

## **Submission to the NSW Flood Inquiry**

### **ON BEHALF OF: the Nimbin Community Response and Recovery Team**

(which includes representatives from Nimbin Neighbourhood and Information Centre, Nimbin A&I Society, Nimbin Branch of the CWA, Nimbin Brigade RFS and a number of community volunteers who have been working on the response and recovery efforts here in Nimbin).

### **RECOMMENDATIONS**

Our recommendations are set out at the end of this submission. We have also included some of the many pictures we have of the landslip damage to homes and access routes.

### **WHAT HAPPENED? – THE IMMEDIATE IMPACTS in the NIMBIN AREA**

As from Monday 28<sup>th</sup> February 2022 until Thursday 10<sup>th</sup> March there were little or no communication technologies (Comms) in the Nimbin catchment area and widespread power outages. Remarkably, the village itself did not lose power.

There was limited mobile phone signal – barely sufficient to even send text messages. Any mobile phone towers still operational were impacted by significant signal draw. NBN, landlines and ADSL were all down. People with satellite phones or satellite internet were able to communicate. People who were able to, found that switching to the 3G signal on their mobile phones improved their signal enough to be able to make calls from certain locations in the village.

Most access roads were cut by significant damage and landslides. Many people were trapped on the other side of landslides.

A number of houses had been lost to landslides with some completely collapsing.

In the beginning there were fears for people missing and with almost no Comms it took some time to account for those people. A lot of this was done by word of mouth or physically walking to them and checking on them. Thankfully, there was no loss of life, although some community members were seriously injured.

The Nimbin Service Station, NRMA and Nimbin Auto Repairs, the Bush Factory/Nimbin Visitors Centre/Candle Factory and 5 houses on Sibley St were

inundated at around 11pm on Sunday 27th February, with significant loss of stock, business and household goods. Many people were stranded in the village from Sunday to Wednesday and slept in cars or at the Nimbin Bowling Club.

There was subsequently no fuel available for the first week, until the damage to the equipment at the Servo had been assessed and repaired. As from 4<sup>th</sup> March the Servo commenced providing fuel once again, and throughout were providing swap and go gas and filtered water. The forecourt controller was destroyed and is yet to be repaired, and one bowser remains non-operational.

For the first week there were limited supplies coming into the village and there was a shortage of cash as people were unable to pay by EFTPOS etc and shops were only able to trade in cash. The SCU bank branch and the Post Office which are key businesses in the village were unable to operate at all without comms.

There were some seriously ill or injured people who needed to get out. It took about 5 days to get them out and airlifted to hospital etc. In one case (30.03.22) a stroke casualty was not able to be air lifted. Another deceased person remained in hospital for multiple days packed with ice from the pub and taking up a bed needed for another critically injured person.

The hospital was also impacted by staffing issues, with the available nursing staff doing double shifts and at first no GPs. One local GP managed to fight his way through the landslides and water on Wednesday 2nd March. A variety of injuries were sustained by people during and following the flood event, e.g. a truck driver who had rolled a truck presented injured and in shock at the Info Desk at the Town Hall.

People on residential home care supports e.g. ACAT, Palliative Care and NDIS clients were suddenly left without support due to the inability of support workers to access the village and/or their clients' premises. This led to several medical emergencies such as severe dehydration and trauma.

For almost two weeks we were isolated from most outside assistance due to the condition of the roads as well as the impact on Lismore. The primary response was undertaken by community organisations and community members on the ground in Nimbin. Locally isolated NSW RFS and NSW Police were immediately engaged with ongoing tasks, plus ADF Joint Operations Command authorised Nimbin ADF personnel to mobilise on 3<sup>rd</sup> March to assist with coordination.

### **ONGOING AND EMERGING IMPACTS**

The most significant issues in the Nimbin catchment area as a result of the flood event are:

- **Significant damage to Council roads infrastructure** with many routes still impassable or sections of road completely missing. Access by some residents

to the village and services and supplies is still compromised. There is a risk that some roads which have been made passable for the time being will deteriorate further which will create the need to resume emergency responses to impacted residents such as food and supply drops by helicopters.

