

People with vulnerabilities in disasters

A framework for an effective
local response

— AUGUST 2016 —

Introduction

Everyone faces a degree of risk when a community is impacted by a natural disaster or emergency. Protective factors, for example, strong family and social connections, enable many people in a community to be better prepared and able to adapt to the impact of a disaster. However, such factors may be limited in an individual or a community's daily life, resulting in vulnerability to higher levels of risk, injury or loss, or severe or longer term impacts than others.

Individuals, families and specific population groups susceptible to vulnerability factors and low levels of resilience, can require more targeted support to remain safe and to prepare for, respond to, and recover from, disaster events.

People with vulnerabilities in disasters – A framework for an effective local response (the Framework) has been developed to help minimise the impact of disasters and emergencies¹ in Queensland. The Framework outlines a state-wide approach to assist local governments and communities identify people who are or who may be highly susceptible to the impact of disasters and plan activities to mitigate or increase their resilience and/or recovery.

The Framework aims to provide an approach for identifying those who may be vulnerable in a disaster and aims to inform the development of engagement strategies for vulnerable people in local communities.

Purpose

The aim of the Framework is to reduce the impact of disasters on people with vulnerabilities, or people who may become vulnerable², and contribute to building resilient communities. The Framework provides a common definition that outlines the target group along with factors to consider when undertaking collaborative work to identify and engage with people who are or may be vulnerable.

The Framework is intended to be of most value for the development of local plans for identifying and engaging with people with vulnerabilities in disaster events, and the stakeholders who know them and/or provide services to them.

The Framework will:

- assist local disaster management stakeholders to identify and engage with people who are vulnerable, or who may become vulnerable in disasters;
- enhance existing disaster management arrangements and planning to more effectively support people with vulnerabilities; and
- inform and drive actions and initiatives to improve preparedness and planning for people with vulnerabilities.

Background

The *Review of cyclone and storm sheltering arrangements Report 3: 2014-15* (Inspector-General Emergency Management 2015) identified the lack of a consistent approach in Queensland in relation to people with vulnerabilities and disaster management. The report noted:

- roles and responsibilities in disaster management arrangements can be ambiguous
- local governments would benefit from assistance and resources to work with local communities

¹ Disasters and emergencies are used together and interchangeably in this paper to capture all types of hazards and all phases of disaster management (before, during and after). For example, people may need to evacuate for safety in a potential weather event, but not experience a disaster due to a change in the weather event.

² People with vulnerabilities or people who may become vulnerable will be referred to as 'people with vulnerabilities'.

- the need to improve consistent, integrated messaging across disaster management stakeholders
- the need for accessible, risk based information in plain language
- the need for more collaborative community education
- greater coordination across stakeholders is required.

Recommendation 3 of the report proposes *A state-wide strategy, including a common definition*, is developed for identifying and engaging vulnerable people in emergencies.

The Department of Communities, Child Safety and Disability Services has prepared the Framework as the state-wide strategy to identify and engage with people with vulnerabilities.

The development of the Framework has been informed by evidence from literature review, state-wide survey and a national jurisdictional scan. It was developed in consultation with key stakeholders from state government, local government and community agencies. The information contributed to the key elements of the Framework.

Other relevant reviews

Several other reviews and inquiries into past disaster event responses have also provided direction to the Framework, including:

- Recommendations in the *Queensland Floods Commission of Inquiry Final Report 2012*, which highlighted the need for local councils to identify and work with organisations that provide services to vulnerable people to support best practice planning and evacuation activities (Queensland Flood Commission of Inquiry 2012).
- The *Brisbane City Council Flood Response Review 2011*, which noted the need for greater awareness of vulnerable target populations. It also highlighted the need to manage special arrangements for those for whom public sheltering is not suitable e.g. oxygen dependent individuals (Brisbane City Council 2011)
- The *Victorian Bushfires Royal Commission 2009*, included a key recommendation for the State to establish mechanisms that would help local councils to undertake planning that adapts to individual communities. Planning in this way would assist with identifying evacuation and sheltering options by helping to identify where vulnerable populations are located (Parliament of Victoria 2010).

Context

The Framework aligns with and complements existing national and state policies, frameworks, manuals and guidelines responsible for components of disaster management.

