James Martin Institute for Public Policy

Policy Insights Paper

Building resilient Australian communities

Policy Insights Paper

Professor Ann Dadich
Dr Cris Townley
Professor Rebekah Grace
Distinguished Professor Lynn Kemp

Contents

Acknowledgment of Country

The James Martin Institute for Public Policy acknowledges the Gadigal people of the Eora Nation upon whose ancestral lands our Institute stands. We pay respect to Elders both past and present, acknowledging them as the traditional custodians of knowledge for these lands. We celebrate the diversity of Aboriginal peoples and their ongoing cultures and connections to the lands and waters of NSW.

About the Policy JMI Challenge Grant

The James Martin Institute for Public Policy (JMI) is a unique joint venture between government and leading Australian universities. Launched in 2021 as a formal partner of the NSW Government, we work closely with government ministers, departments, and other decision-makers to help address their most pressing policy priorities, enabling them to harness a wide range of expert advice. JMI is an independent, non-partisan policy institute with charitable status.

This paper was made possible through a JMI Policy Challenge Grant. This annual grant program supports academics who seek to tackle the greatest public policy challenges facing Australia.

About the authors

Professor Ann Dadich is affiliated with the Western Sydney University's School of Business, and is the Deputy Director of the Maridulu Budyari Gumal Sydney Partnership for Health, Education, Research and Enterprise (SPHERE) Knowledge Translation Platform. She is internationally recognised as an expert in health service management, with a particular focus on knowledge translation and brilliant care.

Dr Cris Townley is a Research Fellow with the Western Sydney University's Transforming early Education And Child Health (TeEACH) Research Centre and the SAGE Deputy Research Lead. Dr Townley takes a collaborative, intersectional approach that recognises the multiplicity of identities lived by children, young people, and families, and requires listening to their voices.

Professor Rebekah Grace is the Director of the Western Sydney University's Transforming early Education and Child health (TeEACH) Research Centre. Her research focuses on the service and support needs of children and their families who experience adversity. She employs cross-disciplinary, mixed-methods research to move beyond the bounds of disciplinary silos to address complex challenges.

Distinguished Professor Lynn Kemp is recognised as an international leader in the field of early childhood interventions in primary and community health and translational research. Her local, national, and international research in early childhood brings quality evidence-based early intervention programs to vulnerable families with young children in Australia and worldwide.

Acknowledgements

The authors thank the following for their contributions to this project: Ms Samantha Frain, Northcott; Adjunct Professor Dianne Jackson, Key Assets Australia; Ms Claudia Lennon, 54 Reasons; Dr Tom McClean, Uniting NSW/ACT, Ms Sophie Murray-Farrell Premier's Department; Ms Grainne O'Loughlin, Karitane; Ms Sharlene Vlahos, Karitane; Wardell Core; Woodburn Hub; Woodville Alliance; the Northern Rivers community; and the South Western Sydney community.

Image credits: Dr Cris Townley

Authorship

The findings and recommendations of any JMI publication are solely those of its authors, and do not necessarily reflect the views of the Institute, its Board, funders, advisers, or other partners.

Recommended citation: Ann Dadich, Cris Townley, Rebekah Grace and Lynn Kemp, "Building resilient Australian communities", JMI Policy Insights (2025).

Executive summary

The last five years have tested the service and support mechanisms that seek to mitigate the impact of community-wide crises across New South Wales (NSW). Although these community crises have been diverse, from military-enforced lockdowns to devastating fires and floods, there is an **opportunity to reflect on what supports make the most difference to community recovery and growth** in such circumstances.

This paper explores the perspectives of two communities in NSW, drawing on their lived experiences of community-wide crises to establish what community resilience means and how it is best supported. **The insights from these communities reveal policy opportunities for the NSW Government that could boost community resilience in future.**

To date, policy approaches to build community resilience have largely focused on the provision of infrastructure, services, funding packages, and crisis management protocols that can be activated quickly when a disaster strikes. This paper provides an evidence base for expanding this approach to include support for social processes and networks.

> *Social cohesion is critical to building resilient communities that can withstand disaster; and reducing the inequitable impacts of crisis conditions.*

Social cohesion is critical to building resilient communities that can withstand disaster and reducing the inequitable impacts of crisis conditions. The citizens most impacted by community-wide crises are those who experience social isolation and have limited access to personal resources. But social cohesion cannot be created on a whim. There is a compelling need to address social isolation and build social cohesion through deliberate, long-term, and ongoing public investment. In turn, this will build the capacity of NSW communities to withstand and recover from future crises.

Our research showed that, for community members, social cohesion manifested in connection – that is, knowledge of each other, care, compassion; and reciprocity – a collective culture of generosity. For some, however, the term, "resilience", can be alienating and used to imply weakness among people who struggled and were fatigued.

There is a need for ongoing investment in community resilience. Specifically, there are four features that epitomise community resilience – namely: recognising that "The community knows what the community needs"; healing from trauma; an equitable response to disaster; and sustained community hub infrastructure.

The key strategies proposed in this paper offer an opportunity for the NSW Government to build more resilient communities. They include positioning social cohesion as a government priority, investing in core local infrastructure that scaffolds community collaboration and cohesion, supporting healing through community-building activities, ensuring equity is a key value in disaster response, supporting multifaceted community hubs by endorsing a community hub framework, and establishing a peak body to promote community hubs.

The erosion of both hard and social infrastructure over time has magnified the impact of disasters – particularly for people who experience disadvantage – **and lengthened recovery time**. The community members who contributed to this research all had lived experience of community crises and presented a compelling case for a change in government policy and funding models, ongoing and sustainable investment in social connectedness, and a shift from deficit identification and intervention approaches.

Policy opportunities

1) **Position social cohesion as a whole-of-government priority through the following opportunities**
   To bolster community resilience, fostering social cohesion and reducing social isolation needs to be positioned as a government priority.

2) **Invest in core local infrastructure that scaffolds collaboration and cohesion**
   The NSW Government can shift from project or program-based funding towards longer-term funding for core local infrastructure to build community resilience. This can be aided by flexible and sustained approaches to community development.

