

16 November 2023

Build it back somewhere better: A national conversation on assisted relocations

Suncorp Group and Natural Hazards Research Australia have today released a discussion paper to help drive a national conversation on giving communities at high-risk of being repeatedly impacted by extreme weather the opportunity to be relocated out of harm's way.

The discussion paper was developed out of a roundtable held in Canberra in September with more than 40 senior executives and experts from government, research, community, and corporate sectors and hosted by Suncorp Group and Natural Hazards Research Australia

It aims to kick start the conversation for key policy makers to include locally tailored assisted relocations – or buyouts or managed retreats - in Australia's disaster resilience strategy which would include moving communities from high natural hazard risk areas to lower risk areas.

At the roundtable, case studies of the successes and limitations of relocations were considered, including the small town of Grantham in the Lockyer Valley in Queensland where many residents were moved to higher ground after the 2011 floods.

Policy ideas discussed in the paper being released today include:

- A national map of natural hazards risks that identifies priority areas.
- A small number of risk-based assisted relocation planning trials to be undertaken and evaluated, building on buybacks already taking place in Queensland and New South Wales.
- Local councils to develop a plan for consulting with First Nations communities.
- Over the longer term the natural hazards risk map should indicate areas for resilience upgrades, or assisted relocations.

Lisa Harrison, CEO Consumer Insurance, Suncorp Group said while similar conversations have been happening around the world in recent years including in Canada and New Zealand, it's time for assisted relocations to be part of Australia's disaster resilience strategy.

"This is an important first step in developing the discussion paper and kickstarting this national conversation. It was great to see such a collaborative approach to this important but complex issue," Ms Harrison said.

"As a member of the Hazards Insurance Partnership, which aims to drive targeted investment and policy solutions in disaster risk mitigation to put downward pressure on insurance premiums, I have seen first-hand the collective focus is now clearly on disaster mitigation rather than just recovery.

"Suncorp commends the Federal Government for taking the lead setting up the Hazard Insurance Partnership, the Disaster Ready Fund and establishing the new National Emergency Management Agency.

“We applaud the Queensland and New South Wales governments for setting up Resilient Homes Funds to buy back, raise and retrofit flood damaged homes.

“And we also welcome the recent decision by the New South Wales government to no longer build housing on high-risk flood plains in Western Sydney after National Cabinet agreed last year to end development on floodplains.

“But if we are serious about improving our natural hazard resilience, we need to go one step further and include assisted relocations as part of our national resilience strategy alongside other disaster mitigation measures.

“We can’t keep rebuilding in the same at-risk areas and hoping for a different result.

“Suncorp Group has long advocated for a four-point plan to build a more resilient Australia through insurance tax reform, public mitigation infrastructure, private household assistance and improved land use planning (including assisted relocations).

“This paper is an example of our commitment to helping to drive the national conversation on natural hazards resilience, working together with our partners across the government, research, community, and corporate sectors.”

Andrew Gissing, Chief Executive Officer, Natural Hazards Research Australia said the roundtable discussion was an opportunity to bring together a wide range of representatives from across government, business, community and research to support people relocating from areas at high risk of natural hazards.

“Successful relocation requires a partnership between all these sectors of our society, it cannot be a top-down approach. The evidence from a number of examples of assisted relocation shows what can go well when a coordinated and collaborative approach is taken, and what can go wrong when these changes are imposed. The best support for those threatened by natural hazards is all about ‘doing with’ rather than ‘doing to’ communities,” Mr Gissing said.

“This highlights the need for further research to fully evaluate these current programs of relocated communities, so we have a clearer idea of what works and what doesn’t.

“We know this is a complex issue but if we can learn from what is happening both here and internationally then we can understand how governments, emergency services, business and the community can all work better together on keeping people safe.”

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