

WELLBEING PROJECT

The importance of place-based community organisations in disasters



Prepared for North West Community Services Inc.

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Acronyms

ABS:	Australian Bureau of Statistics
AGDRPs:	Australian Government Disaster Recovery Payments
AGRN:	Australian Government reference number
ATAPS:	Access to Allied Psychological Services
BNHCRC:	Bushfire and Natural Hazards Cooperative Research Centre
DRA:	Disaster Recovery Allowance
FGD:	Focus group discussion
IRSAD:	Index of Relative Socio-economic Advantage and Disadvantage
LCSA:	Local Community Services Association
LGA:	Local Government Area
NCOSS:	NSW Council of Social Service
NEMA:	National Emergency Management Agency
NGO:	Non Government Organisations
NFP:	Not-for-profit
NPOs:	Non-profit organisations
NSW:	New South Wales
NWBC:	North West Business Chamber
NWCS:	North West Community Services
PTSD:	Post Traumatic Stress Disorder
RFS:	Rural Fire Services
SA1:	Statistical Areas Level 1
SA2:	Statistical Areas Level 2
SES:	State Emergency Services
SOLAR:	Skills for Life Adjustment and Resilience programme
WESTIR:	Western Sydney Regional Information and Research Service
WSPHN:	Western Sydney Primary Health Network

Executive summary

Background



Photo 1. NWCS disaster relief activities, photo provided by NWCS

Founded in November 1977 by Dawn Cassell and a group of women, North West Community Services (NWCS), formerly Riverstone Neighbourhood Centre, is committed to helping communities in need. NWCS offers diverse programs, covering emergency relief, gambling support, financial counselling, therapeutic programs, case work, family support, education, training and employment support, health and wellbeing programs, community connection activities, aged care and disability services. NWCS has been pivotal in supporting community throughout disasters, including repeated floods. The section following the executive summary, entitled “Flood recovery response 2021-2022” prepared by NWCS, talks about the experiences of NWCS and the community during the 2021-2022 floods, including NWCS’ participation in disaster response.

The state of New South Wales (NSW) faces disasters every year. The severe flooding in February/March and June/July 2022 impacted 62 and 51 Local Government Areas (LGAs) respectively, with Blacktown and The Hills Shire, among the most affected. Several studies emphasise the role of local not-for-profit (NFP) place-based organisations in disasters. NWCS initiated a community led, local response to the repeated floods in the Blacktown LGA. This work led to increased evidence, showing local, place-based responses to floods can be effective and was acknowledged and shared via various webinars, podcasts, academic research and with a visit from a delegation from Tokyo, Japan. This work has informed the strategy for The Wellbeing Project. Against this backdrop, in August 2023, NWCS initiated The Wellbeing Project - My Liveable Neighbourhood, funded by the Western Sydney Primary Health Network (WSPHN), targeting communities in Blacktown and The Hills Shire LGAs, especially for those affected by the 2022 NSW flooding. NWCS commissioned Western Sydney Regional Information and Research Service (WESTIR) Ltd. to create this research report as one of the components of The Wellbeing Project.



Photo 2. Flooded home, photo provided by NWCS

Methodology

The report seeks to capture and synthesise the existing body of knowledge on the importance of place-based approaches in disasters. It also highlights project initiatives carried out as part of The Wellbeing Project and how they were crucial to the communities affected by the 2022 NSW flooding in the LGAs of Blacktown and The Hills Shire. In doing so, the report employed four major methodological approaches. It involved (i) a literature review on place-based approaches, social capital, mental health responses, and the role of community organisations in disasters; (ii) secondary research on demographic and disaster resilience profiles of the Blacktown and The Hills Shire LGAs and the 13 selected suburbs within these LGAs, along with relevant disaster resources; (iii) a focus group discussion (FGD) with the staff of NWCS about the project and its impact on the local community; and (iv) an analysis of a community disaster preparedness survey conducted by NWCS.

Literature review

There has been a history of disasters in Australia, with 90 declared disasters in NSW alone between August 2018 and December 2023. Along with the government's response to such crises, community organisations have played a commendable role in the broader disaster management process. Research conducted on various Australian disasters has demonstrated that neighbourhood centres and local non-government organisations (NGOs) led community responses. Community organisations also served as a gateway to the community for external organisations and played a critical role in improving the resilience of their communities. The literature has equally recognised the value of social capital in Australia's disaster recovery efforts. Numerous studies revealed that having strong social capital aided in the management and coordination of relief operations during disasters and that social capital affected resilience and mental health. More importantly, place-based strategies are critical in strengthening a community's ability to cope with disasters. These can offer comprehensive support to the local population and enhance disaster responses and recovery efforts. Belongingness to a place/location also influences recovery and resilience. Furthermore, a body of Australia-based research revealed that disasters affect the mental health of both individuals and their communities. Existing literature has also tackled the use and efficacy of mental health interventions and services during emergencies and suggested ways to improve Australia's mental health services and responses. Recommendations included improving primary mental health care and creating focused policies for mental health disaster preparedness and response.

Demographics

The Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) 2021 Census data revealed distinct demographic characteristics in the 13 suburbs of interest from the Blacktown and The Hills Shire LGAs. The 13 suburbs were:

Blacktown

1. Angus
2. Marsden Park
3. Melonba
4. Richards
5. Riverstone
6. Shanes Park
7. Vineyard

The Hills Shire

8. Box Hill
9. Cattai
10. Maraylya
11. Sackville North
12. South Maroota
13. Wisemans Ferry

The number of usual residents varied across these 13 suburbs, with Richards (37) having the smallest population and Marsden Park (14,610) having the largest population.¹ The ratio of females and males did not vary significantly across suburbs. Of each suburb's population, Angus (56.5%) had the largest proportion of males in the area, while Richards (56.8%) had the highest proportion of females. Meanwhile, the age distribution varied. For instance, across all suburbs, Marsden Park (22.7%) had the largest proportion of persons under ten years old, while Vineyard (34.1%) had the highest proportion of those aged 60 years and over.

There were also noticeable differences across suburbs in terms of cultural and linguistic diversity. Melonba again had the largest proportion of persons born overseas (59.1%), whereas Maraylya had the highest proportion of persons born in Australia (85.2%). In Sackville North, a large proportion of people (94.3%) spoke English only at home, whereas in Melonba, over half of the population (66.9%) spoke a language other than English at home.

Healthwise, Melonba had the lowest proportion of residents without any existing long-term health conditions (84.6%), whereas Richards had the greatest proportion (40.5%) of individuals with at least one long-term health condition.

As for the level of highest educational attainment, Melonba (65.7%) again had the largest population of individuals with a diploma or a higher level of qualification out of the 13 suburbs, while Richards recorded 0.0% in this cohort.² Again, Melonba had the highest proportion of employed persons out of its population aged 15 years and over (76.3%), while Riverstone had the highest proportion of unemployment among residents within the same cohort (3.4%).

Finally, households situated within these suburbs had different characteristics in terms of tenure and income. Most households were rented in Richards (87.0%), while most owned their dwellings in Melonba (87.8%). These insights underlined the multifaceted demographic, cultural, health, economic, and housing dynamics within these suburbs of interest. This is an important consideration while planning any disaster response and coordinating recovery efforts in the area.

Disaster resilience profiles

Membership within the Bushfire and Natural Hazards Cooperative Research Centre's (BNHCRC) disaster resilience factor groups varied across the 13 suburbs of interest. Five of the Blacktown suburbs of interest, with Vineyard as an exception, fell into a group with relatively better access to economic, physical, and government infrastructure but with limited social capital. Inversely, Vineyard and The Hills Shire suburbs, except for Box Hill, had relatively better social capital but less access to economic, physical, and government infrastructure. Finally, Box Hill was generally more resilient compared to the ten other suburbs, scoring at least moderate or high in all eight factors. This shows the varying strengths and vulnerabilities of neighbouring suburbs even within the same LGA.

The Wellbeing Project

The Wellbeing Project (the Project) was a short-term, community-focused initiative funded by the WSPHN. The project prioritised communities in Blacktown and The Hills Shire LGAs that have been impacted by the Hawkesbury Nepean floodplain. A wide variety of activities/initiatives were proposed in the project that were carried out from August 2023 to

¹ After Richards (37 usual residents), Wisemans Ferry (233), Angus (384), Shanes Park (384), and Sackville North (388), recorded the populations below 500 in the 2021 Census (see Section 4.1).

² The ABS advises caution when dealing with small cells, stating, "Cells in this table have been randomly adjusted to avoid the release of confidential data. No reliance should be placed on small cells".

February 2024. Those activities were community events and festivals, therapeutic support, health and wellbeing programs, community education opportunities, casework and brokerage, and data analysis and evaluation. In a short span of time, the project made an impact on the local community, as illustrated by these four broad areas of impact identified through thematic analysis of the focus group discussion:

- it addressed longstanding and ongoing needs in the community;
- clients benefitted from the initiatives, as shown by community demand for similar, sustainable wellbeing initiatives;
- initiatives drew on and strengthened existing relationships with community members, demonstrating the importance of relationship and place-based intervention in effectively meeting community needs; and,
- it capitalised on NWCS's flexibility and resourcefulness as a community-based organisation to tailor services to individuals' needs.

The project also contemplated on different learnings and reflections. They were mostly related to the challenges and barriers during project implementation and the importance of place-based resilience and disaster response in the community. Other reflections that emerged from The Wellbeing Project include the fact that community disaster resilience is not built through workshops or forums programmed in the wake of disasters, constructive though these can be in other ways. Instead, resilience is built when community members are able to ask for and offer help to one another. Neighbourhood centres have a key role to play in building this kind of community resilience, functioning as a resource that brings people together from all walks of life, through creating a place where anyone and everyone is welcome. The Wellbeing Project in particular created new opportunities for NWCS to build relationships with people they had not previously reached. Given the importance of local relationship in creating disaster resilience, The Wellbeing Project was able to make a significant contribution to fostering disaster preparedness in the community.

Community Disaster Preparedness Survey results

- A total of 157 people have responded to the surveys.³ The respondents were from 38 different suburbs, commonly from Riverstone (18.5%), Marsden Park (12.7%), Acacia Gardens (4.5%), and South Maroota (4.5%).
- Regarding **disaster risk and impact**, respondents indicated they were likely to experience both bushfires and floods (31.2%), floods (29.0%), and bushfires (25.8%). Meanwhile, 52.7% reported that they were somewhat, or very knowledgeable about potential disasters in their region. More than half (62.4%) of respondents reported that they were not impacted by floods, bushfires, or any other disasters.
- Regarding **access to support**, while respondents commonly indicated that accessing support services were not applicable to them (17.0%) or that they did not access support (15.1%), others received support from NWCS (17.0%), government agencies (9.4%), and SES (7.5%). Meanwhile, respondents learned about available disaster support services through the community, including friends, community activities, and local knowledge (21.4%), online platforms (17.9%), NWCS (14.3%), and the news, including radio and TV (10.7%).
- The most common barriers to accessing support services were not knowing what supports were available (32.7%) and not meeting eligibility criteria (23.6%). In terms of

³ Totals or the denominators used in the computation of percentages vary for each question. Several questions are multi-response, allowing respondents to select more than one option. Please refer to Section 7 for more information.

recent needs of respondents, mental health support (13.8%), bill assistance (13.8%), and essential household goods (11.7%) were most commonly reported.

- Regarding **access to disaster preparedness information and training**, respondents most commonly received emergency alerts and warnings from television (40.9%) and mobile phone alerts (38.7%). Meanwhile, 62.4% of the respondents were unaware of any disaster preparedness community programs and more than seven in ten respondents (74.2%) had not received any formal training on disaster preparedness in the past five years. Only 23.7% of respondents had developed a family or personal emergency plan. Online platforms (37.0%), NWCS (10.9%), news, including radio and TV (9.8%), and family, friends, and their community (8.7%) were the most common responses when respondents were asked about how they accessed information on disaster preparedness.

Conclusion and recommendations

Recent disasters across Australia and NSW have emphasised the vital role of community organisations. The Wellbeing Project is an example of why place-based organisations are crucial to addressing community needs during disasters. The project addressed ongoing community needs, emphasised the significance of place-based interventions, and adapted flexibly to community requirements. In conducting these initiatives and as informed by the research conducted in this report, The Wellbeing Project has offered the following five recommendations:

- Place-based community organisations should be well-represented in disaster management and planning spaces.
- Implementing local resilience-building strategies, alongside targeted interventions relevant to the location, is crucial to disaster preparedness.
- Considering communities' cultural and linguistic diversity across the 13 suburbs of interest, tailored and localised approaches are essential in disaster planning, response, and recovery efforts.
- Funding is needed for long-term disaster recovery and resilience, even though short-term or project-based funding is needed.
- There is a need to prioritise investment in initiatives that foster local, place-based relationships and build community trust. This should capitalise on existing local connections and prioritise support for place-based approaches carried out by local community organisations. By doing so, funders can avoid duplicating the work of identifying needs and building relationships when bringing in external agencies – who are often unfamiliar with the community and its needs – and instead provide client-centred rather than bureaucracy-centred service.



Photo 3. Community event, photo provided by NWCS

Flood recovery response 2021-2022

North West Community Services' Story

Suburbs within the northwest precinct of Blacktown LGA sit on the Hawkesbury Nepean flood plain. Our community was impacted by four floods throughout 2021 and 2022.

NWCS, previously known as Riverstone Neighborhood Centre, worked closely with the North West Business Chamber (NWBC) to deliver a coordinated, community-led response to the floods in the local neighborhoods.

Historically, our community has often been forgotten as part a disaster response. As residents began calling asking for information and help, NWCS and NWBC invited disaster agencies to form a Blacktown Working Group. This became a critical network to share information in real time, develop appropriate responses for a disengaged community that often lacks trust in public agencies and ensure we were supporting vulnerable people at a time of crisis.

NWCS became an important hub responding to the repeated floods. The objectives were to:

- Secure engagement from disaster and public agencies
- Focus on a local, place-based approach for the local community
- Engaging community and business support (donations, volunteers)
- Information, casework, advocacy
- Maximising resident outcomes by accessing the broader opportunities within the service system (not just flood resources)
- Negotiating to host a Recovery Assistance Point
- Established a flood pop up shop (all free items)
- Supporting people to move off the flood plain, wherever possible
- Providing a service model that was person centred and trauma informed
- Developing an evidence base on the value and benefits of a local, place-based approach when community and disaster agencies work together

Our work has been recognised as best practice, and we have presented our experiences and learning in various podcasts, webinars, academic research. We also welcomed a delegation of public officials from Tokyo, Japan, who were keen to understand why our engagement with community was so successful.

Our flood response and recovery journey has demonstrated the need to focus on:

- Local, place-based approaches
 - Building relationships and trust over time
 - Connection and belonging build resilience in neighborhoods
 - Capitalise on your local, trusted champions
 - People are looking for human connection, not portals, websites or answering machines. This applies to those living through crisis but also those looking to contribute in some way
 - Tap into all the system opportunities, capacity to flexible and innovate
- We need to make the navigation journey easier for people

Our work throughout the four floods led to our approach for the WSPHN funding. We wanted to focus on building those community connections, expanding opportunities in the Hills LGA and exploring opportunities to build disaster readiness messages through everyday activities. There was also a focus on other climate related disaster, such as heat, and the need for improved urban design and social infrastructure in rapidly growing neighbourhoods.

1. Introduction and rationale

Founded in November 1977 by a group of women led by Dawn Cassell, North West Community Services (NWCS), previously known as Riverstone Neighbourhood Centre, has been dedicated to supporting communities in need. NWCS offers various community programs, including emergency relief, gambling support, financial counselling, therapeutic programs, case work, family support, education, training and employment support, health and wellbeing programs, community connection activities, aged care and disability services. NWCS has been pivotal in supporting community throughout disasters, including repeated floods (North West Community Services, n.d).

The state of NSW faces disasters almost every year, resulting in loss of lives and millions of dollars in economic losses. The extreme weather and flooding experienced in 2022 were among the most severe disasters in the history of NSW. Specifically, the flooding in February/March and June/July impacted 62 and 51 LGAs, respectively, including Blacktown and The Hills Shire.

A wide array of literature has suggested that the involvement of place-based not-for-profit organisations in response to disasters has great benefits to the local community. NWCS initiated a community led, local response to the repeated floods in the Blacktown LGA. This work led to increased evidence, showing local, place-based responses to floods can be effective and was acknowledged and shared via various webinars, podcasts, academic research and with a visit from a delegation from Tokyo, Japan. This work has informed the strategy for The Wellbeing Project. Within this context, NWCS launched The Wellbeing Project – My Liveable Neighbourhood in August 2023, funded by the WSPHN. The project worked with communities in Blacktown and The Hills Shire LGAs, particularly those impacted by the Hawkesbury Nepean floodplain (see Map 2), focusing on mental health and wellbeing components. The Wellbeing Project also engaged with critical stakeholders to enhance outcomes for the community, including Councils, Reconstruction NSW, NSW State Emergency Service (SES), education providers and many others. Being a new and short-term initiative, The Wellbeing Project offered the following:

- enhanced community connection – events and local activities,
- supporting mental health – counselling and therapeutic programs,
- active lifestyle and wellbeing activities – health and physical activities,
- supporting disaster preparedness and extreme weather events,
- supporting those still impacted by recent floods – case management and brokerage,
- linking to services and supports, and
- data analysis and evaluation.

To support these goals, NWCS commissioned WESTIR to create this research report as one of the components of The Wellbeing Project, with a focus on 13 suburbs in the North Western corridor (see Table 1 and Map 1). The first objective of this report is to capture the existing body of knowledge on place-based approaches, role of community organisations, the importance of social capital, importance of mental health response, and the importance of local, accessible services and infrastructure in the context of disasters. The second is to present the demographics of the populations and communities within the 13 suburbs of interest. The third objective is to document the initiatives under The Wellbeing Project. Finally, this research report seeks to contribute to the existing body of knowledge on place-based resilience in disasters.

Table 1. Eleven suburbs of interest in Blacktown and The Hills Shire LGAs

Blacktown LGA	The Hills Shire LGA
Angus	Box Hill
Marsden Park	Cattai
Melonba	Maraylya
Richards	South Maroota
Riverstone	Sackville North
Shanes Park	Wisemans Ferry
Vineyard	

This report begins by providing methodological information on how the report was prepared (Section 2). It is followed by the literature review summarising recent disasters in NSW, the role of community organisations in disasters, the importance of social capital during disasters, the importance of place-based organisations in disasters, and the importance of mental health responses to disasters (Section 3). Section 4 provides demographic information sourced from ABS Census of Population and Housing data on the 13 suburbs of interest in Blacktown and The Hills Shire. Section 5 shows the disaster resilience profiles of the Blacktown and The Hills Shire LGAs. Section 6 offers an overview of The Wellbeing Project, including the impacts made by the project on the local community. Section 7 presents the results of the community disaster preparedness survey. Section 8 presents the project learnings and reflections, followed by the conclusion and recommendations in Section 9. Finally, Section 10 lists disaster resources that can benefit community organisations.

2. Methodology

The report entailed four major methodological approaches that shaped the structure of this report, which are a literature review, research from secondary data sources, a focus group discussion, and a survey.

