

SUBMISSION TO THE QUEENSLAND FLOODS COMMISSION OF INQUIRY

SOUTH WEST REGION COMMUNITY SERVICES

APRIL 2011

We, the non-government members of the South West Regional Compact Committee, welcome the opportunity to make a submission to the Queensland Floods Inquiry.

The Queensland Compact is a significant policy initiative for the Queensland Government and Queensland Non-Profit Community Services Sector. The Compact commits all government agencies and community sector organisations to work together in a respectful, product, forward-looking relationship that benefits the community. The Compact was signed by the Premier and representatives of the community services sector on 27 November 2008.

The Regional Compact Committee was established in November 2009 to give effect to the intent of the Queensland Compact in the South West Region, which covers the local government areas of Ipswich, Somerset, Scenic Rim, Lockyer Valley, Toowoomba, Western Downs, Southern Downs, Goondiwindi, Balonne, Maranoa, Murweh, Paroo, Quilpie and Bulloo. The Committee comprises equal numbers of representatives from the non-profit community services sector and the Department of Communities, and aims to:

- Build stronger working relationships;
- Improve sector engagement in regional planning;
- Improve the sector's capacity and sustainability; and
- Continue to improve service quality and promote innovation.

It should be emphasised that the views contained in the submission represent the views of the non-government members of the committee only and not those of the committee as a whole.

The South West Region was significantly affected by the floods that occurred in December 2010 and January 2011. These impacts were felt by non-government service providers directly, with a number of service delivery outlets flooded, and by their clients. Since the floods, providers across the region have reported marked increases in demand for assistance, as residents who have not been previous users of social services find themselves requiring help, and those who have been regular clients cope with dramatically worsened circumstances.

The Committee's submission aims to respond to the following terms of reference of the flood inquiry:

- Preparation and planning by federal, state and local governments, emergency services and the community; and
- Responses to the 2010/11 flood events, particularly measures taken to inform the community and protect life, private and public property.

Planning and Preparation

Feedback from community services in the flood-affected areas has identified a number of issues with regard to the planning and preparation by various levels of government prior to the event.

In particular, service providers raised concerns about the preparedness of local councils with the regard to the establishment and management of evacuation centres. In some instances, there did not appear to be a clear plan regarding the appropriate site for an evacuation centre, particularly outside of the major population centre within a shire. It has been observed that Local Disaster Management Groups were not active in some local government areas prior to the floods, and consequently these councils appeared ill-prepared for the role of establishing and managing evacuation centres.

Concerns were consistently raised about the capacity of evacuation centres to cater to the needs of people with a disability. Many of the designated evacuation centres do not contain either accessible toilets or access ramps. Issues regarding the transport of people with a disability to evacuation centres also need to be considered, i.e. access to wheelchair accessible taxis when the evacuation is occurring. It is suggested that Local Disaster Management Groups seek representation from disability service providers who can advise on strategies to accommodate the needs of people with a disability in the evacuation process. It is also recommended that the implementation of disaster exercises to test local readiness routinely involve people with a disability.

Service providers noted there appeared to have been little planning to accommodate the needs of truck drivers, stranded as a result of road closures. The majority of these drivers were stranded for some time, and they were generally unable to benefit from the assistance available to those in the evacuation centres because they were unable or unwilling to leave their trucks. A number of drivers were travelling with their children at the time they were stranded. Many had access to limited cash and had not been paid for their current job. Community recovery staff or non-government organisations in some towns eventually organised a response to the needs of this group. However, given the likelihood that any serious flood event is likely to involve road closures that will isolate drivers, strategies to respond to the needs of this group should be accommodated in pre-disaster planning.

The communities affected by the flood events in the South West Region have diverse populations, and even western parts of the region have seen an influx of people from diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds over recent years. Communities such as Ipswich contain longstanding communities of people from South East Asian backgrounds, while the last decade has seen rapid increases in the number of African people in centres such as Ipswich and Toowoomba. Rural areas of the region have witnessed growing numbers of foreign workers under 457 Visas employed in the agricultural and meat processing sectors. English language skills in these populations vary, and consequently they may not benefit from information and awareness strategies that target the broader community. It is incumbent on Local and District Disaster Management Groups to ensure their plans contain strategies that enable members of these communities to receive the information they require on impending threat levels and the forms of assistance available. This issue has also been raised in relation to the deaf community.

