

Select Committee on the Response to Major Flooding across New South Wales in 2022

Department of Communities and Justice

Post-hearing responses

Hearing: Wednesday 15 June 2022

Answers due: Tuesday 5 July 2022

Response to Major Flooding across NSW – Answers to questions on notice

Xavier College Ballina

Transcript page 23

The Hon. ROD ROBERTS: Ms Morgan-Thomas, it's a follow-on from Ms Sharpe's question. You said it was your agency that, in the end, approved or accredited the Xavier college at Ballina to be the evacuation centre. Was it also your agency that rang them and told them, "Pack this up. Shut it down. Send everybody back home," to their homes in the flooded streets of Ballina?

ELERI MORGAN-THOMAS: I'm not aware of that. I'm not aware that it was—

The Hon. ROD ROBERTS: How did your agency get involved in the re-accreditation if you didn't know that it was shut down in the first place?

ELERI MORGAN-THOMAS: My understanding is that we were trying to solve an emerging problem that was happening then and a pragmatic decision was made by people on the ground.

The Hon. ROD ROBERTS: Can you take it on notice?

ELERI MORGAN-THOMAS: I can take it on notice.

The Hon. ROD ROBERTS: We really want to know who rang this bloke, this poor principal, who stepped up, along with his staff, and said, "We need to do something here. There's a gap that needs to be filled," and they did it. Somebody rang them and said, "Listen. Shut this down. Turn out all the people that you've already got in there. Turn them out onto the street." "Where am I going to send them to?" "I don't know, not our problem. Turn them out." If that's your department, we need to know.

ELERI MORGAN-THOMAS: I'll take that on notice. I'm not aware that we did, but I will take that on notice.

Answer

On the evening of 1 March 2022, Department of Communities and Justice (DCJ) staff on the ground at the Lennox Head Community Centre evacuation centre were notified that evacuation orders were raised for Ballina Island. In order to assist those impacted by the order, one of the volunteers at the Lennox Head evacuation centre was the assistant principal of Xavier Catholic College who advised DCJ that their school could be opened to assist as a centre. DCJ, along with the assistant principal engaged in conversations with the principal of Xavier Catholic College where it was mutually agreed that it would be appropriate to utilise the site as an evacuation centre as it was a safe place which could provide evacuees with shelter.

When the site was identified by the assistant principal, principal and DCJ, the department consulted with the Local Emergency Management Committee (LEMC) on the evening of 1 March 2022 and sought approval and authorisation for the College to be accredited as an evacuation centre. While DCJ is not responsible for accreditation of evacuation centres, DCJ is on the frontline of disaster events and will liaise with the relevant emergency management stakeholders should there be an urgent need to think and act quickly to support the community. DCJ was not aware of any prior conversations with the Xavier Catholic College principal regarding the site being used as an evacuation centre.

Accreditation process for evacuation centres

Transcript page 24

The Hon. CATHERINE CUSACK: No, that wasn't causing the delay. They said, "We've filled all the approved places now. There is more accommodation in Ballina but it's just not on our list. We need Sydney to approve that and we sit there for two hours waiting." Is it the housing people who accredit in Sydney or is it the locals who accredit on the ground?

ELERI MORGAN-THOMAS: Do you mean the emergency accommodation?

The Hon. CATHERINE CUSACK: The evacuation centres.

ELERI MORGAN-THOMAS: It's our staff on the ground.

The Hon. CATHERINE CUSACK: Can you provide to the Committee details of what accreditation means? There must be protocol or paperwork or something.

ELERI MORGAN-THOMAS: I can take that on notice.

Answer

An evacuation centre is defined as a safe place which provides disaster affected people with basic human needs including accommodation, food and water. The Local Emergency Management Committee (LEMC) is responsible for identifying and auditing evacuation centre facilities. The accreditation process for evacuation centres falls under the responsibilities of Resilience NSW.

Lake Ainsworth

Transcript page 24

The Hon. CATHERINE CUSACK: In terms of the centres, why was Lake Ainsworth at Lennox Head, which is a 200-bed government-owned facility operated by sport and recreation, never utilised for evacuees? They were going into places like schools and sleeping on the floor when we had government-owned accommodation with beds and kitchens sitting there not being used.

ELERI MORGAN-THOMAS: Do you mean why didn't we use it as an evacuation centre? We've certainly used it for emergency accommodation.

The Hon. CATHERINE CUSACK: Yes, but for staff, not for victims

ELERI MORGAN-THOMAS: I don't know why it wasn't an evacuation centre. I can take that on notice.

Answer

Lake Ainsworth was initially stood up as an informal community-led evacuation/accommodation centre in the immediate response to the floods. When DCJ became aware of the site around 10 March 2022, approximately two staff members were placed there to provide support to those in the centre. On 30 March 2022, Lake Ainsworth was evacuated due to flooding and DCJ assisted the disaster affected people into alternative emergency accommodation.

