

People Places Partnerships – Mid North Coast

NCOSS Regional
Forum Taree

November 2023



About NCOSS

NSW Council of Social Service (NCOSS) is the peak body for non-government organisations in the health and community services sector in NSW. NCOSS works to progress social justice and shape positive change toward a NSW free from inequality and disadvantage. We are an independent voice advocating for the wellbeing of NSW communities. At NCOSS, we believe that a diverse, well-resourced and knowledgeable social service sector is fundamental to reducing economic and social inequality.

Acknowledgement of Country

NCOSS respectfully acknowledges the sovereign Custodians of Gadigal Country and pay our respects to Elders, past, present and emerging. We acknowledge the rich cultures, customs and continued survival of First Nations peoples on Gadigal Country, and on the many diverse First Nations lands and waters across NSW.

We acknowledge the spirit of the Uluru Statement from the Heart and accept the invitation to walk with First Nations peoples in a movement of the Australian people for a better future.

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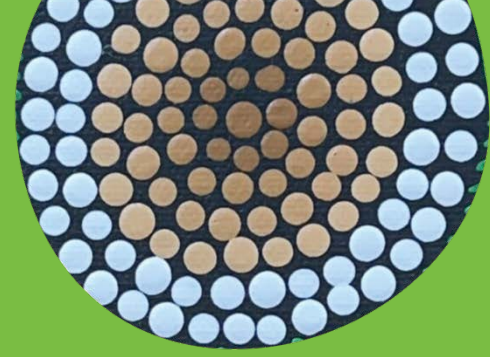


About the Artwork - *The Manning: Biripi Country*

“The lush country allowed the Biripi People to travel all over their country. The mountains to live and hunt. The valley to live and hunt. The seaside to live and fish. Our country provided and still provides it all.”¹

The artwork used throughout this publication is by Pastor Russell Saunders OAM and is available for sale through [Deepwater Shark Gallery](#). Russell is an Elder, Pastor, and a well respected artist in the Biripi community. He has worked in local Schools & TAFE teaching Aboriginal Art & culture over 20 years or more.

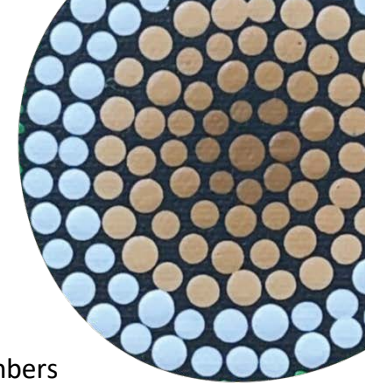
¹ From [Deepwater Shark Gallery](#) catalogue



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Background to this Report



NCOSS Regional Members Meetings

As a statewide peak, NCOSS engages with its regional members through Regional Members Meetings. Regional Members Meetings are held 3 to 4 times a year to provide a dynamic platform for conversation and connection, highlighting the experience of disadvantage and the unique challenges faced by people living outside metropolitan Sydney.

Regional Members Meetings provide opportunities:

- to connect with politicians, decision-makers and others to leverage and influence their impact on regional issues
- to inform the NCOSS policy and advocacy agenda from a regional perspective
- for networking, skill-building, information-sharing and partnerships
- to put a spotlight on growing inequalities and issues for diverse regional communities
- to participate in consultations and important sector briefings.

During Covid the early years of the COVID-19 pandemic, these meetings were held online. At a meeting in August in 2023 it was suggested by a member that it was time to start getting back out to regional and rural NSW for face-to-face discussions.

As a result, NCOSS committed to continuing the online Regional Members Meetings and adding two in-person Regional Forums each year. The first meeting was held in Taree, on the NSW Mid North Coast.

NCOSS and Local Hosts Working Together

An informal working group comprising Zac Carter (Manning Valley Indigenous Community Support Services), Corinne Stephenson (from Forster Neighbourhood Centre), Ben McAlpine (NCOSS Director of Policy and Advocacy) and Francesca Cathie (NCOSS Policy Lead) was set up to discuss local issues and develop an agenda for the meeting.

The working group identified some three significant themes:

- centralisation of services in larger population centres limiting access to services
- fragmented funding causing administrative overload and resource gaps for services
- lack of visibility for smaller local services.

Rather than limiting the Forum to NCOSS members, it was decided to engage with the broader service sector and extend the invitation to all services, local Councils, and government agencies from the Port Macquarie Hastings LGA, the Mid Coast LGA and Kempsey (all within an hour and a half drive from Taree).

People Places Partnerships

The purpose of this report is to provide an overview of the Taree Forum. It provides a summary of the presentations and discussions at the Taree Forum, and identifies the key issues and challenges raised by participants in providing place-based programs, services, and essential social infrastructure to people experiencing inequality, poverty and disadvantage in regional communities.

The audience for the report is broad and includes participants and local organisations to inform their advocacy; and Government officials and elected representatives, so that they can better understand the issues being faced on the Mid North Coast and inform their policy decisions.



Local Hosts

The Taree Forum could not have been delivered without the support of the two local hosts – Manning Valley Indigenous Community Support Services, and Forster Neighbourhood Centre. NCOSS extends its immense gratitude to these organisations and, in particular, Zac Carter and Corinne Stephenson.

Manning Valley Indigenous Community Support Services

Manning Valley Indigenous Community Support Services' (MVICSS) is a relatively new service on the Mid North Coast serving both local and state- wide enquiries and supports. For the 22/23 year, We have assisted our community by offering formal and informal supports to over 250 individuals, offered programs for cultural development and to combat targeted needs such as isolation or mental health, and assisted in the case management and referral processes of over 50 individuals. While still offering health, mental health, court and legal issues or advocacy calls when dealing with other agencies.

MVICSS, supported by our dedicated team of 9 volunteers, have shown a considerable amount of care and consideration for the community, assisting all who face disadvantage and adversity while creating an inclusive interagency network for the region. MVICSS has been proud to work with our community, partners and stakeholders in building a greater capacity of care for our region.

MVICSS has received less than \$16,000 in funding in our 2 years of operation from the PHN (Primary Health Network), NAB Foundation, as well as the Regional Australia Bank-Community Partnership Program. Having such limited grant funding has led to many adversities for MVICSS, in which we tackle head on for the sake of our community. MVICSS will continue to push for greater funding and capacity building not only for ourselves, but for all services of our region.

In response to community identified needs and service identified needs, MVICSS has developed a scaffold for multiple support options that we are seeking grants and partnerships to deliver encompassing the many and diverse areas of the social sector. We will continue to develop these supports alongside our partners for greater community benefit and impact.



MVICSS Art Group in action

Forster Neighbourhood Centre

Forster Neighbourhood Centre (FNC) exists to support the well-being of all Great Lakes residents (within the Mid-Coast LGA of NSW). We are flexible and respond to the needs of the community through Emergency Relief and Support; Information, Advice and Referral; programs and services to address identified needs; and social inclusion activities and programs. In the 2022-2023 funding year we received less than \$500,000 in recurrent funding. In spite of this we achieved:

- *Over 3000 instances of Information, Advice and Referral through our community centre for community members experiencing crisis, more than double the previous year.*
- *Supported over 30 volunteers to contribute 2500 volunteer hours towards our community centre operation and community programs.*
- *Over 500 Emergency Relief packages, an increase of 17% for the previous year.*
- *Over 350 No Interest Loans for community members to access essential items, an increase of 25% from the previous year.*
- *Family Capacity Building and parenting support to 69 families in their home.*
- *Almost 80 counselling sessions for individuals requiring emotional support.*
- *Weekly social participation opportunities for community members experiencing isolation such as the Mens Group, Forster Community Garden, Great Lakes Womens Shed and Vision Impaired Support Group.*
- *Almost 700 instances of education support for school aged children through our Better Learning and After School programs.*

With such a small amount of income, we achieve well over \$1.5 million in social value to our community. This needs to be recognised and resourced appropriately by the NSW Government. Core operation funding for Neighbourhood Centre's in NSW is crucial to support regional communities now and into the future.



Participants on a cultural cruise organised by FNC

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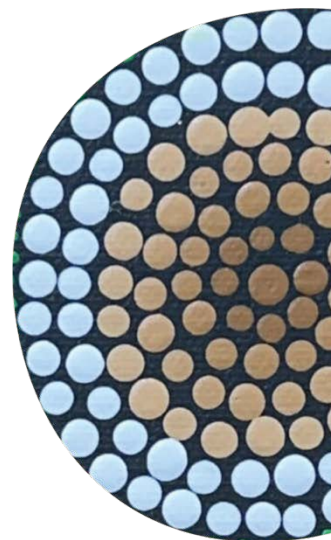


Participants

The meeting was held on Tuesday 14 November at the Manning United Church Auditorium in Taree, from 10am to 3.15pm. It was chaired by Ben McAlpine (Acting CEO, NCOSS). Also attending from NCOSS were Francesca Cathie, Policy Lead, and Eleanor Harris, Senior Program Officer, Community Sector Disaster Capability Program.

