

**Submission
No 68**

REVIEW OF THE NSW RECONSTRUCTION AUTHORITY ACT 2022

Organisation: Healthy North Coast

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Mr Clayton Barr, MP
Chair, Joint Select Committee on the NSW Reconstruction Authority
Member of the Legislative Assembly
Member for Cessnock
Temporary Speaker

Dear The Hon. Mr Barr MP

Joint Select Committee on the NSW Reconstruction Authority Act 2022

The catastrophic flooding that occurred in the Northern Rivers in February and March 2022 has provided crucial lessons for agencies, organisations and communities to enhance disaster management systems and build long-term resilience. The 2022 floods were devastating, with rainfall and water levels surpassing historical records, leading to extensive damage and displacement. In Lismore alone, around 12,000 residents were displaced, with more than 3,600 homes deemed uninhabitable and many residents forced to return to unsafe housing conditions due to a lack of alternatives¹.

These events have had a cumulative impact on the health and wellbeing of local residents. It is within this context that Healthy North Coast provides this submission to the Joint Select Committee on the NSW Reconstruction Authority Act 2022. **While we believe the policy objectives of the Act are valid, amendments should be considered to recognise the importance of incorporating primary and mental health and wellbeing as a core component of the recovery process for communities and that meaningful engagement with primary health care services and Primary Health Networks is essential to supporting this. We raise concerns of the broad breadth of the functions of the Act and the ability of a single agency, the NSW Reconstruction Authority, to effectively lead and deliver across such a broad remit in the face of projected increased natural disasters.** Further, we believe there is opportunity for the NSW Reconstruction Authority to build strategic leadership to coordinate, synthesise and communicate the prevention, preparedness and adaptation activities across diverse sectors, agencies and levels of government so that resources are maximised and communities are supported to recover, build resilience and effectively plan for what comes next.

Yours sincerely



Monika Wheeler
Chief Executive Officer

¹ <https://disasterphilanthropy.org/disasters/2022-australian-flooding/>

Submission to the Joint Select Committee on the NSW Reconstruction Authority Act 2022

Healthy North Coast provides feedback to the Joint Senate Select Committee on those functions aligned with Healthy North Coast operations, or that Healthy North Coast has been directly involved in, through the 2022 Northern Rivers flood recovery process.

Policy context

NSW faces increasing challenges from disasters including escalating costs of recovery. According to the Australian Business Roundtable, natural disasters cost the Australian economy \$38 billion per year on average. As the climate changes, annual costs could rise to \$94 billion by 2060.²

Historically, around 97% of disaster funding has been spent on response and recovery with only 3% spent on reducing risk³. The Primary Object of the Act provisions for an approach that considers prevention, preparedness, recovery and reconstruction following a disaster event. This is commonly referred to as the PPRR cycle. In addition to the PPRR cycle, the NSW Reconstruction Authority Act addresses adaptation.

The functional implementation of the PPRR cycle is complex. The four phases of PPRR are not linear nor are they independent of the others. In practice, recovery activities are likely to begin during the response phase and mitigation strategies may be considered during the recovery phase.⁴ Recovery is arguably the most challenging of the phases. With the increased frequency and severity of disasters, the indirect, flow-on, and cumulative effects of these events are becoming clearer⁵. Recovery is a long-term, multilayered social and developmental process that involves more than just replacing what has been destroyed and aiding those affected. Rather, it is a complex process of individuals and communities who have been impacted by a disaster working to resolve the impacts that the event has had on the trajectory of their lives⁶. These impacts are often felt disproportionately by people experiencing vulnerability⁷.

It is for these reasons that Healthy North Coast has concerns about the breadth of the functions of the Act and the ability of a single agency, the NSW Reconstruction Authority, to effectively lead and deliver across such a broad remit in the face of projected increased natural disasters.

