

ACT MULTI HAZARD ADVISORY COUNCIL

February 2023

Community resilience to natural hazard disasters in the ACT

Introduction

In 2021, both the ACT Minister for Police and Emergency Services and the ACT Commissioner for Emergency Services requested that the newly created ACT Multi Hazard Advisory Council (the Council) provide advice on community resilience / community preparedness to natural disasters as one of its initial areas for focus. The Council considered these requests in its formulation of six strategic priorities for its work over its term of appointment and determined that in 2022 it would work on developing advice on Community Resilience.

The frequency and severity of natural disasters in the ACT is likely to rise significantly over the coming years given the changing climate. Increasingly frequent and severe natural disasters will have a very serious impact on our communities, on individuals and organisations, and is also likely to affect the areas in which we live, play and work. Accordingly, the ability of communities - and their governments - to reduce the risk and mitigate the impact of these disasters needs to be significantly enhanced.

A step-change in community disaster resilience is required in the ACT because all ACT citizens will be affected in some way by future natural disasters:

- bushfire
- flooding
- extreme heat
- storms

Accordingly, the Council has explored the existing ACT Government legislation, strategies and plans to understand what mechanisms currently exist, with a view to identifying issues and potential actions to enhance community disaster resilience. In doing so, the Council has sought advice from the following ACT government agencies:

- Emergency Services Agency
- Community Services Directorate
- Education Directorate
- Environment, Planning and Sustainable Development Directorate
- Health Directorate
- Justice and Community Safety Directorate
- Transport Canberra and City Services

In addition to the expertise within its membership, the Council has also consulted with other experts, community sector representatives and NGOs with expertise:

- Dr James O'Donnell, ANU School of Demography
- Professor Jacki Schirmer, University of Canberra
- Mr Bill Gemmell, Chair Weston Creek Community Council
- Ms Diana Berardi and Ms Jessi Claudianos, Australian Red Cross

The Council has also considered relevant existing international and national frameworks and strategies, and recommendations from recent inquiries into Australian natural disaster arrangements, to provide context and guidance in developing its own recommendations to the ACT Government for improved community disaster resilience.

Australian policy development for natural disaster resilience

In December 2009, the Council of Australian Governments (COAG) agreed to adopt a whole-of-nation resilience-based approach to disaster management and tasked a working group to develop a National Strategy for Disaster Resilience (National Strategy for DR) which was released in February 2011. In preparing this strategy, COAG acknowledged the increasing severity and regularity of disasters in Australia and the need for a coordinated, cooperative national effort to enhance Australia's capacity to withstand and recover from emergencies and disasters.

At the same time, work was also occurring in the international sphere to better guide disaster resilience. The UN Sendai Framework for Disaster Risk Reduction 2015-2030 was adopted in March 2015, and identified 7 targets to reach by 2030, 4 priorities, and several guiding principles. The 4 Priorities are:

- Understanding disaster risk.
- Strengthening disaster risk governance to manage disaster risk.
- Investing in disaster risk reduction for resilience.
- Enhancing disaster preparedness for effective response and to "Build Back Better" in recovery, rehabilitation and reconstruction.

Back in Australia, in 2019 the National Disaster Risk Reduction Framework (National DRR Framework) was released, building on the National Strategy for DR and the UN Sendai Framework. The National DRR Framework identifies a set of guiding principles and four Priorities that mirror those of the UN Sendai Framework:

- Understand disaster risk
- Accountable decisions
- Enhanced investments
- Governance, ownership and responsibility

The National DRR Framework outlines 5-year outcomes and very broad, high-level strategies to address each of the four priorities.

The notion of community disaster resilience is threaded through these national and international frameworks. Whilst natural disasters are not a new occurrence, the idea of collective, or community, disaster resilience is relatively new as a government policy concern. Accordingly, governments and organisations are still developing their understanding of it and finding ways to best to support it.

The need to focus on building community resilience has been a theme in the aftermath of recent large scale natural disasters in Australia. For example, the Royal Commission into National Natural Disaster Arrangements (the Royal Commission) following the 2019-20 bushfire season recommended that state and territory governments deliver education and

engagement programs to promote individual and community resilience (Recommendation 10.1).

