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

Action research insights Briefing Paper
Community Housing Residents

THE UNIVERSITY OF SYDNEY

INNER SYDNEY VOICE
regional social development council

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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.

Shared learnings: social housing tenants' participation

The participation of people living in social housing was central to the Project, as its name suggests. Six social housing tenants participated in the Project at different times, and in different ways. Participation included membership on the Community Resilience Network (CRN), contribution via individual interviews, and attendance at a customised flood awareness training session held at tenants' request. In addition, the Project coordinator met with residents as a separate group prior to each CRN meeting, to ensure that they had space and confidence to share their concerns and ideas. This was important as the CRN meetings usually involved large numbers of attendees, representing a range of stakeholders (several in uniform), and discussions were often fast-moving and jargon-filled. This environment had the potential to silence social housing residents, despite good will and good intentions from other Network members.

The Project coordinator played an important role in inviting and supporting residents to participate in all aspects of the Project. The importance of founding sustainable community disaster resilience on relationships and trust was a theme that emerged throughout the Project, and this was particularly evident in the involvement of social housing residents over the Project's course.

> *"I was just invited, she liked the way I spoke so she asked me to be on the committee and I'm happy to learn and help in any way I can."*
>
> Community member

> *"I've shown [Project coordinator], I've taken [her] around the area ... and there's another person in (neighbouring area) that's taken her around just for the community housing side of it."*
>
> Community member

Community members living in social housing brought a valuable perspective to discussions, contributing knowledge, wisdom, and expertise.

> "I noticed at the last meeting, it was good because I actually felt like I was heard. I noticed I'd said a couple of things and it started a chain of conversation, which was really great."
>
> Community member

> "...(don't) only discuss (things that went wrong) with the people say from the high up end, discuss it everyone all the way down so we're all on the same page. So that we're not left out, it's transparent."
>
> Community member

In turn, the opportunity to participate in this way strengthened connections between social housing tenants and service providers on the network. It was evident that service providers also valued the input of these community members in network discussions. The Project demonstrated early steps in dialogue, good will, and an expanding understanding of the diversity and complexity of tenants' perspectives. However, it also highlighted that sustaining the reciprocal nature of these discussions is likely to require a longer-term commitment, to avoid slipping back to reliance on unilateral information-giving and hierarchical relationships.

> "Then the people on the other side of the social housing people, they need not only education, but they need to have a voice and be consulted. I think this thing is a really good thing, because it's the first step in getting that done, and obviously it's been recognised by the government that there's a big hole there. Yeah, so education."
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> EM Agency

> "Just because you're in social housing doesn't mean you don't have to be prepared. It's not going to mean that someone is going to be there to help pack you up and get you out. You have to have a sense of resilience and independence and for us to know who are the more vulnerable of those people."
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> EM Agency

In interviews, tenants described the diversity of local neighbourhoods, both in terms of individuals' personal characteristics and their engagement with informal social networks. This is an important point to consider in disaster resilience planning. Tenants in social housing, like the population more broadly, are not a homogenous group for whom a "one size fits all" approach will be effective.

"When I was at [locality] my neighbours weren't very friendly, so they didn't really, no one came knocking on my door and I didn't really know them and I stayed away from them because they weren't friendly, they weren't very friendly in that respect."

Community member

"(Neighbour) is on total oxygen supply. They've actually wired up her unit so she can move around with it but she's on the oxygen. If everything went down, how does she get on? So, there's more than just people on walking sticks who can still walk out of the premises. Some people can't and the social housing is going to have a higher propensity of those types of people I would imagine, than normal private rentals through real estate agents and everything."

Community member

Interviews with CRN members from multiple sectors suggest that, while learning occurred over the course of the Project, the differential impacts of disasters on people living in social housing requires further exploration. This is a complex area, as universal human rights and value are weighed against individual strengths and vulnerabilities.

"A lot of our tenants would like to have privacy from their neighbours as well [as from their landlord] and they don't necessarily want to engage and participate in the way that as community workers we assume that they do. I really had to question my assumptions about participation and people's motivation to participate in things. I think I'm gaining a new healthy respect for the choice to not participate and just trying to think about how do we make it so that people can have a say about things without necessarily having to engage in ways that they don't want to and still make sure that they can connect and be more connected to each other if they want to. Also if they don't want to, that they might know their neighbour enough or they might know to know enough to look after each other in case of a natural disaster."

CHP

"...if it's fire, floods, cyclone, it can even be just a train smash and all those sorts of things associated, it doesn't matter what the event is, the outcome's going to be the same for the people at the other end, on the receiving end of the disaster. It's just the type and the combat agency that changes, the outcomes and the whatevers, the victims and whatever, they're all the same people."

EM Agency

Similarly, gaining a deep and nuanced understanding of diversity within the social housing population requires a commitment to including people with a range of views and abilities; this includes a willingness from professional network members to examine their own assumptions and practices in order to create space for community members who may be unfamiliar with formal conventions and expectations.

At the request of the CRN's community housing resident representatives, a focused training session provided further information and an opportunity for interaction in a workshop format. The training session was co-facilitated by representatives of Infrastructure NSW, State Emergency Service, and Inner Sydney Voice. The session responded to residents' areas of interest, which included practical knowledge and information about preparation and response to disaster events, but also discussion about maintaining awareness and how to share information with neighbours. Specifically, participants indicated concern about how to avoid spreading fear, and how to respond to negative responses, reflecting a deeper and more nuanced engagement with local resilience building.

Throughout the Project, the social housing residents brought a number of practical concerns, reflecting their immediate priorities. A concern for access to a ready and accessible source of flood preparedness information led to the development of an infographic. The Project coordinator worked closely with the social housing residents on the content and presentation of this infographic, with advisory input from the wider CRN, and its completion represented a tangible outcome of residents' engagement over a long period. In addition to the infographic itself, its creation was evidence of a cooperative design process in which much mutual learning occurred.

The active participation of social housing residents throughout the different phases and activities of the Project demonstrated that they were:

• advocates for their local neighbourhoods,

• connection points for exchange of information between neighbours and service providers (for example, distributing leaflets to neighbours, sharing information via a community radio program),

• informants about critical emergency response considerations (awareness of neighbours' social isolation, communication impairments, disability, language/literacy)

• interested and enthusiastic CRN participants, with support and encouragement

• Creative, innovative, and passionate about their communities.

Recommendations:

1. Active inclusion of community housing residents in disaster planning discussions. The Project demonstrated that social housing residents' active participation in the CRN activities was of benefit to service providers and to their wider communities as well as to themselves.

2. Provision of support to facilitate effective engagement and contribution. Following on from Recommendation 1, it was noted that many factors work against sustained involvement of residents, including the features of formal meetings that explicitly or implicitly exclude them from meaningful input. Thus, active and ongoing support (such as via a funded coordinator or mentor) is recommended to ensure the sustainability of this valuable aspect of community resilience building.