



# Mid North Coast severe weather event

## Reflections report

May 2025

Healthy North Coast acknowledges the Traditional Custodians of the lands across our region, and pay our respect to Elders past, present and on their journey. We recognise these lands were never ceded and acknowledge the continuation of culture and connection to the land, sky and sea. We acknowledge Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples as the Land's First Peoples and honour the rich diversity of the oldest living cultures.

## Executive summary

As an organisation dedicated to continuous learning, Healthy North Coast (HNC) has reflected on our response to the recent severe weather events that unfolded in the Mid North Coast in May 2025.

Using the *Lessons Management Handbook 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. 2019* developed by the Australian Institute of Disaster Resilience to guide reflective analysis and identification of lessons and subsequent implementation plan.

The HNC response during this time was effective and provided surveillance of primary care access across the affected communities and responses where needed as well as working collaboratively with other organisations. This facilitated shared messaging and streamlining of joined up responses to assist communities to get the supports needed in both immediate response and recovery stages.

Preparedness is a key to continuous improvement in disaster management and the key insights from this severe weather event will be embedded into our planning for future events.

## Key insights

This was an intense and significant event that occurred over a short span of time whilst both the chief executive and Board chair were on leave. The acting Board chair and executive management team stepped up and were able to effectively manage the situation using agility, collaboration and embedding the lessons learned from previous environmental disaster events.

As new challenges emerged, new insights have been captured to for inclusion into future disaster and critical incident management processes.

## Operations

1. The ELT agreed that added value for situational awareness will be gained by standing up the Crisis Management Team at the same time as emergency services are deployed.
2. Consistent messaging from ELT to staff is essential to maintain staff confidence and safety.
3. Where feasible, communications for evacuation and recovery centres and broad community messages to be co-branded with NSW Health, LHDs and HNC. This will decrease duplication and be a trusted voice for communities.

## People

4. Consistent messaging from ELT to staff is essential to maintain staff confidence and safety.
5. Finalisation of the HNC Business Continuity Procedure is needed to support staff to identify, prioritise and pivot changes to business as usual where required.

## Communication

6. Where feasible, communications for evacuation and recovery centres and broad community messages to be co-branded with NSW Health, LHDs and HNC. This will decrease duplication and be a trusted voice for communities.

## Governance

7. Proactive engagement with local government is required to increase knowledge, effectiveness and coordination of disaster preparedness, management and recovery.
8. Assign required attendees for each meeting to avoid double up and coordinate progress reports via written updates from each meeting – to be published in Crisis Management Team project board for all members to keep up to date.

## Command, control and coordination

9. Compilation of a daily list of HNC responses that can be shared to staff and on all governance committees will ensure a comprehensive overview of activities.

*Recovery*

10. Ensure adequate close out of all activities or a continuity plan to ensure that focus is not lost when there are staff changes.

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## Severe weather event

The Mid North Coast severe weather event of May 2025 stands as one of the most significant environmental disasters in the region in recent history. The combination of high rainfall, unprecedented river levels, and widespread flooding created a disaster that exceeded previous benchmarks for the region and resulted in widespread damage.<sup>i</sup>

Starting around 18 May with a slow-moving low-pressure system and going through to the end of May, flooding impacted the Mid North Coast and parts of the Hunter Valley region.<sup>ii</sup> While the most severe impacts occurred in the Hunter New England Central Coast (HNECC) Primary Health Network region, several areas in the Healthy North Coast (HNC) Primary Health Network region were impacted significantly.

Within the HNC region, property damage and infrastructure disruption occurred in the local government areas of Bellingen, Clarence Valley, Coffs Harbour, Kempsey, Nambucca and Port Macquarie.<sup>iii</sup>

On May 21, residents in low-lying areas at Macksville, Wauchope and East Bellingen, were told to evacuate. Evacuation centres were established to provide shelter and support to affected residents. These centres were in Kempsey, Coffs Harbour, Urunga, Nambucca, Wauchope and Bellingen between 20 and 22 May.

