

20 May 2022

Professor Mary O’Kane AC and Michael Fuller APM  
Independent Flood Inquiry  
Via online submissions portal

Dear Professor O’Kane and Mr Fuller,

### **NSW Independent Flood Inquiry – Save the Children’s submission**

I am pleased to provide Save the Children’s submission to this Inquiry.

Our submission is based on:

- our direct experience of responding to the 2022 floods
- our knowledge and expertise as an established provider of disaster response and recovery services for children and their families and communities in NSW and across Australia over many years
- our policy and research insights into the specific needs of children in disasters.

Save the Children’s disaster response and recovery services are integrated with our standing community-based services and supports for children and their families. These span early years, family support, domestic and family violence, education engagement, youth justice, child rights programming, integrated place-based interventions and other services, and reach around 20,000 children and other people each year through a workforce of around 600 across every State and Territory.

Our overarching recommendation in response to the Inquiry’s terms of reference is that **the NSW Government should strengthen its focus on addressing the unique needs of children in disasters, in preparedness, response, recovery and resilience-building**. The rest of this letter provides more detail and our reasons.

#### **Save the Children’s response to the 2022 floods**

In the immediate flood response, Save the Children deployed urgently to establish Child Friendly Spaces in affected sites, wherever this could be coordinated with Resilience NSW and relevant councils.

Child Friendly Spaces are a widely used intervention delivered in humanitarian settings around the world, where they are regarded as an essential service in responding to major disasters. Save the Children is the leading provider of Child Friendly Spaces in Australia. Our globally tested model has been tailored to Australian circumstances over many years of experience, and is calibrated to each individual community’s needs when delivered. Its value has been widely recognised, including in recommendations made by recent independent reports of the NSW Advocate for Children and Young People and the Federal parliamentary inquiry into the 2019-20 bushfires.<sup>1</sup>

The core elements of these Child Friendly Spaces are:

- Generally established within evacuation, relief and recovery centres, in coordination with local government and/or State disaster agencies
- A professional model (not volunteer-based) with staff trained in psychological first aid and trauma-informed practice and expertise spanning early childhood education, family support, primary education and youth work

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<sup>1</sup> Office of the Advocate for Children and Young People, 2020, *Children and young people’s experiences of disaster*, recommendation 4.2, p 136; Finance and Public Administration References Committee, December 2021, *Lessons to be learned in relation to the Australian bushfire season 2019-20*, Final Report, Commonwealth of Australia, recommendation 3, pp 44-8.

- Focused on implementing psychological first aid for children by promoting a sense of safety, calming, a sense of self- and community/collective efficacy, connectedness and hope
- Providing a space where children are supported to process their experiences and articulate their own needs, and parents are helped to understand how to talk to children about their experiences.

Child Friendly Spaces also:

- Act as a gateway for staff to identify families with potential vulnerabilities and link them to nearby complementary services such as child psychologists and family therapists
- Remind parents and communities of the importance of children's needs, helping to avoid the 'benign' but harmful neglect that children often experience in emergencies
- Enable parents and caregivers to access critical relief services for their family, knowing that children are safe in a positive environment, while children avoid exposure to potentially distressing and re-traumatising discussions between parents and other adults.

From the beginning of the flood response in early March, Save the Children delivered Child Friendly Spaces in Narellan, Cabravale and East Lismore evacuation centres, and in Ballina and Lismore recovery centres. Child Friendly Spaces operated at Ballina from Wednesday 9 March to Saturday 26 March and at Lismore from Friday 18 March to Saturday 3 April.<sup>2</sup>

Save the Children directly supported a total of 138 children, plus caregivers, through these Child Friendly Spaces.<sup>3</sup> We reached other children and caregivers through the distribution of Alannah & Madeline Foundation buddy bags, Emerging Minds resources, activity packs and other information and support in recovery centres.

The Child Friendly Spaces were delivered under pre-existing arrangements with Resilience NSW. The arrangements were established following the experience of the 2019-20 Black Summer bushfires, which highlighted the need for a systemic approach to ensuring that Child Friendly Spaces were quickly and uniformly established within all emergency centres, and coordinated with other services, to avoid children's unique needs being overlooked in the chaos of evacuations and other response activities.

Save the Children also participates in the State Welfare Service Committee that is chaired by Resilience NSW. It provides a helpful forum for communication and partnership-building across sectors and agencies.

