

**Submission
No 33**

**REVIEW OF THE OPERATIONS OF THE NSW RECONSTRUCTION
AUTHORITY REGARDING THE NSW EAST COAST SEVERE WEATHER FROM
MAY 2025**

Organisation: Hunter Joint Organisation

Date Received: 7 October 2025



Submission to inform the Review of the operations of the NSW Reconstruction Authority regarding the NSW East Coast severe weather from May 2025.

26 September 2025

Hunter Joint Organisation



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Mr Clayton Barr MP
Member for Cessnock
Chair of the Joint Select Committee on the NSW Reconstruction Authority
nswreconstructionauthority@parliament.nsw.gov.au

3rd October 2025

Dear Mr Barr,

Re: Submission to inform the Review of the operations of the NSW Reconstruction Authority regarding the NSW East Coast severe weather from May 2025.

The ten Member Councils of the Hunter Joint Organisation (JO) welcome the opportunity provided by the Joint Select Committee on the NSW Reconstruction Authority to provide a submission on the Review of the operations of the NSW Reconstruction Authority regarding the NSW East Coast severe weather from May 2025.

The Hunter Joint Organisation is the statutory local government entity established by the NSW Government, through the NSW Local Government Act 1993, to support the ten member Councils of the Hunter Region to 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 by the NSW Government for the Hunter JO include:

1. Strategic planning and priority setting
2. Intergovernmental collaboration
3. Shared leadership and advocacy

Through the [Hunter JO Strategic Plan 2035](#), our councils have identified climate change mitigation, adaptation and disaster resilience as one of the key priorities for the Hunter Region. The Hunter Region, particularly the MidCoast, Dungog, Port Stephens, Maitland and Newcastle

LGAs, was significantly impacted by the NSW East Coast severe weather from May 2025. The ten Mayors of the region are strongly aligned in advocating for sustainable and strategic place-based planning and resourcing of local and regional disaster resilience and recovery activities.

Hunter JO has developed this submission based on council survey responses consistent with the Review's Terms of Reference as well as insights from our extensive disaster resilience capacity building and advocacy initiatives delivered over many years. In line with our strategic objectives and advocacy priorities, the key focus areas and opportunities outlined in our submission relative to the Terms of Reference are summarised below:

Terms of Reference	Focus of regional submission
<i>a) The Reconstruction Authority's (RA) response to recent disasters</i>	Inconsistency in RA's response across LGAs, disaster events, and hazard types, including a detailed case study on the New Lambton landslide.
<i>b) Exercise of RA's planning powers under the Act</i>	Councils have not experienced RA exercising their planning powers to date.
<i>c) RA's communication with affected communities</i>	<p>While there have been some improvements compared to previous events, a lack of communication has resulted in confusion of roles and responsibilities, community frustration and reputational damage to councils. Examples of inconsistent and inaccurate communication of waste disposal options have been included.</p> <p>Missed opportunity for effective community-led recovery – including a case study on the 6-month Community Recovery Officer role offered to the Hunter JO to work with communities across all impacted Councils in the Hunter JO region.</p>
<i>d) Effectiveness of any relevant preparedness and adaptation work by RA</i>	<p>Surveyed council representatives were unaware of any prior Reconstruction Authority preparedness and adaptation work in their region outside of social media communications.</p> <p>Councils and JOs continue to face significant challenges arising from a continued reliance on competitive grant programs to deliver core disaster preparedness and adaptation initiatives.</p>
<i>e) Application of DRFA funding</i>	Council challenges experienced in accessing DRFA funding, including a detailed example from Upper Hunter on the exclusion of water and sewer assets from the DRFA.



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I encourage you to consider our submission to inform the review of the operations of the NSW Reconstruction Authority regarding the NSW East Coast severe weather from May 2025 and would welcome the opportunity to further discuss with the Committee, particularly given the significant disaster impacts experienced in the Hunter JO region.

Should you have any further queries please don't hesitate to contact [REDACTED], Senior Project Coordinator, Hunter JO at [REDACTED] or on [REDACTED].

