



Labor



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By email: SEQFloodReview2022@igem.qld.gov.au

Dear Inspector-General,

Thank you for the opportunity to make a submission in relation to your review. Our community is feeling, more and more, the impacts of climate change, and the increasing frequency and severity of disasters, so the work you are doing is important.

I am a federal MP. My electorate runs along the river from Dutton Park near the Eleanor Schonell Bridge to Murarrie, at a point just to the west of the Gateway Bridge. It also includes Norman Creek. Deluge- and flood-affected areas in the recent disaster included the riverside areas on the Kurilpa Peninsula, at Kangaroo Point, the suburbs and localities on either side of Norman Creek, inland to around Stones Corner and Greenslopes, and the riverside areas on and to the east of the Bulimba Peninsula.

During the floods I visited a range of localities and spoke with affected residents, businesses, and community organisations. Since that time, I have also sought feedback from constituents regarding their experiences with the deluge, the floods, the response, and the recovery.

This submission sets out a range of suggestions for consideration in the review. They arise from feedback I have received, and from my own observations. I appreciate some may not fall within your terms of reference and I welcome you to forward those that do not on to anyone to whom they may be more relevant.

Before turning to those suggestions, I want to state my appreciation for the many people who, in the course of their work, or as volunteers, made a contribution to protecting our community and caring for affected people, during the deluge and the floods. There are too many to mention. I thank all the SES volunteers, government workers, defence force personnel, meteorologists, police, health care workers, council workers, power and water workers, cleaners, civil society representatives and charity workers, businesses, community groups, sports clubs, environmental groups, unions, marine safety workers, telecommunications workers, insurance assessors, disability workers, individuals and all who helped during the disaster, the response, and the recovery, sometimes in dangerous circumstances. The community is very grateful for their work and their help.

This submission makes the following suggestions for your consideration.

Warnings, forecasts and early information

I am grateful to the agencies that worked hard to bring accurate and timely weather information to the attention of local communities.

In making the following suggestions, I do not wish to underestimate the forecasting challenges, or the challenges in striking the right note in communications to encourage preparedness while avoiding creating unnecessary problems.

The review should consider whether official warning channels could be used earlier, and whether formal channels and social media comments from public figures could be better aligned. Specifically the review should consider:

- Whether the content and timing of official warnings, sent through official channels such as the SMS system, and the content and timing of the Lord Mayor's social media posts, could be better aligned;
- whether the SMS alerts were sufficiently timely, and whether enough alerts were sent;
- encouraging further uptake of the Bureau of Meteorology smartphone app by Brisbane residents.¹

The review should consider the optimal use of multiple channels for sending early warnings.

Specifically, it should consider:

- whether there should be greater use of SMS alerts, bearing in mind that power outages will reduce the usefulness of channels that rely on 4G or greater access to data, given power outages' impacts on wifi, and the fact that locals do not necessarily have access to unlimited mobile data;
- how governments and administrations make sure that as many people as possible can receive timely SMS warnings, bearing in mind that people may not realise they need to sign up to an alert service in order to receive such alerts;
- how to make sure people know to turn on the radio and tune in to ABC 612 Brisbane when disaster strikes;²
- whether governments and administrations could better work with body corporates and building managers to distribute timely information to residents of apartment buildings.

The review should consider how best to communicate the severity of coming events. Specifically, it should consider:

- how to make sure people appreciate the difference between reporting on what is happening now and warnings about what will happen next, and the difference in severity between present and future events.³
- whether more visual aids (for example, maps of likely flood levels at times throughout the coming day) should be used to better communicate the severity.

The review should consider whether the warnings were provided in a way that met the needs of people with diverse needs.

¹ I am aware there is also some work being done to give the app the capacity to send push notifications, which I believe would be welcomed by locals.

² See, also, below, the suggestion about making sure that people know that disaster-readiness should include having an AM radio and batteries to hand at their residence if possible

³ As one person said to me, "Saying it will rain with localised flooding once it is already raining doesn't give the full picture or the severity."

Information and communication for disaster preparedness

Your review should consider:

- what information about disaster preparedness should be provided to prospective and new residents in the suburbs along the Brisbane River and major creeks, and how it should be provided;
- how to increase locals' preparedness before disaster strikes, including how to increase households' propensity to stock up on AM radios and batteries, and their awareness of the importance of tuning in to the local ABC radio.