- **A number of displaced people** who need to either temporarily or permanently relocate from damaged or destroyed homes, or due to access issues and the ongoing need to be able to access services including medical services. They can potentially be housed within the community if we had access to some caravans etc. Possible sites for caravans etc. include the showgrounds and the caravan park. There is scope for some people to be billeted and many are staying with friends within the community. There is some enthusiasm within the community to help with the accommodation of displaced people from Lismore, particularly those who have a relationship with the Nimbin community already.
- **A number of vulnerable people who have become isolated or displaced** due to access issues such that their support carers are unable to get to them to provide the normal level of care for people on residential aged care packages or NDIS packages. Those people have been identified and are being supported but in the longer term their care regimes need to be re-established which means the access to their residences must be cleared as a matter of urgency.
- **Water supply issues-** internal water lines cut by landslides/washouts as well as the damage to the Mulgum Creek weir and level 3 restrictions. People accessed drinking water from community water tanks at the Nimbin Showground, the Neighbourhood Centre and 7 Sibley St. Additionally, water was delivered to people on the rural town water supply line by the RFS. The weir and rural line were repaired by Council after around six weeks. The issue of internal community water lines is ongoing as getting equipment and materials to some communities is challenging with ongoing and significant damage to private internal roads as well as Council maintained roads.
- **Widespread damage to access to rural properties** – i.e. driveways and internal roads. So far NNIC has registered around 90 impacted properties, including 12 rural land sharing communities with multiple households (ranging from 3 to 30 on each) impacted. People's homes may be okay but they are unable to get vehicles in or out and have to walk on uneven and slippery ground for distances ranging from 500m to 2km to get supplies in and out of their homes. Some of the people affected are quite elderly and cannot get their own vehicles out to e.g. attend medical appointments. There is no emergency access for fire appliances and ambulance/ police limited to aviation extraction. In some cases, properties remain completely inaccessible for all services. Some of the damage is very significant and will require major earthworks and materials and the cost is beyond many of the affected

people's capacity. There is a risk that the issue of displaced people/homelessness will be exacerbated by the fact that people cannot get access to their own homes and must relocate temporarily or even permanently if their access cannot be restored. There are already some people who have sustained injuries clambering over landslides or over uneven and slippery ground to get home. Demand for machinery and labour exceeds supply and the ongoing wet weather is hampering repair works.

- The considerable works by Council on roads infrastructure and the village water supply is acknowledged and appreciated. We are also very grateful that Council managed to get the garbage collections trucks out to undertake at least some of the kerbside garbage collection, with obvious limitations to access to many parts of the area because of the considerable damage to roads infrastructure. It is highly likely that some of the roads repair work needed may involve large parts of the community becoming isolated once more. If this happens, we are potentially facing large numbers of people being temporarily displaced rather than being isolated, and a need to establish some kind of temp accommodation village e.g. at the Showgrounds to accommodate these people. We may need resources to do this e.g. motorhomes or caravans.
- **Widespread trauma and mental well-being issues** – this issue is growing as the reality of the immensity of the situation sinks in. This is combined with the devastation of Lismore, which Nimbin relies upon for services and supplies, plus the strong relationship with the Lismore community at a personal level and the vicarious trauma of seeing our friends and family in so much distress and at risk of drowning at the peak of the emergency.
- **Widespread power outage and Comms outage issues.** These issues are ongoing with some people still without phone or internet access. There were still people unable to call even 000, five weeks after the Flood event.
- **Other potential health issues** - sanitation issues, mosquito borne illnesses, Covid 19 – so far there no reports of major outbreaks but it may only be a matter of time and COVID 19 protocols have been all but abandoned by many people, tropical ulcers, giardia. (NNIC has mossie repellent and mossie nets to distribute to people in need).
- **Increased trauma and frustration** - arising from people having to deal with multiple service providers and immense red tape involved in accessing disaster relief payments. To date, many residents impacted by landslides have struggled to access disaster relief packages other than the initial \$1000 from Services Australia. They are confronted with massive costs (quotes obtained so far indicate that roads infrastructure repair costs range from \$30,000 to \$300,000) and people are facing having to abandon their homes of many years and becoming homeless. The rental situation in our area was

in crisis before the Flood event caused the displacement of so many more people.

### **THE NIMBIN EMERGENCY RESPONSE**

The local RFS brigade and Nimbin Police (residential staff) commenced an immediate response early on Monday 28<sup>th</sup> February and began travelling along primary routes around the community to assess damage, identify unpassable roads and hazards, and conduct welfare checks on people. The lack of Comms made this overly challenging and stressful for both Police and the RFS crews.

Nimbin Neighbourhood and Information Centre (NNIC) opened its doors at 10am Tuesday 1<sup>st</sup> March with skeleton staff to start gathering info and providing info, material aid, device charging, and **access to maps**. Many people were disorientated – especially any visitors who had found themselves trapped in Nimbin – without Comms and access to tech such as GPS. There was a radio tuned to ABC Local 94.5FM at NNIC which was staffed the whole time to collect info about roads closures etc as this info was sent into the station and this info was key in the very beginning to identifying hazards and problems. NNIC set up a register of people needing help and people offering help. There were no Comms at NNIC including no phones. Information including about roads hazards etc. began to filter through as people managed to walk out of their properties or make their way into the village. As from Tuesday 1<sup>st</sup> March the information gathered at NNIC was collated and posted on a daily basis around the village. People took photos of the posters or came down to the centre and made copies to take back to their local neighbourhoods or communities.

