

NSW Independent Flood Inquiry

NCOSS Submission



20 May 2022

About NCOSS

The NSW Council of Social Service (NCOSS) works with and for people experiencing poverty and disadvantage to see positive change in our communities.

When rates of poverty and inequality are low, everyone in NSW benefits. With 80 years of knowledge and experience informing our vision, NCOSS is uniquely placed to bring together civil society to work with government and business to ensure communities in NSW are strong for everyone.

As the peak body for health and community services in NSW we support the sector to deliver innovative services that grow and evolve as needs and circumstances evolve.

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1. Introduction

The 2022 floods have again highlighted the essential role of place-based social service organisations when emergencies and natural disasters occur. As with COVID-19 and the Black Summer fires, local non-government organisations (NGOs) have been on the ground and at the forefront during the response – especially in smaller towns and communities that became cut-off, making it difficult for emergency response agencies to access.

We have seen local NGOs rise to the challenge during these flood events – supporting existing, often highly vulnerable clients to ensure their safety; taking on additional responsibilities to provide support, information, essential supplies and other assistance; and finding new ways to reach out, including to impacted community members who would not normally access their services. These important ‘community assets’ also offer access to local networks, knowledge and infrastructure, essential for incoming emergency responders.

But they fulfil these roles without additional resources, training or input to an overarching emergency management plan, relying on their own resources, volunteers and donations to provide support. All too often they are not formally recognised in the emergency management system and/or are a late inclusion in the response. This means valuable know-how, preventative measures and tailored solutions are lost.

The recent disasters have also shone a light on some of the biggest challenges facing our state: including that the most basic of human rights – having a decent home – is out of reach for a growing number of people. This is an even greater problem in regional NSW and the loss of homes in the recent floods have only exacerbated the housing crisis in impacted areas.

This Inquiry is an opportunity to learn from recent disasters and strengthen our emergency management system by recognising the essential role played by the social services sector.

2. Context

Disasters are increasing, with disadvantaged communities bearing the brunt

We know that the frequency and severity of extreme weather events and disasters is increasing; and that it is disadvantaged households and communities who are most impacted, and least able to prepare, respond and recover.

The United States was the most natural catastrophe-prone country in the world in 2021, with floods the most common natural disaster for that year.¹ As reported in the American Journal of Public Health:

‘Although disasters have an impact on individuals across social and economic categories, the poor, racial and ethnic minorities, and other marginalised groups are particularly susceptible to the adverse short and long-run effects of disasters. Housing quality, location and affordability, which are deeply interconnected with socioeconomic status, are key drivers of these outcomes.’²

Australian research also highlights that disadvantaged and marginalised communities are most likely to be severely impacted by disasters as they are more likely to be located where land is cheaper and access points more limited, and to occupy sub-standard or over-crowded housing that is further away from amenities and services. It

confirms that irrespective of disaster type, people with greater financial capacity are better prepared and more able to recover from disaster,³ and that particular population groups are most vulnerable.

For example, Australians with disability are two to four times more likely to die or be injured in a disaster than the general population. They experience higher loss of property, greater difficulty with evacuation and sheltering, and they generally require more intensive health and social services during and after disaster.⁴

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities are also disproportionately impacted by disaster. Their over-representation among those experiencing unemployment, over-crowded or substandard housing, and lack of adequate infrastructure such as access roads, phone and internet services and safe places to shelter, mean they are at greater risk when disaster strikes.⁵

Northern Rivers’ flood-impacted communities already had high rates of disadvantage

Analysis undertaken by the University of Sydney in 2016 – prior to the serious, recent events of the 2017 flood, 2019 fires and 2022 floods – found that Local Government Areas (LGAs) in the Northern Rivers region had experienced the highest number of disaster declarations across NSW (declaring it the state’s disaster ‘hotspot’), and were also home to 43% of NSW’s most disadvantaged LGAs.⁶

This aligns with data from the NCOSS/NATSEM ‘Mapping Economic Disadvantage in NSW’⁷ online interactive tool which maps the spatial distribution of poverty across the state for small area locations (ABS SA2), including the different groups in each location most impacted.

Table 1 provides comparative data for key Northern Rivers locations and cohorts. It highlights that areas that felt the brunt of the 2022 Northern Rivers floods were already experiencing higher than average levels of disadvantage relative to NSW overall, metropolitan Sydney, and the rest of NSW (i.e. excluding Sydney); and that particular groups were especially vulnerable.

Table 1: Economic Disadvantage by location*

Rate of poverty (%)	Overall	Single parent households	Lone person households	Children	Private renters	Aboriginal people	People with disability
Location							
NSW	13.3	27.2	21.1	17.7	21.4	26.5	21.3
Sydney	12.6	22.6	18.7	17.2	17.6	21.1	21.1
Rest of NSW	14.6	35	24.2	18.7	30.5	29.1	21.6
Mullumbimby	19.9	36	17	23	35	16	24
Coraki	13.9	39	19	20	39	37	29
Woodburn	17.6	33	27	27	37	22	22
Broadwater	17.6	44	23	27	37	22	23

Lismore	21.3	44	22	31	37	31	21
Casino	18.1	42	20	25.5	36	31	18

*Based on 2016 ABS Census data

3. The social service sector in NSW

A growth industry delivering essential services

Despite being part of the largest employing industry in NSW (Health Care and Social Assistance) – which has also made the strongest contribution to the state’s employment growth over the last 10 years⁸ – the social services sector in NSW is not well understood. This is in part because of its breadth, diversity and its highly dispersed nature. Recent research undertaken by Equity Economics⁹ describes it as follows:

“The Social Sector refers to that part of the economy outside of government that supports people with their everyday functioning and care needs. It includes the provision of aged care, early childhood education and care, community mental health services, disability care, child protection, housing and homelessness services, community mental health, and domestic violence support. A key feature of the Social Sector is the contribution of volunteers that further enhances the sector’s social and economic impact.”

