



Positive Social Change

Submission to the NSW Independent Flood Inquiry

Introduction

Social Futures, a not-for-profit community service, has been driving social change for more than 46 years. We have a presence in the Bundjalung, Gumbaynggirr, Yaegl, Dunghutti, Worimi, Darkinjung, Biripi, Wiradjuri, Wiljali and Barkindji nations. Our service footprint spans across more than 65% of regional NSW, and south-east Queensland. Of our 315 staff, over 200 are based in Northern Rivers and 120 worked from four Lismore offices (prior to the floods). In 2020-21 we supported 20,517 participants across 23 programs, this included delivering the largest specialist homelessness service in Northern NSW; the Tweed and Lismore headspace programs; the NDIS Local Area Coordination (LAC); and more than a dozen mental health, wellbeing, counselling and family support services.

Social Futures welcome the opportunity to share our experience with the 2022 floods and other natural disaster to this inquiry. The inquiry provides an opportunity to recognise the role and contribution of the community services sectors in natural disasters, including the emergency management response and recovery stages.

Recommendations

1. Ensure that a regional natural disaster response and recovery plan is established, that identifies all relevant stakeholders including community support services. The plan should clearly identify roles and responsibilities, be communicated and updated regularly, and all relevant parties should be involved in regular exercises/simulations to ensure that plan is understood and workable.
2. Establish local community sector disaster response and recovery communication networks and protocols to ensure lead agencies use local community service providers' knowledge and capacity to contribute to community-level responses as early as possible.
3. Develop pre-disaster/in advance agreements and resourcing to be able to fund local community services workforce capacity surges and arrangements to rapidly respond to disaster response and recovery.

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We acknowledge the Traditional Custodians of the land where we live and work and their continuing connection to land, water, sea and community. We pay respects to Australia's First Peoples, to their unique and diverse cultures, and to Elders past, present and future.

Inclusion is about the actions we take every day. We welcome, support, and celebrate diversity.

4. Government to establish a stock of portable and temporary accommodation that can be moved to regions hit by extreme weather events, and have pre-existing sites and arrangements confirmed to rapidly establish temporary housing (within 2-4 weeks of the event).
5. Invest in more social and affordable housing in regional communities, to alleviate housing pressures ahead of disaster striking.
 - Social Futures supports the Everybody's Home call for 25,000 more social homes per year nationally. Of these, 12,000 per year should be allocated to regional areas with acute rental stress. We call for urgent access to temporary accommodation and secure and affordable housing for the increasing numbers of people who are experiencing housing stress in the Northern Rivers.
 - Prioritise social and affordable housing delivery on appropriate government land, including within mixed tenure and mixed-use development, and work with community housing providers and other stakeholders to prepare development proposals.
6. State and Federal Governments to work with communities and local governments on remediation and disaster mitigation actions for housing in high-risk locations (respecting connection to community and Country).
7. Invest in long term mental health and wellbeing supports for the Northern NSW flood recovery, including outreach support in towns outside of major centres.
8. Establish structures and budget allocations for expedited support of spontaneous, community-driven, place- and evidenced-based mental health and social connection responses (such as the Northern Rivers Community Healing Hub) and ensure these continue to be resourced for ongoing recovery support.
9. Develop a Northern NSW community services workforce strategy to attract and retain workers including longer contracts, financial incentives and worker housing, backed by government-support.
10. Expedite processes and provide one-off financial support to rebuild, refit, and/or acquire service spaces and offices for the community service sector to help minimise the long-term socio-economic impacts of the floods.
11. Ensure that quick and flexible funding processes are in place to enable local organisations that are providing significant support can quickly access funding without having to go through complex and difficult tender processes.

Social Futures experience

The twin flooding events of 2022 impacted, and continue to impact, Social Futures' participants, staff and community. Staff prepared our Lismore offices for the flood heights predicted, yet, despite our best efforts, all four offices were destroyed on February 28. We lost approximately \$900,000 of equipment and suffered \$1.2 million in damage to office fit-out.

Twenty Social Futures staff members and two Board members had flood waters in their homes with eight staff experiencing major damage, and the homes of more staff and Board members were damaged by torrential rain. Northern NSW and Southern QLD staff were isolated in their homes by flood waters and experienced power and telecommunications outages.