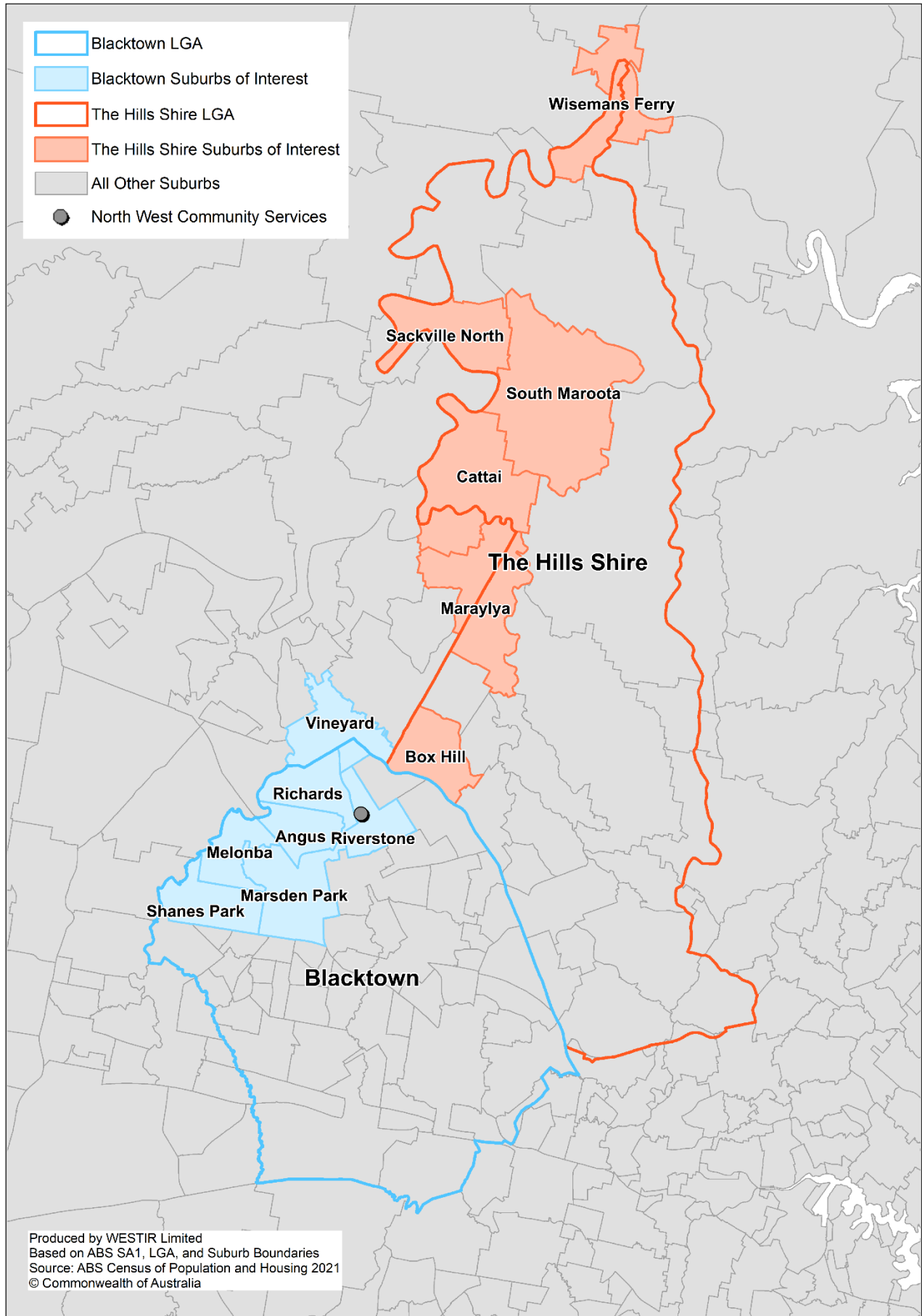
A **literature review** of relevant and recent peer-reviewed and grey literature was undertaken to capture an understanding of recent disasters in NSW (along with government response), the role of community organisations in disasters, the importance of social capital, place-based approaches, and the importance of mental health responses in disasters.

Secondary research gathered and analysed demographic information in the 13 suburbs of interest in Blacktown and The Hills Shire LGAs. Data was mostly sourced from the ABS Census of Population and Housing, 2021. Secondary research also collected data on Blacktown and The Hills Shire’s disaster history, access to disaster support, and disaster resilience from the BNHCRC data portal and the National Emergency Management Agency (NEMA). Secondary research further identified different disaster resources available for community services and stakeholders from relevant government and non-government bodies, such as the BNHCRC, NEMA, NSW Government, Mental Health Commission of NSW, Australian Red Cross, NSW Council of Social Service (NCOSS), and Blacktown City Council.

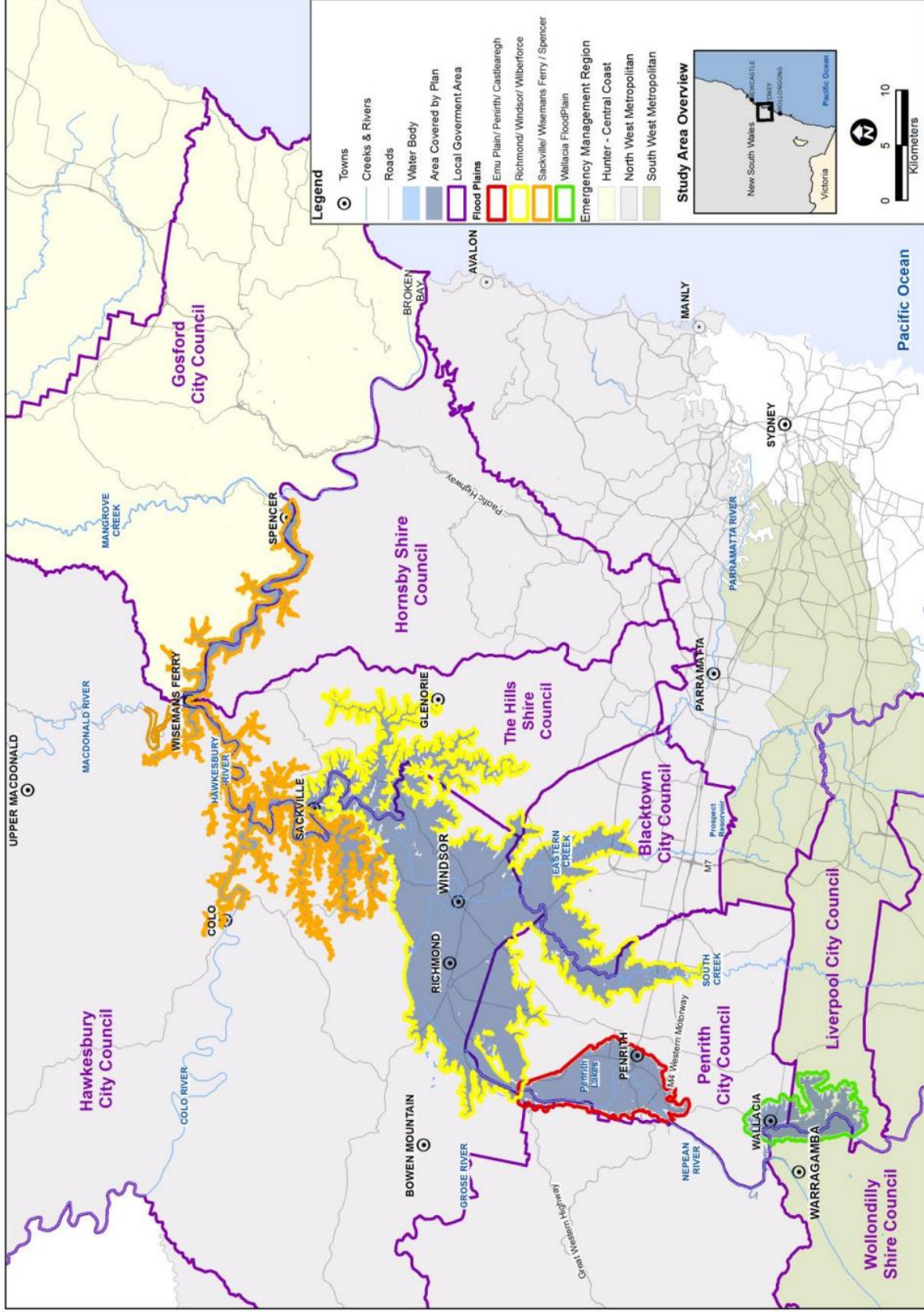
A **focus group discussion** (FGD) with six staff members from NWCS (who worked on the project) was conducted on the 27th of November 2023 to discuss the impact that The Wellbeing Project has made on local communities. WESTIR staff travelled to the NWCS office located in Riverstone to conduct the FGD, which lasted for two consecutive hours. The FGD revealed multiple insights about the project and its impact on its target communities.

A **survey** was rolled out by NWCS from mid-September of 2023 to gather data on community disaster preparedness. Participants of the survey were community members, clients, and program participants. WESTIR researchers analysed survey data received from NWCS and discussed the results in this report.

Map 1. Blacktown and The Hills Shire LGAs and suburbs of interest



Map 2. The Hawkesbury-Nepean floodplain



Source: NSW SES, September 2015, Hawkesbury Nepean Flood Plan, <https://www.ses.nsw.gov.au/media/1627/plan-hawkesbury-nepean-flood-plan-sept-2015-endorsed.pdf#page=18>

3. Literature review

3.1 Recent disasters in NSW and disaster response

Australia has faced a series of disasters over the years. The most common disasters in Australia include floods, storms, tropical storms, forest fires, earthquakes, and landslides (in some areas occasionally) (Gao, 2014). The state of NSW is not an exception and has been hit by several disasters. The first recorded flood disaster in NSW was in the Hawkesbury in 1799 (Gill, 1969). Other major floods also occurred since then, including the 1852 Gundagai floods that claimed 89 lives (Davies, 2013). NSW has experienced numerous disasters since then, with the NSW government officially declaring 90 natural disasters from August 2018 through the end of December 2023. Most disasters were bushfires, floods, and storms (NSW Government, 2023a). The severe weather and flooding across different time frames in 2022 was one of the worst in the history of disasters in NSW. The major flooding occurred in February/March, June/July, August, and September (NSW Government, 2022b). The flooding in February/March and June/July affected 62 LGAs and 51 LGAs, simultaneously, including Blacktown and The Hills Shire.

According to the NSW Government (2023b), the emergency response started promptly through the NSW SES. NSW SES managed numerous volunteers and personnel from various agencies, such as the NSW Rural Fire Service (RFS), Fire and Rescue NSW, NSW Police Force, Marine Rescue NSW, Surf Life Saving NSW, Resilience NSW, NSW Ambulance, St John Ambulance, VRA Rescue NSW, and NSW National Parks and Wildlife Service. The Australian Defence Force and agencies from Victoria, South Australia, Western Australia, and the Northern Territory also joined the disaster responses. In the flooded regions, numerous community members spontaneously assisted family, friends, neighbours and even strangers, utilising their available resources. However, the February/March flood still claimed nine lives, damaged 14,637 homes, destroyed \$2.7 billion in infrastructure, caused more than \$500 million in agricultural losses, and damaged over 2,000 kilometres of roads (NSW Government, 2022a). On top of this, the June/July flood resulted in \$379+ million in economic losses (AON, 2022). Further, it prompted 85,000 people (mainly from Sydney's western suburbs) to evacuate, or to be ready, for evacuation (Jose, 2022).

Simultaneously, in response to the recovery efforts, the NSW Government announced different types of assistance available to the victims and stakeholders affected by these disasters. Most of the assistance available was for affected primary producers concessional loans, transport subsidies, small business concessional loans, not-for-profit organisations concessional loans, sporting clubs grant/concessional loans, small business grants and primary producer grants, as well as state grants.

3.2 The role of community organisations in disasters

Community organisations play a crucial role in disaster response and management. During different disasters across the world, community organisations have played the role of disseminating information to the community, acting as a mediator between the government and the community (Wulandari et al., 2018), and providing emergency response (Mondal et al., 2015).

In Australia, community organisations have played a commendable role in the broader disaster management process. A Victorian-based study by Roberts et al. (2021) revealed that Australian nonprofit organisations (NPOs) significantly contribute to communities affected by disasters through community connections, accessibility to vulnerable populations, and local

knowledge. Studies by Donnarumma et al. (2023) and Muir (2020), in the context of the 2022 Northern Rivers and 2011 Brisbane floods respectively, revealed that local NGOs and neighbourhood centres led their community's response, recovery, and preparedness efforts where formal response and recovery services were limited. A study by Taylor et al. (2023) on the 2022 NSW and Queensland floods acknowledged that community organisations are the gateway to the local community residents and can help to ensure residents' wellbeing and identify local issues. Likewise, a study conducted by Ingham et al. (2023) regarding the 2013 Blue Mountains fire and 2019/20 Black Summer Bushfires indicated that local place-based community organisations are pivotal to building the resilience of their communities. The study emphasised that local community leaders possess prior knowledge, diverse problem-solving approaches, and established networks with emergency services.

However, in attempting to fill service delivery gaps, local organisations are faced with different challenges. The Local Community Services Association (LCSA) of NSW and WESTIR Ltd.'s report (2020) underscores the increased demand for services during disasters and that community organisations have had to step in to fill these needs. Challenges with both human and financial resources were encountered by these organisations; however, they 'embraced innovation and hope, reflecting a confidence in remaining viable and with an optimism for coping with potential future disasters' (LCSA and WESTIR, 2020, p. 7).

Despite the well-documented importance of community organisations in disaster response, it remains a matter for debate and reflection as to whether, or not, public entities yet fully understand and take action that reflects this importance. A study by Donnarumma et al. (2023, p. iv) after the 2022 flood disaster in the Northern Rivers of NSW stated that often these organisations 'lacked a voice at the [...] table' even though they are in the front line of disaster response.

3.3 The importance of social capital during disasters

Social capital is the networks of relationships and the value derived from the positive connection between people (Kenton, 2022; Mask, 2019) that includes favours, helpful information, and innovative ideas. Various studies have emphasised the importance of social capital in disasters. Wickes et al. (2015) stated that the absence of social capital before a disaster delays community resilience, while studies by Delilah Roque et al. (2020) and Kamal and Hassan (2018) showed that social capital plays a vital role in facilitating recovery efforts and enhancing community resilience.

Studies have indicated the importance of social capital in relation to different Australian disasters, for instance, its impact on mental health and resilience. A study by Matthews et al. (2020) focused on the 2017 Northern NSW flood revealed that social capital was linked to a decreased risk of psychological distress among respondents. Examining the experiences of older adults during the 2011 and 2013 floods in Brisbane, Brockie & Miller (2017) found that resilience is linked to participants' social capital and past disaster encounters and highlighted initiatives that enhance social capital. Bryant et al.'s (2017) study, which was focused on Victorians impacted by the Black Saturday bushfires in 2009, indicated that having connections with individuals reciprocally close to each other was linked to a lower risk of Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD). Likewise, a study by Zahnow et al. (2019) on the 2011 Brisbane floods revealed that individual-level social support could moderate or alleviate the impact of flood severity on individual functioning.

On the other hand, studies confirmed that social capital affected the coordination and organisation of relief efforts. According to Darab et al. (2020), the community's self-organised response to the flood highlighted the strong social and community ties among the local

community during the 2017 Lismore floods. Drawing on the same disaster, Melo Zurita et al. (2018) found that social capital generated through personal interactions is crucial and advocated for a socio-cultural approach and a people-centred perspective in disaster preparedness and response. Additionally, Smith and Boruff (2011) stated that possessing robust capital and connections enhanced the community's capacity to resist the impact of 1999 floods in Moora, Western Australia.

3.4 Place-based approaches in disasters

A place is crucial when considering disaster resilience (Tiernan et al., 2019) and place-based approaches are essential for enhancing community resilience to disasters. According to the Dusseldorp Forum (2020), community-led place-based approaches are typically long-term investments that recognise each place's uniqueness and ensure actions align with that specific context. Extensive research also supports the idea that a connection to a place and neighbourhood leads to greater civic participation, more robust social bonds and higher Gross Domestic Product (Landau, 2017 in Johnston, 2015).

Although, limited, a couple of studies have discussed the importance of place or place-based approaches to disasters in Australia. Echoing the COVID-19 pandemic, the Dusseldorp Forum (2020) stated that place-based initiatives can provide comprehensive support to the local community. The study reflected on the efforts of four place-based initiatives in different parts of Australia⁴ to address the different needs of the communities in crisis.

Place-based NGOs provide support in disaster response and recovery. Donnarumma et al. (2023) pointed out the crucial role of place-based local NGOs in responding to the 2022 NSW flood disaster, where these NGOs provided essential services in the short and medium term, ensuring sustainable support for affected individuals and communities. Their research further emphasised the leadership role played by community, neighbourhood centres and place-based community organisations, especially when external support services were delayed (Donnarumma et al., 2023; Muir, 2020).

Similarly, attachment to a place or locality impacts recovery and resilience. A study by Moreton (2016) on four natural disasters highlighted that respondents' attachment to their locality or places they live is among the factors determining community resilience and influencing recovery. Following, the 2009 flooding in Queensland, a study by Boon (2014) identified that individual resilience was fostered by social connectedness and a sense of belonging to a place.

Other studies emphasised the importance of place-based approaches in creating and adapting local knowledge. According to Astill et al. (2020), researchers from the University of Tasmania facilitated a multidisciplinary workshop with emergency professionals to identify the issues faced in emergency services delivery in Tasmania. The workshop established connections and collaboration between the university and the community through joint efforts on Tasmanian-focused natural hazard projects. It identified over 30 research and 20 training needs, along with potential funding opportunities tailored to the needs of Tasmania. The study suggested that this community-of-practice approach can bring positive outcomes on a national scale, allowing those who require and utilise place-based disaster research to identify and access it effectively. Taylor and Goodman (2015) conducted a study to gather perspectives from three stakeholders in the aftermath of the 2009 Black Saturday bushfire. The study called for genuine place-based and community-led disaster preparedness and responses, urging

⁴ Those four initiatives were Hands Up Mallee, Logan Together, Maranguka and Warddeken Land Management.

professionals and institutions to adopt knowledge informed by place-based and community development.

3.5 The importance of mental health response in disasters

A series of publications has suggested that disasters have a broader impact on the mental health of the community. According to Math et al. (2015), mental health problems in disaster-affected populations are more than double of the general population. Makwana (2019) stated that disaster imposes a substantial burden of mental health conditions on both individuals and communities. Similarly, Fernandez et al. (2015) indicated that floods have potentially harmful effects of disasters on mental health, which may not be tangible, like physical injuries (North & Pfefferbaum, 2013).

Studies conducted about Australian disasters have suggested that disasters have impacted the mental health of individuals and communities. A study conducted by FitzGerald et al. (2019) in an area affected by 2011 Queensland floods found that residents whose households were flooded had higher reported rates of trauma, injury and mental illness than those who were not affected. Similarly, a study by Bolsewicz et al. (2013) indicated that the 2011 Brisbane floods greatly affected residents' physical and psychosocial wellbeing. Zhang et al. (2022) argued that bushfires have a significant and lasting impact on mental health in Australia. A study by Bassilios et al. (2012) reported that, after the 2009 Victorian bushfires, the majority of clients using the primary mental health services either had depressive disorders, anxiety disorders, or both. A study by Matthews et al. (2019) found that the mental health risk was significantly higher among study participants whose home/business/farm was submerged during the 2017 Northern NSW flood. Bryant et al. (2017) found varying levels of mental health risks among community members after the Black Saturday bushfires in Victoria.

