Tasmanian Council of Social Service Inc.

Review of Tasmania's State Recovery Plan

June 2023

TasCOSS

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About TasCOSS

TasCOSS' vision is for one Tasmania, free of poverty and inequality where everyone has the same opportunity. Our mission is two-fold: to act as the peak body for the community services industry in Tasmania; and to challenge and change the systems, attitudes and behaviours that create poverty, inequality and exclusion.

Our membership includes individuals and organisations active in the provision of community services to Tasmanians on low incomes or living in vulnerable circumstances. TasCOSS represents the interests of our members and their service users to government, regulators, the media and the public. Through our advocacy and policy development, we draw attention to the causes of poverty and disadvantage, and promote the adoption of effective solutions to address these issues.

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Introduction

TasCOSS welcomes this opportunity to provide a response to the *Review of Tasmania's State Recovery Plan - Issues Paper* ('the Issues Paper'). Our members have given valuable insights over recent years into the experience of community services organisations in providing disaster support to Tasmanians – before, during and after they occur – marking our industry as vital to recovery efforts in this state.

Although the role of external recovery partners is not included as part of this review, our response to the Issues Paper includes relevant learnings from the community services industry following the COVID-19 pandemic to identify potential improvements to the processes supporting recovery planning and coordination in Tasmania.

TasCOSS' response is focused on two key areas identified by our industry as crucial for Tasmania's disaster recovery planning:

- **Ensuring recovery is supported to be community-led and regenerative; and**

- **Recognising the community services industry as a key partner in Tasmania's disaster recovery.**

We refer interchangeably to 'recovery' and 'resilience' throughout our response. We understand the concept of resilience as referring to a community's ability to recover from disruptions, and that strengthening resilience allows for this recovery to take place in rapid, coordinated and equitable ways that are responsive to the needs of the community. The concepts of 'recovery' and 'resilience' have also been linked in research from the Australian Institute for Disaster Resilience (AIDR), which defines recovery as *'part of emergency management, which includes the broader components of prevention, preparedness and response'*.[1]

Background

Although disasters such as extreme weather events or public health crises affect all of us, the impacts of these events are not felt equally. We know disasters have disproportionate impacts on people living in circumstances of vulnerability, particularly those in poverty, having insecure or poor quality housing or living with disability.[2] This means Tasmanian communities are particularly vulnerable to the potentially devastating impacts of emergencies, as Tasmania currently has the country's highest median age[3], lowest median income[4], highest proportion of people living with disabilities[5] and long-term health conditions[6].

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[1] Australian Institute for Disaster Resilience, *National Principles for Disaster Recovery* <https://knowledge.aidr.org.au/resources/national-principles-for-disaster-recovery/> accessed 22 May 2023.

[2] United Nations Office of the High Commissioner (2020) *Persons with disabilities disproportionately affected by climate change,* <https://www.ohchr.org/en/stories/2020/07/persons-disabilities-disproportionately-affected-climate-change>.

[3] ABS (2021) *Regional Population by Age and Sex,* <https://www.abs.gov.au/statistics/people/population/regional-population-age-and-sex/latest-release>.

[4] ABS (2022) *Personal Income in Australia,* <https://www.abs.gov.au/statistics/labour/earnings-and-working-conditions/personal-income-australia/latest-release>.

[5] ABS (2018) *Disability, Ageing and Carers Australia: summary of findings,* <https://www.abs.gov.au/statistics/health/disability/disability-ageing-and-carers-australia-summary-findings/latest-release>.

[6] ABS (2022) *Long-term Health Conditions,* <https://www.abs.gov.au/statistics/people/population/regional-population-age-and-sex/latest-release>.

Every day, community services organisations play a meaningful role in assisting Tasmanians in vulnerable circumstances to live *A Good Life.*[7] Our industry delivers services such as Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander support, aged care, alcohol and other drug/addiction support, child and youth wellbeing, community development, crisis support (such as emergency food relief and accommodation), disability support, early childhood education and care, family and sexual violence support, financial support, mental health services and migration support as well as housing and homelessness services. These services are also delivered state-wide and for some local communities our industry is the only provider of essential services and support.

Tasmania's community services industry is therefore at the forefront of supporting those individuals, households and communities who are at greatest risk of, and likely to be worst affected by emergency events and disaster recovery. Following the pandemic, natural disasters and the threat posed by climate change, it is timely to clarify and consolidate the roles of industry, communities and all levels of government in effective responses. Tasmania's community services industry already plays a primary role in community recovery, and now seeks to play a proactive role in coordinating disaster response, recovery and resilience building.

