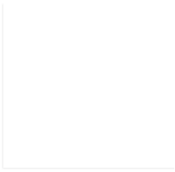


From: [NSW Government](#)
To: [Flood Inquiry](#)
Subject: Floods Inquiry
Date: Friday, 20 May 2022 9:09:38 PM



Your details

Title	Ms
First name	Lisa
Last name	Cameron
Email	
Postcode	2480

Submission details

I am making this submission as	A resident in a flood-affected area
Submission type	I am making a personal submission
Consent to make submission public	I give my consent for this submission to be made public

Share your experience or tell your story

Your story	May 20th, 2022
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My story is not over yet, nor is anyone's and we slowly understand, reluctantly, that the recovery will be very long and that it will be months if not years before there is any semblance of the life we once chose. Our stories are far from over as we wait - on so many levels. Maybe our next

government may pay more attention to climate change and maybe there will be a desire to turn things around such that we don't see a further escalation of what we are already experiencing. That is a pretty big maybe.

Our stories are far from over and I realise this with a heavy heart as all we yearn for right now is to go home and to have some ease in our everyday lives, such as we knew before. The due date for submission to be heard however is today, so I will submit my story thus far, knowing that we will probably enter an even deeper abyss of struggle beyond this day, before we finally climb up the other side and feel a greater sense of recovery and wholeness.

It has been nearly 3 months since our lives were suddenly changed and we were set adrift to navigate a journey we hadn't chosen to embark upon.

Many have told their stories of being inside their houses as the waters rose, stories of waiting to be rescued and not knowing if they would survive. I feel the terror as I read them and I cry each time. Reading these stories has been a cathartic response and a way of releasing some of my own grief, a way of feeling a part of a collective experience in which I have felt very separate at times.

We left early on the Sunday before the catastrophic flood and were spared the harrowing experience which so many shared on the morning of Feb 28th.

The morning was not without drama however, despite us being 'safe'. We woke at 6am to water already coming up to the driveway of our friends' house in Girard's Hill and the power cut. We quickly rose and moved our cars to higher ground and spent the day vigilantly conserving power on our phones and watching as the

waters engulfed half the yard, stopping 4 steps shy of the floor boards in the later afternoon. Our hosts were rescuing neighbours from houses below theirs, gifting warm clothes to elderly people who were dripping wet from the torrential rain which didn't even wish to consider ceasing. So we had a distraction from what we knew was happening to our beautiful house in North Lismore - raised above any historic flood level to 12.98m many years before. At the height of knowing our house was being inundated by water, I sat with my cello and played Bach. That evening we ate by candlelight and played scrabble with an extra five points for every flood-related word. We set alarms to check the number of steps we had throughout the night to be sure the waters were not rising further.

And then we waited, rationing our food, on the island of Girard's Hill, for the waters to subside. We waited, uncertain as to what we would find when we could go back. There was a joy in not yet knowing and a terror as well, as we knew that the moment we could go back, we would also have to accept that it was true. With that much water, it's a long wait and after 4 sleeps away from home, we got through. We left the island and entered what the army later referred to as looking like a war zone. If you didn't see it with your own eyes, you can never know. If you saw it through a screen, be grateful you were spared the true reality of what a life sized version of these images reveals. And if you haven't been here since, you can also be thankful. It is no less shocking to drive through town today than it was 2 months ago. Progress is slow as the task is so big.

Nearly three months on, our home is a skeleton, our memories erased and carried to land fill. Our garden, tended with such care, wears a cloak of mud - still - there will be no harvest of citrus this year. Our hearts break every time we drive through what used to be our town and we

wonder how to answer the questions which keep on coming: “How are you?”, “Are you back in your house yet?”, “Do you need anything?”, “How are the girls?”, “What can I do?”

I’m not sure any of us truly know how or who we are anymore. Since returning to work 4 weeks ago and getting through the disconnect of being away from my traumatised community, I step into the role of functional teacher each morning and on some levels it is a welcome distraction and my investment of energy has tangible outcomes. I deliver my lessons in an upbeat, inspired manner. I treat my students with care, knowing that they too, have lived a high level of trauma over these past years and that none of us is particularly solid right now. At moments in between, the shadows of grief, helplessness, hopelessness and despair reach for me. I don’t know how long it will take for our house to be fixed. Maybe in time for Christmas? Apparently Easter has been and gone. I don’t know if it will ever feel like home again and I don’t know how long it will take for any of us to feel truly safe in the world again. How long will it take to integrate the trauma of losing so much and how can we face the risk of it happening again?

This was not a flood like Lismore has done before. Yes, a major flood is traumatic and devastating for businesses, yet major floods have been done before and we know we can recover from them. This flood was catastrophic and to this day I still can not fathom the volumes of water which rushed into our catchment and flooded so many homes and businesses, destroying so many livelihoods. It is a testament to our community of selfless rescuers that there were not more lives lost.

Our house sits at least 2.5 metres above the ground and it held 1.75m of water at the peak of the flood. My youngest daughter has measured the level in each room and we know that the

flood in North Lismore was at least 14.7m high. Not that that story will be told as we don't wish to put the context of the levee raising the height of water levels in North and South Lismore to the forefront when there is already such a sense of our community having been let down...

