

EVALUATION REPORT

RISING STRONG:
EAST GIPPSLAND'S PATH TO COMMUNITY
RESILIENCE FORUM



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Developed for East
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Neighbourhood Houses
and East Gippsland Shire,
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Acronyms:

The following acronyms are used in this report:

Community Recovery Committee: CRC

East Gippsland Community Foundation (EGCF)

East Gippsland Network of Neighbourhood Houses: EGNNH

East Gippsland Shire Council: EGSC

Inspector-General into Emergency Management: IGEM

Key Evaluation Questions: KEQs

Lake Tyers Aboriginal Trust: LTAT

Mallacoota and District Recovery Association: MADRA

Municipal Emergency Management Plan Committee: MEMPC

Most Significant Change: MSC

Sarsfield Community Association: SCA

Royal Flying Doctor Service: RFDS

Executive Summary

East Gippsland, which is Gunaikurnai Country in Victoria, was significantly impacted by the Black Summer bushfires across 2019 and 2020. In 2023, the East Gippsland Network of Neighbourhood Houses Inc. (EGNNH) received funding from East Gippsland Shire Council (EGSC) to facilitate a forum on recovery and resilience. The forum was called *Rising Strong: East Gippsland's Path to Community Resilience* and was held in March 2024 in Lakes Entrance. The purpose of the *Rising Strong Forum* was to bring a diverse range of community members together to share their experiences and journeys of bushfire recovery and resilience. The forum was an opportunity to celebrate the strength of communities and share what has been learnt, including enablers and challenges. The objective of the *Rising Strong Forum* and this evaluation report is to capture stories and learnings that can be shared with other communities, Local, State and Federal Government and others that have responsibilities in disaster recovery and resilience. By sharing learnings, it aims to improve how recovery and resilience is supported into the future. The *Rising Strong Forum* was hosted by the East Gippsland Network of Neighbourhood Houses (EGNNH) with support provided by East Gippsland Shire Council. There was a total of 47 participants who attended from across the East Gippsland region.

This report is presented in four parts. The first part provides an introduction, context and details the evaluation methodology. The second part presents a summary of the *Rising Strong Forum*, including speakers, sticky note activity, table discussion questions and a summary of the other data collected which are stories and desktop review. The third part details the Key Evaluation Questions, (KEQs), principles and outcomes. The fourth and final part steps through recommendations and conclusions.

The data collected before, during and after the forum is presented in the report. This evidence gives a picture for the two evaluation approaches. The first evaluation approach is the satisfaction and impact of the forum. The forum was deemed by participants as worthwhile, with the majority of respondents stating that the forum was extremely useful or useful (84% of respondents). There were some areas of improvement identified by participants. Some suggestions were made including having more people attend from across the region, with more notice provided, more information about the role and activities of Neighbourhood Houses and some space for a conversation about what is next for East Gippsland. The second evaluation approach utilised principles-focussed evaluation to understand the three outcomes and identify key principles which support these. The three outcomes include two around community engagement and the third is an overall outcome.

The two community engagement outcomes follow:

- 1) Community relationships and collaboration to encourage connectedness, recovery and healing activities
- 2) Community activities and programs to build knowledge, confidence and resilience

The third and overall community outcome follows:

Community resilience and recovery are supported by principles of;

1. Connectedness
2. Knowledge & Confidence
3. Collaboration

Understanding these outcomes and the role of key principles in community resilience and recovery are detailed in this report. This evaluation concludes that the two community engagement outcomes as outlined above are confirmed by the evidence collected. In addition, the overall outcome has also been confirmed, with the principles which support community resilience and recovery. The principles have been refined and added to based on the data. The principles are:

1. Social Connectedness & Social Capital
2. Local Knowledge & Communication
3. Collaboration & Supporting Each Other

From the evidence, additional outcomes were also identified and include 1) Community-led processes, 2) Strengthened communities and 3) Demonstrated leadership and resilience.

In addition to the three key principles confirmed from the data, additional principles have also been identified from the evidence, which promote community resilience and recovery. These are:

- Leadership
- Community-led
- Existing Capacity & Building Capacity
- Approach- flexible, inclusive, take time with focus on community needs
- Holistic & long-term

Social capital and social connectedness have been confirmed as pivotal through the combination of the broad evidence review and the data collected from the *Rising Strong Forum*. The data also identified how leadership is a critical component that has supported recovery and resilience building and that existing trusted relationships or processes which build trusted relationships, have been crucial components. Success is clearly linked to community-led approaches and processes that promote and enable these. Acknowledging existing capacity and opportunities to build capacity have also featured consistently in the data. The approach that enables recovery and resilience in communities has been identified. This needs to be flexible, inclusive, take the time that is required with a focus on community needs. This has been recognised through successes, as well as challenges identified. The data also highlighted the principle of holistic and long-term. Multiple sources of data recognised how narrow and short-term approaches hinder rather than promote resilience and recovery processes in communities. A visual of these principles and other key principles identified in broader evidence can be found in **Figure 17**.

Enablers and challenges were also identified. A total of 25 enablers and 23 challenges were identified. Both the enablers and challenges follow. The enablers include; community-led solutions; social capital, including: community connections, building relationships and connectedness; utilising existing leaders in community (with strength and trust already with community); trusted relationships- processes that build relationships prior and after disasters; taking an inclusive approach- for everyone to be heard in community, community committee structures to be diverse and respectful; building resilience through coming together and supporting one another and building long-term resilience; ways of working that are compassionate and empathic; collaboration, working together and supporting each other; strength, coping, control; people being caring, empathic and supportive; access to services; identify strengths and weaknesses and build on existing strengths and capabilities in communities and bringing in skills where needed; holistic, long term approach; local knowledge being respected and utilised and using lived experience of recovering from natural disasters; capability building is supported by grant applications, increasing capacity and confidence through training/mentoring/working with others, patience and open-mindedness, participating in groups/committee; acknowledgment of the need for service equity for remote communities, where gaps are highlighted in disasters; volunteer time and energy in communities and leaders stepping up; community innovative ideas and resourcefulness; adapt to place – not using a one size fits all approach; funding to enable community-led programs, projects and improvements to come to life; processes (programs and funding applications) that are person-centred, flexible and responsive to community needs; allowing the time that is needed for recovery and resilience to develop (at individual and community level); time to listen deeply to individuals and communities; community-led approach must core, with communities determining where extra support is needed.

Challenges identified, as follows; tick a box, rigid processes and putting a specific timeframe on recovery; processes that don't allow enablers (as identified above); short-term, narrow, restrictive funding. Access to funding also a challenge; community challenges with government funding, must do it differently – with empathy and all levels of governments need to listen more deeply to communities; way too many small grants and very little funding for catalytic ideas to make a difference; East Gippsland Timber Milling Project still needs some funding to continue and innovative project is winding up due to no funding and YRS project success but also no funding for that project either; service gaps in remote communities; recovery processes that cause more

trauma for people that have been through bushfires; multiple issues with system of recovery, with rebuilding of homes not commenced for many four and a half years down the track; trying to make sure that no one falls through the cracks which has not been achieved. To date only 30 of the 125 houses lost have been rebuilt (Mallacoota) and Sarsfield only around a third of the 80 houses lost; that is it too early for many to be talking about resilience when recovery and healing is a long-term and continual journey. A significant number of people who lost their homes in the bushfires are still waiting to build, with many barriers and delays due to bureaucratic processes and requirements; framework for recovery does not necessarily support communities well. Grant, funding cycles and local government processes need to be done differently; asking traumatising community members to contribute time and time again; people who have lost their homes are unable to contribute to the community fully; volunteers in communities have done a large volume of work; complexity of the bushfires highlighted a complex web of problems/issues in the community; amazing array of opportunities like free programs, events but has created a hand-out mentality, now services are leaving or finishing up: a person-centred approach is needed across all response, recovery and resilience activities, acknowledging the trauma that has occurred for people. Taking a person-centred approach requires some re-design of recovery programs and responses; local relationship building between communities and responding agencies is beneficial. This requires support, structures and skill-building to be done well. This has potential to reduce the impact on local people and reduce financial costs. Community resilience requires conversations between local people and agencies; a model for engaging with young people has been created and tested (YRS project). There is a need for long-term engagement models of young people in the remote communities of Cann River and Mallacoota (as well as other communities that don't have the long-term support structures in place to engage young people); Centre for Rural Communities community engagement resources and tools, but no support from universities to support and build capacity for utilising local knowledge; short-term funding; everything has been challenging!

The report puts forward recommendations which follow:

- 1) **A larger evaluation process to document additional recovery and resilience journeys across East Gippsland.** This would extend on the learnings identified to date, including key principles required for recovery and resilience. This is because of the limited scope and size of this evaluation.
- 2) **Data collection to understand confidence levels of being prepared and resilient.** There is scope for understanding community confidence more broadly. A larger data capture process could identify confidence levels and areas for improvement regarding resilience.
- 3) **The strengthening of capacity building with a long-term approach that supports community resilience.** The data highlights the benefit and the need to take long-term approaches for capacity building around resilience.
- 4) **Promoting more flexible, connected processes that embed empathy, kindness and consistency are needed in recovery.** Whilst many recovery programs have been successful, it is important to note where improvements are needed for the future. It is recommended that further listening with people, especially those who lost their homes to understand where local recovery processes can be improved to be more flexible, trauma informed and person-centred.
- 5) **Collaboration to better support long-term, trauma informed recovery processes.** Local, State and Federal Government, along with agencies responsible for recovery need to improve coordination which better supports community needs. Responding to community needs requires trauma-informed and longer-term collaboration. This is at the individual and community level. This recommendation speaks to the feedback received regarding the need to adjust timing and coordination of grants, including the need to reduce competition for grants.
- 6) **A holistic, community-led approach needs to be better supported by recovery processes, including grants.** A longer-term approach is needed for grants to ensure that they occur at the pace that is needed for communities in recovery. This is again at the individual and community level. There is additional complexity for remote communities, where they do not experience service equity, so disasters exasperate the needs and highlight the gaps in support services. Service inequity for remote communities needs to be addressed.

- 7) **No set timeframe on recovery.** More understanding that it takes the time it takes for individuals and communities and they need to be supported at the pace that works for them, whatever that may be.
- 8) **Future gatherings regarding resilience and recovery.** To build on collaborative efforts, extend understandings and improve opportunities for collaboration. Offer mental health supports during and after for participants.

There are limitations with this evaluation report. These limitations are the size and scope of the evaluation, including the small sample size of the data. This minor evaluation didn't have capacity to capture a broader range of experiences across the region. It must be noted that not all perspectives are represented in this report and community recovery and resilience activities are not exhaustive. There are limited or no perspectives from; First Nations communities, adults with a disability, people from the LGBTIQI+ community and not all communities across East Gippsland were represented at the forum. The number of people at the forum (47) and then the smaller amount (60% or 28 people) that responded to the forum survey, are additional limitations. This also means that the data has limitations. This is why there is a recommendation that a larger scope evaluation or reporting process be conducted to extend on this report and capture a broader range of perspectives.

In conclusion, the evidence confirms that there several key principles that play a significant role in community resilience building and recovery.

Section 1: Introduction and Context

The Black Summer bushfires of 2019/2020 had substantial impacts on communities in East Gippsland. In 2023, the East Gippsland Network of Neighbourhood Houses Inc. (EGNNH) received funding from East Gippsland Shire Council (EGSC) to facilitate a forum on recovery and resilience. This project of planning and delivering the forum was coordinated by East Gippsland Shire Council, jointly funded by the Victorian Government through Emergency Recovery Victoria's Recovery and Resilience Grant program and Commonwealth Government under the Commonwealth-State Disaster Recovery Funding Arrangements in response to the 2019-20 Eastern Victorian Bushfires.

The forum was called *Rising Strong: East Gippsland's Path to Community Resilience* and was held in March, 2024. The purpose of the *Rising Strong Forum* was to bring a diverse range of community members together to share their experiences and journeys of bushfire recovery. The forum was an opportunity to celebrate the strength of communities and share what has been learnt, including enablers and challenges. The intent from the forum and this evaluation report is that stories captured will be shared with other communities, local, state and federal government and other agencies that are responsible to support and lead disaster recovery processes. Sharing what has been learnt aims to create improvements in future recovery plans and strategies.

This report presents evidence from the *Rising Strong Forum*, with additional data from stories and a desktop review which demonstrate recovery and resilience in the East Gippsland community. The limitation of this evaluation is the scope and size allocated to this evaluation, which means that it is in no way comprehensive and presents only a sample of data. The structure of the report is presented in three sections- **What?** (what happened), **So What?** (what are the outcomes that have been achieved) and **What Next?** (from the data collected, what are the recommendations and next steps identified).

1.1 Background: Rising Strong- East Gippsland's Path to Community Resilience Forum

EGNNH supported the *Rising Strong Forum* as it was considered a beneficial opportunity for impacted communities to come together to share experiences post natural disasters. The EGNNH were also seeking to reiterate to participants that they were part of something bigger and support is always available including: general advice, mental and physical health, rebuilding community physically and emotionally from neighbourhood houses and others. The EGNNH engaged Sue-Ellen Latham from Seventy Event Management & Communications to assist with coordinating arrangements for the forum.

Topics identified by the EGNNH to be covered at the forum included;

- Future Preparedness
- Impact on community
- Community wellbeing
- Reducing disaster risk
- Community modified infrastructure
- Physical and mental health recovery
- Resilience planning
- Children with additional needs

1.2 Evaluation Design

East Gippsland's Bellabury Bespoke Consulting was engaged to evaluate the *Rising Strong Forum*. There are two elements to the evaluation design:

Evaluation Element	Evaluation Type
Capturing data to understand and confirm the key principles or outcomes of community resilience, including identifying enablers and the challenges in recovery processes.	Utilization focussed & Principles-focused evaluation
Data collection to determine satisfaction and impact of attending the forum.	Summative evaluation

The outcomes identified by the EGNHN are:

1. Knowledge
2. Success
3. Connectedness
4. Positive collaboration
5. Community confidence in knowing they can be prepared and resilient in the future.

The above outcomes are considered principles (aside from success) and this evaluation will test whether these principles (and/or others), are common aspects that enable community resilience following disasters. The purpose of the evaluation is utilization focussed and then the application of principle-focused evaluation can be used when there are complex situations. Principles-focussed evaluation can assist with three aspects, which include:

- 1) *Whether principles are clear, meaningful and actionable, and if so,*
- 2) *Whether they are actually being followed and, if so,*
- 3) *Whether they are leading to desired results* (Patton, 2018, p.3)

Given the diversity of communities in East Gippsland, with a range of contexts, experiences and other influencing factors, identifying common principles that enable, and support community recovery and resilience is considered a useful approach. Recognising also that a broader set of National Principles of Disaster Recovery exist, which are: 1) *Understanding the context*, 2) *Recognising the complexity*, 3) *Use community-led approaches*, 4) *Coordinate all approaches*, 5) *Communicate effectively and*, 6) *Recognise & build capacity* (<https://knowledge.aidr.org.au/resources/national-principles-for-disaster-recovery/> accessed on 8 February 2024). With these national principles to start with, a principles-focussed evaluation approach is seeking to understand principles at a local level that have enabled community recovery & resilience (in a range of contexts, across diverse communities). To assist with building understanding, a number of Key Evaluation Questions (KEQs) have been developed.

1.3 Key Evaluation Questions

Several Key Evaluation Questions (KEQs) have been identified to guide the investigation of principles and outcomes identified in the evaluation design.

The following KEQ's have been identified as part of the evaluation framework;

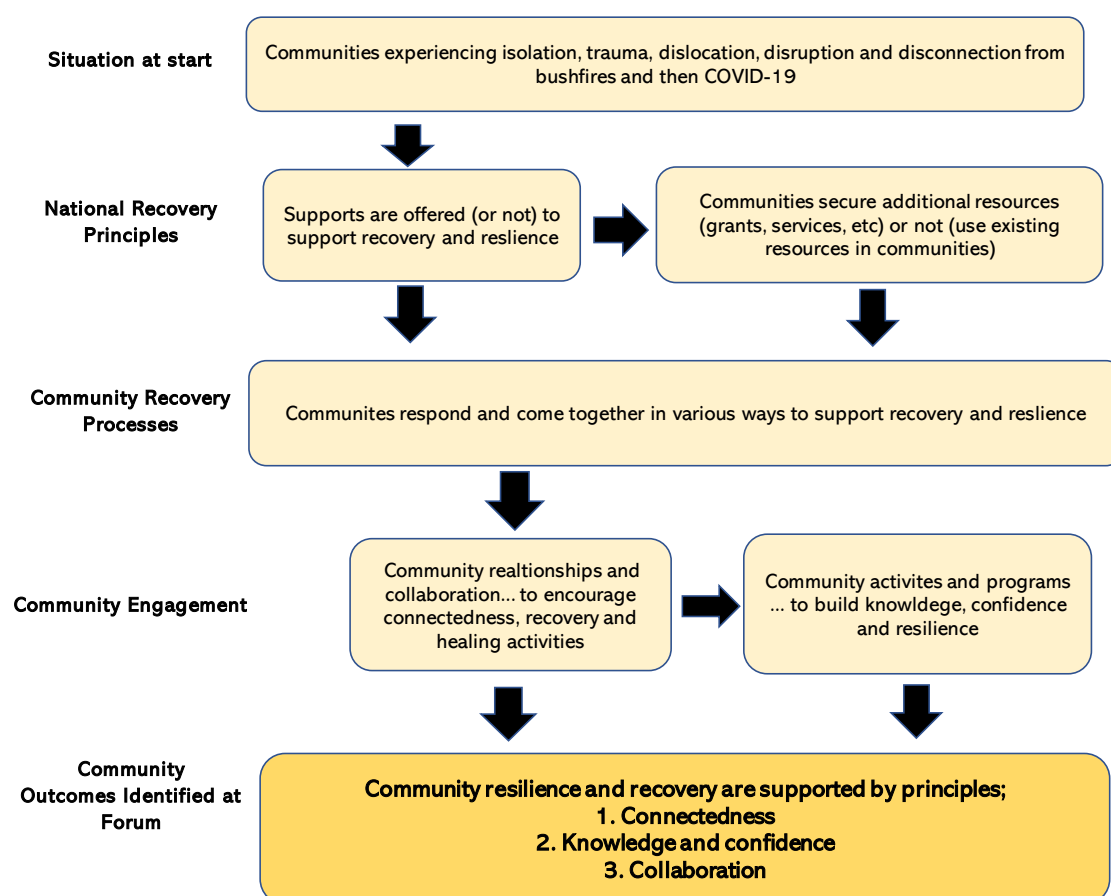
1. What role do the principles of knowledge, connectedness and collaboration play in community resilience building?
2. What do examples of success tell us about what principles are effective for community resilience building?
3. What are the confidence levels of community representatives of being prepared and resilient for the future?

4. What outcomes can be identified in communities and what helped achieve these?
5. What are the unintended outcomes and how did they occur? (what contributed?)

1.4 Program Logic

This section presents the program logic which was developed drawing on resilience and recovery research to understand a theory of change and program logic, which captures the sequence of change to reach outcomes. Disaster resilience is the ability of communities to prepare, deal with and then recover from natural disasters and then the ability of communities to adapt, learn and create change that activates resilience (Parsons, Reeve, McGregor, Hastings, Marshall, McNeill, Stayner, Glavac, 2021). A program logic was developed for the evaluation of the *Rising Strong Forum* (see **Figure 1**). The program logic diagram depicts the three core elements – National Recovery Principles, Community Recovery Processes and Community Engagement – and how they all work together to support community recovery and resilience.

Figure 1. Program Logic



1.5 Methodology

The approach for the evaluation is detailed below, with the outcomes from the program logic and then the approach (or methodology) of collecting data. The data collection occurred as outlined aside from the number of stories. Although the initial scope was for one to two stories, there was more interest following the forum. To honour the stories and voices of community, eight stories have been included.

Table 1. Evaluation Methodology

Community Engagement Outcome	Data collection method	When/How
Community relationships and collaboration to encourage connectedness, recovery and healing activities	Survey prior to the forum to participants attending Observations and notes from presentations at the forum Table question feedback Survey at the end of the forum (relate to KEQs and outcomes and participant satisfaction Any participants willing to provide a Story of Most Significant Change (MSC)	Link sent out to participants registered for online survey Key themes and principles identified from notes Key themes and principles identified from feedback QR code and hard copy surveys made available Interview after the forum to capture MSC story
Community activities and programs to build knowledge, confidence and resilience	Survey prior to the forum to participants attending Observations and notes from presentations at the forum Table question feedback Survey at the end of the forum (relate to KEQs and outcomes and participant satisfaction Any participants willing to provide a Story of Most Significant Change (MSC)	Link sent out to participants registered for online survey Key themes and principles identified from notes Key themes and principles identified from feedback QR code and hard copy surveys made available Interview after the forum to capture MSC story
Overall Outcome	Data collection method	When/How
Community resilience and recovery are supported by principles of; 1. Connectedness 2. Knowledge and confidence 3. Collaboration	Survey prior to the forum to participants attending Observations and notes from presentations at the forum Table question feedback Survey at the end of the forum (relate to KEQs and outcomes and participant satisfaction Any participants willing to provide a Story of Most Significant Change (MSC)	Link sent out to participants registered for online survey Key themes and principles identified from notes Key themes and principles identified from feedback QR code and hard copy surveys made available Interview after the forum to capture MSC story Desktop review

Section 2: What?

This section outlines what happened at the *Rising Strong: East Gippsland's Path to Community Resilience Forum*. It also provides a summary of some of the community recovery and resilience activities and stories that have been identified at and following the forum.

