

**Submission
No 63**

REVIEW OF THE NSW RECONSTRUCTION AUTHORITY ACT 2022

Organisation: Resilient Lismore

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NSW RA Submission

Elly Bird

Executive Director, Resilient Lismore

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I am writing this submission on behalf of Resilient Lismore (RL), which is a place-based locally-led charity, based in Lismore, NSW. Our organisation is working in disaster recovery and resilience following the 2022 flooding and landslide disaster that impacted the Northern Rivers and first formed as a community-based response to major flooding in Lismore in 2017. We are networked with numerous other community and place-based initiatives and organisations through programs and interagency network gatherings that we have hosted and their perspectives also inform this submission.

In our work we have engaged with the RA (RA) through its previous iterations, Office of Emergency Management, Resilience NSW, and the Northern Rivers Reconstruction Corporation, and now with several of the operational areas of the RA, and with many of the staff that are working across the variety of programs and activities it is undertaking.

We are funded by the RA to deliver our 'Repair to Return' project of housing restoration in the Northern Rivers and we are grateful for that support for our work which is still providing practical assistance to impacted community members more than two years after the disaster in the absence of any other funded programs of this nature.

It's no secret that there were problems with previous iterations of the agency as Resilience NSW and a lot of criticism at the height of the disaster and we were part of previous submissions to the NSW Independent Flood Enquiry. But, in making this submission, my reflections do still include our challenges in working with the previous iterations of the agency, and I hope they will inform the ongoing emergence and improvement of the RA and the future activities of the agency following disasters of the scale that impacted our community, which we continue to navigate in recovery. Our reflections particularly focus on the importance of meaningful partnership with community-based non-government organisations such as ours.

Leadership

Firstly, we want to note that the current leadership of the RA have been engaging with us effectively and we acknowledge their efforts to improve the recovery programs that are being implemented in the Northern Rivers and to improve future processes. Leadership at the executive level is strong and we are hopeful that leadership will be able to influence the formation and stabilisation of a government agency that is effective and able to meaningfully engage with communities that are at risk or in recovery.

Community Engagement

A lot of disaster recovery research and thinking emphasises the critical importance of community involvement in recovery - although recently it seems that is a contested idea with government and industry unable to grapple with 'what is community-led recovery'. In our opinion, there has been an abject failure in this space in the Northern Rivers, and that perhaps the lack of support for concepts of 'community-led' has subsequently led to poor and ineffective community engagement by the RA, and we see little change or focus on improvement in this area. There is still no meaningful inclusion of disaster affected community voices in our recovery or in the planning for future processes and events. As an individual who is representative of a single organisation and who is not directly flood-affected, I have often felt that I am a lone voice or a lone token representative of 'the community'.

I sit on several recovery committees, which are listed in the below section on governance, these committees are comprised of organisations, and attended by nominated staff of those organisations, who have been appointed into various recovery positions. The recovery committee governance structures are not effective mechanisms for feedback or inclusion of community members. There has been no meaningful engagement with disaster affected community members. Community groups have been forced into activism and advocacy as their only means to have their voices and perspectives heard. The Community Leaders Forum that currently exists is made up of Mayors and Members of Parliament and similarly does not provide a meaningful forum for community to engage with the programs and plans that directly influence them.

Resilient Lismore is supportive of 'citizens assembly' community engagement and would like to see RA build this form of engagement into their recovery frameworks in disaster affected communities.

Governance

I am a member of the Northern Rivers Health and Wellbeing Sub-Committee which was established soon after the disaster and still meets; I have chaired the Lismore Wellbeing Collective (a Resilient Lismore initiative); I was a member of the Lismore City Council Emergency Recovery Network which became the Lismore Health and Wellbeing Subcommittee; and I am a member of the Lismore Community Resilience Network (CRN). For full awareness I am also an elected member of Lismore City Council although I do not write this submission from that perspective.

With the exception the Lismore Wellbeing Collective, which we facilitated, each of these have taken the form of a reporting forum where members report issues and concerns, which are then 'reported up' but there has been very little information provided back to the committee in response to those escalation pathways. The initial iteration of the LWBSC was chaired remotely by DCJ staff based in Sydney. This is entirely inadequate. Recovery committees should be place based, with face-to-face options wherever possible. They should also be action oriented and should operate with full transparency in providing information back to the members.

In the social recovery space, this is particularly important as most members deliver recovery programs that can be adapted to respond to emerging needs – if adequate funding is provided.

Place based Organisations and Preparedness

The RA is tasked with preparedness for communities, but the reality is that when a disaster hits, the government can be relatively slow to mobilise into disaster affected communities. Following a disaster, two weeks is slow from the perspective of the community, and what happens at the community level in that time forms a possible foundation for community informed recovery and engagement – RA should be preparing to enable, support and engage with the community-based architecture that exists and that might emerge. We advocate for the RA to put in place MOUs with local place-based organisations that can fulfill and support recovery functions in the immediate aftermath of a disaster and that where possible these arrangements should be in place before disasters occur, allowing swift mobilisation at the community level. That said, there should also be mechanisms to fund and support emergent community initiatives if pre-existing MOUs are not in place. The additional benefit of supporting and enabling place-based organisations to deliver recovery activities is that the relationship of the disaster affected community members with that organisation will extend beyond the government determined recovery horizon.

We also suggest that there is a need for regular funding for place-based organisations to deliver preparedness initiatives and that those programs should extend beyond response agencies. In our local area, the SES are significantly under resourced for community engagement, leaving limited preparedness functions being delivered into Lismore, which is one of the highest risk communities in NSW. Alongside this submission in response to the policies and structure of the RA, we also suggest that the SES needs to increase its community engagement capacity and not rely on volunteers to deliver critical flood preparedness programs.

Preparedness should also be thought about in a deeper way and a shift in focus from preparedness only being thought about as individual and family-based preparedness. For example, in the community of Lismore, there is a critical need to focus on community-based collaborative preparedness. This should include planning for how the not-for-profit and community sector is included and activated in recovery.

Staffing

We want to comment on the systemic and structural issue of staffing in Government. The experience for community organisations is one of rotating people in positions within organisational structures that are opaque and not easily understood. We see a revolving door of individuals in positions that we don't understand within the agency, which does not enable the formation of meaningful relationships between community stakeholders and the agency. As an example of this I have met with numerous employees within the RA who want to engage with us as a community stakeholder, their duties and positions aren't clear and often I have not crossed paths with them again beyond that initial meeting. This creates a time impost our organisation and it does not enable meaningful, trust based relationship building. We suggest that the RA makes its organisational structure public and readily available, with the responsibilities for each position articulated so that community stakeholders understand the points of intersection between the staff of the RA and the community it is established to serve. We also respectfully point out the cost benefit analysis of funding local place-based community initiatives to drive recovery and resilience activities in comparison to funding numerous staff within the government agency many of whom do not live in the region or community they are working to support.

Conclusion

Our concluding remarks are that, from our perspective, the RA is still in its establishment phase. We value the agency and its role in the NSW government, and we primarily seek stronger community engagement and the administration and oversight of an equitable and

responsive funding model. This model should enable and encourage place-based resilience and preparedness. We advocate for full and easily accessible transparency regarding which projects have been and are being funded, as well as the outcomes of those projects. This transparency is crucial for understanding and monitoring the complex work occurring across the state, both within the government and in government-funded initiatives. Currently, community organizations and initiatives that aim to progress place-based, community-based work in collaboration with the government are underfunded and forced to compete for relatively scant resources.