

From: [NSW Government](#)
To: [Flood Inquiry](#)
Subject: Floods Inquiry
Date: Thursday, 19 May 2022 7:26:00 PM
Attachments: [Flood Inquiry 19 May 2022.pdf](#)

Your details

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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
Organisation making the submission (if applicable)	Cabbage Tree Island members
Your position in the organisation (if applicable)	Community member
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

A submission has been attached.

Terms of Reference (optional)

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

Supporting documents or images

Attach files

- [Flood Inquiry 19 May 2022.pdf](#)
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To the Flood Inquiry committee**19/05/2022****Flood Inquiry Submission- Cabbage Tree Island**

Cabbage Tree Island is a small Aboriginal community located 22 km south of Ballina in the Richmond River. Approximately 190 people reside on the Island on Bundjalung Country.

There have been two informal community meetings at Southern Cross Distance Education School to voice and discuss the recent floods and its impact for Cabbage Tree Island (CTI) community. Approximately 16 community members have contributed to the issues raised and provided recommendations below.

The community was not warned until the morning of the evacuation on Monday 28 February 2022. CTI community had no time to prepare for a safe evacuation. Families left with only the clothes they were wearing and nothing else. Many were reluctant to leave because they did not know where they needed to go, they didn't want to leave their pets and for some, their home is the only home they had ever known.

A brief overview of events on the tragic day of Monday 28 February 2022.

3:00am A CTI community member rang the SES on Monday 28/2/22. She was informed that there was no warning at this time and to wait for any information

7:00am Police arrived on the Island and warned families to evacuate and stayed on the Island to keep watch.

9:30am The Community Transport bus began to transport community members off the island. Some community had to wait for the next trip because the bus was not big enough for the number of people to be evacuated.

11:00am Community members took another bus trip to the Island. The Police helped check houses to make sure that everyone was off the Island.

Community members were transported to the Richmond Room, Ballina. Many families had not been processed for accommodation until 10pm that night. Individuals were prioritised over families and Elders and single young people were accommodated first while families and Elders were left waiting. This was not adequate for young children and frail and elderly people to be waiting for so long. This caused additional stress and tension for community members who were already distressed.

There were concerns raised that the one lane bridge provides limited access onto and off the island. Families suggest that a double lane bridge or an additional bridge is necessary to ensure a level of certainty when having only one way on and off the island. This could be detrimental to the safety of the community.

Racism

Some motels would not accept residents from Cabbage Tree Island they were unable to provide accommodation once the community was identified as Aboriginal.

One Evacuation Centre was hostile towards Cabbage Tree Island community members, so those community members left the centre to return to an area that had been severely flood affected and put their safety at risk.

Bias and judgement

One evacuation centre asked a de facto couple if they were married (irrelevant information) despite having four children they were forced to separate on site due to Christian and archaic values. This is unacceptable, judgemental and outdated. At times of crisis, support and compassion is needed.

Cabbage Tree Island community members have felt powerless since being evacuated from their homes. Government support agencies have been providing temporary accommodation but have taken all power from the community. Our community has historically experienced a sense of powerlessness due to agencies telling community what to do with very little notice. Some families have been moved more than six times over six weeks with five children. Many families have been split up in a range of locations which has weakened family support when family are key to feeling safe and supported. The approach by government agencies has at times been insensitive and inadequate for our community when it takes time to build trust and put your lives in the hand of strangers.

Flood relief support agencies were not immediately available for Cabbage Tree Island community to access. This limited needy families having funds to help with their daily struggles. Eight weeks after the disaster is too long to wait for help to arrive with paperwork. Many community members did not have computers to use to apply for funding support. Not everyone is computer literate.

Initially, funding support guidelines were changing by the day and it was hard to know what you could apply for. One family was lining up for a hour to find that the funds had run out by the time they got to the front of the line. This is frustrating and a total waste of time for families.

Many families who were staying in a range of temporary accommodation locations had no food after a couple of days. The streets were flooded, and all communication was limited. There were deliveries of food items being dropped off but our community was not told of the locations. There needed to be a better way to make sure that all evacuated families and individuals could get food. If it were not for Food bank and the coordination of our community contacting services our community members would not have had any food for at least 3 days. The Richmond Room ran out of food. The Ballina Shire Council needed to coordinate services for all evacuees and have a back up communication service so that locals could communicate and help each other.

Recommendations:

- There must be adequate time for warnings to be communicated to families on the Island. Immediate evacuation with no warning is not adequate. SES forecasting should have presented early warnings of severe flooding.
- Communication to be timely, clear and delivered in person. Not all community members have mobile phones. Text messages in the early hours of the morning is not suitable.
- Development of a community evacuation plan that is communicated and practiced by community members.

- Identify 2-4 community members residing on the Island to be key contact and rescue personnel. Training and communication processes designed to allow the CTI to respond immediately.
- A large siren to sound the alarm to inform community members to leave the Island immediately.
- Consider a pontoon on the river at the back of the homes for another emergency evacuation option.
- Have access to a full size 52 seater bus to evacuate CTI community members.
- Have a list of houses on the Island with family members named and updated regularly to assist with faster processing of information when evacuations need to occur.
- Families and Elders should be first to be accommodated when crisis accommodation is needed.
- Community members have additional or alternative accommodation for pets. Community members were reluctant to leave their homes due to the concern about housing pets.
- An evacuation centre set up out of flood area. Venues discussed Wardell, Alstonville, Wollongbar and Lennox Head.
- Anti-discrimination law enforced, and training provided to evacuation centre personnel, accommodation managers and staff to eliminate ongoing racist views and behaviour.
- Screen and check evacuation centre employees and volunteers and educate those responsible for support to be culturally sensitive to deliver the most appropriate support.

Conclusion

Cabbage Tree Island was fortunate to not have lost lives. Improvements need to occur so that Cabbage Tree Island residents have confidence in the future that they will be taken care of when a natural disaster occurs. A special meeting should have been organised for the community of Cabbage Tree Island to provide their insights, advice and concerns in a culturally safe environment not at a general community forum and online. This format does not allow for equal access and contribution from all communities to provide their feedback.

Yours sincerely

Teresa Anderson

Cabbage Tree Island community member

Mobile:

James Currie

Cabbage Tree Island community member