

our lives



our stories



in our own words



our experiences matter



The impact of climate change & natural disaster on disabled people in Australia

Kelly Cox



My name is Kelly and I live within the Bundjalung Nation in Northern New South Wales, Australia. I am a disabled person who uses a powered wheelchair for mobility.

I am the Vice President of People with Disabilities Australia and Co-Lead of the 2022 CoSP Civil Society delegation, I am privileged to share this role with Damien Griffis from First Peoples Disability Network.

In February and March 2022 the Northern Rivers area of northern New South Wales, my home and community, was hit by catastrophic rain and floods. An unprecedented fourteen metres of water came through local towns and destroyed pretty much everything it touched. This flood was metres higher than the predictions and warnings that had been issued.

Three months on, and the impact is still significant. It's unclear how or if these small towns across the region will recover – what is abundantly clear is that whatever recovery is possible will take years.

I have gathered this collection of stories to highlight some of the impacts on persons with disability. There is a wide variety of ways people have been impacted; from families who lost everything they own to the water and landslides caused by the deluge, to not being able to access essential services, or having their lives put at risk because the warnings and evacuation notices were not accessible.

By putting these stories together I hope it is a step in the direction of identifying the issues around this type of disaster and giving voice to some of the most marginalised people impacted.

I hope that we can begin the process of creating safer, more effective processes in the future and for collective healing in communities deeply impacted by trauma.

I would like to thank...

The Northern Rivers community for sharing their stories, Anthony Eden for making time and holding space for story telling, Clare Gibellini for her support and picking up my slack, Frances Quan Farrant for helping me put bricks in walls, my fellow CoSP15 Civil Society Delegation members, and Eve Jeffery, David Lowe and the Tree Faerie of Cloudcatcher Media for editing, taking photos and putting these stories on the page.

Kelly Cox

Cover: *RealArtWorks.inc* – artists: *Carla Davey, Mat Daymond, Sunita Bala*

Collaged art work by artists of varying ability in response to the 2022 Northern Rivers Flood





The floods are a story too big to tell

And too big *NOT* to tell

Sigrid Macdonald says there is so much she could say about the floods that she hasn't been able to work out where to start – here is one part of the story.

I am a Deaf business owner of Lismore. I am a passionate and involved member of the Deaf community and my work is in the field of accessibility.

In the days preceding the flood of Feb 28 2022, I was in hospital for a surgery. I was closely watching social media, and the warnings coming from the New South Wales State Emergency Service (SES), and Lismore City Council.

Given that my business premises were in the central business district, and that I knew there were Deaf residents in the flood impacted areas, I was concerned at the lack of Auslan interpreted emergency information, an issue that was raised during the 2017 flood response.

I contacted my Deaf friend trying to make sure they had the right information as I knew it would be completely inaccessible to them. When I didn't hear I sent messages to Resilient Lismore, the SES and

local councillors requesting that they make a welfare check and ensure that this particular resident was aware. SES and a local councillor *DID* make a welfare check, however they did not arrange interpreting – it was through pure chance that another Deaf resident who is a community worker, had also checked in at the same time and they

No plan.

No state, federal or local emergency organization had connected with interpreting

I was extremely worried for my community

agencies to make arrangements for Auslan access to local information to safeguard our beautiful Deaf community.

reached out widely to my personal networks and through messenger. Three interpreters from various agencies said they were available to interpret

emergency updates after they were released to the public.

They asked if I would send them the information as it came through.



Sigrid and her family live in Dunoon, about 18 kilometres north of Lismore.

Photo Tree Faerie

facilitated communication as best they could. I then contacted a number of organisations in the Deaf sector to ask if there was a plan to ensure interpreting for people during the following days. There was no plan.

You might not realise, but Lismore and surrounds has the highest ratio of sign language users in our population of any LGA in the state. We are here. At this point I was extremely worried for my community. I

A local interpreter was able to negotiate with council to upload the videos to their website posts as they became available – however with the chaos of the situation this information was not always available in a timely manner.



This was a dangerous and cumbersome process as it was not a response to any formal procedure or policy, but rather an attempt by myself and the interpreters to fill a gaping hole in the information available to the public. I had grave fears for my community's safety, and spent several sleepless nights monitoring emergency updates, sending information to interpreters, and sharing with contacts on social media.

While in no way close to the experience of those physically in the path of floodwaters, the night of the first flood (February 28th) was still one of the most terrifying nights of my life.

I truly thought I was watching people's final moments play out via social media.

My heart was pounding and I could barely breathe – not knowing if my friends and family were alive – and being powerless to help them.

I was in recovery from an operation and on bed rest. What could I have done anyway?

As it turns out there were multiple Deaf people and their families across the region who were impacted by this event. However, as I have the good fortune of my home being out of the flood zone, despite my business being completely inundated, I was initially able

to monitor emergency updates. Unfortunately our internet and mobile access was sporadic, so there were long periods over the days following the

local emergency updates by representatives from ASLIA, Deaf Connect and Sweeney Interpreting – and I deeply appreciate the work of

The first flood on February 28th was one of the most terrifying nights of my life.

flood that we had no contact – which was anxiety inducing as I was not able to send through the interpreting requests as quickly as possible.

What if something critical was missed?

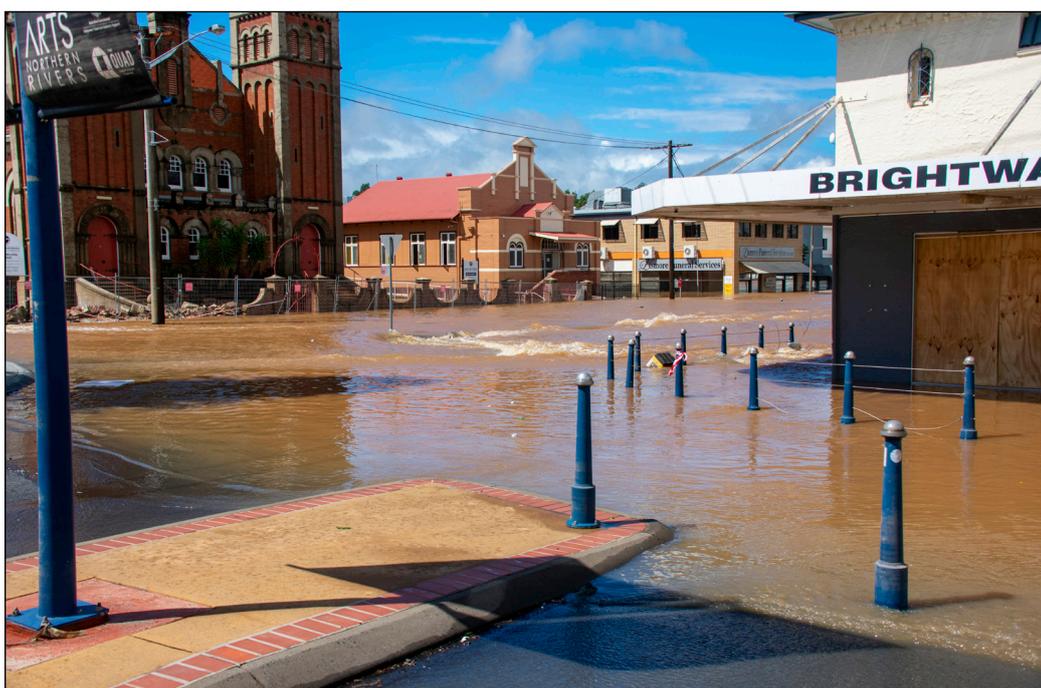
While I was supported in my callout for interpreting of

these individuals in the days following – I am appalled and frightened at the lack of response and initiative from our public organisations tasked with producing the emergency updates for public safety.

