Northern Rivers Recovery Data Collection

A collaborative response for individuals experiencing homelessness post-floods

May 18th, 2022

Contents

Introduction

Across the Northern Rivers, it is difficult to accurately measure the number of individuals experiencing homelessness. The vastness of the region, combined with scarcity of services, and the often-hidden nature of homelessness makes it difficult to build a comprehensive picture of homelessness in the area. This difficulty has been exacerbated by the recent floods in the area which prevented the 2022 street count from being fully completed in the Byron Shire. Due to COVID Health orders the 2021 Census was also unable to release their estimates of homelessness in NSW.

Estimates of homelessness in the Northern Rivers:

- In 2016, the Census[1] estimated that there were 1,494 people experiencing homelessness across the Northern Rivers[2]. Estimates of homelessness are not available from the latest census.
- According to the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (AIHW)[3], specialist homelessness services assisted 1,918 people who were identified as homeless[4] across the Richmond – Tweed Region[5] in 2020/21.

While services and government agencies are responding to the emergency, a gap has emerged for those who were previously experiencing different forms of homelessness before the floods.

During the floods, individuals experiencing homelessness were displaced, moved quickly, and were unaware of supports Many of these individuals who were experiencing homelessness prior to the floods lost possessions, incurred damage to their vehicles/shelters, lost access to outreach and temporary accommodation services, and have had difficulty navigating the new supports set up in flood affected areas. Additionally, homelessness services were left unaware of their clients' circumstances.

The floods have compounded the disadvantage experienced by people at risk of and experiencing homelessness both directly and indirectly. This has further increased their risk of and exposure to traumatic experiences leading to housing insecurity and homelessness. Unfortunately, it has been difficult to obtain basic information on the scale of homelessness since the floods to understand the support needs for this cohort. Therefore, End Street Sleeping Collaboration (ESSC) worked with services and government agencies in the

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[1] ABS Census of Population and Housing: Estimating homelessness, 2016, Cat No 2049.0
[2] The Norther Rivers includes the following LGAs: Ballina, Byron, Clarence Valley, Kyogle, Lismore, Richmond Valley, and Tweed.
[3] Specialist homelessness services annual report 2020–21 – Data tables
[4] As measured by the client's housing circumstances at the beginning of their first support period.
[5] The Richmond – Tweed Region (Statistical Area Level 4), spans Richmond Valley, Richmond Hinterland and Tween Valley.

End Street Sleeping
Collaboration

Northern Rivers to respond to this need and understand the number of people in the area experiencing homelessness.

Project Overview: filling the gap

Harnessing the power of the local collaborations established in the Northern Rivers, a network of services got together to identify how they could gather the information required to fill the gap. The Byron Shire Council and Fletcher Street Cottage from the Byron Shire, and Social Futures, Fred's Place and Tweed Assertive Outreach program from the Tweed Shire contributed to this project by developing the goals, creating the approach, and completing the morning outreach.

Goals

The project's three major goals were to understand:

1. The number of individuals experiencing homelessness in the Northern Rivers. This will help fill the gap in knowledge for local communities.
2. Whether the number of individuals experiencing homelessness has increased, decreased, or remained the same post-floods.
3. The areas and locations in which individuals are rough sleeping post floods.

This information is vital to responding to homelessness in the Northern Rivers, and to developing a collaborative response to the flooding matched to individuals' circumstances and needs via the By-Name List (BNL).

Approach

To achieve these goals, morning outreach was completed over a 7-day period across the Byron, Tweed, and Lismore Shires. An Observations app was developed by ESSC to gather geospatial and non-sensitive information during the morning outreach. The Public Space Liaison Officers, Social Futures, and the Tweed Assertive Outreach team, who have professional experience identifying and engaging with rough sleepers in their areas, assisted in the outreach.

Criteria was established for the observations to determine who would be included in the observational count. These criteria were used to create consistency and evidence-base in the observations being made by different workers completing the outreach. The criteria included:

1. Vehicles: if there was condensation on the inside or on the roof, there were open windows/fans for ventilation, there were a large number of belongings, the bedding was unkempt, parked on level ground.
2. Rough sleeping on streets: sleeping bags, bags of belongings, cleared ground, tents.
3. Rough sleeping in bushlands: trail leading into the camp well-defined, sleeping bags, bags of belongings, tents, tarpaulins, ground sheets.

Exclusion criteria for travellers and/or rented campervans: larger camper vans, newer vans, minimal wear and tear, stylised/expensive fittings/aesthetics inside the vans, branded campervans (ex. "Byron Campers").

The outreach also aimed to facilitate initial engagement with individuals, to add them onto the By-Name List (BNL), and in the process identify who was already on the BNL. Criteria was established to ensure engagements were respectful and safe and included:

1. Do not engage if the individual is sleeping.
2. Do not engage if people are in their vehicles.
3. Do not engage if there was a large group. If there are more people than staff, engagement was not taken for safety reasons.
4. Do not engage if there was evidence of substance use.
5. Ensure the physical environment is safe to enter.
6. Look for verbal and non-verbal cues from the individual. Some cues to not engage include the person having closed body language, does not make eye contact, does not say "hello" back, appears upset, or walking at a face pace.

The outreach included engagements in the drop-in centres of Byron (Fletcher Street Cottage) and Tweed Heads (Fred's Place). These drop-in centres are safe spaces for workers and individuals. Individuals experiencing homelessness would be given a warm referral and introduction to ESSC staff through their existing relationships with Assertive Outreach/Public Space Liaison Officers/drop-in staff. If willing to give their consent, individuals would be added onto the ESSC's By-Name List system, and where possible completed a VI-SPDAT survey.

Terminology and definitions

ESSC's By-Name List (BNL) System: an application, accessed through a desktop or mobile, used by homelessness service providers throughout NSW to store information about those who are experiencing homelessness. Through the BNL people's stories can be shared which enables a collaborative service response.