Key Issues

Ensuring recovery is supported to be community-led and regenerative

TasCOSS is supportive of the paradigm shift towards a focus on long-term resilience over short-term response, currently taking place within all levels of Australian emergency management. We are particularly supportive of approaches which utilise community-led models, which have been identified as a key priority for both the Commonwealth and Tasmanian Governments in responding effectively to disasters.[8,9] While we support 'Using community-led approaches' as one of the five underpinning principles stated in the Issues Paper, we also note embedding transformative community-led approaches must be underpinned with appropriate resourcing and support for both the community services industry and communities themselves.

TasCOSS encourages all levels of government to approach each crisis as an opportunity to respond and build resilience in a way that empowers communities and community service organisations, strengthens community engagement and enhances both individual and community wellbeing. As identified by the Australian Institute for Disaster Resilience:

> *"Recovery can provide an opportunity to improve these aspects beyond previous conditions, by enhancing social and natural environments, infrastructure and economies – contributing to a more resilient community.'*[10]

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[7] TasCOSS (2023) *A Good Life,* <https://tascoss.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2023/02/A-Good-Life-Domains-Goals-Descriptors-February-2023.pdf>.

[8] Australian Government (2021) *National Climate Resilience and Adaptation Strategy 2021-2025,* <https://www.dcceew.gov.au/sites/default/files/documents/national-climate-resilience-and-adaptation-strategy.pdf>.

[9] Tasmanian Government (2020) *Tasmanian Disaster Resilience Strategy 2020-2025,* <https://www.dpac.tas.gov.au/__data/assets/pdf_file/0018/226314/Tasmanian-Disaster-Resilience-Strategy-2020-2025.pdf>.

[10] Australian Institute for Disaster Resilience, *National Principles for Disaster Recovery,* <https://knowledge.aidr.org.au/resources/national-principles-for-disaster-recovery/> accessed 22 May 2023.

Recovery from significant events such as climate change-related disasters therefore has the potential to be not only restorative but regenerative – using inclusive, well-resourced and community-led initiatives, developed and delivered by community organisations, to increase equity through building back better.

Although communities may possess high levels of motivation and strengths such as tightly connected relationships and relevant knowledge, they may need further resources to fully enable regenerative and truly community-led resilience building. For example, a comprehensive pilot project trialling community-led resilience efforts found the need for:

> *'New opportunities to be supported by state and local government and emergency service organisations ensuring communities are included in formal networks and decision-making, resourcing and informal community initiatives to build resilience, along with developing processes for shared planning, dialogue and collaboration with community organisations, groups and members.'* [11]

Communities facing disadvantage are particularly likely to experience barriers to connecting, mobilising, planning or enacting resilience and recovery activities without this appropriate support. The Tasmanian Government's *People at Increased Risk in an Emergency* guide provides examples of susceptibility factors for increased vulnerability to disasters. These include: limited financial resources; insecure housing; reduced health and wellbeing; limited mobility; reduced safety and security (for example, experiencing family violence); reduced or no access to transport; and limited understanding or communication access needs.[12]

One way to build equity into recovery efforts would be to establish a convention around involving community members with lived experience of one or more of these susceptibility factors in Regional Social Recovery Committees, Affected Area Recovery Committees and/or other appropriate planning and decision-making mechanisms (as per 'careful consideration of community representation' in section 6.35 of the *State Recovery Plan)*.

For the community services to support resilience building, formal partnerships are required, particularly between community groups and the appropriate place-based services, community development providers and organisations (and/or peak bodies from key industry sectors) who support people at increased risk during and after a disaster. While our industry is perfectly placed to play this supporting role, it must not be assumed that community services already possess the capacity, specific training, resourcing or even financial sustainability to fully participate in community-led resilience work.

Meaningful involvement of the community services industry can enable and support communities to lead their own resilience and recovery planning based on their own local contexts, diverse needs, unique strengths, capacities and desires for a more equitable and inclusive society. If community-led

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[11] Howard et al. (2020) *Supporting community led approaches to disaster preparedness: learnings from three pilot locations,* Foundation for Rural & Regional Renewal and Resilience NSW, University of Sydney and University of Newcastle, <FRRR-DRFR-Report-Summary-FINAL-for-WEB.pdf>.

[12] Tasmanian Government (2019) *People at Increased Risk in an Emergency: a guide for government and non-government community service providers,* <https://www.bushfirereadyneighbourhoods.tas.gov.au/sites/default/files/documents/people-at-increased-risk-in-an-emergency-csp-guide_wcag_dec_2019.pdf>.

models of resilience and recovery are to be widely adopted, TasCOSS advocates for appropriate resourcing - both for communities themselves and for the services that support them.