There are varying figures about the size of the sector but all show that it is substantial. The Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) reports that the NSW social services sector employs more than 240,000 people.¹⁰

The same Equity Economics report indicates that over 7,800 organisations operate in the social services sector in NSW, providing support to over one million people each year. 6,923 of these organisations have fewer than 20 employees. Volunteers perform 1.7 million hours of work per week.

Complex work in a challenging environment, requiring a highly skilled workforce

As Governments continue to retreat from direct service delivery, the NGO social services sector is increasingly relied upon to provide assistance, care and support for vulnerable population groups. This can range from one-off practical assistance, through to intensive support over an extended period for people facing complex, intersecting challenges. In recent years there has been a growing emphasis on ‘person-centred’ and more tailored solutions rather than a ‘one-size-fits-all’ approach, applying evidence-based programs, measuring outcomes and demonstrating effectiveness. This requires a highly skilled and qualified workforce, which is predominantly female.

At the same time, a growing body of research is highlighting that the social services sector is confronting rising levels of need and increasingly complex experiences of hardship in the community, with resourcing struggling to keep pace and staff at greater risk of burnout.

A recent survey undertaken by McKinsey found that one third of not-for-profit organisations believed that COVID-19 had created a significant threat to their viability, with 40% reporting a revenue decrease of more than 15%.¹¹ New operating models, such as ‘fee for service’ approaches like the NDIS, have also increased the financial risk facing organisations.

Research is also exposing the damaging effect of ‘the overhead myth’, where the effectiveness of a not-for-profit is judged by how low its overhead costs are. This is fuelling the phenomenon known as the ‘non-profit starvation cycle’, where funders continue to have unrealistically low expectations of overhead costs and the real cost of service provision.¹²

A critical role in disasters

As has been demonstrated during the 2017 floods, the 2019 bushfires, COVID-19 and now the Northern Rivers 2022 floods, local NGOs play a critical role in disaster response and recovery. They are key local assets that are trusted by their communities and, in particular, the vulnerable population groups that they support. They bring expertise in working with people in challenging circumstances, providing practical assistance and more specialised support, and responding flexibly to changing needs.

In the aftermath of a disaster, they are able to shift their focus to supplement or replace their ‘business as usual’ service provision with the critical, immediate services required. They are also there for the recovery phase, once the disaster subsides and the task of ‘rebuilding’ the community is underway.

Globally, there is growing recognition of the importance of building NGOs into disaster management and recovery, but also the constraints that can be present.

*‘NGEs (non governmental entities) critically shape the path of disaster response and recovery. NGEs are critical because of their ability to quickly provide services that may not be provided by government, their flexibility and their unique capacity to reach marginalised communities.....But NGE capacity varies significantly. Whereas some communities possess robust non-profit assets, others lack locally embedded capacity to provide post-disaster resources’.*¹³

The social services sector in the Northern Rivers

Obtaining a complete picture of the NGOs that make up the social services sector in the Northern Rivers region is difficult as the data is held by different agencies (or even different divisions within one agency) and there appears to be no ‘single source of truth’ – or at least not one publicly available and easily accessible.

The Department of Communities and Justice (DCJ), a key funder of organisations in the region, has indicated that it contracts with approximately 30 service providers covering 8 LGAs in its Northern NSW District. This includes some service providers who are based outside these LGAs but whose operations extend into them.

Fair Trading funds one Tenants Advice and Advocacy Service in the region, which is provided by the Northern Rivers Community Legal Centre, based in Lismore.

NSW Health and Northern NSW Local Health District fund 17 NGOs in the region.

This information does not include service providers who are funded by the Federal Government (such as aged care or disability service providers) or other NSW Government agencies, and some may be funded through one NSW Government agency but managed by another (e.g. community transport providers funded by NSW Health but managed by Transport for NSW). As such it is an incomplete picture.

The 20 plus organisations in the Northern Rivers that are NCOSS members include very large national organisations that have a presence in the region, large local organisations that have grown their scope over time, through to smaller, place-based organisations that service a particular community or communities. They include:

- community housing providers
- homelessness services
- neighbourhood centres
- child and family services
- out of home care providers
- financial and relationship counselling
- disability services
- aged care services
- domestic violence support services
- youth services
- providers of food relief and emergency aid
- Aboriginal community controlled organisations
- drug and alcohol rehabilitation
- and any number that provide a combination of these types of services.

This submission sets out to highlight the important role played by social service NGOs in the Northern Rivers region in response to the recent floods – based on available information in circumstances that are still evolving – but how numerous systemic challenges limit their ability to play a more effective role in emergency management and provide support to the most vulnerable. It puts forward recommendations to improve this situation.

Summary of recommendations:

- 1. Embed social service NGOs and community-led responses in the NSW emergency management system, by testing a cluster approach that involves establishing Community-based Resilience Coordinators to:**
 - a. Formally support and link Community Resilience Networks to Local Emergency Management Committees (LEMC)
 - b. Promote a focus on vulnerable population groups and those most at risk
 - c. Facilitate NGO and community-led input to LEMC and related planning, preparation, exercises, coordination and delivery in respect of welfare and associated services during all phases of an emergency.

- 2. Address the chronic under-funding of social service NGOs in the Northern Rivers and the need to respond to increased demand in the aftermath of the floods through urgent measures including:**
 - a. Increase recurrent baseline funding by 20% and provide longer-term contracts, of at least five years' duration, to provide certainty and lessen administrative burden
 - b. Provide capital grants to NGOs whose offices have been damaged by the floods and whose service delivery is impeded by the excessive costs involved in refurbishment and the purchase of new equipment
 - c. Build emergency management responsibilities into service contracts, including provisions recognising increased responsibility and resourcing where relevant; and enabling

reimbursement for costs incurred responding to the emergency, as well as the ability to rollover underspend created by the emergency

- d. Fund sufficient Recovery Support Services to meet the real level of community need that will emerge over the next three years, and recognise the need for and incorporate establishment and ongoing management costs and brokerage
- e. Use the Partnerships Grants model to allocate recovery support funding to local NGOs through a streamlined, efficient process for the two to three period it will be required, with sufficient flexibility to support non-clinical, well-being programs and other initiatives that respond to evolving community need.

