



Australian Government

National Emergency
Management Agency

Submission to the Independent Review of Commonwealth Disaster Funding

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Submitted by: Australian Library and Information Association

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

The Australian Library and Information Association (ALIA) is the peak professional organisation for Australia's diverse library and information services sector. Australia's libraries hold significant collections of our country's unique knowledge and heritage. These physical and digital collections range from the papers of famous Australians and priceless artworks held in national institutions, to local history collections in public libraries. What these collections have in common is that they are irreplaceable and, importantly, they tell our stories, and play a major role in rebuilding community identity and resilience after disasters strike.

ALIA is the leading voice supporting the role of libraries in disaster risk reduction and recovery, including through the creation and maintenance of the ALIA disaster management resources. ALIA is a founding and continuing member of Blue Shield Australia. ALIA's experience with Commonwealth disaster funding support is gained through advocacy at a national, strategic level and through direct links to a pilot project funded by National Partnership Agreement.

In ALIA's 2022 submission to the Second National Action Plan under the National Disaster Risk Reduction Framework, ALIA advocated for increased Commonwealth funding to be directed towards disaster risk reduction of the unique cultural heritage collections that are held in libraries and other collecting organisations.

An example of a successful deployment of resources is the pilot training project, administered through SAFECOM, which aims to strengthen disaster resilience in small community metropolitan and regional museums that are prone to disasters through providing training and resources to staff and volunteers. The project utilises the ALIA disaster management resources to deliver disaster training to two metropolitan and two country museums that contain unique knowledge and heritage that tell the community's stories. It is being jointly delivered by Artlab Australia and the History Trust of South Australia. To date, the project has been highly successful with training delivered to three community museums with positive feedback from all participants about the practical worth of the training. The museums have since identified and mitigated a number of key risks to their collections and have developed their own disaster plans. As one participant writes:

'It was illuminating and practical and raised our awareness of risks in the building and to the museum'.

Prevention and preparation is always better than rescuing a situation after disaster has struck. The participant went on to note their confidence that the training program 'will lead to an increased focus within Australia more broadly of the work the cultural heritage sector does to assist communities in times of crisis.'



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

The destruction and loss of cultural heritage can have a catastrophic impact on Australia's communities. In addition, libraries play an essential and often official unrecognised role in assisting communities immediately post disaster and in disaster recovery.

In March 2023 ABC News reported on the changing role of libraries to provide safety from violence and natural disasters. Increasingly, communities recognise that libraries are a trusted source for accessing essential support services, such as shelter, food, digital connections to disaster relief operations and locating loved ones, and continued education for children. In addition, libraries are arranging for conservators to provide conservation advice about damaged treasures, and collecting and recording the history of the disaster.

Despite these key roles in safeguarding unique cultural heritage and assisting communities in disaster recovery, the role that libraries play in national disaster infrastructure is currently fiscally unrecognised. ALIA advocates for recognising and appropriately funding libraries to be better equipped to fill this role as the effectiveness of Australia's current national model of disaster funding is significantly diminished by the major gap in funding for libraries and allied cultural heritage organisations. Direct Commonwealth disaster funding earmarked for capacity building in disaster risk reduction for the staff of libraries and collecting organisations would strengthen community resilience.

In addition, direct funding to ALIA to support and coordinate disaster resource development and delivery would be a cost-effective initiative to support libraries and related organisations preparing for and responding to disasters. ALIA has the capacity to successfully develop, deliver and coordinate disaster training through its networks, building from the widely used ALIA disaster management resources. ALIA's disaster training resources that have been widely used by Australian libraries and a range of other collecting organisations and are currently being used by UNESCO to support a disaster training toolkit for the Asia Pacific region. ALIA's networks, including through Blue Shield and GLAM Peak mean that these resources can be shared more widely with the cultural heritage sector.

It is important to highlight that the disaster risk reduction grants made available through NEMA are the only funding avenue that libraries and cultural heritage organisations can access for disaster risk reduction projects, as the current Disaster Ready Fund requires a 50 % co-contribution which is cost prohibitive for most libraries in a landscape of continued cost cuts to the sector as a whole.

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

No response provided.

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

No response provided.

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

The review of the national model of disaster funding is an opportunity to address the current gap in funding for libraries and allied organisations to safeguard cultural heritage and assist disaster-impacted communities, appropriately targeting funding for capacity building in these areas through national organisations like ALIA.





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ALIA and its network of libraries welcome the opportunity to work with the government to enable libraries and allied institutions to reduce disaster risks and supporting post-disaster support through developing, delivering and coordinating disaster training and sector resources.

We would be happy to provide further information and can be contacted via the details below.

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ALIA (2023, June) Incite vol 44 issue 2 Safeguarding heritage collections from disasters; Be prepared – perspectives from the Northern territory; Public Libraries as places of refuge; Disaster lessons from regional Queensland. pp. 34-37.