Northern Rivers flood events: The NSW Floods event began on 22 February 2022 with severe weather, heavy rainfall, and associated flooding. It was declared a natural disaster up until May 4, 2022. The floods effected the 7 local government areas across the Northern Rivers.

Observation: evidence of rough sleeping homelessness witnessed firsthand during the outreach by ESSC staff members, Byron Shire Public Liaison Officers, or collaborators, in line with the criteria discussed above. Observations were recorded with a location type, latitude and longitude coordinates, and a short description.

People experiencing Rough Sleeping Homelessness:

Homelessness can be defined in a variety of ways. For the purposes of this paper, *The Institute of Global Homelessness* (IGH) (2022) classification will be used. The IGH classifies people without accommodation as the following[6]:

1A. People sleeping in the streets or in other open spaces (such as parks, railway embankments, under bridges, on pavement, on riverbanks, in forests, etc.).
1B. People sleeping in public roofed spaces or in buildings not intended for human habitation (such as bus and railway stations, taxi ranks, derelict buildings, public buildings, etc.).
1C. People sleeping in their cars, rickshacks, open fishing boats, and other forms of transport.
1D. "Pavement dwellers" – individuals or households who live on the street in a regular spot, usually with some form of makeshift cover.

In other literature, rough sleeping can be considered as "primary homelessness". In the *NSW Homelessness Strategy 2018-2023* it states "a person does not have suitable accommodation which meets basic needs including a sense of security, stability, privacy, safety and the ability to control living space" is considered primary when they have "no conventional accommodation or shelter"[7].

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[6] IGH's other classifications of homelessness can be found here on their website: Overview | IGH Hub
[7] This was published by the NSW Government and the report can be found here: NSW Homelessness Strategy 2018-2023

Findings

Observations were recorded with a location type, latitude and longitude coordinates, a short description of what could be seen, and some basic details such as apparent gender, age, and the number of people. In total 363 observations were collated.
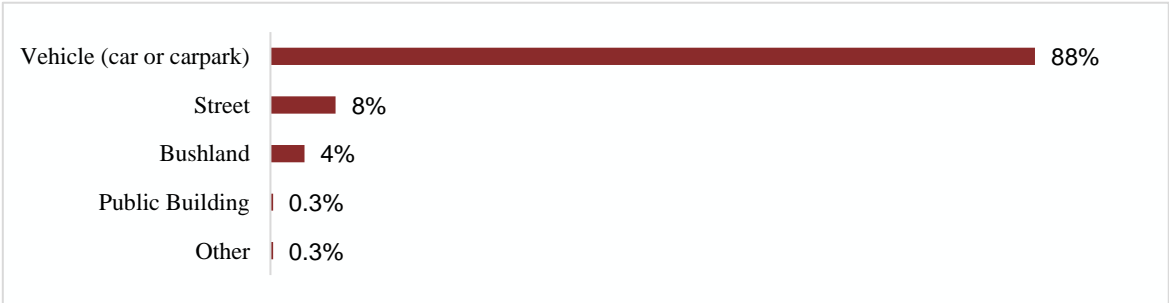
Where evidence of a person/persons sleeping in a vehicle was observed the vehicles' registration plate was recorded where possible, to both prevent the double counting of vehicles, and to understand the movement of vehicles in future analysis. On 29 occasions a vehicle was observed multiple times[8]. In these instances, subsequent observations were excluded from analysis, leaving 333 unique observations. The number of people in a camp or group was recorded for many observations. The maximum number of people recorded in a group was 4. Where no person was visible (for example when still in a van) it was assumed to be 1 person. There was an estimated number of 378 people observed. Where no person was visible (for example when still in a van) the dwelling was assumed to belong to 1 person.

- Number of unique observations (observations): 333
- Estimate of number of people observed: 378

Location Type

Each observation recorded was given a location type, to better understand the types of dwellings or location. The vast majority (293, 88%) of observations were of vehicles, either on the street or in carparks. Most of these were vans, however people were also observed sleeping in smaller SUVs, sedans, hatchbacks, and Utes. Roof tents were also classified as vehicles.

Figure 1 – Location Type by Observations

Location Type	Percentage
Vehicle (car or carpark)	88%
Street	8%
Bushland	4%
Public Building	0.3%
Other	0.3%

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[8] One vehicle was observed 3 times, while all others were observed twice.

Locations

Each observation was recorded along with latitude and longitude coordinates to better understand the areas in which people are experiencing rough sleeping homelessness, and to identify hotspots, patterns, and changes post floods. ESSC developed an interactive map of the observations, which can be viewed if you click here[9]. Observations are separated by Shire and town below[10].