The fact that equal access to critical information as prescribed by the Disability Discrimination Act had to be initiated and driven by a community member, untrained in emergency response is nothing short of negligence.

In a heartbreaking but unsurprising turn of events this roundabout process had to be reproduced in the second flood, a mere month later.

The barriers to accessing supports in the already difficult recovery journey continue.



Lismore central business district in March 2022

Photo David Lowe





A Bundjalung man and his wife just

A stolen child, Earl Bostick didn't find out until he was an adult that he was a Bundjalung man.

He'd lived in Sydney until 2017 when he moved to the Northern Rivers. That was just after the last major flood.

'I'm a disability support worker. I got transferred so we could be close to my wife's parents,' says Earl. 'Then came COVID. and I couldn't wear a mask. I had trouble breathing.'

Earl has type 1 diabetes — with a stent in his heart — and chronic kidney disease, and Hep C from a self confessed 'wild' lifestyle as a young fella. He says it was COVID that tipped the scales and he began to suffer from PTSD.

Earl has a long history of depression and self harm and began to experience a surge in the suicidal ideation he had been experiencing since his youth. He started to cut himself. Because of this he was told he could not go back to work.

Earl and his wife Ann-Maree had been privately renting a house in South Lismore and had been asked to leave by

January 6. Earl says he has been in the Lismore mental health unit over Christmas and it was very hard to find this out around that time.

that the deluge inundated their home and destroyed everything. Ann-Maree barely managed to be rescued herself with the couple's three dogs.

went to look at the devastation of the house. On top of that, the landlord who had the couple evicted demanded that they clean up the house.

Earl, who joined the SES three years ago, said that fortunately his car had been moved to the SES headquarters

When Earl got back to Lismore, he and Ann-Maree went to a friend's place for a week, then Resilience NSW put them in Safety Beach for four days.

'Then we got moved to Grafton for one night. And then we went to Woolgoolga for another four or five days, then a hotel in the Fortitude Valley in Queensland. Then back to a motel in Woolgoolga.'

Earl and Ann-Maree are currently still in Woolgoolga — (they'd like to move home to Lismore but right now that's not an option), but Earl says they have made friends with other displaced flood refugees and are reasonably settled where they are now. They don't want to be moved again until they can go back to Lismore.

Earl says Lismore is the best option for him as far as getting what he needs. 'I'd love to go

Earl has a long history of depression and self harm and began to experience a surge in the suicidal ideation he had been experiencing since his youth

'The case went to the tribunal and we got a new date. We had to be out by the 1st of March. We had a lot of stuff packed up and ready to go. We got a housing commission place.'

Once the rains settled it was still a week before Earl could get home. The roads were blocked and traffic in all directions was restricted.

Earl spent much of the time

'I'd love to go back to Lismore, for all the services that I was using. I used to go to a men's group. I haven't even heard from them. I was seeing a psychologist every week, I've heard nothing from her.'

On February 28 the water began to rise around Earl's home.

Earl was visiting family in Sydney and with all of their belongings packed and ready to go, it was in one fell swoop

on the phone, and personal issues and the separation from Ann-Maree triggered an episode and Earl was taken to Bungarribee House, a mental health unit in Blacktown. Earl said it wasn't a nice place to be. When Earl finally got home he

need a place to call home

back to Lismore, for all the services that I was using. I used to go to a men's group. I haven't even heard from them. I was seeing a psychologist every week, I've heard nothing from her.'

Earl says he and his wife have had a lot of support from the Koori Mail Hub, but accessing other services has been difficult. 'It's hard to keep going back to Lismore. They say "come in" for this and "come up" for that, "come and get these things" but it's a five hour return trip. It's costing me a lot of petrol driving my car there and back.'

Earl says he has until the 16th of June at Woolgoolga and then he's just not sure. 'I have to ring up on the 14th.'

But things just keep getting tricky for the Bosticks. Earl is not sure if they will be given an extension for the motel, as Ann-Maree has citizenship issues.

Ann-Maree is as Australian as you can get without being Indigenous, but she was born overseas. 'Ann-Maree was born in Malaysia – in a Malaysian army hospital during the Vietnam conflict. Her father was born in Adelaide and her

mother was born in Brisbane. Her sister was born in Brisbane, and they moved to Malaysia and Ann-Maree was born there. The family came home and her brother was

'It's just a joke.'

All of this is starting to make Earl feel very low. The PTSD makes his stutter worse and he feels inadequate. 'I can't

needs support services for his diabetes and other health conditions – he needs a lot of support that only comes when you live in a bigger town, and he wants to be home.



born in Brisbane. Ann-Maree came back to Australia on her mother's passport. Now, housing have asked her for her immigration papers.

'She's Australian. She's on an Australian pension. She's paid taxes to the Australian government. She's got Medicare.

provide for my wife – I can't provide for her. It affects my head. I have spent a week in the mental health unit at Coffs Harbour.'

Earl at the very least needs a home, preferably in Lismore. He needs support services for his mental health, he

He would stay in Woolgoolga or Coffs Harbour if he could get a housing commission home.

Earl doesn't know where he goes from here – he doesn't know what's next. 'I'll be supported by my wife as best she can, but I do not know, I just do not know.'



Choosing life – then came the floods

A matter of life or death was a choice Brydie Lee was given by her surgeon when he said she needed a bowel resection, hysterectomy, and temporary stoma.

'I chose life, and went ahead with surgery in early October 2021,' says Brydie Lee.

At 45, Brydie Lee was diagnosed with stage 2 bowel cancer in September 2021.

Because of the diagnosis, and the size of the tumour, her gastroenterologist surgeon prioritised her surgery. After surgery, the tumour and a part of her bowel was sent to histology for examination and addition to the tumour, the histology team found a small lesion, which was not detected under CT or MRI scans.

Because of this, Brydie Lee moved from stage 2 to stage 3 bowel cancer. She needed intensive radiation therapy, as well as 12 cycles of chemotherapy, and to commence radiation and chemotherapy within eight weeks of surgery.

If all things went to plan the radiation and chemotherapy would be complete by April 15 – however, things did not go to plan and owing to two

major flood events and major road closure her treatment was significantly disrupted.



She was cut off from her care team at St Vincent's Hospital in Lismore and she was cut off from her Stoma/Ostomy supplier.'

'Although the town where I live was not as heavily impacted as Lismore, Lismore is where I travel to for all of my medical needs and cancer treatment.

'I was isolated and unable to attend urgent appointments. Phone lines to my oncology

appointments, let alone face to face appointments. Further to this, my chemotherapy was cancelled twice and treatment was extended by two months.'

