

Submission to the Inquiry on the

Review of the operations of the NSW Reconstruction Authority regarding the NSW East Coast severe weather from May 2025

15 October 2025
Final Submission

Executive Summary

NCOSS thanks the Committee for the opportunity to provide a submission on the review of the operations of the NSW Reconstruction Authority relating to recent disaster events.

In the last 12 months, NCOSS has supported member organisations in communities that have been severely impacted by numerous disaster events, including:

- Severe weather, power outages and flooding in Far West NSW in September 2024
- Severe weather and storms that impacted from Mid North Coast to Riverina in January 2025
- Northern Rivers, Mid North Coast, Hunter and Tablelands after Tropical Cyclone Alfred Severe Weather in March 2025
- Mid North Coast, Hunter and Tablelands after severe weather and flooding in May 2025

The NSW Reconstruction Authority's (the Authority's) recovery processes, especially those led by community facing staff, have been increasingly responsive to community needs and well-received by community groups and local social service organisations supporting impacted communities. The Authority's community-facing staff are to be commended for providing sensitive and responsive support to the community. However, the Authority's current systems are not structured to adequately support people living in poverty or the community organisations that support them.

Drawing on feedback from our members, and our own experiences supporting the social service sector, our submission responds primarily to the following terms of reference:

- a) the Authority's response to, and any changes or improvements to the operations of the Authority
- e) The application of any relevant funding under the Joint Disaster Recovery Funding Arrangements, including the implementation of any recommendations arising from the Colvin Review published in October 2024.

The Authority has a vital opportunity to strengthen its response to disasters. NCOSS has outlined practical ways to strengthen the system to better support those most impacted by disaster events.

Summary of recommendations

The Authority:

1. Review funding and operational frameworks to ensure consistent application of community-led principles across all regions.
2. Urge the Federal Government to increase income support so people on low income aren't pushed deeper into poverty when impacted by disaster.
3. Urge the Federal Government to implement the Colvin Inquiry Recommendations for the Australian Disaster Recovery Payment (ADGRP)¹, specifically:
 - a. More clearly define the purposes of the ADGRP and existing DRFA (Disaster Recovery Funding Arrangements) hardship payments.

- b. Consider the AGDRP as part of a holistic package of support to individuals and families.
 - c. Strengthen eligibility based on criteria including geographic location, impact zones and reducing the eligibility timeframes.
- 4. Provide surge funding to local social service organisations, through existing service delivery contracts, to cover the additional costs to services of providing disaster support.
- 5. Urge the Federal Government to implement the Colvin Inquiry Recommendations to:
 - a. separate recovery funding into two streams, one for short term relief and immediate recovery and one for longer term recovery work with community.
 - b. prioritise the redirection of AGDRP funding towards disaster resilience and risk reduction program/s such as those delivered through the Disaster Ready Fund.
 - c. Simplify grants provided to small-to-medium sized social service organisations through the Disaster Recovery Funding Arrangements. Funding for Recovery Support Services should be a minimum of 12 months and include an upfront project establishment payment and brokerage funds.
- 6. Urge the Federal Government to separate the Disaster Ready Fund into two distinct and clearly differentiated streams – Community and Infrastructure.
- 7. Create a new Climate Change & Disaster Adaptation Fund – program-based funding aligned to meet broader social outcomes measures and adaptation goals.
- 8. Build partnerships with Government Departments managing the majority of social service contracts – NSW Department of Communities & Justice, NSW Ministry of Health, Commonwealth Department of Social Services to:
 - a. Share service data to understand community needs, both as a result of disaster and in longer term recovery, and allocate resources accordingly.
 - b. Align disaster support funding with core service delivery contracts to reduce administrative burdens on social service organisations and enhance recovery and resilience outcomes for communities.
- 9. Partner with Councils to establish *ongoing, funded* relationships with social service organisations to build community adaptive capacity. This will enable:
 - a. the development of processes and communication pathways that can be quickly and effectively applied during disaster relief and recovery.
 - b. The identification of communities at most risk, both from natural hazards *and* due to socioeconomic conditions.
 - c. Collaboration between government, social service organisations and the community to develop disaster support plans specifically for, and with, parts of the community who may be more vulnerable to disaster impacts.

Detailed Commentary

The Authority's response to recent disasters has improved over time, but it could still be more effective

After the May 2025 floods, NCOSS attended recovery meetings for the Mid Coast, Central Coast and Hunter regions, led by the Authority's community-facing teams. In these regions, the Authority's community-facing teams took a proactive approach, engaging directly and widely with social service organisations and community groups involved in flood recovery. This enabled timely identification and action on issues, particularly for residents who may struggle to engage with recovery support such as older residents living in caravan parks. NCOSS members in impacted regions reported communication from the government had improved compared to the 2022 floods.

