Lessons from the Flood:

A focus on people at risk in emergencies

Report on stakeholder forums

November 2023

About SACOSS

The South Australian Council of Social Service (SACOSS) is the peak non-government representative body for health and community services in South Australia, and has a vision of justice, opportunity and shared wealth for all South Australians.

Our mission is to be a powerful and representative voice that leads and supports our community to take actions that achieve our vision, and to hold to account governments, businesses, and communities for actions that disadvantage vulnerable South Australians.

SACOSS aims to influence public policy in a way that promotes fair and just access to the goods and services required to live a decent life. We undertake research to help inform community service practice, advocacy and campaigning. We have 75 years' experience of social and economic policy and advocacy work that addresses issues impacting people experiencing poverty and disadvantage.

Acknowledgement

We acknowledge the traditional lands of the Kaurna people, and pay our respects and acknowledge the Kaurna people as the custodians of the Adelaide region and the Greater Adelaide Plains. We acknowledge and pay our respects to the cultural authority of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities and organisations, and appreciate the cultural knowledge that is held and shared.

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Summary

The 2022-23 River Murray flood event occurred between November 2022 and February 2023, as a result of heavy rain and flood events interstate. This flood event was the largest since 1956, and the third highest flood ever recorded in South Australia, with an unprecedented number of homes, shacks, businesses and infrastructure impacted.

The South Australian Council of Social Service (SACOSS) and Red Cross are working together to deliver the *Collaborative Action: People at Risk in Emergencies Project* funded under the Disaster Risk Reduction Grants Program by the Australian Government and South Australian Government.

The significant impact of this flood event prompted SACOSS and Red Cross to undertake consultation with key stakeholders in the flood impacted communities to explore how people with pre-existing disadvantages that could increase their risk from the flood were supported before, during and after the flood.

We held events in Mannum and Renmark to hear from government agencies, health and community service providers, local governments and relevant businesses and community leaders. In total 65 people, representing 28 different agencies or organisations, engaged with the Lessons from the Flood events.

Our objectives were to:

1. To identify how people more at risk were supported before, during and after the flood.
2. To identify what collaboration occurred and how that impacted on the effectiveness of responses.
3. To identify solutions and good practice approaches, including a plan for enacting them.

We heard many positive stories about the responses to the flood, but opportunities for improvement were also identified.

Key themes emerged including:

- Decision making
- Communication
- Preparation
- Community education
- Relief and recovery
- Power disconnection
- Housing
- Workforce
- Relationships and collaboration

A range of recommendations were identified arising from these discussions.

Recommendations

1. Provisions should be made in the *Fire and Emergency Services Act 2005* or Functional Support Group memoranda of understanding to activate a pre-emptive response to directly prepare communities when a disaster or emergency is imminent.

2. Functional support teams should have access to, and increase competence in the utilisation of, the most current and accurate data available to inform their decision making. (We understand that changes have now been made to address this).

3. Communication with the public about floods should be reviewed with a view to enhancing comprehension.

4. A review should be undertaken into the makeup and use of the database used for push communications to the public.

5. SA Power Networks should develop and deliver a campaign promoting the benefits of consumers signing up to receive notifications about outages and disconnections, including messaging about preparation resources and checklists.

6. A campaign promoting the benefits of the Alert SA app and SA government websites (such as the SAPOL site for road closure information and www.sa.gov.au for information about preparing for disasters) should be developed and delivered.

7. Emergency warnings and communications for with people with disabilities in disasters should be directed both to people with disabilities and to their family carers and support providers to ensure consistent messaged delivered in effective and accessible ways.

8. Public permanent levees should be inspected and maintained annually.

9. Private levees should be subject to an approval process and require annual inspection and maintenance. (We understand this recommendation has been put to the parliament for consideration).

10. Consultation should be undertaken to inform the development of enhanced preparation resources (including review of the preparation checklist, and development of instructional videos with captioning for language conversion and accessibility).

11. A community education campaign should be developed to address the purpose and practice of power disconnection in disasters.

