

**EMERGENCY SERVICES REFORM AMENDMENT BILL 2023; STATE EMERGENCY SERVICE BILL 2023;
MARINE RESCUE QUEENSLAND BILL 2023**

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Neighbourhood Centres Queensland

Submission to Review the Emergency Services Reform Amendment Bill 2023

29 January 2024

Background

Neighbourhood Centres (NC's) in Queensland have been frontline social infrastructure in disaster response for the past five decades. While in recent times, Queensland has faced an increase in the number and severity of disaster events, NC's have been responding to natural disasters since their inception.

This wealth of knowledge in the sector has been captured in numerous pieces of research conducted by Neighbourhood Centres Queensland (NCQ), the peak body for an estimated 155 community-based centres around the state.

The *Queensland Neighbourhood Centres Strategy for Disaster Resilience 2023 - 2026*¹ captures the work of neighbourhood centres in community-led disaster preparation, response and recovery. This strategy clearly provides evidence that NC's play an important role in disaster resilience in Queensland from preparation, to response and long-term recovery.

During the early stages of a disaster, and before other services are "stood up", NC's tap into immediate community resources to respond to Queenslanders, particularly vulnerable populations. Their existing networks in local communities mean they know where and how resources and expertise can be rapidly leveraged in their localities, along with key community leaders, details about road infrastructure, community groups and other community assets. 75% of NCs provided emergency food relief in the 2022/2023 financial year. They are embedded social infrastructure that have years of experience in responding to disasters and local issues.

Recognising this local expertise, Queensland Government Community Recovery is increasingly utilising NC's as key recovery points in response to natural disasters². 11 NC's in flood affected LGA's are currently engaged to deliver "Service Navigator" roles to support Queenslanders affected by 2021/22 flood events. In addition, 3 NC's are currently providing specialised disaster support in response to bushfires in the Western Downs, 5 NC's on the Gold Coast and Scenic Rim are providing disaster support in response to severe thunderstorms and more than 5 NC's in Far North Qld are responding to the effects of Cyclone Jasper. Neighbourhood Centres Queensland's current membership

¹ <https://ncq.org.au/resources/queensland-neighbourhood-centres-strategy-for-drought-resilience/>

status on the State Government's Human and Social Recovery Group demonstrates the increasing recognition of the vital role NC's are playing in disaster recovery across the state. However, there are also many challenges NC's continue to experience as they respond to disaster in local communities across the state, and their community-led perspective can make an increasingly valuable contribution to improving Queensland's disaster management system.

Overall, NCQ welcomes the objectives of this legislative reform. Based on perspectives shared by NC's in the numerous experiences of disasters and strategy developments noted above, this submission by NCQ outlines the following recommendations to improve disaster management arrangements in line with the review of the Emergency Services Reform Amendment Bill 2023.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Recommendation 1: Provide consistent funding for community-based disaster resilience workers in Neighbourhood Centres and other community-based organisations in identified areas of high disaster risk.

The Emergency Services Reform Amendment (ESRA) Bill Explanatory Notes indicate that the ESRA Package will cost up to \$578 million over five years, and \$142 million per annum ongoing. While Neighbourhood Centres Queensland welcomes the funding increase to emergency response, there is a significant underinvestment in disaster prevention, preparedness and resilience programs, particularly those which support community-led initiatives.

As recognised by the Queensland Government in the *Neighbourhood Centres Shared Vision*³, "centres play a critical role in contributing to or leading local disaster preparedness, responses and recovery, and in building community resilience." Whilst the Queensland Government acknowledges the valuable role NCs play in disaster resilience, NCs need to be adequately funded to undertake this work, as well as for NCQ to be funded to coordinate this work at the state level.

Challenges exist with the current inconsistent, short-term disaster resilience funding arrangements which resources wages for staff who directly support community members to plan, respond and recover from disasters. Funding for community-based staff to support disaster-affected communities requires consistent and multi-year funding arrangements in order to maintain momentum, relationships and integrated developments across the disaster management sector.

As Neighbourhood Centres have been identified by the Queensland Government to be activated and partly resourced for disaster-related staff wages, NCQ recommends further consideration to increase and extend the financial resourcing of disaster-related staff based in NCs, and other community-based organisations who pay similar roles. Many NC's across Queensland have consistently and increasingly played the role of first responders to community members in need in response to disasters, and throughout the long-term disaster recovery stages, which in some cases have lasted over 10 years. Since the floods between December 2023 and January 2024, the Queensland Government increased requests of NCs to undertake flood recovery services. While funds have been allocated to resource staff for this work, contracts and payments have been delayed and funds have not been adequate to cover all related costs. As one NC CEO stated, "funding has been minimal, with no infrastructure (no laptop, no auspice funds, no brokerage)".