Literature has also documented the utilisation and effectiveness of mental health responses and services during disasters. Cowlshaw et al. (2023) conducted a study to test the efficacy of the Skills for Life Adjustment and Resilience programme (SOLAR) delivered by trained local community members following multiple disasters in Australia. Their study concluded that the SOLAR programme was “effective in improving anxiety, depression and posttraumatic stress symptoms over time” (Cowlshaw et al., 2023, p.1). After the widespread floods and cyclones that impacted 78% of Queensland in 2010-2011, Crompton et al. (2023, p.1) conducted a study to assess the effectiveness of mental health screening programs via the state-wide health call centre (13HEALTH). They concluded that “such opportunistic screening may assist in the identification of those with unmet mental health needs”. Reifels et al. (2015) explored mental health service usage patterns after the Black Saturday bushfires and 2010-11 Queensland floods by analysing data from the Access to Allied Psychological Services (ATAPS) program over two years at the national level. The study found that the bushfire disaster notably heightened ATAPS usage, particularly among those with depression or anxiety. It concluded that the demand for post-disaster mental health services varies and targeted ATAPS services showed promising solutions in primary care settings. It further stated that the primary mental health services provided by the Australian Government to individuals affected by the 2009 Victorian bushfires resulted in favourable outcomes such as symptom reduction and improved psychosocial functioning.

Similarly, studies have offered recommendations for strengthening Australia's mental health responses and services. Bolsewicz et al. (2013) suggested that enhanced support strategies may be needed to mitigate flood-related mental health impacts. Zhang et al. (2022) concluded that, given the significant and lasting impact of bushfires on mental health in Australia, ongoing monitoring and community assistance are crucial. According to Bassilios et al. (2012), improving current primary mental health care indicated a successful bushfire response that

may be used internationally in other disasters. Matthews et al. (2019, p. 1) provided insights into developing “targeted mental health disaster preparedness and response policies tailored to various community sectors”. Additionally, it suggested longer-term interventions to enhance community adaptability to climate change. Bryant et al. (2017) emphasised the importance of a socio-centric approach to mental health. They stated that such an approach provides a better opportunity for interventions in society after the disaster.

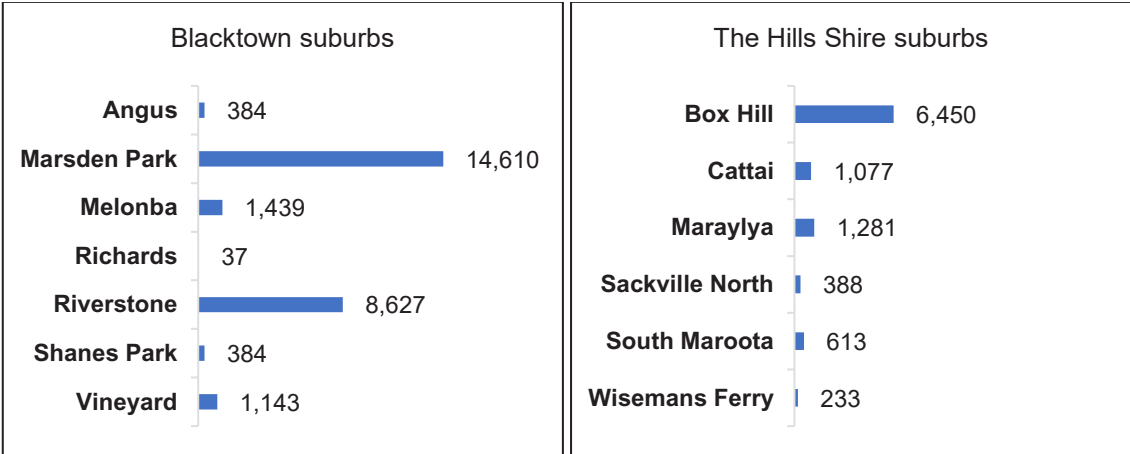
4. Demographics

This section discusses key demographic findings in relation to Blacktown LGA, The Hills Shire LGA, and the 13 suburbs of interest. Data for this section was sourced from the ABS 2021 Census of Population and Housing. This is the most recent source of Census data; however, at the time of writing, more than two and a half years have passed since the Census date on 10 August 2021.

4.1 Sex and age

The Blacktown and The Hills Shire LGAs were home to a total of 396,776 and 191,876 residents, respectively, during the 2021 Census. Of Blacktown’s population, 50.1% were female and 49.9% were male. Of The Hills Shire’s population, 50.7% were female and 49.3% were male. Looking at the 13 suburbs of interest, the 2021 Census recorded the highest populations in Marsden Park (14,610), Riverstone (8,627), and Box Hill (6,450) and the lowest in Richards (37), Wisemans Ferry (233), Angus (384), and Shanes Park (384).

Figure 1. Total population, Blacktown and The Hills Shire suburbs, 2021 Census



Source: ABS 2021 Census of Population and Housing, TableBuilder Pro, Counting persons – place of usual residence

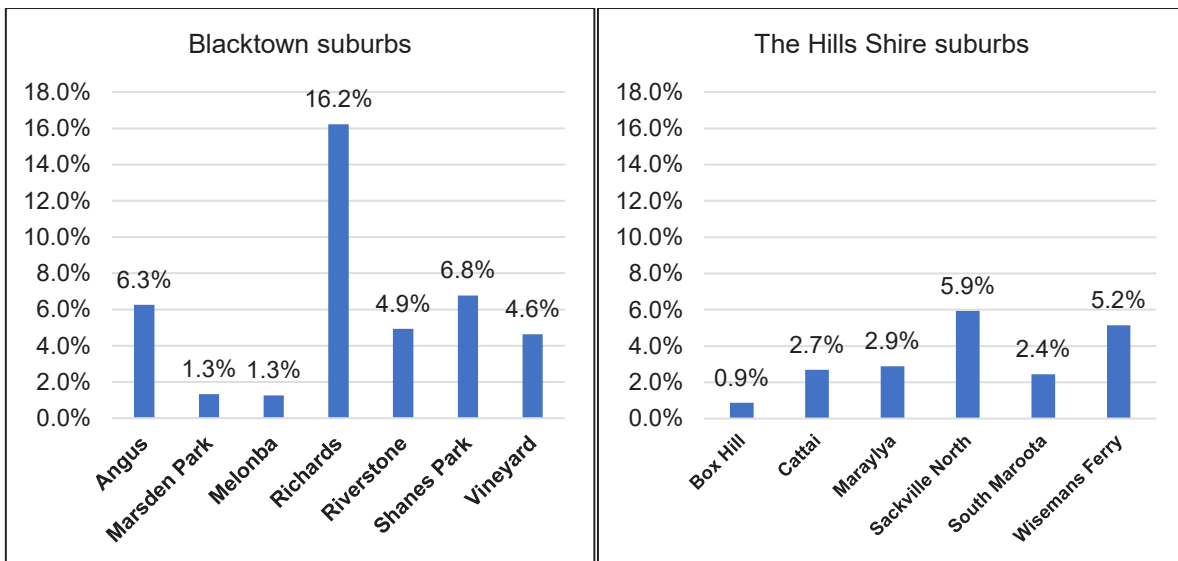
Age-wise, within Blacktown LGA, the most common age groups were 30-39 years and 0-9 years, accounting for 17.1% and 15.4% of the LGA’s population, respectively. Blacktown also had seniors or people who were 60 years and over (15.5%). Across Blacktown suburbs, Marsden Park (22.7%) had the largest proportion of persons under ten years old, while Vineyard (34.1%) had the highest proportion of those 60 years and over. In The Hills Shire, the most common age groups were 40-49 years (15.7%) and 10-19 years (14.6%), while there were more than 10.0% of persons under ten years old (13.5%) and persons aged 60 years and over (20.0%). Across The Hills Shire suburbs, Box Hill (21.9%) had the largest proportion of persons under ten years old, whereas Wisemans Ferry (32.6%) had the highest proportion of those 60 years and over. In both Greater Sydney and NSW, the highest proportions of people were in the following age groups, 30-39 years (15.9% and 14.4%) and 20-29 years (14.1% and 13.0%), respectively. The median age in Blacktown was 34, while the median age in The Hill Shire was 38 (ABS, 2021a, 2021b).

4.2 Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander population

During the 2021 Census, 3.0% (11,806) of the total population in Blacktown and 0.6% (1,206) of the total population in The Hills Shire identified themselves as Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islanders. At the same time, 1.7% (90,940) of Greater Sydney’s population and 3.4% (278,038) of NSW’s population were Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander.

Among the seven suburbs of interest in Blacktown, Richards (16.2%, 6) had the highest proportion of Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander people. It is, however, crucial to note that only 37 Richards usual residents were recorded in the 2021 Census. Melonba had the lowest (1.3%, 18) proportions of Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander people. Meanwhile, Sackville North (5.9%, 23) had the highest and Box Hill had the lowest (0.9%, 56) proportion of Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander people, out of the six suburbs of interest in The Hills Shire.

Figure 2. Percentage of Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander people, Blacktown and The Hills Shire suburbs, 2021 Census



Source: ABS 2021 Census of Population and Housing, TableBuilder Pro, Counting persons – place of usual residence

4.3 Cultural and linguistic diversity

4.3.1 Citizenship

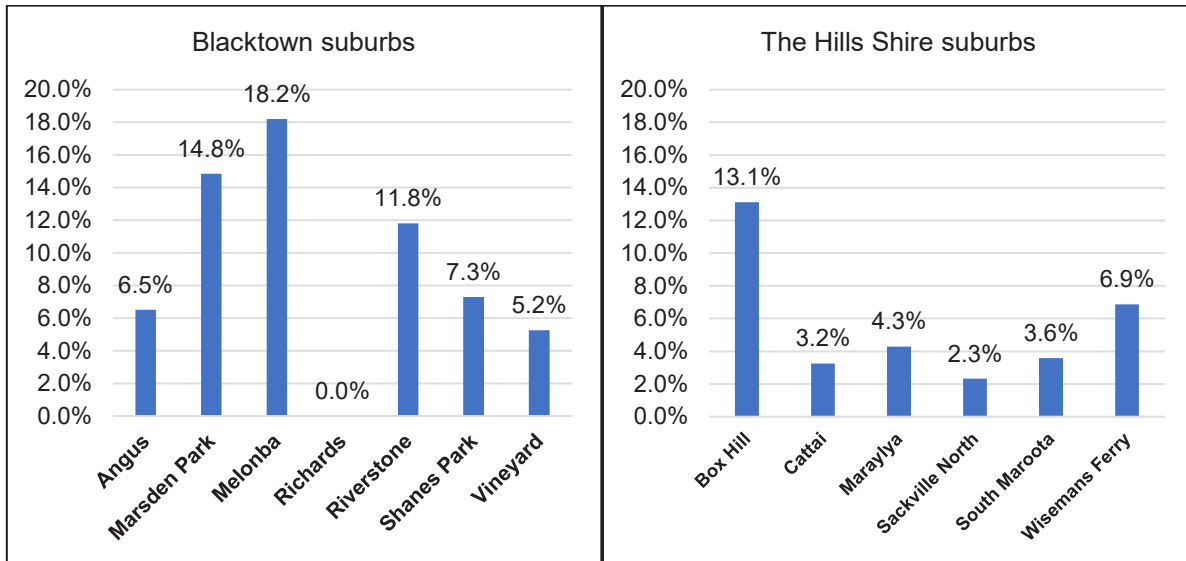
Of the 396,776 residents of Blacktown recorded in the 2021 Census, 79.7% were Australian citizens and 15.0% were not Australian citizens. In The Hills Shire, 85.4% of its 191,876 residents were Australian citizens, while 12.5% were not. Blacktown (15.0%) had a higher proportion of non-Australian citizens compared to Greater Sydney (14.7%) and NSW (11.2%). On the other hand, The Hills Shire (12.5%) had a lower proportion than Greater Sydney (14.7%) but had a higher proportion compared to NSW (11.2%).

The percentage of non-Australian citizens varied at the suburb level. Looking at the seven suburbs of interest within Blacktown, Melonba (18.2%) had the highest and Richards (0.0%) had the lowest percentage of persons who were not Australian citizens.⁵ Among the six

⁵ The ABS advises caution when dealing with small cells, stating, “Cells in this table have been randomly adjusted to avoid the release of confidential data. No reliance should be placed on small cells”.

suburbs of interest in The Hills Shire, Box Hill (13.1%) had the highest and Sackville North (2.3%) had the lowest percentage of non-Australian citizens out of its total population.

Figure 3. Percentage of non-Australian citizens, Blacktown and The Hills Shire suburbs, 2021 Census



Source: ABS 2021 Census of Population and Housing, TableBuilder Pro, Counting persons – place of usual residence

4.3.2 Top countries of birth

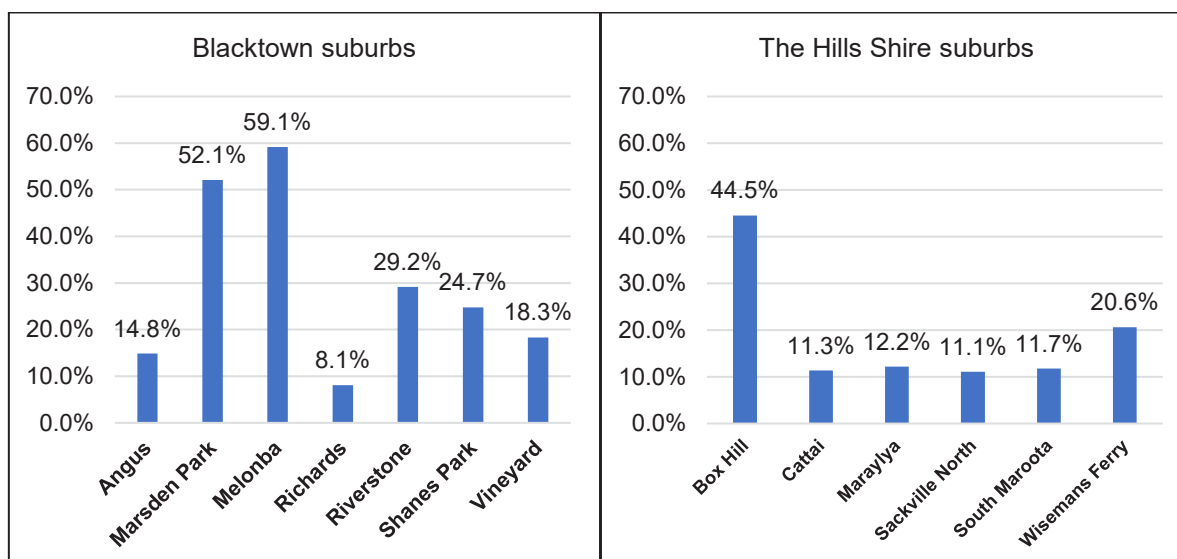
In the 2021 Census, The Hills Shire (57.5%) had a higher proportion of residents who were born in Australia compared to Blacktown (50.4%). Inversely, Blacktown residents (44.3%) were more likely to be born elsewhere or in a country other than Australia compared to The Hills Shire residents (40.3%). In comparison to Greater Sydney (38.6%) and NSW (29.3%), Blacktown and The Hills Shire had a higher proportion of persons who were born elsewhere.⁶

Other than Australia, Blacktown’s top countries of birth were India (11.9%), The Philippines (6.4%), New Zealand (2.1%), and Fiji (1.9%). Meanwhile, the top countries of birth among The Hills Shire residents were India (6.6%), China (excludes SARs and Taiwan) (6.4%), England (2.7%), and the Philippines (1.8%). For both LGAs, India was second to Australia as the most common country of birth; however, Blacktown residents were more likely to be born in India than The Hills Shire residents.

As with citizenship, the proportion of persons born elsewhere was different across suburbs within Blacktown and The Hills Shire. Almost six in ten Melonba residents (59.1%) were born in a country other than Australia. On the other hand, more than four in ten Box Hill residents (44.5%) were born elsewhere.

⁶ Counts here include those born in Australian external territories under categories such as ‘Norfolk Island’, ‘Australian External Territories nec’, and ‘Australia (includes External Territories), nfd’.

Figure 4. Percentage of persons born elsewhere, Blacktown and The Hills Shire suburbs, 2021 Census



Source: ABS 2021 Census of Population and Housing, TableBuilder Pro, Counting persons – place of usual residence

4.3.3 Languages used at home and proficiency in spoken English

In the 2021 Census, The Hills Shire residents (58.6%) were more likely to speak English only than Blacktown (47.6%) and Greater Sydney (57.3%) residents. However, NSW residents (67.6%) generally were more likely to speak English only.

Among all Blacktown residents, 30.3% used another language and spoke English very well, and 11.0% used another language and spoke English well. Meanwhile, 3.9% and 1.4% of Blacktown residents did not speak English well and did not speak English at all, respectively. Besides English (47.6%), the most common languages used at home in Blacktown were Punjabi (5.2%), Hindi (4.4%), Tagalog (3.8%), and Arabic (2.9%). Among the seven Blacktown suburbs, Shanes Park (3.1%) and Melonba (2.3%) had the highest percentages of persons who used a language other than English and did not speak English at all.

Since The Hills Shire residents were more likely to speak English only, it had smaller percentages of residents who used another language and either spoke English very well (26.1%), spoke English well (8.2%), or did not speak English well (3.2%). The Hills Shire (1.4%) had a similar percentage of people who used another language and did not speak English at all with Blacktown. After English (58.6%), the most common languages used at home in The Hills Shire were Mandarin (8.2%), Cantonese (3.4%), Hindi (2.8%), and Korean (2.1%). Among Box Hill residents, 1.2% used a language other than English and did not speak English at all. The rest of the five suburbs in The Hills Shire recorded a percentage of 0.0% of people in this category.⁷

4.4 Long term health conditions

‘Count of selected long-term health conditions’ is a new Census variable, which was introduced for the first time in the 2021 Census. Long-term health conditions included in the counts were arthritis, asthma, cancer (including remission), dementia (including Alzheimer’s), diabetes (excluding gestational diabetes), heart disease (including heart attack or angina),

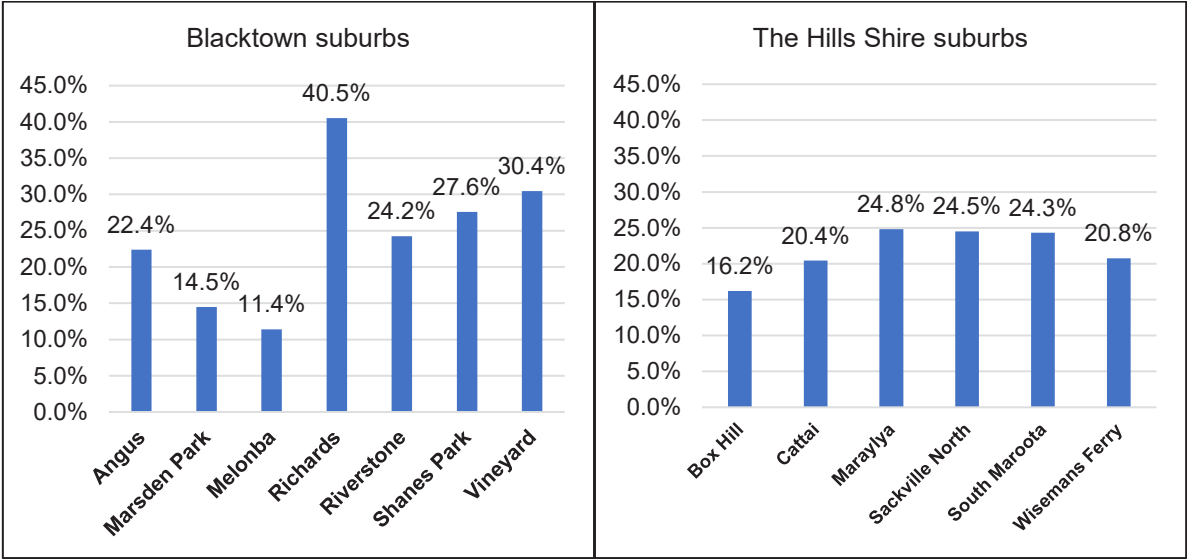
⁷ The ABS advises caution when dealing with small cells, stating, “Cells in this table have been randomly adjusted to avoid the release of confidential data. No reliance should be placed on small cells”.

kidney disease, lung condition (including COPD or emphysema), mental health condition (including depression or anxiety), stroke, and any other long-term health condition(s).

