

LCSA Members Survey Report

# RESILIENCE THROUGH DISASTERS



October 2020



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Report prepared by WESTIR Limited

## Acknowledgements

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- Albion Park Youth & Community Care
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- Bligh Park Community Services
- Boambee East Community Centre
- Burwood Community Welfare Services
- Chester Hill Neighbourhood Centre
- ConnectAbility Australia
- Coolaburoo Neighbourhood Centre
- Coonamble Neighbourhood Centre
- Cowra Information & Neighbourhood Centre
- Crookwell Neighbourhood Centre
- Dungog Shire Community Centre
- Eden Community Access Centre
- Edgeworth Memorial Neighbourhood Centre
- Engadine Community Services
- Glen Innes and District Community Centre
- Glossodia Community Centre
- Graceades Community Cottage
- Griffith Community Centre
- Gundagai Neighbourhood Centre
- Guyra Neighbourhood Centre
- Hawkesbury Community Outreach Service
- Hawkesbury Neighbour Aid
- Highlands Community Centres
- Immigrant Women's Speakout Association
- Kingsgrove Community Aid Centre
- Liverpool Neighbourhood Connections
- Macedonian Welfare Association of NSW
- Manning Valley Neighbourhood Services
- Merana Aboriginal Community Association for the Hawkesbury
- Neighbourhood Centres of Bellingen Shire
- Nimbin Neighbourhood and Information Centre
- Northern Illawarra Community Connections
- Older Women's Network NSW
- Orana Community Centre
- Orana NSW Inc
- Orange Family Support Service
- Hastings Neighbourhood Services
- Pottsville Beach Neighbourhood Centre
- Richmond Community Services
- Riverwood Community Centre
- Shoalhaven Neighbourhood Services
- Snowy Mountains Neighbourhood Centre
- Surry Hills Neighbourhood Centre
- Temora Community Centre
- Tenterfield Social Development Committee
- Tamworth Family Support Service
- The Neighbourhood Centre Bathurst
- The Women's Cottage
- Tomaree Neighbourhood Centre
- Toukley Neighbourhood Centre
- WINS Community Centre
- Wyong Neighbourhood Centre
- Young Neighbourhood Centre

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## Acronyms

ABS	Australian Bureau of Statistics
ANZAC	Australian and New Zealand Army Corps
ATO	Australian Taxation Office
ACT	Australian Capital Territory
COVID-19	Coronavirus disease 2019
DCJ	Department of Communities and Justice
DEX	Data Exchange
DSS	Department of Social Services
DV FDV	Domestic violence or family and domestic violence
EAP	Employee Assistance Program
EAPA	Energy Account Payment Assistance
ER	Emergency relief
HR	Human Resources
IT	Information technology
LCSA	Local Community Services Association
LGA	Local Government Area
NAIDOC	National Aborigines and Islanders Day Observance Committee
NGO	Non-government organisation
NSW	New South Wales
PPRR	Prevention, preparation, response, recovery
RFS	Rural Fire Service
SES	State Emergency Services
TEI	Targeted Earlier Intervention
WESTIR	Western Sydney Regional Research and Information Service
WHS	Workplace Health and Safety

# 1 Executive summary

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In 2019 and 2020, communities and community-based organisations across New South Wales faced significant challenges, from the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic, to the 2019-2020 bushfire season, flooding, and drought. Community and neighbourhood centres have been at the forefront of disaster preparedness and response. This includes the members of the NSW based Local Community Services Association Inc. (LCSA).

In August 2020, LCSA and WESTIR Limited distributed an online survey to the primary contacts of LCSA members across NSW. The aim of this survey was to record perceptions of the roles, responses, and resilience of these organisations through times of crisis.

The following report analyses the survey responses. The report finds that over half of participating LCSA members were impacted by more than one disaster in the year preceding the survey. Critically, five organisations were impacted by four disasters in this period: COVID-19, bushfires, floods, and drought. A combination of three disasters impacted 14 organisations, while another 14 organisations experienced the cumulative effects of two disasters. Many organisations surveyed in this report confronted a daunting task as their communities experienced these disasters simultaneously or in quick succession.