Yours Sincerely

[REDACTED]

Cr Sue Moore
Mayor Singleton Council
Chair Hunter Joint Organisation



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Hunter JO Submission to inform the Review of the operations of the NSW Reconstruction Authority regarding the NSW East Coast severe weather from May 2025

As the level of government closest to the community, councils play a unique and essential role in helping their communities prepare for, respond to, and recover from the growing impacts of natural hazards and disasters. Much of the adaptation required in local communities cannot be delivered by other levels of government due to their lack of local presence and knowledge, as well as the absence of necessary skills, systems and experience delivering place-based projects ([ALGA, 2025](#)). Councils are irreplaceable partners in disaster resilience and recovery, drawing on their local expertise to strengthen state and federal government efforts.

To be most effective, recovery and resilience efforts must be built on genuine collaboration. This means co-designing programs and approaches with councils and Joint Organisations (JOs), embedding them locally within impacted LGAs, and ensuring that agencies such as the NSW Reconstruction Authority work alongside councils as equal partners. Strong, trusted partnerships enable resources to be better targeted, community needs to be more effectively addressed, and outcomes to be more sustainable over time.

The Hunter Region, particularly the MidCoast, Dungog, Port Stephens, Maitland and Newcastle LGAs, was significantly affected by the NSW East Coast severe weather from May 2025. The scale of the event stretched already limited local resources and created major challenges throughout response and recovery. The ten councils of the Hunter have a long track record of working together to strengthen resilience and support their communities in times of need, and they are united in advocating for sustainable, place-based approaches to disaster recovery and resilience planning.

This submission has been prepared by the Hunter Joint Organisation (Hunter JO) in response to the Review of the operations of the NSW Reconstruction Authority during the NSW East Coast severe weather event from May 2025. It draws on Member Councils own submissions to the Inquiry, survey responses from member councils aligned with the Review's Terms of Reference, and insights from our extensive disaster resilience capacity building and advocacy initiatives delivered over many years.

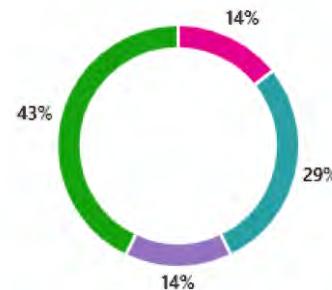
Response to the Terms of Reference

- a) The Authority's response to, and any changes or improvements to the operations of the Authority, the following recent disasters:**
 - i. the severe weather caused by ex-Tropical Cyclone Alfred from 3 March 2025,**
 - ii. the major electricity outages affecting Far West NSW from 17 October 2024,**
 - iii. the catastrophic floods affecting the Central West region in 2022, and**
 - iv. any other disasters that were subject to a Natural Disaster Declaration and in which the Authority exercised its functions.**

Overall, 86% of Hunter Region council respondents to our survey indicated that support received from the Reconstruction Authority in response to the NSW East Coast severe weather event was neutral, ineffective or very ineffective. Only 14% of respondents indicated effective support.

2. Overall, how effective was the NSW Reconstruction Authority's (RA) support for your council during this event?

Very effective	0
Effective	1
Neutral	2
Ineffective	1
Very ineffective	3



While Council feedback was mixed, all praised the efforts of local RA regional delivery staff. One respondent indicated there was strong information sharing and operational support during recovery, including communications meetings, recovery committee meetings, and engagement with GMs and elected representatives. However, staffing constraints limited the support RA could provide to councils for community outreach. While RA Liaison Officers are generally accessible to LEMCs during business-as-usual, they are not always available to directly support their LGAs when large-scale events occur and are often deployed to other, more heavily impacted areas. In this event, councils suggested that the extensive isolation in some areas meant it would have been more effective for NSWRA to establish recovery Assistance Points prior to opening the Recovery Centre and then activate the Centre once all areas were out of isolation. This would have helped capture those who could not initially attend a RAP or who only realised the full impacts once floodwaters had receded.

Councils noted that RA's leadership of the Recovery Centres was effective and provided value. RA also assisted by triaging requests for support, such as deploying Disaster Relief Australia, NSW Environment Protection Authority (EPA), and Rural Fire Service (RFS) resources. However, while this process worked well in some cases, in others the follow-up was inconsistent, with requests left incomplete. As a result, councils often found it more efficient to liaise directly with the relevant agencies.

