Harnessing community perspectives in disaster management

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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.

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Executive summary

New South Wales (NSW) has faced a succession of disaster events, and more are expected in the future with the growing frequency of climate-fuelled disasters. Future disasters will test the resilience of NSW and the effectiveness of its disaster responses. There is a growing consensus, globally and locally, that shared responsibility is important in disaster management, and community engagement reduces disaster risks and enables better disaster responses. In NSW, existing policy approaches face three interrelated challenges to effective community engagement: reaching agreement on who or what constitutes "community" for the purposes of community participation in emergency planning; how to operationalise the shared responsibility required; and how to integrate all phases of disaster management.

Focusing on three Local Government Areas in NSW (Blue Mountains, Cabonne and Hawkesbury), this research explored how communities currently inform disaster responses in NSW. Based on a literature review and contributions from community members, Local Emergency Management Committees (LEMCs) and local and state governments, the study revealed insights that offer a way forward for a more coordinated, joined-up disaster response by policymakers, emergency responders, and communities.

> *There is a growing consensus, globally and locally, that shared responsibility is important in disaster management, and community engagement reduces disaster risks and enables better responses.*

The study found that legislation in NSW does not sufficiently promote active community participation in emergency management. The *State Emergency and Rescue Management (SERM) Act (1989)* prescribes LEMC membership, but there is little reference to or clarity about the role of "community". Further, the meaning of community is undefined and ambiguous, which affects how shared responsibility and community involvement are understood and implemented across prevention, preparation, response and recovery policies.

The study also revealed an ongoing challenge to harnessing community voice in disaster management: how to operationalise shared responsibility effectively and integrate the top-down, command-and-control approach with bottom-up grassroots community action. While the State Emergency Management Plan (EMPLAN) notes the complexity of emergency contexts and recognises the interaction and overlap of different phases in the disaster cycle,

an emphasis on crisis response persists. The continued focus on crisis response reinforces unequal participation in disaster management and reduces the potential for community participation.

Despite ongoing ambiguity in how community is defined and operationalised, signs of progress emerged during the project. The revised NSW EMPLAN (2023) shows a significantly expanded understanding of community diversity, presenting opportunities for future emergency management planning to respond to the contexts of specific population groups within NSW. The NSW EMPLAN's explicit acknowledgement of volunteers (including spontaneous volunteerism) also reflects learning from recent disasters, offering an important inroad for the incorporation of community voice in future policy.

Despite the increasing frequency of climate-related disasters, climate change and its economic and social costs are yet to be fully recognised in disaster planning and policy in NSW.

Several policy opportunities are available to the NSW Government to clarify understandings, bolster community engagement and strengthen cohesion between state, regional and local disaster management policy and planning. These include amending the current legislative framework, providing strategic coordination of prevention and preparedness actions and resourcing and supporting communities to promote local engagement. Seizing these opportunities will result in more effective disaster management across the state and enable the NSW Government to fulfil its objective to ensure communities are better prepared if disaster does strike.[1]

Policy opportunities - at a glance

1) Amend the State Emergency Management (SERM) Act 1989 to include local knowledge and community voice.
The specific inclusion of community in amended legislation would offer an opportunity for innovative policy efforts to increase community participation and entrench structures and functions that can engage communities in decision-making.

2) Provide context-specific definitions or meaningful descriptions of community in policy documents.
Providing context-specific descriptions of community in relation to community participation will increase clarity around actions and responsibilities**.**

3) Provide strategic coordination of preparedness and prevention actions at state and regional levels to ensure joined-up approaches.
The NSW Reconstruction Authority is in a unique position to coordinate preparedness and prevention activities across jurisdictions at multiple levels, with activities tailored to respond to local contexts.

4) Resource and support communities to actively promote local engagement in preparedness and prevention.
Learning from interstate examples and developing NSW-based case studies will inform effective community engagement.

5) Strengthen transparency of LEMCs to support greater community participation in local prevention and preparedness actions.
LEMCs should produce, publish and promote a community-facing version of their Local Emergency Management Plans, which would enhance community engagement.

6) Recognise community diversity in future disaster management policy.
A strong focus on community diversity will help ensure community engagement is effective in disparate settings.

