

## Submission to Review into the 2023-24 Severe Weather Season

### Executive Summary

Neighbourhood Centres (NC's) in Queensland have been frontline social infrastructure in disaster response for the past four decades. The severe weather events that occurred in Queensland between October 2023 – April 2024 of note in this Review, including bushfires, flooding, severe storms and cyclones, significantly impacted Neighbourhood Centres and the local communities they support. Over 30 NCs were either stood up as formal Recovery Hubs or supported other Recovery Hubs across Queensland during these events. NCs have been continuing to support these disaster-affected communities since the events occurred and as place-based organisations, they intend to continue to support their local communities for the long term.

Neighbourhood Centres Queensland (NCQ) is the peak body for over 149 Neighbourhood and Community Centres (NCs) around the state, over 130 of which receive base funding from the Queensland Government. Currently 95% of Neighbourhood Centres who receive state funding are members of NCQ. Queensland's Neighbourhood Centres are key social infrastructure supporting communities affected by natural disasters. Their welcoming and inclusive nature means they are especially effective in supporting vulnerable and marginalised groups and emerging issues.

Neighbourhood Centres' local knowledge and relationships mean they are well suited to prepare for, and respond to disaster affected communities, whether it be an acute event like a cyclone or flood, or a chronic event such as a drought or pandemic. Their location in disaster affected communities has meant that they are often the first to respond with emergency relief and information and short to long-term recovery support for Queenslanders who have been severely impacted or lost everything.

In response to the Terms of Reference for this Review, this submission will address Assessment Area 1 by outlining experiences and challenges for preparedness and response undertaken by Neighbourhood Centres in alignment with other disaster management agencies and services. This submission will also highlight issues impacting the preparedness of NCs to respond to these events, as well as risks associated with the ability of NCs to continue to effectively support community disaster resilience over time, particularly in the context of the increasing occurrence and severity of extreme weather events.

Queensland's Neighbourhood Centre Sector has a demonstrated history in preparation, response and recovery to all types of disasters faced. Neighbourhood Centres are uniquely positioned as strategic partners in building disaster resilience in communities across the state. Based on the data gathered by NCQ to support this Review, this submission proposes a range of recommendations designed to strengthen the preparedness and effectiveness of the role of NCs in supporting the Disaster Management system in Queensland.

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## RECOMMENDATIONS:

1. Queensland Government to provide funding for place-based, long-term permanent disaster resilience workers in high-risk areas to cover all disaster phases, primarily to be provided to Neighbourhood Centres in areas of high disaster risk.
2. Establish individual standing arrangements between the Queensland Government (Community Recovery) and Neighbourhood Centres in high-risk areas across Queensland, to ensure that NCs are equipped and supported when they rapidly respond to disaster.
3. Increase the effectiveness and timeliness of the distribution of recovery funding through directly funding Neighbourhood Centres. This will enhance the capacity of NCs to meet the immediate recovery needs of their community.
4. Increase integration of Neighbourhood Centres into the disaster management system through recommendations to Councils to offer increased connection, communication and coordination with Neighbourhood Centres through their Human and Social Recovery Sub-groups and established communication channels with Local Disaster Management Groups (LDMGs).
5. Queensland Government to increase planning and investment towards upgrading Neighbourhood Centres' facilities and infrastructure in high-risk areas to be disaster resilient.
6. Review government recovery funding guidelines to enable greater flexibility to provide a safety net to support people who are just outside the guidelines but are in urgent need. Neighbourhood Centres are equipped to bridge this gap with formal support.

## Introduction

Neighbourhood Centres (NC's) in Queensland have been frontline social infrastructure in disaster response for the past four decades. The severe weather events that occurred in Queensland between October 2023 – April 2024 of note in this Review, including bushfires, flooding, severe storms and cyclones, significantly impacted Neighbourhood Centres and the local communities they support. Over 30 NCs were either stood up as formal Recovery Hubs or supported other Recovery Hubs across Queensland during these events. NCs have been continuing to support these disaster-affected communities since the events occurred and as place-based organisations, they intend to continue to support their local communities for the long term.

Over 150 Neighbourhood Centres across the state are embedded in their communities, enabling centres to operate on the frontline of disaster planning, response and recovery, often without the coordination of disaster management agencies. As the most natural disaster affected state in Australia, NCQ has collaborated with NCs in hazard prone areas of Queensland to research the role they play in building community disaster resilience. Research indicates that NCs are providing structured support, community leadership and volunteer coordination for our communities through a wide range of disasters.

