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1 April 2011

Commissioner Justice Holmes
Queensland Floods Commission of Inquiry
GPO Box 1738
BRISBANE QLD 4001

Dear Commissioner

Re: Flood Inquiry – Written Statement

As requested in your correspondence dated 25 March 2011, I provide the following written statement in regards to the issues raised:

1. Council staff have participated in a number of training programs prior to the 2010/2011 flood events (the events). Of significance, Council participated in Emergency Services Queensland's (EMQ's) Exercise 'Orko' (including an Exercise Planning Day in September 2010 and the Recovery Workshop following the Exercise) in November 2010. This involved a desk top training exercise as to how Council and the State Emergency Service (SES) would respond to an extensive rain/flood situation. The lessons learnt regarding gaps in our response to such an event were assessed and changes introduced to better prepare for such an event.

Other relevant external training prior to the events included: attendance at an EMQ Disaster Management Workshop (October 2010), participation in the Department of Communities Warwick Community Recovery Committee practical exercise (August 2010), attendance at an EMQ Information Session regarding Changes to Disaster Management Arrangements (August 2010), participation in an EMQ discussion exercise 'Hamish' (June 2010), attendance at the LGAQ Disaster Management Conference (June 2010).

Staff closely monitored BOM reports in the lead up to the Christmas closure on 24 December 2010 and a general invitation to staff was issued in regard to their availability in the event of a flood. Roughly 70 staff made themselves available if required. A contact list was subsequently prepared for approximately 70 staff who indicated their availability. In addition, the Local Disaster Coordination Centre in Warwick was preemptively resourced with information technology equipment prior to Council's annual office closure.

2. Both Warwick and Stanthorpe SES Groups made sandbags (approximately 7,000 in Warwick, Allora and Killarney and 3,500 in Stanthorpe) and sand available to the general public at various locations during both events. The use of sandbags as a flood mitigation measure was generally effective, particularly for smaller volumes of water.

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Council provided press releases prior to the December event advising people to be wary of the potential for a flood. This included a 100 year flood line map which was published in the local newspaper. I am not aware of any other flood mitigation measures being implemented prior to or during the events.

3. Council staff did not participate in EMQ's 2010 Pre-Season Flood and Cyclone Workshop as we were unaware of its existence.
4. Council staff did attend an EMQ Information Session regarding changes to the Disaster Management Arrangements in Toowoomba in August 2010. Staff found the session to be informative and timely.
5. Council provides minor capital and operational assistance to the local SES groups including general support, use of a Council building and maintenance of vehicles. Other training and equipment needs are the responsibility of EMQ and it is believed that an audit of the training and equipment needs of each local group is conducted annually. The SES groups organise and undertake their own regular training at various times throughout the year.
6. As mentioned at (1), staff and resources were placed on standby for a potential flood event in December 2010. In addition, Council plant was strategically positioned within the region to ensure availability in all areas in the event of limited access due to flooding.

A significant number of Council staff and resources were deployed during the events in various capacities including: disaster coordination and administration, call centre operations, assistance with traffic control and road closures, assistance at Evacuation Centres, assistance with recovery centres, assistance with debris removal, etc.

7. The Local Disaster Management Group (LDMG) was activated for both events, of which Council has various Councillor and staff representation. This group coordinated the overall response and recovery operations with the assistance of other agency representatives.

Evacuation Centres were opened in Warwick (x 2), Stanthorpe and Allora and were managed predominantly by Council and Red Cross staff.

8. Water – The Warwick supply was always available, however problems via inundation of the Stanthorpe Sewage Treatment Plant and isolation from the Killarney Water Treatment Plant were experienced. Warnings were issued to residents to boil water before drinking as a precautionary measure. The Killarney Treatment Plant broke down while cut off, prompting the boil water alert.

In addition, the small towns of Pratten and Wallangarra experienced break downs in the local Water Treatment Plants and again, similar warnings were issued until such time as testing proved the water was safe for consumption.

