreciated and assists with the physical and emotional recovery of the community within Latrobe City. This assistance could be improved further by:

- * Allowing flexibility as part of a community led recovery process by ensuring greater access to community groups and private landowners, and the provision of equipment or resource grants to enable communities to gather the necessary evidence for supporting claims.
- * Increasingly shifting the focus of funding from solely response and recovery to long-term resilience strategies, allowing communities to proactively address adaption, the underlying causes of natural disasters, and invest in sustainable risk reduction measures. The recent Disaster Ready Fund is a fantastic example of this type of initiative.
- * Investing in mitigation efforts, including identifying and strengthening critical infrastructure and implementing programs that enhance community resilience. Local governments, with Commonwealth funding support, are well-suited for sustainable implementation.
- * Reviewing funding applicability to include enhancements to critical infrastructure during response and reconstruction activities. The approach to betterment is inconsistent in the application but moreover, misses the point that these essential public assets are legacy assets not built to the current engineering standards. It is essential that modern safety treatment be incorporated in asset restoration, because without adding modern resilience treatment to these assets to withstand the increased effects of climate change, they will most likely fail again in the future.

Part of the adaption to climate change can include a thorough assessment of the need for the reinstatement of that asset in its current alignment. It may be a better use of public funds and a more sustainable solution to relocate a road from a landslip plagued location, however that is not currently eligible for funding. The current funding arrangements do not allow for this type of best use of public funds assessment.

Q3. Please describe your understanding of Commonwealth disaster funding processes.

LCC currently has approximately \$15.4 million worth of outstanding Category B Asset Restoration claims associated with the June 2021 flood and storm event.

It is our experience that the processes involved in accessing Commonwealth disaster funding are complex and time-consuming. It requires comprehensive data collection, including financial documentation, photographs, cost estimates, and damage assessments. Timely submission of invoices from contractors is crucial to meet claim submission deadlines. The administrative burden of paperwork



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and documentation can be challenging and often requires significant resources. Streamlining the application process and reducing paperwork would be beneficial.

Liaison with emergency management representatives and understanding the eligibility criteria for different funding categories are vital aspects of the process. Overall, providing detailed evidence of expenditure can be a time-consuming aspect of accessing Commonwealth Disaster Funding.

We value the funding arrangements and agree that all public monies must be properly disbursed and auditable. However, we find the current evidentiary requirements an impediment to the reconstruction works and claims process, and onerous when compared to other funding streams.

Q4. Are the funding roles of the Commonwealth, states and territories, and local government, during disaster events clear?

The roles and responsibilities are not clear. The rules and guidelines have changed multiple times, leading to confusion and additional work. Understanding the funding rules and how they are assessed by the State can be challenging, contradictory and subject to change. The funding response should be reflective of the scale and nature of the event, to allow flexibility in how immediate and the ongoing needs of the community are met in a coordinated government approach.

There is also confusion regarding the sources of funding and the reporting methods, as they have changed over time – some funding comes from Department of Family, Fairness and Housing, some from Emergency Management Victoria and from other State and Federal agencies. Clarity is needed regarding roles, reporting lines, and the reasons behind information requirements, as information often needs to be provided to multiple departments and consistently, we have had to provide very similar feedback in different ways to State and Federal departments.

Q5. Is there any further information you would like to provide?

Latrobe City Council appreciates the opportunity to make a submission to the Independent Review of Commonwealth Disaster Funding and provide the following additional information:

- * The increasing frequency and severity of events call for dedicated Commonwealth resources to ensure stakeholders are well-informed about requirements and processes related to disaster funding;
- * It is important that the funding and guidelines are fit for purpose, depending on the nature and scale of event. This includes the timely deployment of fit for purpose funding streams to enable a community led recovery;
- * Data sharing of the impact across agencies, while recognising personal privacy constraints would be beneficial;
- * There is a lack of understanding at the Commonwealth and State levels regarding the time and effort required to compile a claim that meets assessor's requirements for full reimbursement. During emergencies, the focus on community safety should overshadow the importance of collecting data for future claims;





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- * System updates, such as in Crisisworks, are needed to include fields for essential information to streamline reporting and eliminate manual data compilation, as the effort moves from disaster response to reconstruction; and
- * Utilising Category A funding more effectively for initial relief and recovery, without excessive concerns about eligibility, would benefit affected individuals. Early confirmation of funded services and timely appointment of recovery officers are essential for efficient and cohesive recovery efforts.

By addressing these points through clear guidance, updated systems, timely funding, and dedicated resources, disaster response, recovery, and funding processes can be improved.