### **Insights from the flood response**

It was clear that **Child Friendly Spaces, and other child-focused services during the immediate response, should be regarded as essential services in any major disaster.** The immensely unsettling and distressing impact of the floods on children all of ages (from the early years to older teenagers) was apparent, as was their need for specific psychosocial support during the crucial early response and recovery period.<sup>4</sup> Also clear was the value of the support that was available in Child Friendly Spaces to aid children with early processing, supporting recovery, alleviating potential trauma response and ultimately restoring resilience.

**The existence of a pre-existing arrangement with Resilience NSW helped significantly with deploying Child Friendly Spaces in a timely and coordinated way, but there remained scope to improve this process.**

<sup>2</sup> The centre was closed from 29 March to 1 April due to renewed flooding.

<sup>3</sup> This includes a small number of children (four in total) reached through other activities in the East Lismore evacuation centre.

<sup>4</sup> For information and evidence about the impact of other recent major disasters on children in Australia, see Save the Children, April 2020, *Children's experiences and needs in the 2019-20 bushfires*, available at <https://www.savethechildren.org.au/getmedia/34d65730-536f-43c6-aaa8-1cdca0c710c3/save-the-children-submission-children-s-experiences-and-needs-in-the-2019-20-bushfires-%281%29.pdf.aspx>; Save the Children, November 2020, *Build back better: Student wellbeing, engagement and recovery in Australia*, available at <https://www.savethechildren.org.au/getmedia/8af84232-1faa-41a0-a455-eb9645327b0a/stc01744-policy-brief-student-wellbeing%2c-engagement-and-recovery-fa.pdf.aspx>.

In practice, children's services were not treated as truly essential services in the response. This was evident from examples of a lack of coordination and streamlined communication which appeared to arise from children's needs not having been properly considered in response planning, and which resulted in delays and inefficiencies in getting services for children into centres as soon as they were needed. For example, in some instances communication about the deployment of Child Friendly Spaces did not consistently reach the on-site evacuation and recovery centre managers.

**Communication about what services were available could have been improved.** Save the Children could have supported many more children and families if government agencies had more clearly communicated the availability of Child Friendly Spaces in recovery centres to the public. Our teams heard that in some cases, people chose not to visit recovery centres because they were concerned about bringing their children into centres and were not aware that the centres included Child Friendly Spaces. Clearer communication about Child Friendly Spaces would have given families more flexibility and confidence to visit the centres where they were unable to easily make alternative arrangements for their children's care.

In centres, **there was inadequate support for victim-survivors of domestic and family violence, including both women and children.** Domestic and family violence increases after a disaster,<sup>5</sup> with women and children at significantly greater risk of harm than ordinarily. This increase has a long tail and spikes immediately. Indeed, in some cases, Save the Children staff observed abuse occurring in centres. There was a need for better support and information in evacuation and recovery centres for adult and child victim-survivors about how to access further support and shelter in a situation where normal networks and services were unavailable.

### **Priorities for recovery**

As usual following a major disaster, Save the Children is now bridging from its initial response via Child Friendly Spaces to supporting community recovery, with a focus on children.

Children have been heavily affected by the 2022 floods and will need specific support to restore their social and emotional wellbeing and resilience. Importantly, **effective recovery will require a time horizon of at least five years**, building on initial response and very early recovery activities over the medium and longer term. This timeframe reflects extensive research as well as community-level experience.<sup>6</sup>

Coordinated, uninterrupted support throughout the recovery period is crucial all the way across the initial five-year recovery horizon. As part of this, **it is important that accessible community-level supports are available in the immediate recovery period between the closure of evacuation and recovery centres and the establishment of formal recovery infrastructure, programs and support.** Past experience shows there is often a gap in services during this critical period for early recovery and early intervention. An example of the type of early community-based support that has proved effective when made available is the 'mobile Child Friendly Space' model, through which specialist multi-disciplinary teams deploy into communities after emergency centres close to offer 'pop up' support in community settings and spaces. This mobile service provides psychosocial outreach support to those who may need it, in the places where they are, while facilitating the creation of safe spaces where people can gather, be heard and start the recovery process – both of which are particularly needed by children and young people after a disaster.

To be effective, **recovery activities must be community-led.** The communities most affected by the 2022 floods have immense strengths and capacities. The role of governments and non-government agencies is to support and enable the rebuilding and use of these pre-existing resources of all kinds, while providing selective additional support as identified and requested by communities.