3. Tackle the exacerbating housing crisis across the Northern Rivers, by undertaking a rapid 'Social Housing Repair, Rebuild and Construct' program in collaboration with Community Housing Providers (CHPs), and guided by an overarching Masterplan to ensure resilience to future disasters, that:

- a. Fast-tracks the repair and rebuild of existing social housing in the right locations
- b. Makes recovery grants immediately available to local community housing, Aboriginal and homelessness services to support people made homeless as a result of the floods.
- c. Involves comprehensive, immediate planning of sufficient temporary housing villages in consultation with CHPs and other relevant NGOs that incorporates access to appropriate support services and relevant initiatives to build cohesion and mitigate the potential to exacerbate trauma and poor outcomes for impacted families and households.
- d. Invests in sufficient, additional social and affordable housing to address the already critical shortage in the region, made worse by the recent disaster.

4. Develop a Northern Rivers NGO workforce strategy that:

- a. Involves collaboration with VET and higher education providers and the use of innovative approaches to fast-track solutions
- b. Recognises the need for adequate wages and conditions and other incentives to attract staff
- c. Ensures a strong social sector workforce with the right skills and capability to support the ongoing recovery phase.

4. Key issues and concerns

NCOSS has gathered information through a range of mechanisms including existing consultative forums, our newly-formed Northern Rivers floods working party, information gathered by other peaks and one-on-one conversations with our members on the ground. However, given the situation in the Northern Rivers is still evolving and the experience across different communities varies, the emerging themes are a snapshot of issues in time and not a complete picture.

The key issues and concerns for local NGOs, and the people they support, have been identified as follows:

4.1 Gaps in the emergency response

4.1.1 Local NGOs are not built into emergency planning, preparation or a coordinated response

The size and the scale of the floods have meant that communities and vulnerable population groups across the entire Northern Rivers region have been impacted. In such a scenario, local NGOs in particular locations have been

critical 'on-the-ground' assets, responding quickly and flexibly to emerging need, supporting their existing clients, along with others made vulnerable by the floods and working with first responders once they have arrived on the scene.

Where they were able, services took the initiative and swung into action – setting up temporary evacuation centres before authorities arrived, locating alternative premises from which to provide emergency relief and essential supplies, and/or coordinating the influx of volunteers and donations. Others were able to quickly set up mobile service provision, with the help of philanthropic support.

But it appears that NGOs were not contacted by their funding body to check in on them, their clients, or their capacity to scale up and contribute to a coordinated effort. Some organisations reported not hearing from the funding body for up to 4 weeks after the floods had occurred.

This is despite the funding body – the Department of Communities and Justice (DCJ) – being officially responsible under the State Emergency Management Plan and its supporting plans for providing key welfare services in the event of an emergency and coordinating delivery of these at a district and local level, including planning, preparedness response and recovery.¹⁴ The point was made by a number of organisations that it appears that DCJ's emergency response role is no longer seen as core business.

A picture has emerged of organisations being left to fend for themselves and their vulnerable clients. As the disaster occurred, a number of NGOs have spoken of their efforts to reach out to clients, check on their welfare, undertake rescues or organise for community members to do this; and of their concern for those they were not able to contact.

Organisations providing accommodation services that were flooded have spoken of scrambling to find alternative arrangements for people already dealing with complex circumstances.

A domestic violence service said that following the 2017 floods, a disaster plan was discussed with the funding body but not progressed. With five properties lost in the recent floods but no plan, a variety of sub-optimal arrangements have been relied on, such as families being crammed into one room, sleeping at evacuation centres, moving multiple times or having to relocate to another regional centre, a long way from regular supports, health services and schooling for children.

Overall lack of planning and preparation and failure to capitalise on lessons from previous disasters was strongly noted by those we spoke to. Despite the experience of the 2017 floods, it seems that, in the lead-up to the 2022 floods, local NGOs had:

- no contact with their Local Emergency Management Committee (LEMC)
- no opportunity to provide advice to the LEMC on levels of disadvantage in the community and those most at risk, to inform consideration of strategies to keep the most vulnerable safe
- no involvement in any simulation or training exercises
- no awareness of an overarching, coordinated emergency management plan for their Local Government Area, including for the provision of welfare services under the Welfare Services Functional Area Supporting Plan (WSFASP).

In Mullumbimby, the local neighbourhood centre played a pivotal role in setting up a temporary evacuation centre with the local ex-Servicemen's Club. The centre knew what to do because it had been through a similar process in 2017 and its longstanding staff had the knowledge and expertise. But there was no formal, approved plan in place, no contact from the authorities and no understanding of when backup support would be provided. In the absence

of this, the centre relied on its own know-how, resources, cash reserves and donations to provide food, shelter and other essential supplies, and coordinate local efforts to ensure people's immediate safety and wellbeing.

Case study – Mullumbimby District Neighbourhood Centre's establishment of a temporary evacuation centre

In the hours and days following the floods, and in the absence of an immediate response by authorities, Mullumbimby District Neighbourhood Centre (MDNC) established a temporary evacuation centre in collaboration with, and based at, the Mullumbimby ex-Servicemen's Club. It was here that the service provided emergency accommodation, food, hot showers and essential supplies for over 200 stranded locals whose houses had been flooded or who were unable to get home. This centre was the only safe haven for locals until the official Recovery Centre was established by government officials 5 days after the floods.

Two months on from the floods, MDNC continues to provide much-needed support to the community including food supplies, short term crisis accommodation through the Accommodation Hub, counselling services, legal advice and referrals to women's support services for those experiencing domestic/family violence. They continue to support the most vulnerable, providing IT, assistance for people to access disaster payments, free tea and coffee and hot showers.

The emergency relief team is staffed by two part-time workers and a pool of dedicated volunteers, who offered up their time following the floods. As at 21 April 2022, the team had completed over 900 appointments with flood-impacted locals to assess their needs and help them access the right support, as well as distributing:

- 609 food parcels
- 4,841 frozen meals
- 8.639 tonnes of food
- 150 mattresses

Since the floods, MDNC has supported an additional 530 clients, managed 400 volunteers and distributed \$250,000 in emergency vouchers.