2.1 Outline of Rising Strong Forum

The *Rising Strong Forum* was held in Lakes Entrance on Friday 14 March 2024. A total of 47 people attended the forum. People who attended the forum came from across the East Gippsland region, including Cann River, Mallacoota, Buchan, Bonang, Orbost, Sarsfield, Bruthen, Bairnsdale, Paynesville and the Lakes Entrance region. There were representatives from Community Recovery Committees (CRCs), Neighbourhood Houses, community members, community and mental health organisations, local and state government representatives. There is a video of the forum that is available on East Gippsland Shire Council's East Gippy TV, Youtube channel; https://youtu.be/08XZpQXA_40

The forum commenced with a Smoking Ceremony and Welcome to Country provided by Gunaikurnai Land & Waters Aboriginal Corporation (GLaWAC) with Aunty Lisa Giblin conducting these.



The forum was facilitated by Eva Grunden from East Gippsland Shire Council and several speakers presented on the day. There were table discussions with key questions. There was also 'sticky note' feedback on the day to the question- *What does resilience mean to you? What helps & supports resilience?* The details of which can be found in the data section. Following is a summary of what was presented on the day.

Opening speaker Caroline Liston- East Gippsland Neighbourhood House Network (EGNHN):

- EGNHN contacted by EGSC to provide funding to support the event
- 14 Neighbourhood Houses across the EGSC providing consistent support to the community
- Acknowledge those that have worked on the event
- Great response from the inspector general of emergency management could not be on attendance but invite all participants to attend a similar event they are holding in Melbourne in the near future



Carol Hopkins and Christy Bryar- Mallacoota District Recovery Association (MADRA):

- Black Saturday fires in Mallacoota in January 2020. Beginning with the thinking group to discuss 'what are we going to do?'
- Firstly, approaching leaders within the community as a starting point and identifying existing strengths within the community
- Followed by consultation with the whole of community. Beginning with an election to form MADRA within the first year, during COVID and providing a voice to community in a truly consultative manner
- Prioritising ideas and being inclusive. Legal structures established. This has galvanised community to work together cohesively
- Staying with the one mission and staying true to community voice within the vision statement and the recovery plan
- Trying to make sure that no one falls through the cracks which possibly has not been achieved. To date only 30 of the 130 houses have been rebuilt
- Incredibly hard work from community but the processes have not been entirely achieved. Advocated strongly, East Gippsland Timber milling project as a great example. Community currently receiving milled timber through this but does require more funding
- Framework for recovery does not necessarily support communities well. Grant, funding cycles and local government processes need to be done differently

Paris Brooke- Wilderness Collective, Mallacoota:

- Working model for economic and community rejuvenation as an offshoot of MADRA
- **Goals:** Opportunity to live, study and work in the community without being limited by remote. Founded by 5 local women
- **What works:** Business incubator, social enterprise and schools' program. Digital skills and local knowledge creating the "Digital Hub" supported by EGSC and ACRE
- Business skill development. Important to build trust around social entrepreneurship
- Innovation and collaboration are key
- Adaptability, building confidence, providing individualised and flexible support
- Providing a framework to harness local skills and obtain funding. Leasing a local building for a community hub.
- Focal point for local business development to test new ideas
- Great way to showcase and engage visitor economy with local enterprises
- Challenges: Community reliant on seasonal tourism limiting long term job security
- Finding a place to operate from
- Getting information into community

- Funding an ongoing challenge. Grant funding very restrictive
- Funding that leads to a handout mentality rather than catalytic results (unintended consequence of short-term funding)
- Looking at levers for change: Complex place-based issues

Dr. Tricia Hiley - Mallacoota Sustainability Network:

- Clean energy improving local energy procurement
- Changing streetlights to LEDs first project in the 1970s
- Ausnet viewed Mallacoota at least reliable in the whole state with average of 23-4 outages per year
- Additional challenges with the bushfires on 31 December 2019
- Solar/battery/generator system commissioned Oct 2020
- May 2021, big battery installed enabling micro-gridding.
- Community power hub- community microgrid sustainable energy program. Heat pump hot water systems being installed.
- All projects enabled through great partnerships with other agencies, EGSC, East Gippsland Water and department of conservation and sustainability, local electricians
- Community energy projects are an important part of resilience and sustainability

John Kinniburgh – Sarsfield Community Association (SCA):

- Recovery from the Sarsfield community perspective.
- Jan 2019 decimated the Sarsfield community. Forming the Sarsfield community organisation made up of volunteers.
- Instigating a range of community events and getting grant funding
- Focus on people, community, and their welfare.
- Have used external consultants and funding have been sought for both projects and consultants.
- Forward looking and optimistic with strong camaraderie
- Have developed a community plan
- Leaning on expertise within the community which has been vast and extremely useful. Has built a much stronger community connection between individuals and families.

Virginia (Ginny) Vincent - East Gippsland's 54reasons of Save the Children Australia and facilitator of the East Gippsland Children's Wellbeing Initiative (CWI):

- The Children with Additional Needs Working Group (CWANWG) secured resources following the bushfires to hear from families with additional needs about what changes and supports helps them in an emergency.
- From hearing the experiences of families with children with additional needs during and after the bushfires, funding was secured for a number of action areas identified.
- One of these action areas was the development of sensory kits for children with additional needs in relief centres.
- CWANWG worked with EGSC and CRCs to develop and distribute the kits.
- Sensory kits for relief centres were developed with sensory toys and activities for children with additional needs, along with children's books as to what they can expect at an emergency relief centre.



Eleni McIlroy- Warm Corners Consulting:

- Supporting Erinunderra to Snowy Community Recovery Committee on *Building Healthy and Resilient Communities through Service Equity* project.
- Isolated region and service access identified as an issue after 2014 bushfires.
- Priorities identified from community planning.
- Improving service equity.
- Access to services, especially health services identified as one of top 3 priorities.
- Poor internet and access issues a big problem. Remote issues with road closures presenting problems.
- Erinunderra snowy tech enabled nurse led health service model.
- Funding for Stage 1: Feasibility study , Stage 2 : Funding to establish wellbeing hubs in Tubbut , Bendoc and Goongerah Stage 3:Funding for operating Nurse led costs at each of the hubs.
- Need for independent data to support the project with university research partner.
- Finding staff an issue
- Community wellbeing spaces, Nurse led health care and Tech & connectivity.
- Split the project into stages and find funding for each part.
- Communicate with the stakeholders.
- Community led local solutions and strong buy in.
- Source skills as needed from outside of the community.



Sherri Brown- Neighbourhood House President of the Cann River Community Centre:

- Fires causing hardship but compounded by floods, more fires and COVID. Impacts on mental wellbeing for community members.
- Providing connectivity with outlying regions
- Engaging young people in projects, building skills, and fostering community participation
- Energy sustainability at the Hub
- Upcoming community events for young people including , cooking events, music and lawnmower races.

Break out group / table discussions (two sessions):

The following questions were on tables with participants providing the below responses. These responses have been themed, analysed and are presented in section three.

Table 2. Table Discussion Questions

Question 1: What examples of community connections have supported recovery and resilience building?
Question 2: What other stories of success in communities can be shared regarding recovery and resilience?
Question 3: What knowledge or skills has been developed in communities which have supported recovery and resilience?
Question 4: What other stories of success in communities can be shared regarding recovery and resilience?
Question 5: What other learnings from community can you share? (about what works/doesn't work in supporting recovery and resilience)?



Sticky Note Reflection Activity

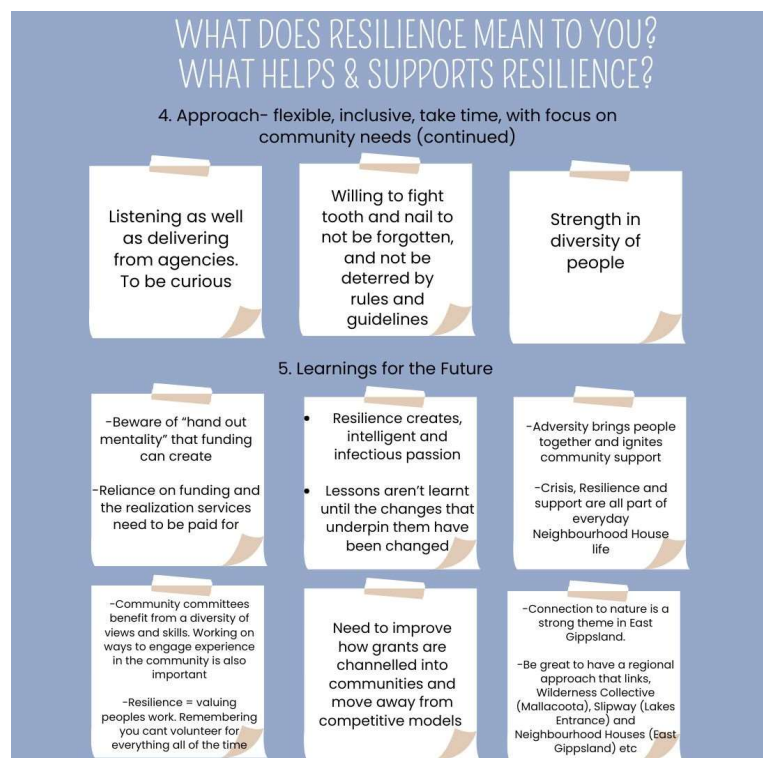
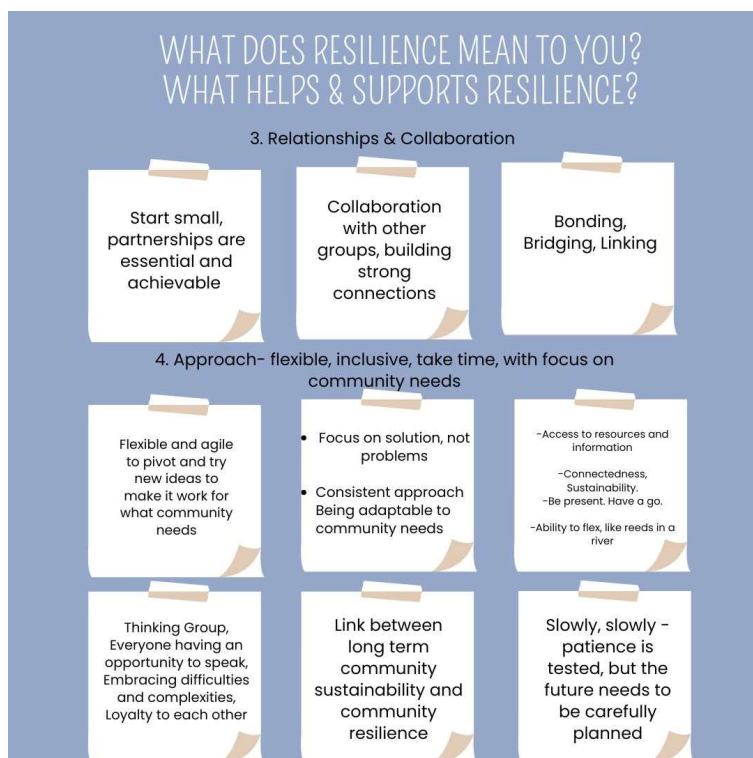
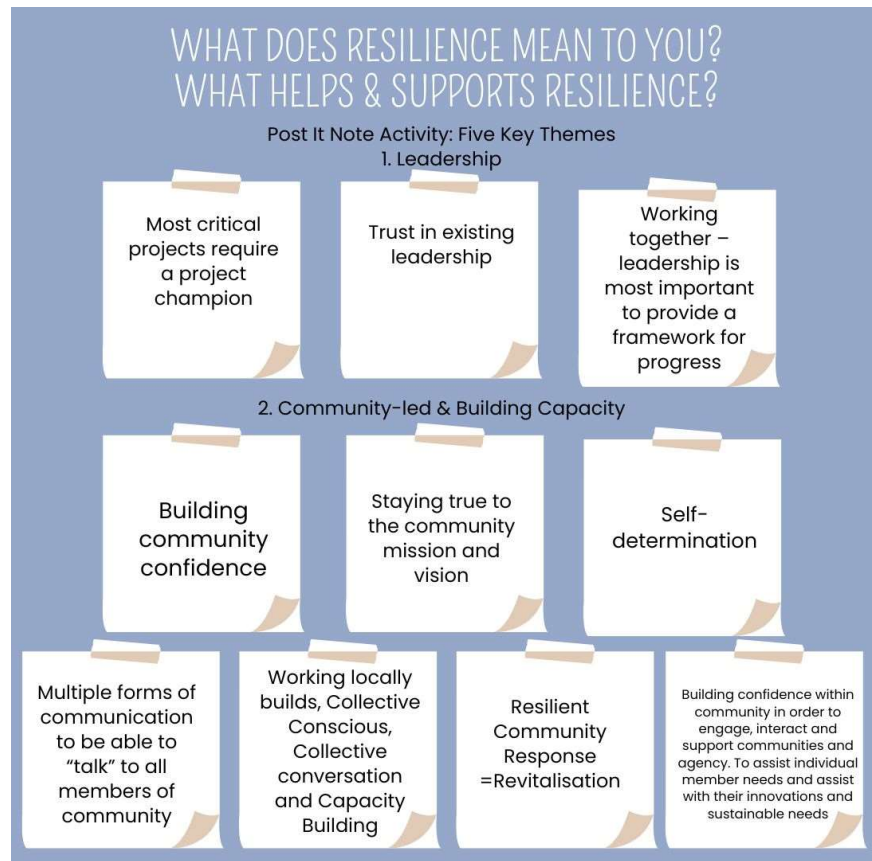
At the forum, participants were asked to provide their feedback, they were asked the question:

What does resilience mean to you?

What helps and supports resilience?

A total of 36 responses were received. These have been grouped into five themes:

1. Leadership
2. Community-led & Building Capacity
3. Relationships & Collaboration
4. Approach- flexible, inclusive, take time, with focus on community needs
5. Learnings for the Future



2.2 Data Collection

The data collected at the *Rising Strong Forum* included; summaries of presentations, sticky note reflection activity, table discussions and survey completed by 28 people (60% of forum participants). A pre-forum survey was also completed by 10 people. Stories were collected, along with a desktop review, both of which are detailed below. Relevant data was collated into an evidence table, where outcomes and principles were identified.

2.3 Stories

A total of eight stories were captured following the *Rising Strong Forum*. The stories included in this report used the Most Significant Change (MSC) approach where possible. Where these stories vary from the MSC approach is especially the length and the usual selection process of one or two stories that most represent significant change. To detail the diverse, important experiences and learnings for individuals and communities, the length and the number of stories have not been limited. The stories were captured predominantly through a nomination process from the *Rising Strong Forum*. Two stories were directly sought to hear about support for young people with one project, the Youth Recovery Support Project (especially with feedback and input from young people in the evaluation of this project) and one from the Aboriginal community. The stories are found throughout the report to demonstrate learnings, principles and outcomes.

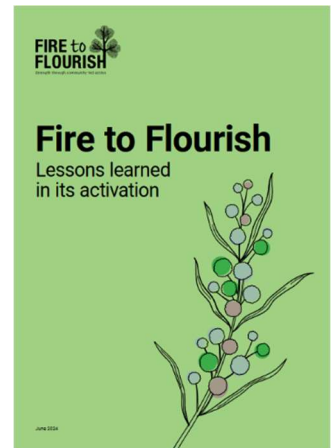
The common factors and themes identified from the stories include:

- Local and flexible approach makes a difference;
- Community relationships have been built in communities that were not strongly socially connected prior to the bushfires;
- That is it too early for many to be talking about resilience when recovery and healing is a long-term and continual journey. A significant number of people who lost their homes in the bushfires are still waiting to build, with many barriers and delays due to bureaucratic processes and requirements;
- A person-centred approach is needed across all response, recovery and resilience activities, acknowledging the trauma that has occurred for people;
- Taking a person-centred approach requires some re-design of recovery programs and responses.
- Local relationship building between communities and responding agencies is beneficial. This requires support, structures and skill-building to be done well. This has potential to reduce the impact on local people and reduce financial costs. Community resilience requires ongoing conversations between local people and agencies;
- A model for engaging with young people has been created and tested. The need for a long-term engagement model of young people in the remote communities of Cann River and Mallacoota has been identified;
- Service gaps in remote communities are a challenge and even more so in disasters and following;
- It has been identified that not all Aboriginal community members have not felt included and culturally safe. There is the need to create culturally safe spaces and improve inclusion in emergency management processes and spaces like relief centres;
- Processes which enable community planning with emergency services and others have assisted in building resilience and having local response and recovery plans;
- Volunteers in communities have worked hard and supported a large volume of work;
- Community-led must be core, with communities determining where extra support is needed.

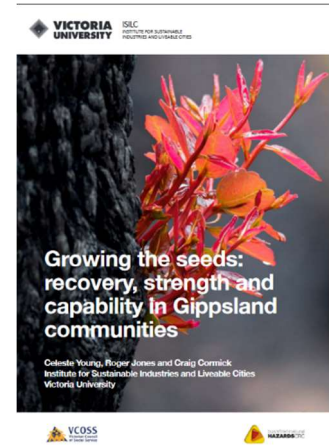
2.4 Desktop Review

A desktop review identified other resilience and recovery activities across East Gippsland. What was found from the review is included below:

- *Fire to Flourish at Monash University* operates in four communities in Australia, with East Gippsland being one of these. A report released in June, 2024 has identified that a more flexible, community-led approach is working well...and “ how a community-led approach can lead to measurable improvements in disaster resilience” (<https://www.monash.edu/news/articles/community-led-disaster-resilience-model-benefiting-those-that-need-it-most> accessed on 15 June 2024).
- *Fire to Flourish* is a potential future model of more flexibly supporting community-led recovery journeys in the long-term. There are six program principles for *Fire to Flourish*: 1) Be Community-led, 2) Foreground Aboriginal Wisdom, 3) Address inequities and enhance inclusion, 4) Be strengths-based and trauma-informed, 5) Be holistic and impactful and 6) Learn, adapt, evolve. In their first report after three years, there are also five key lessons from the program:
 - 1) Year Zero-** invest early to build foundations with communities and partners (Walden, Bos, Rogers, & Werbeloff, 2024, p.6).
 - 2) Lasting Change needs Long Term Funding-** “Short-term funding is problematic for community-based initiatives, reducing the likelihood of creating lasting impact and risking the re-traumatisation of communities with unreliable, sporadic and often disempowering support” (Walden, Bos, Rogers, & Werbeloff, 2024, p.6).
 - 3) Move at the Pace of Trust-** “Moving at the pace of trust requires a significant upfront investment of time, deep listening to the community experiences and priorities, and, in turn, ensuring community feels ownership and commitment to the program” (Walden, Bos, Rogers, & Werbeloff, 2024, p.7)
 - 4) Community Customisation is Key-** “Fire to Flourish is not one-size-fits-all, with core components implemented flexibly in each community, tailored according to the local context and priorities of each place” (Walden, Bos, Rogers, & Werbeloff, 2024, p.8).
 - 5) Resourcing for Community Self-Determination-** “Local knowledge and lived experience means communities are best positioned to make decisions about their local place. This expertise is a critical and often missing piece of disaster response and recovery. Communities bring a deep understanding of local context, needs and priorities and can play a larger role in allocating funding and leading change to support their collective future” (Walden, Bos, Rogers, & Werbeloff, 2024, p.9)
- **Story of the Winter Festival** - as a way to build resilience and support the recovery of the local East Gippsland region. On the podcast with Hayley Hardy (co-creator with Adam Bloem) highlighted that resources were thrust on community and by the time communities were in the space to know what they needed; funding rounds had closed. Confirms need for community-led solutions in a timeframe that works for communities. (<https://resilientready.org/podcasts/episode-17-a-winter-festival-of-community-resilience/> accessed on 15 June, 2024).



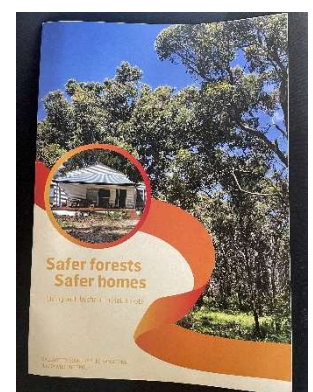
- Growing the Seeds Gippsland Report (2021)**, a study conducted by Victoria University in East Gippsland and Wellington Shire. Key findings are the importance of community capabilities and strengths being understood, recognised and supported in disaster resilience. A holistic approach was identified as needed with governments and supports need to be flexible, collaborative and enable capability building. Trusted relationships and social networks, along with communication were also highlighted as important principles in their findings. The following excerpt demonstrates key points: “The most important strengths and capabilities for the community were attribute-based, such as hopeful, supportive and compassion. These were seen to underpin how these communities’ function and were also strongly associated with resilience. This was also reflected in the survey, with generosity (50%) and resilience (45%) nominated as the most-needed strengths. Attribute capabilities were also seen as the most variable and sensitive to context. The study found that ‘enabling capabilities’ play an important role, and that there were ‘linchpin capabilities’ that support the effective functioning of others. For example, face-to-face communication was nominated as a critical aspect of providing effective care (Young, Jones, and Cormick, 2021, p.5).



- East Gippsland Shire Council Bushfires 2019/2020 Final Progress Report (January 2024)**- provides a summary of the impacts and achievements across a range of domains- built environment, natural environment, social recovery, Aboriginal and cultural healing and economic recovery. It highlights the number of community events from October 2022 to support social connection and recovery. These events total 116 funded community events in bushfire impacted districts, including 24 workshops designed to nurture community connection and leadership. There are nine projects to support Aboriginal communities and cultural healing that have been supported by Emergency Recovery Victoria (ERV). The report notes planning for future emergencies with infrastructure, facilities, telecommunications and community planning as areas of focus.



