

Submission Number: NND.001.01251

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What is your submission based on? I am making this submission based on my professional knowledge, qualifications or experience or on behalf of a group or organisation

What is your area of professional expertise?

If you are lodging your submission on behalf of a group or organisation, what is the name of the group or organisation? Creative Recovery Network

Your Submission

In your experience, what areas of the bushfire emergency response worked well?

Creative Recovery Network is a national agency supporting and advocating for the vital role of culture and the arts and artists within disaster management - preparedness, response and recovery. (www.creativerecovery.net.au)

We were established in 2017 and have been working within state and national disaster management sector to ensure that the arts have a "seat at the table" when decision making, strategy and programming are developed. Supporting the implementation and visioning of community resilience building programs

In terms of bushfire emergency response, the process of activation at a local level -from immediate community collaboration through to council/shire activation in recovery - has been responsive and timely. This season once again highlights the need for local lived knowledge and response capacity, in order for communities to be self-reliant and to be able to activate in culturally sensitive and response ways.

In your experience, what areas of the bushfire emergency response didn't work well?

- Communication across changing interface of government coordination

For us, as a new agency within the disaster management sector, the greatest challenge is the volatility of relationships within the disaster management system. Over the past two years we have established connections with the emergency management departments at state and national government, but these became quickly fractured when political shifts occurred with the establishment of new national and state agency structures. It has been difficult to transition these relationships across into the new structures, particularly during times for response activation rather than reforming communication pathways.

It has meant that our process of engaging and activating through state and local networks has been delayed, which in turn has been detrimental to responsive community programming.

- Multiple disaster impact

The augmented impact on our communities brought about by sequential disasters and emergencies – from drought to bushfire to COVID-19 - does not seem to have been fully acknowledged and managed from the point of view of response and recovery programs. These have been managed in separate silos of investigation and planning which has meant a disconnect, and often a doubling up, of response packages (eg mental health support has been layered and has not had a coordinated or broader impact focus than direct services paid from multiple funding streams). The inability to view the multiple disasters as a whole rather than a sum of its parts seems to have caused fractured rather than collective and collaborative problem solving. This inability, coupled with a determined focus – particularly at a national level - on the economic impact of these emergencies, has undermined the possibility of engaging in more holistic conversations around forward planning and future-ready recovery processes.

For example, the impact of COVID 19 on bushfire recovery plans has been deeply restricting at a time when we needed to be fluid and responsive to the ongoing recovery processes and to provide reassurance to fire affected communities they have not been forgotten amidst the broader community health emergency. The opportunity to reframe recovery programs has been stilted and Councils have had little capacity to respond to external suggestions of engagement through other means than face-to-face programs.

In your experience, what needs to change to improve arrangements for preparation, mitigation, response and recovery coordination for national natural disaster arrangements in Australia?

The arts play a deep, real role in supporting communities and individuals to tackle disasters and the potential of reframing life, landscape and connection before and beyond impact. An arts/cultural response can mean many things – care, comfort, reduced feelings of isolation, increased community cohesiveness, empowerment, reimagining, celebration, memorialising, new personal and creative skills, strengthened connections to place, and a sense of shared optimism.

An appreciation of the complex nature of regional and remote communities' circumstance, lifestyle and history is crucial for effective disaster management. Literature on resilience raises the need to foster greater community engagement, capacity development and empowerment, on better communication strategies and the need for enhanced knowledge as to how emergency services are delivered. The arts can and do play a vital role in this process, but need greater support to enable an embedding of cultural representation within the disaster management structure and relevant activation of services pre, during and post disasters.

Through our network we work with artists and communities to create and achieve locally owned visions and goals, putting local voices in the

lead, building on local strengths and collaborating across sectors. The community arts and cultural development sector has been traditionally partnerships and relationship oriented. This focus is intentional and adaptable, and works to achieve systemic change focused on communities' self-determination and resilience building.

While mainstream service providers generally focus on hard assets and notions of personal safety, there are likely to be different understandings of risks and additional assets that are valued at the community level. These may for example include cultural assets; relationships; aspects of country; and livelihood activities. These may be regarded not only as vulnerable to disasters but also key resources to ensuring the ongoing resilience of communities. Our work aims to address the complexities inherent in identifying and building on the existing knowledge and understanding of disaster management in an Australian context and how we might support and grow this.

Communities by their very nature present considerable complexity, are multidimensional and rapidly changing. In such an environment, direct contact with affected populations, understandings of local cultural and political contexts, and development of close working relationships with local partner organisations do not come easily and can take second place in the priorities of traditional emergency agencies, their staff and funding. As the emergency management work is divided between organisations, an overview of the whole process becomes increasingly difficult to achieve, let alone keep in focus. In this context, local knowledge, experience and linguistic and cultural skills are key to ensuring effective participation of local people, as well as access to other non-traditional response and resilience building opportunities.

The contribution of the cultural sector to enable stronger self-representation, resilience building and management of preparedness, response and recovery can be supported by:

- Formal government recognition and funding support for the Creative Recovery Network as a vital non-government service agency of response and recovery within the emergency management system. This would ensure Creative Recovery leaders can be activated in impacted areas to support community-led programs for preparedness response and recovery – key support artists can provide are: community engagement, communications of emergency management information and services, capacity building, community cohesion and reflection. Funding would also ensure advocacy and leadership at national and state levels within the disaster management sector.
- Leadership by the Commonwealth Government, through the Australia Council, to incorporate art and culture into its disaster / bushfire recovery, social cohesion, resilience and regional Australia agendas.
- Ongoing funding support for training programs for the arts sector, specific to disaster management, trauma informed practice and the intricacies of working within disaster impacted communities – building a network of experienced, trained and trauma-sensitive facilitators who can operate with autonomy within a high-pressure environment, working with multiple partners .
- Creative recovery projects dedicated budget – enabling direct, accessible and quick turn-around funding program to support community project ideas and capacity building based on community needs, from response into recovery.
- Support for the development of effective and future thinking disaster mitigation and risk management plans for the cultural sector – an important learning from this last bushfire season is the lack of preparedness within our national, state and local cultural institutions (galleries, libraries and museums) for diverse and multiple disasters impacting their collections, audiences and infrastructure.

Is there anything else you would like to tell the Royal Commission?

Transformative community arts can help to change dominant narratives and help create different stories, whereby communities can be the protagonists of their reality and, from that reflection, hope can be envisioned. Within emergency management there is an implicit assumption that the bulk of the work is undertaken by service agencies. This view fails to recognise that the bulk of work is actually undertaken by local communities, with the support of local government and organisations and community groups. Our practices need to be embedded by values and principles that are fundamental to building relationships and gaining trust.

Community arts practice is a key vehicle for creating safe forums to express, and to cope with, the loss and grief that community experience: often what arts practice does is hold a space for people and make it safe for people .to be vulnerable, enabling the collective (re)generation for a sense of hope and social/civic normality.

The Creative Recovery Network strives to support emergency management and our communities in disaster to be more functional, efficient and resilient. We work from a starting place that recognises that if we are able to truly connect and join each other in the human story of endeavour and survival we will be stronger, adaptable and hopeful – the corner stones of resilience. We believe that the arts are the bridge that enables us to meet and build strength together.

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