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National Emergency
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Submission to the Independent Review of Commonwealth Disaster Funding

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

This submission is based on Campaspe Shire Council's experience with the Disaster Recovery Funding Arrangements Scheme (DRFA) program in seeking funding to address the aftermath of the 2022 flood event. As outlined in the introduction, Campaspe Shire was significantly impacted by this event and will be in the recovery process for years to come.

We wish to convey our appreciation for funding received so far through the DRFA and other funding streams. However, it should be noted that this submission has been prepared while Council is still finalising its DRFA claim for the flood event.

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

- * Allow councils to submit claims for betterment, and fund improvements to assets where the asset is critical and can be better protected against damage from natural disasters.
- * The introduction of a National Warning System and ongoing community engagement required. Organisations need to review and stay abreast of innovative strategies and provide appropriate consultations meeting the demand and expectations of community.
- * Improve digital connectivity across rural areas to address blackspots, including around key community hubs.
- * Review the Total Flood Warning System and councils' role in providing gauges and markers.

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

The DRFA is a shared funding arrangement between the Commonwealth Government and Australian state governments. For the purposes of Campaspe's submission, reference to the State Government refers to the State of Victoria. Once an event has occurred, the State Government determines which areas receive assistance and what assistance is available. Events generally attract Category A and B funding; A being Emergency assistance to individuals, and Category B being repair of damaged essential public assets. In this model, the DRFA works largely like an insurance scheme – Council puts in a claim for the asset damaged, an assessment occurs, and Council is either reimbursed or receives a payment to allow the work to occur. This process is shaped in three phases – Emergency Works to restore an essential public asset to an acceptable level to support community, immediate reconstruction works, and





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reconstruction works, which has been through an estimate process. Category C usually relates to clean-up costs and recovery packages, following approval by the Prime Minister. Category D, reserved for exceptional circumstances, is also available, and also requires authorisation from the Prime Minister. Ultimately, a claim tends to go through both the State and Federal Governments and must meet both levels of criteria. Both tiers of government tend to point to the restrictiveness of the other tier when assessing claims or providing advice around eligibility.

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

It is clear that funding arrangements are a shared responsibility between all levels of government.

Guidance documents provided to local government in order to try and understand what is considered critical infrastructure/assets, evidentiary requirements to demonstrate the condition of the asset both pre and post the disaster and other requirements to facilitate a claim. Guidelines change often, from event to event, with no consultation.

Claims are incredibly complex, take significant staff effort and time, and are highly dependent on understanding the complex nature of these claims.

Councils don't have specialist officers at the ready to gather the significant amount of evidence required, navigate often-restrictive guidelines, and be across every function performed by Council during an emergency.

Local governments often struggle to provide pre and post condition reports to a level that meets evidentiary requirements, particularly where a contractor has already been engaged in the days following an event. Taking photos of an asset, to facilitate a claim is both time-consuming and resource intensive, adding unnecessary extra pressure on councils trying to address the myriad challenges of a disaster aftermath.

The uncertainty about what will and won't be funded, especially with an event the size of the 2022 floods, not only significantly impacts Council's budget, but also severely impacts on the ability to fund the more than 100 business-as-usual services. The evidentiary requirements of the DRFA need to be clearer, more equitable and flexible, and understanding that Councils, particularly regional Councils, do not possess the capability or capacity to be able to meet these restrictive and cumbersome guidelines.

Council understands that claims need to be entered in \$500,000 blocks for assessment. Given the enormity of our claim, this would require 76 applications through this process. An ability to submit one complete claim, or a small number of claims, would be far more practical and less resource intensive.

There appears to be poor understanding by the Commonwealth Government and state governments regarding the time and effort required to compile a claim that meets assessors' requirements. During emergencies, the focus on community safety should overshadow the importance of collecting data for future claims.

Another concern is the delayed timeframe in which money is made available. Councils start spending money immediately following a disaster event, particularly performing emergency works, with no understanding or certainty as to whether the works will be claimable, or if Category A or B funds will be released.





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There needs to be a level of trust in local government and a relaxation of stifling evidentiary requirements to enable councils to perform their statutory roles and ensure community safety. Positions funded through the DRFA cannot be put in place until an assessor has reviewed a position description. This seems like an unnecessary level of bureaucracy which further slows the ability to quickly respond to events and community needs.

Utilising Category A funding more effectively for initial relief and recovery would benefit affected individuals. Early confirmation of funded services and timely appointment of recovery officers are essential for efficient and cohesive recovery efforts.

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

Mitigation Efforts

It is abundantly clear that there is a lack of leadership and ownership when discussing mitigation efforts about floods.

Floodplain management strategies should not assign responsibilities to councils to provide more engineered structures as solutions to mitigate flooding without acknowledging and addressing councils' and communities' financial constraints and addressing the liability provisions in the Water Act.

Campaspe Shire Council does not have the resources or expertise to be able to fully mitigate flood waters, and only has control over its own municipality. Flood waters do not respect municipal borders.

Council also has no control over crown land, managed by several other agencies and authorities.

More investment is required on long-term mitigation efforts to greatly reduce the need for response and recovery efforts.

