Community engagement

Extreme Weather: Wellbeing, Resilience and Preparedness Program in Sydney North

Acknowledgements

We acknowledge the Darug, Guringai, Cammeraygal and Garigal people, the traditional custodians of the lands of the Northern Sydney region. We pay our respects to the Elders past, present and future for they hold the memories, culture and dreams of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. We recognise and respect their cultural heritage, beliefs and continual relationship with the land, and we recognise the importance of the young people who are our future leaders.

A special thank you to the people who generously shared their experiences, insights and ideas. Thank you also to the service providers who shared their time, expertise and passion and to the Mission Australia staff who provided insights, feedback, design and support.

Mission Australia

Mission Australia is a national Christian charity that has been standing alongside Australians in need since 1859. Our vision is for an Australia where all of us have a safe home and can thrive.

Backed by our supporters, churches, funders and partners, we combat homelessness, provide housing, assist struggling families and children, address mental health issues, fight substance dependencies, support people with disability and much more.

Given the right support, we believe everyone can reach their full potential. That's why we stand together with Australians in need, until they can stand for themselves.

Sydney North Health Network

The Sydney North Health Network (SNHN) is a not-for-profit organisation that achieves better health outcomes through the coordination and support of primary health care services in the Northern Sydney region across the following local government areas (LGAs) - Northern Beaches, Ku-ring-gai, Hornsby, Willoughby, Lane Cove, Hunters Hill, Mosman, North Sydney and Ryde. This region encompasses almost one million residents and covers an area of 899 square kilometres, aligning with the Northern Sydney Local Health District.

Insight Consulting Australia

Insight is a public policy and human services consultancy staffed entirely by people who have substantial experience within government and non-government human service agencies. We combine this experience with high quality skills in research, evaluation, stakeholder engagement and the development of evidence-based policy, programs, practice and strategies. We are small enough to vigorously apply a depth of expertise, while also having the capacity to deliver large projects to a high quality.

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Part 1

Summary of Findings

1. Executive Summary

Mission Australia was commissioned by the Sydney North Health Network (SNHN) and partnered with Insight Consulting Australia to undertake this community engagement project. The project was made possible by funding from the SNHN through the Australian Government's Primary Health Network Program as part of Round 1 of the Community Engagement: Natural Disaster and Extreme Weather: Wellbeing, Resilience and Preparedness Program in Sydney North.

Mission Australia's approach to this project was intended to ensure the voices of those who experience vulnerabilities were heard, as the community considers how it should prepare for and respond to extreme weather events, including those experiencing life challenges such as homelessness and housing instability, financial hardship, disability, mental and physical health concerns, social isolation and drug and alcohol issues.

While many areas of NSW have experienced the impacts of extreme weather in recent years, each community will experience different levels of impact and their own unique challenges and responses. This community engagement project focuses on the unique experience of the Northern Sydney community.

This community engagement project consulted directly with service users connected with a range of service providers across the Northern Sydney and Northern Beaches areas to better understand the experiences, insights and ideas of people in relation to extreme weather. The project aimed to draw out the impacts of extreme weather on individuals, identify what helped with preparedness, resilience and recovery, and to listen to their ideas for what else could help the community in the event of future extreme weather events. In addition to consulting with individuals, the project partnered with local service providers to understand their perspective, including the impact on their service users and how their existing connections to the community could be utilised to better support vulnerable people before, during and after extreme weather.

Consultation was conducted in three phases through a community survey and a service provider survey which were predominantly qualitative in nature, followed by focus groups to explore in more detail the themes from the surveys.

Part one of this report presents a summary of the key findings (Section 2) followed by an overview of the impacts, strengths and solutions heard throughout all phases of the project (Sections 3 and 4).

Part two presents an overview of the context of the project, as well as the methodology and details of participants.

Part three presents a more detailed account of the findings from each phase of the project (Sections 7, 8, 9 and 10).

*Note that quotes from community members or service providers used in this report may have been adapted to ensure they are not identifiable, however every effort has been made to convey the original meaning.

2. Key Findings and Principles

The following section gives a summary of the key findings. More detailed information on impacts can be found in Section 3 and more detail of solutions, community strengths and things that helped are outlined in Section 4.

Key finding 1: For people already experiencing vulnerabilities, impacts were cumulative, often having flow on and magnifying effects and impacting across life domains.

- For many participants, immediate impacts were prolonged rather than resolved. This was due to a range of factors including vulnerability, lack of access to support or resources and a limited ability to navigate such resources.
- Many participants were already managing multiple life challenges and stressors (for example financial stress combined with mental health concerns and caring for a family member with a disability). In many cases, the additional stress placed on them due to the extreme weather events further stretched their capacity to manage, pushing them into crisis or escalating states of distress.
- Unresolved and prolonged impacts then often had flow on effects that compounded. For example, lack of repairs led to physical health impacts and stress trying to access repairs. This in turn led to mental health impacts.
- Recent events also came in context of the previous experience of COVID, where many were already experiencing heighted anxiety, increased isolation, lack of community and mental and physical health impacts.

"It was the anxiety of what do you do first and then next. Then it was waiting for months for help"
Community Member

"…my utilities bills have been higher. I've had to deal with damp and mould which is difficult given my health"
Community Member

Solutions raised to address this included **streamlined and facilitated access to financial, practical and personal support** to address issues in a timely way and reduce stress and complexity. Community service providers can be a key point of contact for linking people to this support.

- Participants mentioned the idea of physical hubs in different forms, particularly as a place everyone knew about, and could go for immediate practical support and basic necessities, as well as find out what other support they could access.

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- Some participants also mentioned they would like a centralised phone number you could call to find out what was happening, or what support could be accessed.
- As participants described these solutions, there was a strong sense of wanting them to provide localised information.

"That could be a huge part of the solution… if there was a community centre in every suburb or every two suburbs, if that was prepared with food and blankets etc.… that could make it a lot easier. Candles, power, chargers etc."
Community Member

"Setup key hubs in community that people can go to for immediate needs or support."
Service Provider

Key finding 2: People felt unprepared for the impact of significant weather events but having lived through recent such events, felt motivated and have a sense of urgency to be better prepared next time.

- Participants experienced being unprepared and 'caught off guard' by events.
- Given the speed and severity of the events, participants felt they had little time for planning as individuals and families and were not involved in wider community planning.
- There was difficulty accessing information on what was coming or how best to prepare for it.

"Every household should have an emergency plan, just like we have a bushfire plan"
Community Member

"You need to know what to do in an emergency… At the time you can't think so it's easier to follow a plan. That should be provided to everyone and teach it at school."
Community Member

A focus on planning activities was raised as a key solution at **individual, community, service provider and sector levels** and **inclusive community planning** was seen as an opportunity to bring different parts of the community together around a common priority to build connections.

- Participants wanted awareness and information to help them know how to best prepare their property. They also wanted information to help to create an individual plan they could follow so that they know what to do, rather than trying to make decisions under stress.
- There was a strong sense of needing a community plan in place that was well known before an event occurred – people needed to know in advance where and how they could get assistance. This linked to the idea of local pop-up hubs or central points of coordination that everyone knew in advance they could access if needed.
- Similarly, service providers felt they could offer better support if there were clearer plans for how they would work together during extreme weather events, including who would take on lead roles for various aspects of response.
- Service providers also wanted to have their own plans prepared including clarity from funders in advance for how they could adapt their service delivery in response to local needs during a crisis. This included agreements on diverting resources or operating under flexible service provision guidelines during disaster events.

"Local Councils and other mainstream services such as Services Australia, Service NSW, local health districts and SES should set up a joint working group with strategic plans to support the NSW community"
Community Member

"Volunteer services to help clear gutters and drains before event [would help the community be better prepared]"
Service Provider

"We would be interested in community disaster planning. There were things on TV of how to prepare for a bushfire but not floods."
Community Member

Key finding 3: Many people experienced significant difficulty and delays in getting damage to their homes addressed.

- For private renters this process was particularly stressful when landlords refused to repair damage or delayed repairs. Some expressed fear that conflict with their landlord may lead to rent increases they could not afford.
- Homeowners experienced stress dealing with insurance companies and accessing and sequencing trades for repairs.
- For some, the expenses involved with repairs and replacing damaged belongings was prohibitive and was sometimes far more than the financial assistance available.
- Other participants were not physically able to clean up their homes or remove water damaged items such as furniture or whitegoods and found it difficult to find help for this.
- Many experienced delays due to the lack of availability of tradespeople.

"The amount of record keeping is too overwhelming for me – the insurance, keeping all the facts of what happened, flood assistance"
Community Member

"I got calls from these people saying they would come and clean the mould; I said there is no point coming to clean the mould until my roof is trapped. It's not being co-ordinated."
Community Member

"The real estate, the owner, no one will do anything to help me. It's constantly flooding in my kitchen"
Community Member

Solutions proposed included **streamlined access to support** for coordinating repairs and **advocacy with landlords and insurance companies**. Also **increased financial relief aligned with costs of repairs** or replacing essential damaged items.

- Participants wanted support to negotiate the stress, complexity and administrative burden of liaising with multiple trades, insurance companies, landlords and financial relief processes.
- They also wanted more support to advocate with those landlords and insurance companies who were unresponsive and made it difficult or impossible for people to get repairs addressed.
- Participants and service providers also wanted to see levels of financial relief for people on low incomes that were more aligned with the expenses many had in repairing damage or replacing major household items.
- The repairs process for social housing residents was in general less stressful and may provide an example to build from.

"You should get just one number instead of being passed on."
Community Member

"Increased financial support for low-income earners with rectifying damage [would help]"
Community Member

"Each person should be allocated a case coordinator and you can go to them for everyone."
Community Member

"Community food banks... cut down the cost of food... so I could spend extra money getting [my] house fixed"
Community Member

Key finding 4: While many felt supported during and after the extreme weather events, this was in stark contrast to the experience of others who felt unsupported and alone.

- Many participants expressed that support from family, friends or neighbours was very helpful for recovery, including practical help as well as having someone to talk to about what was going on.
- Others noted that support from community services providers was valuable in helping them during and after the events, and also noted the value of having someone to talk to.
- In contrast, there were a number of people who expressed feeling unsupported and alone. Some tried to access support but weren't able to get what they needed. Some felt that their neighbours weren't willing to help.
- Some participants found it difficult to find information about what support was available and how to access it.

"I am in social housing. I feel like the odd one out all the time. There is no community, but I would love it if there was."
Community Member

"More support needed for people who are in housing and are already isolated from Family and Friends."
Community Member

"I didn't see anything positive or anyone helping each other around here."
Community Member

Solutions raised included **individualised and facilitated support** and **fostering community connections** through **community-based programs, inclusive community activities** that bring different parts of the community together.

- Individual and community disaster planning was recognised as an opportunity to bring people together from different parts of the community in an inclusive way around a common priority.
- Participants wanted more opportunities and activities to connect and make more links in their community, or wanted to know more about existing opportunities.

"Community – build resilience and concentrate on inclusivity and work together"
Community Member

"My social worker keeping in touch and always there if I needed someone."
Community Member

"There are a lot of community workshops and gathering places but we just don't know about them"
Community Member

"Neighbourhood support programs i.e. turning to your neighbour for support."
Service Provider

"Support from neighbours and being able to talk to someone [was helpful for me]."
Community Member

"Providing adequate education and information to community groups and encouragement to support each other and identify vulnerable members during extreme weather events."
Service Provider

Key finding 5: Knowing how and where to access clear, reliable, local, relevant information is critical, but many felt this was lacking.

- Effective communication and information systems are critical during and immediately after the event – people need to be able to stay up to date and find timely information.
- People experienced difficulty accessing information on what was coming or how to prepare for it, which led to greater impacts.
- They also experienced difficulty accessing information on what support was available, where to go to get it, and navigating the processes required to access it, which often hampered recovery.
- People who had lost power or did not have online access found it difficult to access the predominantly digital information sources available.
- Some who turned to media and news bulletins to stay up to date found the reporting increased their anxiety and distress.

"The information about where to go for help is not clear enough. You can't get through or they don't know what you are talking about"
Community Member

"Knowing that there's help out there once I get to the right channel for the help I needed"
Community Member

"I haven't been able to work since then. I didn't know about any of the resources for post-disaster, about anything that was available to me from the government."
Community Member

Solutions raised included **utilising multiple channels** to reach people in diverse circumstances, **leveraging well established channels** such as local community Facebook groups and **equipping service providers** as a key source of information for people experiencing vulnerabilities.

- Participants wanted more prominent awareness campaigns so that the community was generally more informed of what was coming, how to be prepared, and how to get help, highlighting that bushfire awareness was more effectively communicated.
- Some participants highlighted the need for non-digital channels such as mail or radio broadcast.
- Other participants and service providers highlighted the active local Facebook groups, or suggested the use of alert apps.
- Participants and service providers identified that service providers could be a trusted source of information for groups within the community and need to also be able to find reliable up to date information.

"Ensure all community members are signed up for emergency texts."
Service Provider

"Dedicated radio channel for broadcast which is known to all community members."
Service Provider

"[Service providers could help] be able to provide reliable contacts who can help with property restoration."
Service Provider

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Key finding 6: The cumulative stress and mental health impacts were significant for many.

- For many, anxiety and stress were directly caused by the extreme weather events, with challenges in knowing what to do as an immediate response to stay safe and well. This was particularly the case for those with caring responsibilities for families or children.
- However, this was compounded by a range of secondary impacts such as stress caused by trying to navigate difficult processes, ongoing health impacts, prolonged unrepaired damage and increased isolation.
- Many turned to news and media to stay informed, but some found the reporting and images distressing.
- Participants expressed the feelings evoked by weather events were 'on top of' previous isolation and loneliness experienced by COVID and/or exacerbated existing mental health concerns (for example, depression and anxiety). For some this led to extreme levels of distress including risk of harm and suicidal ideation.

"I am still in the process [getting the damage to my home fixed]. My insurance company has taken a long time to settle…. I'm unsure if [the settlement] will cover the costs. I have so many concerns for my home and the future, and potential extreme weather events occurring again and if my home and my children will be safe."
Community Member

"It has impacted on my mental health severely, pushing me to contemplating taking my life because I couldn't cope and fixing the problem wasn't happening fast enough and the loss of major items due to flooding exacerbated my mental health to the extreme as I don't have money to replace the home items lost due to flooding."
Community Member

Solutions raised included **engagement in community** as protective factors for mental health and wellbeing, **timely and economical access to supports** both informal and formal and a **focus on planning and preparedness** to build resilience. In particular for people experiencing vulnerabilities.

- Many of the solutions raised above to support preparedness, resilience and recovery will also help to address the factors contributing to impacts on mental health.
- Participants also raised the need for affordable access to mental health supports in the recovery phase.

"[What helped was] support from neighbour's and being able to talk to someone."
Community Member

"[What helped was] my social workers… keeping in touch and always there if I needed someone."
Community Member

"Mental health was discussed more openly which made me more comfortable to talk about my struggles"
Community Member

Key Principles to inform activities

The following emerged from the community engagement as key principles to inform and shape activities to improve preparedness, resilience and recovery.

Connected: People in communities have the opportunity to be connected to others. Individuals, stakeholders and the sector work in collaboration and partnership.

Well established connections with service providers can be a key mechanism for individuals and communities to access support at times of significant events.

Rebuilding social networks eroded by COVID-19, providing opportunities for people in communities to connect with each other, form their own networks and bonds that can be called upon during times of crisis.

There is no community, but I would love it if there was."
Community Member

‘More events are needed… … Even just an event to run at a local park to create a sense of community again"
Community Member

"My caseworker has been wonderful"
Community Member

"People willing to help strangers"
Community Member

Localised: Communities have local knowledge and expertise of the impact and the solutions. Solutions should be embedded in community, doing with not for people and shaped by meaningful community engagement.

"That could be a huge part of the solution… if there was a community centre in every suburb or every two suburbs, if that was prepared with food and blankets etc.… that could make it a lot easier. Candles, power, chargers etc."
Community Member

"[What helped was] support from neighbour's and being able to talk to someone."
Community Member

Empowered: People in communities engage in co-designing activities, resources and plans. People experiencing vulnerabilities have the opportunity to engage and their voices are heard.

Planning and preparedness further enhances community cohesion which act as protective factors in wellbeing and resilience.

"I do have an emergency plan. I belong to a group and we are trained to have a grab bag which has essentials in it – medicines and a change of clothes and it's all packed in a suitcase in case you have to leave you can just grab that and walk. It does give me more confidence."
Community Member

"A timeline to safety again"
Community Member

"We all should have a plan really."
Community Member

Holistic: Preparedness, resilience, response and recovery are distinct and interconnected. Life domain areas are interconnected and interdependent.

