



4 Sandringham Avenue, PO Box 3137,
Thornton NSW 2323. 02 4978 4040
www.hunterjo.com.au

Disaster Adaptation Planning Team

NSW Reconstruction Authority

Email: dap@reconstruction.nsw.gov.au

Subject: Hunter JO Submission to the Draft Disaster Adaptation Plan Guidelines

The Hunter Joint Organisation is a statutory local government entity established by the NSW Government, through the *NSW Local Government Act 1993*, to support councils work together for better rural and regional outcomes, and to enhance the way local and state governments work together to plan and deliver important regional infrastructure and investment.

Member Councils of the Hunter JO include:

- Cessnock City Council
- Dungog Shire Council
- Lake Macquarie City Council
- Maitland City Council
- MidCoast Council
- Muswellbrook Shire Council
- City of Newcastle
- Port Stephens Council
- Singleton Council
- Upper Hunter Shire Council

The Hunter JO also works closely with Central Coast Council on a number of disaster resilience initiatives.

The core statutory functions established for the Hunter JO are:

1. Strategic planning and priority setting – to establish strategic regional priorities for the Joint Organisation area and to establish strategies and plans for delivering those priorities.
2. Intergovernmental collaboration - to identify and take up opportunities for inter-governmental cooperation on matters relating to the Joint Organisation area.
3. Shared leadership and advocacy - to provide regional leadership for the Joint Organisation area and to be an advocate for strategic regional priorities.

This submission outlines overall support for the proposed regional DAP approach, governance model and process, but also addresses some key challenges anticipated for local government. The information provided in this submission focuses on those regional scale challenges, priorities and responses on which Hunter JO Member Councils and Central Coast Council are aligned.

It should be noted that regional co-ordination and collaboration by the Hunter JO over the last decade to deliver regional disaster resilience initiatives across the eleven Hunter and Central Coast Councils, has been entirely funded through Federal and NSW Government grants. The current absence of any grant funded coordination resource within the Hunter JO, has prevented the preparation of a more comprehensive submission that would draw out, synthesise and regionally consolidate the individual



4 Sandringham Avenue, PO Box 3137,
Thornton NSW 2323. 02 4978 4040
www.hunterjo.com.au

perspectives of individual Member Councils. As such, this submission draws directly on our experience in delivering regional resilience programs over many years and the existing aligned priorities of the Hunter JO Board.

The comments provided in the submission are drawn from the [Hunter JO Strategic Plan 2032, Hunter JO Advocacy Framework and Priorities](#) and information provided by Hunter JO Member Councils, Central Coast Council and NSW Government Agencies in activities and processes being delivered under various disaster resilience programs that have been coordinated by the Hunter JO.

Key focus areas of our submission include:

- Support for the regional approach, governance model and DAP process.
- Resourcing implications for local government and Joint Organisations to participate in the DAP process.
- The need for robust leadership and improved communication from RA to build confidence and trust.

Should you have any further queries or to discuss any aspects of our submission, please don't hesitate to contact Kim Carland, Advocacy and Government Relations Lead, 0460 034 614 or kimc@hunterjo.com.au.

Yours Sincerely

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "S. P. Wilson". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

Steve Wilson

Director Hunter Joint Organisation (Executive Officer)



Hunter JO Submission to the Draft Disaster Adaptation Plan Guidelines

Summary

Overall, Hunter JO is very supportive of the proposed draft Disaster Adaptation Plan regional approach, governance model and process. However, we have outlined some key concerns for local government that must be addressed to ensure the success of the DAP process.

While Joint Organisations (JOs) are statutory entities established under the Local Government Act, their delivery model is largely underpinned by competitive grant funding applications that have historically resourced staff to participate in programs such as the proposed Disaster Adaptation Plan process. Hunter JO's main concern is that we will be unable to be involved in development and delivery of regional DAPs without direct funding from NSW Reconstruction Authority to support the regional coordination and facilitation that would be required of the JO.

Other challenges are summarised below and outlined in further detail throughout this proposal.

- Resourcing – a significant amount of resourcing will be required for this to be successful across both the council, JO and RA-scale, beyond what councils and JOs currently have capacity for.
- Leadership and coordination – strong leadership, coordination and decision-making powers from RA as the lead agency will be crucial for the success of the DAP process.
- Communication – clearer and more consistent communication from RA about the purpose and benefits of the DAP process is needed.