The Framework represents a proactive Queensland initiative to begin to address issues identified through the national work of the *Vulnerable Sections of Society (an emergency management perspective)* report endorsed in 2015 by the Australia-New Zealand Emergency Management Committee (ANZEMC). The Framework also aligns with national and Queensland Standards and Guidelines as identified in these links:

National emergency management:

<https://www.ag.gov.au/emergencymanagement/Pages/default.aspx>

Queensland emergency management:

<http://www.disaster.qld.gov.au/Disaster-Resources/PGF.html>

Vulnerability in disasters and emergencies

Individuals and communities can potentially face and experience a greater risk of loss, injury, illness and death during disasters. People may have impaired mobility, diminished sensory awareness, multiple chronic health conditions, and/or social and economic limitations — one or more of these characteristics could reduce their ability to prepare for, respond to, and adapt during disasters or emergencies.

A disaster can also disrupt vital support systems people with vulnerabilities may rely on. For example, for some older persons and people with disabilities, independent living is made possible only with continuous supply of utilities and electricity, help from friends, family and in-home services that provide meals, home-based care and help with the activities of daily living. These vital services may be unavailable due to a disaster, resulting in increased susceptibility to the impact of the disaster.

People with low or no pre-existing risk factors can also become vulnerable to severe disaster impact e.g. living or travelling in areas of close proximity to the event, people in high risk geographic locations who experience language or communication barriers to accessing information about identified local hazards (e.g. tourists or itinerant workers).

In other words, a person's level of vulnerability to a disaster impact is not determined by a single indicator. A number of factors, including protective factors, must be taken into consideration before determining the vulnerability of a person in relation to the disaster rather than being a vulnerable person within society.

A common understanding of vulnerability can also support and enhance risk assessment and risk treatment in relation to potential hazards, local planning and responses.

Understanding risk for people requires an assessment of factors that could either increase their susceptibility and/or be protective. The gap between these factors represents the degree of risk and susceptibility for a particular hazard or potential disaster event. This is where engagement and preparedness strategies can be targeted to improve resilience.

Using the Framework, local community profiles for people with vulnerabilities can be tailored according to the assessment of who, according to the definition, is more susceptible in that location in relation to particular hazards.

Resilience

Regular and severe disaster events have exacted a heavy toll in Queensland. Given the forecasts for population growth and increasing population density, as well as the climate change predictions for future weather patterns, there is an urgent need to anticipate, plan for, and reduce disaster risk.

This requires a broader and more people-centred approach with a focus on preparedness and risk reduction strategies and practices (such as *National Emergency Risk Assessment Guidelines*) that are inclusive and accessible for local government and communities. This includes all stakeholders working more closely together to identify and engage with people with vulnerabilities.

Integral to this approach is assisting households and communities to become more resilient.

The *Queensland Strategy for Disaster Resilience* defines resilience as:

The ability of the Queensland Government, local governments, communities, business and individuals to prepare for, respond to, and manage potential hazards and disasters, thereby, minimising impacts and rapidly recovering to emerge stronger and better able to cope with future disaster events.

The shift of focus from recovery to preparedness and planning for people with vulnerabilities is one of the most effective ways to improve resilience. The ability of the Queensland Government, local governments, communities, and business to actively identify and engage with people with vulnerabilities is the foundation of this resilience building.

There is an increasing focus on effective risk management (as opposed to crisis management) as the key ingredient for successful preparedness and resilience development.

This shift to a positive risk culture is important for encouraging individuals, families and communities to take up preparedness; and to improve collaboration to share and reduce risk and the provision of mutual aid.

Local government and communities require access to the right skills and resources to engender a positive risk culture in relation to people reducing their vulnerabilities to disasters. This requires assistance from, and coordination with, state and national authorities. Another key element for a positive risk culture and a resilient community is collaborative planning across sectors and preparedness to ensure the agencies that provide services or support to these cohorts, have disaster plans in place for people with vulnerabilities.



VISION Statement

Local governments and communities work together with individuals to reduce vulnerability and improve resilience in and recovery from disasters.

Guiding Principles

The following principles guide the Framework:

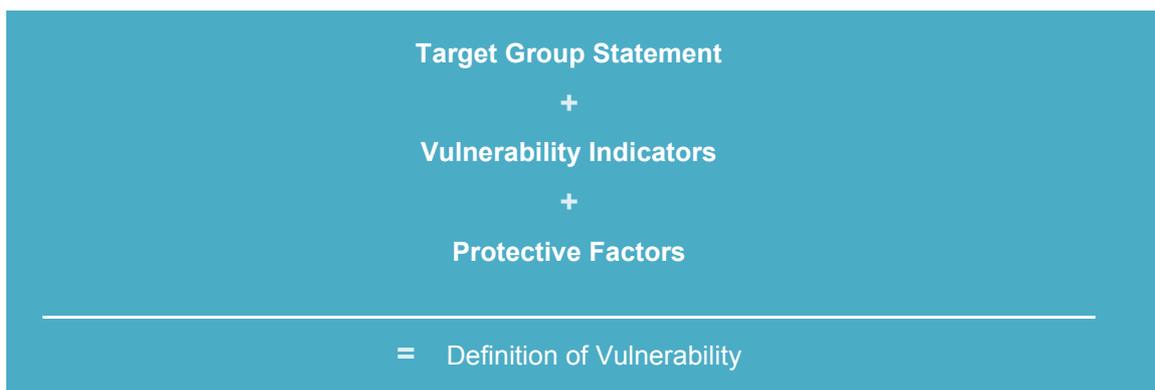
- Individuals and communities are able to take up their responsibilities for planning to reduce disaster related risks for their vulnerable community members.
- Local communities have the capability to assist people with vulnerabilities to reduce their risk and build resilience.
- Local communities know best how to build resilience, particularly with regard to people with vulnerabilities.

Definition of people with vulnerabilities in disasters

Vulnerability in relation to disaster events is a fluid and complex concept. It is challenging to establish a single definition encompassing all factors contributing to a person’s vulnerability to the impact of a disaster is challenging.

However, a consistent definition of people with vulnerabilities will encourage local communities and all levels of government to use the same terminology to identify and target individuals and population groups.

The definition of vulnerability in this Framework comprises three components:



#1 – Target Group Statement

People who would benefit from additional and targeted assistance to prepare for, respond to, and recover from disasters.

#2 – Vulnerability Indicators

Indicator	Can include <i>not an exhaustive list</i>
Proximity to an event, lack of warning of an event	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • People living, working in and travelling through the affected area
Made a decision not to help themselves	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • People have received warning but chose to not take safety advice
Lack of understanding risk to an event	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • People living, working in and travelling through the affected area
Insecure housing or homelessness	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Insecure housing e.g. caravans and boarding houses, rough sleepers and homelessness
Lack of financial resources	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Pension and benefit recipients, low income workers (including casual and part time)
Personal safety; reduced health and/or wellbeing	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Some older people, children and young people, those experiencing domestic and family violence. • People impacted by loss or injury related to a disaster
Disruption to, or lack of available services, supports/ carers medication,	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Some older persons, frail, aged, people with health conditions including mental illness, people with disability

Indicator	Can include <i>not an exhaustive list</i>
aids and equipment	
Lack of access to, or disruption to transport, supplies and communication	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • People without private transport or reliant on public transport, people reliant on medical equipment and medication • People with languages other than English or low literacy levels
Visitors or new arrivals, low risk understanding or knowledge	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Migrants, refugees, overseas/temporary workers, students and tourists
Social, physical, geographic isolation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Some older people, people with health conditions, e.g. mental illness, disability, people experiencing homelessness • People living and working in remote locations

These indicators can be considered when undertaking risk assessment for people with vulnerabilities. This is not an exhaustive list, but aims to support communities to engage in collaborative activities to identify local people with vulnerabilities.

The indicators can interact, shift or change for people, within the context of community diversity and change according to the nature of a disaster event. Some people may be vulnerable under a number of indicators, resulting in increased susceptibility in a disaster.

Other people may become highly susceptible as a result of an event, depending on the nature of the event and any combined indicators they may experience.

Vulnerability factors need to be assessed in conjunction with the third element of the definition, protective factors.

#3 – Protective Factors

The Australian Red Cross has identified four protective factors to provide guidance for communities. These factors align with the current focus in the Australian disaster management environment and encompass a strengths based approach to planning and responding to people with vulnerabilities. These are:

Wellbeing
A person’s health and wellbeing status, including their psychological coping ability.
Connection
The amount of support people can draw upon, referred to as social capital, to achieve goals or shared objectives. This can be through formal or informal links such as family, friends, local groups, and colleagues. It also relates to how connected people are to their local environment.
Knowledge
Access to, and understanding of, appropriate information, community knowledge and local wisdom relating to hazard risk profiles and risk mitigation strategies for a geographic area. Knowledge also refers to a person’s capacity to process this information, and act upon it, individually and collectively, in a meaningful way and contribute to increasing community competence.
Security
Adequate shelter, personal safety, and the capacity to maintain financial protection of assets and livelihoods.

Key elements of the framework

Local governments have a lead role in disaster management in their communities. The review of evidence highlights the critical role of local businesses and community organisations - community partners - in working with their local government to address the needs of people with vulnerabilities.

Community partners include community service providers, who provide services such as accommodation and /or support (e.g. residential aged care or child care centres), volunteer agencies, private business operators, and community and industry associations (e.g. tourism operators, local networks).