"Whilst this was my first significant event at council, I was disappointed at the support received, and poor communication as to RA's involvement. Even when engaging RA, generally we were referred to TfNSW or Public Works for guidance, which makes me question the purpose/role RA is to play. Whilst I know this was a significant event and can't fault local RA staff who kept in contact and provided what they could, many of them were overruled at a higher level as to what support RA would provide the council"

Council survey respondent



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Compared with previous events, councils indicated that RA's operations and processes remained largely the same overall. One council survey respondent shared that in prior minor weather events, RA would contact councils to ask how they could provide assistance, but during the May severe weather event it was evident they could not be as proactive or supportive given the scale of the event.

“Councils have a lot of value to add in disaster situations as they understand the area and the community. Our council in particular is very versed in emergency situations and recovery. RA should be leveraging this knowledge and supporting councils through recovery rather than directing their activities. The uncertainty of what RA would and wouldn't do and they renegeing on promises made what was an already uncertain situation very difficult. Our only saving grace was that we had experienced this behaviour in the 2021 floods and therefore did not rely on RA for anything and just did the work ourselves”

Council survey respondent

Inconsistency in the Authority's response across LGAs, disaster events, and hazard types

While the NSW Reconstruction Authority has provided significant support in many disaster contexts, the level and type of support offered has varied considerably between LGAs, disaster events, and hazards. There appears to be inconsistency in the interpretation of responsibilities and processes and the corresponding provision of RA support (see following case study). This inconsistency undermines the principle of equitable recovery and creates uncertainty for both councils and affected communities.

Case Study – New Lambton landslide, City of Newcastle

In May 2025, a major landslip in New Lambton triggered by severe weather directly impacted 16 properties and over 40 residents, with many homes likely to require demolition. Despite the significant scale of the disaster, the NSW Reconstruction Authority (RA) declined to assume responsibility for recovery, creating major challenges for the City of Newcastle.

RA initially placed a coordination officer in the Emergency Operations Centre (EOC), but this role was quickly withdrawn and replaced by a manager without decision-making authority. It later became clear that RA would not lead recovery, yet Council did not receive timely or formal notification of this decision despite repeated requests. Informal recovery responsibilities were left to the LEOCON until RA formally confirmed, almost eight weeks after the disaster, that Council would be responsible for leading recovery.

This protracted and unclear transition created confusion, inequity, and community frustration, undermining trust in both government and council. While the event was included in AGRN 1212, the Regional Recovery Committee refused to consider or discuss the matter, and no Recovery Centre was established in the Newcastle LGA. As a result, all critical recovery functions, including engaging a Recovery Coordinator, forming a Local Recovery Committee, commissioning geotechnical investigations, site stabilisation, and community engagement, were funded and delivered by the City of Newcastle without RA involvement.

RA did not actively participate in community meetings, provide resident support, or proactively engage with displaced families. Although senior RA staff, including the CEO and Minister, held initial meetings with Council, these were perceived as tokenistic, demonstrating minimal interest in meaningful support. This failure to meet the intent of the NSW Recovery Plan reinforced perceptions that RA is unwilling to act in complex urban settings, eroding trust in the Authority's role and compounding reputational damage for council.

In contrast, RA and the NSW Government have played active roles in recovery for other LGAs and hazards, raising concerns about inequitable treatment. For example:

- **Tweed Shire Council (landslide):** RA provided direct support and led recovery.
- **Singleton Council (2022 Broke flooding):** Ministerial intervention and funding were secured within days following advocacy by local MPs.
- **Central West floods 2022:** The NSW Government provided \$40 million in rate relief to affected residents, support not extended to Newcastle.