"Felt isolated, financially stressed, lonely, got sick a lot"
Community Member

"Mental health was discussed more openly which made me more comfortable to talk about my struggles"
Community Member

"It has affected our… sleep, mental health, community services, visitors, comfort and wellbeing"
Community Member

"…every event that occurs is a burden and has a significant effect on the health and wellbeing of my family"
Community Member

Adaptable: People and communities benefit from simple and efficient mechanisms and activities that are responsive to need, able to be activated quickly, and flexible to changing environments

"Knowing that there's help out there once I get to the right channel for the help I needed."
Community Member

"The somewhat faster financial assistance by State and Fed Governments has been refreshing following fires, Covid and floods. Some red tape still needs fixing"
Service Provider

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Person Centred: People and their communities remain at the core of individual, community, service provider and sector planning activities and responses

"The somewhat faster financial assistance by State and Fed Governments has been refreshing following fires, COVID and floods. Some red tape still needs fixing"
Service Provider

"One person to directly turn to."
Community Member

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3.Summary of Impacts

A key focus of this community engagement was to increase understanding of the impacts of extreme weather events on the Northern Sydney community, and particularly for those experiencing vulnerability. The following section summarises the impacts that were heard throughout the consultation in all phases including the community survey, provider survey and focus groups. A more detailed account of the findings from each phase of research can be found in Sections 7-10.

3.1 Individual and Community Impacts

Participants experienced being unprepared and 'caught off guard' by events. Given the speed and severity of the events, participants felt they had little time for planning as individuals and families and were not involved in wider community planning. There was difficulty accessing information on what was coming or how to prepare for it.

As such participants experienced impacts across the following domains:

Health and Safety

- Homes that were unsafe to live in or people had to live with reduced levels of safety in their homes.
- Extensive property damage to homes and in particular water damage.
- Physical health conditions often exacerbated by extended property repair times, e.g. respiratory conditions exacerbated by mould or smoke.
- Lack of power or internet making it difficult to access information.
- Difficulty accessing information on how to prepare property.
- Couldn't access health care due to services being closed or inaccessible.
- Catching COVID from evacuation centres.
- Injuries resulting from unsafe conditions, e.g. slip and fall injuries.

32% of community survey respondents said they experienced health problems as a result of extreme weather.

Wellbeing and Mental Health

- Difficulty accessing information on what support was available, where to go to get it, and navigating the processes required to access it.
- Difficulty accessing supports for a range of reasons including services not having capacity, services being unaffordable, not being able to physically access supports due to weather conditions.
- Difficulty accessing personal supports such as a friend, or counsellor to talk with.
- Difficulty managing daily responsibilities, such as caring for children, with the added impact of navigating insurances, quotes, repairs and applications for assistance.

41% of community survey respondents said the extreme weather had added a lot of stress to their lives.

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- Compound effects of isolation and in particular emerging from the experience of COVID where isolation was consistent and prolonged.
- Increased anxiety.
- Increased isolation from family and friends, particularly exacerbated by blocked roads and cancelled activities.
- Isolation contributed to a decline in mental health.
- Isolation contributed to reduced capacity to make clear and productive decisions in times of duress.
- Stressful or traumatic experiences during the events themselves, especially for those unable to access help when needed.
- Increased stress in needing to move house and organise alternate accommodation and arrangements.
- Increased stress, particularly in navigating processes to access support, and arrange repairs and liaise with landlords and/or insurance companies.
- Loss or damage to sentimental items causing distress.
- Media reporting of distressing events, e.g. floods, COVID, storm damages caused increased anxiety and stress.
- Feelings of further marginalisation by the processes designed to assist recovery, (e.g. applications did not progress or were rejected due to a lack of reference numbers).
- People vicariously emotionally affected through the experience of family and friends living in other areas that had significant or extreme events.

63% of community survey respondents said they had felt more anxious or on edge as a result of extreme weather.

40% of community survey respondents said they tried to get personal support but couldn't find what they needed.

Home and Daily Living
- Difficulty accessing daily necessities.
- Difficulty getting to appointments due to weather or transport being inaccessible.
- Ongoing or unrepaired damage to homes, such as mould or leaks.
- Trauma of previous events further impacting the ability to prepare for future events.
- Delays in repairs due to difficulty navigating systems (especially for private renters and homeowners), and availability of tradespeople.
- Damage to belongings.
- Lack of shelter from weather for people who were sleeping rough.
- Challenges around managing repairs and the sequencing of works and trades for homes or accommodation.
- The lack of maintenance on properties reduced the property's performance to 'stand up' under extreme conditions, e.g. gutters were not cleaned or maintained resulting in water flowing internally

38% of community survey respondents said they had problems getting damage fixed.

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Financial

- Reduced or loss of income.
- Increase in unexpected expenses.
- Costs in replacing belongings and repairing property, sometimes far more than financial assistance available.
- Difficulty knowing what financial support is available and how to access it.
- Difficulty navigating processes to access financial support or repairs.
- Lack of internet making it difficult to apply for relief payments.
- Loss of housing or accommodation.
- Depletion of initial limited financial resources.
- Grants were not sufficient to cover costs, e.g. $1000 did not cover a fridge, furniture and clothing.

Identity and Relationships

- Difficulty retrieving documentation and valuables.
- Isolation from friends and family and community supports.
- Increased sense of isolation.

Culture and Community

- Unable to attend community events.
- Activities and events cancelled.
- A sense of disconnection and inequity between different groups within the community. Vulnerable people felt particularly isolated due to the relative affluence of the area, and that neighbours were less willing to help them due to their different economic circumstances.

Impact of extreme weather on identity and relationships

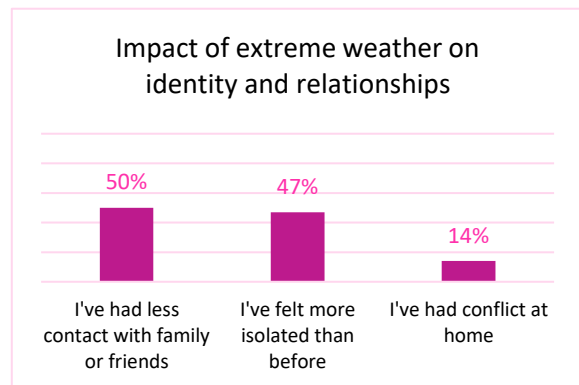| 50% | 47% | 14% |
| I've had less contact with family or friends | I've felt more isolated than before | I've had conflict at home |

Chart 1 – Percentage of participants reporting impacts on relationships in the six months following the events

Education and Work

- Unable to attend work or school.
- Reduced hours or workload.

3.2 Service Provider Impacts

Service providers experienced impacts and challenges as outlined below:

Challenges to Service Provision

- Changes to the demand and the type of service provision needed to support people and communities. There was a need to pivot the usual service delivery to meet emerging needs such as welfare checks, delivery of care packages or essential needs.
- Need for increased brokerage for goods.
- Need for quick turn-around partnerships to allow for material assistance to be provided where it is most needed.
- Demand for service and support from community members who had previously not been in contact with the service system.
- Understanding and delivery of new financial packages and the attached reporting required e.g. navigating financial supports, distributing emergency relief payments.

22% of service provider survey respondents reported changes to support needs for service users.

Disruptions to Service Provision

- Having to revert to non-face to face methods. While this still caused disruption to service delivery, providers were able to adapt quickly.
- Challenges in meeting existing contracts with service delivery diverted.
- Staff shortages and increased risks for staff.

4.Summary of Solutions and Strengths

Throughout the community engagement, a focus was maintained on asking "what helped", "what else could help" and identifying existing community strengths and assets that could be leveraged to support solutions. The following section summarises what was heard throughout all phases of the project. Each section first outlines solutions raised by individual participants and service providers, ("what else could help the community be better prepared, or recover quicker") and then outlines the existing community strengths and assets, identified during the consultation that could be leveraged to support these solutions.

4.1 Preparedness

Planning

Planning at all levels was a key theme throughout discussions of what could help with preparedness.

Having felt relatively unprepared for extreme weather events, particularly the extreme rain and flooding in early 2022, there was a strong sense of wanting to be better prepared for the next event. There was also a sense of urgency, with many recognising events such as these were likely to increase in frequency.

Individual planning: supported by service providers/community organisations

- Assistance for individuals on preparing their homes and belongings.
- Having a plan for what to do in emergency situations including having a plan on where to go.
- Information on how to access help and support if required and what is available.
- Providing information on how to prepare, where to get information, how to get repairs, tenants' rights.

Community Planning: Planning inclusive of a diversity of community members

- Information and resources on how to help others.
- Information on how community members can help their neighbours.
- Places and mechanisms to volunteer.
- Localised planning that is inclusive of community members, local councils, businesses and volunteer organisations.
- Community planning as a key opportunity to bring different parts of the community together around a common priority to build connection and break down barriers.

"Every household should have an emergency plan, just like we have a bushfire plan."
Community Member

"Ensuring properties are repaired by landlords."
Community Member

"We would be interested in community disaster planning. There were things on TV of how to prepare for a bushfire but not floods."
Community Member

Service Provider Planning: including adaptive, flexible practices and resource allocation

- Organisational Business Continuity and Emergency Response plans.
- Agreements with funding bodies on diverting resources or operating under flexible service provision guidelines during disaster events.
- Surge staffing.
- Altering type and mode of service provision.

11% of service provider respondents said ability to be flexible in service provision/work outside guidelines would enable them to better support their service users during extremer weather.

Sector planning: inclusive of service providers and all levels of government

- Mapping of roles and responsibilities, including lead agencies, partner agencies and protocols.
- Referral pathways.
- Distribution of resources, and use of staff across agencies.
- Training for service providers on how to help prepare service users and enhance connections to community.

Other preparedness solutions

- Building maintenance being kept up to date (such as gutters kept clear) and channels for advocacy with landlords who do not respond to requests.
- Support for those who can't easily prepare their own homes. For example, volunteer services to help elderly people clear gutters and drains.
- Good warning systems and information that an event is imminent so that people know to start preparing and be ready to activate emergency plans.

What would help you and the community prepare for future extreme weather?

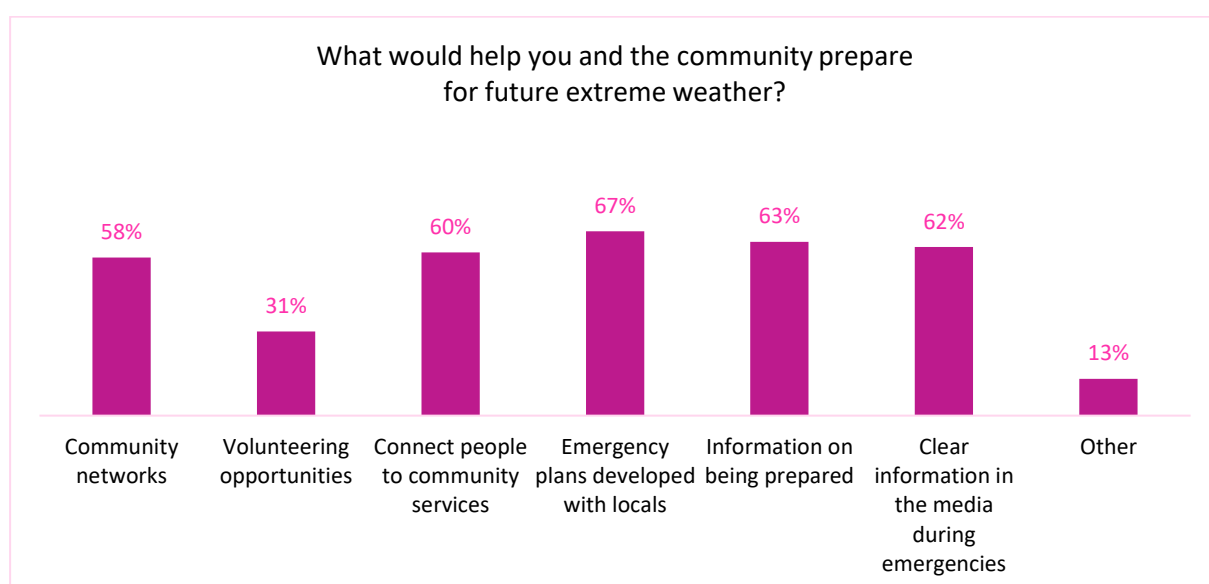| Category	Percentage
Community networks	58%
Volunteering opportunities	31%
Connect people to community services	60%
Emergency plans developed with locals	67%
Information on being prepared	63%
Clear information in the media during emergencies	62%
Other	13%

Chart 2 – Percentage of participants who expected specified preparation activities would be effective

Community Strengths to build from and what helped

- **Service providers' ability to adapt service quickly and be flexible to changing needs:** The experience of COVID 19 has allowed service providers to adapt quickly and alter service provision as needed. Service providers have been responsive to the needs of service users in a more challenging environment. As examples, service providers have been able to deliver care parcels, issue e-vouchers, provide face to face and remote service delivery, and offer online groups and enhanced mental health services.

- **Motivation and urgency to be better prepared next time:** In all groups there was a sense of urgency and motivation to be prepared for future events. This momentum provides an opportunity to bring people together around preparedness now, to start implementing solutions.

- **Existing trust and relationships between community services providers and many vulnerable people in the community:** There are strong existing relationships, rapport and trust between community services organisations and their service users. For some experiencing vulnerabilities, the connection with service providers may be their only point of contact and so is an avenue for support.

- **Strong sector collaboration and integration:** The Northern Sydney sector has extremely strong collaboration, integration, shared visions, and shared project and community work. There are significant and numerous networks and interagency forums across the district with connections to vulnerable community groups. They include service providers and government agencies across all domains. The sense of partnership and investment is strong, as is the appetite to respond quickly and appropriately to emerging needs in the communities they service and represent. A list of interagency groups and committees operating across the across the Northern Sydney area is provided in Appendix A.

- **Utilising existing platforms to build from:** There is an awareness of information about preparing for bushfires, with regular yearly reminders as to how to prepare and care for friends and family, pets, homes and belongings. Participants mentioned visible TV advertising campaigns

- **Existing response plans for people sleeping rough or living outdoors:** Responses and assertive activities currently exist in the Specialist Homelessness Service and Community Housing Provider sector for extreme heat and weather events for people who are street sleeping or residing in bushland and park areas.

- **Existing effective communication channels and systems:** Current systems already exist that provide good communication and warning methods, as evidenced in bushfire alerts to people at risk – alerting the community to act with caution and care and providing steps for action if needed.

- **Established communication channels:** There are active local community communication channels. These include Facebook groups which allow information to be quickly disseminated locally relevant.

    Schools provided information to parents about emergency measures for children through their established communication channels with parents.

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Local Councils provide e-newsletters and up to date and consolidated information on their websites.

Some of the strengths outlined above are already evident in community initiatives and platforms both in Northern Sydney and NSW, examples include:

- Northern Beaches Council: Emergency Ready Week 18 – 25 September, Emergency preparedness section on the website, resources section with personal emergency plans and kits for all types of disasters. Community events such as It Takes a Village Program (includes Meet Your Street Parties and ways to get involved in your local community), and community group events calendar.
- Get Ready NSW initiative under Resilience NSW provides preparedness information for individuals, community service organisations, and businesses.
- Get Prepared App from Red Cross.

4.2 Resilience

Building Community Connections

Many people expressed a strong desire and drive for connection and wanting to assist each other, and many recognised that it was helpful in recovery. Connection can enhance mental health, wellbeing and resilience through community connections, networks, programs and events. Fostering community cohesion and inclusion is a protective factor not only for extreme weather events but also for ongoing individual and community resilience. The ongoing and cumulative nature of events increases the impact of subsequent events. Suggested solutions raised included:

- Enhance resilience, mental health and wellbeing by building community connections, through community-based programs, recreational and the arts and council programs.
- Foster community cohesion through partnerships and community events, for example utilise existing places that people come together such as schools, RSL Clubs and Churches.
- Involve vulnerable people in planning community activities alongside other community groups like surf clubs, sports clubs, RSLs – this could help to bring more people together who may not usually connect with each other.

"Providing adequate education and information to community groups and encouragement to support each other and identify vulnerable members during extreme weather events."
Service Provider

Community Strengths to build from and what helped

- **A desire to help others:** Amongst some community members, there was a strong desire and drive for community members to help each other, and harnessing this energy is a powerful tool. Equipping people with practical tools for making their neighbourhood and broader community more supportive, could improve resilience as well as preparedness. Despite some community members feeling very isolated and reporting having no support from neighbours or the community, there is still an appetite to connect and be involved. Information about

how to help themselves and how they can help others will likely ensure communities are mobilised and are better prepared.

- **Knowledge of services and supports:** Many participants were aware that services exist, and people know about them. Whilst there may not be an understanding of the extent of the service sector, there is an awareness, and as such, an access point for community members who wouldn't normally be connected to service providers.

- **Motivation to participate and be more connected:** Previous extreme weather events had seen an increase in participants' involvement in their community, suggesting a platform to build resilience in significant events and more generally. Also, there is an enthusiasm for joining community activities or get involved in any activities that would connect them to others and build their sense of community. This in turn could build resilience and be a protective factor in mental health and general wellbeing.

