



Lessons Learned in Recovery
Supplemental - 2019-2023

'Lessons Learned in Recovery' - Supplemental 2020-22

Preface

Longer-term members of the Blue Mountains community are no strangers to disasters – major bushfires every 15-20 years, flooding rains, snow/major storms devastating critical infrastructure (often for weeks or months at a time). Some would have told you in 2019 that “we’ve seen it all”.

However, they would have been very wide of the mark. The term “unprecedented” has been thrown around almost casually in the past few years, but it is sadly still the most accurate term. In the period late 2019-2022, the Blue Mountains community has weathered rolling, and often overlapping disasters: serious drought; mouse-plague in some parts; being surrounded on 3½ sides by megafires the like of which this country has not seen (certainly since colonisation); COVID pandemic and lock-down; floods and landslips which destroyed our vital lifelines and major contributors to our local economy - our transport and communications infrastructure; more waves of COVID; more flooding, etc.

Following the 2013 bushfires, the BM community services and emergency services sectors came together to collaborate on raising awareness within our community around the growing threats (more severe and more frequent dangers) climate change posed for our entire community - to attempt to build not only a more prepared community, but also a more resilient one.

Unfortunately, this work has been largely unfunded by government agencies (the same ones which provide operational funding for ‘business as usual’ operations for both sectors); and we were left to cobble together what we could through a patchwork of philanthropic donations, small grants, cake stalls/Bunnings BBQs, community donations, and the like.

And while our experience from 2013 taught us what we needed for a successful Recovery (see the initial *Lessons Learned in Recovery* document:

<http://www.mcrn.org.au/index.php/emergencies/emergency-resources-for-services/emergency-recovery-preparedness-resources-for-services-2>), we were still unprepared for the scale and severity of the 2019-20 Black Summer bushfires; or for the serious ‘monkey wrench’ which the pandemic and lockdowns threw into our Recovery efforts.

All of our previous experience in Recovery had taught us the importance of bringing the community back together again after a disaster, in as many ways as we could (eg local cuppa & a chat sessions; yoga or walking groups; ‘Town Hall’ meetings; Mental Health First Aid or Accidental Counsellor training; working bees restoring local parks or our devastated landscape and wildlife; creative workshops; community choirs – whatever locals wanted, to bring connection, agency, and meaning back into their lives). However, within weeks of the formal commencement of the Recovery, COVID brought all our planning and activity “to a screeching halt”. We had to, and did, find innovative and lateral ways to try and meet the needs of our traumatised community, but it stretched our workers and volunteers (who are also residents in our community) to the limit – and, sadly, sometimes beyond. Burnout, disaster fatigue, and exhaustion have led to significant “churn”, in our community workers in particular – especially when they were essentially asked to “volunteer” this work on top of their paid jobs – and rising costs of living started to bite into their family budgets (noting that community workers – like

Aged/Disability care and Early Childhood Educators – are amongst the lowest-paid workers in the country).

What Did We Do Well?

- As a result of our previous work following 2013, the Recovery swung into action very quickly;
- Partnerships and relationships built following 2013 (eg through the Wellbeing sub-committee and the Resilience & Preparedness Group 2014-2021) were able to be activated swiftly, and the collaborative mode of operation meant a diverse range of local and 'incoming' support services were encouraged and able to work well together (utilising the grass-roots model in local communities/villages which we know works in the Mountains);
- Local connections were thus speedy and relatively seamless;
- We welcomed new members warmly;
- Community-led programs and grant applications were allocated through community consultation;
- We have thus formed great relationships through some of the community groups.

What would we want to see done differently next time?