The report reveals that disasters saw service demand increase for LCSA members. Direct and indirect costs rose as organisations adapted services to community needs while navigating changes to staffing and resources. Despite disruptions, LCSA members embraced innovation and hope, reflecting a confidence in remaining viable and with an optimism for coping with potential future disasters.

The report also analyses experiences with LCSA support during times of disaster. It finds that many participants were satisfied with support from LCSA and drew great benefit from engaging with LCSA tools, such as online member forums.

However, the report also identifies gaps in disaster preparedness, response, and resilience. Further support must be made available if community organisations are to continue operating in healthy, sustainable, and effective ways. To this effect, the report makes six recommendations:

1. Provide ongoing, targeted funding for community and neighbourhood centres to adequately cover the costs of disasters.
2. Enhance mental health support for clients and workers of community and neighbourhood centres.
3. Encourage greater collaboration and coordination between community services and local emergency management agencies.
4. Encourage innovative practices and partnerships for community and neighbourhood centres to respond to disasters.
5. Adequately resource sector planning, training, and infrastructure to help community and neighbourhood centres better prepare and respond to disasters.
6. Undertake further investigation into how community and neighbourhood centres navigate flood events and support flood victims.

## 2 Introduction

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In the twelve months preceding September 2020, communities and community-based organisations across New South Wales (NSW) have faced significant challenges, from the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic, to the 2019-2020 bushfire season, flooding, and drought. At the forefront of local disaster response and resilience are community and neighbourhood centres, many of which are members of the Local Community Services Association (LCSA).

LCSA is a membership organisation founded in 1974 to represent the diverse interests of locally governed not-for-profit neighbourhood centres and community organisations in NSW. LCSA aims to support its members through means such as advocacy, networking opportunities, and information and resources.

This research project was a collective undertaking between LCSA and not-for-profit social research organisation WESTIR Limited (Western Sydney Regional Information and Research Service). WESTIR Ltd was contracted by LCSA to design a survey, to be completed by members of LCSA, and to analyse the results.

### 2.1 Survey aim

In the supportive spirit of LCSA, the survey analysed in this report aimed to build an evidence base regarding the roles, responses, and resilience of community organisations and neighbourhood centres through natural, public health, and economic disasters. The survey results presented in this report provides LCSA with the crucial evidence it needs to support and advocate for its members and ensure disaster preparedness and resilience among neighbourhood centres across NSW.

Importantly, it must be noted that this report does not include a financial analysis. Rather, it highlights the lived experiences and observations of staff and volunteers at NSW community organisations. Further research into the specific financial impacts of disasters is recommended to more thoroughly understand how the disasters of 2019 and 2020 affected community organisations state-wide.

### 2.2 Survey method

The survey was an online questionnaire hosted on Survey Monkey. Following a thorough piloting process, the survey link was distributed by LCSA via email to 152 primary contacts of LCSA member organisations on Thursday, 20 August 2020. Recipients of the survey invite were encouraged to share the survey link with the primary contact at other 'outlets' or sites in their organisation, if applicable. The survey remained open for 25 days and was closed at 12pm, Monday 14 September 2020.

A total of 69 responses were submitted. Eleven responses were excluded from analysis due to them being incomplete (n=7) or duplicate (n=4) responses. As such, the final dataset

consisted of 58 complete and valid responses, submitted from a total of 57 organisations. This represents a strong response rate of 37.5% of primary contacts. As such, while this report does not present an overall census of LCSA members, it offers a broad indication of trends and common experiences among community and neighbourhood centres across NSW. To ensure consistency in analysis, the statistical analyses in this report investigate 57 participating organisations. This means that one response represents one participating organisation. Reflections on open-response questions include responses of all participants.

To ensure respondents were free to confidently express their experiences of disaster resilience, survey responses are de-identified in this report. As such, rather than identifying the specific organisation, responses are classified by three characteristics: the type of organisation they are representing, the size of this organisation, and their location as either Metropolitan or Regional. The meanings of these classifications are noted in the next section, 'Participant Demographics'.

