

MISSION
AUSTRALIA | together
we stand

NSW Flood Inquiry 2022

Submission



Mission Australia

Submission to the NSW Flood Inquiry

May 2022

About us

Mission Australia is a national Christian charity motivated by a shared vision of an Australia where everyone has a safe home and can thrive. Since 1859, we have been standing alongside people in need across Australia, offering real hope that has lasting impact.

In the 2020-21 financial year, we supported over 150,000 individuals through 474 programs and services across Australia. In NSW we assisted about 57,000 people through 260 services that enable children, young people, families and communities to escape homelessness and thrive. These services assisted children, young people and families with support around housing and homelessness, parenting and child wellbeing, domestic and family violence (DFV), mental health, alcohol and other drugs, and employment, education and training. In the Northern Rivers region we operate a range of services including tenant participation, mental health and youth justice services.

This submission makes some initial observations based on the first-hand accounts of our staff members living in flood-affected regions. We are also working with a consortium of service providers in the Northern Rivers region to undertake a research project into housing needs in the Northern Rivers region following the recent floods. The research will identify gaps in the current suite of housing support interventions, ways to address medium-term challenges to the housing system, and actions to offer better mitigation and protections against future disasters for people experiencing hardship and injustice. The project is expected to finish mid-year and we are happy to provide a copy of the final report to the inquiry if this would be of assistance.

Summary of recommendations

1. The NSW Government should consider levels of functional literacy when developing warning and communication systems.
2. The NSW Government should consider the need for support for community members to access technology and skills development to be able to engage through online and digital platforms.
3. The NSW Government should consider the following in developing disaster preparedness measures:
 - a. Efforts required to build community skills and resilience during non-disaster times, and making sure resources, including financial resources, are available immediately when needed.
 - b. Additional resources of State Emergency Service (SES) and Police in areas where natural disasters are forecast to occur.

- c. The appropriate timescale for the involvement of the Australian Defence Force (ADF) in disaster recovery operations.
4. The NSW Government should address any gaps in its medium to long-term responses to housing need in the Northern Rivers.
5. The NSW Government should consider the additional health and wellbeing support needs of people affected by the flooding, and the intersection of these with people's capacity to sustain stable tenancies.
6. The NSW Government should ensure an adequate supply of social and affordable housing is delivered in communities across the Northern Rivers as part of the rebuilding process.
7. The NSW Government should consider appropriate planning and coordination of housing responses in preparedness for future disasters.
8. The NSW Government should commit to a full, transparent and robust engagement with flood-affected communities about responses to the 2022 floods and preparation for future disasters.

Further recommendations will be provided following the completion of the above-mentioned research report.

ToR 1c. Responses to floods

Immediate management including warnings

Concerns have been raised by our staff members about the reliance on written material in warning messages in the lead-up to the floods.

There are high levels of functional illiteracy among our clients. Almost half (47%) of adult Australians have literacy skills below the minimum level required to meet the increasingly complex demands of a knowledge society, with functional literacy even lower among some population groups including those with low income, not working, and early school leavers.¹ Our staff members reported that not a lot of information was audio-broadcast, leaving people to consume warning messages in writing which some may not have been able to interpret.

In addition, we note that community members, especially those on low incomes, need additional support to access technology and skills development to be able to engage through online and digital platforms in a time of emergency and ongoing through recovery.

¹ Australian Bureau of Statistics, 4102.0 – Australian Social Trends, 2008, <<https://www.abs.gov.au/AUSSTATS/abs@.nsf/Lookup/4102.0Chapter6102008>>

In response to these observations, we recommend that:

- The NSW Government should consider levels of functional literacy when developing warning and communication systems.
- The NSW Government should consider the need for support for community members to access technology and skills development to be able to engage through online and digital platforms.

Resourcing, coordination and deployment including ADF

Media reports at the time of the floods suggested that local community-led responses to the flooding in Lismore were more widespread and more effective than government-led responses. The experience of our staff members confirms this.

It was not clear to community members that Government agencies were preparing for the floods. It did not appear that supplementary resourcing for the SES or Police was considered, with community members observing that local teams were not additionally resourced in preparation for the floods. Calls to both the SES and Police went unanswered, and each had voicemail messages directing calls to the other.

While the SES and Police were present on the ground and their efforts were sincerely appreciated, more people ready on the ground at the outset of the floods may have helped to avert some of the rescue and evacuation efforts that later had to be undertaken.

Community-led responses were observed to be more quickly established and more effective than government-led responses. Social media played a critical role in this, and there was a huge reliance on Facebook and other social media for coordination and communication. There was significant coordination of relief efforts across platforms from the outset, including for rescue and evacuation purposes. The local community pages were collecting and coordinating information about people who needed rescuing including names, addresses and mobility issues. This supported the organisation of the 'tinny brigades', which led to immediate responses from local residents.

