

CLUBS AUSTRALIA SUBMISSION AUSTRALIA'S DISASTER RESILIENCE

Clubs Australia welcomes the opportunity to comment on the inquiry being conducted by the Select Committee on Australia's Disaster Resilience.

Clubs Australia represents 6,000 licensed clubs that employ more than 140,000 people. Clubs are not-for-profit, member-owned organisations whose central activity is to provide sporting and recreation infrastructure to their members and the wider community.

During natural disasters, clubs have time and again proven to be a pivotal part of the community's disaster response by acting as places of refuge and providing essential items such as clothing, food and bedding.

Clubs Australia has consulted widely with member clubs, particularly those which have acted as an evacuation centre in either an official or unofficial capacity, as well as clubs that have been damaged because of a natural disaster. Clubs Australia has made a series of recommendations on ways clubs can contribute to improving Australia's disaster resilience, particularly pertaining to the use of clubs as evacuation centres.

SUMMARY OF RECOMMENDATIONS

- Ensure emergency management plans are prepared using the combined input from evacuation centres and community groups involved in disaster resilience, which include registered clubs, local government, and emergency services.
- Improve the emergency radio network and mobile coverage around evacuation centres to ensure evacuees have up-to-date information.
- Provide easy access to backup generators for both official and unofficial evacuation centres.
- Implement a transparent and clear process for clubs to be compensated for their out-of-pocket expenses in assisting the community during disasters.

EMERGENCY MANAGEMENT PLANS

In times of crisis, clubs become vital hubs for their communities providing shelter, food, water and basic facilities to those who need it. Some clubs are designated as evacuation centres by state government authorities; however, many more serve as evacuation centres in an unofficial capacity. Due to the high level of trust the community has in their local club, it is often the first place people turn to in times of emergency. This is particularly true in regional and rural Australia where the local club is often the most equipped facility. Even when clubs are not designated evacuation centres, they will still open their doors to the community.

This has been evident through the Northern Rivers floods of 2022, where 11 clubs acted as evacuation centres and safely housed more than 800 residents. During this period, the NSW club industry alone raised more than \$800,000 to assist with the flood clean-up and recovery efforts. Due to the number of residents that require refuge and safety in such stressful circumstances, it is essential that clubs are supported in providing these services.

During the 2019-20 bushfires, dubbed the 'Black Summer,' and floods of the early 2020s, it was demonstrated that in times of emergency residents commonly present at clubs seeking refuge irrespective of the club's status as an official evacuation centre. The resulting challenges for clubs are exacerbated when there are power outages and lack of phone reception for directions from emergency services to be communicated to evacuees.

Ensure emergency management plans are prepared using the combined input from evacuation centres and community groups involved in disaster resilience, which include registered clubs, local government, and emergency services.

EMERGENCY COMMUNICATIONS DURING DISASTER EVENTS

During the Black Summer Bushfires, Batemans Bay Soldiers Club was on the frontline of the disastrous South Coast fire as an unofficial evacuation centre. The Club lost power at 10 am the day the evacuation order was issued, and the landline phone system was quickly jammed, while the mobile network was limited to text only. Despite this, and although not an official evacuation centre, the Club sheltered an estimated 1,000 people. The Club found that the local council was thoroughly underprepared for the emergency and suggested greater preparation and coordination between all relevant stakeholders in emergency evacuations.

Improve the emergency radio network and mobile coverage around evacuation centres to ensure evacuees have up to date information.

REIMBURSEMENT OF OUT-OF-POCKET EXPENSES

In some circumstances, clubs that act as refuges in a natural disaster must question whether the loss of revenue and prolonged closure will cause the club to become insolvent. Pursuant to the *Corporations Act 2001* (Cth), clubs are prohibited from reopening or accumulating debts if they are insolvent.

Notwithstanding these challenges, assisting the community in this manner is the common approach for clubs that temporarily act as evacuation centres.

Once a club ceases to act as an evacuation centre and evacuees leave the venue, the club is then responsible for cleaning the premises to prepare the club for trading. This includes club staff clearing mattresses, deep cleaning facilities and restocking the premises. For other evacuation centres, government assistance is often provided to assist with the clean-up and help return the premises to its prior state.

Furthermore, even those clubs who held an official evacuation centre status during the floods, such as Woodburn RSL, still faced difficulty accessing assistance whilst operating as an evacuation centre.

In these venues, club staff were required to take responsibility for those that had evacuated to the club premises and in some cases, even conduct the evacuation of residents from the club premises when circumstances changed rapidly.

After a natural disaster or emergency situation, clubs must seek to recover out-of-pocket expenses through ad-hoc requests to the respective state or territory government. This gives little certainty to clubs as to what expenses will be subsidised, and limits the possibility for clubs to budget and prepare for the expenses associated with accommodating evacuees

Ensure a scheme is in place, either through the federal, or state and territory, governments which sets out a transparent and clear process for clubs to be compensated for out-of-pocket expenses in assisting the community.

Case Study: Cherry Street Sports Club Evacuation Centre

Cherry Street Sports Club opened its doors to over 400 residents of Cabbage Tree Island who had been ordered to evacuate due to the 2022 Northern Rivers floods.

Although the Club was only 'stood up' as an official evacuation centre for twelve hours, the Club continued to provide refuge to a large number of residents who evacuated; many of whom presented to the Club as soon as evacuation orders were issued.

Due to the significant number of evacuees, the Club urgently requested bedding and assistance in coordinating themselves as an evacuation centre, as the Club only had four staff members to coordinate the hundreds of evacuees who arrived at the Club.



The Club also aided other locals by providing hot, free meals to evacuees. Club staff continued to provide free meals to evacuees even after the Club premises had also been evacuated. Meals cooked by Club staff were delivered to the evacuation oval.

The Club subsequently became one of the main evacuation centres, hosting over 400 people. Without support from government agencies, Club staff were required to carry out duties that would typically be performed by SES rescue, emergency services or police.

After acting as an evacuation centre for over 48 hours and incurring expenses exceeding \$100,000 with loss of trade, providing free meals, unpaid time of club staff and the post-flood clean up, Cherry Street Sports Club struggled to reclaim the expenses incurred whilst acting as an evacuation centre.

Cherry Street had ceased trading to accommodate the residents from Cabbage Tree Island who had been ordered to evacuate. This included ceasing services of food and beverages and closing the gaming area. Ceasing trade caused the club to suffer a significant loss in revenue and incur out-of-pocket expenses by providing food, beverages, and services to the community free of charge.

PROVISION OF GENERATORS AT EVACUATION CENTRES

In the event of a severe natural disaster, the availability of electricity can quickly become a significant challenge. However, in the modern age and particularly in times of crisis being able to use a charged phone to access timely and critical information is not a luxury but a necessity.

Several clubs provided feedback that power was cut off quickly, and unreliable for many days after a disaster, particularly during the Black Summer Bushfires. While some clubs had onsite generators, other clubs did have financial means to purchase one. Sites that are designated evacuation centres should be provided generators to utilise in the event of an emergency. Additionally, other sites that have acted as evacuation centres in the past or believe they are likely to be considered as an evacuation centre in the future should be able to apply for a generator to house on site.

Provide easy access to backup generators for both official and unofficial evacuation centres.

Contact Information

Clubs Australia appreciates the opportunity to provide a submission. For further information, please contact Simon Sawday, Executive Manager of Policy and Government, at ssawday@clubsaustralia.com.au.