

FLOOD IMPACT

Research,
Respond
and Recover

July 2022



Photo by Mark Kriedermann

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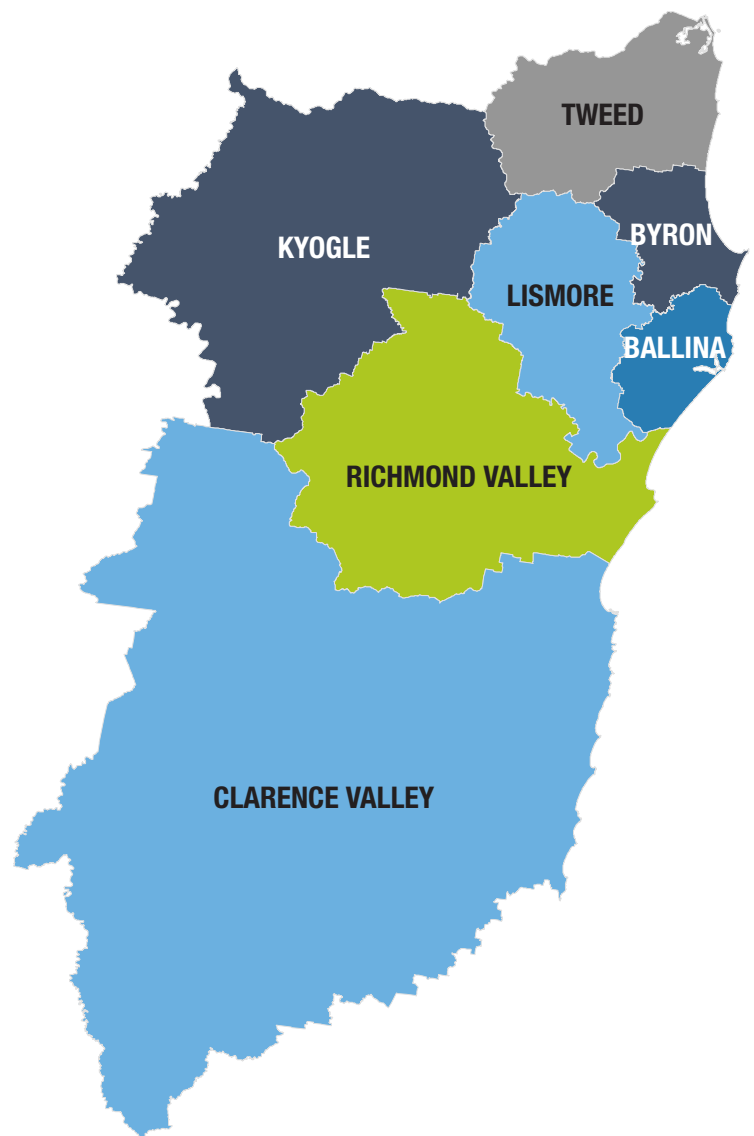
The Northern Rivers region on the Far North Coast of New South Wales is a diverse area stretching from the mountains to the sea, all the way from Tweed to Grafton and from the South Pacific Ocean inland to Kyogle, Woodenbong and Casino. It's known for its pristine environment, beaches, rivers, natural wonders and rich ecosystems. Home to 310,666 people, Northern Rivers region supports 107,411 jobs and has an annual economic output of \$33.713 billion¹.

Established in 2003, the **Northern Rivers Community Foundation (NRCF)** is a high-impact philanthropic organisation that helps build healthy and resilient communities in the Northern Rivers by supporting local not-for-profit organisations to tackle challenging social and environmental problems and pursue positive change.

With around \$2.5M under management and \$500,000 in annual grant funding, NRCF works with 250 community and NFP organisations and a range of donors from individuals to notable large philanthropic foundations.

The February and March 2022 flooding events – when numerous rainfall and river height records were broken – caused tragic loss of life. Homes and businesses were submerged. Infrastructure including telecommunications, roads, bridges, key public infrastructure – including sewage works – was damaged and destroyed.

Our long-standing connection with community organisations across the region provided us with extensive insight into our communities. It was immediately clear to NRCF, in the aftermath of the floods, that the impact would be widespread, significant, and long lasting.



¹ <https://app.remplan.com.au/northernrivers/economy/industries/gross-regional-product>

ABOUT THE NORTHERN RIVERS COMMUNITY FOUNDATION

NRCF takes a hands-on, participatory, and research-led approach, developing and supporting innovative solutions that drive systemic change.

