

**To: Alternative Commonwealth Capabilities for Crisis
Response Discussion Paper**

Submitted online

To Whom It May Concern

The City of Darwin appreciates the opportunity to respond to the Alternative Commonwealth Capabilities for Crisis Response Discussion Paper – August 2023 and provides this submission for consideration.

Local government has a vital role to play in disaster response and resilience. As the level of government closest to the community, local councils have a unique understanding of the specific needs and challenges faced by their residents, and they can respond quickly and effectively to the needs of their communities. To maximize the effectiveness of local government in disaster response, it is essential that councils have the necessary resources and support from higher levels of government, including Australian Defence Force personnel and equipment, particularly where local capacity is limited.

Whilst this submission is made on behalf of City of Darwin, the issues covered here also impact surrounding local governments and communities, the references to Darwin are to the metropolitan area that extends outside City of Darwin local government area boundaries.

This submission considers several issues including:

- The impacts of climate change
- The role of the Australian Defence Force (ADF) in the Darwin community
- Darwin's capacity to respond to significant disaster events.

Climate Change

City of Darwin understands that the premise of this Discussion Paper responds to the position of the *Defence Strategic Review* (Review) that climate change will result in a greater number of disaster events requiring significant response and that if the ADF continues to provide support to respond, it is at risk of being “overwhelmed” and unable to perform its primary objective of defending Australia.



City of Darwin recognises that the potential threats of climate change and as a tropical community is at the forefront of changing climates. City of Darwin has researched this issue extensively and has prepared strategies to respond including the *Climate Emergency Strategy*, a commitment to net zero by 2030, and investment in renewable energies. If current climate change predictions are correct, broader Darwin community will face more significant challenges to our built and natural environments. These may include:

- Extreme rainfall events
- Increased level and severity of bushfires
- Rising sea levels
- A greater proportion of cyclones
- An increase in average daily temperature maximums
- Continued loss and risk to biodiversity
- Risks of contamination to the water supply through saltwater intrusion into freshwater aquifers.

However, despite the Review acknowledging the threats from changing climates to the extent that it has categorised it as a national security issue, the Review commits to a strong presence in Northern Australia, including Darwin. The Review recommends an immediate upgrade and development of “*our northern network of bases, ports and barracks*”¹ and investment in defence facilities is ongoing in the Top End. The ADF accepts the climate risks of a continued defence and civilian presence in Darwin.

City of Darwin recognises that there will be operational priorities for the ADF such as overseas deployment and scheduled exercises. However, it is City of Darwin’s view that if it is in the national defence interest to have an enhanced defence presence in Darwin where there are real climate risks, the ADF will need to provide support to the Darwin community to recover from significant weather events with capacity not otherwise meeting critical operational requirements. It is City of Darwin’s view that local military commanders will be best placed to assess this operational capacity.

The role of the Australian Defence Force in the Darwin community

City of Darwin also recognises that Darwin possesses characteristics that distinguish it from many other regional centres. As of 30 June 2022, 5,191² residents of Darwin were ADF personnel which

¹ Source: Page 76 Defence Strategic Review accessed at [National Defence: Defence Strategic Review 2023 | About | Defence](#)

² Source: Defence Annual Report 2021-22



is 5.8% of the permanent and reserve headcount of the ADF³. In addition to this, a further estimated 2,500 United States Marine Corps (USMC) personnel will rotate through Darwin in 2023⁴. By comparison, Darwin metropolitan area has only 0.55% of the nation's population⁵.

Both the ADF and USMC personnel are well regarded and respected in the Darwin community, as is the resident veteran community. This was evident in the emotional support, including an impromptu vigil, provided to the USMC following the recent loss of three personnel on Melville Island. This support is of vital importance to the ADF and its partners in performing its functions, some of which may cause disruption and inconvenience to Darwin residents, eg. night time operations, operations on public land, live firing exercises etc. Part of that social acceptance is the reasonable expectation that when the community needs the support of the ADF in disaster recovery that it is provided, particularly given limited civilian resources.

Concerns have also been raised about the cost impacts on the ADF of undertaking disaster preparation and recovery activities. If the ADF was not to provide support, it is likely local governments would attempt to supplement the capacity gap with contractor labour which would be recoverable under disaster funding arrangements. City of Darwin submits that if funding is a concern for the ADF, then any out-of-pocket costs should be recoverable for the ADF under the disaster funding arrangements which would have otherwise been paid to local government.

