

John Stewart

Conductor and Founder, Living School

RE: Response to SES Concerns Regarding 69 Woodlark Street, Lismore

Dear Kirra Waine and NSW SES Team,

Thank you for your thoughtful and comprehensive correspondence regarding our development application for the adaptive re-use of 69 Woodlark Street, Lismore. We deeply value the role of the NSW SES in safeguarding our community and acknowledge the depth of your assessment regarding flood risk, public safety, and land use planning. Your feedback provides a vital framework for enhancing both our emergency management planning and the resilient design of our facilities.

As founder of Living School, a progressive, place-based educational initiative committed to strengthening the community of Lismore, I wish to respond to the specific issues raised in your letter and demonstrate how our planning aligns with flood resilience and student safety.

1. Flood History and Risk Awareness

We acknowledge the flood history of this site. As identified, the building has experienced inundation at the lower levels during the 2001, 2009, 2017, and 2022 events - with the February 2022 flood breaching a portion of the second floor. This event, widely recognised as a 1-in-500-year event, represents an extraordinary occurrence. Nevertheless, we do not take that history lightly.

Over the past 25 years, only once has floodwater reached above the ground floor. That said, we are not assuming this pattern will hold. Our design and planning accept that floods will continue - and we are committed to making this development an exemplar of safe, adaptive re-use in a regional floodplain context.

2. Building Design, Material Resilience, and Purposeful Use

The proposed works involve the conversion of the building into a school, with all primary learning areas located on the upper floor (14m AHD), exceeding the Flood Planning Level (13.58m AHD). This floor was untouched in the 2022 floods.

The lower level - acknowledged as the flood-affected zone - is deliberately designed using flood-resilient materials: polished concrete, hardwood framing, and villa board finishes. We have removed previous gyprock cladding, which retained moisture and mould, and instead created open-plan hard-surface areas that function as flexible play and community zones.

A rainforest-inspired garden acts as a natural flood sink. Should water enter the lower level, the landscape will recover via a wash-and-mulch approach, aligned with ecological resilience principles.

Our construction and renovation strategy - developed with engineers, architects, and flood consultants - intentionally incorporates mitigation and recovery planning into every decision.

3. Evacuation Capacity and Emergency Readiness

The SES concern regarding the potential for people being “trapped” is respectfully acknowledged. However, our site is **not residential**, and we operate with a strict early-closure policy in flood scenarios.

Living School is already successfully operating a CBD campus on Conway Street, and our response to the recent **TC Alfred** weather event involved a seamless and pre-emptive relocation of students and staff to Southern Cross University - our secondary campus. This model of evacuation is now embedded in our Emergency Management Plan (EMP), which has been updated with reference to the **2023 Lismore Flood Emergency Sub Plan** and the Australian Warning System (AWS).

We do not rely on last-minute directives. Our protocols are proactive and responsive to AWS alerts, local forecasts, and live Bureau of Meteorology gauge data. Our staff are trained in flood awareness, and our private bus fleet allows flexible and rapid relocation.

The school will not operate during any moderate-to-major flood warnings. Our policy is clear: **no staff or students will be on site if flood risk is elevated**. Our emergency plans are actively rehearsed and communicated to parents and carers through written updates and simulation exercises.

4. Community-Embedded Emergency Culture

We are not newcomers to flood awareness. We live, work, and learn in the floodplain and understand its risks better than most. Our engagement with this building is not speculative - it is restorative. It brings vibrancy and purpose back to the heart of Lismore, without adding strain to emergency services.

Further, our decision to occupy and repurpose an existing structure rather than build new on greenfield land is part of a broader regional adaptation strategy - one that supports renewal and resilience within the urban footprint.

We welcome the SES's recommendation to liaise with the NSW Reconstruction Authority, and have already initiated contact to ensure our project aligns with the **Northern Rivers Disaster Adaptation Plan**. The NSW RA has reached out to discuss how they can further support this proposal.

5. Risk to Life and Adaptive Planning

Our plans do not increase risk to life. Instead, they reduce the vulnerability of the site by re-imagining it as a flood-aware educational facility with robust protocols. Students will never be isolated at the school.

Should flood risk occur during a school day, our logistics allow for full site evacuation to Southern Cross University via Carrington Lane > Conway Street > Wyrallah Road, a well-established egress route, well before any overtopping of the levee system occurs.

Our Flood Emergency Response Plan (FERP) is specific to the site and integrates AWS-based triggers, climate change projections, and community response mechanisms. While we acknowledge the SES's concerns regarding reliance on private plans, we stress that this plan is not a stopgap - it is an active, resourced and community-aligned system, already tested in practice.

6. Our Broader Vision

Living School is a social enterprise in education, built to be embedded in community and accountable to its place. We are not simply building a school - we are cultivating a movement of young people who are flood-literate, place-aware, and hopeful for the regeneration of Lismore's CBD.

We wish to acknowledge the SES's role as a vital partner in this conversation. Your insights have led us to improve our terminology (replacing "evacuation order" with AWS-aligned language), review site-specific flood maps, and consult with additional state authorities on mitigation.

In Closing

Living School extends its thanks to the NSW SES for the considered and professional advice offered. We believe your input strengthens our resolve to manage this site with integrity, pragmatism, and care.

Together, we are forging a new model for responsible floodplain education - where progressive schooling meets climate adaptation and risk-aware community renewal.

Sincerely,

John Stewart

Conductor and Founder Living School

<https://living.school> | <https://living.academy>