- East Gippsland Rotary Fire Aid-** Bairnsdale Rotary Sunrise coordinated the East Gippsland Rotary Fire Aid. This is one example of volunteering, as there was a huge volume of this that is unable to all be captured given the scope of this report. Rotary coordinated numerous donations, including hay, fencing, shipping containers, furniture and other donated items. There were several groups and organisations that came to the region with donations of their time and physical donations. There is potential in a larger scope report to share the local challenges that come with coordinating the distribution of donations, which is noted for attention in IGEM and Royal Commission Inquiry report.
- Mallacoota Bushfire Fuel Management MADRA Working Group-** the publication of a book by volunteers of MADRA’s fuel management working group, lead author, Lyn Harwood with key contributors Jenny Mason and Rosie Morton in 2022. This book describes the purpose of the working group “...to develop a collaborative, ongoing, environmentally and socially responsible fuel management plan” (Harwood, Mason and Morton, 2022, p.3). The working group’s focus has been on reducing risk, protecting amenity and biodiversity. It acknowledges the impact of climate change and “Fire is Good. At the right time, in the right way, in the right place” (Harwood, Mason and Morton, 2022, p.9) and acknowledge the cultural practice of cool burns by Traditional Custodians for tens of thousands of years, along with sharing



future plans and input into current Fuel Management programs, ideas on how to prepare houses and gardens for bushfires and additional resources (Harwood, Mason and Morton, 2022).

- **Sarsfield Snaps-** A project developed by community in Sarsfield that supported children and young people to take photos in their local community. There were multiple exhibitions over time and more children that participated, with around sixty being involved. Sponsorship and funding were secured from a range of sources to enable the project. The children's photos were then part of a calendar and then a coffee book, launched at a local celebration in Bairnsdale and then one at the Melbourne Zoo. An article on Sarsfield Community Association's website noted at this event that "Renowned conservationist, television celebrity, and photographer, Robert Irwin, praised local children and youth for their resilience, application and skills in a recorded address to 150 members of the Sarsfield community" (Benton, 2022). Feedback from parents and children highlighted how important this project was for children to focus on something positive and creative following the trauma of the bushfires (Benton, 2022).
- **East Gippsland Timber Milling Project-** A project that grew from the idea put forward by residents to get a portable sawmill to salvage timber on private properties where trees had either fallen or been pushed over during and after the fires. The project was supported by Lions and Rotary clubs initially to purchase portable Lucas sawmills. This then expanded, with more funders on board and 10 local people were trained to operate and work on 58 properties. Despite meeting local needs and providing free timber for those that lost their homes and fences, this project has been unable to secure funds to continue and is winding up in 2024 (Boyce, 2021; Lucas, 2023).

The commitment of communities to lead their recovery and support their communities is evident in the number of activities, events and plans developed across the East Gippsland region. Many of these are available online and are also documented in the EGSC Bushfires 2019/2020 Final Progress Report (2024). These plans, events and activities point to the level of leadership demonstrated by Community Recovery Committees (CRCs), along with other community volunteers.

This section provided an overview of the content and structure of the *Rising Strong Forum*, and a summary of the additional data captured after the forum, including stories and desktop review. The activities and projects that support resilience and recovery demonstrate a diversity of community responses. The following section presents and discusses the data that came from the forum, along with additional evidence collected.

Section 3: So What?

This section presents the key evaluation questions. It also explores outcomes and principles which have promoted resilience and recovery processes in East Gippsland communities. The discussion in this section draws on the data that was collected on a sample of activities and projects across the region. These activities and projects have come from the *Rising Strong Forum*; stories of Most Significant Change collected, along with a desktop review. Note that the activities and projects have been based on who presented at the *Rising Strong Forum* and then the subsequent stories shared following the forum. It is important to note that due to the limited scope and small size of the evaluation that it is far from exhaustive and does not include or represent all the recovery and resilience activities across the East Gippsland region.



There are two elements to the evaluation. The first is capturing data to understand and confirm the key principles and outcomes of community resilience, including enablers and challenges in recovery and resilience building processes. This evaluation draws on principles-focussed evaluation design for this. The second element to the evaluation is determining satisfaction and impact of the *Rising Strong Forum*, this is using a summative evaluation design.

3.1 Key Evaluation Questions, Outcomes & Principles

This section provides a discussion around each of the Key Evaluation Questions (KEQs) based on the evidence. It then provides a further discussion around outcomes and finally looks at the role of principles in relation to outcomes. The following KEQ's have been identified as part of the evaluation framework to develop an understanding of recovery and resilience experiences in East Gippsland beyond the *Rising Strong Forum*:

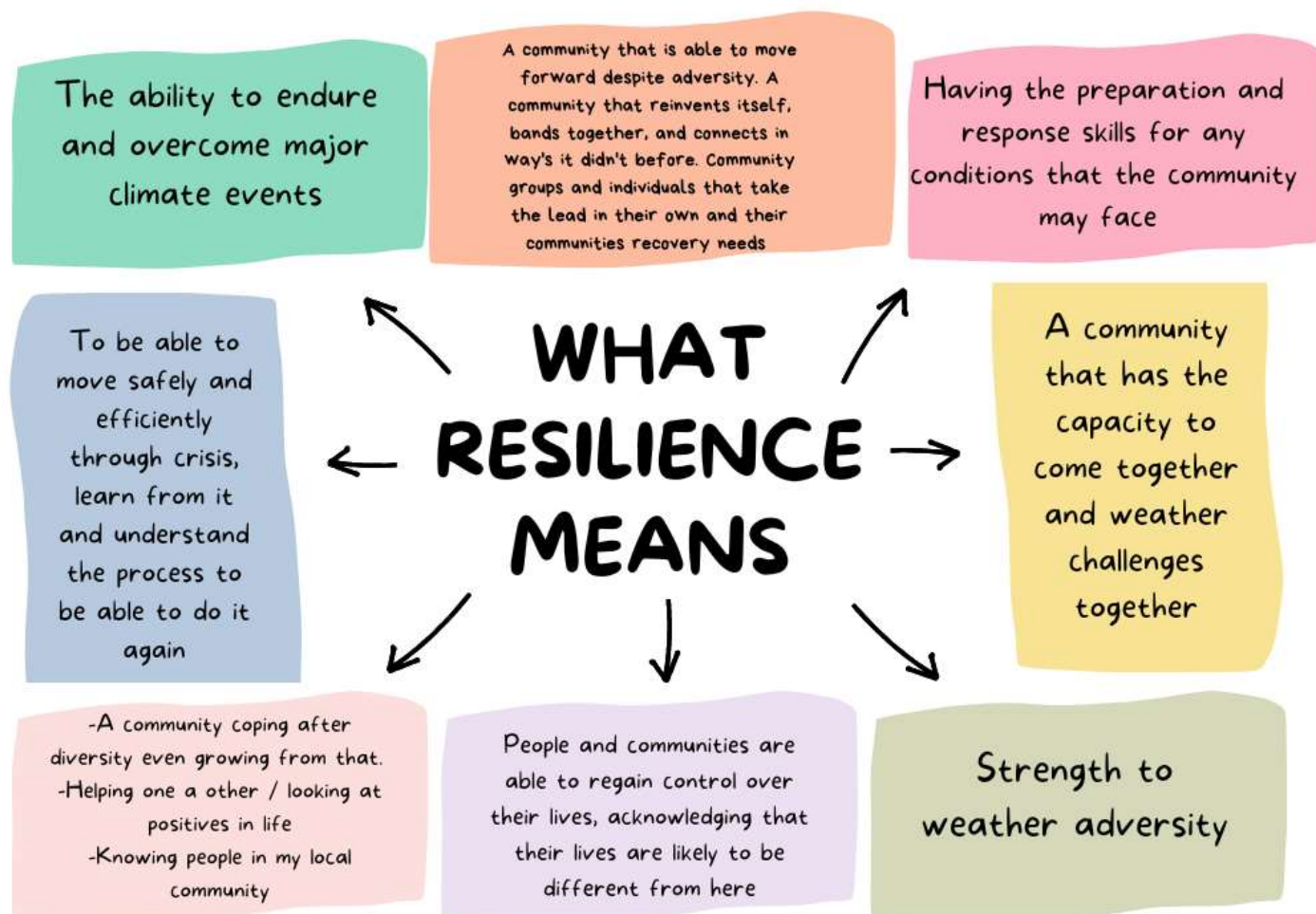
1. What role do the principles of knowledge, connectedness and collaboration play in community resilience building?
2. What do examples of success tell us about what principles are effective for community resilience building?
3. What are the confidence levels of community representatives of being prepared and resilient for the future?
4. What outcomes can be identified in communities and what helped achieve these?
5. What are the unintended outcomes and how did they occur? (what contributed?)

A discussion regarding each of these evaluation questions follows.

3.1.1 KEQ 1: What role do the principles of knowledge, connectedness and collaboration play in community resilience building?

To answer this question, consideration of what resilience means to people that attended the *Rising Strong Forum* is presented first. The pre-forum survey (see **Figure 2**) and the forum captured data from participants which highlights what community resilience means to them. The responses indicate that people are considering both resilience at an individual level and a community level. Key themes of strength, coping, control, skills and communities coming together have been identified from this.

Figure 2. Pre-forum Survey Results ‘what does community resilience mean to you?’

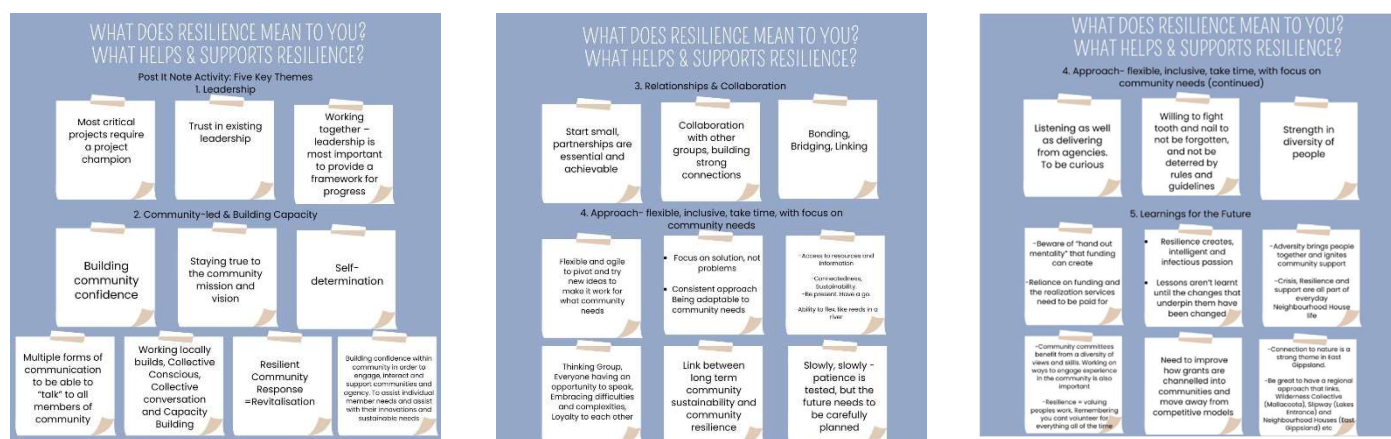


In addition, *Rising Strong Forum* participants were asked to share their thoughts and reflections on sticky notes to the following questions: **1) What does resilience mean to you? and 2) what helps and supports resilience?**

A total of 36 responses were received to the sticky note reflection activity. The responses have been grouped into five themes, with these provided below, with some examples of responses:

1. **Leadership:** Trust in existing leadership
2. **Community-led & Building Capacity:** Self-determination and building confidence
3. **Relationships & Collaboration:** Strengthen and build relationships in community and working in partnership with others
4. **Approach- flexible, inclusive, take time, with focus on community needs:** Communication with everyone, take the time that is needed- going slow, adapting as needed and being able to respond to community needs
5. **Learnings for the Future:** Need to improve on the way that grants come into communities and move away from competitive models, connection to nature as a strong theme in East Gippsland, the ability to connect projects and activities across the region

Figure 3. Sticky Note Feedback



Considering the feedback on the meaning of resilience as a foundation, a discussion of the first Key Evaluation Question (KEQ) follows. To recap, KEQ1: *What role do the principles of knowledge, connectedness and collaboration play in community resilience building?* Specific aspects that contribute to recovery and resilience were identified through the pre-forum survey to test the principles which support recovery and resilience (as part of the program logic). Question three of the survey (**Figure 4**) asked participants ‘What helps to build community resilience?’ with the options of ‘connectedness’, ‘community relationship’, ‘collaboration’, ‘knowledge’ or ‘other’ that could be selected. The data from this survey indicates clearly that **Connectedness**, **Collaboration** and **Community Relationships** are principles which support resilience with 90% of respondents identifying that these help to build resilience. Knowledge as a principle to help build community resilience has also been identified by 70% of respondents. This data indicates that indeed **Connectedness**, **Collaboration**, **Community Relationships** and **Knowledge** are all principles which play an important role in enabling resilience in communities. The last bar of the graph in **Figure 4** below details the ‘other’ responses and these were ‘as above’ and “In reality, it's all of these things and probably more. It has a bit to do with the status of the community to start with and what its strengths and weaknesses were and how the community has worked on strengthening areas where there can be improvement. The ability to advocate is also a necessary concept.”

Figure 4. Question 3- What helps to build community resilience?

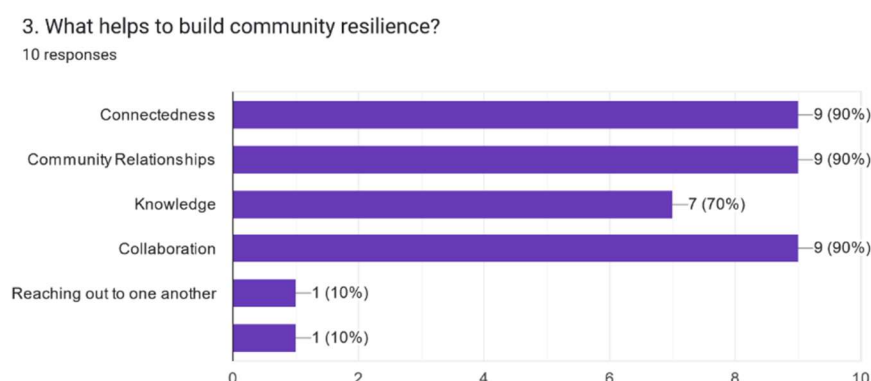
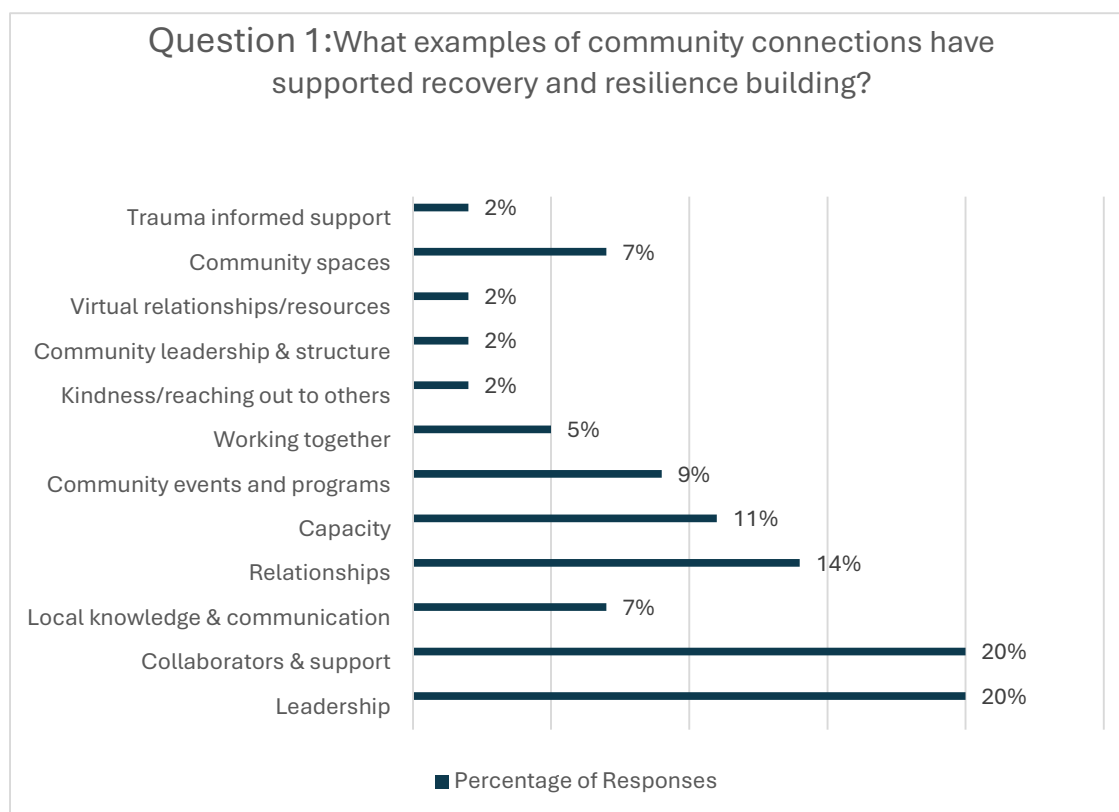


Table questions at the *Rising Strong Forum* also identified the role of community connections in recovery and resilience building. Question one was: ‘What examples of community connections have supported recovery and resilience building?’ A total of 46 examples were provided, allocated to 12 themes. These themes have been identified by drawing on the key principles identified for community leadership in recovery developed from community experiences following Black Saturday (Leadbeater, 2013). These themes are provided in **Figure 5** and provides information regarding question 1 responses.

Figure 5: Question 1 Responses



What we can see from **Figure 5** is that nearly 20% of responses identified **Leadership & Collaborators and support**, followed by **Relationships** (14% of responses), **Capacity** (at 11% of responses), **Community events & programs** (at 9% of responses), with **Local knowledge & communication**, along with **Community Spaces** both at 7% of responses). A total of 5% of responses related to the theme of **Working Together**. There were several responses that related to themes of **Kindness/reaching out to others**, **Community Leadership & Structure**, **Virtual relationships/resources** and **Trauma-informed support**. This data demonstrates the diversity of community connections that have **enabled** recovery and resilience building.

We can observe from this data that the top responses to ‘what community connections support resilience and recovery’ are also aligned with broader evidence identified. Broader evidence includes the key factors identified by Leadbeater cited above. These elements have also been identified in the data collected from East Gippsland and include: 1) Time, 2) Leadership, 3) Relationships, 4) Capacity, 5) Local Knowledge and 6) Communication. There is resonance with what has been found in other communities through research and adding the experiences in East Gippsland. Additional principles which support recovery and resilience have been identified from the data, found in **Figure 17**. How these additional principles relate with others are also presented in this visual (**Figure 17**).

Broader literature confirms the importance of social capital, including three elements identified by Aldrick & Meyer (2015) of bonding (people close to you that provide support), bridging (links of various groups and aids collaboration) and lastly, linking (the linkages between communities and governments, philanthropy and others). These elements came up at the forum and are also evident in the data. Social capital and social connectedness have been confirmed as pivotal through the combination of the broad evidence review and the data collected from the *Rising Strong Forum*. A definition of social capital is provided by Bhandari, Humnath & Yasunobu, Kumi, “Social capital is broadly defined to be a multidimensional phenomenon encompassing a stock of social norms, values, beliefs, trusts, obligations, relationships, networks, friends, memberships, civic engagement, information flows, and institutions that foster cooperation and collective actions for mutual benefits.” (2009, p.486). Liamputtong, Rice and Suwankhong, (2021) identify that social capital is closely associated with social connectedness.

In conclusion, the evidence collected confirms that the principles identified in the program logic: 1) Connectedness, 2) Knowledge & Confidence and 3) Collaboration all play a significant role in community resilience building and recovery. There is also evidence that points to additional principles which support recovery and resilience, and these are discussed and presented in section 3.2 *Key Principles*.

3.1.2 KEQ 2: What do examples of success tell us about what principles are effective for community resilience building?

Several East Gippsland experiences of success were shared at the *Rising Strong Forum*. Additional examples were highlighted following the forum through capturing stories and a desktop review. What is evident from the data is that there are many examples of success in community resilience building. As community resilience is a multi-faceted and complex element, there are also challenges identified along with those stories of success. The challenges have been captured and presented in *Section 4.0: 'What's Next?'* of this report.