12. Where possible, vouchers for food relief should be made available for use in local businesses to make them more accessible to people without independent transport to larger centres.

13. Where support and resources are not accessible locally, a community transport system should be established to enable access.

14. More temporary or pod housing options, including accessible options, should be explored to enable people to remain in their communities if they wish. (We understand that this is underway).

15. More options for emergency pet care should be explored.

Background

The 2022-23 River Murray flood event occurred between November 2022 and February 2023, as a result of heavy rain and flood events interstate. This flood event was the largest since 1956, and the third highest flood ever recorded in South Australia, with an unprecedented number of impacted homes, shacks businesses and infrastructure.

The flow rate at the South Australian/Victoria border peaked at 186GL per day on 22 December 2022, with approximately 4,000 hectares of agricultural land and 3,500 private residences affected over the course of the event. (DEW 2023)

South Australian Council of Social Service (SACOSS) and Red Cross are working together to deliver *Collaborative Action: People at Risk in Emergencies Project* which is funded under the Disaster Risk Reduction Grants Program by the Australian Government and South Australian Government.

The significant impact of this flood event prompted SACOSS to seek additional resources to enable consultation with key stakeholders in the flood impacted communities to explore how people with pre-existing disadvantages that could increase their risk from the flood were supported before, during and after the flood. Resources were secured from RAA Insurance, Department for Premier and Cabinet and SA Power Networks to enable this work to occur.

An event was held in Mannum on 27 July 2023, facilitated by Dr Mark Crossweller (Ethical Intelligence) with 57 participants. Invitations were circulated across all impacted communities. A second, smaller event was held in Renmark on 6 September, facilitated by Kathy Mickan, (SACOSS) in acknowledgement that some Riverland stakeholders were unable to get to the Mannum event. Eight people participated in this event. The Department for Education was unable to attend either event, and a separate meeting was held with their representative.

In total, 65 people engaged in the Lessons from the Flood processes, representing 28 different agencies or organisations, including 9 state government agencies, 12 service providers and 3 councils. For the full list of participating organisations see Appendix 1.

Aims and objectives
The aim was to bring together the key sectors involved in the Murray River Flood management and facilitate an environment that maximised reflection and learning about how they engaged with or supported people who may have been more vulnerable during the flood to drive future practice improvement and collaboration.

Objectives:
1. To identify how people more at risk were supported before, during, and after the flood.
2. To identify what collaboration occurred and how that impacted on the effectiveness of responses.
3. To identify solutions and good practice approaches, including a plan for enacting them.

Scope

This project was not designed as an opportunity to review all actions taken to manage the flood and its impact on all property owners, businesses and the environment. The focus was on reviewing and learning about how stakeholders in the Murray River Flood addressed the needs of people who may have been more at risk from the impacts of the flood. This included communication, collaboration and supports provided to enable people more at risk to prepare for, respond to, and recover from the flood while maintaining their health and wellbeing.

We define people more at risk as being people who do not have the independent capability or resources to prepare for, respond to, or recover from disasters or emergencies. This may include people who are frail and elderly, those living with chronic physical or mental health conditions, people who are disabled, people who are homeless, people who are isolated or housebound, people experiencing poverty, Aboriginal people, and those for whom English is not their primary language. We acknowledge that anyone can experience heightened vulnerability at different stages in their lives, and that some people with experiences that heighten their risk of vulnerability may nevertheless be very resilient, with access to information, financial resources and social supports.

Invitations were circulated to health and community service providers, emergency management agencies, councils, and essential service providers, as well as business and community leaders.

Key questions

The forums were designed around four key questions: (For the full agenda see Appendix 2)

1. What happened, and who did you work/collaborate with?
2. What worked, and what made it successful?
3. What did we learn? What problems emerged, and how can we solve them?
4. What do we need to do now to inform future practice? Who has responsibility?

Results

The outcomes of the discussions at the various workshops and other engagements have been summarised and organised into themes. Recommendations were derived from discussion on the day and subsequently test with the *People at Risk in Emergencies* Project Reference Group and refined.