3) **Support healing through community-building activities**
   The NSW Government can further support healing through informal, community-driven initiatives and activities that build community and connection.

4) **Ensure equity is a key value in disaster response**
   The NSW Government can respond to disasters in ways the community deem to be equitable.

5) **Support community hubs by endorsing a community hub framework**
   The NSW Government can support multifaceted community hubs by endorsing a community hub framework based on the principles of reciprocity, social licence, and triage capacity.

6) **Establish a peak body to promote community hubs**
   The NSW Government can establish a peak body to promote community hubs in their varied forms.

1. Investing in long-term progress

In recent years, communities across Australia have experienced a litany of disasters[1] from fires to floods. The impact on communities has been profound, exacerbated by widespread fear and loss during the COVID-19 pandemic.[2] The Royal Commission into National Natural Disaster Arrangements concluded, "we can… expect more concurrent and consecutive hazard events… each subsequent hazard event can add to the scale of the damage caused by a previous hazard event".[3] The NSW Government has the opportunity to respond to future disasters in a way that supports communities to build greater cohesion, resilience, and equity, thereby minimising the negative impact on citizens.

Governments have typically responded to disasters by managing their immediate impacts, including emergency services, resource mobilisation, and mass communication. While important, an exclusive focus on immediate recovery from episodic disasters ignores the ongoing hardships that compromise community resilience and exacerbate the negative effects of a disaster.[4] It also overlooks the long-term conditions that can minimise negative impacts in future crises.

When a disaster strikes, people who experience hardship and marginalisation are the most likely to be impacted.[5] The challenges associated with physical and mental health conditions, social exclusion, housing insecurity, communication difficulties, and poverty can be exacerbated by extreme conditions in which support services operate. Additionally, limited access to personal resources can hinder opportunities to secure timely support.[6] The economic hardship caused by disasters can push people further into poverty, creating a cycle of vulnerability. Not all people who experience hardship are vulnerable to the effects of a disaster,[7] however, the negative consequences of disasters can be amplified for people who experience hardship, contributing to ongoing adversities for affected populations.

Communities characterised by significant disadvantage also often have limited access to the resources and infrastructure needed to withstand and recover from disasters. These include insurance coverage, public transport, and access to water, food, and other supplies.

The effects of social isolation, which impacts almost one in seven Australians[8], adds a further challenge. The NSW Government's recent commitment to "examine the extent, causes and impacts of loneliness"[9] is timely and offers an opportunity to explore how tackling social isolation and promoting social cohesion will impact community resilience, post-disasters. Efforts to address hardship and build community resilience can promote personal and social wellbeing.

Community resilience is "more than bouncing back".[10] It is a "multifaceted social process",[11] characterised by the collective capacity of individuals, groups, and institutions within a community. It involves interconnected dimensions, including social cohesion, community engagement, resource mobilisation, and adaptive governance. It encompasses the ability of communities to foster strong social networks, support systems, and shared values that enable them to collaborate, innovate, and respond more effectively and collectively to crises. Community resilience also requires partnerships with external organisations, including state and federal government departments, and leveraging diverse perspectives and resources to address complex problems.

A resilient community is a connected community, in which everyone knows where to access information and help and is confident that help will be provided when needed. Community resilience might therefore be understood as a collective ability to "bounce forward,"[12] rather than bounce back to a previous position.

The importance of government leadership to promote community resilience is clear.[13] While Australians celebrate the ways that community members rally together when disasters happen,[14] there is a need to foster a sustained culture of community connection and resilience, not only during short-term collective emergencies, but also in the long-term.

With the NSW Government committing funds to ensure communities are better prepared for natural disasters and can recover faster,[15] this paper is a timely exploration of how people who experienced hardship, and the service providers and managers who supported them, defined community resilience and the features that enabled it.

Informed by contributions from the Northern Rivers and South Western Sydney communities, this paper outlines the policy opportunities available to the NSW Government to ensure that community resilience enables disaster-hit places to recover faster, minimising long-term impacts on local residents and ensuring a more equitable response and thriving communities.

Community dashboard: features of community resilience

Connection

When we support each other through the worst of times **(Northern Rivers, family member).**

A group who can band together without barriers, bring hope when things are bleak, offer and [expect]… support to grow, be a place of emotional support when needed, social inclusion and also a place to enjoy a mutual interest **(South Western Sydney, family member).**

Reciprocity

The more everyone gives, the more everyone gives **(Northern Rivers, family member).**

Sharing with like-minded people. Has the potential to extend into other things like play dates. Like a spiderweb **(South Western Sydney, family member).**

The community knows what the community needs

Something that we noticed that happens amongst our groups is that… families who have been through it themselves guide other families… a very simple example… would be… services [that] have quite extensive registration forms. So there's… a lot of information about families… so families who have been through the process [help others] **(South Western Sydney, service provider).**

I struggle to ask for help. I help others… I support family members… drive them places they need to go, or talk if they need to talk… [There was an] Elderly neighbour just been in hospital, I help her out with shopping or taking the garbage in or out **(South Western Sydney, family member).**

I saw people who were homeless and had been homeless for years really stepping up and helping other people who weren't used to being in the bureaucracy and helping them navigate the bureaucracy, how to get the most out of your grant, how to go and get a washing machine **(Northern Rivers, service provider).**

[This area is] full of different cultures and different communities… we know exactly… whom to go to… it's like a channel… we go to those… community leaders, religious leaders… They play a very vital role… because they have a say **(South Western Sydney, service provider).**

The community knows what the community needs. Not some far off local state or any other sort of government **(Northern Rivers, service provider).**

[People] who have an understanding of it, are best placed to be able to guide other families, because they've got that context around, what it's for… we see that happening a lot, families guiding other families who've been through… the journey before; for a community to be resilient, they need to be… heard. So resilience would be to amplify the civilian voices in that community on the ground **(Northern Rivers, service provider).**

Resilience

It's almost become a little bit of a dirty word in certain circles **(Northern Rivers, service provider).**

