

Joint Select Committee on the NSW Reconstruction Authority – Review of the *NSW Reconstruction Authority Act 2022*

Opening Statement by Northern Rivers Community Legal Centre

The Northern Rivers Community Legal Centre (NRCLC) appreciates the opportunity to contribute to the review of the NSW Reconstruction Authority Act 2022 (the Act) by the Joint Select Committee on the NSW Reconstruction Authority under section 93 of the Act.

The NRCLC is an independent, non-profit community organisation whose vision is to provide justice for all. The Centre provides free legal advice, assistance and education to communities across the Northern Rivers, prioritising those individuals who experience disadvantage, trauma and marginalisation, and advocates for law reform and improvement of inequitable policies and systems.

The Northern Rivers was drastically affected by the February and March 2022 flood events, including the NRCLC office, staff and volunteers. The Centre staff provided immediate assistance to flood-affected residents, attending recovery centres to and advising on issues including lost documents, flood grants and government assistance, tenancy issues, small claims, debts, fines and insurance claims and disputes.

In 2022, NRCLC obtained disaster funding and established a Disaster Response & Recovery Team to specifically assist flood-affected residents. NRCLC staff provided legal advice, assistance and referral services to clients who were directly impacted by this event.

A significant amount of the work of NRCLC's Disaster Response & Recovery Team since the floods has been assisting the community in relation to flood assistance grants and the Resilient Homes Program. This has involved reaching out to and connecting, building relationships and collaborating with NSW Reconstruction Authority (NSWRA) staff to stay abreast of recovery and resilience programs and policies to ensure we are able to provide accurate advice and information to and advocacy on behalf of our clients.

NRCLC, based on our work in community and with the NSWRA and other stakeholders, believe the policy objectives of the Act remain valid and are, in principle, appropriate for securing the objectives of the Act, and also that the broad powers granted to the NSWRA under the Act should be subject to safeguards around accessibility, transparency, clarity and community feedback and engagement.

Such safeguards should include clearer guidelines, particularly in relation to disaster relief and recovery programs, and transparent, readily available and accessible policies and eligibility criteria. Whilst the need for broad powers to expedite response strategies and adapt to various and changing need is acknowledged, it is critical that information is widely disseminated to affected communities across multiple platforms in a timely manner.

Community awareness, education and feedback are key. A more coordinated and collaborative approach to the "betterment" of affected communities, including proactive and ongoing consultation with all relevant government and non-government stakeholders, including local councils, community support services and residents, will allow more effective coordination of disaster recovery and resilience activities.