We came back from a major flood 5 years before. That was traumatic and as it was our first, it took its toll on things stored under the house and the loss of our washing machine and drier. That flood also rose higher than initially predicted, so this time we didn't take any chances, I had seen what water can do and how much there is to clean up afterwards.

We lifted everything we could to the floor level of the house. I even removed mosaic pavers and bird baths from the garden and stacked them on my back deck, lifted pot plants to higher ground, hoping to save them and to save myself the clean up of things post flood. I knew from before that geraniums and lavender don't survive floods and that foliage will never be clean of the mud. I took up a pot which contained a cutting from my grandmother's geranium I had taken in Adelaide some 15 years ago. Cuttings had moved with me when I moved from Coffee Camp into town nearly 8 years ago and my grandmother was always with me in the garden, in tending the soil and plants, even after she passed.

To be honest, I felt I was overreacting in lifting everything so high - the prediction was for a 10.6m flood at that point which would barely come to the cement slab below our house. At the point of leaving the house to evacuate to friends on Sunday afternoon, mostly to settle the nerves of my youngest daughter and to enjoy a flood adventure - not because we had been told to evacuate (those orders came through many hours after we had already left) - the last thing I did was to lift a couple of books and a journal off my bedroom floor and to lay most of my cellos,

violins and guitars on sofas in the lounge room so they wouldn't be touching floor level (just in case!) At that point I really questioned my sanity, but in hindsight this intuition saved some of my own livelihood. Not so my daughter's piano, and the sound of that being crowbarred apart to get it out of the house will be forever etched in my daughter's mind and I don't know at what point there will be an acceptance of the loss of an instrument which was so integral to our wellbeing and kept us connected to ourselves and to our dear music teacher, friend and fellow musician who passed of cancer 2 years before. She sat at a piano last weekend and burst into tears. Who can blame her?

There is a phrase that these items are just things and they can be replaced. I understand the essence of this sentiment and I have told it to myself many times over as we cleared our house of our lives without having the time or space needed to process the letting go of things we had held dear. However, this sentiment brings with it a subtle underlying judgement that if you are feeling grief for things, it is somehow not OK. How can we ever truly let go and integrate if we do not allow ourselves to first fully feel the loss and to acknowledge the true extent of this experience? It is only now, months on, that these feelings have space (though I can't say they are always welcome - we too would rather already be recovered).

The fact that we were 'lucky' not to have to be rescued also stands in the way of us allowing ourselves to feel the pain of our own processes. And as my youngest says - it was not so much luck as that we made a wise decision to leave when we did. In the hierarchy of grief and loss, this deems us less worthy of our processes than those who have been through greater traumas. And then there is resilience - one of the buzz words used to describe our community and our ability to recover. I would think that most

people's resilience, like my own, has worn thin by now and there are few uplifting outcomes to encourage the perseverance that this chapter truly requires.

We are also lucky to have somewhere to live in the meantime. We were offered a furnished rental 3 weeks after the first flood and we came together as a family again. None of us actually like living here, but again those feelings are not given space because in the bigger picture we are indeed luckier than so many.

We are all waiting. Waiting to know if the town will ever be able to come back. Waiting to know how long it will take for insurance to fix our house (again we are 'lucky' enough to have insurance. This being a double edged sword as had I taken on the rebuild task independently, we would be living in our house again by now). As it is, the house was in better shape after two weeks solid work than it is at present.

We are waiting. Waiting to know if there will be land swaps - I would happily move my house to higher ground, yet the idea of creating a garden to feed me into the future from scratch again leads me to question whether I have the physical strength and patience required for that. We are waiting to know if there will be compulsory buy-backs, waiting to know if there is any point in repairing a house while it still sits in an area which will never feel truly safe to live in again.

My children are waiting to see if their High School is reparable and in the meantime they exist with the daily tensions of sharing a campus with another High School, knowing that they are not truly welcome, navigating the tensions inherent to everyone who lives in this area and wishing that the adults were more able to step up to the task of holding them in their uncertainties. An adult myself, I see how readily we will fail our children in this sense. If we weren't at breaking

point in the aftermath, we are now. There is no one left unscathed, everyone has lost something and everyone has lost their town. Many have lost their homes and workplaces as well and here the hierarchy of loss plays itself out once more. Survivor's guilt kicks in for all of us, alongside the existential terror and the recognition of our own mortality which Feb 28th brought forth. Yet we expect ourselves to go on functioning, to return to roles we filled before. The world around us would like that too. Our friends and family would like to look at us and not feel concerned, they too would like the security of knowing that everyone will be OK and that life can return to 'normal'.

I don't quite know who I am right now. I am who I was before, yet forever changed by this experience. I feel hollowed out and when I am not functioning and holding space for my children, or for those I teach, or for friends who experienced their own trauma in helping us to clear out our house, or for my parents who have been living in their van for the past 8 weeks helping us out - I cry. I cry on the way to work when I am alone in my car and have no one to hold other than myself. And I often cry on the way home as well when I can let go of my functioning and acknowledge the depth of the loss I feel.