One local reported that shops ran out of batteries for torches instantly. It would be useful to raise awareness within households about the importance of always having emergency supplies on hand.

Information through the response and recovery period

Many of the same considerations as are set out above in relation to early warnings also apply to communication throughout the disaster, during the response, and during the recovery.

Social media was a useful tool in this disaster, particularly the localised Facebook groups used in suburbs, locales, and even individual apartment buildings. Local MPs and councillors should be given early information that is of a quality that we can post into those groups. Local MPs and councillors should also act responsibly and ensure their information is accurate. And it must be borne in mind that social media cannot be the only, or even primary, means by which information is communicated, because of the impact of power outages, especially on those who have limited or no access to mobile data.

The review should consider what, if any, physical signage or other in-person communication should be used to warn against driving on flooded roads or playing in, or walking through, flood waters. The best means to communicate the public health aspects of contaminated floodwater should be considered.

Sandbags

Residents living to the west of Norman Creek could not be expected to go to Morningside for sandbags. By the time many of them were aware of the need for sandbags, the roads between their residences and the Morningside depot were flooded and they were being asked not to drive through them.

The review should consider:

- whether there should be more sandbag locations;
- whether sandbags should be trucked into river-side communities where it is safe to do so (I have been told that the then local councillor arranged for this to occur in West End during the 2011 floods)
- whether newer sandbag technology such as the self-activating "Gumleaf Miracle Sandbags" could be distributed either during times of disaster preparedness (ie when no disaster is currently underway) or during the early warning stage.

The role of body corporates and building management, in relation to sandbag availability, should also be considered, as should flood mitigation devices of particular use to apartment buildings.

Local water infrastructure

The review should consider what governments, the council, and Urban Utilities should do as a matter of ongoing disaster readiness to ensure that urban water infrastructure is resilient in the face of deluges, stormwater, and flooding.

The review should consider how best to communicate about how to seek help if residents believe there has been a fault in water infrastructure that has led to unsafe or unsanitary conditions.

More generally the review should consider how to ensure public confidence in local water infrastructure during disasters.

The progress, or otherwise, of the installation of backflow valves, since the 2011 floods, should be considered in your review.

The effectiveness of the backflow devices that have been installed, in mitigating water damage and flooding, should be considered.

Power outages and electricity infrastructure

Where possible and safe, locals need advance warning of power outages. The review should consider:

- how best to make sure residents are given as much notice as possible of the likelihood of power outages; and
- whether disaster warnings and forecasts should explicitly state that there is a risk of power outages if disaster strikes.

I acknowledge that notice cannot necessarily be given if there is a risk to safety, and that safety of residents, power sector workers and others must come first.

In relation to the location of, and plans for, local electricity infrastructure, the review should also consider:

- how to take a systemic approach to making sure that electricity infrastructure is as resilient as possible during future disasters;
- how locals can be given more opportunities to notify Energex if they have concerns about the location or flood appropriateness of specific pieces of infrastructure;
- whether there are any transformers or other relevant infrastructure sitting below the 2022 or 2011 flood lines, and, if so, whether that is the optimal location for them;
- how electricity authorities could better take into account flood, inundation and disaster risk in making decisions about the installation and location of electricity infrastructure.

At this point I again express my gratitude to Minister De Brenni and Energex for responding extremely rapidly when I passed on to them concerns that locals raised with me, about the location of a transformer in Orleigh Park, while I was visiting and doorknocking the area during the floods.

Apartment buildings, development, housing and densification

In relation to apartment buildings, I have been advised of situations where residents were without power long after Energex had reconnected the area (with reports of people being without power for a month). The review should consider how to make sure that, in both new and existing developments, electricity infrastructure is suitable for local conditions, and is as resilient to disasters as is practicable.

Similarly, in apartment buildings, electrical connections that power lifts, rubbish chutes, appliances, should be designed with disaster resilience in mind, as should services and infrastructure more generally. In designing basements and the location of services and infrastructure, consideration should be given to flood and inundation risks.

Residents who suspect misconduct on the part of building managers, developers, committees or others should have clear information about how and where to complain, and what action is available to them.

More broadly:

- building design in apartment complexes should be suited to local conditions;
- governments and administrations must take into account the impacts of climate change, and the likelihood that disasters will increase in frequency and severity, in determining policy and legal settings that affect planning, the environment, and development.