The Census indicated that 22.9% of Blacktown’s total population and 21.8% of The Hills Shire’s total population had one or more long-term health conditions. At the same time, slightly higher proportions of people were living with one or more long-term health conditions in Greater Sydney at 23.6% and NSW at 27.0%.

In the 13 selected suburbs of interest, proportionately (of each suburb’s total population), Richards (40.5%) had the highest and Melonba (11.4%) had the lowest proportions of people living with one or more long-term health conditions in Blacktown. In the Hills Shire, Maraylya (24.8%) had the highest and Box Hill (16.2%) had the lowest proportions of people living with one or more long-term health conditions.

Figure 5. Percentage of persons with one or more long-term health conditions, Blacktown and The Hills Shire suburbs, 2021 Census



Source: ABS 2021 Census of Population and Housing, TableBuilder Pro, Counting persons – place of usual residence

4.5 Education and employment

4.5.1 Level of highest educational attainment

The 2021 Census indicated that, out of each LGA’s population aged 15 years and over, 38.2% in Blacktown and 51.2% in The Hills Shire had completed at least a diploma level or above. Meanwhile, 43.0% and 20.7% had completed the same level in Greater Sydney and NSW, respectively.

In the 13 selected suburbs of interest, proportionately (of each suburb’s total population aged 15 years and over), Melonba (65.7%) had the highest and Richards (0.0%) had the lowest proportions of people who had completed at least a diploma level or above in Blacktown.⁸ In the Hills Shire, Box Hill (55.5%) had the highest and Wisemans Ferry (18.6%) had the lowest proportions of people who had completed at least a diploma level or above.

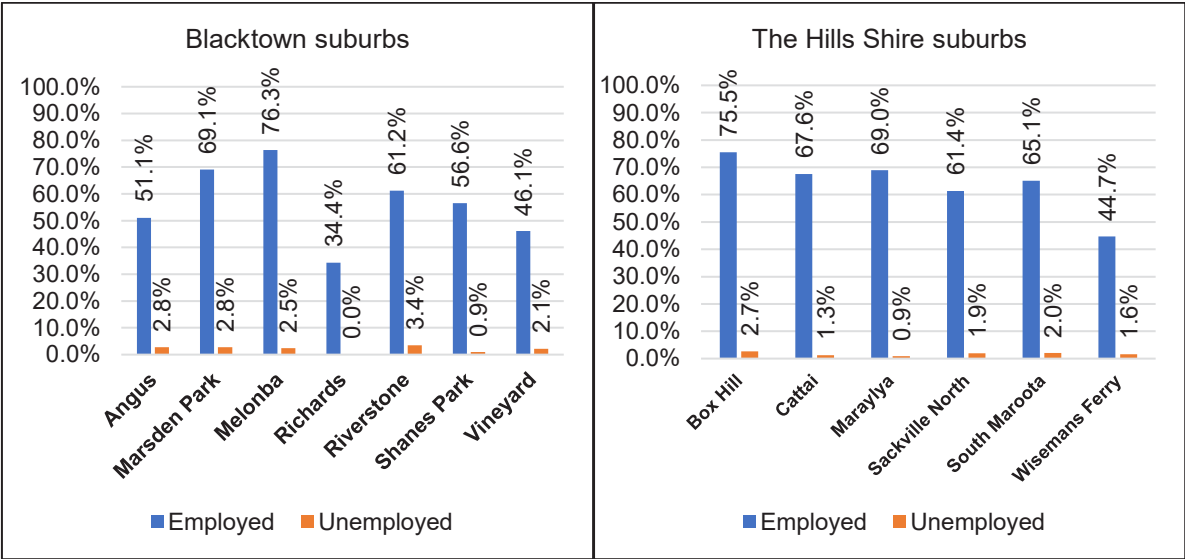
4.5.2 Labour force status

⁸ The ABS advises caution when dealing with small cells, stating, stating, “Cells in this table have been randomly adjusted to avoid the release of confidential data. No reliance should be placed on small cells”.

During the 2021 Census, there were a total of 306,652 persons in Blacktown and 151,212 persons in The Hills Shire of aged 15 years and over. Of this population, 57.0% in Blacktown and 63.8% were employed in The Hills Shire, whether full-time, part-time, or away from work. Meanwhile, out of persons aged 15 years and over, 3.5% in Blacktown and 2.7% in The Hills Shire were unemployed and looking for either part-time or full-time work. Within the same age group, 57.0% were employed and 3.0% were unemployed in Greater Sydney and 55.8% were employed and 2.9% were unemployed in NSW.

In the 13 selected suburbs of interest, proportionately (of each suburb’s total population aged 15 years and over), Melonba (76.3%) had the highest and Richards (34.4%) had the lowest proportions of people who were employed, either full-time, part-time or away from work in Blacktown. In the Hills Shire, Box Hill (75.5%) had the highest and Wisemans Ferry (44.7%) had the lowest proportions of people who were employed, either full-time, part-time or away from work. On the other hand, the highest proportions of people aged 15 and over who were unemployed were in Riverstone (3.4%), Angus (2.8%), and Marsden Park (2.8%) among Blacktown suburbs. Meanwhile, Box Hill (2.7%) and South Maroota (2.0%) had the highest proportions of persons aged 15 and over who were unemployed among The Hills Shire suburbs of interest.

Figure 6. Percentage of persons aged 15 and over who are employed and unemployed, Blacktown and The Hills Shire suburbs, 2021 Census



Source: ABS 2021 Census of Population and Housing, TableBuilder Pro, Counting persons – place of usual residence

4.6 Housing and income

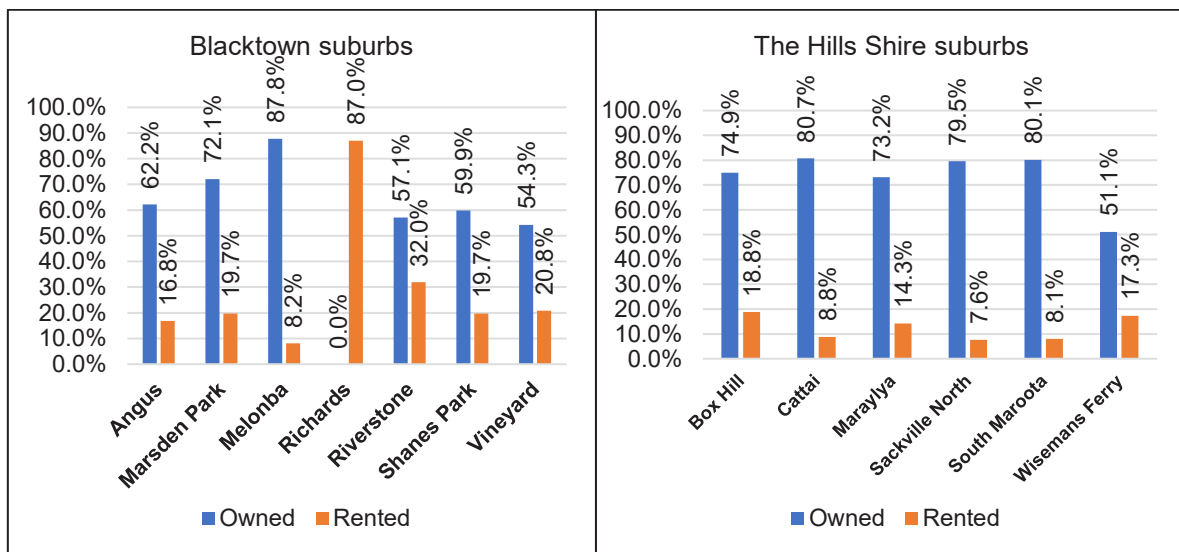
4.6.1 Tenure type

In the 2021 Census, there were 133,984 households in Blacktown and 64,080 households in The Hills Shire.⁹ Of all Blacktown households, 57.2% either owned their dwellings outright or with a mortgage. Meanwhile, 72.0% of The Hills Shire households fell into this category. This means that households in The Hills Shire were more likely to own their dwellings compared to households in Blacktown, as well as Greater Sydney (53.8%) and NSW (55.6%).

It follows that Blacktown households (31.3%) were more likely to rent compared to The Hills Shire households (19.2%). Blacktown had a higher percentage of renting households compared to that of NSW (28.5%) but a slightly lower percentage than Greater Sydney (31.9%).

Results at the suburb level reveal disparities in housing tenure within Blacktown and The Hills Shire LGAs. An overwhelming majority (87.0%) of households in Richards, a suburb in Blacktown, were renting. This is a stark contrast to Melonba, another Blacktown suburb, which only had 8.2% of all its households renting and 87.8% of its households owning their dwellings. Meanwhile, Box Hill (18.8%) had the highest percentage of renting households among The Hills Shire's six suburbs. Sackville North had the lowest percentage at 7.6%.

Figure 7. Percentage of owned and rented households, Blacktown and The Hills Shire suburbs, 2021 Census



Source: ABS 2021 Census of Population and Housing, TableBuilder Pro, Counting dwellings – place of enumeration

4.6.2 Weekly equivalised total household income

According to the ABS (2021c), “Equivalised total household income is household income adjusted by the application of an equivalence scale to facilitate comparison of income levels between households of differing size and composition”.

Among all Blacktown households, almost half (47.9%) recorded a weekly equivalised household income of at least \$1,000. The most common income brackets were \$1,000-\$1,249 (12.0%), \$1,250-\$1,499 (9.6%), and \$800-\$999 (9.3%). Among the seven Blacktown suburbs, there were no households in Richards that was recorded to have a weekly equivalised income

⁹ Section 4.6 is based on the place of enumeration.

of at least \$1,000, making this the lowest percentage. Melonba (74.6%) had the highest percentage.

Out of all households in The Hills Shire, more than six in ten (62.5%) recorded a weekly equivalised household income of at least \$1,000. The most common income brackets for households in The Hills Shire were \$2,000-\$2,499 (11.7%), \$1,000-\$1,249 (9.8%), and \$1,250-\$1,499 (9.1%). Of the six suburbs in The Hills Shire, Wisemans Ferry (35.3%) had the lowest percentage of households with a weekly equivalised income of at least \$1,000. Box Hill (70.2%) had the highest percentage.

4.6.3 Monthly mortgage repayments and mortgage affordability

Among all applicable households in Blacktown (52,088), 39.1% paid at least \$2,600 monthly for their mortgage.¹⁰ The most common mortgage repayment range for Blacktown was \$3,000-\$3,499, accounting for 13.6% of all applicable households. This was followed by \$2,000-\$2,199 (10.2%) and \$2,600-\$2,799 (7.5%). Among the seven Blacktown suburbs, Melonba households (64.7%) were most likely to pay at least \$2,600 monthly for their mortgage.

Meanwhile, among all applicable households in The Hills Shire (27,646), 56.5% paid at least \$2,600 monthly for their mortgage. In addition, 14.3% of applicable households had monthly mortgage repayments of \$3,000-\$3,499, making this the most common repayment range. This was followed by \$4,000-\$4,999 (13.4%) and \$5,000 and over (12.7%). Among the six suburbs in The Hills Shire, Sackville North (81.6%) was most likely to pay at least \$2,600 monthly for their mortgage.

Mortgage affordability was roughly similar in both LGAs, but there was some variation at the suburb level. Among all applicable households, 18.0% in Blacktown and 18.8% in The Hills Shire, respectively, had mortgage repayments that were more than 30% of their household income. Angus (25.8%) had the highest percentage of applicable households in this category among the seven Blacktown suburbs. Meanwhile, Wisemans Ferry (34.5%) had the highest percentage out of the six suburbs in The Hills Shire.

4.6.4 Weekly rent payments and rent affordability

Applicable Blacktown households (41,877) commonly paid \$550-\$649 (12.1%), \$400-\$424 (10.6%), and \$350-\$374 (8.8%) for their weekly rent.¹¹ Of the applicable households in Blacktown, 37.0% paid at least \$450 weekly for rent. Among the seven suburbs in Blacktown, Melonba (100.0%) was most likely to pay at least \$450 weekly for rent.

For all applicable households in the Hills Shire (12,281), the most common weekly rent ranges were \$550-\$649 (28.2%), \$650-\$749 (17.3%), and \$500-\$524 (8.0%). Of the applicable households in The Hills Shire, 80.8% paid at least \$450 for their weekly rent, which is much

¹⁰ This computation excludes households in the 'Not applicable' category: 'Unoccupied private dwellings', 'Visitor only households', 'Non-private dwellings', 'Migratory, off-shore and shipping SA1s', 'Other non-classifiable dwellings', 'Tenure type (TEND) - Owned outright, Rented, Occupied rent-free, Occupied under a life tenure scheme, Other tenure type, Not stated, Not applicable'. For more information, refer to: <https://www.abs.gov.au/census/guide-census-data/census-dictionary/2021/variables-topic/housing/mortgage-affordability-indicator-maid>

¹¹ This computation excludes households in the 'Not applicable' category: 'Unoccupied private dwellings', 'Visitor only households', 'Non-private dwellings', 'Migratory, off-shore and shipping SA1s', 'Other non-classifiable dwellings', 'Tenure type (TEND) - Owned outright, Occupied rent-free, Occupied under a life tenure scheme, Other tenure type, Not stated, Not applicable'. For more information, refer to: <https://www.abs.gov.au/census/guide-census-data/census-dictionary/2021/variables-topic/housing/rent-affordability-indicator-raid>.

higher than Blacktown's figure. Among the six suburbs in The Hills Shire, Box Hill (90.7%) was most likely to pay at least \$450 weekly for rent.

As with mortgage affordability, rent affordability varied at the suburb level but was somewhat similar at the LGA level. Among applicable households, 31.1% in Blacktown and 29.9% in The Hills Shire had rent payments that were more than 30% of their household income. Meanwhile, among the seven Blacktown suburbs, Richards had the highest percentage, with more than half (57.1%) of its renting households falling into this category. On the other hand, Wisemans Ferry (55.0%) had the highest percentage among the six suburbs in The Hills Shire. Wisemans Ferry also had the highest percentage of applicable households with mortgage repayments more than 30% of their household income.

4.7 Index of Relative Socio-economic Advantage and Disadvantage (IRSAD)

The Index of Relative Socio-economic Advantage and Disadvantage or IRSAD provides information on the economic and social conditions of people and households within an area by including both relative advantage and disadvantage measures. A low score or decile indicates a relatively greater disadvantage and lack of advantage, whereas a high score or decile indicates a relative lack of disadvantage and greater advantage.

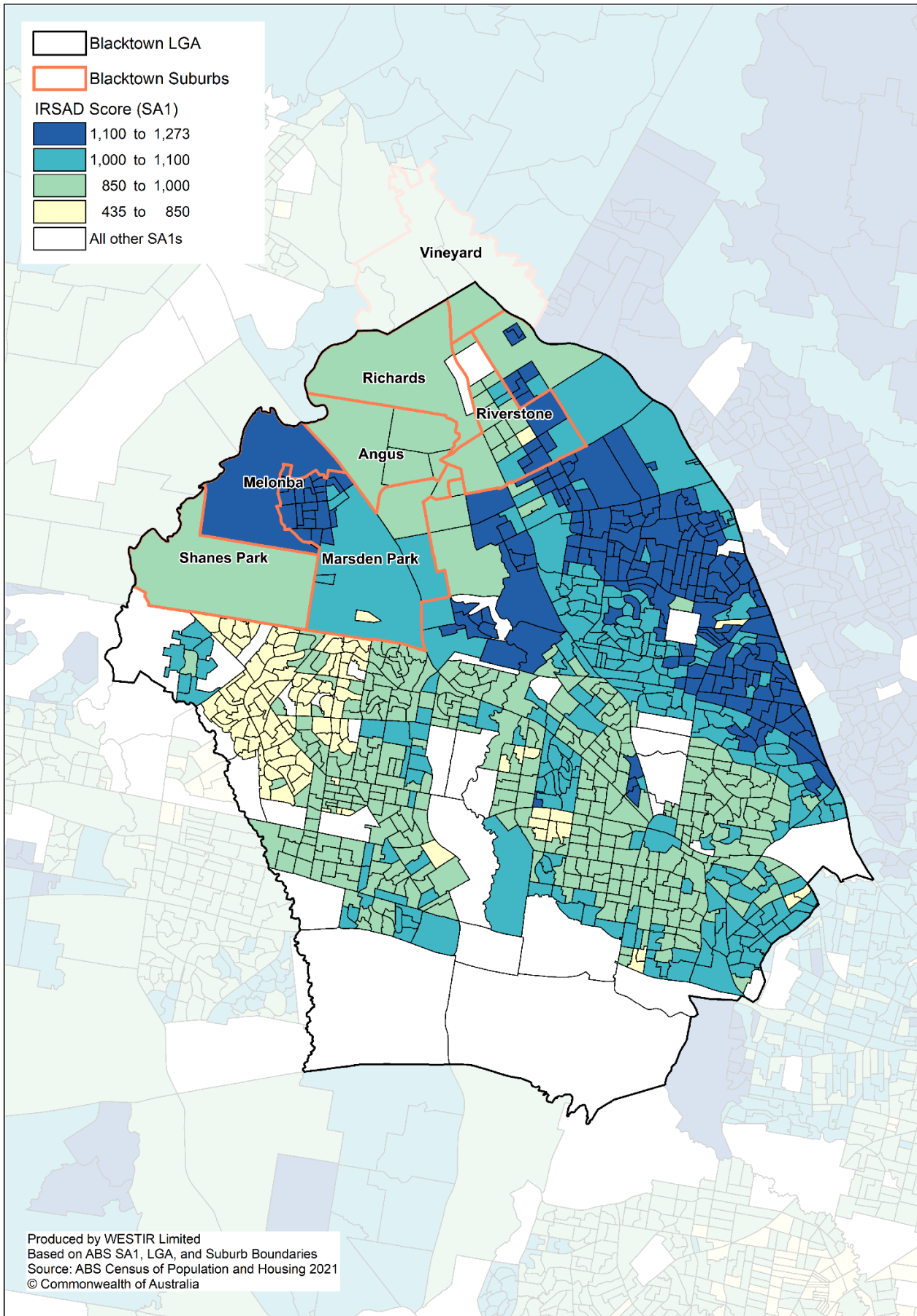
In the 2021 Census, Blacktown recorded an IRSAD score of 1,006 and fell into the 8th decile out of all LGAs in Australia. This means that it had a higher IRSAD score than 70% of suburbs in Australia. On the other hand, The Hills Shire recorded a score of 1,136 and fell into the 10th decile in relation to all LGAs in Australia. This indicates that The Hills Shire's IRSAD score was higher than 90% of all LGAs in the country. Furthermore, The Hills Shire had a higher lack of disadvantage and greater advantage compared to Blacktown.