What happened?

The flood was a long, slow, and far reaching disaster. Despite knowing that the flood was coming, forum participants reported that many communities and households were unprepared.

Flood maps were found to be outdated, with the river having changed shape over time, and many additional properties having been built along the river. This made the job of predicting which properties or communities would be impacted, and when, much more difficult.

Levees were built, repaired or reinforced, and many people were evacuated from their homes or properties.

The floods impacted on towns and regions differently. Renmark is low and flat, so a levee was built around the entire town knowing that if the levee broke, the entire town would be flooded. Mannum has a mix of high and low lying properties and not all properties could be protected by the levee.

Road closures resulted in longer, more expensive trips to work and school, including for those organisations providing home care services.

Power was disconnected in many towns and properties. In the Riverland it was reported that many residents felt that power was disconnected unnecessarily or too early, while in the Murraylands it was reported that disconnections were last minute, with no notice. The Mannum Marina was left without power for seven months.

Relief centres were established, with additional staff brought in from Adelaide.

There were job losses, particularly in caravan parks and hospitality, and job gains in road gangs.

The media were felt to be unhelpful, dramatizing the flood and creating the impression that the entire Riverland was under water or inaccessible. This resulted in a lot of tourist accommodation bookings being cancelled, further damaged the local economy.

There was a strong sense of people coming together to support each other.

Who did you work with or provide support to?

Forum participants reported providing support to the following populations groups or communities:

- people with disabilities
- aboriginal people
- people with mental health concerns

- culturally diverse community members
- people who are frail and older
- people who are homeless including the newly homeless
- people experiencing substance use issues
- people with chronic health conditions
- people experiencing poverty and financial stress
- people experiencing unemployment
- insurance customers
- Renmark hospital patients
- pet owners
- carers and legal guardians
- volunteers
- children and young people
- workers
- energy consumers, including life support customers
- shack owners
- retirement village residents
- business owners
- green industries
- houseboat/ marina communities
- primary producers and irrigators

Engagement and communication were key components of the work of agencies and organisations in responding to the floods. The purpose of the engagement with community was to:

- provide information
- listen and acknowledge experience
- assess needs
- assist evacuation or relocation
- provide financial or legal advice or advocacy
- provide access to emergency relief (food, grants, housing, fuel vouchers etc)
- negotiate care for pets and other animals

Many different modes of engagement or communication were utilised to share information with community members, including:

- community meetings and events (social)
- relief and recovery centres
- delivery of services
- door knocking/ home visits
- telephone calls
- newsletters
- radio
- internet
- social media

What agencies or organisations did you collaborate with?

There was significant collaboration between stakeholders, with much of this driven by existing relationships across the community.

The purpose of the engagement between agencies, service providers and other stakeholders was to:

- Share information to inform decision making
- Coordinate recovery activities
- Work collaboratively on response actions: levees, rescues, evacuations, road repairs etc
- Work together in relief and recovery centres
- Provide referrals
- Participate in functional support groups (government agencies)

Pre-existing relationships provided an excellent launching pad for responding to the needs of the community, with trust already established and collaboration facilitated more quickly.

Flexible and collaborative approaches helped meet people's needs more efficiently and effectively (e.g. homecare services provided by those in close proximity to minimise risk and travel times). While poor or non-existent relationships slowed responses, developing a shared agenda was a driver for building trust and collaboration.