The importance of community engagement in disaster responses

Australia is increasingly exposed to climate-induced disasters. The country is experiencing higher temperatures, prolonged droughts, longer and more intense fire seasons, historic floods, and more extreme weather due to climate change.[2] Despite this, the NSW Audit Office's report into the financial impact of natural disasters during 2021/2022 found that 36 councils "did not identify climate change or natural disaster as a strategic risk despite 22 of these having at least one natural disaster during 2021–22."[3]

Global, national and state policies all focus on a "shared responsibility" approach to responding to these challenges. This approach raises the profile of community in disaster planning, with community engagement identified as a critical component. Globally, the Red Cross and Red Crescent (RCRC) are working towards more effective engagement with communities as equal partners, reshaping relationships that previously focused on communities primarily as being the recipients of aid.[4] Despite a commitment to enabling shared responsibility in disaster management responses, Australia is seen to lag behind others in shaping policy that supports the enactment of this principle.[5]

As shared responsibility becomes operationalised in international settings, a growing body of evidence is emerging to show that community engagement is crucial to effective disaster risk reduction and management. Where this approach is ineffective, it is more likely due to contextual issues rather than the inadequacy of community engagement as an approach.[6]

A failure to support shared responsibility can also provoke community backlash, as seen in the 2022 Northern Rivers floods,[7] which provided a powerful example of community dissatisfaction against government related to disaster management. Following the 2022 floods, Lismore residents described the response as vastly inadequate, too slow, and hampered by bureaucracy.[8] Images of people stranded on rooftops, often with children and pets, shocked the nation. Official post-disaster inquiries have been equally critical, identifying the interface between community and Emergency Management Services (EMS) as tenuous and sometimes fatal. The *2022 NSW Flood Inquiry*[9] found several weaknesses in the flood emergency response and identified significant areas for improvement. The Inquiry found that the community played a critical role during the disaster, although there are no formal records of their involvement, nor was there any ongoing, structured or continuing facilitation of sharing and handover with emergency service systems afterwards. Similar concerns were expressed in previous inquiries in NSW and interstate, including the Brisbane City Council Flood Response Review,[10] the NSW Bushfire Inquiry,[11] the Queensland Floods Commission of Inquiry,[12] and the Victorian Bushfires Royal Commission.[13]

Addressing the enormous challenges of climate-related disasters is complex and will take time. A critical element of the action required is reforming local disaster planning to harness community voices more effectively, in line with emerging international best practice.

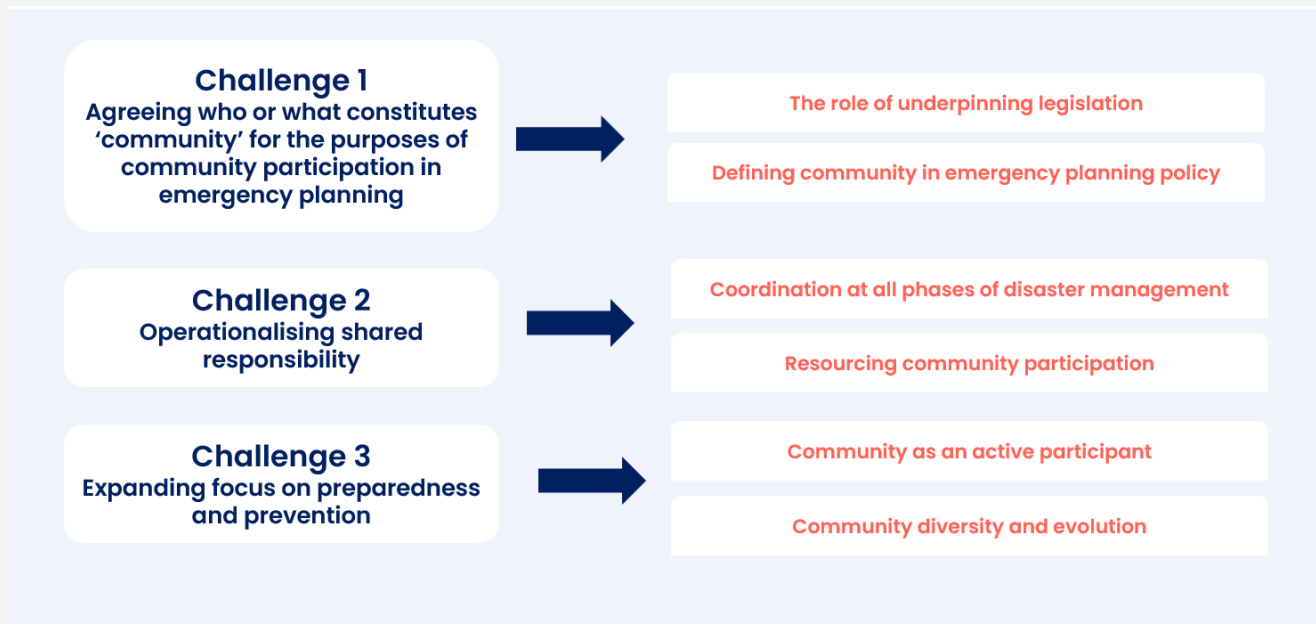# Current policy challenges to community participation

Through a review of literature, policy analysis and fieldwork with community members, LEMCs and representatives of government and emergency services agencies, this study explored how community engagement and shared responsibility are constructed in current NSW emergency management policy and understood by key stakeholders.

