

Submission on Alternative Commonwealth Capabilities for Crisis Response

August 2023

Alternative Commonwealth Capabilities for Crisis Response

Department for Home Affairs and National Emergency Management Agency (NEMA)

Email: NationalResilienceConsultation@homeaffairs.gov.au

Thank you for the opportunity to provide feedback in relation to the Commonwealth Government's call for views on the capabilities that need to be in place to support state and territory led crisis response and recovery efforts as an alternative to the Australian Defence Force (ADF).

As the inaugural Commissioner for Children and Young People for South Australia, I promote and advocate for the rights, interests and wellbeing of all children and young people living in South Australia and help to bring about improvements to the systems that negatively impact on them most. I have heard from many children and young people about their concerns in relation to natural disasters. In particular, fires and floods are major issues for many South Australian young people.

Based on what I have heard from children and young people, I would like to respond in particular to the questions:

- How could the Commonwealth build community resilience and capability, so they are better able to respond to and recover from national-level crises?
- What models could the Commonwealth explore to replace or supplement support currently provided by the ADF during domestic crisis?
 - How could we harness the critical role of volunteers and civilian groups under this model?
 - What gaps currently exist in state and territory emergency management capability?

Historically, the ADF has supplied planning support, logistics, communications, transport and additional personnel to undertake general duties such as search, road clearance, debris removal, emergency repairs, and access control. I recommend that the Commonwealth Government should consider how young people can be used to fulfill the general duties aspect of the ADF's role.

In terms of gaps in existing skills, I am keen to see decision makers gaining the capability and willingness to meaningfully involve children and young people in disaster resilience and recovery planning.

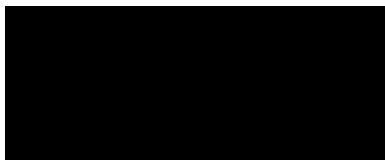
I recommend that the Department for Home Affairs National Emergency Management Agency (NEMA):

1. **Ensure that decision makers meaningfully involve young people in preparing and responding to emergencies.**
2. **Consider options for enabling those under 30 years of age to fulfil emergency response activities as an alternative to the ADF.**

3. Consider expanding the SA Youth in Disaster Emergencies Scheme to all states and territories.

If you have any further queries, please do not hesitate to contact this office.

Yours sincerely,



Helen Connolly

Commissioner for Children and Young People
Adelaide, South Australia

1. Ensure that decision makers meaningfully involve young people in preparing and responding to emergencies

Today's children and young people are being exposed to emergency events and disasters much more frequently than those of previous generations. Unfortunately, this is likely to become more and more frequent as temperatures rise and weather patterns change. Children and young people in South Australia are likely to face regular heatwaves, droughts, floods and bushfires.

It is essential that those responsible for the design and operation of our state's emergency management systems understand that children and young people are key stakeholders and should be informed and consulted as part of their planning and delivery.

We know that young people want to contribute to natural disaster planning and recovery. In conversations about the 2019/2020 bushfires and 2020 COVID-19 pandemic, children and young people have told me that they were concerned about their inability to have influence over, or be included in, decisions being made in relation to their own recovery. Some young people described feeling ignored and 'cut off' from information and decision-making. They said they felt invisible and were not heard or understood by community leaders.

Many described the reliance on family, friends, teachers, and other community members for reassurance and their most trusted sources of information as inadequate. Particularly as no other 'official' information or communication was being tailored for or directed to them. In fact, the consistent message they heard throughout these two crises was 'you're too young, you don't understand.' What they would have preferred was to have information tailored to their needs communicated through channels to which they are already attuned.

As children and young people experience and process disaster differently, the job of adults in emergency management is to ensure preparation, relief and recovery efforts always keep this in mind. In plain terms it means prioritising the needs of children and young people, as well as actively involving them in decisions that are likely to be made about what happens to them in the event of an emergency.