Without the monthly delivery of ostomy supplies, Brydie Lee would have been left with an open stoma and high risk of infection.

She had to beg and borrow from other locals, and her bowel cancer peer group.

Medications were also in short supply as flooded and isolated pharmacies were closed or running short of supplies.

The Oncology unit was closed – due to shortage of staff who could not travel to work because they lost their homes to floods, as well as chemotherapy drugs that could not be delivered to the hospital, due to major road closures.

Brydie Lee was in unbearable levels of neuropathic pain for a number of weeks as she waited for pain medication.

All of this boiled down to high levels of anxiety and fear as well as compromised dignity, physical health and mental health.

'The anxiety and ruminating thoughts of cancelling life saving treatment weighs heavily on my mind,' she says.

'I live in constant fear that my treatment was compromised by a climate change disaster, and that my cancer will return.

'It haunts me daily, and will do for the rest of life. The flood events that blocked my access to services will have an effect on my future life-or-death decision making.'



The water started coming into the house

Jono was visiting his family in Lismore on February 28. This is his story as transcribed by Anthony Eden, and the experience of managing director of disability consultancy service Karina & Co and Kelly Cox on that day...

Jono: I visit my family every week, I'm happy when I visit them. I came over to visit, it was raining, I didn't think of it much, I was playing on the computer and wasn't thinking about things much as I normally do. It was raining a lot, then the waters started coming into the house.

It all turned to shit, it did.

If I wasn't visiting at the time the others would have perished. I was the only one awake when it flooded and the others were asleep.

I called Karina at about 4 in the morning and was on the phone with Karina for 6 hours straight and my phone was running out of battery.

She told me to keep calm and collected and to help the family as best as I could. She called the army and everyone was trying to help but we couldn't get help because the flooding was so big.



Karina: Jono was knee deep in water when he called me. Or at least I think he was. Concepts like depth and risk are hard for anyone when they are scared, but especially hard if you have an intellectual disability.

We measured on body parts – where is the water now? I thought Jono had it wrong, there was no way the water could be moving as fast as

he was saying. Just one of the many things I'd be wrong about that day...

I thought when I told emergency services there were 5 people with disabilities trapped they'd be prioritised, but there were no emergency services.

I thought being in a two storey house they'd be ok but there was too much water. I thought that getting Jono to show

his family how to climb on a kitchen bench would be an easy job, not take two hours of convincing.

I thought they were all going to die but maybe, just maybe, Jono's recent swimming lessons may give him a chance.

I thought when the boats heard Jono screaming they'd come, but they were too full.



Jono: I was calling out for help from the boats and they were all saying the same things, 'get on the roof, get on the roof' but there was no chance of that. The roof was not flat and most of the people in the house were either chunky or had poor health and couldn't get up there.

I was helping the family cope with all of the stress and was helping them get up onto the kitchen benches. Helping in any way I could. Karina helped a lot too, encouraging me to stay calm and collected and to look after the family, that helped me a lot too.

Karina: Over the hours we counted breaths (to calm mum's anxiety attacks) – we screamed for help together (because even yelling is hard when you're scared) – we talked about what he had to do if the water reached the ceiling.

He had to swim out the door and leave his family.

And then, when the water was touching Jono's chin we lost contact. It was an anxious six hours wait, an amazing social media campaign launched by our team and finally a phone call from a stranger.

Kelly: Karina called me after she had lost contact with

Jono. I had been watching the situation in Lismore unfold on TV and on social media and knew it was bad, worse than ever before.

I was closely monitoring friends' profiles who I knew were in the water's path; it's hard to explain what that feeling is like – over and over.

When the news of Jono being trapped came, there was no social media to monitor, no phone to call or text to check. Just a long silence and a lot of unknowns and trying to prepare for the worst and hoping for the best, not only for Jono but for his whole family.

I started posting on social media to let people know the address in the hope someone in a boat would go and look for them. Eventually so many hours had passed and the water had risen so much that there were only two scenarios left. That they had been rescued or they had not and it was too late.

I posted on social media again, this time asking if anyone had seen Jono. There were so many posts like this that it hardly got any attention. I posted again, this time mentioning that Jono had an intellectual disability. I hated doing that but I knew it would get attention and that was our best way of finding out where he was. I was right,



This was one of the posts that Kelly Cox put on social media in the hope that someone would recognise Jono or go to his rescue in Lismore.

the post immediately started to get shared on Twitter and Facebook.

People started actively keeping an eye out for him.



Jono: After all of the commotion we got on a boat and I was separated from the rest of the family, I didn't know if they had perished or not because we were separated. I didn't want to leave the boat. When I got off the boat I met a friend from way back in the past. She helped a lot keeping me warm and encouraging me, meaning happy-wise, keeping my marbles-wise.

Karina: Jono had made it, and thanks to his fierce determination had forced a boat to go back and retrieve his family trapped deep inside a house standing on a kitchen bench.

Kelly: At some point Karina got a call from a man in a boat who said he had rescued Jono but he didn't know where he went after getting off the boat, he said he wasn't in a good way, we had no context for what that meant so continued to worry.

Jono: Someone put me in a van and took me to the university evac, my family went to the other one but I didn't know. How could I know? It took about six hours to find out where they were. I was distraught, I wasn't a happy camper. I was wiggin' out and Donna (a friend) helped me out in my moment of despair and depression. Comforting.

Kelly: We then found out that the rest of Jono's family were in an evacuation centre but Jono wasn't with them. All we could do was wait and continue to monitor social media. At some point in the afternoon, Jono's sister called me. She had seen my post and had also been trying to find out if her family were safe. I let her know that they had been rescued but I still didn't know where they were.



Jono: The evacuation center was not happy and boring, not much entertainment but they had food there. We slept on air mattresses in a basketball court, but that's alright for me. I was there for a week or so. My family was not happy and bored out

of their minds but the food was good and they had the medical needs met. My family had lost all of their stuff because of the flood.

Kelly: At around 8pm that night I got a call, it was a woman at an evacuation centre who had seen my post and found Jono. She put him on the phone and I don't think I've ever had a better phone call than that one.

be acknowledged for what they did, Jono was absolutely one of them.

Karina: Jono's story has a happy ending, but it could have ended very differently.

For people with a disability the complexities of disaster are far more pronounced, the risks significantly higher, as to are the lasting effects.

Jono is inconsolable when it rains, he's certain it's going to flood. Logic is an impossible concept when it happened before. He's terrified of spiders and he's frightened to be separated from his family for too long. But he was brave and because of that his family are alive. For now, that's what we are reminding him of every chance we get.

Jono: At the evac centre I had one regular visitor that wasn't a complete random which made me feel good. I eventually got home and my family got some housing. My family was stressed and needed medical attention. They are still stressed and my mum has nightmares about the floods.

I worry about my family, all the negative things. I don't forget something when I know something, that's my brain and it's my depression.



The water rising a little but nothing

I live in Mullumbimby, Northern NSW, Australia.

The day before the flood it was raining a lot and water rising a little but nothing out of the ordinary. We have lots of low lying land that we expect to flood, and then a significant bank of over 1 metre high beyond which we did not expect water to rise – it's past the 100 year flood level.

