



Australian Government



Australian
**Small Business and
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Ombudsman

15 February 2023

Select Committee on Australia's Disaster Resilience

Chair, Senator Jacqui Lambie

PO Box 6100

Parliament House

CANBERRA ACT 2600

via email: disasterresilience.sen@aph.gov.au

Dear Chair,

Recommendations to strengthen Australia's disaster resilience

We share your concern that governments can do more to facilitate the hardening of key infrastructure, strengthen local business and community-led disaster planning, encourage leadership, and support social and business resources and networks to minimise the costs of natural disasters.

In 2022, we conducted an inquiry into Small Business Natural Disaster Preparedness and Resilience (the inquiry). We visited 36 communities across Australia to hear directly from small and family businesses affected by natural disasters. In addition, an online survey attracted more than 2,000 respondents.

The inquiry highlighted that taking simple steps to be better prepared, pursuing sensible risk-mitigation actions and bolstering resilience can help small and family businesses to get back on their feet quicker after suffering the effects of a natural disaster.

Acknowledging the Australian Government's commitment to better prepare communities for future disasters by creating the National Emergency Management Agency and the Emergency Response Fund, we would draw the committee's attention to the following recommendations that arose from our inquiry:

- 1.** There are currently different methodologies for determining that an area in Australia is 'disaster prone'. To promote certainty of response, the Australian Government should work with state, territory and local governments to settle on a methodology to determine 'designated disaster-prone areas' that reflect economic and natural systems catchments.
- 2.** The Australian Government should consider establishing an opt-in 'My Business Record' to allow for the collation and easy digital access of all relevant government-held information the business may need in the event of a disaster. This could accompany vital information privately held by the business if desired.
- 3.** Local disaster planning should include a commitment to establishing a 'business hub' either within the region or else close to disaster-affected areas, as a single gathering place for federal, state, territory and local government entities and non-government organisations seeking to assist small and family businesses. This would streamline awareness of and access to assistance.



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4. To support the effectiveness of 'business hubs' and to reduce the trauma experienced by small and family business owners needing to re-tell 'their story' repeatedly to different agencies and support providers, the Australian Government should work with state, territory and local governments and non-government organisations to develop a 'tell us once' triage and information collation system.
5. As part of recovery and relief funding, where a small and family business has received an Australian Government grant, an additional amount should be made available to the business between six and nine months following the initial grant, for the express purpose of seeking a 'business health check' and preparing future plans and preparedness strategies with a trusted accountant, bookkeeper or accredited business adviser.
6. The Australian Government should consider providing small and family businesses with a subsidy when workers are called out for volunteer work for an extended period, or when a business is required to scale back operations due to a large percentage of workers being called out for volunteer activities.
7. The Australian Government should implement a 'good neighbourhood' program, focused on ensuring natural disaster risks are mitigated on land owned by the Australian Government. The Australian Government should further work with state and local governments to encourage implementation of a similar program in their jurisdictions, alongside implementation recommendation 17.1 of the Royal Commission into National Natural Disaster Arrangements.
8. To support recommendation 12.1 of the Royal Commission, Australian Government infrastructure grants should be dependent on 'hardening' critical infrastructure that enhances disaster preparedness and resilience. Where Australian Government funding is requested to support infrastructure development or repair, there must be a commensurate responsibility to ensure critical infrastructure is fit-for-purpose for any intended disaster-management and response function.

The *Small Business Natural Disaster Preparedness and Resilience Inquiry* report is attached for the Committee's reference, and is also available at www.asbfeo.gov.au, where there are also checklists and resources to help small business prepare for a disaster and, if needed, to recover after one.

If you would like to discuss this matter further, please contact Ms Sarah Blyton

Yours sincerely

The Hon. Bruce Billson

Australian Small Business and Family Enterprise Ombudsman