

Enabling
Communities:

FROM THE HEART OF THE COMMUNITY

Neighbourhood
houses working in
disaster recovery

FINAL REPORT



Neighbourhood Houses
The Heart of Our Community

Acknowledgement of Country

We wish to acknowledge the Traditional Owners of the many lands across the Network on which our Neighbourhood Houses operate. We express our gratitude that we share this land today, our sorrow for the costs of that sharing and our hope that we can move to a place of justice and partnership together. We acknowledge Elders, past and present.



Acknowledgements

The Enabling Communities: from the heart of the community project was funded by the Victorian Department of Health through the Bushfire Recovery Mental Health Package. We thank them for the opportunity to trial a project model that gave our Neighbourhood Houses the autonomy and flexibility to respond to the gaps and needs within their own communities. We hope this report demonstrates how effective that model can be.

We acknowledge the engagement and work of our six participating Neighbourhood Houses, and their willingness to collaborate and learn from each other. We also thank Anne Leadbeater for her generous sharing of skills, knowledge and wisdom in all areas of community recovery and emergency management.

Enabling Communities: from the heart of the community

A report on Key Learnings from the Enabling Communities Project.

Community-led recovery planning builds community resilience

Neighbourhood Houses build community resilience and play a critical role in cohesive place-based emergency response and recovery initiatives. By providing training, support and connections between people, organisations, information and resources, they enable and empower community-led solutions that best meet the needs and circumstances of Victoria's diverse communities.

Enabling communities to lead

The Enabling Communities project, funded by the Victorian Department of Health, supported six Neighbourhood Houses in the Upper Murray Regional Neighbourhood House Network (UMRNHN) to work with their communities to design locally relevant community-led recovery initiatives, including a Recovery Action Plan.

The Neighbourhood House were supported by a community recovery specialist with experience in the Neighbourhood House Sector (Anne Leadbeater). Anne guided the individual Neighbourhood Houses through community engagement and consultation processes leading to the design of locally relevant place-based recovery initiatives.

Key learnings:

The Enabling Communities Project led to Key Learnings that have relevance beyond the Neighbourhood House Sector.

- **Connected communities are resilient communities.** They are better able to plan for and cope with disruption and continue to function in positive ways.
- **Neighbourhood Houses are uniquely placed to foster community resilience and play a vital role in community disaster preparation, response and recovery.** They are trusted, place-based, on the ground and connected to their communities, including our most vulnerable people.
- **Strong relationships and connections are essential to community recovery.** Linkages are essential to weave a strong social fabric; between Neighbourhood Houses and their communities, emergency services, partner organisations and service providers and other community organisations and groups.
- **One size does not fit all.** When given the autonomy and resources to design and deliver community-led recovery initiatives, the six Neighbourhood Houses funded in this project developed different approaches to recovery and resilience-building, reflecting the specific needs, circumstances, histories, geographies and aspirations of individual communities.
- **Take the time to plan.** Having the support, knowledge and space to develop a Recovery Action Plan has helped each Neighbourhood House identify at strategic and operational levels the role they are prepared to have in future community disasters.
- **Ask don't assume.** Empowering each Neighbourhood House with the skills and resources to engage with their communities allowed gaps, overlaps, relationships and partnerships to be revealed, mapped and understood. This enabled the design and delivery of initiatives and Recovery Action Plans that reflect actual – rather than assumed – place-based needs.
- **Co-design approaches build long-term community agency, efficacy and capacity.** Engaging a skilled facilitator to train and/or work with communities enabled Neighbourhood House staff, committees/boards and volunteers to develop skills and networks that will endure beyond the scope of this project, enhancing overall community resilience, as well as disaster preparedness and recovery capacities.
- **Community-led resilience capacity building and recovery planning contributes to improved personal and community mental health.** In focussing on connection, community-led initiatives also increase civic participation and reduce isolation and loneliness across demographic groups and in vulnerable cohorts in our communities. While the project did not specifically address mental health issues, it is expected that its processes and outcomes will have a positive impact on mental health and wellbeing as individuals and communities feel more connected and in control of their emergency response and recovery.
- **Investments in community-led planning and recovery initiatives leverage extraordinary returns.** Many activities initially funded through this project will continue as Neighbourhood Houses and their communities actively seek other sources of funding to continue and expand their community resilience building and recovery capacities.
- **Initial support leads to catalytic change.** The community-led initiatives and Recovery Action Plans that emerged from the project continue to create positive ripple effects through the skills and connections created. Communities are empowered, skilled equipped and networked to plan and lead local community resilience and recovery initiatives.
- **“Just ask”; people want to connect and contribute.** Raising awareness and inviting participation in Neighbourhood House programs and initiatives is an important first step in building community connection and collective resilience to disruption and disaster.

