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# Submission to the Independent Review of Commonwealth Disaster Funding

**Response ID:** IRCDF\_1147\_50

**Consent option:** Publish with name

**Submitted by:** Sutherland Shire Council

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

Sutherland Shire LGA has experienced nine (9) natural disaster declared events between July 2018 – June 2023 with varying scale and severity impacting community, council assets and services.

With the recent rise in frequency and severity of natural disasters, Council has invested in building specific skills, knowledge, and resourcing capabilities to maximise our disaster funding eligibility and claims potential.

To uplift our disaster claims potential Council has specifically focused on the following key areas

- \* Knowledgeable about eligibility and criteria requirements (the rules) in relation to disaster funding arrangements. Commonwealth Disaster Recovery Arrangements 2018 and NSW Disaster Assistance Arrangement and related Guidelines.
- \* Established close relations with government agencies administrating the claims process, Public Works Authority, Transport for NSW (TfNSW), Environment Protection Agency (EPA) and the Office of Local Government (OLG).
- \* Significant efforts have gone into raising awareness and providing the required support internally and with our supply partners about disaster funding eligibility criteria and evidence capture.
- \* Working to configure our internal enterprise systems and processes to better support information and evidence capture requirements.

In the past three years Council has made four retrospective claims submissions for AGRN 898, AGRN 923, AGRN 1012, AGRN 1025, Totalling = \$1,550,285 (claimed) resulting in one received payment of \$40,419 and one preliminary approved still pending final approval (October 2022) but not received amount \$460,000 and \$550,595 of declined claims.

Additionally, Council also received two separate \$1M advanced disaster grant for AGRN 1012 & AGRN 1025 with works program submitted to OLG in June and October 2022, both submissions are still pending approval with completion required by June 2024. Ineligible and unspent funds must be returned. With the uncertainty of approvals, it places additional unnecessary financial pressures on Council.

Both Commonwealth and State Disaster Guidelines are exceedingly difficult to interpret, criteria and eligibility requirements are complex and inflexible, level of requested evidence is extremely difficult to





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Management Agency

achieve, repetitive requests for additional information, reconciling and the processing of the claims is a manual lengthy process. Application and rigour of the disaster guidelines appear to vary across the different administrating government agencies e.g: Public Works, TfNSW, EPA, OLG.

Managing the complexities of the claims process and information gathering in terms of eligibility requirements during an event is incredibly distracting, challenging and adds undue pressure across the organisation often in very stressful situations.

Funding support to industry and business is limited and delayed, on occasions Council has been required to provide an initial response for assistance.

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

Commonwealth funding can play crucial role in supporting communities to reduce disaster risks through various initiative and programs.

- a. Policy and Regulatory Support: Disaster guidelines need to be simplified into a usable document with the criteria, eligibility and evidence requirements redefined to make access to funding more achievable with a greater focus on situational outcomes. Funding administrating agencies need to provide greater support through proactive engagement and awareness sessions for local government, industry, business, and community groups to enable and build levels of self-resilience.
- b. Infrastructure Resilience Enhancing: Funding allocation for the construction or enhancement of infrastructure that helps reduce disaster risk. This includes investing in projects such as flood mitigation systems, road and bridge upgrades, environmental protection systems, early warning systems, fire-resistant buildings, or retrofitting existing structures to withstand natural hazards. The last flood study completed for the Woronora River was completed back in 1991, over 30 years ago and in urgent need for an update.

As an example, Sutherland Shire would significantly benefit from latest technology early warning systems for riverine and tidal surge water levels, dam spill levels, bushfire ignition/smoke detection, telecommunication coverage upgrades, national parks security surveillance cameras, a commonwealth national disaster information dashboard with local content.

- c. Hazard reduction: programs for managing bushfire risks is critical to the safety of the Sutherland Shire community, the annual hazard reduction programs and delivery methods need to be reviewed to ensure they are sufficiently funded and resourced. Fire trail maintenance and access also requires greater investment to ensure the serviceability and safety of emergency agencies who use those trails. Sutherland's recent submission for fire trail maintenance grant funding was rejected. Additionally, investment in maintenance of riverine and waterway navigational channels to enable communities such as the Woronora, Georges and Port Hacking rivers access and egress safely in the event of an emergency.
- d. Community Education and Awareness: Funding can be directed towards community resilience education and awareness campaigns to promote understanding of disaster risks and encourage preparedness. This can involve organising workshops, training programs, and public outreach initiatives to disseminate information on disaster prevention, response, and resilience strategies.



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- e. **Research and Data Collection:** funding can support various research projects focused on disaster risk assessment, hazard mapping, and understanding the vulnerabilities of different communities. This research can contribute to evidence-based decision-making and inform policy development related to disaster risk reduction.
- f. **Capacity Building:** Funding for capacity-building initiatives that enhance the capabilities of local authorities, emergency services, and community organisations involved in disaster risk reduction. This may include training programs, resource allocation for emergency response equipment, and establishing networks for collaboration and knowledge sharing.
- g. **Grants and Financial Assistance:** provide grants and financial assistance to communities to implement projects aimed at reducing disaster risk. This can involve funding for community-based initiatives, non-profit organisations, or local government programs that focus on resilience-building activities, community engagement, and infrastructure improvements.

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

Commonwealth Disaster funding access is triggered via a state based natural disaster declaration incorporating the Commonwealth AGRN or Australian Government declared national emergency.

Provision of the funding is based on the Commonwealth Disaster Recovery Funding Arrangements Guidelines and NSW Disaster Assistance Guidelines (co funding arrangement).

Funding is administered by state government agencies Public Works Advisory, Transport for NSW, EPA, OLG.

When an LGA is declared a natural disaster event Council can access funding via the above arrangements. Additionally, Council can apply for various grants and financial assistance programs as they become available.

Council DRFA claims are submitted via the 306 form to each administrative agency for (emergency works, immediate reconstruction, and essential public asset reconstruction (submissions and approval requests))

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

Commonwealth Government typically plays a key role in providing financial assistance, coordination, and support to the states during a natural disaster event. They are responsible for national emergency management framework and guidelines, normally co funding response effort, infrastructure repairs, community recovery programs with the states.

States manage the oversight (governance), allocation, administration, and reconciliation of the co shared Commonwealth and State disaster funding provisions provided to individuals, communities, non-for-profit groups, businesses, local government. They also provide guidelines at a state level for how the funds are to be used for eligible purposes.

Local government represent impacted communities back through the layers of government. In the response phase Council will determine with community representatives any immediate funding requirements to be directed to those vulnerable and most at need communities, restore critical



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Management Agency

infrastructure and services, direct individuals, businesses, and community groups to government financial assistance arrangements. Complete any emergency works (clean up) or immediate reconstructions works and look to claim retrospective funding back through the state.

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

From Council's recent experience the community demand for greater resilience building education, awareness engagement has become increasingly evident with the rise in frequency and severity of natural disaster events. Community expectations have lifted on all levels of government to invest in proactive initiative measures for example early warning systems, access to real time live localised emergency information through a single reliable dashboard, infrastructure enhancements/upgrades and financial support.

The rise in the level of community interest for preparation planning and resilience building provides an ideal opportunity to leverage participation through commonwealth/state funded programs to work with local government and our communities.

Council would like to reiterate; the current disaster funding process is extremely complex and clunky and often results in either limited or nil return for effort that goes into making a claim. This process needs to be simplified with eligibility and criteria requirements that are realistic, equitable and achievable. Access to a streamlined electronic centralised claims processing system is imperative, eliminating the alternate paper based 306 forms etc.