- **Community spaces and groups where people naturally come together:** A range of facilities and venues exist in local communities where community members from different groups across the community already come together. These include schools, RSL Clubs, SES volunteers, surf clubs, sports clubs, libraries, community facilities (like skate parks), learning environments and faith communities.

Some of the strengths outlined above are already evident in community initiatives and platforms both in Northern Sydney and NSW. Examples include:

- Northern Beaches Council has a program to support community members to organise meet your neighbour parties.
- Community Builders was an example of a Department of Communities and Justice (DCJ) program that was previously delivered by one of the providers running activities that aimed to build connections in the community. These activities not only provide opportunities for people to build connections but can also be a pathway for linking people with further support if needed.
- Council run community activities and events including "food truck parties" fun on local ovals that bring the local community together.
- Christmas Carol events were identified as an activity that draws people out in the community.

4.3 Response and Recovery

Streamlined access to support

- Consideration could be given to a hub or 'pop up' model locally based that allows for integrated and holistic support. This could re-label and re-purpose evacuation centres as central hubs for support, not just for evacuees, but also for necessities, information, advice, advocacy and connection.
- A centralised toll free number, to call to access support in navigating options and available assistance

"That could be a huge part of the solution… if there was a community centre in every suburb or every two suburbs, if that was prepared with food and blankets etc.… that could make it a lot easier. Candles, power, chargers etc."
Community Member

- Activating a simplified referral process between providers, allowing quick response times and having people connected in to the appropriate support as quickly as possible. This could be in the form of a partnership agreement and set of agreed details that can be shared with consent between providers quickly and easily.
- Support service providers to build on to be increasingly flexible in their service delivery to meet the presenting need during extreme weather events. For example, being able to support with welfare checks rather than appointments or meetings. In addition, where the demand is outside of scope, ensuring linkages to alternate service providers, possibly through a central hub or coordinator.

16% of service provider respondents said information on supports, processes and referral pathways would enable them to better support their service users during extreme weather.

- Lead or single agency to distribute relief funds.
- Distribution of practical items like care packages, alongside the connection and referral of people to service providers that can assist, including information on the process for repairs and replacement of goods.
- Person-centred case coordination for recovery, irrespective of home ownership or rental status and ensuring a holistic response and in particular for people who are not engaged within the service sector but appropriate to need.
- Centralised way to get updates on support, funding applications or repairs, and advocacy with both real estate agents and insurance companies.

"Better advocacy in the sector for vulnerable cohorts when liaising with insurance companies."
Service Provider

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Communication

- Better communication and information systems are critical during and immediately after the event – people need to be able to stay up to date and find timely information.
- Utilising multiple channels for clear communication of support and assistance. This could include social media, government websites and community group platforms as well as traditional media, posters and signs.
- A need for standards around media reporting of events that provide the necessary information but do not unnecessarily contribute to anxiety or distress.

"They should send you an alert via text – this is what is happening here and here ... An automated text."
Community Member

What would help you and the community recover after future extreme weather?

Community events: 23%
Community information: 57%
Repairs to roads/infrastructure: 79%
Volunteering opportunities: 25%
Mental health services: 79%
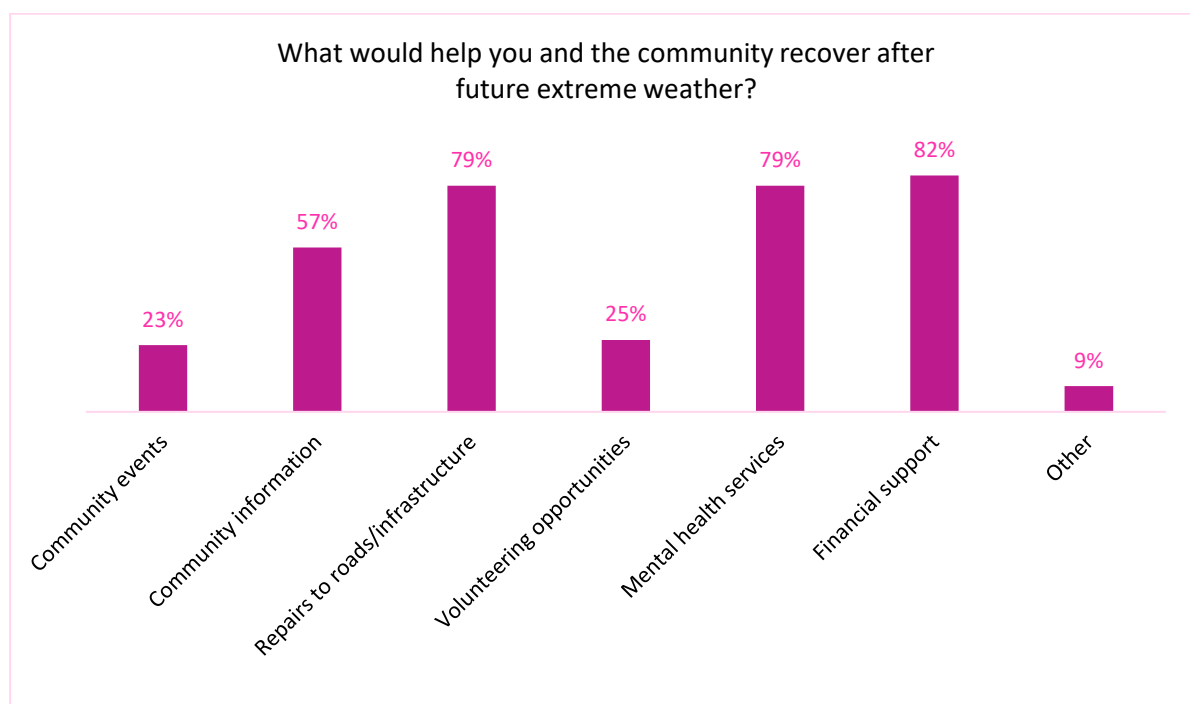Financial support: 82%
Other: 9%

Chart 3 – Percentage of participants supporting specified recovery strategies the events

Community Strengths and what helped

- **Getting damage repaired in a timely way:** The outcomes and experience for those who were able to get damage repaired quickly was much less negative than for those who experienced prolonged delays and cumulative impacts.

- **Channels where people were able to access to clear, local, relevant information:** These included local Facebook community pages, schools, local council and MP, local emergency services, alert apps,

- **Assistance from local emergency services:** Invaluable assistance was provided to many by local police, fire, and SES.

- **Ability to adapt quickly:** Service providers were able to adapt quickly and work flexibly using existing business continuity plans and emergency actions plans. Many of these were actioned

during COVID and had well established frameworks and partnerships to provide the pivot in service delivery.

- **Support from service providers:** Many people highly valued the support provided by service providers including practical support, having someone to talk to, providing reliable information and accessing what they needed.

- **Welfare checks:** Some service providers were able to do welfare checks on vulnerable service users following the extreme weather event, as well as support service users to access government grants or support.

- **Access to support:** Many participants were able to find the practical or personal support they needed (24% and 27% respectively).

- **More interaction with neighbours:** 53% said they got to know their neighbours better as a result of the floods.

- **Practical and personal support amongst social networks:** Many people received support from family, friends or neighbours and expressed a desire to help others. 32% said they were able to help others. Many had opportunities to connect with others and found this helpful in supporting their recovery.

- **Access to emergency or alternative accommodation**: In some cases, Community Housing Providers had the capacity and flexibility to relocate people to alternative accommodation while repairs were made to damaged properties. Similarly, Specialist Homeless Services were able to access additional and temporary accommodation and support for residences in crisis and transitional housing if the need arose. These plans were able to be actioned quickly as a result of strong community partnerships and frameworks already in existence.

- **Additional funding to providers:** Enhancement funding, additional to usual service delivery, was made available in a responsive and timely manner. The funding was made available through existing Emergency Relief providers, so that existing process and frameworks allowed for it to be allocated to those in need quickly and seamlessly.

Some of the strengths outlined above are already evident in community initiatives and platforms both in Northern Sydney and NSW, examples include:

- Service NSW overview of financial assistance and a disaster assistance finder, as well as a storm and flood customer care service.
- NCOSS flood relief and assistance page compiling all available support including state and federal government payments, allowances and subsidies, as well as major banks providing customers with emergency assistance for floods. Also links to housing support, guidance for owners and tenants whose houses were damaged, emergency accommodation, and housing support packages.

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Part 2

Project and Methodology

5. Introduction

5.1 Aims of the project

Mission Australia was commissioned by the Sydney North Health Network (SNHN) and partnered with Insight Consulting Australia to undertake this community engagement project. The project was made possible by funding from the SNHN through the Australian Government's Primary Health Network Program as part of Round 1 of the Community Engagement: Natural Disaster and Extreme Weather: Wellbeing, Resilience and Preparedness Program in Sydney North.

Through this program, SNHN is seeking to *promote and enhance the wellbeing, resilience, and preparedness of communities and primary healthcare providers*. Target groups identified by the SNHN for the consultation included *vulnerable community members and/or primary healthcare providers in the SNHN region who have been, or may be affected, by floods, bushfires and extreme weather events.*

This community engagement project is intended to determine the impact that extreme weather events have had on the communities in Northern Sydney, the initiatives that communities believe will assist their wellbeing, resilience and preparedness for future events and the existing community assets that can be leveraged to achieve this.

The insights from this project will be used by the SNHN to inform future community development activities to promote and enhance the wellbeing, resilience, and preparedness of communities in the event of extreme weather events across the region.

Mission Australia's approach to this project was intended to ensure the voices of those who experience vulnerabilities were heard as the community considers how it should prepare for and respond to these events, including those experiencing life challenges such as homelessness and housing instability, financial hardship, disability, mental and physical health concerns, social isolation and AOD issues.

This community engagement project consulted directly with service users connected with a range of service providers across the Northern Sydney and Northern Beaches areas to better understand their experiences, insights and ideas of in relation to extreme weather. In addition to consulting with individuals the project partnered with local service providers to understand the impact on their services and how their existing connections to the community can be utilised to better prepare and support vulnerable people before, during and after extreme weather.

5.2 Context

In the first half of 2022 alone, parts of NSW were inundated up to four times with heavy rain and resulting floodwaters. Many of the suburbs impacted were also flooded in 2021, and almost all of the NSW east coast was impacted in 2019 by the black summer bushfires, either through the direct threat of fires, or the heavy blanket of bushfire smoke that engulfed the state, in some cases for weeks on end. These natural disasters have bookended the most significant impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic and left many people with a compounding sense of isolation and trauma.

Northern Sydney and the Northern Beaches, like much of NSW, has experienced several extreme weather events over the past few years.

South Turramurra in the Ku-ring-gai LGA experienced the Black Summer Bushfires in December 2019 – January 2020 and the area was blanketed in bushfire smoke for several months from fires burning on the outskirts of Sydney.

The region also experienced severe weather and floods in February and March 2022, including the impact in the Northern Beaches LGA where many residents were evacuated, and houses, cars, businesses, and other infrastructure damaged due to flooding.

Other impacts across the region included land slips in Hornsby LGA at Galston Gorge and in Ku-ring-gai LGA at North Turramurra along with flooding across roads in Willoughby LGA to include Roseville Bridge. Residents from across all LGAs in the region were impacted in many and varied ways.

The region has also been impacted over time by other bushfires, frequent severe storms and impacts of costal erosion.

One of the more unique challenges of the extreme rainfall and flash flooding of early 2022, faced by Northern Sydney, and as differentiated from other parts of the NSW was to a large extent unexpected by many residents, with many completely unprepared for such events.

After the flooding events in NSW in early 2022, two separate inquiries were launched into the response and recovery efforts. A Parliamentary select committee was established to inquire into and report on the response to the major flooding in NSW in 2022. The committee delivered its report in August 2022, which considered the Government preparation and response, the role of Resilience NSW, the coordination between levels of government and non-government agencies, public communication and the overall effectiveness of the flood response. The Inquiry made 21 findings, primarily relating to the effectiveness of Government coordination and response, and included that the NSW Government failed to adequately incorporate the role of community organisations in the response, lacked a streamlined process for grant applications, and failed to prepare effective temporary housing solutions[1].

An Independent Inquiry into the 2022 flood events mirrored many of the Parliamentary inquiry findings, with a greater focus on the impacts of the failures on the individuals involved, with far reaching consultations capturing the experiences of communities. The Inquiry made 28 recommendations for change, including enhanced preparedness at all levels, from government to the individual, training and harnessing volunteers as 'community first responders', centralised coordination of disaster support and information provision by the Department of Customer Services, and consideration of the impact of the built environment and use of flood plains[2].

The Welfare Services Functional Plan should set out the roles and responsibilities for community organisations during a natural disaster, however it was highlighted by organisations as not offering a clear mechanism for agencies to connect with each other, hampering their ability to coordinate services to provide maximum benefit to those in need of support[3].

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[1] New South Wales Parliament, Legislative Council, Select Committee on the Response to Major Flooding across New South Wales in 2022, Report no.1.

[2] 2022 New South Wales Flood Inquiry, Volume Two, Full report.

[3] New South Wales Parliament, Legislative Council, Select Committee on the Response to Major Flooding across New South Wales in 2022, Report no.1.

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As outlined in these reports, natural disaster planning, preparation and response is the responsibility of government and governed by various state plans, Acts, and government owned strategies. While community organisations and NGOs cannot control or change the government level responsibilities, they can and should play a key role in local level support. In particular, with established connections with those who may be experiencing vulnerabilities and life challenges, they are often well placed to play a role in supporting these individuals and groups as part of a local approach to preparedness, recovery and resilience in relation to severe weather.

6. Methodology

6.1 Overview of project methodology

This project consulted directly with individuals and service providers in Northern Sydney through surveys and focus groups, with an emphasis on the voice of participants. Surveys used predominantly open-ended questions, with free text boxes accompanying any closed option questions.

The project was conducted over three phases.

- **Phase 1: Service provider consultation**
  An online survey was used to capture service provider input and seek their support to engage with their service users in Phase 2. All levels of service provision were invited to participate and included direct service workers through to management level roles. The survey was promoted through interagency meetings and connections with Mission Australia.
  The survey was predominantly qualitative in nature, using free text short answers with a view to capturing the full range of impacts, strengths and solutions observed by providers. Providers could offer multiple answers to most questions. In analysing the results, responses were grouped into themes and counted. Detailed findings from this phase are presented in Section 7.

- **Phase 2: Community member consultation**
  An online and paper-based survey was used to gain insights from individual community members with a focus on including the experiences of people experiencing vulnerabilities. Mission Australia frontline staff engaged service participants and invited them to complete the survey. Service providers who completed the service provider survey were also asked to do the same. The hard copy version mirrored the online survey questions. Both survey versions could be completed with the support of a worker or independently by the participant.
  The survey was predominantly qualitative in nature, with a mix of tick box prompts and free text questions to encourage participants to expand or add additional answers. The survey tools were tested with a reference group of participants prior to being released with significant changes made from their feedback to ensure they were accessible and easy to complete.
  Detailed findings from this phase are presented in Section 9.

- **Phase 3: In-depth consultation**
  Small focus groups of individuals and an online forum with service providers were conducted to explore the insights gained from the surveys in more detail. Participants were recruited through Mission Australia services, through other service providers or by self-nominating when completing the online or paper-based community survey. A small number of individual interviews were also conducted with participants who were not able to attend the groups. Service providers who filled out the survey in Phase 1 were invited to nominate if they would like to participate in the online provider forum or were recruited through interagency groups and contacts.
  Groups and interviews were run in a semi-structured format, with guiding questions used by facilitators to generate discussion, while allowing an organic conversation to emerge between participants. Detailed findings from this phase are presented in Sections 8 and 10.

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6.2 Community Engagement Questions

The project aimed to answer the following key questions:

1. **What were the impacts?**
   What were the impacts of extreme weather events on individuals within the community, particularly those that experience vulnerabilities?
   What were the impacts on support services delivered to these groups?

2. **What helped with preparedness, recovery and resilience?**
   What helped individuals and communities to recover from extreme weather events, at the time, and in the months that followed?

3. **What else could help improve preparedness, recovery and resilience?**
   What else could help individual and communities to recover, be more resilient and better prepared to face future challenges such as extreme weather events?
   What community strengths and assets could support this?
   What are the gaps in being able to achieve this?
   How can service providers support this?

These questions guided the design of the survey tools and methodology.

6.3 Community Engagement Participants

Capturing the voices of people experiencing vulnerability across Northern Sydney

Participants in the community survey and focus groups were recruited through targeted channels to create opportunities for people experiencing vulnerabilities and life challenges to share their experiences. Participants included many with lived experience of homelessness, risk of homelessness, rental stress, housing instability, mental health concerns, alcohol and other drug concerns, financial stress, isolation and disconnection from community

Community survey participants were predominantly connected in some way with either Mission Australia services, or other service providers across the region. Services that sent out the surveys to their service users included those working in Homelessness, Mental Health, Drug and Alcohol, Health, Education, Youth services, Community Housing, Employment, Disability and Early Intervention with a particular focus on older people, young people, First Nations People and Culturally and Linguistically Diverse People Groups

Service providers were encouraged to particularly invite those who had been in areas affected by extreme weather events to participate.

