



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

**Action research insights Briefing Paper  
Project Leaders**



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.

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This Action Research Insight focuses on the Project Leaders: Inner Sydney Voice (ISV), Infrastructure NSW (INSW), NSW State Emergency Service (SES) and the Action Research Team from the University of Sydney. In this way the Project and this partnership is illustrative of 'shared responsibility' in practice highlighting how the non-government sector (ISV), government (INSW), emergency management agencies (SES) and academia (University of Sydney) might work together. These Project Leaders worked in partnership to:

- a. Achieve the program objectives;
- b. Learn together.
- c. Create an evidence-base to influence policy change

A partnership or shared responsibility approach was built into the Project from the beginning, even in the design phase:

*"So I was asked, as a part of my work, to think about who were the most vulnerable, who's the most at risk in the flood footprint and then what would targeted outreach look like and what partnerships we would develop to deliver that work"*

**Project Leader**

The construction of the partnership by INSW was deliberate, 'inspired' by previous work undertaken by the various partners. All partners were seen as having specific expertise to contribute to the success of the Project in the Hawkesbury-Nepean Valley.

### **The partners**

Inner Sydney Voice was established in 1978 in Waterloo initially as the Inner Sydney Regional Council for Social Development with a place-based focus on Inner Sydney. ISV is a small NGO, with a staff of four to six workers depending on funds, which are normally less than \$1m per year. ISV is managed by a Board of Directors, who are local residents and representatives from community organisations based within the local government areas they serve. ISV oversee

a number of key projects that provide support, access to resources, advocacy and information services for our local communities. In this way they are similar to many other organisations in the non-government sector. Between 2017 and 2019 ISV supported the development of a Community Resilience Committee with social housing residents in Redfern and Surry Hills, funded through the then Office of Emergency Management (now Resilience NSW) (Rawsthorne, Howard & Joseph, 2020). This previous project allowed the organisation to develop expertise in applying their community engagement skills to disaster preparedness. Their involvement in the Hawkesbury-Nepean Project, however, signaled an extension of the geographic focus on the organisation. They believe:

*“Inner Sydney Voice brings to this project our experience in working with social housing tenants and our experience in disaster preparedness and resilience in our Resilient Australia NSW Community Award for building disaster resilience in social housing communities.”*

Inner Sydney Voice, 2021

Infrastructure NSW was established in 2011 through an Act of Parliament to advise the Government on the identification and organisation of critical public infrastructure. Infrastructure NSW’s:

*“Vision is to achieve community wellbeing through great infrastructure. We are creating a sustainable infrastructure legacy for NSW through expert advice, priority project delivery, oversight of the state’s infrastructure pipeline and place management.”*

Infrastructure NSW, 2021

Infrastructure NSW is the lead organisation for the Resilient Valley, Resilient Communities – Hawkesbury-Nepean Valley Flood Risk Management Strategy. The Strategy aligns with the State Emergency Management Plan and the National

Strategy for Disaster Resilience. A key activity of the Strategy is an extensive Community Resilience Program aiming to increase flood awareness and preparedness. The Community Resilience Program is a joint program of Infrastructure NSW, and the SES.

The third partner, the NSW State Emergency Service (SES) is an emergency and rescue service dedicated to assisting the community. It is primarily a volunteer-based organisation, although it does employ some around 300 professional staff. Under NSW legislation the SES is a designated Combat Agency for flood, storm and tsunami emergencies or disaster events (SES, 2021). The SES has been actively involved in the production of communication resources, including videos, to raise awareness of the flood risk in the Hawkesbury-Nepean Valley.

The final partner was the Action Research Team, comprising academics from the University of Sydney. These academics brought research expertise in relation to disasters, community development and action research methodology.

### **Principles of partnership**

The remainder of this Insight describes the partnership principles which informed how the Project Leaders worked together.