Table 1 - Observations & Estimated Number of People by Location

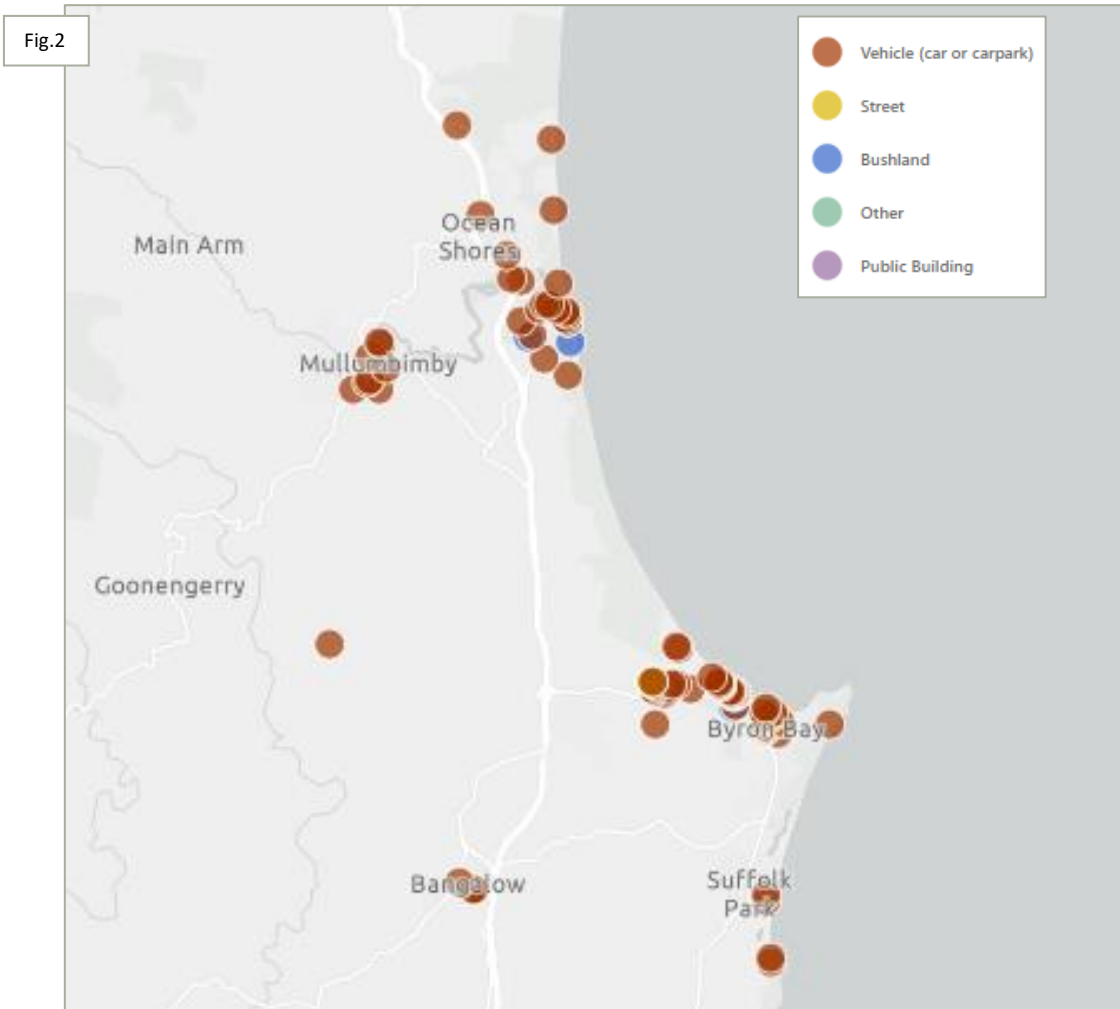| Location	Observations	Est. People
Bangalow	6	7
Brunswick Heads	48	51
Byron Bay	125	128
Mullumbimby	16	16
Ocean Shores and surrounding area	12	12
Suffolk Park	7	7
Total - Byron Shire	**214**	**221**
Tweed Heads	65	70
Fingal & Chinderah	9	9
Kingscliff	13	13
Cabarita Beach & Hastings Point	5	5
Murwillumbah and Uki	10	10
Total - Tweed Shire	**102**	**107**
Lismore[11]:	17	19

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[9] You may need to login to a Power BI account. ESSC can provide BNL members with access.
[10] The maps have been created with Arc GIS software.
[11] Observations of people camping on what looked like their property were not included in the official data, however, roughly 25 camps/campervans were observed on people's property.

I. Byron Shire

Figure 2 – Observations across Byron Shire by Location Type
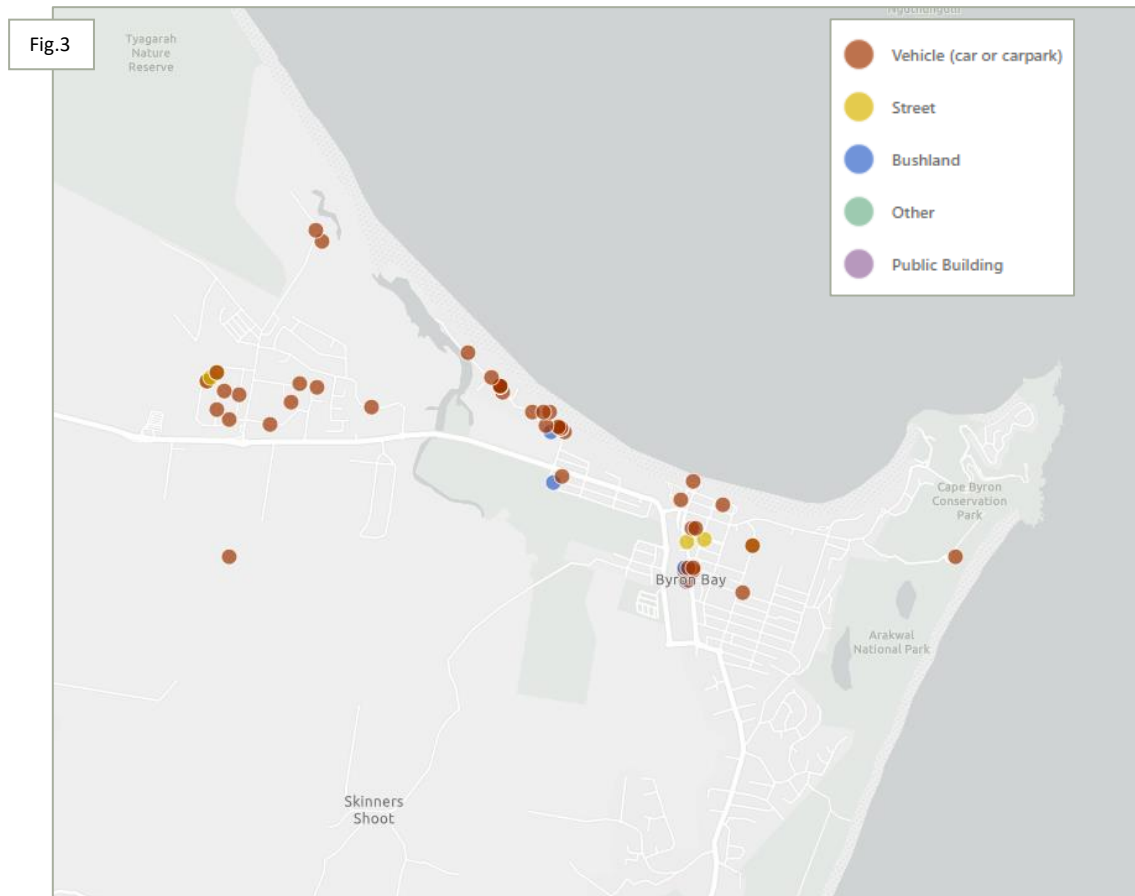

Overall, 201 (94%) observations in the Byron Shire were of classification 1C of the homelessness definition –people sleeping in their cars and other forms of transport.