When we involve children and young people in all stages of emergency management we provide them with knowledge and skills that they can then build on. It sends them the message that they are a priority in the event of an emergency and that they have a role to play. It also makes it clear that adults think their wellbeing is important and that they want to put in place conditions that will enable children and young people to feel safe, connected and hopeful as quickly as possible. Likewise, if we don't involve children and young people in emergency management, we can't assume or expect that their specific and diverse needs will be met.

Young people today view the world quite differently to previous generations and they have different expectations of leadership as a result. They want leaders who listen to them and who consider their ideas. They want a future where their contributions are validated, and where the value that their perspectives and lived experience has is considered and reflected in the emergency management plans made for them. They

want their interests, expectations and ideas to be embraced, and for their emerging capacity for leadership to be nurtured.

Young people frequently express concern that although they are often best placed to identify their own needs, they are rarely asked to do so. Similarly, although they have ideas and opinions about what will improve their situation, these ideas and opinions are rarely sought. On the rare occasions when they are sought, they are often overlooked.

Emergency management staff and volunteers can often underestimate the competencies of children and young people, particularly during and following a crisis situation. They tend to rely heavily on adult representations and assumptions, rather than sourcing children and young people's perspectives and experiences direct. At the core of valuing and respecting children and young people is acknowledging and legitimising the view that they are critical stakeholders who have a right to have input into decisions that impact on their lives.

What children and young people have said are foundations for success:

- feeling known
- feeling valued
- having a voice
- having a purpose
- having capacity to make a difference.

What children and young people have said are foundations for their engagement:

- I want to engage on issues that I care about
- I want to express my personal values in the community issues I engage with
- I want the opportunity to use my voice and be heard
- I want to be supported to achieve
- I want to make an impact now and in the future.

What adults can do to support children and young people:

- be welcoming
- be inclusive
- give them a say
- allow them to be useful
- be future focused.

Supporting children and young people to be hopeful and useful:

- provide regular updates specific to children and young people
- ask for any information they may have about family members, neighbours
- reassure children and young people that professional emergency management personnel are being involved
- ask older children who are coping well to reassure younger siblings and other children
- explain to children and young people how important communication is and who they can talk to

- provide opportunities for young people to volunteer – prioritise the rebuilding of sport and recreation activities for all ages: preschool / primary / secondary – quickly establish school/learning alternatives
- build in capacity for children and young people to be involved in rebuilding local school cultures, including providing new student responsibilities that can help children and young people recover more quickly – foster opportunities for children and young people to become ongoing volunteers in emergency management arenas.

Supporting children and young people to have a say:

- explain what to do and who to approach if something bothers them
- make sure they know who their trusted adult is
- ask them how they think the Emergency Relief space could be made better from their point of view and if anything is concerning them
- provide noticeboards and suggestion sheets in community venues and relief centres that are aimed directly at children and young people
- encourage mental health check-ins and provide psychological first aid for children and young people
- establish child and youth led/focused recovery committees
- establish online and offline ways for young people to share their recovery stories
- monitor recovery of children and young people over time
- involve children in discussions about commemorating days or building memorials
- re-affirm established emergency management drills or protocols
- involve young people in decision-making committees.

The findings of a recent Victoria University study echoed what SA kids have told me. Associate Professor MacDonald found that, “When young people are included in disaster management, there are benefits for themselves, their peers, community, and the environment. Yet as they increasingly seek opportunities to engage with issues that will impact them and their futures, they often find they are sidelined”¹. This study recommended that young people should be provided with opportunities to help with rebuilding and clean-up after natural disasters, as well as being meaningful included in the governance committees that make decisions about disaster preparedness and recovery².

