

## Every little bit helps: assisting State and local government agencies to manage disaster recovery.

Phillip Clarke, Queensland Ombudsman, Australia

### Session G: Suddenly displaced communities – unique challenges requiring unique strategies for the Ombudsman

*If Queensland was a country, it would rank as the 25<sup>th</sup> largest in the world; in between Libya and Iran. With an area of 1.73 million square kilometres, Queensland is the second largest state in Australia. It is nearly 5 times the size of Japan, 7 times the size of Great Britain and 2.5 times the size of Texas. Prolonged and intensive rainfall over Queensland led to significant flooding in December 2010 and January 2011. 35 people died and three still remain missing. Three quarters of Queensland was declared a disaster zone with over 2.5 million people and 70 towns affected and around 29,000 homes and businesses suffering some form of inundation. When the Brisbane River peaked at 4.46 metres on January 13, 14,972 homes and businesses were completely submerged and 18,025 partially flooded. 67 suburbs in Brisbane alone were swallowed by floodwaters forcing residents to seek shelter elsewhere. More than 478,000 homes and businesses were without power. In early 2011 Cyclones Tasha, Anthony and Yasi swept across parts of northern Queensland and caused more substantial property damage to the region. Between November 2010 and February 2011 Commonwealth and State Natural Disaster Relief and Recovery Arrangements were activated in 72 of the 73 local government areas in Queensland. This paper considers the nature of the recovery response by State and local government agencies after these events and the role played by the Queensland Ombudsman in assisting agencies and the community to manage that recovery.*



Queensland Department of Premier and Cabinet

It's a pleasure to share the stage with fellow Ombudsmen and outline the unique challenges the Office of the Queensland Ombudsman was faced with when a number of significant flood and cyclone events hit the State of Queensland between November 2010 and February 2011. This paper necessarily takes a macro view of the government and community responses to these horrific events and discusses themes rather than particular case studies.

### What happened

Prolonged and intensive rainfall over Queensland led to significant flooding in December 2010 and January 2011. 35 people died and three still remain missing. Three quarters of Queensland was declared a disaster zone with over 2.5 million people and 70 towns affected and around 29,000 homes and businesses suffering some form of inundation. When the

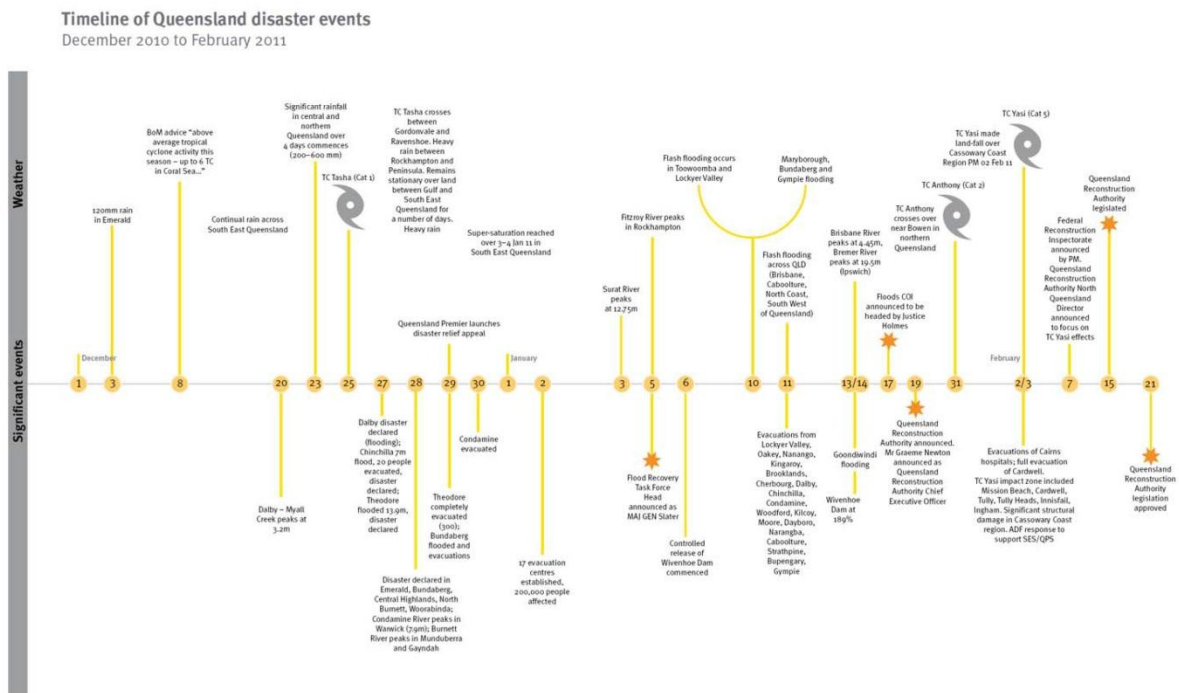
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The 360 residents of the Lockyer Valley town of Grantham were hardest hit with 'a wall of water' damaging over 130 homes and 12 lives lost in a catastrophic event on 10 January 2011.