Other NGOs have reported that the impact of the floods on their staff and premises and the speed with which it happened meant they were not able to play a broader role, and that it was 'grassroots' responses from community members and groups such as Resilient Lismore and Resilient Byron that saved the day – ensuring people were rescued and able to get their basic needs met, and coordinating the clean-up effort.

The response of the Koori Mail – converting its headquarters into a grassroots hub to clothe, feed, coordinate housing, provide support and access to services for Lismore's Indigenous population – is one such example of a community-led response that happened outside of the official emergency response system.

Case study - Koori Mail grassroots response

After the major flooding event on February 28 2022, the Koori Mail, a national newspaper delivering news and analysis for Australia's Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, was unable to print for the first time in its 30-year history, losing its entire offices in the devastating floods. While not publishing the paper was a hard decision to make, General Manager Naomi Moran was clear that supporting the local Bundjalung communities affected by the devastating impacts of this flood were the priority.

The site of the Koori Mail became the centre of Lismore's flood recovery effort. The newspaper's team and the hundreds of volunteers, who have supported them, began their efforts to clothe and provide housing for

the majority of Lismore's affected Indigenous population – without support from any level of government. The land that once housed the headquarters of Australia's national Indigenous newspaper became a grassroots hub providing everything from basic supplies to children's clothes to medical assistance and providing temporary accommodation. Doing everything they could to take a holistic approach to what recovery means, the staff and volunteer team operating the Koori Mail Hub established on-site services so that locals can see a doctor, get legal advice, talk to a counsellor in a safe space and even take some much-needed time out with a massage.

Naomi Moran said¹⁵: *"... I think for us, for Bundjalung people, our families and communities, when this happened, when we knew this was happening, they come first. Now that we've provided them with as much support as we can, this is now about the Lismore community and the surrounding towns."*

Through the Bundjalung Community Flood Relief Fund, set up by the Koori Mail, eligible Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander individuals and families affected by the recent devastation could register to access support to re-furnish their homes, pay for repairs, and/or costs associated with new accommodation. The Koori Mail received hundreds of registrations beyond Lismore, from Coraki, Casino, Wardell, Cabbage Tree Island, Ballina and as far as Tweed Heads and other surrounding areas.

As well as receiving requests for assistance, the Koori Mail also had volunteers eager to help from well beyond the Lismore area. Dunghutti and Gumbaynggirr man Dennis Kelly, from Nambucca Heads, utilised his cleaning and labouring skills to help clear waste off Lismore streets: *"It's gonna be hard to rebuild this town but this is just the start here with the spirit they have here and the comradery — it's powerful and amazing what people can do."*¹⁶

Naomi Moran said about the Koori Mail Hub, which relies solely on donations and now provides for the whole community: *"This is a classic example. And a really strong and resilient example of how our local mob are self-determining what crisis support and relief means for our people."*¹⁷

4.1.2 The disconnect between formal emergency management structures and processes and NGOs on the ground has meant a 'hit and miss' approach

NSW's emergency management system is complex and does not recognise the role played by NGOs

The emergency management system in NSW is governed by the *State Emergency and Rescue Management Act* (1989) and set out in the NSW State Emergency Management Plan (EMPLAN). As the Plan indicates, it is a complex, 'command and control' approach involving multiple agencies and supported by a variety of sub-plans, supporting plans, policy instruments, guidelines, structures and process operating at a state, regional and local level.

Its guiding principles recognise the importance of coordination and information sharing; that the emergency response should be conducted at the lowest level of effective coordination; and that disaster resilience is increased by active planning and preparation that involves shared responsibility – including with the non-government sector – and enables a focus on those most in need or at threat.¹⁸

But neither the EMPLAN, nor the Welfare Services Functional Area (WSFA) Supporting Plan, recognise or include the non-government sector as Participating Organisations or Supporting Organisations in the emergency response (other than a limited number of large NGOs contracted to provide specific disaster-related services for

an identified period). As such NGOs are not represented on the various committees that play key roles in the emergency management system at a state, regional and local level.

The WSFA Supporting Plan, in acknowledging that the delivery of welfare services occurs with the assistance of the non-government sector, categorises NGOs as 'Other Stakeholders', and ascribes to Local Government a coordinating role that is 'crucial to establishing and maintaining community service organisations' networks that can be accessed following the impact of a disaster'.¹⁹

While some Councils may have a good understanding of and involvement with the social service system and the NGOs within it in their LGA, in other areas Councils won't necessarily have this knowledge or involvement. Either way, a Council is unlikely to establish and maintain networks of community organisations that cover the diversity of services operating in their patch and which will be of potential relevance to the emergency management preparation, planning response and recovery task.

The reality on the ground is very different

Lack of involvement in planning and preparedness, and no awareness of an overarching plan or plans, has meant that disaster response and recovery arrangements are not necessarily clear to local NGOs on the ground. This has resulted in limited clarity of roles and responsibilities, inadequate information and communication channels, and a haphazard, 'hit and miss' approach.

We have been told of referrals from recovery centres coming to local NGOs when they were still without power, internet and premises and with no prior discussion. In some cases, referrals were made to the wrong service, resulting in people needing to be referred on and having to retell their story, adding to their distress. Others have said information on the location of evacuation and recovery centres was hard to come by.

Local NGOs took it upon themselves to locate their clients, reach out to them and provide support to those in evacuation and recovery centres. This was left to individual organisations rather than being the result of a planned, coordinated effort.

While it has been reported that some recovery centres are well run, others have been described as chaotic and not the right environment for people with complex needs. There have also been concerns expressed regarding cultural safety, with reports that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people have found the experience of attending a recovery centre dehumanising.

In our consultative forums, the problematic nature of DCJ's temporary accommodation program has been highlighted as 'a disaster in itself'. Because it is very short-term in nature, clients have to keep re-registering and often are required to move multiple times. This is difficult for those without transport, and for people needing to access their usual medical services or schooling for children. It adds further trauma to an already traumatic situation, and increases the workload for those NGOs providing support. The point has been made that a Business as Usual, one-size-fits-all approach does not work in the context of a major disaster like the recent floods.

