

Question 1: What experience have you had with Commonwealth disaster funding?

- Greater than \$3.2b
- Strategic coordinated planning at all levels required
- Application processes lengthy and cumbersome

The Western Queensland Alliance of Councils (WQAC) represents 23 councils across the north west, central west and south west of Queensland – covering 60 per cent of the most disaster impacted State in Australia.

Since 2010, **in excess of \$3.2 billion in disaster funding has been administered across the 23 councils** within the Western Queensland Alliance, 99.5% of which has been through the Commonwealth and State jointly funded Natural Disaster Relief and Recovery Arrangements (NDRRA) and Disaster Recovery Funding Arrangements (DRFA) reconstruction funding programs. During this time (2010 to 2023), over 300 activated events have occurred within the 23 councils, with peaks as high as 42 in 2021/22. This results in **an average of over 23 activations per year**.

The roads in these three regions provide **vital economic and social connections for individuals, families, businesses, industries, and government services**. The transport networks carry the products that keep Australians fed, clothed, and earning export dollars. Our road network is vast and in need of significant considerations in terms of flood resilience. We need **better planning and better coordination across all levels of government in terms of resilience funding** to keep our supply chains open, tourists exploring and communities recovering from the inevitable impacts of frequent and increasing disasters.

The *Statewide Assessment of Flood Risk Factors (SAFRF) (QRA May 2023)* notes along the Gulf of Carpentaria, two councils from the WQAC (Burke, Carpentaria) have **over 70% of their roads in the floodplain** with Carpentaria having nearly 4,000km of roads in the floodplain – making Carpentaria the second most DRFA-activated Queensland council for flooding.

In addition to NDRRA and DRFA, the above figures represent experience with funding through Natural Disaster Resilience Program (NDRP), Queensland Disaster Resilience Fund (QDRF), Queensland Resilience and Risk Reduction Funding (QRRRF) and Get Ready Queensland. Further, the WQAC region has experience dealing with standalone funding programs such as Preparing Australia Program, National Flood Mitigation Infrastructure Program and other event-specific funding. **The dollars allocated and spent in risk mitigation, prevention and preparedness are almost insignificant in relation to the reconstruction and recovery costs**.

While the WQAC is very supportive of the DRFA and the necessary funding it provides to rebuild post-disaster, in our experience it is often the case that the process for damage assessments, applications, approvals and acquittals is **unnecessarily complicated and slow**. Community expectations are high, particularly for road repairs and reopening, and these expectations rest on local government to deliver.

Regardless of the funding source, local government as the lead is imperative. In Queensland, the Local Disaster Management Group underpins successful disaster response and recovery, including the delivery of funded reconstruction works. Our experience under these arrangements should be reflected in any funding related to mitigation and resilience as it is with response and recovery.

In our experience, **lessons learnt from previous events** (e.g. speed and type of extraordinary funding announced) are not considered when designing or implementing programs in response to new events.

Question 2: How could Commonwealth funding support communities to reduce their disaster risk?

- Consider local knowledge and priorities
- Betterment as risk mitigation not just response
- Limited capacity and resources in councils

The nature of communities and how they interact with the environment is changing, and funding should be designed to support up-to-date understanding of the nature of those changing risks across all hazards - flood, cyclone, bushfire, storms, animal disease and biosecurity threat among others.

Councils should be supported to work through priorities in conjunction with both Commonwealth and State governments.

In terms of flooding alone, the SAFRF assessed all councils in the WQAC as needing **contemporary flood studies** as a high priority, and increased **LiDAR mapping** is also required. Flooding causes the most damage of all disasters, and the key link to ensuring communities can remain connected, supplied, and evacuate when necessary is the roads. The SAFRF identified councils south of Cloncurry and west of Toowoomba as being **high need for mitigation to reduce the risk of cut-off from flooding**, Gulf councils' flood exposure puts the connectivity of remote communities at risk. In WQAC regions, low populations, lack of contemporary flood studies, low LiDAR coverage and vulnerable road networks combine to indicate a high requirement for increased support to undertake flood risk management.

Vast amounts of data exists across the region in terms of repeat damage and costs associated with disaster reconstruction, giving an immediate picture of those assets that would benefit from a planned approach to resilient roads. A **strategic and coordinated approach to local, state and national roads** would better support all communities to reduce risk to both their economic and social wellbeing.

