

Submission to the Southeast Queensland

Flooding & Rainfall Event February - March 2022 Review

Submission prepared by
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Acknowledgement

NCQ acknowledges the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples as the traditional custodians of Country; we pay our respects to their elders, ancestors, land and seas.

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Abstract

This submission to the *Southeast Queensland Flooding and Rainfall Event February-March 2022 Review* was provided to IGEM (Inspector General Emergency Management www.igem.qld.gov.au) in April 2022. This submission provides insight into the scope of support Neighbourhood and Community Centres (NCCs) provided to their communities, describing centres' preparedness and adaptive approaches. The submission outlines 6 recommendations to enhance the capacity of NCCs to continue to support their communities.

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Executive Summary

Neighbourhood Centres Queensland (NCQ) is the peak body for over 143 Neighbourhood and Community Centres (NCCs) around the state, 127 of which receive base funding from the Queensland Government. Currently 95% of Neighbourhood Centres who receive state funding are members of the organisation. Queensland's Neighbourhood and Community Centres (NCCs) are key social infrastructure supporting communities affected by natural disasters. Their welcoming and inclusive nature means they are especially effective in supporting vulnerable and marginalised groups and emerging issues.

Their local knowledge and relationships mean they are well suited to prepare for, and respond to disaster affected communities, whether it be an acute event like a cyclone or flood, or a chronic event such as a drought or pandemic. Their location in disaster affected communities has meant that they are often the first to respond with Emergency Relief for Queenslanders who have been severely impacted or lost everything.

When flooding hit Southeast Queensland communities during February/March this year, NCCs located in the 23 Local Government Areas impacted by the recent flooding mounted an immediate response to the urgent needs of local people before any other services arrived. Pop-up Community Recovery Hubs have subsequently also been formally hosted on the premises of 14 NCCs (Kingston East NC, Sherwood NC, West End Community House, Yeronga NC, Caboolture NC, Deception Bay NC, Gympie Community Place, Palm Beach NC, Zillmere NC, Lockyer Valley Community Centre, Laidley Community Centre, Lowood & District Community Centre, Maryborough NC).

In response to the Terms of Reference for this Review, this submission will outline the key measures that supported the preparedness of NCCs operating in flood affected areas of Southeast Queensland to mount an immediate response to the needs of their communities, as well as the work they will deliver in the recovery phase over an extended period. This submission will also highlight issues impacting the preparedness of NCCs to respond to the rainfall and flooding event, as well as risks associated with the ability of NCCs to continue to effectively support community disaster resilience over time, particularly in the context of the increasing occurrence and severity of extreme weather events.

Queensland's Neighbourhood Centre Sector has a demonstrated history in preparation, response and recovery to monsoon, cyclone, flood, bushfire, drought and pandemic events and are uniquely positioned as strategic partners in building disaster resilience in communities across the State. Based on the data gathered by NCQ to support this Review, this submission proposes a range of recommendations designed to strengthen the preparedness and effectiveness of the role of NCCs in supporting the Disaster Management system in Queensland.

RECOMMENDATIONS:

1. The capacity of NCCs to support increased community demand in preparation, response and recovery is appropriately resourced through increased investment in baseline funding from the Queensland Government. This needs to change from the current median DCHDE funding of \$126,500 per centre per year to a minimum of \$256,000 per centre per year to ensure adequate staffing levels, communication with community and the maintenance of digital infrastructure.
2. Establish individual standing arrangements between the Department of Communities, Housing and Digital Economy (DCHDE) and Neighbourhood Centres across Queensland, to ensure that NCCs are equipped and supported when they rapidly respond to disaster.
3. Provide funding to Neighbourhood Centres Queensland to employ a permanent worker to provide ongoing support to enhance the preparation, response and recovery capacity of the NCC sector through disaster training for NCC staff and implementation of the co-created Queensland Neighbourhood Centres State Strategy for Disaster Resilience.
4. Increase the effectiveness and timeliness of the distribution of recovery funding through directly funding NCCs, rather than current arrangements that require funding to be funnelled through local Councils. This will enhance the capacity of NCCs to meet the immediate recovery needs of their community.
5. Formally integrate NCCs into the disaster management system through requiring Councils, through their LDMG, to initiate connection, communication and coordination with NCCs as part of their responsibility under the Queensland State Disaster Management Plan (2018).
6. Review government recovery funding guidelines to enable greater flexibility to provide a safety net to support people who are just outside the guidelines but are in urgent need. Neighbourhood Centres are equipped to bridge this gap with formal support.