In response to critical issues impacting the Northern Rivers community, NRCF's annual community grants program has over recent years provided hundreds of community organisations with small grant funding in the following areas:

Housing and
homelessness



Employment
support



Disability and
inclusive community



Families and
children



Health and
wellbeing



Social and cultural
disadvantage



Youth and
community



Art and
culture



Response, first aid and
recovery support to
animals and wildlife



Conservation of our
natural environment



NRCF'S IMMEDIATE FLOOD RESPONSE

In the week following the second flood disaster, the NRCF engaged a team of volunteers in a research project, contacting community organisations across the region at a local level to understand the impact of the disaster on:

- » Staff and capacity of community organisations
- » Infrastructure
- » Impediments to service
- » Immediate need (organisational and community)
- » Need/knowledge of, and access to funding opportunities
- » Capacity to apply for funding and/or other support

This research project assisted NRCF to identify community organisations requiring immediate support, informing the Flood Relief Fund (discussed below).

NRCF subsequently facilitated almost \$1M in rapid response granting in the six weeks following the March floods, to deliver immediate support to over 100 organisations in flood-affected communities.



Photo by Mark Kriedermann



RESEARCH PROJECT METHODOLOGY

Volunteer Team

NRCF recruited and trained a team of 10 volunteers to conduct telephone research with community organisations across the seven Local Government Areas of the Northern Rivers² between 14 March and 28 April 2022.

The team consisted of experienced and connected community leaders with a range of skills including clinical psychology, mental health, health and wellbeing; research, consulting and community engagement; philanthropy and not-for-profit sector. The team was supported through a weekly online meeting, providing a forum for a mental health “check-in” for the team; question and answer session; triage opportunity; as well as phone and email support.

Telephone research

Volunteers conducted calls to executive level leaders of community organisations and asked a short series of questions to understand the impact of the floods on the organisation, their capacity and needs, as well as gain valuable insight into the impact and needs of their communities. Volunteers offered information on funding opportunities based on identified needs, and triaged calls for follow up by NRCF’s Grants and Impact Manager, to support directly with flood relief grant applications and/or specialised support.

The team did not record an average first call time but reported that research calls took a long time. Escalated calls (when an immediate need had been identified) took an estimated average of 30-40 minutes. Many respondents struggled to answer questions; they wanted to share their flood story. It appeared challenging for many to express, comprehend or quantify the extent of the impact, the scale of the damage, or what was needed to support recovery.

Categorically we can say that these conversations were hard but welcomed by the respondents.

NRCF believes that our many years of community engagement, our proactive support of community and our close relationships with grant recipients provided the basis for the high rate of contact: local community organisations were willing to take our calls during this time of disaster.

Volunteer Coordinator

As the scale of need became evident in the week following the launch of the project, a volunteer coordinator was engaged to ensure best-practice volunteer management and manage NRCF’s risk and crisis communications and response. The coordinator effectively managed the pipeline of appropriate organisations for volunteers to approach – the research list, contact and follow up, escalation and response.

Collation and analysis

A database was created from NRCF’s current and previous grant recipients, nominated Northern Rivers ACNC registered organisations, emerging disaster hub organisations, referrals, and other research.

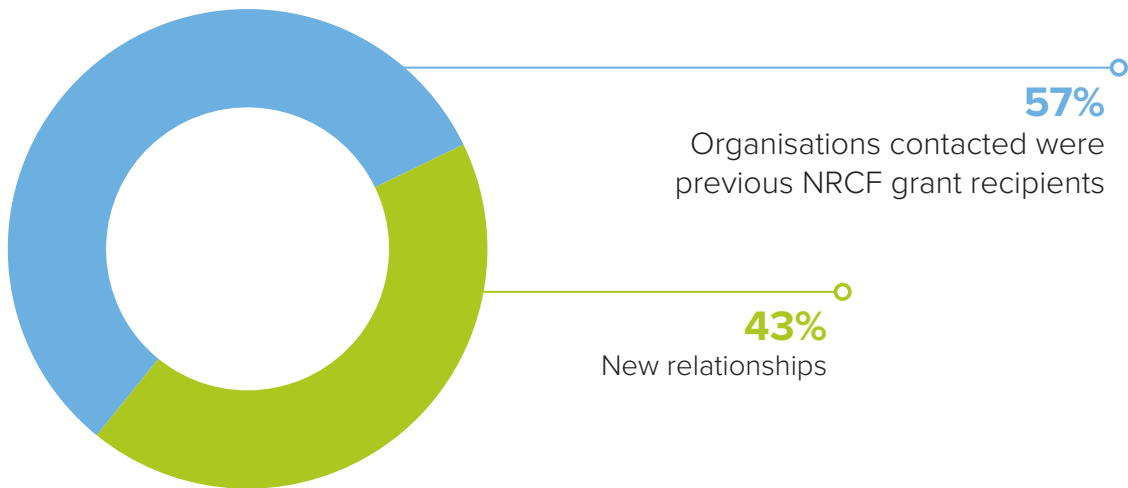
The research has been consolidated and analysed to provide key insights into the immediate flood impact, the changing needs of the organisations in the weeks following the flood disaster, and the ongoing needs of the organisations and the communities they support.

