

**Senate Select Committee on Australia's Disaster Resilience
Submission from Queensland Fire and Emergency Services
February 2023**

In Queensland, Queensland Fire and Emergency Services (QFES) currently has administrative responsibility for fire and rescue and emergency management programs and services throughout Queensland. This is delivered through the Fire and Rescue Service (FRS), Rural Fire Service (RFS) and State Emergency Service (SES). However, responding to natural disasters often involves many agencies across government through activation of the State's robust Queensland Disaster Management Arrangements (QDMA).

Under the QDMA, government agencies work with communities and partners by assisting them to understand their local hazards and ensuring they have the right knowledge, information and resources to strengthen their capability and resilience, as well as to minimise the impacts and consequences of disasters and emergencies on persons, property and the environment. A strong emphasis is placed on prevention and preparedness to avert emergency incidents as well as response and recovery. These activities include: community education; fire safety; hazard identification and risk assessment; and working with communities to plan for and mitigate disasters.

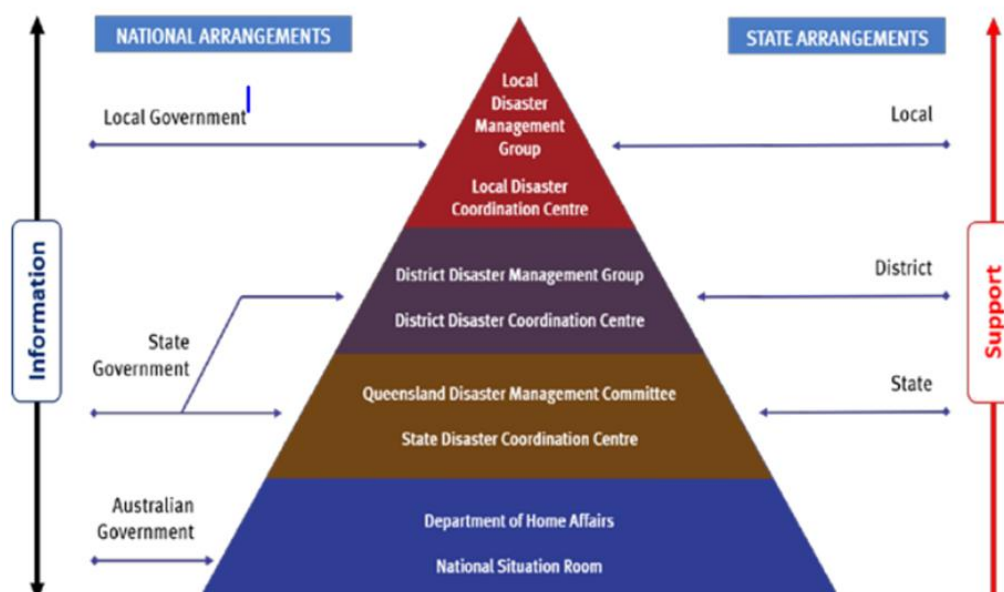
Queensland Disaster Management Arrangements

Queensland's approach to the management of disaster events builds on the comprehensive and integrated approach adopted by the Australian Emergency Management Arrangements. *The Disaster Management Act 2003* (DM Act) and the Disaster Management Regulation 2014 provide the statutory framework for the QDMA, which govern how the Queensland Government collaborates with local governments, government owned corporations, non-government organisations (NGOs), partners and stakeholders to ensure effective disaster management across the state. The Commissioner, QFES is currently the Chief Executive of the DM Act. In accordance with s.16A(c) of the DM Act, the Commissioner, QFES has a responsibility to ensure those with a role in disaster operations are appropriately trained.

The Queensland Government has tasked its Inspector-General of Emergency Management to undertake a review of the QDMA, with the final review report to be provided by 29 April 2023.

Queensland's current approach is outlined in figure 1 below.

Figure 1: Queensland Disaster Management Arrangements



Central to the effective operation of the QDMA is the role of local, district and state groups that comprise of local government and state government agencies and NGOs who collaborate and consult together to ensure interoperability with key stakeholders such as community members or groups, essential service providers, agencies, key tourism and transport operators, and NGOs. QFES is a core member of all state, district and local level disaster management groups, which work across all phases of disaster management (prevention, preparedness, response and recovery). The DM Act also provides that disaster management planning in Queensland should occur across all four phases of DM. QFES developed the [Queensland Prevention, Preparedness, Response and Recovery Disaster Management \(PPRR DM\) Guideline](#) to provide guidance to local, district and state disaster management stakeholders with regard to their functions, obligations and legislative requirements under the DM Act.

