

**Submission
No 21**

REVIEW OF THE NSW RECONSTRUCTION AUTHORITY ACT 2022

Organisation: Uniting NSW.ACT

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Mr Clayton Barr MP
Chair
Joint Select Committee on the NSW Reconstruction Authority
NSW Parliament House
6 Macquarie Street
Sydney NSW 2000

via email: nswreconstructionauthority@parliament.nsw.gov.au

Dear Mr Barr

Review of the NSW Reconstruction Authority Act 2022

We welcome the opportunity to make a submission to the Joint Select Committee's review of the NSW Reconstruction Authority Act.

Uniting NSW.ACT contributes to the work of the Uniting Church in NSW and the ACT, through social justice advocacy, community services and spiritual care. We provide services for people through all ages and stages of life, and drive solutions to systemic issues so people experiencing disadvantage can live their best lives. Our purpose is to inspire people, enliven communities and confront injustice. We value diversity and always welcome everyone exactly as they are.

Uniting's role in disaster recovery and reconstruction

In making this submission, we draw primarily on our experience working with the NSW Reconstruction Authority and local communities following the 2022 floods in the Northern Rivers region of NSW to provide flood recovery services. We operate two temporary pod villages at Brunswick Heads and one at Wardell as well as providing flood Recovery Support Services across the Northern Rivers (Kyogle, Lismore, Richmond Valley and Ballina local government areas).

The Wardell temporary village was established to house people displaced from the Cabbage Tree Island Community, and had 51 pods housing approximately 160 people.

The villages at Tweed Street and Bayside in Brunswick Heads were established in January 2023 with 58 and 27 pods respectively. They house people displaced predominantly from the Byron local government area, many with complex needs including a history of homelessness, poor mental health, drug and alcohol use and domestic violence.

Our Recovery Support Services provide individualised and relationship-based services to support and strengthen the capacity of flood-affected people across the Northern Rivers. Our team has worked in almost every pod village providing an average of two days a week support to current clients living on site (RA, Formerly NRRRC; Ballina Pod Village; Lismore Pod Village; Wollongbar Pod Village; Evans Van Village; Bruns Village Tweed St; Bruns Village Bayside; Coraki Pod

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Village). They have provided several thousand people with light touch support, information and referral in emergency accommodation and outreach sites on their journey to recovery from the 2022 floods. To date we have assisted 2,523 unique households (4,541 people) with emergency accommodation in Northern NSW since February 2022, and are currently managing some 491 cases, and continue to receive between 30-50 referrals each week.

We support the submission prepared by Western Sydney University, which draws on research that was funded by the James Martin Institute for Public Policy and which we supported as a research partner.

Observations from our flood recovery experiences

The NSW Reconstruction Authority has been a strong partner in the provision of support services across the Northern Rivers, and we acknowledge that each disaster recovery brings unique challenges. There are a number of observations, however, that we would make on aspects of the process and framework that have impacted the community's experience since the 2022 floods.

1. *How can we work with the Government to achieve greater certainty for the community in the delivery of Flood Recovery Services, and to improve the coordination of communications with the community?*

Displacement from home and community is an inherently unsettling experience for individuals and families. The practice of the NSW Reconstruction Authority has been to tightly control any form of public communications. This is important to consistency of messaging, however it has at times left a void in information flow to the community. This has in turn increased the level of uncertainty in the community and contributed to higher levels of anxiety. Service providers such as Uniting are the first point of contact for many affected people and families and need to be equipped to provide timely and meaningful information to them.

2. *Certainty for service providers*

Uniting's Recovery Support Services and temporary accommodation contracts are funded under very short-term arrangements.

The Recovery Support Services contract expires in February 2025, following a short-term extension. This impacts our 18 caseworkers and 3 coordinators.

The Wardell temporary village initial contract period ends in September 2024, and the Brunswick Heads village in January 2025.

We are committed to supporting those people displaced by flooding while longer-term solutions are developed by government, however, our short-term contractual arrangements provide us with no certainty as an organisation, and make it very difficult to retain skilled staff who do not have job security.

While we have been working with the NSW Reconstruction Authority, a lack of clarity about plans for these communities, insufficient information flow from government agencies, and uncertainty as to contractual arrangements, means that we are not able to provide the level of assurance that we think our staff and the community deserve.

3. *The need for a long-term plan for recovery*

The Melbourne University *10 Years Beyond Bushfires Report* demonstrates that recovery from natural disasters is a long-term process for the community. The study found that people directly affected by the 2009 Victorian bushfires showed remarkable capacity to adapt and recover: ten years after the bushfires 66.5% of respondents across all communities reported that they personally felt 'mostly' or 'fully recovered'. However, the

broader community takes longer to recover, with a much lower 44.1% of participants reporting that they felt that their community was 'mostly' or 'fully recovered'.

The NSW Reconstruction Authority legislation needs to be able to support much longer planning timeframes to be able to fully support people and return a sense of community cohesion.

A lack of a long-term vision for people to exit from immediate relief mechanisms increases the levels of anxiety within communities and exacerbates their experience of displacement. Typically, people with means are able to plan for their own pathway to recovery, while those more financially or socially disadvantaged people are less well-equipped. These groups are also less well equipped to manage the levels of uncertainty and fracturing of broader social supports.

4. *Complexity of joint funding models and governance*

Financial support of the Commonwealth Government is valuable and welcome in any recovery program. However, this shared responsibility makes the process of navigating contract extensions and processes much more complex for providers and community organisations.

This is also the case with the governance of the NSW Reconstruction Authority, which is under the joint responsibility of the Minister for Planning and Public Spaces, the Hon Paul Scully MP, and the Minister for Emergency Services, the Hon Jihad Dib MP. Such a shared governance model must be assumed to increase the complexity of decision making and communications, and increases the difficulties faced by the community and service providers in seeking to engage with decision makers.

We are available to speak to our submission if required by the Joint Select Committee. We can be contacted via Mr Dom Schuster, Government Relations Lead, or [REDACTED] or [REDACTED]

Yours sincerely,

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