43 people from 30 services, peak bodies, government agencies, or local government attended including:

- Bucketts Way Neighbourhood Centre
- Burrun Dalai
- Camden Haven and Manning Valley Community College
- Catholic Care
- Community Housing Ltd
- Community Resources
- Forster Neighbourhood Centre (Local Host)
- Great Lakes Manning Homeless Support Service
- Hastings Neighbourhood Services
- Headspace
- Home in Place
- Homebase Youth Services
- Kinchela Boys Home
- LCSA
- Local Health District – Mid North Coast – Kempsey Community Health Centre
- Local Health District – Hunter New England - Forster Community Health Centre
- Manning Support Services
- Manning Valley Indigenous Community Support Services (Local Host)
- Manning Valley Neighbourhood Services
- Midcoast Community Legal Centre
- Midcoast Council
- Mission Australia Housing
- Pathfinders
- Port Macquarie Hastings Council
- Regional NSW
- Regional NSW (Office for Regional Youth)
- Taree Community Member
- TIDE
- Vinnies - Taree Conference
- Wesley Mission
- YP Space MNC





Welcome to Country – Pastor Russell Saunders OAM

Pastor Russell OAM gave a passionate and warm Welcome to Country as well as a fantastic yidaki performance. He spoke about his connection to country and how in this place “Jaree”, the place of the big hollow and the sandpaper fig, from the mountains to the sea – “we are the shark people”, the Biripi people. He spoke about the devastating effects of the referendum and how Aboriginal communities are “offended by the results of the referendum”. He called for us all to continue to work together in spite of those results. He talked about how there are many nations in this country, many “footfalls across the land”, and how we can all serve our communities.

Introduction

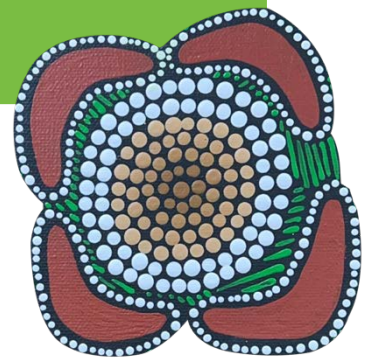
The three host organisations – NCOSS, Manning Valley Indigenous Community Support Services and Forster Neighbourhood Centre introduced their organisations and the key themes of the day.

Key Points

Ben McAlpine - A/CEO NCOSS

- Centralisation and standardisation of funding, services, and networks can deprive communities of what they really need – truly localised services that build community wellbeing, address disadvantage, and respond to disasters in the era of climate change.
- We know that local solutions work and are critical to building effective networks of support.
- When we say ‘local’, we mean place-based communities – we might use the word regional – but people live in communities not regions.
- As a state peak with political visibility, NCOSS can shine a spotlight on issues facing local communities and services.
- We commit to developing a report from today’s meeting (that captures your input) and will use that report to inform our advocacy.
- We also commit to a meeting with local politicians to talk them through the issues facing their local communities.

“Too often services are reliant on an unsustainable patchwork of short-term grants, funding, and philanthropy”
Ben McAlpine
NCOSS

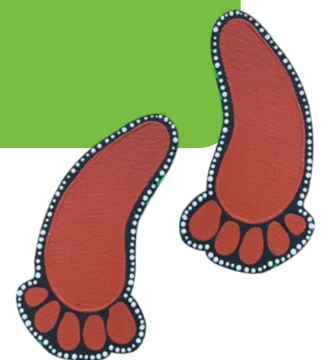


Zac Carter – Executive Director MVICSS

- For almost 2 years, MVICSS has been assisting clients, participants and community with case management and programs while striving to expand to serve the diverse needs of the region.
- From advocacy and referrals, support, health and mental health, court support, education pathways and advocacy along with a school support network, and CuppaYarn groups targeted at combating isolation, mental health and targeted needs.
- MVICSS currently operate between Taree, Wingham and Harrington, providing continuous support for the Manning Valley – we need to expand outreach and service footprint to the underserved northern boundary.
- Together, (today) we can create a genuine snapshot of our community.
- We need to be vocal about areas of concern, knowing there is a difference between the regions' recorded and unrecorded statistics.
- This is often through clients not receiving support in the past or believing that things are “hopeless” so not engaging.
- How can we best plan for our clients and communities? - given our area's recent history with floods and fires, as well as this year expecting heatwaves and further turbulent weather.
- Encourage the meeting to engage with Foundation for Rural and Regional Renewal “an incredible community focused funding body” - They give smaller organisations the opportunity to access funding that they often miss out on.
- We (the sector) need to consider the way we support each other - partnerships, interagency approaches, collaborative problem solving and grant applications.
- What information do we need e.g. service directories and program or support lists that would be beneficial for our work in communities?

“I acknowledge the history of this beautiful land, Biripi land, I acknowledge the Elders, of the past, present and emerging. To those who never returned home, and to those who settled from other countries.”

Zac Carter MVICSS



Corinne Stephenson – Forster Neighbourhood Centre

- Local place-based services are responsive and flexible – we know what our communities need, and we are a part of those communities – we live and work in them.
- Often those services are working above capacity and filling gaps on the go, in response to community need
- There is a need for government to invest in local connectors that can navigate and interpret the service system for those experiencing crisis – access and engagement will increase across all services with a safe pair of hands providing warm referrals.
- A safe pair of hands with established rapport in communities is key to resilience when disaster strikes. Local place-based services can adapt and respond quickly to get support to those that need it most.
- We look forward to working together to strengthen our local connections and to develop a united voice for NCOSS to go into battle with government for our region and the locals who support it.

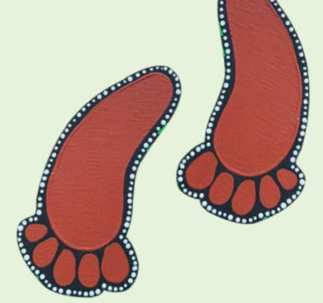
“Local place-based services are responsive and flexible – we know what our communities need.”

Corinne Stephenson
Forster Neighbourhood Centre



Presentation 1 :

Mapping Disadvantage



Ben McAlpine (Acting CEO of NCOSS) gave a presentation on the NATSEM Mapping Disadvantage research. This research was commissioned by NCOSS and undertaken by the National Centre for Social and Economic Modelling (NATSEM) in the Faculty of Business, Government and Law at the University of Canberra. You can find out more about all the reports and tools [here](#).

Key Points

Findings across NSW

- While the overall rate of poverty² in NSW has barely changed since 2016 (13.4%), population growth means we now have almost a million people living below the poverty line.
- An additional 100,000 people since 2016 are now living in poverty. This demonstrates that what we are doing to address poverty is not working.
- The fact that this research relies on the Census data from 2021 is also concerning, considering skyrocketing living costs, interest rate hikes, and rental increases since that time. We expect that poverty rates would be far worse if measured today.
- 50,000 of the 100,000 additional people living in poverty since 2016 were over the age of 65.
- The single highest rate of poverty was for people in public housing.
 - Almost 60% of tenants live below the poverty line - this group saw the largest percentage point increase since 2016.
 - This suggests something is fundamentally wrong with the social housing system.
- Snapshot of poverty in regional NSW
 - Average poverty rate dropped from 14.6% to 13.7%
 - Highest rates are scattered along the Mid and Far North coasts, in North West NSW and parts of New England and Central West
 - Riverina experienced the most significant worsening of poverty since 2016 (e.g. Hay up 45%; Gundagai up 40%).
 - Poverty rates also worsened in pockets of New England and the Far North Coast.
- Impacts are markedly different in regional NSW compared with Greater Sydney
 - Young People – 25% higher
 - Men – 30% more likely to be living in poverty
 - Unemployed – 86% higher
 - Single Parents – 39% higher
 - Children Under 15 – 22% lower.

² Poverty is defined using the threshold based on median incomes, with 50% below this threshold being the 'poverty line'. This method is widely used in national and international studies and measures living standards relative to those enjoyed by 'middle Australia'.