1.0 Introduction

143 neighbourhood and community centres across the state are embedded in their communities, enabling centres to operate on the frontline of disaster planning, response and recovery, often without the coordination of disaster management agencies. As the most natural disaster affected state in Australia, NCQ has collaborated with NCCs in hazard prone areas of Queensland to research the role they play in building community disaster resilience. The research indicates that NCCs are providing structured support, community leadership and volunteer coordination for our communities through widespread flooding and destruction.

This research has previously been presented in three documents relating to monsoon¹, drought² and bushfire³ with a focus on the development and implementation of strategies to enhance the capacity of centres toward building community disaster resilience. With the increase and severity of disaster events, NCQ is now working with NCCs more broadly across the state to develop a Queensland Neighbourhood Centres State Strategy for Disaster Resilience. The purpose of this document is to build on the existing research to capture and conceptualise strategic pathways to enhance the effectiveness and capacity of Centres to work with their communities in preparation, response and recovery and to support local disaster management capability.

NCCs in Southeast Queensland have reported that their key roles in responding to this most recent rainfall and flood event were in the delivery of information and referral services, food relief, material relief, emotional support and volunteer coordination. They also were able to draw on their local knowledge and partnerships to contact the most vulnerable, coordinate emergency food distribution, source emergency housing and provide personal support. Many centres also offered refuge, safety, showers, laundry and access to computers and internet to their community.

As a significant aspect of the role NCCs play in community disaster resilience, they are currently delivering recovery services. Centres have estimated that the longevity of the recovery phase following the recent flooding event is anticipated to span a period of up to three years, exacerbated by the compounding effects of the COVID-19 Pandemic.

It is anticipated that the outcomes from this Review will produce significant insights and strategies to support the existing work that NCQ is facilitating with neighbourhood and community centres to enhance their capacity to work with their communities to build community disaster resilience as part of the disaster management system.

2.0 Neighbourhood Centre Preparedness Activities

As place-based community organisations, NCCs are embedded in the communities where they deliver their services, having a physical presence, operating in a localised way and responding to local issues and opportunities. The significance of social infrastructure, such as meeting and activity spaces, the delivery of services and responses that meet the needs of local communities, as well as community ownership and governance provides on the ground experience and knowledge that other transient services do not possess. As existing social resources, the often long-standing connection with their communities establishes a foundational level of preparedness for response and recovery. The following

sections provide more detail on the preparation efforts that enabled NCCs to mobilise for this most recent rainfall and flooding event.

2.1 Scope of Support Provided by NCCs

A survey⁴ was conducted by NCQ immediately following the rainfall and flood event to understand what programs and services were being offered by different centres and the key resources needed by centres in the coming weeks and months. Information provided by the 42 centres that responded is set out below.

Of the centres who responded, 93% of them were providing information and referrals to people impacted by flooding.

76% of centres were providing **emotional support and/or counselling.**

69% were providing **material aid and emergency relief**

69% were **checking on and/or identifying vulnerable people**

69% were providing **food support e.g., ready-made meals, tea and coffee, food packs**

52% were providing **lounge space e.g., peer support, activities, phone charging**

45% reported they were **supporting other providers** by acting as a connector at the time of the survey, and this appears to have increased in the days following the flooding.

Many centres also supported people to find accommodation, provided tenancy and/or legal support and advice, provided showers or washing facilities and coordinated new and existing volunteers. Two of the centres that responded also acted as evacuation centres.

2.2 Preparedness – Adaptation acquired through responding to the Pandemic

The information outlined above highlights the scope of support these centres were able to provide their communities as part of the flood response and now in recovery. While these services have been traditionally delivered by NCCs, a state-wide annual Neighbourhood Centre survey⁵ conducted by NCQ in October 2021 provided insights into the significant creativity and flexibility utilised by Centres during the height of the COVID-19 Pandemic. The data identifies how Centres quickly adapted the way they delivered their services to the community to meet the challenges posed by the restrictions and conditions during that time.

Adjustments made to service delivery in response to the Pandemic have had a significant impact on preparation, particularly on the effectiveness of support and connection during

the flood response, adding a new dimension to their capacity to respond to the needs of their communities during future disaster events.