Regional Approach and Governance

Hunter JO is very supportive of the proposed governance model and a regional approach to DAPs – disasters don't follow LGA boundaries, so it makes sense to take a regional approach to disaster adaptation planning. In the Hunter especially, councils and the JO have a long history of working together on disaster resilience and adaptation as a collaborative region, reaching as far back as the 1955 Maitland floods. Our councils clearly see the benefits of taking a regional approach to disaster adaptation, hence Hunter JO's efforts to secure grant funding to progress resilience projects on behalf of the region. As demonstrated by the JO model, a regionally coordinated approach provides efficiency, consistency, shared outcomes and learnings, structured engagement with stakeholders, strategic alignment and identification of scalable actions. JOs are already well established across regional NSW and councils and JOs have been successfully collaborating in disaster risk reduction for the past 18 months under the DRRF



program, and even longer for some regions. The Hunter JO has been collaborating with agencies including the NSW Office of Emergency Management, Resilience NSW and RA to deliver regionally focused disaster preparedness programs for well over a decade. This experience has repeatedly demonstrated the logic and value of taking a regional approach, as reflected in the DAP approach.

Challenges

- **Resourcing:** A regional DAP approach and governance model will require a substantial amount of resources across both the council, JO and RA at a scale beyond what councils and JOs currently have capacity to provide. Joint Organisations currently have no capacity to even adequately consult with councils or RA on the DAP guidelines and will be unable to be involved in DAP governance, even as a Steering Committee member, without dedicated funding being provided to resource this role.
- **Stakeholders:** The regional DAP approach involves many stakeholders who will have different and conflicting priorities. It will also likely bring together stakeholders who may not have worked together before and will need to overcome pre-existing silos within and between stakeholder groups. Ensuring that stakeholders work together effectively and collaboratively will be essential for the success of the DAP process.
- **Regional alignment:** While it makes sense to use existing regional boundaries for regional DAPs, there are inconsistencies between RA regions, JO regions and combat agency regions which could cause confusion. For example, MidCoast Council is part of Hunter JO but not the RA Hunter region. For larger regions, there is a concern that some hazards may detract from others, for example, in the Hunter JO region coastal hazards may be the focus while hazards affecting inland LGAs may be assessed as lower priority within a regional context, despite the significance of disaster events on these communities.
- **Decision making and accountability:** It is unclear who has decision making powers and how the stakeholder and technical working groups will be kept accountable through the draft DAP governance model.

How might we work together to overcome these challenges?

- **Strong coordination and leadership from RA:** The roles and responsibilities of participating stakeholders must be very clearly defined with robust leadership from RA. It will be crucial for a lead agency (presumably RA) to be allocated for each DAP region to provide legislative authority, decision-making powers and coordination between state and federal stakeholders. Joint Organisations can play a key role in coordinating councils and bringing a regional lens to the DAP process, and councils to bring the local focus and on-the-ground perspective.



4 Sandringham Avenue, PO Box 3137,
Thornton NSW 2323. 02 4978 4040
www.hunterjo.com.au

- **Resourcing:** Funding and/or resourcing must be offered to all stakeholders involved, otherwise there is a risk that stakeholders will not be able to meaningfully contribute. Recognising that stakeholders have varying circumstances and resourcing levels, there must be flexibility allowed in how different stakeholders participate and contribute. Funding/resourcing needs to be provided to allow stakeholder participation and oversight, coordination, support, and development and implementation of the DAP process and must be available for the long-term (4-5 years) to encourage continuity of staff throughout the entire process.

What opportunities might this process present for your organisation?

- **Formalising the role of JOs:** The DAP governance framework and regional approach provides an opportunity to formalise the role of Joint Organisations in regional disaster adaptation. Ideally, this would also fund a permanent or long-term role / position within JOs to focus on development and implementation of regional DAPs, allowing facilitation of ongoing regional resilience collaboration between councils, and providing RA with a reliable and consistent regional coordinator for councils, retaining skills and knowledge within the region.
- **Streamlining regional collaboration:** JOs, councils and RA have been working collaboratively on disaster resilience projects for many years through the BCRRF and DRRF funding programs. Continuation of this model will maintain momentum and retain existing stakeholder relationships and corporate knowledge, streamlining the collaboration process and achieving efficiencies for councils and RA. JOs have a statutory function for intergovernmental collaboration, regional planning and advocacy for the shared priorities of their regions, so it is important that the DAP governance framework resources and leverages this to avoid any duplication of what already exists.

DAP Process

Hunter JO is highly supportive of the proposed DAP five-stage process. The proposed process gives clear direction for approximate stages and timelines but appears to be flexible and adaptable to accommodate existing regional maturity, work, plans and actions.

Challenges

- **Communication and misconceptions:** There appears to be a lot of misconceptions from stakeholders about the DAP process, for example, that a DAP is compulsory, that DAPs will duplicate or supersede existing plans and programs, that work can't commence until Stage 5 is

reached, or that responsibilities are being shifted to councils without support. Better communication from RA will help to build trust and gain stakeholder support and buy-in.