Many services have reported that the management of donated goods became a major problem very soon after the event. Disasters such as the floods touch many families and individuals outside the immediately affected area, and this is reflected in donations of both material goods and financial contributions to the Premier's Disaster Relief Appeal. Service providers in many flood affected communities have indicated that they were overwhelmed with offers of material goods or in some cases, truckloads of goods which arrived without warning on their doorsteps. These goods were of varying quality, with much of it of no value to affected households. Electrical

goods required electrician assessments before they were made available. The sorting, storage and distribution of these donations created a major pressure on often small organisations who were already struggling to meet demands for assistance by affected families and individuals. As the disaster situation progressed the message that cash donations were preferred was released at a statewide level, but by that point, many communities were already struggling to manage donated goods. Three months after the event, some organisations are reporting that donated goods continue to arrive. It is recommended that statewide communication strategies contain early messages that cash is the preferred means of donating to disaster affected households. It is also recommended that local disaster management groups develop strategies for the storage and distribution of donated goods as part of their pre-disaster planning.

The final issue regarding pre-disaster planning relates to the lack of planning regarding the management of volunteers in the clean-up effort. Volunteers routinely come forward to respond to people affected by disasters, particularly floods, so local level planning regarding the effective deployment of volunteers in the wake of an event would be warranted. Service providers have cited instances of the privacy of affected households being violated by inappropriately trained and supervised volunteers. There were also instances of personal goods being removed from flooded households before the residents could photograph the lost items to support insurance claims. It is recommended that Local Disaster Management Groups incorporate responsibilities for the management and training of volunteers in their disaster plans. This responsibility should not be delegated to small local organisations which are already likely to under enormous pressure in the period following a disaster event.

Issues regarding the Response

Service providers have raised concerns about the significant impact that the community recovery response has on front-line agencies such as the Department of Communities, Lifeline and the Red Cross. They have noted that many of the important functions of these staff were deferred while they were deployed on community recovery. Up to two thirds of Department of Communities staff in the South West Region were deployed in the early weeks of the recovery response. Members of the Regional Compact Committee have argued that local service providers could potentially play a more significant role in the community recovery process, reducing the impact on core functions of the key recovery agencies. Over coming months the committee will be exploring options that would enable this to occur.

The involvement of local agencies would have the added benefit of enhancing continuity in the local community recovery response. Service providers, their clients and local councils have noted the difficulties caused for affected people by the rapid turn-over of staff in the recovery process, where workers are typically deployed for five days at a time before being replaced. Many of those deployed are from outside the region and have limited understanding of rural or regional areas. Service providers have noted the need for improved processes to hand over information from the outgoing to incoming teams at the end of deployments.

Finally, the Regional Compact Committee would note that the floods' impact will be sustained over a number of years. Many residents of affected communities are still in negotiations with their insurers, and even if successful, repairs to housing will take some time to effect and will have significant impacts on their living arrangements. In some instances families will be displaced for months at a time while houses are

rebuilt. Agencies heavily involved in the recovery effort are reporting that they are still locating families who have not sought assistance of any kind. Small communities which were isolated by flood waters remain several months behind their non-isolated counterparts with regard to the recovery process. The financial impacts on low-income households will be very significant, with a number likely to be declared bankrupt. Additionally, the emotional impacts of the floods will be felt by affected individuals and communities for some time, and some will require specialised assistance to deal with the impacts of this trauma. The emotional impacts will be particularly heightened around the anniversaries of events, particularly in those communities where lives were lost. The ongoing needs of affected people will have an impact on non-government community services within those communities. The Department of Communities has provided information to the sector about funding assistance that may be available to support agencies in coping with this additional demand. It is recommended that this assistance be made available in a timely manner and that funding contract managers remain aware of these pressures affecting funded services. It is also recommended that the local recovery arrangements take account of the medium to long-term needs of residents and allocate resources accordingly.

Thank you once again for the opportunity to make the submission to the Inquiry.