Project findings

A two-stage approach to Enabling Communities

The co-design and consultation support enabled the Neighbourhood Houses to go beyond assuming to truly understanding their communities' specific recovery needs, as well as existing services and gaps, as a basis for effective response and recovery planning.

The two stages of the project enabled Neighbourhood Houses to understand and support the needs of their communities. Specifically, it:

- Empowered each community to work with their neighbourhood house to design and deliver local initiatives that would benefit recovery and resilience.
- Built the capacity of participating Neighbourhood Houses to respond more effectively to emergencies by developing a recovery plan linked to broader emergency plans within their Local Government Area.
- Supported Neighbourhood Houses to position themselves in the emergency response and recovery space and be included in future emergency planning processes.

Stage 1 Understanding community needs

The six participating Neighbourhood Houses were able to apply for up to \$20,000 to staff and resource their community consultation and recovery initiative planning. Despite the ongoing disruptions and challenges of the Covid pandemic, the participating Neighbourhood Houses were able to identify community needs through a mix of surveys, meetings, street stalls and workshops that engaged community members, community organisations and partners and other providers. While not a planned part of this project, the Covid pandemic again confirmed the critical emergency and recovery roles played by the Neighbourhood House network, as well as community expectations that they do so.

Stage 2 Developing locally responsive initiatives and Recovery Action Plans

Having established their community needs and consulted or co-designed on solution-orientated initiatives, each Neighbourhood House was able to apply for further funding under this project up to \$50,000, to detail the design, implementation and evaluation of their initiative.

The six Neighbourhood Houses participating in this project were required to develop a local Recovery Action Plan. In all cases, these plans articulated local co-design processes and needs. Through this process, committees/boards and staff reflected on community expectations of Neighbourhood Houses in an emergency and strategically considered how they would position their Neighbourhood House in the recovery context, including their role as well as required resources, partnerships and relationships. This increased knowledge and understanding regarding emergency actions and how their Neighbourhood House might assist in community recovery. It also built and strengthened key relationships between the Neighbourhood Houses and emergency services and other providers and positioned the Neighbourhood Houses as a critical node in the disaster preparation, response and recovery network.

Locally designed, place-based initiatives

The variation evident in the initiatives developed by each participating Neighbourhood House is a key feature of this project. This variation reflects the unique circumstances, history, geography and capacities of each House and its communities. It further confirms a key learning outcome which is that one size does not fit all when it comes to community recovery. The most effective initiatives are those based on community consultation where communities are supported with the skills and resources needed to design and lead place-based initiatives. The key features and different consultation processes and resultant initiatives undertaken by the six Neighbourhood Houses participating in this project are described below.

Corryong Neighbourhood Centre (CNC)

Connecting young people for fun and mental health; youth engagement and voice in recovery.

Youth mental health is a priority in Corryong following the tragic loss of six young men in recent years, including four to suicide, and the compounding impacts of the Black Summer bushfires and the Covid pandemic. Building on its successful youth program, the CNC recovery project focussed on an approach that would offer young people agency and autonomy in planning events and taking the lead in their own recovery with an emphasis on having fun together and rebuilding connections – an outcome of which was the purchase a giant inflatable obstacle course for the local swimming pool. While Covid disrupted many planned activities, the Youth Working Group established through this project developed relationships and connections with other recovery agencies and services in the region including the Community Recovery Committee.

CNC also developed an 'Emergency Response Policy' to position CNC strategically in response and recovery.



King Valley Learning Exchange (KVLE)

Food security; access to equipment and supplies to aid recovery; training volunteers to assist in recovery

King Valley Learning Exchange (KVLE) focused on developing community preparedness and access to practical emergency response and recovery resources. While the Covid pandemic impacted community engagement plans, KVLE was able to explore community needs as part of a broader Rural City of Wangaratta survey. Food security and access to practical response and recovery resources emerged as key needs. In response, the project established a Community Resource Centre, developed in consultation with RCOW emergency management staff. The Centre includes a food relief service with appropriate policies and procedures in place for normal operations and in the event of an emergency. New and existing volunteers have been trained for activation in an emergency.

In addition, KVLE has been able to leverage additional resources to upgrade the kitchen to increase capacity for food relief. Data has also been collected identifying local recovery resources and there is more work to be done in developing processes for how this will be activated in an emergency. To strategically position itself in advance of a future emergency, KVLE developed a Position Statement on bushfire, flood, heatwave, pandemic and other emergencies.

Tallangatta Neighbourhood House (TNH)

Community events, working with community groups on preparedness

The Tallangatta Neighbourhood House (TNH) Advisory Group determined community needs and focused on developing a suite of community connection and resilience building events and activities. These involved partnering with CFA, SES and Red Cross on an Emergency Services Popup information stall outside the local IGA; providing Accidental Counsellor training to upskill community members in recognising and responding effectively to someone experiencing a crisis; hosting a Community Brekky; an uplifting morning of community connection held in 'The Triangles' in the main street of Tallangatta; and partnering with Men's Shed to run wooden chair-building workshops.