The *State Emergency Management Plan (NSW EMPLAN)*[14] and *Emergency Risk Management Framework*[15] form the architecture for disaster management in NSW, underpinned by the *State Emergency and Rescue Management (SERM) Act 1989*. Responsibility for response and recovery sits with the state government and designated agencies, including the State Emergency Service, Rural Fire Service, Police, Ambulance and Department of Communities and Justice, often in partnership with non-government organisations (notably the Red Cross) and local governments. These partnerships are formalised through LEMCs. Local communities are mostly excluded from this partnership, positioned instead as beneficiaries or clients.

The research identified three overarching challenges for future NSW emergency management policy and six themes that relate to these challenges.
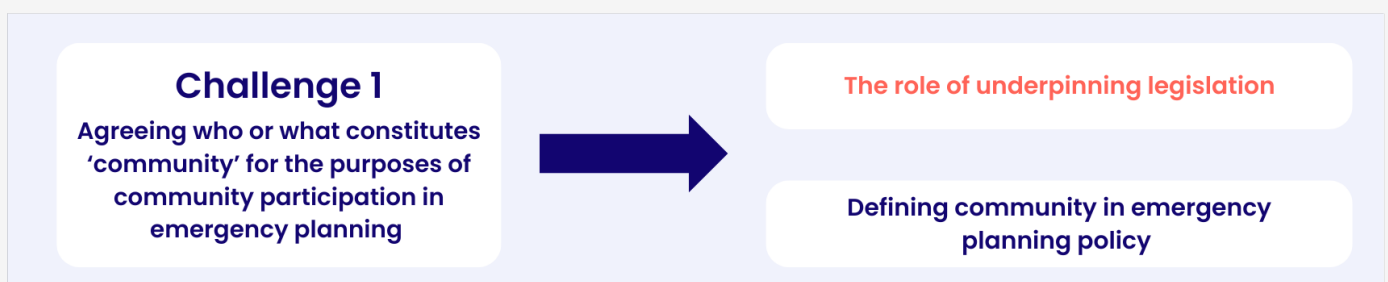
Figure 1: Challenges to community participation in disaster management in NSW

Challenge 1
Agreeing who or what constitutes 'community' for the purposes of community participation in emergency planning

→ The role of underpinning legislation

Defining community in emergency planning policy

Challenge 2
Operationalising shared responsibility

→ Coordination at all phases of disaster management

Resourcing community participation

Challenge 3
Expanding focus on preparedness and prevention

→ Community as an active participant

Community diversity and evolution

Challenge 1: Reaching agreement on who or what constitutes 'community' for the purposes of community participation in emergency planning

The study revealed a lack of clarity about how "community" is defined in disaster management. For example, if community was understood as place, it was unclear at what scale - street, neighbourhood, village, town, Local Government Area or region? If it was understood as shared interests, it was unclear which groups were covered - faith-based groups, business groups, First Nations groups or LGBTQ groups? This lack of clarity has serious ramifications for operationalising shared responsibility and community participation in emergency planning. The absence of specific references or definitions is particularly noticeable in the legislative framework and emergency management policies.

The role of underpinning legislation

Challenge 1
Agreeing who or what constitutes 'community' for the purposes of community participation in emergency planning

→ The role of underpinning legislation

Defining community in emergency planning policy

The research found that the legislative foundation in NSW has not kept pace with evolving disaster management practice. The concept of shared responsibility has gained traction in global disaster management practice (e.g., the *Sendai Framework for Disaster Risk Reduction 2015*-2030[16]) and has informed national disaster risk reduction. In NSW, the *State Emergency Rescue Management (SERM) Act (1989*) prescribes the membership of LEMCs, but despite 25 years of amendments, it only mentions community once – in its definition of recovery as the "the process of returning an affected community to its proper level of functioning".[17]