Queensland has 77 local government areas (LGAs) and one town authority. As per the DM Act, local governments are primarily responsible for managing disaster events in their local government area (LGA), which is managed through their Local Disaster Management Group (LDMG). Accordingly, LDMGs are responsible for the development and implementation of their Local Disaster Management Plan (LDMP) and are required to address hazard risks, within their area. Along with assistance from QFES, LDMGs have a range of guidance materials to inform the development of plans and treatments for risk. For example, the [Queensland Emergency Risk Management Framework](#) (QERMF), which outlines Queensland's approach to assessing disaster risk. The QERMF is based on analysis of international best practice in disaster risk assessment and harnesses scientific data related to significant hazards to identify exposures, vulnerability, and risk. The QERMF can be applied at a state level and tailored to local circumstances.

Local governments are ideally placed to provide disaster management at the community level, primarily due to their localised knowledge and understanding of social, environmental, and economic issues. If local governments identify gaps in their capacity or capability to manage a disaster event, they can request support from their District Disaster Management Group (DDMG).

The Disaster Management Regulation 2014 identifies 23 disaster districts and their associated LGAs. The DM Act provides for the establishment and functions of DDMGs, including the appointment of a chairperson, deputy chairperson and executive officer. Among other things, DDMGs are to ensure disaster management and disaster operations in the district are consistent with the State Disaster Coordination Group's (SDCG) strategic policy framework for disaster management, to develop effective disaster management for the district, including a District Disaster Management Plan, and to regularly review and assess disaster management. The Disaster Management Regulation 2014 provides the membership of a DDMG. DDMGs provide a whole of government planning and coordination capacity and support local governments in disaster operations and disaster management. They ensure that recovery arrangements are prepared for, planned for, and implemented to support the LDMGs within their district.

The Queensland Disaster Management Committee (QDMC) provides strategic senior leadership in relation to disaster management across all four phases (prevention, preparedness, response and recovery). The QDMC is chaired by the Premier, with membership prescribed by the Disaster Management Regulation 2014 and other persons invited by the Chairperson. The QDMC facilitates communication between the Premier, relevant Ministers and State Government Chief Executives before, during and after disasters. Overarching authority for disaster management lies with the QDMC.

The QDMC is responsible for ensuring effective disaster management is developed and implemented for the State and to ensure arrangements between the State and Commonwealth about matters relating to effective disaster management are established and maintained. The QDMC appoints a State Disaster Coordinator (SDC) to coordinate disaster operations for the state. Disaster response coordination, including coordination and efficient deployment of state government resources is

provided through the State Disaster Coordination Group (SDCG) which comprises State Government Senior Executives, and the State Disaster Coordination Centre (SDCC).

The Queensland Reconstruction Authority (QRA) is the lead agency for recovery and resilience policy in Queensland. Recovery activities in Queensland are guided by the [Queensland Recovery Plan](#), which is a sub-plan to the [Queensland State Disaster Management Plan](#) (QSDMP). The Queensland Recovery Plan outlines recovery requirements for operations, planning and arrangements at the local, district and state level, as well as functional recovery groups that coordinate sector-specific planning and recovery activities and are led by related government departments. The Queensland Recovery Plan also describes the arrangements for transition from response to recovery—highlighting the roles and responsibilities of the [State Recovery Policy and Planning Coordinator](#) and the [State Recovery Coordinator](#).

Queensland has a comprehensive emergency and disaster management framework (outlined above). The DM Act provides the authority for the declaration of disaster situations and is operationalised through QDMA, based on partnerships between the community and groups at the local, district, state, and Commonwealth levels to deliver coordinated, cooperative and integrated outcomes. These arrangements are responsive and scalable however local level capability forms the frontline of disaster management. The QDMA are well-established and well-exercised and provide a structure, planning and coordination framework that enables the organisation of resources and community engagement.