During this time, just over 125 community members across the region attended an evaluation centre. The evacuation centres in the HNC region closed by 24 May as waters receded, evacuation orders lifted and the transition from emergency response to recovery operations began.<sup>iv</sup> Recovery centres were opened in Port Macquarie, Kempsey and Macksville from 27 May.<sup>v</sup>

A natural disaster was declared in the six North Coast Local Government Areas of Bellingen, Clarence Valley, Coffs Harbour, Kempsey, Nambucca and Port Macquarie.<sup>vi</sup>

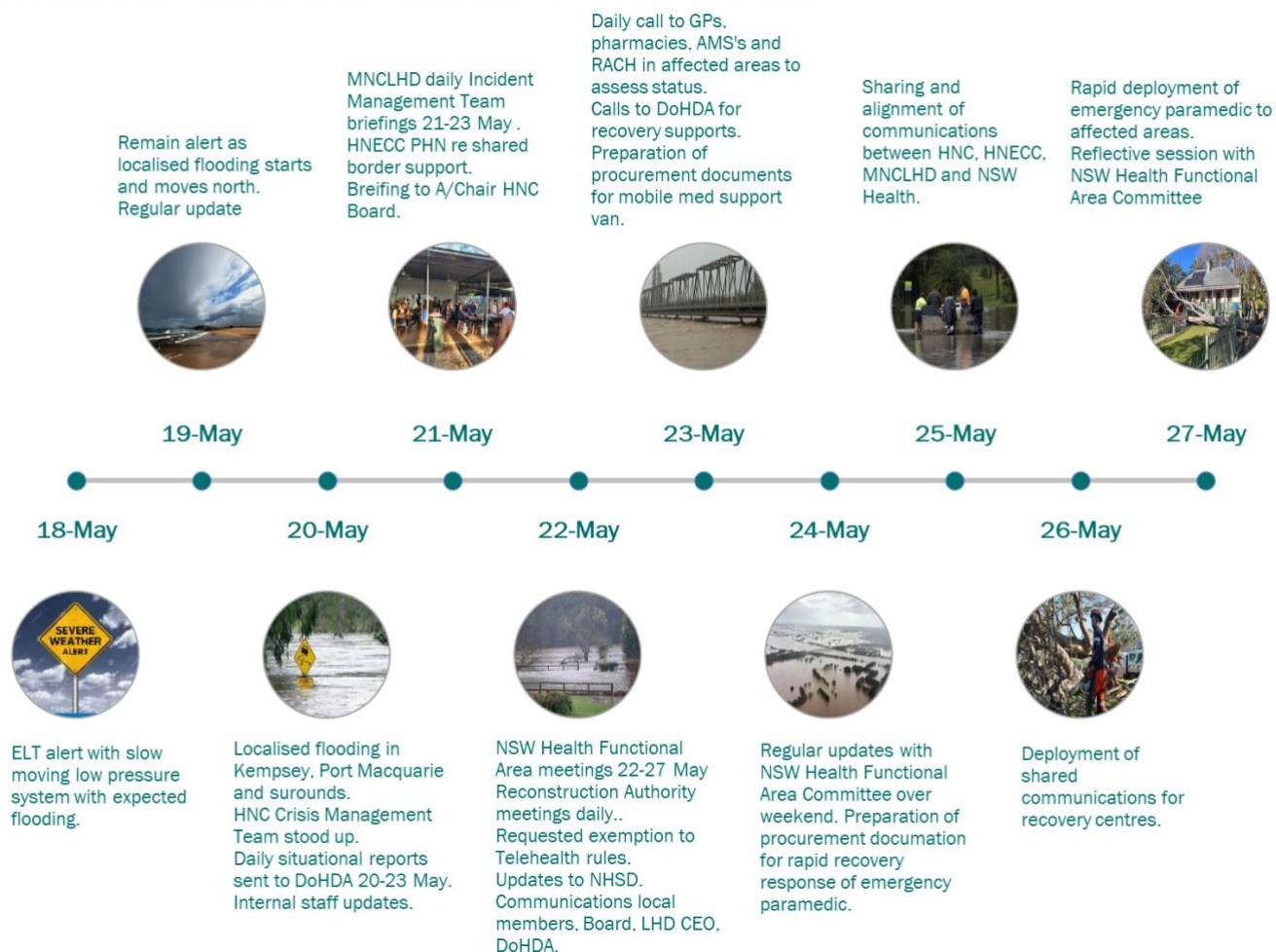
## Healthy North Coast response

This reflections report is informed by the *Lessons Management Handbook 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. 2019* developed by the Australian Institute of Disaster Resilience.<sup>vii</sup> This has guided observations and subsequent insights that have been incorporated into an implementation plan for lessons management. This will include a monitoring and evaluation approach to monitor progress.

