

ClubsNSW Submission NSW Independent Bushfire Inquiry

ClubsNSW thanks the NSW Independent Bushfire Inquiry for the opportunity to lodge a submission.

ClubsNSW is the peak body for the 1,300 not-for-profit registered clubs in NSW.

Clubs are the backbone of their communities and proved that again during the recent bushfire crisis.

Clubs play a vital role in providing community infrastructure and a place where people can come together to seek support, friendship and a sense of belonging. They are a social hub upon which many have come to depend.

In times of crisis and natural disaster, clubs respond to the needs of the communities by becoming evacuation centres and refuges; offering shelter, food and physical and moral support for victims, volunteers, first-responders and even wildlife and pets.

The facilities and efforts that clubs provide in times of crisis such as bushfires are desperately needed and provided willingly. Clubs form a key part of the emergency response and ClubsNSW believes that their contribution cannot be underestimated.

Following the outbreak of bushfires, at least 38 clubs served as evacuation centres and refuges for their communities.

These clubs took in 24,000 displaced people who were desperate to shelter themselves and their families. The people taken in by clubs were highly distressed; many watched the fires spread, wondering if their homes, farms and loved ones were at risk.

The challenges faced by clubs were compounded by the diverse needs of the evacuees, which included people that had a disability, people that were elderly, and mothers with newborns.

Club Sapphire Merimbula provided overnight accommodation to over 1,000 people including people experiencing breathing difficulties and high anxiety.

An image which encapsulates the challenges faced by clubs shows a woman washing her baby using a tap at the bar.



A person cleans her baby in the bar sink of Bermagui Country Club.

The clubs which served as evacuation centres gave their communities a safe place to eat and sleep, providing a total of 40,000 meals.

Given the critical function of clubs in sheltering their communities, ClubsNSW wishes to provide feedback on the third and fifth points of the Inquiry's terms of reference; on responses to the bushfire and preparation and planning for future bushfires, respectively.

Various NSW Government agencies and bodies provided assistance to clubs which acted as evacuation centres, including the provision of counselling, medical and veterinary services for the residents taking shelter in the clubs.

While the assistance provided by the NSW Government was vital, ClubsNSW considers that the experience of the 2019-20 Bushfires provides valuable practical insights to inform how the NSW Government can better support clubs which are capable of assisting their communities during future natural disasters.



To best prepare for future bushfires and other natural disasters, ClubsNSW recommends that governments of all levels develop a strategy to:

- proactively identify clubs in regional NSW that are capable of acting as an evacuation centre in the event of a bushfire or other natural disaster;
- assist those clubs to install facilities that are sufficient to operate an evacuation centre, such as facilities to support multi-night accommodation as well as young children, elderly people and pets;
- ensure that, once a natural disaster strikes a community, it is clear which agency the club should take direction from to ascertain whether the club is expected to be an evacuation centre, the role the club is expected to play and the assistance the club will receive; and
- provide a transparent and clear process for clubs to be compensated for their out-of-pocket expenses incurred in assisting their community.

Should you wish to discuss this submission further, please contact [REDACTED],

[REDACTED]
[REDACTED]



A person uses a supermarket trolley to seat her young child at Club Sapphire.



How clubs responded to the 2019-20 bushfires

Following the heavy outbreak of bushfires in September 2019, clubs in affected zones were required to immediately cease trading and accommodate their communities.

Some clubs provided more than 10 days of continuous overnight accommodation, with people creating makeshift beds on couches, chairs and the floor.

The following examples demonstrate the extraordinary role clubs played in protecting their communities:

- Staff at Bermagui Country Club worked 42 hours straight, sheltering over 2,000 people and preparing 2,500 meals;
- Over five days, Club Taree provided bedding for up to 800 people, served 6,601 meals and accommodated 150 animals;
- Laurieton United Services Club was suddenly required to accommodate more than 1,200 people and 130 animals;
- Mittagong RSL Club provided over 2,600 meals which were distributed to volunteers of the NSW Rural Fire Service;
- Despite having an earlier power outage, Moruya Golf Club served cooked meals to more than 200 fire fighters in the RFS;
- Colburra Bowling and Recreation Club provided shelter for approximately 1,000 people and had bedding in the kitchens.

ClubsNSW interviewed club personnel and community residents who were impacted by the bushfires on the South Coast. The video showing the interviews can be found [here](#).

Clubs must have sufficient facilities

Clubs tend to occupy large, sheltered venues that include kitchen facilities, which means clubs are an ideal venue to serve as an evacuation centre. It is for this reason that clubs are often expected by their local communities to provide refuge and shelter.

However, many clubs do not have the breadth of resources to sufficiently accommodate hundreds if not thousands of community members, on some occasions for several consecutive nights. As experienced in the recent bushfires, clubs may also require backup generators to ensure they can continue to support their occupants.

As demonstrated during the bushfires, there are diverse community needs which require clubs to have facilities that can accommodate babies, elderly people and pets.

ClubsNSW recommends that clubs capable of acting as an evacuation centre in future natural disasters should be supported by the NSW Government to install and develop the necessary facilities to accommodate the diverse needs of their community.

Clear direction

As demonstrated by the 2019-20 bushfires, the emergence of a natural disaster may involve immediate and rapid developments, including power outages, overwhelmed phone and internet systems and a sudden arrival of panicked residents at the local club, many with their pets.

In these circumstances, it is vital that the club's secretary manager is immediately aware of whether their venue is required to be an evacuation centre, and, if so, the role the club is expected to play.

For instance, clubs must know whether they are expected to accommodate animals, provide food and drinks or provide overnight accommodation. Clubs must also know the support that will be provided government agencies and bodies, such as counselling, medical and veterinary services.

Upon the outbreaks of the 2019-20 bushfires, some clubs did not know whether to seek advice on their expected role from the local police, local council or Rural Fire Service.

ClubsNSW recommends that for subsequent natural disasters, a dedicated agency or body be authorised to give clubs direction on:

- whether and when the club is expected to serve as evacuation centre;
- the role the club is expected to play (for instance, whether the club is expected to accommodate people with a disability or pets, and whether the club is expected to provide overnight accommodation); and
- the assistance the club will receive.



Reimbursement for out-of-pocket expenses

Clubs who transform into evacuation centres must cease all trade, which includes closing the gaming machine room and ceasing the service of food and liquor.

By ceasing trade, clubs experience a substantial loss of revenue which may exceed 50% for a month or quarter.

In addition to the loss of revenue, clubs may also incur out-of-pocket expenses of providing food and beverages to their communities, free of charge.

Subsequent to the bushfires, many clubs recovered these expenses through ad-hoc requests to the NSW Government.

ClubNSW recommends that there be a transparent and clear process for clubs to be compensated for their out-of-pocket expenses in assisting the community.

By providing clubs with confidence that their out of pocket expenses will be reimbursed, clubs will be in a better position to budget and prepare for the expenses involved in accommodating evacuees, such as purchasing food, water and bedding.

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