Table 2 – Observations & Estimated Number of People by Location Type in Byron Shire

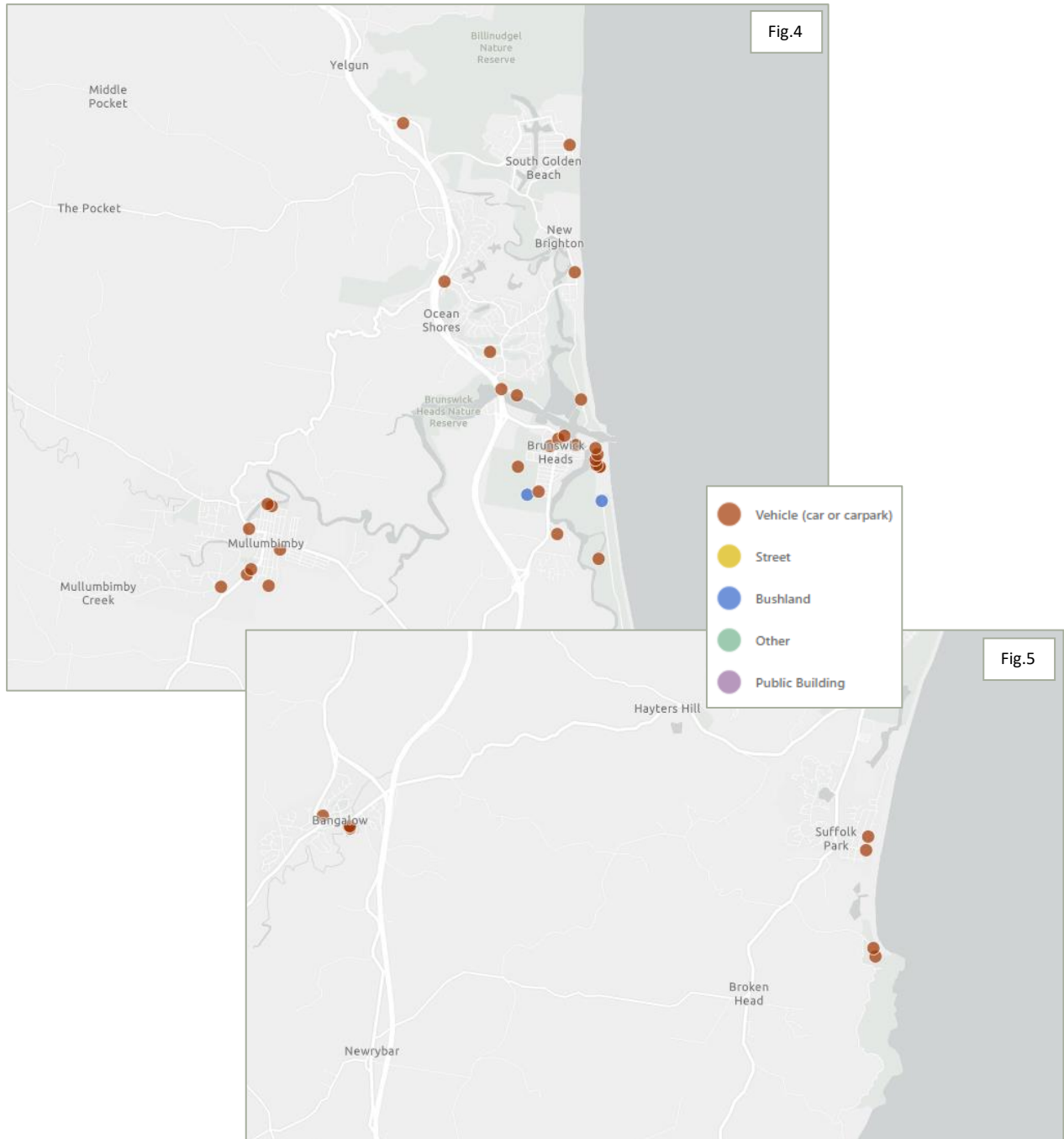| Location	Observations	Est. People
Vehicle (car or carpark)	201	203
Street	7	9
Bushland	5	8
Public Building	1	1