Augmenting the capacity of communities to better prepare for, respond to, and recover from floods was also a feature of the 2022 report to the NSW Government by the NSW Legislative Council Select Committee on the Response to Major Flooding Across New South Wales (hereafter “The Select Committee flood inquiry”). Community disaster resilience featured in several of its recommendations, including:

- The NSW State Emergency Service (SES) realigning the focus of the organisation to harness local knowledge and networks (Recommendation 1).
- The NSW SES, in partnership with the Bureau of Meteorology, investigate ways in which local communities and local media with local knowledge can play a stronger role in flood predictions and warnings (Recommendation 6).
- The NSW Government reviews its public awareness and communication strategies in relation to natural disasters (Recommendation 9).
- The NSW Government ensures that community groups, both existing and emerging, including First Nations groups, are well integrated into disaster recovery, by incorporating them into state recovery plans and engaging with them in between and in the lead up to natural disasters (Recommendation 17).
- The NSW Government, in partnership with community groups, including First Nations groups, develops initiatives to build community resilience, particularly in regions at high risk of future natural disaster events (Recommendation 18).
- The NSW Government works with First Nations peoples to support Aboriginal organisations in their capacity to operate and respond in times of natural disasters (Recommendation 28).

What is community disaster resilience and what is needed to enhance it?

What is a disaster resilient community?

The 2011 National Strategy for DR indicates that some key characteristics of a disaster resilient community include:

- people understand the risks that may affect them and others in their community and they have comprehensive local information about hazards and risks, including who is exposed and who is most vulnerable.
- people have taken steps to anticipate disasters and to protect themselves their assets and their livelihoods, including their homes and possessions, cultural heritage and economic capital, therefore minimising potential physical, economic and social losses.
- people work together with local leaders using their knowledge and resources to prepare for and deal with disasters.
- people work in partnership with emergency services, their local authorities and other relevant organisations before, during and after emergencies to ensure that community resilience activities are informed by local knowledge, can be undertaken safely, and complement the work of emergency service agencies.
- emergency management plans are resilience-based, to build disaster resilience within communities over time.

Community disaster resilience is defined in the United Nations Sendai Framework for Disaster Risk Reduction 2015-2030 as

“The ability of a system, community or society exposed to hazards to resist, absorb, accommodate, adapt to, transform and recover from the effects of a hazard in a timely and efficient manner, including through the preservation and restoration of its essential basic structures and functions through risk management.”

Community disaster resilience is enhanced by many social, economic and environmental factors including social cohesion, understanding of risk, access to resources, planning and preparedness. Some of these can be readily addressed by specific initiatives, whilst others are broad in scale and diffuse, require a variety of policy settings and programs of activity.

Community disaster resilience needs to be a priority

Community disaster resilience is not included as an object in any ACT legislation, so far as the Council is aware, nor is it covered in the 2019 version of the Strategic Bushfire Management Plan although it has community as one of its six focus areas. Inclusion of community disaster resilience as an object in relevant ACT legislation such as the ACT Emergencies Act 2004 and the ACT Planning Act would help to drive the required step change. It would ensure community disaster resilience is considered in decision making and stimulate the development of objectives, decisions about trade-offs between objectives, development of measures, allocation of resources, and measurement of progress. It would also assist its inclusion in major natural disaster strategies, such as the Strategic Bushfire Management Plan.

Develop clearer objectives and measures for community disaster resilience

Notwithstanding the establishment of community disaster resilience as an object in ACT legislation, an agreed definition, or specified measures, for community disaster resilience in the ACT context could better support the identification and development and assessment of appropriate mechanisms to enhance it. From that, it would be possible to incorporate key characteristics of a disaster resilient community into relevant natural hazard strategies and plans. A further expansion from a definition to a set of agreed outcome measures is needed to support articulation and evaluation of potential strategies to increase community resilience.

A whole-of-government approach is needed

Community disaster resilience is the cumulative outcome of many aspects of communities, including their social, economic and physical attributes. These in turn are either the responsibility of, or affected by the operations of, many ACT Government agencies. Enhancing community disaster resilience therefore will require coordinated work across those agencies – not just the emergency response agencies. Whilst the ACT Emergency Services Agency has responsibility for many aspects of disaster preparedness and response, enhanced community disaster resilience requires consideration of appropriate measures (and avoidance of perverse measures) across all government directorates and agencies – such as planning, education, policing, community services, city services, transport, infrastructure and health. There is no overarching mechanism currently being used for community disaster resilience to guide the coordinated development of policies and plans that could enhance it.