Neighbourhood Centres in Queensland have reported that their key roles in responding to the severe weather events that occurred between October 2023 – April 2024 were in the delivery of information and referral services, support with grant applications, food relief, material relief, emotional support and volunteer coordination. They also were able to draw on their local knowledge and partnerships to contact the most vulnerable, coordinate emergency food distribution, source emergency housing and provide personal support. Many centres also offered refuge, safety, showers, laundry and access to computers and internet to their community.

As a significant aspect of the role NCs play in community disaster resilience, many are currently delivering recovery services. It is anticipated that the outcomes from this Review will produce significant insights and strategies to support the existing work that NCQ is facilitating with Neighbourhood Centres to enhance their capacity to work with their communities to build community disaster resilience as part of the disaster management system.

## Neighbourhood Centres' Experiences and Challenges

As place-based community organisations, NCs are embedded in the communities where they deliver their services, having a physical presence, operating in a localised way and responding to local issues and opportunities. The significance of social infrastructure, such as meeting and activity spaces, the delivery of services and responses that meet the needs of local communities, as well as community ownership and governance provides on the ground experience and knowledge that other transient services do not possess. As existing social resources, the often long-standing connection with their communities establishes a foundational level of preparedness for response and recovery. The following sections provide more detail on the preparation efforts that enabled NCs to mobilise for this most recent rainfall and flooding event.

## Connection to Local Disaster Management Groups and Sub-Groups – Underutilisation of Key Disaster Capacity

This submission supports an integrated approach to developing strategies that improve systems and structures fundamental to planning for resilience and capacity in the face of a range of future threats. The clear benefit offered by multi-sectoral resilience planning processes is the increased level of support that can be activated to complement formal response efforts during an event, the opportunity for role clarification across the disaster management system, information and resource sharing during disasters, and improved coordination and enhancement of functionality during disasters.

Internationally, community leadership is being recognised and enabled as part of collaborations and networks that form critical resources to work with and support emergency management agencies. However, the development of locally-led preparation, response and recovery efforts, also recognised by the Royal Commission into Natural Disaster Arrangements<sup>1</sup> as a strength of the disaster management system (*Commonwealth of Australia, 2020*) are yet to be fully capitalised on as a means of complementing the capacity of the sector.

There is an inconsistency in the strength of relationships between local Councils and Neighbourhood Centres across the Queensland. Of those engaged, most NCs are members of local Human and Social Recovery Sub-groups, however some are also members of the LDMGs. Not all NCs have capacity to respond or provide formal recovery roles. However, some NCs have identified the relevance of their organisations to be either be members of LDMGs or have communication channels established with LDMGs, however have not been included at this level.

Where NCs seek inclusion with LDMGs and it is deemed not suitable for NCs to be members, they seek to establish clear communication channels between LDMGs and local Neighbourhood Centres for information and timely updates on the localised disaster response. This is in addition to the need in many areas to increase Neighbourhood Centres' active membership of local Human and Social Recovery Sub-groups.

Surveys conducted by Neighbourhood Centres Queensland with 89 NCs across Queensland in 2022 revealed that while 45% of Neighbourhood Centres were part of community-based disaster networks and 63% were distributing disaster management resources, only one third were a member of their local council's Human and Social Recovery Sub-group. The degree of engagement and collaboration between NCs and their councils vary across Local Government Areas.

“Neighbourhood Centres need to be brought into the fold of the LDMG structure. If you're in a regional city, in some areas you are completely left out and it really comes down to personal relationships between council workers as to whether you are included in communications or response or not.”

Regional NC Manager

<sup>1</sup><https://naturaldisaster.royalcommission.gov.au/publications/html-report/overview>

The strengthening of collaborative approaches between local Councils and the NCs operating in their areas must constitute a critical component toward developing effective preparation, response and recovery efforts for communities in those locations. Council involvement and support in local asset planning, delivery of community preparation workshops, facilitation of first responder courses for NC staff as part of a formal cross-sector partnership are central to community disaster resilience. Equally, the connections held by NCs can facilitate direct access to community to assist LDGMs and Sub-Groups, such as Human and Social Recovery Sub-Groups, to enhance the effectiveness of community preparation and hazard awareness. Failure to address this issue will continue to see NCs as an underutilised capacity in a disaster management system that is becoming more stretched as events intensify.

### Enhancing Centre Capacity to Support Increased Community Demand in Response and Recovery

Consultation undertaken by NCQ with frontline Neighbourhood Centre staff in disaster-affected communities has identified an urgent need for funding and resources to meet the growing level and complexity of demand from the community during times of disaster. It is important for the Review to consider that NCs do not receive any additional funding to meet the demands of flood response and the prolonged recovery period. Centres are provided with \$230,000<sup>2</sup> annual median funding from the Queensland Government to operate a Centre at a basic level.