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<sup>5</sup> See, eg, D Parkinson and C Zara, 2013, 'The hidden disaster: Domestic violence in the aftermath of natural disaster', *Australian Journal of Emergency Management* 28(2): 28-35.

<sup>6</sup> Witness Statement of Lisa Gibbs, Professor of Public Health, The University of Melbourne, 22 May 2020, provided to Royal Commission into National Natural Disaster Arrangements, available at [https://naturaldisaster.royalcommission.gov.au/system/files/exhibit/MDH.500.001.0001\\_1.pdf](https://naturaldisaster.royalcommission.gov.au/system/files/exhibit/MDH.500.001.0001_1.pdf).

**Successful recovery requires putting children’s recovery front and centre, including social and emotional wellbeing support.** Children are resilient and when they are supported to recover, the future capacity of communities is strengthened. Children can and do play an active role in broader community recovery. However, without support, the negative impacts of experiencing a disaster can be far-reaching for children, extending across their academic learning, social and emotional wellbeing, and into their adult lives.<sup>7</sup>

**In supporting children’s recovery and mental health and wellbeing needs following the floods, schools will be a crucial site, and dedicated funding is required to ensure the timely rollout of school-based support.** This should be part of a broader continuum of support – see below.

Save the Children has seen the importance of schools first-hand in the communities where we work. In response to requests from schools and local communities, we have been providing our school-based *Journey of Hope* program in NSW and Victoria to support recovery from the 2019-20 Black Summer bushfires, as well as the compounding effects of the ongoing pandemic.

*Journey of Hope* is a school-based group-work intervention for children who have experienced a collective trauma. The program supports children to identify, process and normalise emotions and to identify positive coping strategies they can use, to support children’s mental health and wellbeing and restore resilience. Extensive evaluation, including recently in Australia, has demonstrated *Journey of Hope’s* impact.<sup>8</sup> It has been highlighted in the recent Federal parliamentary inquiry into the 2019-20 bushfires and in the *National Children’s Mental Health and Wellbeing Strategy* released in 2021.<sup>9</sup>

An important feature of *Journey of Hope* is that it is delivered in schools by specialist external facilitators. Feedback from schools where the program has been offered is clear that this additional support – rather than asking more of an already overburdened school workforce – has been important, as a complement to other efforts that focus on building the capacity of existing school staff to support their students’ wellbeing.

Save the Children has provided *Journey of Hope* and other supports as part of the recovery continuum continuously in bushfire-affected communities since the immediate response to the Black Summer bushfires ended in early-mid 2020. Reflecting the importance of a long-term focus on recovery, we intend to continue – and in some cases broaden – the support we are providing across 2022 and into 2023-24.

This relates to an important broader point. **School-based recovery support should form part of a trauma recovery continuum.** Services should wrap around and support children, families and communities, targeting key intervention points, throughout the recovery process. The continuum of supports should be evidence-based and holistic. The **Attachment** to this submission illustrates Save the Children’s emergency response program suite as an example.

Two particularly important aspects of this broader recovery continuum are:

- Enabling children’s voices, agency and participation in decisions and activities in their communities that relate to disaster planning, preparedness and recovery. Children have a right to be heard and

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<sup>7</sup> See, eg, A McFarlane and M Van Hooff, 2009, ‘Impact of childhood exposure to a natural disaster on adult mental health: 20-year longitudinal follow-up study’, *British Journal of Psychiatry* 195: 142-8; L Gibbs et al, 2019, ‘Delayed disaster impacts on academic performance of primary school children’, *Child Development* 90(4): 1402-12; Centre for Education Statistics and Evaluation, 2020, *The impact of bushfires on student wellbeing and student learning*, NSW Department of Education.

<sup>8</sup> L Alexander, L Carpenter, J Simpson and L Gibbs, 2021, *Journey of Hope Evaluation*, Save the Children Australia and University of Melbourne, available at <https://www.savethechildren.org.au/getmedia/7a14b618-c1a6-4290-93a1-d73656bd06fc/JoH-evaluation-report.pdf.aspx>. See also the Evaluation Summary, available at <https://www.savethechildren.org.au/getmedia/34ff73ad-d21b-48f6-ad7c-c915297f99d7/JoH-evaluation-sum.pdf.aspx>.