Rethinking the locus of power and responsibility for disaster preparedness and response

There can be significantly different approaches taken to community disaster resilience, and one of the central drivers of difference in approach would appear to be where the locus of power resides, along with the extent to which the natural hazard can be controlled. This can be along a spectrum from government-centred “command and control” style approaches, to community-centred, distributed coordination models.

Government-centric approaches are common within Australia, US and Canada in application to wildfire preparedness and response, and aligns with a 'command and control' response style, and large, well-funded emergency response agencies. In contrast, disaster risk reduction work in many developing countries, and for other larger scale and less “combatable” natural disasters, is expanded from building capacity in single response agencies to building capacity within communities to prepare for, respond to and recover from disaster.

Some differences between extremes of the two approaches are suggested in the table below:

Aspect of approach to Disaster Risk Reduction	Government-centric	Community-centric
Approach to assessment of risk	Likelihood x Consequence	Hazard x Exposure x Vulnerability
Event Size	Smaller, discrete	Larger, diffuse, cascading effects
Area of focus within Emergency Management	Prevention, (Agency) Preparedness, Response, Recovery (PPRR)	Reduction, Readiness and Response, and Recovery
Prevalence of focus	Technical	Human
Direction of control	Top Down	Bottom Up
Organising philosophy	Centralised command & control	Distributed Coordination

Within the ACT, neither approach has been explicitly adopted given the lack of a framework for community disaster resilience, but the default approach has more commonly been Government-centric. These approaches (such as Rural Fire Service brigades and State Emergency Service units) have been effective at mobilising and using community efforts to respond to bushfires and other natural disasters (predominantly response, though this also entails limited work on community preparedness and prevention). Since the 2003 bushfires, the ACT ESA has also established 58 Community Fire Units, which are an example of a community-centric approach.

In the USA, the government-centric approach to the community in natural disasters has been critiqued in the Building Cultures of Preparedness report by US Federal Emergency Management Agency, which advocated a shift from

- Treating the community as a nuisance or liability, and treating everybody the same to
- Treating the community as a resource, and tailoring to diversity

With the increasing frequency, duration and severity of natural disasters forecast with a changing climate, we may be approaching the limits of government resources to prevent, prepare and respond effectively to those disasters – and need to foster a better capacity within the community for appropriate responsibility. It would seem obvious that community-led approaches to disaster resilience can leverage government resources to effectively expand the resources available and can more effectively guide the effort of the community in preparedness, risk reduction, response and recovery. This may be true for some aspects of community resilience to bushfires and storms, and for many aspects of other natural disasters.

Diverse communities have diverse strengths, vulnerabilities and needs

Enhancing community disaster resilience also requires understanding the diversity of communities and risks in the ACT. Each community may have different strengths and vulnerabilities that are important to take account of in planning and support.

Communities can exist through lenses of affiliations through place, time, demographic, culture, activity, employment, education and so on. The attributes of a particular community may relate to its strengths and vulnerabilities and it is therefore important to use precise language in describing any particular community. For example, there are several ways to define multicultural communities in the ACT:

- 1) People with limited English proficiency – This wording refers to members of the ACT communities who would benefit from language support services like translated information.
- 2) People born overseas – This wording is applicable for both ACT residents with limited English proficiency and those with high proficiency in English but are not familiar with disaster risks and emergency services in the ACT. This definition can include people who arrived in Australia from English speaking countries (e.g. UK, US, NZ and South Africa), but still may be vulnerable due to their lack of awareness in disaster risks in the ACT and Australia.
- 3) People with multicultural backgrounds – The difference between this wording and the ‘people with diverse language and cultural backgrounds’ is that the latter is very similar to ‘culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD) people’. The term ‘CALD’ is widely used to describe people born in countries other than those classified by the ABS as ‘main English-speaking countries’ including Australia, UK, US, NZ and South Africa. Thus, it can overlook people born in Australia and speak English as their first language, but have multicultural backgrounds.

