

From: [NSW Government](#)
To: [Flood Inquiry](#)
Subject: Floods Inquiry
Date: Friday, 20 May 2022 9:44:21 PM



Your details

Title

First name

Last name

Email

Postcode

Submission details

I am making this submission as

A member of the general public

Submission type

I am making a personal submission

Consent to make submission public

I would like this submission to remain anonymous

Share your experience or tell your story

Your story

I live in East Lismore with my husband and 3 children. We have lived in Lismore since 2010. We love Lismore and our community. We are active in the community through our local public school, church and sporting clubs, amongst other community groups. We were not directly flood affected but did have some storm damage to our home from the

February rain event.

We are deeply heartbroken for our friends who have had their homes and businesses destroyed, some only just recovering from the 2017 flood. We are heartbroken for the loss that Lismore has suffered, the complete destruction of our CBD - truly the beating heart of our beautiful community - much loved services such as our library, our sporting fields and clubs. We are heartbroken for the many vulnerable members of our community who live in North, South Land East Lismore and the loss they have sustained and the challenges they have and are facing to rebuild their lives.

We are concerned about the future of Lismore, how we can recover from a flood more than 2 meters higher than the planned-for worst case scenario. How we can recover from 2 floods in such a short space of time, how our traumatised community can be supported, how our city can be flood safe, how Lismore and surrounds will be supported by state and federal governments to be flood safe and how we can create a new normal.

Terms of Reference (optional)

The Inquiry welcomes submissions that address the particular matters identified in its [Terms of Reference](#)

1.1 Causes and contributing factors

Acknowledgement of the increasing severity and frequency of floods in Lismore and the Northern Rivers and link to climate change by all levels of government would be a good place to start. Not long after the February 28 flood, our federal member publicised that they had secured funding for a study and engineering solution and were claiming that the discussion was over in regard to flood mitigation! If we acknowledge that the cause of the floods is linked to climate change, we will see that engineering may only be a minor part of the solution. Rather we need to adapt to the changing environment and

weather patterns. We cannot change that Lismore was settled in the flood plain where the Wilson River and Leycester Creek meet and that settlers did not heed advice of local Aboriginal elders in the 1800's that Lismore does flood and can flood in a catastrophic way. Also, we cannot just rebuild and assume business as usual, because we know from climate models that these extreme events are increasing in frequency and severity. We need to adapt and seriously re-think land use in Lismore, what can cope with being flooded (potentially sporting fields, parks and green space) and what can't (homes, our CBD and businesses and essential services).

1.2 Preparation and planning

The destruction of the February 28 flood did not occur for lack of preparation and planning. Anyone who lives in the floodplain is aware of the risk of flood and many people have plans. But they can't plan for something they don't know about. Information in the leadup to the flood from the SES kept changing with the predicted peak water levels being revised upwards every few hours. Importantly, even late on the eve of the levy overtopping, people were advised it wouldn't be higher than 2017. Businesses and homeowners made important decisions based on that information only to find that the information was totally wrong! Most businesses and services operating in the flood zone have a flood plan and activated that. The days before the flood were extremely busy with our community supporting businesses and services in town to prepare for the flood. We all knew a flood was coming. There had been too much rain. We helped a business and the library shift stock and goods to the upper floors which had never been flooded and were part of the plan to be flood-wise and prepared. Amongst the devastation of the February 28 flood there are some small, good news stories. Generally, the Lismore Library ground level floods but the 1st and 2nd floors were not considered to flood. The Lismore Toy Library, a

small community group, run entirely by volunteers, is located in the bottom floor of the Lismore Library. The flood plan (at a very basic level) for the Toy Library and the Lismore library is to move everything up to the higher floors. In 2017 the Lismore Toy library managed to move many of its toys up to higher levels. However, items which could not be moved as well as shelving and storage cupboards were destroyed. Following the 2017 flood, the Lismore Toy Library secured grant funding to purchase shelving on wheels which would fit in the library's lift. This made it possible for all the goods and the shelving to be easily moved up to higher levels as per the flood plan. On Sunday 27th the Lismore library was a hive of activity with library staff and volunteers moving library items/materials/books to higher levels, as well as volunteers moving Toy library items up to higher levels. The activation of the Toy library flood plan was smooth and efficient due to all shelving having wheels that could be pushed into the lift and be moved higher. The Lismore Toy library was directed to move shelving up to the 2nd floor and this meant that all items were saved. An incredible outcome for the Toy Library. Sadly, it was a terrible outcome for the Lismore Library. Flood water entered the 1st floor of the library and many items moved from the ground floor, as well as the children's and parenting collection, junior and youth fiction, adult fiction collections were lost. This is a great loss, as our library is a safe place and very much-loved place in our community, especially our children and young people. It is important to note that the manager of the Lismore library is an incredible leader and community member. She worked tirelessly with her staff to do everything they could for the library.