³ <https://www.housing.qld.gov.au/initiatives/strategic-repositioning-committee>

Disaster-related government funding has not adapted to the re-occurring nature of disasters, evident by their increased frequency and severity in Queensland. NCs have expressed notable concerns about the sporadic nature of current funding models and seek greater staff security through multi-year funding agreements dedicated to disaster resilience. NCs require scope in funding arrangements to ensure their organisational capacity and priorities align with the requirements of funding agreements. Increased funding security will result in increased organisational planning capacity, staff retention, increased staff capacity through training and local knowledge, strengthened relationships with community members and disaster management stakeholders and ultimately, greater disaster resilience at the local level.

NCs and NCQ need to be well funded to be well prepared to support disaster-affected communities, particularly in areas where other services do not have the on-ground capacity and adaptability to support immediate needs of local communities, particularly vulnerable groups.

Recommendation 2: Review planning and investment of buildings utilised for disaster response and recovery operations, including Neighbourhood Centres.

In alignment with the above comments on the ESRA Package, NCQ consider there to be a lack of investment in disaster prevention, preparedness and resilience programs, including building infrastructure in local communities. Many Neighbourhood Centres have identified the need for their buildings to be better equipped to provide the necessary systems and supports during and after disasters. Over 45% of neighbourhood centre buildings are owned by the Queensland government, with a further 33% of neighbourhood centres operating in buildings owned by local government⁴.

In some cases, NCs have proactively sought funding to address their infrastructure needs, such as back-up power supplies through generators and solar panels, yet been unsuccessful in securing financial support. The Queensland Government has subsequently requested these NCs to provide flood recovery services in times of loss of power, yet these neighbourhood centres have been unable to provide essential services to their community as a result of inadequate infrastructure.

NCQ recommends:

- A) an assessment of existing NC buildings, which are most likely to be called upon during and post disasters, in order to identify priority infrastructure resourcing; and
- B) Planning is adequate to ensure any future developments of new NC buildings are fit-for-purpose for disaster response and recovery where required.

Infrastructure considerations informed by NCs experiences include:

- Back-up power supplies such as generators with long run times and solar power to power core building functions to provide services such as refrigerated food and medical supplies, and to support social infrastructure of groups and stakeholders through the provision of functioning meeting places.
- Air-conditioning and affordable power sources to provide 'heat refuges' during heatwaves, which was identified in consultation by the Queensland Government with NCs in November 2023.

⁴ <https://ncq.org.au/resources/2021sectorimpactreport/>

- Satellite internet to provide essential communication, information sharing and immediate processing of funding and insurance claims.
- Water tanks for additional fire protection of these properties and back-up water supply in the case of flood-related water contamination.
- Trailers with bedding and/or essential goods and equipment for areas that experience cut road access.

Recommendation 3: To strengthen working relationships and integration with Local Disaster Management Groups (LDMGs) and sub-groups with community-based organisations to build local-level capacity.

As stated in the *Queensland Neighbourhood Centres Strategy for Disaster Resilience 2023 – 2026*¹, “the place-based nature of NCs provides them with on-the-ground experience, community connection and local knowledge, enabling them to play an important role in building resilience across multiple sectors of the community. As locals themselves, NC’s long-standing connections with local communities provide shared experiences and understandings of disaster events and the impacts these have on their community. This also provides them with foundational knowledge vital to informing place-based preparedness, response and recovery efforts.”

Neighbourhood Centres, along with other community-based organisations who provide direct support to disaster-affected communities, maintain consistent, long-term relationships, skills and local knowledge which has been shown through disasters to be vital for communities to respond and recover from disasters. Hence, these community-based organisations require strengthened relationships and greater integration with local disaster management arrangements through Local Disaster Management Groups (LDMGs) and their relevant sub-groups.

In addition to the key recommendations above, NCQ further supports recommendations made by Community Legal Centres Queensland (CLCQ) and QCOSS with regards to this legislative reform.

Of particular note are CLCQ’s first recommendation that ‘the proposed amendments to the *Civil Liability Regulation 2014* are welcome but should be expanded to close an existing gap in legal protection for ‘Good Samaritan’ community volunteers’. This recommendation addresses concerns raised by NCs in relation to the legal protection of community members, such as spontaneous volunteers.

We echo QCOSS’ call to ensure better disaster management coordination in partnership with the community sector.

Warm regards,

Em James

CEO

Neighbourhood Centres Queensland