Community Disaster Preparation

What we learned from flood recovery

www.communitydisasterprep.com.au

This project is funded under the Disaster Risk Reduction Grants Program funded by the Australian Government and the South Australian Government.

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What we learned from flood recovery

The eastern Australia floods in 2022 followed two years of above average rainfall, with the wettest recorded month nationally in November 2021. There was flooding in Queensland in November and December 2021. Ex-Tropical Cyclone Seth brought further rainfall in late December and early January causing flooding in southeast QLD and the Mary River. Soils were saturated. In February and March southeast QLD and eastern NSW experienced extreme multi-day rainfall and significant flooding, and further heavy rain occurred in NSW in late June.

Natural Hazards Research Australia commissioned research into community experiences of the floods, with the findings from QLD and NSW available at https://www.naturalhazards.com.au/floods2022.

This resource summarises the findings about flood recovery and what can be done to make the process less distressing.

Opportunities for better policy

- Flood data – issues with accessibility to good quality data, trust in the accuracy of data for local flood risk management, and ongoing flood literacy issues.
- Localised perspective – the need for focus at the local level and inclusion of local knowledge. There was rejection of official information due to lack of local relevance and the experience of officials rejecting local knowledge.
- Information expectations – a need for timely, relevant, and accurate official information, and the move to established trusted community sources on social media.
- Forgotten people and forgotten places – a sense of being forgotten, let down, and overlooked, the negative influence of media.
- Community responders – the changing role of communities and integration into emergency management. Good and bad impacts of disaster on communities and planning for future response.
- Clean-up – managing the challenges of the clean-up. Renegotiating relationships with possessions, dealing with looting and scavenging, the impacts of untrained and overzealous helpers, and need for support with help literacy.
- Insurance – the advantages and disadvantages of insurance in a large-scale disaster. Challenges with claiming, assessment, resolution, rebuilding, and reinsuring.
- Bureaucracy – encountering a range of challenges in gaining financial support as well as persistence, connectivity, and documentation in post-disaster settings. Retraumatising from repeated lodging of claims and discontinuity in responses.

Two thirds of survey respondents said that in future they would rely more on local information from their community.

More people (65%) were dissatisfied with information about council waste collections than the timing of collections (55%).

Local councils need to provide free skip bins and collections and better communication around the timing and continued availability of services to remove uncertainty and allow those who want more time to take things at their own pace.

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- Temporary housing – managing displacement, being moved around, loss of agency, and being 'homeless'.
- Disaster opportunism – frustration at the perceived financial exploitation of flood-impacted residents and the disaster situation broadly. Scams, rorts, opportunism, and theft.
- Recovery fatigue – communities struggling to keep volunteering in recovery support with insufficient resources.
- Infrastructure, planning, and maintenance in sensemaking – frustration at the lack of maintenance of stormwater drainage and water and rain gauge systems, and the impacts of planning decisions and infrastructure construction in compounding the impacts of flooding.

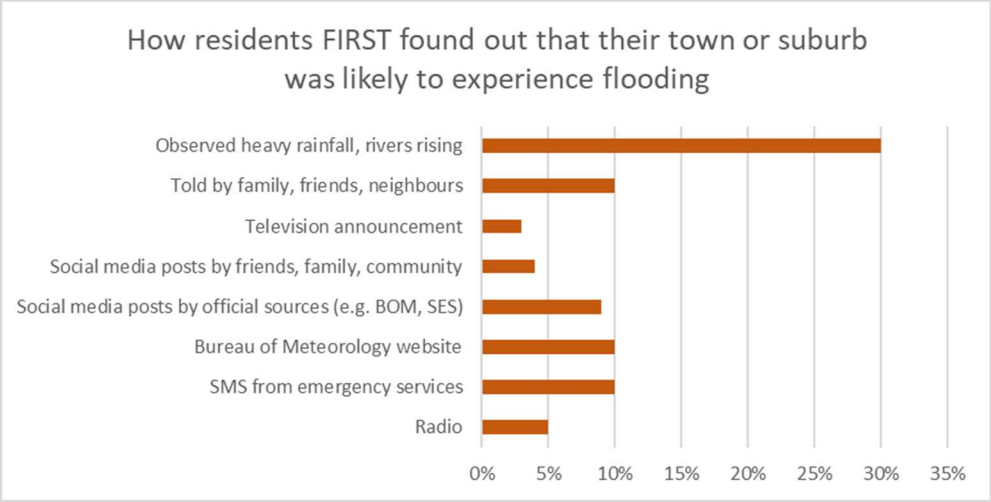
74% felt that poor maintenance of stormwater and drainage, and

72% felt that land use planning contributed to flooding.

Where did people get information?

Apart from direct observation of the unfolding situation, the most frequent source of initial information was from friends, family and community (14% including social media and word-of-mouth).

