

**INQUIRY INTO RESPONSE TO MAJOR FLOODING
ACROSS NEW SOUTH WALES IN 2022**

Organisation: End Street Sleeping Collaboration

Date Received: 20 May 2022

Submission to Select Committee on the response to major flooding across New South Wales in 2022

Ensuring the inclusion of those previously experiencing
homelessness in the flood response

May 19th, 2022



Submission

The End Street Sleeping Collaboration (ESSC) appreciates the opportunity to provide a submission to the Select Committee for the *Inquiry into the response to major flooding across New South Wales in 2022*.

End Street Sleeping Collaboration (ESSC) is a not-for-profit organisation that aims to halve homelessness across NSW by 2025 and work toward ending it by 2030. Signatories to the Joint Commitment to End Street Sleeping include the Premier of NSW, the homelessness sector's leading NGOs, City of Sydney and homelessness peak bodies. Collaborators include local governments, philanthropists, homelessness sector NGOs and the Department of Communities and Justice. ESSC was specifically established to lead the collaborative effort, deliver on the Premier's commitment, and reach the targets set.

In the Northern Rivers region, ESSC partners with Byron Shire Council on the Ending Rough Sleeping Byron Shire project to reduce and end rough sleeping through community action.

Summary of recommendations

End Street Sleeping Collaboration, in collaboration with the Ending Rough Sleeping Byron Shire, recommends that the NSW Government enact the following key recommendations:

Recommendation 1. Increase the provision of emergency accommodation in the Northern Rivers, with special consideration for those who are experiencing homelessness.

Recommendation 2. Commit to providing ongoing emergency accommodation options in local government areas that have low or no emergency housing provision prior to the flood events, such as the Byron Shire Local Government Area.

Recommendation 3. Ensure equitable access to emergency accommodation during disaster response and recovery, so that those experiencing homelessness at the time of events can access temporary accommodation options.

Recommendation 4. Secure a multi-agency government commitment to develop and enact an extreme weather and emergency response protocol for people sleeping rough in the region, based on the functioning protocol from Inner City of Sydney. Partners to include Department of Communities and Justice, Local Government, and key homelessness service providers, at a minimum.

Recommendation 5. Ensure that all evacuation and recovery centre staff and volunteers are trauma-informed, and adequately trained to support vulnerable and marginalised community members during a crisis event. It is important to have a specific process and supports to assist individuals who were previously experiencing homelessness before the crisis event.

Recommendation 6. Improve co-ordination and communication across government agencies, specifically Services Australia, Services NSW and the Department of Communities and Justice, to meet the specific needs of people sleeping rough and impacted by flood events.

Recommendation 7. Ensure that all Recovery Centre staff are aware of and trained in processes to deliver services to persons with no fixed address, particularly in locations with documented high numbers of people sleeping rough.

Recommendation 8. Provide timely, trauma-informed outreach service delivery to assist with obtaining identification, accessing temporary accommodation, accessing disaster relief payments and other available supports.

Recommendation 9. Increase data-sharing and transparency of Government agencies following disaster events. Government systems that capture disaster related data should have sharing arrangements and agreements in place prior to events to facilitate multiagency access during disaster response and recovery.

Recommendation 10. Increase communication and collaboration across Government agencies when responding to housing needs and homelessness during the flood event.

Recommendation 11. Increase the role of agencies with local knowledge and experience in delivering housing and homelessness responses including Department of Communities and Justice – Housing and Specialist Homelessness Services (SHS).

Current issues for those previously and currently experiencing homelessness in Northern Rivers

TOR 1. (a) the preparation, coordination and response to the Western Sydney and North Coast floods by Government

Issue 1. Lack of emergency accommodation

Prior to the flood events, the Northern Rivers had only a small number of government-funded emergency accommodation providers despite the high rates of homelessness in the region. It is important to mention that the Byron Shire Local Government Area (LGA) had no emergency accommodation prior to the flood events yet had the second-highest number of people sleeping rough in NSW (Department of Communities and Justice, 2021). As well, across the region the emergency accommodations often were at capacity when individuals were trying to access rooms through Link2Home pathways.