During the severe weather event, the Mid North Coast region (includes HNC and HNECC PHN regions) had 5 deaths due to the flooding, 443 homes destroyed or severely damaged, 2311 landholders with flood inundation, 162 impacted businesses and almost \$124 million damage to public infrastructure.<sup>viii</sup>

The timeline below shows the Healthy North Coast responses as the disaster unfolded.

## Healthy North Coast responses to severe weather event May 2025.



### Operations

As the situation unfolded from the 18 May, the executive management team (ELT) were alerted to, and watched the situation. As flooding started and emergency services were deployed on 20 May, the ELT met and determined to stand up the Crisis Management Team and prepared the first of daily situational reports for the Department of Health, Disability and Ageing (DHDA). The acting chief executive contacted the CEO of HNECC PHN and established ongoing communication and shared support across the affected areas in both regions.

The first full meeting and establishment of the crisis management plan was 21 May. This comprised the ELT members and the Associate Director of Communications. The MNC LHD Incident Management Team was stood up on the same day with HNC staff attending the daily meetings. Both the HNC and MNC LHD meetings ceased on 23 May as evacuation centres began to close and the transition to recovery commenced.

*Lesson – the ELT agreed that added value for situational awareness will be gained by standing up the Crisis Management Team at the same time as emergency services are deployed.*

*Lesson – the Associate Director Community Impact is to play a central role in the Crisis Management Team along with ELT and Associate Director of Communications.*

*Lesson – finalisation and socialisation of the HNC Business Continuity Plan is required to underpin HNC responses to interruptions to business as usual.*

## People

Messaging to internal HNC staff commenced at the start of the event and continued throughout to 23 May. Building on previous lessons, the messaging went out via both the HNC staff Teams messaging platform and the Citation platform. Messaging was sent around the same time each day to support login by staff that may have limited access to know when to login.

Staff were informed not to travel between the predicted areas of impact (From Kempsey to Coffs Harbour) during the event. The People and Culture Team contact the direct line managers of staff members in the affected areas to ask that they remain in contact with their respective teams during the event.

Associate directors monitored any changes to business as usual for staff.

*Lesson – consistent messaging from ELT to staff is essential to maintain staff confidence and safety.*

*Lesson – finalisation of the HNC Business Continuity Procedure is needed to support staff to identify, prioritise and pivot changes to business as usual where required.*

## Communication

Communication was a strong focus of Healthy North Coast's response efforts. Help-seeking materials were published across multiple multi-media channels encouraging flood impacted community to seek help through telehealth mental health and other health support lines. The HNC Communications Team worked closely with MNCLHD and NSW Ministry of Health Communication Teams to ensure same messaging was distributed to communities, within evacuation and recovery centres.

## Board

There was a constant stream of communication throughout the event. The acting chief executive and acting Board chair kept in contact and updates were provided to Board members.

## Funded providers

The affected Aboriginal Medical Services (Durri and Werrin) were contacted regularly throughout the event and Durri used HNC created social media tiles to promote access to alternative services. An email was sent to all funded providers to assess business continuity across affected areas. This was monitored with limited continuity issues to providers.

## Local members and local government

Emails were sent to all parliamentary members in affected areas providing HNC contact details and update on HNC responses. A similar email was sent to the Kempsey Shire Mayor and offering support as required.

## Department of Health, Disability and Ageing

The acting chief executive maintained proactive and regular engagement with HNECC PHN and senior officials at DHDA regarding coordinated response and recovery efforts across both regions.

Situational reports were sent to DHDA each day during the event combined with HNECC PHN reports. Several meetings were held with DHDA, HNECC PHN and Healthdirect to identify issues as they arose and commence discussions on potential supports needed once the situation transitioned to recovery. These discussions centred on additional mental health supports and potential to expedite the establishment of the Kempsey Medicare Mental Health hub.