The examples of success identified from forum participants are included below in **Table 3**. There were 42 responses, and these have been grouped into key themes using the three principles identified in the program logic:

Table 3. Other Stories of Success Regarding Recovery & Resilience

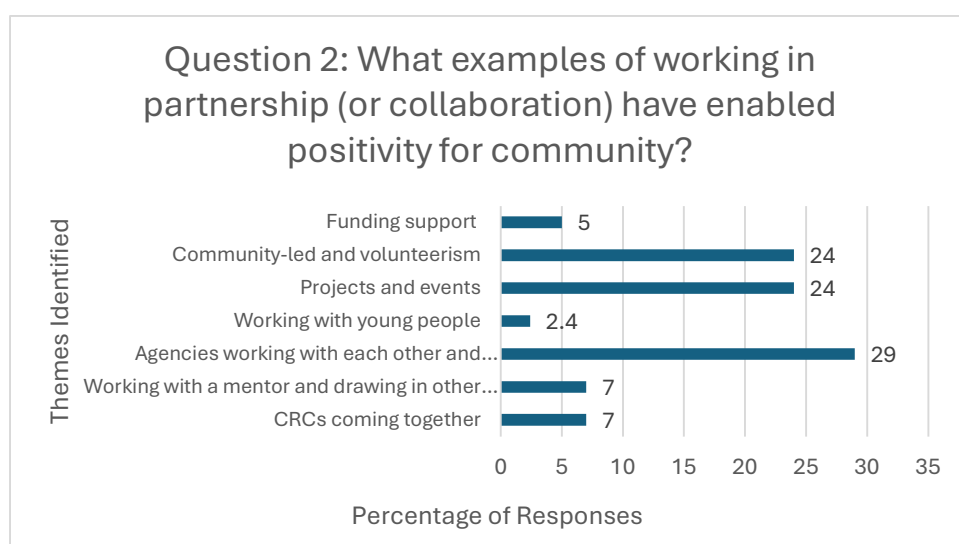
Question 2. What other stories of success in communities can be shared regarding recovery and resilience?	
Social Connectedness	
Community dinners- sports clubs and community	working with a mentor
Learning, bringing CRCs together	Steve Pascoe- Strathewen- mentor CRCs
Sarsfield SNAPS	Fire to flourish= Monash University
Concert	Agricultural events at Clifton Creek- sunflowers
Local knowledge & Communication	
Shared experiences	Family focus- playground building
Surveys/consultation processes enable broad community input and provided evidence of needs	East Gippsland Community Foundation- very responsive of other funding bodies, need to keep it strong for future emergencies
Collaboration & Supporting Each Other	
Champions - brought in universities and government departments and other bodies in a regional approach. Post disaster planning to improve resilience. Included insurance.	Sarsfield community association (SCA), SCA volunteerism, work being done by volunteers, progress being made on community plan actions
EGNNH- supporting communities impacted by natural disasters and COVID	Is success attached to the ability to ask for appropriate help- not relinquish control
East Gippsland network of neighbourhood houses working with EGSC	Friday night feeds- driven locally, external visitors
Reclink, Moogji	No interpersonal conflicts help with positivity
Children with additional needs, Youth focus network, East Gippsland Communities for Children Community advisory group, East Gippsland Partners in Violence Prevention	Fact that support is there, government funding, government emergency response and ongoing support of connectors at various level of governments and services, e.g. Red Cross
Collaboration with consultants enabled documentation of community voices	CRC link ups and draw in other community members/skills- sources of info referrals and support
CRC link up important to continue	We've all pulled together- different groups that already existed for other reasons

Question 2. What other stories of success in communities can be shared regarding recovery and resilience?	
Social Connectedness	
Mallacoota Sustainable energy group	Growing from existing strengths, leaders, skills and talents
Community groups make things happen without the drag of bureaucracy, waiting for things to be done- or funds to be provided, etc.	
East Gippsland Timber Milling Project-engage with activity	Cann River community centre-Foodbank Wednesday lunch, services Australia, library, op shop, youth

The table discussion to question two, ‘What examples of working in partnership (or collaboration) have enabled positivity for community?’ provided 41 responses with a total of 7 themes that were identified (see **Figure 6**).

Agencies working with each other and communities had the highest number of responses (at 29%), followed by **community-led** and **volunteerism** and **projects and events**, with both at 24%.

Figure 6. Question 2- What examples of working in partnership (or collaboration) have enabled positivity for community?



It can be seen from **Figure 6** that working with each other, community-led and volunteerism are significant responses. Projects and events have also been identified as examples of working in partnership, which have brought a positive focus into communities.

We can see from the data that there are examples of success that fit into the three principles of 1) Social connectedness, 2) Knowledge & Confidence and 3) Collaboration. There are also examples of collaboration that have been positive for communities. This points to the importance and effectiveness of the three principles and in particular, that collaboration is an effective principle.

Several enablers have been identified which support recovery and resilience processes in communities. These are detailed in the last section and include factors such as the hard work of volunteers, the pivotal role of relationships, including trust in relationships and access to services and funding.

In **Figure 7** below, a Most Significant Change Story has been provided regarding the Youth Recovery Support project in Mallacoota and Cann River. This story is another example of successful community resilience building while the project was in operation. This story also highlights the power of not only community-led approaches, but the pivotal role of trusted relationships and the need for long-term approaches working with young people. It also highlights the urgent mental health service gaps for young people in these communities with the project no longer operating due to no funding.

Figure 7. Most Significant Change Story: ‘Short-term Youth Recovery Support for the Far East’

Most Significant Change Story: ‘Short-term Youth Recovery Support for the Far East’

What Happened?

The Youth Recovery Support (YRS) Project in Mallacoota and Cann River emerged out of the needs identified for young people following the bushfires of 2019/2020. The project aimed to improve the wellbeing of young people and was funded for a two-year period. The YRS project produced **two overall project outcomes, both of which were fully achieved**. A clear learning from the project is that there are gaps in existing services for young people. In particular, these are: 1) Local crisis and homelessness support; 2) Support for face-to-face mental health (crisis and early intervention); and 3) Place-based case management. It emerged through the YRS project that there were gaps in mental health responses for young people in Cann River and Mallacoota, especially if mental health issues were moderate to high risk. There are no local mental health services for Cann River or Mallacoota and the data suggests that this is a dangerous gap for young people in the region and one that needs to be urgently addressed.

Evidence from the project also indicates that the youth service system does not meet the needs of young people living in Cann River and Mallacoota. This project has unearthed some significant service issues. These issues include a lack of youth services – or the short-term nature of such services and their narrow focus – which means that young people can easily fall through the gaps. The project saw many examples of opportunities for early intervention which were missed due to the way the youth support system operates. Mallacoota and Cann River requires solid, ongoing support in order to support the wellbeing of its young people. The YRS project worked well in engaging young people, in coordinating services, building collaborations, creating new services, and informing the community. The project identified many service access challenges, a major one being inconsistent availability and multiple barriers to accessing them. In brief, services come irregularly, they are unreliable, and they are not always trauma aware.

A key learning is that having locally based professionals is critical. There is a need to train people to work with young people and create pathways for upskilling them. If professionals are going to engage with young people, they must use a trauma-informed approach, which means having reliable local workers who can devote time to building trusted relationships. In this way, young people can acquire a sense of safety, knowing there is someone who can understand their needs and aspirations.

Why does the storyteller think this is significant change, and what difference it has made or will make in the future?

The evidence from the YRS project confirms that there have been positive outcomes and benefits from supporting the young people of Cann River and Mallacoota in this short-term project. However, young people need long-term support which is provided in a holistic way. Recognising that disasters may well become more frequent due to climate change; we need to build long-term resilience into remote communities. The YRS project has shown itself to be a successful model, embodying a local and holistic approach. The data shows that these essential elements have contributed to the wellbeing of young people in Cann River and Mallacoota.

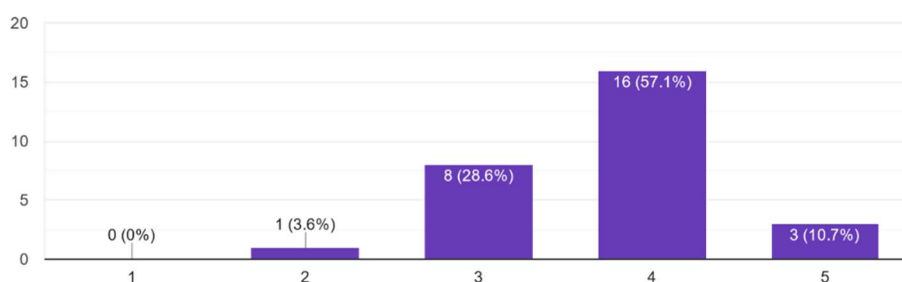
However, as the YRS finished in 2023 due to no funding- the concerns for the mental health of young people have become ever more urgent. As there are no local mental health services, the Royal Flying Doctor Service (RFDS) has been providing a service. However, this service is now finishing up. This timeframe doesn’t work for young people to access in meaningful ways as things settled down for them and as they became ready to access (a 5-year cycle would have been better!). Now, as RFDS is more embedded and normalised we could have seen an increase in uptake of services but no, RFDS are winding up. There are remote/telehealth (headspace, i-connect) options but the importance of the in-person moment and opportunity to build relationships needs to be offered in order for telehealth to be successful and for better prevention strategies (young people more likely to see counsellors when critical, rather than as prevention and mental health promotion before reaching critical status). I would describe service access as tokenistic at best for young people in remote communities.

3.1.3 KEQ 3: What are the confidence levels of community representatives of being prepared and resilient for the future?

The survey data from the *Rising Strong Forum* provided a small sample of data in relation to this Key Evaluation Question. **Figure 8** below shows the reported confidence level of respondents on a scale of 1 to 5. Where **1= Not confident at all** and **5= Extremely confident**. The results show that a total of **68% of respondents** reported a 4 or 5 confidence level, these are on the higher end of the scale, with 11% reporting that they are extremely confident. There was another 28% of respondents that reported their confidence to be middle of the scale, at a 3. It can be concluded from this data that most or nearly 70% of survey respondents feel confident of being prepared and resilient for the future. Noting the limitation of the small sample size, considering future options for a larger data collection to this question could occur to support local resilience planning and building.

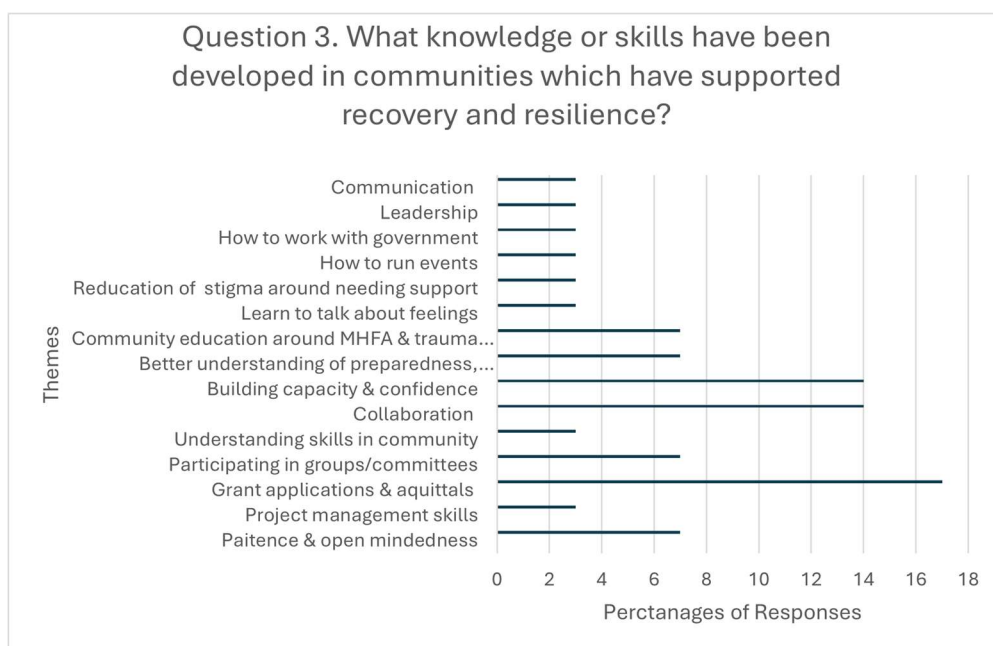
Figure 8. What is your confidence level of being prepared and resilient for the future

What is your confidence level of being prepared and resilient for the future?
28 responses



Additional data captured at the forum also provides some insights into confidence levels through the development of knowledge and/or skills. The third table question at the forum was ‘What knowledge or skills has been developed in communities which have supported recovery and resilience?’ There was a total of 29 responses, and these have been grouped into themes and can be found in **Figure 9** below. Skills around grant applications & acquittals featured highest, followed by building capacity & confidence and collaboration.

Figure 9. Table Question 3 Results



In addition to the evidence presented, the pre-forum survey also identified what community activities and programs have built knowledge and confidence. **Figure 10** below identifies the responses, which highlights the importance of communities coming together, the forming of CRCs, training and a range of activities including craft, art, lantern making, art therapy, healing singing and wellbeing days.

Figure 10. Pre-forum Survey Results: ‘What community activities and programs have built knowledge and confidence?’



Data collected in 2021 from a community forum and surveys across East Gippsland and Wellington Shires also confirms the importance of several community strengths including; local knowledge, being caring and supportive, established trusted relationships and ways of working, being compassionate and empathic, lived experience of recovering from natural disasters, connected, resourceful and volunteering (Young, 2021). This feedback flags the importance of lived experience, and this could be considered in relationship to confidence levels into the future.

It can be concluded that there are some confidence levels from those attending the forum, with **68% of respondents** reporting a 4 or 5 confidence level (on a scale of 1-5). There is only a small number of people that reported being extremely confident, at 11% of respondents. There are some examples provided of knowledge and skills that have been built in communities, suggesting that this may translate into confidence levels. There are some examples of activities and programs that have built confidence of community members and communities. **Figure 11.** Most Significant Change Story: ‘Foundation for Flexible Community Solutions’ identifies the benefit of locals supporting locals to identify solutions and support recovery and build resilience. It also indicates some confidence in being resilient for the future through several community generated projects supported through the foundation.

Figure 11. Most Significant Change Story: ‘Foundation for Flexible Community Solutions’

Most Significant Change Story: ‘Foundation for Flexible Community Solutions’

Storyteller: Helen Martin, Director- East Gippsland Community Foundation

What happened?

This story is about the East Gippsland Community Foundation (EGCF) and my experience with the foundation over the last few years. The Victorian Government ran an appeal through the Bendigo Bank and raised a lot of money from public donation for people affected by the 2019-20 bushfires. The first distributions were made through Bendigo Bank’s philanthropic arm, the Community Enterprise Foundation, and went to individuals who had been directly affected by the bushfires and lost their homes or had them damaged. There was some initial funding for recovery activities but that was cut short by COVID. The Government and the Community Enterprise Foundation felt it would be best to allocate the rest of the funding to local community foundations, who were closer to the communities and who could put money out over five to ten years. There wasn’t a community foundation in East Gippsland, so the East Gippsland Community Foundation was established.

The Foundation has an absolutely fantastic staff of three and a board of ten volunteers. Has been operation for 3 years. Started with formal funding rounds and aimed to make it as simple as possible. The Executive Officer had a lot of close interaction with many applicants to encourage them. We set up a simple funding and acquittal process to make it much easier for community groups to deal with. Have just allocated our fifth round of funding. More recently, we spoke to a lot of the Community Recovery Committees (CRCs), and they were nearly burnt out from scraping up funding from multiple sources. Decided to take a different funding approach. Offered each of the CRCs \$50,000 for one year and another for the second year. They could direct it to whatever they thought was the highest priority in their community. Has been quite good and useful for them to decide where they wanted this to go. Interesting that CRCs haven’t snapped this offer up immediately and has been an example of people being tired. Because our funding is flexible have been able to provide funding for project development as well, to be able to help with working out the definition and costs of projects before applying for funding. Being able to provide project development and seed funding to support planning and building projects is one thing that I’m pleased about.

Some of the joy has been able to work with the remote communities from Angler’s Rest to Wairewa, Genoa and back again. Some of the projects we have been supporting are small but vital things and has been great fun to see these. Have a number of groups in the community that have come back again and said it has been so good working with the foundation because we have been so responsive. Because of the impact of COVID and increase in building expenses, projects have found themselves with shortfalls and we have been able to assist to plug that gap as other funding bodies wouldn’t support projects that had already started. Especially in the early stages, the commonwealth and state government funding took a long time to assess and announce funding. We had allocated funding already and if projects were successful with both, we have been able to reallocate to similar causes in the community. The model has proven to be really excellent. To some degree that is down to the excellence of the staff that we have been able to attract. It is also because the community foundation model is very flexible and responsive kind of way of getting money out. For any future disaster, I would encourage governments to think about running grants programs through an organisation like the foundation.

Why does the storyteller think this is significant change, and what difference it has made or will make in the future?

The foundation has also been giving scholarships to tertiary education and other forms of post-secondary education and all of them have been very well received. Some of them are enthusiastic about a university life and not having to work every available hour just to get by. There are at least 30 students previously or currently funded. Doing the most amazing range of courses from bio-medical technology to apprenticeships, lots of teaching, some nursing, medical. Quite amazing array and most say they want to come home when they are finished.

How the foundation can be useful to other agencies is that EGSC and ERV have had some funding for community events in the CRC areas. Last year and in 2024, they have channelled that through the foundation, which is administering it on their behalf. Similarly, Monash University’s Fire to Flourish project, which has some pilot projects in community granting around Eastern Australia. East Gippsland is one of their pilot areas, it’s a footprint from Cabbage Tree Creek to Genoa. We administer the grants on their behalf and the community teams from Fire to Flourish are working with the communities to develop the projects. These are a couple of examples how external bodies can partner with a foundation and achieve a lot of their own aims while minimising their administrative burden.

The difference the foundation has made is supporting more connected communities, more responsive in terms of the timeframe and more responsive in being able to alter the purpose of the project if circumstances change and having

flexibility around that. Also being able to assist people with their ideas and help to frame their project. Have also had project partnerships with other organisations, apart from CRCs, like the Gippsland Agriculture Group and we've done some work with the Emergency Services Foundation on a mental health project and one with the East Gippsland Shire to continue some work with rural farming communities. With our youth focussed funding round there was a youth leadership project with TAFE. Also helped with children with additional needs with the development of sensory kits in relief centres. There have been all kinds of joyful examples that have come out of this. I think we have made a difference which is a nice thought. The people that really made the difference are the people that gave the money in the first place.

3.1.4 KEQ 4: What outcomes can be identified in communities and what helped achieve these?

An assessment of the three outcomes identified in the program logic are presented in this Key Evaluation Question. Additional outcomes are identified from the review of the evidence are also presented.

3.1.4.1 Outcomes

There are three outcomes that were identified in the program logic. There are two community engagement outcomes and then the third is the overall outcome. The community engagement outcomes are:

1. **Community relationships and collaboration to encourage connectedness, recovery and healing activities**
2. **Community activities and programs to build knowledge, confidence and resilience**

The overall outcome is:

Community resilience and recovery are supported by principles of;

1. **Connectedness**
2. **Knowledge & Confidence**
3. **Collaboration**

The evidence tables point to specific examples that demonstrate the outcomes. Data also points to additional outcomes, unintended consequences and additional principles, all of which are detailed in this KEQ.

A principles-focussed evaluation approach was employed to understand and confirm the key principles involved in success in creating outcomes of community resilience. This has also included identifying enablers and the challenges in recovery processes. The enablers and challenges are detailed in the last section of the report. A discussion is presented in section 3.2 about key principles which support community recovery and resilience.

3.1.4.2 Outcome 1- Community relationships and collaboration to encourage connectedness, recovery and healing activities

The data identified that the first community engagement outcome - **1. Community relationships and collaboration to encourage connectedness, recovery and healing activities** can be confirmed. This is because community relationships and collaboration did play a role in facilitating connectedness and contribute towards recovery and healing activities. This is demonstrated by the data captured with examples provided in **Table 4**. The pivotal role of both relationships and collaboration are confirmed through the data, which came through in the key themes identified across all of the evidence, including stories. In addition, table question one shows examples of community connections which have supported recovery and resilience building. The story from the Sarsfield Community Association provides evidence of this and can be found in **Figure 12**. Some of the data highlights the problem of putting a timeframe on recovery and the need to acknowledge it will be different for every individual and community. The local evidence suggests that recovery is not something that is ever fully achieved as it is an ongoing journey with a number of phases that people experience over time (Young, 2021).

Table 4. Evidence Table: Outcome 1

Outcome: 1) Community relationships and collaboration to encourage connectedness, recovery and healing activities	
Source	Evidence/Example
Figure 12. Story: ‘Next Level Volunteerism’	‘...- the community that has been built’ demonstrates increased relationships and collaboration through the work of the Sarsfield Community Association
Desktop review	Sarsfield Snaps, East Gippsland Timber Milling Project, Winter Festival
Figure 7. ‘Short-term Recovery for Young People in the Far East’	Youth Recovery Support Project shows demonstrated outcomes from relationships and collaboration and increased connectedness identified as a result of the project
Rising Strong Forum Table Discussion and pre-forum survey	46 examples of community connections that supported recovery and resilience building, with 20% identifying examples that fell into the key theme of Leadership and another 20% the theme of Collaborators and support. 90% of respondents stated that Connectedness, Collaboration and Community relationship support resilience (pre-forum survey)

The story in **Figure 12.** ‘Next Level Volunteerism’ provides evidence of the pivotal role of building relationships and how community connectedness has changed for the Sarsfield community since the bushfires.

Figure 12. Most Significant Change Story: ‘Next Level Volunteerism’

Most Significant Change Story: ‘Next Level Volunteerism’

Storyteller: John Kinniburgh, Sarsfield Community Association

What Happened?

This story shows the extent of volunteerism in the community and people stuff in Sarsfield and achievements since the bushfires. I reckon this is a most significant change for the community as I was connected with Sarsfield originally in the 1970s when I came up from Melbourne. Then it was a totally different community, there was a school, a cricket club and would go to each other places for lunch. At this time, it was much less populated, a very tight community and had infrastructure.

When I moved back to Sarsfield in 2006, for most of the next 14 years, we waved to neighbours and there were a couple of functions a year. There was no tennis club or cricket. People liked it in Sarsfield- there were birds, trees, solitude, the view and it was quiet- but it wasn’t a community. Now there is a sense of community. There are events like regular Friday dinners, yoga, chat group, art, and the hall will be re-built. Lots of people come to the events that are held. I know my neighbours now. It is drastic change.

Everyone was affected in some way by the bushfires. Early on, people that got it going were the people that didn’t lose their homes and made cuppas at the hall after the bushfires. Once there was community association formed, there was a plan developed by the community, Sarsfield 2030. The plan is to have a new building and a playground and to have people playing cricket, have nature walks in the bush and people being involved in community events and activities. This work has been heavily supported by the foundation (East Gippsland Community Foundation) and other organisations. I think it is sustainable and at the moment, very much supported. Friday night dinners are supported, and people don’t have to pay. However, it is more the connections made by people that have made it a more of a community. It is about people.