"Resilience" – it's so overused. In this particular flood, parts of the community who in the past have been really hit hard by floods, this time they're saying to us, "We're not bouncing back this time" **(Northern Rivers, service provider).**

Already I work double my hours **(Northern Rivers, service provider).**

It's almost its own beast at the moment because it's so overused and it's almost negative at this point… But it is kind of accurate as well **(Northern Rivers, service provider).**

An equitable response to disaster

To find a good doctor or paediatrician is hard, expensive. Specialist services are expensive… You find the money by not getting other things… Food prices have gone up, so has mortgage repayments or rent **(South Western Sydney, family member).**

If a house is repaired and made better, then often the rent was jacked up **(Northern Rivers, service provider).**

Healing from trauma

The days when I couldn't see an end of the pain or losing hope, [support from peers in my communities] helped me get through that day and the next **(South Western Sydney, family member).**

A safe space for people to be themselves, to be inclusive, to have it be diverse, and be able to respect diversity as well **(South Western Sydney, service provider).**

We are running these music sessions, which started with two parents coming along for under-fives and… now we've had to break it into two sessions… It's a way that people create meaning… when we're asking them… what's causing you to disengage from school or… what kind of things do you do… when… you feel really sad or you're feeling really angry, what things help you with that?… drawing, music… come out… as… self-regulation strategies… free music… classes… drama groups… [and] art classes… they bring about connection **(Northern Rivers, service provider).**

[The arts are] such a simple thing, but it had a hugely profound effect on my ability to connect **(Northern Rivers, service provider).**

Sustained community hub infrastructure

Being within walking [distance] from travel from train station. It's really important. Because if it's… 35 degrees and people have to push the pram to get there, they just don't have the strength to, they just say it's just easier to give up rather than make that effort **(South Western Sydney, service provider).**

When a family come, I connect the family [to] as many as any service that is available. And they… appreciate it **(South Western Sydney, service provider).**

People need somewhere to go to talk to people **(Northern Rivers, family member).**

I love the fact that we've broken barriers for people… the pizza night's a great example… everyone gets to pay what they can afford and somehow it all works out **(Northern Rivers, service provider).**

2. How communities understand community resilience

People with lived experience provide invaluable insights, enabling policymakers to better understand key challenges and identify feasible solutions. The narratives they form to convey their knowledge can aid meaning and shared understanding.[16]

The insights presented throughout this paper are heavily informed by the lived experiences of 83 people, 33 of whom received human services during recent disasters (hereafter referred to as family members) and 50 people who delivered and/or managed human services – 48 were based in the Northern Rivers and 35 in South Western Sydney. Their voices and perspectives are captured on the community dashboard on pages 10-11.

Connection

Community members, including the service providers and service managers who supported families and communities, indicated that community resilience was relational and occurred during times of adversity. When hardship occurred, community resilience manifested via connections, care, and compassion. For instance, it involved community members knowing each other, understanding their needs and preferences, and supporting each other practically, psychologically, and socially. Such reciprocity enabled individuals and their communities to collectively survive hard times and work towards a better future. This was partly because the strength that came from a sense of safety, sustained by cumulative resources, enabled them to positively change their situation as a community. While community services were important, participants indicated that relationships among community members were at the heart of community resilience.

Reciprocity

Participants described community resilience as generative, whereby generosity fostered generosity. While not all community members were able to support others or demonstrate resilience, individuals were more inclined to offer support in a context where such practice was a norm.

Resilience – a "bit of a dirty word"

Some participants, particularly in the Northern Rivers, reported being alienated by the term "community resilience". They indicated that the term was used to blame them for their lack of resilience in the face of circumstances beyond their control and unrelenting adversity.

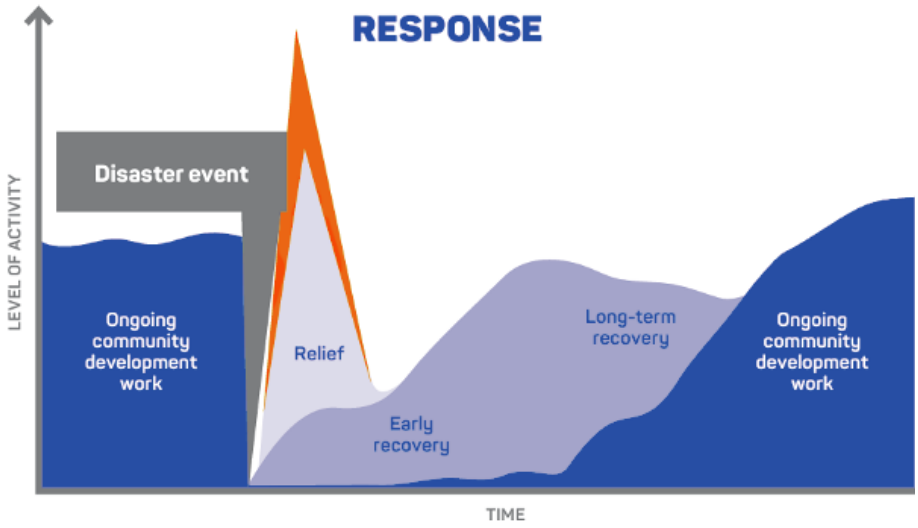
Some participants recognised that the term had become commonplace and its use in public discourse did not always reflect the connections, care, and compassion they deemed to be important. For instance, given the ongoing, rather than episodic nature of adversity – as demonstrated by the fires, floods, and housing crisis – community members were often fatigued. In the Northern Rivers particularly, some participants indicated they were beyond resilience, describing themselves as surviving.

Such fatigue was exacerbated by the incongruity between community support and government support, placing greater onus on the community. For instance, service providers often provided unpaid overtime; furthermore, family member access to information and support was hindered by disjointed services. This, in turn, fuelled frustration, distrust, and cynicism among some community members.