During the flood events there was an increase in government-provided emergency accommodation across the Northern Rivers. However, community service providers across the region reported that there are no vacancies for people requesting emergency accommodation via Link2Home. There was also inconsistency in the number of days

individuals were given access to. Community service providers had some clients approved for 28 days, while others were only given 2 days, and others any amount in-between. The provision of emergency accommodation does not match the increasing number of people experiencing homelessness since the flood events.

It has been reported that vulnerable people experiencing homelessness have had to travel long distances outside the region to access emergency accommodation. For example, staff from the Fletcher Street Cottage, a key local homelessness service in Byron Bay, reported that a vulnerable woman escaping domestic and family violence had to travel from the Byron Shire to Sydney to access the only emergency accommodation option available via the state-wide government service Link2Home. The staff had to use donated community funds to pay for this travel. The woman was highly vulnerable, isolated from supports and forced to relocate away from her community.

Community service providers reported that people experiencing homelessness at the time of the flood event were unable to access flood-related emergency accommodation. This has been a particular issue for flood-impacted persons with no fixed address. For example, community service providers have reported that flood-impacted persons who were experiencing homelessness when the event occurred have been told that they cannot access flood-related emergency accommodation via Services NSW but must instead use Link2Home, unnecessarily delaying their access to safe accommodation.

Inequitable access to emergency accommodation post-floods has increased the marginalisation of this vulnerable cohort and left them without any government-provided accommodation options in the Northern Rivers region. This has exacerbated their vulnerabilities and caused re-traumatisation which has impacted their mental health and health concerns. Individuals experiencing homelessness need intensive supports to help with their needs, which is even more important during crisis events.

Recommendation 1. Increase the provision of emergency accommodation in the Northern Rivers, with special consideration for those who are experiencing homelessness.

Recommendation 2. Commit to providing ongoing emergency accommodation options in local government areas that have low or no emergency housing provision prior to the flood events, such as the Byron Shire Local Government Area.

Recommendation 3. Ensure equitable access to emergency accommodation during disaster response and recovery, so that those experiencing homelessness at the time of events can access temporary accommodation options.

Issue 2. Emergency response for individuals experiencing rough sleeping homelessness

There were high numbers of individuals experiencing rough sleeping homelessness in the Northern Rivers region during the flood events. ESSC's By-Name List (BNL) records information about each person who is currently sleeping rough, couch surfing, or living in crisis accommodation and has measured high levels of vulnerability for these community members in Northern Rivers. This information can be found in the appendix on page 7.

During the flood response, government and community were inadequately prepared to support the needs of this vulnerable cohort. There was a lack of appropriate shelter options for the specific needs of vulnerable community members who were sleeping rough. For example, during the flood event a group of approximately twenty people sleeping rough in Byron Bay contacted local government staff requesting access to community buildings to use as an emergency shelter. They were unable to access evacuation centres due to their location away from the town centre, which was also cut-off by water during the second flood event.

Recommendation 4. Secure a multi-agency government commitment to develop and enact an extreme weather and emergency response protocol for people sleeping rough in the region, based on the functioning protocol from Inner City of Sydney. Partners to include Department of Communities and Justice, Local Government and key homelessness service providers, at a minimum.

Recommendation 5. Ensure that all evacuation centre staff and volunteers are trauma informed, and adequately trained to support vulnerable and marginalised community members during a crisis event.

Issue 3. Recovery supports for people sleeping rough

Homelessness service providers have reported that many people who were rough sleeping during the flood events have lost belongings and identifying documentation. This is a significant barrier to their ability to access any accommodation options and other government and community supports.

Feedback from community members who accessed Recovery Centres to seek support were initially informed by government agencies that they were unable to assist them. Subsequently, some community members received support while others did not. Many people reported that they were referred across agencies without any substantive outcomes.

For example, when visiting Recovery Centres flood-impacted people with no fixed address were initially unable to access Disaster Recovery Payments via Services Australia. Local government staff were required to spend time advocating for these payments to be available for these vulnerable persons. It has been reported by homelessness service providers that a number of people sleeping rough continue to experience difficulties accessing these payments.

Local government staff have advocated for outreach service delivery by Services NSW and Services Australia to locations away from Recovery Centres with high numbers of flood-impacted people experiencing homelessness. It has been 12 weeks since the first flood and this has not occurred. Homelessness service providers have expressed frustration at the lack of service response for these vulnerable community members.

