



**Professionals  
Australia  
LGEA**

# **NSW Independent Flood Inquiry**

**Submission by  
LOCAL GOVERNMENT ENGINEERS'  
ASSOCIATION**

**28 June 2022**

## About Us

The Local Government Engineers' Association ('LGEA') is a registered industrial organisation representing professional engineers, engineering staff and related technical professionals working in local government in NSW. LGEA is also a division of Professionals Australia which is a nationally registered industrial organisation of more than 25,000 professionals working in a range of industries throughout Australia.

Our members live and work in local government communities in NSW and they have a strong commitment to, and identify with, their local communities, many of which were impacted by the recent floods. We have consulted with our membership in relation to their experiences during the NSW floods, and the recovery efforts, and we welcome the opportunity to make a submission to the Inquiry on their behalf. We know our members have contributed to this Inquiry via the submissions from their employing councils, and our submission is made in support of those submissions.



# Introduction

The LGEA welcomes the opportunity to provide a submission into the *NSW Independent Flood Inquiry*. NSW local government plays a vital role in the design, creation and maintenance of local infrastructure assets. The industry owns and controls approximately \$178 billion in infrastructure assets<sup>1</sup>, ranging from roads and bridges, pedestrian and cycle networks, parks and recreation facilities, water and sewerage utilities, and more. Our members perform design, scoping, asset management and project management roles across the industry to ensure the safety and sustainability of these vital assets.

NSW local government is not just a major supplier of local infrastructure assets, but it is also a major employer across the state. Our members often live and work in their local government area and when natural disasters such as the recent floods occur, our members are often on the frontline in the recovery process, whilst dealing with personal impacts at home such as loss of property. The fallout from the flood events of 2022 will be felt by many for months and years to come and we welcome the opportunity to contribute to the identification of contributing factors and possible solutions to help reduce the risk of such devastation from recurring.

Good engineering practice is fundamental to the sustainability, liveability and resilience of our local cities. Engineers are central to the delivery of a reliable and sustainable water supply, the promotion of environmental safeguards, the delivery of value-for-money investment in infrastructure and most importantly, the promotion of community health and safety. As such, our members have a unique and valuable insight into the causes and contributing factors of the recent flooding disaster, and the effectiveness of the subsequent recovery effort. We have consulted with our members, and their feedback focuses on three common themes, which we will address below:

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.yourcouncil.nsw.gov.au/nsw-overview/assets/>

- 1) A need for improved coordination across sector and agencies
- 2) The need for greater engineering expertise within the sector
- 3) Increased resourcing and funding for flood prevention and mitigation.

## 1) Improved Coordination Across Sector and Agencies needed

It is now widely accepted that our climate is changing, and we are faced with the prospect of more frequent and severe weather events, including droughts, floods and storms in the future<sup>2</sup>. As recently as 2020, much of NSW was suffering the effects of a prolonged and record-breaking drought, whereas this year has seen a number of regions impacted by record rainfall and the loss of life, property and livelihoods from devastating floods.

Decisions made at times of perceived crisis are often influenced by public perception and as such are less likely to be evidence-based and/or cost-effective. When this happens, it is critical that all organisations understand their role, the relevant organisations they should be coordinating with, and have the in-house capacity to make informed judgements and assessments. Unfortunately, in NSW there appears to be a lack of clarity around responsibilities for flood mitigation. Responsibility for the management of water in NSW is shared between commonwealth, state and local government, authorities and agencies. In local government, flood mitigation activities are shared across general purpose and county councils, making it often unclear which organisation is to take the lead role. Additionally, there is overlap with broader water sector, which is notoriously complex to navigate, creating a further lack of coordination and cooperation between agencies.

In times of crisis, clarity of roles and responsibilities is critical to success. However, our members have told us that during the recent flood events, key flood mitigation authorities

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<sup>2</sup> [Climate Change 2022: Mitigation of Climate Change \(ipcc.ch\)](https://www.ipcc.ch/)

and local councils were, at times, not consulted, which led to increased risk to residents and communities<sup>3</sup>.

Improving coordination across all of the relevant employers, authorities and agencies should be a key priority of the State Government, to better protect communities during future adverse events.

