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Submission to the Independent Review of Commonwealth Disaster Funding

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Submitted by: Macedon Ranges Shire Council

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

Commonwealth disaster funding has been essential for Macedon Ranges Shire Council over recent years, having been impacted by eight previous weather events since November 2019, as reflected in data from the National Emergency Management Agency (NEMA). These events have included a mix of bushfire, storm and flood, impacting across the Macedon Ranges community.

Our team have been actively involved in relief and recovery efforts related directly to these events, acknowledging a particular focus on the long term recovery for residents who have had the unfortunate compounding experience of multiple events across a short period of time.

Council has been eligible for nine Disaster Recovery Funding Arrangements (DRFA) since November 2018, as well as funding through the Commonwealth Preparing Australian Communities – Local Stream fund in 2022. This funding, including 130 DRFA claims totalling \$13 million, has provided direct benefit to the Macedon Ranges community.

Council also recently submitted three submissions to the Commonwealth Disaster Ready Fund Round One, which were unsuccessful.

Council staff have gained experience and knowledge in submitting claims and working closely with DRFA and other funding bodies in as proactive a way as possible. However, the team has found submitting applications to all these funding streams, to be a time-consuming and repetitive processes. Many have required a co-contribution of funds, which places intense economic pressure on councils, who are often already stretched for resources and money. Additionally, acquittal processes are demanding and resource intensive, taking staff away from important recovery activities and impacting the overall recovery process.

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

Macedon Ranges Shire Council, with the Victorian State Emergency Service (VICSES), undertakes regular Community Emergency Risk Assessments. We acknowledge that access to disaster recovery funding has had significant positive impacts on our local community. This assistance could be improved further, however, through:

- * Funding for more resilient infrastructure





Australian Government

National Emergency
Management Agency

Allowing funding for DRFA Delivery Agencies to undertake betterment works where there is clear financial and social benefit for community, and where the prevention of future disaster damage would benefit all levels of government. The Queensland Government have shown that an investment of \$137 million in betterment projects has generated more than approximately \$391 million in savings or avoided costs.

* Funded local resources to enhance resilience building and planning

Councils have the opportunity to directly support community in paving their own resilience models. This includes enabling each community to articulate and plan for how they can reduce their own risks of natural disasters, and agency to support themselves in the event of a disaster for some time. Commonwealth funding of locally based positions would boost community productivity and provide engaged communities, knowledgeable in their own unique disaster risk profiles.

Councils also have sites within communities that can serve multiple purposes for reducing disaster risk, including hosting local emergency planning committees and community reliance building activities, as well as places for evacuations, emergency relief and recovery during and after a disaster. Increased Commonwealth funding for locally based positions to support these activities would boost productivity and efficiency for these ever-growing needs.

Commonwealth funding of locally based resources for effective planning around key risks (fire, flood, storm, extreme temperature and telecommunication/power interruption) within communities would enormously help and demonstrate to the community that all levels of government are working together for rapid and targeted response, with clearly defined roles.

* Enhanced relationships between Commonwealth and councils

Partnerships with the Commonwealth are critical for councils to deliver effective, essential services to community. Local councils have specialised knowledge and connection to their local communities and landscape, enabling effective delivery of disaster mitigations, response support and recovery coordination. This includes relationships with local communities, organisations and emergency services that enable rapid and place-based mitigations for disasters. Strong partnerships between councils and the Commonwealth are essential in effective and simplified delivery for our communities, as councils rely on state and Commonwealth support for mitigation of these significant, unpredictable impacts of disaster.

* Simplified funding processes

Simplified funding application, claims and acquittals processes, with clearer support from the Commonwealth, or improved coordination at the state level, will greatly assist councils' short-to-long-term resource planning.

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

The government will announce a national funding amount and priority to the public via an election promise, media release and/or campaign. Details are then issued to the states and territories, who are responsible for coordinating their own responses.





Australian Government

National Emergency
Management Agency

In Victoria, this is coordinated through Emergency Management Victoria (EMV). EMV will issue details through the emergency management networks and councils/relevant organisations. Organisations then work within their own internal structures to compile and submit their applications through the relevant process, as determined by EMV or the direct Commonwealth agency.

The Commonwealth Disaster Funding process in terms of DRFA is a cost-sharing arrangement between Commonwealth and states after a natural disaster. This is administered in Victoria by EMV, and assessed by a secondary Victorian Government department (Department of Transport and Planning (DoTP)). Delivery agencies (such as local councils) are responsible for the reconstruction of eligible assets and providing emergency relief to individuals in line with the Victorian DRFA Guidelines.