The community-led response has continued to evolve over time. Two hubs set up almost immediately by the Koori Mail and Lismore Resilience Helping Hands group grew in sophistication, starting with Emergency Relief-style services and later included resources for clean-up, primary health services, mental health workers and other needed supports. These central hubs in Lismore supported the surrounding smaller towns as well and are still in operation.

The Government hub operating out of Southern Cross University took longer to establish than the community hubs, accompanied by mobile vans provided by Service NSW. While these services are valuable, these hubs do not replicate the types and level of supports available through the community hubs in any observable way.

The Australian Defence Force (ADF) personnel were very helpful in the areas of debris removal and provision of assistance through skilled tradespeople. The presence of skilled tradespeople, such as plumbers and electricians, was vital to early rebuilding and clean-up efforts. However, the ADF

personnel withdrew much earlier than the community wanted them to, for reasons that the community did not feel were properly explained beyond needing to 'return to BAU'. There was and remains a continuing need for ADF resources, which would have a real ongoing impact particularly coming into winter.

On the basis of these observations, we recommend that:

- The NSW Government should consider the following in developing disaster preparedness measures:
 - a. Efforts required to build community skills and resilience during non-disaster times, and making sure resources, including financial resources, are available immediately when needed.
 - b. Additional resources of State Emergency Service (SES) and Police in areas where natural disasters are forecast to occur.
 - c. The appropriate timescale for the involvement of the Australian Defence Force (ADF) in disaster recovery operations.

ToR 1e. Recovery from floods

Housing and homelessness

The lack of affordable, secure and sustainable housing in the Northern Rivers was a critical issue before the flooding. Housing prices were already inflated due to well-documented housing market conditions resulting from COVID. The 2016 Census count estimated that there were 1,494 people experiencing homelessness across the Northern Rivers and, in 2020-21, Specialist Homelessness Services assisted 1,918 people across the Richmond-Tweed region.²

The effect of the floods has in many ways exacerbated existing issues to crisis point. A count of people sleeping rough conducted by the End Street Sleeping collaboration at the end of April found a total of 333 individuals across Byron Shire, Tweed Shire and Lismore, although further work needs to be done to understand the impact of the floods on trend data.³

Our staff in flood-affected regions have observed a complete lack of available long-term properties for people who are homeless, whether their homelessness was caused by or pre-dated the floods.

Even where people have been able to return to their homes, many are living in a single room or reduced area of the house. Some people are still waiting to hear from their insurance company about whether the flood damage is covered under their policy, making further action difficult. There is significant overcrowding, with family and friends trying to stay together in dwellings that are too small.

² End Street Sleeping Collaboration, 2022. Northern Rivers Recovery Data Collection: A collaborative response for individuals experiencing homelessness post-floods.

³ End Street Sleeping Collaboration, *ibid*.

Many have had to move right out of the area, displacing them from their community. Due to the exacerbated lack of affordable housing, even people who would previously have been competitive in the private rental market are now being forced out of the area. The problem of affordable housing is being pushed out further into the region, and people are further away from their employment, childcare and services.

The availability of temporary accommodation is greatly reduced because properties previously used for temporary accommodation such as hotels were destroyed. This has put pressure on hotels and other temporary accommodation providers in nearby areas such as Ballina and Casino, which were already hurting from their own flooding issues. People from Lismore have been put in temporary accommodation as far away as airport hotels on the Gold Coast, which were completely unsuitable and unreasonably far away. Additionally, people were removed from hotel-based temporary accommodation over the Easter period to allow for holiday travel. While the impact of COVID and the floods on struggling businesses is acknowledged, it further compounded the trauma of those whose housing was affected by the floods.

On the basis of these observations, we recommend that:

- The NSW Government should address any gaps in its medium to long-term responses to housing need in the Northern Rivers.
- The NSW Government should consider the additional health and wellbeing support needs of people affected by the flooding, and the intersection of these with people's capacity to sustain stable tenancies.
- The NSW Government should ensure an adequate supply of social and affordable housing is delivered in communities across the Northern Rivers as part of the rebuilding process.
- The NSW Government should consider appropriate planning and coordination of housing responses in preparedness for future disasters.

Need for community engagement

Lismore community members have reported complete uncertainty on the part of many residents about how to plan for their future. The essential decision for many is either to stay and rebuild, or to try to set up a new life elsewhere. At present, Government signals about whether people will be adequately supported in either of these is missing. One of our staff members commented:

Do you stay, and will you be backed up if you do? Or do you go? And leave what you love? Because you are so tired, and there is no leadership. People don't know what to do.

The community does not feel invited into conversations with Government about either temporary or long-term housing solutions. It is difficult to make costly decisions about what to do on an individual level – and to have meaningful conversations about what to do on a community level – without robust and structured engagement of the community by Government. The community is very interested in having these discussions but does not feel that the right forums have been established. The observation

of our staff is that, given the community-led response to the floods and the care and ingenuity on display, part of the Government's role should be to facilitate community-led solutions over the long term.

In response to these concerns, we recommend that:

- The NSW Government should commit to a full, transparent and robust engagement with flood-affected communities about responses to the 2022 floods and preparation for future disasters.