



# Get Ready for Flood Community Housing Sector Project (Hawkesbury Nepean Valley)

**Action research insights Briefing Paper  
Community Housing Providers**



THE UNIVERSITY OF  
SYDNEY



**INNER SYDNEY VOICE**  
regional social development council



The Get Ready for Flood Social Housing Sector Project was a joint initiative by Inner Sydney Voice and Infrastructure NSW, and was funded under the Hawkesbury-Nepean Flood Risk Management Strategy. The University of Sydney was the Project Research Partner co-ordinating Participatory Action Research throughout. The Project utilised a sector capacity building approach and was implemented in two stages.

During Stage 1, a Disaster Resilience Network was formed to map key issues facing social housing tenants in the Hawkebury-Nepean Floodplain, bringing major stakeholders including community housing providers, local government, emergency management agencies, local community services organisations, government and social housing tenants. Gaps in disaster preparedness in relation to social housing tenants and strategies to build tenant and sector support and resilience capacity were identified.

Stage 2 of the Project enacted strategies from Stage 1 including training and development in disaster preparedness with community housing providers, local community service providers and tenants. Flood preparedness information in the form of a flyer was developed collaboratively with tenants. In Stage 2 a number of opportunities for ongoing network and capacity development amongst stakeholders were identified as part of long-term flood preparedness for vulnerable populations in the Hawkesbury-Nepean Floodplain.

The Participatory Action Research (PAR) process which ran throughout the Project provided real time data to Project Leaders and stakeholders as the Project progressed. This meant that refinement, based on research evidence could be undertaken to ensure learning was translated immediately into project design and implementation. Use of PAR in this Project ensured quick and practical feedback loops for each activity and for Project objectives overall. This supported a process of adaptation and responsiveness throughout.

Project processes and outcomes are reported in a series of Briefing Papers focused on different aspects and stakeholder groups. This Briefing Paper is one of a set which cover all key elements of Project design, implementation and outcomes.

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Community Housing Providers (CHPs) were seen as key access points to building disaster awareness and community resilience among social housing residents in the Hawkesbury-Nepean floodplain. This briefing paper details the key insights from the action research undertaken by the University of Sydney that supported the project.

The original planning for the project did not anticipate the complexity of the task of engagement with CHPs. An initial mapping of CHPs across the floodplain identified at least eight agencies involved in the provision of subsidies housing.

*"I had no idea myself that there were so many different social housing providers. That was one of the biggest eye openers I discovered that there was all these people sitting around the table, and they've got six or seven, they've got nine different providers, I had no idea at all that that's the case."*

EM Agency

Among CHPs there was considerable diversity, including government (Department of Communities & Justice), large and medium non-government and specialist providers. Some were located within the region whilst others outreached from some distance. These agencies had successfully tendered to the NSW State Government to provide subsidies housing to eligible tenants and as such can be conceived as 'competitors' rather than natural collaborators.

*"...services are quite competitive and protective with one another, so that's a challenging landscape in itself when you try to say 'look, here's a common threat, or a common opportunity' even, just to get people together to have a conversation and start to consider 'how as a service system we could all work to the same end on something'."*

OT

This was highlighted in survey data which indicated 63% of CHP client officers indicated prior to the training they 'never' worked with other organisations to help prepare residents for disasters.

In the initial months of the Project, it became clear that CHPs faced many challenges in resourcing tenants to build disaster awareness and community resilience. Involvement in this type of work was not incorporated in tender documents and hence was un(der) resourced. CHP staff carry very significant caseloads, reducing their capacity to actively engage with individual tenants. Over time it also became clear that data, including that held by government, on the profile and needs of social housing residents was limited; specifically when it came to additional support needs like those living with a disability etc. An important step in the Project was the identification and mapping of CHP owned properties across the floodplain. Once the location of CHP properties were mapped various flood scenarios were overlaid, illustrating the extent of flood risk. This was new information and created a much greater awareness in the CRN of the flood risk facing social housing residents.

This context meant that at least the first 12 months of the Project was required to build knowledge and engage with CHPs. One CHP participant noted they had to work internally within their agency to explore:

*"What on earth are we actually responsible for in the event of a natural disaster as a social landlord? I'm only just beginning to understand how emergency services work in case of a natural disaster like a flood."*

CHPs who participated on the Social Housing Community Resilience Network (Social Housing CRN) on an ongoing basis included: Mission Australia; Evolve Housing; Platform Youth Services; Hume Housing; and Link Wentworth Housing, who held the largest housing stock across the region. Other CHPs were invited but did not attend. During August and September 2019 each of these members were asked to identify their roles and responsibilities in relation to disaster preparedness and building community resilience. Most members did not see this as core to their work, but those who did so identified:

- Educating tenants and building tenant's resilience
- Empowering tenants and addressing social isolation
- Duty of care to tenants to prepare them for emergencies and empower them
- Educating our clients about the risks in line with the advice we receive from emergency services; Regularly evaluate (and refresh where needed) client's knowledge of the issue and suggested tips; Potentially work on a database of clients that are more vulnerable i.e aged complexes (if relevant); Develop a policy position for the above to embed it into our business