<sup>9</sup> Finance and Public Administration References Committee, December 2021, *Lessons to be learned in relation to the Australian bushfire season 2019-20*, Final Report, Commonwealth of Australia, pp 44-5; Australian Government, 2021, *The National Children’s Mental Health and Wellbeing Strategy*, p 40.

taken seriously, and to participate, in decisions affecting them. **Meaningful participation directly enhances children’s wellbeing, supports recovery and builds resilience, as well as improving policy design and implementation.** Effective programs and approaches exist to support meaningful participation in practice, and have recently been delivered with children and young people in Eurobodalla, Shoalhaven, Mid Coast and East Gippsland (in Victoria) after the 2019-20 bushfires. We would be happy to provide more information about this.

- Some specific risks escalate after an event like the 2022 floods. As noted above, **increased domestic and family violence is a particular concern, and is commonly associated with other toxic stressors and sources of harm to children**, including increased alcohol and other drug use and mental ill-health in families. It is important that this is addressed through effective services and supports focused specifically on both children and adults, including upskilling of non-specialist services that may have contact with children and adults who have experienced violence.

### **The relevance of climate change**

It is important to also recognise that **climate change is making major disasters like the 2022 floods more frequent and more severe.** This has important implications for future disaster preparedness, response and recovery in NSW, as part of the broader disaster risk reduction cycle. In particular:

- The climate crisis is multiplying the negative impact of events like the 2022 floods on children’s mental health and wellbeing. Save the Children regularly hears from the children we work with that the threat of climate change is a constant, ongoing source of anxiety, stress and fear that is compounded when major disasters strike. This adds to a context for children that also includes the exceptional instability and uncertainty of the COVID-19 pandemic and, especially recently, the turmoil and ‘shifting sands’ of global conflict. Children’s wellbeing is under extraordinary pressure.
- This generation of children will be more exposed to natural hazards and disasters like the 2022 floods than any before. Under the current – and inadequate – Paris Agreement pledges, a child born in Australia in 2020 can expect to experience over four times as many heatwaves, 3.4 times as many droughts, 1.4 times as many river floods and 1.3 times as many bushfires as their grandparents.<sup>10</sup> This sobering fact makes it more important than ever to focus strongly on addressing children’s unique needs in disasters and for this to be done holistically across all phases of disaster risk management.
- Children are the most affected by climate change, yet are the least heard in decision-making and debates about the issue. As noted above, children have a right to be heard and taken seriously in discussions and decisions about issues that affect them. Climate change and its impacts, including the 2022 floods, are a paradigm example. Governments must be accountable to children for their decisions and actions in relation to climate change, the environment and disaster risk management. Children must have the opportunity to participate meaningfully in decision-making about these matters, from decisions made in their local communities to policy-making and legislative and budgetary responses at the State level.

### **Summary of recommendations**

The comments provided throughout this submission can be distilled into 5 key recommendations:

1. The NSW Government should strengthen its focus on addressing the unique needs of children in disasters, in preparedness, response, recovery and resilience-building.
2. The NSW Government should continue to strengthen arrangements to ensure that child-focused services, including Child Friendly Spaces, can be rapidly and efficiently deployed in all evacuation and recovery centres in future disasters, in a way that is coordinated with other essential services and includes clear public communication about their availability.

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<sup>10</sup> Save the Children, 2021, *Born into the climate crisis: Why we must act now to secure children’s rights*, available at <https://resourcecentre.savethechildren.net/document/born-climate-crisis-why-we-must-act-now-secure-childrens-rights/>.

3. The NSW Government should ensure there is adequate support for victims-survivors of domestic and family violence in evacuation and recovery centres, and in communities during recovery – importantly, including both adults and children who have been impacted by violence.
4. The NSW Government should invest in long-term, community-led, child-centred trauma recovery services, including dedicated funding for school-based wellbeing and resilience supports, programs to enable children’s participation in local decision-making and planning, and enhanced supports addressing increased risks of domestic and family violence and other harmful post-disaster trends.
5. The NSW Government should:
  - a. explicitly and strongly recognise the impact of climate change on children and their rights, including the impact of climate change in driving severe events such as the 2022 floods, and
  - b. commit to being accountable to children for its decisions relating to climate change, the environment and disaster risk management, including in relation to the 2022 floods, and should create specific mechanisms for children’s participation in these decisions.

Thank you for considering this submission. I would be very pleased to provide more detail or discuss it further. For further information, please don’t hesitate to contact either myself or Howard Choo, our Australian Policy and Advocacy Lead at [howard.choo@savethechildren.org.au](mailto:howard.choo@savethechildren.org.au).

Yours sincerely,



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Attachment – Save the Children’s emergency response program suite