Investment in sustained community engagement is required, both in the preparation for, and recovery from disaster. Recovery from disaster can be a long-term process,[17] especially for people who experience hardship. It often requires considerable investment in community development, both long

before and after a disaster. As the Australia-New Zealand Emergency Management Committee[18] illustrated (see Figure 1), disaster management cannot be contained to efforts that immediately follow a disaster. Community development work requires sustained community engagement, cross-sector partnerships, and transdisciplinary research.[19]

Figure 1
Effect of disaster on ongoing community development and interface with relief and recovery

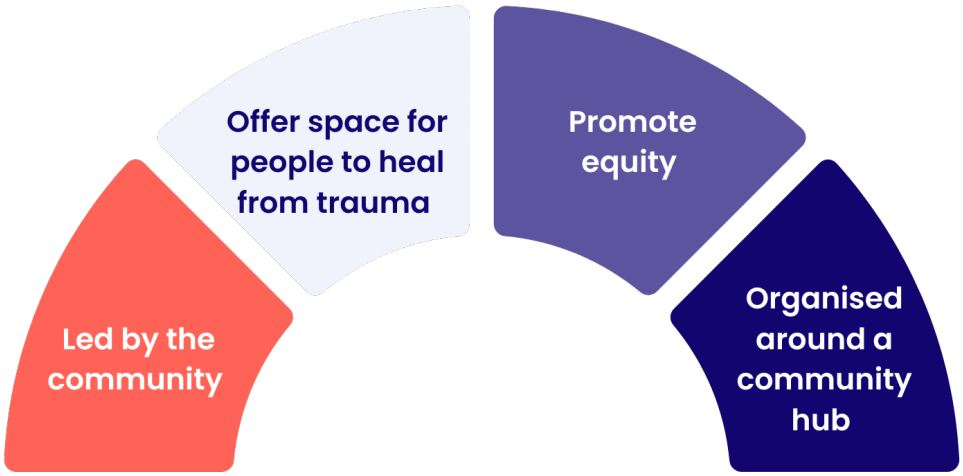


Source: Australia-New Zealand Emergency Management Committee, 2018

Community members indicated that there was an inadequate level of ongoing community development work before disasters, which negatively impacted communities. Furthermore, the time from disaster to long-term recovery was longer than the periods typically supported by government funding. Establishing relationships with individuals, groups, and organisations within a community and harnessing their expertise could help to ensure a high level of community development during future disasters.

3. The features of community resilience

Insights from the Northern Rivers and South Western Sydney revealed that resilient communities epitomised four features. Specifically, they were led by the community, they offered space for people to heal from trauma, they promoted equity, and they were often organised around a community hub. Each is addressed in turn.



Features of resilient communities

"The community knows what the community needs"

To ensure that efforts to promote community resilience were meaningful, they must be led by community members. Participants emphasised the importance of community members determining what efforts were required to promote community resilience and how they were implemented. This view highlighted the importance of lived experience and contextual knowledge.

Some participants explained that rebuilding a community after a disaster could strengthen community resilience by enabling community members to exercise their sense of agency. While they needed and received support, they also had the opportunity to provide support to fellow community members. Such reciprocity was deemed to be integral to community-led resilience, where people offered and received support.

The insights from the Northern Rivers and South Western Sydney reflect broader evidence and government directives that recognise the value of enabling communities to drive and deliver their own recovery following disasters.[20] This is largely because communities possess invaluable local knowledge, ownership, and empowerment, allowing for tailored and sustainable recovery plans. Their involvement ensures cultural sensitivity, faster response times, and resilience building through solidarity and trust among members. By leading their recovery, communities can mobilise resources more efficiently and effectively, prioritising long-term sustainability and the wellbeing of future generations. Overall, community-driven recovery efforts are about more than rebuilding infrastructure; they restore hope, preserve dignity, and foster resilience in the face of adversity.

Healing from trauma

Many participants had experienced or witnessed significant adversity and they stressed that resilient communities require opportunities to heal from trauma. In the Northern Rivers, trauma was associated with natural disasters, like floods, while, in South Western Sydney, it was associated with the COVID-19 pandemic and migration settlement journeys.

These experiences were compounded by other traumas, including family violence, school-based bullying, secondary (or indirect) trauma, and the difficulty of navigating bureaucracy to find support. To enable communities to be resilient, participants recognised the need to heal, which might involve peer support.

Creative practices, like art and music, were considered vital to heal from trauma, build community, and reduce isolation (see Vignette 1). For some participants, creative arts had a significant impact on their wellbeing.

Vignette 1

Women's arts project

Each year, in one cultural community, a community leader facilitated a women's art program. This was a partnership between the community, local government, a service provider, and an arts exhibition space. Arts projects have included ceramics, sewing, and dance. There were also activities for the children that the women cared for. In this space, the women developed artistic skills and learnt information they were unable to readily source elsewhere.

According to the participants, healing from trauma required a safe space, where people felt recognised and understood. Such spaces included playgroups, community centres, and culturally specific spaces. While they recognised the availability of schools, cultural communities, and emergency housing (among others), these were not always safe spaces because participants sometimes experienced judgement or violence there. However, when people felt safe, they had the opportunity to build relationships with others, access support, and learn.

School children also lived with the effects of trauma, which can lead to bullying, suspensions, violence, and a limited ability to learn.[21] Some participants suggested that school staff members did not always understand children's self-soothing behaviours to self-manage their trauma.

An equitable response to disaster

In both the Northern Rivers and South Western Sydney, participants described the important role of equity in community resilience. They spoke of people who were isolated and disadvantaged faring worse during recovery periods.

For example, people who were homeless before a disaster were less likely to be accommodated after the disaster. Similarly, while individuals who rented a home faced losing their home without compensation, homeowners received compensation. And while the Lismore business district was protected by diverting flood water to low-lying homes in a lower socioeconomic area, renters faced rent increases because of the repairs.

Participants also highlighted inequities in the education system, noting that private schools had the means to relocate buildings to higher ground, while public schools used demountable buildings as classrooms. Community members did not have equitable access to resources and decisions reinforced social structures that prioritised the protection of wealth.

