



Australian Government

National Emergency
Management Agency

Submission to the Independent Review of Commonwealth Disaster Funding

Response ID: IRCDF_1169_51

Consent option: Publish with name

Submitted by: City of Onkaparinga, South Australia

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

**** Please note, this response is the feedback of the administration and is not an approved position of the elected Council of the City of Onkaparinga ****

In 2022, the City of Onkaparinga was awarded funding through the National Emergency Management Agency (NEMA)'s Preparing Australian Communities – Local stream fund.

We received \$3.57 million (over three years) for our Bushfire Preparedness and Resilience Project (BPP). This represents the largest Commonwealth grant in the disaster preparedness field that council has received to date.

The grant has allowed us to undertake demonstrable improvements in bushfire preparedness in Year 1 of the agreement. Further improvements will be implemented over the remaining term of the agreement.

The project has fostered strong engagement between council and local NEMA staff and has generated considerable interest from Elected Members and the public.

We submitted our application through the business.gov.au portal and found the process simple and intuitive. The administrative requirements for receipt of funds and acquittal reporting are to be expected and are not considered onerous.

However, the timing and timeframe for submissions proved difficult. The funding round was released in early December 2021 and closed on 6 January 2022 (the Christmas period). This is a short timeframe and an inconvenient time of year for most corporate organisations.

Timeframes for grant applications across Commonwealth (and state) portfolios remain an enduring difficulty for local government, especially those with matched funding. We recommend that future application timeframes be further considered to allow for local government budgetary timelines and processes.

We note that the City of Onkaparinga has also partnered on collaborative Resilient South initiatives that have received federal disaster resilience funding including the Resilient Asset Management Project, the Enhanced Resilient Asset Delivery program, and the Resilient South Regional Climate Action Plan.

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

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A comprehensive approach to disaster management comprises four phases: Prevention, Preparedness, Response and Recovery.

While the local government sector has a powerful role to play in all phases of disaster management, the City of Onkaparinga is particularly focused on risk mitigation and resilience strategies. We support calls for an increase in funding for prevention and preparedness initiatives with a focus on climate resilience. This is the best way to support communities to reduce their disaster risk and constrain escalating national disaster recovery costs.

In 2015, the Australian Productivity Commission (the Commission) expressed concern that 97 per cent of Australian Government disaster funding was being spent on post disaster relief and recovery and just 3 per cent on mitigation, preparedness and resilience combined. It advised that responding to bushfires, storms and cyclones after the fact was likely to cost 11 times more than investment in prevention and preparedness. As part of its inquiry, the Commission also recommended the Australian Government establish a fund of \$200 million per year for mitigation. While we commend the Commonwealth Government for implementing this recommendation, and have benefitted from this shift in focus, further investment is required.

The Australian Prudential Regulation Authority states that Australia must spend \$3.5 billion each year to limit the damage from climate-related natural hazards.

Additional investment in risk mitigation, including for the Preparing Australian Communities – Local stream fund, is essential to reduce risk and improve the resilience of our communities against bushfires and floods.

Ongoing Commonwealth funding to maintain existing Community-Led Emergency Resilience and Community Disaster Resilience Groups is also recommended. This would foster continuity and facilitate the ongoing delivery of resilience programs that are currently at the mercy of time-limited grant agreements.

In terms of funding distribution, our experience suggests that partnership arrangements between Commonwealth agencies like NEMA and local government, and/or NGOs, represent the optimal delivery mechanism for providing funding to support communities. Local government has existing relationships with community groups which can be leveraged to promote messaging and programs. The importance of localisation is acknowledged in the Australia's national midterm review of the Sendai Framework for Disaster Risk Reduction 2015-2030 Report.

In practice, in addition to our other work, we have delivered a 'resident education' program as a component of our NEMA-funded BPP. This enabled the establishment of community groups that come together to identify and assess their bushfire risk. While our current focus under the BPP is bushfire preparedness, the benefits of community engagement and hazard identification being demonstrated through our project are applicable to all disaster hazards.

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

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The Disaster Recovery Funding Arrangements 2018 page on the Department of Home Affairs website (Disaster Recovery Funding Arrangements 2018 (disasterassist.gov.au)) is a good initial resource for understanding Commonwealth disaster funding processes.