As a precaution, all Social Futures offices between Ashmore and Kempsey were closed during the flooding emergency.

Service delivery in some parts of Northern NSW was temporarily suspended on February 28 with services operational by the end of the week in Lismore, Tweed, Ballina and Grafton. As an essential service, we resumed services as a priority.

Our staff conducted check-in calls within a week to more than 500 participants in our disability, housing and mental health programs considered vulnerable because of the flooding impact. We also worked with Councils, Resilience NSW and other agencies to provide information and support across 15 Flood Recovery Centres (and the Evacuation Centres in the early response stage). We assisted with outbound referrals to legal services, housing and tenancy services, welfare services, Centrelink, mental health lines, etc. Social Futures also deployed our Mobile Outreach Office Vans (MOOVs) to the flood Evacuation/Recovery Centres to provide a confidential, accessible space for participants to discuss their needs and be connected to the right supports and services.

Social Futures continues to be part of the disaster response and recovery effort across our community.

Preparation and planning

The scale of the 2022 floods have clearly highlighted the need to strengthen disaster preparation and planning and coordination and integration of Government agencies with community service organisations like Social Futures, and other community bodies.

Many community service providers have reported unclear roles, a lack of coordination, and in some cases, a lack of preparedness that limited the effectiveness of our response as a sector.

Post-2017 floods, the NSW Government provided resources and funding to the Red Cross undertake planning to prepare for any future natural disasters. In 2021, the Mental Health Commission of NSW, NCOSS and University of Canberra conducted the Community Resilience, Wellbeing and Recovery research project. This produced guides and resources for funders, government agencies and local community-based organisations to plan and prepare for disaster recovery and resilience (<https://www.nswmentalhealthcommission.com.au/advocacy-work/community-resilience-wellbeing-and-recovery-project-resources>).

Any planning and preparation work undertaken since the 2017 floods did not effectively harness experiences and lessons from this disaster and provide a strong base for effective responses in 2022. Response structures to support preparation, planning, response, and recovery phases of natural disasters can be strengthened by including local community services to draw on the networks, knowledge, and expertise they can contribute during disasters.

Recommendations

1. Ensure that a regional natural disaster response and recovery plan is established, that identifies all relevant stakeholders including community support services. The plan should clearly identify roles and responsibilities, be communicated and updated regularly, and all relevant parties should be involved in regular exercises/simulations to ensure that plan is understood and workable.
2. Establish local community sector disaster response and recovery communication networks and protocols to ensure lead agencies use local community service providers' knowledge and capacity to contribute to community-level responses as early as possible.

3. Develop pre-disaster/in advance agreements and resourcing to be able to fund local community services workforce capacity surges and arrangements to rapidly respond to disaster response and recovery.

Response to floods

The lead disaster recovery agency, Resilience NSW, and related agencies such as the Department of Communities and Justice did not adequately engage with the Northern Rivers community services sector. At all levels of Government, there was mixed use of the local knowledge or labour force of the community-service organisations. Some local councils were more proactive or open to accepting offers of support than others.

The opportunity was missed in the very early days after the 28 February flood event to find out our capacity to respond to participants' needs, and what we could do to support the immediate Government response.

Despite all four Lismore offices being destroyed in the February flood, as an essential service, and alongside many local service providers and community-led organisations, we resumed services as a priority just days later.

Social Futures were ready and willing to help, but the lack of communication and coordination needed us to take a proactive approach to supporting flood-impacted residents. Social Futures placed staff in the 15 Recovery centres to support the immediate response to the flood emergency by connecting quickly with our staff, participants, other community organisations and NGOs and agencies.