Sustained community hub infrastructure

Many participants recognised how community hubs bolstered community resilience. While they assumed different forms (see Box 1), a community hub was largely understood to be a locally-owned, community space – physical and/or virtual – in which various forms of support (informal and formal) were harmonised. Reflecting the continuum between "service work" and "community development",[22] community hubs included spaces that "deliver[ed] services to or for 'clients'" – and as such, were "top-down (worker-led)" – as well as those that were "citizen-led" or "bottom-up", and all that lay between.

Community hubs were deemed to be safe and accessible, and they met the varied and changing needs of the community. This was partly because they drew on local expertise. Such hubs were trusted sources of support and often fulfilled functions for government that had not been formally recognised.

Box 1

Community hub examples

- **Hub 1** was community-led, governed by a community board. Funding for mental health services had been secured, which was used to build a community centre with community-initiated and community-led activities.
- **Hub 2** was built using a collection of government program funding, was under the auspice of a neighbourhood centre network, nurtured interagency networks, and involved volunteers in community-building activities.
- **Hub 3** had been a local community centre for many years. It was funded by a changing set of program funding, used flexibly and creatively to meet local need that individual program funding did not always recognise, and provided triage for anyone who visited. Disaster recovery funds were used to build people networks that could be quickly mobilised for new disaster events.
- **Hub 4** invited services into its rooms to provide outreach, as needed, with some services visiting weekly. This resulted in greater access to support, compared to visits from an outreach bus that was not connected to the community hub.
- **Hub 5** and **Hub 6** supported a wider geographical area than most place-based hubs, serving lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBTQ+) communities and families living with a disability – this was particularly important, given these communities were often isolated from other community networks and activities.

According to participants, community hubs built community via activities, such as breakfasts, gardening, arts, foodbanks, communal meals, playgroups, and disaster preparation training (see Vignette 2 and Vignette 3). They also served as a site for agency outreach, connecting community members to other services. These opportunities enabled people to connect with each other and the services available to them, and sustain these connections for long-term benefit.

Vignette 1

Playgroups

Playgroups contributed to resilient communities, enabling parents to build relationships with each other and form a community. The parents supported each other, learnt from each other, and accessed resources. They also formed trusting relationships with the playgroup facilitators who connected them to ancillary services. These connections enabled the parents to demonstrate the confidence and agency to drive playgroup activities.

Vignette 2

Radio networks as scaffolding infrastructure

In some areas, disaster recovery and disaster preparation funding provided communication and other equipment for local communities. To bolster effectiveness, the community members established radio networks – a social infrastructure of people who were trained and connected to mobilise and, when required, operate the radio network. This disaster preparation demonstrates social infrastructure that required maintenance through ongoing facilitation of the relationships within the network.

The importance of community hubs reaffirms the close connection between community resilience and social infrastructure, which is essential for community wellbeing.[23] Social infrastructure encompasses networks and institutions facilitating social interactions and support within communities. It includes schools, healthcare facilities, community centres, and more. Strong social infrastructure fosters trust and cooperation among community members, enabling collective action during crises. It serves as the backbone for support networks, mobilising resources, and assistance in times of need. Social infrastructure also builds community capacity by promoting resilience through social cohesion and civic engagement. Moreover, it reduces vulnerability by addressing socioeconomic disparities and promoting inclusivity. Community resilience, in turn, relies on robust social infrastructure to withstand and recover from challenges. Investing in social infrastructure and engaging communities in resilience-building efforts are vital to enhance adaptive capacity and promote equity and social justice. Together, they form the foundation for thriving and resilient communities in the face of adversity.

The importance of community hubs also reinforces the value of sustained community engagement. These hubs might be defined as physical or virtual spaces that serve as a focal point for activities, services, and resources within a community. Community hubs bring people together, foster social connections, and support the wellbeing and development of the whole community. They can take various forms and serve different purposes, depending on the needs and characteristics of the community they serve. Given their many benefits,[24] community hubs have been described as "critical infrastructure".[25]

Policy opportunities: A future agenda for government

Insights from community members, service providers, and service managers in the Northern Rivers and South Western Sydney have helped to identify key strategies that will enable the NSW Government to build more resilient communities. These strategies reflect a different way of engaging and collaborating with communities, enabling the features that typify resilient communities to flourish. These strategies will likely be of interest to other Australian states too. While the Australian Government continues its support for community services, providing $76.3 billion to community services in 2022 to 2023,[26] a business-as-usual approach will not bolster community resilience sufficiently. The probability of "more concurrent and consecutive hazard events",[27] which are likely to have the greatest impact on people who experience ongoing hardship,[28] underlines the urgency of the policy challenge. The opportunities for policy transformation are as follows.

1. Position social cohesion as a whole-of-government priority through the following opportunities

Community resilience requires governments to prioritise the reduction of social isolation and promote social cohesion. While the NSW Government recognises the need to address social isolation, efforts are often directed towards certain populations, like older people,[29] rather than fostering more socially cohesive communities more broadly.

Given the increasing proportion of people in NSW who report feeling lonely[30] and the associated implications for community resilience, there is a clear need to promote greater social cohesion. This would be achieved via the following actions.

2. Invest in core local infrastructure that scaffolds collaboration and cohesion

Community resilience requires investment in core local infrastructure that scaffolds collaboration and cohesion. This can be aided by flexible and sustained approaches to community development. Such approaches accommodate a community's changing needs and preferences, ensuring

decisions are made at a local level and solutions are tailored to the local context.

Flexible funding can enable grant holders to use the funds to support the different activities required for a desired outcome, which might include interagency collaboration to foster partnerships, outreach, a drop-in space, and a receptionist, among others.

Similarly, sustained support offers certainty. It requires a shift away from short-term project or program-based funding towards longer-term funding for core infrastructure and offers confidence in sustaining longer-term partnerships with communities.

This approach aligns with important government initiatives, including the Australian Government's commitment to a "stronger, more diverse and independent community sector".[31] Correspondingly, the NSW Government established a Leadership Group in 2024 to "increase funding certainty for key community services providers; and reduce administrative burden to secure… funding certainty for community services providers".[32] Such efforts will contribute to the core local infrastructure required to scaffold longer-term collaboration and cohesion.