*Lesson – where feasible, communications for evacuation and recovery centres and broad community messages to be co-branded with NSW Health, LHDs and HNC. This will decrease duplication and be a trusted voice for communities.*

*Lesson – proactive engagement with local government is required to increase knowledge, effectiveness and coordination of disaster preparedness, management and recovery.*

## Governance

The acting Board chair liaised closely with the acting chief executive and provided ongoing support for the ELT. As the overarching governance structure for HNC, this support was appreciated and provided confidence to the ELT that responses were appropriate.

HNC played an ongoing monitoring role of primary health care capacity for the LHD and other combat agencies – assessing the need for urgent response such as extension of after-hours care and support in evacuation centres as required. Attendance at relevant meetings facilitated this monitoring allowing HNC to identify areas where efforts would provide value in the response and recovery stages.

Two ELT members participated in the MNCLHD Incident Management Team meetings that occurred each day from 21 to 23 May. Additional discussion with the LHD occurred outside of the formal meetings to update on the support requirements of the LHD and provide updates on practice and pharmacy closures and availability across affected areas. The meetings provided real time updates and allowed collaboration across LHD and HNC to find solutions for the affected communities. These meetings were attended by the acting chief executive and Director Integrated Community Wellbeing,

The NSW Ministry of Health invited HNC to participate in the Functional Area Severe Weather Event meetings that occurred daily. These meetings included members from emergency and response services, NSW Health, LHDs and DHDA Ageing unit. The meetings were extremely useful in keeping up to date with all progress updates and responses across the different sectors to enable coordination. HNC's participation in these meetings facilitated shared communications messaging for recovery centres and affected communities. These meetings were attended by the acting chief executive.

Reconciliation Australia meetings were held regularly throughout to coordinate and provide localised responses as the disaster unfolded. The meetings provided a good overview of services involved and provided to affected communities. The meetings were attended by the acting Director People Planning and Performance, Director Integrated Wellbeing and Associate Director Community Impact.

*Lesson – assign required attendees for each meeting to avoid double up and coordinate progress reports via written updates from each meeting – to be published in Crisis Management Team project board for all members to keep up to date,*

## Command control and coordination

### *Telehealth and Healthdirect*

HNC requested from DHDA and was approved an exemption for MBS Telehealth Services. This exemption was in place from 22 May and allowed patients in the affected areas (officially declared natural disaster local government areas) to access telehealth services from any medical practitioner in any general practice.<sup>ix</sup>

Working directly with Healthdirect, HNC and HNECC PHNs arranged for a banner on the Healthdirect website noting updates to impacted areas and implemented a new process for the National Health Service Directory (NHSD). This process allowed practitioners to directly update closures and opening hours in the NHSD finder. This provided almost real-time updates and was a vast improvement from the procedures used in cyclone Alfred. A total of 13 service updates were made to the Service Finder. Healthdirect provided daily updates of service use through the response and recovery periods.

The following table shows the Healthdirect usage by those in impacted areas in the HNC footprint. As shown, 13 practitioners made changes to the National Health Services Directory to indicate a change in hours or closure on May 23. This date was when the main street of Kempsey lost power. The Helpline usage data will be compared with trended usage to indicate any spikes during the floods and recovery stages.

Date	Healthdirect Helpline (nurse triage)	Healthline callers connected to virtualKIDS	Helpline callers connected to virtualADULTS	GP consultation sessions	Services requesting alternate hours or closure in NHSD
21/05/2025	99	3	4	12	0
22/05/2025	84	4	3	20	0
23/05/2025	66	1	6	5	13
24/05/2025	95	8	4	11	0
25/05/2025	103	3	5	9	0
26/05/2025	72	3	2	10	0
27/05/2025	70	2	2	6	0
28/05/2025	74	1	3	8	0
29/05/2025	57	1	3	7	0
30/05/2025	59	2	2	7	0
31/05/2025	99	0	5	14	0
1/06/2026	91	3	7	10	0
2/06/2025	100	2	3	10	0
3/06/2025	86	1	3	10	0
4/056/2025	81	3	9	10	0
<b>Total</b>	<b>1,236</b>	<b>37</b>	<b>61</b>	<b>149</b>	<b>13</b>

*Primary and aged care*

During the response stage Healthy North Coast contacted practices, pharmacies and residential aged care homes daily to assess support requirements and address where feasible. General practices and pharmacies in Kempsey and Port Macquarie, Hat Head and Crescent Head were the focus.

