

27 September 2023

Department of Home Affairs  
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**Re: Submission – Alternative Commonwealth Capabilities for Crisis Response Discussion Paper**

Australia Post welcomes the opportunity to contribute to the Government’s Alternative Commonwealth Capabilities for Crisis Response Discussion Paper (the discussion paper).

Australia Post is trusted Australian Government Business Enterprise which has for over 200 years been an integral part of the Australian community, facilitating communication and delivering consumer and business services across Australia. We have a unique presence in regional and remote Australian communities which means we can play a critical role in supporting during disasters and emergencies. In addition to our extensive network of over 4,200 Post Offices and over 12 million delivery points throughout Australia, and a total workforce of over 60,000 people across our network, we also have the capabilities to support coordination across all levels of government.

We primarily do this through our partnerships (including the Australian Red Cross) and our coordination with state and territory governments and agencies (such as the State Emergency Services) and Commonwealth (such as the Australian Defence Force (ADF)) for the provision of our mail and parcel services and other essential needs. For example, we have a role to play with the ADF, SES and other bodies such as the police, to get mail through when access for our team members is not possible/safe. Where we are not able to continue providing vulnerable residents with core services ourselves, we support the government. Through the State Incident Controller/Regional Controller we are connected to the ADF. We use the State Incident Controller/Regional Controller relationships to seek support from the ADF and for the handover of the products, as occurred for mail in Mallacoota in 2020.

We can also help in disaster through our fleet. For example, in 2022, Lismore and the Northern Rivers region were hit by catastrophic flooding, the worst flood on record for the area. More than 6,000 homes were damaged or destroyed, and communities were left without essential services. Seeing the devastation in surrounding areas, the Ballina Post Office sent a mobile Post Office van to affected towns. With banks closed and ATMs offline, residents relied on Australia Post’s Mobile Post Office service to do their banking, pay bills, redirect their mail, and post parcels and letters.

We commend the work done to-date to create a strong crisis response program in Australia and recommend strengthening this program in the ways outlined below.

***Communication of responders and other key stakeholders***

Strong communication channels, including video, websites and social media accounts, managed by responders and associated agencies can help both communities and those supporting response efforts. Where there are multi-jurisdictional incidents (e.g., Black Summer) ensuring there is timely information from each of the relevant jurisdictional bodies is integral to how



Australia Post acknowledges the Traditional Custodians of the land on which we operate, live and gather as employees, and recognise their continuing connection to land, water and community. We pay respect to Elders past, present and emerging.

Australia Post can plan and coordinate our teams to ensure mail is delivered, and to ensure our network is ready to respond to increased demand.

Likewise, during the peak of the COVID-19 pandemic, having clear, accurate and consistent information about travel restrictions and cross-border requirements ensured we were able to adjust our operations with confidence while continuing to service the community. Transparent communication from government (as a trusted and credible source) also played a role in making our team members feel safe, particularly early in the pandemic with high levels of uncertainty and often conflicting information in the public domain.

Providing guidance to, or a central place for, multi-jurisdictional information flow for responders and key stakeholders would greatly assist.

### ***Education***

Education and partnerships are a key part of ensuring that communities, businesses, and responders are best prepared in a crisis. We do this by supporting The Australian Red Cross' Disaster Preparedness campaign, leveraging digital, radio, unaddressed mail, and social media channels to share preparedness information and to encourage Australians to take steps to prepare.

The annual campaign targets regions identified by Australian Red Cross as high risk of a disaster occurring. In 2022, with our support, visits to the Australian Red Cross Prepare landing page tripled and resource downloads doubled compared to the previous year. Furthermore, we created an educational quiz with Australian Red Cross to improve individuals' preparedness, with 86 per cent of people agreeing that they felt more prepared after taking the quiz.

Last year, the Disaster Preparedness campaign coincided with a severe weather forecast for Victoria. VicEmergency (the official Victorian Government source for emergency warnings and information) requested access to the quiz as part of their resources, demonstrating the value of engaging resources to help prepare communities for disaster. We have learnt through our partnership with Australian Red Cross that a key part of emergency management is focusing on preparation and building community knowledge and capability to reduce the impacts on communities in the disaster response and recovery phases.

Over the next three years, Australia Post is expanding its partnership with Australian Red Cross to include The Pillowcase workshops, a disaster preparedness education program for 8- to 10-year-old students living in areas at high risk of disaster, such as bushfire and flooding.

This initiative will teach kids practical skills like what to pack for an emergency and how to prepare their minds for the thoughts and feelings that may arise before, during and after an emergency. Australia Post is supporting Australian Red Cross to deliver the workshops and to co-create educational resources – including the emergency kit pillowcases – for more than 6,000 children a year.

Commonwealth funding and support for education and awareness, is integral to minimising the ongoing impacts of a crisis years after it has occurred, including investing in disaster

preparedness education for children who can be positive change agents for their families and communities.

### ***Scenario planning and evolved learnings***

Scenario planning, including activities across responders and supporters in different industries are an important part of the coordination and planning process. We have learned valuable lessons from recent fires and COVID which has tested our resilience, infrastructure, and people.

In early 2020, the COVID pandemic began hitting Australians, and waves of lockdown orders and restriction on movement came. States were closing their borders and new border-crossing checks and processes were being implemented. Ensuring clear and consistent messaging across these jurisdictions going forward would simplify how we can prepare our logistics and team members to respond in a crisis. This could be achieved by facilitating coordinated release of information (taking account of time differences) and having agreement on key terms and objectives.

Australia Post experienced impacts to our delivery network because of COVID, including interstate road and rail transport, access to cargo space for flights (as commercial flights had reduced) and the movement of other key overland lanes (such as working with Greyhound Australia who ceased operations between critical lanes for letter delivery). As a result of these disruptions, we had to completely reconfigure our delivery routes and opportunities to transport letters and parcels, particularly in remote and rural areas. As COVID was an emerging risk, the advice and the impacts of this advice evolved over time. Scenario planning on the potential impacts of escalating incidents that may restrict commercial land or air travel is an important part of crisis management. Governments can consider what options there are for ensuring essential services and products remain available with reduced commercial carriers, which may include utilising the ADF.

Long term resilience in crisis response is also important and can be assisted with planning and scenario preparation. The above COVID example followed a difficult summer in January and February 2020 where there were multiple floods and bushfires affecting our services. The challenges presented by natural disasters reinforces how important both post offices and posties are to Australians in a crisis.

We encourage the Commonwealth to undertake exercises with relevant agencies, responders, and support services to help plan and prepare for a range of cross-jurisdictional and long-term or cascading events, such as those described above. We participate in scenario planning activities with a range of external stakeholders and find it invaluable to refining and improving our internal coordination as well as understanding communication from relevant government entities.

Thank you for the opportunity to provide this response into Commonwealth Crisis Response. ■