3. Support healing through community-building activities

Community resilience requires opportunities to heal through community-building activities. While much of the funding for community services supports programs and projects delivered by employed service providers, our research revealed that the most powerful opportunities to heal often came through initiatives and activities that build connection and community. This underlines the importance of informal, community-driven activities, including music, art, gardening, and cultural groups. These activities enable community resilience, and supporting them to develop and flourish is an important and impactful public investment.

4. Ensure equity is a key value in disaster response

Community resilience requires community recognition that all members are supported equitably. While significant funding is injected into communities post-disaster, community access to financial and infrastructure support is inequitably dependent on pre-disaster resources. Strategies to improve equity, such as stable housing, protection for renters, and public infrastructure, would enable communities to benefit from equitable support, thereby enhancing community cohesion.

5. Support community hubs by endorsing a community hub framework

Sustainable, multifaceted community hubs are critical social infrastructure that build community resilience. Here, the term "community hub" is expansive, encompassing neighbourhood centres, community centres, neighbourhood centre consortia, and elements of community-led resilience teams.

To enable different forms of community hubs, the NSW Government can endorse a community hub framework, comprised of core principles to inform how hubs are designed, developed, operated, managed, and supported for long-term community benefit. Given that community hubs take various forms and serve different purposes, there is limited value in articulating a single definition of a community hub. A community hub framework, comprised of core principles that enable a range of hubs, will have greater value. Specifically, the framework could be used to inform the design and evaluation of:

- Funding schemes for community services, arts organisations, and other sectors that are offered by government departments and philanthropic bodies
- Assessment tools to determine how disaster management and recovery efforts affect community hubs and, relatedly, community resilience
- Decision aides to determine the potential value of an interagency partnership and perhaps inform this partnership to strengthen community hubs and relatedly, community resilience

The core principles for the proposed framework are described as follows.

Principle 1: Triage capacity

To accommodate the changing needs and preferences of community members, community hubs require the capacity to facilitate skilled, long-term triage processes. This ensures an open door approach, with no wrong referral pathway. As such, people might access a community hub with a range of requests, from needing to charge their mobile telephone to seeking to end domestic violence. Whatever the initial approach, they should be welcomed and given a reason to return, reducing the stigma of seeking help. Over time, their complex needs will emerge and can be met through direct services, community activities, and referrals. Building relationships with

people who access a community hub requires time and funding. This triage role needs to be sustained as core infrastructure.

Principle 2: Reciprocity

Community hubs should be designed to support reciprocity and provide opportunities for people to both seek help and support others. This might involve initiatives that enlist, train, support, and recognise volunteers. Volunteers support communities in many ways, such as visiting aged people who are housebound, working unpaid overtime, organising games activities, delivering food, supporting playgroups, and contributing to community gardens. Supporting and managing volunteers is an important role that is often invisible and unfunded.

Principle 3: Social license

Social license is foundational to ensure a community hub is embedded in the community and addresses community needs. Social license refers to community acceptance and approval granted to organisations and/or their offerings.[33] It signifies alignment with community values, transparency in operations, and responsiveness to local concerns. While social license is not a legal requirement, it is crucial for legitimacy and sustainability. Key elements include trust-building, transparent communication, responsibility for impacts, fair benefit-sharing, and continuous stakeholder engagement. A failure to secure social license can lead to opposition, reputational harm, or worse still, legal issues. Thus, it is pivotal for ensuring long-term success and minimising conflicts by addressing community expectations and fostering mutual understanding.

For community hubs, social license can be demonstrated by initiatives that are community-led and responsive to local need. It can also be bolstered when community hub staff members reside in, and are known by, the community, which can strengthen perceptions of accountability. Equally important is community involvement in what the community hub does and how it does it. Examples include the appointment of community members on boards, community advisory committees, and ongoing community consultation.

6. Establish a peak body to promote community hubs

To enable emerging and/or established community hubs to operationalise the core principles outlined earlier, resources are required. There is an opportunity to establish a peak body to promote and support community hubs. Potential functions of the peak body include:

- Developing and disseminating blueprints to inform how community hubs establish strong governance arrangements with organisations as well as within and beyond the community, including the non-government, government, and private sectors
- Connecting community hubs with funding opportunities and supporting community hub staff members to secure funds
- Facilitating mentoring programs for community hub staff members and volunteers
- Advocating for the needs and interests of community hubs and the communities they support
- Serving as a conduit between community hubs and governments
- Advocating for community hubs, encouraging governments and funding bodies to rethink how community resilience is conceptualised, demonstrated, and sustained

While there are some initiatives to strengthen certain hubs, including those that "bring… together supports across health, education and social care… [to] help children to thrive".[34] there is a need to promote a variety of hubs, including those that are for all community members and those that are "citizen-led" or "bottom-up".[35]

The establishment of a peak body for community hubs has the potential to provide Australian governments with the opportunity to "partner… with trusted community organisations with strong local links"[36] and fund "[community service organisations] with local and specialist knowledge".[37] Similarly, it has the potential to provide Australian governments with the opportunity to create a "stronger, more diverse and independent community sector".[38] This peak body could be developed from an existing body, such as the NSW Local Community Services Association, or constituted as a new body. Membership and access to resources should be without cost to optimise access.

The establishment of a peak body for community hubs would be a first in Australia. As such, there is an opportunity for the NSW Government to lead this initiative and serve as an exemplar for other states and territories to follow.

Conclusion

Building on insights from the Northern Rivers and South Western Sydney, this paper demonstrates how the erosion of both hard infrastructure and social infrastructure, over time, has magnified the impact of disasters and lengthened recovery time.

Consequently, community members need and want change. Specifically, it is important that the promotion of social cohesion be positioned as a government priority. This would involve investing in core local infrastructure that scaffolds collaboration and cohesion; initiatives that support healing through community-building activities; as well as support for multifaceted community hubs, including via a new peak body.

The opportunities presented in this paper provide a roadmap to reimagine community resilience in NSW and Australia. This is imperative, given the likelihood of "more concurrent and consecutive hazard events".[39]

Endnotes

[1] Scott McKinnon and Margaret Cook (eds.). *Disasters in Australia and New Zealand: Historical approaches to understanding catastrophe* (Gateway East: Springer Nature, 2020).