Neighbourhood Centres across the state have reported that they were operating from a position of too few staff hours prior to the disaster events in their areas. This became a major issue, with reports of staff at some Centres working additional hours in a volunteer capacity in the days and weeks after the disasters due to unavailability of funding required to meet community demand.

*"When you have a disaster like this, it exacerbates these social issues and services have limited capacity to cope."*

Neighbourhood Centre Manager

With Centres already reporting an increase in mental health, domestic violence and demand for housing, Neighbourhood Centres have said these issues have been heightened as part of the compounding effects of the disaster events.

The existing challenges for NCs to meet community demand adequately in response and with appropriate documentation to support accountability, particularly for social support, administration and volunteer supervision, is an issue that constitutes a risk to response and recovery for future events and must be addressed as a key aspect of preparedness activities. Neighbourhood Centres have suggested that increased investment in the form of the introduction of disaster training for existing staff, together with the addition of a permanent additional disaster recovery and resilience worker is required to build a more realistic level of response and recovery capability, as well as supporting preparation efforts. This resourcing is particularly important where NC staff have also been personally affected by disasters and may be unable to travel to the Centre.

<sup>2</sup>Neighbourhood Centres Queensland, 2022 Sector Impact Report. [https://ncq.org.au/wp-content/uploads/20230619\\_NCQ\\_2022SectorImpactReport\\_V2\\_WEB.pdf](https://ncq.org.au/wp-content/uploads/20230619_NCQ_2022SectorImpactReport_V2_WEB.pdf)

As another key role of NCs in disasters, they also provide space and resources to host the larger services and charities in the recovery phase. These organisations are well-funded, as well as often being the beneficiary of disaster appeal funding. NCs acknowledge the important role these organisations play as part of a disaster situation. However, as transient services, they are reliant on place-based Neighbourhood Centres to enable them to effectively support the community through their local knowledge and the community focus of NCs. There is a cost to NCs in resourcing these organisations, highlighting a further financial impact that can affect the ability of Centres to effectively deliver their recovery efforts.

Some Centres have reported occasions where the Queensland Government has provided resourcing where Centres have been asked to support the collection of data and assist community members as part of Recovery Hub activities. Centres have suggested that the availability of recovery funding should be made available as part of the Queensland Government's Recovery Arrangements, or as standing arrangements with Community Recovery to streamline the delivery of the resourcing associated with hosting the external organisations and the support to Recovery Hub activities.

The issue of the ability of NCs to support community members who present in urgent need, but who may be just outside the Centre's catchment or perhaps is just outside all government funding guidelines has also been raised in consultation with NCs, with Centres advocating for more flexibility to address these needs and gaps.

The demonstrated ability of NCs to support disaster resilience in their communities has been documented by NCQ as part of existing research, including the [Queensland Neighbourhood Centres Strategy for Disaster Resilience 2023-2026](#). However, just as the capacity of the Disaster Management sector, as well as the large charity organisations have been impacted by the effects of compounding disaster events, the capacity of NCs is also being severely stretched. A significant point of departure in assessing the effectiveness of preparedness activities of these agencies lies in the disparity between the level of resourcing and support available to each of them.

### Building Resilience of Neighbourhood Centres' Infrastructure

Neighbourhood Centres emphasise the need for government planning of infrastructure options to ensure services can continue to operate and mobilise, if necessary. E.g. generators, water supply, alternative power, air conditioning.

Given the increased utilisation of Neighbourhood Centres by Community Recovery for activation of formal Recovery Hubs, there is an apparent need for increased government consideration of investment in Neighbourhood Centres' infrastructure.

Neighbourhood Centres have limited time and resources to work through additional challenges faced in cases of infrastructure losses or damage. Mossman Community Support Service lost part of a building and experienced these challenges while facing increased demands on their services.

### Conclusion

This submission has highlighted a range of challenges faced by NCs that are impacting their ability to support their preparedness. These include an existing lack of funding to support their traditional and contracted services, with limited additional funding to support the delivery of preparation, response and recovery. Inconsistent levels of

collaboration and connection between NCs and LDMGs is out of step with international trends in the development of community leadership models and a recognition of the need to build the capacity of the Disaster Management sector.

We would like to thank IGEM for the opportunity to respond to the Review. NCQ considers the challenges that have been highlighted in this submission as major risks to the ongoing ability of Neighbourhood Centres, as key social and disaster management infrastructure, to effectively provide the support that will be required as the climate changes and the occurrence of severe weather events increase.