These definitions of communities highlight the importance of correctly recognising how several communities may exist through lenses of different affiliations, despite their similarities. In building community disaster resilience, it is imperative to understand the composition of various communities in the ACT and how vulnerabilities may manifest for them during future natural disasters.

The Census data from the Australian Bureau of Statistics and other sociodemographic data can be used to develop a better understanding of the ACT communities to help shape outreach and engagement activities, and the development of plans. The current and forecast different types of communities of which each ACT citizen is a part, and the prevalence of different demographic attributes should be primary considerations in planning for improved resilience.

In addition to formal analyses of community diversity, mechanisms that foster diversity within the ACT workforce are also important in bringing understanding of the ACT communities into decision-making. A diverse workforce, including volunteers and decision makers, optimises the innate capacity of governments to appropriately support their communities. Having a diverse workforce in the emergency management sector would allow the lived experiences of various communities to be reflected in all levels of decisions, policies and activities that seek to build community disaster resilience.

Community Disaster Resilience in the ACT

An ACT Framework for Community Disaster Resilience?

The adoption of a framework against which community disaster resilience could be assessed and enhanced would address the current gaps of priority, clearer objectives and measures, responsibility and coordination. Addressing these gaps would assist the ACT government – and communities themselves – to identify and prioritise the development of desirable traits and mechanisms, and measure progress in doing so.

Whilst there has been much work in the ACT to improve government’s capacity for disaster response, there has not been a similar investment, or focus, on the community’s disaster resilience. To accelerate improvement, development of a framework for community disaster resilience for the ACT that sets the context, definitions, principles, key drivers, priorities and strategic objectives would be helpful. This framework should of course be aligned with the National Strategy for DR and the National DRR Framework.

The existing international and national frameworks are essential to underpin coordinated arrangements and development of better mechanisms, but their focus is necessarily across all aspects of disaster risk reduction. The existing guidance on community disaster resilience is therefore still articulated at a very high level of priorities and strategies, which does not sufficiently guide the development of practical measures nor drive “on-ground” improvement. The Council is unaware of any national frameworks or strategies that focus specifically on community disaster resilience that can be used as a model. The ACT Government can either wait for these to eventuate, replicate work being done in other Australian jurisdictions, or innovate by being amongst the first jurisdictions to develop its own.

Several other Australian jurisdictions (SA, Qld (currently being updated), Vic, Tas, WA (in Prep)) have developed disaster resilience strategies, all addressing community resilience, sometimes with subtle differences in approach.

- South Australia’s Disaster Resilience Strategy 2019-2024 has 3 focus areas: Neighbourhoods, Children, Small Business and identified 1500 ‘pain points’ across SA.
- Victorian SES Community Resilience Strategy 2016-2019 used a “chain of preparedness” model to guide enhancement of community resilience

NSW has a State Emergency Management Plan which appears similar to ACT’s current approach, and in which community resilience is to be addressed within subplans. It is not apparent whether a community resilience strategy exists to span across all subplans.

In developing any Framework for the ACT, or any more detailed Plan, the applicability of the approaches in the SA, Tas, Vic, WA and Qld community disaster resilience arrangements should be considered.

The ACT community needs better access to information to help it prepare, respond and recover

It is not easy to discover the existing information regarding ACT Government mechanisms and initiatives to support the communities of the ACT to prepare for natural hazard disasters, react safely to them and recover from them.

- The information that does exist is spread across several government websites
- Key ACT Government plans cannot readily be found
- Disaster preparedness information relevant to the individual, the household and the organisation should be collated and accessible, noting that information may need to be differentiated for those different users
- All ACT citizens and community groups should be able to easily discover information that
 - Maps the level of bushfire and flood risk estimated for the area where they, their families and their communities live, work and recreate
 - Helps them to identify the issues that will arise for them when a natural disaster could or does occur
 - Helps them to develop an appropriate plan for their preparations and actions in the event of an emergency, including identifying and addressing any resources and support they may need

An ACT Community Disaster Resilience Plan is needed

Community resilience is supported by good preparation and pre-incident planning.

Community disaster resilience is not something that can be built in a short period of time; it requires a long-term and ongoing preparation built on extensive planning before a natural disaster.