[2] Sotiris Vardoulakis, S. et al. "Building resilience to Australian flood disasters in the face of climate change", *Medical Journal of Australia*, 217:7 (2022), 342 - 345; Grant Sara, "Mental health data, modelling and the pandemic response", *Australian and New Zealand Journal of Psychiatry,* 56 (2022), 127-127.

[3] Royal Commission into National Natural Disaster Arrangements. *Royal commission into national natural disaster arrangements report* (Canberra: Commonwealth of Australia, 2020).

[4] Stéphane Hallegatte, Adrien Vogt-Schilb, Julie Rozenberg, Mook Bangalore and Chloé Beaudet "From poverty to disaster and back: A review of the literature", *Economics of Disasters and Climate Change*, 4 (2020), 223-247; Sonia Akter and R. Quentin Grafton, "Do fires discriminate? Socio-economic disadvantage, wildfire hazard exposure and the Australian 2019-20 'Black Summer' fires", *Climatic Change*, 165: 53 (2021); Annie Rosenthal, Eric Stover and Rohini J. Haar "Health and social impacts of California wildfires and the deficiencies in current recovery resources: An exploratory qualitative study of systems-level issues", PLoS One 16, e0248617 (2021).

[5] Caroline Ratcliffe, William Congdon, Daniel Teles, Alexandra Stanczyk and Carlos Martín, "From bad to worse: Natural disasters and financial health", *Journal of Housing Research*, 29, S25-S53 (2020).

[6] Stéphane Hallegatte, Adrien Vogt-Schilb, Julie Rozenberg, Mook Bangalore and Chloé Beaudet,. "From poverty to disaster and back: A review of the literature", *Economics of Disasters and Climate Change*, 4 (2020), 223-247; Maureen Wilson-Genderson, Allison R. Heid and Rachel Pruchno, "Long-term effects of disaster on depressive symptoms: Type of exposure matters", *Social Science & Medicine*, 217 (2018), 84-91; James R. Elliott and Junia Howell, "Beyond disasters: A longitudinal analysis of natural hazards' unequal impacts on residential instability", *Social Forces*, 95 (2017), 1181-1207; Wenlin Liu, "Disaster communication ecology in multiethnic communities: Understanding disaster coping and community resilience from a communication resource approach", *Journal of International and Intercultural Communication*, 15 (2022), 94-117; Mariya Bezgrebelna et al. "Climate change, weather, housing precarity, and homelessness: A systematic review of reviews", *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health*, 18 (2021).

[7] Shinya Uekusa, "The paradox of social capital: A case of immigrants, refugees and linguistic minorities in the Canterbury and Tohoku disasters", *International Journal of Disaster Risk Reduction*, 48, 101625 (2020).

[8] Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, Social isolation and loneliness, https://www.aihw.gov.au/mental-health/topic-areas/social-isolation-and-loneliness (accessed 19 August 2024).

[9] NSW Department. *NSW Government launches parliamentary inquiry to look at impacts of loneliness*, 12 August 2024, https://www.nsw.gov.au/media-releases/nsw-government-launches-parliamentary-inquiry-to-look-at-impacts-of-loneliness.

[10] Anne Cafer, John J. Green and Gary Goreham, *More than bouncing back: Examining community resilience theory and practice* (London: Taylor & Francis, 2023).

[11] Esther Carmenet al., "Building community resilience in a context of climate change: The role of social capital", *Ambio*, 51 (2022), 1371-1387.

[12] William Hynes, Benjamin Trump, Patrick Love and Igor Linkov, "Bouncing forward: A resilience approach to dealing with COVID-19 and future systemic shocks", *Environment Systems and Decisions*, 40 (2020), 174-184.

[13] Melissa Parsons, "Disaster resilience in Australia: A geographic assessment using an index of coping and adaptive capacity", *International Journal of Disaster Risk Reduction*, 62, 102422 (2021).

[14] Disaster Relief Australia (DRA). Community stories, https://disasterreliefaus.org/stories/community-stories/ (2024).

[15] NSW Government. *$115 million to ensure disaster recovery and preparedness* (4 September 2023), https://www.nsw.gov.au/media-releases/disaster-recovery-and-preparedness.

[16] Vivien Lowndes, "Storytelling and the art of Judgement" in Gerry Stoker and Mark Evans (eds), *Evidence-based policy making in the social sciences: Methods that matter* (Bristol: Bristol University Press, 2016), 103-122.

[17] Mariana Arcaya, Ethan J. Raker and Mary C. Waters, "The social consequences of disasters: Individual and community change", *Annual Review of Sociology*, 46 (2020), 671-691.

[18] Australia-New Zealand Emergency Management Committee. *Community recovery* (Melbourne: Australian Institute for Disaster Resilience, 2018).

[19] Yue Ge et al., "Building community resilience through cross-sector partnerships and interdisciplinary research", *Public Administration Review*, 83 (2023), 1415-1422; Joongsub Kim, "What kind of community development system can effectively support citywide philanthropic efforts to promote community well-being?", *International Journal of Community Well-Being*, 5 (2022) 305-338; Linda Sprague Martinez et al., "Two communities, one highway and the fight for clean air: The role of political history in shaping community engagement and environmental health research translation", *BMC Public Health*. 20, (2020) 1690; Paweni Narasri, Sukanya Tantiprasoplap, Chatsiri Mekwiwatanawong, Wanna Sanongdej and Noppawan Piaseu, "Management of food insecurity in the COVID-19 pandemic: a model of sustainable community development", *Health Care for Women International,* 41 (2020), 1363-1369 ; Natalicio Serrano, Laurel Schmidt, Amy A. Eyler and Ross C. Brownson, "Perspectives from public health practitioners and advocates on community development for active living: What are the lasting impacts?", *American Journal of Health Promotion* 38 (2024) 80-89; Clayton Hurd and Timothy K. Stanton, , "Community engagement as community development: Making the case for multilateral, collaborative, equity-focused campus-community partnerships", *Community Development*, 54 (2023), 875-898.

