



Legislative Assembly of the Northern Territory

Public Accounts Committee

# **Inquiry into Howard Springs Accommodation Village – 2023 Flood Evacuation Costs**

July 2025



# Inquiry into Howard Springs Accommodation Village - 2023 Flood Evacuation Costs



Legislative Assembly of the Northern Territory

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# Contents

Chair's Preface .....	4
Committee Members.....	5
Committee Secretariat .....	5
Acronyms and Abbreviations.....	6
Inquiry Referral .....	7
<b>1 Introduction.....</b>	<b>8</b>
Inquiry Referral.....	8
Conduct of the Inquiry.....	8
Report Structure.....	9
<b>2 Flood Evacuation – March/April 2023.....</b>	<b>10</b>
Background .....	10
Emergency Management Framework.....	10
Procurement Processes .....	15
Emergency Accommodation Options .....	17
Evacuation Costs.....	19
Reporting and Debriefing Mechanisms .....	21
<b>3 Concluding Comments.....</b>	<b>24</b>
<b>Appendix 1: Private Briefing.....</b>	<b>26</b>
<b>Bibliography.....</b>	<b>27</b>

## Chair's Preface

This report details the Committee's findings regarding its inquiry into costs associated with the 2023 flood evacuation to the Howard Springs Accommodation Village (HSAV), which was referred to the Committee by the Treasurer, the Hon Bill Yan MLA on 29 October 2024. Noting that the overall cost of \$12.7m to the Northern Territory Government was significant, the Committee was tasked with investigating the matter to ensure due diligence was exercised in the expenditure of government funding.

As indicated in this report, the costs associated with the March/April 2023 flood evacuation to the HSAV reflected the prolonged period the centre was required to be operational and the number of people it was required to cater for. While the HSAV was the most viable option for an evacuation centre under the circumstances, it was acknowledged that it presented a number of challenges which necessarily impacted on the overall operational costs associated with use of the facility.

Nevertheless, following consideration of the evidence, the Committee is satisfied that appropriate processes were followed and due diligence was exercised in the expenditure of government funding.

On behalf of the Committee, I would like to thank the agency representatives that briefed the Committee. Their advice and commentary was particularly insightful and of great assistance to the Committee. I also thank my fellow Committee members for their bipartisan approach to the inquiry.

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read 'Clinton Howe', with a stylized flourish at the end.

**Mr Clinton Howe MLA**

**Chair**

## Committee Members

Chair:	Mr Clinton Howe MLA Member for Drysdale
Deputy Chair:	Mrs Laurie Zio MLA Member for Fannie Bay
Members:	Mr Manuel Brown MLA Member for Arafura  Justine Davis MLA Member for Johnston  Mr Brian O’Gallagher MLA Member for Karama

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## Acronyms and Abbreviations

CMSC	Crisis Management Sub-committee of Cabinet
CNR	Centre for National Resilience aka Howard Springs Accommodation Village
EOC	Emergency Operations Centre
HSAV	Howard Springs Accommodation Village aka Centre for National Resilience
NTEMA	Northern Territory Emergency Management Arrangements
NTES	Northern Territory Emergency Services
TC	Territory Coordinator
TRC	Territory Recovery Coordinator
TEMC	Territory Emergency Management Council
TEP	Territory Emergency Plan

# Inquiry Referral

On 29 October 2024, the Committee received the following inquiry referral from the Treasurer, the Hon Bill Yan MLA.



TREASURER

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## **Public Accounts Committee – Howard Springs Accommodation Village – Costs associated with Flood Evacuation March/April 2023**

I refer to the Public Accounts Committee for further investigation the costs associated with the flood evacuation during the March and April period of 2023 which utilised the Howard Springs Accommodation Village.

The overall cost of \$12.7M to the Northern Territory Government is significant and requires further investigation to ensure due diligence was exercised in the expense of government funding.

I request that the Public Accounts Committee investigate the use of government funding in relation to this matter and report back to Parliament with the Committee's findings and recommendations.

Yours sincerely

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to be 'Bill Yan'.

Hon. BILL YAN MLA  
MEMBER FOR NAMATJIRA  
TREASURER

# 1 Introduction

## Inquiry Referral

1.1 Pursuant to clause 1(d)(ii) of its Terms of Reference<sup>1</sup>, on 29 October 2024 the Public Accounts Committee received an inquiry referral from the Treasurer, the Hon Bill Yan MLA, requesting that the Committee investigate the costs associated with the flood evacuation during March and April 2023 which utilised the Howard Springs Accommodation Village (HSAV) to ensure due diligence was exercised in the expense of government funding.<sup>2</sup>

## Conduct of the Inquiry

1.2 In order to gain an understanding of emergency management procedures and the costs associated with the March/April 2023 flood evacuation to the HSAV, the Committee wrote to the Chief Executive Officer of the Department of the Chief Minister and Cabinet, as the lead agency, to seek a briefing from relevant agency officers regarding the following matters:

1. The processes and procedures in place for dealing with natural disasters such as major flood events.
2. The extent to which standard procurement processes apply in emergency situations; funding sources for such events; and accountability mechanism in place regarding expenditure of government funds in emergency situations.
3. The options available regarding accommodation of evacuees and the considerations that were taken into account when deciding to use the Howard Springs Accommodation Village;
4. Which agencies were involved in the March/April 2023 flood evacuation to the Howard Springs Accommodation Village and who were the primary decision makers.
5. When Ministers were made aware of the potential costs associated with the use of the Howard Springs Accommodation Village and the role Ministers have in the approving decisions relating to such costs.
6. How the costs associated with the March/April 2023 flood evacuation to the Howard Springs Accommodation Village compare with previous evacuations as a result of natural disasters.