These events all raised the profile of TNH and built strong relationships between TNH and community members and community groups, including those involved in emergency response such as the CFA, SES and Red Cross. In addition, TNH developed a 'Position Statement' in consultation with Towong Shire's Emergency Management Coordinator ensuring that Council and other stakeholders in the Municipal Emergency Management Plan are aware that TNH has a role to play in this space.



Myrtleford Neighbourhood Centre (MNC)

Community mapping; development of community action plan for emergencies

Myrtleford Neighbourhood Centre (MNC) engaged with local community groups and organisations, Alpine Shire Council and the Community Recovery Committee (CRC), as well as their own committee and other volunteers, to identify community needs. They identified the need for community mapping, including the various groups and services operating and offered in the Myrtleford area, and the development of a community action plan for emergencies.

A strong partnership was formed between MNC, the CRC and Into Our Hands, a local philanthropic Community Foundation, and in 2021 the partners were successful with an expression of interest to the Foundation for Rural and Regional Renewal (FRRR) as one of three communities funded through the newly developed Disaster Resilient: Future Ready (DR:FR) program. This 18-month program will focus on developing an action plan for the Myrtleford community for the 72 hours following an emergency. This will be a valuable legacy of the Enabling Communities project.

MNC has since hosted a RediCommunity workshop with Red Cross and become a member of the Alpine Resilience Committee, raising its profile as an organisation working in the recovery and resilience space. MNC has also developed a Community Food Pantry to assist with food security for the Myrtleford and surrounding communities during an emergency. Like the other Neighbourhood Houses in this project, MNC has also developed a position statement on its role in bushfire, flood, heatwave, pandemic and other emergencies.

Mansfield Adult and Community Education (MACE)

Community profiling; facilitating communication and collaboration between emergency services and other stakeholders; preparedness communications to community members.

Mansfield Adult and Community Education (MACE) identified community needs through a Recovery Service Providers workshop that brought together over 30 people from various organisations and services, including Mansfield Council emergency management staff, the Bushfire Recovery Victoria Aboriginal Support officer, Red Cross, local schools, Albury Wodonga Health and Mansfield District Hospital. Using a co-design methodology, the workshop focused on creating a community profile, developing a master list of agencies and service providers and supporting collaboration with Mansfield Shire Council on recovery planning for the municipality, including raising the profile of MACE as a key recovery stakeholder.

The workshop resulted in the formation of the Municipal Emergency Management Plan Recovery Sub-committee, of which MACE is a key member. This Sub-committee has developed a local communication strategy to be used during recovery. The workshop process also resulted in the preparation of a recovery database, several new Neighbourhood House programs, as well as enhanced internal processes, systems and skills through inclusive and participatory development of a Neighbourhood House Position Statement, to improve community wellbeing in recovery.



Mt Beauty Neighbourhood Centre (MBNC)

Community awareness and preparedness

Mt Beauty Neighbourhood Centre (MBNC) staff and volunteers consulted with community leaders across various agencies, services and community groups, including CFA, Red Cross, Alpine Shire, the Community Recovery Committee, football, netball and cricket clubs, and Rotary, to talk about what MBNC was doing, what it has the capacity to do, and how they could potentially work together.

In February 2021 the MBNC ran a two-day RediCommunity workshop with Red Cross. This included community asset mapping, and a presentation by emergency services and community members. A number of initiatives flowed from this community engagement, including: a community radio program ('Rebound') focusing on stories of resilience, preparedness, response and recovery; the formation of the MBNC 'Keep Calm Committee'; formation of the 'Community Resilience Action Group' (now working on a Community Recovery Plan for Mt Beauty); community picnics, development of CFA Community FireGuard groups; and overall community engagement and outreach.

One of the most positive outcomes from the Enabling Communities project was that MBNC is now recognised by many in the community as the place to go during a crisis and for providing relevant and timely information about preparedness. To strategically position itself in this space, the MBNC developed an 'Emergency Management Plan' and Emergency services now recognise MBNC as a partner in supporting and building community safety and resilience.



Connected communities are resilient communities

Community connection was a common focus of all community consultations, plans and initiatives. Through the learnings and outcomes from the Enabling Communities project, as well as the experience of the Neighbourhood Houses during COVID, we now have a much greater appreciation of the important role that Neighbourhood Houses have and can play in community recovery and resilience. This has led to the UMRNHN identifying community resilience as a key strategic priority, with a strong professional development and training program to build the skills and capabilities of managers and other staff and volunteers in this most important capacity.

Learn more:

To learn more about this project please contact:

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