Increased utilisation of technology

A key adaptation reported by Centres has been the effectiveness of enhancements to and increased utilisation of online and virtual platforms to engage and connect with community members, developed in response to the restrictions of the Pandemic. On-line activity, including increased use of social media, provided a platform for community to receive information on current restrictions and other COVID information from a trusted source. Many Centres also adapted and increased their emergency relief and food provision using e-vouchers, as well as linking with other services to further connect community members needing food relief. Centres also reported providing support to other organisations and groups through sharing resources online to ensure they were better equipped to support their communities.

Services such as counselling and working with domestic violence support, normally delivered in a face-to-face setting, were effectively moved to be delivered remotely during the Pandemic. These adaptations continue to be utilised as part of the current response and recovery phases, with NCCs reporting that where access to their Centres was affected by flooding, staff had been able to deliver counselling and other services remotely.

“If I could have done anything differently (to prepare for the Pandemic) I would've upfront invested resources into technology. Unbeknownst to all of us I think technology was such a key thing in the pandemic in regard to how you connected with your community.”

Brisbane based Neighbourhood Centre Manager

Food Support

Centres reported a significant increase in the distribution of frozen meals to community members from the onset of the Pandemic. Survey participants recorded the distribution of 11,496 frozen meals per month, equating to 137,962 meals distributed by the entire sector annually. This method of food distribution, refined by Centres during the Pandemic, enabled an immediate response with food relief for flood affected communities as part of the recent event.

Broadening Established Networks and Relationships

In a time of crisis, the ability to be able to access resources, knowledge and support through a range of established networks and relationships can make a major impact on response and recovery efforts. The compounding impacts of natural disasters and the COVID-19 Pandemic has heightened the need for community members, small to medium organisations such as Neighbourhood and Community Centres, as well as large services and government agencies to work together to support one another through these challenging times.

In adapting service delivery to address changing conditions, many NCCs recognised the value in expanding their existing networks, enhancing their ability to draw on a broader range of information and resources to facilitate the rapid mobilization of support during an emergency. Centres have reported the expansion of their networks to include organisations such as GIVIT, Volunteering Queensland, and more localised organisations such as other local service providers, Meals on Wheels and local businesses, enhancing their scope to more effectively meet the needs of their communities. One NCC operating in the flood affected area of the inner-city reported that increased partnerships had resulted in the Centre receiving \$35K worth of donations in the form of cash, white goods and other major essentials.

Continuous Improvement of Business Maturity

The last two years has seen an increase in awareness by NCCs of the need to support response and recovery through improved policy and procedures. Some of this focus has been on volunteer recruitment and management, with the impetus for improvements influenced through the advent of spontaneous volunteering, as well as the decline of an aging volunteer workforce during the Pandemic. This awareness had direct benefits to centres during the flood event, with increased effectiveness in managing the inundation of the kindness of local businesses and residents offering to volunteer their time and resources.

Another key area of development has been an increased awareness of the value of business continuity planning. In the wake of the Pandemic, many NCCs have gained an appreciation of how this planning can assist their preparations to enable the continued safe operation of their Centres following impacts of disaster events on their own facilities and staff.

NCQ anticipates that the preparations undertaken by NCCs in Southeast Queensland will continue to evolve as learnings from this latest event are unpacked and strategies to enhance service delivery are jointly developed and implemented to support their response to future events.

3.0 Supporting the Effectiveness of Neighbourhood Centres to Respond

The section above has outlined the significance of the adaptations made by Neighbourhood and Community Centres in response to the COVID-19 Pandemic that have supported their preparations to respond to the recent rainfall and flooding event in Southeast Queensland. These adaptations have enhanced and complemented the local knowledge of their communities developed by centres over time. However, some challenges that have impacted the ability of Centres to respond to this most recent event have also been identified. These challenges, if left unaddressed, are considered to pose a significant risk to preparation, response and recovery efforts of NCCs to effectively meet the challenges ahead. These are outlined in the following sections.

3.1 Connection to Local Disaster Management Groups – Underutilisation of Key Disaster Capacity

This submission supports an integrated approach to developing strategies that improve systems and structures fundamental to planning for resilience and capacity in the face of a range of future threats. The clear benefit offered by multi-sectoral resilience planning processes is the increased level of support that can be activated to complement formal response efforts during an event, the opportunity for role clarification across the disaster management system, information and resource sharing during disasters, and improved coordination and enhancement of functionality during disasters.