On Monday morning, 28 February 2022, we woke to find we were completely surrounded, water above the bank and rising quickly towards the house, cars submerged, and an evacuation order had been made for Mullumbimby before we even woke. It was too late to leave.

Sky, who lives on my land in her caravan, came in as waters were rising and entering her caravan, while my house was still dry. She and I just did the best we could to move stuff up, while watching the water rising, which it did rapidly. I wanted to move my motorised wheelchair somewhere higher but NDIS (Australia's National Disability Insurance Scheme) hadn't approved a ramp yet so I couldn't put it on my veranda or house.

I had to leave it in my art studio and water was already covering the floor in there by the time I left to return to the house. I can walk a short way without my wheelchair. It wasn't long before water was



flowing fully under the house and only centimetres from the floor level.

We were scared because if the water continued to rise at this rate it would only be another hour before it entered the house and inundated us. Another friend who lived interstate was texting with me and searching online to try and understand the flood forecast and how much further the waters might rise. All he could find was that an hour away in

Lismore, another two metres of water rise was expected. We made plans to move into the roof cavity and worked on creating a survival nest there and saving my artworks and journals.

Predicting power to go out, we also prepared food, tea light candles, water and a toilet bucket. If the waters rose by more than another two metres, the roof cavity would not be high enough, so in that case, we would have to swim to the roof of our art studio – the highest point we could reach. So we also prepared a plastic bottle of clean water to tie to us to bring with us, and a series of ziploc bags in the hope we could bring our phones and my hearing aids

and have them survive. Also in the hope of being evacuated before all this happened, I packed us each a small bag of absolute essentials, including some of my clothes for Sky. At the same time, I wanted to call 000 or SES and let them know we were trapped and wanted to be rescued.

Being Deaf, I can't just call 000 myself, and I have problems using the National Relay Service. I texted a hearing friend who lives interstate in Brisbane and asked her to call for me. She did but was routed to Queensland emergency services. She couldn't talk to services in New South Wales. She asked her mum, who lives in NSW, to call for me. Her mum called but was on hold to the SES for over an hour. I could not have done that through the relay service and simultaneously done all the preparation that needed doing. A local friend texted to check on me – she called 000 on my behalf and likewise was on the phone for about an hour trying to get through. She did eventually get through and they told her that they had 300 others requiring rescuing and some of them were on the roof with water up to the gutter, so they were going to close our



out of the ordinary

call for now and we should ring back if things became more dire.

I was worried about losing internet, power and phone, and wanted them to keep us on a list of lower priority people, just in case we couldn't contact them later, but they refused. They just said, call back if you need.

Shortly after that we lost power and internet and had no way of contacting anyone. I wondered, if we ended up stranded on the roof of the art studio, and my phone didn't survive the swim there, how long would it take for someone to find us and rescue us? I tried not to think about that rather terrifying scenario.

Given that I am usually bed-bound, my body was amazing! I got up several times and managed to do so much more than I could have thought was possible! It came at a good time as just the day before I was thinking my health had improved and I could do a bit more. But then I was spent and I just had to rest. Sky was incredible – so calm, so hard working. And we both kept our spirits up really well, encouraging each other, with positive talk.

Flood waters stopped rising so fast and held steady for a while just below floor level which was good, though we lost power to the power points and internet reception and phone signal. Then we saw the family who lives in the other house on my land being evacuated so we quickly prepared. Sure enough, just after that, two guys turned up with a lilo. They said the tide would rise again at 7pm and didn't think we would be safe then and we should leave now.

I felt a bit confronted leaving a safe dry house to go out into the rain, especially without my wheelchair, but the prospect of staying was quite terrifying so this was our only option. The guys walked through the flood water, pulling us – I think they were civilians just helping out, not part of a co-ordinated official rescue effort. A particularly creepy thing was floating past Sky's car and the wheelchair accessible van and seeing them full of water. . . something about that made me feel a bit sick. I don't know why that image in particular was so disturbing.

They led us on the lilo up to the main road. A bit of a way along it was low water – only

ankle deep. It was still raining heavily. Not knowing I usually use a wheelchair, they told us to walk through that and that there was unflooded road further up. So we each carried a our bags as a parcel in our arms and walked. We had to walk a long way, much further than I usually walk.

The rescue guys said that at the unflooded bit of road there were lots of cars and someone would take us somewhere. We got to the unflooded road but there was no-one – just abandoned cars. There was a house on a hill with a man on the veranda and we went up there but he didn't want to help so we left. We walked and walked and then I couldn't walk any more and sat down on the road. Every muscle was aching.

There was a car with a grumpy woman in it who didn't want to help. Our neighbours had disappeared. They must have gotten in one of the promised cars and gone somewhere. After a while the rescue people drove past in a 4WD towing a boat. They stopped and talked to us. I asked for a lift to somewhere. They had no space in the car. They said they would take their boat home then come back for us.

Eventually the grumpy woman got out of her car – she was waiting for her husband to sort out their horses and was also sodden, like us. She opened the back of her car with a fold down section and fold up roof, and Sky sat on that and I lay with my head in her lap. We were still in the rain though, soaked through to our underwear, and it was still raining fairly heavily.

We waited and waited there. . . fully wet and being rained on. The woman's husband came and they were to leave soon. They kindly said we could go with them to South Golden Beach but I thought they'd be flooded too.

After a long time a rescue person came past and Sky flagged him down. He then organised a lift for us. A nice woman and man turned up in a 4 wheel drive and said we could get in. We were *SO WET* and cold. I had to take off my top and they put on their heating so I could dry off. They had a towel, thankfully.

It was a while before we felt safe. . .

Only two weeks later we had to evacuate again.



Why people with disability and their carers

Floods expose social inequities

Floods expose social inequities and exacerbate the housing crisis for people with disability and carers. Here are six steps governments could take now to minimise this, writes Ms Jodie Bailie and co-authors.

Thousands of people have been displaced from the floods in New South Wales and Queensland. Across the Northern Rivers, the floods have damaged at least 5,500 homes, with at least half of these expected to be uninhabitable. Floods expose social inequities and exacerbate the housing crisis for people with disability and carers in the region. In 2020, the disability royal commission raised concern that people with disability were more at risk of homelessness during emergencies. This followed our research after the 2017 Northern Rivers floods, which showed people with disability and carers were more likely than others to have their homes flooded, to be evacuated and still displaced from their homes six months after the flood. We found people with disability

and carers were at greater risk of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD).

Why the greater impact?