A key finding of the 2022 NSW Flood Inquiry centred on the performance of the former NSW government agency, Resilience NSW. Resilience NSW was created in the wake of the black summer bushfires that devastated parts of the state in 2019 and 2020. It was given a wide remit to deal with disaster preparedness, response, recovery and rebuilding. The inquiry conceded that as a result, when the 2022 catastrophic floods hit, there was confusion about who was responsible for what⁸.

On 16 December 2022 Resilience NSW was abolished and relevant functions and most existing staff were transitioned to the NSW Reconstruction Authority⁹. The NSW Reconstruction Authority Annual

² Deloitte Access Economics Australian Business Roundtable for Disaster Resilience and Safer Communities Special report: Update to the economic costs of natural disasters in Australia

³ NSW State Disaster Mitigation Plan

⁴ Queensland Disaster Management Guidelines https://www.qld.gov.au/disaster-dev/_resources/accordions/pprr-dmguideline/foreword

⁵ Australian Disaster Recovery Framework 2022

⁶ Australian Disaster Recovery Framework 2022

⁷ The National Disaster Risk Reduction Framework

⁸ NSW Flood Inquiry 2022

⁹ NSW Reconstruction Authority Annual Report 2022-2023

Report 20220-2023 states that “As a part of its establishment and to ensure the Authority is best placed to deliver on the responsibilities outlined in the NSW Reconstruction Authority Act 2022, a process to design the future organisational structure was conducted. The NSW Reconstruction Authority inherited the structure of its predecessor agency, the former Resilience NSW, when it was established in December 2022. This structure was not fit for purpose, given **the Authority has a significantly broader remit and set of responsibilities than its predecessor**”¹⁰.

The scope and remit of the NSW Reconstruction Authority under the terms of the NSW Reconstruction Authority Act is broader than the former Resilient NSW responsibilities and includes 19 diverse and complex functions. **Successfully translating the functions into operations that are accessible to organisations, agencies, business and industry, communities and individuals is imperative to avoid replicating the failings identified in the 2022 NSW Flood Inquiry.**

Act Objects

The following content addresses Healthy North Coast’s experience of the two components of the Act’s object:

a) *disaster prevention, preparedness and adaptation:*

The disaster prevention, preparedness and adaptation environment on the North Coast is busy. Healthy North Coast is aware of a range of initiatives and activities being delivered by the NSW Reconstruction Authority and other organisations and community groups across the North Coast footprint that fall within the functions listed below.

Functions of Authority

- (a) disaster prevention and preparedness, including—
 - (i) identifying, assessing and managing the risks from disasters, and
 - (ii) leading disaster resilience, adaptation and mitigation activities, and
 - (iii) building community capacity and resilience to disasters, and
 - (iv) developing and implementing methodologies for disaster resilience, adaptation and mitigation activities,
- (b) reconstruction and recovery following disasters and other emergencies, including—
 - (i) assisting the Minister administering the State Emergency and Rescue Management Act 1989 and the State Emergency Recovery Controller to exercise the Minister’s and Controller’s functions in relation to recovery under that Act, and
 - (ii) facilitating, coordinating and directing the recovery, planning and rebuilding of affected communities, including repairing and rebuilding land and infrastructure and other development, and
 - (iii) balancing constraints to enable a focused, timely and expedited recovery of affected communities,
- (c) information provision and exchange and community engagement, including—
 - (i) supporting collaboration and coordination between government agencies, local councils, service providers and communities to improve disaster prevention, preparedness, recovery, reconstruction and adaptation, and

¹⁰ NSW Reconstruction Authority Annual Report 2022-2023

- (ii) increasing the flow of information and enabling community participation to support the development of strategies for disaster prevention, preparedness, recovery, reconstruction and adaptation,
- (d) to coordinate the development and implementation of whole-of-government policies for—
 - (i) managing the risk of disasters in the State, and
 - (ii) ensuring communities can recover, reconstruct and adapt effectively and efficiently following disasters, and
 - (iii) improving the preparedness and resilience of communities for potential disasters,
- (e) to prepare and implement a State disaster mitigation plan for disasters in the State,
- (k) to carry out research, and provide advice, proposals, recommendations and reports to the Minister, about—
 - (i) disaster prevention and preparedness, and
 - (ii) recovery and reconstruction following disasters,
- (m) to implement funding schemes to provide financial support in relation to disaster prevention, recovery and reconstruction,