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Timeline courtesy of Queensland Reconstruction Authority

The consequences of these natural disasters were shocking. With no warning whatsoever people in Grantham were swept by a torrent of water from their homes and killed. Nine motorists drowned while they attempted to negotiate flood waters. Some towns were completely isolated for weeks, with other towns requiring a total evacuation. Residents of cities like Ipswich and Brisbane lost everything they owned in waters which wrecked thousands of homes – displacing thousands of people. Some towns were flooded more than once with hundreds of families forced to evacuate. Many of these events created displacement of entire communities.

On a more personal level, the Office of the Queensland Ombudsman was flooded and inaccessible from 11 to 25 January. During this period, the Office did manage some small return to normal services by relocating to the nearby Parliamentary annex to set up a small call centre, internet and mail handling facility. This allowed us to continue to receive complaints and queries even while the floods were receding.

### **Government response**

On 17 January 2011 the *Queensland Floods Commission of Enquiry* was established by the State Government. The terms of reference was to make recommendations for the improvement of preparation and planning for future floods, associated emergency response and legislative change requirements. The commission handed down an interim report in August 2011 and final report in March 2012 ([http://www.floodcommission.qld.gov.au/\\_\\_\\_data/assets/pdf\\_file/0007/11698/QFCI-Final-Report-March-2012.pdf](http://www.floodcommission.qld.gov.au/___data/assets/pdf_file/0007/11698/QFCI-Final-Report-March-2012.pdf)).

The Queensland Reconstruction Authority was also established by the end of January 2011 to “reconnect, rebuild and improve Queensland communities” and its economy. A comprehensive integrated reconstruction plan for the State – Operation Queenslander: The State Community, Economic and Environmental Recovery and Reconstruction Plan 2011-2013 was thereby formed. This included recovery efforts across flood and cyclone areas of the State.

As part of the plan six lines of construction were established to co-ordinate key aspects of the reconstruction and recovery effort:

1. Human and social
2. Economic
3. Environment
4. Building Recovery
5. Roads and Transport
6. Community Liaison and Communication.

These six lines of construction provided guidance to reinforce the recovery work that had already begun through local disaster recover arrangements and set the framework for rebuilding Queensland. The responsibility for delivery was decentralised across responsible agencies that were aligned with the six lines of reconstruction.

For example, at the peak of the floods and cyclones 48 water treatment plants and 76 sewage treatment plants across Queensland were affected with nearly all back in operation by March 2011. Building recovery was aimed at coordinating the planning and implementation of the state-wide rebuilding program with a focus on housing, in particular the 478,000 homes and businesses without power.

Between November 2010 and March 2011 the scale of the damage to infrastructure was considerable with 9,170 kilometres of Queensland state-owned roads and 4,748 kilometres

of the rail network damaged. 377 Queensland schools were impacted and 89 state-owned bridges and culverts suffered major damage.

By September 2011, 8,482 kilometres of state-owned roads and 4,596 kilometres of rail network had been repaired and reconstructed, 377 schools were operating from the original location and all 89 bridges and culverts had been repaired.

The reconstruction cost was estimated to be \$5.8 billion with 86% of the reconstruction costs flood related damage.

The government also made a number of financial assistance grants available to those affected by the natural disasters with more than 630,000 Australian Government Disaster Recovery Payments made totalling \$725 million. 61% of those claims were flood related. The very significant speed of response was assisted by “up-front” payments to local councils to expedite urgent works and to ensure that workers displaced from private sector employment could be gainfully employed. Processes for subsequent reconciliation of funds were determined between governments and oversighted by appointed probity officers in collaboration with auditors.