- To connect with community groups 'on the fringes' when things work well for areas (like the Mounts, Megalong, Clarence/Dargan/Bell or Berambing) - not just when there is a disaster;
- Blue Mountains services to work even better together (eg by continuing collaboration through the *Resilient Villages* pilot and merged cross-sector interagency of Recovery, Resilience & Preparedness);
- Develop strategy at planning level to incorporate BM and Lithgow (Councils are working on this)
 - there is recognition by governments of cross-over of LGAs i.e. Dargan/Clarence – BM and Lithgow; and Berambing/Bilpin – BM and Hawkesbury;
 - we (community and emergency services) also have work to do – residents in many of these areas described themselves as “the fringe dwellers” and frequently felt abandoned (particularly following the COVID lockdowns).

'Protective Factors' in Recovery which built on our previous work and the strengths of our local community:

Recovery Support Service (RSS) – Protective Factors:

Funded by the then Resilience NSW, the **Step by Step Recovery Support Service** (c/o Gateway Family Services, and commissioned by the Nepean Blue Mountains PHN), made a welcome return in the aftermath of the Black Summer fires (the service had previously be piloted in the Mountains following the 2013 bushfires).

This RSS again made an appreciable difference to the Recovery, as the management (and several of the workers), had been with us in 2013, so were in a position to 'dive straight in':

1. RSS workers were there, reaching out to affected residents where they were (literally and metaphorically); building trusting relationships; offering non-judgemental and personal/group support and psycho-education; and 'normalising' the recovery journey.
2. Especially once COVID hit and lockdowns meant we couldn't gather communities together or meet people Face 2 Face, their outreach activities and check-ins 'over the fence' or via Zoom were invaluable connections so that people knew they had not been forgotten.
3. They are also local, so they know each unique community and its characteristics; they were here following 2013, and are trusted local service providers; they were active participants in the Regional & LGA Health & Wellbeing sub-committees of the Recovery; and they also know the local community services intimately, so warm referrals to local services were seamless.
4. ALSO - they are all experienced, well-trained, trauma-informed workers, who operate from a strengths-based practice.

RSS - Potential Risks & Suggestions for Improvement:

1. The RSS service needs to be funded for significantly more than one PT worker stretched across a large regional LGA - ideally 2 or 3 FT workers, because (as the *10 Years Beyond Bushfires* report makes clear), it is not just those "directly impacted" by the fire/flood/cyclone who are affected - in this case it was our entire LGA suffering from collective community trauma.
2. RSSs in regional/remote areas need to be provided with at least one 4WD & a satellite phone. In addition to practical reality on rutted and often boggy back roads, this is also a work health and safety issue for staff.
3. RSSs should also be provided with a suitable van/mini-bus which can operate outreach "pop-up" Recovery Hubs on location, where required, on a regular "circuit".
4. The current ad. hoc. activation leads to long time delays – when an RSS is actually needed immediately a Disaster Declaration is made, so that they can be present from the first time a Recovery Centre is stood up.
5. The current model is too short-term even after a "normal" disaster, the trauma and related impacts will affect residents' recovery for several years. In the 4 years since late 2019, residents in our LGA have been impacted by at least 9 major disaster events (including two lockdowns due to COVID) which have devastated our local economy, our mental health, etc.; and lead to significantly elevated presentations of severe financial distress, DV, MH, homelessness, AOD, overwhelming levels of suicidal ideation for our young people (even children as young as 10), etc. Suitable contracting periods after a disaster are more in the realm of a minimum of three years (by which time, for example, signs of PTSD have started to emerge, and affected residents can be referred and supported to access suitable local trauma specialists)
 - for example: Wolgan Valley, Lithgow LGA – becomes hemmed in by floods, and access to basic needs (like education, food, medicines etc) are impacted each event. Communities are finding their own short-term solutions, some of which are risking life. Long-term impacts on education, mental health and community cohesion are not measured, and hence not addressed. Recovery for communities like this are going to be long-term.
6. The current short-term funding leads to constant "extension" of contracts (leading to uncertainty for workers and residents alike); and the end of a 12-month funding contract has lead in some cases to the service being due to cease at the same time as an anniversary of the event – which is extremely poor timing.
7. This model of trauma-informed, experienced local workers who know their community should be activated immediately in any impacted LGA with a Disaster Declaration. To enable

this activation in a timely fashion, we would recommend that Resilience/Reconstruction NSW (or the relevant agency) establish a pre-approved Panel or pool of suitably qualified local, place-based community organisations in each regional/rural LGA, ready to be activated as a local Recovery Support Service following disaster(s).