If government is considering buying residential properties from residents, there are various issues to be considered including:

- house prices and house price inflation;
- prohibitively expensive rental costs, and whether purchasing arrangements are sufficient to make sure residents can stay within the local area;
- the future use of any land obtained on behalf of the public by such buybacks;
- less direct but nonetheless important flow-on effects.

Telecommunications

The review should consider what telecommunications infrastructure owners should do to make sure that disruptions to internet access can be minimised in times of disaster.

It should consider what should be done in apartment buildings to ensure telecommunications infrastructure within the development is suitable for disaster-prone areas.

People with a disability or other special needs

Where there were power outages affecting lifts in apartment buildings, or the ability of people to microwave pre-made meals designed for particular food intolerances, for example, emergency arrangements are needed to help get people to safe and appropriate accommodation during outages.

Inaccurate information can have a particularly severe impact on people with a disability. One location that was set up for temporary emergency relief – a dry place to store belongings, charge a phone, and get a cup of tea – was misdescribed in a community email as an evacuation centre. This caused distress to a gentleman with a disability who arrived there expecting to be able to stay. He then had to secure hotel accommodation, drawing on his NDIS package to pay for it. The review should consider how best to clearly and accurately communicate information about assistance available to people with particular needs. That could include considering whether it timely and accurate information could be provided to people via their NDIS providers, support workers, or other trusted sources.

Similarly, the review should consider how best to physically assist people with disabilities to evacuate, for example through the provision of disability-appropriate transport, and/or accessible emergency accommodation.

I have received reports of people having to rely on NDIS packages to fund emergency accommodation. This is concerning, erodes the NDIS package, and compounds the stress already being suffered.

Some residents with sickness or chronic pain felt that they were being treated unfairly because of their lesser capacity to assist with cleanup. This was obviously a stressful time for everyone. More assistance, whether government or 'mud army', may have assisted in defraying tension such as this.

Public health and safety

I have already referred, above, to the issue of contaminated floodwaters. The importance of making sure people can seek medical assistance has also been raised with me.

The need for more emergency lighting, including in apartment buildings, should be considered, as a matter of safety when power outages occur.

Evacuation, emergency relief centres, and social services

The review should note the impracticability of asking displaced people to evacuate at short notice to a centre a significant distance away, especially where there was flooding between their residence and the evacuation centre (as was particularly the case for people living in the suburbs to the west of Norman Creek).

The review should also note the additional challenges posed by seeking to keep people safe from both the impacts of the disasters, and from the pandemic.

The recent disaster demonstrated the importance of community-owned halls and like facilities, and the apparent dearth of facilities suitable to rapid conversion into evacuation centres in the inner-southern and inner-south-eastern river-side suburbs. The review should consider:

- whether there are sufficient community-owned halls, community centres, and like facilities that can be used as nearby emergency support and/or evacuation centres if needed in times of disaster;
- if not, how to grow the stock of such community facilities;
- whether governments and administrations, in making decisions about the disposal (through sale, transfer, or demolition) of publicly-owned facilities, could or should be obliged to take into account the cumulative impacts of such disposals on the stock of community assets in the local area that can be used for disaster evacuation or disaster relief purposes;
- whether there are arrangements in place to make sure that community-owned facilities can be utilised by the community in times of disaster, in circumstances where those facilities are, in non-disaster times, let or sub-let.

Flood affected communities need early access to government services and government personnel.

The review should consider:

- whether more government personnel should make themselves physically available in flood-affected areas, to assist with disaster payment applications, and, if so, under what conditions (eg government facility, civil society facility, pop-up offices, etc), taking into account the importance of safety and security for the workers concerned;
- what can be done to better coordinate between different spheres of government in relation to service provision;
- transport for flood affected people to get to service providers, emergency relief centres, or the like.

The review should also consider how to strengthen communication and connections between civil society groups including charities, ethnic communities, and community associations, as well as businesses and others, because greater social cohesion and community capital will lend itself to better communication and cooperation during times of disaster.

The review should also note there are longer-term housing issues for people displaced by floods, beyond emergency evacuation. Housing affordability issues including rental increases will compound the difficulties already been faced by people affected by the disasters.

I also take this opportunity to thank locally based charities, community centres and civil society organisations that immediately scaled up their local services and worked together to provide relief.