The Australian and Queensland Governments together committed approximately \$6.8 billion to rebuild the State with an additional \$276 million donated to the Premier’s Disaster Relief Appeal and more than \$251 million distributed to individuals.

### **The community response**

As well as committing \$276 million to the Premier’s Disaster relief Appeal, Queenslanders made a major contribution towards the cleaning up and recovery efforts. Volunteering Queensland reported 80,000 expressions of interest registered in the days following the Brisbane floods and with government support, a ‘mud army’ of thousands of ordinary Queenslanders descended on flood-ravaged streets and suburbs to help clean up flood affected communities and donate food, goods, bedding and clothing. Images of thousands of volunteers on the evening television programs made a major impact on the spirit of the community and contributed greatly to the social and psychological health of disaster victims and their families. A number of my staff were involved in these volunteering efforts.

With the State thrust into flooding, the media and emergency services needed to find a way to get life-saving information out to the community quickly.

Generally people tend to think of social media platforms like Facebook and Twitter as someone talking about what they had for breakfast, which isn’t very interesting. However it was those same platforms that delivered a fast and extremely effective way of broadcasting information that possibly saved lives during the natural disaster events of that summer. Social media also contributed greatly to the coordination of recovery efforts.

The “Twitter community” became very active during the disaster with between 14 and 16 thousand tweets per hour during the event using the hashtag #qldfloods. Many agencies and organisations began using Twitter to upload information and began to trust and ‘follow’ other agency or organisation accounts. This meant that information was freely available to both the community but also all the relevant agencies and organisations during ‘real time’ and ‘as it happened’.

The Queensland Police Service (QPS) had the most active and visible twitter accounts through the disaster, and many other agencies took their lead from the @QPSMedia account.

Facebook groups also garnered a large audience. Queensland Floods applications had over 86,000 fans, linking to other sites such as volunteer organisations, fundraisers, the Qld Flood Relief Appeal and Qld Flood Open Beds.

### **What went wrong**

In handing down the final report, the Queensland Floods Commission of Enquiry said the floods were unprecedented, in many places completely unexpected and struck at so many places at once that no government could have been expected to have the capacity to respond seamlessly and immediately everywhere, and in all the ways needed.

Its report contained 177 recommendations covering a range of matters including:

- Floodplain management
- State planning instruments
- Local planning instruments
- Satellite planning instruments
- Development and flood considerations
- Development assessment in practice
- Building controls
- Essential services
- Buy-back and land swaps
- Performance of private insurers
- Mining
- Emergency response
- Operation of Wivenhoe and Somerset dams
- Other dam issues.

The Queensland Government has committed to the implementation of all the recommendations.

In response to the significant loss of life and property in the Grantham area the Lockyer Valley Regional Council and Queensland Government committed to a new Grantham Master Plan and Land Offer Program. They established a new residential subdivision offering all land-owning residents a voluntary swap of equivalent-sized blocks with the first residents moving in December 2011.

By 24 February 2011 there were 97,000 insurance claims reported with an estimated reserved value of \$2,770 million.

As a result of the Commission's work and the sheer volume of claims and disputes over flood insurance, in particular the correct definition of 'flood', the Federal Government introduced a standard definition of flood with the Insurance Contracts Amendment Bill 2011 in Parliament. This legislation is an attempt to address the problem faced by many of the flood victims who thought they were covered by insurance but were faced with the devastating discovery that they were not.

The Commission also referred three dam engineers to the Queensland Crime and Misconduct Commission (CMC) to determine if they were guilty of official misconduct related to evidence they provided to the Commission. The CMC has recently determined that they have no case to answer. These are the only charges currently being considered against any public official in relation to the flooding and cyclone events. Civil actions against the State government and related parties are currently being considered by a number of groups.

Recovery from the floods took the state by surprise, having been much more accustomed to a state ravaged with drought. In the final report from the Commission, Queenslanders believed that the government had provided a prompt, although not perfect, response. Queensland already had an existing, coherent emergency management structure that had not yet been tested against a natural disaster of these proportions and although some local councils struggled people came to the assistance of others.

