



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

**Action research insights Briefing Paper
Local Government**



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 Hawkesbury-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.

This Action Research Insight focuses on the local government participation in the Project. Two Councils through their community development/community services staff were active participants in the Project whilst a third Council was only peripherally involved. This highlights the size and complexity of the region covered by the Project. During the life of the Project, the impacts of fire, flood and COVID highlighted the importance of local government in providing place based and locally focused support.

Local government provided a key conduit role during the Project conveying local knowledge, connecting the Project with local networks and communicating about Council focused initiatives and resources. Councils in the two local government areas were active participants in the Project. Cascading disasters in the Hawkesbury (bushfire, minor flood, COVID 19, major flood) resulted in Council playing an ongoing and central role in relation to both organisational networks and local communities.

The generalist remit of Council, which spans infrastructure, services, community engagement, funding, and planning, enabled a unique contribution both across hazards and across communities. This was observed particularly in the Hawkesbury where work ranged from on the ground community connecting with homeless community members living near the river, to supporting and advocating for community representation on the Local Emergency Management Committee (LEMC), to resource allocation for disaster preparedness, response and recovery in isolated communities, to co-ordination and network building with local non-government organisations.

During lockdown periods in 2020, local government workers were able to support the Project by joining the virtual community of practice and assisting in contextualising disaster preparedness for social housing tenants within a wider community context. Existing relationships and networks between Council and a range of non-government organisations were drawn on throughout the Project to link participating organisations. Council facilitation of Hawkesbury Connect provided a critical space for co-ordination, knowledge sharing and the development of local initiatives. During the period of COVID restrictions in 2020, this forum continued online providing continuity and connection for community groups and organisations.

In Stage 2 of the Project, the focus on South Windsor and Bligh Park encouraged discussion of the

intersections between geographic flood risk, social disadvantage, the logistics of evacuation for social housing tenants, and the support needs of community members both during a crisis and in preparing for it. In locating issues of preparedness for social housing tenants within very specific geographic locations based on flood impact, Council's role in service provision, governance, infrastructure and community support was highlighted. This was important in prioritising very locally focused initiatives which work practically with the intersecting challenges of place, disaster impact, disadvantage and support. Here local government was pivotal in planning and provision at a local level, a role which is quite different to that of community housing providers (CHPs), larger NGOs, State and Commonwealth government, who organise their services across geographic locations and targeting specific groups rather than in place-based communities.

Challenges for Councils

The central role of local government across such a wide range of areas highlighted a number of challenges. Project stakeholders were clear that Councils were critically important, particularly in supporting response and recovery activities, but the scope and specific responsibilities of Council in relation to social housing and social housing residents was less clear. Co-ordination between local government and Emergency Management Agencies (EM Agencies) emerged as a pivotal factor in local disaster planning. The membership of local government on the LEMC meant that the scope of this role was often framed by the imperatives of formal emergency management response. Longer term resilience building and community support, which was also a strong theme in Council's work over the life of the Project, seemed to operate in parallel with formal emergency response and recovery activities rather than in an integrated way. This reflection from a Project stakeholder illustrates this challenge:

"Top three things (desired project outcomes). Well, better coordination between emergency services, local council, and key influential voices in communities to get trusted information out. Number one."

NGO

Challenges around clarity of roles, co-ordination and scope between local government and a range of other players emerged as a consistent theme throughout the project. Social housing providers, residents and support services identified the need for clarity and consistent communication about roles as a significant barrier for effective disaster planning in relation to local residents living in social housing. The comment below succinctly summarises this challenge:

"Okay, in social housing specifically. Look, the first thing is to get people in the same room and talking and building a common understanding of who does what, what is the role of SES, what is the role of RFS, what is the role of council. What are the roles of the other government departments during times of emergency? And at what stage do they play their roles? I suspect that a lot of the mistrust or resentment and even the miscommunication that leads to missed action opportunities - because people don't understand who's doing what when. It's very easy to blame someone else not doing something without recognising well, that actually wasn't their responsibility in the first place."

NGO

This was a focus area for the Project and one where work was effectively commenced. Research findings consistently found the need for ongoing work on co-ordination and communication between all stakeholders (including community members, NGOs and other local community groups) as a priority, and the gaps in co-ordination and communication which currently exist as posing a significant risk to the safety of social housing residents.