II. Byron Bay

Figure 3 – Observations across Byron Bay by Location Type

Some observations of street homelessness were made in central Byron, but the majority of observations were classification 1C. Two observations were made of rough sleeping in bushland in the area behind main beach and near the Cumbebin Swamp Nature Reserve. Observations of two different groups in the Byron central area. One group had 5-6 individuals camping together, the other had 3 individuals with 4 dogs. Both groups were sighted multiple times in the same spots.
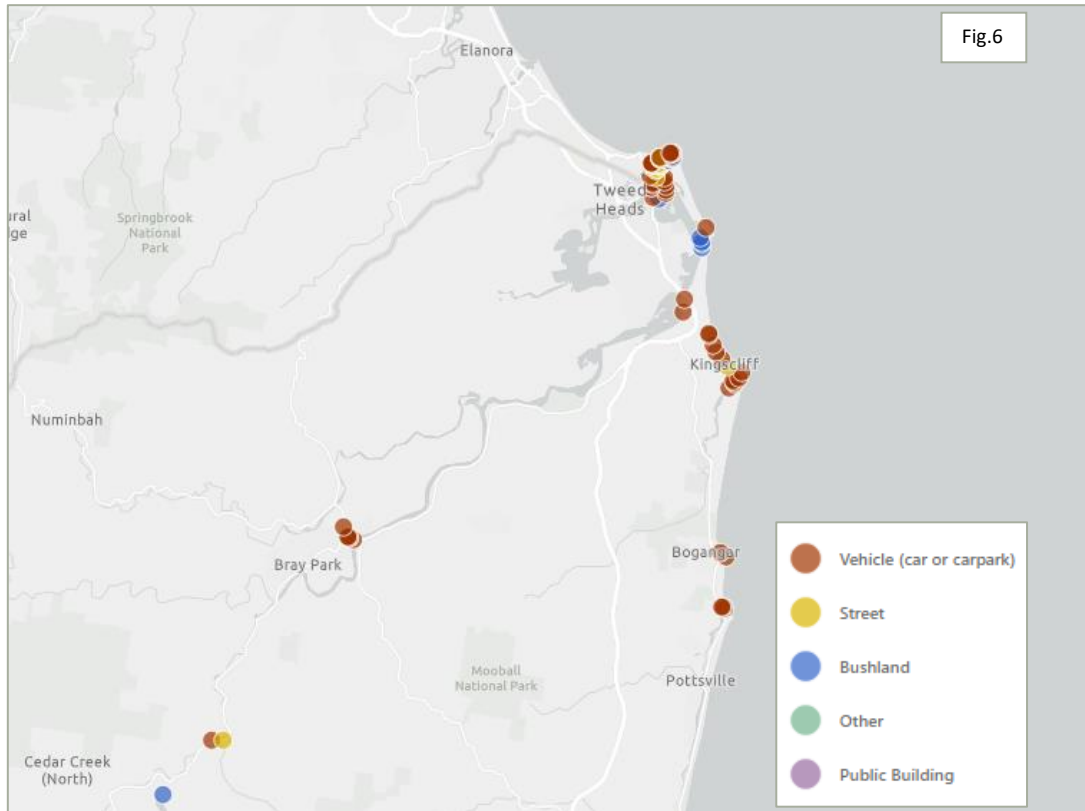
III. Byron surrounding areas

Figure 4 & 5 – Observations across Byron Shire by Location Type

Camps in bushland were found in the bush bordering Brunswick Heads Surf Club. The Brunswick Surf Club car park had the highest concentration of observations.

IV. Tweed Shire

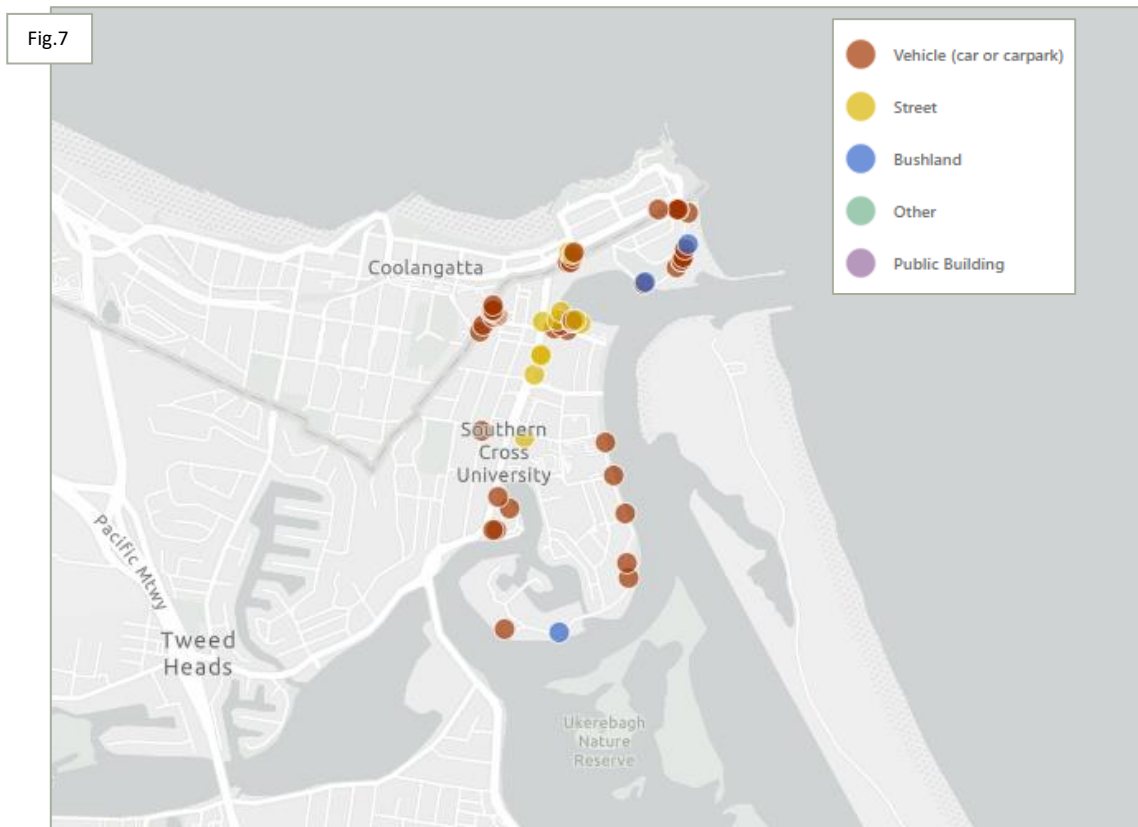**Figure 6 – Observations across Tweed Shire by Location Type**

Classification 1C observations were found along the coast – as well as inland in Murwillumbah and Uki, however observations were far fewer than expected in inland areas. This could support the anecdotal evidence that people have been displaced from inland areas due to the flooding. There were higher numbers of individuals in classifications 1A, 1B, and 1D within Tweed Heads and mostly in the park areas.