73% said that they preferred SMS for receiving future flood warnings, with the next most popular methods being mobile phone app (34%), radio (32%) and Facebook (32%). Only 14% favoured a recorded phone message and 3% favoured Twitter.



Uncertainty is a feature in all disasters, at all stages, and had many negative consequences for those impacted, including inertia, powerlessness, inability to plan, and anxiety. Communication is key – even if this is communicating what you know/don't know, what you are doing, and what you want others to do/advising people what they can do. All stakeholders need a readiness to engage, to listen, and to make changes or change priorities, and to communicate intent. Communication is not a substitute for action, but it will assist residents to plan and act, and help to maintain trust.

A disproportionate burden in recovery is falling to communities and volunteers who are running community hubs and other local support. Although there is goodwill and assistance in the early stages, as the weeks and months pass volunteer numbers dwindle as people return to work and other activities, and the burden shifts to an ever-smaller group.

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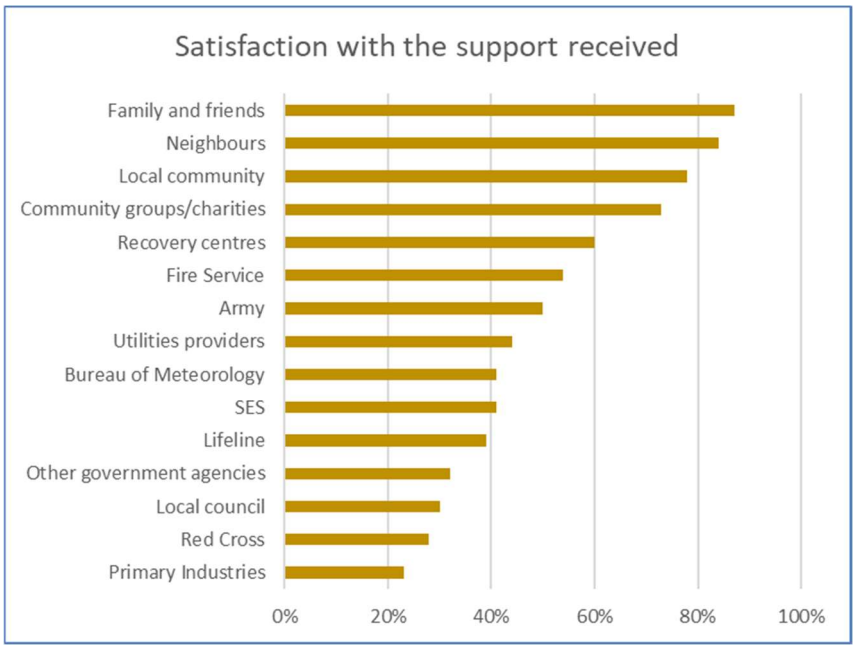
Satisfaction with the support received

The highest levels of satisfaction were for support received from friends, family, neighbours, the community and community groups/charities (all over 70% satisfaction).



The report highlights four challenge areas for emergency management stakeholders:

Loss of trust in institutions – the gradual erosion of trust that needs to be addressed across the entire emergency management system.

Navigating the balance of control – grappling with the need to embrace self-activating communities and integrate community into all phases of disaster.

Emotional impacts – managing the long-term psychological impacts of an increasingly complex disaster landscape.

More than disaster – the need to see disaster support as part of a wholistic person-centred approach.

In addition to recovery agencies personnel, personnel in all stakeholder organisations should be trained and ready to hold a presence in community immediately after a disaster and for the months that follow. Being there, checking in on people, and acknowledging survivors was a powerful comfort for survivors.

Disasters magnify existing vulnerabilities in society and individual vulnerabilities add an additional overlay to planning. Older people, those living alone, those with physical limitations/mobility issues and a range of disabilities encountered a range of issues – from not receiving warnings, being unable to lift possessions, and problems during evacuation. It is critical that stakeholders involved in disaster and social support have plans in place to identify, engage, and support community members with a range of different needs.

Response agencies need to build connection and embeddedness in their communities. Residents, especially female residents, showed interest in a range of flexible community responder/disaster-related roles, and additional roles and tasks which suggests potential for volunteering roles oriented to this area.

Re-telling and re-living experiences when interacting with service providers can have negative psycho-social impacts on individuals and delay service provision. There is a need to capture residents' information/history in a secure way so that they don't need to repeat their story or keep providing the same information when dealing with multiple services or different people.

Community connectedness was a recurring narrative. Family, friends and neighbours helped to alert others, played a role in information sharing, and supported each other in numerous ways as floodwaters were rising, assisted in evacuations, helped with clean-up, and supported recovery. All stakeholders need strategies to build community connectedness. Community cohesion and connectedness is a much-needed force multiplier when it comes to disasters.