DCJ is not aware of why Lake Ainsworth was not utilised as an evacuation centre.

Decisions regarding the accreditation process for evacuation centres are the responsibility of Resilience NSW.

Housing helplines

Transcript page 29

The Hon. ROD ROBERTS: Do you think, in hindsight, that providing a 1800 number to the staff in the recovery centre who had a traumatised victim sitting opposite them, and who would say, "Hang on, I'll ring the 1800 number", and the victim sitting there for half an hour to an hour waiting to get assistance was a smart move? Could it have been done better?

ELERI MORGAN-THOMAS: I can find out what the waiting time is. My understanding is it's nowhere near that long, because we had a dedicated team in Sydney—so not putting pressure on local resources—and we resourced that very well to manage calls quickly and efficiently. Because you're right, nobody wants to be sitting on the other end of a phone. But I can find out on notice what the average waiting time was, because I don't think it was that much.

The CHAIR: To follow that up, we were then told that they set up for staff that were waiting on the 1800 number. They had set up a 1300 telephone number for them to wait on. That's what the evidence yesterday was.

LANCE CARDEN: I'd have to take that on notice as well.

The Hon. MARK BANASIAK: As an initial follow-up on that, you said that you withdrew the resources because there were inquiries coming through other mechanisms. What were those other mechanisms that you were getting greater traffic through? I think that's important for the Committee to know.

ELERI MORGAN-THOMAS: Partly through work on the ground, talking to people. That's not the only mechanism. There's a recovery centre. But also, because it was advertised on Service NSW, people could call Service NSW or they could call our Housing Contact Centre through the dedicated number we set up. People were using—they weren't just having to drive to or go to a recovery centre to do it. There are other ways. But I can get those data for you.

Answer

To clarify our response, DCJ withdrew staff from the recovery centres, not the evacuation centres. As housing related queries decreased at recovery centres, a physical presence by DCJ was no longer necessary. Recovery centres maintained a contact point for housing should someone require assistance with emergency accommodation.

To continue supporting disaster affected people, DCJ established the Housing Flood Recovery Service, which is an onsite presence in Northern NSW, as well as a virtual team that works closely with every person in emergency accommodation to assist them to secure longer term accommodation options. DCJ also operates the 24 hour Disaster Welfare line (1300 number) through the Housing Contact Centre which continues to provide assistance to anyone that requires emergency accommodation.

Ongoing assistance is also provided by DCJ through the local offices that undertake assessments, provide referrals to support services and conduct regular homeless Assertive Outreach patrols within the community. Additional housing assistance is

also provided via the Housing Contact Centre and online services that are available via the DCJ website.

From 24 February to 12 June 2022, the average speed of answer for the Disaster Welfare line was one minute and six seconds and the average speed of answer for the Housing Flood Recovery Service (1800 number) was four minutes and 59 seconds.

Southern Cross University (SCU)

Transcript page 29-30

Ms CATE FAEHRMANN: We heard evidence about the centre at Southern Cross University—that there were issues with staffing in the first few weeks there. Ms Morgan-Thomas, I might just ask you: What was the situation with DCJ staff at the SCU recovery centre?

ELERI MORGAN-THOMAS: I don't know the specific numbers of how many people we had. I can find that out for you. But if I hark back to my opening statement, we've got 90 staff in Lismore, which is where Southern Cross University is, many of whom had been affected by the floods themselves. We staffed 54 evacuation centres in northern New South Wales. In northern New South Wales altogether we've got 225 staff. In the first initial bits we weren't able to bring in people from anywhere else. We had to rely on what we had, even before—

Ms CATE FAEHRMANN: Can I just jump in? I do have evidence here—in fact, the Committee received from the local member that in fact there were DCJ staff there. Then she got told that they were ordered out by Resilience NSW. Are you aware of that?

ELERI MORGAN-THOMAS: No, I'm not aware of that.

SHANE FITZSIMMONS: Not at all.

The Hon. PENNY SHARPE: Can you take it on notice?

Ms CATE FAEHRMANN: Neither of you have heard the local member saying—and she said it publicly as well—that in fact DCJ staff got ordered out by Resilience NSW?

ELERI MORGAN-THOMAS: I have heard that but—

Ms CATE FAEHRMANN: Did you make inquiries—

ELERI MORGAN-THOMAS: Yes, I did.

Ms CATE FAEHRMANN: —when you found that out? Sorry—when you heard that, did you make inquiries internally?

ELERI MORGAN-THOMAS: When I heard that—yes, I did.

Ms CATE FAEHRMANN: Okay, so what happened?

ELERI MORGAN-THOMAS: Nobody was aware of it.

The CHAIR: You just let the allegation stand? You didn't investigate it? You didn't follow it up?

ELERI MORGAN-THOMAS: I did follow up.

The CHAIR: Did you follow it up with Mr Fitzsimmons?

ELERI MORGAN-THOMAS: No, I didn't follow up with Mr Fitzsimmons.