The only place in town with reliable comms was the Nimbin MPS (Nimbin Hospital) which has its own mini NBN tower relaying a signal from the Lismore Base Hospital. Suddenly the hospital became the most popular place in town with many people sitting around the hospital grounds because they so generously opened up their Wi-Fi to community access.

By Wednesday 2nd March the Nimbin branch of the Country Women's Association sprang into action and began cooking food including taking on the usual Meals on Wheels customers who were unable to access the normal service temporarily. The CWA also provided clothing and hot meals to community members and worked closely with NNIC around material aid and support.

The CWA initiated daily am and pm briefings in their rooms which became an essential component of the organisation of the response and enabled strong communications to be maintained between the CWA, NNIC, the RFS, SES, and the Evacuation Centre operations once it opened up at the Nimbin Showgrounds on 3<sup>rd</sup> March.

Nimbin Bakery managed to get bakers through the landslides and began baking bread as fast as they possibly could to supply locals with much needed bread when

all supplies were very low. A day or so later the Nimbin Emporium also managed to get supplies through as did the Newsagency. There was a degree of panic buying, however, and supplies of fresh food were quickly exhausted.

In the meantime, local residents worked with what tools and equipment they had to clear their own access roads and driveways, causeways etc to enable residents to get out.

The Nimbin crews worked closely with the Channon crews to access those parts of our catchment which we could not get to but they could, or vice versa.

Both the CWA and NNIC remained open over the weekends of 5<sup>th</sup>/ 6<sup>th</sup> March and 12<sup>th</sup>/13<sup>th</sup> March plus an additional satellite information desk was established in the foyer of the Nimbin Town Hall to assist with information collection and provision and basic triaging of people to send them to where they could get assistance. The Info Desk was staffed by spontaneous volunteers who also attended the daily briefing meetings in the CWA rooms.

The Showgrounds opened up on Wednesday 2<sup>nd</sup> March and began providing local support and soon they were managing large deliveries coming in from various locations. The A and I Society members who are all volunteers, some of whom were heavily flood impacted themselves, provided daily support to people, prepared the chopper landing sites and worked tirelessly to support the Evacuation Centre when it was established a day or so later, until it closed. Digby Morrison, who works for DCJ and is a local community member, sought authorisation from the LEOCON from the NSWPOL to commence services at the A&I Showgrounds on Wednesday 2<sup>nd</sup> and his support was greatly appreciated by the community.

The Evac Centre/Showgrounds became the main staging area for the response by emergency services and the primary landing base for helicopters, radio comms base for Nimbin RFS (PMR equipped Cat 1 tanker) and deliveries of food and other supplies to isolated people. At its peak only 16 people sought shelter at the evac centre, most people choosing to stay with friends within the community if they were unable to return home or had been otherwise displaced. The Neighbourhood Centre had a very large and detailed topographical map of the catchment area and that was installed at the Showgrounds and became a key tool in the operations in the absence of any comms.

Showers were provided at the Showgrounds until mid-April 2022 and the cost of these was borne by NNIC via its (CONC) Emergency Relief funding.

In the absence of comms, people were walking back and forth between the CWA, NNIC, the Hub at the Hall and the Showgrounds on a regular basis to relay info back and forth to ensure a unified response.

A small group of spontaneous volunteers with prior Mental Health experience attended to the various mental health issues arising during the initial emergency

response, including follow-up care of existing clients of Lismore Community Mental Health. It was fortunate that both NNIC and CWA had people with skills and training in mental health first response, to enable this support to occur.

When the Evac Centre was operating it was providing food to approximately 1000 people every 48 hrs, reducing to around 400 people per 48 hrs in the second week of operations. An Optus mobile tower was brought into the Showgrounds to improve communications.

Both the Evac Centre and the Satellite Info Desk at the Town Hall foyer closed on the evening of Saturday 12<sup>th</sup> March. Much of the remaining food stores were brought up to the CWA and NNIC to continue distribution. Some of it is still stored at the Showgrounds.