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<sup>1</sup> See Public Accounts Committee – Terms of Reference, [https://parliament.nt.gov.au/data/assets/pdf\\_file/0005/1453595/PAC-Terms-of-Reference-16-October-2024.pdf](https://parliament.nt.gov.au/data/assets/pdf_file/0005/1453595/PAC-Terms-of-Reference-16-October-2024.pdf)

<sup>2</sup> See Howard Springs Accommodation Village – Costs Associated with Flood Evacuation March/April 2023, Inquiry Referral, <https://parliament.nt.gov.au/committees/list/public-accounts-committee/howard-springs-accommodation-village#IR>

7. What, if any, extraordinary costs were associated with March/April 2023 flood evacuation to the Howard Springs Accommodation Centre, and to what extent such costs could have been mitigated.
  8. What reporting and debriefing mechanisms were in place at the agency and whole of government level, what lessons were learnt and whether processes and procedures have been updated as a result.
  9. The cost of the damage to the Howard Springs Accommodation Centre and how much has been recouped to date.
- 1.3 As set out in Appendix 1, on Tuesday 10 December 2024, the Committee received a comprehensive briefing from the then Commissioner of Police and Co-Chair of the Territory Emergency Management Council; the Chief Executive Officer, Department of Logistics and Infrastructure; the Deputy Chief Executive Officer Strategic Enabling Services, Department of Health (and former Chief Finance Officer of the then Department of Territory Families, Housing and Communities); and the General Manager: Strategy and Programs, Department of Children and Families (and former Executive Director of the then Department of Territory Families, Housing and Communities).

## **Report Structure**

- 1.4 Chapter 2 considers the evidence presented to the Committee.
- 1.5 Chapter 3 sets out the Committee's concluding comments relating to the terms of reference.

## 2 Flood Evacuation – March/April 2023

### Background

- 2.1 For context, the CEO of the Department of Logistics and Infrastructure provided an overview and timeline of events regarding the evacuation and repatriation of residents affected by the March/April 2023 floods as summarised below.
- 2.2 On 27 February 2023 a deep tropical low over the Gregory district in the north-west part of the Northern Territory brought heavy rains, with the Bureau of Meteorology issuing flood warnings for the Daly and Victoria River districts. On the night of 28 February, severe flooding caused extensive damage across the communities of Kalkarindji, Daguragu and Nitjpurru (also known as Pigeon Hole). Minor flood warnings were also issued for Palumpa, Lajamanu, Timber Creek and Yarralin.
- 2.3 With road access cut to the communities of Kalkarindji, Daguragu and Nitjpurru, a state of emergency was declared by the then Chief Minister, Hon Natasha Fyles MLA, on 1 March 2025. Members of these communities were initially evacuated to Katherine via commercial and defence air assets, and from there were subsequently moved to the HSAV which had previously operated as the Centre for National Resilience during the COVID 19 pandemic. Residents of Palumpa and Yarralin were able to remain in their communities as they were only subject to minor flooding.
- 2.4 As the Committee heard, the evacuation of Kalkarindji, Daguragu and Nitjpurru was highly complex involving the relocation of 721 residents in a challenging environment due to the weather situation and cultural complexities. Moreover, while the emergency declarations for Palumpa and Yarralin were revoked on 9 March, they remained in place until 8 May for Kalkarindji and Daguragu, and were not lifted in Nitjpurru until 21 July 2023.
- 2.5 The Committee heard that the HSAV operated as an evacuation centre from 2 March 2023 to 30 April 2023. The facility was then used as short term accommodation and a staging point for Kalkarindji and Daguragu residents until they could be repatriated to their communities as their houses and temporary accommodation became available. However, given the extent of the damage to Nitjpurru, the Committee heard that residents ended up being put up in makeshift tents in the Yarralin community before being finally repatriated to their own community.<sup>3</sup>

### Emergency Management Framework

- 2.6 As set out in the *Territory Emergency Plan (TEP)*, governance arrangements for emergency events in the Northern Territory are shared between the NT Police Force and the NT Fire and Emergency Services (response), and the Department

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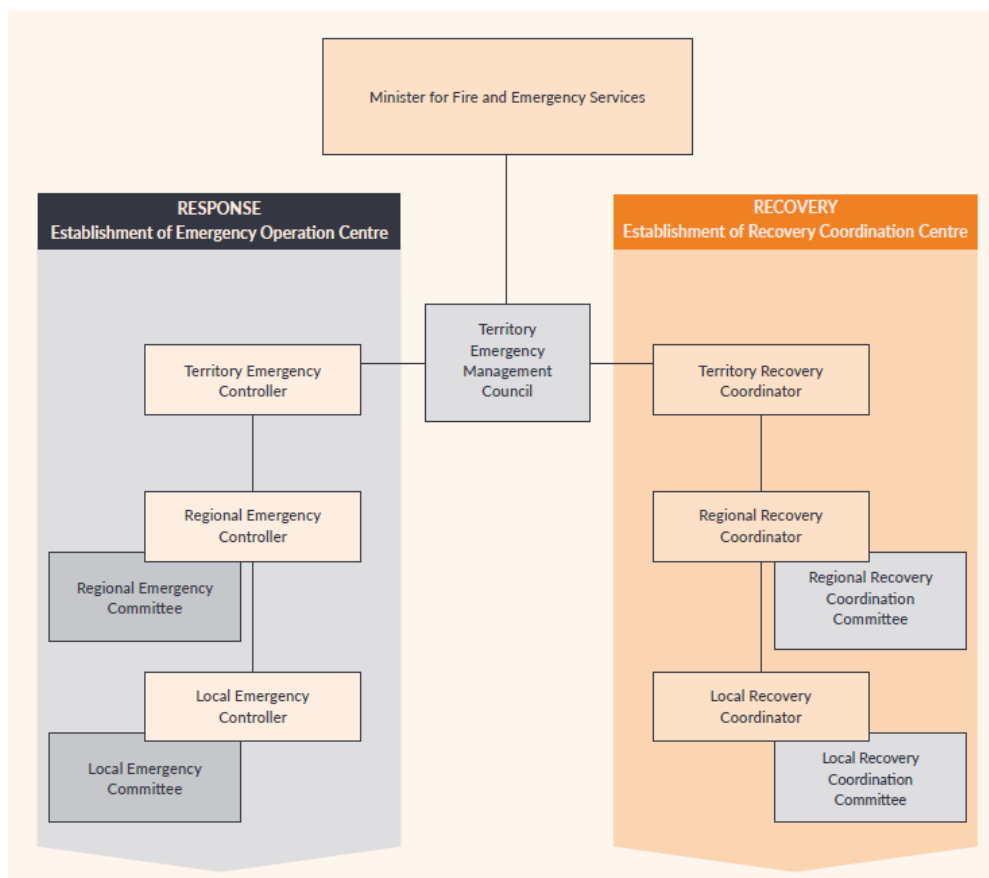
<sup>3</sup> Committee Transcript, *Private Briefing – 10 December 2024*, (Unpublished), pp. 2-3

of the Chief Minister and Cabinet (recovery coordination).<sup>4</sup> Reflecting an all hazards approach to the management of emergencies, the *Emergency Management Act 2013* (the Act) provides for:

the adoption of measures necessary for the protection and preservation of human life and property from the effects of large-scale emergency events. It forms the legislative authority for emergency management activities, defines the NT's emergency management structure and assigns roles and responsibilities across all levels of government.<sup>5</sup>

