

**Submission
No 52**

REVIEW OF THE NSW RECONSTRUCTION AUTHORITY ACT 2022

Name: Mr Lewis King

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Dear Committee.

Firstly I would like to state that in undertaking a review of the Act there has not been enough information about the review taking place. It has not been communicated well enough to people, especially those people of the Northern Rivers who have had first hand dealings with the RA. This lack of information and engagement with such a heavily impacted community does those people a disservice, and further disempowers those who are already struggling to navigate the disorganised and overly complicated disaster recovery process. These people would have valuable feedback on how the RA is putting the policy objectives of the Act into practice.

In reading Section 93 of the Act

(3) The Joint Select Committee is to review—

(a) this Act to determine whether—

(i) the policy objectives of the Act remain valid, and

(ii) the terms of the Act remain appropriate for securing the objectives, and

(b) the operations of the Authority regarding any disaster in relation to which the Authority exercises functions.

I note that in your terms of reference you do not include part (b) pertaining to the operations of the Authority in relation to a disaster.

I would have thought that after the Act and the Authority being set up, and having to deal with the aftermath the devastating 2022 floods, it would have been a valuable time to gather information and review both the Act and the Authority. To assess and improve its function moving into the future and better prepare and respond to disasters yet to come. I sincerely hope that when the time comes for a review of Section 93 part 3 (b) looking at the operations of the Authority itself that significantly more time, effort and resources will be spent on a public information campaign calling for submissions so as to give a clear picture of the Authority's performance.

That being said the Act and the Authority have unfortunately fallen far short of their objectives to provide a clear path forward for the survivors of the 2022 Floods, not only in Lismore but in so many areas of the Northern Rivers.

Here are the two areas of the Act where the RA has fallen he most short in my own experience.

Section 10 part 1 (b) (iii) balancing constraints to enable a focused, timely and expedited recovery of affected communities,

And

(c) information provision and exchange and community engagement,

The recovery process has been painfully slow. Two years is a very long time for people to be living in limbo, not knowing how to move forward. More resources should have been dedicated to expediting the process and working towards solutions for those in need. I think there should be capacity within the RA to call in a large number of emergency staff following a disaster, to assist with processing claims and communicating with those affected, but they must be properly trained and competent.

The staff who do work at the RA really need far more training in “Trauma informed engagement”, following a disaster there are many traumatised people, and trying to apply for assistance can often bring up and refresh their trauma.

The RA has also been very poor at communicating, with individuals, with the community and with local leaders. There has been inadequate community engagement and changing information. Also so much information is verbal or changes based on individual cases. In the case of Lismore and the Resilient Homes program, there was the initial phone call that many people received telling them they were unsuccessful in their applications.... Some people received the news multiple times from different phone calls (how unprofessional and upsetting). I have personally witnessed applicants initially being knocked back for retrofit/raising houses, only for them to appeal and put in a compelling case and then be approved. Fortunately for them they were educated, they had secure housing outside of Lismore and had the time and energy to put an appeal case together. For many people who don't have the knowledge, the skill, the time, the energy for various reasons, they unfortunately won't be approved. This is not an equitable and just way to respond to a disaster. There needs to be clearer guidelines on who is eligible and who isn't and they need to be communicated to those affected. There seems to be a lack of transparency and equality and it has caused significant damage to the cohesion of the community. For those who are left we have a strange mix of those who have been given a helping hand, and those who have not.

For those of us affected by Landslides, we are completely left to the mercy of when the RA will come up with a policy relating to what assistance will be offered. Landslide survivors (there are many in our region) who did not buy in a flood zone, are left to waiting (some of them homeless) for an open ended amount of time while the RA considers what the policy should look like. Others, like us, live under the threat of another landslide further impacting our homes and access, and every weather event that approaches our area carries with it untold stress and a prompt evacuation to a safe location. Communication from the RA has been very poor, with the deadline for some form of policy being continually pushed back “call back in two weeks”. It's been 6 months.

All in all I think the Act and the RA are shortsighted in their approach to Disaster mitigation and recovery. We must be thinking long term about the future of our communities, and what disaster resilience looks like in a changing climate. After the initial phase of responding to a disaster has passed, that is the critical time to be looking at making some big changes, to be ready and minimise the risk to life and property when the next one comes. The RA needs to be working with communities, not against them, and take the community that journey to build a better, more disaster resistant future.

Sincerely

Lewis King