Government Disaster Payments

The review should consider:

- the appropriateness of online forms for disaster payment applications in circumstances where there are widespread power outages (noting the comments above that people do not necessarily have access to unlimited mobile data);
- the appropriateness of online forms for people with diverse needs;
- the rates of government payments and, to the extent it is within the scope of the review, the fairness or otherwise of lower rates of payments being offered in Queensland compared with New South Wales;
- the impact that inconsistent decision-making, in relation to payment eligibility, can have on communities and households;
- the appropriateness, and the clarity, of the eligibility rules for government payments (including the Commonwealth rules about damage to Queenslander-style homes, and rules relating to damage suffered because of flooding in basements);
- the source of any delays in government payments, and the appropriateness of timeframes for applications to be made;
- whether there was enough information provided to the community to make them aware of government assistance.

National emergency, and national disaster funding

The review should consider the timeliness or otherwise of the Commonwealth's natural disaster determination.

The review should note that the Morrison-Joyce government had failed to adequately use its disaster fund to help prepare for and mitigate the likely impacts of disasters.

Transport

The review should consider what can be done to make transport infrastructure and services more disaster-resilient, while at all times ensuring the safety of transport workers.

Bikeways are important to locals in my electorate and some have noted the delays in clearing them. Some residents noted that basement floods and lift outages prevented them from using their bikes. One resident noted the importance of keeping pedestrian routes clear. The review should consider what can be done, if anything, to make sure active travel options are kept open to the extent possible (though it is noted that not everyone can use such options).

Clean up, and volunteering

The review should consider whether the communication from the Council about the "mud army" was conducted well and with consistency.

The review should consider whether a city-wide "mud army" is the best approach or whether it should be supplemented by more localised coordination of volunteering (as occurred with Kurilpa Futures and WECA on the Kurilpa Peninsula, for example).

The review should consider whether anything could be done to reduce the time taken to clean up transport infrastructure such as bikeways.

The review should also consider whether hygiene was taken into account sufficiently in relation to the clean up of dried-up flood mud. Some locals have raised concern about the dust that was stirred

up, especially given their apprehension that the mud contained sewerage; they question whether the dried-up mud could have been wet again before the cleaning happened.

One local suggested a communications system for those needing help, as follows. Council could give everyone a tag that they can put on their letterbox – either a "yes, please help" tag or a "no thanks, we're okay" tag. Volunteers would then not all ask the same house multiple times.

Residents reported a strong neighbourly spirit in the clean-up.

Natural environment

The impact of disasters on the natural environment, on land, in rivers and creeks, and in the ocean, should not be disregarded. The review should consider:

Business and work impacts

The review should consider how better to get information to flood-affected businesses regarding available supports.

Some residents turned to libraries to do their work because of power and internet outages at home. During times of disaster with extensive power outages this additional use of libraries should be taken into account, and consideration could be given to extending opening hours.

Insurance

Many difficulties relating to insurance are well known and should continue to be considered as part of the broader imperative to adapt to climate change. These difficulties include but are not limited to:

- the availability of affordable, or any, insurance in disaster prone areas;
- the workforce pressures that affect the ability to get assessments done and claims decided rapidly; and
- the issues regarding coverage of floods versus stormwater/deluge damage.

Where there are shared storage spaces in apartment buildings it should be made clear what, if any, insurance cover is available, and what risk people are taking on by storing their personal property there.

The value of insurers' modelling as an information source has been pointed out by a local resident, noting that insurers often have a sophisticated understanding of likely disaster impacts.

Where people are living in apartment buildings there have been some reports of building managers, developers, committees, and body corporate managers being involved in relation to insurance claims, and of this impeding the timely sharing of information. In some cases residents have expressed the view that information has deliberately been withheld or worse. Consideration should be given as to how to improve communication, make sure all residents have access to information, and redress power imbalances related to information asymmetry.

The region

The review should, of course, consider the adequacy of flood mitigation for the whole Southeast Queensland region including the current configuration of dams and other infrastructure, and the management of same.

Broader impacts

Disasters such as these have ramifications beyond the immediate. They can affect enrolments at schools, mental health, isolation and loneliness, work-related stress from staffing impacts, and many other areas of life. Disaster preparedness, response, and recovery are all related to broader social and economic conditions.

Thank you for the opportunity to provide this submission to me. If you require any further information, please do not hesitate to contact me on 07 3397 1674 or by email at Terri.Butler.MP@aph.gov.au.

Yours faithfully,

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "Terri Butler". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

Terri Butler MP
Member for Griffith
22 April 2022