Food – Council staff gathered local information on food (and fuel) availability within the region and as a result the need for resupply of these items was not considered necessary.

Power and Communications – These services were generally operational throughout the region, although some flood affected buildings were disconnected by Ergon Energy (particularly in Warwick).

Transport – Many local and main roads and bridges were closed during the event. In addition, the National Highways within the region were closed for a period of time. Council maintained a list of road closures throughout the events which it communicated with the general public (main access routes only), the Department of Transport and Main Roads (DTMR) and members of the LDMG (for emergency access). Representatives from the DTMR were present at all meetings of the LDMG during the January event.

Upon flood waters receding, Council staff inspected the roads and bridges (under its control) and prioritised the opening of main access routes.

Sewerage – This service was generally operational throughout the region.

9. There is a long established Bureau of Meteorology (BOM) flood monitoring system in the Condamine Catchment and a recent installation in the Severn River/Quart Pot Creek in the Stanthorpe area.

A general warning of possible flooding was issued by Council to the community on 23 December 2010 (before the annual office closure), which was based on BOM forecasts and warnings. Council also issued regular media releases to the community during and immediately after the events which were also based on BOM information.

10. Although the Condamine system worked well in the December event, two monitors failed in the January event. It was obvious that in the January event BOM staff were very busy due to flooding in the major urban centres so Council was unable to seek ready advice from that agency. Due to the flood waters it would not have been possible to fix the installations while flooded. Manual readings were taken in Warwick after the gauge failed.

The system used in Stanthorpe operated but as it is relatively new there is no historical data available as yet which can be used to predict flood levels. Overall Council considers the systems are a vital tool in flood prediction and management.

11. As mentioned at (9), Council issued media releases to the community before, during and immediately after the events which outlined various information including: local BOM forecasts, evacuation centre arrangements, road/bridge closures, health and welfare arrangements ie waste, water supply alerts, mosquito control, emergency payments and funding programs.

The local SES groups proactively made individual contact with as many residences and businesses which may have been affected by floodwaters prior to the event.

12. The Warwick SES were required to evacuate two people from their homes in Warwick due to mobility and access issues. It is believed that these evacuations were adequate and timely, however should not have been required under the immediate threat of rising flood waters if the affected residents had made appropriate evacuation arrangements as previously advised.

Council is aware that two helicopter rescues took place, with one occurring near Pratten and one near Allora. Council and SES staff were not directly involved in these rescues so are not aware of the full circumstances of the situation and therefore cannot provide an informed assessment of the adequacy and timeliness thereof.

13. As mentioned at (7), Evacuation Centres were opened in Warwick (x 2), Stanthorpe and Allora due to the numbers of people requiring emergency accommodation (including local residents and travelers). The two Evacuation Centres in Warwick were the most utilised during the events and were strategically located on either side of the Condamine River to accommodate people who were isolated on both sides of the town.

Council staff and Red Cross were responsible for the coordination of the Evacuation Centres, with assistance being provided by other organisations with associated requirements such as catering, counseling, bedding, etc.

Apart from an initial lack of local Red Cross resources, there were no significant difficulties encountered at these Centres. I believe that the establishment, operation and performance of these Centres was effective and efficient.

14. I am not aware of any flood-related human fatality within the region during the events.

15. As mentioned at (7), the LDMG was activated for both events, of which various State Government agencies are represented, including the Queensland Police Service (QPS), Queensland Ambulance Service, Queensland Fire and Rescue Service (QFRS), EMQ and SES. Additionally, other State and Federal Government agencies provided response measures, personnel, equipment, services and/or logistical support during the event in various capacities including: DTMR, Queensland Health, Department of Communities, BOM and Sunwater.

Generally, coordination between Council and most State and Federal Government agencies worked well. Local QPS representatives were particularly skilled at providing assistance with logistical support during the event.