A more effective system, marshalling community resources and matching available housing to the circumstances of those in need, has been established under the auspices of a local neighbourhood centre.

Byron Council provides financial support to continue Mullumbimby Accommodation Hub

In the days following the floods in Mullumbimby, a retired local social worker offered to speak to those who came in to the temporary evacuation centre at the local RSL club looking for a place to stay after the floods.

This volunteer took details of people needing accommodation with a notepad and a pen and started to match them with locals offering their homes.

Five days later, with telecommunications and wifi restored, the list of people needing accommodation grew and an emergency accommodation register and matching service spreadsheet was developed with the help of a donated laptop. The list of those in need included the most vulnerable e.g. elderly, children, single parents, pregnant women.

The spreadsheet noted whether they required accommodation for one night, a few nights or up to two weeks and any specific housing requirements they had. Each person on that list had specific needs and the volunteers would do their best to link them up with locals and other landlords who could offer spare rooms and other accommodation that matched their needs.

Two months on and “The Accommodation Hub” is staffed by a team of volunteers and under the auspice of the Mullumbimby District Neighbourhood Centre. This service works in parallel to temporary accommodation service Link2Home offered by DCJ. The service differs from that offered by DCJ in that accommodation can be offered for up to two weeks, and can account for particular needs, such as whether the person has pets, or a needs to be in a particular location.

The work delivered by the team of volunteers has been recognised by Byron Shire Council. At a recent council meeting, councillors unanimously passed a motion to allocated \$10,000 so that the team could be paid for the next 10 weeks, while they wait for NSW Government to deliver temporary housing pods.

As reported in local newspaper the Byron Echo²⁰ *‘the service continues to be among the most effective emergency housing and accommodation service in the region.’*

‘The best way for us to help is to provide financial support,’ Byron Shire Mayor, Michael Lyon, told the council meeting.

‘We’re hoping to see some of the temporary housing pods promised by the State government arrive within the next four to eight weeks, so this allocation will at least support the Neighbourhood Centre until then.’

Organisations have reported significant variation in the involvement of relevant authorities. In some areas, local government’s involvement has been strong, while in other areas the Council appears to lack the capacity to deal with disasters, despite having a key role in each LGA’s local emergency management plan and (erroneously) being identified in the relevant supporting plan as playing a coordinating role with community service organisations.

We have heard reports of Resilience NSW working well with some local organisations and establishing Community Resilience Networks in some locations that are proving effective forums for bringing NGOs, community groups, other stakeholders and different initiatives together to establish a more cohesive, coordinated approach.

Harnessing the respective strengths of local NGOs, community groups and grass-roots initiatives, coordinating efforts from the outset, and embedding them in the emergency management system would ensure a more consistent and effective response when disaster hits.

NCOSS has previously called on the NSW Government to resource Community-based Resilience Coordinators (Community BRCs) in high-risk communities to engage with, support and coordinate local social services and

other community assets in the emergency and recovery response. This proposal is worthy of further exploration and testing in the Northern Rivers context, in collaboration with organisations and groups on the ground.

Such a proposal recognises that the current 'top down, command and control' approach to emergency management may no longer be fit for purpose and that a networked, cluster model that incorporates and leverages the input, expertise and strengths of community-based approaches is needed. Community Resilience Networks (CRNs) could be built on to form a key element of this approach.

The Community BRC role could include:

- working with local organisations and community groups (through CRNs) to assist them to plan and prepare for disasters;
- acting as the point of contact with and link to the LEMC to ensure understanding of the overarching emergency management plan, sharing of expertise and involvement in training and simulation exercises; and
- ensuring coordinated input into a comprehensive WSFASP that reflects an understanding of levels of disadvantage and vulnerable population groups within the community, the best use of available resources and includes clear allocation of roles and responsibilities.

In the event of a disaster, the Community BRC would assist the LEMC and DCJ to ensure the activation of relevant plans, effective communication channels and coordination and support of local NGOs and community driven initiatives.

The Community BRCs could be positioned in trusted 'lead' non-government and/or Aboriginal community-controlled organisations already involved in the local flood response in their communities, and would work with and be supported by other local organisations. They would sit alongside and work with NSW Police, Resilience NSW, SES, Department of Communities and Justice, and local Councils.

Smaller communities which have proven harder for first responders to reach should be prioritised. To avoid the resource-intensive and wasteful cycle of procurement, start up, establishment, implementation and transition/exit, which is a feature of short-term grant funding, consideration should be given to resourcing over a five-year period.

Effective representation of NGOs and community groups at the local planning level should 'cascade up', to ensure representation on regional and statewide emergency management and related committees.

Recommendation 1

Embed social service NGOs and community-led responses in the NSW emergency management system, by testing a cluster approach that involves establishing Community-based Resilience Coordinators to:

- a. Formally support and link Community Resilience Networks to Local Emergency Management Committees (LEMC)
- b. Promote a focus on vulnerable population groups and those most at risk

- c. Facilitate NGO and community-led input to LEMC and related planning, preparation, exercises, coordination and delivery in respect of welfare and associated services during all phases of an emergency.

Representation of local NGOs and community groups in local emergency management processes should cascade up and include representation on regional and state emergency management committees and related sub-committees.

4.1.3 Larger NGOs with an identified role in disaster management can't replace local, place-based organisations and Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisations

The Red Cross, Vinnies and Lifeline have high profiles, large footprints, particular expertise and a key role to play in the wake of disasters, as they are doing in the Northern Rivers region. Our consultations have emphasised that this should supplement, not duplicate or replace the role of local NGOs on the ground. Local NGOs have situational awareness, the trust of their communities, and expertise in supporting vulnerable groups.

Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisations in particular have spoken of their deep understanding of their communities, including strengths and fragilities. They need to be supported and resourced to enable culturally-safe healing and recovery.