These recommendations are in line with the *Sendai Framework for Disaster Risk Reduction 2015-2030*³ which was adopted at the Third United Nations World Conference on Disaster Risk Reduction in 2015. It calls for:

¹ Research shows young people want to contribute to natural disaster planning and recovery, Australian Independent Media, 30 May 2023, <https://theaimn.com/research-shows-young-people-want-to-contribute-to-natural-disaster-planning-and-recovery/>

² Agents of change in bushfire recovery: Young people's acts of citizenship in a youth-focused, animal-welfare and environmental program, International Journal of Disaster Risk Reduction, Volume 87, March 2023, Fiona MacDonald, Chris Lanyon, Leah Munnery, Derm Ryan, Katherine Ellis, Sam Champion <https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S2212420923000316?via%3Dihub>

³ Sendai Framework for Disaster Risk Reduction 2015-2030, United Nations: <https://www.undrr.org/publication/sendai-framework-disaster-risk-reduction-2015-2030>

- an inclusive and people centred approach to disaster risk reduction, to include children and young people as integral stakeholders in decision making
- young people to be involved in the policies and practices of disaster risk reduction and management
- children and young people to be seen as agents of change and should be given the opportunity to contribute to disaster risk reduction.

A range of guides and resources are available to support the involvement of children and young people in emergency planning and recovery. Emerging Minds offers a range of resources to support student advice in disaster recovery⁴. Future Proof⁵ is a Victorian initiative that offers school leavers the chance to gain valuable skills in community work and emergency management to enable young people to play an active role in disaster planning and response. Save the Children's Our Voice⁶ program supports children and young people to engage with local decision makers in emergency management planning.

2. Consider options for enabling those under 30 years of age to fulfil emergency response activities as an alternative to the ADF

Young people who play an active and informed role in emergency preparation and recovery not only support their families, friends and communities; they are also more emotionally resilient in the face of disasters⁷. There are many models under which young people can be actively involved in disaster recovery both to benefit themselves and their local communities, and to take the pressure off emergency service providers.

New Zealand's Student Volunteer Army⁸ was created after the 2011 Christchurch earthquake when young people got together to support community recovery. Since then, its 3000 or so members have helped in the response to other events, such as the 2016 Kaikoura earthquake, the 2017 Port Hills fires and after the Christchurch Mosque shootings. Tasmania has been trialling a similar scheme⁹.

The South Australian Country Fire Service (CFS), like other country fire services across Australia, has a well established cadet program¹⁰ in many of its 420 brigades. Cadets learn basic firefighting, pump operations, hose work, use the radios and learn how to

⁴ For schools: Supporting student voice in disaster recovery, Headspace Australia, April 2021

<https://emergingminds.com.au/resources/for-schools-supporting-student-voice-in-disaster-recovery/>

⁵ Future Proof Youth-led Projects, Indigo Shire Council, <https://www.indigoshire.vic.gov.au/Community/Young-people/Disaster-Recovery/Future-Proof-Youth-led-Projects#:~:text=Future%20Proof%20is%20place%2Dbased,projects%20and%20community%20decision%2Dmaking.>

⁶ Our Voice - Listening to children and young people's voices during emergency planning, Safe the Children Australia, <https://www.savethechildren.org.au/our-work/our-programs/australia/our-voice>

⁷ Youth Are Our Future Assets in Emergency and Disaster Management

Amir Khorram-Manesh, Bull Emerg Trauma, 5 Jan 2017,

<https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC5316128/>

⁸ Student Volunteer Army NZ, <https://sva.org.nz/>

⁹ Youth Volunteer Army, Volunteering Tasmania, <https://volunteeringtas.org.au/future-of-volunteering/youth-volunteer-army/>

¹⁰ Cadet Program, Country Fire Service SA, <https://www.cfs.sa.gov.au/volunteers/volunteers/cadet-program/>

search and rescue, as well as engaging in more fun activities, such as camps, firefighting competitions and outdoor activities. Taking part can count towards their SACE credits or the Duke of Edinburgh Award.

Similar programs are run internationally, such as the Jeune Sapeur-Pompier program¹¹ in France which sees 28,000 11-18 year olds training to be firefighters. Members can gain a National Certificate which includes first aid, fitness and fire fighting components.