Key Points

Mid Coast, Port Macquarie Hastings, Kempsey

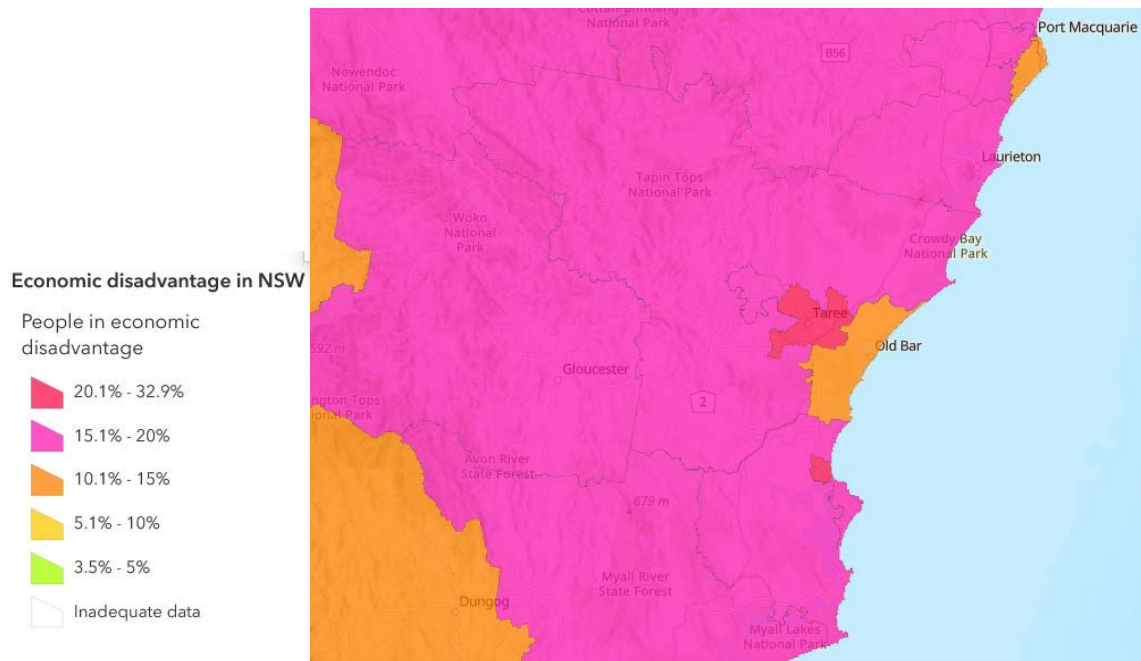


Diagram: Poverty Mapping – Mid North Coast

- **Looking at the overall data for Mid-North Coast, including Taree and surrounds, Tea Gardens and Buladelah in the South, to Kempsey and surrounds in the North, and out to Gloucester in the West:**
 - The poverty rate (17.41%) is 27% higher than the average for the rest of NSW (13.7%).
 - All cohorts are experiencing higher rates of poverty compared to the rest of NSW.
 - There are pockets of concentrated poverty, and this is particularly significant for children and young people, with rates of poverty being 40% higher than the rest of regional NSW.
- **Young people (aged 15 – 24)**
 - 21.6% of young people in the region are living in poverty.
 - In Taree the poverty rate for young people was 30.9% compared to the rest of NSW which sits at 15.1% – more than double.
 - In Bulahdelah-Stroud, the rate is 34%. This cohort also saw one of the largest changes since 2016: 236% more young people were in poverty since 2016.
 - In Kempsey, children (25%) are experiencing almost double the rates of poverty compared to the rest of NSW (12.8%), although they have experienced an improvement since 2016.

- **Household type**
 - While single parent households (34.3%) are the most likely to be living in poverty in the Mid North Coast, it is couples with children (13.8%) who are twice as likely to be living in poverty when compared to those living in the rest of NSW.
 - In Gloucester, couples with dependent children (18.3%) have had the highest increase in poverty rate – close to double (99% increase) since 2016.
 - In Kempsey, the rate for couples with dependent children (19.7%) is 114% higher than the rest of NSW. One-in-three single parent and lone adult households are living in poverty, which is significantly higher than rest of NSW.
- **Housing tenure**
 - Public renters (74.7%) are experiencing the highest poverty rates, being 29% higher than in the rest of NSW.
 - 13.8% of households with a mortgage are living in poverty – 44% higher than rest of NSW.
 - Mortgage holders in Taree (19.5%) have experienced the greatest worsening (216%) of poverty rates since 2016.
 - Households paying off a mortgage in Gloucester (17.6%) experienced a 176% increase in poverty rates since 2016.
 - In Bulahdelah-Stroud (46%) and Kempsey (41.1%), private renters are twice as likely to be in poverty compared to the rest of NSW (22.3%).
- **Employment status**
 - If you are employed full time (4%) and living in the Mid North Coast, you are 37% more likely to be living in poverty than the same cohort in the rest of NSW (2.9%).
 - In Bulahdelah-Stroud, 71.6% of unemployed people are living in poverty. This cohort experienced a worsening of poverty rate by 137% since 2016.
- **First Nations Households**
 - First Nations households, particularly in Taree and Kempsey, are significantly more likely to live in low-income households. The rates are more than double (128% and 133% higher respectively) than the rest of NSW, and 26% higher than other First Nations households across NSW.
- **Households with a disability**
 - In Buladelah-Stroud, nearly one-in-two households headed by a person with disability are living in low-income households, being 181% higher than the rest of NSW (16.2%).



Key Points

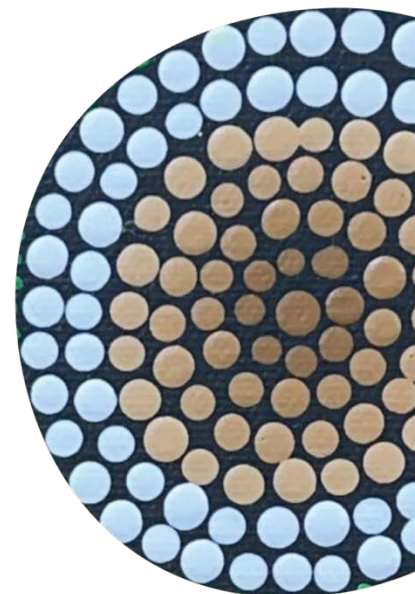
Snapshot for Taree

- **Young People**
 - Almost 1 in 3 live in poverty – double the rate for regional NSW.
 - Rate increased by 34% since 2016.
- **Single Parents**
 - 2 in 5 live in poverty
 - Rate is 50% higher than the rate for regional NSW.
- **Private renters**
 - 1 in 3 live in poverty
 - Rate is 53% higher than the rate for regional NSW.

Key Points

Snapshot for Gloucester

- **Young People**
 - 1 in 4 live in poverty
 - Rate is 67% higher than the rate for regional NSW
 - This increased by 47% since 2016
- **Children**
 - 1 in 5 live in poverty
 - Rate is 62% higher than rate for regional NSW
- **Public renters**
 - 98% live in poverty
 - Rate is 68% higher than the rate for regional NSW



Tool #1: Online Mapping Tool

- Mapping visualisation of SA2 small-scale poverty data across NSW
- Two sets of maps:
 - NSW 2021 estimate by SA2
 - Estimated changes 2016-2021 in NSW by SA2
- Ability to filter by all demographic groups in the research (sex, age, employment, household composition, household tenure, low-income household rates)



Tool #2: SA2 Dashboards

- Dashboard visualisation of key data for individual SA2s, presenting four key demographics:
 - Age
 - Household Composition
 - Employment
 - Household Ownership
 - Sex
- For each of these, it presents:
 - Poverty rate for each sub-group (e.g. children)
 - Comparison to the relevant regional average
 - Change since 2016



Discussion and Questions

Several technical questions were asked about the tools which Ben was able to demonstrate and give further information about.

“Our services are swamped with people suffering the mental health impacts of stress and trauma caused by poverty.”
Participant

“We are seeing real differences between coastal areas, which tend to be more affluent, and inland areas where there are high rates of poverty. Older people and young people can experience more acute poverty in these affluent areas as rents and other services cost more.” Participant





Presentation 2:

Risk Reduction and Disaster Preparedness in a Warming World

Megan Nicholson NCOSS Director, Community Sector Disaster Capability Project and Eleanor Harris NCOSS Senior Program Officer, Community Sector Disaster Capability Program gave an overview of findings of the Project. In particular, they explained the importance of social connections and local networks in disaster recovery and preparedness, and how this approach underpins the Project's collaboration with four regional communities to enhance their disaster preparedness.

Key Points

Background to the Community Sector Disaster Capability Project

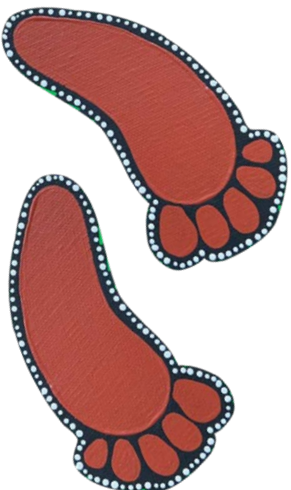
- The role of local services in responding to disasters and supporting recovery is increasingly recognised and valued, by both communities and governments.
- But the role of social services in disaster preparedness and planning remains contested – with some in government and emergency services still seeing disaster planning and preparedness as the province of government and disaster experts.
- The sector's role in preparing for, and helping to reduce the impacts of, future disasters needs to be better understood, supported and embedded in our emergency management plans and systems.
- To this end, NCOSS in collaboration with AbSec and the Local Community Services Association, is delivering the [Community Sector Disaster Capability project](#), funded through the Disaster Risk Reduction Fund by the Commonwealth and New South Wales governments.