² Tweed Shire Council, Kyogle Council, Byron Shire Council, Ballina Shire Council, Lismore City Council, Richmond Valley Council, Clarence Valley Council

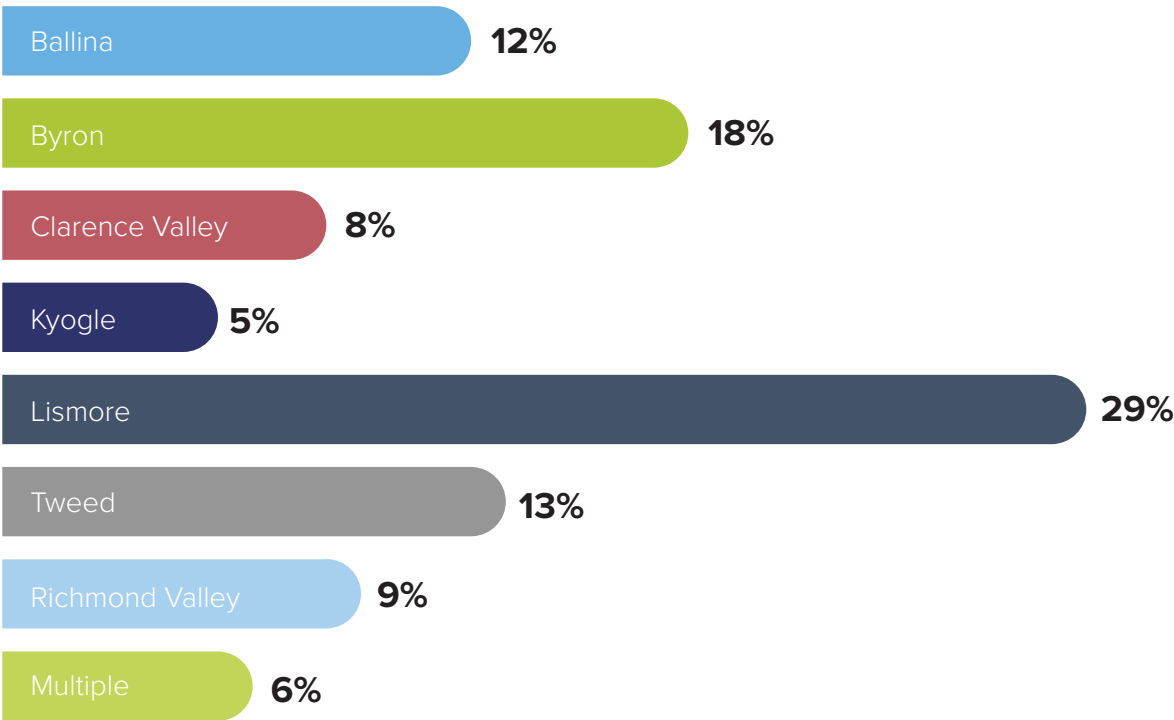


RESEARCH PROJECT OVERVIEW

Organisations contacted: **294**



Local Government Area representation:



At least five organisations contacted were formed by volunteers as a direct result of the flood disaster, to support immediate response for local communities, particularly in more remote areas. Two of these, at least, took the lead role in disaster recovery and clean up. These organisations operated with varying degrees of support from other established community organisations (eg. Mid Richmond Neighbourhood Centre played a leading role in auspicing multiple grants, capacity building on the ground through these groups).

Organisations including Wardell Core, Wardell Warriors, Coraki Flood Recovery Hub, Wyrallah Road Recovery Hub and Murwillumbah Volunteer Hub played a key role as disaster hubs offering services including:

- » **Evacuation Centres:** immediate shelter from flood and extreme weather
- » **Volunteer and disaster relief coordination**
- » **Funding support and coordination** (eg. Coordination of GIVIT donations)
- » **Service support:** providing a hub for service providers and support including mental health support; funding information for individuals; legal support regarding tenancy agreements for flood damaged properties
- » **Donation hub:** receipt, sort and delivery of donations including food, household goods, equipment and recovery needs
- » **Basic need provision:** Meals to evacuees; emergency support and clean-up crews and ongoing flood displaced persons; provision of clothing; showers, laundry and hygiene support; provisions for household pets; provision of clean up supplies.