These include:

- Local Council Community Resilience Networks (CRNs)
- Local Emergency Management Committees
- Local Council climate change adaptation planning
- Local and regional disaster scenario exercises
- Evacuation centre scenario exercises
- NSW Reconstruction Authority Disaster Adaptation Plans (DAPs)
- Commonwealth and NSW government agency adaptation plans
- Local community-led resilience groups and Hubs
- Grant rounds including the Disaster Ready Fund, Community Resilience Grant Program (NRCF & NSW Government)
- Research across mental health, infrastructure, housing and social determinants of health
- NSW State Disaster Mitigation Plan
- Community-based workshops and labs such as Living Lab.

Healthy North Coast has delivered the following health prevention and planning activities:

- Disaster prevention and planning workshops for primary care
- In conjunction with NNSW & MNC LHDs established a Disaster Health Response Network to improve health outcomes in the face of disasters
- Multi-agency health disaster response tabletop exercise in collaboration with NSW Health and the Department of Communities and Justice
- Community Wellbeing and Resilience grant funding to support communities
- Capacity building workshops for Community Aged Care and Residential Aged Care Homes (with the support of NSW SES and the Department of Communities and Justice).

Healthy North Coast's experience of disaster prevention, preparedness and adaptation:

- There are many networks and activities at the regional level and within local government areas (LGAs), as well as within towns and villages.
- There is no clear way for Healthy North Coast to stay abreast of the breadth of prevention and preparedness activities occurring across the region or to target where to invest resources to build health prevention and preparedness.

- For organisations that do not have a formal disaster management remit, the understanding of disaster management arrangements including roles and responsibilities of key agencies is limited.
- There is limited integration of individual agency-level disaster management plans which results in unclear roles and responsibilities and the potential for preparedness gaps
- There are knowledge gaps about disaster management in general practice and primary care
- Health records management remains an issue at evacuation centres.
- People experiencing vulnerability continue to fall through the cracks at evacuation centres including:
 - People living with a disability
 - Older people and people experiencing frailty living independently in the community
 - People experiencing domestic and family violence.
- The Disaster Ready Fund was uncoordinated and communication disorganised. In a region that had only recently experienced one of the largest climate disasters in Australian history, we were disappointed with the lack of information provided about the Fund. There was a disconnect between the NSW Reconstruction Authority EOI and the later release of Guidelines from the National Emergency Management Agency. This created confusion for Healthy North Coast and many North Coast organisations.
- **There is a risk that adaptation activities may fall short due to complexity and duplication of adaptation in the NSW Reconstruction Act and plans and planning across other NSW government agencies.** As an example, there are adaptation intersections with the NSW Climate Change Adaptation Strategy and NSW Climate Change Policy Framework, as well as the work of Adapt NSW. It is therefore unclear which NSW government agency has carriage of adaptation, and how organisations and community will be brought along on the journey.
- **It is unclear how adaptation within the Act intersects and builds on Commonwealth and local government adaptation planning and how communities and organisations navigate and make sense of the layers of adaptation planning.**
- **The Reconstruction Authority commenced the delivery of Disaster Adaptation Plans (DAPs) however responsibility and accountability for the DAPs are unclear as both RA and local councils have been identified as preparing these plans. Further, it is unclear how knowledge sharing and improvement will be managed as successive DAPs are rolled out across the state over the next 5 years.**
- Important research is being delivered rapidly and it is not always apparent that current research is being considered by the NSW Reconstruction Authority in policy and program development (A sample of relevant research includes: [UCRH, After the Floods Report](#), 2017, [University of Newcastle, Womens leadership and a community 'saving itself': learning from disasters, health and well-being impacts of the Northern Rivers flood 2022](#), 2024, [NRCF, Research, Respond, Recover: A year on from disaster](#), 2023, [UNSW, The impact of housing vulnerability on climate disaster recovery: The 2022 Northern Rivers Floods](#), 2022).
- **There is an opportunity for the NSW Reconstruction Authority to build strategic leadership to coordinate, synthesise and communicate the prevention, preparedness and adaptation activities across diverse sectors, agencies and levels of government so that resources are maximised.**