I struggle to make my choices of clothing work when I get dressed in the morning. What combination of garments actually expresses who I am right now? And who am I in these new clothes, generously gifted, but not my own. And then there are my own clothes - carefully washed and returned to me by helpful friends. I am not the same person anymore and I feel a stranger in my old skins as well as in my new.

So we exist in this limbo, edging a void which threatens to pull us in. And I know we are lucky. We really are. We have support, we have insurance, we have some savings, we will be

OK. I have the experience in accessing counselling services prior to this and we slowly put things in place which will support our wellbeing and recovery. All this we have and yet still we are broken and yet to be whole.

How does an area as big as this recover when everyone has been affected and our holdings of ourself and each other are so fragile? On my good days I can appreciate the depth that this experience lends me in my experience as a human being. I can appreciate the joy of the week post flood when I had the chance to reconnect with people dear to me who I have barely seen over the past years of Covid and within the busyness of juggling parenting and working full-time, when I saw the rich tapestry of my life in the connections with many different people from many different communities and felt their love and support. I had nostalgia for those days recently. Despite the horrific sight of our house and the trauma of piling our lives onto the pavement outside, there was a warmth and a buoyancy of spirit in coming together after the great Covid divide. The early weeks were a testament to human kindness and the willingness of everyone to step up and drive ourselves and each other forwards.

I realise now, we were in shock. For many weeks. We didn't feel the fullness of our losses as we were in survival mode, driving towards the next goal. Emptying the house, cleaning the house, cleaning the house again. It was only once those tasks were complete and the waiting began that our feelings slowly came forth. Or maybe it was Covid and having to stop which brought our feelings some space. And the second flood which rocked everyone's sense that recovery was possible and catapulted us into the true reality of what living within climate change is going to look like if we don't have leaders who are sensitive to people before profit.

My body reveals chapters I have forgotten about over time. My wrist I strained during the first week of clean out, my foot I possibly fractured dropping a vacuum cleaner on it when we moved, my knee which is not yet fully scabbed over from falling with full force on slippery asphalt whilst exercising (for the sake of my mental health) - who knows when I will be able to comfortably kneel on that again? A stubborn tennis elbow from lifting too much, too often. My adrenal system is shattered.

I wonder how many others lie sleepless at nights. I rarely have trouble getting to sleep. I am tired, drained. But I have difficulty staying asleep. In the first weeks I often woke after barely a few minutes sleep. Sometimes it was an hour, sometimes more. For weeks I would awake to images of myself lifting sodden music books, novels, poetry, journals written over 35 years from my shelves and throwing them out the window. I learnt last night, whilst reading "An Ordinary Day", these are called flashbacks. My night hours were also the time to process things which had no space during the day. I would awake with something like a panic attack, feeling unsafe in the world and sometimes I would cry. I consciously stopped myself crying the first few days as the primal howl I could feel build inside myself would have frightened not only me but all those around. I have managed feelings of anxiety in the past by being in control. Something this big challenges all our coping strategies and challenges us to grow.

It isn't easy, nor is it comfortable. I appreciate the comfortable home we had all the more now that it is gone. There is nothing easy about daily life anymore. We are constantly confronted with going to get that thing we no longer have or not finding something we know we do have as we can't remember where we put it. Everyday remembers something else we no longer have.

We will have less things on return and that is not a bad thing. Who knows when the next flood will be and how big? We don't want to impose excess belongings on people helping us clear our house a subsequent time. Nor do we want to be attached to things we may lose again. We will have less need of things and be more discerning. We still have each other and in that sense we are lucky. Things could always be worse, though some days I draw little comfort from that sentiment and I know that those who didn't lose their houses will never know how this feels and ironically, they too suffer because of that simple fact.

With time we will create new memories and we will keep them on very high shelves - at at least 16m as apparently at that height, future flood waters will have to disperse. That leaves 60cm below my 3.6m ceilings to store anything precious to us. We will each need a ladder in our rooms.

There is so much more to say, yet there will never be words enough for this experience, at least not now. This too will take time and I expect for many people to be ready to share their stories at all, we would need a submission date further in the future when unspeakable things can be spoken, when we have had more time to heal and I can only hope that most of us make it, that we can keep finding the courage to go on.

Terms of Reference (optional)

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

1.2 Preparation and planning

We were well prepared for a 13m flood, though the prediction when we evacuated was only for a 10.6m flood and no evacuation orders had been given. Had we waited for that, we too would have needed rescuing.

1.3 Response to

Was met by ourselves and friends who

floods supported us for over a week before fire crew and SES came past to check safety of the house.
Koori Mail (our closest centre) was instrumental in providing support in the form of food, cleaning products and equipment.

1.4 Transition from incident response to recovery Other centres such as Lifeline and Threads have been very helpful in providing clothing and essentials.

1.5 Recovery from floods Is a long long way off - physically, mentally and emotionally.

1.6 Any other matters /Users/lisa/Desktop/Dateien Lisa/Flood Photos 2022/IMG_9805.HEIC

Supporting documents or images

Attach files

- [Lounge.jpg](#)
- [Flood Photos Hall.jpg](#)