Recommendation 6. Improve co-ordination and communication across government agencies, specifically Services Australia, Services NSW and the Department of Communities and Justice, to meet the unique needs of people sleeping rough and impacted by flood events.

Recommendation 7. Ensure that all Recovery Centre staff are aware of and trained in processes to deliver services to persons with no fixed address, particularly in locations with documented high numbers of people sleeping rough.

Recommendation 8. Provide timely, trauma-informed outreach service delivery to assist with obtaining identification, accessing temporary accommodation, accessing disaster relief payments and other available supports.

TOR 1. (c) coordination between the New South Wales Government, New South Wales Government departments and agencies, the Federal Government, Federal Government departments and agencies, local governments, private sector operators and the community, including requests or offers of assistance

Issue 4. Access to data

Homelessness service providers, local government and community organisations experienced difficulties when trying to obtain information about housing need from government agencies responsible for delivering flood supports. For example, local government staff made multiple requests to obtain deidentified information about the number of requests for temporary housing support via Service NSW.

Access to this information was significantly delayed and required staff to make multiple requests across this and other government agencies, until a numerical figure was provided. This information was inadequate to understand and respond to post-flood experiences of homelessness.

In response, local organisations including ESSC, local government and specialist homelessness services had to conduct their own data collection exercise after the flood events. This report can be found as an additional attachment to this submission. This diverted staff away from important flood response and recovery work.

Recommendation 9. Increase data-sharing and transparency of Government agencies following disaster events. Government systems that capture disaster related

data should have sharing arrangements and agreements in place prior to events to facilitate multiagency access during disaster response and recovery.

Issue 5. Multi-agency coordination and communication

Flood-related emergency and temporary accommodation has been delivered by Services NSW. During the response phase, Department of Communities and Justice – Housing and the Specialist Homelessness Services were disconnected from the initial housing response. These agencies have the local knowledge and experience in delivering housing/homelessness supports in our community.

Reports from community members and staff within Recovery Centres and from key homelessness service providers expressed confusion about processes to access post-flood housing and homelessness supports. As a result, a number of community groups formed to temporarily house people. These community groups were not appropriately experienced or skilled to adequately support people and help transition to longer term accommodation.

Many people were diverted away from government services during this time, leading to an initial underestimation of housing need by government agencies and an accumulation of unmet housing need in community.

During the recovery phase, homelessness service providers have reported a lack of transparency about the ongoing housing response in the weeks following the flood events. This has created confusion and difficulties for both community and service providers.

Recommendation 10. Increase communication and collaboration across Government agencies when responding to housing needs and homelessness during the flood event.

Recommendation 11. Increase the role of agencies with local knowledge and experience in delivering housing and homelessness responses including Department of Communities and Justice – Housing and Specialist Homelessness Services (SHS).

Appendix

ESSC's By-Name List system: helping to understand the needs of those experiencing homelessness in Northern NSW

The situation and needs of people on the BNL pre-flood

ESSC's By-Name List (BNL) system contains very detailed and useful data for understanding the situation and needs of people experiencing homelessness. You can find our de-identified data on our website here: <https://endstreetsleeping.org/data>.

Pre-flood, there were 232 individuals on the By-Name List system in the MNCNNSWNE region¹. *Table 1* in the appendix shows a visualisation of this data.

- The housing statuses of these individuals include:
 - **97 (42%) rough sleepers**
 - **24 (10%) couch surfers**
 - **50 (22%) in TA/shelter/temporary housing**
 - 51 (22%) in permanent housing and needing ongoing support. The housing outcomes were through Tweed Assertive Outreach, Assertive Outreach Expansion, and Together Home Programs.
- Level of support needed:
 - **167 (72%) of individuals reported a high acuity** (score of 10 or above) on their VI-SPDAT. This indicates the person is likely to need long term and intensive supports, in conjunction with housing they can afford to end their homelessness.
 - **43 (19%) of individuals reported a medium acuity** (score between 5-9) on their VI-SPDAT. This indicates the person is likely to need short-medium term supports, in conjunction with housing they can afford to end their homelessness.
 - 22 (9%) of individuals reported a low acuity (score of 4 or below) on their VI-SPDAT. This indicates the person is likely to be able to resolve their own homelessness with access to housing they can afford.
- 70 (31%) individuals are Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander
- 83 (36%) individuals identified as female. Of these females, 70% stated their current homelessness was due to a breakdown of social relationships; **95% stated they are at risk of harm**; 69% stated they were in an imminent risk of violence; and 63% are at risk of exploitation.
- 21 (9%) individuals are under the age of 24 and suitable for a youth response.
- 88 (41.5%) of individuals were identified as likely eligible for My Aged Care².