### **The Queensland Ombudsman's role**

With the government determining to establish a judicial enquiry into the floods and creating the Queensland Reconstruction Authority, the Ombudsman role became one largely of receiving and managing complaints and providing input to the processes and systems established by the Authority in its own complaints management. At this time, it has not been necessary to investigate the policy framework established by the Authority. However, a review of the handing of the small number of complaints received by the Authority has been commenced with a view to ensuring appropriate treatment and outcomes of those complaints.

My office has also been receiving regular reports and briefings from the Authority, as have other oversight agencies, containing progress on applications, claims and payments to State agencies, local governments and individuals. I have had no instances where access has been denied, or attempted to be denied, to records or information when requested.

There have also been relatively few complaints received by my office about matters concerning these major disasters. Analysing the complaints data to the end of July 2012, there have been only 224 complaints across all events. These were largely related to: concerns about the quality of existing and future infrastructure; delays in processing grants payments; ineligibility for grants; safety issues about response management; delays in damage clean-up by local authorities, adequacy of building/development policies and processes; insurance; and availability of information. All of these complaints were managed informally with the agency responsible and without requiring formal investigation.

The State Government's decision to establish both the Floods Enquiry and the Queensland Reconstruction Authority gave both a focus to managing the recovery and community confidence that any failings would be investigated and remedied. Whether or not this is achieved will only be fully tested when the next major disaster event is visited upon a community somewhere in the State. The scale and impact of the series of natural disasters which impacted Queensland in the eight weeks between December 2010 and January 2011 will hopefully not be repeated in the near future. The science about weather and the impact on communities, particularly coastal communities, will remain an area of major public concern and a challenge to governments everywhere.

## **Every little bit helps: assisting state and local government agencies to manage disaster recovery**

**Phil Clarke, Ombudsman  
Office of the Queensland Ombudsman  
November 2012**

# Queensland

Figure 1: NDRRA Activation Measures

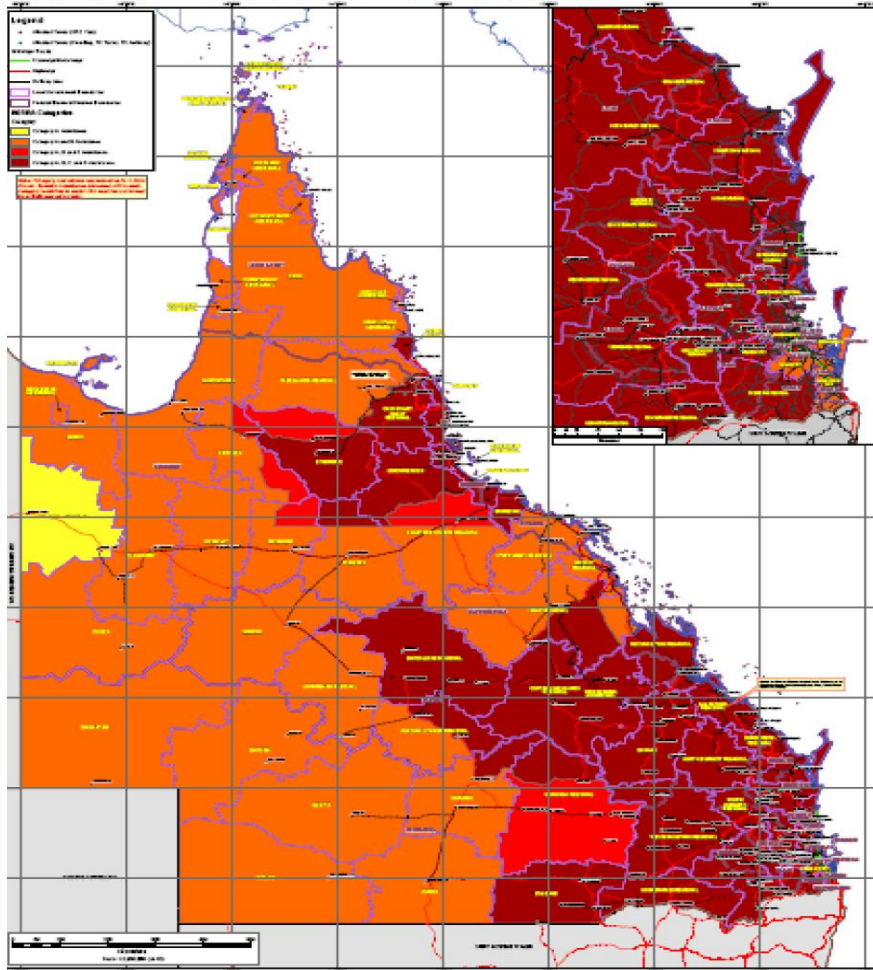
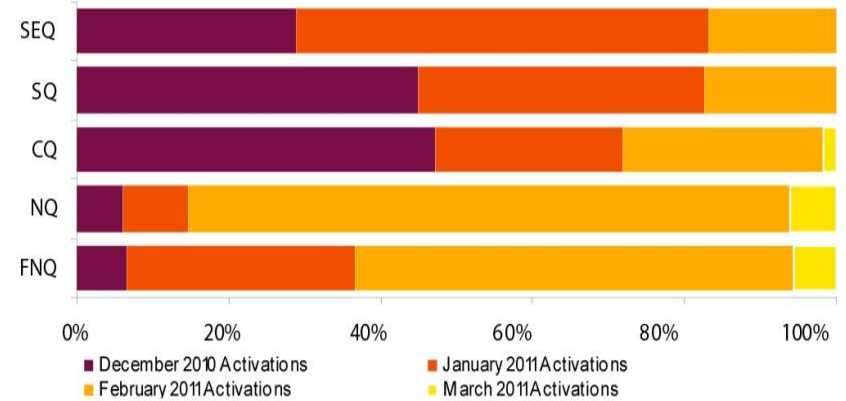


