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

Action research insights Briefing Paper
Non-Government Organisations

THE UNIVERSITY OF SYDNEY

INNER SYDNEY VOICE
regional social development council

NSW GOVERNMENT

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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Non-government organisations, separate from Community Housing Providers, were observed throughout the project, with two more detailed case studies of place-based local Non-government Organisations (NGOs) being undertaken during the period of COVID restrictions mid-2020. The case studies were developed as a method for data gathering during this period while face-to-face contact with communities and other stakeholders was not possible. They provided an ideal opportunity to track the experiences in real time of those working closely with community members, including social housing tenants, in the context of an unfolding disaster (the COVID-19 pandemic).

Local NGOs were invited to participate in a Zoom focus group to discuss changes, learning and reflections on working with community members during a time of crisis and rapid change. Two organisations expressed an interest in participating, with cross disciplinary teams from each organisation participating. Following the initial focus group discussion, organisations were invited to a follow-up focus group. Both organisations took up this opportunity.

Each of these organisations provided a range of individual and family welfare and support services to local people in areas with a high concentration of social housing and significant flood risk. At the time of the focus group discussions both organisations, together with their local communities, were also emerging from the direct impacts of an intense, prolonged and traumatic fire season.

Key themes emerging from these case studies provided important insights about connecting with and supporting community members, including social housing tenants:

1. Adaptability

Both NGOs demonstrated an impressive capacity to adapt rapidly to a radical change in their service provision model, shifting from face-to-face work to a completely online environment quickly and with a continuity of support for people across a range of services. The agility of small NGOs in particular is worth noting in the context of disaster response. Workers were able to devise, communicate and implement new models of support ranging from online playgroups to in-home meals and home care, to social support by phone or Zoom. The focus of both organisations on timely support for their client groups enabled workers to think and act very practically

between the imperatives of what was needed and what was possible, given a close to 100% change in approach over a few weeks.

2. Increased engagement

Interestingly, the imperative for change during the pandemic led directly to increased individual engagement with those using their services and a close sense of connection with and knowledge of service users. Workers reported that the need to make direct contact with clients via phone had resulted in a greater capacity to be responsive to specific needs.

The change from a centre-based service model to an outreach one, although more intensive, was experienced as positive for both workers and service users. Workers described an increased understanding of the home, family and local community context for those they were working with and were able to tailor support more effectively as well as connecting with other family and community supports for that person. This depth of knowledge was critical in engaging with disadvantaged and isolated community members.

> *"A lot of our clients actually, even though they're listening to the news, they were not fully understanding the directives and the messages that were coming out around safety. And so the role of the team has been so critical to ensuring their safety."*

In addition to deeper knowledge of existing service users, staff at one organisation told of an innovative approach to playgroup activities that saw the agency's reach extend, numerically and geographically, from approximately 20 local families previously to over 4,000 in the online format. This presented complex challenges in terms of defining boundaries and expectations from both funding bodies and community members. While demanding, however, increased engagement could also be experienced as rewarding and empowering.

> *"It's nice to know that we're reaching more people, and I think I want to continue doing it even when we go back into the centre for people who aren't able to come to playgroup or are out of area, stuff like that. It'd be good to still reach people."*

3. Recognition

Both of the case study organisations had provided support to local community members during and post past disasters, including fire and flood. Both saw their local knowledge and relationships as an important driver of this work. For each, this work was experienced as important but largely unrecognised within the broader realm of disaster management. While both organisations described their resources as available to be used in a disaster, neither had clear information about if or how this might happen. Workers spoke about both relational and material resources ranging from relationships and trust with isolated individuals and families to buses and food, which could be added to emergency management efforts during flood or bushfire events. The location of NGOs outside the formal emergency management processes and networks, however, meant that the role and contribution of the case study organisations was not included in deliberations about disaster preparedness. Both organisations expressed consistent willingness to be included in formal disaster planning in order for the work that they were already doing to be integrated with broader systems. This, however, had not been their experience to date.

4. Resource Limitations

Although there was strong evidence in both case study organisations that disaster preparedness, response and recovery work was being undertaken with a range of community members disproportionately impacted by disasters, both were poorly resourced to undertake this work. Funding provided for supporting a range of at-risk groups (older people, people living with disabilities, CALD community, low-income families) did not include consideration of the impact of cascading disasters (two floods, serious bushfires and COVID-19) which took place in the local area over the life of this project.

One organisation described how resource limitations were exacerbated by additional administrative requirements across multiple sectors, particularly as the pandemic unfolded. For example, programs for older people in the community could be caught administratively within other aged care accountability requirements, including for residential aged care settings. As a result, the organisation "completely revised (its) business continuity plan, taking into account all the requirements of different government departments", a significant undertaking at any time, and particularly while undertaking crisis-driven programmatic re-design.

During the latter stage of the project, one of the case study organisations was able to participate in staff and volunteer training in working with clients on disaster preparedness provided free through this Project. The availability of resources to support the organisation to work with their service users on disaster preparedness were welcomed with large numbers of staff and volunteers completing the training. Both case study organisations reported seeking additional resources for doing disaster resilience work to supplement the work they were already undertaking under long term resource pressure and limitations.

5. Ongoing relationships with community members at a local level

It was clear that both case study organisations exhibited long term locally focused relationships with community members who were experiencing a diverse range of disadvantage (including social housing tenants) that placed them in a unique position to engage with, provide support to and work alongside some of the most marginalised community members during all phases of the disaster cycle. These relationships also provided detailed and contextual knowledge about the needs of groups most impacted by disaster, which can potentially play a significant role in informing and shaping formal emergency management processes. There was no evidence of a mechanism or process through which this knowledge can be shared and utilised in formal disaster planning in an ongoing way, which means vital information is currently not in the mix as a matter of course in emergency planning.

Recommendations

1. Community resilience networks and formal disaster planning should include representation from NGOs, to ensure effective two-way communication of information, constraints, and resources. NGOs' depth of knowledge about their communities places them in an ideal position as both a source of knowledge to support and enhance emergency planning, and as a means of communicating such plans to community members who have specific additional support needs in relation to disaster preparation, response and recovery.

2. Expectations placed upon NGOs around service delivery, accountability and compliance, particularly in times of crisis response and recovery, should as far as possible be commensurate with their level of resourcing.