



ASSESSING COMMUNITY RESILIENCE FOR EMERGENCIES IN LOCAL GOVERNMENT POLICY – A SUMMARY

Maroondah City Council and Knox City Council case
studies

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BACKGROUND

The Yarra Ranges Council, Maroondah City Council and the Knox City Council partnered with the Bushfire and Natural Hazards Cooperative Research Centre in 2020 to conduct the *Assessing community resilience for emergencies in local government policy* (ACRE) project. ACRE evaluated Maroondah and Knox policies to see where and how they align with resilience. The project also highlighted some strategic issues that are potentially relevant for local government and disaster resilience policy more broadly. Whilst the Yarra Ranges Council was an important contributor to the development of the research project, Maroondah and Knox City Councils were chosen as case studies.

All levels of the Australian Government adopted the National Strategy for Disaster Resilience (NSDR)¹ in 2011 and its implementation is ongoing. The NSDR aims to shift national policy away from the traditional focus on disaster response toward planning and prevention to reduce the risk of natural disasters and the severity of their consequences. In 2018, a National Disaster Risk Reduction Framework (NDRRF)² was introduced to guide disaster risk reduction activities for greater resilience. Importantly, the NDRRF deals with the increasing problem of disasters by considering the whole system and its interdependencies. In doing so it incorporates sustainability and climate change adaptation goals

A resilience-based approach will improve the 'capacity of individuals, communities, institutions, businesses and systems within a city to survive, adapt and grow not matter what kinds of chronic stresses and acute shocks they experience'³. Local government is a key partner in achieving these goals because of its proximity to the community and the array of assets, services and programs it manages that are vital to the well-being of local communities. Local councils also have a legal responsibility to develop and maintain and review policies in critical areas, including for disasters and other emergencies. This provides opportunities to build the resilience of communities by pivoting local government policies and programs toward approaches that are proven to support resilience. In order to do this, Maroondah and Knox City Councils sought, as a first step, to better understand how their existing policies reflect support for resilience-based approaches and how this can be improved.



WHAT DID WE DO?

The ACRE project was conducted in two parts: Firstly, selected policies were evaluated using the Community Resilience Framework for Emergency Management⁴. This framework was developed by the Emergency Management (Victoria) in 2017 to encourage local resilience that can be mobilised for an emergency or in a disaster. Secondly, council policies were evaluated using an alternative framework drawn from key areas of resilience research.

The project did not assess the effectiveness of the implementation or outcomes of the policies. Its scope was confined to the evaluation of the policy wording. The findings were obtained by matching the words and phrases to the categories in the evaluation instruments and then counting and comparing them. A number of strategic policy issues were interpreted from these results.



WHY IS THIS WORK IMPORTANT?

Our exposure to natural hazards is increasing as is the incidence and severity of extreme weather events. This will make disasters more likely along with the chance that they could exceed our existing capacity to resist, respond and recover. Indeed, the latest estimates of future disaster costs predict that the costs of disasters will reach \$39 billion per year by 2050⁵. This trend is exacerbated by climate change. Resilience is a quality that must be embedded in social, environmental and economic systems at every level. In particular, local level resilience, in individuals, households and communities is the wellspring of a resilient nation. While federal and state government policies tend to have a broad strategic influence on the resilience of the population, local government has a direct role and its responsibilities in this area are growing⁶.

This is possibly the first time that an Australian government has examined its policies as a whole, to see how consistent they are with resilience principles and practices. As with all levels of government in a democratic system, local government is accountable to its citizens through local and state government laws, regulations and policy and funding arrangements. Local Government has limited revenue raising capacity, and within these limitations, is concerned to achieve its policy objectives, effectively and efficiently, including by capitalising on existing capacity. Resilience to disasters is linked to the resilience of the system more broadly, particularly through social factors. By examining their policies, Maroondah and Knox City Councils will be able to better identify how local government can and does build resilience within its existing activities and where there are gaps that need to be addressed and that may require additional resources to do so.

The outputs from this project will assist councils by:

- giving them evidence to advocate for resources
- contributing in the longer term to a more resilient local population who are better able to survive, adapt and thrive in the face of a range of stresses and shocks.