¹ When considering this data, it is important to consider the hidden homeless population that may not be accurately represented on the BNL system as of date.

² This is based on those aged 50 or above; or aged 45 or above and identify as Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander).

- **86 (37%)** were identified as being **likely suitable for NDIS packages** based on having 2 or more indicators of disability³.
- **121 (55.8%)** individuals are identified as displaying **Tri-morbidity**⁴.
- 44 (22%) of individuals have dependent children and/or caring responsibilities.

Newly identified individuals being added to the BNL post-flood

- There are more than 50 individuals on the BNL who have been added post-floods by a variety of homelessness services. On the BNL, we are capturing these individuals under the programs “NSW Floods 2022”.
- Of the individuals added, 24 VI-SPDATs have been completed. *Table 1* in the appendix shows a visualisation of this data.
- From the 24 completed assessments, the following acuity scores were reported:
 - **High: 18 (75%)**
 - **Medium: 6 (25%)**
 - Low: 0
- From the 24 completed assessments, the following factors were reported:
 - Housing Status: **14 (59%) rough sleeping; 3 (12%) couch surfing; 7 (29%) TA/ in shelter/ temporarily housed**
 - First Nations: **11 (46%) identify as Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander**
 - Gender: 13 (54%) males; 11 (46%) females
 - Age: 15 (63%) of individuals are aged 35-54
- From the 24 completed assessments, we can understand the health and well-being needs of a client. *Table 2* in the appendix shows a visual representation of this data.
 - 22 (88%) reported having a physical health condition; 22 (88%) reporting have a mental health condition; 16 (56%) reported substance use
 - **14 (56%) reported having tri-morbidity**
- ESSC worked in partnership with Byron Shire Council and Social Futures to understand the number of individuals currently sleeping rough after the floods. ESSC utilised the new Observations app to geocode and record sightings of individuals across the Byron and Tweed Shires. **333 observations were reported.**
- ESSC staff will continue to build this list with (1) those who were previously experiencing homelessness pre-flood, and (2) those post-floods who were directly or indirectly flood effected and are presenting to homelessness services across the Northern Rivers.

What do we know about post-flood individuals, so far?

In looking at individuals who have been identified for supports through a rough sleeper flood response, we can see what types of supports will be needed. The data indicates:

³ The 5 indicators of disability from the VI-SPDAT include (Serious Brain Injury (ABI) or Head Trauma, Learning, Developmental or Intellectual Disability, Mental Health/Brain Issues that Limit Ability to Live Independently, Physical Disability That Limits Housing Accessibility, and reported Mental Health Conditions Diagnosed is one or more.

⁴ Tri-morbidity represents the overlap of physical health, mental health, and substance use conditions. Research has shown that those experiencing homelessness often experience tri-morbidity, a factor that increases the risk of early mortality (Vickery et al., 2021: <https://doi.org/10.1097/mlr.0000000000001435>)

- **100% of the individuals are likely to need long term and intensive to medium supports**, in conjunction with housing they can afford to end their homelessness.
- 0% of the individuals have a medium or long-term housing solution to end their homelessness.
- Culturally safe and appropriate responses will be needed to support the 46% of First Nations individuals.
- We can use this existing information from the BNL to understand the specific types of supports individuals will need in the Northern Rivers.

