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

Action research insights Briefing Paper Information

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.

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In both Stage 1 and Stage 2 the Project adopted an information strategy targeting social housing tenants, other community members and staff within Community Housing Providers (CHPs) and welfare agencies (NGOs). This Action Research Insight reports on the strengths and limitations of this strategy drawing on observation and interviews. It concludes with recommendations for future information strategies.

A review of existing research (Howard et al, 2020) identified information as a key pillar in supporting community-led disaster preparedness and resilience building. In particular it found:

· Multi way communication and information flow between Emergency Management Agencies (EM Agencies) and communities, is essential for community members to understand and act on disaster planning.

· Different groups in the community engage with information in very different ways so a range of engagement and communication activities and strategies need to be used.

· The dissemination of information is supported by strong relationships between local EM staff or volunteers and community networks (both formal and informal). These relationships will be strengthened by an ongoing community led planning process.

In this Insight we focus on a number of questions in relation to the information strategy: what were the sources of information and how were they used? how did information flow within the community? how relevant was information? how was information dissemination co-ordinated? and how was information translated to action?

Interestingly, a great deal of faith was placed in information as a key strategy in preparing tenants and Community Housing providers for flood by all participants in the Project. This faith in information has been found in other disaster-related projects (Gibbs et al. 2015) suggesting there is considerable community buy-in that can be a useful resource in resilience building.

Information Sources and Resources

The activities of the CRN and training were heavily influenced by SES and Infrastructure NSW information products. These products were of high quality and powerfully communicated the dangers posed by flood in the Hawkesbury-Nepean valley. The BOM (Bureau of Meteorology) website was described as 'the one truth' repeatedly by Emergency Management members of the CRN, somewhat at odds with the notion that information ideally is multi-directional.

Tenants involved in the CRN meetings strongly advocated for locally produced, tailored, information products. They worked alongside the Project officer and SES staff to develop a flyer to be distributed to social housing residents by Community Housing providers. Considerable work was undertaken to ensure the flyer used accessible English and covered the breadth of information needed succinctly. Plans are currently underway to have the flyer translated into a number of community languages.

> *"I suppose where I'm going with that is that the tenants are driving some of the need for change. And for information for tenants to help them get ready. So, I thought that was quite a positive outcome from the stuff."*
>
> **CHP**

The Project was successful in including a range of voices and tailoring information to a range of uses. Follow up research on the dissemination and use of the flyer would provide additional insights into the potential of these information products design and use. Social Housing tenants acknowledged that their participation in the CRN and the Project created a source of information for their personal use as well as wider dissemination within their networks.

> *"So it was really good information for me. It gave me I suppose, personal information – yet I was learning, and it was good."*
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> **Community member**

We found positive evidence of information flow between tenants, Community Housing Providers, welfare agencies and Emergency Management Agencies created by the Project.

> *"[Our resident] attended some of the training and stuff. And he came back to the meeting and wanted to put together a preparedness handbook. And we noticed that – actually council sent us through a link - that Inner City Voice had actually produced something. Quite a substantial booklet kind of handbook with quite a bit of information. They sent me an actual pdf file of the document. And they were happy for us to have a look at that. That was a direct result of him attending that training."*
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> **CHP**

The final and in some ways most important question we asked was 'how was information translated to action?' Participants in the Project, particularly those in government, were acutely aware of the challenge of influencing behaviours through information. Facilitating access to information was only the first step. Communicating information was identified as a significant challenge even when the 'messaging' was quite simple. One CRN member noted

> *"But the same messages go out. I mean the classic one was especially in the last week or after this weekend, telling people, "Don't drive through flood water." Yet, they say it every time. I think it was one of the guys from emergency services says, "You know what, we're going to say this. And within the next hour there will be 20-odd rescues that we have to do. Because people just don't get it." So, I don't think there's anything new in any of this stuff necessarily. It's just getting the same message out."*

Distributing, Receiving and Acting on Information

Data from meeting observations, surveys and interviews revealed a number of important questions within many disaster focused information strategies which draw attention to the gaps between information dissemination and community capacity for practical action. These include:

How is information received?