Many survey participants were individually invited to participate by front line workers (for example their Case Manager) and could complete the survey on their own (either digital or paper based) or as a conversation with a support worker. This was intended to increase the uptake of the survey and ensure barriers to participating were reduced.

Participants represented all LGAs across the Northern Sydney region including Hornsby, Hunters Hill, Ku-ring-gai, Lane Cove, Mosman, North Sydney, Northern Beaches, Ryde, Willoughby and Eastwood. The largest representations were from Northern Beaches, Hornsby or Ryde LGAs.

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A total of 128 people participated in the survey, including 69 online surveys and 59 completed in hard copy.

Adults, older people and young people were all represented in the survey participants, with the majority being between 25-64 years of age.

Just over half were women (56%).

4% of participants identified as Aboriginal, which is eight times the proportion of the wider Sydney North population (0.5%).

Twenty six percent of respondents spoke a language other than English at home which is similar with the PHN's catchment (30%).[4]
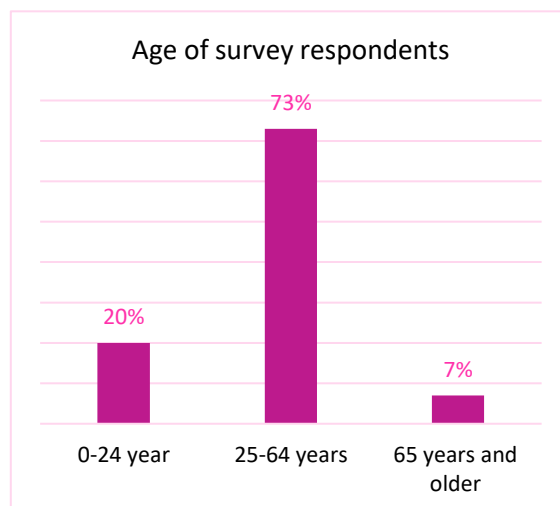
Age of survey respondents

Chart 4 - Age of survey respondents

Participants reported having been impacted by various types of extreme weather, with the majority having been affected by floods (40%) and storms (36%). Most responses referred to the impacts of the floods, heavy rain and storms in early 2022, with only a small number of respondents specifically referencing the impacts of the 2019 bushfires.

Two community focus groups and three individual interviews were conducted with community members to explore in further detail the findings from the surveys. The focus groups had a total of 10 participants, with three individuals participating in interviews. The majority of focus group participants had experienced impacts from extreme weather events. Focus group participants included social housing residents and people with lived experience of homelessness, those who were living in transitional housing or currently experiencing homelessness, and those with mental health concerns and carers for people with disability.

All focus group participants were over 35 years of age, with three being over 55. There were six females and four males. Individual interviews were conducted with two females and one male.

Partnering with Service Providers across Northern Sydney

Service Providers across Northern Sydney were engaged to complete a survey about the impacts of extreme weather on the people they support and the impacts on the delivery of their services. In addition, as outlined above, they were encouraged to distribute the survey to service users and invite them to be participants in the focus groups. This targeted strategy of partnering with service providers was intended to ensure the voices of people experiencing vulnerabilities were captured in the community survey and focus groups. Service Providers were engaged through the strong network or inter-agency groups across Northern Sydney. See Appendix A for a list sector of interagency groups in the region.

A total of 89 representatives from 45 different organisations across the Northern Sydney area completed the survey, ranging from direct service workers through to management level roles.

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[4] Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2021 Census of Population and Housing, Tablebuilder data

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The service providers involved in the survey provide a wide range of support services including community housing and homelessness services, material aid, health and disability support, employment services, mental health, drug and alcohol, family violence, education, community development and youth services as shown in the below table.

The service providers surveyed offered support to a wide range of groups within the community, with many offering support to multiple groups as shown in the table below

Target groups supported by participating providers	Number of providers	Percentage of providers
Young people	67	74%
Older people	36	40%
People who identify as Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander	52	58%
People from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds	57	63%
People living with mental health concerns	67	74%
People who are homeless or at risk of homelessness	48	53%

Target groups supported by participating providers

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Part 3

Community Engagement Findings in Detail

The following sections report the findings through the three community engagement phases in order to convey the direct voice of participants and service providers.

A summary of findings can be found in Sections 2, 3 and 4 drawing together key themes from all phases of the project.

7. Community Survey Results

The following section outlines the findings in detail from the Phase 2 community survey.

7.1 Impacts of extreme weather

The survey focused on the impact of extreme weather on different areas of the lives of participants, including health, mental health and wellbeing, home and daily living, financial impacts, identity and relationships, culture and community and the impact on work and education. Participants were able to select more than one response to these questions to reflect all areas of impact experienced.

Health, safety and wellbeing

Almost a quarter (23%) of respondents said their home wasn't safe to stay in after the extreme weather events and almost a third (32%) experienced health problems as a result of the events. Almost two thirds (63%) of respondents reported feeling more anxious or on edge, and 41% said it had added stress to their lives highlighting the immense impact of extreme weather events (and the situations that result from them) on the mental health of vulnerable people.

"The worry has caused insomnia."
Community Member

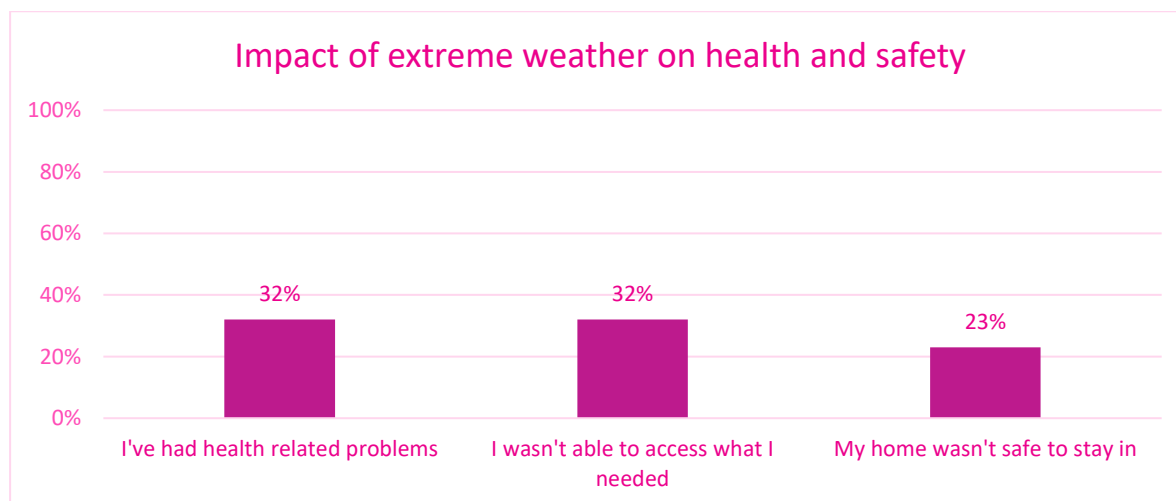*"The worry has caused regular panic attacks."*
Community Member

Chart 5 – Percentage of participants reporting impacts on health and safety

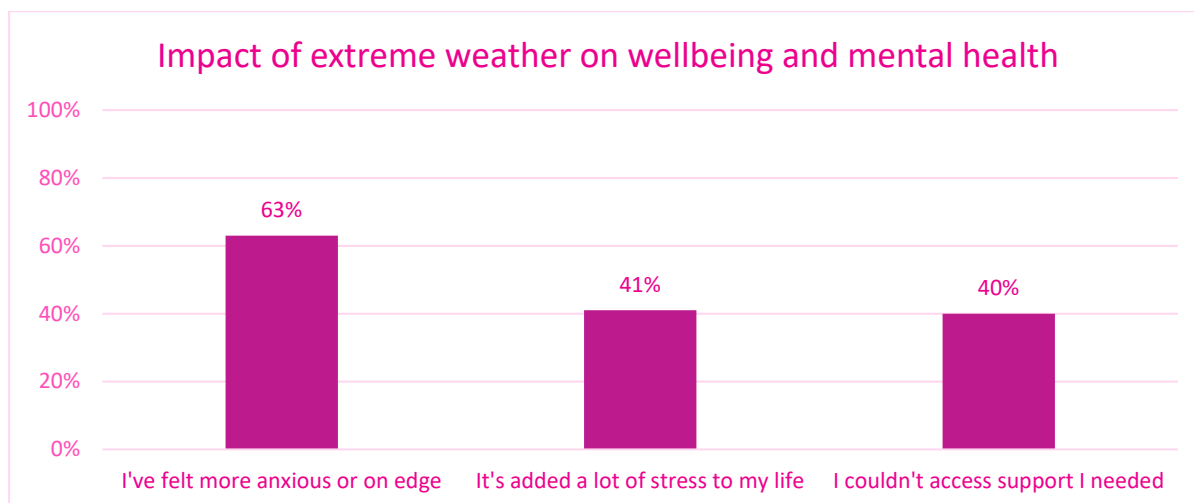## Impact of extreme weather on wellbeing and mental health

Chart 6 – Percentage of participants reporting impacts on wellbeing and mental health

"I couldn't see my sick parent as much as I usually do"
Community Member

"No one wanted to visit me due to the flooding [and] mould infestations"
Community Member

While the extreme weather events and stressful situations that follow (such as needing to move house or organise repairs) may directly impact mental health, there was also an impact on relationships and activities which would otherwise have been a protective factor for mental health. Half of the respondents said they now had less contact with family or friends, and 47% said they felt more isolated than before the extreme weather events. In addition to this, blocked roads and cancelled activities left people further isolated. One of the concerns for vulnerable people's experience of disasters is that whatever the physical impacts of the event are, they frequently have fewer internal resources and external networks to draw on for their resilience and recovery.
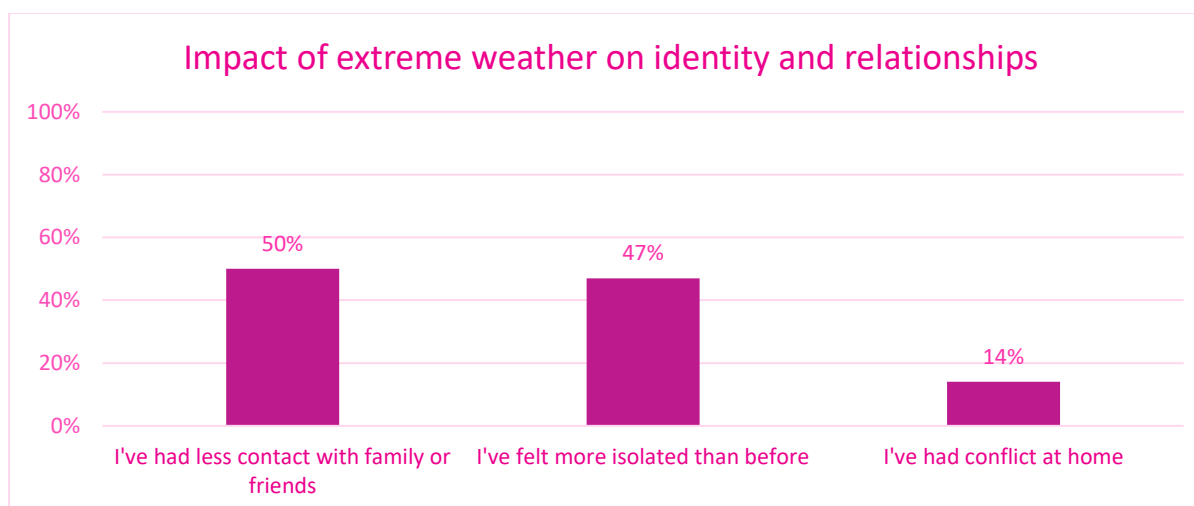
Impact of extreme weather on identity and relationships

Chart 7 – Percentage of participants reporting impacts on relationships in the six months following the events

Impact of extreme weather on culture and community

- Roads near me were closed or blocked: 59%
- Activities I usually go to were cancelled: 43%
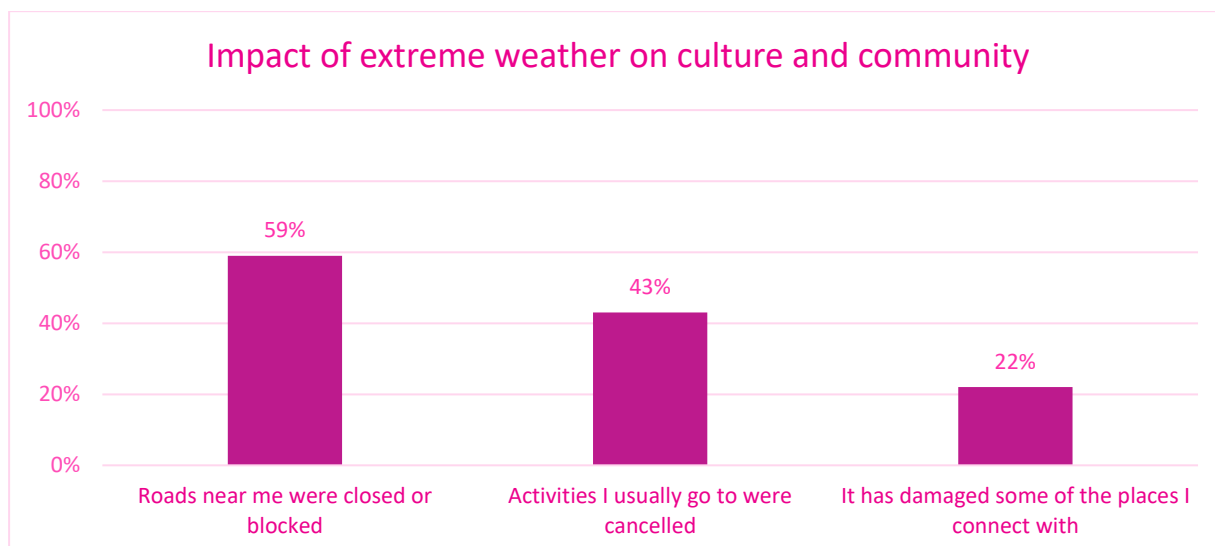- It has damaged some of the places I connect with: 22%

Chart 8 – Percentage of participants reporting impacts on their connection to community

Home, daily living and finances

One of the most tangible impacts of extreme weather is damage to homes and belongings. A majority of respondents reported damage to their home or property (59%), and a need to replace damaged belongings (56%), and as such having an impact on their finances. The comments from participants highlighted some of the downstream consequences of this damage, a predominant example being water damage causing long term (still unresolved) mould issues, which then exacerbate or cause respiratory issues. This issue was also tied to difficulty in getting repairs completed, leading to further leaks and water damage during the many wet months that followed the initial extreme events early in 2022.