While there has been increased spending in terms of **flood warning infrastructure, inconsistent application of ownership, operations, and maintenance** of this infrastructure, as well as **availability and sharing of data** gleaned from gauges and cameras, is impacting on benefits being achieved. Funding to ensure reliable access to information and data is required.

The WQAC supports **Betterment programs** for infrastructure, and expansion of this or other similar programs. Currently the scale of the event that is required to trigger a Betterment program is significant. Consideration of **betterment programs as a mitigation tool, rather than a response tool**, and using the vast amount of data that exists to develop an ongoing program of resilient works would ultimately reduce reconstruction costs and the downtime for road networks.

Currently, **infrastructure funding programs do not consider the council burden of maintenance** funding, and essential public infrastructure such as water and sewerage assets and rural airstrips have funding eligibility restrictions. The repair and maintenance of these assets is a considerable cost, and some of the most impactful on community if damaged. Rural airstrips are vital in disaster response, particularly when the road network is not resilient, and there is generally a lack of disaster funding for these essential public assets.

Funding for positions to increase capacity through disaster-specific and/or technical expertise in rural and remote councils to better equip them for activities across PPRR would be beneficial.

Question 3: Please describe your understanding of Commonwealth disaster funding processes.

- Timeliness and inconsistency of program processes
- Indirect impacts should be considered
- Co-contributions discourage participation

Across funding programs, **processes and guidelines are not consistent**, and the disaster funding space can be difficult to navigate. Clarity on eligibility and consistent processes related to applications, reporting and audit would make a measurable impact.

Rural and remote councils are disadvantaged in terms of available capital and resources for business cases, preliminary design, or technical expertise for things like engineering. This makes it difficult in the grant application process, particularly for competitive funding grants where funds are limited, and application timeframes are very short.

The seemingly reactive, sometimes political, often not co-ordinated nature of various funding and grant programs from the Commonwealth perspective is a **barrier to participation** from under-resourced councils. This includes the **opening and closing dates** for non-event related programs (e.g. Disaster Ready Fund) coinciding with a **lengthy EOI and submission processes** for a project under DRFA (e.g. Betterment fund).

While agreed trigger point amounts for DRFA are well understood and supported, **compulsory (up to) 50% co-contributions are beyond the reach of rural and remote councils** for other competitive funding programs, particularly when announcements of funding programs are rarely aligned with Council budget planning cycles, thereby reducing likelihood of successful applications.

Application and submission processes are complicated from a council perspective, but also from individual community members, primary producers and small businesses. Regardless of the funding source, and always with the understanding that there has to be due process, **eligibility to apply and the guidelines for success are often not well articulated, can be overly bureaucratic, and not well understood**. Government objectives for funding programs do not always translate to the individuals or businesses that they are aiming to assist.

Audit and assurance requirements necessary to the administration of public funds are supported, however the level of detail and the time it takes to assure is not value for money. Strict Commonwealth guidelines and eligibility requirements delay DRFA submission approvals and acquittals. This can delay the commencement of works after an event, as well as potentially impact cashflow while the remaining 10% of funding is held at acquittal. While there is understanding that the commencement of works is not incumbent on a DRFA submission approval, the financial risk to councils is too high. Having to **respond to audit queries up to two years after early works** have been completed is time consuming and expensive, is often a matter of small dollars, insignificant issues, and is challenging to gather information and context.

Where disaster funding processes have **eligibility requirements for 'direct impact'** (e.g. inundated by floodwater, physical damage to building, demonstrated crop loss), the **social and economic impacts to the broader community from the disaster are discounted**. The overall economic impacts and costs to community and government are well articulated in Deloitte Access Economics' assessment of various disasters, and include intangible impacts as well as physical reconstruction costs. Disaster funding processes should recognise these impacts, and funding programs and processes should reflect the same.

Question 4: Are the funding roles of the Commonwealth, states and territories, and local government, during disaster events clear?

- Cost shifting in the arrangements is not supported
- Governance should be consistent across jurisdictions

From the perspective that 'during disaster events' covers the whole PPRR spectrum, **further clarity is required** on roles, responsibilities (including legislative) and processes for accessing funding support.

Challenges navigating funding and support programs limit the ability to maximise the expenditure, which results in **missed opportunities** for communities, particularly in respect to human and social recovery, risk mitigation and building back better.

There is a great deal of support for the shared and escalating manner of current funding arrangements, which **reflect the Queensland Disaster Management Arrangements**.