Next steps for local collaborations in Northern Rivers

What assistance people experiencing homelessness need

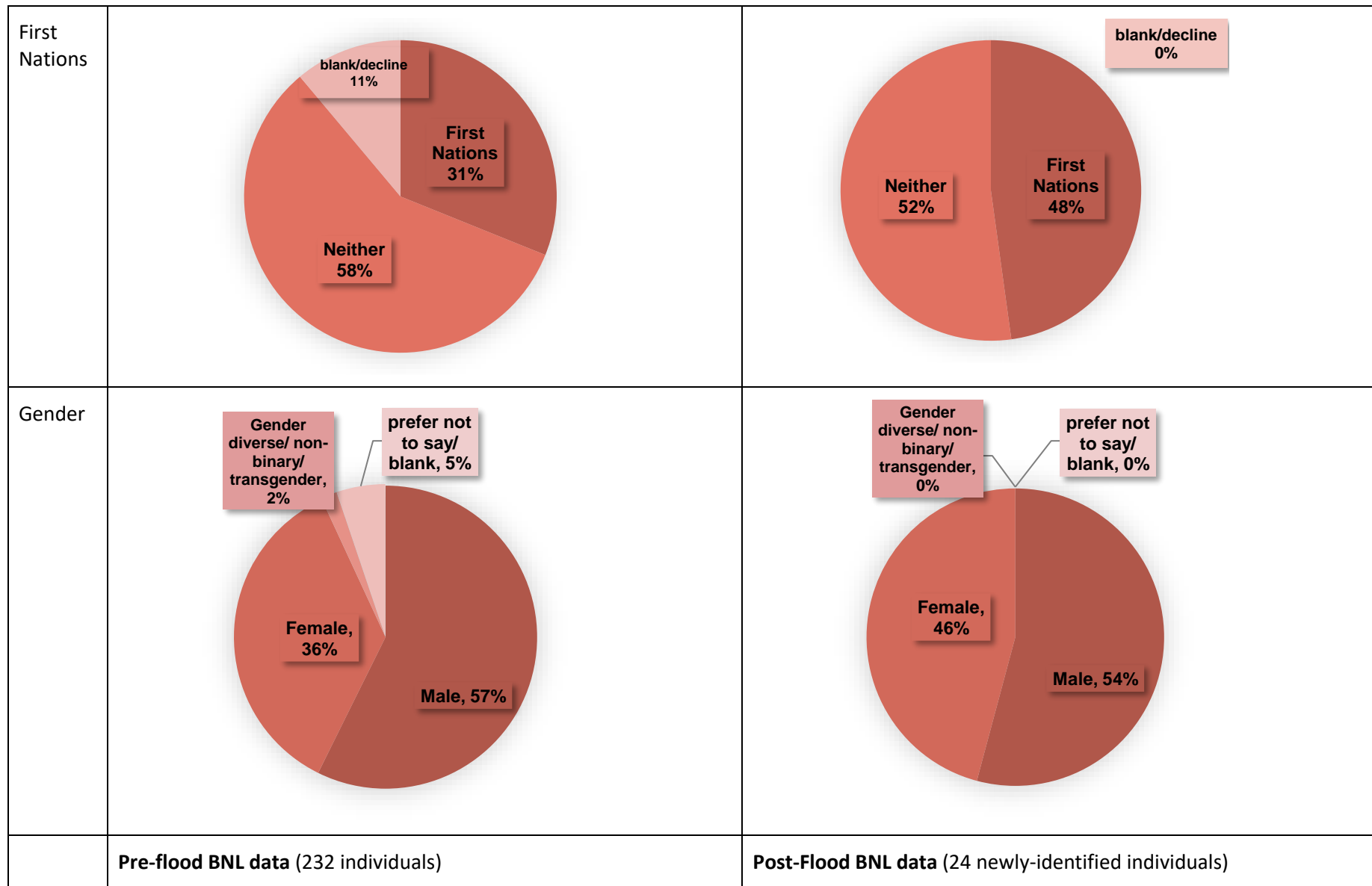
1. Increase access to caseworkers and supports. The waitlists will continue to get longer due to the impact of the floods. ESSC is in conversations with Collaboration partner St. Vincent de Paul to see if remote support can be given in the Northern Rivers.
2. No restrictions on accessing temporary accommodation as a rough sleeper or couch surfer. If the individual is on the BNL, they can be supported while stabilising in temporary accommodation to get housing ready for when properties are available.
3. Collaboration with government agencies and homelessness services to get individuals onto the BNL system and coordinate appropriate supports through service coordination meetings and referrals. This would include supports for ID, connecting with recovery centres, and accessing relief payments.
4. Additional communication from housing providers about how housing wait lists and rough sleeper programs will be impacted. Particularly for people experiencing homelessness on the waitlists without short or medium accommodation options.