QFES' workforce model

Traditionally, the primary response for the FRS has been to fire in the built and landscape environments. However, this has evolved over time to meet the changing needs of the community to become a multi-hazard response agency, which includes road crash rescue, bushfire, hazardous material, technical rescue including vertical and remote rescues and swift water rescue.

The RFS is the lead service for bushfire in Queensland and primarily composed of a volunteer workforce. The community-based RFS operates in rural, semi-rural and some urban fringe areas and provides firefighting; fire prevention and community education services; permits to light fires; and deployments and assistance during bushfires, other emergencies and disasters.

The SES is a community-based volunteer emergency service, enabled by state and local governments. SES is the primary responder for cyclone, storm and flood events and provides road crash rescue, remote rescue and vertical rescue capabilities in specified areas of Queensland. It also provides support to other agencies such as the Queensland Police Service (QPS) by assisting with search and rescue.

QFES has a dedicated volunteer workforce comprising of Rural Fire Service (RFS) and SES volunteers, peer support officers, research and scientific volunteers, technical rescue volunteers, and chaplains all of whom are key to both community capabilities and organisation capabilities. QFES volunteers have strong relationships to their communities and undertake a range of activities that enhance and strengthen community resilience. These volunteers also play a prominent and critical role in response and recovery to emergencies and disasters within Queensland. QFES has a volunteerism strategy with four strategic priorities to:

1. embrace volunteers and embed volunteerism into QFES' culture, ethos and values
2. empower volunteers to work with their local communities to improve community resilience
3. enhance the effectiveness of our volunteer services to face future challenges
4. excel by recognising the volunteer workforce as professional and encouraging best practice and innovation.

Through these strategic priorities, QFES strives to ensure the sustainability of its volunteer workforce in the face of increasing frequency and severity of natural disasters.

QFES also supports other emergency response volunteer organisations including Surf Life Saving Queensland (SLSQ), Royal Life Saving Society Queensland (RLSSQ), Australian Volunteer Coast Guard Association (AVCGA) and Volunteer Marine Rescue Association Queensland (VMRAQ). QFES is currently leading a Queensland Government program to create a new single marine rescue service, Marine Rescue Queensland (MRQ), which will seek to bring together both AVCGA and VMRAQ into the new entity within the Queensland Police Service (QPS).

QFES plays a support role during the transition to recovery and during the recovery phase. Examples of QFES contributions to recovery operations include: emergency mapping to inform recovery activities undertaken by other agencies, such as human and social recovery and building recovery; and damage assessments used to inform impact areas. These assessments are conducted immediately post a disaster event (and where required, periodically to measure recovery progress) to provide guidance to other agencies regarding unfolding or evolving recovery decision making and arrangements, in response to unique and immediate recovery needs. RFS and SES volunteers also provide support recovery activities through assistance with clean up and washouts during the recovery phase. This is a very important part of assisting the community get back to normality as soon as possible.

Queensland's Disaster and Emergency Management Reform Program

Queensland has faced consecutive years of increased surge demand in response to emergency and disaster events, compounded by overlapping bushfire and severe weather seasons, widespread drought and heatwave conditions. Changes in the frequency and intensity of climate extremes resulting from changing climate systems, along with the intensification of population growth and urban development in hazard-prone areas, are likely to increase exposure and risks to Queensland communities and infrastructure.

An independent review of QFES was conducted in 2021 to examine how best to sustainably resource Queensland's fire and emergency services to meet current and future climate challenges. The Independent Review Report was delivered in November 2021 and recommended reforms to function and structure, culture, efficiency and funding, to deliver sustainability of Queensland's fire and emergency services.

The Independent Review of QFES and previous reviews into the operation of marine rescue services and the SES recommended three key changes to enhance the delivery of disaster and emergency services in Queensland, particularly as climate change increases the impacts from emergencies and natural disasters on communities:

1. The SES and marine rescue services, under the soon to be established Marine Rescue Queensland, will transition across to the QPS. These services will be separate entities within the QPS. Grant arrangements for Surf Life Saving Queensland, the Royal Life Saving Society Queensland and Police Citizens Youth Club Emergency Services Cadets will also transition to the QPS.
2. The Queensland Fire Department (QFD) will be established as a dedicated fire department. The Rural Fire Service will be a separate entity within the QFD.
3. Queensland's disaster management functions will also transition to the QPS, subject to the outcomes of a review of Queensland's disaster management arrangements by the Inspector-General of Emergency Management (IGEM).