[20] Royal Commission into National Natural Disaster Arrangements. *Royal commission into national natural disaster arrangements report* (Canberra: Commonwealth of Australia, 2020); Raven Cretney, "Beyond public meetings: Diverse forms of community led recovery following disaster", *International Journal of Disaster Risk Reduction*, 28 (2018), 122-130; Raven Cretney, ""An opportunity to hope and dream": Disaster politics and the emergence of possibility through community-led recovery", *Antipode*, 51 (2019), 497-516 ; Carole Owen, "How can governments enable and support community-led disaster recovery?", Australian Journal of Emergency Management, 33 (2018), 66-69.

[21] Farhat Shireen, Himani Janapana, Sanila Rehmatullah, Hoor Temuri and Fatima Azim, "Trauma experience of youngsters and teens: A key issue in suicidal behavior among victims of bullying?", *Pakistan Journal of Medical Sciences*, 30 (2014), 206-210; Jane Sanders et al., "Exposure to adversity and trauma among students who experience school discipline: A scoping review", *Review of Educational Research*, 00346543231203674 (2023); Laura Baams, Margreet Ten Have, Ron de Graaf and Peter de Jonge, "Childhood trauma and bullying-victimization as an explanation for differences in mental disorders by sexual orientation", *Journal of Psychiatric Research*, 137 (2021), 225-231.

[22] Chris Mundy, "Queensland neighbourhood centres and community development: Remembering our past and adapting for the future", *New Community Quarterly*, 22 (2024), 32-39.

[23] Tracey L. O'Sullivan, Craig E. Kuziemsky, Darene Toal-Sullivan and Wayne Corneil, W., "Unraveling the complexities of disaster management: A framework for critical social infrastructure to promote population health and resilience", *Social Science & Medicine*, 93 (2013), 238-246; Daniel P. Aldrich and Emi Kyota, "Creating community resilience through elder-led physical and social infrastructure", *Disaster Med. Public Health Prep*. 11, (2017) 120-126; Blake Poland et al., "A connected community approach: Citizens and formal

institutions working together to build community-centred resilience", *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health*, 18 (2021).

[24] Katarina Ostojic et al., "A pragmatic trial of integrated health-social hubs for migrant and refugee women and their infants in Australia - First 2000 days care connect (FDCC)". *Pediatrics* (under review); Michael Hodginset al., "The building blocks for successful Hub implementation for migrant and refugee families and their children in the first 2000 days of life", *Health Expectations* (under review).

[25] Ian McShane and Brian Coffey, "Rethinking community hubs: Community facilities as critical infrastructure", *Current Opinion in Environmental Sustainability*, 54 (2022), 101149.

[26] Productivity Commission. Report on government services 2024 (2024), https://www.pc.gov.au/ongoing/report-on-government-services.

[27] Royal Commission into National Natural Disaster Arrangements, *Royal commission into national natural disaster arrangements report* (Canberra: Commonwealth of Australia, 2020).

[28] Stéphane Hallegatte, Adrien Vogt-Schilb, Julie Rozenberg, Mook Bangalore and Chloé Beaudet. "From poverty to disaster and back: A review of the literature", *Economics of Disasters and Climate Change*, 4 (2020), 223-247; Sonia Akter and R. Quentin Grafton, "Do fires discriminate? Socio-economic disadvantage, wildfire hazard exposure and the Australian 2019-20 'Black Summer' fires", *Climatic Change*, 165: 53 (2021); Annie Rosenthal, Eric Stover and Rohini J. Haar "Health and social impacts of California wildfires and the deficiencies in current recovery resources: An exploratory qualitative study of systems-level issues", PLoS One 16, e0248617 (2021); Caroline Ratcliffe, William Congdon, Daniel Teles, Alexandra Stanczyk and Carlos Martín, "From bad to worse: Natural disasters and financial health", *Journal of Housing Research*, 29, S25-S53 (2020).

[29] NSW Government. Reducing social isolation for seniors grant, https://www.nsw.gov.au/grants-and-funding/reducing-social-isolation-for-seniors-grant#toc-key-information (2022).

[30] NSW Mental Health Commission, Loneliness, https://www.nswmentalhealthcommission.com.au/measuring-change-indicator/loneliness (accessed 12 August 2024).

[31] Australian Government Department of Social Services. *A stronger, more diverse and independent community sector: Issues paper* (Canberra: Australian Government, 2023).

[32] NSW Department of Communities and Justice. *Secure jobs and funding certainty leadership group terms of reference* (Parramatta: NSW Government, 2024); NSW Department of Communities and Justice. *Secure jobs and funding certainty – Background* (2024), https://dcj.nsw.gov.au/service-providers/secure-jobs-and-funding-certainty-for-community-services/Background.html.

[33] The Ethics Centre. "Ethics explainer: Social license to operate", 23 January 2018, https://ethics.org.au/ethics-explainer-social-license-to-operate/

[34] Murdoch Children's Research Institute. Child and family hubs, https://www.childandfamilyhubs.org.au/child-and-family-hubs/ (accessed 12 August 2023).

[35] Chris Mundy, "Queensland neighbourhood centres and community development: Remembering our past and adapting for the future", *New Community Quarterly*, 22 (2024), 32-39.

[36] Department of Social Services. *A stronger, more diverse and independent community sector: Issues paper* (Canberra: Australian Government, 2023).

[37] Social Ventures Australia, *Department of Social Services - Reforms to strengthen the community sector Summary of submissions* (Sydney: Social Ventures Australia, 2024).

[38] Department of Social Services. *A stronger, more diverse and independent community sector: Issues paper* (Canberra: Australian Government, 2023).

[39] Royal Commission into National Natural Disaster Arrangements. *Royal commission into national natural disaster arrangements report* (Canberra: Commonwealth of Australia, 2020).

James Martin Institute for Public Policy

Transforming public policy

Level 1, 60 Martin Place Sydney
NSW 2000 Australia

E info@jmi.org.au | **W** jmi.org.au