1.3 Response to floods

Firstly, I would like to acknowledge the many members of our community had traumatic and distressing experiences and rescues and in no way what I say is intended to discount that. There has been a lot of criticism about the

response to the flood. From discussions with friends and community members and what I have seen in the media and on social media, there is a feeling that the Lismore community was abandoned by SES, police and ADF. I can imagine if there were more resources available that rescues may have been faster, maybe safer and maybe some different outcomes. We will never know what could have been. It is worth reflecting on how communities can be supported better by the SES, police and ADF. I hope this inquiry will help achieve that goal.

I would like to comment on what I did see and hear about the Lismore community. I heard countless stories of incredible brave community members, on boats, kayaks and jet skis, risking their own lives to rescue the many people trapped in flooded houses and stranded on their roofs. Nonetheless with all these uncoordinated watercraft operated by people without training for disaster situations, it was amazing that there were no further fatalities arising from the actual rescue efforts. I've heard accounts of rescued people falling overboard from a tinny because of being jolted by the wake of a speeding jet-ski; tinnies being punctured by a street sign post when lifted and then dropped by a wave of another speeding rescue vessel. Nonetheless, there was a need and community stepped up in a phenomenal way and did everything they could until the SES, police and ADF could provide more support. These were incredible circumstances that resulted in an incredible response. We need to celebrate and acknowledge the bravery and commitment to support the community through our darkest hour.

A friend assisted with coordinating the rescues by identifying request for help from facebook, as 000 and SES calls were over loaded and beyond capacity. Aside from rescues, our community responded to the disaster in other vitally important ways too. A local GP friend was at SCU meeting helicopters (Westpac, ADF and

others) who were completing rescues to triage injured people and have them transferred to the Lismore Base Hospital as efficiently as possible. He volunteered many shifts after his normal job and as well as set up a roster to ensure local medically trained volunteers were there to help.

I believe that all of this should be celebrated and acknowledge the incredible resilience, independence, skill and strength our community has. I believe we need to remember that this was a natural disaster of catastrophic proportions.

**1.4 Transition
from incident
response to
recovery**

As with many Lismore locals who were not flood affected, I went to help out as soon as I could in our community. For the most part, I found incredible support and willingness to help those flood affected by our local community and from people further afield. However, there were 2 points I found very concerning, regarding spontaneous volunteers and donations. In regard to spontaneous volunteers, I believe most assistance was provided in a respectful way. However, I did observe firsthand spontaneous volunteers, both local and from out of town, behaving in very distressing ways and adding to trauma for people who had distressing rescues and had lost their homes and possessions. In responding to a disaster there is adrenalin and a lot of it! People want to help and help as many people as they can. Many flood-affected people report having volunteers arrive at their property and without consent or request for instruction, throw flood affected belongings onto the side of the road. Volunteers see it as rubbish and are not looking at what is valuable, sentimental or can be salvaged. In some instances, the behaviour was blatantly unsafe and could be labelled hooliganism. For example, throwing furniture through closed glass windows from a raised house onto the road, spraying glass everywhere and making the property non-securable; or damaging the concrete steps and making access to the raised house unsafe. It appeared as if these 'helpers' saw the clean-up

as an opportunity to do things that they would never ever get away with any other time. This type of behaviour is unsafe, disrespectful and unacceptable

A lady I know, said the whole 1st floor of her flooded house was cleared out without her knowledge or consent, including her family photos and other precious belongings which could have been saved. She was upstairs dealing with some other things while this happened at a rapid speed. At another friend's house in North Lismore, I saw spontaneous volunteers (I believe from out of town) throwing large pieces of furniture from 1st and 2nd floors to a rubbish pile on the side of the road. I also saw spontaneous volunteers push large items such as a fridge down flights of stairs. It seemed that this was less about volunteers helping and more about ego. I found this distressing and when I asked the volunteers if they had permission to do this, they said the owner was ok about. This made me reflect on several things, I believe there is a very important need for training our community when they volunteer post disaster. Volunteers need to understand that flood/disaster affected people are traumatised, can't think clearly and have trouble making decisions. I believe the highest priority is to be respectful to the flood affected people and their belongings. If volunteers imagined that it was their family photos or their child's kindy drawings and family heirlooms been thrown with disregard onto a rubbish pile, maybe (hopefully) they would think twice about their behaviour and be respectful and seeking consent. It is not about how fast people's homes are cleared out. It's not a race! The process is most important and that it is respectful. Having said all of this, it is important to acknowledge that many many spontaneous volunteers did incredible respectful work helping people get through the mammoth job of clearing out and cleaning their flood affected homes.

Sadly, stories of looting of affected properties

and businesses were also abundant.

In regard to donations, there was an overwhelming amount of donations which were given after the flood. Again, I think our community would benefit with some education around donations and be encouraged to think about their motive.