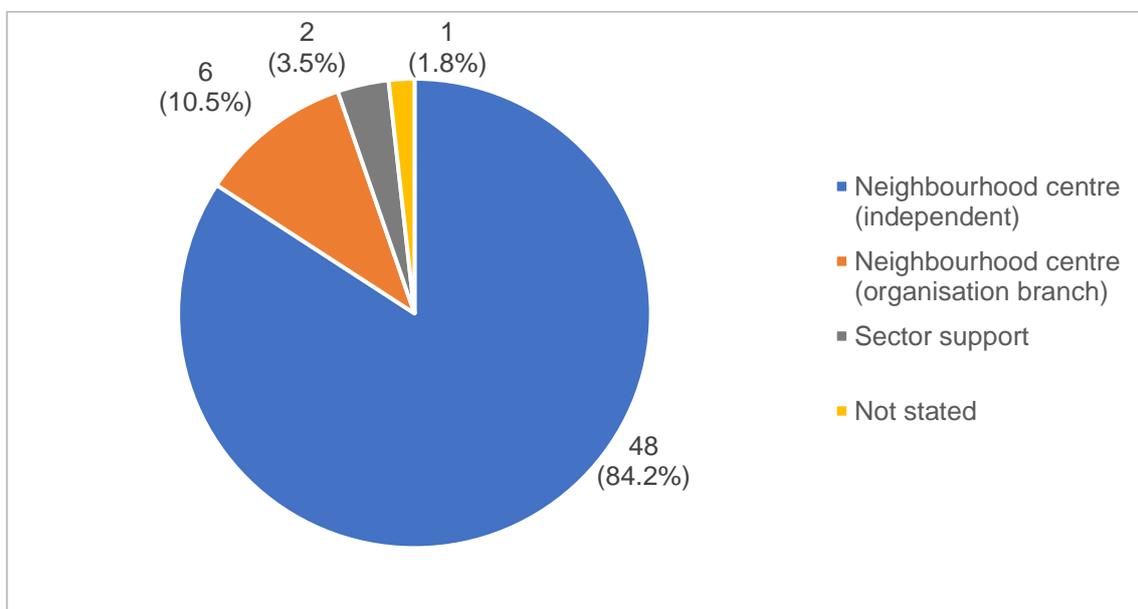
### 3 Participant Demographics

Each survey participant had the option to share three demographic details about their organisation: their type of membership within LCSA; the size of the organisation by annual revenue; and the Local Government Area (LGA) in which they were primarily located. The following section describes the 57 participating organisations by these demographics.

#### 3.1 LCSA membership type

Membership to LCSA is classified by organisation type. Out of 57 responses, most (n=48; 84.2%) came from an 'Independent Neighbourhood Centre'. Six responses were from an 'Organisation branch of a Neighbourhood Centre', meaning that the centre was situated within a larger organisation. Two responses were from organisations that provide 'Sector support' and one response did not state an organisation type (see Figure 1). There were no responses from local governments.

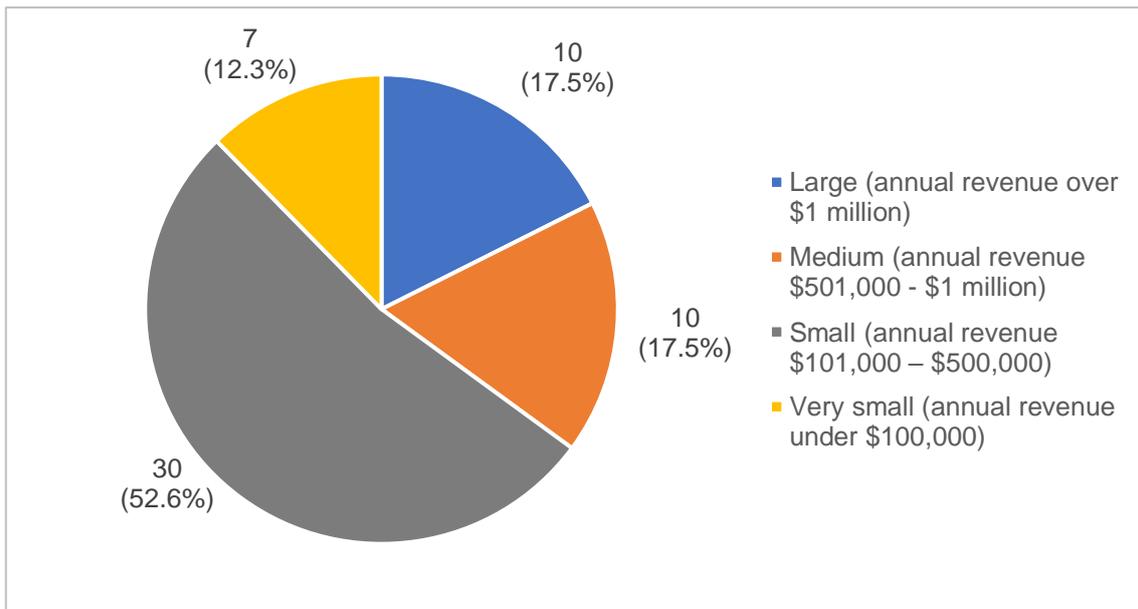
Figure 1: Responses by organisation type