Photo by Mark Kriedermann

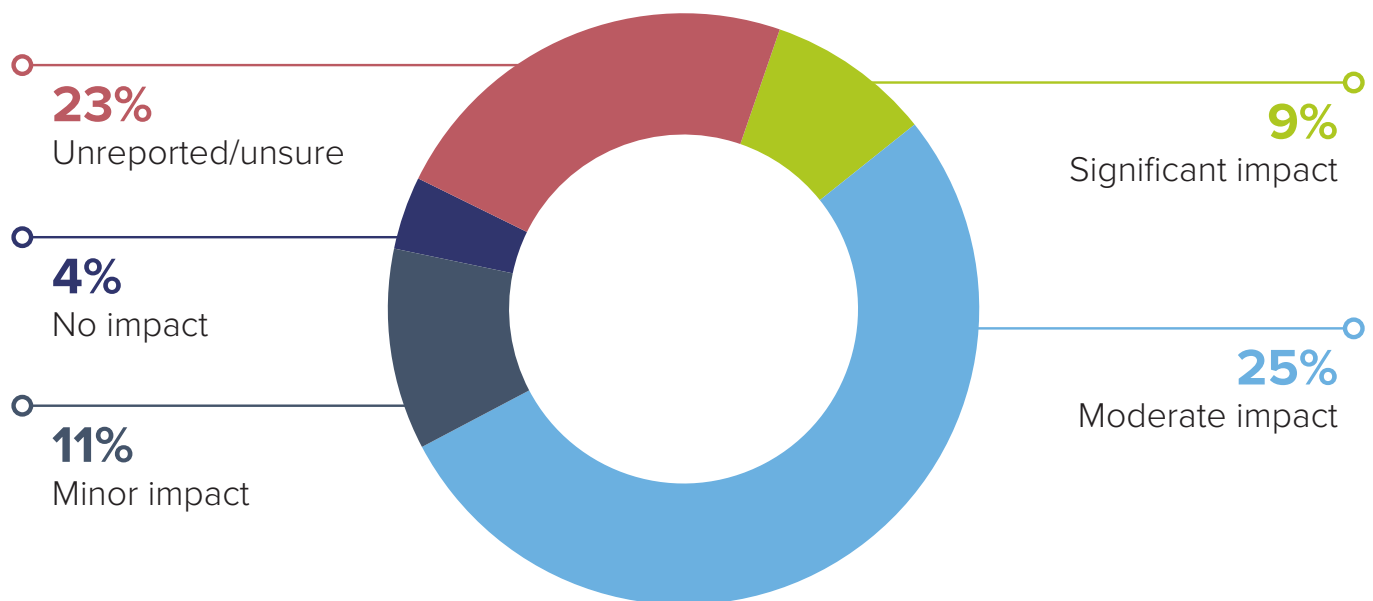
Impact on Staff and Capacity

Volunteers questioned local organisations about their ability to offer their previous service and/or respond to new/stronger need. For example:

Was a soup kitchen, used to serve 100 meals a day, now doing 500?

Was a mental health support group servicing 100 families per year now we're supporting 100 families a week?

Was a new business venture leasing a warehouse, now we're a disaster hub, managing 100 volunteers a day to support 10,000 incidents/issues across the town?



Given the scale of the floods, it is important to note that many respondents were often personally impacted, simultaneously supporting traumatised and displaced staff, as well as leading disaster recovery for their organisation and community.

Impact to Physical Space

Many towns and villages across the region were completely submerged for days and raging flood waters, landslides and debris blocked access routes. Equipment and vehicles were destroyed or washed away. Communications were severely impacted – in some regions, including Lismore and large parts of the Tweed and Byron LGAs – there were no communications for 5+ days. Remote areas such as Nimbin, Main Arm and Doon Doon are still struggling with access and communications. Receding flood water, access and communications meant that it was some time before many organisations were able to access their facilities or talk to staff to understand the impact of the disaster, their needs, as well as those of communities.

6%

organisations experienced significant damage including the need to demolish, building or infrastructure destroyed, or washed way

7%

of organisations contacted were unimpacted

Funding Need

20%

organisations identified immediate need for funding to support clean up and recovery

8%

identified no immediate need

General Observations

NRCF analysed the research findings and identified the following observations:

- » Organisations with significant funding (eg. Government grant-funded organisations) identified challenges in responding immediately to the disaster as their existing grant funding was tied.
- » Organisations with significant resources (eg. National organisations) were in need of immediate funding while insurance assessments were arranged, new premises located and due diligence conducted. Funding was not available from other sources to respond to immediate need on the ground such as mental health or crisis support in evacuation centres.
- » The fundraising capacity of many organisations had been impacted by the global pandemic, with few having access to additional funds, such as savings.
- » Some larger organisations had received bushfire grant funds which had enabled them to put into place business continuity plans, positively impacting their ability to maintain continuity of service 24/7 throughout the flood disaster.
- » Some organisations had learned from experiences in responding to COVID-19 to shift further to mobile/remote services, building their capacity to offer services such as trauma counselling remotely or at disaster hubs immediately following the disaster.
- » One national organisation's Lismore facility was destroyed in the flood. They pivoted to providing emergency mental health support in evacuation centres. The organisation was insured and received a significant government grant, however there was still a substantial gap in funding for the recovery work they carried out.