"I have to replace a lot of our things because of black mould and water damage"
Community Member

"I'm afraid if I force it with the landlord, they'll put up the rent. I am already well-priced out of this area, so we are stuck. We don't have the means to move."
Community Member

Impact of extreme weather on home and daily living

- I had damage to my home or property: 59%
- I've had problems getting damage fixed: 38%
- It affected my ability to function day to day: 29%
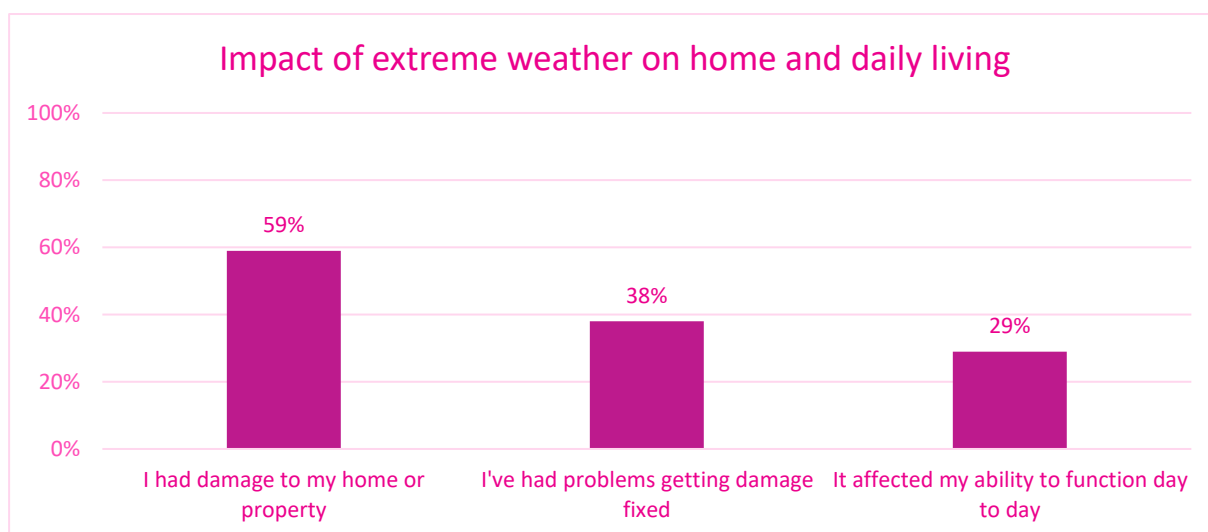
Chart 9 – Percentage of participants reporting impacts to home and daily living

Impact of extreme weather on finances

51% — I had extra expenses
56% — I've had to replace some of my stuff
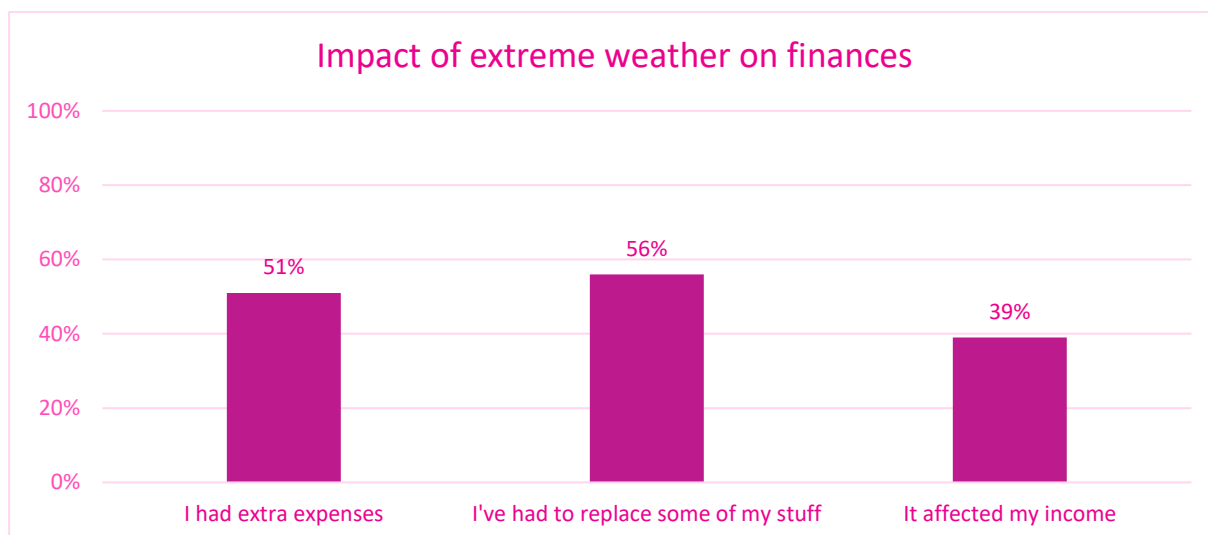39% — It affected my income

Chart 10 – Percentage of participants reporting financial impacts

In addition to financial pressures caused by needing to replace personal belongings, a small but significant group of respondents lost some work due to the extreme weather events.
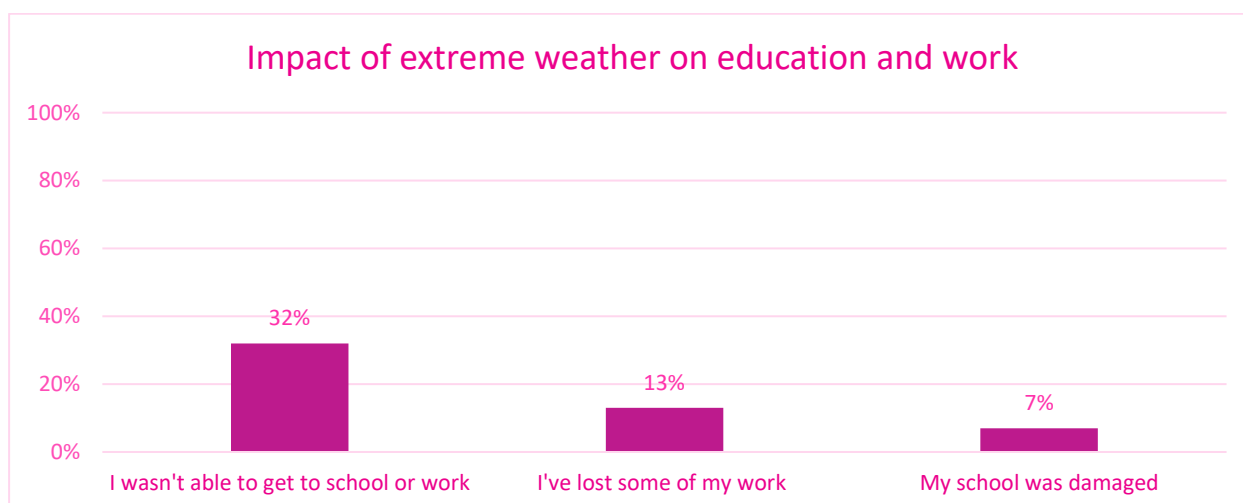
Impact of extreme weather on education and work

32% — I wasn't able to get to school or work
13% — I've lost some of my work
7% — My school was damaged

Chart 11 – Percentage of participants whose education or work was affected

"Cannot afford to move. Mental health effected."
Community Member

"Stop me going to medical appointments as… public transport is unsafe in flooding conditions."
Community Member

Impacts are inter-related and cumulative

When asked to comment on any other ways extreme weather had impacted them, many respondents elaborated on the impacts recorded in the previous questions and provided in-depth examples on the personal cost and impact to themselves and their families. For many, impacts were cumulative in nature – for example a lack of repairs by the landlord led to increased mould which impacted on their physical and mental health.

7.2 Accessing Practical Support

Participants were asked about whether they required practical support as a result of the extreme weather and the nature of that support. Most people either didn't require support or were able to find what they needed, however 19% of respondents tried to get some practical support but couldn't find what they needed and another 12% needed support but didn't seek it.
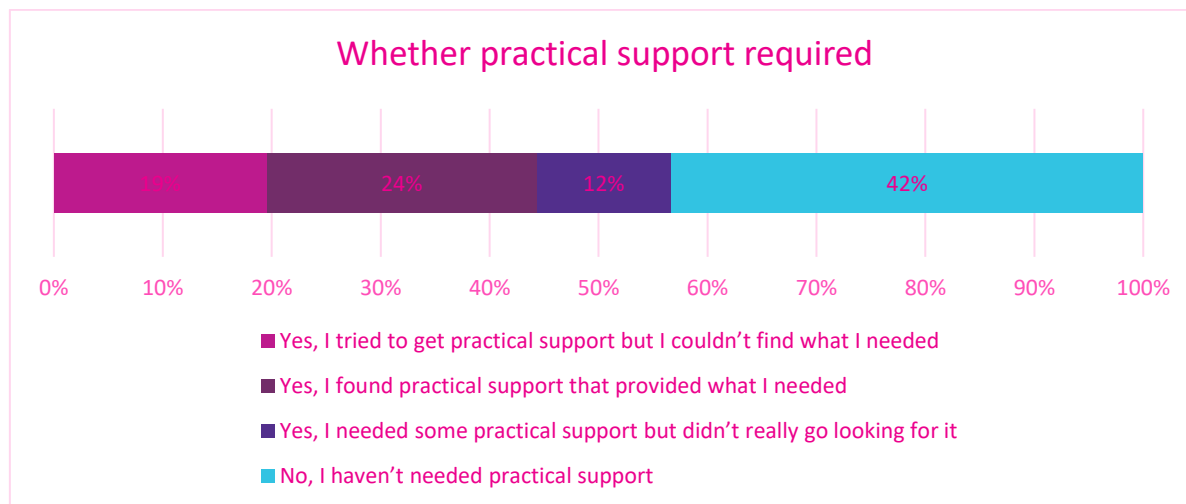
Chart 12 – Percentage of participants who needed practical support

The practical support that participants said they needed ranged from emergency assistance through to help from neighbours, with the most common response being access to basic necessities (30%). Unfortunately, the need for home repairs or dealing with insurers were not multiple-choice options but featured in people's comments, as did cleaning mould and replacing items. Some specifically mentioned the value of their Case Manager's support or conversely noted that the service they approached was "too busy" to assist them. One wanted someone to assist find accommodation and finance to replace lost items.

Chart 13 – Percentage of participants who needed specified supports

7.3 Accessing Personal Support

In addition to practical supports, participants were asked if they needed any personal support as a result of extreme weather. In contrast to the responses regarding practical support, over 40% of people responded that they tried to find personal support but didn't find what they nee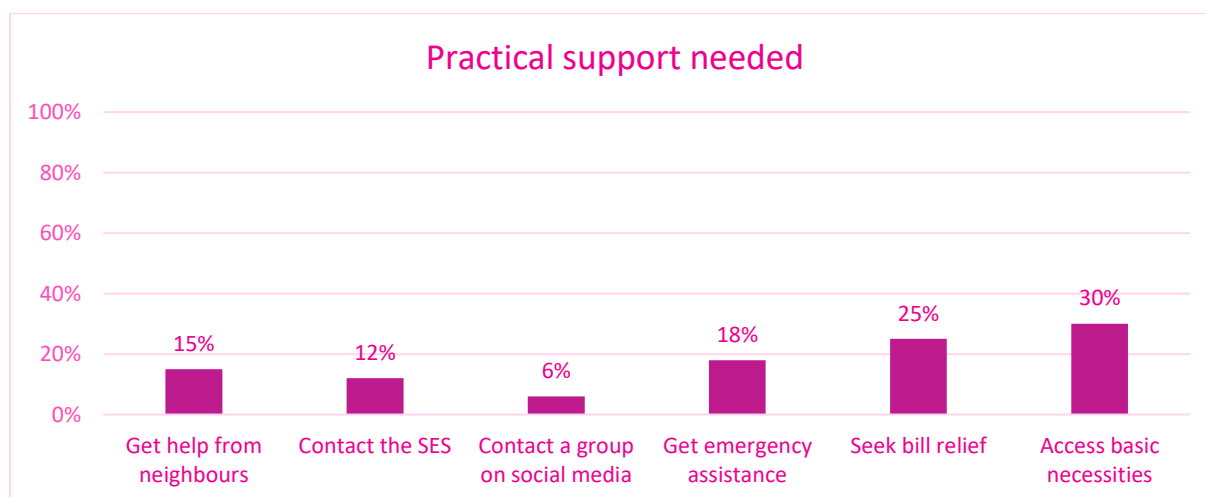ded and another 15% needed support but didn't go looking for it – meaning that 55% of people needed personal supports but did not receive them. Only 15% of participants said they haven't needed any personal support.
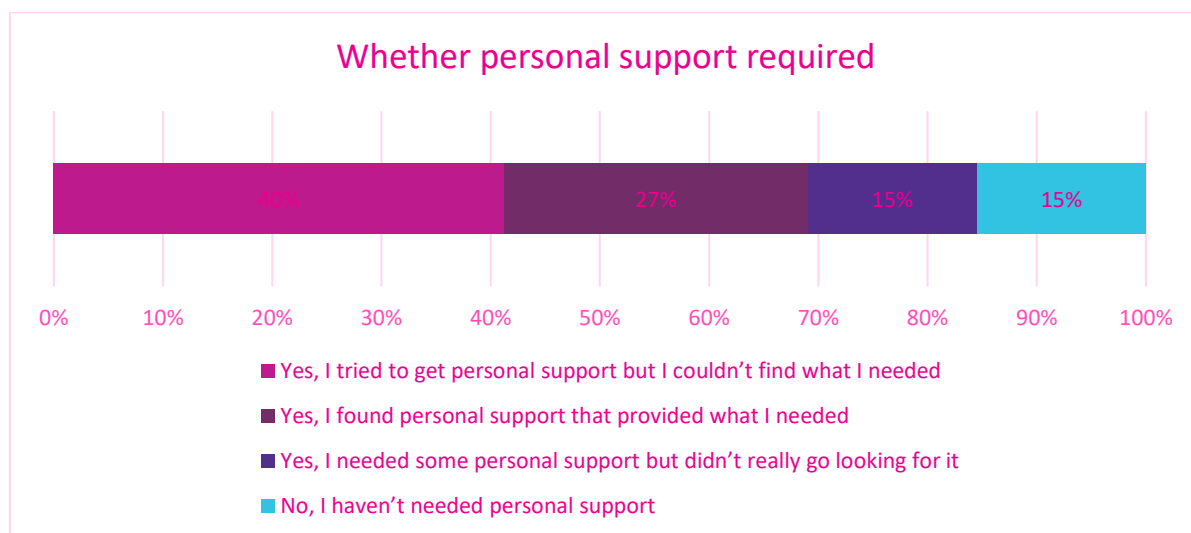

Whether personal support required

27%	15%	15%

- Yes, I tried to get personal support but I couldn't find what I needed
- Yes, I found personal support that provided what I needed
- Yes, I needed some personal support but didn't really go looking for it
- No, I haven't needed personal support

Chart 14 – Whether personal support required – percentage of participants

The most common personal support people said they needed was to see a doctor or counsellor, followed by talking to a friend. Considering the levels of isolation reported in earlier questions, it would seem consistent to find that people seeking personal support in the form of a friend to talk to were not able to find the support they felt they needed. Individuals commented on their need for assistance with advocacy regarding insurance and for accessing mental health support. People again mentioned the value of the support they received from the service providers they were connected to (including Case Managers) – while many others didn't receive the support they needed.

Personal support needed

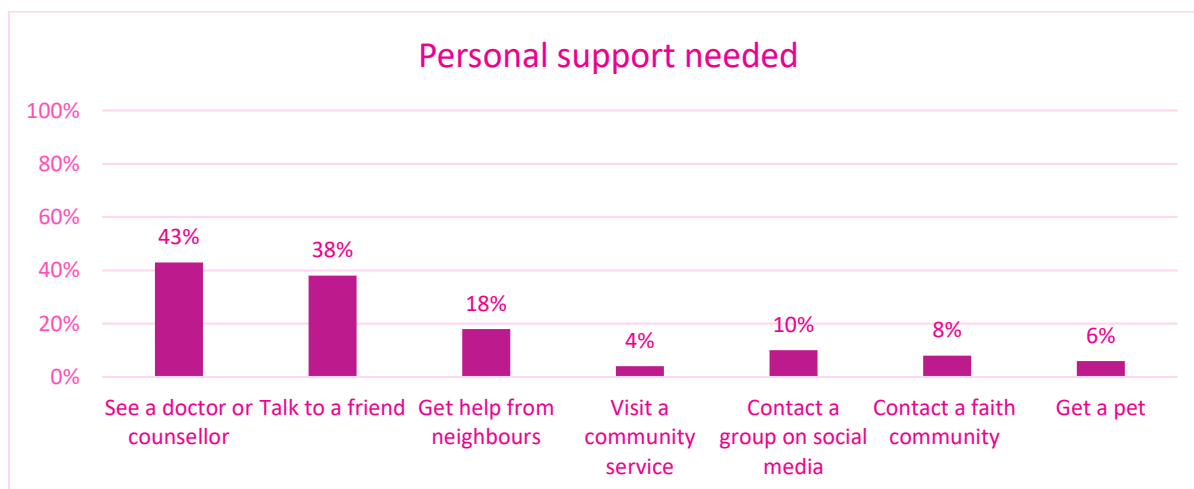| See a doctor or counsellor	Talk to a friend	Get help from neighbours	Visit a community service	Contact a group on social media	Contact a faith community	Get a pet
43%	38%	18%	4%	10%	8%	6%

Chart 15 – Percentage of participants who needed specified personal supports

Participants were asked what was helpful for them during or after extreme weather. This question was a free form text box and had a large range of responses. Most common responses included:

- Support from service providers
- Support from family, friends and neighbours. This included practical support and the value of connecting and having someone to talk with.
- Financial support
- Being able to access repairs and get them done
- Accessing or receiving information from the news and other sources was also considered helpful. In addition to news updates these included local community Facebook pages, alert apps (e.g.. fires/floods near me), local council/MP updates via Facebook

Other responses mentioned:

- Food or petrol vouchers or community food banks that helped to ease financial stress while trying to afford repairs
- Help from emergency services such as Police, Fire and SES to make properties safe
- Access to online information, services and entertainment.

When asked what wasn't helpful the responses largely mirrored the impacts listed in earlier questions, and overwhelmingly referenced difficulty and delays in getting repairs, and landlords/ housing providers/insurers not being helpful in those processes.

Other specific barriers mentioned included:

- Lack of power or internet access making it difficult to access information via predominantly digital sources
- Lack of internet access making it difficult to apply for flood relief payments
- Challenges in navigating processes and completing complex paperwork to access financial support or repairs
- Not knowing what support is available and how to access it.
- Transport challenges, including public transport not being available

7.4 What would help community members prepare for future events?

The leading strategy supported by participants for preparing community members for future events was for emergency plans to be developed in ways which involve local people. This reflects an understanding that community involvement would both improve the quality of the planning but also be a means for mutual education between the community, government agencies, service providers and other stakeholders.