ESSC's Role

- ESSC will use the By-Name List system to drive a coordinated response for rough sleepers and those experiencing homelessness in Northern Rivers. Utilising the BNL triages individuals from to understand the level of supports an individual will needs and they can be allocated to appropriate services. Depending on their acuity, individuals may be suitable for remote case worker support, or need intensive case management.
- ESSC will support services to identify individuals experiencing rough sleeping and those who were previously homeless to coordinate a response with the local collaborations. This will include creating new BNL records and updating existing client information and using the "Observations" app to capture geospatial information via street counts.

Table 1: Visualisation of Pre-Flood BNL data for the 232 individuals and Post-Flood BNL data for the new 24 individuals within the MNCNNSWNE region.

	Pre-flood BNL data (232 individuals)	Post-Flood BNL data (24 newly-identified individuals)																								
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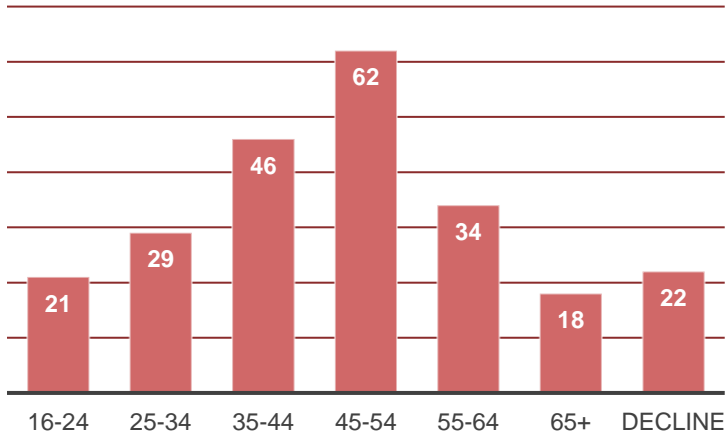
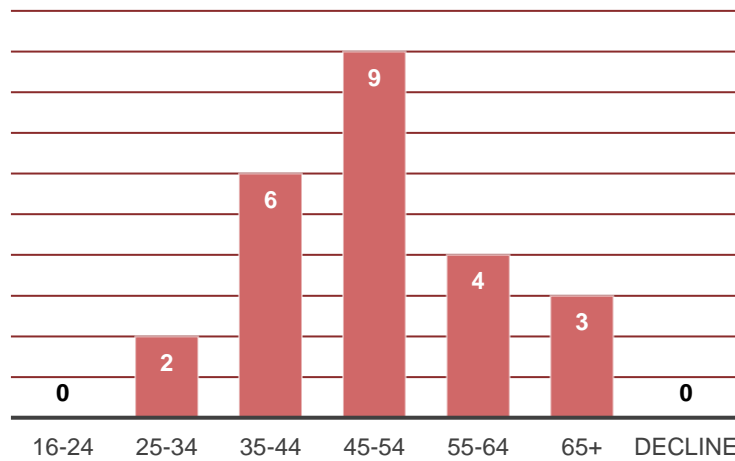
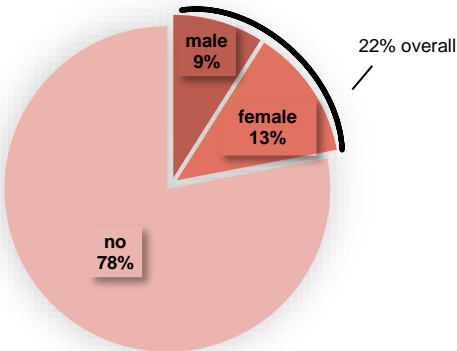
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Caring Respons ibilities	 <table><thead><tr><th>Category</th><th>Percentage</th></tr></thead><tbody><tr><td>no</td><td>78%</td></tr><tr><td>female</td><td>13%</td></tr><tr><td>male</td><td>9%</td></tr><tr><td>Overall (female + male)</td><td>22%</td></tr></tbody></table>	Category	Percentage	no	78%	female	13%	male	9%	Overall (female + male)	22%	<p><i>*not calaculated at this stage</i></p>																						
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Table 2: Visualisation of the Post-Flood BNL Dashboard on the health & wellbeing needs for the 24 individuals within the MNCNNSWNE region.