A collaborations mapping process was undertaken to identify the ways in which different agencies and organisations worked together to support communities. The web of connections is shown in Figure 1 (next page) which demonstrates the central coordinating role of the Community Recovery Officer located in the Department for Premier and Cabinet. The important role of local government is also evident.
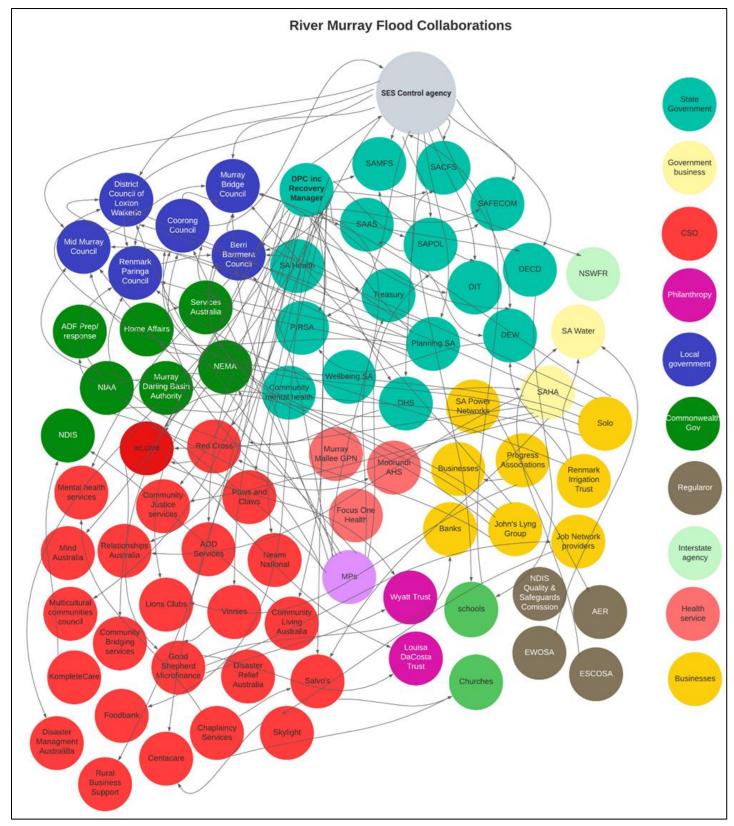
Figure 1: collaborations that occurred in response to the floods – indicative only, not an exhaustive list

River Murray Flood Collaborations

Key themes

Key themes were identified through questions regarding what worked, and what could be improved.

Decision making

Positives

The Recovery Coordinator was commended for their work

The SES Incident Management Team, as well as local leaders across emergency management and councils, were also praised for their efforts.

Decision making was reportedly fast, flexible, and made on the basis of need, rather than driven by budgets and strict adherence to rules.

There was an emphasis on collaboration at an agency and community level. Where relationships and agreements were in place prior to the event, services were able to be put in place much more efficiently and effectively.

Areas for consideration/ improvement

The Recovery Coordinator could have been appointed earlier given we knew the flood was coming. Having people on the ground providing warnings and clear advice on how to prepare may have improved the preparation of high risk populations and reduced household losses.

Decision making was hampered due to out of date flood mapping.

Local leadership should be encouraged and empowered to be part of decision-making and actions, given their knowledge of the landscape and community.

Recommendation 1
Provisions should be made in the Fire and Emergency Services Act 2005 or Functional Support Group memoranda of understanding to activate a pre-emptive response to directly prepare communities when a disaster or emergency is imminent.

Recommendation 2
Functional support teams should have access to, and increase competence in the utilisation of, the most current and accurate data available to inform their decision making. (We understand that changes have now been made to address this).

Communication

Positives

Multiple modes of communication made information more accessible.

Councils were commended for the information provided on their websites, which were updated daily.

Community meetings were seen to be the sources of truth, as traditional and social media were seen to be promoting misinformation. They were also valued for of bringing people together.

Door-knocking by SAPOL, SES and other services was also considered to be very important, meeting the needs of community members who may have been reluctant to reach out for help.

Push communications were an important tool for communicating during the emergency.

Areas for consideration/ improvement

"Gigalitres of flow across the border" was not found to be a readily understandable or relatable way of communicating the risk posed by the flood. Participants felt that river level would be better understood, particularly if it was linked to reporting of the elevation of key community assets, including SA Power Network assets and community facilities, so that community members could easily relate the information to a visual indicator of the likely impact of water reaching that level.