Table 3 – Observations & Estimated Number of People by Location Type in Tweed Shire

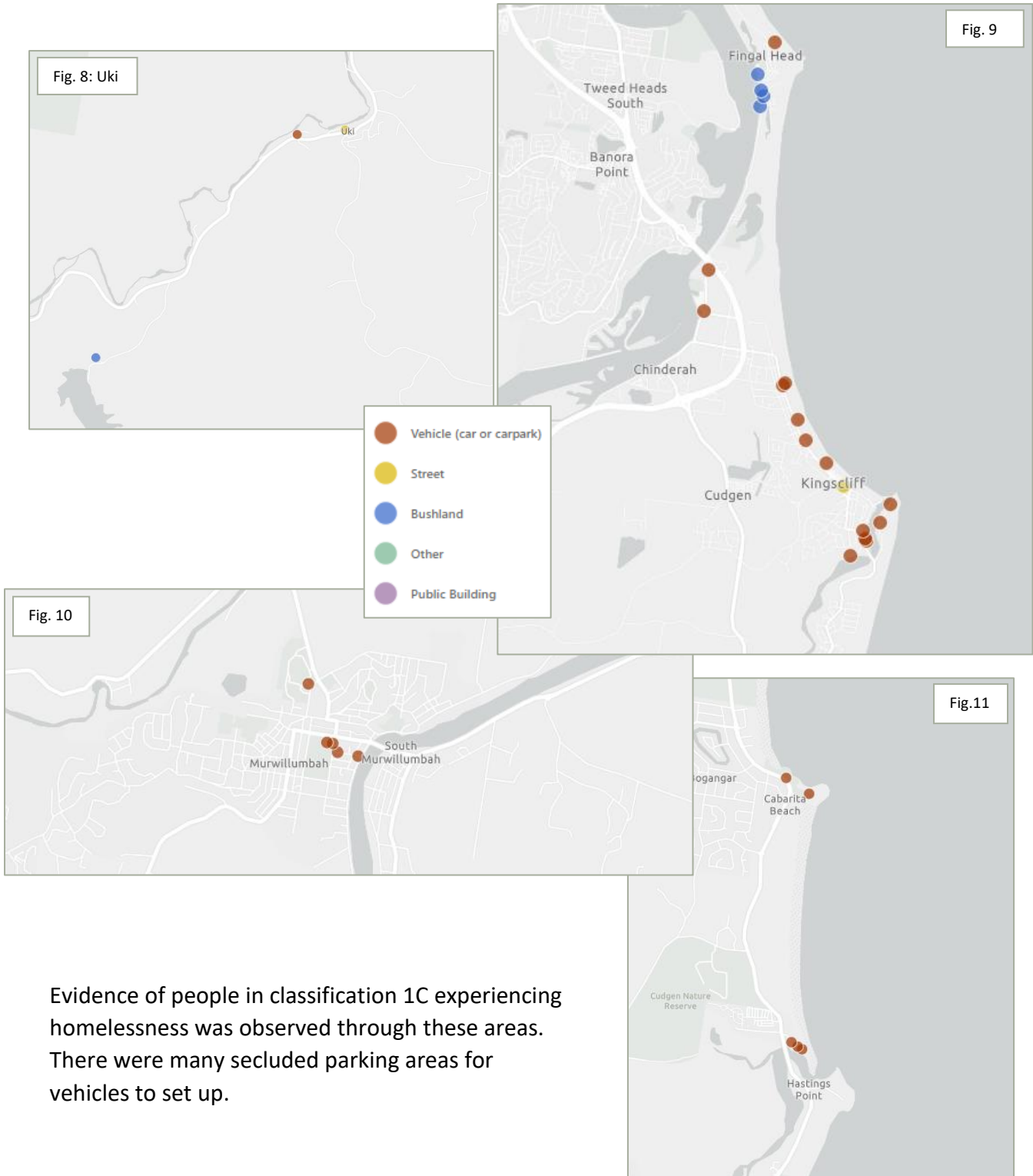| Location	Observations	Est. People
Vehicle (car or carpark)	77	79
Street	17	20
Bushland	8	8
Public Building	0	0

V. Tweed Heads

Figure 7 – Observations across Tweed Heads by Location Type

Classification 1A, 1B, and 1D of homelessness was concentrated around Wharf St. and Jack Evans Park in central Tweed. Many vans were also observed near the border suggesting many people/groups living in vans may move back and forth over the border. From conversations with people experiencing homelessness at Fred's Place (drop-in centre), ESSC were told by individuals that people (roughly 25) were squatting in 2 public buildings. They were not included in the observation count because outreach was not able to observe them firsthand.
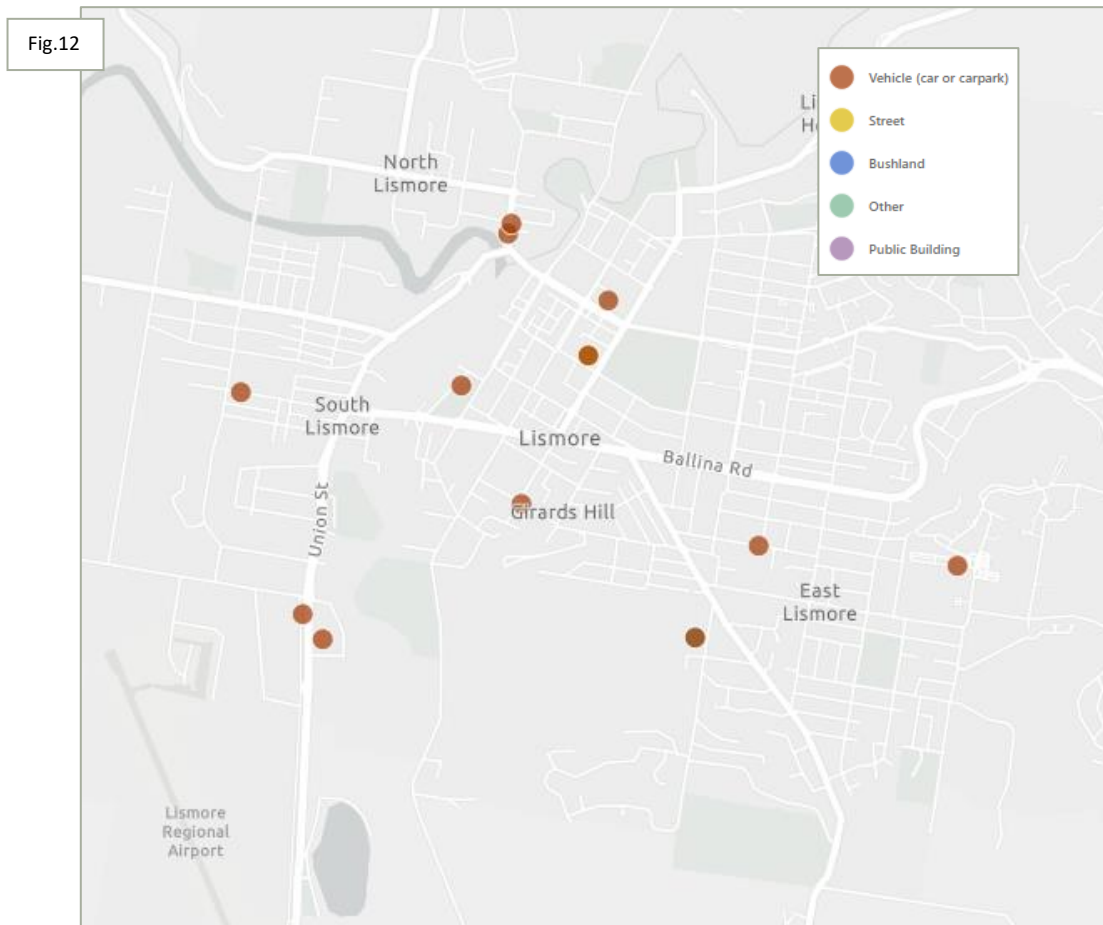
VI. Tweed surrounding areas