Map 3 shows the IRSAD scores of Statical Areas Level 1 or SA1s in Blacktown LGA and the seven suburbs of interest.¹² From this map, it is evident that the level of relative advantage and disadvantage varies geographically within the LGA. SA1s in Melonba had IRSAD scores ranging from 1,100 to 1,273. SA1s in Marsden Park had IRSAD scores ranging from 1,000 to 1,100, and several had scores of 1,100 to 1,273. These indicate a relatively higher lack of disadvantage and greater advantage. Meanwhile, SA1s in Vineyard, Shanes Park, and Angus had IRSAD scores ranging from 850 to 1,000. Riverstone SA1s had more variation. One SA1 in central Riverstone had a score ranging from 435 to 850, indicating a relatively high presence of disadvantage and lack of advantage.

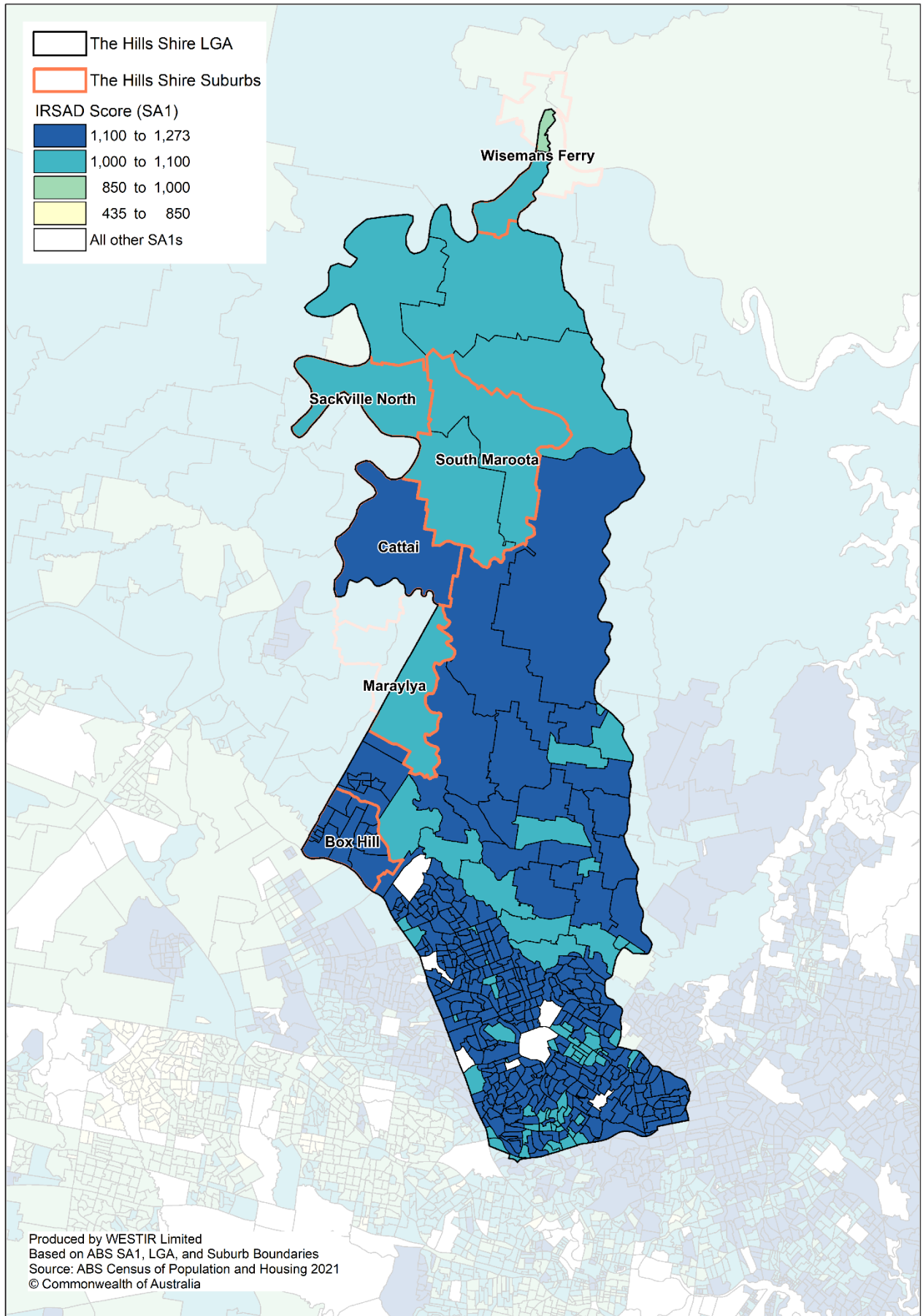
Map 4 shows the IRSAD score of SA1s in The Hills Shire and the six suburbs of interest within this LGA. Compared to Blacktown, it is evident that there is less variation within The Hills Shire in terms of IRSAD scores. The majority of the SA1s recorded a score between 1,100 and 1,273, indicating a relatively higher lack of disadvantage and greater advantage. This applies to SA1s in Box Hill and Cattai. The remaining SA1s, including those in Sackville North, South Maroota, Maraylya, and Wisemans Ferry scored between 1,000 to 1,100. Although outside the borders of The Hills Shire LGA, there are SA2s within the Wisemans Ferry suburb that scored between 850 to 1,000, lower than their counterparts in The Hills Shire LGA.

¹² According to the ABS, 'Statistical Areas Level 1 (SA1) are geographical areas built from whole Mesh Blocks. Whole SA1s aggregate to form Statistical Areas Level 2 (SA2) in the Australian Statistical Geography Standard (ASGS) Main Structure.'
[https://www.abs.gov.au/ausstats/abs@.nsf/Lookup/by%20Subject/1270.0.55.001~July%202016~Main%20Features~Statistical%20Area%20Level%201%20\(SA1\)~10013#:~:text=Statistical%20Areas%20Level%201%20\(SA1,Standard%20\(ASGS\)%20Main%20Structure.](https://www.abs.gov.au/ausstats/abs@.nsf/Lookup/by%20Subject/1270.0.55.001~July%202016~Main%20Features~Statistical%20Area%20Level%201%20(SA1)~10013#:~:text=Statistical%20Areas%20Level%201%20(SA1,Standard%20(ASGS)%20Main%20Structure.)

Map 3. IRSAD SA1 scores, Blacktown, 2021 Census



Map 4. IRSAD SA1 scores, The Hills Shire, 2021 Census

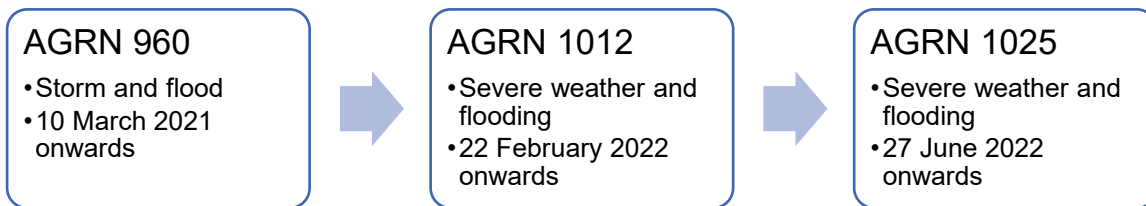


5. Disaster resilience profiles

5.1 Disaster history and access to support

Since 1 July 2020, three disasters have impacted Blacktown and The Hills Shire LGAs as officially declared by the NSW Government (NSW Government, 2023a). The storm and flood in March 2021 were later followed by severe weather and flooding in February 2022 and again in June 2022. Once disaster declarations are issued by the NSW Government, along with an Australian Government reference number (AGRN), impacted communities can access support and assistance.

Figure 8. Blacktown and The Hills Shire disaster history



Amid these disasters, residents of Blacktown and The Hills Shire were able to access supports such as Australian Government Disaster Recovery Payments (AGDRPs), concessional loans, Disaster Recovery Allowance (DRA), landholder grants, primary producer grants, and small business grants. Table 2 shows the total number and value of applications approved in Blacktown and The Hills Shire LGAs per payment type since 01 July 2020.

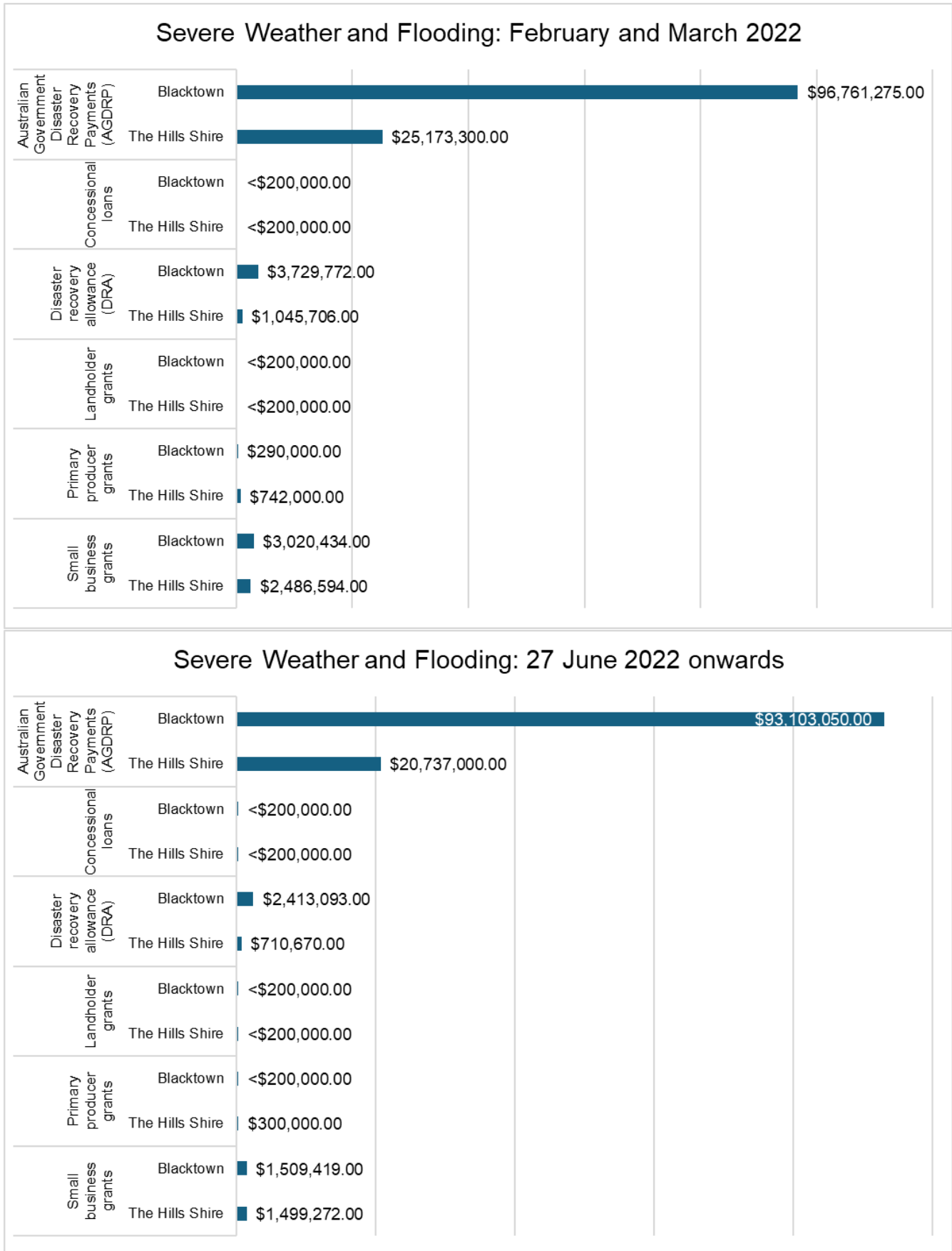
Table 2. Total number and value of applications approved since 01 July 2020

LGA	Blacktown		The Hills Shire	
	Applications Approved (no.)	Applications Approved (\$)	Applications Approved (no.)	Applications Approved (\$)
AGDRP	187,892	218,406,325.00	44,478	50,191,900.00
Concessional loans	-	-	-	-
DRA	1,622	6,243,689.00	506	1,871,678.00
Disaster relief grants	18	<200,000	<5	<200,000
Landholder grants	<5	<200,000	<5	<200,000
Primary producer grants	9	356,500.00	18	1,198,500.00
Small business grants	397	6,081,538.00	261	4,681,508.00
Supplementary - AGDRP	-	-	-	-
Top-Up - DRA	-	-	-	-

Source: National Emergency Management Agency, Local Government Area Profiles, 2024, <https://nema.gov.au/data>

Figure 9 shows the total value of applications approved for two severe weather and flooding disasters in 2022, February and March 2022 (AGRN 1012) and June 2022 (AGRN 1025).

Figure 9. Total value of applications approved for selected 2022 disasters



In the February and March 2022 disaster, supplementary AGDRPs (<\$20,000.00) and top-up DRAs (<\$20,000.00) were also approved for both LGAs.

5.2 Disaster resilience factor groups

Recent disasters emphasise the importance of local resilience. The BNHCRC (2020) measures disaster resilience, adaptive capacity, and coping capacity of geographies across Australia. The BNHCRC also examines eight factors (see Table 3) and identifies whether these are strengths or barriers to disaster resilience for specific geographies. All SA2s in Australia were then divided into five groups with unique disaster resilience profiles. Map 5 shows the factor groups of SA2s within Blacktown and The Hills Shire suburbs.

The majority of SA2s within the Blacktown suburbs of interest, excluding Vineyard, were classified under Group 1 (see Table 3). This group is characterised by relatively better access to economic, physical, and government infrastructure but has limited social capital. As seen in Table 3, Group 1 had a high score for emergency services and moderate scores for economic capital, planning and the built environment, information access, and governance and leadership. It scored low for social character, community capital, and social and community engagement. Group 1 also recorded a median disaster score of 0.4787 (0 being the lowest disaster resilience score, 1 being the highest disaster resilience score).

SA2s within The Hills Shire suburbs of interest, with Box Hill as an exception, and SA2s within Vineyard fell under Group 2 (see Table 3). This group is almost the exact opposite of Group 1 in the sense that it had relatively better social capital but lesser access to economic, physical, and government infrastructure. As seen in Table 3, SA2s under Group 2 scored high for social character, community capital, and social and community engagement and fared moderately for economic capital, emergency services, planning and the built environment, and governance and leadership. However, they scored in terms of information access. Group 2 also had a median disaster score of 0.5731.

SA2s within Box Hill, on the other hand, mostly fell into Group 4. This group scored high for economic capital, community capital, and governance and leadership. Meanwhile, it fared moderately for all other factors. Group 4 also had a median disaster score of 0.7020, which indicates relatively high disaster resilience. Data from the BNHCRC demonstrates the strengths and barriers to disaster resilience for Blacktown and The Hills Shire suburbs.

Map 5. Blacktown and The Hills Shire SA2s' disaster resilience factors groups

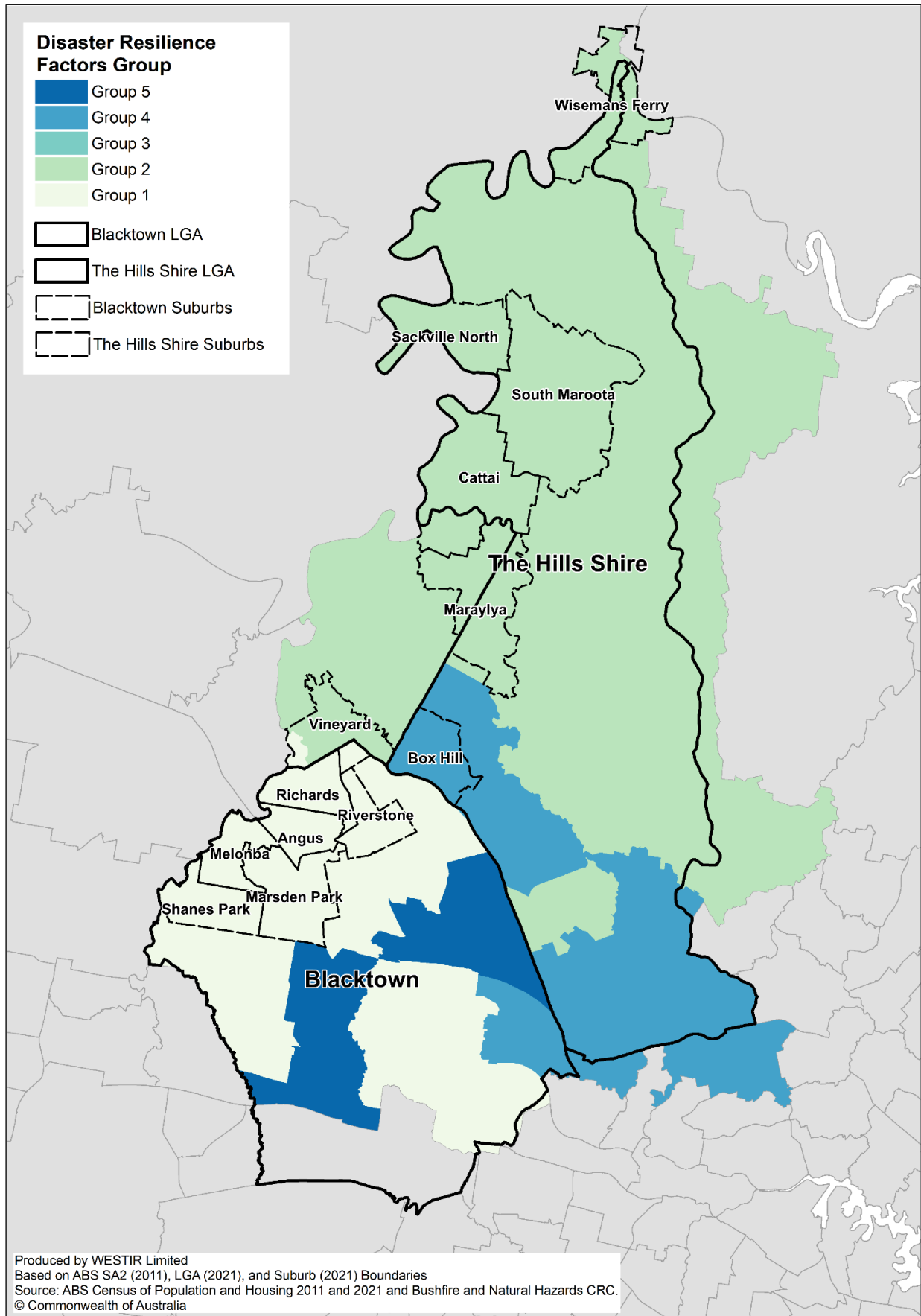


Table 3. Disaster resilience factors groups and scores

Regions	Group	Social character	Economic capital	Emergency services	Planning and the built environment	Community capital	Information access	Social and community engagement	Governance and leadership
Blacktown									
Angus	1	Low	Moderate	High	Moderate	Low	Moderate	Low	Moderate
Marsden Park	1	Low	Moderate	High	Moderate	Low	Moderate	Low	Moderate
Melonba	1	Low	Moderate	High	Moderate	Low	Moderate	Low	Moderate
Richards	1	Low	Moderate	High	Moderate	Low	Moderate	Low	Moderate
Riverstone	1	Low	Moderate	High	Moderate	Low	Moderate	Low	Moderate
Shanes Park	1	Low	Moderate	High	Moderate	Low	Moderate	Low	Moderate
Vineyard	2	High	Moderate	Moderate	Moderate	High	Low	High	Moderate
The Hills Shire									
Box Hill	4	Moderate	High	Moderate	Moderate	Moderate	High	Moderate	High
Cattai	2	High	Moderate	Moderate	Moderate	High	Low	High	Moderate
Maraylya	2	High	Moderate	Moderate	Moderate	High	Low	High	Moderate
Sackville North	2	High	Moderate	Moderate	Moderate	High	Low	High	Moderate
South Maroota	2	High	Moderate	Moderate	Moderate	High	Low	High	Moderate
Wisemans Ferry	2	High	Moderate	Moderate	Moderate	High	Low	High	Moderate

Explanatory notes:

Disaster resilience factor group data from the BNHCRC are for SA2s (2011 Boundaries). Data in this table are extrapolated from Map 5, which shows SA2s within each suburb of interest. Factors with a “High” or “Moderate” score are considered disaster resilience strengths. Meanwhile, factors with a “Low” score are considered barriers to disaster resilience. For an explainer of these factors and groupings, including a list of all SA2s by group, please refer to this link from the BNHCRC: Complete List of SA2s by Group https://www.adri.bnhcrc.com.au/pdf/SA2s_ListbyGroup_ALL.pdf.