The South Australian State Emergency Service (SES) also advises local governments of funding opportunities through Zone Emergency Management Committees, which the SES administers across our state.





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The City of Onkaparinga has a sound understanding of Commonwealth disaster funding processes. As a large metropolitan council, we are fortunate to have the staff capacity, including officers with specialised skillsets, to investigate and provide advice about such opportunities. However, anecdotal evidence from smaller councils, particularly those in rural and remote areas, indicates that they may face resource challenges when it comes to researching and understanding disaster funding processes.

Additional constraints are presented by grants that include 1:1 matched funding requirements. These requirements constrain the ability of councils to achieve ambitious projects and disproportionately affect smaller councils, including ones in disaster-prone areas, that are financially unable to meet such requirements.

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

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Funding roles are likely to be clear to organisations that have experienced a disaster event that triggered funding or to councils of a sufficient size to have specialised staff to conduct research in this space. Smaller councils and other organisations are less likely to have this capacity.

Clearly, having to learn and understand relevant roles and processes during a disaster is an enormous challenge and additional burden for any council or other organisation involved in such an event. For this reason, we suggest the Commonwealth Government consider education and awareness initiatives to inform relevant state and local governments, and community groups, on disaster funding roles and processes. Local NEMA staff could partner with state and local government stakeholders to proactively attend community events well before there is an emergency. This could also be done during a disaster event through attendance at emergency/relief centres and other locations where affected people congregate. In this way, experts in the field could share such information directly to those who need it when they need it.

We recognise that established processes can and do change for a variety of reasons, including political processes and cycles, the need to re-prioritise, especially when multiple emergencies occur simultaneously or in quick succession, and through lessons learned after disaster events. Having an established education and awareness program, as discussed above, and/or other established information-sharing mechanism, would ensure such changes are communicated to stakeholders in a timely manner and support greater efficiencies in systems and processes.

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

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State emergency arrangements in South Australia provide for relevant agencies to assume a Hazard Leader role. The Hazard Leader is responsible for planning and preparedness activities for their allocated emergency type. At present, this responsibility is not as well developed as the Control Agency roles that are activated in the response phase of emergencies. Boosting the capability and capacity of Hazard Leaders would be an excellent way to reduce disaster risk. Commonwealth funding could be provided for state agencies with this responsibility to address the gap.





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Current arrangements have resulted in a gradual reduction in the general understanding of landscape-scale risk of natural disasters in South Australia. Individual landowners often do not have access to Hazard Leader risk assessments as these documents are generally not made available to the public, adding to the issue.

In the absence of landscape-scale data, the City of Onkaparinga is using a portion of our NEMA grant to understand our exposure and vulnerability to bushfire. Ideally, this work would not cease at our council boundary (as is currently the case) and could be applied across local jurisdictions, state- or region-wide, and made accessible publicly. Commonwealth funding for broader implementation of such landscape-scale data initiatives would be valuable.

We reiterate some of the key aspirations and challenges faced by local government in our emergency management role, as described in our responses. These include:

- * prioritising grant funding for prevention and preparedness (risk mitigation and resilience, including climate resilience) as an essential investment to curb the escalating economic and human costs of Australia's disasters
- * reconsidering 1:1 matched funding requirements to support all councils to deliver prevention and preparedness initiatives and achieve ambitious resilience projects
- * the provision of more generous grant application timeframes in consideration of local government budgetary timelines and processes
- * partnerships between Commonwealth agencies and state and local governments for education and awareness campaigns
- * partnerships between Commonwealth agencies and local government for funding distribution mechanisms to community groups
- * funding for more community engagement and hazard identification initiatives that support risk reduction/mitigation and resilience, and long-term funding for existing resilience groups
- * enhanced information-sharing mechanisms to ensure timely communications regarding disaster roles and processes, and changes thereof.

The City of Onkaparinga welcomes this review and its objectives to ensure a scalable, sustainable, effective, equitable, transparent and accessible system with resilience and risk reduction at its core. We recognise the unique opportunity to achieve positive reform afforded by this process. We wish the reviewer well in their work and would welcome the opportunity to discuss our responses.