It is noted that the major water storage in this region is Leslie Dam (11kms west of Warwick) which is operated by Sunwater. Discharge from that storage resulted in flooding of the Cunningham Highway west of Warwick which has

occurred before on those rare occasions when a release must be made. Council has met with Sunwater since the events to improve communication channels. It is anticipated that this will improve the notice regarding potential highway closures and also to recognise that significant outflows from the dam may result in flood waters in Warwick not receding as quickly due to the water from the dam flowing into Sandy Creek which joins the Condamine River further west of Warwick.

Communication between government agencies in relation to road conditions/closures could be improved. During the first event in Warwick it is believed that a large number of people in the southern Evacuation Centre had travelled from New South Wales only to find the roads cut at Warwick. QPS, when made aware of the numbers arriving, put in place arrangements at Stanthorpe to warn people and deter them from travelling further and thereby make use of the accommodation in that town. Advice from DTMR representatives based in Warwick is that there is no coordination between the two states regarding road condition warnings.

16. Members of the LDMG, including Councillors and staff, were in regular contact with the Warwick District Disaster Coordinator (DDC) before, during and after the events. In addition, regular Situation Reports were submitted at intervals requested by the DDC. The nature of communications from the DDC were varied but included issues relating to resupply requirements, Evacuation Centre resource requirements, BOM predictions, Highway conditions/closures, event summary statistics, recovery status, etc. Council believes that some of information requests from the DDC were as a result of requests from the State Disaster Coordinator or the State Recovery Coordinator (due to the disaster management hierarchy).
17. Council's equipment and communications systems were adequate, however it is acknowledged that the associated staff resources required were stretched during the events. This can be attributed to the timing of the first event in Warwick which occurred during Council's annual office closure. Due to the widespread nature of the event, Council eventually ran short of adequate signage.

Council used a variety of communications systems to distribute and share information during the events including email, internet, telephone, fax, radio, tv, printed material/media, etc. An initial assessment of ways to improve the use of communications systems for future events has been undertaken and any changes will be incorporated into Council's documents and procedures.

Council utilised the QFRS (Rural Operations) extensive communication network in small rural communities within the region to share information and this proved to be a very effective means of communicating with residents in those areas. The SES also used this resource effectively.

18. Generally the community's response during the events was positive, with most people taking heed of warnings by being prepared and making their own evacuation arrangements where necessary. It is felt that despite every effort to warn some people, apathy continued to prevail in some situations.

19. Council is currently in the process of completing a Flood Study for the Condamine River and tributaries (covering the towns of Warwick, Killarney, Allora, Pratten and Tannymorel) which, among other benefits, will assist with the identification and assessment of appropriate flood mitigation measures. A similar study is proposed to be undertaken for the areas of Stanthorpe and Leyburn in the near future subject to Council funding. Once the flood study is complete, this will be incorporated into Council's Town Planning Scheme.

Council and the LDMG have conducted reviews regarding the coordination of and response to the events and continues to implement the changes into plans, policies, procedures, training, etc. Experience showed that learnings from the December event were acknowledged and changes were made for the January event, resulting in improvements. This will be an ongoing process following the last event in our region.

20. N/A

21. Amalgamation of local government areas created an initial problem when the Stanthorpe area flooded. The Coordination Centre at Warwick was already in operation and a second Centre had to be established at Stanthorpe. Fortunately experienced staff at Stanthorpe were available and the QPS took charge of the situation. Improved preparation for a dual event will be carried out in the near future.

During the events, there were concerns about the stability of some large horticultural dams in the Stanthorpe area. The Department of Environment and Resource Management advised that there is currently no requirement for the standard of construction and maintenance of these dams. It is believed that this resulted in an increased threat of instability during the events and the subsequent deployment of engineering resources (who were not specifically skilled in dam issues) to respond to concerns. These resources may have been utilised for other response activities. Improved regulation of these types of dams may prevent the deployment of Council resources to respond to these types of issues during future events.

Please contact me if clarification or further information is required in relation to this statement.

Regards



Rod Ferguson
Chief Executive Officer