As a result, legislation in NSW does not explicitly support efforts to enact community participation in emergency management. This limits attempts to increase participation in LEMC decision-making and entrenches the status quo.
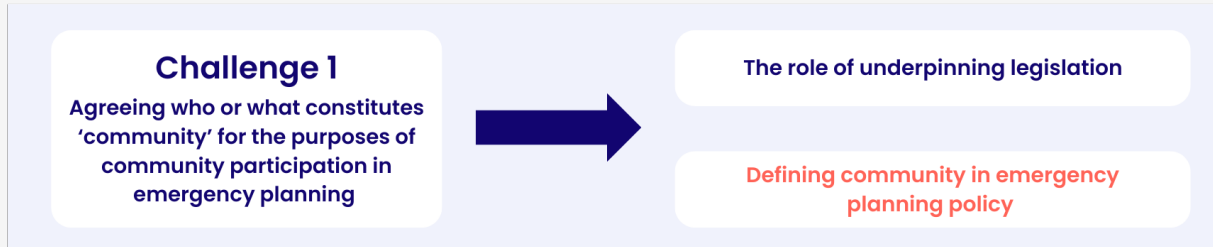
> *The State Emergency Rescue Management Act determines who sits on the committee as a member and only members have voting rights. … We can't go against what the statutes say. (Government participant)*

> *…there's a whole lot of players that probably have important roles in terms of emergency management, but actually, as per the legislation, cannot be a member as such, not that we don't value their input. But yeah, it's a little bit of a legacy issue that I think [would] be useful for the State Government to sink their teeth into at some point. (Government participant)*

The legislation also indirectly influences the inclusion of community voice through its relationship with EMPLANs at the state and, subsequently, local levels.

> *So if we take the local emergency management plan as an example, basically we're provided with a template from state level that says, "This is what a local emergency management plan needs to look like" and it's going to have some placeholder text in it and says, "Go forth and populate that." There's really not a lot of opportunity there for the community to influence our emergency management works in that sense. (LEMC member)*

Defining "community" in emergency management policy

Challenge 1

Agreeing who or what constitutes 'community' for the purposes of community participation in emergency planning

→

The role of underpinning legislation

Defining community in emergency planning policy

In addition to references on community involvement and participation in the legislative context, this study also revealed an absence of any definition of community or a clear description of the term in policy documents, leaving its meaning to be assumed. This ambiguity creates challenges when it comes to operationalising shared responsibility with communities. However, while the term "community" is undefined in the 2023 *NSW EMPLAN*[18], and its relationship with formal emergency management is ambiguous, the 2023 EMPLAN denotes a subtle but significant shift towards a more active community voice. For example, s.150 states:

> *Agencies preparing plans under the EMPLAN will engage with the community and stakeholders; promote community understanding of the hazards they face; seek their input in the development of plans, especially at the local level; and involve communities and stakeholders in exercising these plans, where appropriate.*

There is limited visibility of community as a key stakeholder in policy documentation, particularly at a local level. The 2023 *NSW EMPLAN*[19] contains a total of 168 direct mentions of community/ communities, compared to 89 mentions in the previous iteration. In contrast, the *Emergency Risk Management Framework*[20] contains 29 mentions, the regional EMPLANs we reviewed contained 28 (Central West[21]) and seven (North West Metropolitan[22]), and the local EMPLANs we reviewed contained only nine (Hawkesbury[23]) and 16 (Blue Mountains[24]).

The limited reference to community in local EMPLANs can be interpreted in different ways. One interpretation is that the visibility of community in state-level planning dissipates as the emphasis shifts to localised detail. Another is that references to community in state-level policy are primarily conceptual, understanding community as valued but somewhat nebulous, and that local policy, which is closely embedded in the detail of local operationalisation, expresses community indirectly in social, economic, and infrastructural factors.

Challenge 2: Operationalising shared responsibility

The study revealed challenges in operationalising shared responsibility, which are exacerbated by ambiguities in how community is understood (see Challenge 1 above). The unequal participation of communities at different stages in the disaster cycle severely constrains the integration of the top-down, command-and-control approach with bottom-up grassroots community action. This is evident in emergencies where formal response agencies move in and out of communities at moments of crisis, with little to no integration or recognition of the array of bottom-up action.

The lack of clarity about the concept of community undermines efforts to facilitate community engagement, resulting in an absence of formal structures to support shared responsibility. For example, the restricted access to operational information in many local EMPLANS symbolically and practically limits the community's role in shared responsibility.

Two areas of particular importance emerged: coordination of community engagement at all phases of disaster management and the need for more resourcing and support to enhance community engagement.

Coordination at all phases of disaster management

Challenge 2
Operationalising shared responsibility → **Coordination at all phases of disaster management**

Resourcing community participation

The 2023 *NSW EMPLAN*[25] indicates a positive shift towards integration of the phases of preparedness and prevention in disaster management and helpfully acknowledges that there is overlap between different disaster phases. Yet, it retains a strong focus on response and recovery at the expense of prevention and preparedness.