Internationally, community leadership is being recognised and enabled as part of collaborations and networks that form critical resources to work with and support emergency management agencies. However, the development of locally led preparation, response and recovery efforts, also recognised by the Royal Commission into Natural Disaster Arrangements⁶ as a strength of the disaster management system (*Commonwealth of Australia, 2020*) are yet to be fully capitalised on as a means of complementing the capacity of the sector.

The state-wide annual Neighbourhood Centre survey conducted by NCQ in October 2021⁵ indicated the existence of some strong connections between Neighbourhood and Community Centres and their Council's Local Disaster Management Group (LDMG). These relationships appeared to be more likely to exist in areas extending from Far North Queensland as far south as the Sunshine Coast. However, the survey, together with conversations with centres following the recent event have revealed that NCCs located in the Southeast of the State are the least likely to be connected with their LDMG. The strengthening of collaborative approaches to disaster management between local Councils and the NCCs operating in their areas, particularly those already responding to their communities in hazard prone areas of the Southeast, must constitute a key strategy to support effective preparation, response and recovery efforts for communities.

Some NCCs in the Southeast have reported a connection with their LDMGs through formal arrangements as members of Human and Social sub-groups, or less formally through hosting preparation events delivered by the LDMG or SES. In the more rural areas of the Southeast, some NCCs report that their relationships with Council are not necessarily formal, but can be mutually beneficial, with Council's referring community to Centres and Centres requesting assistance where Council services are required. Other Centres report that while they are known to their Council, communication is not strong.

“Natural disasters have changed, and it has become clear to us that the nation’s disaster management arrangements must also change.”

(Commonwealth of Australia, 2020, Royal Commission into National Disaster Arrangements)

Southeast Queensland has some of the largest local government areas in the State, including Brisbane City Council as the largest and most populous local government area in the country. Denser populations present a different set of challenges to emergency management operations to those in rural areas, including a reliance on critical physical

and social infrastructure that become crucial to the support of response and recovery efforts. Effective preparation, response and recovery efforts benefit from an approach that incorporates “*coordination, collaboration, and communication*” (Kapucu & Garayev, 2012 p313)⁷. While NCCs are reporting that some LDMGs in the southeast are now beginning to establish connections with Centres operating in their areas, Brisbane City Council has no formal or informal arrangements for the effective connection, communication and cooperation of the 22 NCCs operating across the city, some of which are located in suburbs that were severely affected by the 2011 flood event and were again impacted by this recent event.

Brisbane has many hazard-prone communities, as demonstrated by the 2011 flood event impacting 94 suburbs across the city and resulting in the deaths of 35 people. The demand on Disaster Management sector resources at that time resulted in place-based community organisations providing locally led responses, linking their communities to critical information and resources, and providing outreach services to vulnerable residents after the flood had subsided (West End Community House, 2011)⁸. Several of the suburbs seriously impacted in 2011 such as Yeronga, Rocklea and Oxley continue to be impacted by severe flood events.

“Neighbourhood Centres need to be brought into the fold of the LDMG structure. If you’re in a regional city, in some areas you are completely left out and it really comes down to personal relationships between council workers as to whether you are included in communications or response or not.”

Regional NCC Manager

The strengthening of collaborative approaches between local Councils and the NCCs operating in their areas, particularly in hazard prone areas of the Southeast, must constitute a critical component toward developing effective preparation, response and recovery efforts for communities in those locations. Council involvement and support in local asset planning, delivery of community preparation workshops, facilitation of first responders' courses for NCC staff as part of a formal cross-sector partnership are central to community disaster resilience. Equally, the connections held by NCCs can facilitate direct access to community to assist LDGMs to enhance the effectiveness of community preparation and hazard awareness. Failure to address this issue will continue to see NCCs as an underutilised capacity in a disaster management system that is becoming more stretched as events intensify.

3.2 Enhancing Centre Capacity to Support Increased Community Demand in Response and Recovery

Consultation undertaken by NCQ with frontline neighbourhood centre staff in flood-affected communities has identified an urgent need for funding and resources to meet the growing level and complexity of demand from the community during times of disaster. It is important for the Review to consider that NCCs do not receive any additional

funding to meet the demands of flood response and the prolonged recovery period. Centres are provided with \$126,500 annual median funding from the Queensland Government to operate a Centre at a basic level.