Information for residents on how to prepare and clear information through the media when an event is imminent/occurring were the next two highest responses. People's comments also indicate they want reliable, consistent information through apps, social media and the post - "for those without internet". People saw a role for local government in managing effective communications.

Connecting people to community services and to community networks were the other strongly supported strategies for preparedness – reflecting the above experiences of either being able to access support (and the role of services and informal networks in that) or of not being able to access support when people had inadequate connections to services or the local community.

What would help you and the community prepare for future extreme weather?

- Community networks: 58%
- Volunteering opportunities: 31%
- Connect people to community services: 60%
- Emergency plans developed with locals: 67%
- Information on being prepared: 63%
- Clear information in the media during emergencies: 62%
- Other: 13%
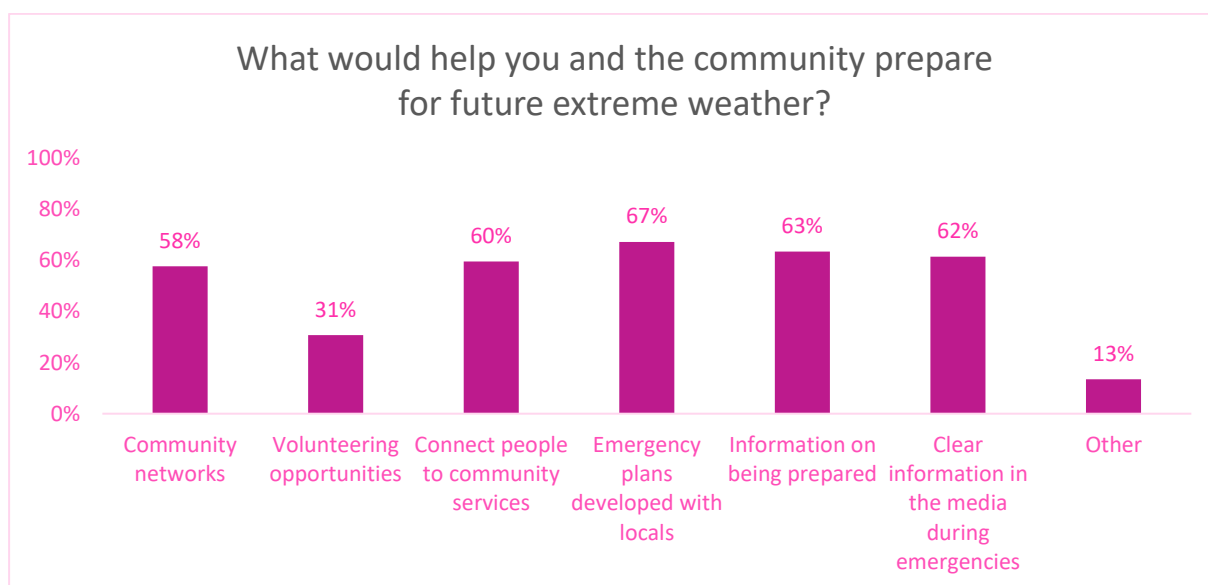
Chart 16 – Percentage of participants who expected specified preparation activities would be effective

7.5 What would help community members recover?

The most strongly supported strategies for recovery were for financial support, mental health services and repairs to roads and infrastructure. Each of these were also evident in people's comments, with the latter encompassing a general clean-up of the area (trees/debris) and getting transport working again.

Unfortunately, the multiple choices did not include an option regarding home repairs and replacement of necessary items, but from the comments and focus groups it is clear that this would also have been well supported and is probably represented in the responses regarding financial support. Local temporary housing was also mentioned in comments.

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Community information was the other notable response and relates to comments regarding the need for information about local services and financial assistance. Several comments attested a desire for community events and volunteering to bring people together.
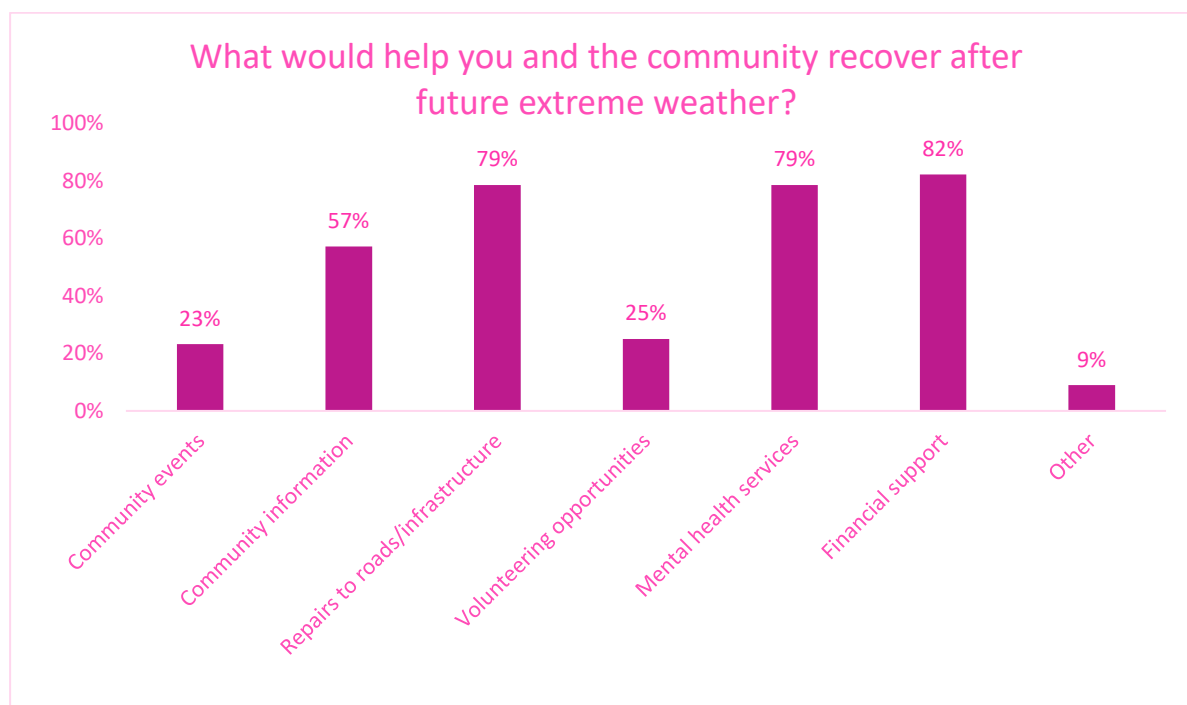
Chart 17 – Percentage of participants supporting specified recovery strategies

7.6 Positives that came out of the extreme weather

Almost half of participants reported that they got to know their neighbours better as a result of the extreme weather. This is important context for the focus group discussions (below section) which reported an absence of community support or active social exclusion.
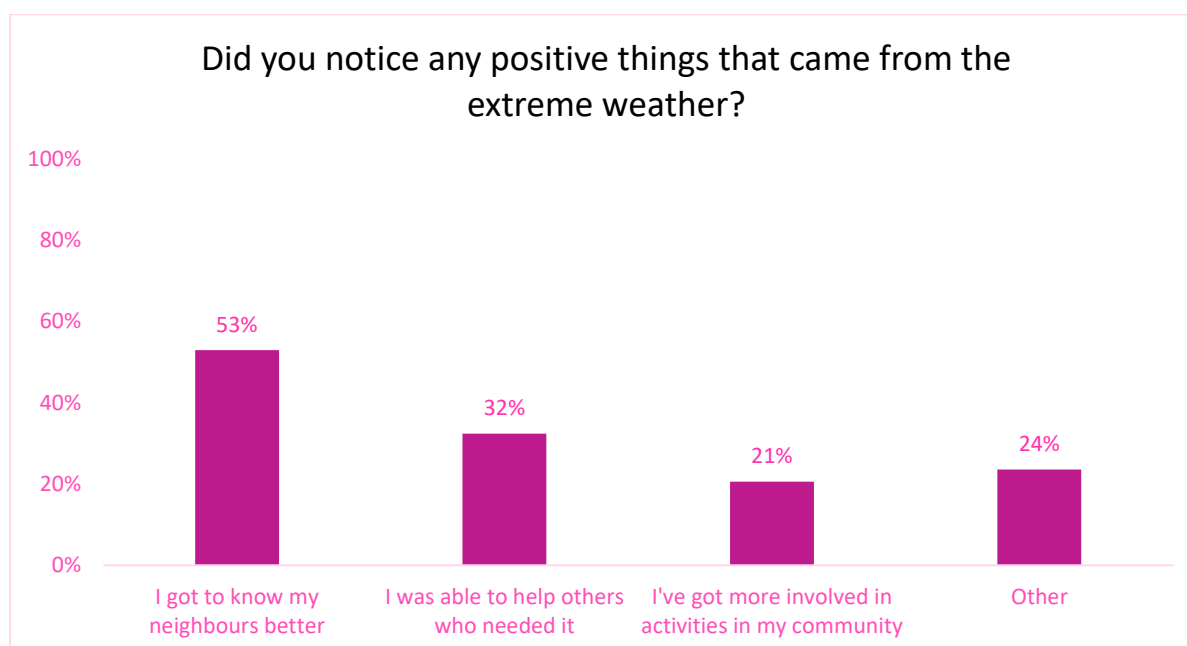
Chart 18 – Percentage of participants who noticed positive things emerge from extreme weather

Almost a third of participants were able to help other people, which is consistent with the willingness to help others demonstrated through the focus group discussions. One in five participants got more involved in community activities – which contrasts with other cohorts who providers reported experienced increased isolation. Only a few other benefits were mentioned in comments and several participants noted that they could not identify any positives.

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8. Focus Group and Interview Results

The following section outlines the findings in detail from the Phase 3 community focus groups and interviews.

8.1 What were the impacts of extreme weather?

Damage to homes and belongings

Participants reported extensive **damage to their homes**, including

- Damage to or loss of appliances and belongings.
- Loss of access to electricity for days and up to nine weeks.
- Being inaccessible to support services because of unrepaired damage to the electricity supply
- Flooding under doors and up through drains and floorboards
- Leaking roofs and windows.
- Destroyed bedding, furniture and carpet.
- Ongoing and worsening mould on walls, ceilings furnishings and belongings.
- Loss of personal items.
- Unrepaired housing damage preventing the replacement of items and leading to inundation and further damage with lesser rain events.

> *"The water just got higher and higher and the water got more and more. The water was raining inside the side of the windows that were shut... The water filled up the lightbulbs and they all smashed."*
> **Community Member**

Health and safety

Participants reported a range of **health and safety impacts**, including

- Unresolved mould exacerbating asthma.
- A slip and fall injury (when the house was inundated).
- Catching Covid-19 from others during the emergency (because of forced close proximity at evacuation centres or schools).
- Pneumonia or other illness from months of stress and/or unsuitable housing.

> *"The black mould is going up. It's not good with asthma."*
> **Community Member**

Daily living

Six months after the events of early 2022 participants reported ongoing impacts to their **daily living**.

> *I'm grateful to have a light after 9 weeks… I still don't have a roof tarp after six months."*
> **Community Member**

This includes almost universal difficulty getting repairs, particularly for renters negotiating with landlords and for homeowners negotiating with insurance. This leaves many homes unsafe and unliveable, but participants felt trapped in their current settings due to an expensive housing market and poor conduct from landlords. One participant lost their housing and became homeless while others experienced a sense of housing instability.

Flood Assistance arrangements and other forms of government or subcontracted support have simply not worked for some of these vulnerable residents (see below financial section). Without insurance or government support people have not been able to replace necessary home appliances like stoves, or get basic repairs completed, or properly resolve access to essential utilities. For some social housing was the exception as those residents had their repairs attended to - once trades could be secured.

"I don't know anyone around here and I really struggled and had really high anxiety levels. Suddenly everything was stressing me and worrying me."
Community Member

"It's been one disaster after another since the last four years."
Community Member

Mental health and ability to function

Participants described significant impacts for their **mental health and ability to function**. They reported added stress, social isolation, and the impact of 'trauma brain' on trying to complete necessary recovery tasks.

In the context of the increasing frequency of extreme weather events due to climate change it is important to note that people reported the cumulative mental health impacts of several disasters (bushfires, extreme weather events, the pandemic) over consecutive years - a phenomena we can expect to increase.

Financial

Participants faced multiple **financial** impacts and barriers to recovery, including:

- Financial loss of damaged property and housing.
- The loss of work.
- The loss of housing.
- The need for financial support to recover.
- Extreme difficulty in navigating the financial assistance and repair processes.
- Having limited financial resources to start with and depleting those.
- Not having the networks which assist some to access information and support.
- As vulnerable people being marginalised further by the very processes intended to assist people recover.

"I tried to reach out and speak to someone about it. I had to book in… to pay upfront… and then I would get the rebate two weeks later…. I can't afford to pay it and wait two weeks for the rebate…. Even after the rebate it still would have cost me $100. That's a lot of money to be out of pocket. I couldn't do it."
Community Member

> *"I've applied for all the right programs; I've done all the right things I'm supposed to do…. I've got absolutely nowhere. I've waited six months for the report from the flood assistance program."*
> **Community Member**

Disturbingly, participants reported not being able to follow through on their application with the flood assistance program because it did not provide a reference number or functioning point of contact. Community organisations became channels for gaining assistance.

8.2 What helped? What else would help?

What would help with preparedness?

Participants saw a need for more engaging disaster planning at community and individual levels, and the establishment of better communication and information systems for emergencies. Because building maintenance is important, they raised the issue of how to ensure landlords play their part. Some participants felt that local infrastructure was not ready for flooding

> *"They should send you an alert via text – this is what is happening here and here … An automated text."*
> **Community Member**

What would help with resilience?

Consistent with understandings of resilience which emphasise interconnected social, cultural and environmental systems, participants wanted opportunities to connect with others in their communities, including through community events, activities, and places to meet people. Almost everyone said they would attend groups or activities to make connections.

However, what they reported was a divided local community, where they as vulnerable people felt excluded, and where they observed a general lack of community connectedness.

> *"It's a cold world nowadays. Community is missing."*
> **Community Member**

> *"The neighbours didn't help me at all, you know"*
> **Community Member**

While focus group participants recounted disturbing stories of their experiences with extreme weather and difficulties with the systems set up to provide support, they also overwhelmingly expressed a desire to help each other, and to get involved in any activities that would connect them to others and build their sense of community. This strength and resilience already present provides an opportunity to empower vulnerable community members to help each other and build back some of the connections lost during COVID.

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What would help with recovery?

Participants suggested:

- Consistent and accessible information - not all were online and few reported knowing where to go for help.
- Care packages of practical items.
- A known local place to go for information and practical assistance.
- Centralised support with a single number to call, and accessible feedback and tracking about where individual's recovery claims and actions are up to.

"We need relief bundles when you are being herded somewhere. A bit of milk and things like that, or change of clothes, phone numbers."
Community Member

9. Service Provider Survey Results

The following section outlines the findings in detail from the Phase 1 provider survey. [5]

9.1 Impacts of extreme weather on service users

Service providers estimated the percentage of users of their service who were impacted by extreme weather during or immediately after extreme weather. Responses varied widely for each category, from nil to 100 per cent. The majority of providers had at least some service users who were significantly impacted (83% percent of providers indicated at least 10 percent of their service participants were significantly affected). A small number of providers (18%) said that at least half of their service users were significantly impacted.

Service providers are working with diverse service users – not all of whom were affected by extreme weather. Service providers were asked about the impact of extreme weather on their service participants at the time of the events and immediately after.

"Significant property damage resulting in homes becoming uninhabitable."
Service Provider

The most common impact at the time was damage to homes or property, followed by mental health impacts like stress and anxiety. They saw the mental health as being impacted by the cumulative effects of Covid and repeated episodes of extreme weather. Almost 10% of providers commented on a lack of shelter for rough sleepers, which led to difficulty in keeping their belongings, valuables and important documents safe and dry.

Providers also mentioned in their comments

- Medical issues emerging due to limited access to General Practitioners.
- People's "fear and anxiety from media and news coverage".
- Children and young people not being able to access sports or even just go outside to play – affecting their wellbeing.
- The loss of access to public transport and to daily necessities.
- People's frustration with trying to access services in the absence of functioning internet and phone services.