Transition from incident response to recovery

Social Futures staff from our mental health, Family Connect and Support, NDIS Local Area Coordination, and homelessness support teams visited the 15 Recovery Centres after the floods. Our staff heard first-hand the immediate and specific needs and challenges that flood-impacted people faced, including:

- increased level of family dysfunction because of the stress of flooding
- families needing support to encourage children to return to school, particularly those families whose schooling had been disrupted by floods or who had to move to a different school
- safety planning needs of families affected by family and domestic violence
- access to mental health and wellbeing support
- mental health of children in regional and remote areas vocalising their trauma at school to each other and schools having no capacity to self-manage
- difficulty navigating multiple and complex government services and thus not receiving the right help at the right time
- significant disruption to usual services and supports. Most service provider offices in Lismore had been seriously impacted and staff availability dropped

- needing financial support due to increased travel requirements to shopping centres for example, exacerbated by increased cost of living expenses and shortages in this area
- transport needs to medical and other appointments, especially for those who had been relocated away from usual supports, and increased difficulty accessing medication especially immediately following the flooding
- strained community connections and supports due to the widespread impact of the flood events and many people living further away from their usual communities
- older people struggling with accessibility of emergency housing in sport and recreational camp sites (such as sleeping on top bunks) and accessible housing for people with disabilities or specific needs
- a need for stable temporary accommodation impacted by other factors (e.g. Easter and school holiday bookings)
- people living for longer periods of time with friends and family had (and continues to have) an additional toll on mental wellbeing
- concerns the Evacuation Centres were unsafe due to drug use, lack of separation of participants and limited supervision at night, plus no trauma debriefing for people staying in the centres.

Recovery from floods

Many of the recovery requirements, such as emergency and medium term housing; need for long term mental health support etc, are predictable and can be planned for. If they are planned for in advance, then effective support can be provided quickly after the event, to minimise the ongoing trauma and economic/social cost to affected communities.

After the experience of 2017 floods and 2019 fires, this planning should have taken place. Much of the current trauma and discomfort being experienced by the Northern Rivers community is a consequence of the ongoing delay in providing resources and lack of clarity about support pathways and developing solutions post-disaster, which takes time.

Housing, mental health and rebuilding the NGO sector are critical to recovery and future resilience.

Housing

A home is an essential and basic human need. Social Futures has been working with Northern Rivers people who are either homeless or at risk of homelessness since 1994. In 2020-21 we supported more than 2,400 people experiencing homelessness or housing instability.

More than 7,000 homes were inundated and more than 3,600 deemed uninhabitable following the catastrophic February-March floods. Based on the average household size and Northern Rivers population, Social Futures estimates one in every 20 people in the Northern Rivers have been impacted by the flood event on their property (with impacts ranging across water inundation, access and landslides).

The floods have intensified pressure on a private rental market that was already under critical stress prior to the 2019 bushfires and then the Covid-19 pandemic driving record migration out of cities.

House prices in many parts of regional Australia were already out of the reach of low- and even middle-income earners. Urgent investment in social and affordable housing is needed in regional communities.

Housing is critical to people's mental wellbeing following a disaster. University Centre for Rural Health research following the 2017 Northern NSW floods found people displaced longer than six months were twice as likely to experience continued mental distress and symptoms of post-traumatic stress, anxiety and depression, compared to people more briefly displaced.

Prior to the floods, Social Futures was close to completing the development of a twelve-unit affordable housing project in Lismore. Whilst destroyed by the floods, the site could accommodate people in need of housing and we are negotiating with a range of transportable housing suppliers to establish pods or other temporary housing on this location.

The floods have exacerbated the vulnerability of those who were already at risk of homelessness. Many of these individuals who were experiencing homelessness prior to the floods (and camping or living in cars) lost possessions, incurred damage to their vehicles or shelters, lost access to outreach and temporary accommodation services, have difficulty navigating the new structures established in flood-impacted areas and are often not eligible for temporary housing solutions being developed for flood impacted residents.

A recent observational count by Ending Street Sleeping Collaboration and agencies (including Social Futures) across Byron, Tweed and Lismore LGAs found that homelessness in vehicles is increasing. The vast majority (293 or 88%) of observations were of vehicles, either on the street or in carparks. These people need access to temporary accommodation and to be included on the priority housing list.

Governments need to plan to reduce the risk of impacts of extreme housing events on regional housing stock to ensure it is available when needed. The past three years informs us that regional NSW is becoming more vulnerable to extreme weather events, such as the Black Summer bushfires and Lismore flooding events. This is reinforced by the 2022 Climate Council Uninsurable Nation Report (<https://www.climatecouncil.org.au/resources/uninsurable-nation-australias-most-climate-vulnerable-places/>) that places the Richmond and Page electorates in the top ten most at risk to climate change-related extreme weather events.

