



Australian Government

National Emergency
Management Agency

Submission to the Independent Review of Commonwealth Disaster Funding

Response ID: IRCDF_1302_77

Consent option: Publish with name

Submitted by: Tweed Shire Council

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

Council has significant disaster response, recovery and resilience experience obtained through numerous disasters over many years. Recent DRFA declared natural disaster events in Tweed LGA:

- March 2017 Severe Flood (AGRN 755)
- August 2019 Drought
- December 2019 Black Summer Bushfire (AGRN 871)
- February 2020 Storm and Flood (AGRN 898)
- December 2020 Storm and Flood (AGRN 943)
- March 2021 Storm and Flood (AGRN 960)
- March 2022 Severe weather and flooding (AGRN 1012)

Commonwealth disaster funding played a role in each of these events – primarily through DRFA (previously NDRRA) Part B (plus Parts A & C-E in our liaison with local community). Disaster specific funding has also been provided through Community Local Infrastructure Recovery Package, and Northern Rivers Disaster Adaptation Project - Northern Rivers Reconstruction Corporation under the Emergency Response Fund (ERF). Plus during the disaster recovery period, Council continued to utilise Commonwealth funding for other works such as those under the Local Roads and Community Infrastructure Program, Federal Assistance Grants, Department of Infrastructure & Regional Development Grants, etc.

Management of grants for the 2022 flood event has required considerable Council resources (at last count there were over 55 individual grant programs potentially available for flood related activities). Following the event, Council recruited an entire team of 25 professional project managers and administrators to restore all flood damaged assets and to administer the many state and federal recovery grants; with most of Council's costs for these staff being reimbursable under DRFA Part B funding. While Council is reimbursed for these costs, we are concerned that too much time is required to manage grant funding (in both the receiving and administering agencies). For instance, 2 staff are employed fulltime and a further 2 FTE across the team are required to manage the grants and acquittals processes. These figures do not include the considerable time spent by senior staff (manager and





Australian Government

National Emergency
Management Agency

director level) in attending meetings, determining priorities & applicability, resolving disputes, and dealing with the complexities of grant and administering-agency related issues.

The timeframes to compile applications and to undertake the works are often unrealistic and unmanageable. Once Council knows of the grant, confirms the criteria & whether a relevant project is ready, the timeframes for submission can have lapsed – particularly if community consultation is required. Review and decisions on successful applications can then take many months (usually more than the application), but Council is unable to undertake works during this time. When successful applicants are announced, in some circumstances there are only months to complete and deliver the project.

Councils in NSW must develop a series of 4-year Strategic & Delivery plans that commit to the community the projects Council will undertake with the resources and within the timeframes available. When grants cannot be utilised for activities within those strategic documents, resources are diverted to grant relevant projects; causing disruption and inefficiencies for Council and its service providers; and angst and confusion within the community when promised projects are shelved or delayed.

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

The National Disaster Risk Reduction Framework, and its supporting Action Plan and Recovery Framework, are a comprehensive set of documents and we agree with the 4 stated priorities of the Plan. However, these need to be translated and implemented at the local level to realise the desired outcomes.

The current availability of funding initiatives at the local level is broad. What is lacking, is a structured and strategically targeted approach at either the regional and/or local level to maximise effectiveness to local communities in line with that community's risk reduction knowledge/resilience maturity and it is unique to that community/region. Current funding initiatives are a scatter gun approach and the outcomes are not necessarily translated/communicated to the broader community, may create competing priorities within the community and do not give the community a sense of unified direction.

It is recommended that regional/and or locally developed strategies are supported along with the resources required to ensure ongoing effective implementation and , that Commonwealth funding initiatives support these plans.

The development of regional/local strategies may also address some of the governance and implementation barriers and challenges faced by applicants such as resources required to apply for grants, uncertainty of success, alignment with budgets and inability to strategically plan alongside of BAU projects etc.