Insights from the action research suggests that prior to participation in the Committee, disaster preparedness was a low priority for CHPs in their work to support residents. Survey results support this with over half (53%) of CHP client officers who completed the training (see below) rarely or never spoke with residents about disaster preparedness. The Project's assumption that CHPs would be well placed to support social housing residents to prepare for disaster shifted through a more nuanced understanding of the relationship between CHPs and tenants:

*"It's always a funny dynamic for us because we are landlords, so our clients expect a level of privacy from us in a sense, if that makes sense. At the same time, our clients are people who often do require extra support and there's an expectation that we are responsible for some of that as well so just trying to find the right balance between leaving people alone and being of service."*

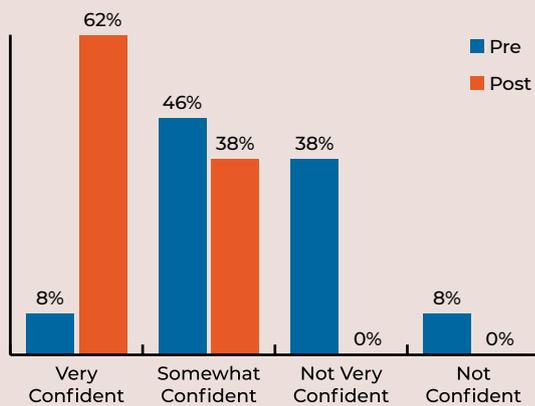
CHP

To some extent there was evidence of resistance among CHP staff to taking on another responsibility without additional resourcing or adequate expertise. There was a belief among CHPs that disaster preparedness was the responsibility of Emergency Management Agencies (EM Agencies). CHPs spoke of being 'directed' by EM Agencies and following advice given, rather than taking an active leadership role.

The Project's focus on training in the second part of the Project appeared to tap into the desire of CHPs' to build their staff expertise. Training was offered within specific CHPs' and strongly supported by managers.

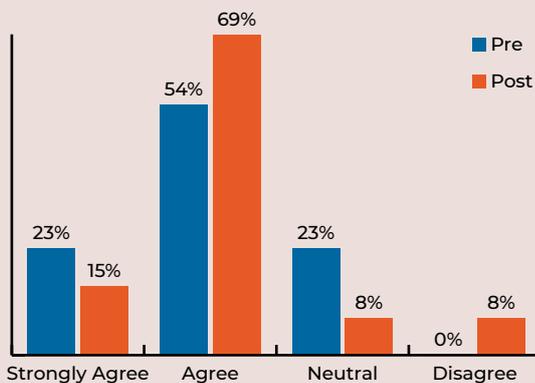
The aim of the training sessions was to build awareness, provide information and change behaviours of participants. The graph below illustrates the very positive impact on participants confidence, with those 'very confident' increasing from 8% to 62%.

**Graph 1. I know where to get information about disaster preparedness**



However, whilst participants (mostly CHPs Community Service Officers) expressed greater confidence, ambivalence to some extent increased about their roles in disaster preparedness after the training. The catastrophic portrayals in the training of inevitable flood disaster within the Hawkesbury-Nepean floodplain may have inadvertently led some participants to reassess their capacity to respond.

**Graph 2. I feel disaster preparedness as a core to my role**



One of the concerns expressed and identified by CHPs was their capacity to meet expectations in relation to disaster preparedness, response, and recovery. Towards the end of the Project quite a lot of discussion occurred among the various stakeholders about how the momentum of the Community Resilience Network (CRN) could be maintained. A number of people felt that a CHP (most likely Link Wentworth) was best placed to provide leadership and resourcing of the CRN in the future. No CHP expressed a desire or a capacity to take on the role of facilitating the regional network such as the CRN. There was also some discussion that identified the Community Housing Industry Association (the peak organisations for CHPs) as this would overcome localised competition among providers. The CHPs suggested that any future facilitation role was beyond their capacities and would require specific funding.

### Recommendations

1. We recommend the development of stronger collaborative networks between CHPs, local community organisations (NGOs) providing support to tenants and local government. Supporting disaster preparedness effectively with tenants requires both broader and more dense relationships and networks between CHPs and other stakeholders. CHPs are one vital part of a broader ecosystem supporting disaster resilience with tenants and the need for support from other parts of that system was highlighted throughout the Project.
2. We recommend follow up training and support for CHP staff in building on confidence and skill levels in disaster preparedness with tenants which was started in the initial training. This is essential to support ongoing work with tenants in both practical preparedness and organisational capacity for integrating a disaster component in tenant support in policy as well as practice.
3. We recommend that future funding agreements with CHP's should look at identifying and recognising the role that key social service sectors (including CHP's place in DRR and building in that role/including funding and resourcing for this activity).