6. The Wellbeing Project

The Wellbeing Project: My Liveable Neighbourhood was a short-term, community-focused initiative funded by the WSPHN. The project prioritised communities in Blacktown and The Hills Shire LGAs who were impacted by the Hawkesbury Nepean floodplain and involved a wide variety of initiatives focused on individual and community wellbeing, carried out from August 2023 to February 2024.

6.1 Overview of initiatives

The Wellbeing Project focused on mental health and wellbeing in the communities that NWCS serves. With the goal of creating the best possible outcomes for community, the Wellbeing Project engaged critical stakeholders such as local councils, Reconstruction NSW, NSW SES, NSW RFS, and education providers, among others.

The key goals of the Wellbeing Project involved a focus on:

- Promoting community connection
- Supporting mental health
- Promoting an active lifestyle among community members
- Supporting disaster preparedness and readiness for extreme weather events
- Supporting those still impacted by recent floods
- Linking individuals to services and supports

These goals were achieved through the following activities:

- **Community events and festivals**
- **Therapeutic support** and access to mental health professionals
- **Health and wellbeing programs**, including fitness activities, sports, and creativity and wellness workshops
- **Community education opportunities**, focusing on disaster and hazard preparedness
- **Casework and brokerage** for flood-impacted individuals
- **Website creation**
- **Data analysis/consultation/evaluation**

Further detail on each activity area is provided below. Appendix 4 shows a complete list of events with the number of participants.

6.1.1 Community events and festivals



Photo 4. Spring fair, photo provided by NWCS

The Wellbeing Project was incorporated into NWCS initiatives and events, taking these as opportunities to build knowledge and share information on disaster preparedness. Two different spring fairs were held during the funding period, one in South Maroota and the other in Riverstone. These fairs combined family-friendly activities (e.g., music, rock climbing, jumping castles, food, etc.) with the presence of and information from essential support service teams, such as disaster services and other agencies.



Photos 5-8. Spring Fair events highlighting community engagement with NWCS and other community and disaster services, photos provided by NWCS

Similarly, a number of other community engagement initiatives were also undertaken. They were:

- BBQ community garden
- Community afternoon tea
- Community high tea
- Seniors social outing
- Cool centres
- Diwali event
- Christmas events



Photo 9. Diwali event, photo provided by NWCS

6.1.2 Therapeutic support

Therapeutic support was offered through counselling services for children as well as for adults. In total, The Wellbeing Project offered 138 occasions of service in the school and 33 occasions of service for adults through its counselling sessions. Therapeutic programming for children involved a school-based programme at Cattai Primary School, which is in the centre of NWCS's outlined area for flood affected communities. NWCS was able to offer a specialised counselling programme for children living in disaster affected communities. This programme was initially offered for one term, but NWCS secured funding for a second term to serve ten more children at the school. The case studies below highlighted how vital this counselling support was to the school children.



Photo 10. Play therapy, photo provided by NWCS

Case study 1

The 8-year-old female child was referred to a program for anxiety, which impacted her daily life, primarily at school. A child would experience severe panic attacks at the school gate each morning while saying goodbyes to mother. It was hard for her to go inside, and sometimes, she would stay there for a long time, with many teachers trying to help her feel better. This made it difficult for everyone, using up a lot of resources and time, and it was hard for her to focus on learning once she finally got inside. After consulting with family and school staff, a morning routine was developed. With the help of therapeutic intervention and new self-regulation strategies, the child began transitioning into school each morning without any tears or delay at the gate. Furthermore, by the end of week four, the child travelled to school by bus and reported feeling calm, settled and enjoying morning playtime. It has been reported that this has continued into the new year, with parents stating the program has resulted in 'massive improvements.'

Case study 2

Siblings aged 10 and 12 years old were referred to the program for generalised anxiety. After assessments and initial sessions were conducted, further concerns were highlighted, including trauma, disordered eating, self-harm and exposure to domestic violence. Through establishing trust and safety, both children could process their experiences, develop greater self-confidence, and cultivate skills and capacity to self-regulate and self-soothe. Both children reported feeling calmer, coping better, and enjoying having an outlet to express themselves freely. Additional supports were also extended to staff and family units to support children outside the school setting. Support included referrals to mental health services, domestic violence services, communication strategies, and risk assessments. Further, one of the two siblings continues receiving support into the new year.



Photo 11. Mental health artwork, photo provided by NWCS

health among younger generations. This was conducted with a total of 22 participants. The winning artwork was used as a cover for a journal given to young people receiving counselling support and included essential mental health contact numbers and the artist quote: “We each have a role to play in our community, even the nature that surrounds us. We are all unique but come together as one.” An award ceremony was also held, where local state government member, Warren Kirby MP, honoured the winner and finalists. Mr Kirby presented awards and prizes, emphasising community involvement in mental health awareness.

Additionally, a youth art competition was included as part of the therapeutic supports offered, timed for mental health month, with the theme: “We all have a role to play: Self-care, community, connection, inclusiveness, allyship”. This competition was available to young people studying in The Hills and Blacktown LGAs with a primary school and a high school category. It allowed participating young people to showcase their artistic talents while raising awareness about mental



Love in Life

Photo 12. Winning artwork, photo provided by NWCS

Therapeutic support for adults was provided through counselling for adults aged 25 years and above, which was offered at flexible locations but took place primarily at NWCS’s centre in Riverstone due to participating community members’ preferences. Multiple sessions were conducted during the project period.

6.1.3 Health and wellbeing programs

Several different health and wellbeing programs were carried out during the funding period¹³. These included the following free activities:

- ZUMBA Fitness Classes
- Dance Fitness Classes
- Creative Kids Playgroup
- Garden/Street Library
- Playgroup Program
- School Holiday Programs
- First Aid Training
- White Card Training
- Sound Healing Sessions



Photo 13. ZUMBA class participants, photo provided by NWCS

¹³ Activities were held on the indicated dates except for occasional cancellations or event postponements due to unforeseen circumstances. Please refer to Appendix 4 for a complete list of events and participant numbers.

- Art Activity – Clay Making Group Workshop
- Tech Tidbits: Digital Literacy Help for Seniors Sessions
- Mums and Bubs Information Session
- Pollinator/Love Bees-Ecology Workshop
- Community Pop-Up Events
- Art and Yarn Initiation – Community Consultation and Codesign



Photo 14. Community members gardening, photo provided by NWCS



Photos 15-17. Participants in health and wellbeing programs, photos provided by NWCS

6.1.4 Community education opportunities

Community education opportunities were pursued in a variety of contexts, such as disaster preparedness events, like the Fire/Flood Readiness event in South Maroota. Education was also integrated into community events, such as the Spring Fairs held in South Maroota and Riverstone, and other community activities – e.g., bringing firefighters to “Elara’s Playgroup”, as well as through direct community outreach – e.g., information tables in local shopping centres.



Photo 18. Firefighters at Elara’s Playgroup, photo provided by NWCS



Photo 19. Outreach via information table, photo provided by NWCS

6.1.5 Casework and brokerage

Casework and brokerage were provided for 29 people who were flood-impacted, recording almost 1,471 occasions of service. Although, casework sought to assist community members to access a range of flood grants, many individuals had experienced difficulties acquiring this and other much-needed government disaster support due to timing and other barriers to access. For a number of individuals, back-to-home grants have also expired.

Brokerage funds were also made available as part of the project, and these were used to try and assist community members in need to get back to where they would have been, had they not been disaster-affected. NWCS created a framework which provided clarity around how much money could be provided, for whom, and under what circumstances, while maintaining flexibility to help those most in need.

The case study below summarises how helpful casework and brokerage support was to one of the project beneficiaries.

Case study 3

Client A met with NWCS at the flood pop up shop in March 2022, to inquire about getting some clothing etc. due to impacts of the flood. The client was linked in with a caseworker. The client had moved to Riverstone, into a private tenancy a few months prior to the floods, not knowing their home and business was on a flood plain. A few months after moving in, their business and home flooded. They were a multigenerational home with 12 people living in the property at the time, with very complex needs, including mental illness, addiction, incarceration, children with additional needs and domestic violence. The client was ready to give up and move, as their home and belongings were destroyed, and she felt hopeless as their family received no support for previous natural disasters (floods) and she believed there was no government support or funding. The family had used their savings and current income to purchase what they could, and this had added additional burdens to them.

Throughout 2022, NWCS casework included essentials such as food, hygiene products, legal referrals for complex tenancy matters, NCAT proceedings and support, EAPA (water, gas and electricity), flood grant support and applications for both personal and business, material aid (clothing, shoes, white goods etc.), temporary housing assistance, multiagency support and advocacy with government services such as Resilience NSW, Service NSW, real estate and other services. Once the immediate needs were met, NWCS was able to support the client further and engage the client and her family in the services. The client engaged in financial counselling at NWCS. Further, the client and her grandchildren became active participants in a supported playgroup. The client was also able to deal with outstanding fines through Work Development Orders with NWCS. Over time, the client became a volunteer and supports NWCS's school holiday programs and other activities throughout the term. The client regularly attends local community events and has been an active community member since connecting with NWCS in 2022.

The Wellbeing Project was readily accepted by this client, as she indicated she has utmost trust in the team and their capacity to support her. Throughout 2023 and into 2024, the client has now removed herself and her young children from the multigenerational living arrangement, has left the partner and domestic violence. This has been a significant milestone for the client and her young child. This client has moved several times since the flood and is now looking to move back into the Riverstone area to be closer to supports. The impact of the floods has left her in significant financial difficulty. Brokerage from the Wellbeing Project assisted with car registration, food vouchers and school supplies as her daughter started Kindergarten in 2024. She has also received case management and mental health support. The client notes the engagement with the financial counsellor has

been extremely impactful and she now feels she has more control over her circumstances. Her life remains challenging, but she has a much more positive outlook and acceptance of her choices. She is now engaging in one of the NWCS' programs called Work Connect program to get work ready and secure some part time paid work. Her young child is thriving at school, and NWCS has seen significant developmental milestones when compared to early 2022.

This client has stated she has full trust with the NWCS team and is willing to engage when issues arise. This is important as it means she engages earlier rather than allowing things to build into crisis. Importantly, having a funding model that allows flexibility to tailor services to client needs has meant more time to work with the client and ultimately, NWCS has seen exceptional outcomes as a result.

6.1.6 Website creation

A page was created on NWCS's website to provide information on The Wellbeing Project: <https://nwcs.org.au/wellbeingproject/>. On this page, there is a section with information on how to prepare for disasters, quick links to relevant emergency services, and useful apps related to disaster preparation and other environmental hazards.

North West Wellbeing Project

Welcome to the exciting North West Wellbeing Project

My Liveable Neighbourhood!

We invite all community members to actively participate in this exciting initiative! From community festivals and outdoor fitness classes to support groups and eco-conscious initiatives, we have something for everyone.

What's Planned?

Community Festivals and Events, Therapeutic Support, Case Management, Access to Mental Health Professionals, Fitness Activities, Sports Events, Creativity & Wellness Workshops, Community Education, Disaster & Hazard Preparedness (Fires, Floods, Climate), Safety Measures, Leveraging Technology, Eco-Friendly Initiatives.

Join a range of field experts sharing knowledge and practical tips.

Building Community Connection!

Supporting Mental Health!

Encouraging Active Lifestyles!

Supporting Disaster Preparedness!

Linking Community to Services and Service systems!

WELLBEING PROJECT

My Liveable Neighbourhood!
Get involved in exciting programs and activities!
To learn more contact:
North West Community Services
02 96273622 / reception@nwcs.org.au

This program has been made possible by funding from Western Sydney Primary Health Network.

ONLINE SURVEY

WELLBEING PROJECT

Participate in Disaster Preparedness Survey by Scanning the Code

North West Community Services Inc. is conducting a survey to better understand community needs. Participants can receive Disaster Preparedness resources by providing contact information at the end of the survey. For more information, contact 02 96273622 or admin@nwcs.org.au.

This program has been made possible by funding from Western Sydney Primary Health Network.

Disaster Preparedness - How to prepare for disasters

Every day actions make a difference

RISKS THIS SEASON - An El Niño climate pattern has developed this season. El Niño increases the chance of a drier hot season. Take steps today to make sure you're prepared for an emergency.

3 steps to get ready

- Understand your risk** - Natural disasters impact people, destroy homes and damage roads and essential services. Understand your risk so you can be prepared for an emergency.
- Make your emergency plan** - Guidance on how to prepare your home, family or business for natural disasters, such as storms, floods, bushfires and heatwaves.
- Pack your emergency kit** - An emergency kit should be put together before a disaster happens. It can save you valuable time, if you need to leave your home or defend your property, and can help you survive.

Information courtesy Get Ready NSW website [click here for more information](#)

QUICK LINKS

Use the quick link icons below to be directed to NSW police, SES, RFS and Fire + Rescue.

HANDY APPS TO HAVE

HAZARDS NEAR ME NSW

Hazards Near Me shows current information about local emergencies, including flood, bushfire and tsunamis, and advice on what to do to stay safe. The app can send you push notifications when there are new incidents or when information changes.

Don't have a device that can download apps? View hazards on a desktop:

- Visit NSW SES for floods, storms and tsunamis alerts and warnings. <https://www.ses.nsw.gov.au/>
- Visit NSW Rural Fire Service for fire alerts and warnings. <https://www.rfs.nsw.gov.au/fire-information/area-near-me>

Hazards Near Me NSW

6.1.7 Data analysis/ consultation/ evaluation

To carry out the data analysis, consultation, and evaluation element of The Wellbeing Project, NWCS engaged WESTIR Ltd. to carry out data analysis, a literature review, and other evaluation activities, which are summarised in this report. Two elements of data collection included a Disaster Preparedness Survey, created by the team at NWCS, and an FGD facilitated by WESTIR Ltd.'s research team with NWCS staff, which provided an opportunity to learn from their experiences of The Wellbeing Project.

6.2 Impact of initiatives

Information on the impacts of The Wellbeing Project's initiatives was sourced from both clients who engaged with the project, as well as NWCS staff members who delivered the initiatives. Feedback was sourced via client feedback to NWCS staff and NWCS staff sharing during an FGD with members of the WESTIR research team.

WESTIR research staff used thematic analysis to explore the impacts that emerged from these data sources, including the FGD as well as the feedback from NWCS staff, which provided rich qualitative information on The Wellbeing Project's impact on the community. Key impacts of the project included the ways:

- a) **it addressed longstanding and ongoing needs** in the community;
- b) clients benefitted from the initiatives, as shown in the **community demand for sustainable wellbeing initiatives**;
- c) initiatives drew on and strengthened existing relationships with community members, demonstrating **the importance of relationship and place-based intervention** in effectively meeting community needs; and,
- d) it capitalised on NWCS's **flexibility and resourcefulness as a community-based organisation** to tailor services to individuals' needs.

These themes are outlined in depth below;

6.2.1 Addressing longstanding and ongoing needs

A key impact that The Wellbeing Project made was that its programming met longstanding needs in the more remote and underserved communities that NWCS serves in the north of the Blacktown and The Hills Shire LGAs. One of the staff commented:

There are no services in the northern suburbs of the Hills. The neighbourhoods are geographically isolated from town centres. People accessing programs at South Maroota were coming from the whole catchment. We used this opportunity to seek feedback, ascertain needs and provide information.

Therapeutic support initiatives in particular addressed longstanding community needs for mental health services:

We have seen a lot of unmet needs and significant demand for services, especially for the therapeutic program. People are desperate for child and youth practitioners; they are very hard to find. Some families have been able to get onto wait lists, and there is a long wait, which isn't responsive to meet the needs, and some can't afford the gap fees. Mental health is a really big issue in our neighbourhoods.

In addition, the services provided by The Wellbeing Project "are plugging gaps in the system and then trying to help people get into where else might be suitable for them, but for some (...) there isn't anything". The Wellbeing Project's initiatives appeared to be spot on in terms of

identifying and providing effective ways of meeting community needs. Indeed, as one staff member identified:

[W]e are not providing services to people who could be in the mainstream or are able to access mainstream. So it's really looking at the gaps. Who's missing out? That's where the focus is on priority for the service that we're offering. And you know, for a lot of people, if they're needing ongoing specialist support, there's a real focus on making sure we hold them and support them until they get it.

Overall, The Wellbeing Project appeared to have at its core an emphasis on “construct[ing] solutions to problems rather than just doing more of the same”. Community members benefitted from this in multiple ways, including the fact that the child counselling services provided clinical psychotherapy specialised for children and young people, including play and art therapy, and “there's not a lot of practitioners out there qualified to do that”. As one FGD participant described, particularly when it comes to mental health interventions:

[It is] hard to find specialists willing to work with children and young people. That's a real gap that we see in our community (...) the area health services, (...) all have very strict tick boxes. If you go for a primary mental health care plan, there's out of pocket costs.

Unfortunately, due to the project and its funding being short-term in nature and having limited scope, the community needs which it addresses remain ongoing. One example of this, as shared in the FGD, is that, for the child counselling program at Cattai Primary School, the school principal was “very, very supportive [and] wanted to share this as a resource to his local schools and principals. But we [NWCS] had to say no” because of limited funding, and the fact that The Wellbeing Project’s limited term counselling initiative was, therefore, already at maximum capacity.

6.2.2 Community demand for sustainable wellbeing initiatives

Reflecting the fact that the community needs addressed by The Wellbeing Project are ongoing, many clients expressed a desire for even more of the same kinds of initiatives, as well as a wish for many of the project activities to carry on past the funding end date.

Related to the ongoing needs for counselling services at Cattai Primary School, “almost 50% of the school population registered interest to have their child placed into [The Wellbeing Project] programme”. To meet demand, as part of The Wellbeing Project, NWCS engaged a child-focused psychotherapist to be based there two days a week. Additionally, NWCS sought additional funding to continue the programme for a second term to meet demand. The need for more counselling services at this and other small schools in the region was further illustrated by the fact that Cattai Primary, and likely many other schools in the area, has a school counsellor who comes “one day every [four or] five weeks”. Additionally, although “[the school counsellors] want to help the kids. They just have so much other stuff that’s on their plate”, particularly in terms of being “busy doing assessments and reports” and, therefore, not having time to do as much therapeutic work, which is a key need in disaster-affected communities.

