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# Submission to the Independent Review of Commonwealth Disaster Funding

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**Consent option:** Publish with name

**Submitted by:** Local Government Association of the Northern Territory

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

The Australian Emergency Management Arrangements Handbook talks to the fundamental role the local government sector plays in emergency management due to their strong relationships with their local community networks and knowledge of locally available resources.

Additionally, the Northern Territory (NT) Emergency Plan and the Territory Emergency Management Council (TEMC) Strategic Plan 2020-2023 talk to the core principles of emergency management including an 'integrated approach' across all spheres of government. These documents also refer to the 'shared responsibility' of emergency management depicted the National Disaster Resilience Framework.

Unfortunately, emergency management arrangements in the NT do not take an integrated or shared responsibility approach to building community resilience – and this could be putting lives at risk particularly given the limited resources in the NT, the size of the jurisdiction, and the remoteness of some of our towns and communities.

LGANT recently requested membership of TEMC be extended to the organisation in recognition of the role local government councils play across all four phases of a disaster. The TEMC Co-chair responded offering observer status which only reinforced the NT Government's isolationist approach to emergency management.

In LGANT's advocacy on emergency management to the NT Government we are mindful that we don't want the inclusion of the local government sector into the emergency management framework to result in responsibility and cost shifting. Rather our advocacy efforts focus on the recognition council's play and better coordination of the effort.

LGANT's members tell of the ongoing confusion about the line of command and lack of coordination during and after disasters from constituents and media. We feel this may, in part, be due to emergency management arrangements interstate where Mayors are often the point of contact in disasters but not so in the NT. There is considerable room for improvement in coordination and community education in emergency management in the NT.

Roles local government councils in the NT play in emergency management include but are not limited to: fuel reduction for the prevention and preparedness of bushfires; coordinating pre-cyclone clean-ups; protecting community assets in the response phase such as roads used for emergency service personnel





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(eg. airport, airstrips and barge access roads); and supporting the recovery phase through the repair of infrastructure and restoration of services (eg. waste recovery) to assist in emotional, social, economic and physical wellbeing of its constituents.

LGANT is also concerned about the level of engagement to date by the NT Government in engaging with the local government sector on recommendations 11.1 and 11.2 of the Royal Commission into Natural Disaster Arrangements. Consultation and implementation of these recommendation is critical to boosting the local government sector's capacity to respond to disasters.

So, although that is a long introduction to our response, the local government sector in the NT has had limited experience with commonwealth disaster funding support. In consultation with our members, most experience comes from applications for the Disaster Recovery Funding Arrangements (DRFA).

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

Commonwealth funding could support communities to reduce their disaster risk by providing funding directly to local government councils, the sphere of government closest to communities, rather than through state and territory governments.

Most councils in the NT often have low rate bases and hence limited resources to enable co-contributions and capacity to write grant applications – which ultimately means they often don't submit grant applications. Local government is consistently found to be the most trusted level of government by Australians so the Commonwealth recognising this and assisting through the provision of direct funding, rather than competitive grants that require a cash co-contribution, would be a huge support.

Commonwealth funding support could also be used in the front-end of emergency management (eg. prevention and preparedness) rather than mainly recovery efforts where most funding currently goes. Mitigating for the effects of climate change is an example of where the Commonwealth could assist local government councils.

The Commonwealth could support communities by making betterment a core principle of funding arrangements such as, but not limited to the DRFA, rather than replacing as it was. This approach, although seemingly more costly initially, will have long term savings and other economic and social benefits particularly in areas like northern Australia that are subject to annual wet season events.

An example would be replacing a causeway in the NT that floods most wet seasons. Replacing the causeway with a bridge would not only save on the repair bill but would also mean food and other critical goods can be transported to the communities impacted by flooding rather than the community being cut off and supplies being flown in.

The Commonwealth could consider building flexibility into the DRFA application process so infrastructure, such as roads, do not continue to deteriorate while approval is being sought.

The Commonwealth could also consider road types when developing infrastructure and disaster funding programs. For example, a considerable portion of the NT's local roads are unsealed and are often the only way in and out of communities or to the airstrip post disasters. These roads present vastly different maintenance challenges, such as being more susceptible to washouts from the rain that comes with cyclones for example, to highly developed roads in other parts of the country.





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The Commonwealth could also support communities by increasing road and infrastructure funding programs (such as Roads to Recovery) and replace the Local Roads and Community Infrastructure Program with a new program that delivers benefits to councils and their communities.

Failure to invest in maintaining road infrastructure now will reduce the lifespan of these facilities and transfer the cost of renewal onto future generations. This is the same for remote airstrips. Recent weather events have demonstrated how vulnerable remote communities are to being cut off and isolated due to road and airstrip closures. The Commonwealth could assist in undertaking a strategic review of the 70 airstrips and their access roads in the NT and provide appropriate mitigation funding.

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

LGANT understands Commonwealth disaster funding comes in various forms including the DRFA, the new Disaster Ready Fund (DRF), state and territory level programs from the National Partnership Agreements (in the NT this is the Risk Reduction Program (RRP)), and ad-hoc grants. Some councils may consider the new Growing Regions and Thriving Suburbs programs to apply for emergency management related project funding.

LGANT understands non-financial support includes deployment of the Australian Defence Force to assist in recovery operations.

Feedback from our member councils is that the evidence and administration required for DRFA claims is 'near impossible'. The NT's Barkly Regional Council, at over 322,000 square kilometres, is the second largest local government area in Australia, an area which is 42 per cent larger than Victoria. Regularly recording the condition of roads and other assets in anticipation of DRFA funding is a considerable resource requirement for a council with a low rate base.

Better use of existing data already collated by the Australian and NT governments for other funding programs should be considered for DRFA as well as the sharing of best practice and/or resources to undertake these exercises.

Further feedback is that councils in the NT often don't take up other funding opportunities. This is evidenced by no local government councils receiving funding under the NTG's RRP.

Feedback on round 1 of the DRF is that it was skewed to state and territory success and not local government councils. LGANT supports the Australian Local Government Associations' advocacy efforts in requesting a dedicated stream of funding for councils in the program.

LGANT members advise insurance is one of their most common risk mitigation resources (noting this is a recovery exercise and does not assist with prevention and preparedness).

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

See above

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

LGANT has been advocating for an Emergency Management Coordinator and Local Government Risk Reduction Fund to under-write Resilience Plans for local government councils in the NT. These plans





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would include individual Climate Adaptation, Emergency Management and Business Continuity Plans. The Commonwealth could assist to reduce disaster risk by funding this initiative.

The Commonwealth should also restore Financial Assistance Grants to at least one percent of Commonwealth taxation revenue to ensure council sustainability and to fund emergency management projects



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