- **In an environment of increasing natural disasters, where many communities have experienced multiple natural disasters in the last five years, there is a need for strategic documents that are easy to understand and implement.** The State Disaster Mitigation Plan (SDMP) is a 168-page plan that is complex and intersects with the NSW Climate Change Adaptation Strategy as well as other NSW government plans. While these documents are complementary, there is a risk that they will create uncertainty about the roles and responsibilities of each of the agencies when it comes to adaptation activities.

b) recovery and reconstruction following disasters

The impacts of disasters on individuals and communities can be long-term and complex, involving loss of life and injury, damage to health and wellbeing, housing, financial and material losses, family separation, education and employment prospects, changes in community dynamics, and the environment¹¹. Deloitte Access Economics 2017 found the long-term impacts of disasters on people's mental health and wellbeing far outweigh the costs of replacing personal assets. Many communities are experiencing successive disasters, the compounding impacts of which are not fully understood. **Coordinated, integrated and collectively considered recovery strategies and interventions over the short, medium and long term are required.**

Healthy North Coast has been involved in recovery efforts from the 2022 floods that fall within the NSW Reconstruction Act functions outlined below.

Functions of Authority

- (b) reconstruction and recovery following disasters and other emergencies, including—
- (i) assisting the Minister administering the [*State Emergency and Rescue Management Act 1989*](#) and the State Emergency Recovery Controller to exercise the Minister's and Controller's functions in relation to recovery under that Act, and
 - (ii) facilitating, coordinating and directing the recovery, planning and rebuilding of affected communities, including repairing and rebuilding land and infrastructure and other development, and
 - (iii) balancing constraints to enable a focused, timely and expedited recovery of affected communities,
- (c) information provision and exchange and community engagement, including—
- (i) supporting collaboration and coordination between government agencies, local councils, service providers and communities to improve disaster prevention, preparedness, recovery, reconstruction and adaptation, and
 - (ii) increasing the flow of information and enabling community participation to support the development of strategies for disaster prevention, preparedness, recovery, reconstruction and adaptation,
- (d) to coordinate the development and implementation of whole-of-government policies for—
- (i) managing the risk of disasters in the State, and
 - (ii) ensuring communities can recover, reconstruct and adapt effectively and efficiently following disasters, and
 - (iii) improving the preparedness and resilience of communities for potential disasters,
- (h) to lead the management and coordination of housing and infrastructure renewal and recovery within affected communities,

¹¹ Australian Red Cross Community Recovery Information Series

- (i) to work closely with affected communities to ensure the needs of each community are recognised in the recovery and reconstruction of the community, and to improve the disaster preparedness and resilience of communities,
- (k) to carry out research, and provide advice, proposals, recommendations and reports to the Minister, about—
 - (i) disaster prevention and preparedness, and
 - (ii) recovery and reconstruction following disasters,
- (m) to implement funding schemes to provide financial support in relation to disaster prevention, recovery and reconstruction

Healthy North Coast's involvement in the NSW government and the Reconstruction Authority recovery activities includes:

- Attendance at the Recovery Coordination Centre in early recovery
- Participation in the Regional Health and Wellbeing Subcommittee (HWBSC)
- Attendance at NSW RA recovery workshops and round tables
- Participation in the development and refinement of the HWBSC Recovery Action Plan
- Delivery of the Multi-Agency Care Tool – recovery sector mental health capacity building
- Participation on the Regional Business and Industry Subcommittee (workforce).