Regarding the community events and festivals, an FGD participant shared that “the [South Maroota] community connected really well with the organisation, and they really love those two events and they keep asking for more”. Additional feedback from this community was that “[i]t's sad to say that the funding is coming to an end, so they are pretty disappointed with that, but they wanted to continue. There are very few services out there”.

Staff involved with other elements of The Wellbeing Project also reported that, “There’s a hunger out there for more [activities] and it’s not only (...) disaster management [information and activities]. It’s just that having something out there to do”.

6.2.3 Importance of relationship and place-based intervention

Another way in which The Wellbeing Project was able to positively impact the community through its initiatives was related to relationship-building and the significance of NWCS being a well-established neighbourhood centre offering place-based support to clients. Several staff working across a variety of The Wellbeing Project programming discussed how the trusting relationships they had with community members facilitated clients’ engagement with initiatives.

For example, when conducting surveys with individuals attending community events and festivals, many people expressed disinterest in sharing information due to being “over-surveyed” post-floods. However, a staff member involved in delivering this initiative shared that “we get them to do it in a nice way and that seems to have worked, and, again, going back to you know that locally based organisations, and they trust us, so they give information”.

Regarding adult counselling services, a staff member shared that they had offered to make services available at a location closer to potential clients to facilitate their access. However, in the end clients “were happy to actually travel down to [NWCS’s centre] (...) because now they know a place-based service (...) they have that confidence, and that bridge is being built up”.

Another FGD participant observed more broadly how, once community members felt connected with NWCS, it was easy to holistically address their varied needs. The relational and place-based approach to service delivery is highlighted by the following quote:

People may connect with us initially for one specific service/program. That is the opportunity to start building relationships, and we can start to connect to a range of other supports as identified by people. People quickly figure out this is a place they can trust, and that we care because our approach is person centred. They also see we follow up and strive to get results. So, what started as joining a Zumba class, for example, became an opportunity to support someone through serious domestic violence.

When it came to counselling services for young people, NWCS staff were able to be relational in their approach and build trust with adolescents that then facilitated a higher level of “buy-in” to counselling and therapeutic supports on offer. While youth counselling is not within the scope of The Wellbeing Project, NWCS’s success in this space informed their approach to child and adult counselling:

[W]orking with young people, there can be some resistance, some avoidance. It takes time to build trust, to build rapport (...) and I have the luxury of being a bit more flexible. Because I’m not a private practitioner that’s charging \$220.00 an hour so I can, you know, jump through their hoops. (...) I can earn their trust for them to commit. (...) So I think that’s definitely a strength in this programme.

On the whole, NWCS as a centre appeared to be perceived by communities as a place where individuals could come and receive both support and connection, in times of disaster affecting the whole community, as well as in times of individual crisis. As one staff member shared of a community member who participated in The Wellbeing Project’s playgroup:

One of our supported playgroup clients said I’m not going to survive over Christmas without this group. We made friends here. We know people. We belong here, we are

welcome here. We know where to come if we need something". This client highlights why local opportunities are so important because it's about community connections. This is local place-based model that we talk about. If community doesn't have that, where do they turn?

6.2.4 Flexibility and resourcefulness as a community-based organisation

A critical element of NWCS's approach to carrying out The Wellbeing Project that facilitated their ability to build trust with community members was staff members' willingness and ability to be flexible and resourceful in their service delivery.

As a place-based community organisation, NWCS was able to adjust project implementation to meet community members' specific needs where more formalised service delivery had broken down and left individuals to fall through the cracks. For example, with counselling services, a staff member shared that she often saw young people give up on pursuing needed mental health services because of the wait time it took to access the right services:

So if they're ready today and it takes five weeks to see the right person (...) They're already done with it. They don't want to access anything. So, these two clients that I'm referring to, they work with me for that period and then they have someone that they're going to regularly while they're going through the process [of] doing the forms, meeting the psychiatrist, getting their referral, talking to that person or this person until they get into the [long-term] programme. And this specialist programme (...) does amazing work (...) But they don't take everyone. And it takes time to get in. (...) So those young people in the meantime, they need to be held, but in some capacity. So I'm really happy that a couple of my clients have gone into that specialist programme, and you know, obviously I can't be that specialist service for them for that area. They get specialist mental health support over a longer period of time.

The way in which NWCS's mental health staff was able to work with young people while they navigated the system and waited to access longer term services was something "most clinicians don't do" – a unique and important offering in the mental health space. As mentioned previously, youth counselling is not part of The Wellbeing Project. However, it has informed NWCS' approach to child and adult counselling, particularly in terms of engagement and person-centred practice.

One area of the project in which NWCS's flexibility made a meaningful difference to community members was in their approach to casework and brokerage. As one staff member shared:

We had 29 people who took casework support with this project. There are clients who have had a tough time with flood grants and have not been able to get them. We have offered a lot of advocacy, but the timing of this project was difficult as many of the grant's processes are now closed. The eligibility criteria was so prescriptive, and we had people that just couldn't meet the criteria, they are now really struggling. The system is so complicated, and we try to find alternative support opportunities for people to meet their needs as much as possible.

Related to this, staff were able to use the brokerage funding associated with the project and shared that it "has been fantastic and we have set up the framework around that. So we have some clarity around how much for whom, under what circumstances". This has allowed staff to work with clients to "really [demonstrate] what the need is and [think] about how will this best help this household".

This often evidences a systemic issue in disasters, that funding/grants are available on a short-term basis for those affected by a disaster, but the reality is that the funding closes and people are still negotiating with insurers, builders, etc., which often fall out of the limited timeframes. Therefore, they cannot access the funding/grants.

Another area in which the staff and project flexibility benefitted clients was, when providing therapeutic services, the way in which NWCS staff were able to meet clients where they were at and facilitate their engagement. As one FGD participant shared:

[The ability] to be flexible and (...) use expressive therapies is also a big bonus because not everyone can sit in front of someone for 50 minutes and talk. It's not always an option. So yeah, I think we're able to be more flexible and meet the need in a different way.

Furthermore, this flexibility was related to staff members' resourcefulness in making community events multipurpose to best serve the community. For example, when community members would attend programmes such as Zumba or cultural events, staff turned this into an opportunity to promote disaster preparedness:

[W]hen they come in for these programmes, that's where we give them the information. So for example, we also recently had a Diwali event in Elara and we made disaster preparedness pack[s]. So when they came to enjoy the event, they went back with that information, so we also tried to capture surveys at that time because then [we] get people interested in giving us that feedback.

Such flexibility and resourcefulness allowed NWCS staff to reach underserved communities and meet their needs in a way that prevented them from being overlooked. This could perhaps best be summed up as a holistic approach to caring for community, as described by one staff member:

So they [a community member] might access case management because they need advocacy with something, and then the young person comes and sees me. The parent talks to [NWCS staff member], then they come to the event. They're connected on a multi-level holistic basis as opposed to, you can do this application and get this much money and you're just a number in the system.

7. Community Disaster Preparedness Survey results

Since mid-September 2023, NWCS has conducted a survey on disaster preparedness as part of The Wellbeing Project, targeting clients and project participants. This survey contributes to the data analysis component of the project. A total of 157 persons have responded to the survey.¹⁴ The respondents were from 38 different suburbs, commonly from Riverstone (18.5%, 29), Marsden Park (12.7%, 20), Acacia Gardens (4.5%, 7), and South Maroota (4.5%, 7).

¹⁴ The survey rolled out on 18/11/23 at the Diwali event and 16/09/23 and 07/10/23 Spring fair events did not include the questions below. For these eight questions, the 32 responses from the 18/11/23 Diwali event and another 32 responses from the 16/09/23 and 07/10/23 Spring fair events are excluded from the computations.

1. How would you rate your knowledge about potential disasters that could affect your area?

7.1 Disaster risk and impact

The survey asked respondents, “Which types of disasters do you believe are most likely to occur in your region?”. This aims to assess self-reported disaster risk. Of the 93 respondents, 31.2% (29) indicated they were likely to experience both bushfires and floods, and 29.0% (27) indicated they were likely to experience floods in their region.¹⁵ Meanwhile, 25.8% (24) answered that bushfires were likely to occur in their region. The remaining provided other responses (3.2%, 3), no response (9.7%, 9), or did not know the answer (1.1%, 1). It is also worth noting that, out of the 93 respondents, 49 (52.7%) reported that they were somewhat or very knowledgeable about potential disasters in their region.

In terms of impact, more than half (62.4%, 98) of 157 respondents reported that they were not impacted by floods, bushfires, or any other disasters. Meanwhile, 18.5% (29) and 1.9% (3) of respondents were impacted separately by floods and bushfires, respectively. Three respondents (1.9%) were impacted by both. The rest did not respond (5.1%, 8), were impacted by disasters but were not specified (3.2%, 5), or chose “Other” (7.0%, 11). Respondents who described their experiences stated that “it was a horrible time” and there were “not enough people to assist”. One of the respondents lost their job and had to claim Centrelink payments until they secured employment. A respondent who experienced a severe storm said, “[...] Our bathroom roofs and ceiling collapsed, causing water damage to bedroom furniture and various household items”. Lack of access to childcare during a disaster was also raised as a challenge by another respondent.

7.2 Access to support

The survey also investigated the types of services accessed by the respondents, including barriers, needs, and information sources.¹⁶ For instance, out of all respondents (53) who answered the question, “Please describe any support or services you received that helped you cope with the disaster impact”, 17.0% (9) indicated that this question was not applicable to them and 15.1% (8) did not access any services. NWCS (17.0%, 9) was the most common response, followed by relevant government support (9.4%, 5), SES (7.5%, 4), and the community (3.8%, 2), local councils (3.8%, 2), and the RFS (3.8%, 2).¹⁷ Meanwhile, respondents commonly learned about support services through the local community, including friends, community activities, and local knowledge (21.4%, 12 of 56 applicable or non-empty responses), online platforms (17.9%, 10), NWCS (14.3%, 8), the news, including radio and TV (10.7%, 6), and government platforms (5.4%, 3).

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2. Which types of disasters do you believe are most likely to occur in your region? (select all that apply)
 3. How do you receive emergency alerts and warnings? (select all that apply)
 4. Are you aware of any community programs related to disaster preparedness?
 5. Where do you access information on disaster preparedness?*
 6. Have you received any formal training or information on disaster preparedness in the past five years? If Yes, who provided the Training?
 7. Have you developed a family or personal emergency plan?
 8. Is there anything else you would like to share regarding disaster preparedness in your community or personal preparedness efforts?

* Only the 16/09/23 and 07/10/23 Spring fair events did not include Question 5.

¹⁵ Counts for both bushfires and floods included responses that indicated both including another response. Other responses to this question included hail, earthquakes, storms, and heat waves.

¹⁶ Questions in this section are multi-response. Respondents can choose more than one option.

¹⁷ Other responses included legal aid, the police, mental health services, Windsor Country Village, and a church.

Out of all applicable responses (55) to the question “What barriers did you face when accessing support?”, four in ten (40.0%, 22) did not face any barriers. The most common barriers were not knowing what supports were available (32.7%, 18) and not meeting eligibility criteria (23.6%, 13). Other barriers were application processes being difficult (16.4%, 9), wait lists being too long (10.9%, 6), and services being unavailable (7.3%, 4).

The survey also asked about the types of support services respondents needed now. Out of the 94 respondents who answered this question, 52.1% (49) reported they do not have any need for support services. The remaining indicated a need for the following services: mental health support (13.8%, 13), bill assistance (13.8%, 13), essential household goods (11.7%, 11), family support (9.6%, 9), financial support (8.5%, 8), housing (7.4%, 7), other types of support (4.3%, 4), and employment support (3.2%, 3). Five respondents (5.3%) indicated that this question was not applicable to them.

7.3 Access to disaster preparedness information and training

Within this context, it is crucial to look at access to information and training related to disasters. When asked, “How do you receive emergency alerts and warnings?”, the top responses were TV (40.9%, 38 of 93), mobile phone alerts (38.7%, 36), and social media (32.3%, 30).¹⁸ Family and friends (25.8%, 24), radio (22.6%, 21), and the Hazard Near Me App (18.3%, 17) were other options chosen by the respondents. Only nine respondents (9.7%) reported that they do not receive alerts. One respondent (1.1%, 1) indicated that the police was their source of emergency alerts and warnings.

While emergency alerts and warning signs seem to be received by respondents, there remains a gap in terms of access to disaster preparedness information and training. For instance, 62.4% (58) of the 93 respondents were not aware of any disaster preparedness community programs. Only 25.8% (24) were aware of these programs, while 11.8% (11) did not respond to this question.

As for access to information on disaster preparedness, those who responded (92) indicated the following as their sources: online platforms (37.0%, 34), NWCS (10.9%, 10), news, including radio and TV (9.8%, 9), family, friends, and their community (8.7%, 8), government platforms, including Services Australia, Service NSW, and other agencies (5.4%, 5), their local councils (5.4%, 5), SES (4.3%, 4), their local fire services (3.3%, 3), and the Windsor Country Village, a retirement community (2.2%, 2).¹⁹

Similarly, more than seven in ten respondents (74.2%, 69) have not received formal training nor information on disaster preparedness in the past five years. Only 10.8% (10) received formal training or information. The rest (15.1%, 14) did not respond to this question.

Only 23.7% (22) of the 93 respondents developed a family or personal emergency plan, while more than half (59.1%, 55) have not. The remaining (16.1%, 15) did not respond to this question.

¹⁸ This is a multi-response question. Respondents can choose more than one option.

¹⁹ This is a multi-response question. Respondents can choose more than one option.

8. Project learnings and reflections

During the FGD that WESTIR staff held with members of the NWCS team involved in The Wellbeing Project, NWCS staff were invited to share their learnings from and reflections on the project. These are grouped into two broad areas: a) challenges and barriers, and b) place-based resilience and disaster response.

8.1 Challenges and barriers

- **Challenges of short-term funding and program instability** – Funding for and the creation of The Wellbeing Project provided an excellent opportunity to create programming that met community needs. However, the FGD also revealed that these needs were so large that funding for this project alone was insufficient to fully address the needs. Increased and/or consistent funding that would allow NWCS to expand and continue providing such services would be well spent, based both on NWCS staff observations and feedback they have received from community members and partners.
- **Time constraints and challenges in stakeholder engagement** – Building relationships with community stakeholders takes time. Many staff reflected that the project's short-term nature created time constraints that limited the potential effectiveness of some initiatives. This can also have a trickle-down effect for community members who use neighbourhood centre services, in that, when stakeholder engagement is necessary to procure resources for service provision (e.g., use of local club space, or referrals for NWCS activities), there can be delays in activity implementation. Additionally, when seeking to collaborate with sector stakeholders, staff reflected on how, despite individuals often desiring to work together and support one another within the sector, organisational agendas around work and resourcing made this difficult in practice.
- **Geographical considerations** – It was noted that on several occasions, community members were willing to travel greater distances to access services when these services, or centres, were familiar to them. This was an important reflection on the significance of relationship when individuals choose which services to access. Remoteness of a community has also initially impacted the level of engagement of communities, for instance, in South Maroota. While the South Maroota community was previously “slow to engage”, they now “want[ed] to continue” with the program given that there are “very few services out there”.
- **Challenges with non-local consultants in community programs** – Staff shared reflections on a recurring issue where larger organisations outside of the community frequently received government funding to carry out projects in the area. In these cases, as a locally-based organisation, they were often sought out so that groups coming in from outside could capitalise on their community connections, convenient location and local knowledge. Many NWCS team members shared that this felt like an inefficient use of resources, with one staff member reflecting that NWCS often had to “do the work” as non-local consultants often “didn't have connections in the community”.

- **Challenges faced by neighbourhood centres in meeting immediate needs** – Staff members shared how, during the recent flooding crises, there was an expectation from some community members that they at NWCS would be offering assistance to meet immediate needs. However, NWCS itself was experiencing urgent needs themselves and awaiting these to be recognised by SES by declaring their area a flood zone. As remarked by a staff member, there was an expectation from one of the community members that they “ha[d] to help” even if they “couldn’t do nothing”. Nonetheless, staff reflected on this as also being positive, in that they want to promote help-seeking behaviour in the community and are happy to be available as an initial “point of call” for individuals in need of assistance, often acting as an advocate to get them in touch with specialist services and engaged with local community. Also, funding to centres is grant based and have specific criteria for usage of those funds. Also, there are employment considerations to take into account. Centres are already stretched to meet community needs, so that when a disaster happens, they need to have access directly to the government released funds, as they have the connection to community. Centres do want to assist but do not have the resources to meet the expectations that communities have on them. Acknowledgement, is made that governments have invested in some centres to receive training in disaster preparedness but this, again, is time limited but should be ongoing.

8.2 Place-based resilience and disaster response

- **Trust, community connection, and resilience** – Fostering community connections and trust within the community builds resilience. As mentioned by one of the staff members, “Resilience is actually something that happens in neighbourhoods in community every day before the disaster strikes”. Another staff member remarked that “you can’t develop resilience in crisis”, and another mentioned how, although workshops and forums held after disasters are important, that is not the point at which resilience is built. This means that building these place-based relationships is a huge and critical investment not only to disaster response but also to resilience more broadly. Neighbourhood centres are well-placed to help foster these resilience-building relationships and sense of community by providing a space where community members from all backgrounds are welcomed to seek support and get to know one another. With the creation of The Wellbeing Project, NWCS staff discussed how it allowed them to carry out new programming and reach people with whom they would have been otherwise unable to connect.
- **Importance of place-based organisations for community support and disaster response** – Place-based organisations play a crucial role in building community connections, as well as providing community support and participating in disaster response. Despite the challenges faced by NWCS as a local organisation, staff members shared anecdotes of individuals and communities who have appreciated their initiatives as part of The Wellbeing Project. While neighbourhood centres work to fill in the gaps and community needs during post-disaster responses, it is important to acknowledge that they often do not get the funding to do so.
- **Valuing lived experiences in disaster response models and person-centred resilience building** – Trauma-informed and person-centred approaches promote positive outcomes, as they acknowledge the lived experiences of individuals and communities who have experienced adversity. One staff member commented that the NSW disaster model is “not about lived experience at all” and often follows a “one-

size-fits-all” approach. On the other hand, NWCS drew on their person-centred and trauma-informed philosophy, which is why their initiatives “worked”. As explained by one of the staff members, “Our philosophy is very different to how we engage, and I think that’s why when people start to work with us that experience is what builds their trust”.

- **Holistic approach and flexibility of The Wellbeing Project** – Neighbourhood centres often had to pivot to cater to the needs of their community, especially after disasters struck. As a smaller organisation, well-integrated in the community, NWCS was able to do this quickly and effectively. The FGD also brought to light NWCS’ holistic approach to community development. For instance, parents of young people who accessed counselling through NWCS also engaged with NWCS through other programs. Aside from community members having their basic needs met, one of the staff members remarked, “They have someone that they can speak to, their psychological and emotional needs. So, it’s that holistic framework. But also for us, it allows us to continue to connect [with] them”.

8.3 General reflections

Similarly, WESTIR received the raw data from NWCS, which provides overview of various aspects concerning community engagement initiatives and challenges faced during the project. It encompasses critical points such as the population explosion in flood-affected areas, distrust in government services, the impact of urban design on climate risks, successful community empowerment initiatives, high demand for services like child counselling, and challenges in sustaining programs due to short funding durations. These insights shed light on the NWCS efforts and feature the importance of ongoing support and engagement within the communities. These reflections stem from the interactions with The Wellbeing Project beneficiaries throughout various project activities, with some of the key reflections being shared by the project participants themselves. Please refer to Appendix 3 for a comprehensive list of these reflections.