2.7 Part 4 of the Act identifies the key emergency management positions, and outlines their functions and powers. The Commissioner of Police is the Territory Emergency Controller (TC), responsible for controlling and directing emergency operations, which includes activities and training to prevent, minimise, prepare for and respond to an emergency event. The Chief Executive Officer of the Department of the Chief Minister and Cabinet is the Territory Recovery Coordinator (TRC), responsible for coordinating and directing recovery operations.<sup>6</sup> As illustrated in Figure 1 below, a number of regional and local positions sit beneath the TC and TRC.

**Figure 1: Emergency Management Positions<sup>7</sup>**



<sup>4</sup> NT Emergency Services, Territory Emergency Plan, 27/11/2024, <https://pfes.nt.gov.au/sites/default/files/uploads/files/2024/1.%20Territory%20Emergency%20Plan.pdf>, p. 12

<sup>5</sup> NT Emergency Services, Territory Emergency Plan, 27/11/2024, p. 12

<sup>6</sup> NT Emergency Services, Territory Emergency Plan, 27/11/2024, p. 13

<sup>7</sup> NT Emergency Services, Territory Emergency Plan, 27/11/2024, p. 14

2.8 The TC and TRC co-chair the Territory Emergency Management Council (TEMC). Responsible to the Minister for Fire and Emergency Services the TEMC has the following functions:

- a) to direct resources for emergency operations and recovery operations in the Territory;
- b) to advise the Minister in relation to emergency planning, emergency operations and recovery operations in the Territory;
- c) to consider emergency plans for the Territory for approval;
- d) to advise, assist and, if necessary, direct the Territory Controller, the Territory Recovery Coordinator and the Commissioner in the exercise of their powers and the performance of their functions;
- e) any other functions conferred on it by this or any other Act.<sup>8</sup>

2.9 As set out in Figure 2 below, membership of the TEMC includes the Chief Officer NT Emergency Services as the Executive Officer and the Chief Executive Officers of key Northern Territory government agencies.

**Figure 2: Territory Emergency Management Council Membership<sup>9</sup>**

Title	Agency	Role
Territory Emergency Controller	NT Police Force	Co-chair
Territory Recovery Coordinator	Department of the Chief Minister and Cabinet	Co-chair
Chief Officer	NT Fire and Emergency Services (NT Emergency Service)	Executive Officer
Chief Executive Officer	Attorney-General Department	Member
Chief Executive Officer	Department of Agriculture and Fisheries	Member
Chief Executive Officer	Department of Children and Families	Member
Chief Executive Officer	Department of Corporate and Digital Development	Member
Chief Executive Officer	Department of Corrections	Member
Chief Executive Officer	Department of Education and Training	Member
Chief Executive Officer	Department of Health	Member
Chief Executive Officer	Department Housing, Local Government and Community Development	Member
Chief Executive Officer	Department of Lands, Planning and Environment	Member
Chief Executive Officer	Department of Logistics and Infrastructure	Member
Chief Executive Officer	Department of Tourism and Hospitality	Member
Chief Executive Officer	Department of Trade, Business, and Asian Relations	Member
Under Treasurer	Department of Treasury and Finance	Member
Commissioner	NT Fire and Emergency Services	Member
Chief Fire Officer	NT Fire and Emergency Services (NT Fire and Rescue Service)	Member
Deputy Commissioner	NT Police Force	Member
Commissioner	Office of the Commissioner for Public Employment	Member
Chief Executive Officer	Power and Water Corporation	Member

2.10 Observers or subject matter experts may also be invited to attend TEMC meetings. Depending on the circumstances of the emergency these may include,

<sup>8</sup> *Emergency Management Act 2013 (NT)*, s 37

<sup>9</sup> NT Emergency Services, Territory Emergency Plan, 27/11/2024, p. 47

for example, Australian Defence Force – Joint Operations Support Staff; Bureau of Meteorology; Territory Generation; senior government officers or advisors, Local Government Association NT; and other Northern Territory government agencies and hazard management authorities.<sup>10</sup>

2.11 Where response to, and recovery from, an emergency event requires multi-agency support, the Committee was advised that this is provided through the activation and coordination of 13 dedicated functional groups as set out in Figure 3 below.<sup>11</sup>

**Figure 3: Functional Groups and Lead Agencies<sup>12</sup>**

Functional group	Lead agency
Animal Welfare Group	Department of Agriculture and Fisheries
Critical Goods and Services Group	Department of Trade, Business, and Asian Relations
Digital and Telecommunications Group	Department of Corporate and Digital Development
Emergency Shelter Group	Department of Education and Training
Engineering Group	Department of Logistics and Infrastructure
Industry Group	Department of Trade, Business, and Asian Relations
Medical Group	Department of Health
Public Health Group	Department of Health
Public Information Group	Department of the Chief Minister and Cabinet
Public Utilities Group	Power and Water Corporation
Survey, Rescue and Impact Assessment Group	NT Police Force
Transport Group	Department of Logistics and Infrastructure
Welfare Group	Department of Children and Families

2.12 Comprised of both government and non-government agencies, each of these groups have designated roles and responsibilities designed to achieve specific emergency management outcomes.<sup>13</sup> As noted in the TEP:

Many functional groups will be activated before and during response operations and some may continue to operate throughout the recovery phase, depending on impact. This is particularly relevant for complex, protracted or significant emergency events.<sup>14</sup>

2.13 In relation to the March/April 2023 flood emergency, for example, the Committee heard that this was the case for the Welfare Group whose responsibilities include establishing and operating evacuation centres – see Figure 4 below.

