

Responding to the national bushfire crisis

A plan for action

January 2020



Introduction

ACOSS shares the grave sense of sorrow felt so deeply across the community for the tragic loss of life, homes, livelihoods and nature inflicted by these terrifying and unprecedented bushfires fuelled by climate change. Amid the devastation and sadness, the response from local and international communities to this ongoing bushfire crisis has been incredible. People have donated money, time and goods to support the response and recovery effort, and we acknowledge the courage and tireless effort of the firefighters and community sector volunteers and staff to this crisis.

We welcome the creation of the National Bushfire Recovery Agency and the National Bushfire Recovery Fund, along with a range of measures the Federal Government has taken to support people affected by these bushfires. It is vital that the Federal Government continues to play its role providing adequate support to the thousands of people so badly affected.

Right now, we need urgent action on several fronts to provide relief to people affected by the bushfires. We urge the Federal Government to act quickly on these recommendations. We have also included in this document a number of longer term initiatives so that we learn the lessons of this disaster and prepare better for the next. Importantly, we must also strengthen our own response to the climate crisis, and take a global leadership role on climate change.

Immediate steps

1. Increase the Australian Government Disaster Recovery Payment from \$1,000 to \$3,000, and from \$400 per child to \$1,000 per child for people who have been adversely affected by the bushfires.

ACOSS is very concerned that the current Disaster Recovery Payment is seriously inadequate, particularly for people on lower incomes and with fewer assets, family and friends to secure transport, alternative housing options and immediate recovery resources. We recommend an urgent increase to this payment, which has remained unchanged since 2006.

2. Increase the Disaster Recovery Allowance

ACOSS welcomes the Prime Minister's announcement that the Disaster Recovery Allowance will not be taxable. That said, this allowance is inadequate to cover basic living costs, paid at the same rate as Newstart (or Youth Allowance for young people). We call for an immediate increase to these allowances to help people recover from this disaster.

3. Increase funding for food relief

Food relief is critical for people, families and communities that are affected by bushfires. ACOSS recommends that the Government immediately allocate an additional \$30 million in funding to food relief community sector organisations to respond to the surge in need which is likely to continue for many months.

4. Streamline processes so that help is getting to people on the ground

It is important that people can access payments and supports without unnecessary bureaucracy. Centrelink and Services Australia should exercise leniency and flexibility in the administration of recovery and crisis payments to ensure people in need receive them, including where people cannot readily provide the required documentation because they have lost their home or do not have access to their home.

5. Ensure volunteer firefighters are not subject to mutual obligation or debt recovery

ACOSS welcomes the decision to suspend debt recovery and mutual obligation arrangements for people receiving income support in bushfire affected areas for two months. We also welcome the national freeze of mutual obligation requirements to 19 January 2020. However, we must ensure volunteer firefighters who reside outside bushfire affected areas continue to be exempt from mutual obligation requirements after the national freeze ends, including where they cannot readily access proof from their command that they are fighting fires.

6. Ensure community sector inclusion in the National Bushfire Recovery Agency's advisory board

It will be important that the National Bushfire Recovery Agency has an advisory board that includes people with a mix of skills, knowledge and experience. We call for the Agency to have an advisory board that includes people with knowledge of the role that the community sector plays in the disaster recovery process, to ensure the agency focusses on rebuilding lives as well as infrastructure.

Medium and long term initiatives

7. Provide additional relief for people on low incomes who could not afford insurance and establish a review on affordable insurance.

As extreme weather events increase in Australia, insurance premiums are escalating and too many people, particularly people on low incomes, find themselves under-insured or not insured. We need to respond to the needs of people without insurance now, but also to establish a review to examine how the Federal Government and the insurance industry can assist people on low incomes access insurance products.

8. Establish an ongoing Disaster Management Grants Scheme for Community Sector Organisations

This grants scheme would support the participation of the community sector in local, state/territory and federal response and recovery processes, and help to better prepare for disasters and emergencies. This scheme would also ensure continuity of care for people who face vulnerabilities, including local case management support, and to adapt to the effects of extreme weather events and the climate crisis.

9. Establish a one stop shop online resource for how to get help in a disaster

A number of ACOSS members have developed excellent resources for how to get help or help out in a disaster. It is clear that people affected would greatly benefit from a one-stop-shop resource that consolidates and links these resources across local, state/territory and federal levels.

10. Convene a National Summit on Bushfire Recovery and Preparedness

ACOSS believes that a proposed Royal Commission will help with lessons learned, but will not address the immediate policy and investment needs for recovery, nor the actions required to protect communities against extreme weather events this year and ongoing. We need a national summit to draw on the best advice across the community about what we need to do to recover from this bushfire crisis, and what is needed to prepare for the increasing natural disasters that we will inevitably see as our climate changes.

Taking action on climate change

11. Invest in energy efficiency and disaster resilience for low income households

More than 95% of homes in Australia have poor energy efficiency leading to higher energy bills or energy deprivation, serious health impacts and financial stress. ACOSS recommends the introduction of mandatory energy efficiency standards for rental properties, as well as landlord incentives and safeguards to minimise rent increases. This proposal will provide energy cost relief, and reduce emissions. This would also provide an excellent injection of income and jobs growth into many struggling regional communities, including bushfire-affected areas, to support the recovery of local communities.

12. Support just transition for workers and communities

Some communities could experience negative effects from our response to climate change, such as those heavily dependent on burning or extracting fossil fuels. We must develop transition plans that are place-based, and include the development of new economic opportunities. These plans must include the re-skilling of workers to exploit these opportunities. ACOSS recommends establishing a statutory agency to manage coal closures, oversee worker support, coordinate plans for regional

economic activity, and manage industry-wide, multi-employer pooling and redeployment schemes.

13. Phase out fossil fuel subsidies

ACOSS recommends the abolition of fuel tax credits for off road use (except agriculture), from July 2020. This proposal would remove a market distortion that is severely undermining efforts to transition to a clean economy and meet our emissions reduction targets.