

From: [NSW Government](#)
To: [Flood Inquiry](#)
Subject: Floods Inquiry
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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 Firstly I want to say, that the community of Mullumbimby acted as best as possible, however what failed, and immediately and into the response, was the official emergency agencies and the Govt, and our council. Even after the previous serious flood in Mullumbimby, just five years ago, from Cyclone Debbie and the countless meetings held after that one, then the

fires in late 2019, and countless meetings held after that, NONE of the agencies, nor council, nor the Govt were in any way prepared, or had in any way prepared the community for yet another catastrophic disaster.

PERSONAL STORY -

I could not sleep the night that the floods came, having experienced the previous flood, just five years prior, but at a different address in Mullumbimby, and having lost my car and many possessions in those 'once in a hundred year' floods from Cyclone Debbie, I was wary of the rain, and potential flood alerts primarily from facebook weather groups, so was very alert to the possibility of a flood. The house I rent is right on the edge of the CBD in the town-centre of Mullumbimby. It is a nearly 100 year old house, and I had been assured by my landlord, that it had never flooded ever in its history, and the house has been in the same family for all that time, four generations of the same family. But in the early hours of the 28th February I was sitting on my back verandah, at around 4am, when I started to notice that cars that came down the street, were reaching my house and reversing backwards and realised that the water was rising in my street, and by then, had already reached about 30-50cm in my yard and driveway and I started to hear items toppling over inside my large four-car garage. It was too late to save my car, the water had already entered it, and I had no way to get it out anyway, with the water having risen in both streets where my house is on the corner. We were trapped, simple. I woke everyone in the house at around 4.15am and told them to get everything up as high as possible, but it was impossible, so we just waited, as there was nothing that could be done, nowhere to put things.

Over the next few hours, I realised a lot of people would be in serious trouble, all the

houses down my street were flooded, not one missed out. The water was hitting my house with such force, that it took every single item from my side yard, driveway and from the back of my house, out into the torrent in the street and washed it all away, all my pot plants, my bins, all three of them, benches from the garden, everything, gone.

It was a week before I was even able to get any help to deal with the flood mud at my place. The losses were huge. I am still dealing with it now. And I am traumatised over and over each time it rains heavily.

NEIGHBOURS HELPING NEIGHBOURS - LACK OF SES ABILITIES/LACK OF MEMBERS -

I watched neighbours and friends take to their boats and canoes and go around our town and save people from their roofs. I knew from previous experience that the SES would have limited abilities, as the absolute debacle from the previous floods had shown us that while the few SES members in our region are all highly dedicated, they just do not have the numbers to be effective in a serious disaster. The population of Byron Shire is about 36,000 and we have just 12 SES members for the whole region, and as it turned out, just seven were able to assist in this flood. They were swamped with hundreds of calls, from those who could call, but even they knew that there were thousands of people who were unable to call, who they knew would be in serious trouble, but with so few SES members, and no telecommunications for most people, they could not possibly have done the job needing to be done, it really was up to the community.

What is really desperately needed in our region, is a serious campaign to attract more new volunteers to the SES. But one of the obstacles

for many in our area, is that there are some rather ridiculous rules regarding having to be vaccinated against covid, to become a member. This has been a deterrent for many, as while we do have a reasonably vaccinated population now, many of those who would volunteer their time for such services, are as yet still unvaccinated, and will not vaccinate. In a time of disasters, it seems stupid to have this as a stipulation of becoming a member of the SES. The Govt itself has let go of anything to do with covid, so why do SES volunteers have to deal with this?

LACK OF COMMUNICATIONS - PHONE/INTERNET/POWER OUT -

Telstra failed our community. As did the NBN. Many are still without phone and internet, nearly 3 months after this disastrous flood. The ONLY communications through the worst of it, were those who had Optus phones. And as for internet, many have had to rely on satellite dishes from companies such as Starlink. Without that satellite internet, many would still be cut off.

One of my own first personal concerns, was for my daughter, who lives in the rainforest at Wilson's Creek, part of the mountain ranges situated to the west of Mullumbimby. Her property is right on Wilson's Creek. I tried to contact her, there is no phone signal up there, but they do have power and internet, however what I was unaware of at the time, was that ALL of that was gone, there was no power and no internet there by the time I was trying to contact her, and I started to hear of catastrophic landslides, roads having been washed away, and serious flooding like never before, in her area. But with the whole town flooded, and my car too, there was no way for me to get to her and I knew she would be trapped, or worse. I feared for her life, and with good reason as it turned out. Three people on her property nearly

died in the flood, they had at least been able to tie themselves together and to a small tree in the early hours of the morning, but even that wasn't enough, and as the water rose around them, if it hadn't been for the axle of a car, wheels and all, that had come down with the water from the creek, and slammed against that little tree, allowing them to step slightly above the water as it reached neck high, they would have died, simple. Thankfully the day before, another member of the property had given one of these people a walkie-talkie, just randomly by chance, and so they were able to radio through to others on the property, who all formed a roped chain to rescue them from the raging waters of the creek which had swollen to become a river, or they would have died. That little tree astonished me, as the property had massive trees, pulled out of the ground roots and all, leaving huge holes, but that little tree remained.

But I was unable to contact my daughter for days afterwards, and had no idea whether she had survived or not. The loss of internet and phone signal made any communications impossible for so many in our region. Her own car was under a stack of trees that had come down around it or been washed against it, and she is only a learner driver, so unable to drive without a licensed person in the car with her anyway. But I am still traumatised over the fact that for days, we could not contact each other at all. The power and internet remained cut off to her property for weeks afterwards. When I did finally get there, it was like a war zone, dwellings smashed to pieces, washed down the raging waters of the creek, massive trees uprooted, gone, and the creek, now as wide as a river, all the vegetation, all the soil gone, the permaculture gardens taken with the waters, it is forever changed.