Photo by Mark Kriedermann

NRCF'S RESPONSE TO IDENTIFIED IMMEDIATE NEEDS

88 organisations were identified as having immediate need. These, along with other referred organisations, were contacted by NRCF's Grants and Impact Manager to offer support, assess need, and discuss funding opportunities.

Recognising the multitude of challenges faced by organisations impacted by the floods, NRCF entered grant applications on behalf of **42%** of the grant recipients, to expedite funds for recovery needs.

Flood Relief Fund Grant Program

The Byron Community Centre, with its strong local support base, received many pledges in the days following the flooding events, as the need and impact of the disaster became evident. The NRCF, with its well-developed community network across the seven LGA's of the Northern Rivers and experience in managing best practice grant programs, was ideally placed to facilitate a fast emergency grants round. A partnership – with BCC fundraising and NRCF administering a grants program – was established to provide emergency relief grants of up to \$10,000 to community organisations in response to the flood disaster.

Grant Program Overview

Grants were assessed on an ongoing basis by the Flood Relief Fund Grant Committee, and funds were paid out weekly. Additional organisations applied independently, or were identified over time, supplementing the initial 88 organisations identified.



151

Applications received



106 (70%)

Applications funded



55%

Direct applications



42%

Grants entered by NRCF



\$964,139

Grant funding



79

Grants of \$10,000

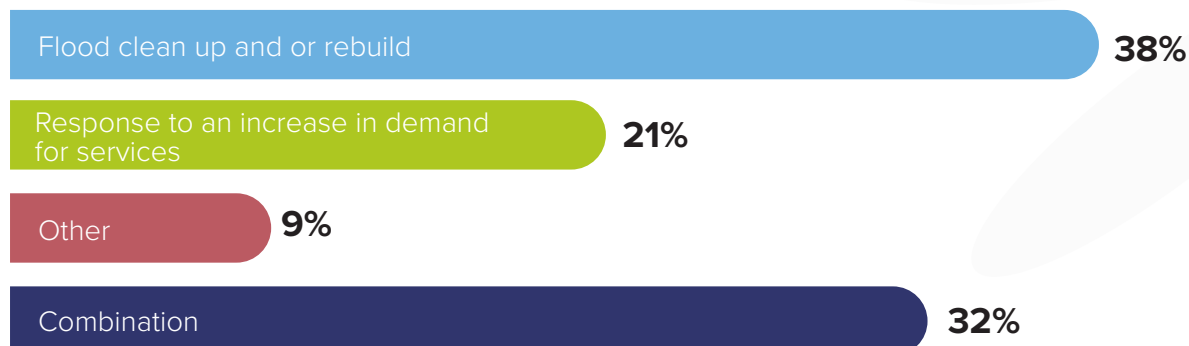


\$9,096

Average grant

The average time between application and funding was estimated at 10 days.

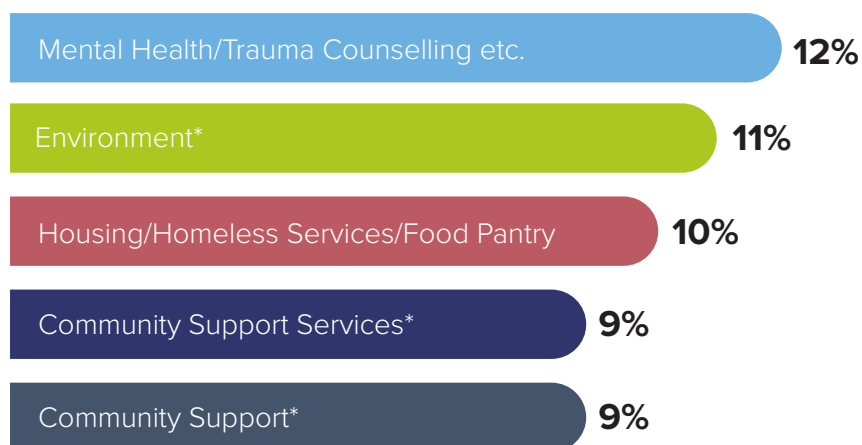
Reason for funding:



Areas of Impact

We supported 6 neighbourhood centres and 9 volunteer recovery hubs providing immediate grassroots response to community, functioning as evacuation centre, disaster hubs, and supporting the on-going and changing needs provision for local communities across the region.