One death occurred in the Care Finders program where an elderly man was caught in floodwaters. Formal correspondence was provided to the Aged Care Unit in DHDA about this event.

*Procurement and commissioning*

The HNC Procurement and Commissioning Team worked to quickly stand up the required paperwork for the rapid deployment of the emergency paramedic mobile health service (RESQ-MED) to commence service provision in recovery stage from 27 May for 5 days.

*Mental health*

HNC mental health commissioned service providers were put on standby to respond effectively to increases in referrals. Minimal increases in demand have been seen to date with a 5% increase to

Medicare Mental Health Phone Service. This is consistent with previous disasters responses where increases in mental health referrals increase in the periods beyond the immediate response and recovery periods.

*Lesson – the HNC responses and activities were timely and effective. Ensuring that all staff and governance meeting attendees have visibility of all activities, compilation of a daily list of HNC responses that can be shared to staff and on all governance committees will ensure a comprehensive overview of activities.*

## Recovery

The engagement of the RESQ-MED concentrated on Kempsey and surrounding areas including mobile outreach visits to Kempsey Neighbourhood Centre and isolated residents in Smithtown. Most of the support provided was clinical assessment, wound care and minor injury management.

More than 600 people who attended the Kempsey recovery centre and the Kempsey Neighbourhood Centre had direct access to the RESQ-MED service. Approximately 70 occasions of service were provided through the mobile health response including 4 home visits, with the service operating until 30 May 2025 before it was stood down.

## Community

Follow up discussions with DHDA occurred about the impending need for increased mental health supports in affected areas, particularly those with limited access such as Kempsey.

HNC will continue to work with stakeholders and communities to monitor and where feasible, address ongoing support needs.

*Lesson – ensure adequate close out of all activities or a continuity plan to ensure that focus is not lost when there are staff changes.*

## Capability development

As a continuous learning organisation, HNC will develop and implement a lessons management plan to be incorporated into future responses. It is envisioned that this knowledge management will be evolving and form a central part of HNC reflective learning, evaluation and implementation to environmental disasters and other significant and relevant interruptions to business as usual.

## Resources

Additional resources have been allocated to staffing to recruit a full-time Senior Manager – Disaster Management. This position will provide a valuable asset in disaster preparedness, response and recovery.

## Conclusion

HNC responded well to the severe weather event though there are always lessons to learn and embed into our structures, systems and knowledge to be better equipped for future events. We are taking a pro-active approach to this and are improving all the time and emerging as a credible and valued service and support in disaster preparedness, response and recovery. We will continue to grow and work as 1 with our stakeholders and communities to ensure ongoing effectiveness.

## Endnotes

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- <sup>i</sup> Bureau of Meteorology – Australia in May 2025 <http://www.bom.gov.au/climate/current/month/aus/summary.shtml>
- <sup>ii</sup> NSW Aboriginal Land Council – Major flooding continues across the Mid North Coast [UPDATE: Major Flooding Continues Across the Mid North Coast](#)
- <sup>iii</sup> NSW Government – Disaster support for sixteen Hunter and Mid North Coast LGAs following severe flooding [Disaster support for sixteen Hunter and Mid North Coast LGAs following severe flooding | NSW Government](#)
- <sup>iv</sup> Port Macquarie Hastings Council – May weather event update [pmhc-update-24-may-2025-4.00pm.pdf](#)
- <sup>v</sup> NSW Government – Recovery centres opening from tomorrow as flood response continues [Recovery Centres opening from tomorrow as flood response continues | NSW Government](#)
- <sup>vi</sup> [Disaster support for sixteen Hunter and Mid North Coast LGAs following severe flooding | NSW Government](#)
- <sup>vii</sup> Australian Disaster Resilience Handbook Collection, Lessons Management 2<sup>nd</sup> ed 2019 [Lessons Management Handbook, 2019](#)
- <sup>viii</sup> Sourced from NSW Government overview
- <sup>ix</sup> <https://www.mbsonline.gov.au/internet/mbsonline/publishing.nsf/Content/Factsheet-Telehealth-Updates-April%202023>