



Case Study

Disability Inclusive Disaster Risk Reduction (DIDRR) in action

Listening and learning from people with disability

Known for its architectural heritage, Ipswich is an urban region in Southeast Queensland. Situated on the floodplains of both the Bremer and Brisbane rivers, Ipswich is no stranger to flooding and has had its share of severe weather events; many in recent years. Ipswich is also at risk of other natural hazards including bushfire and heatwave.

Ipswich City Council is dedicated to making sure that all residents are disaster-ready. In 2020, [Ipswich City Council was recognised with a Resilient Australia Award for their animated video series](#). The animations poke a bit of fun at our tendency to put off preparing and compel viewers to get ready today. Matthew Pinder, Emergency Management and Sustainability Manager was the driving force behind this novel approach that engages while educating about the local disaster risks that Ipswich residents face.

In 2019, Ipswich City Council partnered with the [Disability Inclusive and Disaster Resilient Communities](#) project team. In May of 2019, Ipswich was host to two inclusive community engagement forums that brought together people with disability, community, health and disability service providers, emergency personnel, and government to learn

about [Disability Inclusive Disaster Risk Reduction \(DIDRR\)](#). Forum participants learned directly from people with disability about the challenges they face before, during, and after disasters in Ipswich and surrounding communities. Reports were shared back to participating Councils and findings from seven forums held in four Local Government Areas were used to build the [Queensland DIDRR Framework and Toolkit](#).

When the project team got started on Phase Two of the DIDRR project, Ipswich City Council made a commitment to implement the DIDRR Framework. That started with a self-assessment process to examine their emergency management activities and a goal to make disaster risk reduction information, education and resources accessible to everyone. Later that year, Kristie McKenna, Emergency Management Officer, who was new to her role, took a leadership role to achieve their goal. Kristie got started by listening to people with disability to understand the issues from their perspectives. Eighteen months later, Ipswich boasts a long list of DIDRR actions that Kristie admits, “are actually easy for us to do and make a big difference for people with disability.”



Some examples include:

- reviewing all emergency management documents for accessibility and adding alt text to images and figures
- adding Auslan and closed captioning to existing videos and making a transcript of all videos available
- hosting workshops on [Person-Centred Emergency Preparedness](#) in partnership with people with disability
- ensuring disability representation in the Local Disaster Management Plan and highlighting those changes in formal committee reports
- inviting a disability representative to speak to the [Local Disaster Management Group](#) about DIDRR

Kristie says, “they’re not ground-breaking actions” and she doesn’t expect to be rewarded for taking them. Her colleagues at [Queenslanders with Disability Network \(QDN\)](#) would probably agree with this assessment – because having access to information about disaster risks and preparedness is a [human right](#) and a [responsibility under Australia’s emergency management arrangements](#). The real challenge for councils is knowing how to put disability inclusion principles into action. Kristie’s experience offers important learnings and her action steps provide a good model for other Councils to get started.

Kristie says, “the most important action I took was to listen.” With humility in spades, Kristie is the first to admit that her initial plan emphasised efficiency – her idea was to get stuck into the task by coming up with ideas and solutions for greater accessibility and inclusion, then to check in with the disability community. She pitched this approach to Peter Tully, a QDN Peer Leader and action researcher on the project team. Kristie says, “Peter put me in my place very quickly and basically said, Don’t do that! Just involve us from the beginning. Don’t start designing or making anything without having involved us from the start.” It was a humbling experience and the start of a partnership with Peter and his local Ipswich community network of peers with disability.

When asked about the biggest barrier to getting started with disability inclusive emergency planning, Kristie said that she had never worked with people with disability before and she was afraid of saying the wrong thing and upsetting people. She remarked, “In my experience, disability had been a taboo subject except for those who live with disability or know somebody who does.” Kristie said she got over that fear through exposure to people with disability and their lived experiences. Peter was her first guide who advised that, “people with disability are just like anybody else, so just treat us that way.” Kristie said that was a big

learning for her stating, “until then, I didn’t even realise that I was treating people with disability differently just by having that lens of caution and treading lightly.”

Peter introduced Kristie to members of the Ipswich peer support group who meet monthly. Kristie said, “I started going to those monthly QDN meetings and used some of the feedback from the people in that group to change and update some of the things we were doing. Some of it was really simple. We just weren’t having the conversations with people with disability in order to know that we weren’t getting it right.” By joining in for six of their monthly meetings, Kristie gained exposure to people with different disabilities. This was the start of what Kristie describes as taking, “lots of little steps toward some big realisations” about what is needed to put people and their support needs at the centre of disability inclusive emergency planning.

Those little steps involved responding to the issues raised by people with disability. Kristie shared one of the first conversations she had with a peer group member about an infographic promoted by Ipswich City Council. It was called, “if Ipswich were 100 people.” He pointed out that the infographic is meant to represent the whole community, but it didn’t include people with disability. Kristie took this issue back to Council and had the Marketing team update the infographic, which now includes 17 people with disability and carers. In the 2021 review of the Local Disaster Management Plan (LDMP) Kristie also made sure that people with disability are represented. She included the new infographic and added more information to the community profile section of the LDMP to ensure disability representation.

It was through conversations with the peer group that Kristie learned about other worries and concerns. As Kristie tells it, “Some of the people in the group had questions about emergency preparedness in their homes. One lady had particular concerns about how emergency services would know that she had a disability – asking, what happens if my house is on fire? I’m deaf. I can’t hear them. How are they going to find me? So, I asked Queensland Fire and Emergency Services to come in and talk about their Safe Home program.” Kristie pointed out that, “This service is already available but this group just didn’t know about it.”

She went on to explain, “Fire and Rescue organised a crew to come out and they brought a fire truck. The firefighters talked about the Safe Home program, but left most of the time to answer individual questions that people had. They were really good at talking about the things that individuals can do to stay safe, how just having a tidy home helps firefighters locate you in a fire, but also how firefighters can help. A few of the people brought their kids along, so the firefighters put on their turnout gear and demonstrated the jaws of life and other equipment. So, it was a little bit of fun as well. The woman who had raised the concerns, that prompted me to ask Fire and Rescue out in the first place, was really happy with it. She was absolutely stoked. She’s deaf and blind, so she faces more challenges than anyone I’ve ever met. But she got to ask her questions and they answered the questions that were relevant to her. One of the firefighters spent almost the whole time, while everyone else was doing the truck stuff, having a chat with her and continuing to answer her questions.”



Asked what she would recommend to others, Kristie advised, “Just get out and talk to people with disability. Find out what it’s like. Find out how you can make things easier.” Kristie pointed out that councils have many touch points into communities, whether it is through their community development programs or their disability and inclusion committees. She recommended reaching out through them. “Honestly, attending the QDN meetings has probably been the best insight and the best way to build trust and relationships, which I think will help us to keep this going moving forward. You can’t unlearn this,” Kristie says, “we’ll now consider disability inclusion as ‘business as usual’ in our emergency management work.”

Lessons Learned

- [Disabled People’s Organisations \(DPOs\)](#) can play a significant role in disaster policy, planning and interventions by representing their members and allowing their voices to be heard. Reach out to a DPO or advocacy group in your community.
- Making documents accessible is critical. This helps everyone to learn about and understand their disaster risks.
- Listen and respond to the issues raised by people with disability. It builds trust and mutual learning for disaster resilience.

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For more information: www.collaborating4inclusion.org

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