The preparation and planning should include:

- 1) Increased disaster risk awareness at all levels: from the members of communities to decision makers in the ACT Government, based on accurate information and input from various data and members of communities.
- 2) Plan how the risks may be managed before, during and after disasters and communicate the risks to the public.
- 3) Allocate resources to manage the risks, including to volunteers and community organisations.
- 4) Enhance ACT communities' capability to be resilient to natural disasters through incorporating disaster risks to future development and planning in the ACT.

This process will require extensive network building with various communities in the ACT and having strong partnerships with them.

The complexity of community disaster resilience lies in the complexity of communities themselves, the diversity of their strengths and vulnerabilities, the diversity of natural disasters

that may occur and the complexity and interconnectedness of government services, policies and programs. Enhancement of community disaster resilience for the whole of the ACT requires a comprehensive whole-of-government plan, developed in partnership with the communities and organisations it serves.

The ACT has some good starting points to build on for improving community disaster resilience

There are several existing mechanisms and planned initiatives in the ACT that support, or have the potential to support, community disaster resilience:

The ACT Wellbeing Framework 2020

In 2020 the ACT Government introduced the ACT Wellbeing Framework, which covers 12 domains of wellbeing and provides high-level social indicator outcomes for Canberra. The indicators are informed by measures that will use both people's subjective interpretations of quality of life, and data that charts objective progress. These indicators are grouped under each domain and will help identify whether wellbeing is improving or diminishing over time. The monitoring outcomes will be used to guide and evaluate policy and programs that influence community wellbeing.

While this new Wellbeing Framework is a very positive development, the current domains do not cover the issue of community resilience to natural disasters. The Safety domain focusses on people feeling safe and secure around their families, homes, community and on-line; while the Environment and Climate domain focuses on Canberra's natural environment sustaining all life, and being accessible, climate resilient and clean.

Both individual and community wellbeing will be negatively impacted if areas of Canberra and the wider ACT are subject to more frequent occurrences of severe natural hazard disasters, such as bushfires, heat waves and major flooding events.

The ACT Emergency Plan

The ACT Emergency Plan provides for an ACT Recovery sub plan, which in turn includes four sub recovery plans:

- Community recovery
- Economic recovery
- Infrastructure recovery
- Environmental recovery

Some of these are not currently discoverable, or not easily discoverable, on ACT government websites. The ACT Community Recovery Plan 2015 outlines responsibilities and coordination arrangements in the event of an emergency, focusing on social recovery activities and processes during and after an emergency. It briefly references Resilience Building, but its focus is on Recovery rather than Preparedness, and there are few roles or organisations identified with responsibilities for resilience building.

The ACT Community recovery plan 2021-2022, focused on recovery from COVID-19, includes \$75M to build strong social connections, decrease loneliness and foster resilience, especially amongst vulnerable community sectors such as Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders, multicultural, young people and LGBTIQ+ people. The "Mingle" initiative is a partnership

between local stakeholders and community organisations in 3 new land estates (Throsby, Taylor & Whitlam) with 7 principles:

- Partnership & collaboration
- Learning & information
- Social and environmental sustainability
- Health wellbeing and active living
- Activated spaces
- Culture identity and respect
- Safety

This is an admirable use of the Recovery sub plan mechanism to assist communities to develop in a cohesive, informed, resourceful way. This initiative may be a useful model for other new and many existing residential areas to enhance community preparedness, responses and ability to recover from natural disasters.

Current ACT government opportunities

Planning in the ACT

The ACT Planning System Review & Reform provides another opportunity for appropriate arrangements for community disaster resilience. The planning system is the most powerful tool available to minimize the impact of natural hazards on the community and, therefore, is one of the most powerful tools to ensure that the ACT community is better prepared to cope with expected natural disasters. This is because it can be used to effectively separate people from the risk and ensure that infrastructure and buildings are more resilient to natural disasters, all of which substantially affects the way in which people can respond to incidents when they do occur. For this reason, minimising the risk posed by natural hazards should be specified as a primary objective of the planning system and there should be a clear line of sight between this objective at the highest level in the planning system and all policies, standards and plans at all lower levels in the planning system.