An underlying assumption in current approaches is that crisis mechanisms and relationships are appropriate at all phases of the disaster cycle. Even when attention is paid to non-crisis actions, these are framed in terms of their relation to a crisis event. For example, the *NSW EMPLAN*[26] states that "community and stakeholder engagement is a critical aspect of emergency management across the full spectrum of prevention, preparation, response and recovery" (p.9, s.125.).

While acknowledging the importance of community, this approach does not distinguish between the capacity for shared responsibility at different points in the disaster cycle. Crisis mechanisms and relationships are assumed to be appropriate in the prevention and preparation stages or, where not driving these aspects, to be almost entirely absent.

In the study, community participants and some LEMC participants differentiated opportunities for greater community involvement between preparedness, response, and recovery stages. Community participation in decision-making is often limited due to the operational expertise of emergency management agencies. However, some LEMCs see the potential of community networks to strengthen preparations for future events.

> *But I think, around the preparedness piece, [the question is] does the community have a role to play there in terms of influencing what that looks like? … looking towards community strengths and capacity … when we start talking about the notion of shared responsibility, we can actually leverage [those strengths and capacities]. (LEMC member)*

Resourcing community participation

Challenge 2		Coordination at all phases of disaster management
Operationalising shared responsibility	→	**Resourcing community participation**

The study revealed exciting possibilities to position community members as knowledge-holders and equal partners with emergency agencies and other service providers in disaster training. Developing training and resources to support community engagement will be an important factor in achieving shared responsibility.

One aspect of the study explored the extent to which communities understand the role of LEMCs. In one municipality, the research revealed that many community members did not know about the activities or purpose of the LEMC. There was a greater degree of knowledge about the Local EMPLAN but a lack of understanding of the LEMC's role in developing and implementing that plan.

In contrast, in the other two municipalities, focus groups with community members revealed greater awareness of the LEMC and other disaster plans. In these locations, participants were already involved in a range of disaster-related activities and placed a strong emphasis on the value of local knowledge, networks, and experience to the planning and recovery processes.

I think we've got a lot to offer, really. There's nothing like a bit of lived experience. Because you can have all the people in there making plans, but until you've seen the minutiae of what happens during the disaster, in the days, the weeks – from my perspective, people – just the health-related things. The effects of trauma on people. (Community member)

In one community near us they use a warden system which involves so many community members and that works really well and has worked in the last two floods. Community members have a clear role and contribution and this is seen as crucial. (Community member)

The research also revealed local government areas in NSW (outside the scope of the study) that are already supporting greater community engagement. This suggests that reform is being hindered by a lack of resources to support positive changes over time, rather than a lack of goodwill.

Because obviously, the LEMO can't take all that responsibility on because the LEMO job in itself was massive, but it's about finding where in council you can get that information into the LEMO and then offering that space in the LEMC to that resilience officer who can do the community stuff so the LEMO could focus on that really emergency focussed. (Community member)

The differing levels of awareness of the role of LEMCs and LEMPs indicates that action is needed to increase community awareness and drive greater community engagement in local planning.

## Challenge 3: Expanding the focus to preparedness and prevention

Despite goodwill among those involved in emergency management, the preparedness and prevention stages remain significantly under-resourced and under-developed. In the context of cascading and sometimes concurrent disasters, it is difficult to focus on preparedness and prevention of future events, which results in the continuation of what community members expressed seeing as hierarchical and crisis-centred status quo.

Government participants in the study also identified other barriers to reforming the LEMCs' relationship with local communities and achieving greater shared responsibility. This included a tendency to focus on immediate response by the LEMCs.

> *…despite their charter, to look at all four components of emergency management, many LEMCs are really just focussing on the preparation and response side of things more than recovery or prevention for that matter as well. They largely see recovery as something you chuck to Reconstruction Authority to look after. (Government participant)*

Placing a greater focus on prevention and preparedness would support a shift away from top-down, "command and control" approaches to more integrated responses. The research highlighted two areas of specific interest: shifting communities to active participants in disaster responses and recognising the diversity of different communities.

Community as an active participant
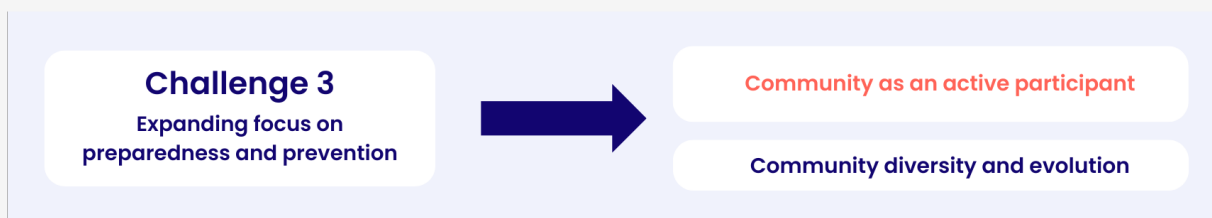
Current policy documents view communities as passive, disengaged and information-lacking. Community engagement is typically framed as a way to disseminate information that will result in an assumed behaviour change or action by the community. Across the disaster management field, there is a belief that information is lacking, and that providing it will automatically lead to action.