KEY INSIGHTS

1. **It is critical that council programs and activities are designed and implemented in accordance with evidence about how to achieve resilience.** The use of resilience terminology in council policies does not, in and of itself, ensure that resilience is being successfully implemented or that people are becoming more resilient as a result.
2. **Maroondah and Knox City Council policies have a generally high level of adherence to resilience principles.** This is mainly attributable to the strong emphasis on community connectedness and sustainability. This finding accords with the Australian Disaster Resilience Index that ranks Maroondah and Knox Local Government Areas as having a ‘high capacity for disaster resilience’⁷. However, this result must be regarded with caution because the ADRI cannot identify variations in resilience within postcode areas and it is likely that there are sections of the Local Government Area population who have lower levels of resilience.
3. **Both councils’ climate change policies stand out in that they reflect a wide range of resilience characteristics.** This wide-ranging interpretation of resilience means that it is better able to be integrated into mainstream policies.
4. **Compared with their climate change policies, councils’ emergency management plans are narrowly focused in terms of their alignment with resilience.** This suggests less potential to promote resilience across-the-board. However, given their focus on emergency response, a relatively operational focus may be appropriate for this purpose.
5. **There are gaps in both Maroondah and Knox policies in the areas of volunteering and business continuity planning.** This is a significant omission because both are widely accepted as exemplars for translating resilience policy into practice.
6. **Diversity and participation of potentially vulnerable groups,** (including people who are aged, disabled, Indigenous and those from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds), is a theme that is woven throughout many council policies. However, without further research, it cannot be assumed that resilience is strong in these groups.
7. **The Community Resilience Framework for Emergency Management (EMV Framework) primarily takes a top-down approach.** This manifests in an under representation of key elements of resilience as per the resilience research literature. For example, social capital, networks, governance, information and communication and self-efficacy appear regularly in a number of the council policies but are not picked up adequately in the EMV Framework. Thus, it should be adapted to strike a better balance with bottom-up approaches that empower local government.



FUTURE CONSIDERATIONS

The ACRE project has highlighted the interdependencies between resilience policy and the realisation of resilience goals. It has also highlighted opportunities to improve resilience in local communities.

Some of these opportunities may already be available while some will rely on additional future support and capacity building. Suggestions for a number of future actions to enhance resilience capacity within Maroondah and Knox City Councils' communities are outlined below. They are listed according to whether they require council actions in terms of direct policy and program initiatives or where further research is indicated to complement and support local government resilience effort.

The list is not exhaustive. It is hoped that it will stimulate discussion amongst stakeholders, particularly those with the local knowledge, experience and commitment and will generate more ideas about how resilience-based approaches can benefit their communities.

POLICIES AND PROGRAMS

Maroondah and Knox Councils could:

- adopt a revised version of the Community Resilience Framework for Emergency Management. The new framework would integrate parts of the existing framework with material from the community disaster resilience literature to fill the gaps identified by the ACRE project
- agree priorities for action to address the gaps identified by the ACRE project where existing arrangements offer the potential to make early gains in resilience. For example:
 - incorporate resilience into all policies including municipal emergency management plans
 - develop action plans for municipal emergency management plans to link them to other council policies and actions
 - strengthen resilience networks by leveraging councils' existing advisory committees. Terms of references could be reviewed and updated to include resilience goals
 - design information and communication activities for risk reduction to promote personal ownership and behaviour change rather than using traditional top-down messages
- consider the findings of this report in the context of the recommendations from the Royal Commission into National Natural Disaster Arrangements⁶, particularly in relation to the roles and responsibilities of the three tiers of government
- circulate the ACRE report to key stakeholders with a view to considering a plan to invite their discussion on the document. The report could be distributed to other levels of government, including but not limited to Emergency Management Victoria; other councils and Local Government



Victoria (LGV)⁸ plus other organisations and individuals who should be aware of this work

- identify funding options and approach state and federal government for funding to conduct necessary policy and program development and further research (as detailed below) to complement and build upon the ACRE project.

RESEARCH

The research that was done for the ACRE Project is one part of a bigger picture. Further research should be conducted to expand on the findings of this report and to better equip councils with the knowledge and tools to build disaster resilience.

Potential future research could involve:

1. Ensuring that all local government policies are developed and reviewed so that they are informed by a comprehensive set of evidence-based resilience principles such as those identified in this project,
2. Operationalising resilience by turning policies into actions that have been proven to deliver resilience outcomes,
3. Monitoring, measuring and evaluating the outcomes of these activities to see if resilience levels have changed. Measuring baseline or existing levels of resilience in a given LGA or group of LGAs would need to be done so that before and after measures could be taken. Within this, capability should be developed to assess resilience amongst and within both communities of interest (for example, migrant groups) and communities of place.



ENDNOTES

- 1 Commonwealth of Australia, 2011, The National Strategy for Disaster Resilience: Building the resilience of our nation to disasters. At <http://www.em.gov.au/Documents/1National%20Strategy%20for%20Disaster%20Resilience%20-%20pdf.PDF>. Accessed on 051020
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- 4 Emergency Management Victoria, 2017, Community Resilience Framework for Emergency Management. At <https://www.emv.vic.gov.au/CommunityResilienceFramework>. Accessed on 101020
- 5 Australian Business Roundtable for Disaster Resilience and Safer Communities, 2017. At <http://australianbusinessroundtable.com.au/assets/reports/media-release-nov-11.pdf>. Accessed on 0510020
- 6 Royal Commission into National Disaster Arrangements report, October 2020, at <https://naturaldisaster.royalcommission.gov.au/publications/royal-commission-national-natural-disaster-arrangements-report>. Accessed on 301020
- 7 The Australian Disaster Resilience Index: A System for assessing the resilience of Australian communities to natural hazards, 2020. At <https://www.bnhcrc.com.au/research/resilienceindex>. Accessed on 051020
- 8 Local Government Victoria: Local Government Victoria provides policy advice, oversees legislation and works with councils to support responsive and accountable local government services. at <https://www.localgovernment.vic.gov.au/>. Accessed on 301020