Recognising the community services industry as a key partner in Tasmania's disaster recovery

Tasmania's community services industry is consistently among the first responders to emergency and recovery events, providing food, housing, financial support, digital access and other urgently needed goods and services to affected communities. Community organisations remain engaged on the ground long after emergencies or unexpected events take place, remaining involved with disrupted and traumatised communities for months or even years after a major event. Our organisations are therefore instrumental in performing the functions of social recovery, as laid out in the *State Recovery Plan*.[13]

Across Australia, Councils of Social Service have shown that the community services industry's role in disaster response, recovery and resilience has long been underestimated, undervalued and under-resourced. For example, in a recent report the Victorian Council of Social Service noted:

> *'Community organisations are key to building resilience and to supporting people and communities during a crisis. They have knowledge and skills that are vital during disasters, crucial in their aftermath, and essential to building community resilience. However, the full value of this sector is not being realised.'[14]*

The COVID-19 pandemic provided an unprecedented test to our state's capacity for coordinated response and recovery. Through undertaking the *Community Services COVID-19 Response Evaluation Project[15],* commissioned by Communities Tasmania (and later overseen by the Department of Premier and Cabinet), TasCOSS revealed a comprehensive picture of how pivotal a role is played by the industry in this state, in terms of disaster response and recovery.

Service providers of all sizes, sectors and from all corners of the state told us that they are:

- Heavily relied upon when disaster strikes, both in response and subsequent recovery (involving increased, changing and complex demand in their communities);

- Operating in a context of chronic underfunding, instability and rising service costs, making 'business as usual' increasingly unsustainable;

- Not at the planning table for emergency management activities despite the significant and long-term role played;

- Not adequately funded to respond appropriately when disaster strikes;

- Not adequately funded to maintain their own organisational resilience;

- Often left without essential information during an emergency, regarding maintaining services in the unfolding crisis;

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[13] *State Recovery Plan*, p28.
[14] VCOSS (2022) *A healthy climate supporting resilient communities: 2022 Victorian budget analysis,* <https://vcoss.org.au/budget/2022/05/a-healthy-climate-supporting-resilient-communities/>.
[15] See Final Evaluation Report attached.

- Lacking capacity to effectively network and/or partner with key stakeholders in the interests of resilience (i.e. local community organisations, business, other community services, local government and/or emergency management agencies); and

- Perfectly placed, though not adequately funded, to support community-led resilience building activities.

Furthermore, community services professionals who participated in the one-day scenario planning workshop, hosted by TasCOSS as part of the COVID-19 Project, gave highly positive feedback in relation to engaging in specialised training, with some telling us it was the first time they had been given the opportunity to be in the same room as emergency management agencies, despite playing an active role in community recovery programs and service delivery.

TasCOSS believes our industry must be involved in how the Government intends to plan for, and respond to, emergency or crisis situations. We strongly recommend the reorganisation of the current structure of interagency responses to include industry and/or relevant industry peak bodies as part of the Recovery Working Group (RWG), as well as the inclusion of peaks and/or place-based service providers in the Regional Social Recovery Committees (RSRCs). It is also crucial to ensure that the community services industry remains updated with relevant information through the response and recovery phases of an emergency event.

Conclusion

The community services industry already plays a vital role in responding to disasters and working collaboratively with communities through recovery. However, we need adequate resources to ensure we are properly equipped to continue the work involved in strengthening community resilience and enhancing recovery. This should also include additional resourcing to engage in work with those who may be particularly vulnerable to the impacts of disaster events, as well as funding to engage in the opportunities presented by emergency events to generate and continue positive community change.

TasCOSS welcomes opportunities for partnership, co-design and collaboration with all levels of government, emergency management agencies and, most importantly, communities. Tasmania should aspire to disaster recovery and resilience that builds more equitable and inclusive communities.

TasCOSS endorses the findings and recommendations in the attached *Community Services COVID-19 Response Evaluation Project* report and advocates for the following:

- involvement of community members with lived experience of one or more of the 'susceptibility factors' (identified in the *People at Increased Risk in an Emergency* guide) in Regional Social Recovery Committees, Affected Area Recovery Committees and/or other appropriate planning and decision-making mechanisms;

- community services industry involvement in how government intends to plan for, and respond to, emergency or crisis situations;

- appropriate resourcing, both for communities themselves and for the services that support them;

- the reorganisation of the current structure of interagency responses to include industry and/or relevant industry peak bodies as part of the Recovery Working Group;

- the inclusion of industry peaks and/or place-based service providers in the Regional Social Recovery Committees;

- ensuring that the community services industry remains updated with relevant information through the response and recovery phases of an emergency event.