Figure 3: NDRRA Activation Measures



Source: Disaster Management Queensland as at 11 March 2011

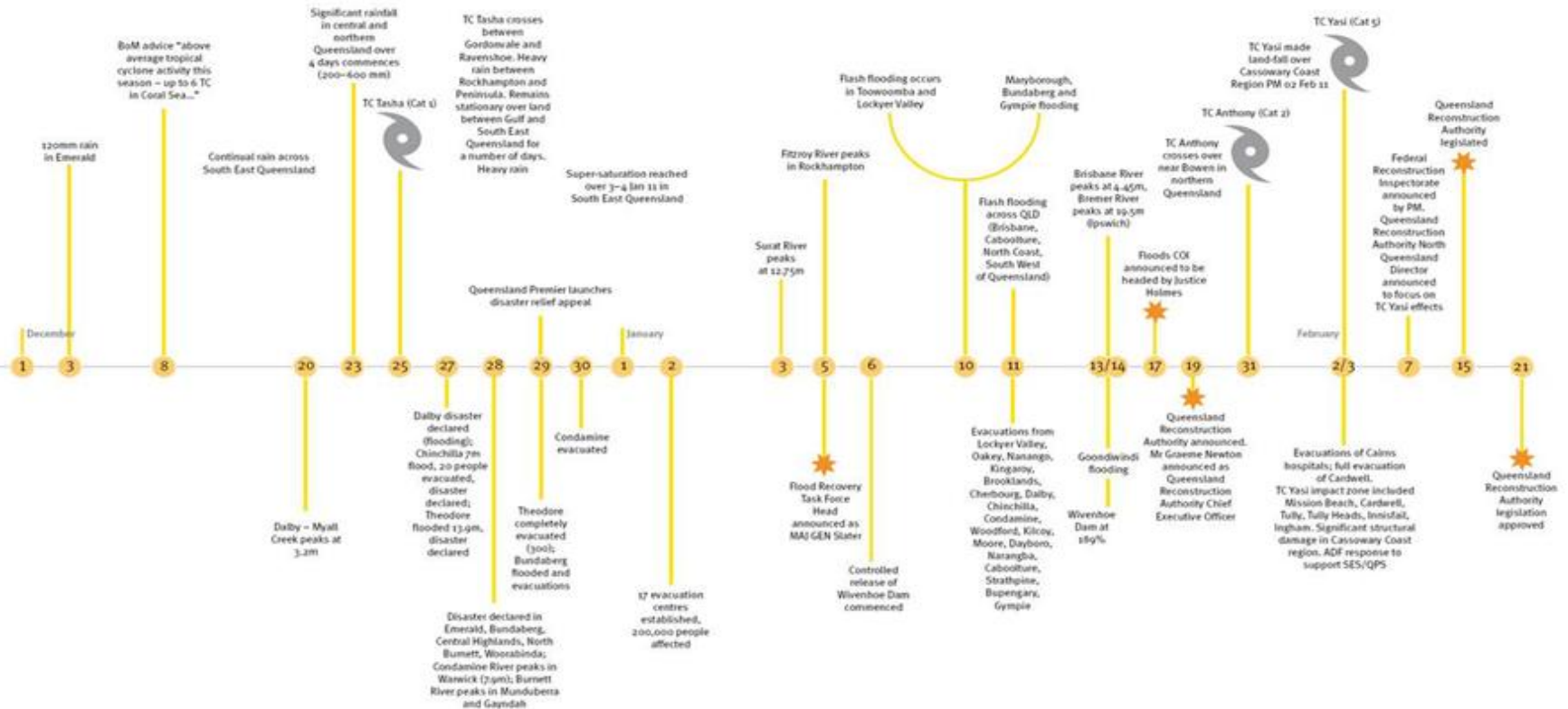


# Disaster timeline

Timeline of Queensland disaster events  
December 2010 to February 2011

Weather

Significant events