Push communications were well received by the community. However, a better database of community contacts is needed, as well as further consideration about how that database could be used, including for communications about power disconnections.

Communication for people with a disability or experiencing mental health issues was reported to be lacking in effectiveness.

Language barriers meant that some members of CALD communities could not easily understand warnings or road signs. It was suggested that bringing in resources to prepare this community before the flood event would have been much more impactful than attending to their needs after the flood.

Recommendation 3
Communication with the public about floods should be reviewed with a view to enhancing comprehension (for example providing information about the elevation of key assets, marked on the asset, so that community members have a relatable and understandable point of comparison).

Recommendation 4
A review should be undertaken into the makeup and use of the database used for push communications to the public.

Recommendation 5
SA Power Networks should develop and deliver a campaign promoting the benefits of consumers signing up to receive notifications about outages and disconnections, including messaging about preparation resources and checklists.

Recommendation 6
A campaign promoting the benefits of the Alert SA app and SA government websites such as the SAPOL site for road closure information and www.sa.gov.au for information about preparing for disasters should be developed and delivered.

Recommendation 7
Emergency warnings and communications for with people with disabilities in disasters should be directed both to people with disabilities and to their family carers and support providers to ensure consistent messaged are delivered in effective and accessible ways.

Preparation and community education
Positives

There was time to prepare.

Some relationships and agreements were in place ahead of time which made for more efficient responses.

Areas for consideration/ improvement

Lack of maintenance of permanent levees intensified the workload as levees had to be assessed and repaired with a heightened sense of urgency.

Earlier calling of the emergency declaration or request to stand up support organisations would have enabled agencies like Red Cross and others to offer support and information that could have better prepared the community.

Community preparation occurs on the basis of informed decision making. However, participants reported that while there were plenty of warnings, the information was not always relatable or practical. For example, community members appeared to be missing key messages relating to turning off solar panels, how to tie down a tank or the importance of removing all gas tanks and toxic chemicals. We suggest that consulting people who were impacted (including diverse community members and first responders) would be beneficial.

Many people in river communities had no flood or emergency plan and were not at all prepared for the flood. This resulted in greater losses and a bigger, riskier clean up with gas bottles and other submerged items in the river.

Community members were unaware that SA Power Networks disconnections are made along a power line, rather than by individual properties. This angered some residents who felt they were disconnected unnecessarily or too early.

In addition to being unprepared, many were uninsured, with cost and eligibility being an impediment to community members.

Recommendation 8
Public permanent levees should be inspected and maintained annually.

Recommendation 9

Private levees should be subject to an approval process and require annual inspection and maintenance. (We understand this recommendation has been put to the parliament for consideration).

Recommendation 10

Consultation should be undertaken to inform the development of enhanced preparation resources (including review of the preparation checklist, and development of instructional videos with captioning for language conversion and accessibility).

Recommendation 11

A community education campaign should be developed to address the purpose and practice of power disconnection in disasters.

Relief and recovery

Positives

Overall, there was a sense that relief and recovery centres were well run, including pop up centres, and there was benefit in locating centres on both sides of the river. There was a balance of demand for a single point of contact for information and wanting a good spread of centres to improve accessibility. The inclusion of Centrelink services in recovery centres was particularly appreciated.

The relief centres were operated in a way that became a community hub, rather than a crisis centre, reducing the stigma of help seeking and building community connections.

Social community gatherings and events were considered very important for maintaining community morale and connectedness, particularly in the communities most impacted by the flood.

They were also an important way to acknowledge and thank members of the community for the support they were providing/ had provided.

Areas for consideration/ improvement

Accessibility was a real issue for people who were homeless or without independent transport. While they may have had access to a relief or recovery centre, they were provided with vouchers that could not be used in their local community, and there is often no public transport between the towns.

There was a sense that there should be more local leadership in centres, rather than a dependence on staff or volunteers brought in from Adelaide.

Mental health and wellbeing support and coordination needs to be available long term. Initially, in response to this flood event, psychosocial supports were only made available to the community for five months but this was later extended.