Resourcing Recovery – at the grass-roots

- **Community-lead resilience planning and recovery is a critical first principle.**

The WESTIR report on *Resilience Through Disasters*¹ has recommended [the research was specifically into Community & Neighbourhood Centres, but the recommendations are equally valid for all local, place-based community services], echoing our own experience over the past 10 years that government:

- “Provide ongoing, targeted funding to adequately cover the costs of disasters.
 - Enhance mental health support for clients and workers.
 - Encourage greater collaboration and coordination between community services and local emergency management agencies.
 - Encourage innovative practices and partnerships to respond to disasters.
 - Adequately resource sector planning, training, and infrastructure to help services better prepare [for] and respond to disasters.
 - Undertake further investigation into how [local community services] navigate [disaster] events and support [impacted residents].”
- Resourcing on-the-ground services to deliver immediate relief and long-term Recovery.
 - In NSW, the model adopted by Department of Communities & Justice in light of the COVID pandemic was a little delayed, but extremely effective (i.e. up-front ‘acquit & report at the EOFY’ grants (on a sliding scale depending on the size of the organisation); followed by an Open Grants process to meet demonstrated demand).
 - Community Sector Organisations (CSOs – registered place-based charities funded by government departments at all levels to deliver social services, and the local ‘social scaffolding’ of the community) need immediate financial support (“surge” funding) on Declaration of an emergency. In the wake of a disaster, residents descend – often in large numbers – on the local support services they know and trust (Neighbourhood Centres, Family Support/youth/homelessness/DV services, etc.).
 - CSOs then require ongoing resourcing for at least 5 years for the inevitable surge of need which follows every disaster – severe financial distress, homelessness, DV, mental health distress/trauma, AOD, suicides, etc.
 - In addition to “surge” support, community sector organisations also need funding for support the supporters: eg
 - counselling,
 - respite,
 - professional supervision,
 - additional allowances for Recovery Workers,
 - self-care resources, and
 - backfilling of Business As Usual (BAU) roles.

¹ *Resilience Through Disaster* Report, October 2020 – WESTIR/LCSA, p. 2

- Long term planning is required to be undertaken - in advance of the next disasters - by governments at all levels for grants around preparedness/mitigation, community resilience-building and recovery. Current grants at the Federal level (eg Preparing Australian Communities rounds) are an excellent first step
 - we fully support the position that resourcing needs to go to local communities and that the majority of the public monies should be invested in local preparedness/resilience for disasters (currently around 3%), instead of waiting for disasters to occur and the majority of the spending is then on response and recovery (currently around 97%).
 - communities need certainty about rounds of funding, eligibility criteria, timing, etc so they can undertake needs analysis and consult properly with local community to apply for the most appropriate grants (not in a panic, thinking it might be their only opportunity);
 - ongoing funding and support is also required in each LGA in Recovery; and ongoing resourcing for a preparedness officer at the local level.
- Nationally and locally, we need to look at how individuals take responsibility for their own properties to reduce risk
 - the Blue Mountains Recovery, Resilience & Preparedness (RR&P) Group has endorsed Person-centred Disaster Preparedness (PcEP) as the model of individual/family unit emergency planning for all residents;
 - we have been working closely with local RFS and Habitat for Humanity around property preparation for our most vulnerable/at-risk residents;
 - as humans, we also need to build individual ownership and responsibility for what we can each do to reduce climate change.
- Lack of referrals by government agencies to local services – most particularly by Service NSW – was intensely frustrating for local services in the 2019-2021 Recovery (eg to local Recovery Support Services)
 - relevant government agencies (eg DoH, DCJ, ResNSW, Service NSW) should at least be able to share data on local organisations they fund – with public monies – to deliver social services and recovery supports!
- NSW Reconstruction Authority (NRA - or the relevant agency) needs to develop databases of affected residents which can be shared with (suitably-qualified) local services on a 'need to know' basis – the Privacy Act is a nonsensical excuse, when informed consent can be given to enable such sharing with approved local recovery organisations and authorised recovery workers
 - in our experience, a simple privacy waiver from resident to allow them not to have to re-tell their story (and potentially be re-traumatised);
 - such databases also need to draw from a larger pool than simply those impacted residents who turn up to an Evacuation Centre.
- Grant funding for recovery/resilience must be community-led wherever possible (Black Summer Bushfire grants, for example, or the recent Disaster Ready Fund, were emphatically **not** community-led). The Disaster Ready Fund (announced at the end of 2022), for instance, had significant issues with timing, targeting and requirements:
 - most CSOs were on leave until early February (with plenty of notice, the next round of funding should open say, early-March and close early-May) - so as not to conflict with end of financial year (higher workload for CSOs around July-Oct);