Figure 8, 9, 10, & 11 – Observations across Tweed Shire by Location Type

Evidence of people in classification 1C experiencing homelessness was observed through these areas. There were many secluded parking areas for vehicles to set up.

VII.   Lismore

Figure 12 – Observations across Lismore by Location Type
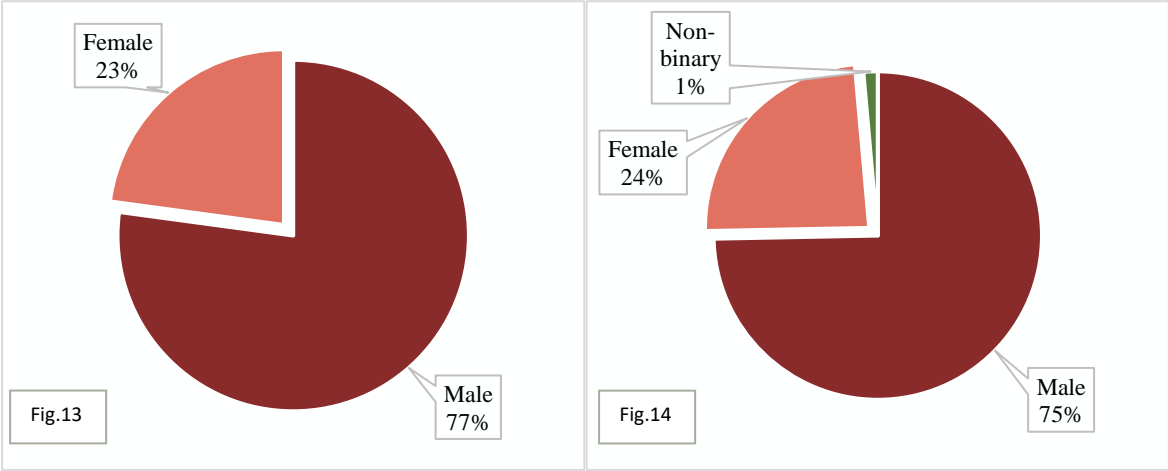

Some evidence of people in vans experiencing homelessness was observed through Lismore. We learnt from a contact at The Winsome (drop-in centre and emergency accommodation provider for men) that all their temporary accommodation was full (despite the drop-in centre not operating due to flood damage).

Demographics

While the BNL should be used as the primary source for individual level data – some demographic information (apparent gender and age) was captured along with observations where possible.
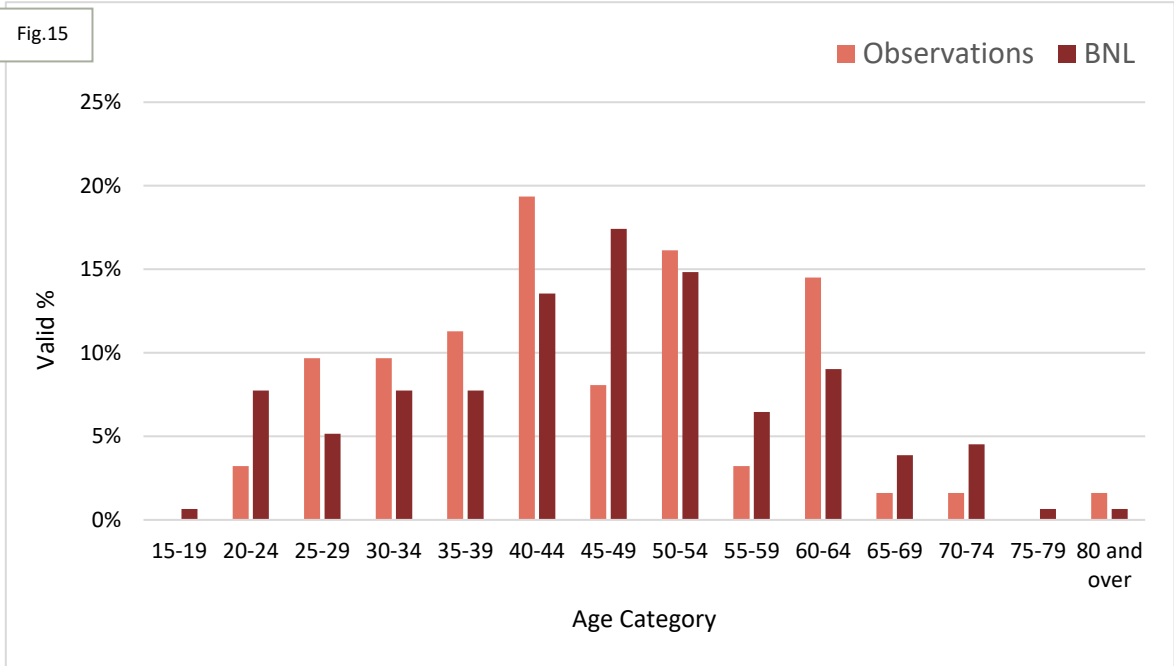
The apparent gender of the person/s was observed in only 70 of the 333 observations (21%). Of those 70 observations, 16 (23%) were noted as female and 54 (77%) as male. Looking at the BNL, 32% of the people who experienced homelessness on the Mid North Coast, Norther NSW and New England regions identified as female - higher than the rest of NSW (24%).