<sup>10</sup> NT Emergency Services, Territory Emergency Plan, 27/11/2024, p. 47

<sup>11</sup> Committee Transcript, Private Briefing – 10 December 2024, (Unpublished), pp. 3-4

<sup>12</sup> NT Emergency Services, Territory Emergency Plan, 27/11/2024, p. 18

<sup>13</sup> NT Emergency Services, Territory Emergency Plan, 27/11/2024, see Annexures E(i) to E(xiii), pp. 52-64

<sup>14</sup> NT Emergency Services, Territory Emergency Plan, 27/11/2024, p. 18

**Figure 4: Welfare Group – Role and Responsibilities<sup>15</sup>**

Functional Group	Welfare Group
Lead Agency	Department of Children and Families
Role	The role of the Welfare Group is to co-ordinate and implement responses operationalised by its member organisations, to meet the immediate essential needs of individuals and families and promote self-efficacy during the response to and recovery from emergency events.
Responsibilities	<p>The key responsibilities of the Welfare Group are to:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>provide a general assessment of the needs of individuals and families affected by disaster</li> <li>provide advice to the TC and TRC on appropriate responses and recovery strategies</li> <li>coordinate the establishment and operation of evacuation centres and/or welfare recovery centres</li> <li>coordinate the provision of, or access to support services that assist to meet the immediate essential needs of affected people during response and recovery. Support services may include access to personal support and counselling, emergency clothing and alternate accommodation advice</li> <li>facilitate DRFA (Category A) for affected individuals to alleviate personal hardship</li> <li>work with individuals, families and the community to build people's capacity to recover, by promoting self-efficacy, helping people to identify their strengths and abilities to meet their own needs</li> <li>contribute to broader operational planning and activities which impact on or include welfare group activities</li> <li>provide advice to the TEMC on measures to improve provision of welfare support in the event of a disaster.</li> </ol>
Participating Organisations	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Department of Corrections</li> <li>Department of Education and Training</li> <li>Department of Corporate and Digital Development</li> <li>Department of People, Sport and Culture</li> <li>Department of Housing, Local Government and Community Development</li> <li>Department of Human Services (Australian Government)</li> <li>Australian Red Cross</li> <li>Salvation Army</li> <li>St Vincent de Paul</li> <li>Foodbank SA NT</li> <li>EASA</li> <li>NT Council of Churches</li> <li>54 Reason (Save the Children)</li> <li>United Muslims of NT</li> <li>Other non-government agencies and Aboriginal controlled organisations specific to the event or locality.</li> </ul>
Supporting Organisations	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Commercial providers such as evacuation centre owners/organisations</li> </ul>

2.14 While the TEMC is the primary decision-making body in relation to emergency response and recovery operations, the Committee was advised that it reports to the Crisis Sub-committee of Cabinet (CMSC):

<sup>15</sup> NT Emergency Services, Territory Emergency Plan, 27/11/2024, p. 64

The CMSC provides a forum for senior government ministers to receive advice concerning security situations or emergencies, The CMSC may receive advice from the TC and the TRC, in their capacity as co-chairs of the TEMC.<sup>16</sup>

## Procurement Processes

2.15 As noted previously, the TEMC is the primary decision-making body in relation to emergency response and recovery operations including associated expenditure. Prior to an emergency being declared the Committee heard that the TEMC will convene to ascertain response options taking into consideration advice from the Bureau of Meteorology, condition of the road network, aircraft positioning, food security, potential damage to housing and essential infrastructure such as sewerage, power and water supply in affected communities. If it is determined that an evacuation is necessary the Council will advise the Minister.<sup>17</sup>

2.16 While costs associated with a potential evacuation are discussed, the Committee was advised that it is not always possible to provide exact costings. For example, the Committee heard that:

from an engineering and transport perspective, we try to give advice on scenarios on how we might be able to recover and respond. The pod example was how we can get them back to community quickly. Given the extensive damage that had happened to their homes, the pods became an option that we put to TEMC. We got quotes from the pod suppliers so that there was an idea of how much it would cost. There are some things that we do not know the cost of, because until the event has passed, we do not know what damage we will be looking at. Where there is a decision to be made if we can identify the cost, we will do that.<sup>18</sup>

2.17 While the Committee heard that the CMSC is not a decision-making body per se, it was noted that:

any major decision that will impact a lot of resources and cause a lot of displacement and have a lot of funding attached to it will be through the Territory Emergency Management Council and usually the subcommittee of Cabinet.<sup>19</sup>

If we had to procure an asset that cost a lot of money like an aeroplane with fire retardant from Sydney that would cost \$250,000 an hour, that would probably be a decision for the subcommittee of Cabinet.<sup>20</sup>

2.18 Pursuant to sections 5 and 9 of the *Procurement Act 1995* (NT), paragraph 6.3.2 of the *Procurement Rules* provides for an Emergency Exemption for the purchase of supplies that are urgently required in response to an emergency situation that cannot be practicably obtained through an open and competitive process. Such supplies are exempt from the requirement to:

- consult with Industry Capability Network NT

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<sup>16</sup> NT Emergency Services, Territory Emergency Plan, 27/11/2024, p. 16

<sup>17</sup> Committee Transcript, Private Briefing – 10 December 2024, (Unpublished), pp. 12-13

<sup>18</sup> Committee Transcript, Private Briefing – 10 December 2024, (Unpublished), p. 13

<sup>19</sup> Committee Transcript, Private Briefing – 10 December 2024, (Unpublished), p.12

<sup>20</sup> Committee Transcript, Private Briefing – 10 December 2024, (Unpublished), p. 13

- use Contract and Procurement Services' quotation and tendering service
- undertake a quotation or tender process, including the requirement to invite a Territory enterprise to quote.<sup>21</sup>

2.19 However, where practical and appropriate, supplies must be purchased locally from a Territory enterprise. The agency must also provide quarterly reporting to the Procurement Board detailing the nature of the supplies purchased, their value and the reason for using the emergency exemption.<sup>22</sup> As indicated in Figure 2 above, the Under Treasurer is a member of the TEMC and provides advice as to funding arrangements and what contribution may be available from the Commonwealth.<sup>23</sup>

2.20 Noting that procurement during an emergency is time sensitive, the Committee sought clarification as to the decision making process in such circumstances. In relation to the Department of Logistics and Infrastructure, it was noted that:

Under our department we have a respite function or responsibility for engineering and transport functions, so our procurement will relate to those. In our business-as-usual capability we have a lot of period contracts or panel contracts in place, so we often call on those contractors to help us respond and include them in our preparedness planning so that in the event something happens they are aware they may be requested to assist.