#### 3.2 Organisation size

In addition to membership type, LCSA classify members by the size of their organisation based on funding. Amongst the 57 survey responses, all organisation sizes were well represented, with small organisations (funding of between \$101,000-\$500,000 per annum) the most frequent participants. Of the remaining participants, 7 were very small (funding of less than \$100,000 per annum), 10 were medium size (funding between \$501,000-\$1 million per annum), and 10 were from large organisations with funding of more than \$1 million per annum (see Figure 2).

**Figure 2: Responses by organisation size**



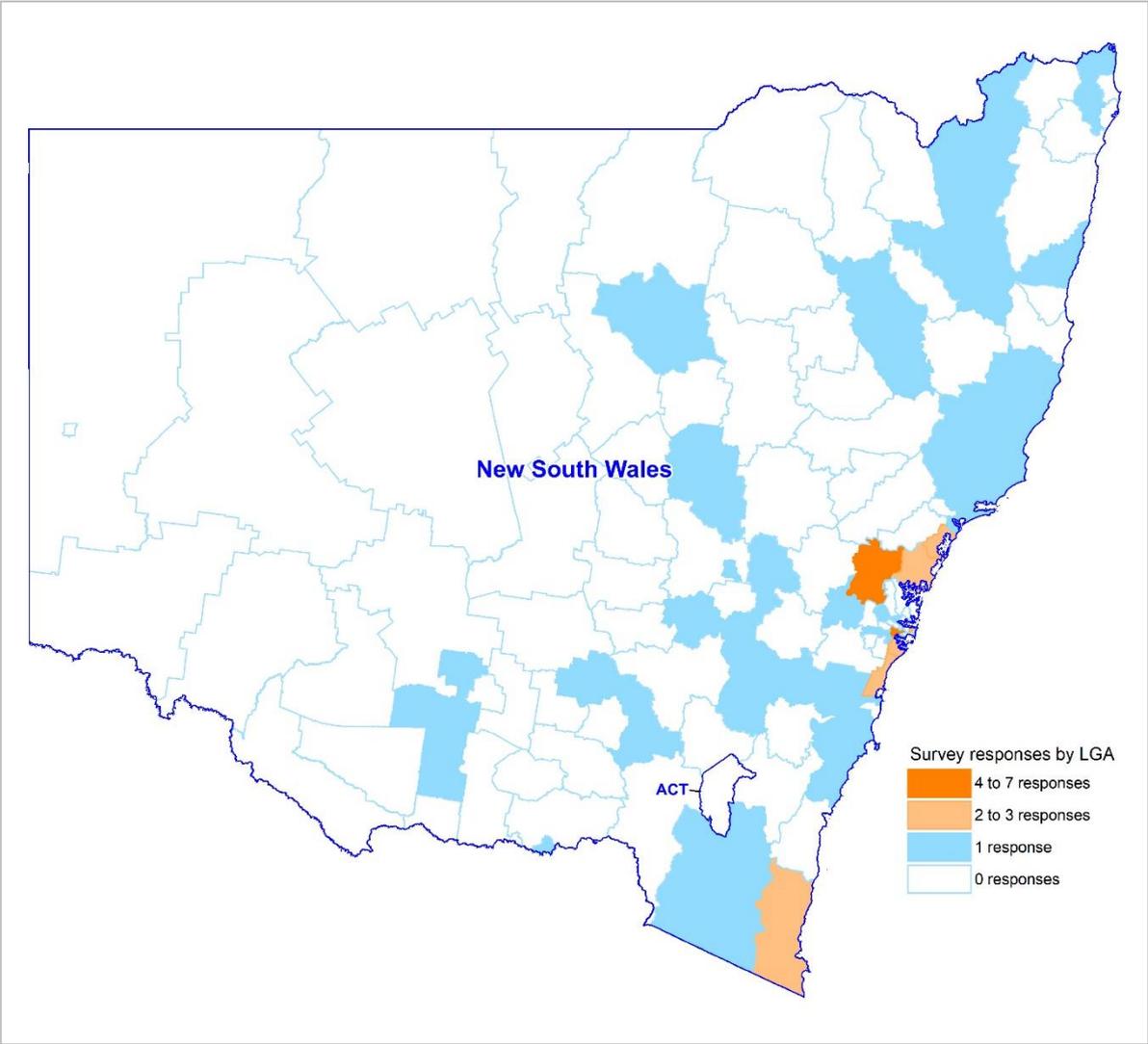
### 3.3 Location

Participating organisations were located in a wide range of LGAs along the eastern seaboard of NSW and over the Great Dividing Range into Western NSW. In some LGAs, multiple organisations submitted responses. However, most LGAs only had one organisation respond to the survey. Hawkesbury LGA had the most responses with 7 different organisations responding to the survey. This is seen in Map 1, below, which shows NSW LGAs by the number of responses received.

The responses came from organisations located in metropolitan, outer metropolitan, urban, suburban, rural, regional, and coastal areas, allowing LCSA a valuable insight into disaster response throughout much of NSW. When participants are quoted in this report, they are identified as either 'Metropolitan' or 'Regional'. This terminology follows the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) definition, which classifies LGAs within the Greater Sydney Statistical Area as Metropolitan, and LGAs outside Greater Sydney area as Regional. More information on the Greater Sydney Statistical Area can be found on the ABS website, or seen in map form on ABS Maps.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> ABS 2020 available at <https://bit.ly/2SAAtq9L>; ABS Maps 2020 available at <https://itt.abs.gov.au/itt/r.jsp?ABSMaps>

Map 1: LCSA Survey responses by LGA



## 4 Disasters in New South Wales

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The LCSA Member Survey asked respondents a series of questions about a range of disasters and whether the disaster had impacted the respondent's organisation during the past year. These disasters were COVID-19, bushfire, drought, and floods.