People with disability are disproportionately impacted by flooding because of socioeconomic disparities. Floods intersect with social, cultural and economic factors

rented due to the vulnerability of their buildings in floods. These types of rooms/places were really vulnerable in the flood, it would have been impossible to get possessions to safety quickly enough. And people who rent these types of places have the least resources (mental, emotional, physical – cars etc – financial) to cope with this type of event quickly.
- Person with disability

I am currently homeless with three children, looking for help from community organisations and there are big waiting lists

to shape people’s exposure to risk and their ability to prepare for, respond to, and recover from flooding events. In Lismore, for example, 82% of people living in the 2017 flooded area were in the lowest socioeconomic group. Housing in flood-prone areas is generally cheaper to buy and to rent, which means people with the least resources – including those with disability and carers – are more likely to be living in areas prone to flooding. As one person told us: *Some of my friends lived in places in the centre of Lismore CBD that perhaps should never have been*

Stories from the ground

Due to socioeconomic disparities, people with a disability or carers affected by flooding have greater need for emergency housing in the short term and more secure housing in the long term. In many cases, people affected by this flooding event will have experienced other climate-related traumas. It was only five years ago that the Northern Rivers experienced its last major flood event and just over two years since bushfires devastated the region. Following a disaster, people with disability must navi-

gate two complex and often inaccessible bureaucracies: the emergency response and recovery arrangements, and disability services, which which are likely to be compromised by the same disaster. In the 2017 flood, people felt left behind. As one person explained to us: *“The disgusting way people were left to fend for themselves and then the lack of proper response from our federal government [...] The lack of help for the homeless and vulnerable. The anxiety and stress that occurred and the amount of people left homeless and still trying to find a home five months later. Services that were desperately needed were very hard to find.”* - Person with disability
The lack of affordable and accessible accommodation resulted in people with disability and carers returning to, or moving into, unsafe accommodation. Floods can affect the integrity of buildings: they are more likely to leak, develop mould, and suffer from draughts. Our research highlighted the lack of affordable accommodation for displaced people with disability, a situation exacerbated by many temporary accommodation and homeless services being flooded.



fare worse after floods

“Where the flood did affect me was the housing crisis borne of a shortage of rental properties. I was given notice to move from my rental property just before the flood. It was extremely tough to find anything affordable on the pension [...] in the months after. I am currently in temporary accommodation till March, then who knows?”

Some become homeless. I am currently homeless with three children, looking for help from community organisations and there are big waiting lists.
- Carer

Climate change means there will be more frequent and severe disasters. The Northern Rivers will flood again. The right to safety and well-being in emergencies is now built into Australia’s Disability Strategy 2021–31. It includes, for the first time, targeted action on disability inclusive emergency planning. This must include safe and accessible housing. Improving housing outcomes for people with disability affected by flooding requires the removal of pre-existing barriers that increase inequitable access to safe living situations. This should happen during pre-planning, and we have direction with the new disability strategy.



Three days after the February flood in Ballina residents were still waiting for the water to recede. Photo David Lowe

6 steps to minimise the housing crisis when disasters strike

But we’re in the middle of an unfolding flood disaster now. So here are six steps governments could take now to minimise the housing crisis for people with disability and carers:

- provide accessible short-term emergency housing and support access to secure, safe and accessible long-term housing options
- relocate displaced people with their family, carers and support networks to ensure continuity of support from the

people they rely on for personal, practical, and emotional support

- partner with people, their representative, and advocacy organisations to identify, understand, and respond effectively to disaster-related housing vulnerabilities
- include local housing and homelessness services in human and social recovery planning now and for long-term recovery
- resource disabled people’s organisations to enable person-centred emergency preparedness (P-CEP) tailored to people’s local flood risk, living situation, and other support

needs to increase choice and control during recovery

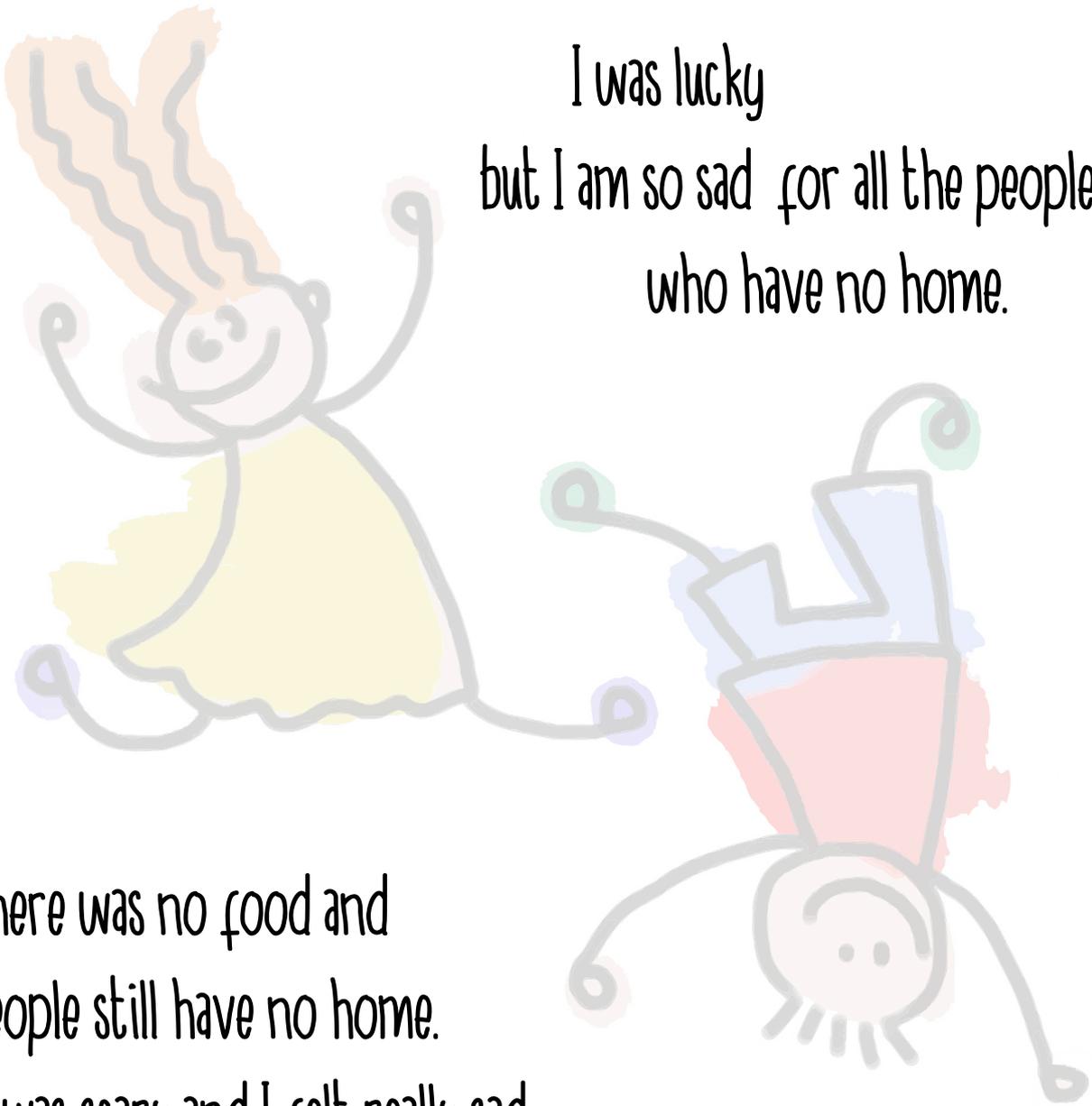
- support social housing and homelessness services to develop effective emergency plans for how they will sustain services and continuity of supports during and after disasters.