Figure 13 & 14– Observed Gender by Observations (left); Gender from BNL data (right)

Similarly, the apparent age of a person was recorded where possible with the observation. 62 (19%) observations of age were recorded out of the 333 observations. The distribution of apparent age was similar to what we observe on the BNL.

Figure 15 – Distribution of Apparent Age by Observations & Age from BNL data

The similarities between the distributions of apparent age and gender amongst observations and BNL data suggest that the floods did not disproportionately impact any demographic cohort.

By-Name List and Engagements

While adding individuals experiencing homelessness onto the By-Name List is vital to the ongoing understanding of homelessness in the region, the focus of this project was to capture the total number of individuals experiencing rough sleeping homelessness. It was decided during the outreach to prioritise the observational count rather than engagements and make engagements a priority in the next phase of the project. This decision was made on the basis that engagements often took a great deal of time, and outreach took place early in the morning while people were still in vehicles or asleep.

There were instances where we were able to engage with people. The majority of engagements were made back in the drop-in centres after outreach, at either Fred's Place in Tweed Heads or Fletcher St. Cottage in Byron Bay. Additionally, in instances where someone was not in a vehicle – and visibly vulnerable (sleeping on street/bushland/smaller vehicle with little equipment) we did engage and ask if they wanted to be added to the BNL or connected to services. The total number of people added to the BNL is 22.

The level of engagement made varied greatly. Some engagements were just casual conversations, letting a person know about what local services were available. Many engagements focussed on building trust. In more than a couple of instances we were able to connect a person with services but did not add them to the BNL, in line with their wishes. This is due to a mistrust of government/services and technology, which will continue to be a barrier to many people experiencing homelessness in the region.

Discussion

This project commenced within 2 days of its initiation and was designed to be adaptable to circumstances and need. After each outreach, the team would debrief about what worked, what didn't, and determine what the next day goals would be. Some of the learnings from these debriefs includes:

1. **Expanding the response:** after the first day, it was determined appropriate to split into two teams to cover more areas. While the response was initially for the Byron Shire, given the number of outreach workers that participated, the project able to be expanded into other Shires.
2. **Types of observations:** The definitions of the types of observation (car, car park, street, bushland, public building, and other) needed to be clarified. The use of "car" and "car park" was confusing. It was decided to tag all vehicles as "car", even if they were parked in a "car park".
3. **Focus of the response:** during the outreach, it was determined too time consuming to have meaningful engagements with individuals. It was decided that the focus

should be on competing the observations and gaining the total number of rough sleeping homelessness The time in the drop-in centres were focused on the continuation of meaningful engagements and entering and updating individuals onto the BNL.

There were some limitations to this project that included:

1. **Limited entry and updates to the BNL system:** Since there was a focus on observations and understanding the number of individual experiencing homelessness in each area, the time and ability to enter onto the BNL system was limited.
2. **The Observations:** in many cases it was difficult to accurately determine who was in the vehicles/tents, how many people were in the vehicles/tents, their real age, or the gender in which they identified. The collaborators and ESSC staff made judgements to the best of their ability. While this impacted accuracy, it was still beneficial to make these observations to understand the scope of the rough sleeping homelessness population in Northern Rivers.
3. **The Observation app:** Given the need for expediency, the app was developed for a single purpose. While the app was beneficial and effective during this project, it will need modifications for future use. It is crucial for this app to communicate with ESSC's BNL system to enrich our understanding of rough sleeping homelessness within communities. The Observations app will be continually updated with input from service users.

The above learnings and limitations have provided valuable information for the local collaborations to advocate and implement flood responses in the Northern Rivers. ESSC will work with collaboration partners to building and sharing a knowledge base. We will also use the outcomes and findings of this project to inform the next steps for the Northern Rivers Flood Response, which is discussed below.

Next Steps

Collaboration

ESSC will continue to collaborate with government and non-government organisations to engage with those experiencing rough sleeping homelessness. As next steps the goal is to connect with individuals who were previously experiencing homelessness and are now in the camps and/or in temporary accommodation. The long-term goal is to input as many of these individuals onto the BNL system to (1) accurately understand the number of individuals experiencing rough sleeping homelessness, and (2) understand the needs and level of supports for these individuals.

After understanding the total number and what the needs are, ESSC will work with local services to coordinate a response for these individuals to place the appropriate supports around them and advocate for secure and affordable housing.

Advocacy

This project was established to provide evidence to test the anecdotal view that homelessness in vehicles is increasing. Next steps will be to compare current findings with past and current data to see if this view is correct.

While it is unclear what the direct impact of the floods was on those previously experiencing rough sleeping homelessness, it is clear that those individuals were indirectly affected. These indirect affects on individuals include limited access to temporary accommodation solutions and disruptions to existing supports. The data collected during this project and subsequent work will be used to advocate for access to temporary accommodation and the inclusion of these individuals onto the priority housing list.

Organisation details:

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