Why does the storyteller think this is significant change, and what difference it has made or will make in the future?

The pillars in the community plan were about people and being aware that many were hurting and angry. We were helping people hurting by bringing people together. While some people haven't taken that up and don't come to many events and some moved away, there are people that do come regularly to events. The community plan and events are fairly strategic. We probably don't come back to the plan enough, but plan keeps us a bit focussed. Neighbourly connections are such a basic, simple thing. Food, music and things for kids are three things we regularly do. These are no brainers and if you provide them, you have a high chance of things going okay. The thing I am proud of and blown away is the level of volunteerism, it is next level. When we get a new hall, while it means we have a more appropriate building, it is all about the people- the community that has been built.

3.1.4.2 Outcome 2- Community activities and programs to build knowledge, confidence and resilience

The data identified from the *Rising Strong Forum* indicates that the second outcome- **2. Community activities and programs to build knowledge, confidence and resilience** has also been achieved. There were examples of community activities and programs that did increase knowledge and confidence, which were provided in the table discussions (detailed in the previous section). The evidence that confirms is in **Table 5**. While there are references to resilience in the data collected, demonstrated resilience at a particular level is harder to confirm. Resilience does exist but appears to vary for individuals and communities. For a larger evaluation, it may be useful to consider the broader use of a resilience measure to understand in more detail the levels of resilience and what contributes to this, individually and at a community level. The National Disaster Resilience (NDR) Index may have some relevant components of resilience that could be utilised (Parsons, Reeve, McGregor, Hastings, Marshall, McNeill, Stayner, & Glavac, 2021). The NDR Index identified that East Gippsland has moderate resilience based on the population level data that it uses to assess resilience levels.

The evidence regarding knowledge and confidence is included in the discussion regarding Key Evaluation Question three. As previously outlined, 68% of respondents report being confident of being prepared and resilient for the future. However, it must be noted the limitation with this data being a small sample size as previously flagged.

Table 5. Evidence Table: Outcome 2

Outcome: 2) Community activities and programs to build knowledge, confidence and resilience	
Source	Evidence/Example
<i>Rising Strong Forum</i> pre-survey data, table discussion and stories	Forming a CRC, music events, training opportunities such as trauma informed training, activities such as craft, lantern making, sport, art therapy, healing singing and wellbeing days. Youth Recovery Support Project (YRS) Project- see Figure 7 . Demonstrates an increase in community activities and confidence during the project (noting that the project has now ceased due to no funding).
<i>Rising Strong Forum</i> Survey data	68% of respondents reported a 4 or 5 confidence level on the higher end of the scale, with 11% reporting that they are extremely confident
<i>Rising Strong Forum</i> data, table discussion	Knowledge and skills that have been developed in communities that have supported recovery and resilience include grant applications and acquittals, building capacity and confidence, collaboration, community education around mental health and trauma, preparedness, participating in groups and committees, project management skills for example.

The evidence outlined confirms that outcome two has been achieved. Determining specific levels of resilience cannot be achieved as this varies for people and communities and there is no baseline that is available. What is available is an assessment overall for East Gippsland with a moderate level of resilience based on the NDR Index (Parsons et. al, 2021).

3.1.4.4 Overall Outcome

The overall outcome in the program logic is detailed below. Additional outcomes identified are also highlighted in this section.

Community resilience and recovery are supported by principles of;

- 1. Connectedness**
- 2. Knowledge & Confidence**
- 3. Collaboration**

It is evident from the data that the overall outcome has been achieved. The three principles of Connectedness, Knowledge & Confidence, and Collaboration are present, with the data confirming that they play a key role in supporting resilience and recovery processes. This can be seen by the examples provided at the forum and the stories which are demonstrated in the evidence table in **Table 6**.

Table 6. Evidence Table: Overall Outcome

Overall Outcome: Community resilience and recovery are supported by principles of; 1. Connectedness 2. Knowledge & Confidence 3. Collaboration	
Source	Evidence/Example
Desktop review and literature review	Key learnings from <i>Fire to Flourish Report</i> confirm these principles. Additional literature reviewed also identify these principles as factors that have played a role in recovery journeys of other communities, including principles for community leadership in recovery (Leadbeater, 2013).
Stories	All stories identify the importance of key principles Connectedness, Knowledge and Collaboration in different ways. They also highlight elements that have informed updating the principles and additional principles including local knowledge, communication and supporting each other. Examples include Figure 12 . 'Next Level Volunteering' Figure 11 . 'Foundation for Flexible Community Solutions', Figure 7 . 'Short-term Youth Recovery Support for Far East' and Figure 21 . 'The Power of Local Knowledge'.
<i>Rising Strong Forum</i> data- Presentations, table discussions and survey results (pre and post).	Presentations, table discussions and survey data confirm that the principles of connectedness, knowledge and confidence, and collaboration all play a role in recovery and resilience. While they are consistently present across the range of data identified, specific examples include the presentations from the Wilderness Collective, MADRA and Sarsfield Community Association. The evidence reviewed has also highlights changes to principles to encapsulate

Overall Outcome: Community resilience and recovery are supported by principles of; 1. Connectedness 2. Knowledge & Confidence 3. Collaboration	
Source	Evidence/Example
	all of the evidence presented and additional principles have also been identified. These are discussed in section 3.2 Key Principles .

There are also additional outcomes identified from the evidence, which are detailed following. Evidence is outlined in **Table 7**. and then a story is presented in **Figure 13**. ‘Resilience Plan in the Omeo Region’ which demonstrates leadership, collaboration, local knowledge and resilience.

Table 7. Evidence Table: Additional Outcomes

Additional Outcomes: Community-led processes Strengthened communities Demonstrated leadership and resilience		
Additional Outcomes	Source	Evidence/Example
Community-led processes	<i>Rising Strong Forum</i> presentations, stories, survey data, table discussions	MADRA, SCA, Wilderness Collective, Mallacoota Sustainability Network, Winter Festival, <i>Fire to Flourish</i> project
Strengthened communities	<i>Rising Strong Forum</i> presentations, stories, survey data, table discussions	SCA Presentation and Figure 14 . Story: ‘What about Sarsfield! What about what it has achieved’
Demonstrated leadership and resilience	<i>Rising Strong Forum</i> presentations, stories, survey data, table discussions, desktop review	Figure 13 . Story ‘Resilience Plan in the Omeo Region’ story, Figure 14 . ‘What about Sarsfield...’MADRA presentation, Warm Corners Consulting presentation on Erinunderra to Snowy CRC- <i>Building Healthy & Resilient Communities through Service Equity Project</i> , CRC examples, EGSC Final Progress Report- 2024

Figure 13. Most Significant Change Story: ‘Resilience Plan in the Omeo Region’

Most Significant Change Story: ‘Resilience Plan in the Omeo Region’

Storyteller: ORCRA committee member

What Happened?

The Omeo Regional Community Recovery Association (ORCRA) created a disaster resilience plan for the communities of the Omeo Region. ORCRA was structured in their approach to get recovery priorities and have an emergency management plan across the region. Utilising research in disaster resilience we used the disaster risk equation and how understanding individual and community capacity is key to reducing the impact of hazards like fire and flood, but also vulnerability in place. The consultant Liza Gelt guided us through understanding our strengths, our vulnerabilities and how we respond. The rest of the ORCRA team and the resilience plan sub-committee members, Jane Rowe and Trudy Anderson were great in bringing community members together in highlighting our strengths across the towns and the region overall. ORCRA's consultant helped understand the capacities across the various towns, and able to link across the towns and the region the strengths, vulnerabilities and needs. The focus on each community was captured including what makes their town unique. The resilience plan for each of the towns captures community actions, what they already do before, during and after disasters, and their expectations of agencies.

We have had local incident management plans for a dozen years or so, but our resilience plan brought everyone together to focus on one outcome and help us to understand each other and we found we have similar values and strengths as a large network of farming communities with a strong volunteer base. The whole reason I joined ORCRA, as this was the first time, outside of business and tourism, everyone was coming together as the whole valley, to build our capacity and resilience for whatever comes next this way. The region has been impacted over time by floods, fires, storms, drought, animal disease, and plague locusts. Included in the resilience plan for each town are the expectations of agencies. As a result, the agencies mentioned in the resilience plan came to our towns to talk about our expectations of them before, during and after disasters. They spoke with us about what was feasible, improved community understanding of why agencies do certain things, and how we can work better together in the future.

Why does the storyteller think this is significant change, and what difference it has made or will make in the future?

The state emergency management plan structure is state, regional, municipal and then local, so once the resilience plan was written, it was presented to the Municipal Emergency Management Plan Committee (MEMPC) by our president Jane Rowe and the consultant Liza Gelt. ORCRA requested to MEMPC that they take the resilience plan as our region's community emergency management plan as part of the Municipal Emergency Management Plan. The result of this is that agencies would recognise this resilience plan in an event and use it to guide response, relief and recovery. The current local incident management plans have only one aspect in an individuals plan and emergency assembly areas in our community, they don't go into the detail required for a community emergency management plan. When agencies come into the Omeo area it's big, so the resilience plan helps to say what they can do locally in each town and will help for a more coordinated and equitable approach. The resilience plan is not a normal community plan as part of community development- it is all about emergencies and managing disasters at a local level by locals, assisted by agencies. When a community plan does happen our community hopes that the resilience plan could feed into it. The process has created key connections between agencies and communities and would help in the future. The hardest part is just getting the word out there about what is working well, like the resilience plan, to other communities. The amount of time and effort that ORCRA and other community members have put into this is pretty awesome, we are all volunteers. This story highlights that sometimes the research and the agency information can be put to good use at the community level if we are able to drive it and interpret it to adapt it to each our unique environments and people.

The significant role of social connections has not only been highlighted by local evidence presented, but it is also confirmed by Hilbrink (2023) and other researchers. The story provided in **Figure 14. ‘What about Sarsfield! What about what it has achieved’** demonstrates the critical role of social capital in building relationships, which have been built, along with skill building, leadership and volunteer work that have supported a range of activities in the community that have contributed to resilience.

Figure 14. Most Significant Change Story: ‘What about Sarsfield! What about what it has achieved’

Most Significant Change Story: ‘What about Sarsfield! What about what it has achieved’

Storyteller: Kate Nelson, community member

What Happened?

The Sarsfield community was significantly impacted by the black summer bushfires. It is a unique community, situated close to Bairnsdale. Prior to the bushfires, it would be fair to say that the community connection was low. Many people didn’t know much about their neighbours and the community didn’t come together often. What the community has achieved since the bushfires is something to be recognised and celebrated. If we look at the community efforts from the response to the bushfires and the volunteering afterwards. We’ve had Friday night get togethers, a community published newsletter, Sarsfield Snaps (which is another story in itself) and lots more. Those community-led activities have built connections, which didn’t happen before the fires. Let’s focus on what has happened – without people realising, the community is building resilience. This got me thinking about when there was a local campaign, #whataboutsarsfield when bushfire recovery funding wasn’t initially allocated to the Hall Project. Whilst this campaign highlighted that Sarsfield had been potentially disadvantaged by a grant assessment process, as a community member, I think there is another way to look at the #tag and focus on the positive. What about Sarsfield? The community has achieved a lot.

Why does the storyteller think this is significant change, and what difference it has made or will make in the future?

Now people have much better connections in the community, new people are welcomed, and the significance of the hall and recreation reserve is recognised. The work of the Sarsfield Community Association and the connectivity that has been created by people in the community has been significant. This work has been community-led. Although supported by a formal recovery process at times, the community members leading this work might not realise how all the small things that have been happening in Sarsfield add up to build the resilience of the community, led by the community. Living in Sarsfield, I see the drive of people, publishing the newsletter, doing things at the hall and also the efforts to get a new hall. A recent example is that the community have created the opportunity to do a food handling course and teaching people how to use canva online program. Doesn’t seem significant, but all this builds the capacity of the community. If we have a brand-new hall with a commercial kitchen, we now have people trained up in advance with food handling. The community leaders are building skills in the community. I see all the stuff going on and as a community member, I think ‘that’s amazing’. There is a lot of time and energy from some community members. Community leaders have gone and sourced money to help keep it going. They have even sourced resources from FRRR (Foundation for Regional & Rural Renewal) to have a part-time role for 2 years to keep things going and to support the volunteers. There are very good people involved. The significance isn’t always recognised and it’s important to acknowledge and celebrate just WHAT (it is) ABOUT SARSFIELD!

3.1.5 KEQ 5: What are the unintended outcomes and how did they occur? (what contributed?)

The evidence presented has pointed to the achievement of outcomes identified in the program logic. Another key consideration is any unintended outcomes. This KEQ explores any unintended outcomes that have come to light and how they occurred. This is in addition to the additional outcomes outlined in **Table 7**.

One unintended outcome was identified at the forum, with one participant reporting that they found the forum triggering. This is a consideration for future gatherings and offering supports during and after for participants. Additionally from the data, an unintended outcome is a handout mentality identified from funding (rather than catalytic results) from short-term funding.

The story in **Figure 15**. ‘Feels like Wading through Concrete’ provided below highlights additional unintended outcomes. This story also highlights changes that are needed, and these are reflected in the recommendations section. The unintended outcomes are below:

- The recovery process has been more traumatic than experiencing the bushfires
- Recovery processes still need to improve to become more person-centred and trauma informed

A second story (**Figure 16**) is also provided in this section that highlights the impact of racism and people feeling culturally unsafe and how this then rippled through the Aboriginal community. This story highlights the unintended consequence of systems that may be culturally unsafe and the presence of unconscious bias.

Figure 15. Most Significant Change Story: ‘Feels like Wading through Concrete’

Most Significant Change Story: ‘Feels like Wading through Concrete’

Storyteller: Christy Bryar, community member

What Happened?

My story is not a neat and tidy story. I wanted to take the opportunity to talk on the back of the forum. To me, it feels somewhat premature. We need to talk about resilience, but these words around recovery and resilience, we don't necessarily know what that means, they mean different things to different people, and I don't think we have a collective understanding. Recovery and resilience go hand in hand, but it feels like we talk about one after the other, we talk about resilience because we have recovered. We have got through and let's be ready for next time. This is problematic for me, because I am one of the people that lost their homes and not in a new home yet, I am still in a temporary home like many other people. It's hard to have those conversations around notions of being recovered and moving on to resilience or adaptation. I understand they are important concepts to talk about, but particularly in the last few weeks this has come up for me, about timeframes. I remember early on hearing about recovery taking five years, so for some reason, there is a clock on it. For thinking of things for the future and having a better understanding, my advice going forward in the situation that I have found myself in, is that there is no timeframe and there is no end. It doesn't end, your life has changed, and it will never be as it was before, and this is something that gets missed in a lot of the programming. We have this sense of things being ticked off and we are moving through steps, but for those that are still living it every single day, for whatever reason, whether it is not being at home already or processing the grief and trauma and all the various aspects of what we have been through, it is hard to think about resilience yet.

I think in terms of important, useful or really beneficial programs, things like the case support program, has been and still is. I just had a call this morning with my case support worker. I think a lot of people rely on their support person quite heavily, because you are always battling. There is this balance of systems- as governments need to be accountable- but often doesn't really marry well with the needs of people recovering from a natural disaster. Needing flexibility to react and assist where we can, but often we can't, we are hamstrung and often it feels like wading through concrete most of the time. Certainly things like case support and psychological support services have been instrumental to people in our community.

I often think that, and it shouldn't be this way, but the recovery process for want of a better phrase, has actually been harder than going through that traumatic event itself. I was here in the fire, I faced that. I faced whether I would live or die, my house burnt down. That has been easier to deal with than the processes after the event. There is supposed to be support programs and things in place, which have actually been obstructionist and made it so much harder than it needed to be and that is problematic. I worry, every time I see some other place experiencing fire or flood, my heart just breaks, because I know they are at day one, which is the best part of it, which is just frightening, and we need to do better. If we are claiming to support people in what is the worst time of their lives, it needs to be supportive, non-judgemental and there needs to be listening. I'm not saying everything has been terrible. There have been a number of programs that have been well managed, however, there have been a number of parts that have created distress, been re-traumatising and re-triggering and unnecessarily so. It is not okay.

It feels like we need to remember that it's people at the end of all of this. This is where government have to operate in a certain way and have certain systems, but the left hand isn't talking to the right hand. It's coming back to just being human and having a human centred approach, having empathy for other's anguish or misfortune. There isn't one size fits all, we know this. The research shows this, that people are going to go through things at different stages. It is easy at the start when everyone is at the same place, where programs can roll out in a generally supportive way- that is always really great and needed- but then it falls away, one year, two years... we are now over four years down the track. The human element is forgotten almost. It's taking more time, is the key lesson. More time to listen. Taking time to meet that person face to face. To go to their property. I'm speaking from a personal perspective, I'm also on MADRA and an architect, so have clients that I'm assisting to rebuild. I keep hearing the same thing over and over, there are these little battles all the time. If there is a roadblock, people need to sit down and work out what the issues are and balance out all the needs and just be human and have compassion. I think it's something that gets lost when people are sitting in an office far away - processing forms and paperwork- not being there on the ground and hearing and seeing firsthand. Even happens in our own community. Just asking the question- asking people, what do you need? Are you okay? How can I help? These things take time, and they take more money. That is just part of the costs of these natural disasters. Just can't ram it through in five years because someone along the way said it takes five years. It will take the time it takes. You can't will it to be what you want.

When you take that time, then you do start to see commonalities and can group services or different cohorts. Everyone is different but there are lots of strings that are common too. Taking that time to find the strings and then organise them, to

me that is more efficient and then have programs that hit the mark . Programs that are actually meaningful, rather than just rolling out a heap of stuff to say we are doing something, but it doesn't hit the ground, and no one is better off. What does that achieve? It doesn't achieve anything. The money has been spent and then it is the numbers game and again forgets about the human at the end of the number.

If we have 35 families or households in Mallacoota that intend on re-building that haven't even started four and a half years after the fire and they are not feeling supported, then we are doing something wrong, fundamentally wrong. There are lots of good things that have happened, absolutely, but we can't just be saying it's those people's fault, they have to do it themselves. It is up to everyone to support, to create the net for. We have to support all of those people through to a point, where they can get on by themselves and move forward in their lives. I put in a planning permit in July 2020 and only today (10 May 2024) my permit is, finally, fully approved. It has taken that long. It shouldn't take that long. If there are sticking points anywhere, we need to collectively ask the question: why is this a sticking point and how can we resolve? I'm answering my own question really about resilience, it's the mesh of people. The way that we all come together as a society to move through these difficult times, and we don't leave anyone behind. It's me this time and maybe next time it will be someone else and I will have the capacity to be able to support them. Resilience is about being collective and having a strong community and helping each other out in many different forms.

About two years after the fire, some people in the community were starting to show resentment towards people who had lost their homes, saying 'aren't they recovered?' There was nastiness in the community. Instead of judging them, how about asking them if they are, okay? See if you can help out. Doesn't have to be anything big, as they have a lot on their plate. But we had people saying, 'they are getting things'. However these community members have just lost everything. So, we saw people starting to lose perspective on what it meant to support someone else. Thankfully, I feel like that has shifted again, which is good through the work that MADRA has been doing. COVID didn't help with isolating everyone. I think one of the key things that I have learnt and have had this conversation with people in the community since, is to not be afraid of people who are doing it hard. There were some significant people in the community in supportive roles, finding it difficult to approach people who had lost their homes. It took ages to have a conversation with one person in the community and they said, 'I've been too scared to talk to you as I didn't want to upset you'. This has been a lesson for me and part of the reason that I stepped up to MADRA. Don't be scared to ask a question or to hear a story. You don't have to fix it but, don't be scared. All of the fear, all it did was isolate those of us who did lose their homes and made us scared to put our hands up and ask for help. From a community point of view, don't be scared to have those conversations. When you have lost your home, you are going to get upset and it's not when people ask, 'are you okay?'. Definitely one lesson is not to be afraid to approach people. Even if you do make them cry, that is okay too. If you are being kind and it makes them cry, it's okay.

Something else that has been a struggle the whole time and has created some roadblocks for everyone that did lose their place. There has never been an accessible list or database of people who lost their homes. Not that you can share information freely because of confidentiality, not everyone wants the spotlight on them. From MADRA's point of view, they have never been able to have a list. We have managed to get one over time from people talking. To have a list up front and people consent to be included on a list, could mean that we could communicate more broadly with the community and then more discretely to other cohorts in the community, those that lost their homes, to be able to communicate certain information that is just specific to them – not for everyone. To build that central information sharing, develop it through one channel, rather than people grabbing it from here and there and then word of mouth, with some people getting the information and some people not. When we asked anyone if we could have a list, there has been the confidentiality issue and has been to the detriment of those people that have been impacted. Could easily be remedied early on from just a consent form. Some opportunities were lost to be able to connect those people together. I think about re-building for example, sometimes I get a message from someone looking for trades and suppliers (being an architect) but could share more freely with everyone and have a repository of information to be able to help each other where we can. Could share more freely and be much more of a community within a community. But we have been fractured in a way from COVID and not having a way to discretely communicate with each other as a group. This would have been much more helpful. There are now mini versions of this, but still not comprehensive. Could be something the Red Cross or others would manage, register names and addresses as the first point of call in the relief centre and could be getting consent at that point. Could always have that option to withdraw consent.

Why does the storyteller think this is significant change, and what difference it has made or will make in the future?