To improve funding programs available to local government authorities it is recommended:

Local govt betterment projects:

(A) Provide less restrictive betterment funding that is available for a range of scenarios not currently considered/permitted, for example:

- i) Implementation of resilience measures in the repair of existing damaged assets
- ii) Replacement or improvement of assets in alternative flood-free locations





Australian Government

National Emergency
Management Agency

iii) Upgrading non-impacted assets that offer resilience to the overall system/community (e.g. upgrading alternative access routes to reduce isolation during & following floods),

(B) Resilience/Betterment funding could provide improved outcomes by:

Providing more guidance, coordination and support during "peacetime" to enable better planning and preparation that improves disaster response and more effective resilience/betterment. For example:

i) Greater coordination and sharing of flood risk mapping would identify areas where VHP/VHR schemes could be implemented immediately following an event BEFORE residents repair or sell. This would avoid residents/businesses being in extended limbo, and would reduce the at-risk building stock thereby reducing impacts from future events

ii) Funding stream for ongoing upgrades of identified evacuation centres, identification of core requirements for evacuation centres, and clear governance and funding structures during disaster events. This would assist in the removal of doubt during disasters, as to what is covered/not covered and assist in the planning for evacuations as part of preparedness programs and exercising of that preparedness.

iii) Enabling greater resilience activities and fostering relationships during "peace time" across organisations, community groups, business, etc so they can be relied upon during disasters.

- Specified training for community leaders, such as First Aid Training, Psychological First Aid Training, CPR Training, Manual handling.

- Workshops on ready plans and assisting the community with community evacuation plans

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

It is very difficult to stay abreast of the disaster funding process. It varies between states, disasters, agencies, and grants. Following 2022 floods, Council attempted to compile a register of known disaster related grants to enable coordination. Council was not able to stay abreast of the more than 55 grants available as it mid 2022 and subsequently stopped updating the register. While Council is very experienced with grants, it has been overwhelmed. It is likely that community groups, with much fewer resources, would have found the processes even more difficult to navigate.

To highlight the quantum, in the 2022/23 financial year Tweed Shire Council interacted, reported and acquitted \$65,479,143 in grant funds across 43 different agencies (Federal, State, quasi Govt, NGO, Private) covering 230 grant programs.

The above issues also make it difficult for Councils to assist in providing advice to the community and businesses. This is exacerbated further when multiple contact points to grant agencies results in inconsistent information and responses. Our experience suggests that even within administering agencies there are varying levels of understanding of the multitude of grants, and their rules and processes.

Government response needs to be consistent across States and Federal government and across disasters and consistent with the type of disaster (ie, flood, fire, drought etc.).





Australian Government

National Emergency
Management Agency

As a New South Wales community bordering with Queensland we see the impacts and confusion state differences cause when we employ staff, consultants, construction contractors and other service providers with Queensland experience. A more nationally unified process would assist organisations operating across borders.

Council often experiences delays within the grant processes including in gaining feedback during the submission period, the announcement date (often within follow-on affects to other project processes), and with acquittals and payments.

i) DRFA arrangements in particular result in significant cashflow stress on councils; who must carry out the works, submit evidence of completion for progress payments, have that evidence assessed & approved, and then await transfer of funds (all of which can take many months). To receive final payments, Councils must also provide pre-disaster evidence and then await an audit process. In NSW this quarantines 25% until the administering agency has adequate resources to undertake the audit. For a large event such as the 2022 floods, 25% amounts to approximately \$35M – which a Council of Tweed's size is unable to forward fund. It should be further noted that in Queensland only 10% is withheld for auditing.

ii) Because multiple agencies and treasuries (both Federal and State) tend to be involved in grant submissions, assessments, review of unusual project requests, acquittals, etc; it is very difficult for councils to understand who or what is holding up the process (approvals, payments, etc). This results in Council staff chasing multiple personnel across multiple agencies; often while simultaneously contacting local Federal or State MPs to advocate on Council's behalf. A more transparent and understandable process would avoid this and provide feedback as to where bottlenecks occur so that appropriate resourcing can be allocated.

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

No, not at all. Not clear during or after the event. Council, businesses and the community are confused and overwhelmed by the grants/government relief available.

The proactiveness of Commonwealth and State agencies following 2022 floods was very welcomed (councils and community felt supported), however there were too many diverse sources and touch points which stretched under-resourced councils, charities and communities when they needed to focus on restoration and recovery activities.

Grants should be centralised, consolidated, and compatible with existing strategic objectives, programs of work, and funding sources (eg IPR reporting, DRFA processes, etc) to reduce the administrative/bureaucratic burden which diverts senior people from restoration work, and creates additional costs, delays, uncertainties, and frustrations.