Key Points

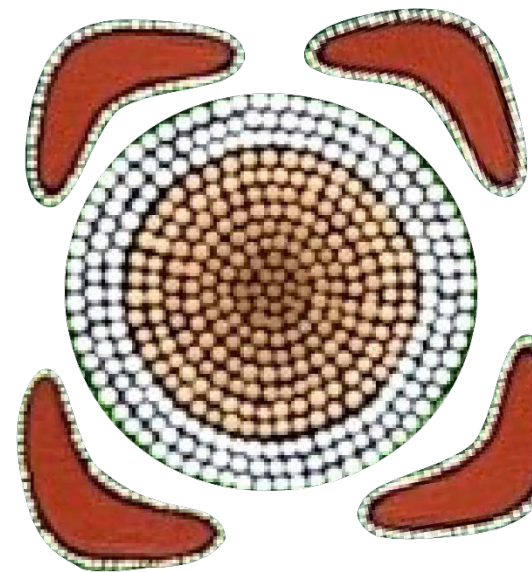
International Findings

NCOSS's former CEO Joanna Quilty undertook a Churchill study tour to New Zealand, the US, Puerto Rico, and Canada to investigate community-led responses to disasters. Megan outlined some of the key findings from this study tour:

- Other jurisdictions have experiences familiar to the sector in NSW. The study tour included meeting a range of community organisations, led most often by women, that were undertaking disaster organising, planning and responses appropriate to and embedded in local communities. Often, they were battling slow-moving government processes and a bureaucratic and funding environment that favoured the big, media savvy organisations or directed funds away from those with the greatest need.
- New Orleans is one location that provided a case study of significant change to disaster planning and risk reduction following the dire experience of Hurricane Katrina, where over 1800 people died.
 - During and after the hurricane, existing inequalities were exacerbated. For example, the Road Home program was found by a federal court to be discriminatory because houses in black areas were assigned a lower value, which meant black residents received less compensation and were unable to rebuild and return. This resulted in lower rates of poverty in New Orleans after Katrina, as poor people were forcibly displaced.
 - The experience of New Orleans highlights the need to build considerations of equity into plans and programs at every stage; and to better understand how social disadvantage and vulnerability intersects with disaster risk.
- Another key observation was the importance of local people and organisations as the first line of defence. There were many examples of organic, unplanned responses which saved the day and kept communities safe until first responders could arrive. This included the Māori response in NZ following the Christchurch earthquake, a women's health organization in Puerto Rico following Hurricane Maria, and Neighbourhood Centres in NY following Hurricane Sandy.
- Another key observation was that communities with strong social ties and connections recover more quickly.
 - A range of data sources and a survey of over 7000 people in New Orleans provided evidence of this. Research by Professors Frederick Weil and Daniel Aldrich shows that it's communities with strong social bonds and a collective approach who recover fastest - they bring a collective approach, and they work together.
 - For example, a Vietnamese community in New Orleans recovered three and half times more quickly than surrounding neighbourhoods, leveraging religious, cultural and business links. Together the community assisted with rebuilds and repairs, set up a community garden and community radio station, held cultural events and turned recovery into a group effort.



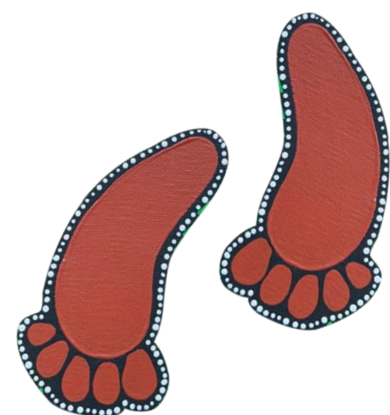
- Another important finding the study tour was the value of disaster backbone organisations known as COADs – or Community Organisations Active in Disasters.
 - In places such as California, COADs have become a form of best practice for community-led disaster response, recovery and preparedness. They are member-based organisations representing a diverse range of local organisations. COADs focus on disaster preparedness, particularly in neighbourhoods with limited services or communities experiencing disadvantage.
 - COADs are place-based entities, usually with modest philanthropic and or local government funding, and Joanna heard that they work best when formally established and resourced.
 - They are effectively functioning as a continuously operating disaster organisation – they are local and on the ground fast, and active for the long term.
 - They are a single point of contact for emergency managers – a link between government and community organisations. They take a seat at the local emergency organising committee, providing advice, information and contributing to decisions and convene a range of working groups directed to preparedness, resilience, vulnerability, funding and donations, and long-term recovery. They support and coordinate the efforts of other local organisations and services. They can also act as gatekeepers to keep well-meaning outsiders at bay.
 - A key feature of this model when most effective is a strong and respectful partnership with local government.



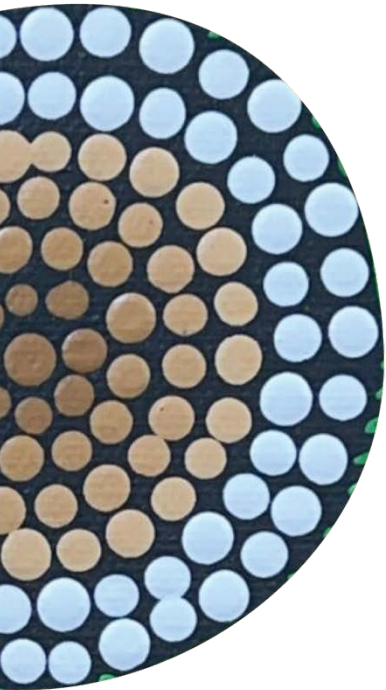
Key Points

NSW Experience

- Over the last 5 years we have experienced droughts, Black summer fires, COVID-19, and 2021 & 2022 floods.
- Consider the **scale** – the areas and communities impacted, huge swathes of the state. Consider the **severity** of those disasters – records broken, people saying ‘we’ve never seen it like this before. And consider the **frequency** – the events we experienced have been overlapping – for example, recovery from the Black Summer fires constrained by COVID-19 restrictions. Effects were compounded by the overlapping nature of these disasters.
- What was our shared experience of all of these emergencies? As communities we experienced:
 - Uncertainty, fear and loss.
 - Confusion, resilience, heroism, chaos, frustration, anger.
 - Isolation, working together, kindness, generosity.
 - Bureaucracy, barriers, blame, conflict.
- But as individuals, as families, we aren’t all equal when it comes to disasters. Social factors impact people’s access to support after disasters and their ability to recover well.
 - Income and resources
 - Health, physical capability, disability
 - Family make-up, age
 - Stigma, discrimination or fear of discrimination
 - Gender and sexual orientation
 - Cultural background and language
 - Access to information, internet, phone
 - Community connections and social supports, a sense of safety and belonging
 - The quality and safety of homes, roads
 - Geographic isolation.
- All these play a massive role in people’s experiences of and responses to disasters. Both here and overseas, we see people experiencing disadvantage as most at risk during and after disasters.
- As the international examples highlight - established local connections, trust and expertise in working with people experiencing vulnerability, are of immense importance in reducing the impacts of future disasters.



- We know that in New South Wales, place-based community organisations have that trust, knowledge and connection, which can assist in:
 - accurate assessments of local disaster risks and vulnerability
 - shaping effective local strategies and plans to reduce risks, reduce harm, and prepare better.
- Program and services delivered by the NGO sector aim to improve well-being and social connections, reduce disadvantage, and support the most vulnerable - essential elements of disaster recovery and resilience.
- Social service organisations are natural partners in emergency planning and preparedness but supporting infrastructure and enabling resources are needed to do this work. Through the Community Sector Disaster Capability project, we are looking to demonstrate the value that place-based NGOs bring to this work.



Key Points

Community Sector Disaster Capability Project

- NCOSS research, and the stories the sector has shared with us have shaped:
 - our sector development and advocacy work over the last few years
 - the aim and design of the Community Sector Disaster Capability Project.
- **Expectations on local NGOs**
 - Provide local knowledge and community connections to recovery agencies and large external organisations to support and enable long term disaster recovery.
 - Compete in a competitive recovery funding market.
 - Core services will continue much as usual.
- **Reality for local NGOs**
 - Supporting recovery has a resourcing and workforce cost that is not factored into recovery requests.
 - Applying for multiple grants is resource intensive and creates a funding cliff.
 - Increased demand for core services as a result of ongoing disaster impacts.
- **What is needed?**
 - Better recognition of the essential role of local NGOs in disaster response, recovery and preparedness, especially expertise in working with people experiencing disadvantage.
 - Effective, ongoing two-way communication between NGOs and Emergency Management structures.
 - Resourcing for organisational capacity development.
 - Coordinated and streamlined resourcing to meet the increased need after disasters.
- **Community Sector Disaster Capability Project** aims to collaborate with place-based organisations to:
 - Strengthen disaster risk reduction capability of place-based NGOs and communities esp. vulnerable groups.
 - Enable stronger, ongoing knowledge and connection between place-based NGOs and disaster management structures and agencies.
- The Project builds a collaborative, networked approach to local disaster management, providing an opportunity for local community organisations, and the communities they support, to bring their expert knowledge and connections into play. It develops their capacity to identify, assess and mitigate risks as well as strengthen ongoing interactions and exchange with formal disaster management systems.
- Place-based organisations lead the project in 3 locations – Hawkesbury, by [Peppercorn Services](#), NSW Northern Rivers, by [Resilient Lismore](#), South Coast/Snowy Monaro by [Katungul Aboriginal Corporation Regional Health and Community Services](#) and [Monaro Family Support Service](#) (MFSS).

- The project is jointly funded by the Commonwealth/NSW Government through the Disaster Risk Reduction Fund until June 2024 – so a tight timeframe for delivery.
- In each of the locations, the local services leading the work have mapped disaster strengths and vulnerabilities and considered the lessons drawn from recent disasters. This is shaping the activities and strategies being delivered locally through the project that will build both services and the community’s resilience and preparedness.
- NCOSS, LCSA and AbSec continue to be engaged in advocacy to government – with many reviews underway at the Commonwealth and state level.
- To find out more about the Project, visit the [Community Sector Disaster Capability](#) page on the NCOSS website.



Discussion and Questions

Q. That's great information – thank you. What about the role of Community Resilience Networks (CRNs) and other stakeholder governance bodies?