If we get beyond the capacity of those contractors then we often go to other period contractors, what capability might be available in the market at the time. For example, housing – we already had Rusca Bros doing the housing program in the communities, so we worked with them to get things happening relatively quickly because they are already on the ground. We are doing a situational analysis of who we have ready and available to respond quickly to those things.<sup>24</sup>

2.21 Once an emergency is declared all related expenditure is captured in separate emergency management cost code centres which is reported back to Treasury:

That is for two purposes. One, it is because of the impact on our business-as-usual budgets and what we have been appropriated for. The other reason is for reporting to the Commonwealth because we can claim a subsidy or reimbursement for some of those costs. It happens on a sliding scale.

For the first \$13.76m, we do not get any reimbursement from the Commonwealth. For costs that are above \$13.76m and up to \$24.07m, we get a 50% reimbursement of those costs. For expenditure above \$24.07m, we get a 75% reimbursed by the Commonwealth.

The capture and reporting of all that expenditure is really important to make sure we can put those claims into the Commonwealth. They happen some years after the event because those costs are coming in and being audited and checked for eligibility for those claims.<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> Northern Territory Government, Procurement Rules, Version 1.8, p. 23

<sup>22</sup> Northern Territory Government, Procurement Rules, Version 1.8, p. 23

<sup>23</sup> Committee Transcript, Private Briefing – 10 December 2024 (Unpublished), p. 13

<sup>24</sup> Committee Transcript, Private Briefing – 10 December 2024, (Unpublished), p. 8

<sup>25</sup> Committee Transcript, Private Briefing – 10 December 2024, (Unpublished), p. 7

- 2.22 With regards to the impact on business-as-usual budgets, the Committee heard that, in the first instance, funding for emergencies comes from an agency's appropriated budget:

Within the infrastructure space we look after both the transport and engineering functions where a lot of the expenditure occurs during these events. ...The funding comes from our budget. As a whole of government we get an infrastructure repairs and maintenance budget every year. Some of that is transferred, basically, to what we call disaster maintenance funding. We track that across all infrastructure assets each year. ...<sup>26</sup>

We keep a track of the repairs and maintenance budget close towards the end of the financial year because sometimes it gets close to going over and we have to ask for a Treasurer's advance to make sure. If projects have not gone ahead because of a disaster, sometimes you cannot do your business as usual, that money is reallocated within that budget.<sup>27</sup>

- 2.23 In relation to the Department of Logistics and Infrastructure, the Committee was advised that while the March-April 2023 flood evacuation event was claimable as a Treasurer's advance, it was funded as a transfer of unspent capital appropriation of \$4,278m for repairs and maintenance costs. Other expenses, including evacuation costs, were absorbed within existing resources.<sup>28</sup>

- 2.24 With regards to Treasurer's advances, it was further noted that there is some work that agencies undertake in an emergency event which is part of their business-as-usual functions:

We have functional responsibilities assigned to agencies. The readiness for those is part of our BAU [business-as-usual]. We might have dedicated people who set up and plan for the events and would naturally respond in the first instance to events. It is where you start to get into overtime costs or, in prolonged events, where you need to back fill those primary people in roles, that you start to get additional beyond normal expenses.<sup>29</sup>

## Emergency Accommodation Options

- 2.25 As noted previously, the Welfare Group's key responsibilities include coordination of the establishment and operation of evacuation centres and/or welfare recovery centres.<sup>30</sup> This includes site planning for evacuation centres in regional locations across the Northern Territory, with site arrangements and options included in the welfare group's seasonal preparedness report for consideration by the incident controller and TEMC. Site options include the Katherine Showgrounds, Katherine High School, the Foskey Pavilion at the Darwin Showgrounds and the Marara evacuation centre.<sup>31</sup>

- 2.26 On 1 March 2023 the Welfare Group briefed the TEMC on the impacts or likely impacts to communities due to the significant rainfall associated with the slow-

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<sup>26</sup> Committee Transcript, Private Briefing – 10 December 2024, (Unpublished), p. 6

<sup>27</sup> Committee Transcript, Private Briefing – 10 December 2024, (Unpublished), p. 6

<sup>28</sup> Department of Infrastructure and Logistics, *Response to Question Taken on Notice*, 10 December 2024, (Unpublished), p. 2

<sup>29</sup> Committee Transcript, Private Briefing – 10 December 2024, (Unpublished), p. 7

<sup>30</sup> NT Emergency Services, *Territory Emergency Plan*, 27/11/2024, p. 64

<sup>31</sup> Committee Transcript, Private Briefing – 10 December 2024, (Unpublished), p. 8

moving tropical low and advised that while evacuees were being evacuated to Katherine as an interim measure, the Foskey Pavilion and Marrara evacuation centres had been activated. However, following a briefing of the CMSC, on 2 March the TEMC was advised that the HSAV was being established as an operational site for direct intake, with the Foskey Pavilion and Marrara being set up as a backup in case the HSAV was unable to be opened in time for the evacuees.<sup>32</sup> As the Committee heard:

The concern at that time was the number of residents coming out of community at the same time and the pace in which they needed to be brought out. Foskey has not had 700-and-something people before and Marrara is usually set up as a tent environment for short-term accommodation. Those facilities would not be suitable for the number and length of time which was expected.<sup>33</sup>

- 2.27 While people were initially evacuated and taken to the HSAV, the Committee was advised that there was no requirement for them to stay there. Rather, evacuation centres are established primarily for those people who have no alternative accommodation option in a disaster event.

Across Darwin and Katherine, there ended up being evacuees self-selecting to stay with family and various other areas. No-one is compelled to remain at CNR [HSAV] or any evacuation centre, but we maintained our come-and-go scenario; people visited families and they came and went.<sup>34</sup>

- 2.28 The Committee also heard that, in line with international best practice, establishing the evacuation centre at the HSAV facilitated provision of a range of services similar to those evacuees had access to in their home communities:

When we evacuate communities, we try to establish an evacuation centre with similar operational ability that the person may have in their home environment. Education came into play. We had the Child and Family Centre established onsite, such as the Child and Family Centre in Kalkarindji, run by the same staff. It was additionally complemented by education and welfare groups, Australian Red Cross and St Vinnies.