Seven elements of the Framework are outlined below reflect key objectives of consistent place based planning, building resilience and continuous improvement and are intended to guide actions and strategies to implement the Framework.

The elements include enablers, designed to illustrate practical measures to assist with implementing each element. Potential lead Local, District or State disaster management levels are identified for each enabler.

Consistent place based planning

1. Local Governments are able to identify community partners who are aware of and/or will identify people with vulnerabilities in each hazard risk location.

Enablers:

- Agreements are in place with the Queensland and Australian Governments to provide annual updated data about funded services and existing networks by Local Government Authorities (LGA). (*State level lead*)
- Agreements are in place with industry bodies and representatives (for example Chambers of Commerce) to provide information about local businesses and other community partners. (*District and Local level lead*)
- Resources and best practice approaches are available to inform documenting and recording these lists in a consistent manner. This will facilitate information sharing and planning across administrative and geographic boundaries. (*State and District level*)
- Disaster management guidelines and resources support collaborative risk management for people who may become vulnerable in identified hazard risk locations. (*State, District and Local levels*)

2. Local Government and community partners assess the needs of people identified as low resilience/ high risk, and their requirements to prepare for, respond to, and recover from disaster events.

Enablers:

- Resources and tools are available to assist local communities to undertake assessment of vulnerability, consequences and resilience. (*State level*)

- 3. Based on risk assessment for people with vulnerabilities, annual plans across all levels include arrangements for data sharing protocols and roles and responsibilities for government and community partners (across prevention, preparedness, response and recovery).**

Enablers:

- Existing disaster management guidelines are reviewed to capture the above arrangements. *(State level)*
- Resources and best practice approaches are available to inform consistent, flexible place based plans. *(State and District level)*

Building Resilience

- 4. Individual households assessed as having low resilience can access support to develop their own preparedness plans.**

Enablers:

- Community partners and government service providers include disaster preparedness/resilience as part of their core business with clients and customers. *(Local and State level)*
- Community partners and government service providers can access annual disaster management training and skill development. *(Local, District and State level)*

- 5. Community partners have disaster management business continuity plans in place.**

Enablers:

- Information and advice is available to support business continuity planning. *(Local and State level)*
- Opportunities are identified for strengthening regulatory requirements for business continuity planning in disasters. *(State level)*

- 6. Access to hazard information and warnings are developed and available for people identified in local annual plans as being impacted by disaster events.**

Enablers:

- Resources, tools and best practice guidelines are available to support the development of tailored warnings. *(State level)*

- 7. Specific community engagement and development activities, including with community partners, are delivered to build preparedness and resilience for people with vulnerabilities identified in local annual plans.**

Enablers:

- Resources, tools and best practice guidelines are available to complement local knowledge and existing networks and local initiatives. *(Local, District and State level)*

Operationalising the Framework

The *People with vulnerabilities in disasters* Framework supports and informs all disaster management arrangements in Queensland. It applies to local, district and state levels and guides activities related to all hazards and all phases of disaster management; before, during and after disasters.

The Framework focuses on the role of local governments as the frontline of disaster management as set out in S4A(c) of the *Disaster Management Act 2003*: “local governments should primarily be responsible for managing events in their local government area.”

The Framework expands on specific elements of disaster management policies and procedures where people with vulnerabilities are referred to or are part of existing requirements and processes, including the *Queensland Local Disaster Management: Guidelines*.

Underpinning the Framework is acknowledgement of the role district and state groups have in resourcing and supporting local government to carry out disaster management activities. These groups will have responsibility for incorporating the Framework as appropriate within their disaster management responsibilities, as well as contributing to implementation of the Framework in local disaster management activities.

The development of an Implementation Plan will support the implementation of the Framework through local management activities.

The Implementation Plan will provide practical guidance to enable local government embed the Framework into the community’s local activities. The Implementation Plan nominates activities which provide practical measures including responsibilities and best practice examples that are adaptive and scalable for communities.

The Framework focuses on core elements for identifying and building relationships between local governments and agencies responsible for people with vulnerabilities.

The Framework acknowledges that individuals who may be regarded as vulnerable may be different in different communities and susceptibility to disaster impact may change over time within communities. The community agencies that support people with vulnerabilities, and business operators that accommodate, employ or provide services to groups that may become highly susceptible in an event, will also vary across communities and change over time.

As a result, strategies and responses to foster preparedness and build resilience will be different in each community and need to be reviewed as part of regular annual planning and readiness activities. Communities will need to work across geographic and administrative boundaries to ensure holistic and coordinated action responding to and recovering from disasters.

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