## 2) The Need for Greater Engineering Expertise

Our members design, scope, construct and maintain community infrastructure and other critical assets across the local government sector. When the floods occurred, they were the experts called on to commence the recovery process and were often the first people to access areas that had been isolated. One of our members involved in the recovery process described the situation this way:

*“Seven Council engineers (many who were personally flood affected including myself) instigated, planned and coordinated the delivery of emergency access to all the areas that were isolated by floods, washouts and landslides. This was with the help of construction and maintenance teams but largely without guidance from managers or directors who were pre-occupied with Emergency Operations Centre meetings and liaison with other emergency services operations. Three days after the flood and with no communications except word-of-mouth due to a regional Telstra outage, we formed a skeleton crew of engineers and roads staff to start tackling the many roads and bridges we knew had been destroyed, that communities desperately need repaired to access essential services and start their own recoveries.*

*It's not easy to list all the challenges we faced. Huge rockslides, landslides, rivers through roads, broken bridges, washed out causeways, multiple land slips hundreds of meters long that have completely isolated communities. Cars and livestock lost, lives and livelihoods also lost.*

*Infrastructure Services was already short-staffed with three vacant Engineer positions prior to the event, and as such each Engineer's 'business as usual' workloads were already well beyond achievable due to the lack of human resources.*

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<sup>3</sup> For further information please see Rous County Council's submission to this Inquiry.

*Council is struggling to recruit and retain Engineers due to housing availability and affordability in the area. This is compounded by low wage caps and an increase in demand and wages offered in the private sector. Since the flooding, we've lost three of seven the engineers involved in the works above. This nearly halves our capacity to do the good work referred to above should we be faced with another disaster situation."*<sup>4</sup>

NSW local government has increasingly limited career paths for engineers and comparatively low rates of pay compared to other public and private sector organisations. In an environment where competition for engineering skills has been acute due to a national engineering skills shortage, this has led to a lack of experienced engineers working within the industry that is most directly charged with delivering infrastructure for the public good. The remoteness and low population density of some regional towns can further exacerbate the impacts of skills shortages and many local councils have difficulty attracting and retaining suitably qualified and experienced staff to fill critical roles within their business, especially in the technical professional areas. As previously identified by the Government in their *Draft NSW Water Strategy*<sup>5</sup>, whilst this can be due to the remoteness and scale of some regional towns, it is largely due to a local council's capacity to offer appropriate remuneration or career progression opportunities.

Our members want to be a part of a local government where long-term thinking triumphs over short-term objectives, where projects are properly scoped, designed and managed and where councils have sufficient numbers of skilled and qualified employees to ensure that they are informed infrastructure managers.

Instead, they find themselves in an industry in which experienced engineers and technical professionals are being worked to the bone whilst younger professionals are leaving the industry due to a lack of clear career paths.

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<sup>4</sup> Discussion with Asset Engineer, Byron Council, June 2022.

<sup>5</sup> Draft NSW Water Strategy, February 2021

The LGEA believes that the Government must address the issue of the industry's shortage of appropriately qualified staff as a matter of priority. Ensuring that work on council assets and infrastructure is undertaken by appropriately qualified staff can only lead to better solutions and improvements in long term asset planning, asset management and asset maintenance and recovery in times of natural disasters.

### **3) Increased Resourcing and Funding for Flood Mitigation and Prevention**

Resourcing and funding are key issues in NSW local government. As we have already noted, the industry already struggles to offer appropriate remuneration to attract and retain necessary technical professionals. The recent wave of natural disasters has further impacted the financial sustainability of the sector.

To ensure the long-term sustainability of NSW's rural and regional communities, there needs to be a shift in focus on disaster response and recovery funding. As industry has noted, it is not sustainable to continue to try and manage the impact of these events only through local government coordinated efforts, and solely funding the restoration of damaged infrastructure alone<sup>6</sup>. Local councils do not have the in-house capacity to manage recovery works in addition to the normal day-to-day responsibilities demanded of engineering and technical professionals. Members from across all of the flood-impacted councils have confirmed that their councils have had to seek out engineering consultants to assist in recovery efforts. These external engineering experts come at an increasing cost, as the demand for these skills soars throughout the state.

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<sup>6</sup> For further information please see Kyogle Council's submission to this Inquiry.

The financial sustainability of NSW local government has been hit hard by these recent natural disasters, and is further compounded by asset depreciation and the revenue-restriction imposed by rate pegging. The State Government must review the funding provided to local government, and do so in consultation with the industry, in order to ensure a sustainable industry for the communities who live and work within it.

## CONCLUSION:

Thank you for the opportunity to provide a response to the NSW Flood Enquiry on behalf of our members. Engineers and other technical professionals working within the local government sector are essential to disaster recovery efforts. They play a fundamental role in the development and implementation of strategies to maintain the safety and sustainability of local infrastructure assets during times of increasingly frequent natural disasters. Unfortunately, due to a lack of funding and a trend away from coordinated long-term planning and resourcing, there is currently insufficient engineering expertise within the industry. This urgently needs to be addressed and we look forward to working with you further as the Inquiry progresses.





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