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Emergency Management
Department of Home Affairs

By submission: https://www.homeaffairs.gov.au/reports-and-publications/submissions-and-discussion-papers/alternative-commonwealth-capabilities-for-crisis-response-discussion-paper/alternative-commonwealth-capabilities-for-crisis-response-discussion-paper-form

RE: Alternative Commonwealth Capabilities for Crisis Response – Discussion Paper

Thank you for the opportunity to express the Internet Association of Australia's (**IAA**) perspective on the Alternative Commonwealth Capabilities for Crisis Response Discussion Paper (**Discussion Paper**).

IAA is a member-based association representing Australia's Internet community. Our membership is largely comprised of small to medium sized Internet Service Providers. This response is written primarily in representation and from the perspective of these members, as well as the Internet and telecommunications industry more broadly.

We welcome the consultation into the role of the Commonwealth government as we expect Australia to face increasingly frequent natural disasters at larger scales and intensity. We support this collaborative initiative to engage with various stakeholders as the issue requires a multifaceted approach and consideration. Our response primarily responds to the following questions raised in the Discussion Paper:

Acknowledging the primary role of state and territories in emergency response, what longer-term capacities and capabilities does the Commonwealth need to develop to meet the challenges of the evolving strategic environment?

At a national level, what are likely to be the key pressure points or challenges for the Commonwealth responding to competing and concurrent crises?

How could the Commonwealth build community resilience and capability so they are better able to respond to and recover from national-level crises?

What are the critical functions the Commonwealth Government should continue to perform in disaster relief and recovery, in support of local, state and territory governments?

Need for national investment

Telecommunications is an important area to consider in Australia's crisis response as ensuring secure and reliable communications during emergencies is vital to ensuring the safety and resilience of Australian communities, as well as the efforts of emergency services.

To this end, we support investment that will improve communications and connection availability, such as the Telecommunications Disaster Resilience Innovation program. We encourage the

government to engage further with and facilitate further discussions between industry, communities vulnerable to crisis events and emergency services to develop more innovative solutions to improve the availability of telecommunications during crises.

Need for national coordination

In doing so, we strongly encourage greater collaboration between federal and state and territory governments. As communications is governed by the Commonwealth government, while emergency management is primarily headed by the state and territory governments, we believe an important area where the Commonwealth can play a role is facilitating the coordination between the different layers of government.

Inconsistent laws and requirements between the states and territories add an additional layer of difficulty as businesses try to operate during crisis events, and/or minimise the adverse effect of emergencies on their business. For example, during lockdown periods of the Covid-19 pandemic, IAA personnel were required to leave their homes, specified radii and/or local government areas in certain situations because physical repair and/or maintenance of our networks was required. During such periods, IAA was responsible for providing a letter authorising such staff to leave their homes and/or designated areas which in some cases, required specification of the lawful basis under which our staff would be considered 'authorised workers'. However, the laws between different states and territories were different and often changed daily, causing great difficulty for us to keep up to date on the laws so that our authorising statement would be compliant under the laws of each jurisdiction. Although the pandemic is not a natural disaster, it does serve as a good example of the practical issues that occur due to the complex legislative and government landscape during periods of national crises. Had the Commonwealth provided a national permit, or maintained an up to date piece of text for use, this would have alleviated the effort required – especially for smaller entities.

Having a centralised authority or platform that can be a hub for coordinated information sharing and provides real-time alerts, other guidance and resources pertaining to all the different states and territories, to help businesses and the public navigate periods of emergencies is needed.

We understand that the existing Trusted Information Sharing Network (TISN) is intended to, and to some extent, already play this role for various sectors. However, we recommend a broader platform or body that is not sector-specific, or allows for information sharing between sectors, and is also not restricted to participants being subject to non-disclosure obligations to allow for wider information sharing.

We also recommend greater engagement between federal and state and territory governments, as well as with industry and academic institutions regarding the sustainability and resilience of Australia's workforce, particularly in critical sectors, which can be facilitated by the Commonwealth government. Telecommunications has long experienced a skilled workforce shortage, exacerbated by the covid-19 pandemic which also restricted migration of skilled workers.

The US Colonial Pipeline cyber-attack of 2021 is a grave example of the lack of maintaining skilled workers resulting in the company having to pay ransom as they were unable to maintain operations. Although this example does not relate to natural disasters, it is easily translatable to such a situation where manual operations may be needed due to a natural disaster. As industry moves towards automation to simplify areas of their business, it is still equally important to ensure that there remains a base level of skills and knowledge to ensure continued operations of critical systems and networks in the case of a natural disaster. This is an area requiring cooperation between

government (both federal, and state and territory), industry and education providers, which again, we raise an opportunity for the Commonwealth government to coordinate and investigate.

Need for application and use of Commonwealth data

Furthermore, in light of recent legislative changes regarding critical infrastructure, we believe the Commonwealth government to be better positioned in understanding the risks facing Australia, including in cases of natural disasters. Recognising that the critical infrastructure legislation targeted sectors and assets considered vital to Australia's economic and social life, we believe that one of its requirements, the submission of asset information to the Cyber and Infrastructure Security Centre, should have provided the government with greater data and insight that allows for cross-sector analysis of Australia's risk and resilience landscape in relation to national crises. We strongly recommend using such data and resources already available to the government to provide greater reporting and information sharing back to industry, academia and the broader public. This can then better facilitate multi-stakeholder discussions and foster more innovative ideas and development of solutions where there are gaps in Australia's resilience and capacity to respond to natural disasters and other crises.

Once again, IAA appreciates the opportunity to contribute to the consideration of Alternative Commonwealth Capabilities for Crisis Response. As Australia faces the real threat of national emergencies, particularly in the form of natural disasters, we believe that there is a real need for all stakeholders to be involved. Therefore, this requires the Commonwealth government to play a more active role in sharing its own resources, as well as facilitate broader stakeholder information sharing to develop strategies to prevent, and prepare for, as well minimise and adequately respond to national crises in Australia.

ABOUT THE INTERNET ASSOCIATION OF AUSTRALIA

The Internet Association of Australia (IAA) is a member-based association representing the Internet community. Founded in 1995, as the Western Australian Internet Association (WAIA), the Association changed its name in early 2016 to better reflect our national membership and growth.

Our members comprise industry professionals, corporations, and affiliate organisations. IAA provides a range of services and resources for members and supports the development of the Internet industry both within Australia and internationally. Providing technical services as well as social and professional development events, IAA aims to provide services and resources that our members need.

IX-Australia is a service provided by the Internet Association of Australia to Corporate and Affiliate members. It is the longest running carrier neutral Internet Exchange in Australia. Spanning six states and territories, IAA operates over 30 points of presence and operates the New Zealand Internet Exchange on behalf of NZIX Inc in New Zealand.

IAA is also a licenced telecommunications carrier, and operates on a not-for-profit basis.

Yours faithfully,

Narelle Clark
Chief Executive Officer
Internet Association of Australia