

Case Study

Disability Inclusive Disaster Risk Reduction (DIDRR) in action

Care Goondiwindi

Collaborating with local authorities to better inform Person-Centred Emergency Preparedness plans

The Queensland border town of Goondiwindi sits on the banks of the Macintyre River and in the floodplains at the headwaters of the Murray Darling Basin.

The tree-lined streets are home to approximately 6,300 people but the town provides services to a regional population of more than 15,000.

[Care Goondiwindi](#) is a good example of a collaborative style of service provision. It offers services designed to improve the quality of life of local people but also those in the broader Western Queensland region including people with disability, their families and carers.

An Approved Registered NDIS provider since 2016, Care Goondiwindi offers individualised NDIS packages, respite care, holiday programs plus social programs for young people with disability.

Goondiwindi experiences a flood event about every couple of years. The last occurred in April 2021, when Goondiwindi's levees, first built in 1956, were able to stop floodwaters inundating the town.

In the past, Care Goondiwindi created disaster response plans in isolation but now works in collaboration with local authorities, which has proved a win-win for all.

Understanding the complexity of emergency planning

Care Goondiwindi CEO Tracy Macdonald says a number of events helped bring the complexity of emergency planning as a disability provider into sharp focus.

Reflecting on the lessons of the lethal floods that swept through Toowoomba and Ipswich in 2011 was one of these. That event knocked out mobile phone towers and left many service providers short handed as staff had to leave work to protect their own homes and families. There were also tragic cases of vulnerable people becoming isolated in their homes.

Another occurred a few years later when Goondiwindi Regional Council sent out an emergency mobile phone text message during a weather event to "evacuate, evacuate, evacuate".



“It was 6pm on a Friday evening and there had been no prior warning. Most of our staff had gone home,” Tracy says. “My first thoughts were, ‘what about our clients? Some of them can’t read; some don’t have mobile phones, even those who do, may not have them switched on.’”

“When that message went out, it was a very clear indicator for us that we were not fully prepared for a natural disaster like a flood.”

“We have updated our business continuity plan due to COVID-19 and while some of that planning was relevant, it was not a plan for all natural disasters such as a flood,” Tracy says.

That gap in planning was further illustrated when Tracy and Care Goondiwindi’s Quality Assurance Officer, Virginia Shipp, attended a disaster preparedness seminar.

Stepping inside the information loop to share a unique perspective

As a first step in improving its DIDRR response, Tracy joined the Goondiwindi Regional Council’s Local Disaster Management Group (LDMG). This provided the organisation with access to the strategies of council and also the Queensland Department of Communities.

“I needed the LDMG to include me, so that when things were difficult within the community, no matter the type of disaster we might encounter, we were in the loop of information,” she says.

However, the sharing of valuable information soon proved a two-way street. Care Goondiwindi was able to represent the perspective of the people it supports and the needs of service providers to plug an important gap for authorities.

“We have a very good network amongst other organisations in this community, which has allowed us to coordinate with other providers and services to get the right support that our clients need,” Tracy explains.

“In regional and remote areas, you’ll find a collaborative, strong and trusted stakeholder network is critical to all operations,” she says.

“When I asked to join the LDMG, they realised that the community sector wasn’t represented in their plan. They needed us to be included to understand our perspective.”

Tracy says that when Goondiwindi was issued with an evacuation order several years ago, no thought had been given to creating advice for people sheltering in their homes.

“The LDMG had thought of the aged care sector and had evacuated aged care facilities. It also evacuated hospitals but there was no communications tailored to the general community let alone people with disability. People did not have access to information that would help them understand the message that went out.”

“This proved an, ‘OMG moment’ for LDMG where they realised, ‘wow, we actually never thought about that’.”

“We became better informed about the Goondiwindi Council’s disaster preparedness plan, which included all the main services in the town - health, education, police, council, electricity, water and all the emergency response groups.”

“And the LDMG had new input to help it consider how emergency planning information is seen by high-risk groups on a community level and what the impacts are to them. We were able to represent the voices of this group and be their main contact on the LDMG.”

“This was the biggest win for both of us. We became better informed, but we were able to protect the people that we support by helping emergency services understand who they are, where they are and what their issues are,”

Tracy says.

Taking the next steps to strengthen DIDRR

The next step for Care Goondiwindi is to incorporate the knowledge gained from managing COVID-19 safety and from the LDMG into its new disaster response plan.

“We’ve probably done the biggest body of work for our people with disabilities because we’ve got comprehensive risk assessments on all of them. That allows us to find some key areas that highlight those most at risk to develop a person-centred plan that caters to the needs of individuals,” Tracy says.

Care Goondiwindi lessons your organisation can leverage

- Collaboration and support across all community services is essential to meet the needs of your entire community.
- If you haven’t already, get involved with your LDMG. Understand what knowledge you have to share that will improve the disaster response plans of your local authorities.
- Work together with people with disability and emergency personnel to identify and address the extra supports that people need in times of disaster.

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For more information: www.collaborating4inclusion.org

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