"People rough sleeping lost original documents to water-damage."
Service Provider

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[5] The majority of the survey was free text short answer questions, providing participants flexibility in responses. The free text has been grouped and key themes identified and counted. In some instances, there were a wide range of disparate responses that did not group easily, resulting in a large percentage of responses marked as 'other'.
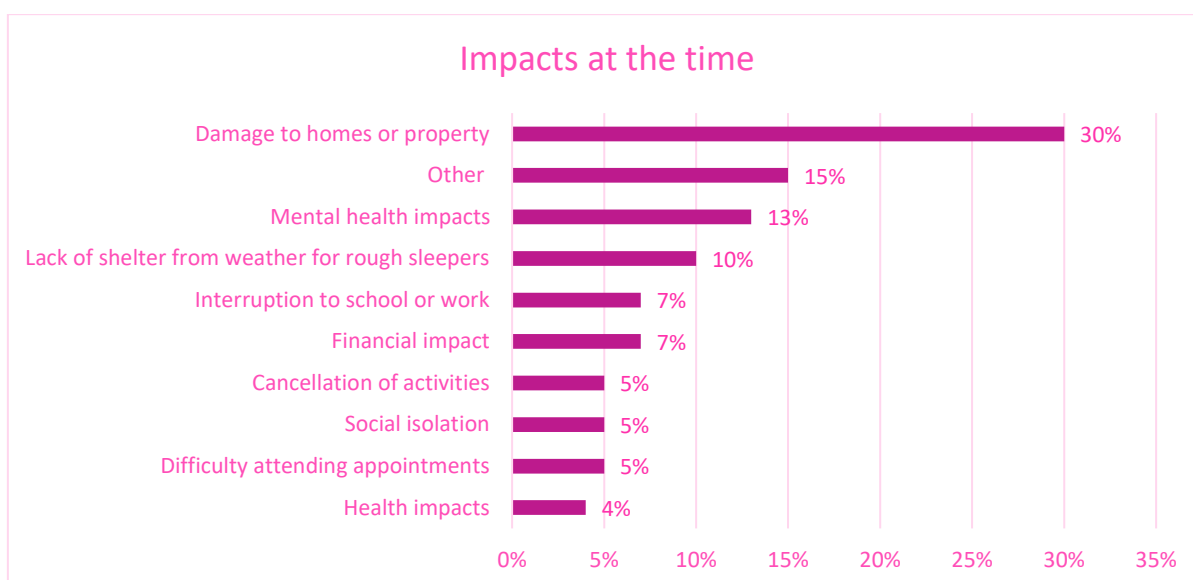
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Impacts at the time

Impact	Percentage
Damage to homes or property	30%
Other	15%
Mental health impacts	13%
Lack of shelter from weather for rough sleepers	10%
Interruption to school or work	7%
Financial impact	7%
Cancellation of activities	5%
Social isolation	5%
Difficulty attending appointments	5%
Health impacts	4%

Chart 19 – Estimated percentage of providers whose service users were affected by specific impacts of extreme weather at the time of the event

"Mental health & family and domestic violence issues have increased significantly due to the pandemic and disasters."
Service Provider

"Slow repairs/ mould issues/ accommodation issues"
Service Provider

Service providers were asked separately about the impacts on service users in the months following extreme weather events. Interestingly, in the months that followed, mental health impacts became the most commonly reported impact, closely followed by ongoing mould.

Many providers commented on the lengthy processes involved in accessing support and repairs leading to ongoing stress, compounded by social isolation and a lack of support. These comments mirrored the inter-related nature of each of these impacts as we heard from participants in the consumer survey and focus groups.

For some service users, their trauma or anxiety was at least in part the result of their awareness of friends, relatives or the general community's experience of natural disasters rather than direct impacts for themselves. Whatever the source, mental health impacts led to:

- Impaired day-to-day functioning (at a time when people needed to manage complex tasks).
- School refusal or not wanting to leave home/family.
- Frustration and behaviour for young people leading to school and/or sports suspension.
- Reduced confidence to access the local community, compounding isolation.
- Increased presentations to mental health services.
- Disconnection from services and difficulties re-engaging.
- A general feeling of insecurity.

Ongoing financial impacts were common. Some service users remained unemployed and experienced a declining quality of life. People were still unable to replace appliances, clothing and belongings

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while also unable to afford the rising costs of fresh fruit and vegetables. Some service users remained in temporary accommodation at the time of the survey.

Providers also noted how infrastructure damage (roads, bridges, playgrounds, community facilities), affected people's ability to attend usual activities.
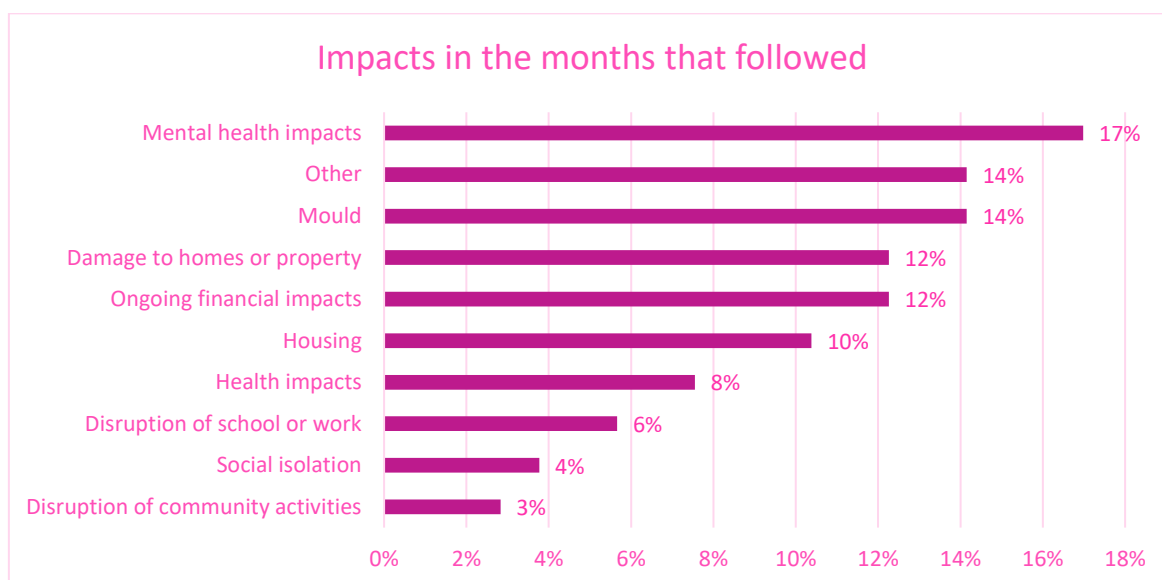
Chart 20 – Estimated percentage of providers whose service users were affected by specific impacts of extreme weather in the months that followed

9.2 Challenges to service delivery caused by extreme weather

Service providers were asked what challenges the extreme weather posed to service delivery at the time of the events or immediately after. The most common challenge was in relation to face to face appointments, followed by the physical impacts like closed roads and water. Services noted that demand for their support escalated at the same time that staff availability and/or their own premises were compromised by the extreme weather. Opening all sites was a challenge for some. Not being able to have face-to-face contact impaired service's ability to deliver support and know what was needed.

This question had a large number of disparate responses resulting in the below large 'other' count.

Challenges to service delivery at the time

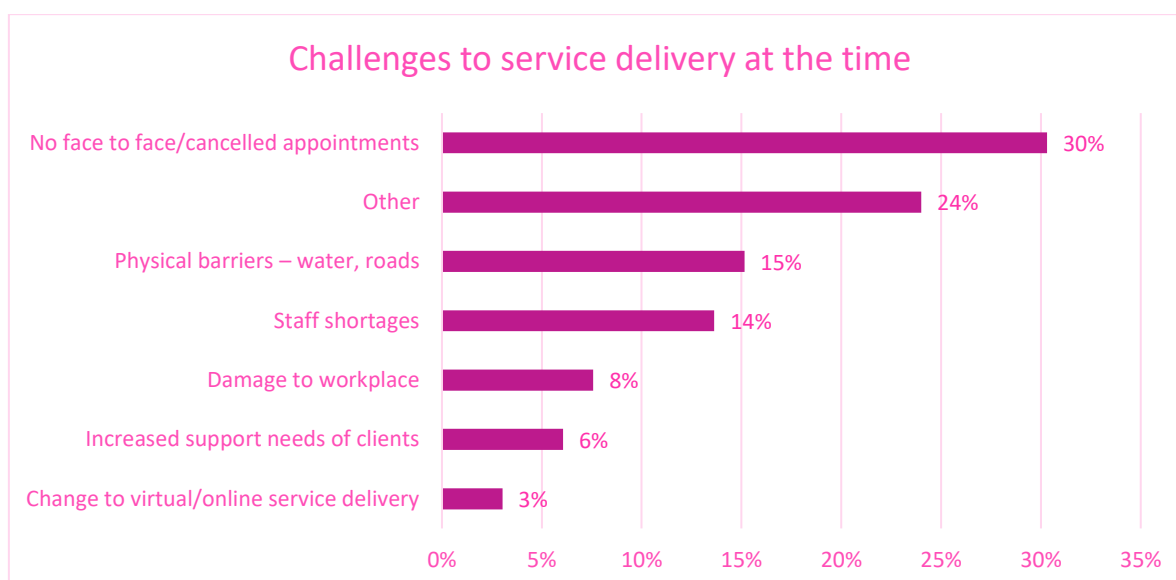| Challenge	Percentage
No face to face/cancelled appointments	30%
Other	24%
Physical barriers – water, roads	15%
Staff shortages	14%
Damage to workplace	8%
Increased support needs of clients	6%
Change to virtual/online service delivery	3%

Chart 21 – Percentage of providers who experienced specific challenges to service delivery at the time

In regard to challenges to service delivery in the months that followed the extreme weather events, the most common response was a change in support needs for service users. These answers referred to both an increase in the level of need being experienced as well as change in the types of needs service users were presenting with. Providers reported doing more 'welfare checks' and supporting service users to access repairs, appliances, food and other practical needs. Some service users' mental health needs increased as time passed.

"It's hard to move forward on goals and service delivery when your service users are in constant damage control mode."
Service Provider

Lengthy delays to the basics that people needed – such as repairs or access to financial support – impaired client's ability to engage with services and start their personal recovery, let alone continue the longer-term service journey which was interrupted by the events.

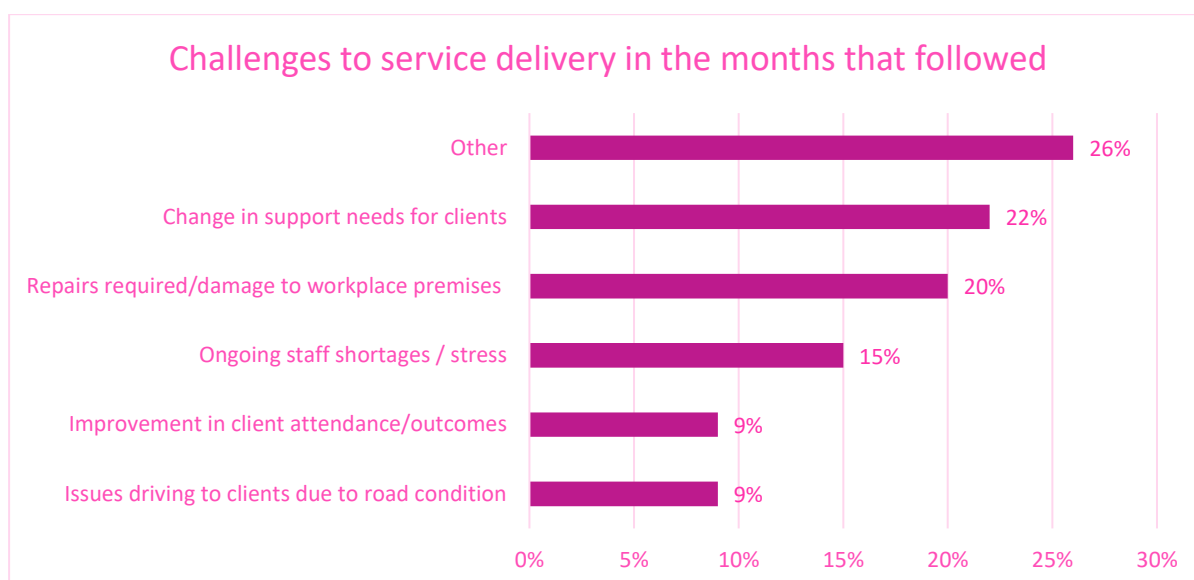Again, there were a wide range of "other" responses which did not group into a common theme.

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Challenges to service delivery in the months that followed

Challenge	Percentage
Other	26%
Change in support needs for clients	22%
Repairs required/damage to workplace premises	20%
Ongoing staff shortages / stress	15%
Improvement in client attendance/outcomes	9%
Issues driving to clients due to road condition	9%

Chart 22 – Percentage of providers who experienced specific challenges to service delivery in the months that followed

9.3 What helped?

Service providers were asked to consider what has helped their service users in their recovery from the extreme weather events, with the most common answer being support from the service, followed by information and/or communication. This included accessing clear information from official sources, as well as information or communication to the client directly from the service provider. While many people lacked awareness of relevant support options, people already engaged with services had an advantage in having somewhere they knew to go for trusted information and support.

Services needed to be flexible and agile – and sometimes funder expectations hindered this. Simple check-ins, listening, empathy and reassurance were important practices for working with traumatised people. Providing practical supports – such as brokerage, vouchers and food parcels – were also important aids to recovery,

> *"Consistent empathy helped, looking on the bright side if possible."*
> **Service Provider**

Simplified emergency payment arrangements helped significantly but not for all, with further room for improvement in terms of the accessibility and scale of payments. Where alternative accommodation could be found this was a critical foundation for recovery.

Some respondents thought that safety and evacuation drills completed before the events helped, and that some evacuations were well handled. The Response Teams deployed and ongoing support through Recovery Centres seemed effective.

Services helped people access their own informal support networks. Good weather and resuming employment were also enablers for people's recovery.
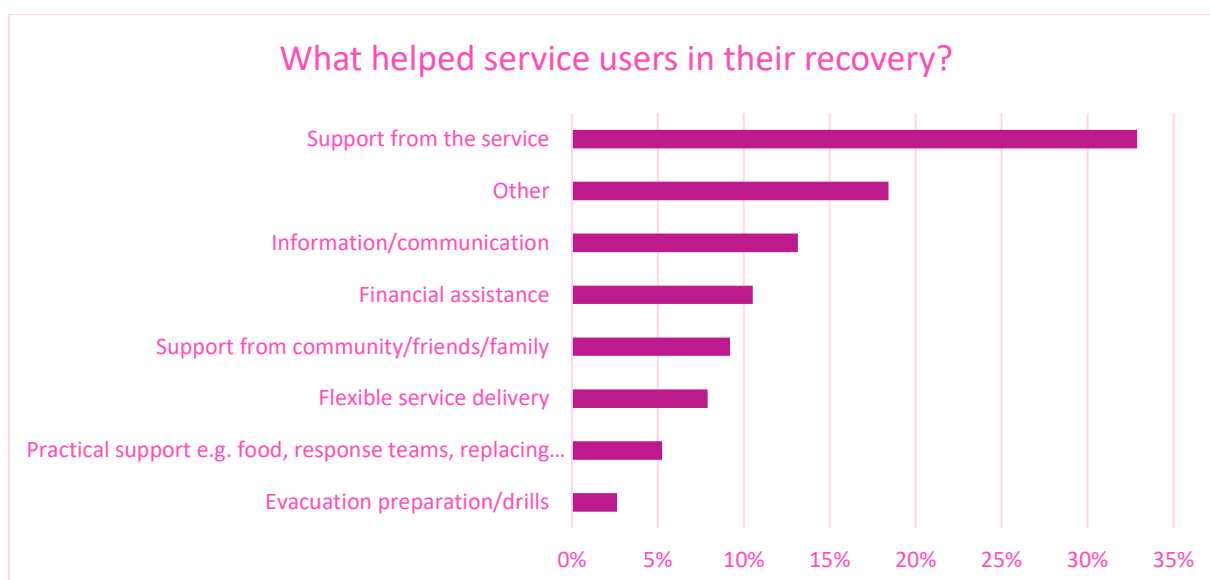
What helped service users in their recovery?

Category	Percentage
Support from the service	~33%
Other	~18%
Information/communication	~13%
Financial assistance	~10%
Support from community/friends/family	~9%
Flexible service delivery	~7%
Practical support e.g. food, response teams, replacing…	~5%
Evacuation preparation/drills	~3%

Chart 23 – Percentage of providers who noted specific things that assisted service users to recover

9.4 What didn't help?

When asked to consider any barriers to recovery that service users may have faced, the most common response was financial barriers, including ongoing expenses related to replacing damaged items and the limited financial support offered. The second most common response was delays or difficulty in accessing repairs, this referred to both difficulty in navigating processes related to repairs (e.g., negotiating with landlords) as well as delays in tradespeople being available to complete the works. The lack of alternative accommodation options and the inaccessibility of the housing market left people in unsuitable housing and therefore unable to resolve other needs, including mental health and daily functioning.

