



Australian Government

National Emergency  
Management Agency

# Submission to the Independent Review of Commonwealth Disaster Funding

**Response ID:** IRCDF\_1572\_173

**Consent option:** Publish with name

**Submitted by:** Hunter Joint Organisation

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

Funding accessed by the Hunter JO

Since 2013 the Hunter JO has accessed grant funding through a number of Commonwealth supported (joint Commonwealth & NSW Government funded) grant programs, to facilitate the design and delivery of regional scale disaster preparedness programs in collaboration with our 10 Hunter JO Member Councils, Central Coast Council, NSW Government Agencies and Community Service Organisations. These programs and their focus have included:

- \* 2022-24 Disaster Risk Reduction Fund
- \* 2021-23 Bushfire Community Recovery and Resilience Fund
- \* 2021-23 Bushfire Local Economic Recovery Package
- \* 2020-21 Regional Disaster Preparedness Program
- \* 2014-18 Community Resilience Innovation Program
- \* 2013-14 Auxiliary Disaster Resilience Support Scheme

Funding programs accessed by Individual Councils

Hunter JO member Councils have also individually been the recipients of various government funded disaster grant programs including:

- \* Disaster Risk Reduction Fund
- \* Bushfire Community Recovery and Resilience Fund
- \* Bushfire Local Economic Recovery Package
- \* NSW EPA Clean-up of Bushfire Generated Green Waste
- \* Preparing Australian Communities Local Stream (PACLS)
- \* Essential Public Asset Restoration (EPAR) funding





Australian Government

National Emergency  
Management Agency

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

The 10 Councils of Hunter JO have identified the following strategic objectives and directions for the region to ensure local communities "are prepared for change and ready to withstand, adapt and recover from natural and human induced risks":

Strategic Objectives and Directions:

2.1 We are recognised as innovative leaders in Council capacity building and policy support for climate change action, resilience and disaster preparedness.

2.2 We take leadership and drive regional best practice in climate action

2.3 Our region is resilient to environment risks, natural hazards and climate change.

4.3 Our natural environments including our bushland, estuaries, waterways and beaches are protected and enhanced.

Advocacy Priorities:

2. A resilient region prepared for change

6. Improving authority and resourcing for place led decision-making at a local and regional scale

Commonwealth funding has the potential to directly support the achievement of these strategic objectives and directions of the Hunter JO Councils, if it were to:

\* Commit to a more sustainable and strategic place-based approach to local and regional recovery and resilience planning, delivered via the collaborative efforts of Local Councils and JOs. At a minimum, funding should be provided on a four-year, recurrent funding cycle that aligns to the Integrated Planning and Reporting cycles of Councils and Joint Organisations. This would represent a profound and beneficial change that would directly support local government to strategically plan and resource priority disaster preparedness initiatives to improve the resilience of their local communities. This approach would be fundamentally different to that which currently exists, which requires Councils and groups of councils to reactively stitch together a range of disparate short-term grant funding opportunities to attempt to deliver longer-term, sustained programs to address place-based priorities, in line with their statutory planning timeframes (ie 10 year Community Strategic Plans, 4 year delivery programs and annual implementation plans) required by the NSW Integrated Planning and Reporting Framework.

\* Investigate opportunities to consolidate different funding sources and programs to streamline and sustain the delivery of disaster focused programs. This would have significant efficiencies for both local government and the funding agencies involved in administering them.

\* Provide funding that permits asset renewal and maintenance upgrades that "build back better" to ensure future infrastructure resilience. Instead of restoring damaged assets, upgrades are often necessary to ensure resilience.

\* Provide funding and resourcing to drive adaptation planning for communities exposed to a higher risk of disasters due to legacy planning decisions.





- \* Amend the administrative requirements on councils accessing disaster funding for road repair, by reducing and amending them, to facilitate council prioritisation and allocation of funds consistent with place-based priorities
- \* Review the evidence requirements for retrospective claims. These need to be minimised and consistent across programs and communicated to Councils prior to any disaster events occurring
- \* Provide more opportunities for proactive grant funding for resilience and preparedness initiatives rather than predominantly providing reactive funding following disaster events
- \* Provide resourcing to support an increase in regional place-based delivery to disaster preparedness. Further detail is provided in the Appendix.