In Queensland, **local government is the lead** for disaster response and recovery, with support from state and Commonwealth governments as local resources are exhausted, and when the impact warrants. **Rural and remote councils have limited capacity to absorb any shift in cost sharing arrangements that would result in a greater contribution from local governments**. As funding arrangements rightly focus toward building community and infrastructure resilience, an important component is working to identify a revision that reflects actual improvements in the risk mitigation and resilience-building funding before any changes to reconstruction and recovery support are implemented.

Regarding the changing nature of the disaster and emergency management space, to reduce the cost to ratepayers and taxpayers, **more funding outside of response and reconstruction is required**. Allowing for local government to determine, in conjunction with a **collaborative** point of view from a state and national road network in particular, the best way to allocate expenditure on capital and maintenance works will ultimately support better funding outcomes in the long term.

There are concerns about **'politics' in disaster response**, and the perception of 'interference' from state and Commonwealth governments. Reactive and one-off funding programs that result from a high-profile event often leave **legacy issues** during delivery, and councils are left with the **administrative burden**.

There is certainty of roles in the response phase in terms of DRFA activation requirements for council funding. Council works with the state government to assess initial impacts and determines when a request for activation of DRFA funding is required. However, there can be confusion in terms of the means to access support for response to and recovery from **less common hazards** such as pandemic or biosecurity hazards, where **different government departments and agencies have 'combat' responsibilities** and funding roles.

Individuals are largely not aware of the funding roles across levels of government, and particularly in the early response and relief stages, they want to know what is available and how to access it. There is a degree of vagueness around who might be eligible for individual assistance (e.g. Primary Producers grants, Personal Hardship Assistance, AGDRP), and the triggers for activation of those measures.

Coordinating efforts across levels of government and a whole-of-system approach would clarify funding roles. **Clarity and consistency from a national perspective and across jurisdictional lines** is required to avoid the cross-border issues that arise in terms of triggers for funding and equitable access to funds.

Question 5: Is there any further information you would like to provide?

- Consider existing data and local and regional plans
- Fit-for-place and fit-for-purpose

The WQAC is currently finalising a Road Network Route Hierarchy and Funding Prioritisation Map, taking into consideration region-wide, strategic planning necessary to retain both east-west and north-south connectivity. Using the **locally-led and identified priorities as the basis for local, state and Commonwealth funding** into road assets in a coordinated way would improve risk mitigation outcomes in the national road network and supply chain.

Reconstruction of flooded roads is not the only aspect of disaster resilience and recovery that Commonwealth disaster funding needs to consider. To ultimately reduce recovery costs, funding to support prevention, preparedness and risk mitigation across all hazards – bushfire, biosecurity, cyclone - and all recovery domains – social, economic, environment, infrastructure - is required. **Putting genuine funding behind preparedness and risk mitigation scaled to reconstruction and recovery to flip the current spending pyramid of 5% up front and 95% to recover.**

Reducing the impacts of disasters as well as reducing the risks is vital – consideration of **improved telecommunication access** for remote and rural communities, support for capacity increases in terms of local government resources and government support agencies, and **'fit for place'** considerations must be at the forefront of decision-making in relation to disaster funding arrangements.

Coordinated and strategic planning and oversight across state and Commonwealth government agencies regarding funding and planning in the areas that they control should consider disaster and emergency resilience. **All levels of government have responsibility for various components that could contribute to better outcomes** – national highways, state roads, council roads; national parks and state forests; land-use planning, vegetation management and development approvals. **A national approach** to disaster preparedness and risk mitigation should be supported and embedded in strategic planning and decision-making – in school curriculums, in roads planning, in national mental health programs.

There are issues with current funding program design that results in councils and others competing for grants, with complicated application processes, tight timeframes and outside of budget cycles that make it difficult to meet minimum co-contribution requirements. It would be beneficial if there were **ongoing funding programs that would allow for long term strategic planning**, building off other funding and capital budgets, and allowing local governments to be strategic with identified priorities rather than 'inventing' projects that suit the detail of a standalone program. Further, there should be timely evaluation and consultation on the redistribution of funds where funding programs have low uptake or are not delivering on intent.

In addition to this review, the WQAC would also propose that the DRFA Review consider the best way to remove remaining barriers to the efficient and cost-effective use of council staff, plant and equipment in delivery of reconstruction works. Consideration should also be given to **balancing the activation levels and the definitions of eligible events being equitable** across the country with the limited resources in small rural and remote communities.

The WQAC anticipates the opportunity for continued engagement on the independent review, and the processes for disaster recovery funding.