Key areas of impact:



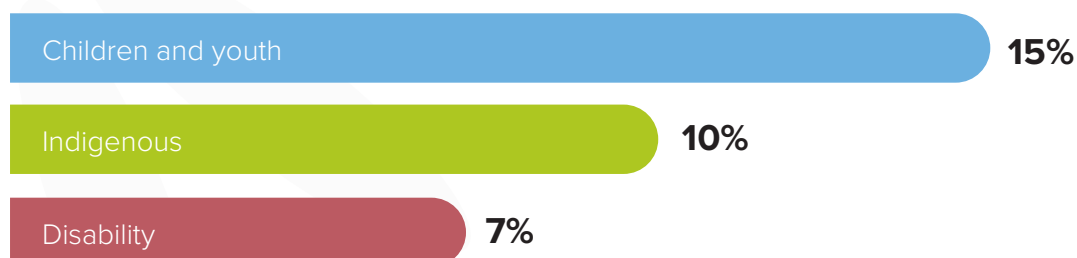
*Service examples:

Environment: the weather event caused significant damage to our local environment, resulting in landslides, pollution to habitats, displacement of animals, and increased injury to local wildlife. Funding supported local Landcare groups working on slide remediation, environment centres supporting clean up, and animal rescue groups supporting displaced and impacted animals.

Community Support Services eg.: Housing and wrap-around service providers, neighbourhood centres, legal centres, recovery support networks.

Community Support: Community radio, locally run disaster management, pastoral care, trades and renovation support, healing and trauma support.

Primary target groups:



Emergency relief grants under the Flood Relief Fund concluded on 30 April 2022.

Additional Funding Sources

A clear need for immediate funding to support clean up and the additional demands on resources was identified.

In addition to the Flood Relief Fund, and the NSW State Government funding discussed below, a number of additional funding sources quickly emerged, offering a range of support to community organisations.

Key organisations involved in supporting recovery through donations included:

- » Red Cross
- » St Vincent de Paul
- » Good360 NSW
- » Salvation Army

The GIVIT funding platform emerged quickly as a strong resource for community organisations to support basic needs in community with items such as food, fuel vouchers, white goods, and household goods. The NRCF volunteer group recommended this platform as the go-to resource for these basic needs. GIVIT was relatively responsive and often able to supply significant needs in flood devastated communities.

The platform was well supported and funded, though did have some limitations, most notably supply limits (GIVIT matches donated items with demand), and the requirement to register. Managing the flow of GIVIT donations quickly emerged as a challenge for disaster hubs.

The Flood Fund funded a number of donation coordination roles to ensure that the donation pipeline delivered goods to those in need. Supply in certain areas was exhausted as the scale of the disaster became evident, and the Flood Relief Fund did shift focus to fill the gap for vouchers through a small number of grants.

It is also worth noting that there was a significant sentiment of community mistrust associated with some funding sources, following criticisms levelled at some of these organisations for their strategies relating to earlier natural disasters.

Challenges

On-going Funding Need

The Flood Relief Fund Grant application asked applicants to gauge the need for longer term assistance:

65%

responded yes, probably, or maybe to long term assistance

17%

were still assessing or not sure of longer-term needs

18%

said no, or did not anticipate long term assistance



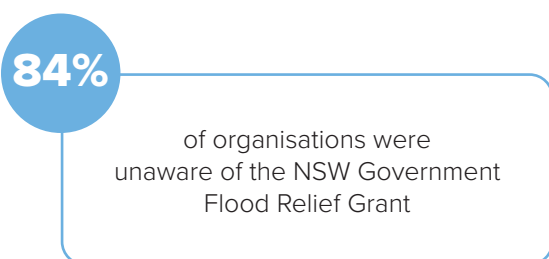
Photo by Mark Kriedermann

NSW GOVERNMENT FLOOD RELIEF FUNDING (GRANTS AND LOANS)

In the weeks following the flooding disaster a grant of up to \$50,000 and a disaster recovery interest free loan of up to \$25,000 was made available by the NSW Government, to help pay for the costs of clean-up and reinstatement of small businesses and not-for-profit organisations.³

Our research indicated that awareness of the NSW State Government relief program was not widespread, there was a lack of clear understanding of eligibility, confusion between the loan and grant program, and what available funding could cover.