Further, Healthy North Coast delivers the following health and wellbeing recovery programs and initiatives:

- Mental Health Flood Recovery Navigators program
- Resilient Kids program
- Community Wellbeing and Resilience grants
- Primary Care Infrastructure grants
- Primary Care Workforce and Wellbeing program
- Safe Haven Hubs supporting mental health and wellbeing in four communities
- Head to Health mental health information, services and supports
- Northern NSW Strong Community Program
- Access to primary care – “We Are Open” campaign.

Healthy North Coast's experience of recovery and reconstruction:

- Regional Health and Wellbeing Subcommittee:
 - The Subcommittee was stood up 10 weeks after the flood event after initial advice from the NSW government that there was not a need for a regional health and wellbeing subcommittee.
 - While the membership was broad and included 55 people from a range of agencies, organisations and peak bodies, it was not necessarily reflective of the needs on the ground and unclear why some organisations were in attendance.
 - While there was a Terms of Reference, there was little adherence to the TOR and the roles and responsibilities of member organisations and stakeholders were loose.
 - The Chair of the subcommittee had little awareness of local issues, context and stakeholders. The lack of knowledge of local systems slowed progress and diminished opportunities to leverage existing sector relationships.
 - The NSW Recovery Plan stipulates that it is important for the subcommittee structure to be agile. The HWBSC, with its 55-person membership, was not agile or responsive.
 - Repeated requests for data by the HWBSC membership were not acted upon. The provision of reliable data on which to base decisions and investments would have improved the quality of decision-making and the effectiveness of interventions

- The large number of organisations on the HWBSC and the generally chaotic structure surfaced competition within local organisations and also with the peak bodies. Criticism among members and organisations was also observed.
- The HWBSC held numerous all-day planning sessions about a range of topics that did not yield any demonstrable change, and feedback was not provided to attendees to show the outputs or results of the significant multi-agency resource it required.
- A draft Social Recovery Action Plan was delivered by the Reconstruction Authority to HWBSC members in December 2023. The draft plan demonstrated a lack of understanding from the Reconstruction Authority of their remit as well as coordination, communication and responsible agencies. Healthy North Coast provided detailed feedback to the Reconstruction Authority on the draft plan. As of May 2024, the final plan is yet to be delivered.
- Membership progressively fell off due to ineffectiveness.
- Mental health:
 - There was a very high demand by agencies for clinical mental health support and there was often a mismatch between what was being said at the agency level versus what was happening on the ground.
 - Healthy North Coast observed that the NSW Reconstruction Authority-funded Recovery Support Service (RSS) workforce was predominantly comprised of people who did not come from a mental health background or were not familiar with working with mental health needs and therefore needed to acquire mental health knowledge rapidly. Healthy North Coast, the NSW Local Health District and Resilience NSW delivered mental health training to over 200 frontline recovery workers to rapidly build the capacity of the workforce.
 - Many frontline staff at emergency and temporary accommodation villages did not have a mental health or community services background or trauma-informed processes for working directly with people experiencing trauma.
 - Security staff on-site at accommodation villages did not have a trauma-informed approach to sometimes complex challenges.
- Late in 2023, by request from the NSW Reconstruction Authority through the NSW/ACT PHN Disaster Network, Healthy North Coast submitted an urgent review of the *NSW Reconstruction Authority Recovery Plan*. (After the review was submitted,) Healthy North Coast was contacted by our local Reconstruction Authority office asking why we made the submission. No Reconstruction Authority staff in Sydney or the region could answer why we had been requested to provide the urgent review. There was no feedback provided to Healthy North Coast about our submission. Resources were allocated to this task that could have been used elsewhere.
- **There are strong examples of social research and evidence about the health and social impacts of disaster on the North Coast, that to date still do not appear to have been incorporated into recovery planning and implementation.**
- A recovery community engagement plan was never effectively delivered. The community has reported some distress around the Reconstruction Authority's doorknocking and denial of housing support which lacked a considered and trauma-informed approach.