This case highlights inconsistencies in response and the absence of a clear process, leaving councils uncertain about the level of assistance they can expect. In New Lambton, the lack of RA leadership and support left residents feeling abandoned, generated delays and confusion, and placed substantial additional burdens on Council.

b) **The exercise of any planning powers under the Act in the affected region, including:**

- i. **powers under Parts 6 to 7 of the Act following a Ministerial declaration under Part 5, particularly the power to compulsorily acquire land,**
- ii. **land and housing buybacks and disposals,**
- iii. **the effectiveness of housing resilience programs, and**
- iv. **developments subject to a ministerial authorisation order under section 68 of the Act.**



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It has only been four months since the May 2025 severe weather events, so it is recognised that RA may exercise their planning powers further down the track. Nevertheless, Council representatives from a range of impacted LGAs have not experienced RA exercising their planning powers to date, including in areas where homes are no longer habitable (i.e. New Lambton landslide). There have also been no ministerial authorisation orders under section 68 or housing resilience programs applied within the authority of NSWRA.

c) How the Authority and relevant agencies communicated to and engaged with affected communities in the delivery and design of reconstruction and preparedness efforts, including whether principles of community-led recovery and culturally appropriate emergency management were considered.

Inconsistent communication is an ongoing challenge in disaster response and recovery, and as the closest level of government to the community, councils ultimately bear the brunt of community frustrations. Anecdotally, many councils reported an overall improvement in communication from RA and other agencies between the January 2025 storms and the May 2025 severe weather events and notes that inter-agency communication was relatively strong during the May 2025 flood event. However, there is clearly still work to be done, particularly around delivery and design of reconstruction and preparedness where co-design with communities did not occur. The examples below outline specific challenges faced by Hunter councils regarding waste management as a result of inaccurate agency communications:

- Some Hunter councils were notified by NSW RA that they could claim reimbursement for kerbside collection of storm waste from the January 2025 storms well after the fact, making it difficult to evidence expenses accurately
- Following the January 2025 storms, the NSW Emergency Services Minister announced all waste disposal fees would be waived, which was inconsistent with the protocols and processes in place across different LGAs
- Following the May 2025 severe weather events, the Premier's Department advised residents in all Disaster Declared LGAs to leave flood waste and debris on their kerbside for Council to collect/transport for free - a service that was being offered by some Councils but not an option for others

There was also uncertainty encountered surrounding disaster declarations. Declarations were announced for LGAs, but there was confusion in the community as funding appeared to be allocated based on predicted impacts and locations rather than actual damage. Hardship funding was allocated by suburb, which meant some areas that experienced no impacts received funding, while other areas outside the predicted impact zones, while affected by backflow and runoff, were excluded despite being inundated.



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These examples and the New Lambton landslide example resulted in confusion of roles and responsibilities, community frustration and reputational damage to councils.

Council survey respondents rated RA's overall communication during response and recovery as follows:

- Overall communication with councils during response and recovery was rated good by 28.6% of respondents, 14.3% rated communication as fair, 28.6% as poor and 28.6% rated very poor.
- Communication with the community from RA was rated good by 28.6% of respondents, 28.6% rated fair, 14.3% rated poor and 28.6% rated very poor.
- 28.6% of council respondents rated communication with other agencies during response and recovery as good, 28.6% ranked as fair, 14.3% as very poor. 28.6% of respondents were unsure of communication with other agencies.

Survey respondents were asked if community led recovery principles and culturally appropriate approaches were evident in their area. 86% of respondents were either unsure or did not see any evidence of this and only 14% noted that this was done.



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Example – New Lambton landslide, City of Newcastle

“There are no examples of the NSW RA directly communicating with or engaging affected residents in the New Lambton landslip. RA has provided no meaningful engagement with the community in the design or delivery of reconstruction or preparedness efforts for this disaster.

RA did not involve themselves in community meetings or information sessions or provide written correspondence to displaced residents. All engagement has been undertaken by City of Newcastle (CN) either on behalf of the LEOCON in response or CN in recovery, with limited resources, working exorbitant hours on top of regular workload causing impact to other city services.

Residents repeatedly ask why RA is not leading recovery nor involved earlier in the response phase. The written advice from RA, later shared with residents, confirmed that they would not take responsibility for recovery, effectively removing them from any meaningful engagement. There was no visible leadership from RA.

The lack of RA presence has fueled perceptions of abandonment, eroded confidence in the state’s disaster recovery framework, and placed council in the difficult position of both coordinating recovery and absorbing community frustration meant for state agencies, all compounding resident distress which has been reflected in national news.