We need to celebrate the wins and the positives, we absolutely need to do that, but as humans we do get things wrong, it's okay, these situations are really complex, there is no blame there. If there is a sticking point somewhere, let's ask, how can

we do better? We should always ask the question. How do we want to live our lives as human beings? We don't want people to be distressed. Hearing those hard stories, there is usually a simple lesson and a simple change that can take place, so doesn't have to happen again. I take it seriously and to heart, I don't want the next lot of people to do it so hard and if I can change one little thing, then losing my house is worth it.

The story presented in **Figure 15**, highlights that there are significant blockages in the system that require attention to improve how people are supported following natural disaster. This story details the unintended consequences of recovery processes which have significantly impacted on the wellbeing of community members.

In **Figure 16**, The story of Bung Yarnda points to the consequences of processes that are not culturally safe and inclusive. Whilst creative solutions have been identified by the community, the story highlights the need for improvements that promote inclusion and cultural safety.

Figure 16. Most Significant Change Story: Bung Yarnda (Lake Tyers Aboriginal Trust)

Most Significant Change Story: Bung Yarnda (Lake Tyers Aboriginal Trust)

What Happened?

When the residents of Lake Tyers Aboriginal Trust (LTAT) were confronted by the oncoming fire front community members were told to evacuate, and some did. This made it more difficult as they felt like they had nowhere to go in the mist of what seemed like chaos and the uncertainty of what they would encounter upon their return, and wondering whether their homes were still standing in that summer of 2019/20. Out of the evacuation came a story of racism towards an Elder in a relief centre, and this echoed throughout the community, therefore deterring other community members from seeking safety and being culturally safe at the relief centre. Upon hearing their story, Bushfire Recovery Victoria through the Aboriginal Culture and Healing Pillar provided funds to undertake a feasibility study for the LTAT Bushfire/Emergency Relief Centre Project and consulting with the community to ensure the Project was their core priority for recovery.

Why does the storyteller think this is significant change, and what difference it has made or will make in the future?

After high level consultation and discussion, the Victorian Government commitment and announcement of funds to build an emergency relief centre, as this now will be a centre that will be culturally sensitive, safe place for community to use in times of natural disasters and will also serve as a multi- purpose facility, as the announcement had been made a couple of community members made these statements, "A safe, relaxed building that mob, the community could come and feel safe" and "Community's assurance that they're going to have a place that they can actually go to, in the case of any event that would cause evacuation of the community".

This section has walked through each of the KEQs and addressed these in turn. The KEQs have demonstrated that the principles in the program logic can be confirmed by the evidence. It has also presented the outcomes and how the evidence supports these, including additional outcomes and unintended outcomes. The next section discusses the key principles.

3.2 Key Principles

This evaluation is seeking to confirm the principles identified by the EGNH. These were initially identified as outcomes in the project evaluation brief. Using a utilization, principles-focussed evaluation approach, this evaluation is looking to understand and confirm the key principles of community resilience, including identifying enablers and challenges in recovery processes. The previous section provided a discussion on KEQs and outcomes. Building on the outcomes demonstrated in KEQ four, this section presents the key principles identified that support resilience and recovery. To provide context to principles and a deeper understanding, broader research is also discussed in this section. Considering broader research and learnings from other communities is an important consideration to build on the knowledge that has already been generated. This section walks through the national, community and local principles that have been identified in the evidence regarding recovery and resilience. In addition, it identifies some of the linkages between key elements and principles with mind maps.

Mind maps are one tool that can be used to demonstrate connections and relationships between key elements around a topic, issue or idea. They can be used to assist with problem solving in complex situations. Another process and tool utilised in East Gippsland previously is Deakin University's 'Systems Thinking for Collective Impact' which uses a program for systems mapping. This was supported by the East Gippsland Primary Care Partnership (EGPCP), which no longer exists. This work created systems maps which identified factors and their relationships to better understand what actions could create impact with complex issues. As a result of this work, a range of partnerships developed systems maps to assist them create better understanding around complex challenges in the community. These included; family violence, child wellbeing, healthy eating and active living. This work occurred prior to the bushfires.

The initial principles identified included connectedness, knowledge and collaboration. Reviewing research and local evidence has refined and updated the three principles to the following:

1. Social Connectedness & Social Capital
2. Local Knowledge & Communication
3. Collaboration & Supporting Each Other

Evidence presented, analysed and discussed in the previous sections of this report confirm that these principles clearly enable community recovery and resilience. The forum showcased several projects, activities and approaches across communities which confirm that these principles play a role across diverse communities. The evidence to support this is highlighted in the evidence tables. These principles are unmistakable across all of the data, are clearly important and it is fair to say are a foundation to recovery and resilience in communities. These principles are evident in most of the data from surveys, table discussions and stories and finally, they all appear to be ingredients that contribute to outcomes in communities, which are all elements of principles-focussed evaluation (Patton, 2018). From the data collected (forum, survey data, stories, desktop review and review of broader evidence), it is also evident that there are additional principles which are relevant to community resilience and recovery.

The additional principles identified from the data include the following:

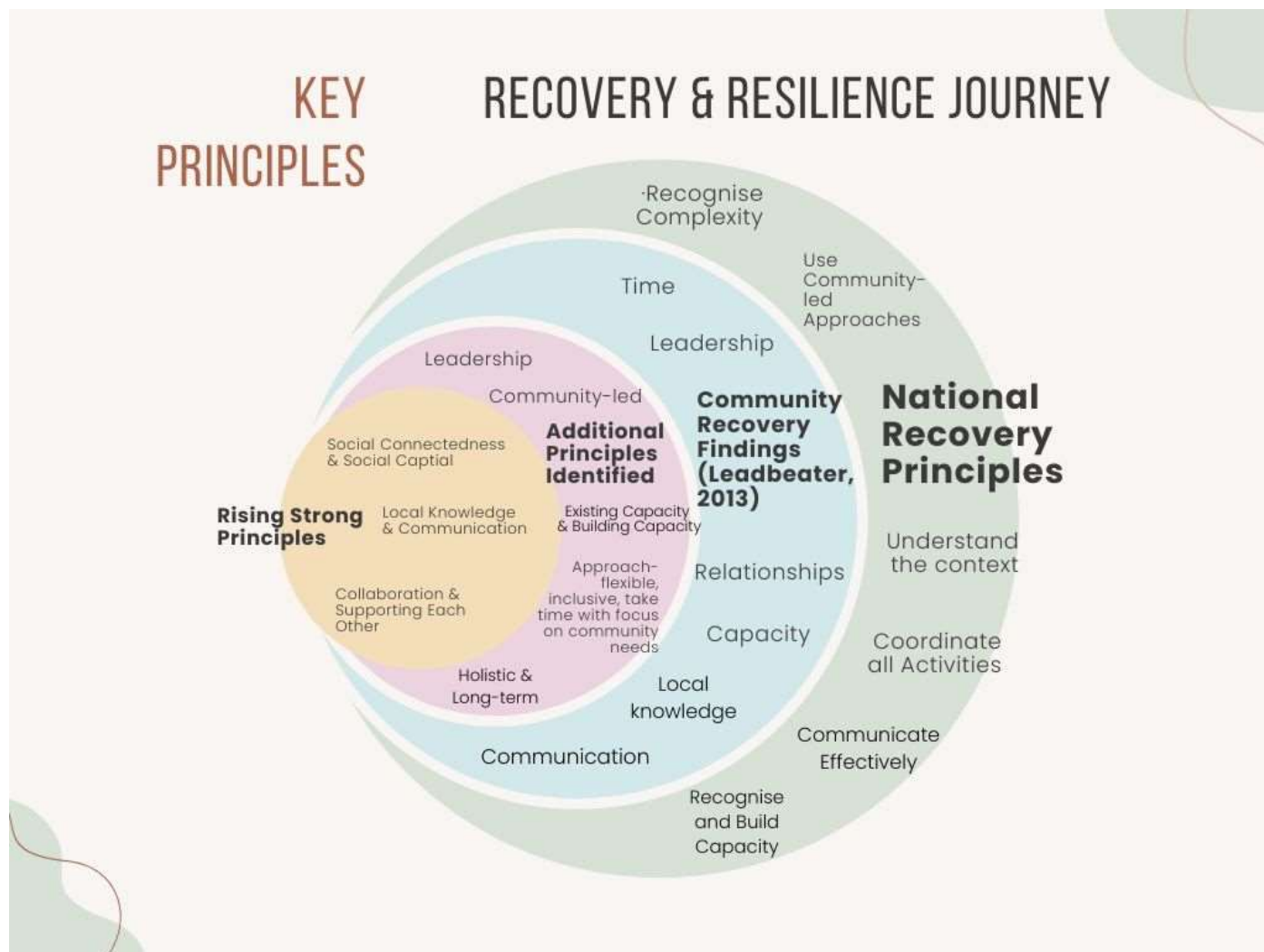
1. Leadership
2. Community-led
3. Capacity Recognition & Capacity Building
4. Relationships
5. Approach- flexible, inclusive, takes time with a focus on community needs
6. Holistic and Long-term approach

Monash University's *Fire to Flourish* Project report identifies enabling factors that reinforce several of the key principles. For example, *Fire to Flourish* learnings from the three-year program included 'move at the pace of trust'. The importance of the time element surfaced in the evidence, with data pointing to the need not to have a timeframe on recovery. It is critical that things happen when communities are ready and need it, rather than when it works for services or funders. *Fire to Flourish* also identified a learning of 'Community Customisation is key' and this confirms the diversity and uniqueness of communities and the need to address the issues that communities identify, as each community context is different. 'Resourcing for community self-determination' is another learning from *Fire to Flourish*. This is not only evident in the national principles, but local knowledge and community-led approaches have also strongly been identified in the evidence. The importance of social capital has surfaced in many areas of this report. The relationship between social capital and social connectedness has also been recognised in broader evidence.

To take a holistic perspective and consider learnings from other communities, a review of some broader research and evidence was conducted regarding principles already identified. These principles play a role in enabling community recovery and resilience. Starting at a national level, as recognised in the program logic, principles of recovery include: 1) Understand the Context, 2) Recognise Complexity, 3) Use Community-led Approaches, 4) Coordinate all Activities, 5) Communicate Effectively, 6) Recognise and Build Capacity.

It can be seen from the confirmed and additional principles identified, the alignment and crossover with the national principles. At a community level, Leadbeater (2013) recognised the following factors in community leadership in recovery: 1)Time, 2) Leadership, 3) Relationships, 4) Capacity, 5) Local Knowledge and 6) Communication. The evidence from East Gippsland confirms the importance of these factors in community leadership that Leadbeater (2023) identified. This can be seen with similar, or the same principles identified from East Gippsland experiences. The visual of the different principles at the national level, identified from other communities and the principles identified from East Gippsland can be found in **Figure 17**.

Figure 17. Key Principles: Recovery & Resilience Journey



What is evident from the data collected is the pivotal role of social capital in recovery and resilience journeys in communities. This is also confirmed by research, with Aldrich & Meyer (2014) identifying that social capital and social networks are critical components that facilitate recovery. They also concluded that disaster managers and planners need to prioritise strengthening community or social infrastructure. A recent Australian publication by Hilbrink (2023) uses slightly different language but confirms core principles that are suggested by Aldrich & Meyer. Hilbrink (2023) talks about the importance of social connections and social support in resilience. He also notes that many definitions of resilience focus on the individual and don't acknowledge that people are part of social networks. Social networks can vary in terms of their own resilience and play a key role in people's level of resilience. Furthermore, he puts forward the relationship between stress and social connections and the pivotal role which social connections play, "Social connection acts like a container for stress during challenging times. With good social support, we perceive challenging events as less threatening"

(Hilbrink, 2023, p.28). Finally, he also suggests that while many programs aiming to increase resilience are focussed on the individual level, how resilient people are could be linked more so to their social connections and levels of social support.

Parsons, et al. talk about community capital and the description they provide is: “The cohesion and connectedness of the community, represents the features of a community that facilitate coordination and cooperation for mutual benefit” (p. 2., 2021). Parsons goes on to say: “Participation in social networks can enhance solutions to collective action problems. Disaster resilience is enhanced by the ways the sense of community fosters participation, community competency, pro-social behaviour and preparedness through working with others to solve shared local problems. Social capital facilitates disaster resilience before, during and after disasters. Social capital is often highlighted in times of disaster because it is a resource that facilitates collective action for mutual benefit” (p. 2., 2021). This broader evidence, coupled with the evidence from East Gippsland confirms that social or community capital and social connectedness, are critical elements which enable and support resilience and recovery.

The creation of a mind map by Kate Nelson, community member attending the forum, provides a visual of the relationships of multiple elements demonstrated at the *Rising Strong Forum*. Additional connections have been added to the map in green to demonstrate the evidence and the key principles identified in this report. These mind maps can be found in **Figure 18** and **Figure 19**. They provide a perspective which demonstrates the complex environment of resilience and recovery in communities and highlight the existence of some of the key principles and connections.

Figure 18. Mind Map: Approaches to Building Resilience (Kate Nelson with green line additions)

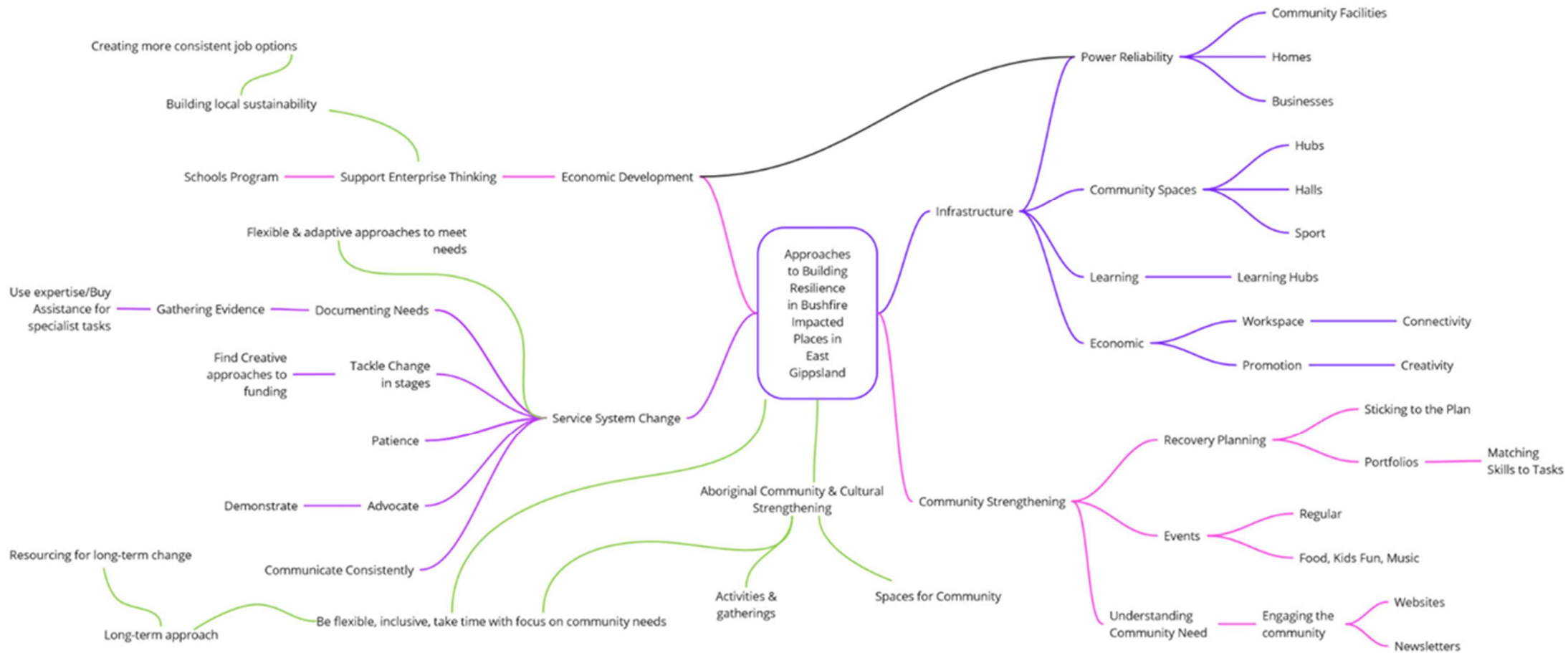
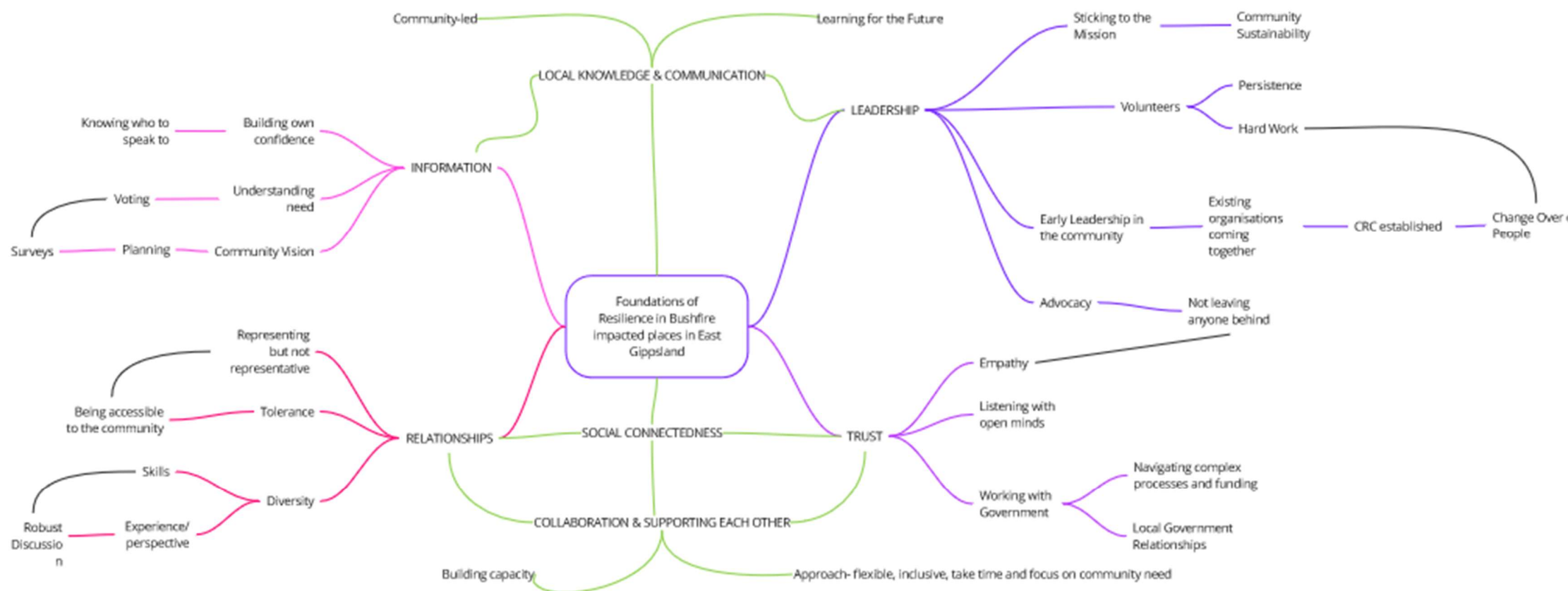
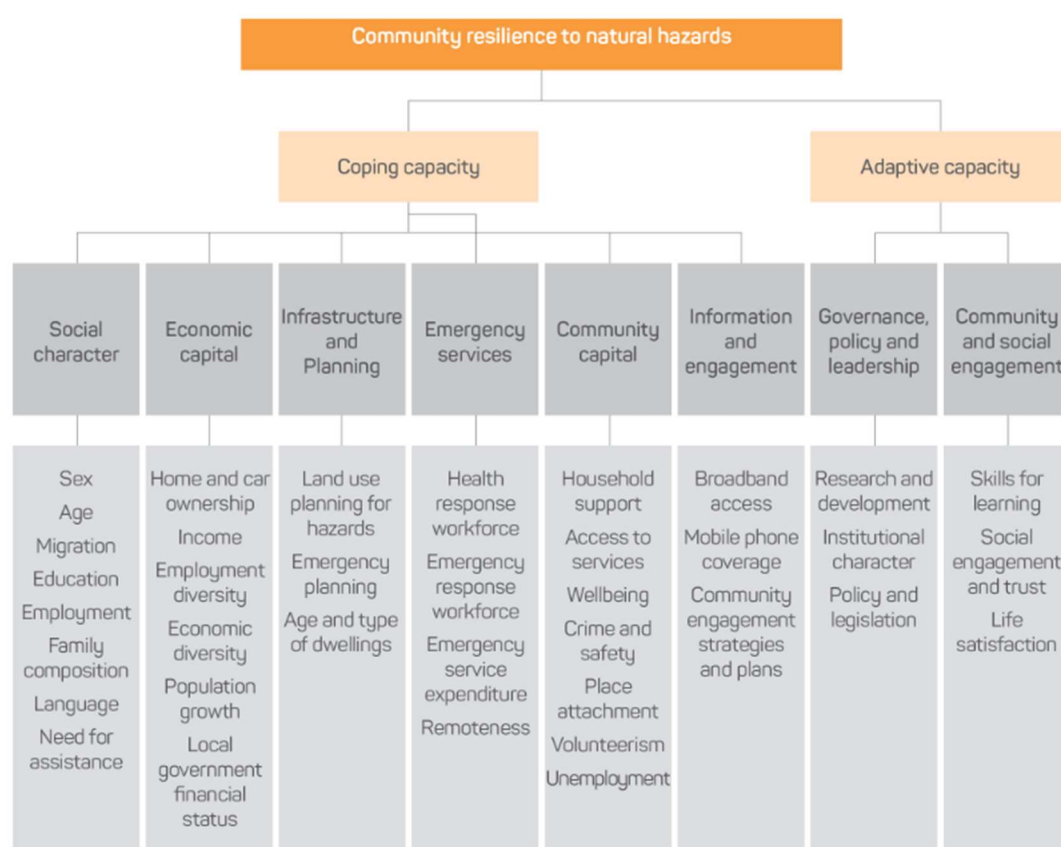


Figure 19. Mind Map: Foundations of Resilience (Kate Nelson with green line additions)



For future consideration is the work of Parsons et. al, (2021) with the creation of the *Australian Natural Disaster Resilience Index*. There are a broad range of additional domains that are relevant to community recovery and resilience including built, cultural and economic (Parsons et al, 2021). The Index has two key areas- coping capacity and adaptive capacity. A combination of both these aspects helps communities. A visual of the components can be found in **Figure 20** below. This index assesses resilience levels nationally, with East Gippsland deemed at a moderate level. As this evaluation is small and specific in scope, a larger evaluation could potentially have broader scope and assess the level of resilience at a local level through local data collection. The Torrens Resilience Institute developed a balanced Scorecard for communities to assess disaster resilience in 2012 (Ramsey, Steenkamp, Thompson, Anikeeva, Arbon, Gebbie, 2016). This has been trialled by a number of communities across Australia. This or other tools could be utilised to capture levels of resilience. The benefit of undertaking broader data collection is that local government and communities could use it to identify what is working well and what needs additional focus in relation to resilience. This could assist with future planning, resilience building and risk mitigation strategies.

