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# Submission to the Independent Review of Commonwealth Disaster Funding

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**Consent option:** Publish with name

**Submitted by:** Southcoast Health and Sustainability Alliance

## Q1. What experience have you had with Commonwealth disaster funding support?

SHASA received a grant from the Australian Government under the Protecting Australian Communities Program- Local Stream to the value of \$99,700 for Stage 1 Upgrade of the Uniting Church to operate as a Heatwave and Bushfire Haven. Works included:

- rooftop solar, batteries and back up generator so that they can operate even when the power goes down.
- Power and lighting to both the generator shed and main switch board.
- Installation of two air conditioners in the Pivout Point food bank offices and a hepa filter system.
- 3 catchpower diverters to heat the hot water from the solar system and a new hot water service.
- New ground floor fire escape door and new roller door for the generator shed.
- Total renovation and conversion of downstairs bathroom into a disability accessible bathroom with toilet, basin and shower and other appropriate disability accessible furniture.
- Relocated existing fire hydrant hose reel to a more accessible location

The timing of the application process was not ideal being over the summer holiday period.

SHASA has secured a number of smaller grants (up to \$25,000) through the Federally funded FRRR Strengthening Rural Communities Prepare and Recover Grant funding to install solar and batteries on a number of community owned facilities. Its a fantastic program, very streamlined administrative processes and run 4 times a year.

SHASA is very disappointed that projects from the Eurobodalla are not eligible to apply for up to 90% of project costs under the Growing Regions Program. This is because we have not had a natural disaster since 1 May 2022. The Eurobodalla had a number of major disasters in the preceding 28 months. This would have been an ideal opportunity to secure funding to implement the SHASA Eurobodalla Heatwave and Bushfire Haven Strategy.

## Q2. How could Commonwealth funding support communities to reduce their disaster risk?

Commonwealth funding would be used to implement the SHASA Eurobodalla Heatwave and Bushfire Haven Strategy which includes business cases to upgrade a further 11 community owned facilities and 5 Council community halls to operate as heatwave and bushfire havens, including energy systems to operate when the grid goes down, temperature and air quality control systems. The population of the



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Eurobodalla is geographically spread with a number of smaller communities surrounded by bushland in high bushfire risk environments. A total investment of under \$2m is needed to complete the network of havens to protect the more vulnerable members of our community from the adverse health impacts of heat and wood smoke.

During the 2019/20 Evacuation Centres were set up at the Basket Ball Stadium at Hanging Rock, Batemans Bay, the Basket Ball Stadium in Moruya and the Recreation Hall in Narooma. These buildings urgently require air conditioners (temperature control) and HEPA filters (air quality control). They are not currently fit for purpose for both residents and tourists.

Eurobodalla also has a number of unshaded car parks. Community well-being, health and resilience would be enhanced by funding to install shading and solar car parks with EV chargers.

**Q3. Please describe your understanding of Commonwealth disaster funding processes.**

Responding to natural disasters, including the provision of relief and recovery assistance to disaster affected communities, is primarily the responsibility of state and territory governments ('the states'). However, in recognition of the significant cost of natural disasters, the Australian Government established the joint Australian Government-State cost sharing arrangements to alleviate the financial burden on the states and to facilitate the early provision of assistance to disaster affected communities. Through the Disaster Recovery Funding Arrangements 2018 (DRFA), the Australian Government provides financial assistance directly to the states to assist them with costs associated with certain disaster relief and recovery assistance measures.

Under these arrangements, the states determine the type and level of assistance to make available. Importantly the states are not bound by the assistance available under the DRFA.

Importantly in the Eurobodalla the DRFA assistance was not always used to complement and promote disaster resilience outcomes for affected individuals and communities.

**Q4. Are the funding roles of the Commonwealth, states and territories, and local government, during disaster events clear?**

The funding roles of the Commonwealth and States is clear. 50/50 split. What is unclear is why the States determine how the funds will be used. We do not believe the Commonwealth assistance is providing value for money outcomes for all levels of Government.

What is very unclear is the role of local government. Eurobodalla Shire Council have informed members of the community that they have no role to play in disaster preparation and recovery. This includes the Evacuation Centre buildings in Batemans Bay, Moruya and Narooma which are owned by Council.

The Eurobodalla Shire Council did not conduct a review of its operations during the 2019/20 summer bushfires.

Not only do we need clear funding roles but also implementation roles for the various tiers of government. Otherwise we get buck passing and key preparations are not undertaken, such as upgrading current Evacuation centres and creation of heat and smoke havens.





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#### **Q5. Is there any further information you would like to provide?**

SHASA would like to bring to your attention the A Better Eurobodalla (ABE) Submission to the NSW Public Accounts Committee Inquiry into the Integrity, Efficacy and Value for Money of NSW Government Grant Programs.

Their own first hand experience and that of many community members during the crisis highlighted the pressing need for additional and greatly improved evacuation facilities in Eurobodalla Shire to enhance future resilience. Consequently ABE has been very disappointed by the meagre allocation of funds (\$200,000 to date) put towards this critical need by Eurobodalla Shire Council. No new centres have been funded in towns and villages where people had nowhere to go during the fires. What little funding is available has been confined to existing facilities, which were found to be grossly inadequate in capacity, as well as capability, during the bushfire crisis.

Given these circumstances, ABE was very surprised when \$5.25 million of the Bushfire Local Economic Recovery (BLER) funding was allocated to ESC for a recreational walking trail proposal. This proposal was essentially unknown by the Eurobodalla community prior to an announcement by our local member Andrew Constance on 12th November 2020 of the Batemans Headlands Walking Trail Project.

ABE believes that the arbitrary nature of grant programs places too much discretionary power in the hands of State MPs and Ministers, making Councils, businesses, individuals and communities across NSW dependent on the largesse of MPs and Ministers. This can have the effect of stifling debate and discussion on many issues of importance to local communities, as well as curtailing activities important for community well-being.

ABE considers that it would be more beneficial for both regional communities, and the broader NSW public, to replace the current arbitrary and easily "pork barrelled" grants system with recurrent program-based funding mechanisms which reflected actual needs and priorities. These programs should be administered by independent, informed, and experienced public servants, and incorporate rigorous mechanisms for ensuring transparency and accountability in both allocation and expenditure of the program funds. These programs should be placed at arm's length from Government, similar to the status of ICAC.

ABE believes that in order to achieve integrity, efficacy and value for money in government grant expenditures, it would be advisable for all allocations to include specific obligations for grant recipients to provide timely, accurate and accessible financial and project progress reports to the community affected by the grant. This would help to restore community confidence that grant monies were being spent on appropriate activities, and increase transparency and accountability, bolstering the "integrity, efficacy and value for money" of such allocations.

Grants need to be fairly and transparently assessed, with the relevant processes and decisions being clearly documented and available for scrutiny by the public. This will help to deliver better, more equitable outcomes for all the bushfire-affected communities across NSW.