A. We definitely need to leverage existing interagency forums to garner the views and engagement of NGOs in disaster preparedness. CRN's are currently convened by Community Recovery Officers in local Councils. They are funded under Recovery so are necessarily time limited.

CRNs are valuable but it is difficult for services that are already stretched to attend more meetings. The COAD (Community Organisations Active in Disasters) model from the US may be a better option where one (or a number of local NGOs) are the conduit between the disaster management and social services sectors.

There is a need for ongoing, sustained mechanisms to build sector engagement and capability over time. We hope that with sustained advocacy and the evidence from the project about what communities need, that eventually these will be established and properly resourced.

Q. Could the project be extended to other areas – our services have been supporting communities in other disaster-impacted regions such as when the Manning Valley floods happened?

A. We see the current project as a pilot - we hope to expand to other areas in the future.

“One of the main aims of the project is to map the groups and organisations on the ground and link this place-based work to formal disaster management work”

Eleanor Harris
NCOSS

“It is the local unfunded volunteer groups who are the first responders - the RSL, the Bowling, & Golf clubs and community halls who provided food and refuge. Lions, Rotary, Blaze Aid, Vinnies, Salvos, Samaritans, Indian and Muslim communities, and others who worked tirelessly to help those impacted.... not to forget the local residents who gave so much of their time and resources.”

Participant



Presentation 3:

Place Based Funding for Local Solutions

April Merrick, Grants Program Manager (NSW) from the Foundation for Rural and Regional Renewal (FRRR) outlined FRRR's funding programs and shared insights on the advocacy and projects they have supported that enable place-based approaches.

Key Points

How FRRR Works

- FRRR is about more than just grant giving – it is about support through activities such as:
 - **Funding & Development:** Funding not-for-profit community organisations to implement local solutions to local problems.
 - **Leverage & Broker:** partnering with non-DGR NFPs to fundraise, receiving funds on their behalf for an agreed purpose.
 - **Insights & Learning:** Sharing our insights and making connections to advocate for remote and rural communities.
- FRRR Focus Areas
 - **People:** investing in capability and capacity. Strengthening local not-for-profits, community groups, and volunteer-led efforts, and enhancing opportunities for leadership, networks, and skill development.
 - **Place:** valuing locational context and relative competitive advantage/disadvantage. Celebrating vibrant cultures, encouraging self-generation, and improving access to sustainable social and physical infrastructure.
 - **Disaster Resilience and Climate Solutions:** Investing in the intersection of people, place & climate risk through a long-term and continuous lens. Partnering with communities before, during and after disasters, and investing in solutions for increased climate resilience.
- FRRS Funding Model links the need and opportunity in a place focused way that also:
 - generates an impact on the social, economic or physical infrastructure of a place.
 - acknowledges the uniqueness of different places and communities and delivers outcomes that are meaningful for donors.
- FRRR works across the spectrum of place-based funding approaches:
 - Individual projects in a place.
 - Tackling place-focused issues.
 - Whole-scale systems change programs.
- We target support for community led initiatives addressing social, physical, built and environment wellbeing and that facilitate and promote connection to place as well as:
 - Increase equitable access to philanthropic support.
 - Support more equitable access to services in RRR.





FRR Grant Programs

People

- Investing in Rural Community Futures
- Heywire Youth Innovation
- Trailblazer Development Fund

Place

- Strengthening Rural Communities
 - Small & Vital
 - Prepare & Recover
 - Rebuilding Regional Communities
- Gardiner Dairy Foundation – Working in Dairy Communities
- In a Good Place
- Back to School
- ANZ Seeds of Renewal
- Nutrien Ag Solutions Community Grants

Disaster Resilience

- Helping Regional Communities Prepare for Drought Initiative
- Back to School – Bushfire Recovery
- Yulgilbar Foundation Fund
- Investing in Not-for-Profit Capacity in Regional NSW
- Grants for Resilience & Wellness
- Disaster Resilient: Future Ready
- Volunteer Emergency Services
- Suncorp Rebuilding Futures

Key Points

Grants in Action

Place Grants in Action

TenterLIFE Suicide Prevention Network Inc Suicide Prevention

- ❖ Boost community knowledge of suicide, its impact with a focus on prevention through a series of community awareness events and Mental Health First Aid training.

Outcomes:

- ➊ Improved social connections and suicide awareness.
- ➋ “Walk ‘n’ Talk for Life is a huge success with new community members joining in each time, the benefits to the participants can be seen on their faces and in their attitude”



Volunteers in their Walk n' Talk for life T-Shirts



Volunteers & Community at mental health awareness event

9

Place Grants in Action

Contact Incorporated Making the Wanaaring Community Hub Happen

- ❖ Revitalise the very remote community of Wanaaring by supporting the development of a new community hub to provide essential services.

Outcomes:

- ➊ Under utilised building complex is now a Community hub with space to host visiting service providers
- ➋ Build connections and a sense of optimism.
- ➌ Support local services and create new services



Located 190km from Bourke



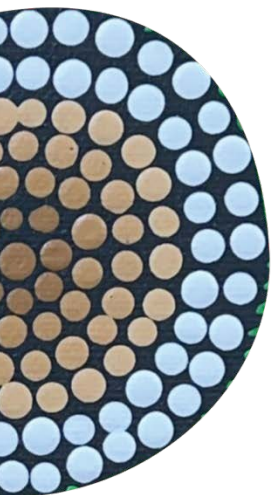
Community consultation

7

Key Points

Community Led and Flexible

- Even though there are different grants programs, they all have a place-based lens. Our philosophy is to fund grass roots activities - we prioritise community led programs and will not fund applications from larger organisations that have parachuted into a locality – they must be able to prove that the project came from and is led by the community in a genuine partnership.
- We have some programs that are able to fund anything – they are totally flexible and can be spent on people, programs or infrastructure. We also make sure that grant programs have a suitable time frame – for example grants for projects in Victoria for Black Saturday recovery are just winding down now – 13 years after the fires.
- Because we are nation-wide, we are able to get some powerful data about community need and identify emerging themes in grant applications – for example many communities are switching from recovery projects to disaster preparedness especially around technology and communications or infrastructure like flood barriers.
- More information about the [Foundation for Rural and Regional Renewal](#) can be found on their website.





Discussion and Questions

Q. Who are the donors and what are they mostly interested in supporting?

A. We have thousands of donors from individuals to corporates to bequests. We are also working with Federal State and Territory governments. They obviously have things they want to get done policy wise. We see big responses for disasters and then people get disaster “fatigue” and it drops off just when communities are needing long term support. Donors often want to fund positive things or something that is shiny and innovative. That’s quite hard when a lot of communities just need basic stuff. So, we spend a lot of time talking to donors about what communities want. We have a donor team to educate them about what is needed in rural, remote and regional communities.



Discussion 1:

Funding for Place-Based Solutions

Services regularly talk to NCOSS about funding challenges, with their stories captured in multiple reports put before government over many years. The NSW Government has the capacity to start addressing the deep inequities in NSW. Communities are intently focused on solutions to poverty and inequality through the lens of the cost of living and housing crises. Allocating adequate, well-targeted, and streamlined funding to provide high quality place-based services and infrastructure to communities experiencing poverty and disadvantage is critical. The resources are available - they just need to be re-directed. The political support from the people of NSW is there³ – it just needs to be highlighted and appealed to.

Much of the discussion about funding centred around the deep reform needed in the way funding is allocated and accounted for. Services highlighted how more importance needs to be put on building relationships and trust by funding agencies. Recently at the National Housing Conference Steve Lucas, The Chief of Staff of Public and Indian Housing in the US Department of Housing and Urban Development quoted author Steven Covey “Change happens at the speed of trust”. He was talking about how Native American communities are funded in the United States – communities are empowered to make their own decisions about how funding is spent and how they report back to government – there are no line-by- line accountabilities imposed on funding recipients.

³ For example, the recent [Housing Monitor Survey](#) showed high support for investment in social housing.

We asked

What challenges do your services have with funding? And what are the impacts of those challenges on people experiencing poverty and disadvantage; and on your services and staff?

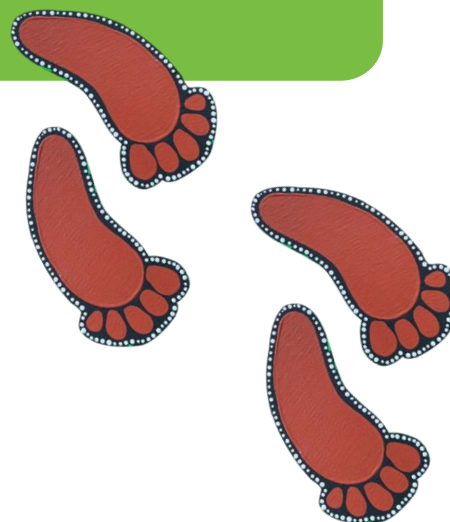
What people told us⁴

Restrictive Guidelines

- Funding programs are not always addressing actual needs in the community. Smaller place-based services located in communities can work in trauma-informed ways that build trust and community knowledge. However, services are increasingly being concentrated in larger population centres, losing touch with the communities they are meant to be working with and providing services for.
- The scope of funding agreements often doesn't include vulnerable people such as aged and disability – 'no closed door' approaches mean services are working way beyond their capacity and resources to meet the needs of communities.
- Lack of flexibility in funding and guidelines doesn't reflect the reality of working in communities – services are unable to adapt, innovate or take advantage of opportunities for partnerships. Funding bodies and donors have too much say over how money is spent.
- Core funding guidelines limit support for broader community initiatives.