You need to communicate this message through engagement with the public so that individuals can prepare their own properties and improve their resilience in contributing to their overall community responsibility. (DPIE)[27]

Community members report frustration with this approach and are actively seeking a more participatory role.

Why can't we have the LEMC as more open, where minutes are available so we can stay in touch with what is happening and where there are sometimes when community members can join the discussion? I don't really understand why there is a situation that excludes the community from information we really need to plan for disasters. (Community member)

The current emphasis on community vulnerability reinforces the assumption that communities are simply passive recipients of external action.

By considering all the elements of vulnerability, we are increasing the community's physical and economic resilience over time. … These [vulnerable] communities need detailed analysis and planning to identify ways to increase their resilience to hazard events. (DPIE[28])

Community knowledge is valued, but primarily in terms of what it offers emergency management agencies. The current policy framework fails to strengthen local decision-making or community-led action, instead emphasising the one-way provision of information.

At a broader level, the risk management focus in policy implies that disaster settings can be controlled and ordered. Further, community "disengagement" is perceived as a problem in policy; available documentation appears to assume that if communities were engaged, information would be accepted and (appropriate) action would follow. In setting up the problem as community disengagement, it sets up a potential risk that energy might be wasted on responses that are ultimately likely to fail.

During the study, LEMC members revealed the constraints that restrict committees in terms of community involvement. These constraints included the current legislative framework, concerns about confidentiality, and the practicalities of retaining a volunteer "community rep".

> *There are some things that potentially are discussed within [the LEMC] that are not for general public consultation or discussion. And how much [do] we bring [more issues] into that one group? [It] then [goes] from a two-hour meeting to a five-hour meeting, because we're broadening the topics within that. I think if we use a model where we have the LEMC which are the decision-makers, but based on the subcommittee, that will be better. (LEMC member)*

LEMC members also highlighted the complexity of community representation. This complexity raised questions about the value of having a "community rep" added to the existing LEMC membership and the risk that committee structures would become unwieldy if all community interests were represented.

> *If you look at the [municipality] here, community clearly is multifaceted where obviously there are many different groups within the community, depending on how you can find the various cohorts. We also have significant tourism and economic interests here. We have significant environmental interests here. So having a singular person who can represent all of those interests, I think would be a significant challenge. And I think we're probably leading on to the other options about having more of a broader network that somehow feeds in key input to the committee rather than seeing a single person trying to do all of that. (LEMC member)*

Existing emergency management volunteers were identified as an untapped source of community involvement in LEMC planning.

> *Our volunteer members are the community; they're the local farmers or they're the local people in the community, so they're in touch with [the community] as well. So that is fed through to [paid staff] to represent them [and the community]. So, how much more do we want? I think we've already got that level of community there at some level. (LEMC member)*

Community members involved in the study saw their ability to act ("get shit done") as a strength of local community involvement.

> *We've got more ability to just get shit done, just get things happening. And I think though, in a very specific sense, we've been able to do things. Whereas if council were needing to do it, they'd have five risk assessments … and a whole lot of rules and regulations they've got to meet and make happy before they can [act]. (Community member)*

> *We need to match the complexity of the situation with the role and purpose of community involvement, which is different at different times. There are important times for community involvement in disaster planning, and it is now before the next one. At a community level, disaster prep is a huge contribution and we keep missing the boat. This is what community can and wants to do. (Community member)*

Community members demonstrated a clear awareness of the importance of collective action, which was at odds with the LEMC focus on individual responsibility. Throughout the study, community members expressed concerns about the long-term and under-recognised commitment of local residents.