Figure 20. Snapshot of Disaster Resilience Index Components



What Parsons et. al (2021) work demonstrates is the combination of coping capacity, with aspects such as community capital (access to services, volunteerism) and information & engagement (community engagement strategies and plans) being important, along with adaptive capacity elements including community and social engagement (skills for learnings, social engagement and trust).

This section has pointed to the evidence regarding outcomes and principles. It has also surfaced from the data additional outcomes, unintended consequences and additional principles identified. This section has drawn on local data, as well as broader evidence to demonstrate key principles which support community recovery and resilience processes.

Figure 21. Most Significant Change Story: The Power of Local Knowledge

Most Significant Change Story: The Power of Local Knowledge

Storyteller: Dr. Helen Sheil, Centre for Rural Communities

What happened?

This story is about the East Gippsland Community Resilience Project which happened in 2015. The project enabled community partnerships in six East Gippsland small communities with disaster response agencies. The communities involved were Orbost, Tubbut, Goongerah, Buchan, Bruthen and Nowa Nowa. This project has relevance today as it demonstrates the power of establishing respect and building relationships over time. The process and the relationships resulted in improved communication and confidence for communities to prepare and respond to disasters. The project focussed on establishing relationships between communities and agencies involved in preventing, responding and coordinating recovery from disasters, especially bushfires. Community concerns about how the bushfires at this time were handled prompted the project. It was a real effort to invest in community local knowledge through Neighbourhood Houses and communities. Coming together to share knowledge and reach agreement over time, as opposed to the common one-off information sessions delivered to communities' model was a real shift in approach. One-off information sessions usually have a format where the agencies are the experts and there isn't time or space for communities to have input or share what they have to offer. This project changed this usual dynamic.

This project demonstrates the difference between holding an information expo to the shift of having local knowledge as part of the discussion. Local knowledge is important during a crisis, and it helps lower the trauma. We saw in previous fires where there are strong relationships from the project developed prior to the fires, that when they happened, communities knew who to speak to and had trust that they would be listened to. Because of this trust and democratic decision making it was much easier to agree on where funding should go following the bushfires. So the process to develop relationships helped speed up the recovery in many situations. The structure of using the study circle kit to systematically engage with communities, building trust and relationships helped to embed local knowledge. It also provides the space for different perspectives. Currently, there is still no way for local knowledge to be systematically part of planning. We are seeing a shift to centralisation with people not feeling listened to. Many people in community engagement roles don't have the skills or capacity to engage with community. Community plays a role in extending the capacity of the agencies. Some of the changing attitudes from this project have been written up and will be in my book to be published.

Why does the storyteller think this is significant change, and what difference it has made or will make in the future?

The main point of this story is the importance of partnerships and relationships being set up prior to disasters. If you are asking communities to rethink how they work together after a disaster, it is a hard call when people are exhausted. We have a process and resource that supports community engagement through the Centre for Rural Communities. Unfortunately this used to be delivered through a university but is no longer happening despite national and international interest previously. The significance is that local knowledge is key, and preparation leads to better outcomes.

Please note that this is shortened version of this story, please see APPENDIX 1 for the full story

3.3 Rising Strong Forum

There were several ways in which data was captured at the forum. This included: the pre-forum survey, table discussions, 'sticky note' feedback and survey on the day. The data collected has assisted in addressing the Key Evaluation Questions. The forum survey provides data to determine the satisfaction and impact of the forum itself. In addition, the EGNH were also seeking to understand *community confidence in knowing they can be prepared and resilient in the future*. This is also touched on in this section.



3.3.1 Expectations & Usefulness

There were 10 people or just over 20% of participants that completed the survey prior to the forum. Below identifies the expectations expressed prior to the *Rising Strong* Forum.

Table 8. Question 1) What are your expectations of the Rising Strong Forum?

Information
To reflect on the strength and progress of communities' post bushfire, and to identify areas for improvement.
Connecting with the group and learning how I can contribute to the community in this space.
To better understand my communities' journey to build insight into how I can assist moving forward
An opportunity to connect with people recovering in other parts of the Shire to share stories of what we have been doing and how it has been going
Hear some interesting strategies and inspirational stories
Hearing stories about resilience
I'm not entirely sure because the information circulated isn't very explicit about what to expect. However, I am hoping that I will be able to gain some insights into what the communities in East Gippsland see as their growth in resilience, or challenges, following the 2019/20 bushfires.
To be involved and learn
Meet some people who have travelled a similar road in the past few years

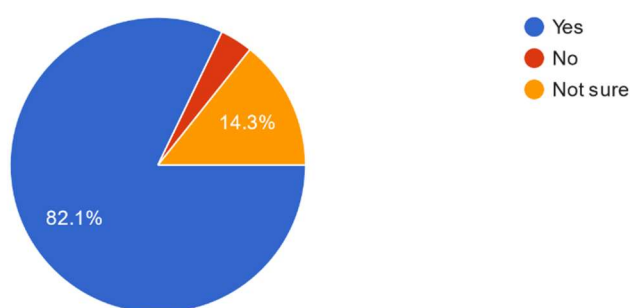
The survey at the end of the forum was completed by 28 people (60% of participants). The results of this survey can be found in **Figure 22**. With 82% responding that the forum met their expectations, another 14% were not sure and around 3% of respondents said that it didn't meet their expectations. For those that expressed that the forum didn't meet their expectations, the following comments were provided:

- Many more attendees and representation in the speakers from across East Gippsland communities
- There was no expectation apart from a gathering to review where we had been and how we arrived at where we are now. It is to be hoped that the lessons learned by the various communities are captured and retained in order that we may better be prepared for future events that will happen.
- I was surprised how triggering it was
- More focus on role of Neighbourhood houses/community hubs in networked and relationships. Role in preparation and recovery.

Figure 22. Forum Expectations Responses

Did the forum meet your expectations?

28 responses

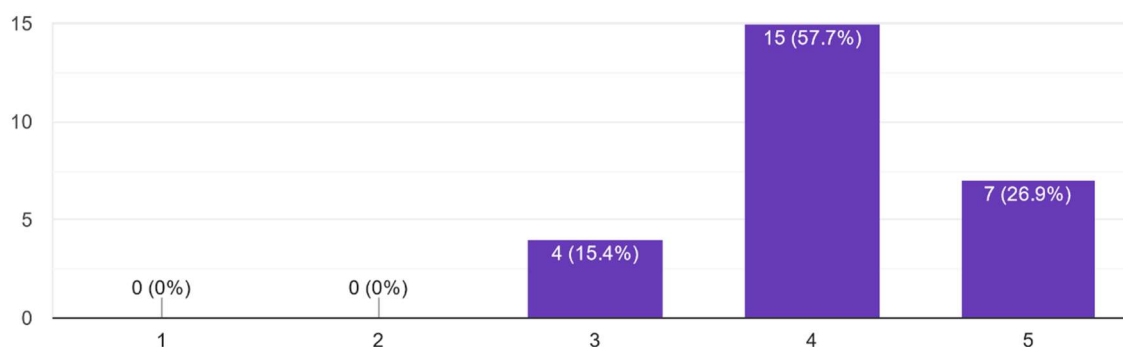


Respondents provided feedback on a scale of 1-5 (1= not useful at all to 5= extremely useful) regarding how useful the forum was. It identified that 27% felt that it was extremely useful (rated at a 5), with another 58% of respondents rating this at 4. This means that, overall, **84% of respondents** rated the form as either **extremely useful or useful**. There was another 16% of respondents that rated the forum in the middle range, at a 3. These results are represented in **Figure 23** below.

Figure 23. Usefulness of the Forum

On a scale of 1-5 (not useful at all to extremely useful), how useful was the forum?

26 responses



There were 26 responses to the survey question, ‘**What was most useful?**’ and there were four key themes identified from these. The four key themes identified as most useful were 1) Hearing/listening, 2) Connecting with others, 3) Knowledge and Understanding and 4) Focus Areas & Structure.

Table 9. Most Useful Themes: Hearing/listening

<i>What was most useful?</i>		
Hearing from speakers	Hearing about success stories of communities after fires	Listening to other groups
Hearing the community journey in recovery	Listening to experiences of other communities and how they handled/went about during those problems. Learning that we are not alone, but all have different challenges which are all important	Time to talk/listen
Hearing from the community recovery committee representatives	Understanding the successes in communities	Keynote speakers and the information provided and discussed with other forum participants
Information and networking	Community initiatives shared	

Table 10. Most Useful Themes: Connecting with others

<i>What was most useful?</i>		
Meeting up with people from other communities/discussions/ Connecting with others to see themes running across the region	Networking and making connections/Network across the region/ Networking with other participants	Collaborating and networking/ Great sharing/Sharing

Table 11. Most Useful Themes: Knowledge and Understanding

<i>What was most useful?</i>		
The importance of neighbourhood houses in East Gippsland	The importance of acknowledging volunteers have lives and can tap out and be welcome back when available again	Meeting up with others in East Gippsland
Knowledge of past/present skills and ways to approach different circumstances	Gaining knowledge and insight/ Participation to see how communities were affected	Reinforcing the importance of our work in the community. Validating the time & energy spent as a volunteer
Confirming the importance of working together	Sensory kit presentation and speaker- made us walk in the shoes of children who have challenges. Excellent perspective	Knowledge from speakers/ Keynote speakers

Table 12. Most Useful Themes: Focus Areas & Structure

<i>What was most useful?</i>		
Focus on resilience and capacity building	Children with extra needs recovery	Inspiring and motivating
A forum that brings our communities together to connect and share is a great thing. An agency person reflected on the CWANWG CRC boxes and said "what a great initiative"	Opportunity for reflection on what's been achieved from the investment by communities and government	Good balance of presentations (good variety too!) and other opportunities for discussion/ Hearing the alignments/similarities between communities which are very different

In summary, *Rising Strong Forum* participants found it useful to listen to others, acknowledge the important role of volunteers and connect with others across East Gippsland.

3.3.2 Improvements & Feedback

This section provides the survey data in regard to suggested improvements and any additional comments and feedback. Predominately, there was positive feedback regarding the forum and there were suggestions regarding the notice for the forum, number of participants, broader representation and the content and structure of the forum and include more of a focus on challenges as well as success.

Following are the results for the questions in the survey, ***What could be improved about the forum?***

Table 13. What could be improved about the forum?

What could be improved about the forum?		
Everything was Ahhmazing Thank you!	A where to into the future together as East Gippsland	No improvements from my perspective
Forum was great	Expected to hear more about neighbourhood houses due to being a sponsor of the event. Involvement in projects/what they do/active/not active	Less siting and listening. Could have been a lot shorter, quite repetitive.
Shorter question in break out groups and have questions on the screen, not just one copy per table	More time to follow up issues of interest	Perhaps not so tight a time constraint so that we have time to digest all the wonderful information
Take away resources	More notification of event	Annual event
More stories and successes	PowerPoint presentations don't all need explaining where as text is on the screen	Balance- celebrate success but also discuss and acknowledge difficulties
More participants- reps from the other CRCs- the ones who had challenges to share instead of successes	A broader representation of communities that have been bushfire affected	How do we reach more people to come and share
Council's recovery reports are a good record of what's happened, but would be great to really document some of the case studies explored today- maybe that's	Also hearing of challenges for CRC's & other groups as well as success stories	Maybe an open-mic session where people could make short contributions

What could be improved about the forum?		
the plan?? other areas/councils can learn from this, even if there aren't the same resources		
It's been very well organised	The air-conditioning was too cold. Not the organisers fault!	Maybe more pre-education/getting knowledge ready for speakers so that presentations complement each other- that eventuated but maybe more by good luck

The final open-ended question was the opportunity to provide other comments and feedback, and these can be found below. They have been put into two categories – **positive and what could be improved/for consideration**.

Table 14. Other comments/feedback

Positive	What could be improved/for consideration
Thank you, a day that will continue to make change, within daily thoughts and/or goal setting.	The promotion for this forum was not what I expected, hence the low attendance and a great deal of money spent. Maybe a group discussion on how we go into the future. What can we achieve together. If possible, attendees had known there was accommodation, those further away may have attended. The speakers and program was never released which may have also attracted more attendance.
Thanks for bringing our community together	Well done to organisers, shame there hasn't been more take up with more community members, not just agency representatives.
Great day, enjoyed hearing the stories & experiences from across East Gippsland	I acknowledge the resilience, thankful for the funding and support even if it wasn't perfect
Great speakers with amazing knowledge to take home	Excellent forum- would like to have seen more participants.
Thanks for the opportunity to learn and contribute	
A fantastic gathering of extremely dedicated and diligent community members whose focus is on community, not on self.	
Live and learn, Adapt and support and Share and respect	
Regular forums important connection point to raise profile. Showcase/network/connect.	
Thoroughly enjoyable day	
Thanks for the opportunity - great to hear the diversity of projects, the unique challenges	

Positive	What could be improved/for consideration
faced by our most remote communities, and to experience the passion, care and resilience of so many great Gippslanders.	

3.3.3 Rising Strong Forum Conclusion

Overall, the evidence indicates that satisfaction levels regarding the forum were positive. While some areas of improvement were identified, there was a total of **84% of respondents** who rated the forum as either **extremely useful or useful**. In addition, the open-ended questions provided more than 50% more positive comments, as opposed to what could be improved. The comments for improvements also had some positive elements, along with suggested areas for improvement. From the evidence, it is concluded overall, that the forum was useful and a positive experience for participants. Opportunities for improvement include more time to promote forum, more people from across the region, especially a broader diversity of community members, focus on challenges as well as successes and to hold a 'where to next focus' discussion.

Section 4: What Next?

This section sets out what is next considering what has been presented in the report. It summarises enablers and challenges, recommendations and conclusions.

4.1 Enablers and Challenges

The evidence has identified a number of enablers and challenges for community resilience and recovery. The enablers are presented first, with a total of 25 identified and these can be found below in **Table 15**. Drawing on all the data presented, the key principles are seen as enablers that support processes of recovery and resilience building and are also included in the enablers. Following the enablers, challenges are presented in **Table 16**., with a total of 23 identified.

Table 15. Enablers of Recovery & Resilience Processes

Enablers
Community-led solutions
Social capital, including: community connections, building relationships and connectedness
Utilising existing leaders in community (with strength and trust already with community)
Trusted relationships- processes that build relationships prior and after disasters
Taking an inclusive approach- for everyone to be heard in community
Community committee structures to be diverse and respectful
Building resilience through coming together and supporting one another and building long-term resilience
Ways of working that are compassionate and empathic
Collaboration, working together and supporting each other
Strength, coping, control
People being caring, empathic and supportive
Access to services
Identify strengths and weaknesses and build on existing strengths and capabilities in communities and bringing in skills where needed
Holistic, long-term approach
Local knowledge being respected and utilised and using lived experience of recovering from natural disasters
Capability building is supported by grant applications, increasing capacity and confidence through training/mentoring/working with others, patience and open-mindedness, participating in groups/committee
Acknowledgment of the need for service equity for remote communities, where gaps are highlighted in disasters
Volunteer time and energy in communities and leaders stepping up
Community innovative ideas and resourcefulness
Adapt to place – not using a one size fits all approach
Funding to enable community-led programs, projects and improvements to come to life
Processes (programs and funding applications) that are person-centred, flexible and responsive to community needs
Allowing the time that is needed for recovery and resilience to develop (at individual and community level)
Time to listen deeply to individuals and communities
Community-led approach must core, with communities determining where extra support is needed

Table 16. Challenges of Recovery & Resilience Processes

Challenges
Tick a box, rigid processes and putting a specific timeframe on recovery
Processes that don't allow enablers (as above)
Short-term, narrow, restrictive funding. Access to funding also a challenge.
Community challenges with government funding, must do it differently – with empathy and all levels of governments need to listen more deeply to communities
Way too many small grants and very little funding for catalytic ideas to make a difference
East Gippsland Timber Milling Project still needs some funding to continue, and innovative project is winding up due to no funding and YRS project success but also no funding for that project either.
Service gaps in remote communities
Recovery processes that cause more trauma for people that have been through bushfires
Multiple issues with system of recovery, with rebuilding of homes not commenced for many four and a half years down the track
Trying to make sure that no one falls through the cracks which has not been achieved. To date only 30 of the 125 houses lost have been rebuilt (Mallacoota) and Sarsfield only around a third of the 80 houses lost
That is it too early for many to be talking about resilience when recovery and healing is a long-term and continual journey. A significant number of people who lost their homes in the bushfires are still waiting to build, with many barriers and delays due to bureaucratic processes and requirements
Framework for recovery does not necessarily support communities well. Grant, funding cycles and local government processes need to be done differently
Asking traumatising community members to contribute time and time again
People who have lost their homes are unable to contribute to the community fully
Volunteers in communities have done a large volume of work
Complexity of the bushfires highlighted a complex web of problems/issues in the community
Amazing array of opportunities like free programs, events but has created a hand-out mentality, now services are leaving or finishing up
A person-centred approach is needed across all response, recovery and resilience activities, acknowledging the trauma that has occurred for people. Taking a person-centred approach requires some re-design of recovery programs and responses
Local relationship building between communities and responding agencies is beneficial. This requires support, structures and skill-building to be done well. This has potential to reduce the impact on local people and reduce financial costs. Community resilience requires conversations between local people and agencies.
A model for engaging with young people has been created and tested (YRS project). There is a need for long-term engagement models of young people in the remote communities of Cann River and Mallacoota (as well as other communities that don't have the long-term support structures in place to engage young people).
Centre for Rural Communities community engagement resources and tools, but no support from universities to support and build capacity for utilising local knowledge
Short-term funding
Everything has been challenging!

4.2 Recommendations

Based on the data analysed, recommendations are set out in this section. Before detailing the recommendations, the limitations of this evaluation need to be reiterated. Given these, there is potential for additional data to be collected based on the feedback from the *Rising Strong Forum*. Additional data could more comprehensively capture recovery and resilience journeys across East Gippsland. This could build on the learnings and the principles confirmed and additional principles identified. This opportunity is reflected in the recommendations. A number of opportunities for the future were identified from the *Rising Strong Forum*. This includes an annual event with more participants, and an opportunity to explore 'where to next' together and how to tackle some of the challenges. Also reflected are recommendations which respond to the consistent challenges identified.

Several recommendations have been identified that that could be investigated and implemented:

- 1) A larger evaluation process to document additional recovery and resilience journeys across East Gippsland.** This would extend on the learnings identified to date, including key principles required for recovery and resilience. This is because of the limited scope and size of this evaluation. Therefore this evaluation cannot capture a broader range of experiences across the region regarding recovery and resilience. It must be noted that not all perspectives are represented in this report and not all of the community recovery and resilience activities are represented. There are limited or no perspectives from First Nations communities, adults with a disability, people from the LGBTIQI+ community and not all communities across East Gippsland were represented at the forum. It is recommended that a larger scope evaluation or reporting process be conducted to extend on this report and capture a broader range of perspectives regarding recovery and resilience activities in East Gippsland.
- 2) Data collection to understand confidence levels of being prepared and resilient.** There is scope for understanding community confidence more broadly. A larger data capture process could identify confidence levels and areas for improvement regarding resilience. This could include capturing a baseline to assist with targeted long-term strategies for building resilience and confidence levels. This could fit in with recommendation 3.5 from the *Royal Commission into National Natural Disaster Arrangements* (Binskin, 2020) to create a standing resilience and recovery entity. Using the checklist which draws on the national recovery principles could be a useful resource for recovery and resilience planning (see **APPENDIX B**).
- 3) The strengthening of capacity building with a long-term approach that supports community resilience.** As the data highlights the benefit and the need to take long-term approaches to capacity building around resilience. An example of an approach used is highlighted by the story shared by Dr. Helen Shiel in using the study circle kit resource for community engagement and building the capacity for ongoing meaningful community engagement at the local level to inform preparation, resilience and recovery and have local knowledge at the centre.
- 4) Promoting more flexible, connected processes that embed empathy, kindness and consistency are needed in recovery.** Whilst many recovery programs have been successful, it is important to note where improvements are needed for the future. It is recommended that further listening with people, especially those who lost their homes to understand where local recovery processes can be improved to be more flexible, trauma informed and person-centred. This is aligned with recommendations 100 and 101 in the *Royal Commission into National Natural Disaster Arrangements* that acknowledge that recovery processes are complex to navigate, and information sharing is needed to reduce additional trauma caused by re-telling of stories to multiple agencies (Binskin, 2020). Improved information sharing processes were also in the findings (3.3-3.5) of the Inspector General into Emergency Management (IGEM) *Inquiry into the 2019–20 Victorian Fire Season, Phase 2 Report* (Pearce, 2021).