# Brisbane River rising



# Floods and cyclones



Flood damage in Grantham



Damage from Cyclone Yasi



Damage from Cyclone Anthony



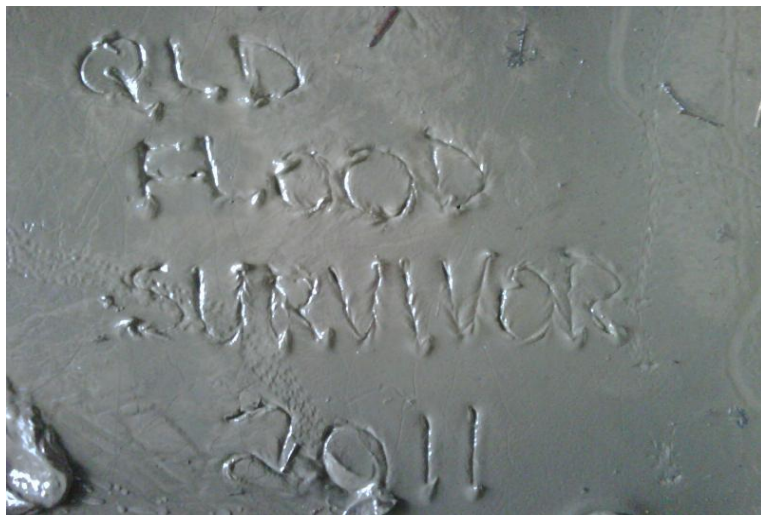
Cyclone Tasha

# Flooding at Queensland Ombudsman Building

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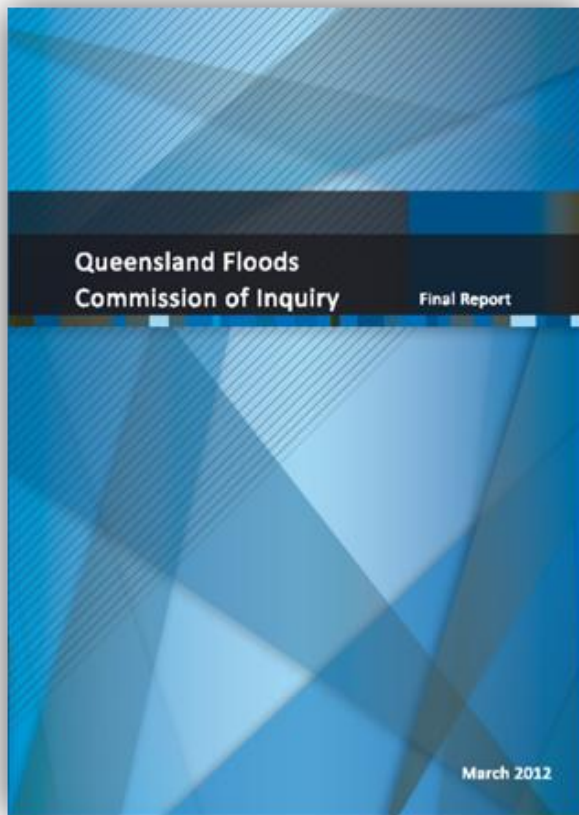