The NSW Recovery Plan emphasises the role of state agencies in providing consistent communication and structured recovery leadership. In this case, the absence of RA communication stands out as a complete gap in practice”

City of Newcastle council survey respondent

Missed opportunity for effective community-led recovery

Local Community Recovery Officer roles are an important enabler of community-led recovery and are strongly supported by councils and JOs. However, for these types of roles to be most effective it is crucial that they are codesigned with input and support from councils and/or JOs and are placed locally within impacted Councils given their community focus and geographic scale of operations.



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Case study – Community Recovery Officer opportunity for Hunter JO and Mid North Coast JO regions

Following the May flooding and severe weather event, NSW Reconstruction Authority approached Hunter and Mid North Coast JOs offering the opportunity to each host a Community Recovery Officer (CRO) role for six months - in effect splitting funds available for a 12-month role into two 6-month roles across two JOs. The roles would be funded under Category A of the Disaster Recovery Funding Arrangements (DRFA), and the CROs would work with flood-impacted communities across both JO regions to identify needs, attend local recovery events and meetings, assist communities to access accurate recovery information and resources, and provide leadership and community capacity building, supported by the RA.

While the concept of working with JOs to support recovery at the regional scale is welcomed and provides considerable opportunities for supporting council and community recovery efforts, the design of such roles and functions needs to be co-designed with JOs and Member Councils in order to effectively meet local needs, not presented with predetermined outcomes and predetermined funding requirements and guidelines. In this case, supported by council General Managers, Hunter JO and Mid North Coast JO both declined the offer to host the role for the following reasons:

- Practical limitations of the role – there was significant concern that a six-month role would not be effective in engaging local communities across both JO areas given the extensive travel and level of engagement that would be required. For example, MidCoast Council identified the need for two CRO's across two years in their LGA alone.
- Scope of CRO role – CRO's are best placed within impacted councils given their existing strong relationships with community and local networks, relationships that do not exist at the regional JO scale. Councils are also better placed than JOs to provide the emergency recovery and community engagement supervision expertise and support required.
- JO structural and financial model – the funding arrangements proposed for the role were financially unsustainable for Hunter and MidCoast JOs (i.e. we did not have the funding necessary to resource the additional administrative and supervisory support that was required by the predetermined funding requirements).

d) The effectiveness of any relevant preparedness and adaptation work by the Authority for the affected region before the disaster.

Surveyed council representatives were unaware of any prior Reconstruction Authority preparedness and adaptation work in their region outside of social media communications.

Recommendation 5 of the Colvin Review states that *The Commonwealth, via NEMA, should work with state and territory governments to adopt a leadership and oversight role in ensuring adequate capability, capacity and/or investment exists across Australia for local government and communities to adequately respond to natural disaster events, and to engage with appropriate support and funding structures.*

This is because the involvement of local councils in preparedness and adaptation work is critical. Councils play a unique and systemic role in addressing climate risks and achieving adaptation objectives. The adaptation required in local communities cannot be delivered by any other level of government due to a lack of local presence and knowledge, and the absence of necessary skills, systems and experience in delivering place-based projects (Australian Local Government Association, 2025. Adapting Together: Local Government Leadership in a Changing Climate).

Hunter JO has received funding through NEMA's Disaster Ready Fund towards supporting councils and the NSW Reconstruction Authority on developing regional Disaster Adaptation Plans in the coming years. This provides an important opportunity to plan for, prioritise and drive adaptation work across the Hunter Region. Many Hunter and Central Coast councils have also received funding through NEMA and the Reconstruction Authority for preparedness and adaptation activities

However, despite having had success in accessing these funding opportunities, councils and JOs continue to face significant challenges arising from a continued reliance on competitive grant programs to deliver core disaster preparedness and adaptation initiatives. Investment that enhances disaster resilience, delivers betterment of vulnerable infrastructure and sustains community engagement in preparedness planning is becoming increasingly critical, yet local councils, especially regional and rural ones, are typically under-resourced to plan and undertake this important work. To do so, they are heavily reliant on competitive grant funding for both immediate disaster recovery efforts and to deliver long-term risk reduction measures. Key challenges with this grant focused approach include:

- NSW Government figures identify that 97% of disaster grant funding goes to response and recovery rather than risk reduction.
- Short-term, competitive grants can in fact impede the long-term resilience of councils and their communities, given the challenges of sustaining community engagement and staff (and accompanying corporate knowledge) needed for their implementation due to the stop-start nature of such programs.