Bureaucratic over-complication of grant administration occurs instead of assistance that is quick, adaptable and directed to where it is needed. There are numerous examples of overcomplication following the 2022 NSW North Coast floods.

i) eg Commonwealth funding for betterment/resilience measures was provided to the NSW Government. The funding was split between two state agencies (Regional NSW and Transport for NSW)





Australian Government

National Emergency
Management Agency

who then developed two different grants (with different rules, timeframes, objectives, etc – albeit both using common SmartyGrants submission platform). Councils had to determine which potential projects would fit each grant, guess what portion of project scope would/wouldn't be covered by DRFA, spend significant time and money on detailed applications for the remaining scope, and then wait for a response. In the case of the Regional NSW grant, Council was unsuccessful, so senior staff wasted time without result. In the case of the TfNSW grant, repair works are funded via DRFA Cat B funds while the betterment component is funded via this grant. Repairs to the road network have been delayed at these sites because Council is still awaiting confirmation regarding the apportionment of DRFA/Betterment funding and whether Council's betterment component has been approved.

ii) A far more efficient approach (using the TfNSW grant as an example) would have been to allocate the betterment funding to the DRFA reviewing agency (TfNSW) and enable them to allocate the funding at the same time as assessing the proposed restoration works for each damage item through the standard DRFA process. Where betterment/resilience works are identified as part of the repairs, TfNSW (using its knowledge of restoration works across the region) could determine whether betterment funding should be allocated to cover the betterment/resilience components of that particular damage item (or not). In this way, a single process could be utilised (one compatible with the existing DRFA process) while ensuring each damage site is assessed on its merits.

iii) The different proportional contributions to these funding sources (state/commonwealth governments) causes perverse outcomes where each jurisdiction attempts to minimise its own financial exposure.

Disaster roles (not just disaster funding roles) are not always clear and are not well understood by the community. There are also many "grey" areas where it is not clear for agencies/councils as to who has jurisdiction/responsibility (for example in the repair of Crown Roads, the cleanup of waterways, etc).

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

A) Tweed Shire Council has also provided significant feedback on Commonwealth related disaster issues to several recent Government inquiries. Given this survey's restricted answers, further relevant information and detail can be obtained from Council's representations & submissions to those inquiries including:

- Representation to the Senate Select Committee on Australia's Disaster Resilience (29/06/2023)
- Submission to the Senate Select Committee on Australia's Disaster Resilience (02/08/2023)
- Independent Review into Disaster Funding (Deloitte focus group with Northern Rivers, Blue Mountains and Hawkesbury councils) (26/07/2023)

B) Councils endeavour to respond to the push for emergency management recovery arrangements to be led at the local government level. Recovery plans under emergency management arrangements are being formulated to this end. However, whilst Council supports that recovery should be led locally, local government can only be a contributor in this space much as it is in response. It is not council's core business/service provision nor is there capacity or capability without ongoing additional resources. During and post disaster, council's focus will be on the restoration of its services; particularly critical





Australian Government

National Emergency
Management Agency

services such as repair/restoration of roads; continuity of water supply, wastewater services and solid waste management; restoration of community facilities and maintenance of public health and safety.

Mechanisms are required at State level, as the responsible authority, to lead recovery in consultation with council as support; much like it is in emergency response. The community asks councils for assistance, but not being a lead agency or clarity; it is difficult to support the community.

To ensure appropriate resourcing during and post disaster; funding is required to engage, develop and imbed recovery resources during peacetime. It should also be noted that engagement of additional resources rural and regional areas can be difficult.

C) Local Government, and the community, need clear and precise clarification on the framework and structure of Emergency Accommodation, to provide adequate and accurate advice to assist our community:

- Department of Communities and Justice (DCJ) stands up Evacuation Centres, however once closed and people move to Emergency Accommodation (EA), DCJ support to the community and other agencies decreases. More clarity needed regarding handover and referral to other supports such as RSS and RedCross. DCJ also needs to remain in contact and share information with Council and other agencies over the duration of recovery.

- Examples of EA residents not receiving appropriate recovery support include: 1) Earlier this year, EA residents received text messages with only a few days' notice, that EA placements would end on a Sunday, with no offers of assistance to secure alternative housing. 2) In May 2023 Council and Red Cross visited EA providers (10 housing 87 persons) across the shire. Several residents only received text message notification with no personal follow-up support. Other residents were told someone would be in-contact, but never heard back. Many are still awaiting crucial and timely support and advocacy for range of complex issues.

- As the EA funding is slowing decreasing, people are being left homeless with no respite, no support and no answers.