This article was first published on March 16, 2022 on The Conversation and is written by Ms Jodie Bailie, Dr Jo Longman, and Professor Ross Bailie from the University of Sydney Centre of Rural Health, and Associate Professor Michelle Villeneuve from the University of Sydney.

• Reprinted courtesy of the The University of Sydney.

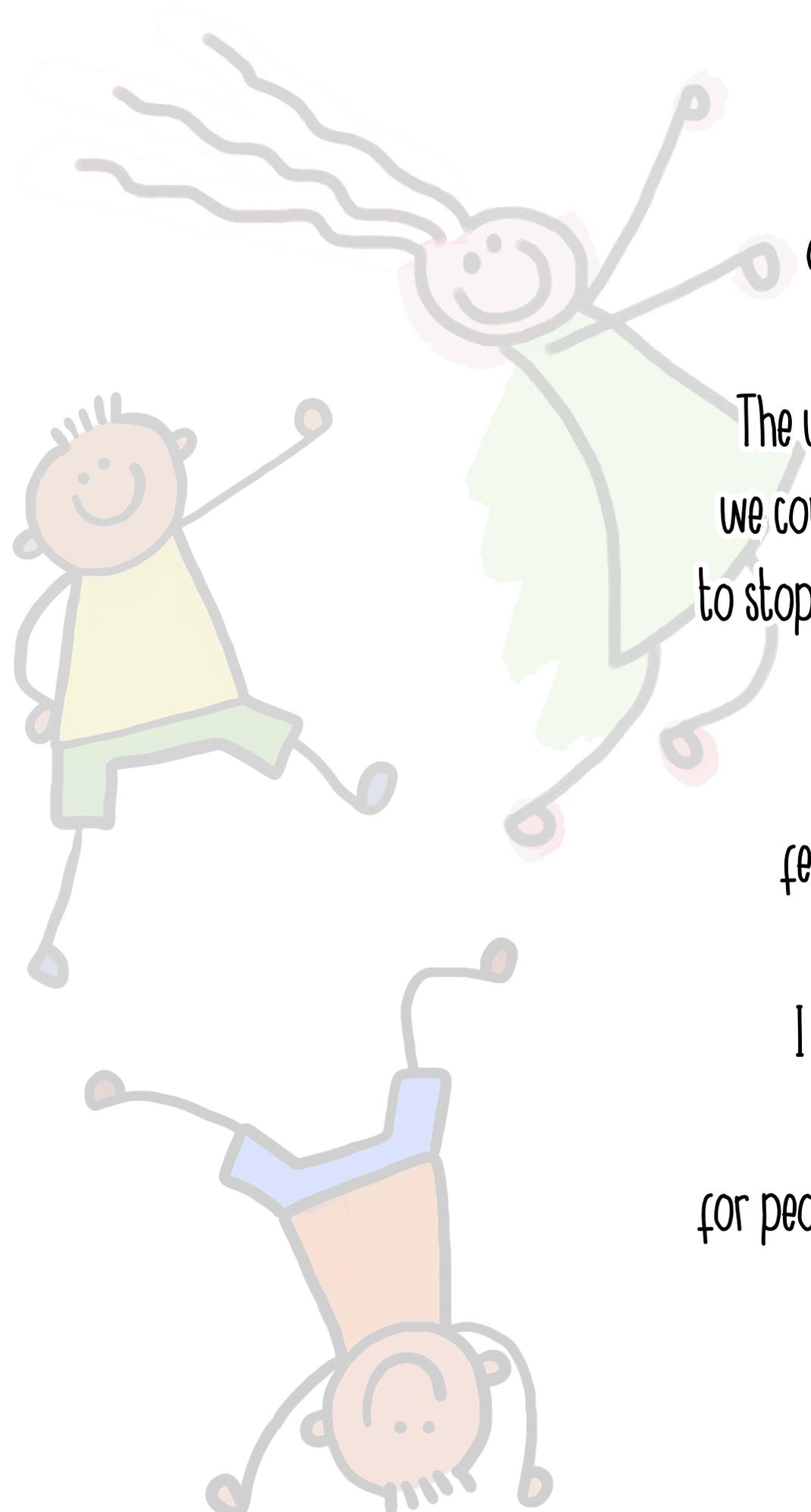
We were evacuated, we couldn't call Dad
or use the internet,
we couldn't go home for 4 nights.

I was lucky
but I am so sad for all the people
who have no home.



There was no food and
people still have no home.
It was scary and I felt really sad.

Harry, Ballina - New South Wales, Australia.



A depressing,
sad and
desperate time.

The worst part was
we could do nothing
to stop it at the time.

I felt helpless,
fear and anxiety.

I still feel so sad
and fearful
for people in our area

Maddie 13 years.



Impacts of the floods reach far beyond



Ballina March 2, 2022.
Photo David Lowe

Alanna and Ryan's family home was not directly affected by floodwater. There were however huge impacts on almost everybody in the area.

Here is their story, from Alanna's point of view. . .

Our rental home in a newly-built estate was cut off by floodwater.

Occasionally king tides would result in sea water lapping across some road in Ballina. This event far exceeded that!

We were lucky in Ballina. Many Ballina residents received a few hours notification that some flooding might occur.

We followed that advice and organised to evacuate to East Ballina where we had parents to stay with.

I am employed as a support coordinator and Ryan is a Paramedic and we are both based in Ballina.

Many things were uncertain. One thing we didn't know was that we were both about to work almost non-stop for several days, as ALL phone communications were cut!

Our most vulnerable members of the community were about to, at best, be stranded and, at worst, be in life-threatening danger!

On the first warnings that evacuation might be needed for many areas of Ballina, we firstly organised for our children to go to our parents' place at East Ballina, and our elderly neighbour to go to the Evacuation Centre for Ballina residents.

We remained in the house for the night, where we prepared and packed our essentials to leave the area by morning. We also had aunt Wendy and uncle Norm who live three doors down who would require assistance the following morning to evacuate if the orders were given. Norm is a Vietnam veteran who had been released from hospital only days prior, after a below

the knee amputation of his leg, and Wendy who has cancer and other health issues.

The phone calls and messages, about sirens and evacuations, began in the middle of the night. We both lay and listened to advice that all residents in low lying areas of Ballina should evacuate to safer areas by 7.30am.

We remember the eeriness of the evening. It was silent, no rain. We were thinking of those in Lismore who had already lost everything. The phone kept ringing, and we were both grateful that our children and our elderly neighbour were not listening to the messages. Ryan was on call



those whose homes were inundated

and rostered to start a day shift the next morning and would leave for work at 6.30 and we would both support Norm and Wendy to pack and get ready to evacuate by 7.30.

There was no sleep. We both started early and we packed our family's things, finished preparing the house and we helped Norm and Wendy pack, trying to make sure that we had all the things that Norm needed in an environment that was not set up for his wheelchair.

We drove through top-of-our-wheels deep water to exit our estate — the water was higher earlier than expected. We all moved to our parents' grateful that there was wide enough doors and space for Norm to access the house with his wheelchair.

The problem solving began at this point. Our parents' house although having adequate space for Norm's wheelchair and with his walking frame he could access the toilet, Norm could not access the shower/bathrooms. We would organise for warm washes for Norm from a bucket. Norm is also diabetic and requires dialysis 3 days per week.