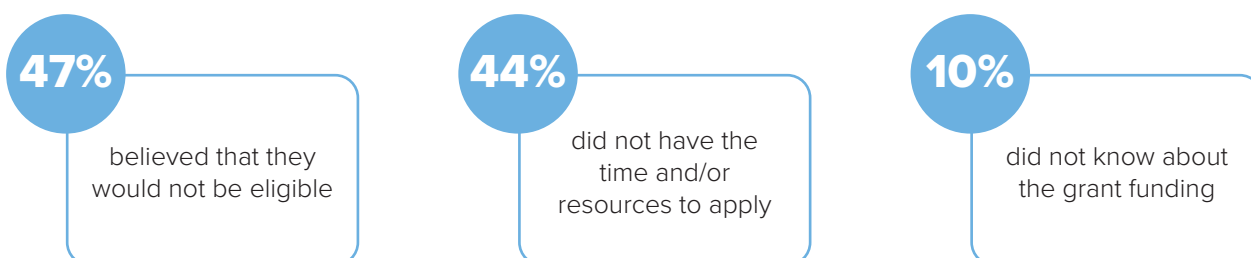
Awareness



Responses to our research team identified that many organisations were not aware of the NSW Government funding. These organisation's responses included:



Despite the identified need for longer term assistance (see p.14), **73%** of grant applicants to the Flood Relief Fund had not applied for the NSW State Government disaster recovery grant.



³ <https://www.service.nsw.gov.au/transaction/apply-february-and-march-2022-storm-and-flood-disaster-recovery-small-business-grant>

Barriers to Application

In the days following the flood, most organisations were in disaster recovery mode, and did not have the capacity to research, understand their eligibility or apply for funding. This was compounded by regional telecommunication failures and the fact that many organisations lost offices, servers and computers. In addition, many staff who were responding to community needs had themselves suffered loss or damage to their own homes or been impacted by accessibility issues.

Particular challenges identified included:

- » Loss/destruction of computers and equipment to apply for the grant
- » Lack of understanding of the application process (communications not clear)
- » Not sure if eligible to apply
- » Don't have time/resources to collate all the information and apply for the grant in one sitting
- » Unable to save application once started – need to collate all information required at the outset and complete the application at one time

Almost 1 in 5 organisations expressed a need for support in completing the disaster recovery grant application.

Feedback from Community Organisations

Community organisations provided a range of feedback to our research team regarding the NSW government assistance available:

- » Difficult to understand if you have to pay upfront first and then be reimbursed
- » Invoices are required and these have been lost [in the floods]
- » We tried to apply but were told we have too many staff
- » The application process is too difficult
- » Found it impossible to apply
- » Applications do not progress once we can't produce one of the many things they are asking for, such as receipts
- » We're overwhelmed
- » Not sure if we meet the criteria
- » We sent in an application two weeks ago and still haven't heard if it was received.

NSW State Government Funding – A Grant Applicant's Experience

NRCF received the following feedback from the CEO of a community organisation applying for a grant post flood:

“

Thank you for checking in. We have applied for the grant, the initial application was easy once we were sent the direct link however the following process to claim is taking a lot of time and frustrating.

I was informed on the phone you can apply for the \$50k, with \$15k easy to claim quickly, with the balance requiring more information and proof of payment.

The initial claim I sent in was for less than \$10k and submitted various invoices as proof of purchase. **I was then requested to submit a detailed reason for each invoice**, why the items we were purchasing was essential to recommence business and show proof of payment. I have completed it but it was frustrating in two ways - **initially I was told proof of payment wasn't required** for the first \$15k and the time taken to justify each item purchased. We purchased some basic items such as cups, cutlery, tea towels - nothing expensive as we got them from second hand shops and Kmart, extension leads, PPE, laptops, mobiles, basic tools such as a hammer etc. It maybe because we are in the thick of it, but explaining why we spent \$80 on cups, cutlery, tea towels so staff can eat and drink while at work seemed a little ridiculous.

We have another company we manage who mainly has property. I submitted the grant with only one quote to get the process started, then received an email that I had **28 days to send something more than a quote otherwise our application would be closed**. It's a bit difficult to get things done to any building at the moment with the lack of materials, electricity and builders. I submitted an invoice for electrical works to check on the electrical safety of the buildings after the flood and to restore power to one of the buildings which I described in the email. I get a response requesting "A description of how the items being claimed relate to your business and how they are essential to resume operation" I would have thought that it was pretty self explanatory, we need power checked for safety and power to resume business. I was then sent another email stating: "Alternately as you are in a severely impacted area, you can claim up to \$25000 with an itemised list only. If you would like to reduce the claim to \$25000 please provide an itemised list with estimate cost. "

Which to me it sounds like that if we make it really difficult, we will offer to make it easier and give you half as much.

Sorry for the rant. It is great that there is funding available, however it is **very difficult to get assistance when we need it**. We are going backwards and forwards for minor things, we are still trying to get our business up and running let alone trying to organise all the trades, furniture, etc. and we are having to justify why we buy glasses for staff to drink from. I understand the need for transparency and accountability when it comes to funding but a lot of time you think that it is all too hard and is it really worth it.

