

14 July 2023

The Chief Executive
Mr David Witherdin
Northern Rivers Reconstruction Corporation
Submitted online

Dear Mr Witherdin,

The St Vincent de Paul Society NSW appreciates the opportunity to provide comments about the draft *Northern Rivers Resilient Lands Strategy – Summary Report*. The Strategy is an important opportunity to respond to the needs of people most impacted by the recent catastrophic events in the Northern Rivers and to build more resilient communities.

The Society is a lay Catholic charitable organisation in NSW that comprises over 3,500 members who provide on the ground financial and material assistance to people in their communities as well as connection to community. We are also a significant provider of services to people experiencing poverty, homelessness and other forms of disadvantage. We provide supported accommodation and case management services to people experiencing domestic or family violence, homelessness, or the risk of homelessness; food supply services; services to people with complex mental health diagnoses and/or behavioural support needs, people experiencing problematic alcohol or other drug use, people with disability, and young people at risk of exclusion. In 2022-23, our specialist homelessness and housing services supported 9,026 people. We provided significant support to the people of the North Rivers during the 2022 flood disasters including \$3.28m in immediate financial relief to 2,180 applicants. Of these, 1 in 5 reported their homes had been destroyed, and 60% said their homes had been damaged.

Late last year the Society, with Mission Australia and other organisations¹ arranged for a research report into the impact of housing vulnerability on climate disaster recovery. With more frequent climate disasters expected in the future, this collaborative research project sought to better understand the impact of the floods on people already experiencing housing vulnerability, identify additional support needed in the medium-term recovery period, and draw out lessons that can be applied to efforts towards building communities that are more resilient in the face of future natural disasters. The [Report](#) focuses on the 2022 flooding events in the Northern Rivers, but its findings are applicable to other flooding events and climate disasters.

Key findings

Key findings of the Report (pp.1-2) were that housing support services (for people who are homeless or at risk of homelessness) were subsumed into the flood-response evacuation and emergency housing systems put in place.



This included human resourcing and housing stock. The effect of this was to worsen the situation for people already experiencing homelessness before the floods. Further, the shock to housing supply caused by the recent floods, already in crisis due to price rises in the Northern Rivers private rental market, has accelerated the need for subsidised housing options that are suitable for those on low incomes (p.2). This has left more renters and owners with no choice but to opt for inappropriate housing alternatives like informal tenures, sub-standard dwellings and locations removed from support networks, community or employment opportunities. The result is that there have been exacerbated disruptions to health, income, social connection and wellbeing.

The draft Strategy is welcomed in terms of the proposal to “identify and accelerate the delivery of land suitable for residential development” across the LGAs of Ballina, Byron, Clarence Valley, Kyogle, Lismore, Richmond Valley and Tweed (up to 10,300 dwellings). It notes that the Northern Rivers Resilience Corporation will now commence detailed investigations and feasibility studies for 15 sites which will include “consideration of the dwelling types required to provide housing diversity including affordable rental, key worker and social housing.” (*Strategy*, p.8).

Whilst the Strategy acknowledges that it doesn’t establish a response to address all pre-flood housing constraints across the Northern Rivers, of concern is that the Strategy only generally mentions the need for social and affordable housing and only once. While there are many impacted residents, prioritising those on low incomes and people with vulnerabilities is critical as they are least able to respond to a climate disaster and this should be identified in the Strategy. Further, the Society recommends mandating affordable housing targets for all new residential developments identified in the Strategy: 15% on private land and 30% on government land with dwellings to be affordable in perpetuity and managed by a community housing provider. This would be in line with the government’s pre-election commitment and its recent media [announcement](#) on 15 June 2023. Further, improving private rental affordability for those on low incomes by implementing laws that set fair limits on rent increases and no-fault evictions would assist to ensure secure and affordable rental housing not only in the Northern Rivers but State-wide.

Recommendations

Our Report’s Recommendations are relevant to the Strategy and we re-commend them to you. In particular, we draw your attention to these recommendations:

1. Identify clear pathways for people to move out of emergency accommodation and into semi-permanent medium-term housing (p.35)
2. Develop more detailed planning around any proposed ‘pod home’ villages (p.36)
3. Support tenants from the medium-term failings of the private rental market (p.36)
4. Mitigate the impacts of displacement and dislocation from existing community connections (p.37)
- ...
8. Develop a more sustainable ongoing social housing sector (p.39/40)



People in the Northern Rivers, and in particular, those on low incomes or experiencing disadvantage (such as First Nations communities, those with disability, those from diverse backgrounds), have experienced unprecedented challenges caused by the pandemic and natural disasters. The government needs to canvass all available options to get people back into permanent homes, recognising the positive financial, health and wellbeing impact that this will have on shattered communities. Given this, it is unlikely that the Strategy should incorporate any 'business as usual' models (p.9).

The reconstruction and recovery of the Northern Rivers is a unique opportunity to fast-track the provision of affordable and social housing and immediately deal with the State's housing crisis. It's a chance to build back better, including shaping a housing system better able to respond to future housing shocks, including those caused by natural disasters.

We look forward to engaging with you on this important issue. Should you have any questions please contact Solange Frost, A/Manager Policy and Advocacy, at solange.frost@vinnies.org.au.

Yours sincerely,

Yolanda Saiz
Chief Executive Officer