We also established a location on the site where we had what was called a safe haven ...for women and children to come and go as they wish, if they did not wish to stay in the area where they were room-allocated. That was taken advantage of by a number of women over that time.<sup>35</sup>

- 2.29 A further advantage of the HSAV was that it had the capacity to operate as an evacuation centre, short term accommodation and a staging point for the return and repatriation of evacuees to communities:

CNR [HSAV], in some respects, was able to straddle the difficult period of what we knew would be a prolonged repair period in community, let alone the public health measures. That was the ability to be a short-term accommodation, an evacuation centre and a next step. We do not have a great deal of – this is across Australia – resources to hold dislocated populations for long periods of time.

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<sup>32</sup> Committee Transcript, Private Briefing – 10 December 2024, (Unpublished), p. 8

<sup>33</sup> Committee Transcript, Private Briefing – 10 December 2024, (Unpublished), p. 8

<sup>34</sup> Committee Transcript, Private Briefing – 10 December 2024, (Unpublished), p. 9

<sup>35</sup> Committee Transcript, Private Briefing – 10 December 2024, (Unpublished), p. 9

In setting up CNR [HSAV] both as an evacuation centre and short-term accommodation and then a staging point for return and repatriation to Kalkarindji, Daguragu, and then eventually Yarralin to Nitjpurru, seemed to work in this instance.<sup>36</sup>

- 2.30 From a response and recovery perspective, the Committee was advised that this event was particularly challenging in that evacuation centres, by international standards, are generally only stood up for a maximum of four to six weeks.<sup>37</sup> Compared to other emergency situations in recent years, the Committee was advised that the emergency declaration for the 2023 flood evacuation was one of the longest the Territory has had to date:

This was an unusually long Wet Season and not only did we have the impact on these communities, but our road network sustained substantive damage ... For the size of the weather event yes, it was significant. The length of time was based on the damage that occurred in Pigeon Hole. I think all the houses in that community had been affected by floodwaters. There were biohazards in the community. As you can imagine, there were dead things in that water and pathogens in the flood mud that had been left in most houses. We had a significant cleanup effort. Some houses were beyond repair and had to be demolished, hence why we had to have temporary accommodation available to them.<sup>38</sup>

## Evacuation Costs

- 2.31 As highlighted to the Committee, the high costs associated with the March/April 2023 flood evacuation to the HSAV were largely attributable to the prolonged period the evacuation centre was required to be operational and the number of people that needed to be accommodated. For example, catering alone for 700 odd evacuees for a period of two months amounted to \$1,864,836.<sup>39</sup>
- 2.32 While the cost of evacuating residents from affected communities to the HSAV were not dissimilar to those associated with the evacuation of residents from Groote Eylandt and Borroloola to Nhulunbuy, Katherine and Darwin for Cyclone Trevor (\$1,581,128 as opposed to \$1,155 372), the Committee was advised that there is no comparable event for costs associated with operating the HSAV as an evacuation centre.<sup>40</sup>
- 2.33 As noted during the 2023 Estimates hearings:

Evacuation centres are usually large spaces where people stay for a short amount of time. Members of the committee may be aware that we had previously stood up the Foskey Pavilion for other evacuation events. Those kind of large spaces are fairly usual for evacuation centres across Australia and how we respond to emergency events. The Centre for National Resilience [HSAV] was operated and stood up as an evacuation centre, so it was an unusual place for us to stand up that type of service delivery. Because

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<sup>36</sup> Committee Transcript, Private Briefing – 10 December 2024, (Unpublished), p. 9

<sup>37</sup> Committee Transcript, Private Briefing – 10 December 2024, (Unpublished), p. 9

<sup>38</sup> Committee Transcript, Private Briefing – 10 December 2024, (Unpublished), p. 5

<sup>39</sup> Estimates Committee Transcript, Thursday 15 June 2023,

<https://parliament.nt.gov.au/committees/previous/estimates/estimates-2023#Transcripts>, p. 77

<sup>40</sup> Committee Transcript, Private Briefing – 10 December 2024, (Unpublished), p. 5, and Department of Infrastructure and Logistics, Response to Question Taken on Notice, 10 December 2024, (Unpublished), p. 1

of the length of the operation and disaster impacts upon the communities that were affected, it became a viable and positive outcome for the length of operations we were stood up for.<sup>41</sup>

- 2.34 The Committee was advised that the total expenditure for the Department of Territory Families, Housing and Communities for the evacuation centre was \$9.7m and represented extraordinary costs in that they were in addition to the normal business that the department would have been doing at the time.<sup>42</sup> The Committee heard that the line items in relation to the \$9.7m were usual expenditure items in an evacuation centre including, for example, food, security, cleaning, and staffing.<sup>43</sup>
- 2.35 However, it was also acknowledged that the size and nature of the HSAV presented a number of challenges that impacted on operational costs. A 2,500 bed facility set on five acres, approximately a quarter to half was used as the evacuation centre. As the Committee heard, this event had particularly heavy staffing costs to operate the facility, with over 200 staff coming off normal business as usual functions to run on 24/7 rosters for the two month period.<sup>44</sup>
- 2.36 Given the size of the facility, security costs were also higher for this event at \$1,021,974.<sup>45</sup>

The security was about gate management and as a criticality we only used the one front gate. As the commissioner pointed out, it is a five-acre property, so we utilised CCTV on the perimeter of the gate. We also had security patrols going around the perimeter of the site every half hour, particularly at night for obvious reasons, as part of attempting to restrict alcohol access to the site. The site itself was a declared site, as all evacuation centres are, for restriction of alcohol.

Security manned the gate to make sure only evacuees were going in ... We also instigated bag searches of people coming into the centre, which was endorsed by the Aboriginal and community leadership, and security were removing alcohol as people came through the front gate.

We also operated ... a sobering-up location outside the centre, in the cul-de-sac car park near the front gate. It was off the area and we gated it all up so it was a safe place. We also had security there to help de-escalate if our staff were unable to ...