In response to these recommendations, the Queensland Government has commenced a reform program. As part of the reform program, QFES will transition to the QFD, which will retain the FRS and RFS, while the SES and disaster management responsibilities will transition to QPS, along with the Marine Rescue Implementation Program that is delivering MRQ.

The Queensland Government will also provide additional funding to both QFES/QFD and QPS to strengthen frontline service delivery and provide additional resources to increase service delivery

capacity and strengthen disaster management arrangements. The Government's intent for these reforms includes the enhancement of frontline response capability when natural disasters and other emergencies impact the state; and to streamline coordination and improve interoperability between all disaster and emergency response functions.

National disaster management arrangements

Queensland is often supported by emergency services personnel, including volunteers, from outside the State as well as Queensland personnel deploying to other jurisdictions to offer support. While jurisdictions have differing support arrangements and capacity based upon historical contexts of their respective jurisdiction's approach to disaster management, QFES considers that improved national strategic focus on, and investment in, volunteers across fire and emergency services is necessary to ensure the sustainability of communities' disaster management capabilities.

The QDMA also allow for the request of assistance from Commonwealth Government agencies as required. Under the QDMA, support is initially sourced at the local government level and when local resources have been exhausted, requests for assistance are escalated to the Disaster District for consideration and support. In the event the Disaster District cannot facilitate the request, it can be escalated onwards to the State level as required. The final level enables the Queensland Government to request assistance from the Commonwealth Government. The Australian Defence Force (ADF) may be activated under Defence Assistance to the Civil Community (DACC) arrangements, upon activation of the Commonwealth Disaster Response Plan (COMDISPLAN), through submission of a formal Request for Australian Government Non-Financial Assistance (RFA) by the SDCC to the National Emergency Management Agency.

When the SDCC is activated, ADF Joint Operations Support Staff and a representative from the National Emergency Management Agency are deployed to the SDCC. These staff work closely with the SDCC Operations and Command capabilities to ensure an appropriate request for assistance is raised. QFES has a Memorandum of Understanding with the ADF which guides QFES through the DACC process. Assistance is also provided by ADF Liaison Officers who are embedded within QFES' State Operations Centre during activations.

In relation to the role of the ADF in responding to domestic natural disasters, the ADF can provide unique ancillary support capabilities and resources such as logistics, communications, transport, and personnel, however domestic disaster assistance and recovery activities are largely perceived as a non-core military activity. The ADF has a finite capacity and capability and should not be relied upon as a first responder to natural disaster events, notwithstanding its access to reserve forces. ADF resources used for disaster responses are typically sourced from any available units and can involve significant and non-recoverable costs. If the ADF is to be called upon more frequently to assist in disaster responses, there may be a requirement to review and revise existing resources, operational arrangements and training procedures.

The Royal Commission into National Natural Disaster Arrangements (RCNDA) in 2020 made a number of recommendations that, if implemented nationally, would provide practical, legislative, and administrative arrangements that would improve Australia's disaster resilience. Some of these areas include:

- the delivery of a Public Safety Mobile Broadband (PSMB) capability
- improved natural disaster risk information to support decision making, including national standards and common information platforms
- leverage Indigenous land and fire management insights to improve public land management and increase natural disaster resilience
- implementation of the all-hazard Australian Warning System
- improved government radio communications interoperability.

QFES acknowledges that these recommendations require national collaboration on complex, long-term projects, including investment by all jurisdictions in common ICT systems and technologies, such as operational communications, all-hazard warnings platforms, and disaster risk information and data sharing systems. However, QFES considers that proper implementation of national RCNDA recommendations through a collaborative approach with states and territories will greatly improve Australia's resilience and response to natural disasters.

While noting the above, with the increasing severity of natural disasters due to climate change, the capacity of local governments to respond is diminishing. The increase in catastrophic events that are having larger impacts on communities is likely to require an increase in intervention by the State and Commonwealth Governments. Consequently, the increasing size and frequency of these events suggest that there will be an ongoing if not increasing need for additional support and specialist assistance such as that held by the Commonwealth.