However, in terms of responding to potential concerns around “cost shifting”, City of Darwin believes that the better view is that the capacity and retention challenges of the ADF that are partially underpinning the intention of the ADF to withdraw from disaster assistance would effectively be transferred to the local government sector. This is a challenge for local government as the capacity constraints for the Northern Territory are the basis for seeking ADF support during disaster preparedness and response.

Furthermore, training for humanitarian missions is part of operational activities of the ADF and its international partners, including the USMC deployment in Darwin. City of Darwin is aware of at least one recent trilateral humanitarian exercise named *Exercise Crocodile Response 23* with ADF, USMC and Indonesian military elements. It would cause reputational damage to the Commonwealth Government and the ADF if the Darwin community was to form the view that the ADF are willing to provide overseas humanitarian support but not provide support in Australia that they have been trained for, especially if USMC elements were willing to assist their host community, as they have done in the past.

³ Source: Defence Annual Report 2021-22

⁴ Source: <https://www.minister.defence.gov.au/media-releases/2023-03-22/australia-welcomes-united-states-marines-back-darwin>

⁵ Source: Department of Treasury and Finance; ABS, *Regional Population Growth, Australia*, Cat. No. 3218.0



Darwin's capacity to respond to significant disaster events

Darwin has a relatively small base of operational local government and Northern Territory Government emergency services personnel. Similarly, Darwin also has a small private contractor base who already service multiple local governments, the Northern Territory Government, and public utilities. Furthermore, unlike most other major centres such as Southeast Queensland, metropolitan Sydney and Melbourne etc, readily deployable resources are not located in nearby or connected communities. In fact, the closest community of a comparable size to Darwin is Dili, the capital of Timor-Leste. Similar sized cities to Darwin on the east coast of Queensland are potentially inaccessible during a significant weather event due to loss of road and rail access, and potentially use of Darwin International Airport. It would also be cost prohibitive to transfer personnel and equipment, whereas ADF has personnel and equipment already in place.

City of Darwin acknowledges that the presence of significant local, state and voluntary emergency organisations in more populous regions means that the need for a significant ADF response is sometimes surplus to requirements. However, given Darwin's isolation and small base of personnel and equipment, defence support is invaluable when required. The lack of definition of "most extreme emergencies" on page 9 of the Discussion Paper is also of concern to City of Darwin. Given the limited resources in the Northern Territory, the threshold for requiring assistance would be lower than other metropolitan areas. For example, Tropical Cyclone Marcus in March 2018 was a Category 2 cyclone and caused significant tree loss, extended loss of power and significant food wastage. ADF and USMC assistance at least halved the recovery time for the communities of Palmerston and Darwin. The "one size fits all" approach to be applied nationally is not suitable given Darwin's circumstances. Noting these local factors, City of Darwin also submits that the discretion to respond be given to local military commanders who have a strong relationship with local and Northern Territory Government to authorise the deployment of local resources.

City of Darwin also understand there is potentially consideration being given to the use of a federally funded "rapid deployment" workforce and/or funding for locally based volunteer organisations. City of Darwin is concerned that any federal workforce would likely be based a significant distance from Darwin, would have a number of potential barriers restricting its ability to deploy rapidly and little local knowledge and presence due to the relatively small population base. Size of population also means that volunteer organisations may not be feasible and as noted in the Discussion Paper, may be competing for the same personnel as emergency services and the ADF Reserve.

City of Darwin also notes commentary from the ADF as part of the Royal Commission into National Natural Disaster Arrangements that discussed the ongoing operational impacts of sustained non-military events such as COVID 19 and the 2019-20 bushfire response. Darwin's primary need for disaster response and recovery will likely be from impacts associated with cyclones not bushfires and COVID requiring a short term response. It has also been City of Darwin's experience that the ADF and USMC have appropriate command structures and equipment such as trucks and aircraft to provide support for preparatory and response activities for cyclones. The ADF has done so in recent times, including Tropical Cyclone Marcus recovery in 2018, Tropical Cyclone Trevor evacuations and recovery in 2019 and evacuations during extreme rainfall events in March 2023.



Thank you for the opportunity to comment on the Discussion Paper. City of Darwin would appreciate the opportunity to further participate in consideration of the issues raised in the Discussion Paper, including further submissions and committee appearances as appropriate. [REDACTED]

Yours sincerely

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