- **Resourcing:** There are clear concerns that existing staff resources at councils and JOs will not be sufficient for what will be required to deliver the DAP process. It is challenging to fill vacancies in regional areas, so any additional funded positions for DAP development need to be long-term (4-5 years) to encourage quality candidates and staff retention. There is also concern that the DAP process will divert resources away from their 'day jobs' which councils will also need to back fill.
- **Grant funding:** RA have advised that funding for DAP implementation may be provided through the State Mitigation Fund, however, there are concerns around the administration of competitive, short-term grant funding which embeds vulnerability instead of building resilience. Traditional grant processes make it difficult for councils to anticipate what funds they may receive for projects, hampering delivery if and when funding is received. This inability to plan with block funding leads to:
 - skills and talent loss in regional areas (impacting knowledge continuity and sustainability of programs), with the result being that local jobs are often lost to consultants located in metropolitan areas
 - boom/bust scenarios where funding is flooded into the market, and suppliers increase their prices leading to reduced efficiency and outcomes from the grant funding available.

To improve consistency and efficiencies for both the funding agency and council recipients and to allow councils to better plan, grant funding should be delivered in longer term block funding aligned to councils' four-year Delivery Programs. Attachment A '*Hunter JO Submission to Independent Review of Commonwealth Disaster Funding*' outlines the grant funding challenges in further detail.

- **Engagement fatigue:** The DAP process will require significant community engagement, and a challenge will be preventing engagement fatigue. The process will need to identify opportunities to streamline engagement and leverage existing processes.
- **Disaster impacts:** If a disaster was to occur during development of a DAP, RA staff resources will necessarily be diverted until recovery is complete.

How might we work together to overcome these challenges?

- **Communication:** Clear, effective and consistent communication and genuine consultation, collaboration and co-design from RA at all stages of the process, backed up by the Regional Delivery teams, is crucial to achieve council and community trust and support. Councils have

suggested that a roadshow for Councillors, Mayors, GMs and Executives would be helpful to clearly explain the purpose and benefits of DAPs early on in the process in late 2024 or early 2025.

- **Leverage:** It will be key to leverage the extensive work that has already been done in development of regional DAPs. The NSW Government led Enabling Regional Adaptation reports are still recent and should inform DAP development, as well as Coastal Management Programs and other council owned plans and reports.
- **Resourcing:** Consistent, prolonged and flexible resourcing must be made available to support councils adequately contribute to the DAP process and also to encourage staff retention.
- **Grant funding:** Commit to a more sustainable and strategic approach to local and regional disaster adaptation funding aligned with councils' four-year statutory planning timeframes. Please see Attachment A '*Hunter JO Submission to Independent Review of Commonwealth Disaster Funding*' for further detail on the Hunter region's grant funding asks.
- **Disaster Impacts:** The diversion of RA staff resources from the DAP process to respond to disaster events would be ameliorated by investing in the establishment of regional coordination roles, employed directly by JO's, whose role would be focused on DAP development and delivery.

What opportunities might this process present for your organisation?

- The DAP process gives JOs the opportunity to contribute towards a strategic long-term place focused program that is supported and led by RA, as opposed to the historic reliance of JOs on short-term grant-funded projects for building disaster preparedness and resilience across councils and their local communities.
- A more sustainable and strategic approach to local and regional recovery and resilience planning and funding, aligned to both DAP priorities and to local government four-year statutory planning timeframes via the NSW Integrated Planning and Reporting Framework.

What additional capabilities, skillsets or resources will you or organisation need to participate in the DAP process, including development of implementation plans?

- **Resources:** Resourcing for at least one full-time DAP / regional collaboration / capacity building dedicated role per JO to focus on development and implementation of regional DAPs, allowing facilitation of ongoing regional resilience collaboration between councils and providing RA with a reliable and consistent regional coordinator for councils, retaining skills and knowledge within the region.
- **Subject matter expertise:** Access to or funding to engage subject matter expertise including community engagement, planning, hazard specialists, etc. Some councils will not have subject matter expertise in many of these fields or budget available to procure them.



4 Sandringham Avenue, PO Box 3137,
Thornton NSW 2323. 02 4978 4040
www.hunterjo.com.au

Overall approach of the Guidelines

Overall, Hunter JO is supportive of the proposed DAP Guidelines, regional approach and governance. However, as outlined in this submission, there are some significant challenges that will need to be resolved for the guidelines to be a success.

Hunter JO's main concern is that we will be unable to be involved in development and delivery of regional DAPs without direct funding from NSW Reconstruction Authority. Another key concern is resourcing – local government is already under resourced and in regional areas recruitment and retention is an ongoing issue. Significant funding will be required to resource DAP development at councils, JOs and RA, however, it will also be crucial to have people with the right skillsets involved.

To date, lack of communication about the draft DAP process has led to potential misunderstanding, misconceptions, concern and distrust. Moving forward, communication will be key at all levels from officers to decision-makers to ensure all stakeholders are fully supportive and engaged in the DAP process. JOs and the RA Regional Delivery team could play a key role to encourage and reassure councils of the benefits of the DAP process.

Hunter JO is looking forward to working collaboratively with the Reconstruction Authority and councils to continue to support regional-scale disaster adaptation for the Hunter region.