- no local CSO will have the required 50% co-contribution; and
- the next round might strategically be targeted specifically at local, place-based organisations working in Recovery/resilience (ACNC Registered charities?)
 - having a community sector round would encourage smaller local organisations to apply;
- some Councils had been reported as “disappointed” that the community sector and other organisations were “allowed” to apply for what they deemed was “their” funding; though funding was not apparently intended for physical infrastructure
 - the guidelines were perhaps unclear?; the next round of grants will need clearer guidelines;
- disaster-affected communities have given feedback that grant money is getting directed to the “wrong areas”, with services that do not work in recovery submitting grant proposals for local recovery work in their area;
- In addition to these issues, our experience is that small community organisations are disproportionately impacted by the flow-through of reporting requirements, set by State and Federal Governments on larger primary contractors, to the delivery activities of these smaller organisations. Often, primary contractors simply duplicate the extensive (and appropriate) reporting and acquittal requirements of the lead contract into the sub-contracts covering actual program delivery. This may even be done while withholding a proportion of total funding to meet their own administrative overheads, including reporting and acquittal. Contract design needs to either provide greater funding and resourcing of the small community organisations delivering services on the ground to meet the desired level of reporting and acquittal, or provide for a more streamlined, scaled-down reporting and acquittal requirement while still maintaining appropriate oversight and transparency of the expenditure of public funds.

Community-led recovery/resilience requires either that:

1. local CSOs undertake community engagement and consultation to determine needs and what the locals wish to do about meeting them (which also needs to be resources to undertake this effectively); or that
2. small community groups are supported to apply for their own grant-funding. For this to be successful, resourcing needs to go to:
 - drastically improving (streamlining and demystifying) the various eligibility criteria, application forms and portals – these are all currently so onerous, time-consuming and cumbersome that even experienced grant writers blench – it is astonishing that small unpracticed community groups manage to apply for anything at all!
 - one example of appropriate changes to eligibility for grants would be increased flexibility in allowing more collaboration between communities across impacted LGA boundaries;
 - additional support to auspice and assist local groups to coalesce and to apply for grants – genuine local partnerships should get priority;
 - providing a small community group with support/capacity-building for the grant application process eg
 - idea and project formation
 - building a realistic budget
 - writing the actual application
 - suitable evaluation strategies
 - one alternative might be to resource each affected LGA for a 'grants applications officer' to be available for these voluntary/community groups and small organisations to help write funding applications;

- encouraging/drawing forward local champions/leaders who work within the community group to see who these people are to lead.