The Authority's community-facing staff applied the principles of community-led recovery^{i ii} by:

- **recognising that individuals and the community may need different levels of support** and endeavouring to provide or link people to appropriate support
- **channelling effort through existing community assets** such as community groups active in recovery and local social service organisations able to identify and respond to community needs.

However, the system within which Authority staff operate does not support the application of community-led principles across all the Authority's areas of operation. For example, time-limited funding tied to an individual disaster event results in restrictive and bureaucratic funding requirements that further disadvantage those experiencing hardship.

Recommendation

The Authority should:

1. Review funding and operational frameworks to ensure consistent application of community-led principles across all regions and areas of operations.

The Authority's current approach does not adequately support people experiencing poverty and needs to be simplified

People experiencing poverty and disadvantage (including people with disability, low-income renters, people who are homeless, First Nations peoples, and those who are socially isolated) are the most impacted by disaster and have the fewest resources to recoverⁱⁱⁱ. Local social service organisations have reported that complex grant application requirements for multiple grants adds further distress for residents already coping with the stress of flood impacts.

"Some elderly people who are permanent residents of caravan parks struggled to understand the recovery support that was available. Caravan park staff took on the role of informal case managers, bringing issues to the Authority and ensuring these residents were able to access support."

Feedback provided Mid North Coast recovery

These processes also significantly increase the workload of community members and social service organisations who provide support to disaster-impacted residents:

"Local social service organisations, such as neighbourhood centres, provided support to flood impacted residents to complete applications for government grants. They reported that residents were frustrated and confused by application processes such as requests for documentation that had been destroyed by flood waters."

Feedback provided Mid North Coast recovery

Simplifying the grants available for immediate support will reduce the confusion and stress for applicants and ensure those already experiencing hardship are not further disadvantaged.

Recommendation

The Authority should:

2. Urge the Federal Government to increase income support so people on low income aren't pushed deeper into poverty when impacted by disaster.
3. Urge the Federal Government to implement the Colvin Inquiry Recommendations for the Australian Disaster Recovery Payment (ADGRP)¹, specifically:
 - a. More clearly define the purposes of the AGDRP and existing DRFA (Disaster Recovery Funding Arrangements) hardship payments.
 - b. Consider the AGDRP as part of a holistic package of support to individuals and families.
 - c. Strengthen eligibility based on criteria including geographic location, impact zones and reducing the eligibility timeframes.

Social service organisations cannot provide recovery support without adequate financial support

When disaster strikes, local social service organisations provide disaster support, on top of their core services, while simultaneously managing direct impacts and increased demand from their communities. Often, these organisations implement new processes to become providers of GIVIT, and similar, disaster-focused support. Establishing and maintaining new processes – training staff and volunteers, maintaining records, time spent with applicants and managing applications – impose costs on organisations that are not covered by core funding or disaster-specific financial support.

When specific disaster recovery funding is provided, it can be complex and administratively burdensome. For example, the Authority engages local social service organisations to deliver Recovery Support Services (funded through Disaster Recovery Funding Arrangements), recognising the value of their expertise and local connections. However, the strict structure of DRFA requirements places considerable pressure on the operations of social service organisations:

- **Financial burden:** The reimbursement funding model requires organisations to bear costs that can be significant, especially during the establishment phase of the grant.

- **Redundant operations:** As grants are separate from existing agreements, organisations can be required to establish new operational processes to fit the finance and reporting requirements.
- **Short-term contracts:** Recovery Support Service contracts last between three and 12 months. In prolonged recovery periods exceeding 12 months (such as in the NSW Northern Rivers), local social service organisations have been re-contracted up to five times, creating uncertainty for staff and administrative burden.
- **Event-specific limitations:** As all DRFA grants are tied to specific disaster events, a Recovery Support Service can only case manage residents impacted by the specific disaster they are funded for. Residents impacted by other events or who are not directly impacted by the disaster but are experiencing hardship, must be referred to business-as-usual social support and case management (if available).

Recommendation

The Authority should:

4. Provide surge funding to local social service organisations, through existing service delivery contracts, to cover the additional costs to services of providing disaster support.
5. Urge the Federal Government to implement the Colvin Inquiry Recommendations to:
 - a. separate recovery funding into two streams, one for short term relief and immediate recovery and one for longer term recovery work with community.
 - b. prioritise the redirection of AGDRP funding towards disaster resilience and risk reduction program/s such as those delivered through the Disaster Ready Fund.
 - c. Simplify grants provided to small-to-medium sized social service organisations through the Disaster Recovery Funding Arrangements. Funding for Recovery Support Services should be a minimum of 12 months and include an upfront project establishment payment and brokerage funds.
6. Urge the Federal Government to separate the Disaster Ready Fund into two distinct and clearly differentiated streams – Community and Infrastructure.
7. Create a new Climate Change & Disaster Adaptation Fund – program-based funding aligned to meet broader social outcomes measures and adaptation goals.

