

City of Newcastle Opening Statement: Review of the operations of the NSW Reconstruction Authority regarding the NSW East Coast severe weather from May 2025

Thank you for the opportunity to outline our experience of the NSW Reconstruction Authority following a landslip in New Lambton on the 23rd of May last year. This extreme weather event was formally declared a natural disaster using the reference AGRN 1212. The result has been that 16 families have been prevented from returning to their homes for the past 9 months.

I would first like to acknowledge the ongoing engagement of elected representatives, including Minister Jenny Aitchison, Minister Jodie Harrison, Minister Yasmin Catley and Minister Janelle Saffin. Each has maintained communication with me through face-to-face meetings, phone calls and texts. I would like to especially call out the leadership of Jenny Aitchison, who called me late on the first night of the landslip to ask how she could help. This was despite neither her portfolio nor her state electorate being impacted by the landslip.

She then proceeded to pass on my mobile number to Minister Saffin so that she could call me directly to ask about the landslip. I should also mention Police Officer Steve Benson, who led the emergency response. His leadership was magnificent. He demonstrated a compassionate and generous leadership style that the NSW Government can be proud of.

The May 2025 natural disaster caused significant damage to approximately 10,000 properties throughout many parts of the Hunter and the mid and far north coasts. Almost all of the homes were damaged by strong winds or floods. In the majority of cases, clean up was complete in weeks and sometimes months.

Unfortunately for the people of New Lambton, AGRN 1212 was not a flood - it was something far more devastating and which to this day remains unresolved. It was a landslip. A slow-moving landslide. Not only are these 16 homes unable to be entered, but some have literally collapsed. Others are one extreme weather event away from suffering a similar fate. There is no likelihood that these almost 50 people will be able to return to their homes in the short to medium term.

For residents, the impact of this natural disaster was immediate. Families were told in the middle of the night to pack their lives into suitcases and leave immediately. Since that day, they have faced ongoing financial, emotional and practical pressures associated with long-term displacement. City of Newcastle staff remain in regular contact with those affected, and the prolonged absence of certainty has become one of the most difficult aspects of recovery.

The emergency response phase was effective. Emergency services and local agencies worked collaboratively through the Emergency Operations Centre, funded by City of Newcastle, to ensure immediate public safety.

The NSW Reconstruction Authority was physically present during this phase. However, it provided no information or guidance to City of Newcastle regarding transition to recovery.

That absence of input was noted by agencies involved in the response and was sadly an indicator of their future refusal to offer meaningful support to our staff or residents.

The Reconstruction Authority's legislated role is to facilitate and coordinate disaster recovery. While not a disaster on the scale of the Lismore floods in 2022, make no mistake. This is a disaster for these 50 affected people.

Over the past nine months, City of Newcastle has received a series of differing explanations as to why we, and not the Reconstruction Authority, must lead this phase.

On the 24th of July, and almost five weeks after formally asking the Reconstruction Authority to lead the recovery process, CN was advised it was "best placed" to lead the recovery. The letter contained no explanation how this opinion had been reached.

On the 30th of January, and 8 months after the landslide, I received a letter explaining to me that City of Newcastle was best placed to lead the recovery given we had commissioned and funded a geotechnical report. In effect, our decision to step up in the absence of leadership by the Reconstruction Authority was evidence that City of Newcastle should lead the recovery. The geotechnical report itself has cost Newcastle ratepayers more than \$1.3 million this financial year. Given our forecast budget position was a forecast surplus of just \$258,000, the Reconstruction Authority's refusal to lead the recovery has quite literally placed Council's finances into deficit.

The same letter also referenced section 6.3.1 of the State Recovery Plan, which provides for Low, Medium and High Severity coordination models, including escalation mechanisms such as recovery coordinators and formal state coordination arrangements. While all other communities impacted by AGRN1212 were treated as Medium Severity, the Reconstruction Authority categorised New Lambton as Low Severity. This is despite almost 50 people continuing to be legally unable to set foot inside their homes for the past 9 months.

While executive-level meetings have occurred on several occasions, operational management has largely been remote, despite the Reconstruction Authority maintaining a physical office literally across the street from us. This has limited the development of an embedded recovery presence and meaningful coordination on the ground.

My last meeting with senior executives of the Reconstruction Authority was on the 16th of December. I received a call at approximately 9pm the night prior saying that the meeting would not proceed unless I committed to not telling my councillors or residents about it and what we were going to discuss. Reluctantly I agreed. I shouldn't have. No offer of support was offered for the New Lambton residents. Instead, when I asked for written confirmation New Lambton residents were ineligible for current support packages, the RA said they felt 'intimidated' and didn't trust that information put in writing wouldn't be released to media. I was astounded by this reply.

More concerning has been the Reconstruction Authority's efforts to avoid engaging with residents. Families who remain unable to return home have not experienced visible, structured recovery leadership. A framework that requires councils to repeatedly advocate for clarity is not functioning as intended.

While City of Newcastle has funded the recovery effort to date, many councils would not have been able to do so. Had this event occurred in a small, regional or rural LGA, residents would not have received any assistance beyond the immediate emergency response. Local Government must operate within the confines of the Local Government Act which prevents ratepayers' money from being directed towards private property intervention. The Act also prevents financial assistance and other housing support being paid directly to residents. Rather, these responsibilities sit with the NSW Government.

The affected residents have struggled to access meaningful recovery assistance. AGRN 1212 recovery packages have proven largely inaccessible due to eligibility criteria, despite prolonged displacement and hardship. Information has been provided, but often where eligibility thresholds are unlikely to be met, raising expectations without delivering outcomes.

Communities impacted by the Black Summer bushfires, the Central West floods and the Northern Rivers floods experienced visible, coordinated recovery leadership. The residents of New Lambton have not received that experience.

City of Newcastle continues to advocate for our residents. Rate relief requests have been declined by the NSW Government despite a \$40 million rates relief package receiving bipartisan support within three months of the 2022 Lismore floods. No one is suggesting that the impact of the New Lambton landslip is the cumulative equivalent of the Lismore floods. But the impact of a natural disaster is identical for each household regardless of whether they are one of 16, or one of 1500 homes.

The disaster that has unfolded for these families at New Lambton is far from over. In fact, they are just three months away from their personal situation becoming far worse. Rental support by their individual insurers ends at the beginning of June. This leaves families facing mortgage repayments on homes and land that they cannot sell and arguably has no value, while having to continue paying rent for temporary accommodation that in truth, is far from temporary.

On Tuesday, Newcastle Councillors will consider asking the NSW Reconstruction Authority to provide up to \$700,000 in financial support for the New Lambton residents to ensure these families can continue to pay their rent for the next 12 months. It is our understanding that there is ample funding remaining from the \$50 million program announced by the NSW Government last year to respond to the victims of AGRN 1212.

City of Newcastle appears before you today with a forward-looking focus. This review presents an opportunity to strengthen recovery frameworks by clarifying triggers for state-led leadership, ensuring consistency across disaster types, improving transparency in decision-making, and recognising the practical limits of local government capacity in prolonged recovery situations such as a landslip.

It is our hope that the lessons from this natural disaster will ensure future recovery frameworks deliver certainty sooner, more transparently and more equitably.

Australians have grown used to pictures on our televisions of our political leaders meeting with victims of natural disasters. Inevitably those who have suffered tremendous loss are assured that the government is there to help them rebuild their lives. This help has not materialised in New Lambton. It's not too late.

Jeremy Bath
CHIEF EXECUTIVE OFFICER