While volunteering is a great way for young people to get involved, it is not a sustainable way to mobilise young people across all high-risk communities. We know that one in six Australian children lives in poverty¹². In South Australia more than half of all children and young people (53.6%) live in disadvantaged socioeconomic circumstances¹³ particularly in areas that are susceptible to disasters such as floods, bushfires, extreme heat and droughts, so it is important to recognise the need to cover the costs of involvement, and to provide free transport wherever possible.

Gap Year Programs

I recommend that consideration is given to establishing a voluntary gap year program to enable those under 30 years of age to engage in socially valuable training and activities such as community emergency response. This would provide a fit and enthusiastic alternative workforce to be readily available in the event of emergencies. It would also help to ensure that school and university leavers have a means of gaining a range of skills that will better enable them to enter the workplace.

For many young people, their aspirations are closely linked to their sense of having purpose and meaning in their lives gained by being recognised and valued for achieving or contributing to something bigger than themselves. For many young people this is found through work or volunteering. Participation is crucial to the physical and mental health and wellbeing of young people.

The notion that young people are a vital part of disaster recovery is not a new one. In the 20th century many countries, including Australia, had national service schemes which involved aspects of disaster response. Under the German scheme, which ran until 2011, draftees could opt for Civil Protection rather than military service, which saw them work in medical ambulances and disaster relief under local authorities and crisis management agencies like the Red Cross. Draftees could also undertake Civilian Alternative Service as conscientious objectors, working in kindergartens, hospitals, or in international aid agencies.

¹¹ Devenir Jeune Sapeur-Pompier, Pompiers Fr, <https://www.pompiers.fr/grand-public/devenir-sapeur-pompier/devenir-jeune-sapeur-pompier>

¹² Australian Council of Social Service in partnership with UNSW, 2022. Poverty in Australia 2022 <https://povertyandinequality.acoss.org.au/a-snapshot-of-poverty-in-australia-2022/>

¹³ Child Development Council, 2022. How are they faring? South Australia's 2022 Report Card for children and young people, <https://childrensa.sa.gov.au/wp-content/uploads/2022/12/How-are-they-faring-SAs-2022-Report-Card-FINAL-2022-12-21.pdf>.

In addition, many countries have compulsory fire services. Switzerland and Singapore, for example, where national service endures, require all private individuals to undertake compulsory fire service for specific circumstances.

A more innovative and optional civic service program is Yere Here¹⁴ – a postgraduate social immersive, action-oriented course in which young people spend a year helping to build creative, smart solutions to entrenched social problems in London. Tuition fees are covered, and a financial support package is provided in the form of loans, bursaries, and travel discounts in addition to flexible paid work and affordable accommodation.

Consideration of gap year programs for under-30 year olds would need to include provision for a living allowance, affordable accommodation, and free transport.

3. Consider expanding the SA Youth in Disaster Emergencies Scheme to all states and territories

The Youth in Emergencies Development Program (YDEP) is a two-year collaboration between the Australian Red Cross (ARC), the Commissioner for Children and Young People (CCYP), Duke of Edinburgh International Award (DofE), local government, and emergency management agencies, including the Country Fire Service (CFS). It aims to create a diverse community of young, informed change-makers in the South Australian emergency preparedness landscape, through:

- Selecting 20 year 10-12 students from the CCYP's Student Representative Council, CFS/SES cadets and local government youth councils to co-design a Duke of Edinburgh International Award program to educate young people on disaster resilience and emergency preparedness
- Subsidising 50 students to undertake the new Award program, comprising education/skills development, local community resilience/preparedness projects, and a graduation event with emergency management sector decision-makers to share learnings
- Exploring the appointment of Award recipients to a Youth in Emergencies Advisory Committee (YEAC), providing a state-level voice to the emergency management sector and local youth activation capacity.

The project will draw on existing educational resources, such as those developed by the Red Cross and the Australian Institute of Disaster Resilience.

The intention is that the program could be expanded to other States and Territories if the evaluation proves it to be a success.

¹⁴ Year Here, Programme, <https://yearhere.org/programme/>