Norm was due for dialysis the following day, we were notified

that Ballina Hospital had been evacuated and the dialysis unit had been shut due to impending flooding.

At this stage the only communication we had was very little service from one of our phones, random messages etc. Without communication we did not know if dialysis had been organised through another hospital, we did not know if Norm would have dialysis, but what we all knew was that he could only go without it for another day or two maximum before it became a medical emergency.

Every effort was made, we would travel up to the top of hills, stand in every section of the street to communicate with his dialysis team. There were even talks of Norm traveling to Lismore by chopper. A grateful moment when we were told that he could travel by road via Byron Bay (the longway around) to Lismore for dialysis — he had become very sick.

During this time Alanna also made efforts to contact her participants by going to the top of a hill on the outskirts of town to hopefully reach another area's phone tower signal. She was able to make contact with some participants, and she was able to make contact with her team

leader who was able to contact those that Alanna couldn't. One participant could not be contacted who was a high-risk participant.

Support Coordinators in the area spent hours locating their participants, and ensuring that they were safe and that they had access to the supports they required. This is sadly something that could not be done for all.

Ryan worked for 3 days straight, and remained on call throughout. The communication problems, hospital access issues, hospital evacuation, the community's inability to call 000, road closures and then the delay on people receiving medical support when they could call 000, were only a few issues throughout these days. Ryan slept in the Ambulance for two nights so that he could respond from radio calls across the only channel of communication which was the two way radio. As a first responder who's trained and conditioned to 'help and respond' it was harrowing to not be able to reach people due to either communication issues or bodies of water.

The impact of lack of communication, inability to maintain routine, and the uncertainty of what was to come also impacted

our father who has a diagnosis of PTSD and heavily relies on these factors. We can guarantee that he is not the only one that relies on routine, being able to communicate through non-face to face supports and requires structure and updated information.

Having experience between the both of us with emergency services and supporting individuals with a disability, we are both sad, and feel it's important to have plans, coordination of emergency events, and equal access to information.

The event has passed, the rescue phase has finished, however the aftermath, devastation and financial, physical and mental cost of this event is ongoing. Over three months on, people are still homeless, businesses are still closed, support workers and service providers still struggle with providing supports to those with a disability, and there is no "fix it" timeframe.

• Alanna and Ryan are now effectively homeless and will move out of the area to find new housing.

Their property almost immediately went on the market and they refuse to compete with people who lost everything for local properties.



David was taken in by wonderful people

When David was first advised to leave, the water had cut off two nearby roads. David lives alone. With nobody to support him at this time, he thought that the wise decision was to leave...

My near neighbour was outside as I went past on my scooter and agreed to give me a lift to the evacuation centre, but I had to leave immediately.

When I arrived there I plonked myself down at a table with another couple of people and we just waited for further advice. The other couple decided to go to the evacuation centre at Lennox Head. Some time later I decided to get a lift head to Lennox Head. I left my house in such a hurry I was woefully unprepared, I had no change of clothes or anything.

While I was being registered, a young lady came past, took pity on me and asked whether I would like to take up a bed at her place? Of course I thanked her very much and after she assured me that she had a spare room and if I could put up with her two children I would be more than welcome I went with her.

I basically had two choices, either spend a couple of nights in the evacuation centre or spend some time with a family. It was a no

brainer as far as I was concerned and turned out to be one of my better decisions.

I arrived at the home of Ben and Abby with only the clothes on my back. Their children were still awake and they also made me feel welcome and Ben had organised us all to have bangers and mash for dinner. Come bed time I was ushered into Quinn's bedroom as he was sharing with Lennon.

I was uncomfortably hot during



the night which I realised was my own fault for not being prepared for an evacuation. Ben went to my house. I had asked him to take lots of photos, he apparently got down on his hands and knees and rubbed his hands all over the carpet — it was dry! He collected some clothes for me and gave me a rundown on what was actually flooded, apparently the floodwater came right up to floor level but did not actually enter the house.

I had to obtain the services of

a level 2 certified electrician to check and actually reconnect the power. The electrician reconnected the power but the water pump needed to be replaced as it was completely flooded, so I couldn't make a cup of tea or flush the toilet. Luckily I was allowed to stay with Ben and Abby and when my carer Heidi finally got in touch and she told me about the government assistance I was able to buy a new water pump.

I didn't know anything about the

ernment assistance when I went to Heidi's place. They were all set to knock me back but Heidi came with me when I attended the Centrelink van at West Ballina and she was able to explain things to them.

It would have been really helpful if there was a register of all the people living with a disability in the Northern Rivers, particularly those living by themselves, those with poor hearing and or eyesight, mobility issues, etc. . .

This would have been of great assistance to the services that needed to know, if people who had a pre existing diagnosed disability were automatically placed on a register the correct type of assistance may have been put in place much earlier.

As I got back into my house after thirteen very disjointed days I was really pleased to see that I did not have any major damage.

After I had got back into my home I received the greatest amount of support from my carer Heidi, she was absolutely indispensable, probably because her place had been inundated as well so we were able to see what each other was doing.

extent or severity of the floods because Ben and Abby had no internet coverage and for the first few days I had no charger for my phone.

Heidi had plenty of room at her place she offered me accommodation and we could cook some meals to restock the freezer. We also went back to my place every day to check on the water situation.

I only found out about the gov-



Heather and her family wanted to stay at home

Heather has a genetic condition called Ehlers-Danlos Syndrome (EDS). She says that she dislocates her joints a lot, she is prone to soft tissue injuries, she bruises easily and her skin is really fragile.

Heather lives in Lismore and didn't evacuate because she thought her house was high enough.

'We thought we would get cut off in the house for a couple of days. We thought the water would just go underneath the house and then we'd hose everything off and we'd be all good.

'Instead, we had metres of water inside the house and we ended up on our roof.'

'I pretty much couldn't get myself up on my roof. We were standing on our front steps and my husband Christen had to basically duck underneath the water and then came up underneath me and pushed me up to get me up on the roof.'

Why didn't they just go to the rescue centre as soon as the warning came?

'Our house stayed dry in the 2017 floods at 11.4 metres, so we thought at worst we might get a centimetre of water in the

house, but we could manage that — it would be all right. 'We had gone to the evacuation



centre for the previous flood when we moved to Lismore. When you get to the evacuation centre there's no bedding, there are no beds. They didn't even have any food until the next day. Because of my EDS, I struggle with chronic pain and sleeping — sitting on on a hard floor is very uncomfortable and very painful for me. So we just made the decision that we would just stay at home because we figured it's not going get that high.'

There were other reasons to stay at home — Heather is autistic as is her 5-year-old daughter Violet.

'I don't do well with change in my routine I like things to be as

they are. It was pretty rough getting into the boat, as physically hard as it was to get on the roof.

It was hard to get off the roof into a boat. Then it was hard to get out of the boat. Christen ended up basically having to lift me out of the boat.'

The Lismore evacuation centre was in a big gymnasium at the university. It was loud and there were people everywhere. 'It was just overwhelming. Violet also has multiple food allergies — neither of us were doing very well. I was so worried about losing Violet that I actually I took a permanent marker and I wrote my phone number on her.