Emergency and safety management arrangements

The ACT Government has well-developed security and emergency management arrangements which have served the Territory well in significantly improving the capacity of a small Australian jurisdiction to respond to natural disasters. These arrangements include the establishment of the Emergency Services Agency and the existence of the Security and Emergency Management Division within the Justice and Community Safety Directorate. The centralised coordination arrangements that exist for whole of government responses to emergencies provide the right mechanisms to expand from an initial necessary focus on improving government response capability, towards mechanisms to support and enhance the community's disaster resilience.

Recommendations

1. The ACT Government consider including community resilience to natural disasters, or a related outcome, as an object in relevant legislation:
 - i. ACT Planning legislation
 - ii. ACT Emergency Act 2004

2. The ACT Government develop objectives, principles and measures for community disaster resilience to:

- i. Guide consideration of community disaster resilience across all ACT government initiatives
- ii. Identify strategic objectives and associated indicators for community disaster resilience
- iii. Support evaluation and review of activities to support community disaster resilience.

This outcome may be achieved through development of a stand-alone ACT Community Disaster Resilience Framework or by including community disaster resilience as a domain within the ACT Wellbeing Framework.

3. The ACT Government develop an All-Hazards Community Disaster Resilience Plan aligned with the National Strategy for Disaster Resilience and National Disaster Risk Reduction Framework, any ACT Community Disaster Resilience Framework and/or the ACT Wellbeing Framework. This plan should specifically include strategies for increasing:

- i. **community connectedness** and capacity for mutual support including the ability of community members to share lessons of what worked and did not work with each other (a networked community)
- ii. the **ACT Government and community working together** to enhance community disaster resilience
 - o development and implementation of a community engagement framework that facilitates mutual learning, and addresses vulnerability and inclusion
 - o the use of local knowledge and networks held by the community, including by the non-government organisations and businesses within the ACT
 - o including a community function in the management of government responses to natural disasters, for example in Incident Management Teams
 - o enhancing the way people work in partnership with emergency services, their local authorities and other relevant organisations before, during and after emergencies
 - o clarifying the support that can be expected from the ACT Government for volunteers, vulnerable people and vulnerable communities to develop and implement preparedness plans
 - o encouraging people to work together with local leaders to enable use of their knowledge and resources to prepare for and deal with disasters.
 - o the engagement and resilience of the rural landholders and private sector, including ACT small business
 - o fostering cooperation, collaboration and integration with non-government entities who already have established, implemented programs for increasing the resilience of the ACT community (e.g. Red Cross)

- increased connections with the diverse ACT communities through nurturing greater diversity in the employees and volunteers of ACT government, including particularly in emergency management.
- iii. the availability, quality and usability of **comprehensive local information about natural disaster risks**, including who is exposed and who is most vulnerable.
 - before disasters, to increase their resilience - including geographic maps of risk
 - during emergencies and disasters, including developing appropriate technology to efficiently collect and analyse information from the community
 - an audit should be made of existing government information relating to disaster planning and response that should be readily available, and all identified relevant documents be made available, ideally via a single website
- iv. **understanding of communities** and how this affects their exposure and vulnerability to natural disaster risks, and their capacity to respond
 - the current and forecast ACT population and its characteristics in terms of attributes that are likely to affect citizen's experience of natural disasters and their ability to respond to them
 - identification of, and understanding of, isolation and vulnerability within the community: how that affects how different community sectors experience natural hazard disasters and affects their requirements for support to prepare, respond to and recover from a disaster
 - Individuals and communities who have higher risk of not being able to cope with the change of environment caused by natural hazards due to physical, social, cultural, economic and environmental factors
 - Individuals and communities who have barriers to communication and accessing accurate information before and during emergencies, such as those without strong connection to social capital/networks, or language barriers
- v. **Actions to reduce risks:** risk reduction by the community and preparedness to act appropriately when natural hazard disasters occur
 - Individuals and organisations are supported to develop pre-incident plans
 - People have taken steps to anticipate disasters and to protect themselves their assets and their livelihoods, including their homes and possessions, cultural heritage and economic capital, therefore minimising potential physical, economic and social losses.
 - Preparedness and pre-incident plans being co-designed for focus/vulnerable groups
 - Appropriate resources are provided to vulnerable individuals, communities and organisations to support the implementation of their preparedness plans
- vi. Evaluation and learning to be incorporated into the strategy.

4. Commonwealth and other funding sources be investigated for delivering activities under an ACT community disaster resilience plan.