Case Study – MidCoast Council Recovery Officer

MidCoast Council prior to the May 2025 flood event hosted a Community Recovery Officer – a short-term grant funded role. This role provided vital capacity to engage directly with communities to facilitate preparedness and adaptation to natural disasters and to assist with recovery efforts.

Prior to the flood event, the only preparedness and adaptation work that council was aware of was delivered through this grant funded (NSWRA) Community Recovery Officer role. Unfortunately, funding for the role ceased in the months before the May 2025 flood event, meaning that this key staff resource with established connections with local communities was no longer available to assist with recovery efforts following the May flood event.

This example highlights how a dependence on stop–start, short term competitive grants for community focused adaptation and recovery roles can impede the capacity and timeliness of community recovery. This is because the need to recruit new recovery staff after each disaster event and rebuild the corporate and community knowledge and connections required within these roles loses valuable time and consumes other council resources that could otherwise be focused on direct recovery efforts.

- Many grant programs now require councils to co-contribute up to 50% of funds, leaving smaller councils excluded.
- Regional and rural councils often lack the capacity to apply, co-fund, or meet evidence requirements—further exacerbating their vulnerability and existing inequities in their capacity to fund and deliver programs that build local community resilience.

In addition to these challenges, the growing administrative burden, evidence and co-contribution obligations required of councils and JO's from RA for delivering grant funded resilience and adaptation initiatives is significantly detracting from their ability to deliver actual project outcomes and deterring organisations from making future funding applications. This directly undermines the intent of Recommendation 5 of the Colvin Review by limiting the ability of local governments and communities to respond adequately to natural disasters.

Key opportunities for improving sustainable and effective implementation of shared NSW and Local Government recovery and adaptation priorities include:

- NSW Government committing to streamlined, ongoing funding aligned with councils' four-year Integrated Planning and Reporting (IP&R) cycles to reduce administrative burden and enable proactive, long-term adaptation planning.
- Enabling betterment funding to rebuild public infrastructure to higher standards.

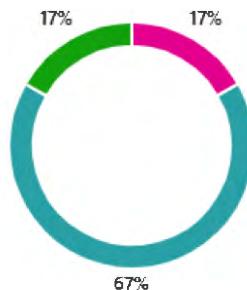
- Providing targeted investment in high-risk communities, particularly where legacy planning has increased exposure to climate-related hazards.
- Reforming road repair and betterment grant processes to give councils greater flexibility to fund locally defined recovery and adaptation priorities.
- Funding permanent, dedicated council based roles focused on community and disaster resilience and recovery.
- Investing in regional capacity, including coordination roles that support technical delivery and policy alignment across councils and the NSW Government
- Formalising place-based adaptation partnerships between NSW Government, JOs and councils to coordinate planning and investment.
- Co-designing regional funding programs to identify and address shared regional priorities.
- Engaging and co-designing programs with councils and JOs early in the process to ensure they reflect local risks, priorities and delivery mechanisms and capacity.

e) The application of any relevant funding under the Joint Disaster Recovery Funding Arrangements, including the implementation of any recommendations arising from the Colvin Review published in October 2024.

Councils face ongoing challenges in applying for and reporting on competitive grant programs. All councils surveyed have requested funding under the Joint Disaster Recovery Funding Arrangements (DRFA) following the May 2025 severe weather event, however some, such as MidCoast Council, have received little or are still yet to receive any funds. Of those who responded to the survey, 17% indicated the effectiveness of the DRFA as effective, 67% as neutral and 17% very ineffective.

9. How effective has the Joint DRFA funding process been (timeliness, adequacy, flexibility)?

Very effective	0
Effective	1
Neutral	4
Ineffective	0
Very ineffective	1



Councils suggested that the DRFA categories are too complicated and lack clarity as to what can be claimed and the purpose of each. For a significant event like that which occurred in May 2025, councils found that the process for applying for emergency funding was slow and convoluted.



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Overall, support for standard Category B funding was reasonable however there was far too little available for Category C.