**There were a few days of disorganised chaos after the Evac Centre closed without there being any proper handover back to the generalist support agencies in the village.**

The ADF were by now coming into the village to assist and there were significant issues with communications and organised job despatch. This issue was remedied by Wednesday 16<sup>th</sup> March when a system was set up utilising a local ADF reservist. Matt Brumley had been formally engaged with ADF Joint Task Force since 3<sup>rd</sup> March and was re-tasked to provide liaison between NNIC and the ADF platoons. NNIC was charged with collecting lists of jobs around the catchment area for daily despatch of jobs to the ADF crews. The ADF crews did a great job and the community was grateful for their help.

In summary, the village of Nimbin itself is almost back to normal functioning. It is essential that we address access issues so that the people in our area can resume reasonably normal lives and are able to access the village and services. The quicker this can be achieved, the less demand there will be on external services and responses by emergency response agencies. The community is continuing to work together to solve problems and address needs as they arise. We will need additional support and resources to enable the medium to longer term recovery.

Nimbin Neighbourhood and Information Centre is continuing to operate as the Recovery Assistance Centre in Nimbin. It is now 11 weeks since the event and many people are still isolated or unable to access their homes with vehicles. Progress has been hampered by a shortage of funds, equipment, machinery and labour, plus the continuing wet weather.

## **RECOMMENDATIONS**

### **1. RECOGNITION OF THE ROLE OF LOCAL COMMUNITIES IN DISASTER RESPONSE**

The role of community organisations and community members in the response to a disaster situation needs to be recognised, acknowledged and properly resourced.

The first people on the ground are likely to be community members who live in the area and know it well. Responding to such large-scale disasters is beyond the capacity of the designated response agencies, especially when locations become totally isolated as we did in the Nimbin district.

**In particular**, when the Evacuation Centre closes there needs to be a formalised handover back to the organisations on the ground (in our case to the Community Response and Recovery Team).

Additionally, the fact that the Nimbin Showground is 100% owned by the Nimbin A&I Society, and not by local or State government, needs to be fully understood by the response agencies utilising the site, and that maintaining effective communications with the A&I Society is essential.

## **2. THE NEED FOR CASE MANAGEMENT**

It is clear that people need case management support as soon as possible after a disaster to eliminate the trauma of having to retell their story again and again to an ever-revolving door of personnel. People also need support and advocacy to navigate their way through the various disaster relief payments. This is a very challenging process for people who have lost everything including all their paperwork documents and records. Some people do not even have any ID let alone the paperwork required in order to apply for the available grants.

## **3. FLEXIBILITY AND INCLUSION of ALL IMPACTED PEOPLE in RELIEF FUNDING**

Applying for disaster relief payments is reliant on people being able to provide documents and paperwork that they may have lost along with their house and all their belongings.

In the case of Rural Land sharing Communities (aka “MOs”, residents may have little evidence of e.g. individual Lot Numbers as they do not receive bills etc to their Lot number but rather to a common address for the community (e.g. distributed via an internal mailbox system), depending on the structure of the community. Similarly, documents such as drivers’ licenses, passports etc. may not show Lot numbers but rather the common address for the whole community.

The grant criteria are restrictive and mostly preclude people impacted by landslides and lost access and water infrastructure etc. This disaster has impacted communities in different ways. Whilst in Lismore people’s homes were inundated by flood waters, in our area many homes have been impacted by mud and landslides, but the outcome is the same – displaced and traumatised people.

Many people contacted Services NSW via the 137788 number for assistance but were initially told there was nothing that could be done for them and so they subsequently stopped trying. As a result, the number of people needing help



registered with Resilience NSW is currently significantly lower than the actual number.

#### 4. INVESTIGATION INTO LANDSLIP AREAS AND UNDERLYING CAUSES

Although landslides have occurred in our area in prior weather events, we have never seen such widespread damage. There is speculation as to whether the 2019 drought and bushfires contributed to the vulnerability of the land to slips. Other causes such as historic land clearing and vegetation removal need to be considered. It will be important to understand these issues in order to inform sound land management practices in order to prevent such widespread environmental and asset damage in the future.

Yours sincerely



Natalie Meyer, Manager, NNIC

On Behalf of the Nimbin Community Response and Recovery Team



Example of one of the many destroyed driveways.  
The person at the end of this driveway has significant issues and is a vulnerable person.

Bishops Creek Rd





ADF personnel at Moondani Community, having spent many hours digging out mud.



Collapsed home at Moondani





The landslip on Tutable Falls Rd known as “the Dairy Slip” – pic taken prior to the significant repair works being undertaken.



Severe tension crack at Moondani community tells a dire story





Extensive damage at Tuntable Creek Road between Beardow Rd and Rose Rd.







Severe damage to access road Wirrega Community

Huge landslide at Tuntable Coop