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

DRFA funding lines are clear, once the damage has passed the limit to be assessed as an eligible disaster. The Commonwealth will assign an event reference number (AGRN), representing shared funding between Commonwealth and state governments for the clean-up and reconstruction for eligible public assets and some emergency assistance to individuals.

Beyond DRFA however, there is less consistency or clarity. For the Disaster Ready Fund, timelines were extraordinarily tight and there was little clarity from the state coordinating agency (EMV) regarding the process of assessing these to progression to the Commonwealth. There was also a lack of clarity around outcome timelines and feedback on why applications were unsuccessful.

There does not appear to be any centralised, consistent management, communication or coordination of these opportunities, making it difficult for councils to plan or communicate to their communities effectively. Additionally, each fund appears to have a different process, timing, scope and outcomes.

For example, Macedon Ranges Shire Council recently made three submissions to the Disaster Ready Fund. While this was Commonwealth funding, submissions were funnelled through EMV, which made timelines for submissions tight, and there was also a lack of transparency around how/why submissions were/weren't progressed through to the Commonwealth level.

Additionally, states and territories seem to differ in their approach and funding for reinstatement works ('build-back-better') that would ultimately save time, money and reduce the risk to communities significantly. A Commonwealth, nation-wide mandate or fund would greatly support this critical area for improvement for disaster funding in Australia.

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

Council seeks simplified, clearer and more flexible processes for Commonwealth Disaster Funding, including:

DRFA

- * Enhance support to enable councils to 'build-back-better' and reinstate more resilient infrastructure – this would reduce the need for repeat claims, ultimately saving significant money, time and resources.
- * Reduce administrative requirements for the applications, claims and acquittals processes.





Australian Government

**National Emergency
Management Agency**

- * Fund resources within councils to build and submit claims to DRFA (result - better quality claims, reduction in cost pressures on the most impacted)
- * Implement rolling dates for the submission of claims – this will mean claims aren't all being submitted to assessors at once, reducing the time taken for claims to be processed and paid.
- * Continue cash advance offers to support smaller councils/most impacted, to continue without cash flow worries during times of disaster.
- * Overhaul and align onerous evidence requirements on damaged and completed assets across states.
- * Expand eligible public assets list to reflect what the community see as essential (including trees and walking paths). Current DRFA guidelines penalise certain disasters (wind storms) through interpretation of eligible activities and assets.
- * Tight submission timelines currently place enormous pressure on councils that are also juggling their 'business as usual', social and asset based recovery activities and essential services to community.
- * Greater flexibility is needed within DRFA guidelines, supporting and encouraging innovation in clean-up and repair works and embrace new ways of dealing with catastrophic debris, including recycling.
- * CAT A-eligible activities (i.e. emergency assistance to individuals) are currently assessed by the Department of Transport and Planning. These should be assessed by a department that understands the language of social impact and recovery, as opposed to grey infrastructure specialists.

Betterment

- * Include funding for betterment in the reconstruction phases after disasters, to increase community resilience. This will allow councils and state agencies to improve key assets such as causeways, culverts, roads and bridges to better withstand the impacts of natural disasters. A betterment fund not only maintains essential infrastructure for communities, it saves millions in future repair costs.

Disaster Ready Fund Program:

- * Clearer communication around eligibility requirements and assessment criteria is needed.
- * Feedback on unsuccessful submissions should be provided in a timelier manner.
- * Announcements of funds can be unpredictable and sometimes overlapping, making planning and submitting applications difficult.
- * There are currently too many limitations placed on funding, i.e. that funds can't be used in conjunction with other federal funding.





Australian Government

**National Emergency
Management Agency**

Other funding:

- * Implement rapid Community Support Funding immediately following a disaster, to support urgent works to restore essential infrastructure and provision of emergency relief.
- * Implement funding for increased business-as-usual staffing needs to ensure usual levels of service across the council are maintained.
- * Remove funding obstacles, including requirements for co-contribution; unnecessary reporting; current restrictions i.e. funding can't be combined with another grant. While some administration and evidence is required, this needs to be simplified.
- * Expand Strengthening Telecommunications Against Natural Disaster (STAND) Program.
- * Allow flexibility within funding to meet community needs, not tightly defined

