



**Sharon Grierson MP
Federal Member for Newcastle**

21 June 2007

Storm Recovery Effort

Ms GRIERSON (Newcastle) (11.23 am)—I rise today to update the House on the wonderful, selfless work of the people contributing to the recovery effort in Newcastle and the Hunter in the wake of the devastating long weekend storms. Last Friday, I had the opportunity to invite the Leader of the Opposition, Kevin Rudd, to Newcastle to meet some of the people affected by the storms and to visit the SES headquarters and the disaster recovery centre. I want to put on the record my appreciation, and my region's appreciation, that the opposition leader could show his support for us in this very meaningful way.

And support is still needed. We met people who had still not been able to come home, who still needed to have their carpet pulled up or were still going through their possessions working out what they could salvage.

Newcastle's famous spirit—based on networks of family, friends, community groups, volunteer organisations, businesses, civic leaders and government agencies—has been there to help right from the start. In the Hamilton street we visited last week, men and women, adults and children, cats and dogs and even a rabbit—from up and down the street—all spent the first wild Friday night of the storms together, welcomed in by their neighbours into one of the few houses not inundated. There are countless stories of heroism that night from ordinary people who just happened to be in the right place to assist and who often put their own safety in jeopardy to do so.

The State Emergency Service, Westpac Rescue Helicopter, Newcastle Port Corporation, ambulance and police were vital in providing the first response. To all of them, I give our region's sincere thanks. While we mourn for those who we have tragically lost, we cherish every life that was saved. As we continue the recovery phase, our community organisations have been outstanding. Groups like the Red Cross, St Vincent de Paul, the Adventist Development and Relief Agency and Anglicare, to name but a few, have been providing much needed relief to families. The Newcastle Law Society has been providing advice and referrals and next week is hosting a community forum about legal matters that may arise out of the storms.

In the corporate sector, I noted yesterday that Woolworths has made a big donation to the Salvation Army's appeal while EnergyAustralia and Telstra, aside from their work getting people's phones and power back on, are offering forms of assistance to account holders. The Newcastle Permanent Building Society has put \$250,000 into a fund to

help people out. There are many other businesses in our region generously giving to relief efforts.

Of the Commonwealth government agencies, I would particularly like to pay a special tribute to Centrelink staff in the region who have done an outstanding job—in particular, the Wallsend office in processing people's claims for disaster assistance payments. Centrelink tells me that it had processed some 2,000 claims for this payment as of Monday, which is an incredibly quick response to a very real need in our community. Centrelink staff flew in from North Queensland this week to help, the same as Newcastle staff had done for the North Queensland communities following Cyclone Larry. It is important to remember that these workers have also been personally affected by the storms. This applies to all people who worked during the storms and in the aftermath. They did it even when their own homes, families or businesses may have been under threat or damaged.

I am very happy to report to the House that the insurance problems some people were experiencing last week are being resolved. I acknowledge the hard work being done on the ground by Insurance Council of Australia representatives and commend the work of call centre staff and assessors in looking at about 30,000 claims thus far. I trust that any further problems will be rectified quickly and smoothly for people who continue to face great financial and emotional hardship from these storms. Our experience in the earthquake almost 20 years ago tells us that the loss is ongoing and the harm is substantial. I think in the aftermath of the earthquake another 30 people died from stress related health problems. We have to keep a watchful eye on our communities in the future. At this time, people in our region do not need any more pressure. Make no mistake: this has been an enormously difficult time for us all, but we will be vigilant. We are tough and we will stick together to support our communities.

To those people in the worst affected areas of my electorate—Beresfield, Hamilton, Merewether, Millers Forest, New Lambton, Wallsend, Woodbury, Hamilton North and elsewhere—your determination and good humour in the face of adversity is an inspiration. That you took the time to support others was a wonderful tribute to the people of those streets and those affected suburbs. Last night I passed on to Mark Scott, ABC managing director, my appreciation for ABC 1233 and, in fact, all local media for the sterling job they did in providing human contact and information for the people affected by the storms.