Councils indicated that there is an expectation that DRFA assessments be submitted before impacts are fully known or floodwaters have receded. This creates additional burden for councils, as they are often required to provide the same data multiple times throughout the initial declaration process. Councils suggested a more effective and simplified approach could include appointing a dedicated resource to work with each LGA to assess council damages, reducing confusion about what can be claimed and ensuring appropriate confirmation of loss is obtained and provided to RA in a timely manner.

Councils also expressed concern that when the responsibility for managing the DRFA claims process transfers to RA in October, processes will again change leading to further delays and other negative impacts.

Case Study – MidCoast Council

MidCoast Council were the most impacted council during the NSW East Coast severe weather event beginning in May 2025, with MidCoast Council taking on and continuing to manage the enormous response and recovery effort arising from this event, spending over \$21 million. However, at the time of writing there remains approximately \$8 million in claimed funds that remain outstanding through the DRFA. Additionally, the processes for documenting eligibility for claims, agreeing on categories and competing claims have been identified as time-consuming and representing key barriers that are diverting staff from response and recovery efforts as well as creating significant financial stress for Council.

These experiences and barriers highlight limited progress in implementing key Colvin Review recommendations relevant to funding design and delivery, reiterating the importance of accelerating implementation of recommendations 36-40.

DRFA exclusions unfairly impacting councils

While the DRFA is a much-needed mechanism for accessing funding in response to disasters, the guidelines exclude or restrict certain assets and activities, limiting critical recovery efforts. Examples include:

- Betterment funding – councils noted difficulties claiming betterment funding through Category B
- Spontaneous volunteer management and coordination – DRFA guidelines do not allow recovery of costs incurred through spontaneous volunteer management and coordination, including through third parties such as Disaster Relief Australia.
- Water infrastructure – see following case study.



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Case study – Water infrastructure in Disaster Recovery Funding, Upper Hunter Shire Council

Upper Hunter Shire Council has called on the NSW Government to urgently review disaster recovery funding rules, following significant damage to local water infrastructure caused by the storm event of 3 August 2025, which was subsequently declared a natural disaster.

The storm left Council with close to \$500,000 in costs to repair essential water infrastructure. Despite the scale of the impact, water and sewer assets are currently ineligible for cost recovery under natural disaster declarations, due to their classification as “commercial activities.”

The situation highlights an inequitable and short-sighted approach that unfairly burdens small rural councils and communities. The reality is that water infrastructure are vital public assets and every bit as essential as roads, bridges, or community facilities – assets which do qualify for recovery funding. Excluding water and sewer services from disaster recovery frameworks places an unreasonable strain on rural councils. It represents targeted cost-shifting from State to Local Government where regional councils are most affected, leaving communities to carry the financial burden for damage caused by events outside of their control.

Water and sewer services are fundamental to public health, safety, and liveability. With natural disasters becoming more frequent and severe, the lack of financial support risks undermining the ability of councils to maintain these essential services.

Revising the existing criteria to ensure water and sewer assets are included in disaster recovery funding needs to be undertaken, as regional communities cannot, and should not, be expected to shoulder these costs alone.

Conclusion

The May 2025 severe weather events across the Hunter Region highlighted once again both the essential role of councils in disaster response and recovery, and the critical need for strong, consistent, and collaborative leadership from the NSW Reconstruction Authority. While there were examples of effective support, such as in the operation of Recovery Centres and facilitation of agency resources, overall, councils reported significant inconsistencies in RA's role, communication, and processes. This created confusion for communities, uncertainty for councils, and inequity across LGAs.

To be effective, disaster recovery and resilience frameworks must recognise councils as equal partners and draw on their local knowledge, capacity, and established community trust. The challenges identified in this submission, including unclear leadership, inconsistent application of



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responsibilities, fragmented communication, and limitations in funding frameworks, must be addressed if future disaster responses are to deliver fair, timely, and sustainable outcomes.

The Hunter JO and its Member Councils are committed to working with the NSW Reconstruction Authority, the NSW Government, and the Commonwealth to strengthen disaster preparedness, recovery, and adaptation. By embedding co-designed, place-based approaches and ensuring equitable access to resources and support, together we can build greater resilience for communities across the Hunter and beyond.