Community-led recovery is most effective when social service support and disaster support systems are aligned

Social service organisations play a critical role in providing disaster support, bringing considerable expertise and knowledge of their community, particularly for people experiencing disadvantage. Social support and disaster support systems should work collaboratively to support the community through disaster and increase its adaptive capacity. However, in practice, these systems work in

parallel, leaving social service organisations to do most of the work to adapt to rigid government disaster support systems. These organisations are required to adapt their core service delivery to meet the needs of the disaster-affected community or are required to make significant organisational adjustments to continue supporting their community via the disaster recovery system. As highlighted in the Colvin Review Report the recovery phase is not ideal for implementing transformational changes aimed at reducing risk^{iv}.

"Local Councils are funded through the DRFA to provide Community Resilience Network meetings to social service organisations and community groups. Some NCOSS members report that, though they see the value of these meetings, it is difficult for them to attend as they are responding to increases in demand for services as a result of the disaster event."

NCOSS member organisations

"The high volume of applications for individual grant support after the NSW East Coast Severe Weather event led to delays in grant payment. To meet basic, immediate food and material needs, residents in financial distress relied on assistance such as GIVIT vouchers and Emergency Relief (funded through the Australian Government Department of Social Services, <https://www.dss.gov.au/emergency-support/emergency-relief>) provided through local social service organisations. A number of organisations noted their yearly allocation of Emergency Relief funding was exhausted meeting the increased demand. They would therefore have to turn away future request for crisis support."

Feedback provided by social service organisations in disaster-impacted regions, 2023-present

To more fully apply the principles of community-led recovery, including building collaborative partnerships between the community and providing the flexibility to allow different communities to choose different paths to recovery^v, government systems must align social support and disaster support systems.

Recommendation:

The Authority should:

8. Build deeper partnerships with Government Departments managing the majority of social service contracts – NSW Department of Communities & Justice, NSW Ministry of Health, Department of Social Services to:
 - a. Share service data to understand community needs, both as a result of disaster and in longer term recovery, and allocate resources appropriately.
 - b. Align disaster support funding with core service delivery contracts to reduce administrative burdens on social service organisations and enhance recovery and resilience outcomes for communities.
9. Partner with Councils to establish *ongoing, funded* relationships with social service organisations to build community adaptive capacity. This will enable:
 - a. the development of processes and communication pathways that can be quickly and effectively applied during disaster relief and recovery.
 - b. The identification of communities at most risk, both from natural hazards and due to socioeconomic conditions.
 - c. Collaboration between government, social service organisations and the community to develop disaster support plans specifically for, and with, parts of the community who may be more vulnerable to disaster impacts.

Conclusion

NCOSS has observed that the Authority's response to recent disasters has improved, becoming more responsive to community needs. More improvement is required, particularly through simplification of support systems and deeper partnership with the social services sector.

A more coordinated, flexible and community-focused system will ensure the best results for NSW communities facing more destructive and frequent disaster events.

NCOSS welcomes the opportunity to work with the NSW Government to strengthen disaster management systems and processes in NSW to be more responsive to community needs.

NSW Council of Social Service (NCOSS) is the peak body for non-government organisations in the health and community services sector in NSW. NCOSS works to progress social justice and shape positive change toward a NSW free from inequality and disadvantage. We are an independent voice advocating for the wellbeing of NSW communities. At NCOSS, we believe that a diverse, well-resourced and knowledgeable social service sector is fundamental to reducing economic and social inequality.

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Acknowledgement of Country

NCOSS respectfully acknowledges the sovereign Custodians of Gadigal Country and pay our respects to Elders, past, present and emerging. We acknowledge the rich cultures, customs and continued survival of First Nations peoples on Gadigal Country, and on the many diverse First Nations lands and waters across NSW.

We acknowledge the spirit of the Uluru Statement from the Heart and accept the invitation to walk with First Nations peoples in a movement of the Australian people for a better future.

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ⁱ Australian Disaster Recovery Framework Principle 3 – Use community-led approaches
<https://knowledge.aidr.org.au/resources/national-principles-for-disaster-recovery/>

ⁱⁱ Neighbourhood Centres Queensland, Understanding community-led disaster recovery https://ncq.org.au/wp-content/uploads/20240918_NCQ_Handout_WhatIsCommunityLedDR_WEB-1.pdf

ⁱⁱⁱ United Nations Office for Disaster Risk Reduction, Inclusion webpage, <https://www.undr.org/inclusion>.

^{iv} ^{iv} Final Report Independent Review of Commonwealth Disaster Funding, p 100

^v Neighbourhood Centres Queensland, Understanding community-led disaster recovery https://ncq.org.au/wp-content/uploads/20240918_NCQ_Handout_WhatIsCommunityLedDR_WEB-1.pdf