”

NSW State Government Grant – Key Stats

Flood recovery grant for small business (February 2022)⁴

Program status: Open | Started: 9 March 2022 | Last updated: 9.20am, 15 June 2022

Applications	18,810		Value \$299.4m
Undergoing assessment	3,707	20%	Value \$64.4m
Paid	4,992	27%	Value \$75m
Awaiting information from customer	2,714	14%	Value \$48.3
Ineligible applications	9,885	53%	Value \$156.4m

Note: includes all NSW, not just the Northern Rivers Region



Photo by Mark Kriedermann

⁴ <https://www.nsw.gov.au/floods/financial-support/grants-statistics>



MEDIUM-LONG TERM NEEDS

The aftermath of the flood disaster brought with it a range of health, social, economic and environmental impacts that the region will continue to face into the medium and longer term. To date we have identified the following medium term priority areas of concern and funding need:

- » **Disadvantage:** there is significant social, economic, cultural and/or educational disadvantage that needs to be addressed:
 - Domestic violence and suicide rates
 - Women's Refuge severely limited
 - Schools impacted by disaster and children and youth suffering from disengagement
 - People with disabilities need opportunities to re-engage: employment, cultural and social opportunities few and impacted by floods
- » **Health:** Mould and other environmental pollution, trauma and stress as a result of the significant weather event and disaster and the social impact of isolation are challenges that will be felt long term in our communities. The region is suffering from a significant shortfall in mental health (as well as other health) support workers. We understand that a national hiring initiative may be required to fulfill our short to medium term requirements.
- » **Housing:** The Northern Rivers region faced a housing crisis before the flood disaster and this has been exacerbated by the floods. Thousands of homes have been deemed uninhabitable, and the region is struggling to support and re-home displaced families.
- » **Conservation of our natural environment:** The floods have caused pollution of waterways adversely impacting on habitat. Many areas also experienced landslips/landslides, with ongoing impact.
- » **Infrastructure:** damage to roads, bridges and infrastructure has impeded resident's mobility and adversely impacted local businesses, with both social and economic impacts.
- » **Communications:** The floods resulted in a significant failure in communications and has had longer term detrimental impacts on infrastructure.
- » **Food security:** region wide coordination requires significant mapping work.
- » **Assistance with funding applications:** Many community organisations working on the ground do not have sufficient internal capacity or expertise to prepare grant applications. In response to early calls to our team, identifying the challenges in applying for the NSW Government funding assistance, NRCF scoped the possibility of developing a mechanism to provide direct support to organisations in applying for the funding. Given NRCF capacity constraints during the emergency this was not pursued but remains an area requiring further attention and funding.

- » Need for Northern Rivers-wide regional learnings, coordination and approach
- » Support required for long term capacity building within community organisations
- » Importance of investment in resilience building and business continuity planning
- » Need for emergency funding (untied) to support disaster response projects
- » Importance of networks, relationships and partnerships to underpin fast response, understanding impact and need, and establishing recovery response
- » Need for appropriate disaster communications and importance of grass-roots information feeding into official systems
- » Importance of volunteer response: learn from and implement best practice disaster response through key organisations (eg, Resilient Byron and Resilient Lismore)
- » Key insecurities in the region: communications, food security, road and infrastructure



Photo by Mark Kriedermann

NRCF's expertise is in research-based strategic response: our team was relatively inexperienced in disaster response. While we sought and received mentoring and support in our approach, buttressing our team as the scale of the disaster emerged, many of our learnings surfaced as the disaster and its aftermath unfolded.

NRCF is still working through the extensive learnings from the disaster research program. In addition, we are currently supporting 106 community organisations funded through the Flood Relief Fund. Impact reporting for this program (due in July 2022) will further inform our understanding of our region, the resilience of our communities, and the needs and capacity of community organisations requiring support.

Our initial research findings have clearly identified the need for additional funding to support the region's recovery. To this end, The Flood Relief Fund will launch a second flood relief grant round, opening 1 July 2022. This grant program will distribute \$250,000 to five key community organisations across the Northern Rivers, via an expression of interest application process.

The aim of this grant is to fund the ongoing need to respond to increased demand in the aftermath of the floods through urgent measures, including:



NRCF's annual community grants program, to be launched on 1 August 2022, will also include a substantial flood recovery component.

Longer term, NRCF's research will inform our Community Impact and Grants Committee to review and develop a grant strategy to ensure maximum impact for the region as we move into the next phase of this disaster.

The ongoing research and response to the Flood Relief Grant Program has outlined clear needs and we want to ensure that NRCF are best placed to support the continued recovery work across the Northern Rivers. To that end we're working with our partners and community organisations on the ground to ensure that we are leading a robust, research led, resilient and dynamic community-wide approach to a strong and positive future for the Northern Rivers.

NRCF are committed to leading change as we move forward, seeking to ensure more resilient communities that are better placed to respond to the further disasters that we know will be a part of our region's future.

All queries related to the content, or to any use of this report should be addressed to:

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