“We identified a need for programs for ex-offenders – to help them and their families. But as a child and family service this didn't fit in with our guidelines and we couldn't implement it”

Participant



⁴ Discussions outlined in this section and the following, capture key points recorded on the day from post it notes and meeting scribes. They have been summarised and paraphrased in the active voice for readability. Direct quotes are included in quotation marks.

Administrative Burden and Reporting

- Services have multiple funding contracts just to cover core business.
- Processes including grant writing, administration of funding, data gathering and reporting are too onerous – they are diverting time away from core business and delivery of services to people and communities.
- Funding does not cover the costs of these administrative burdens and reporting systems mostly do not measure what services actually do.
- People and families access many services to get the help they need – reporting doesn't reflect the complex ways people achieve good outcomes (over long timeframes) for themselves and their families.
- The burden of reporting is significant. We know of at least one service who has a dedicated staff member to address reporting requirements through DEX. This position used to be a service delivery position...

Flexibility and administrative burdens

There is no leniency or flexibility in the administration of funding – no recognition that sometimes real life gets in the way of reporting. Over a period of 9 months there were up to 25 people across the Aboriginal community in the Macleay Valley who passed away. We were still expected to report against all our contracts according to their timeline and meet the KPIs - even though they knew what was happening and that everyone in the community was affected – service users and staff alike.

Bureaucrats need to build relationships in local communities and advocate for their communities and the services that work with them when times are difficult. At no stage did we receive any written communiques from our Contract Managers to see how staff were coping or if there was anything they could do to support us during that period. Placed based cultural competency and flexibility needs to be built into funding guidelines.

ACCO, Kempsey

Adequacy of funding

- Contracts don't reflect the reality of wages and oncosts needed to meet community demand – also insurance, indexation, CPI increases, staffing, transport and fuel (a huge cost in rural and regional areas), and cyber security.
- Aboriginal ways of doing things – sitting with people in their pain, listening, yarning and spending time with people is not acknowledged and funded. Likewise, Neighbourhood Centres are not recognised for much of the work they do and do not receive core funding. They are often the first place people turn to.
- Services are stretched way beyond what they can offer or what is within their scope. They are scrambling to provide high quality services - *“We have had to put our clients on a wait list for some services. Or cut services completely.” Participant*

- Limitations in delivery and duration of support leads to clients getting frustrated with staff and staff burn out. It is demoralising for staff when they are unable to meet their communities' needs.⁵ Pressures of trying to make the budget work also impacts staff retention from the bottom of the pay scale to the top.
- There is not enough/any brokerage funding to support clients who are really doing it tough.
- Not enough funding for role-specific training. Not enough cultural safety training and little capacity to provide culturally safe services across the sector. Aboriginal people often don't get the type of support they need.
- It creates an unsafe work environment when staff go above and beyond to cover gaps on the go – it leads to burn out and basically equates to wage theft.
- Co-ordination of funding across an area or region can be problematic – from feast to famine.

Short term nature of funding programs

- We have no ability to succession plan for key/essential programs. Many small, short-term projects in a community result in less positive impact for communities and uncertainty and instability for the local workforce.
- Short-term funding impacts on staff development and retention, staff can't build skills or even stay in their own communities. Often the projects/programs require specific skills sets - so we need to engage staff from outside the area but we can't attract them as timeframes are too short for people to uproot their whole lives for.
- Staff are always changing – there is no consistency of contact for clients, or consistency of services offered. People and families start to get engaged, start to get to know the staff and then a program ends. Trauma-informed and strengths-based work is based on relationship building - programmatic funding doesn't recognise this.
- *“Kempsey is called Kempsey Airport by local services – because there are so many pilots here”*
Participant
- Lip service is continually paid to “co-design” but we (the sector and lived experience advocates) are not included properly in the design of programs so quite often funding criteria for programs are inappropriate.
- Media announcements set up unrealistic expectations of what can be delivered – funding bodies make broad announcements about funding, but they don't think about the impacts of those announcements on demand – suddenly everyone thinks a service has money but it's always time limited and for very specific things. This plays out in significant ways in smaller communities and can impact relationships.

“The sector knows strengths-based approaches work best but community development has become a dirty word for funding bodies – it's all about efficiencies and churning out spurious individual “outcomes” instead of working in step with communities.” Participant

⁵ This has more impact in regional and rural areas where staff come from and live in the communities they work with.

Disaster Funding

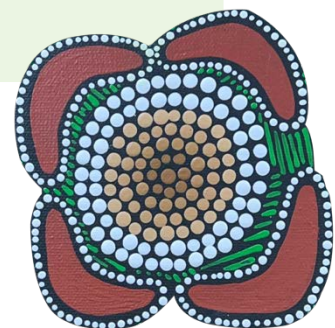
- There is no funding for disaster responses – people turn to services for immediate emergency relief but they can't provide it as it's not part of their core business.
- ACCOs had to do their own COVID response. They were not invited to sit on co-ordinating bodies but they supplied essential hygiene items, food, fresh meat and other essentials. They also had to provide normal services as well as respond to the crisis. Many unpaid hours were done during this time.

Disaster Responses

The Nulla community reached out to Kinchela Boys Home Aboriginal Corporation (KBHAC) in the recent fires – KBHAC responded by supplying food and gas burners as the community had no electricity and had lost all their refrigerated food. We had no funding to do this.

We are not a member of the local emergency management meeting but we are the ones that pull it all together in a disaster and make it work, without any funding.

ACCO, Kempsey



We asked

How do you currently get around the funding challenges?

What people told us

Cost cutting

- We are continually looking for ways to cut back on costs, for example we rely heavily on volunteers.

Building Relationships

- Building relationships is key to organisational survival, within the team to ensure that workers are well supported in a high demand environment, and externally with other organisations to complement our work and share practices with. Vital for collaboration.
- Relationships with communities is vital for both sides – to understand what we do and improve access but also so we can source scarce resources, philanthropy and volunteers. Also helps to build the picture of what people are struggling with as well as community strengths that everyone can draw on.

Philanthropy and Revenue

- Services put a lot of work into building their profiles in communities and putting out good news stories - as well as fundraising and building relationships with potential donors. Other tactics were outsourcing to other organisations and seeking in-kind contributions “we get freebies from anywhere and everywhere”.
- Partnerships with other organisations to collaborate on grant applications but partnerships take time and additional money – this is often not recognised by funding bodies.
- Hiring out rooms (but the community has problems with this – they don’t understand how little funding we operate on).

Reliance on volunteers and staff working for free

- Services rely a lot on volunteers. But volunteers can’t do everything so overtime and staff volunteer hours are often relied on – this is basically staff working for free. In other industries this would be called wage theft, but it is relied on heavily in our sector. Staff volunteer their time regularly. Funding bodies seem to turn a blind eye to this...even though it is well known throughout the sector.
- Some services manage burn-out by only having part time positions.
- We are investigating a peer workforce in lieu of reliance on volunteers.

Innovation and skill

- Our staff are multi-talented and skilled – they have to think outside the square. We push the boundaries, get creative and bend the rules – catering for all disadvantaged groups regardless of guidelines.
- We are doing our own research – pairing with research organisations to get the data we need to target and build services.

Advocacy

- We are involved in ongoing advocacy to put the issues in front of politicians and government department. We lobby our peaks bodies including NCOSS and LCSA to speak up on our behalf.



We asked

In terms of funding and administration what do you think services really need to keep up with demand, and offer high quality services that make a real difference to people's lives?

What people told us

- We need core funding that adequately resources effective administration and management, including the burden of reporting, indexation and funding for core community development work that recognises that positive outcomes are built over time - through ongoing engagement.
- As a sector we need to report on all extra work to demonstrate the need to funding bodies.
- Community development work is really important – we need to listen and respond to what communities are telling us. Its really important we highlight community voices in our advocacy work and work to create community designed programs.
- Focus needs to be on the equitable funding of services – too often equality is prioritised with no recognition of place-based needs. For example, in Taree we have high rates of disadvantage and poverty, an active and strong First Nations community, and a river that is flooding more and more often.
- We need better community infrastructure – community and meeting rooms; and funding for networking.
- We need an end to short-term funding programs. Services need flexible funding so they can test and trial programs and use the ones that work on an ongoing basis - as well as developing a skilled workforce that is drawn from our local communities. Also need improved funding for training and development. And more flexibility in what we spend funding on overall.
- The nature of competitive tendering and grants means we can't collaborate as much as we would like – funding bodies want us to collaborate at the same time as making us compete with each other. Surely if they (DCJ and other funding bodies) built better relationships in their communities they would know who could do what well and which services could collaborate... and fund new programs appropriately without us having to constantly jump through hoops?
- Would be great if our sector could be recognised as essential social infrastructure. We also need more recognition for our ability to innovate and think outside the square.