Local organisations are also there for the long haul, which is critical given recovery processes can take many years.

But while bigger NGOs can attract disaster management funding from government and donations from the public, local NGOs often don't receive additional funding even though their workload increases dramatically. While they are expected to be there for the community, respond to increased need and provide support and advice to larger disaster management NGOs, this doesn't translate into additional, ongoing funding that matches the ongoing nature of the impacts for the community. This issue is discussed further below.

4.1.4 There is a need to recognise the importance of non-clinical, culturally-appropriate social support as well as increased access to trauma-informed counselling

The importance of 'softer' mental health supports, via programs that promote social connection and wellbeing in trusted community settings, has been highlighted strongly in our consultations. The role that these types of supports can play in lessening the need for clinical services further down the track has been particularly pointed out, along with the fact that for many people, they are less confronting and easier to access.

Providing a sense of belonging and an opportunity to connect is particularly important for Aboriginal people, with processes like yarning circles a means of supporting people through trauma. During a recent NCOSS forum, our ACCO members expressed the need to 'sit together with our pain', and that the importance of sharing, talking, grieving and being together in the aftermath of the floods must be recognised. So too must the importance of cultural practices and guidance from Elders.

NCOSS has been told that there is concern that Government is rushing to move people onto recovery and resilience. Supporting and resourcing ACCOs and community leaders to play a key role through the immediate response and ongoing recovery period is vital to empowering Aboriginal communities to lead their own recovery.

In a number of locations, local NGOs have proven their resourcefulness in establishing counselling services, relying on philanthropic funding to supplement existing services, and/or retired psychologists and social workers to lend their services on a voluntary basis. However, this is not sustainable over the longer term, although the need for this type of specialist support will exist well into the future.

We have heard that there needs to be a continuum of supports – free of charge and provided in trusted, welcoming settings – to help communities process the trauma of the floods and promote social connection, from wellbeing programs through to psychological support and counselling.

4.1.5 For NGOs in the Northern Rivers, the long-term problem of inadequate baseline funding has been exacerbated by the floods

The social services sector has long struggled with the problems of lack of growth funding, reliance on short-term grants to meet demand and make up funding shortfalls, and insufficient recognition of the true administrative and overhead costs involved in service delivery.

Consequently, while NGOs in flood-impacted areas in the Northern Rivers have been at the forefront of the emergency response in various locations and rapidly found ways to respond to community need, this is not sustainable. Many report that funding for core programs has not seen a real increase since the 1980s and 1990s, despite population growth, changing demographics and rising demand.

Services were straining at the seams before the floods, and will not be able to meet the increased level of demand that will exist in the community for years to come. For example, NCOSS has been told that while the Northern Rivers is home to 30% of the state's rough sleepers, it receives only 6% of funding for Specialist Homelessness Services. This problem will only exacerbate as levels of homelessness continue to rise in the face of the ongoing housing crisis, made worse by the floods.

Time-limited grants can assist following a disaster, but adequate baseline funding is imperative to support ongoing sustainability and the real, efficient costs involved in the delivery of specialised services to vulnerable groups. This baseline needs to incorporate:

- a role in emergency management planning and preparedness,
- capacity for collaboration and coordination with other services,
- flexibility to respond to changing need,
- the true cost of overhead and administrative expenses, and
- be linked to population growth and other indicators of demand.

Baseline funding needs to increase, after many years of neglect, to match the real cost of service provision and in response to rising demand. NCOSS has previously argued that, in the absence of an evidence-based funding model, a 20% increase should apply.

The role of NGOs in emergency management should also be reflected in service contracts, and a mechanism to enable them to be compensated for funds spent during an emergency situation included. Contracts should also allow underspends incurred as a result of the impacts of floods (for example recruitment being put on hold) to be

rolled over to the next financial year, and flexibility for organisations to spend this on getting their business back up and running, or meeting increased community demand.

The consequences of not providing adequate baseline funding are already playing out. Recent research highlights the rise of stress and burnout among social service staff and worsening staff shortages, the result of a combination of factors including a growth in unpaid hours, poor pay and conditions, and lack of job security.²¹ Workforce issues are impacting in the Northern Rivers, as discussed in Section 3.

4.1.6 Access to supplementary funding

There is an urgent, immediate need for organisations whose premises have been extensively damaged by the floods and who don't have access to insurance to receive capital funding to enable them to undertake refurbishment and purchase replacement equipment, so that they can become fully operational again.

While landlords will be responsible for covering the cost of structural building repairs, they are not responsible for covering internal fit out, ceilings or partitioning works. Organisations must cover these costs themselves, and pay for any new equipment. In particular locations it hasn't been possible to get contents insurance, and the grants available through Service NSW are not sufficient for the extensive costs involved. In some instances, the estimated cost of repair work, new fit-out and equipment purchase is estimated to be millions of dollars.

Case Study: Community Grants Helping organisations get back to business

Ngunya Jarjum, a Lismore-based ACCO not-for-profit with a focus on families and children, was one of many services directly impacted by the flood events.

In Ngunya Jarjum's March newsletter,²² it was reported '*Our workers are delivering what services we are able – however our workplace was inundated with flood water and will take some time to make safe and secure for our teams again.*'

'Some of our workers, their families and extended communities have suffered extensively as a result of the flood event, our staff availability has been directly impacted as we make space for these families to commence recovery processes. No one has been left untouched as a result of this disaster.'

Two months on from the floods, the service is still without office accommodation, however the team continues to support the community remotely and through outreach opportunities, such as through the Jarjum Centre in Goonellabah.

Ngunya Jarjum was recently successful in their submission for funding through the Flood Relief Grants Program offered by the Northern Rivers Community Foundation. The service reported that the Foundation assessed and approved the grant application within a day. The grant will help with the cost of refurbishment and equipment/supplies for the Ngunya Jarjum Family Room where they conduct supervised family time, family meeting circles and other gatherings.