SHANE FITZSIMMONS: I followed it up internally when I heard about it and we can find no such evidence of any such thing ever occurring. If you've got the example or whatever, then I'm more than happy to have a look at it.

The CHAIR: It's in the transcript—provided to evidence to this inquiry.

SHANE FITZSIMMONS: With respect, we heard that, but DCJ confirmed they had no evidence of any such direction being given by us and I've got no indication of anyone in my team suggesting anything. It doesn't even make sense.

Ms CATE FAEHRMANN: Can I just continue then? Again, this is from Ms Janelle Saffin, the local member. It doesn't sound like it was just a rumour because she in fact had to act to get staff put back in. She said:

... I put in a call at the highest level; they were put back in. Then they got pushed out again; I did that again. I heard it happened in other centres.

Are you saying that Ms Saffin is lying to the Committee about what was going on, Mr Fitzsimmons?

SHANE FITZSIMMONS: I'm saying I have no indication from any of my team that any such thing occurred with us ordering DCJ out. The only thing that may have happened is, around that period at the end of March, which was for a couple of days—where there was the cessation of some of the centres because of the flood threat for the second wave, which was four weeks on. I don't know if that's the connection but there was no ordering to get anybody out in terms of the way that that was described in the media. I haven't read the transcript.

Ms CATE FAEHRMANN: Alright. Ms Morgan-Thomas, did you receive calls from the highest level—say, from the Premier or anyone else within Government? Did you receive calls to get more staff into those recovery centres?

ELERI MORGAN-THOMAS: I didn't but I wasn't in this position at that point in time. And I'm not aware that there was but I will make inquiries about that.

Answer

Southern Cross University was an evacuation centre, not a recovery centre.

Following the closure of evacuation centres and through the initial period of the recovery phase of the event, the DCJ Deputy Secretary responsible for the department's disaster response retired. Ms Eleri Morgan-Thomas acted in the Deputy Secretary role while the recruitment process was undertaken. At the time that DCJ was invited to appear at the hearing, Ms Morgan-Thomas as the acting Deputy Secretary was the most appropriate DCJ witness to attend the hearing.

DCJ is unaware of calls requesting more DCJ staff be provided for the Southern Cross University evacuation centre. Approximately 60 DCJ staff covered around 266 shifts at the evacuation centre, which was operating 24 hours a day for 26 days. DCJ remained on site until the closure of Southern Cross University as an evacuation centre on 24 March 2022.

Emergency Accommodation

Transcript page 34-35

The Hon. CATHERINE CUSACK: Given that there is no alternative plan for those people, these holiday facilities need to take bookings—maybe for the October long weekend or for Christmas—but nobody from the department seems to be able to tell them how long the interim accommodation is going to be needed, and certainly the people using that accommodation have no alternatives. The request from operators is can you at least do three-month contracts? Because they don't want to be caught having to evict victims in order to honour bookings, as occurred last Easter.

ELERI MORGAN-THOMAS: I can respond to that one because DCJ does the bookings for those. Some of the camps and holiday parks we have extended to the end of November now, so we have contracts in place for them. We are trying to book as many places as we can, knowing that we will have people in emergency accommodation for some time yet. Some people will move into the pods over time, as they become available, and people will have other options. But we're trying to book through as long as we can. We want to provide certainty to them, and our team in the Housing Contact Centre is on the phone all the time trying to lock in some of those contracts. So we're on the same page; we want the same thing.

The Hon. CATHERINE CUSACK: It's just that they were three months initially but then they went to one month, even though the operators had asked for three months?

ELERI MORGAN-THOMAS: Yes.

The Hon. CATHERINE CUSACK: And someone from the department doorknocked all of the accommodation and told people, "Get ready to leave," but they didn't have anywhere to go to?

ELERI MORGAN-THOMAS: I am confident that we are in a better place now than we were even last week or the week before.

The Hon. CATHERINE CUSACK: Is there an actual plan now for that?

ELERI MORGAN-THOMAS: Yes, there's a—

The Hon. CATHERINE CUSACK: Is it possible to provide that to the Committee, please?

ELERI MORGAN-THOMAS: It's not a plan that is written down as a plan, but Lance might—

LANCE CARDEN: I mean, we're literally—

The Hon. CATHERINE CUSACK: What sort of plan is it?

LANCE CARDEN: We've got staff literally on the phone all day, every day, ringing providers and extending bookings as far as we can in advance—at this stage right through until November. We've got the motorhomes booked, at this stage, until the end of August, but we can extend beyond then if the demand and the need is still there. As Ms Morgan-Thomas said, the recreation camps are booked long-term as well.

The Hon. CATHERINE CUSACK: Are they? All of them?

LANCE CARDEN: I would have to take on notice the actual date, but I'm pretty sure that we have two of them booked until November.

Answer

The bookings for all recreation camps have been extended for disaster affected people until the end of November 2022.