> *We're all there for the same cause, and we are able to use our professional skillsets. And we're just not thinking about ourselves; we're putting the community first, but also thinking not what we want to achieve today, but we're thinking further – next week, next month. How do we get to that goal maybe six months or even two years down the track? How do we get there? (Community member)*

The study revealed community frustrations about the existing relationship with emergency management agencies, including the practices and perceived culture of LEMCs. Community members expressed particular concern about the lack of transparency and the sometimes exclusionary practices of LEMCs. They also reported that the relationship between the LEMC
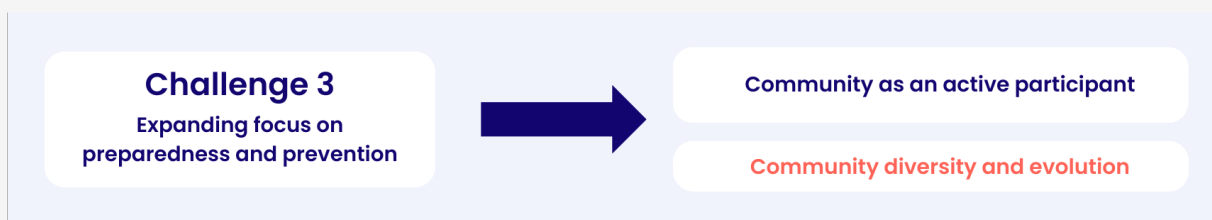
and community had been characterised by distrust and a lack of respect. The absence of opportunities to influence local planning and poor access to existing plans contributed to this frustration and lack of trust.

During the research, staff within government acknowledged that change would require time and resources, but that there was value in building stronger relationships.

> I think there's a lot of pre-work that is involved in terms of engaging the LEMC with the communities that it represents, and establishing a lot of those relationships ... Where [the LEMC] had broadened the outer concentric circle of their LEMC, people (i.e. community members) did seem largely to be happy about that because they knew what was going on. (Government participant)

Government staff that participated in the study identified a range of innovations that were currently being implemented in some parts of NSW, including subcommittees, community representatives on the LEMC (most often Council) and ongoing Community Resilience Networks. There is scope to share this emerging practice with other areas to help boost community engagement in disaster management across NSW.

Community diversity and evolution

Challenge 3
Expanding focus on preparedness and prevention

→ Community as an active participant

Community diversity and evolution

A significant challenge for future disaster management policy is the diversity of communities that must be considered, and their constant evolution, particularly in the face of climate change. A simple "cookie cutter" or "toolkit" approach is inadequate; policy must enable flexibility to respond to contextual factors such as local histories, hazards, and cultures. Importantly, an inclusive approach to incorporating community voice requires the participation of community members with diverse and sometimes uncomfortable perspectives.

This study found specific incidents where community engagement, when it was undertaken, was partial and unrepresentative. This included an invite-only community meeting to inform council priorities and flood planning. The meeting involved primarily male participants over

45 years old and was led by a council-engaged consultant. Young people were absent from the discussion and organisers made clear that there were no guarantees that community concerns would be actioned. The session format was designed to reduce the possibility of dominating voices and "council bashing". Council staff indicated this was a deliberate strategy to ensure that forward-planning did not get bogged down in negative feedback.

The past five years of disaster experience in NSW has demonstrated that evolution in local communities can be both incremental and rapid: incremental as community members age and younger generations leave for other opportunities, and rapid as seen in the influx of new residents in rural communities post-COVID-19. These demographic changes bring challenges and opportunities: longstanding, accumulated and sometimes contested local knowledge is concentrated in certain parts of the community, while new members can bring naivety about disaster implications but also cultural diversity, energy and enthusiasm.

Climate change and the economic and social costs of climate-related disasters are yet to be fully recognised in disaster policy and planning. They are largely absent from the *NSW EMPLAN*[29] and climate change is mentioned only twice in the *Emergency Risk Management Framework*.[30] The lived experience of recent disasters has not yet led to policy that reflects the increasingly urgent need for a strategic response to climate change.[31]

Moving forward

This research aimed to explore community engagement in disaster management and identify innovations to support greater shared responsibility and community involvement in disaster planning. Following detailed fieldwork, a policy roundtable was convened in July 2024. Participants brought high-level experience and expertise and were invaluable in shaping the policy opportunities presented in this report.

One proposal was to agree on strategic goals in relation to planning processes for disasters. This would enable all those involved (community members, emergency management agencies, LEMCs and local government) to agree to certain measures of "success" of disaster planning. A joint strategic planning process would help overcome miscommunication and address existing tensions between agencies and community members through the identification of shared goals (for example, no loss of life). These strategic goals could underpin post-event evaluations of the effectiveness of the local response and identify areas for improvement.

Emergency management agencies also recognised the direct benefit of community engagement and education. LEMCs, as the formal structure that brings agencies together, are well placed to support ongoing, proactive community engagement and education initiatives. Rather than a "one size fits all" approach, this engagement should be dynamic, regular, two-way and build on existing relationships and networks. The 2023 NSW EMPLAN now references volunteers and spontaneous volunteerism,[32] which indicates that lessons

have been learnt from previous disasters. This shift provides an opportunity to further embed community voice in disaster policy and planning.