Long term community building as disaster preparedness

A key gap identified in both Stage 1 and 2 of the Project was the need for ongoing, local community development work. Across the board, long term informal community networks and connections

between community members who were living in social housing, local community groups and organisations and local government were not evident or only evident in pockets. This quote illustrates the clear identification of this gap and the challenges in addressing it:

"I think there has been a shift, for sure, particularly around – for the emergency service perspective I think there has been a clear acknowledgement around the fact that we don't know enough about the vulnerable people in our community. And we don't know enough about how we need to support them. And there has been an acknowledgement that it is the community organisations like the neighbourhood centres and the housing providers, they're the ones who know these people and have that contact day to day with them. And so there is a need for us to have some form of relationship there...I think that's been progress because that wasn't there before. But I think there's a long way to go in terms of I guess recognising that – how that relationship works and recognising the community a bit better and figuring out the details of okay, well this is how we function together."

While Community Housing Providers employed community development or engagement workers, large caseloads and the landlord-tenant relationship which framed their work, meant that this work was time limited, occasional, and challenging. Disaster preparedness research both in Australia and overseas emphasises the importance of strong existing local relationships and social capital in communities which can be mobilised during times of disaster. Observations from the action research are consistent with this. All participants in the Project spoke about the lack of and need for long term community development in communities impacted by disasters where social housing residents were located. Our findings point to local government and

local non-government organisations as key in this work due to the place-based focus of their remit and its capacity to work across communities rather than only with specific target groups. In the Hawkesbury close relationships between Council and local place based NGOs strengthened links between planning and action for local community members, although this work was most often framed as case work or individual support rather than community building or development. It was clear that individual support provided by local NGOs is vital and this needs to be complemented by broader community connecting, capacity building and networks which were less evident. Research findings revealed that local government is playing a role in community resilience building but that this is still an emerging area of activity and remains at the margins of formal disaster planning. As two stakeholders commented:

"I feel like resilience and the work around that – it's nearly like a new language for council - and I think it means different things, even in different branches in council, let alone what we're broadly talking to the community about what resilience means. I mean our local emergency management plans – and I hear that we're not unique in this – they don't really reflect anything in regards to community."

LGA

"In terms of community resilience – again, I feel like that's a kind of emerging focus for council – I don't know that we've necessarily even really been considering the work of council through that lens, let alone actively involved in that state."

LGA

Investment in community building and community development has a long history in local government, but often fluctuates over time and place. In this Project the value of such work in laying the foundation for community resilience, particularly

amongst those most impacted by but least able to recover from disasters was evident throughout. Knowledge embedded in relationships at a local level was very limited across all organisations in the Project, but it was this knowledge, which was emphasised consistently as key to developing responsive strategies to ensure community safety in the event of a flood or other disaster. The Project laid foundations for ongoing dialogue and collaboration between local government and community members who are living in social housing, however, this foundation requires long term investment of time and resources to reach its potential. The unique opportunity to build connections between local government and community members here marks a promising direction for resilience building efforts in LGAs covered by the Project, as this reflection conveys:

“The way council at the moment talks about resilience – some of it’s tied to community events, which are really tourism promoting. Some of it’s related to volunteering, some of it’s related to small sponsorship grants. And it’s not to say that these things aren’t all means to a similar end, but I think that – and specific with this group – I mean the community are the experts here and I just feel like this project has real opportunities, certainly for our section, to hear directly from the community, which we don’t always get.

It’s typically through the filter of a service organisation – because that’s the nature of our work – and then sometimes our energies and efforts miss the mark as a result. So here’s an opportunity for us to be sitting around the table with people who are living in social housing residences and saying ‘this is my experience of being where I am’. And I just feel like what we currently do, certainly from our branch in terms of resilience, could look really different as a result.”

LGA

Local government currently plays a key co-ordination role at an LEMC level as well as through community development and engagement areas. The need for more proactive integration of these two focus areas was highlighted in the Project in relation to social housing tenants. The particular case of social housing in flood impacted areas requires an approach to preparedness which recognises and responds to the very real impacts of social disadvantage and exclusion in addition to individual health, mental health and disability needs. There was little evidence that mainstream planning and a reliance on information provision and individual capacity to prepare and evacuate in the context of social housing were effective strategies. Community services/development teams in local government consistently demonstrated a detailed understanding of the social impacts of disaster on those living at the margins in local communities (including social housing tenants). There was also strong evidence of active local networks and relationships with local community organisations.

Recommendation

1. It is recommended that local Emergency Management planning include community services/development representation and information as central if the needs of social housing tenants and other disadvantaged community members (those most impacted by disasters) are to be effectively addressed.
2. Local government community development work to include a disaster resilience building focus with particular consideration of disaster impacts on disadvantaged community members including social housing tenants.