"Depression and a sense of 'why bother' seemed to permeate."
Service Provider

Barriers to recovery for service users

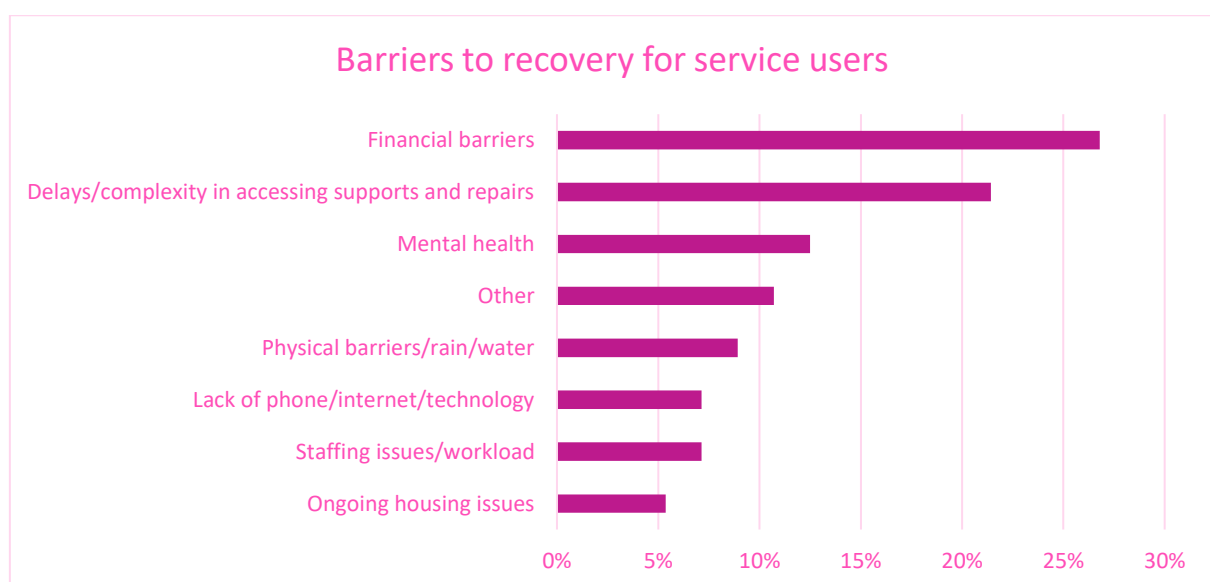| Category	Percentage
Financial barriers	~26%
Delays/complexity in accessing supports and repairs	~21%
Mental health	~12%
Other	~11%
Physical barriers/rain/water	~9%
Lack of phone/internet/technology	~7%
Staffing issues/workload	~7%
Ongoing housing issues	~5%

Chart 24 – Percentage of providers who noted specific barriers to recovery for service users

"Some young people refused to engage back into sports and starting participating in risk taking behaviour."
Service Provider

"Inadequacy of payments to meet needs."
Service Provider

Not knowing that assistance was available or where to go for assistance, or having difficulty accessing help, was contributed to by barriers regarding phone and internet access - including damage to infrastructure, loss of electricity, lacking computer literacy, the expense, and some people's wariness of virtual services. Some people were anxious about having any interactions with Centrelink or they experienced complex application processes. Extreme weather disconnected people from their usual activities and networks and subsequently people have not been in a place where they could re-engage, leading to social isolation being a further barrier to recovery.

Providers reported that poor interaction between different levels of government and a disconnect between government and what community members were facing on the ground as further factors affecting people's recovery.

9.5 Adaptations to service delivery

Service providers were asked to consider how they adapted their service delivery in response to the extreme weather events. The most common response was that they switched to phone or virtual appointments. Many commented that a beneficial outcome of COVID was that they were already set up to do this, so the switch was easy to make. The next most common response was that they altered their service delivery types or methods in response to client needs – including rapid response to those most affected. Frequently home visits were used to check on the welfare of service users, in other cases providers assisted people access government grants and

"Efforts were made to increase engagement and provide more flexibility with how service users were supported, e.g. Phone and visits."
Service Provider

support, or utilised brokerage funds to replace damaged items. These responses were from services that do not usually provide disaster relief/emergency recovery and were outside of their usual business. One noted that "agency responses are improving as feedback and post-disaster reviews accumulate".

Adaptation to service delivery	Number	Percentage
More phone/virtual appointments	21	32%
Changed/altered service delivery options or methods	15	23%
Increased contact	9	14%
Other	9	14%
Staff support/changes	7	11%
Provide financial support	4	6%
Grand Total	**65**	**100%**

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9.6 What would help resilience and recovery?

When asked to comment on how they thought the community could become more resilient and better able to recover, the most common response was to access and share information. A range of emergency communication methods were suggested – including systems for text messaging and use of social media, and better connection with information hubs like Council websites, Services NSW and Services Australia. Educational community events were also suggested.

"Providing adequate education and information to community groups and encouragement to support each other and identify vulnerable members during extreme weather events."
Service Provider

The second most common response was for community organisations to be flexible and work together to support people. This included being able to adapt service delivery, make simple referrals between providers, or communicate between providers to find available services to meet client needs. The need for more accommodation options was mentioned by a couple of organisations, as was the need for emergency counselling and other forms of mental health support. A couple of providers suggested ways to increase the level of engagement and support between neighbours.

What would help the community become more resilient and recover?	Number of providers	Percentage of providers
Share/access information	14	25%
Community organisations/services working together/being flexible	10	18%
Work together/support each other	8	14%
Develop emergency plans	5	9%
Store emergency supplies	5	9%
Prepare properties/secure belongings	5	9%
Increased funding for community organisations	5	9%
Other	5	9%
Grand Total	**57**	**100%**

Responses suggested a range of disaster preparation and planning strategies, including public transport planning and information for individuals. There was also support for various forms of central hubs and care packages – as quoted below

- Setup key hubs in community that people can go to for immediate needs or support
- Have offices in close proximity to areas
- Have supplies in store
- Create 'essential items' packs for vulnerable people in the community
- Support the community with food if needed
- Pre-stored emergency supplies ready for immediate distribution
- Resources deployed to schools such as pens and paper and laptops and materials to make them readily available

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Providers noted that better responses from insurance companies would help, while another wondered if there was a need for better advocacy with insurers regarding vulnerable people. Similarly, one provider suggested some vulnerable people need a recovery case manager when they don't have informal networks they can draw on – an approach which also came up from the participant's focus group.

9.7 What would enable service providers to better support service users?

Service providers were asked what would enable them to better support their service users in response to any future extreme weather events. The most common response was to have clear information on the supports available from government and the processes for accessing those supports. The next most common response was the ability to be flexible and work outside their service provision guidelines where appropriate. This would require some flexibility in funding models, to allow service providers to reallocate resources in the event of a natural disaster or extreme weather event.

Responses were disjointed because the impact seemed somewhat dispersed compared to more heavily impacted communities - therefore pockets of support needs and possibly isolation."
Service Provider

Providers suggested "localised response points and coordination" – including coordination across all levels of government and with non-government agencies.

There were a large number of disparate responses to this question which did not group into any particular themes, resulting in a large "other" category.

Enablers for better support to service users	Number of providers	Percentage of providers
Other	22	35%
Information on supports, processes, referral pathways	10	16%
Increased/flexible funding/brokerage	9	15%
Ability to be flexible in-service provision/work outside guidelines	7	11%
Coordination of response from government and providers	4	6%
Improved communication from authorities	4	6%
Flexible/increased staffing	3	5%
Clear guidelines/procedures on disaster response	3	5%
Grand Total	**62**	**100%**

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10. Service provider forum

A forum was held to gain deeper insights from the experiences of service providers and from their interactions with a diversity of service users. This forum was also used to test the themes that had emerged to date through to surveys and focus groups.

Forum attendees were asked to reflect on the main issues raised by participants in the other phases and consider potential solutions that could be implemented in the community in preparation for future extreme weather events.

Two key messages emerged through the provider forum

1. **Adequate community connections really are missing** – especially for vulnerable people in these suburbs, and to a more notable level than is observable in many other Sydney and NSW locations. This is observed by providers and evidenced by research. What is especially missing is "bridging" social capital – the connections between different parts of society (including socio-economic divides)
    a. **This requires leadership** (by Federal, State and local government, service providers and other community institutions) to model and facilitate community building. The work by Northern Beaches Council was noted as an example.

2. **The time for strengthening preparedness and resilience is <u>now</u>** – including through community building, community engagement in planning and provision of information - because
    a. Memories are fresh of recent disasters and people know there are several months ahead of further extreme weather – there is a sense of urgency and relevance
    b. Building community connections needs to occur outside of times of crisis so that they are there when needed
    c. Building community connections now for future events will also assist people recover from the ongoing impacts of past events
    d. Communication during events has proven patchy – it's important to convey information and establish patterns and expectations before events

Several potential ways forward were tested through the Forum and are discussed in greater detail below.

10.1 Impacts

- Media reporting of extreme weather/disasters can impact and exacerbate anxiety and stress. As a key source of information people turned to, news bulletins need to provide the necessary information without unnecessarily stoking anxiety or contributing to people's heightened state.
- When extreme weather has occurred, people have been left with no utilities and no access to information in the following days – until providers have visited their homes. This reveals a significant gap in disaster communications.
- Other impacts acknowledged by the group are consistent with those canvassed in previous sections.

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10.2   Preparedness

- Considering the intergovernmental nature of the responses required to extreme weather events, it is crucial that all levels of government along with community organisations work together both in preparation and response
  - There is a role for interagency disaster planning (across government and non-government agencies) which clarifies roles, responsibilities, referral pathways and key Hubs for community access
- There is an opportunity for community involvement in suburb-level disaster planning. Community members attend public consultations on a range of matters now. In the current context many would attend localised community consultations on disaster preparedness – where they
  - have the opportunity to shape and participate in local community preparedness
  - build community connections, and
  - get information for individual preparedness
- Beyond Business Continuity Planning, community service providers need to agree a high-level approach with their funders and Board which enables them to appropriately adapt service provision and reallocate resources

Many of the points in the below sections require preparation to be delivered when needed.

Existing community strengths and assets for preparedness

- Existing relationships and trust between community organisations and vulnerable people.
- Strong collaboration and integration of service providers through regional inter-agency forums.

10.3   Response and recovery

To better manage **repairs to housing** in a difficult environment there were positive lessons from the way community housing providers managed their response

- A single point of contact for consumers – including the ability to contact by phone (not just online)
- The capacity to move some people to alternative housing until repairs could be completed
- Coordination of all repairs by a single entity so traumatised or overwhelmed people weren't trying to manage that and so works were sequenced appropriately
- Clear communication to manage expectations and keep people up to date on the repair process.

People in private rentals or who owned their own home reported significant difficulties getting buildings repaired and contents replaced and needed some support to resolve these issues. That some people do not have a tarpaulin on their roof or adequate electricity – let alone white good replaced - six months after the events indicates a need for greater support for some community members. Service providers may be well positioned to assist in that space and empower community members, if resourced.

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There were a few suggestions to improve **financial assistance:**

- Providers and service users appreciated the relatively easy access to $1000, the no-questions-asked approach, and how quickly it was made available
- Where people lost essential white goods, furniture and/or clothing the $1000 government grant was grossly insufficient. Even six months later providers continue to receive new requests for financial assistance for significantly larger amounts
- The $1000 grants were difficult to access for people who lost their identity papers in flooding, or who had trouble navigating online formats, or who didn't have access to a smart phone. Some people (including those without ID) needed easy access to someone they could talk to rather than online access
- While it worked to use existing Emergency Relief providers to get funds to people quickly, it lacked coordination or a plan, and added further work to organisations already in the midst of disaster response. There is a need to plan a better way in future – which could be for a single provider to manage or for planned coordination to be in place.
- There seems to be a lack of services able to assist people advocate with insurers (including contents insurance for renters)
- Some people can find it hard to prioritise the spending of the grants effectively when so much needs attention all at once, and needed support to do this and get good outcomes

To **improve communication** providers noted several opportunities

- Multi-channel communication is needed to adequately reach people in diverse circumstances and communities.
- There are Facebook community groups that were actively sharing information during events, and some schools sent messages to families to update on the situation. These existing communication channels could be leveraged more to provide information, e.g., on recovery supports, as well as crisis/emergency information
- The *Fires Near Me* app provides an example of the kind of app that could bring together extreme weather, disaster, preparedness and recovery information for people in a timely way, including with maps
- Some organisations are well positioned to provide information to vulnerable people and ensure they have the correct information, e.g., housing providers, community service providers and the SES.

Service providers are a substantial asset for response and recovery due to their engagement with community and their contact with vulnerable people, but they face some challenges to fulfilling their potential in these events. Some funders allowed providers to do whatever they needed to in order to assist people, while other funders were less flexible and/or required a lot of administrative work which took resources away from people in need. More trust and flexibility from funders would assist providers be more responsive to the immediate needs of their service users and communities in future crises.

Government could consider a **local hub model** for disaster response - an accessible place that everyone knows is the local go-to point for information, assistance and evacuation. These hubs could

have a care package of essentials and information about support after an extreme weather event. People need to know these places before events happen as communications afterwards may be compromised. The suggestion was made that these not be labelled as evacuation centres, so that they can also be targeted for those who have not had to leave their home but require support or assistance.

Existing community strengths and assets for response and recovery

- Services exist and people know about them
- Good communication/alert/warning methods for bushfires
- Awareness of information about preparing for bushfires
- Patterns of helping each other noted among some social housing residents
- Ability of service providers to adapt and work flexibly already established during Covid
- Service providers were able to be a source of information to their service users
- Some service providers were able to do welfare checks on vulnerable service users following the extreme weather event, as well as support service users to access government grants or support
- Active Facebook groups for some communities are good channels for timely information
- Schools have established communication channels with parents, including for emergencies
- Some CHPs were able to move people to alternative stock while repairs were made
- Emergency Relief providers can respond quickly

10.4   Resilience

Increase social capital – especially bridging social capital

Service providers agreed with the community survey as to the absence of adequate community connections in this region – which affects people's access to practical help and information (from neighbours, friends, school networks, etc.), and which has consequences for their wellbeing and mental health. This lack of community networks affects people from all backgrounds, but especially vulnerable people. A range of ways were suggested to address this but the key directions were

- For local government, providers and other local institutions to play leading roles in facilitating and modelling social inclusion and the building of community connections
- To partner with and make use of existing spaces and networks which bring people together across social divides – such as schools, RSL Clubs, SES volunteers, surf clubs, sports clubs, libraries, community facilities (like skate parks) and churches
- To engage vulnerable people in the planning of community activities or events to help ensure events are accessible and inclusive. For example, inviting social housing tenant action groups to be involved in planning activities with other community stakeholders (like those listed above). This could both empower vulnerable people and break down barriers between parts of the community.

The current program delivered by Northern Beaches Council was seen as an example of local government providing leadership to activate community through the *It Takes a Village* program and *Meet Your Neighbour* parties. More thought may be required to ensure strategies bring together different parts of the community and effectively include vulnerable people.

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Service providers were motivated to be a part of solutions which assist their communities be better prepared in future, and to work in the community-building space to ensure vulnerable people feel connected within the Northern Sydney and Northern Beaches communities. They emphasised localised approaches which

- Build community across social divides before crises
- Engage community members in collaborative planning and acting for preparedness, recovery and resilience

Empower vulnerable people to be part of solutions and decision making

Existing community strengths and assets for resilience

- Participant's enthusiasm for community activities that would connect them to others
- Community Builders program
- Northern Beaches Council's community building programs and strategies
- Christmas Carol events bring diverse people together
- A range of facilities and venues exit in local communities where community members from different groups across the community already come together

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11. Appendices

The Northern Sydney sector has extremely strong collaboration, integration, shared visions, and shared project and community work. There are significant and numerous networks and interagency forums across the district with connections to vulnerable community groups. They include service providers and government agencies across all domains. The sense of partnership and investment is strong, as is the appetite to respond quickly and appropriately to emerging needs in the communities they service and represent.

Below a list of inter-agencies and committees operating across the Northern Sydney area:

- Northern Sydney District Sector Executive Group
- Northern Sydney Housing and Homelessness Committee
- Northern Sydney Health Network Connected Mobs
- Case Coordination Groups for Street Sleeping in Northern Beaches, Hornsby, Lower North Shore and Ryde
- Northern Sydney Regional Leadership Group
- Hornsby/Ku-ring-gai, Lower North Shore, Ryde Hunters Hill and Northern Beaches Child and Family Interagencies
- Hornsby/Ku-ring-gai, Lower North Shore, Ryde Hunters Hill and Northern Beaches Domestic and Family Violence Networks
- Hornsby Ku-ring-gai, Lower North Shore, Ryde Hunters Hill and Northern Beaches Youth Interagencies
- Hornsby Ku-ring-gai, Lower North Shore, Northern Beaches Multicultural Interagencies and Ryde Intercultural Network
- Hornsby Ku-ring-gai, Lower North Shore, and Ryde Mental Health Interagencies
- Northern Area Participation and Employment Committee
- Northern Sydney Vocational Support Network
- Northern Sydney Disability Support Network
- Northern Sydney Community Network from the Beach to the Bush
- Northern Beaches Homelessness Interagency
- Community Safety Planning Committees in Manly and Willoughby
- Lower North Shore General Interagency
- Lane Cove Area Network
- Hornsby Community Drug Action Team
- Northern Sydney Community Drug Action Team
- Brookvale/North Shore Community Drug Action Team
- Northern Beaches Youth Drug and Alcohol Interagency

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