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

- \* The current system of Commonwealth disaster funding is largely available post disaster and is reactive rather than proactive. The grant process is usually competitive and directly fosters competition between regional stakeholders rather than building the alignment and a collaborative approach that is needed to successfully support communities recover from, and plan resilience to, natural disasters of increasing frequency and intensity.
- \* In the recent experience of the Hunter JO and Member Councils, that funding is allocated from the Commonwealth to state agencies (NSW Reconstruction Authority) to manage. The level of involvement and oversight of the grant funding varies significantly between grant authorities and even between grants. Some require significant amounts of reporting and financial reports while others require less.
- \* While the frequency and level of monitoring and reporting can vary significantly across different funding programs, there has been a discernible increase in the requirement for more frequent (in some cases monthly) milestone progress reporting. This is on top of an additional trend toward requiring more frequent (quarterly) milestone and financial reporting. Given the scale and duration of most projects being delivered, 6-monthly financial and implementation reporting at most is considered appropriate. In particular it should be noted that the direct impact of the increasing frequency of grant reporting being required to deliver grant programs focused on disaster resilience, is that significantly more time is being spent on project administration at the expense of actual project delivery.
- \* There is a noticeable trend occurring across disaster resilience grant programs, that while offering substantive and appropriate levels of funding for projects, the time period allowed for project delivery is unreasonably short (in many cases 12 months or less). This is of particular concern to JO's and other groups of Councils, where delivery of regional scale projects across multiple local council authorities and state and commonwealth government agencies typically involve a level of complexity, collaboration, stakeholder alignment and cross organisational systems development, that require adequate time to deliver. Longer term project time frames are also critical to:
  - \* Enabling project outputs to be embedded within local government and other project stakeholders, to ensure the sustainability of outcomes.
  - \* Addressing the challenge of attracting and retaining staff that arises from short term employment contracts linked to short term project delivery timeframes.



Australian Government

National Emergency  
Management Agency

- \* Ultimately providing Councils' and JOs more time to plan and execute projects to a higher standard.

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

Funding roles of the Commonwealth, state and local government are generally unclear, especially to the community, who do not understand the roles and responsibilities of various government authorities and agencies, and typically assumes that the local council does (or should) fulfil most roles.

The community is also generally unaware of the particular grant funding priorities or restrictions that accompany the delivery of disaster related grant funding, including the allocation of funding to specific projects or focus areas that are required by different programs. Where these focus areas are inconsistent with the expectations of the community it can lead to considerable frustration. Where multiple regions are impacted by a disaster event, it can also be more challenging for Councils to access consistent funding and resource support, placing further strain on their recovery efforts and resources.

When short-term resources (including grant-funded recovery roles) are provided to Councils during or immediately after a disaster event, the community sees this as an expansion of Councils' role and expects it to continue even after the extra grant funding supporting the role ends. This creates further challenges for Council's in trying to service the increase in community expectations and needs that have been created, which can typically be required for many years after the grant funded support ends.

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

The current system of reactive, post disaster competitive grant processes to facilitate local and regional recovery and disaster resilience planning does not provide the best value for money. Such an approach:

- \* Directly fosters competition between regional stakeholders rather than building the alignment and a collaborative approach that is needed to successfully support communities recover from, and plan resilience to, natural disasters of increasing frequency and intensity
- \* The current system places a significant administrative impost on Councils in the post disaster period, at the very time that maximum resources (human and financial) need to be focused on disaster recovery and resilience efforts
- \* The current competitive grant-based system places a disproportionately negative impact on the capacity of smaller and less resourced Councils and Joint Organisations to access adequate and sustainable recovery and resilience funding. Less resourced Councils simply do not have the capacity to apply for disaster grant funds that may be available, particularly following a disaster event when limited resources are even further stretched.
- \* The short-term nature of resilience focused grant programs embeds vulnerability into local systems and processes, in direct contrast to the need to build and sustain core capability and resilience within Local Councils and their communities
- \* A grant focused approach to building resilience adds significantly to Council workload and creates new obligations that Councils don't have the capacity to take on and sustain. Instead, funding





Australian Government

National Emergency  
Management Agency

should be directed to supplementing existing work & priorities that reflect the place based needs and priorities of local communities.

\* To claim disaster road funding, Councils have to demonstrate prior road condition, for example via photographic inspection programs. Photographic inspection programs may be feasible for larger metropolitan councils, however this is not generally the case for regional councils who typically have less resources and thousands of kilometres of roads.

\* Existing disaster recovery funding programs frequently don't recognise the interconnectedness and interdependence within regions and adjoining Councils that can underpin economic and social recovery following these events. For example, many disaster recovery programs will only provide funding to "disaster declared" Local Government Areas, with the requirement that funding be spent only within that Council area. This specifically prevents the significant benefits that can be realised from collaboration between adjoining Councils or via regional groups of councils where only one or two may be declared a disaster area. It is therefore recommended that funding programs recognise and broaden eligibility requirements to facilitate collaborative opportunities of this nature. Examples of where such programs could have particular advantages include provision of temporary housing across adjoining Council areas, creating employment opportunities and regional promotional / communication campaigns to address community misconceptions post disaster about visiting an area.