Inside we had permanent security on the pool because, obviously there is only a certain amount of time we had the lifeguard there. All the other times the pool was attractive to everyone, so we had security on the pool at all times for risk mitigation. We had patrols moving through back and forth inside the residential areas, particularly at night. We had security on also what I would call rapid deployment stuff ... which enabled staff to contact security on walkie-talkies. ...

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<sup>41</sup> Estimates Committee Transcript, Thursday 15 June 2023, <https://parliament.nt.gov.au/committees/previous/estimates/estimates-2023#Transcripts>, p. 69

<sup>42</sup> Committee Transcript, Private Briefing – 10 December 2024, (Unpublished), p. 14

<sup>43</sup> Committee Transcript, Private Briefing – 10 December 2024, (Unpublished), p. 14

<sup>44</sup> Committee Transcript, Private Briefing – 10 December 2024, (Unpublished), p. 14

<sup>45</sup> Estimates Committee Transcript, Thursday 15 June 2023, <https://parliament.nt.gov.au/committees/previous/estimates/estimates-2023#Transcripts>, p. 70

It was a vast monitoring process. Because it was such a large site and while we were only using the occupation of various rooms – a quarter to a half – we could not section off the site. We literally had five acres. We were mindful about making sure that security was able to patrol the whole site, not just the area where people were accommodated. Often, they redirected people back to the populated area or to the gym which was the major hub of the site.<sup>46</sup>

2.37 In addition to security, a police presence was also maintained on site. As the Committee heard, pre-existing cultural tensions between members of the three communities flared up at times, particularly when alcohol was involved. Police were also required to respond to instances of anti-social behaviour and domestic violence.<sup>47</sup> As noted in the 2023 Estimates hearings, Aboriginal Liaison Officers were stationed at the facility during the day, along with members of Strike Force Lyra which is a dedicated domestic violence team. In addition, three officers from the Community Resilience and Engagement Command were there on most days.<sup>48</sup>

2.38 During the two month period the HSAV was utilised as an evacuation centre, the Committee was advised that a significant amount of damage was caused:

The total figure is \$1.25m and that included \$34,000 for pressure cleaning of the facility and some of the mattresses; a damage condition assessment of the facility, which was about \$28,000; replacement of extinguishers and smoke alarms was \$177,000; Handy Man, which was the boarding of windows, patching paint and repairs, replacing some of the fixtures and those sorts of things and some fencing was \$277,000; new mattresses – which was a select tender – was \$89,000; plumbing which was drain clearing and some hot water systems was \$174,000; and the window replacements you mentioned was \$470,000.<sup>49</sup>

2.39 It was noted that much of the damage occurred in the unused portion of the site and got worse the longer people were there as they became more frustrated about not being able to go home. However, in the absence of sufficient evidence as to the perpetrators, the Committee was advised that no charges related to property damage were laid and no costs have been recouped.<sup>50</sup>

## Reporting and Debriefing Mechanisms

2.40 The TEP details the debrief process to be applied during and post operational responses to emergency situations which implements a lessons learned approach. All personnel involved in operational responses are encouraged to record activities where there are lessons to be learned, such as decision making and consequential responses. Decision makers, including Incident Controllers, Incident Management Team members and functional group members, are required to record decisions made in a Decision Log which can then be referred to as part of the debrief process.<sup>51</sup>

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<sup>46</sup> Committee Transcript, Private Briefing – 10 December 2024, (Unpublished), pp. 15-16

<sup>47</sup> Committee Transcript, Private Briefing – 10 December 2024, (Unpublished), p. 10

<sup>48</sup> Estimates Committee Transcript, Thursday 15 June 2023, <https://parliament.nt.gov.au/committees/previous/estimates/estimates-2023#Transcripts>, p. 10

<sup>49</sup> Committee Transcript, Private Briefing – 10 December 2024, (Unpublished), p. 20

<sup>50</sup> Committee Transcript, Private Briefing – 10 December 2024, (Unpublished), p. 20

<sup>51</sup> NT Emergency Services, Territory Emergency Plan, 27/11/2024, p. 42

2.41 As the Committee heard, the debrief process includes hot debriefs, internal organisational debriefs, multi-agency whole-of-government debriefs and a lessons management process. A hot debrief is conducted immediately after response operations are complete or when a person concludes their shift. This allows for the:

rapid capture of real-time feedback aimed at addressing pressing or immediate concerns. This is a key time to address any health or safety issues and provides an opportunity for instant feedback.<sup>52</sup>

For example, the Committee was advised that during the event the welfare group conducted end-of-shift briefings with staff which enabled any adjustments to be made for the next day's activities depending on what was happening on the ground at the time. A hot debrief was also conducted immediately after the event and submitted to NT Emergency Services (NTES).<sup>53</sup>

2.42 Internal organisational debriefs are held within 14 days of an event. Where the management of an event is ongoing, regular internal debriefs are conducted as operational objectives are met.<sup>54</sup> The Committee heard that:

During the event the welfare group did daily reporting to the TFHAC [Territory Families, Housing and Communities] executive, the EOC [Emergency Operations Centre] and the incident controller to enable situational decision-making that is required.<sup>55</sup>

2.43 A whole-of-government debrief, facilitated by the Controlling Authority, is required to be conducted within 28 days of an event for all emergencies that require a multi-agency response. The TEP notes that:

This debrief should focus on the effectiveness of inter-agency coordination. The process should identify strengths and weaknesses as well as areas for development and improvement, with considerations to both response and recovery phases.<sup>56</sup>

2.44 Where management of the emergency is on-going, the Committee heard that the Regional Controller is responsible for reviewing and 'critiquing the decisions during the event to say why we are doing this based on risk, resource, cost ... drawing on the collective wisdom of all the functional groups and feeding back into TEMC.'<sup>57</sup> The Committee was further advised that in addition to the debriefs and reviews conducted by the Regional Controller,

the event was also peer-reviewed by an after-action review team facilitated by NTES [Northern Territory Emergency Services] ... which includes independent members for Australian Fire and Emergency Services authorities.<sup>58</sup>

2.45 In relation to the lessons management process, the TEP notes that:

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<sup>52</sup> NT Emergency Services, Territory Emergency Plan, 27/11/2024, p. 42

<sup>53</sup> Committee Transcript, Private Briefing – 10 December 2024, (Unpublished), p. 16