When it comes to time-limited, funding for recovery support, it is positive that Resilience NSW has recognised that local organisations are well placed to take on the responsibility of Recovery Support Services – being a logical extension of their role post disaster and capitalising on their trusted presence in the community. But it is

concerning that the funding available does not factor in the management task involved in establishing, overseeing and delivering such a specialised service; that it doesn't include brokerage funds to enable flexible responses to clients' immediate needs; and that the formula used to estimate demand and determine the level of funding required (15% of those registered with recovery centres) under-represents the true extent of demand in the community.

We have heard that the need for case management support to assist people to get their lives back on track, access support and navigate complex bureaucratic processes has already tripled post floods.

It will be important that there are sufficient Recovery Support Services available, that they are there for the length of time that recovery can take, and that they are able to service the true extent of demand.

Case study: Step by Step Recovery support cut short

The Step by Step Recovery Support Service was funded, initially for a 12-month period, to employ a team of five part-time recovery support workers to provide intensive case-management support to over 500 bushfire-affected residents across four NSW local government areas. While an extension of a further 12 months was able to be negotiated, available evidence points to the need to fund recovery operations for at least five years. The service wound up in February of this year.

Short-term funding for long-term recovery results in job insecurity and uncertainty for staff, along with increased pressure to rush the roll-out of recovery activities. Step by Step found it challenging to recruit appropriate staff when 12-month contracts were all that could be offered initially. When a disaster recovery program ends, communities lose the support of experienced, knowledgeable workers who have built trusted connections with disaster-weary and wary clients. It is worth noting that many of Step by Step's most vulnerable clients were older women living on their own.

Many disaster recovery workers do not have established employment to return to when recovery operations wind up. For example, some Step by Step workers needed to start looking for other employment before the recovery program had completed. The current short-term funding model is unsustainable and actively works against best practice in disaster recovery.

Research by the Australian Institute for Disaster and Resilience²³ states:

'Disasters vary in scale and intensity and will impact people in different ways. Those at greater risk will also be disproportionately affected. The duration of a disaster and time people's lives are disrupted will also have a considerable impact.'

'Expectations in relation to timeframes can be further reinforced by the media's reporting of the recovery process as well as ambitious promises made by politicians about how fast the recovery will progress. In reality, recovery is a complex, multi-faceted experience requiring detailed engagement and negotiation with a wide range of stakeholders. It takes time and should progress at a pace that is right for impacted individuals and communities.'

The following diagram – Australian Disaster Resilience Community Recovery Handbook (AIDR 2018) – demonstrates the different phases that individuals and communities might experience post disaster



Figure 4 Different phases that individuals and communities might experience post disaster
Adapted from Cohen and Ahearn 1980 and DeWolfe 2000

As well as Recovery Support Services, other NGOs will also need access to time-limited, supplementary funding to support increased community demand and respond to recovery needs – including through the provision of soft-edged interventions as mentioned in 1.4.

This supplementary funding should be available for two to three years’ duration, allocated to local organisations in flood-impacted locations through a rapid, streamlined process and provide sufficient flexibility for services to use as dictated by community need. The partnership grants allocated to NGOs in the 12 LGAs of concern during the Delta lockdown in 2021 provides the model for this approach. With it now coming up to almost three months since the floods occurred, it is imperative that this support be rolled out now so that funding flows to organisations and communities on the ground.

The cost to services of having to constantly apply for short term grants that don’t factor in the time required to start up new programs (including recruitment of staff) is prohibitive, as illustrated by the case study above.

Recommendation 2:

Address the chronic under-funding of social service NGOs in the Northern Rivers and the need to respond to increased demand in the aftermath of the floods through urgent measures including:

- a. Increase recurrent baseline funding by 20% and provide longer-term contracts, of at least five years’ duration, to provide certainty and lessen administrative burden
- b. Provide capital grants to NGOs whose offices have been damaged by the floods and whose service delivery is impeded by the excessive costs involved in refurbishment and the purchase of new equipment
- c. Build emergency management responsibilities into service contracts, including provisions recognising increased responsibility and resourcing where relevant; and enabling

reimbursement for costs incurred responding to the emergency, as well as the ability to rollover underspend created by the emergency

- d. Fund sufficient Recovery Support Services to meet the real level of community need that will emerge over the next three years, and recognise the need for and incorporate establishment and ongoing management costs and brokerage
- e. Use the Partnerships Grants model to allocate recovery support funding to local NGOs through a streamlined, efficient process for the two to three period it will be required, with sufficient flexibility to support non-clinical, well-being programs and other initiatives that respond to evolving community need.

4.2 Housing and homelessness crisis

NSW had a housing and homelessness crisis before the floods, with 50,000 households on the social housing waiting list statewide, and a private rental market that is increasingly unaffordable, particularly in regional NSW.

North Coast NSW was at the forefront of this crisis – with 250 people on the priority housing waiting list at June 2021 and a private rental market vacancy rate of 0.5%. The 2021 Tweed, Byron Bay and Lismore homelessness street counts identified over 300 people sleeping rough.

Before the devastating floods of February/March 2022, North Coast families were already being forced to live in tents, cars and other makeshift arrangements because there was simply nowhere affordable or available for them to live.

Many households are still affected by previous floods and bushfires in the region, living in overcrowded or substandard conditions with significant health, safety and well-being impacts. This includes Aboriginal families and communities who were already disproportionately impacted by disadvantage.

Median house prices in Byron Shire climbed 44% over the last 12 months to \$1.8 million, topping Greater Sydney's median price of \$1.59 million. Median house prices in Ballina have risen by 34.2% over the last 12 months with the median house price hitting the seven-figure mark.²⁴ Increased flows of people from capital cities to regional areas post-COVID (along with fewer people leaving regional areas), and growth in Airbnb/holiday accommodation have contributed to this situation.

Community housing and homelessness services in the Northern Rivers area continue to be very concerned about the future for their tenants and clients, and their ability to provide adequate shelter and support. They have told NCOSS that there is a dire shortage of accommodation in the region to re-house people, as most of the affordable accommodation is located in flooded areas and holiday bookings have blocked out available accommodation. Many people have resorted to relying on friends and family for shelter, sleeping on couches or living in their cars.