FAILURE OF OFFICIAL EMERGENCY
AGENCIES AND COUNCIL -

But what came after that flood hit, that day and in the days that followed, was just so chaotic. The community itself rallied behind each other, and helped each other out, but there was a systemic failure from every single agency, from council to the SES to the Army to telecommunications. The only thing that worked was people helping each other, literally blind, as many had no power, no internet, no phones, so it was a case of the community members themselves trying to figure out the best way to help each other, and primarily this all took place from the Civic Centre and worked pretty well, at least until the 'authorities' stepped in, then, really, things went downhill as some were unable to do this or that due to insurance, or had to wait for the chain of command responses before they could act, or had no idea what to do or who to go to for instructions.

There was no one in charge from any of the emergency groups, or council, just two councillors trying to do their best around the clock, trying to advise people as best as possible and being that is was right after our own local council elections, even they were without their official phones and emails, as they had not been officially sworn in as yet, so they were limited as to who they could even contact, without any of their official council contacts.

THE ARMY -

Even when the Army finally arrived, they were in no way prepared, they had no apparent chain of command, they had no idea what they were and weren't allowed to do and in fact, they weren't allowed to do a lot, so many of us who could have urgently used the assistance of the Army to help clear the mud etc, were told they were not available to us and they seemed to spend a lot of time doing nothing, or waiting to be told they could do something. They didn't even have tents with them, or any form of bedding, when they

arrived, which would have been a pretty obvious need, considering that we also had thousands immediately displaced, the Army members thought they were going to be put up in some kind of accommodations. I felt really sorry for them having to sleep on the floor at the Cavanbah Centre in Byron. But really, Army tents and not just for them, but to also set up an immediate tent city evacuation centre for those who were immediately forced from their homes, seems to me to have been a no-brainer that no one thought of! That needs to be addressed! If they Army can go in at a minutes notice, then they should be going in lock stock and tents too! Medicos too! We couldn't even get bandaids for cut feet, let alone get any real immediate medical attention for anyone.

WHAT DID WORK - FACEBOOK COMMUNITY GROUPS -
AND WHAT FAILED - COUNCIL WEBSITE/FACEBOOK

The one thing that we are really good at in this region is utilising facebook as a tool for community communications. There are countless local community facebook groups, but the immediate implementation of a new group, 'Byron Shire Urgent Flood Assistance' was the best and easiest tool for people to use, that is, if they had access to power and internet. As someone who administrates 23 local pages, groups etc on facebook, including having been a founder and the main administrator of the 'Flattening the Curve' group, a covid information group that has kept more than 3000 people informed for more than two years now on all things covid, and also being the founder and administrator of the Byron Shire Community News page on facebook with hundreds of thousands of followers, I know the power of social media for communities, and it was the key tool for communications through the last floods and the fires, and should have been in this flood

too, if not for the failure of Telstra and the NBN. But for those who could use it, the 'Byron Shire Urgent Flood Assistance' group provided the best forms of factual information and immediate assistance across our region.

What was also very apparent was the lack of any form of council assistance, or any factual or up to date information on their website or their facebook pages. There was no one 'in charge' from council. The one person that just went into action was Cr Sarah Ndiaye, who immediately went out into the streets and assisted at the Civic Centre and also the evacuation centre at the Mullum Services Club and in turn a recently elected councillor Mark Swivel. The Mayor Michael Lyons was 100% absent, and in fact he has had little to nothing to do with anything much even since. And as a whole, council was uncontactable as usual in a disaster, it was not open, no one could call them and they were just useless. Information was not updated, and there was a total lack of direction from them for anyone in our community.

THINGS THAT REMAIN UNADDRESSED -

Living right in town, on the edge of the CBD, the drains and drainage ditches around my house remain choked, even now. They are still full of mud, full of flood debris, overgrown with weeds, full of water still. It would not take much to see flooding just from the state of the drains. Some have been cleared around town, but most have not. I have reported this to our council and more than 10 weeks after the flood, I am still waiting for council to deal with this.

WHERE TO FROM HERE -

I somehow doubt that anyone is going to read anything I write, as submissions like these are generally just unread.

But, if there is to be any form of where to from here, it should be COMMUNITY LED and not left up to pen pushers and bureaucrats who do not live here, who did not experience what our community did, and who usually have no idea how to actually plan for the reality of the chaos that ensues in a disaster such as what happened in our community. I have worked in community for nearly 20 years, I have been a part of disaster planning meetings over the last 10 years and have had to bat heads with people in 'Sydney' who never have any idea of the reality of the issues for our region, even outside of disasters. We are always overlooked. Sydney-based govt desk-jockeys cannot make decisions or plans for communities such as ours, no matter what 'qualifications' they think they may have. It is personal experience from being actually on the ground through disasters such as this, that is the most valuable at making plans and preparations for future disasters. You cannot plan for what happened to us from a textbook, there was nothing textbook about it, it was unprecedented!

To be honest, I could go on and on and on about what went wrong, but this needs to be put to more community meetings, lists need to be made by our community of the failures and what worked and our community needs to lead the way in writing up an official report, based on what WE experienced, not what some govt dept thinks we had happen here.

Terms of Reference (optional)

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

Supporting documents or images