Across all three locations of this study, participants noted the importance of adequate resourcing to support greater community involvement in disaster planning. Local government should not be seen as the default option to provide this resourcing, although they are often well-placed to provide support. Dedicated ongoing resources are required, administered through the most appropriate local forum.

The limited references to community engagement in local and regional EMPLANs must also be addressed. There is a valuable opportunity to frame future policy around "disaster" rather than "emergency" to integrate all disaster phases and support community participation in the preparation and implementation of plans. This would help strengthen cohesion between state, regional and local policy and planning.

A policy agenda for NSW

The study identified six policy opportunities for the NSW Government that will help harness community perspectives in future disaster management.

1. Amend the State Emergency and Rescue Management (SERM) Act 1989 to include local knowledge and community voice

There is an opportunity to amend the legislative framework in NSW to incorporate the specific inclusion of community. NSW Government could review the SERM Act, in consultation with relevant stakeholders (including community perspectives), and identify amendments that would facilitate greater community engagement in future disaster management practice in NSW. This would support innovative policy efforts to increase community participation and entrench structures and functions that engage communities in decision-making particularly in preparedness and prevention activities.

2. Provide context-specific definitions or meaningful descriptions of community in policy documents

The research showed ambiguity about who and what constitutes "community" in different contexts, and this confuses efforts to effectively support shared responsibility and community engagement. This leads to an inability to formalise shared responsibility, particularly in the top-down command-and-control approach of established emergency management in formal systems. Disaster management policy documents should include definitions or meaningful descriptions of community, specific to the policy context.

3. Provide strategic coordination of preparedness and prevention actions at state and regional levels

There is a need for governance structures that actively support preparedness and prevention activities. Their structural design should build in flexibility and the ability to be tailored to local contexts, while bringing a broad view of all phases of the disaster "cycle" and the role of multiple systems, both formal and informal. The NSW Reconstruction Authority is well placed to provide strategic coordination of the preparedness and prevention action at state and regional levels. Municipal arrangements should also reflect local level circumstances. This action will help address the current dominance of crisis mechanisms and relationships in the disaster management cycle and enable more community engagement in prevention and preparedness.

4. Resource and support communities to actively promote local engagement in preparedness and prevention

New resources are needed to enable a stronger focus on community voice in the prevention and preparedness elements of disasters. Community members, local governments, emergency management agencies and other service providers hold different knowledge and expertise. Further training of existing agencies will be required to enable an expansion from crisis response to prevention and preparedness. Some local government areas in NSW are leading the way in exploring and testing new models of community engagement and their approaches could be shared more widely to build capability across the state. There is also an opportunity to learn lessons from how other Australian jurisdictions support community engagement.

5. Strengthen transparency of LEMCs to support greater community participation in local prevention and preparedness actions

Although the study revealed support for the broad retention of existing LEMC arrangements, it highlighted the need for refinements to LEMC arrangements to respond to changing circumstances. This included support for LEMC structures to enable greater community participation in the preparation and preventative action that takes place at the local level. One way to achieve this is through the production, publication and promotion of a community-facing version of the LEMP. This would respond to community desire for greater transparency and promote communities' active involvement in local prevention and preparedness actions.

6. Recognise diversity between and within communities in future disaster management policy

The *2023 NSW EMPLAN*[33] indicates a positive shift in attention toward the diversity of communities and the impact of this dynamism on how disaster management policy is translated into practice. All levels of government should continue this trend and advocate for a greater recognition of community in emergency policy that is both more nuanced and more readily translated into diverse practice settings.

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Building a collaborative future for emergency management in NSW

Cascading disasters, changing community expectations, and resource limitations pose significant challenges for the NSW Government's emergency management planning. This research explored the perspectives and experiences of key groups, including community members, emergency management agencies and state government agencies. Each group recognised these challenges and expressed a desire to work more collaboratively in the future. The key question for government is what shape a reformed emergency management planning system might take and how community perspectives might be effectively incorporated in future.

The study revealed tangible actions that the NSW Government could take to harness community perspectives in disaster management more effectively.

It identified six policy opportunities that will enable further progress, enhance NSW's ability to respond to future disasters and bolster the state's resilience. This includes amending the legislative framework that underpins disaster management practice, developing and disseminating resources and training to support community engagement and fostering a shared understanding of what community means at a local level in the disaster context. Doing so will enable the NSW Government to fulfil its aspirations to get on the front foot and ensure that communities are better prepared if disaster does strike.[34]

Endnotes

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