Other considerations

Healthy North Coast recognises that the PRR cycle is not linear, and there is concurrent and overlapping activity occurring in each of the phases of the disaster management cycle. On the ground within agencies, organisations and communities this complexity has the potential to create structural barriers to participation. Compounding these challenges is the rapid development and release of plans and strategies across multiple agencies and tiers of government. It is left to communities and organisations to navigate how these plans intersect and interact, and where they fit within them.

The NSW Reconstruction Authority states that “communities are at the heart of the NSW Reconstruction Authority’s activities¹²” and while there are clear attempts to consult more widely with the community in the development of NSWRA plans, many of these documents, including the NSW Recovery Plan 2023 are written in language that assumes a level of expertise and ability to participate.

Further, there has been significant structural change in the state and Commonwealth disaster management agency landscape. Much of this change has been reflective of collective learnings from more severe disasters and is designed to provide more effective support to the community. Since 2021 there has been change and rebranding of agencies including:

- Commonwealth - The formation of the National Recovery and Resilience Agency in May 2021 saw a merger of the National Bushfire Recovery Agency with the National Drought and North Queensland Flood Response and Recovery Agency in response to the [Royal Commission into National Natural Disaster Arrangements](#). In September 2022 the face of devastating fires and floods, the Australian Government combined the efforts of the National Recovery and Resilience Agency and Emergency Management Australia, into the National Emergency Management Agency (NEMA) to create a single, enduring, end-to-end agency to better respond to emergencies, help communities recover, and prepare Australia for future disasters¹³.
- NSW - The Office of Emergency Management was replaced by Resilience NSW on 1 May 2020. In July 2022, the Northern Rivers Reconstruction Corporation (NRRRC) was established to lead the reconstruction of the NSW Northern Rivers. In December 2022 NSW Resilience was abolished and the NSW Reconstruction Authority was established. The Northern Rivers Reconstruction Corporation (NRCC) was transitioned to the NSW Reconstruction Authority, the NRRRC Board was dissolved in August 2023.

Structural changes such as the formation and rebranding of agencies at both the Commonwealth and state levels, pose several risks to community perception, trust, and role clarity:

1. Frequent changes and rebranding can lead to confusion and scepticism among the community, as they struggle to keep track of which agencies are responsible for disaster

¹² NSW Reconstruction Authority Annual Report 2022-2023

¹³ <https://nema.gov.au/stories/nema-established>

- prevention, preparedness, response and recovery. This can erode trust, especially if the community perceives these changes as reshuffling rather than genuine improvements.
2. Merging and restructuring agencies may blur the lines of responsibility and accountability, making it difficult for stakeholders and the community to understand which agency handles specific aspects of disaster management. Clear communication is essential to ensure that all parties are aware of the roles and functions of the new or rebranded agencies.
 3. Many of the functions of state and Commonwealth agencies are similar, creating complexity for the community as end users across the whole disaster management cycle.

What is Healthy North Coast?

Healthy North Coast Ltd, trading as North Coast Primary Health Network (NCPHN) works alongside community members, health professionals and social services to build a person-centred health system in which each member of the North Coast community, receives care that is integrated, high quality and easy to access.

Our primary role is to deliver the Primary Health Network program on the North Coast on behalf of the Australian Government's Department of Health and Aged Care.

We aim to work together to transform the healthcare system to reduce health inequalities. Our work begins by gaining an understanding of the health care needs of the North Coast. We use this information to work with health professionals and community members to find gaps and facilitate local solutions.

Healthy North Coast is a commissioner of services that best meet our community's needs. We have well-established and effective clinical and community councils across the region which guide our actions to improve the quality of health care.

We have strong partnerships with the six local Aboriginal Community Controlled Health Services and the Mid North Coast and Northern NSW Local Health Districts.

The Healthy North Coast region covers 35,570 square kilometres from the Queensland border in the north, to Port Macquarie in the south. The population in the region is just over 540,000 with high rates of older people and disadvantage.