<sup>54</sup> NT Emergency Services, Territory Emergency Plan, 27/11/2024, p. 42

<sup>55</sup> Committee Transcript, Private Briefing – 10 December 2024, (Unpublished), p. 16

<sup>56</sup> NT Emergency Services, Territory Emergency Plan, 27/11/2024, p. 43

<sup>57</sup> Committee Transcript, Private Briefing – 10 December 2024, (Unpublished), p. 17

<sup>58</sup> Committee Transcript, Private Briefing – 10 December 2024, (Unpublished), p. 16

Lessons management is an overarching term that refers to the collecting, analysing, disseminating and applying learning experiences from operations. The intent of the whole-of-government debrief process is to ensure that a Controlling Authority's ability to respond to an emergency event evolves. This should include providing an opportunity for impacted communities to be involved in the debrief through their relevant local Emergency Committee.<sup>59</sup>

- 2.46 With regards to the latter point, the Committee heard that multiple feedback mechanisms are employed in evacuation centres. For example, a drop box was provided at the HSAV where people could provide feedback. In addition to feedback from community leaders, community meetings were also held daily:

At 4 pm or 5 pm before the dinner run, we would open up the mic. DCMC [Department of the Chief Minister and Cabinet] or police would come out and provide key messaging that was coming from the emergency operations centre. We also opened up the feedback about what people wanted and what we could change in operations.<sup>60</sup>

- 2.47 After the event, the Committee heard that police conducted debriefing sessions with the local Emergency Management Committees, local councils and leadership groups. Following repatriation of evacuees, the Welfare Group also conducted a number of debriefing sessions in affected communities:

At least three debriefs were done across Kalkarindji and Daguragu, which involved welfare group members with the Red Cross – or sometimes Red Cross alone to step government out of that process. We did walk-throughs and catch-ups ...

We did Red Cross into Timber Creek, the Yarralin tent city and then when Pigeon Hole (Nitjpurru) went home, we actioned three returns back out to Pigeon Hole to survey how things were settled in, what feedback and information there was. We did formal processes, ad hoc and structured follow-up, which is also part of understanding the disaster and recovery principles and international conventions.<sup>61</sup>

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<sup>59</sup> NT Emergency Services, Territory Emergency Plan, 27/11/2024, p. 43

<sup>60</sup> Committee Transcript, Private Briefing – 10 December 2024, (Unpublished), p. 19

<sup>61</sup> Committee Transcript, Private Briefing – 10 December 2024, (Unpublished), p. 19

## 3 Concluding Comments

- 3.1 As noted previously, the costs associated with the March/April 2023 flood evacuation to the HSAV reflected the prolonged period the centre was required to be operational and the number of people it was required to cater for. While the HSAV was the most viable option for an evacuation centre under the circumstances, it presented a number of challenges which necessarily impacted on the overall operational costs associated with use of the facility. Nevertheless, following consideration of the evidence, the Committee is satisfied that appropriate processes were followed and due diligence was exercised in the expenditure of government funding.
- 3.2 In relation to how costs associated with an event of this magnitude could be mitigated in the future, the Committee was advised that, in line with international best practice, the focus going forward is on building community resilience such that residents are able to respond and recover within community rather than having to be evacuated which is both expensive and resource-intensive.<sup>62</sup>
- 3.3 To this end the Committee heard that the Territory has received \$15m in Disaster Ready funding from the Commonwealth Government for cyclone shelters:
- We are currently doing a cyclone shelter for Nhulunbuy. With Nitjpurru [Pigeon Hole] we have also installed a new – it is not a cyclone shelter but a facility where the community can gather closer to the aerodrome where it is a flood-free zone. If it comes this Wet Season that there is quite a flood that comes through, they will be able to respond to that by staying in community.<sup>63</sup>
- 3.4 While it was agreed that having opportunities for people to be placed in evacuation centres in smaller groups closer to home would be beneficial and more cost effective, it was acknowledged that it represents a considerable investment in infrastructure. It was further noted that consideration also needs to be given to essential infrastructure within remote communities:
- There is a lot of conversation on building evacuation centres or shelters which may be safe places for people to live and access their store and food security ... Probably the less sexy part of this conversation is actually about the thing that triggers evacuations is sewage. It is all very nice to have the perfect building in your community but if your sewerage pump goes under, public health will say the water is now unsafe and that is often the very last trigger for evacuation. ...It is about public health and if the sewerage pump has gone under, there is often not a choice because everything is unsafe.<sup>64</sup>
- 3.5 Given that maintaining food security during emergencies is often an issue in remote communities, especially when roads are cut, it was noted that discussions are also being held with the National Indigenous Australians Agency regarding refrigerated containers that can be pre-placed in communities. As the Committee

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<sup>62</sup> Committee Transcript, Private Briefing – 10 December 2024, (Unpublished), p. 18

<sup>63</sup> Committee Transcript, Private Briefing – 10 December 2024, (Unpublished), p. 5

<sup>64</sup> Committee Transcript, Private Briefing – 10 December 2024, (Unpublished), p. 19

heard, having sufficient food supplies to keep people in place safely for up to 72 hours would be a real advantage in an emergency situation.<sup>65</sup>

- 3.6 In relation to mitigating the costs associated with responding to and recovery from emergencies and associated investment in infrastructure, the Committee was advised 'that future planning will be undertaken through the Executive Director of Emergency Management.'<sup>66</sup>

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<sup>65</sup> Committee Transcript, Private Briefing – 10 December 2024, (Unpublished), p. 5

<sup>66</sup> Committee Transcript, Private Briefing – 10 December 2024, (Unpublished), p. 11

# Appendix 1: Private Briefing

## Private Briefing – Darwin – 10 December 2024

Louise McCormick: Chief Executive Officer – Department of Logistics and Infrastructure

Michael Murphy APM: Commissioner of Police and Co-Chair Territory Emergency Management Council

Kim Charles: Deputy Chief Executive Officer, Strategic Enabling Services – Department of Health (and former Chief Finance Officer of former Department of Territory Families, Housing and Communities)

Gabrielle Brown: General Manager, Strategy and Programs – Department of Children and Families (and former Executive Director of former Department of Territory Families, Housing and Communities and Welfare Functional Group Leader)

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