Centres in the Southeast reported that they were operating from a position of too few staff hours prior to the flood event. This became a major issue, with reports of staff at some Centres working additional hours in a volunteer capacity in the days and weeks after the flooding due to unavailability of funding required to meet community demand. Some Centres reported resorting to fundraising efforts, and in some cases, staff using their own money to provide essentials to support their communities affected by flooding. The use of increased technology, highlighted as a key element of preparedness, will also require a level of investment that NCCs may not have.

“When you have a disaster like this, it exacerbates these social issues and services have limited capacity to cope.”

Neighbourhood Centre Manager

With Centres already reporting an increase in mental health, domestic violence and demand for housing as part of the response to the Pandemic, these issues will be heightened in the coming months as part of the compounding effects of the flood event. Following the impact of the flooding in Gympie for example, the Gympie Community Place coordinator considered there would be a need for an extra paid role for the next twelve months to maintain service delivery over that period.

This lack of ability to meet community demand effectively and safely in response and with appropriate documentation to support accountability, particularly for social support, administration and volunteer supervision, is an issue that constitutes a major risk to response and recovery for future events and must be addressed as a key aspect of preparedness activities. Centres have suggested that increased investment in the form of the introduction of disaster training for existing staff, together with the addition of a permanent additional disaster recovery worker is required to build a more realistic level of response and recovery capability, as well as supporting preparation efforts. This resourcing is particularly important where Centre staff have also been personally affected by flooding and may be unable to get to the Centre.

As another key role of NCCs in disasters, Centres also provide space and resources to host the larger charities in the recovery phase. These organisations are well-funded, as well as being the beneficiary of flood appeal funding. NCCs acknowledge the important role these organisations play as part of a disaster situation. However, as transient services, they are reliant on neighbourhood and community centres to enable them to effectively help the community through their local knowledge and the community focus of Centres. There is however a cost to NCCs in resourcing these organisations, highlighting a further financial impact that can affect the ability of Centres to effectively deliver their recovery efforts.

Some Centres have reported occasions where the DCHDE has provided resourcing where Centres have been asked to support the collection of data and assist community members as part of Recovery Hub activities. Centres have suggested that the availability

of recovery funding should be made available as part of the Queensland Government's Recovery Arrangements, or as standing arrangements with the DCHDE to streamline the delivery of the resourcing associated with hosting the external organisations and the support to Recovery Hub activities. Centres have also reported that where recovery funding has been made available, current arrangements that require this funding to be funnelled through local Councils only serve to prolong the timeframe for the funding to reach them. The consequence of the complexity of this arrangement is that Centres are not receiving financial support for their recovery efforts for some time. NCCs have recommended that funding provided directly to Centres would be more effective in supporting their ability to meet the immediate recovery needs of their communities.

The issue of the ability of NCCs to support community members who present in urgent need, but who may be just outside the Centre's catchment or perhaps is just outside all government funding guidelines has also been raised in consultation with NCCs, with Centres advocating for more flexibility to address these needs.

4.0 Conclusion

In line with the Terms of Reference for this Review, this submission has outlined key preparation activities that have supported Neighbourhood and Community Centres to effectively respond to the needs of their communities, as well as to commence their work in the recovery phase. NCCs have based many of their preparedness activities utilising the breadth of creativity and flexibility they have demonstrated in adapting to the changing circumstances and restrictions of the Pandemic. This has been demonstrated by the scope of support they have been able to provide in response.

The demonstrated ability of NCCs to support disaster resilience in their communities has been documented by NCQ as part of existing research. However, just as the capacity of the Disaster Management sector, as well as the large charity organisations have been impacted by the effects of compounding disaster events, the capacity of NCCs is also being severely stretched. A significant point of departure in assessing the effectiveness of preparedness activities of these agencies lies in the disparity between the level of resourcing and support available to each of them.

This submission has highlighted a range of challenges faced by NCCs that are impacting their ability to support their preparedness. These include an existing lack of funding to support their traditional and contracted services, with no additional funding to support the delivery of preparation, response and recovery. Inconsistent levels of collaboration and connection between NCCs and LDMGs is out of step with international trends in the development of community leadership models and a recognition of the need to build the capacity of the Disaster Management sector.

We would like to thank IGEM for the opportunity to respond to the Review. NCQ considers the challenges that have been highlighted in this submission as major risks to the ongoing ability of Neighbourhood and Community Centres, as key social and disaster management infrastructure, to effectively provide the support that will be required as the climate changes and the occurrence of severe weather events increase.

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