Heather said there was nothing at the vac centre. 'They didn't

have any towels. We were soaking wet and covered in floodwater.

'My daughter and I were both covered in scrapes and cuts from hanging on to the edge of the roof. I was worrying because, God knows what was in that flood water.

'We had been really lucky that we had managed to pack a bag — it was like five o'clock in the morning when we realised the water was going to come in. It went from nothing in our house to chest deep in 20 minutes but because we've had so much experience with hospital trips for Violet, with her food allergies and other stuff, I'm able to pack really quickly. So I just grabbed a bag and started stuffing in the clothes, our medications and phone chargers. . . '

Heather and her family are currently staying at a caravan park. They have been back to their home a few times and Violet still does various classes in Lismore four days a week.

Heather says they have to move back to Lismore. They have a mortgage. 'If we walk away, we lose our deposit, we lose the equity, we lose everything. So we're going to try and fix it'



Carol and her children walked to higher ground

My partner and I lived separately together in Lismore for over 20 years, both in precious spots on the flood plain. We have an adult birth son who was born with a chronic illness which causes him to have physical and other disabilities.

I have fostered kids for over 40 years now. The most recent unfortunately have significant, complex post traumatic stress disorder disabilities.

My partner passed away and left us his house which is right on the river. The plan was for my son to move into his house. He's finished his law degree and needed a private place to work on a PhD. And some time to be himself — our house is full of therapy sessions and support workers.

I've had blood cancer for years and that leaves me exhausted most of the time.

We all knew there was a bigger flood coming than was predicted but we didn't imagine the reports were as wrong as they were.

The night before the flood I ended up staying up all night. Only one of the support workers was available to help the next day, some of the roads were cut and / or people were busy elsewhere. The available support worker is a tiny woman not suited to a lot of

physical work but she was able to get her brother to come and help for a bit too (he and their mum were also in the flood zone so had to do their own preparations).

The flood level predicted was still way below our floor levels when I went to bed at midnight after spending hours talking with the kids about what we'd do if the flood was higher than they were saying.

None of us would easily be able to go to the evacuation centre because our disabilities put us all very at risk of Covid, and for some of us being with strangers is terrifying. On top of that the evac centre wasn't accepting pets. We have a very old rescue cat and a pet as therapy dog from the Guide Dog Association and we weren't about to leave them in a flood to fend for themselves.

At 4am a quiet but panicked knock on my door. My son was awake monitoring the flood levels. The report had come in for 14 odd metres. We were done for.

I can't move quickly or think quickly. Our flood plan consisted of us walking out our back door and up the hill.

My foster daughter woke up and looked out her window and saw our front yard full of water. It was horrific for her, she imagined that we were going to leave her in the house to drown and she had resigned herself to that fate.

The power had gone out so we were walking around with torches and candles looking for things. The floor in the back of the house is

lower than in the front where my son was so he didn't realise why I was so insistent that we had to get out asap.

Our neighbours ended up having to sit on their roof and wait to be rescued, there's no way we could have gotten up to ours; it would have been impossible with our range of disabilities.

By the time I reached the edge of the rising water my son had managed to get my terrified foster daughter down the stairs and he was heading off to follow me, then he followed with the cat and went back in to find the dog. They were terrifying minutes.

Our house, which had been adapted over decades to cater for

floods, swiftly went underwater to the ceiling while we sat dripping and freezing, in a stranger's living room using every spare towel they owned. . .

Now, the kids are not in a good way. My foster daughter is highly reactive, suicidal, and desperately afraid of what happens when we have to leave this house. And what happens to her if I die. My son is feeling helpless, having a major allergy to mould in Lismore isn't an easy thing at the moment either. Support workers are just about burnt out.

The house we had lived in was flood insured and we were listed with the insurance company as vulnerable people, meaning that we should have received extra supports, and they should have found us housing, but they were unable to find anywhere we could have our animals, or where my foster daughter wouldn't be badly triggered.

They suggested we use some of our insurance payment to buy a motor home and live in it. They said it will be at least 12 months before they can start to repair the house as it has major damage so we should live in the back yard. My foster daughter definitely would never be able to go back, but they don't understand that.

Our neighbours ended up having to sit on their roof and wait to be rescued, there's no way we could have gotten up to ours



The Australian Federal Assistant Minister for Social Services

Earlier this year, the catastrophic flooding we experienced on the North Coast of New South Wales, Australia, devastated lives, livelihoods, and entire communities.

On top of the enormity of this natural disaster, a complete lack of planning for emergencies across our state had a huge impact on us – between the issues we faced with timely warnings and rescues, to the lack of information regarding evacuation centres and places of refuge, and the ongoing clean-up and rebuild, our communities know first-hand the need for serious planning that is inclusive of all in our community.

In the first days of the flooding, the situation was so dire that I was coordinating community rescues through my public Facebook page, with stranded locals desperately sending messages to try to connect with community members who had taken the initiative to



find their own boats and rescue others. Much of this – the rescues, the confusion, and the continuing issues with rebuilding – could have been avoided if we had proper emergency management plans in place. And while these challenges were hard enough for the community as a whole, they were compounded for people with disabilities.

With emergency lines ringing out and hours-long waits for rescues, many people with disabilities were severely at risk in this catastrophic situation.

And when people were finally rescued, they faced another challenge – evacuation centres which were often not equipped for their needs.

While there are challenges in an emergency, it's vital that we implement systems that work for everybody. The volunteers who ran our evacuation centres did a stellar job, with extremely limited resources, in looking after the thousands who came through their doors with nothing.

However, the lack of planning highlighted these issues of equality and discrimination, and exposed just how unprepared we were to cater for members of our community with disabilities. There was an extremely limited capacity to provide appropriate facilities, care, and support.

We cannot let this happen again, and we need proper emergency management plans in place that leave no-one behind. We can – and must – do better for all in our community.

The Hon. Justine Elliot MP is the Assistant Minister for Social Services and the Prevention of Family Violence in the Australian Government. She is also the Federal Member for Richmond, an area severely impacted by the 2022 Northern NSW floods.

In the mashed up words of Joni Mitchell: ghosts of the flood town community, stare right out of the bricks at me...

Lismore has become a scary place – my beloved home has become a scary place.

We weren't flooded, but there is another danger that comes with a deluge: landslides.

We live on the side of a hill and now every time it rains we pack up our essentials and leave our home.

What was once a sustainable, low footprint haven with tank water, a compost toilet and off-the-grid solar power, has now become an unknowable and unpredictable, possible death trap.

Don't tell me there's no such thing as climate change!

I am a climate refugee in the most damaging way: the loss of my peace of mind.

This document was conceived and created on the Country of the Arakwal, Minyungbal, Nyangbal and Widjabul Wia-bal People, of the Bundjalung Nation.

It travelled through the Yuggera, Wakka Wakka, Gubbi Gubbi, Badtjala, Gureng Gureng, Bayali, Darumbal, Guwinmal, Yuwi, Giya, Yuru, Bindal, Nyawaygi, Wargamaygan, Djirbalngan, Yidinjdji and Djabuganjdi Country before the process was complete

– Eve Jeffery, Editor.