Given this is a known risk, there is scope to have supplies of deployable housing and sites identified with all planning and infrastructure issues addressed and resolved in preparation for rapid provision of temporary accommodation.

Recommendations

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- Prioritise social and affordable housing delivery on appropriate government land, including within mixed tenure and mixed-use development, and work with community housing providers and other stakeholders to prepare development proposals.
6. State and Federal Governments to work with communities and local governments on remediation and disaster mitigation actions for housing in high-risk locations (respecting connection to community and Country).

Mental Health

Social Futures is aware that many people have been traumatised by the twin flooding events of 2022 and some people are still impacted psychologically from the 2017 flooding.

Our staff who have worked in the Evacuation and Recovery Centres and hubs just after the flooding emergency, noted that while physical needs for food, water and shelter were mostly met, wellbeing, mental health and other more complex needs were not always able to be met.

Prior to the floods there was a lack of mental health workers in this area. The lack of housing impacts on capacity of community service organisations to recruit mental health workers from out of area. Also, many existing mental health workers have been impacted by the floods (i.e. lost their homes) and need time off work. Governments must continue to invest in mental health services, and support the community services sector to recruit and retain staff.

We can look to past research to identify who is particularly vulnerable to mental health challenges post floods. The University Centre for Rural Health and University of Sydney flood studies (2017 and 2019) on the impact on mental health found people living with a disability, identifying as Aboriginal and/or LGBTIQSB and those in receipt of income support were more likely to be evacuated or displaced and experienced worse mental health outcomes. 82% of people in the flooded areas were living in the most disadvantaged quartile neighbourhoods. The research found that flood affected people with a stronger sense of belonging and social connectedness had better mental health outcomes.

The Northern Rivers Community Healing Hub – collaboratively established quickly by Indigenous and non-Indigenous practitioners, community members and organisations (including Social Futures) after the flooding emergency – is an important response to support healing and trauma stabilisation. It is place based, open to the whole community, and Social Futures is proud to have contributed with our Mijung Jarjum Kids in Mind program providing play therapy and running the kids' space within the hub.

Social Futures supports holistic healing spaces that create opportunities for trauma stabilisation and connection. These spaces move beyond a formal or clinical mental health service delivery model into a socio-cultural model of health underpinned by personal and community developmental approaches for individual and collective wellbeing.

Recommendations

7. Invest in long term mental health and wellbeing supports for the Northern NSW flood recovery, including outreach support in towns outside of major centres.
8. Establish structures and budget allocations for expedited support of spontaneous, community-driven, place- and evidenced-based mental health and social connection responses (such as the Northern Rivers Community Healing Hub) and ensure these continue to be resourced for ongoing recovery support.

Rebuilding the community services sector

Rebuilding the Northern Rivers community service sector, which delivers key support services to Northern New South Wales is critical to the recovery of our community.

The sector is essential to help reduce long-term social and economic impacts of trauma; and a stable base is essential for that. Immediate support is required to rebuild, refit, and acquire service spaces and offices for the community service sector. Many community service organisations have limited capacity to build financial reserves to respond to these types of events due to government funding requirements.

Funding is available for recovery of business and community organisations (e.g. small and medium business grants), however, these have taken significant time to be released and funding for larger businesses and NGOs (such as Social Futures) is in the process of being released.

Social Futures is concerned about local staffing shortages in the community services sector (particularly mental health case workers) over the next six to 24 months. Housing availability is a major issue impacting recruitment and responding to workforces shortages. Action is needed now to address the recruitment and retention of community service workers. Government-backed strategies are needed to resolve skills and labour, such as financial incentives and subsidies to attract and retain people from elsewhere. Worker housing will also need to be secured.

Recommendations

12. Develop a Northern NSW community services workforce strategy to attract and retain workers including longer contracts, financial incentives and worker housing, backed by government-support.
13. Expedite processes and provide one-off financial support to rebuild, refit, and/or acquire service spaces and offices for the community service sector to help minimise the long-term socio-economic impacts of the floods.
14. Ensure that quick and flexible funding processes are in place to enable local organisations that are providing significant support can quickly access funding without having to go through complex and difficult tender processes.

Tony Davies
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