Previous experience from the 2017 Lismore floods and Black Summer bushfires raised concerns that NSW Government recovery agencies failed to engage early enough with community housing providers (CHP) and specialist homelessness services (SHS) around immediate housing needs, and this remains an ongoing issue with subsequent disasters including the 2022 floods.

The pressure on these services is enormous. CHP and SHS providers have been directed at short notice to manage emergency accommodation camps because government staff were not yet trained. There has been confusion around the requests and expectations on these services to provide emergency accommodation, as there has not been a clear distinction made between emergency accommodation (required in the immediate aftermath of disaster) and temporary accommodation (which is part of these services' ordinary contracted deliverables).

These services are also being expected to manage people in emergency accommodation who are affected by trauma and are in distress, because recovery agencies are referring people to these services rather than to the necessary mental health supports. On top of all this, the majority of staff in these services are themselves impacted by the floods but expected to continue providing support to the community.

Over 7,000 properties in the Northern Rivers were affected by the recent floods and over half of those have been classed as uninhabitable. This means that thousands of people continue to be in acute housing stress. Some of these people are staying in temporary accommodation provided by government, while most others have been relying on family, friends and other community members who have offered up rooms for those that are displaced. We know that it may take many months for people to return to their homes. These type of arrangements are suitable for a week or two, however this is not sustainable in the medium term while these households wait to return to their homes or find longer term housing.

NGOs supporting vulnerable clients in housing leased through the private market have also been impacted by the dire situation. Where the housing has been flood affected, services have placed their clients in whatever temporary arrangements (motels, caravans, mobile homes etc.) can be found. This isn't ideal for people with complex issues (NDIS clients, young people in out-of-home-care, women and children leaving domestic violence), as the displacement can be very traumatic. Services are concerned that they will be evicted from these properties while they are under repair, and won't be able to renegotiate leases. We have been told that repairs to both NGO-owned and leased properties are being delayed by the shortage of tradespeople.

Early in the aftermath of the disaster, NCOSS joined with the Community Housing Industry Association NSW (CHIA NSW), NSW Aboriginal Community Housing Industry Association (ACHIA NSW) and Homelessness NSW²⁵ to call on the NSW Government to fund a significant and immediate housing recovery package to address both the short and long-term impact of the recent floods across NSW.

It is imperative that, in tackling the crisis and the mammoth 'repair, rebuild and construct' program required, a coordinated and holistic 'whole of portfolio' approach is taken and a Masterplan developed, identifying properties across the entire region for repair and relocation, and sites for the extensive new build required to meet demand.

There is a strong sense of urgency and a need to move away from inefficient, bureaucratic approaches to a more flexible, rapid response. This will need to involve Government working closely with Community Housing Providers to ensure a strategy that can deliver housing as quickly as possible, that will be resilient to future disasters.

In the meantime, there is a need to learn from the experience of establishing temporary housing villages and the importance of planning for these in advance and incorporating them into the emergency management planning

process. They are time consuming to establish and undertaking preparatory work would serve to speed up the process and lessen the trauma and uncertainty for already traumatised families and households.

Going forward, ensuring that these temporary villages are well supported with access to sufficient recovery services, wellbeing activities, opportunities to engage and connect, and mental health supports (both clinical and no-clinical) will be imperative. The extended period of dislocation, the experience of congregate living, and people's levels of trauma (in response to the floods and pre-existing) will potentially increase the incidence of stress and anxiety, domestic violence, drug and alcohol issues, child abuse and neglect, disengagement from school by young people and other impacts. Over and above the need for additional funding set out at 1.5 and 1.6, there will be a need to plan for and contract in a coordinated package of specialist support services to match the number of temporary housing villages to be established. It will be imperative to plan in advance, given existing staff shortages, pre-existing levels of unmet need and rising demand already being experienced.

Recommendation 3:

Tackle the exacerbating housing crisis across the Northern Rivers, by undertaking a rapid 'Social Housing Repair, Rebuild and Construct' program in collaboration with Community Housing Providers, and guided by an overarching Masterplan to ensure resilience to future disasters, that:

- a. Fast-tracks the repair and rebuild of existing social housing in the right locations
- b. Makes recovery grants immediately available to local community housing, Aboriginal and homelessness services to support people made homeless as a result of the floods
- c. Involves comprehensive, immediate planning of sufficient temporary housing villages in consultation with CHPs and other relevant NGOs that incorporates access to appropriate support services and relevant initiatives to build cohesion and mitigate the potential to exacerbate trauma and poor outcomes for impacted families and households
- d. Invests in sufficient, additional social and affordable housing to address the already critical shortage in the region, made worse by the recent disaster.

4.3 Workforce issues

There were staffing shortages in the social services sector in the Northern Rivers region prior to the floods. These have been exacerbated by COVID-related sick leave, vacancies as a result of staff being let go because of vaccine requirements and now the floods. Staff themselves have been impacted and have lost their housing. Many are going above and beyond, working unpaid and excessive hours to respond to the crisis and meet community need, but ending up exhausted and unwell as a result.

Volunteers have played a critical role but there is a lack of recognition of the need to provide guidance, support and oversight which is resource intensive. Many volunteers are now needing to get on with their lives and return to their day jobs, so relying on their availability is not a viable, long-term solution.

There needs to be recognition of the collective trauma experienced by staff who have been directly impacted and have also had to deal with the grief and trauma of clients and other community members. This is an ongoing situation, so the longer-term impact is unknown.

Local NGOs need support and resources to enable them to backfill positions, and recruit more staff to bolster the workforce and provide the case management and other support that will be needed going forward.

The point has been made that one-off funding for IT or for brokerage for clients is not helpful if you don't have staff to administer such initiatives.

Recommendation 4:

Develop a Northern Rivers NGO workforce strategy that:

- a. Involves collaboration with VET and higher education providers and the use of innovative approaches to fast-track solutions
- b. Recognises the need for adequate wages and conditions and other incentives to attract staff
- c. Ensures a strong social sector workforce with the right skills and capability to support the ongoing recovery phase.

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