Discussion 2:

Local Services

There is a large body of evidence about the efficacy of place-based approaches that are built from the ground up in collaboration with communities, about person centred service delivery and co-design. From sector research we know that cohesive communities have less crime, better mental and physical health, are more resilient and are more able to cope with disasters when they come. But services on the ground in their communities report that more and more services are being withdrawn at the local level and centralised in larger population centres.

When a neighbourhood centre closes down, opportunities for support and connection close down with them. When a legal centre moves away to a big town more and more people get entangled in the “justice” system.

Access to local services is a big concern for people working closely with communities experiencing poverty and disadvantage.

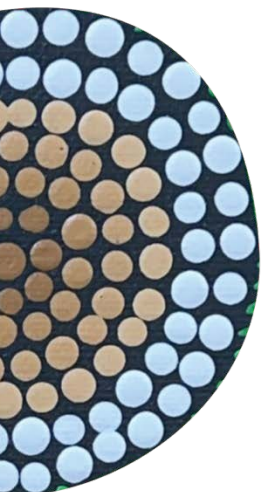
We asked

What are the challenges in connecting people to the services they need?

What people told us

Trusted services with workers people know and trust

- Engaging people in effective programs can be difficult – you need to be able to build a local profile and demonstrate non-judgemental approaches. Trust and confidentiality is key for wary clients. There is a lot of stigma and shame out there. Clients need to be reassured they will be safe and not be judged – it takes time to build trust and relationships but that is not funded – KPIs measure “occasions of service” not time spent with clients.
- Staff are always chopping and changing with the delivery of so many short-term programs – pilot programs are shut down or offered sporadically so communities get distrustful – when they hear about a new program their instinct is to dismiss it as just another fly by night service and don’t engage.
- Non-Indigenous services are not always culturally safe, or they have one or two Aboriginal workers who shoulder a huge load for those services.
- Sometimes there are no safe spaces to talk about sensitive personal issues. People in trauma often can’t keep appointments or stick to a plan. They may be having to access multiple services and outreach may not be available on the days they need it.
- There are digital barriers for people without access to technology or digital literacy skills. Many services are now only able to be accessed online – for example Centrelink and housing applications.
- People also want to avoid having to tell their story over and over again. This can be a real problem when there is so much reporting to be done.



Local knowledge and communication

- Services need to have high visibility – a lot of access is through word-of-mouth, but this can also create confusion about where to go if the right messaging hasn't got through to local communities.
- Worker knowledge of services to refer to is critical – it depends on a number of factors but a lot is just experience and longevity in the sector – it's not just about knowing what's out there but about being able to have trust in another service that they have the skills and training to support your clients (e.g. cultural safety) – we need to be able to hold each other accountable.
- Hard to build this knowledge and trust with so many short-term programs and high staff turnover – interagencies are vital – but connections and networks take time attention and resources – we need to be funded to do this.
- Community directories are usually out of date or not rolled out adequately with proper promotion and access.
- Data collected by government agencies is too slow to inform immediate need - the census data is too slow and is inaccurate for First Nations communities - who often don't engage due to fears of what happens with their data or how it is used against them in mandatory reporting.

Families falling through the gaps

A father and daughter were living in the state forest in their caravan. They were displaced due to disasters – fires and floods. Parks and wildlife decided they needed to “remove” families from the forest. They were referred to us by a priest. The story got news coverage, so we were able to get donations for them...

The father had literacy challenges and there were custody issues. Due to this the father was not receiving benefits. Aboriginal Legal Aid became involved to organise legal custody, so the father was able to receive benefits for his daughter. We organised residency at a caravan park and paid the rent for him – we were also able to organise bond support and housing with a local real estate agent so they were able to be housed in the same area so the daughter could continue at the same school.

Child and Family Service, Mid North Coast

Thin markets compounded by inadequate transport networks

- Often services just don't exist, or they have huge waiting lists. For example, there is almost nothing for young people needing mental health services. Headspace won't go near complex cases and unless you are in an acute mental health crisis there are no supports for you.
- Clients are isolated in rural and satellite towns with NO access to services – there is 1 bus daily and the cost deters people – there is NO public transport.
- Government agencies or larger services might deliver outreach in an area but crises don't always happen on the right day of the week and if you miss it that's it until the next time they come. Also they are often not co-ordinated for a particular area and may clash with other services for very limited timeframes.
- Sometimes services or programs are available but their criteria are just too limited.
- Temporary accommodation limits are too short – 30 days is not enough time to find or access affordable housing. Rentals have increased by 7% in Taree over the last 12 months and we have huge wait times for social housing (5 – 10 years for all property types).
- We lost some services when Councils were amalgamated and some clients fell through the gaps.

Building the local workforce with skills that people can rely on

- It's really hard to get workers in communities with the highest need. *"There is a joke in Kempsey – Q. Whats the best thing about Kempsey? A. The road out."* Participant
- Lack of housing in some areas makes it really hard to attract staff with the right skills.
- We need better basic customer service skills – it makes a real difference to people who walk in off the street. But it can be hard to find properly trained staff.
- Child protection in this area is a real problem (area not stated) – it operates in a way that actively harms kids and families.⁶

Disability services out of reach for many

- Cost of accessing disability services can be prohibitive – for example, assessments can cost thousands of dollars. People need to build a body of evidence to access NDIS and get the support they need - it is out of reach for many – there is no affordable access to psychiatrists and there is also a very limited supply of allied health professionals such as Occupational Therapists in many areas.

⁶ We know from previous conversations with ACCOs especially that a punitive approach is taken with many Aboriginal families who are struggling with poverty or inadequate housing. Children are taken from their families because they are poor not because they are neglectful or abusive. 40% of Aboriginal children taken from their family of origin are the subject of one or NO substantiated risk of harm reports (ie solely on the assessment of the child protection case worker alone). From *Restoration from Out of Home Care for Aboriginal Children* BJ Newton et al January 2023 viewed 3 April 2024 at https://www.facs.nsw.gov.au/_data/assets/pdf_file/0009/852381/1-s2.0-S014521342300039X-main.pdf

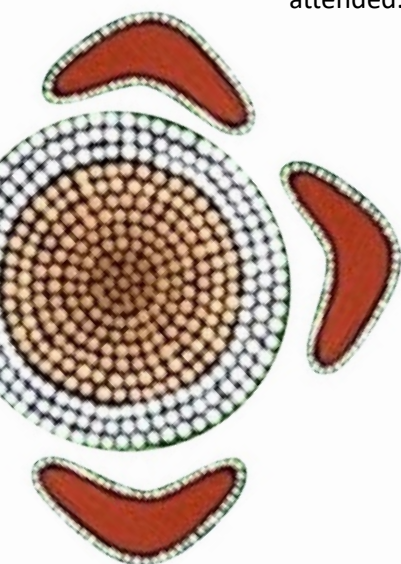
We asked

What are the strengths in local service provision? Where are the gaps?

What people told us

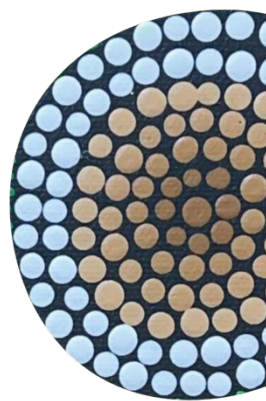
Communication, Connections and Collaboration

- We are proud of the work we do; we act fast to address needs; we minimise red tape and respond to need not criteria. We work hard to provide approachable personable services with a “no wrong door” approach.
- Relationships are built more easily in smaller communities – we know our communities – its locals supporting locals.
- We have committed and passionate staff who want to collaborate across the sector. Our workers are diverse, and our services are resilient – we use limited resources creatively and build trust and rapport with communities.
- Delivering and attending local community events is really important for building these relationships. It’s all tied in with the work we do, community cohesion and overall resilience of local places – especially during disasters.
- As a sector we have really good widespread support from local communities who provide donations and volunteers. Volunteers are a true community strength – they are genuinely invested local people who love to connect with and support others.
- Community directories from Mid Coast Council. Council connects with existing networks to connect people in, for example the Youth network, the Aboriginal community development network. We also rely a lot on our Indigenous liaison officers.
- We all know the system and work hard to make sure that our workers understand where to refer people to with “warm referrals”.
- As a sector we work together with services and communities to reach common goals, sharing information and resources through networking and program planning meetings, collaborating in local towns on place-based issues, and we have some great interagencies – for example the Domestic Violence network. Any opportunity for networking is regularly attended.



What is missing in local service delivery?

- There are limited services for men especially men with children. Or men over 25. Also for young people between 12 to 15 years of age.
- Allied health services – there is an 8 month waiting list in Kempsey for critical services such as speech pathology, occupational therapists etc. Even with an NDIS plan there are huge timeframes to access services.
- Services for people journeying through the justice system are very, very limited – especially for young people – we need mental health, addiction and literacy programs, as well as personal advocates.
- Most areas have limited or NO mental health services.
- A lot of programs are quite reactionary – they focus on recovery not prevention or preparation. Not just in the emergency space either but across the board.
- Skillset shortages have a huge impact on service delivery. We need better pay and conditions and funding for training and development so we can build the skills that we need and attract the workers we want. More housing for key workers would help as well as counting social sector workers as key workers!
- Specialist roles need to be offered long term to attract people to regional areas. Trying to find specialist staff for short term or pilot programs is a nightmare.
- We struggle to attract workers from a CALD background and retention rates are not great.
- Some services have been centralised to larger population centres but there is no reliable public transport and no community transport - the harder things are for people the less likely they are to engage. Some services are not accessible to people with disability.
- Larger services and funding bodies seem to think that as long as they offer outreach in smaller/isolated towns the problem is solved – but there are problems with accessing outreach when it is not co-ordinated and is very very limited.
- Connectivity can be a problem – we need better access to good networks and technology.
- Support and advocacy from local political members would be great – smaller services struggle to get visibility with them.