Recommendation 12

Where possible, vouchers for food relief should be made available for use in local businesses to make them more accessible to people without independent transport to larger centres.

Recommendation 13

Where support and resources are not accessible locally, a community transport system should be established to enable access.

Power disconnection

Positives

Some community members had signed up for SAPN notifications and had notice before disconnection.

SAPN have details of life support customers and could communicate with them regarding disconnection.

Areas for consideration/ improvement

Many community members were disconnected with little or no notice.

SAPN felt hampered by out of date mapping and poor forecasting.

Community members were not aware that decisions about disconnections are made with respect to the vulnerability of the grid, rather than an assessment of the risk posed to individual properties. Some were upset when they felt they were needlessly disconnected.

Many community members had no back up plan for times of disconnection.

SAPN do not have access to a comprehensive database of households to communicate information about disconnections.

SAPN were not aware of a range of vulnerable customers that should be prioritised for re-connection. This is something that community service clubs, sporting clubs and local volunteers could likely assist with.

Recommendations 3,4, 5 and 11 apply.

Housing

Positives

Some people were able to be housed in or near their communities.

Areas for consideration/ improvement

Disasters inevitably result in homelessness. For some, homelessness will be short term, for others it can be much longer. Recovery is improved when social connections can be maintained.

Lack of housing generally, and more specifically accessible housing and housing for pets, meant that some people made homeless by the flood needed to be relocated to Adelaide and other locations away from their community.

Recommendation 14

More temporary or pod housing options, including accessible options, should be explored to enable people to remain in their communities if they wish. (It is understood this is underway).

Recommendation 15

More options for emergency pet care should be explored.

Workforce

Positives

Agencies, organisations, volunteers, councils and businesses pulled together to get the work done.

Areas for consideration/ improvement

This was a significant sustained event and there was an impact on volunteers and staff in relation to fatigue management.

A psychologically safe work environment is essential for all workers, including volunteers and call takers on the hotline.

Where possible, it is beneficial to utilise local volunteers. Building the capacity of local volunteers and engaging them in responses has the benefit of building trust, rapport and empathy, as well as building community resilience.

Emergency management volunteers need to be prepared and trained to respond to disasters, including training in:
- Vicarious trauma
- Mental health first aid
- Referral pathways

Visiting workforce provided challenges.

Appendix 1: Participating organisations

The following organisations attended the events

- Neami National
- ac.care
- Mid Murray Support Service Inc
- KompleteCare
- SASES
- SA Police
- Department of the Premier and Cabinet
- National Emergency Management Agency
- SACOSS
- Rural City of Murray Bridge
- Foodbank SA/NT
- Vinnies
- Mid-Murray Council
- South Australian Metropolitan Fire Service
- Community Justice Services SA
- Australian Red Cross
- ac.care
- Department for Education
- SACFS
- Department of Human Services (DHS)
- SAFECOM
- IntoJobs
- Renmark Paringa Council
- Salvation Army
- Community Bridging Services
- Chaffey Community Centre
- Renmark Irrigation Trust
- SA Power Networks

Appendix 2: Full agenda of the event

Lessons from the Flood: a focus on people most at risk

Date: Thursday July 27th, 2023

Time: 10:30am – 3.00pm

Venue: Mannum Community Club, 66 Randell Street, Mannum, SA 5238

Agenda

The event will be facilitated by Dr Mark Crossweller.

10.15am	Registrations open & guests arrive
10.30am	Welcome and introductions (Ross Womersley)
10.45am	Event objectives
10.50am	Overview of the flood event (Alex Zimmerman)
11.00am	What was your experience, and who did you work/collaborate with?
11.30am	What worked, and what made it successful?
12.00pm	What did we learn?
12.30pm	Lunch Break
1.15pm	What problems emerged, and how can we solve them?
1.45pm	What do we need to do now to inform future practice? Who has responsibility?
2.30pm	Wrap up, check in on achievement of objectives
2.45pm	Thank you and actions going forward (Ross Womersley)
3.00pm	Close