‘External’ Organisations in Recovery

We have found in all our Recovery efforts since 2013 that there is a potential issue with Government(s) funding large (often national or state-wide) organisations who lack much/any footprint at a local level to bring additional resources or expertise to the impacted LGA – often on a wide regional front, with inadequate resources/staff to cover four or five large regional LGAs! The alternative – funding known and trusted local organisations, where these already exist to undertake the required work in their community – is by far the preferred model. One issue, of course, is that these large external organisations don’t always have intimate local knowledge that is needed for Mountains communities to recover. In addition, if they have no pre-existing local footprint, is that it takes time to build up the trust of the local community and local relationships/partnerships. In addition, briefing and supporting such organisations until they can ‘get up to speed’ can be a severe strain upon existing (already over-stretched) local organisations – and then, their funding frequently runs out at that point, and the community is left ‘high and dry’.

How do we identify community organisations that can partner and deliver with efficacy?

How do big external organisations most effectively build local relationships that are ongoing – eg to support grant applications as they arise?

From the perspective of the smaller community based/local Community Sector Organisation (CSO):

- Large (national/state) NGOs have grant writers.
- We need to build an understanding of the construct of smaller organisations (local, place-based CSOs) and our (usually limited) capacity to write large grant applications (often with a disproportionate level of detail to the amount sought).
- Resources could be shared to support community-led/place-based organisations.
- ‘Community-led’ is a buzz word that a myriad of services are seeking to work with, which sets up a situation where communities can feel bombarded by short-term ‘offerings’ of support.
- How do we find ways for large and small organisations to coordinate and cooperate?
- One bugbear of local community sector organisations is that of last-minute requests to support applications from big NGOs to increase their link with community – this approach needs to progress to money coming across the table to place-based CSOs to deliver locally.
- Relationships are key - and this extends locally as well. Communities need to link with local CSOs, and vice versa, to build trust.
- Large NGOs need to preference employing people from a local community to increase trust, agency, connection and resilience (echoed from both sides represented).
- We know that disasters are going to get worse. Rather than respond by ‘sending in’ external organisations, or (only temporarily) embedding Recovery workers in local Council, it would be more effective to implement permanent local workers who can build those trusting relationships and links.
- Bringing harmony of understanding across sectors and governance structures increases cohesion.
- There is an impasse in some funding contracts to address recovery and resilience – we need to be investing public monies where intentions and partnerships are.

From the perspective of the large external NGO:

- Need to know how to identify 'who', and how to liaise.
- It is tricky to navigate when you're "coming in from outside" & don't know the community or the players.
- Recognise the challenges in identifying who does what.
- Creating shared documents or cross-sectoral or interagency meetings to inform ways that organisations can support Recovery in partnership.

Possible project to create a template for mapping community work and areas:

- Mapping support across communities.
- Is strategic planning reflecting the spread of work?
- Assists the larger organisations to understand the work and what the needs are.
- Increasing relationships outside of grant processes, to support them when opportunities for grants arise.
- Create a model of best practice that details how to go from big to local – i.e. a larger (non-competitive) funding pool, resulting in permanent capacity to run at short notice, versus vulnerable funded but connected.

We acknowledge that the broad reach of large NGOs means there is a sustainable workforce and structure of governance behind their work, but the capacity of local organisations to genuinely meet community needs is the asset that all work needs - in particular, in disaster response and recovery.

NCOSS, the Mental Health Commission of NSW and University of Canberra have developed valuable resources to enable community assets, such as local community sector organisations (CSOs), to be a key part of community-led disaster recovery, and how to enable non-local organisations, such as government agencies and large NGOs to support them (*Community Resilience, Wellbeing and Recovery Project Resources*):

<https://www.nswmentalhealthcommission.com.au/advocacy-work/community-resilience-wellbeing-and-recovery-project-resources>.

Large NGOs have the capacity to argue upwards about the shift of models/paradigms required, and assist in building an advocacy role with a collective voice. Grant applications are often required for extremely difficult and complex issues within some small and isolated communities, - but small organisations or community groups would find it hard to apply.