We asked

What is needed to address those challenges and gaps? And how can you build on the strengths?

What people told us

Addressing challenges and gaps

- More funding! We need realistic funding that covers all the costs of running an organisation including disaster preparedness, innovation, administration, staff and volunteer development, management and reporting. As well as building capacity to meet and respond to community needs. Funding that is indexed on a regular basis not just for wages but for CPI as well.
- More coordination and communication between federal, local and state governments and between and within agencies. Collaboration and sharing of resources are vital so that all cohorts are serviced adequately. Local service provision needs to be focused on the needs of communities and aligned with local, regional and national strategies.
- Government agencies should be directly accountable to communities and build relationships with service providers and communities so they know what is going on and can identify best practice. Agencies could benefit from “shadowing” NGOs so they really understand what it’s like on the ground.
- There is a significant problem with mental health services – people fall through the gaps between age-based programs, short term provision of psychology services through the health system, and psychiatric services provided through community health teams – we need properly funded ongoing mental health services including AOD and rehabilitation. And we need to shift the stigma away from people accessing those services. Need to build community awareness around a better understanding of addiction as self-medication in response to trauma (intergenerational, climate change induced, DFV, childhood sexual abuse) – and need to offer timely support to head off that nexus. We also need mental health first aid training for police and other first responders.
- Without social and affordable housing many of our programs are useless as people struggle to put a roof over the heads of themselves and their families. Investment in housing provides stability and security for people and families needing to access a broad range of services.
- We need more funding and support for young people including after school programs, trained youth workers with trauma informed training, services for young people going through the “justice system” and better access for families in need of early intervention – to get problems before they escalate.
- We need immediate reforms to child protection systems to stop kids being taken from their families. This means culturally appropriate support for families and family preservation services that are adequately funded and accessible to all – not just to those that live in larger towns.
- Need reliable timely public transport network or community transport networks.

- We should be providing support and funding for Lived Experience Advocates and for peer workers in services.
- We need to find a way to incentivise specialists to move to regional areas (both in the health sector and more generally).
- Work Development Order providers can provide an escape route for people, but we need to diversify the current activities on offer.

Building on strengths

- We need to change the way funding is done - longer term contracts that provide for greater service flexibility and staff recruitment and retention. Governments should build on the sectors commitment to collaboration by developing non-competitive funding models based on long term investment not short-term grants. Need to collect real data on outcomes over time – real evaluations done in a culturally sensitive way – coupled with commitment to long term funding for successful programs.
- People can be connected in really well through generalist services such as Neighbourhood Centres and ACCO's. Those services need to be recognised and funded for all of the work that they do. Community development roles are a priority, and all services should receive funding for community engagement. The role of volunteers in services needs to be more broadly recognised and supported with funding, training and development.
- We need to build links with communities through participation in school and community events – turning up is an important part of our work that's not recognised.
- Also, better health funding for Primary Health Networks to facilitate co-ordination and collaboration across health and social services.
- More support for place-based networks and collaboration all round.

Participants at the Taree meeting





Discussion 3:

Networks and Sector Support

Networking and interagencies are a key way of sharing information and ensuring that communities are able to access the services they need. An up to date and well-informed social service sector is crucial to providing high quality services for people experiencing poverty and disadvantage. Services in smaller towns or with smaller cohorts can struggle to connect as the critical mass to resource interagencies and other networks is just not there. Government commitment to resourcing networks, interagencies, and regional peaks is patchy; and some practices have led to conflicts of interest with services being represented by services they are competing against for scare funding and other resources.

It is clear that more work needs to be done to map existing networks and to establish opportunities for services to connect on a regular basis – both in regard to the types of services they provide and in relation to place based collaboration. Small local networks need to be supported as much as larger service type interagencies.

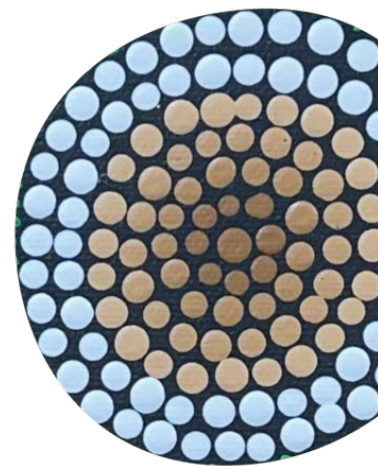
We asked

What local networks and interagencies exist – formal and informal? What role do they play locally?

What people told us

- Client focused regular meetings are really important to ensure that people with complex needs can access all parts of the service system. We rely a lot on:
 - Safety Action Meetings (Police)
 - Youth Action Meetings (Police)
 - Weekly Allocation Meetings (DCJ)
 - Interagency Case Discussions (DCJ)
 - Homelessness Case Discussions
 - Mental Health Case Review (Headspace)
 - Local Coordinated Multiagency (Police, DCJ, Health)
- Interagencies focused on particular service types or cohorts are important to share information and keep ourselves up to date with reforms in the sector, innovation and research, and to build relationships for future collaboration:
 - Homelessness Interagency
 - Aboriginal Interagency (Coffs Harbour, Kempsey, Port Macquarie)
 - Legal Services Interagency
 - Mid North Coast Community Housing Provider network – established through an MoU to enable collaboration and partnerships
 - Interagencies supported by Mid Coast Council and/or Port Macquarie Hastings Council include:
 - Youth strategic interagency
 - General interagency
 - Child & Family Interagency
 - Community Resilience Network
 - Health and Ageing
 - Mental Health and Housing
 - Domestic Violence
- Place based informal networks perform the same functions as interagencies but are often not supported with funding and other resources. Some examples include:
 - Forster – services including Forster Neighbourhood Centre, Homebase Youth Services, Tobwabba AMS, Great Lakes Manning Homeless Support Service, Womens Shelter, Home-start Family Services.
 - Taree - Aboriginal services including Manning Valley Indigenous Community Support Services, Care Shelf (NDIS), Biripi ACMC, TIDE Employment Services.

- Partnerships for collective impact:
 - Learning the McLeay – implemented by Kinchela Boys Home this Stronger people Stronger Places network will “have a clear focus on data analysis that will help determine “justice circuit breakers” and establish relationships with the local and regional NSW Police commands”⁷.
- Important community events are often run in partnership or through collaborations founded in interagencies for example:
 - You’re ok in the Macleay LGBTIQ+ family event
 - Laneway Youth Festival Kempsey
- Other networks or peak bodies that we partner with to work in communities and to support and advocate for us include:
 - Community Drug and Alcohol Teams
 - Collaboration for Impact
 - NCOSS
 - Local Community Services Association
 - Primary Health Network
- Services participate in and provide feedback in a number of reference groups:
 - Community Inclusion and Wellbeing Committees
 - Place based program planning meetings
 - Regional and Local Aboriginal Education Consultative Groups
 - Suicide Prevention Groups
 - Police and Community Consultation Committee
 - Land Council Meetings
 - Planning meetings for local events such as NAIDOC Week.



⁷ <https://www.justreinvest.org.au/community/kempsey/>

Who supports them? Who should and could support them? What else is needed so that local services can better connect, network, and share information, resources, and knowledge?

- Various groups are supported across the sector and by government – state, federal and local. Local government has a big role to play in co-ordinating and supporting interagencies – they are not competing in the same space as social services so are unlikely to have the same conflicts of interest as when larger sector organisations are tasked as unofficial regional “peak” bodies.
- Where local organisations set up their own networks they are mostly run on top of existing workloads and with little or no resourcing - “support is patchy”. All organisations should receive adequate funding to enable them to both participate in and resource local networks.
- We need support and funding for place-based community development roles. Funding for services should acknowledge their key role in community resilience and building local networks. Restricting funding stops organisations from participating and keeps them in silos – it creates inefficiencies such as inappropriate referrals.
- Networks need a clear scope and terms of reference to ensure that they are effective and achieve what they were set up for.
- Greater transparency across government agencies, services and communities would be great. We need a service “tree” or map – something that we can access for making appropriate referrals. Needs to outline the scope of practice and information such as waitlist restrictions.
- We need more resourcing to build mental health networks and to support advocacy for building a strong regional mental health sector.
- My Community Directory needs to be supported and funded to keep it relevant and up to date – it’s potentially a great resource.



Thank you!

NCOSS would like to thank local hosts Zac Carter and Corinne Stephenson for their critical role in bringing the meeting and this report together. We would also like to thank Pastor Russell Saunders OAM for his Welcome to Country and his permission to use his artwork in this document - as well as the Deepwater Shark Gallery in facilitating this use. And of course, to all the participants on the day for their rich information and deep insights about how the system operates on the Mid North Coast and vital reforms needed to address poverty and disadvantage in their communities.

For more information

For more information about this report please contact:

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