In this Project, an assumption that social housing tenants, CHPs and other stakeholders lacked the information they needed to be prepared for disaster underpinned the information strategies developed. Research data supports the validity of this assumption, however over the life of the Project there were significant differences in understanding between key stakeholders about how the relationship between information given and how it was received fundamentally shaped the ways in which information would be used. One example of this is in the differences between the views of some emergency management agencies who argued that once information is given to community members, it is their responsibility to act on that information and get ready for a disaster, and those of tenants, who argued that it is important that information is designed and delivered in an accessible way which provides achievable practical steps and does not overwhelm people who are often already experiencing crisis. Over the life of the Project, an increasingly sophisticated approach to design, scale, technical detail and practicality of information was evident. The Action Research Team (ART) and other stakeholders paid increasing attention to the ways in which target audiences received, understood and were able to act on information and this process yielded increased engagement and action based on information strategies. From the start the Project adopted an approach which focused on the ways in which social housing tenants were able to access, interpret and act on new information. A shift away from context free, simple and crisis-oriented messages (Leave early, know what you will do) towards more targeted, contextual and localised information across both Stages of the Project enabled more effective information to be developed and distributed, increased buy-in and in some cases collaboration with tenants and CHP providers, and clearly framed information as a multi-way process embedded in shared responsibilities rather than only with the recipient of information. By the end of the Project,

detailed attention to the quality of the relationship between information giver and receiver meant that training and follow up (although not completely free of some information participants found overwhelming) was designed and delivered with information as a conversation rather than a purely one way presentation.

What is required for action to be taken?

In grappling with this question, information gathered and utilised throughout the Project contributed to a similar shift to that described above. Rather than an assumption that once received social housing tenants were in possession of all they needed to get ready for a disaster, Project workers and the ART were able to gather and analyse information from tenants and other stakeholders which highlighted critical contextual challenges (lack of transport, lack of friends and family to stay with, mental health issues, disability, limited income) which needed to be addressed before social housing tenants were able to practically act on any information they received. This link between information and context resulted in a number of disaster planning considerations and precipitated both advocacy and further network building between the Project and key emergency management and community stakeholders.

Here information was vital but not sufficient for action by social housing tenants, however, information from tenants was able to expand current knowledge and contribute to disaster response planning.

What is expert information?

Information consistency (often referred to as 'the one truth') in disasters is a priority for EM Agencies, particularly during disaster response. The provision of central information from one reliable source was seen as valuable by both tenants and other stakeholders during times of crisis. During the Project a number of disasters where experienced by communities in the Hawkesbury-Nepean Catchment, however, and information was experienced as more chaotic and confusing for many. In this Project the role of expert information was key as was the question about whose expertise was valued. While narrowly focused and action-oriented information may be appropriate for evacuation orders and other response-based information to broad audiences during a disaster, a key learning from this Project was the importance of including a diverse range of information to shape disaster preparedness, particularly for groups who have experienced exclusion from mainstream

processes. Research data reveals significant contributions made by community organisations (local NGOs), Council, social housing residents and community groups. The information provided by each of these groups was able to be utilised at all stages of the Project to inform activities, planning and advocacy. This expert information was, however, largely invisible in formal emergency management planning processes. The work of the Project contributed to bridging this gap between expert knowledges through acting as a conduit and network builder across sectors, communities and groups. This work was vital and requires ongoing support, however, at the end of the Project there remains a question about who can take responsibility for this ongoing work.

Recommendations for future information strategies

1. All design and delivery of disaster preparedness information with social housing tenants must include co-design with tenants to ensure the information is accessible, inclusive of local knowledge and tenant experiences, and able to be actioned at a local level.

2. In disaster preparedness work, the inclusion of expert information must include collaboration with a broad range of local experts including those outside formal Emergency Management Agencies. In the case of social housing tenants, information sharing between local community organisations, CHPs, Council and tenants themselves is essential for the development of detailed planning and support before during and after a disaster that meets the specific needs of this group.

3. Information that is developed should have a nuanced understanding of its audience's needs so that it speaks to existing issues/reflects barriers and creates doable, achievable calls to action.