I volunteered at the SCU evacuation centre in the days after the flood and the most pressing need was sorting of donations of clothing, the sheer volume of donations was affecting the ability to help people and meet their needs. I was there for days with many people sorting huge quantities of clothes. The volume of clothes, bedding etc was incredible, large rooms full of clothes and household items. Yes, people who have left their flooded house with nothing but what they are wearing, will need some clothing and blankets immediately after entering a recovery centre. But to assume that they want to replace all their clothes and household items with 2nd hand belongings is unreasonable.

There is a time and a place for 2nd hand donations. This is particularly in the first week post disaster when other avenues are cut off or destroyed. However, the response needs to be respectful, ensuring dignity of flood affected people. If the quantity of clothing donations could somehow be managed, this would have freed up a large number of volunteers to help in other ways. In the week after the flood there was large rooms full of clothes and household items such as bed linen, pillows, doonas, blankets and towels etc. I understand that it became an issue of space and a short time later (I don't know exactly how long), large quantities of the items were removed and went to landfill. Not only is that an incredible waste of clothing and household items, but it is also a waste of resources. Many people spent many days organising these items only to have them thrown out. I don't have a solution about how this could be managed but I know that it wasn't well done. It is important to acknowledge, definitely there is

a place for donations following a disaster, but it has to be reasonable and measured. There have been many donations that have been well managed and helping flood affected people very effectively for example, the food pantry on Wyrallah Road and at the Koori mail and donations managed through GIVIT. Also, the timing is very important, immediately post flood, we don't need massive number of beds and fridges and furniture etc, there are no houses to put them in!

I think it is important for people donating 'things' and money to be mindful of their motives. I know a flood affected person needed a fridge, she found a woman on facebook willing to donate and deliver it to her from a nearby city. However, the person donating the fridge insisted that the flood affected person must tell her story and show her flood affected house in exchange for the fridge. This re-traumatised the flood affected person and found the whole process very distressing and commented that it wasn't worth the fridge. It was very disrespectful and inconsiderate of the person donating. I am sure that the person donating did not intend to be disrespectful and inconsiderate, however, maybe they were just unaware of the impact of their request. It would be great if our community and country was educated on how best to respond in a disaster. I believe people see the disaster unfold on tv/ social media and feel helpless and they are desperate to help and they feel better by donating things. It is important to remember post disaster, the flood affected people are the highest priority and it's not about donors and making them feel better and allay their conscience. In general, if you want to donate, CASH IS BEST!!!!

1.5 Recovery from floods

Lismore is sort of recovering. Some shops are opening in the CBD but we don't know what the future holds and whether the CBD will stay or be moved, whether homes will be bought back by the government etc etc etc. We're all tired, so very tired. I see many flood

affected friends and they all share look of complete exhaustion and weariness in their faces, you can see it in their eyes and the trauma, stress and weariness they carry. It is distressingly notable. The flood has a great personal cost to our community as a whole and most significantly to those directly impacted. Housing is likely the biggest immediate issue to address. We had a housing crisis before the flood hit and now have lost another 3000 or so dwellings. Knowing that these events are likely to reoccur more frequently and more severe, relocation needs to play an important part of the solution. There is an urgent need for quick decisions and courageous leadership to offer relocation programs – land-swaps, buy-back schemes, relocation of homes particularly out of North and South Lismore and schemes for raising the floor level of houses in East Lismore. People need to have certainty soon in terms of what the options will be. Many are trapped by mortgages over houses now potentially worthless and definitely uninsurable. Houses that are structurally intact could be relocated onto floodfree land and rebuilt there – so we don't need to start from scratch and the owners have a sense of familiarity and attachment that provides social stability and ultimately an important story to tell. We need creative strong intelligent leadership to manage this very complex situation.

My children have asked if we will move from Lismore now that our town has been destroyed. We talk about it and come back to the main fact, we love Lismore and our community and its our home. We know we will recover but it will be tough.

1.6 Any other matters

From the recent floods I have observed recovery is made up of many things:

- Helping friends clear mud out of their house;
- Making food and delivering it to strangers who are working hard;
- Washing clothes and toys for people affected

people;

- Cleaning lego;
- Cleaning and repairing salvageable items like bikes and washing machines;
- Cleaning and drying photos and paper work;
- Storing friend's photos and important documents in a freezer until they have the time and energy to go through them and work out which ones to salvage;
- Minding kids so parents can go and help;
- Volunteering with the amazing community organisations like the Resilient Lismore – Helping Hands and Koori Mail;
- Cooking and cooking food to give;
- Organising and managing and donating to foodbanks;
- Donating your time and skills to support flood affected people as they try to repair their houses and businesses.

This is not a conclusive list but it does high light that it takes a whole community to recovery from a flood and we have an incredible depth, capacity and resilience in our community.

Supporting documents or images

Attach files

- [LismoreToyLibrary packed up 2nd floor.jpg](#)
 - [LibraryFlood.jpg](#)
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LESMORE CITY LIBRARY