Health & Wellbeing

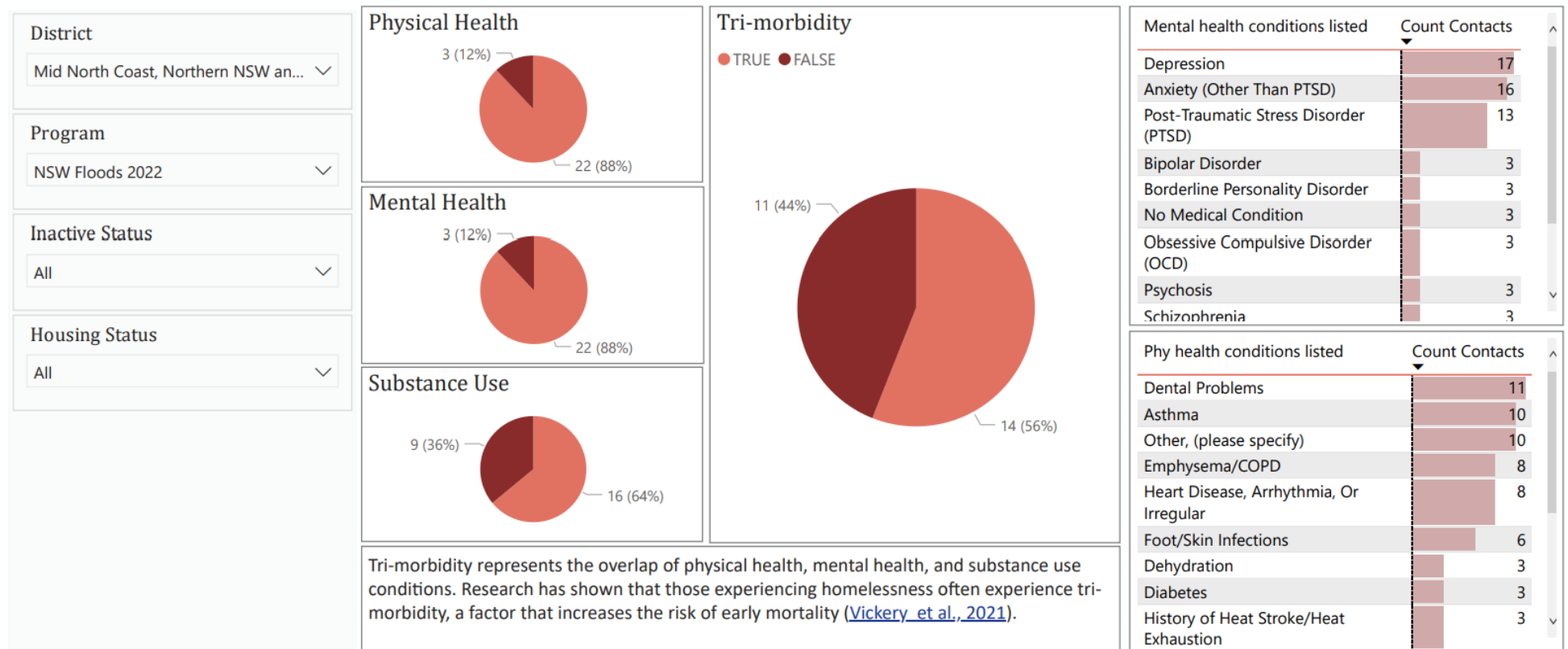


Mental health: Answered yes to any mental health condition listed in Q37 of the VI-SPDAT.

Physical health: Answered yes to any health condition in Q32, or yes to Q25, Q27, Q28 or Q29 of the VI-SPDAT.

Substance use: Answered yes to Q30, Q31, Q32, Q33, Q34, Q35 or Q36 of the VI-SPDAT.

Clients could list multiple mental and physical health conditions.



Organisation details:

Legal Name:	End Street Sleeping Collaboration Ltd
ABN:	96 636 177 949
Address:	Registered Address: Level 8, 133 Liverpool Street, Sydney NSW 2000
Website:	http://endstreetsleeping.org
Date Established:	13 September 2019
Contact:	Graham West, Chief Executive Officer,
DGR and TCC:	DGR established on 13 January 2020 TCC established on 17 January 2020
Contact:	Graham West as above