- 5) Collaboration to better support long-term, trauma informed recovery processes.** Local, State and Federal Government, along with agencies responsible for recovery need to improve coordination which better supports community needs. Responding to community needs to be trauma-informed, allowing for longer-term collaborative processes. This is at the individual and community level. Processes need to allow for adequate time for communities to consider needs and have input around recovery resources. This recommendation speaks to the feedback received regarding the need to adjust timing and coordination of grants, including the need to reduce competition for grants. There also needs to be some consideration about how to manage organisations without a local presence receiving funding, including considering community input and endorsement processes. This recommendation is also supported by the *Royal Commission* to streamline disaster recovery funding arrangements (Binskin, 2020). In addition, the IGEI Inquiry also detailed findings about the level of distress and anxiety identified at an individual and community level as a result of recovery funding processes (Pearce, 2021).
- 6) A holistic, community-led approach needs to be better supported by recovery processes, including grants.** A longer-term approach is needed for grants to ensure that they occur at the pace that is needed for communities in recovery. This is also at the individual and community level. This recommendation is also aligned with the IGEI finding (5.4) which has highlighted the lack of surety to support medium and long-term recovery (Pearce, 2021). There is additional complexity for remote communities, where they do not experience service equity, so disasters exasperate the needs and highlight the gaps in support services. Remote service inequity requires attention.
- 7) No set timeframe on recovery.** More understanding that it takes the time it takes for individuals and communities, and they need to be supported at the pace that works for them, whatever that may be.
- 8) Future gatherings regarding resilience and recovery.** To build on collaborative efforts and offer mental health supports during and after for participants. This could include a process to support understanding *where to into the future together* for East Gippsland.

While the data from the forum, desktop review and stories are included in this report, the ability to capture all the suggestions made (see **Table 17**) has not been possible due to the scope of this evaluation. These could be considered in a larger evaluation process.

Table 17. What other data, stories and learnings need to be collected

What other data, stories and learnings about community recovery and resilience in East Gippsland need to be collected?	
Community challenges and how to or who to approach with different situations or outcomes	Changing expectations
What the impact to communities when funding packages cease. People have become dependent on "freebies"	Why there is never 10 years support for recovery from any agencies when data supports the need for this especially with mental health
More stories from community not for profit organisations, e.g. Rotary/Lions/Business & Tourism Associations/football/netball clubs. All run by volunteers.	Everyday stories about community challenges that are changing and more information on neighbourhood houses and what they do in communities
Capturing some of the challenges/gaps that still exist and feeding this into government learnings for future events.	More advocating that standard grant programs DON'T support community recovery.

What other data, stories and learnings about community recovery and resilience in East Gippsland need to be collected?	
Reasons why people have not rebuilt	Family mental health care
All the research and surveys that have already been gathered by universities and other agencies.	It is a constant, keep gathering.
Time in each community to see the diversity of what they have learned	\$\$ spent-
Stranded assets- i.e., BRV 'hub' buildings now empty, exit plans- transition away from services instead of sudden cessation.	Where things have been less than perfect - remembering communities who have been left out.
Individual's recovery stories should be included.	Collected or shared and added into the hierarchy of state Emergency Management planning.
Focus on what's been achieved and how (not just the \$'s)	Benefits of networked regional approach for community hubs/neighbourhood houses that can access skills, knowledge, resources in small group processes. Community investment rather than corporate structures.
Interview with all CRC reps to record their ideas on the key steps needed to do recovery better.	More personal stories, this reminds us all that recovery and resilience is about people.
Would be interesting to know of East Gippsland homes lost- how many now rebuilt, how many relocated, how many were not family homes (i.e. holiday homes, etc), how many properties sold (for future re-building), how many still in limbo or living in STMH.	

4.3 Conclusions

This evaluation report has presented evidence generated from the *Rising Strong Forum* and data collected after the forum, including a desktop review and stories. Overall, the evidence suggests that the forum was worthwhile, and the majority of participants found it useful, with a smaller number of people deeming the forum as extremely useful.

The data has confirmed the outcomes outlined in the program logic have been achieved and there are additional outcomes and unintended consequences or outcomes also identified.

The confirmation of key principles identified from the data has occurred from published evidence regarding community resilience and disaster recovery. The principles in the program logic have been tested and then updated based on the evidence of what facilitates recovery and community resilience building in communities. This has been confirmed by data from the forum and are demonstrated in the evidence tables presented in this section. The evidence collected confirms that the principles of 1) Social Connectedness & Social Capital, 2) Local knowledge & Communication and 3) Collaboration & Supporting Each Other- all play a role in community resilience building and recovery.

In addition to these three key principles, the following additional principles have been drawn from the range of evidence analysed to highlight their importance in community resilience building:

- 4) Leadership

- 5) Community-led
- 6) Existing Capacity & Building Capacity
- 7) Approach- flexible, inclusive, take time with focus on community needs
- 8) Holistic and long-term

The key themes and stories identify that:

- 1) There are examples of success in communities that have facilitated processes that promote healing, recovery and resilience building;
- 2) There has been a significant volume of volunteer work undertaken in East Gippsland following the bushfires captured to date and there are more examples across East Gippsland of activities, programs and events supported by communities that haven't been captured through the *Rising Strong Forum* and this evaluation that could be captured and shared;
- 3) While there are examples of success, there are also concerns that were identified about:
 - Resourcing tied to timeframes that have been identified that don't necessarily support or represent the recovery journey that communities are on and will be for some time. This has not only been confirmed from data collected through the *Rising Strong Forum* process but has also been identified by Leadbeater (2013) following the Black Saturday Bushfires about how important it is not to impose a timeframe (Gordon R., 2023).
 - The recovery process has caused stress and more trauma for people that have lost their homes. There is still a significant number of people and households that haven't started rebuilding due to planning permit delays and a considerable number that haven't completed building. There is an opportunity to explore how systems can improve to be people-centred and reduce the level of stress experienced in recovery and re-building. Despite it being documented in 2009 from Black Saturday regarding the rebuilding aspect and failures of the system to support this, this has occurred again from 2019/2020 where bureaucratic, or 'red tape' is a barrier and issue with rebuilding (Leadbeater, 2013). Whilst there have been programs established to improve experiences, it appears that there are still major improvements to be made to ensure all supports for rebuilding are trauma informed.

Based on the analysis of the evidence, a total of eight recommendations have been outlined. These respond to the limitations of this report and opportunities for improvement. These opportunities have been identified from the experiences of a range of community members in East Gippsland. The recommendations put forward aim to improve the recovery system and benefit a range of communities into the future. The successes achieved have been highlighted in this report. It is important to celebrate the achievements, whilst also valuing the experiences and challenges encountered by communities. To learn from these challenges demonstrates respect to communities in East Gippsland. It also provides opportunities to build on the recovery and resilience demonstrated so far. It also provides learnings for levels of government, funders, services and others. That if actioned, can improve the experiences of communities in the future that go through disasters.

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APPENDIX A

Most Significant Change: The Power of Local Knowledge

Storyteller: Dr. Helen Sheil

What Happened?

This story is about the East Gippsland Community Resilience Project in 2015. The project enabled community partnerships in six East Gippsland small communities with disaster response agencies. The communities involved were Orbost, Tubbut, Goongerah, Buchan, Bruthen and Nowa Nowa. This project has relevance today as it demonstrated the power of establishing respect and building relationships over time. The process and the relationships resulted in improved communication and confidence of communities to prepare and respond to disasters. The project focussed on establishing relationships between communities and agencies involved in preventing, responding and coordinating recovery from disasters, especially bushfires. Community concerns about how the bushfires at this time were handled prompted the project. It was a real effort to invest in community local knowledge through Neighbourhood Houses and communities. Coming together to share knowledge and reach agreement over time, as opposed to the common one-off information sessions delivered to communities model was a real shift in approach. One-off information sessions usually have a format where the agencies are the experts and there isn't time or space for communities to have input or share what they have to offer. This project changed this usual dynamic.

The Centre for Rural Communities got one year of funding from regional development to partner with the East Gippsland Network of Neighbourhood houses. Where there wasn't a Neighbourhood House, the project happened through community hubs. My role was to coordinate the project, further develop a resource (study circle kit) and support workers using the engagement process in each community. The project employed a part-time worker in each of the communities to facilitate the engagement process over about ten months. The project included introducing the workers to the relationship building process using the study circle kit and setting up groups in their own communities. The project also included having regular meetings and forums with relevant agencies within their own communities, like the CFA and SES to address local concerns.

In one community, the CFA, SES, Police and department for environment were invited to these meetings. What we found to start with was that the attitude of some agencies came with anger and concern at why they were being asked to come to the neighbourhood house. This seemed to be because they felt their knowledge was being questioned, they would be attacked and didn't understand what the role of community could be. We did the democratic thing of listening to everyone. At one meeting there was a major disagreement between the SES and CFA about where the refuge was located and it was quite amazing, also during the meeting, the CFA person, put his head in his hands and said, "I didn't know that people didn't know what to do". Because he had been doing his job for 40 years and he didn't realise that many community members didn't know what to do [in a bushfire or preparing for one]. So as a result, partnerships formed, rather than isolation from community. That shift in relationships happened in each of the communities. We had agencies offering their knowledge and resources. We had one agency by the end of process come in to run scenarios for communities in high-risk areas which hadn't happened before. Where the relationship was sustained, it helped, especially with communication. Agencies would come and say 'this is really different for us'. The meetings were really respectful, people were heard, and agencies commented on that and welcomed the opportunity to be partners. Because of those public forums, when the next fires happened, people remembered. In one instance, the relationship continued and in the others it didn't. In my mind, that was a huge loss. The role of local knowledge, how it fits and can be beneficial and embedded into systems of communication is now far more recognised. But how to do this systemically is still a real challenge. It seems now that nobody talks to the agencies, just seen as a problem, not a resource. Although the agencies have resources like history, maps and information that could be used in amazing ways.

This project demonstrates the difference between holding an information expo to the shift of having local knowledge as part of the discussion. Local knowledge is important during a crisis, and it helps lower the trauma. We saw in previous fires where there are strong relationships from the project developed prior to the fires, that when they happened, communities knew who to speak to and had trust that they would be listened to. Because of this trust and democratic decision making it was much easier to agree on where funding should go following the bushfires. So the process to develop relationships helped speed up the recovery in many situations. The structure of using the study circle kit to systematically engage with communities, building trust and relationships helps to embed local knowledge. It also provides the space for different perspectives. Currently, there is still no way for local knowledge to be systematically part of planning. We are seeing a shift to centralisation with people not feeling listened to. Many people in community engagement roles don't have the skills or capacity to engage with community. Community plays a role in extending the capacity of the agencies. Some of the changing attitudes from this project have been written up and will be in my book to be published.

Why does the storyteller think this is significant change, and what difference it has made or will make in the future?

In every level of disaster planning, it talks about for every \$1 spent in preparation you save, \$10 and that was a while ago, so I think it has doubled. This is in financial terms, as well as in trauma terms. However this is reduced if people are involved and aware of their roles in a way that is manageable. One of the communities that we have learnt from is the Buchan community. They were incredibly organised, they had phone trees, communication and information. They were able to look after each other. While they have struggled to recover and were isolated, they knew how to take care of each other. They knew how to work with everyone. Crews coming in from outside were informed. That was an example of the partnership with local knowledge in action. Now that things are becoming more centralised, it is cutting out the local knowledge. Many CFA members are struggling with this and feel that the central decision making is putting communities at risk and are leaving the brigade. Some people with a lifetime of knowledge of fire, now won't work with the CFA, as they know how critical local knowledge is. They don't want to send visiting relief workers into situations that they may not come out of. I heard and saw people speak about the importance of local knowledge time after time. This is especially so for the Omeo region where a bushfire crosses local government boundaries, making local knowledge, briefings, communication and coordination across local government boundaries essential in emergency management. However, this doesn't always happen.

While local knowledge and community planning has a role in disaster planning, it also has a role in other areas like education, health, etc. Workers are sent out into the region without basic skills and often burn out fairly quickly and community expectations aren't met. Programs are funded with goodwill and intentions, but often don't deliver as community engagement doesn't start with where each community is at. This is important as each community is very different.

Now people are realising that climate change is not going to go away. We need to involve people; how do we create changes? People shouldn't start from nothing to figure this one out. Community engagement should be a leading course in university. My big interest is in resources like the study circle kit being accessible to workers and as a pathway for workers, academically. The Regional Community Development course (with the study circle kit a part of it) was available previously at Monash University. People over the world were looking at this course. The Red Cross was interested too as they do disaster recovery. But with more and more disasters, they realised that they needed to invest in local partnerships in the community to minimise what happened and to involve local people. Quite often agencies don't get there for weeks or months after a disaster. Communities are the first responders, always. So agencies were interested and loved the model. Thirty agencies wanted to enrol [in Regional Community Development course] from London. But by that stage, there wasn't support from Monash University for the course anymore. There isn't the structural support for the course, and it went in the change to Federation University. I got employed to rewrite the course in 2017 and made films for it, but then the University pulled the course, and no one talked to me. Don't know what happened. So it isn't there anymore.

There are international community development programs that the course could be part of, but these are mostly academic, not practical like this course and it prepares people for the frontline. As community engagement can be scary, when people are angry and distraught, because they haven't been heard. The course and the study circle kit resource support workers to have the capacity to hear communities, to create their own plan and to hear each other. Skills, knowledge and resources need to be available to workers. My focus is the promotion of employing local people and avoiding expensive drive in and drive out workers. For communities that don't have an established partnership with agencies prior to a disaster, the community are trying to find their own feet, as well as understand others. Whereas if partnerships are already there, then it happens much easier. The text (for the Regional Community Development course) is being rewritten – if anyone would like to access it, can print on demand. I am interested in how to get this process up and running and have written to bushfire enquires and haven't had anything back. This work is a valuable contribution which hasn't been recognised.

The main point of this story is the importance of partnerships and relationships being set up prior to disasters. If you are asking communities to rethink how they work together after a disaster, it is a hard call when people are exhausted. Preparation is key to better outcomes.

APPENDIX B: Checklist for Recovery

Applying the National Principles for Disaster Recovery post-disaster

The review of the National Principles for Disaster Recovery ('The Principles', published 2018) confirmed that they continue to provide the foundation for successful community recovery. This checklist can assist to identify strengths in your approach to recovery and capture stories that can be shared nationally about the application of the National Principles.

Recovery refers to both the approach and the outcome, as they are interdependent and the Principles can be applied before and after the event by agencies, or be used and adapted by interested parties in communities:

1. When pre-planning for recovery (before disaster) The Principles can be used as a guide, for example by re-framing each of them into questions: "How can we use community-led approaches in our community?", "How can implementation be guided by the community's priorities?", and "Who do I need around the table to help me make appropriate decisions and plan for my community?".
2. In the review of post-disaster recovery planning and implementation, The Principles can then be applied as criteria, for example: "How effectively did we as an agency build collaborative partnerships with community?", "How did we assist individuals, families and the community to actively participate in their own recovery?", and "How did we ensure the voice of all community members was heard, including the most vulnerable?".
3. Similarly, communities might examine some of the skills, knowledge, strengths and wisdom they require to plan disaster recovery, through the lens of The Principles.

The Principles have been turned into questions on the following pages to enable reflective practice and continuous improvement by agencies and organisations involved in community recovery post disaster. Note: Social impact might be replaced by public value and is potentially related to the National Recovery Monitoring and Evaluation Framework. If the impact is not a positive one, this can be framed as a learning.

The Principles:

- Understand the Context
- Recognise Complexity
- Use Community-led Approaches
- Coordinate all Activities
- Communicate Effectively
- Recognise and Build Capacity

If you would like to share your insights, please return any feedback about the use of the National Principles for Disaster Recovery to Catherine Gearing, SRRG National Consultant Disaster Recovery, catherine.gearing@reconstruction.nsw.gov.au.

Checklist for applying the National Principles for Disaster Recovery during post-disaster recovery planning

Understand the CONTEXT: Successful recovery is based on an understanding of the community context, with each community having its own history, values and dynamics.		
Did we apply this?	How did we apply this?	What are we seeing as a result?(Social Impact)
☐ Acknowledging existing strengths and capacity, including past experiences;		
☐ Appreciating the risks and stressors faced by the community;		
☐ Being respectful of and sensitive to the culture and diversity of the community;		
☐ Supporting those who may be facing vulnerability;		
☐ Recognising the importance of the environment to people and to their recovery;		
☐ Acknowledging this process as requiring a long term, sustained effort as needed by the community;		
☐ Acknowledging the impact upon the community may extend beyond the geographical boundaries where the disaster occurred.		

Table 1 of 6: Understand the Context

Recognise COMPLEXITY: Successful recovery is responsive to the complex and dynamic nature of both emergencies and the community.		
Did we consider the factors related to complexity:	How did we apply this?	What are we seeing as a result?(Social Impact)
☐ Disasters lead to a range of effects and impacts that require a variety of approaches; they can also leave long-term legacies;		
☐ Information on impacts is limited at first and changes over time;		
☐ Affected individuals and the community have diverse needs, wants and expectations, which can evolve rapidly;		
☐ Responsive and flexible action is crucial to address immediate needs;		
☐ Existing community knowledge and values may challenge the assumptions of those outside of the community;		
☐ Conflicting knowledge, values and priorities among individuals, the community and organisations may create tensions;		
☐ Emergencies create stressful environments where grief or blame may also affect those involved; and		
☐ Over time, appropriate support for individuals and communities, from within and outside, can cultivate hope and individual and collective growth.		

Table 2 of 6: Recognise Complexity

Use COMMUNITY-LED approaches: Successful recovery is community-centred, responsive and flexible, engaging with community and supporting them to move forward.		
Did we apply this?	How did we apply this?	What are we seeing as a result?(Social Impact)
☐ Assisting and enabling individuals, families and the community to actively participate in their own recovery;		
☐ Recognising that individuals and the community may need different levels of support at various times;		
☐ Being guided by the communities priorities;		
☐ Channelling effort through pre-identified and existing community assets, including local knowledge, existing community strengths and resilience;		
☐ Building collaborative partnerships between the community and those involved in the recovery process;		
☐ Recognising that new community leaders often emerge during and after a disaster, who may not hold formal positions of authority; and		
☐ Recognising that different communities may choose different paths to recovery.		

Table 3 of 6: Use Community-led Approaches

COORDINATE all activities: Successful recovery requires a planned, coordinated and adaptive approach, between community and partner agencies, based on continuing assessment of impacts and need.

Did we apply this?	How did we apply this?	What are we seeing as a result?(Social Impact)
☐ Ensuring we have clearly articulated and shared goals based on desired outcomes;		
☐ Flexible, taking into account changes in community needs or stakeholder expectations.		
☐ Being guided by those with experience and expertise, using skilled, authentic and capable community leadership;		
☐ Working recovery at the pace desired by the community, and seek to collaborate and reconcile different interests and time frames;		
☐ Reflecting well-developed community planning and information gathering before, during and after a disaster;		
☐ Using clear decision-making and reporting structures and sound governance, which are transparent and accessible to the community;		
☐ Demonstrating an understanding of the roles, responsibilities and authority of organisations involved and coordinate across agencies to ensure minimal service provision disruption;		
☐ Demonstrating that we are part of an emergency management approach that integrates with response operations and contributes to future prevention and preparedness; and		

☐ Being inclusive, availing of and building upon relationships created before, during and after the emergency.		
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Table 4 of 6: Coordinate all Activities

COMMUNICATE effectively: Successful recovery is built on effective communication between the affected community and other partners.		
Did we apply this?	How did we apply this?	What are we seeing as a result?(Social Impact)
☐ Recognising that communication should be two-way, and that input and feedback should be encouraged;		
☐ Ensuring that information is accessible to audiences in diverse situations, addresses a variety of communication needs, and is provided through a range of communication channels and networks;		
☐ Establishing mechanisms for coordinated and consistent communications between all service providers, organisations and individuals and the community;		
☐ Ensuring that all communication is relevant, timely, clear, accurate, targeted, credible and consistent; and		
☐ Identifying trusted sources of information and repeat key recovery messages to enable greater community confidence and receptivity.		

Table 5 of 6: Communicate Effectively

Recognise and build CAPACITY: Successful recovery recognises, supports and builds on individual, community and organisational capacity and resilience.		
Did we apply this?	How did we apply this?	What are we seeing as a result?(Social Impact)
☐ Assessing capability and capacity requirements before, during and after a disaster;		
☐ Supporting the development of self-reliance, preparation and disaster mitigation;		
☐ Quickly identifying and mobilising community skills, strengths and resources;		
☐ Developing networks and partnerships to strengthen capacity, capability and resilience;		
☐ Providing opportunities to share, transfer and develop knowledge, skills and training;		
☐ Recognising that resources can be provided by a range of partners and from community networks;		
☐ Working with the Acknowledgement that existing resources may be stretched, and that additional resources may be sought;		
☐ Working with the understanding that additional resources may only be available for a limited period, and that sustainability may need to be addressed;		
☐ Demonstrating an understanding of when and how to step back, while continuing to support individuals and the community as a whole to be more self-sufficient when they are ready; and		
☐ Evaluating our input into the community's recovery to provide learning for future disaster and improved resilience.		

Table 6 of 6: Recognise and Build Capacity

Checklist for Applying the National Principles for Disaster Recovery – Post-disaster, V1.0, 20180416.