#### **Shared responsibility and commitment**

Structurally, Infrastructure NSW provided funding through its Communities of Concern Program within the Strategy to ISV to implement the Project. This relationship was formalised through a funding agreement with specific outcomes, milestones and funding triggers. However, this was much more than a traditional grant relationship. Infrastructure NSW staff were actively involved in all aspects of the Project. SES committed significant staff time and resources to the Project reflecting their role in the Flood Risk Management Strategy. This involvement however evolved over time, with the SES being most active in the information and training activities of the Project.

#### **Open communication**

All partners demonstrated a willingness to communicate openly. Regular meetings (at times fortnightly) of all stakeholders were held digitally supported by regular email and phone communication. This commitment to open communication was evidenced by the creation of shared information repositories and pre and post reflective meetings for all training sessions. This

open communication supported the Project Leaders learning together (see below).

### **Respectful engagement**

There was evidence throughout the Project of a commitment among the Project Leaders to respectful engagement among themselves but also with others. Of particular note was the respectful engagement and acknowledgement of social housing tenants' contribution to the Project.

*“And so that was a real benefit of the [CRN], that it wasn't just government agencies. It also had tenants themselves .. some of them were really active participants and did a great job of raising issues, flagging problems, challenging, thinking, which was all awesome.”*

### **Valuing diversity and different perspectives**

The partnership of the Project Leaders brought together the diverse perspectives on disasters: non-government, government, and Emergency Management Agencies. It is a testament to the skills and attitudes of those involved on a daily basis in the Project that there was little evidence of conflict between these divergent views. This success was enabled by the other values embedded in the partnership, respectful engagement and ongoing open communication. This suggests that an intentionally created small core group can support and enact shared responsibility. Getting the 'right' balance of diverse perspectives that supported the work of the Project however was a challenge for the Project, with one commenting:

*“I think we brought together a pretty diverse group of stakeholders, but my sense was that the initial briefings and the bringing together the bigger group worked quite well just to get people's buy-in, share information, get a sense of where people were at, talk about the focus for us of the flat area and why we wanted people there, increasing people's knowledge of the risk. To me then quite quickly though, it felt like that Community Resilience Network was probably too big and had probably some players who had a peripheral relationship to the project. So there became people who were drivers and who probably were able to deliver in terms of their passion and buy-in and capacity for resourcing or overlap with their own work. And then those people who were attending those meetings and probably just listening and nothing happened between that.”*

### **Learning together to build knowledge.**

The Project was designed to build knowledge on how best to support people in relation to flood risk through the embedded action research project. The action research supported a reflective approach to the Project by the Project Leaders allowing new ideas or approaches to be developed, trialed and evaluated. The format and process of the CRN, for example, evolved through ongoing reflection between the Project Leaders.

*"I think what [the Project worker] was trying to do was make sure everyone was involved in that process and make sure it was collaborative. And there are lots of learnings from me too, because [the Project worker] had a sense of those [too]. But then I was watching some of those meetings, going, "Hmm, how well is that gelling for people? How useful is it? These meetings get quite long. How regularly should we pull these people together?"*

In this way the Project Leaders demonstrated a strong commitment and capacity to learn together. The format of the CRN was not a 'set and forget' process but one of continual reflection and refinement. The value of the action research design within the Project was that it gave shape to and a process for this ongoing learning. An important element of this learning was a recognition of the time required to achieve sustainable change.

*"You have to just be really committed to the long journey because this is a piece of culture change"*

## **Recommendations**

1. The capacity and willingness of organisations to work in partnership needs careful consideration in the development of future community resilience building projects, with a particular focus on relevant local relationships and networks.
2. Partnership development should include time to articulate the value base of the partnership as well as collaborative skills development for Project Leaders.
3. Learning should be embedded in future community resilience building projects as a key goal.
4. Work to build DRR initiatives with communities who are marginalised or living with complex needs requires a variety of expertise and diverse and complementary skill sets.