# Community response

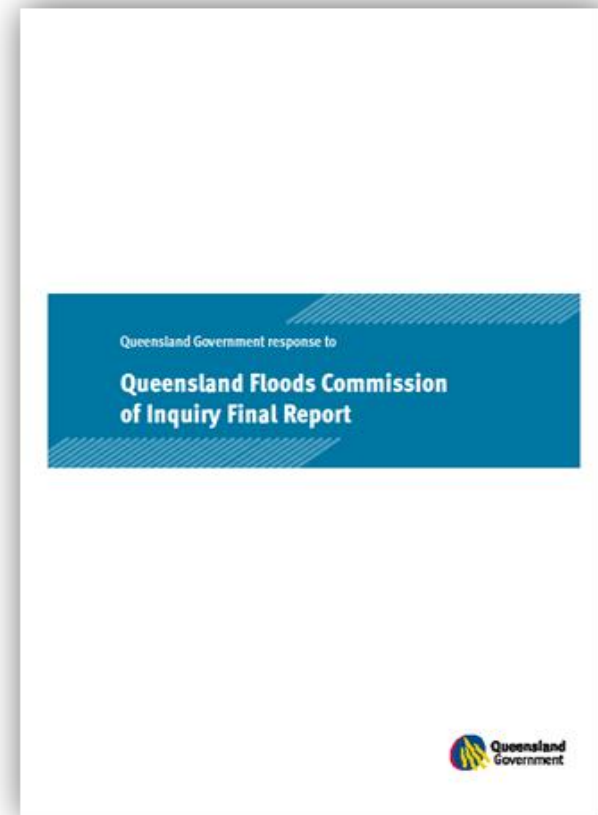


# What went wrong: the Final Report

Final report



Government response to Final report



# Queensland Ombudsman's role



# ombudsman

www.ombudsman.qld.gov.au

The screenshot shows the homepage of the Queensland Ombudsman website. At the top right, there are navigation links: Home, Media, Info Pathways, Links, and Contact Us. Below these, there are links for Login and the date June 10, 2008. The main navigation bar includes Home, About Us, Make a Complaint, Public Agencies (which is highlighted), Training, and Publications and Reports. A search bar is located below the navigation bar. The main content area features a large banner with the text "Excellence in public sector decision-making and administrative practice." Below the banner, there is a "Welcome to the Queensland Ombudsman" section. This section includes a paragraph about the office's role and a list of services: "What we do", "Public agencies", "Make a complaint", and "Training". On the left side, there are two sections: "Latest News" and "Quick Links".

QUEENSLAND ombudsman

Home | Media | Info Pathways | Links | Contact Us

Login | June 10, 2008

Home | About Us | Make a Complaint | **Public Agencies** | Training | Publications and Reports

Back to: Home

search

**Excellence** in public sector decision-making and administrative practice.

**Welcome to the Queensland Ombudsman**

The Queensland Ombudsman's Office is an independent complaints investigation agency. Our role is to make sure that our public agencies (State government departments and bodies, and local councils) act fairly and make the right decisions for Queenslanders.

We also help public agencies improve their decision-making and administrative practice for the benefit of the community. If you believe that a public agency has made an unfair or incorrect decision about an issue that affects you, then we may be able to help.

**What we do**  
Find out more about our role and what we investigate

**Public agencies**  
Information and resources to help agencies improve public administration

**Make a complaint**  
Find out how to make a complaint or complain online

**Training**  
Book a Good Decisions Training or Complaints Management Training session

**Latest News**

- New website launched
- Frontline Perspective now available
- CMP Self-Audit Tool available now for agencies
- Open training session available for agencies in Brisbane
- Checklist for managing internal witnesses now available

**Quick Links**

- Online Complaint Form
- Multicultural Brochures
- Complaints Management





What is clear from these disasters is that communities expect their governments to learn from diversity. Human memory is long, but political cycles are short.

The unending social and economic pressures, particularly related to land availability and use, where flooding is concerned, and building standards, when considering cyclones, will present challenges to governments and communities when considering how to balance development against the potential impacts of, and preparedness for, future disaster events.