In addition, to the insights above, reflections on The Wellbeing Project has been further highlighted through local media coverage. This media exposure not only amplifies the relevance of The Wellbeing Project but also underscores its significance within the local community. For detailed coverage, please refer to Appendix 1 and Appendix 2 for further insights.

9. Conclusion and recommendations

Recent disasters in NSW have emphasised the crucial role of community organisations. Not only do community organisations act as intermediaries between their communities and external organisations, but they also fill in the gaps in disaster recovery by providing informal support. These organisations draw on their local knowledge of their communities, established by long-term trust in the community and relationship building.

NWCS, through The Wellbeing Project, is an example of how community organisations work to support their communities amidst disasters. As part of the project, NWCS implemented a wide range of initiatives, seeking to promote community connection, improved mental and physical health, and disaster preparedness and recovery. Over the short project period, The Wellbeing Project has assisted local communities by addressing longstanding and ongoing community needs, showing the importance of relationship and place-based intervention in addressing community demand, and adapting flexibly to tailor services to individuals' needs. The community beneficiaries expressed a strong desire for the continuity of such initiatives.

Informed by findings from this research, this report concludes and puts forward the following five recommendations:

Recommendation 1

The literature highlighted how community organisations had led disaster responses and contributed significantly to improving community resilience across different disasters in Australia. Hence, place-based community organisations should be well-represented in disaster management and planning spaces. This is due to their long-established local knowledge, their experiences in disaster responses, and their capacity to adapt to the needs of their communities. Unfortunately, often these organisations 'lacked a voice at the [...] table' (Donnarumma et al., 2023, p. iv) even though they are the front line of disaster responses.

Recommendation 2

Analysing disaster resilience profiles across Blacktown and The Hills Shire SA2s through BNHRC has shown the nuanced strengths and barriers within each locality. It indicated the importance of local resilience-building strategies. Likewise, these groupings suggest the importance of developing targeted interventions and resource allocation in disaster planning and preparedness efforts in these regions. These findings also highlight the importance of social capital, a facet of disaster infrastructure, along with other 'softer' types of infrastructure, often overlooked.

Recommendation 3

Data-driven strategies are crucial to disaster resilience. The 2021 Census revealed the locations of the most culturally and linguistically diverse communities across the 13 suburbs of interest in the Blacktown and The Hills Shire LGAs. Results of the survey implemented by NWCS also underscore the gaps in access to disaster preparedness information and training. Such varying demographic features can affect the disaster response and recovery of the communities; hence, tailored and localised approaches are essential in disaster planning, response, and recovery efforts.

Recommendation 4

Long-term funding is needed for long-term disaster recovery and resilience, even though short-term or project-based funding has its benefits. The Wellbeing Project exemplifies that much can be achieved when resources are targeted into communities and community organisations. However, reliance on short-term funding models will not be enough to tackle the complex and systemic impacts of disasters and build disaster resilience.

Recommendation 5

The Wellbeing Project epitomises what NWCS has emphasised over the last five years and is supported by research. As explained by one of the NWCS staff members in the FGD, local, place-based relationships and trust fosters community resilience and can provide more effective responses to disasters with reduced costs. Hence, it is suggested to prioritise investment in initiatives that foster local, place-based relationships and build community trust. This capitalises on existing local connections, avoids duplicating the work of identifying needs when bringing in external agencies unfamiliar with the community, and ultimately provides truly client-centred rather than bureaucracy-centred service.

10. Disaster resources

This section compiles disaster resources for community services and stakeholders from relevant government and non-government bodies.

Table 4. List of disaster resources

Title	Author or institution	Year updated	Description	Link to resource
Australian Disaster Resilience Index	Bushfire and National Hazards CRC	2020	This portal contains an interactive map showing the disaster resilience, coping capacity, and adaptive capacity scores of SA2s. Users can select SA2s within LGAs. This portal also examines strengths and barriers to disaster resilience within SA2s.	https://adri.bnhcrc.com.au/
Data portal	National Emergency Management Agency	No information	This portal contains an interactive map showing disaster affected LGAs, available funding, and disaster footprint. Users can also download LGA disaster profiles containing similar information.	https://nema.gov.au/data
Disaster relief and support	NSW Government	2024	This page compiles NSW Government support available to individuals and communities affected by disasters.	https://www.nsw.gov.au/disaster-recovery/disaster-relief-and-support
Disaster Welfare Assistance Line 1800 018 444	Mental Health Commission of NSW	2020	Disaster Welfare Assistance Line 1800 018 444 is for communities and individuals impacted by disasters. This page also compiles helplines for those in need of support.	https://www.nswmentalhealthcommission.com.au/
Emergency management resources	Australian Red Cross	No information	This page is a collection of emergency management resources.	https://www.redcross.org.au/emergencies/
Flood assistance resources	NSW Council of Social Service	2023	This page compiles flood resources for individuals and communities	https://www.ncoss.org.au/sector-hub/sector-resources/flood-relief-assistance-resource/
Get Ready NSW	NSW Government	2023	Get Ready NSW is a recent campaign by the NSW Government, which seeks to help prepare communities for disasters.	https://www.nsw.gov.au/emergency/get-ready
Map of flooding precincts and bushfire zones	Blacktown City Council	No information	This interactive map shows layers of flooding precincts with likelihood of floods occurring and bushfire zones.	https://maps.blacktown.nsw.gov.au/
Find Out My Flood Risk	NSW State Emergency Service	Current	This is an online tool that shows residents in the Hawkesbury-Nepean Valley their flood risk	https://www.ses.nsw.gov.au/51awkesbury-nepean-floods
North West Metropolitan	NSW Government	June 2023	This is the emergency management plan (EMPLAN) that is in compliance with the State & Rescue Management Act 1989	https://www.nsw.gov.au/sites/default/files/hoindex/2023-10/North_West_Metro_Regional_EMLAN_2023.pdf

Regional Emergency Management Plan	Resilience NSW	December 2021	This document outlines the responsibilities, authorities and mechanisms for disaster recovery in NSW.	https://www.nsw.gov.au/sites/default/files/2021-04/Supporting-Plan-Recovery.pdf
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Appendices

Appendix 1. Media coverage 1

COMMUNITY NEWS

South Maroota Fair

By DR KIM LOO

North West Community Services Inc. (NWCS) is a non-profit community organisation based in the Sam Lane Community Complex, Park Street, Riverstone.

Formally known as Riverstone Neighbourhood Centre, NWCS was renamed in March this year (2023) and is behind the Riverstone Family Medical Practice where I work. It supports a range of services including a Men's Shed and community garden.

On Saturday (September 16th) NWCS held a Community Spring Fair at South Maroota.

Present were all the services that help foster community, engage and support those who are vulnerable, help with preparedness for disasters and improve and nourish the community with more green spaces.

I spoke to Alex Blair from Maroota RFS who told me the summer is going to be hot and dry. And not that long ago there were serious fires.

He and his team are working with residents to make sure the community is well prepared. This community has not had a major fire in this area for 20 years. To find out more about being prepared visit the Rural Fire Service website www.rfs.nsw.gov.au and www.myfireplan.com.au

I spoke to Angela Van Dyke the CEO of North West Community Services about this wonderful organisation which works in multiple

ways to foster community well-being and disaster preparedness. This service has helped several of my patients.

CEO of Landcare Tulough Guerin was also there. The Landcare movement is an invaluable organisation which encourages a community-based approach to protecting and managing our resources. Our natural world is so important for our physical and mental health.

Our interests overlap as I do nature prescriptions and this does intersect with the work of Landcare. I prescribe time with nature for my patients such as a walk in a wooded area or gardening. It helps with psychological distress and improves general health. There are good studies in Australia with supporting evidence of this.

The SES and service NSW Service NSW were also present. As we have increasing heat waves and extreme weather. We need to have community preparedness and good disaster planning.

This fair was important because it gave an opportunity for our community to connect and



Angela Van Dyke the CEO of North West Community Services with Dr Kim Loo from Riverstone

find out what is available and accessible so that we can all plan ahead for any disaster.

North West Community Services has a full program of activities every week. To find out about regular programs and special events like the Spring Fair visit <http://nwcs.org.au>

The Hills to Hawkesbury welcomes articles for consideration. If you have been to an event in the Hills to Hawkesbury area that you want to write about submit it and a photograph to contribute@hillstohawkesbury.com.au

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Glenorie Probus Club Activities

Glenorie Probus Club has had another active period which included a wide range of activities. A visit to the Nancy Bird Airport Experience Centre was very informative as this is developing at a rapid rate and will have some impact on our area.

A weekend at Mudgee included a day at the Mudgee field day and a day in the historic town of Gulgong (the town on the first \$10 note). A very pleasant Christmas in July lunch this year was held on the Nepean Belle Paddle-wheeler cruising the Nepean Gorge. An enjoyable tour was undertaken to Mount Wilson to view the Autumn Colours. A visit to the Secret Gardens and Nursery at the Western Sydney University Campus which is operated by the North West Disability Services for individuals with special needs showed how disadvantaged people benefit from activities like this.

The Club meets on the at 11.00am on the 4th Wednesday of the month at Glenorie RSL. There is a different guest speaker of interest to members each month and members stay for lunch after the meeting.

New members are always welcome. Contact Wendy Black on 9653 1022 or email wendyireneblack@yahoo.com.au



Appendix 2. Media coverage 2

The Wellbeing Project: resilience - how do we build it?

North West Community Services have been at the forefront working with our emergency responders and wider community to provide as much support as possible, particularly through COVID lock downs and repeated floods. We learned some very important lessons along the way, which we have shared as part of numerous networks, webinars, international delegations and academic research. Natural Hazards Research Australia recently published, *Community Experiences of the 2022 Australian Floods*. www.naturalhazards.com.au/floods2022

We were pleased to be part of this important research because it highlighted some very important elements about community, connection, systems, and being able to respond to and overcome disasters.

We have been saying that resilience is about people and place. It's about the human connections in neighbourhoods, who we know, trust, ask for help, where we find meaningful activity and purpose.

Communities that have strong social connections, build stronger resilience indicators. Connected communities build a strong and united voice for change, they find ways to build investment in infrastructure, they have strong ambassadors/champions/leaders and they are comfortable giving support and asking for support when needed.

The research confirms what we know, that we need local, place based connections. We need safe spaces to gather, to share in learning, to give and take. Local neighbourhood community centres play a critical role in building community and resilience.

Our new initiative, *The Wellbeing Project*, has been funded by the Western Sydney Primary Health

Network. It aims to build on our local knowledge, test what we think we know, and aims to build more local connections, which enhances resilience in community, within the Hills and Blacktown Local Government Areas.

We do this by offering free access to:

- Building community connection
- Supporting mental health
- Encouraging active lifestyles
- Supporting disaster preparedness
- Linking community to services and service systems

Find out more about *The Wellbeing Project* by following our Facebook page and at nwcs.org.au/wellbeingproject/

Our concern this summer is for extreme heat, and we are working with Blacktown City Council to host Cool Centres again. For those struggling without air conditioning, or may no longer afford to run the air conditioning, people can come along, enjoy a cool space, socialise, play games, share a meal and connect with disaster-ready information in a safe and informal way.

So, *the Wellbeing Project* is all about community connections, activity supporting mental and physical health, working with preparedness activity and finding our voice to build change for better systems into the future.

By building local connections in our neighbourhoods, we build the capacity of our community, and that is how we build resilience!

If you would like more information, or to connect with North West Community Services Inc Phone: 9627 3622; email reception@nwcs.org.au www.facebook.com/northwestcommunityservices/ Visit www.nwcs.org.au



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Appendix 3. Details on general reflections

<p>1. Population Explosion: Lots of new people moving into new estates who would not be aware of their risk. Population growth has been so high, so many people to reach without resourcing. Our north west region is geographically large, and flood affected communities across Blacktown and Hills are diverse and spread far apart.</p>
<p>2. Many clients lack trust in government services due to experiences such as prolonged difficulty in accessing assistance during the 2022 flood. They faced continual rejection from grants, leading to frustration and distrust in the system. Clients felt government services were unavailable, lacked empathy, and had limited understanding. This resulted in reluctance to engage with available grants and government resources. Instead, clients relied heavily on community support networks. typically, they all communicate and will connect each other to NWCS and local supports etc. Disappointment with the government grant process deterred many from seeking assistance, depleting their financial resilience. Subsequently, clients struggled to afford basic living expenses, including bills and school costs. Duplication of services in the Hawkesbury area further complicated the process for clients, adding to their confusion when attempting to reconnect with assistance through NWCS. Clients found the process confusing and made it difficult when trying to re-engage with NWCS.</p>
<p>3. Urban design will be exacerbating climate risk/consequences.</p>
<p>4. NWCS delivered successful community engagement and empowerment initiatives through PHN Funding. Clients were impressed by the flexibility of the wellbeing project, allowing them to request support tailored to their specific needs. They appreciated the diverse funding options available and the strong engagement across various programs. Initiatives funded by the PHN facilitated well-designed community events and programs, raising awareness about emergency preparedness, and facilitating learning on various topics. These events also provided opportunities for community cohesion and enjoyment. The community's enthusiastic participation and feedback underscore the importance of these initiatives in meeting the needs of young families. Informative sessions empower parents to make informed decisions for their children's well-being, fostering a supportive environment for sharing experiences and building community connections.</p>
<p>5. There is a high demand: Child counselling services experienced a surge in demand, particularly at Cattai Primary School, where all available resources were fully utilised. Psychologists shared among schools primarily focused on assessments and reporting, lacking sufficient capacity for therapeutic services. The school-based setting facilitated easier access to children with the support of families and the school community.</p>
<p>6. The wrap-around approach proved effective: Counselling support helped identify additional needs, and our expertise in case management and the service system facilitated a swift response to those needs. Clients received comprehensive support, with an emphasis on navigating the service system to achieve desired outcomes.</p>
<p>7. Casework enabled stronger community relationships and further established client/community need. Clients received holistic support from NWCS, and this was highly valued.</p>
<p>8. There is a demand for more after hour activity access and free activity. Many working families also need support but miss out. After hours services require additional funding investment. Learning that the community is thirsty for programs and events.</p>
<p>9. Community engagement in Blacktown LGA was strong. Clients were engaged and seeking support, even more so knowing they could access it and funding was available.</p>
<p>10. Our program promotion and community engagement strategies worked well. Promotional channels used: via website, Facebook, events, office, letterbox drops and</p>

community noticeboards. The messaging and program delivery method was appreciated by the Community.
11. Community surveys have been challenging. A lot of work for limited return. Survey with disaster stakeholders also yielded poor return. Service staff /People are too busy.
12. The project's short duration prevented the full utilisation of community connections established. Despite significant effort, the programs are now unsustainable, and the built connections remain underleveraged. The project's short time frame, coupled with its abrupt ending just as momentum was gaining, led to a lack of sustainability, ongoing activities, and follow-up.
13. Team collaboration was integral to the program's success, with the entire team sharing knowledge and ideas. Short-term funding spurred disruptive innovation, and the team quickly mobilised, leveraging established relationships. Engaging events, supported by trained trauma-informed professionals, yielded meaningful outcomes for both the community and funders. The Project Lead coordinated efforts with enthusiasm and professionalism, supported by the active involvement of all NWCS staff. The project fostered a strong sense of achievement, pride, and team spirit within the NWCS team.
14. South Maroota Community and Community in general feel let down now as supports not continuing and they don't have continued access. Context example: During the Zumba fitness program held at South Maroota, several participants expressed their enthusiasm for the program. They stated the importance of such programs in the area, noting a significant need that they feel has been overlooked by the Council/Government. They expressed their frustration at the lack of interest and activities/events in their community. Participants understood the current program is short-term, but they hoped it would continue. They stated that increasing the attendance and support to the Zumba fitness program and other activities/events within the Wellbeing Project, there may be opportunities for future funding from the government or other sources.
15. The bottom-up approach empowered the team closest to the community to design and implement programs tailored to community needs and engagement preferences. The flexibility in funding allocation enabled meeting community expectations with minimal bureaucratic constraints and KPIs. This approach optimised the impact of the short-term funding allocation.
16. Unable to establish engagement with Shane's Park Communities due to shortage of time.
17. The project has identified a need for a platform for the community to build social connections, understand the infrastructure within their local area and a space to educate themselves and family members in disaster preparedness.
18. Funding parameters allowed NWCS to utilise relationships with community in ways that benefit community. Allowed to connect with community the way community needs. Programs were flexible and tailored to community interest.
19. Funding came too late: Timing of the project was late, over a year since the last flood, to when the project started. The funding came too late in terms of when the clients truly needed support. Funding came in over a year after the flood.
20. Budget was appropriate for the time allocated (8 months).
21. Limited involvement from disaster related/ public services, government services and other stakeholders in the disaster management space. This was due to scheduling commitments, changes in roles and limited capacity to participate in activity after ours and limited capacity with an additional unexpected project.
22. Funding budget was flexible and catered to the client's needs not a tick a box approach. Allowed NWCS to support clients further, which continues to build therapeutic alliance and continue to connect with community.
23. Funder trusted NWCS knowledge and relationship with community which allowed us to do our work.

24. Time frame of the funding was too short. Especially in terms of building casework relationships with clients in the hills, as we do not typically have presence in those neighbourhoods.
25. Clients experience a sense of disappointment and lack of support when funding abruptly ends, resulting from the discontinuation of programs for the community.
26. Client may now have raised expectations: They anticipate a spring fair event in 2024 for which there is no funding.

Appendix 4. The Wellbeing Project data

PHN DATA COLLECTION	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	Cumulative Delivered
	JULY	AUG	SEPT	OCT	NOV	DEC	JAN	FEB	
Reception (walk ins- access to PHN programs and support information)	224	133	168	168	163	119	121	186	1,282
SOCIAL MEDIA									
Social Media (reached)		18,186	64,267	40,581	26,147	31,664	25,695	19,217	225,757
Social Media (Engagement, clicks, comments)		1,641	5,396	3,646	2,012	2,032	1,306	662	16,695
PROMOTION									
Town Centre Noticeboard & Website		750	750	750	750	750	750	750	5,250
Mail drop			10,000						10,000
Flyers			2,000	2000	2000	1000	200	200	7,400
Local Magazines (print)			15,000			15000			30,000
Local Magazines (online)				15000					15,000
Newsletters			200				200		400
PROGRAMS (participant numbers)									
Sound Healing @ Blacktown					16				16
Zumba Fitness Programs @ SM			4	28	30				62
Dance Fitness @ Blacktown			50	50	50	7			157
Creative Kids Playgroup			2	2	2				6
School Holiday Programs South Maroota			24						24
School Holiday Programs Riverstone			25						25
Street Library			300	300	300	300	300	300	1800
Plagroup @ Blacktown			100	100	100				300
Mums & Bubs Information Session					35				35
First Aid Training					10				10
Sound Healing @ South Maroota								21	21
Tech Tidbits-Digital Literacy								18	18
Clay Making- Art Making Group workshop								6	6
Love Bees-Ecology Workshop								25	25
Community Pop Ups					100		100		200







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SOMETHING; IT'S ABOUT DOING
SOMETHING TOGETHER THAT
MAKES BELONGING MATTER.

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