Before assessing the specific impacts of these disasters on LCSA members, it is important to understand the dynamics of each disaster. As such, this section provides a brief outline of each disaster in a NSW context and describes the number of organisations impacted by that disaster.

### 4.1 COVID-19

*“The influx of people to our Centre at the beginning of the Pandemic was huge. The reasons for the influx were multi-factorial including: other services closed, lack of clear information, fear, unemployment... FDV [family and domestic violence], addiction issues. If our staff had not been prepared to volunteer extra hours and our volunteers also worked extra hours - we could not have met demand” (Independent Neighbourhood Centre, Medium, Metropolitan).*

COVID-19, the disease resulting from a novel coronavirus, was declared a pandemic by the World Health Organisation on 11 March 2020. Community transmission was detected in Australia on 2 March 2020 and cases surged by mid-March. In NSW, where this research is based, the end of March saw the closure of non-essential businesses, the introduction of social distancing measures, and the instruction that people only leave home on essential business.

At the time of this survey, some restrictions had been lifted in NSW, but social distancing measures remain in place and the pandemic's economic impact continues to be felt nationwide. As this report describes, the impacts of COVID-19 were similarly felt among neighbourhood centres, including 56 of the 57 organisations surveyed for this report (n=56).

For many people, COVID-19 has resulted in the loss of employment or employment hours, restricted mobility, the need to be tested and to self-isolate, or physical and mental ill health. Indeed, COVID-19 has impacted the whole of Australia. As this survey is based in NSW, it describes the experience of NSW organisations operating under both state and federal restrictions, and traces how these organisations responded to the challenges of COVID-19 while assisting those in need.

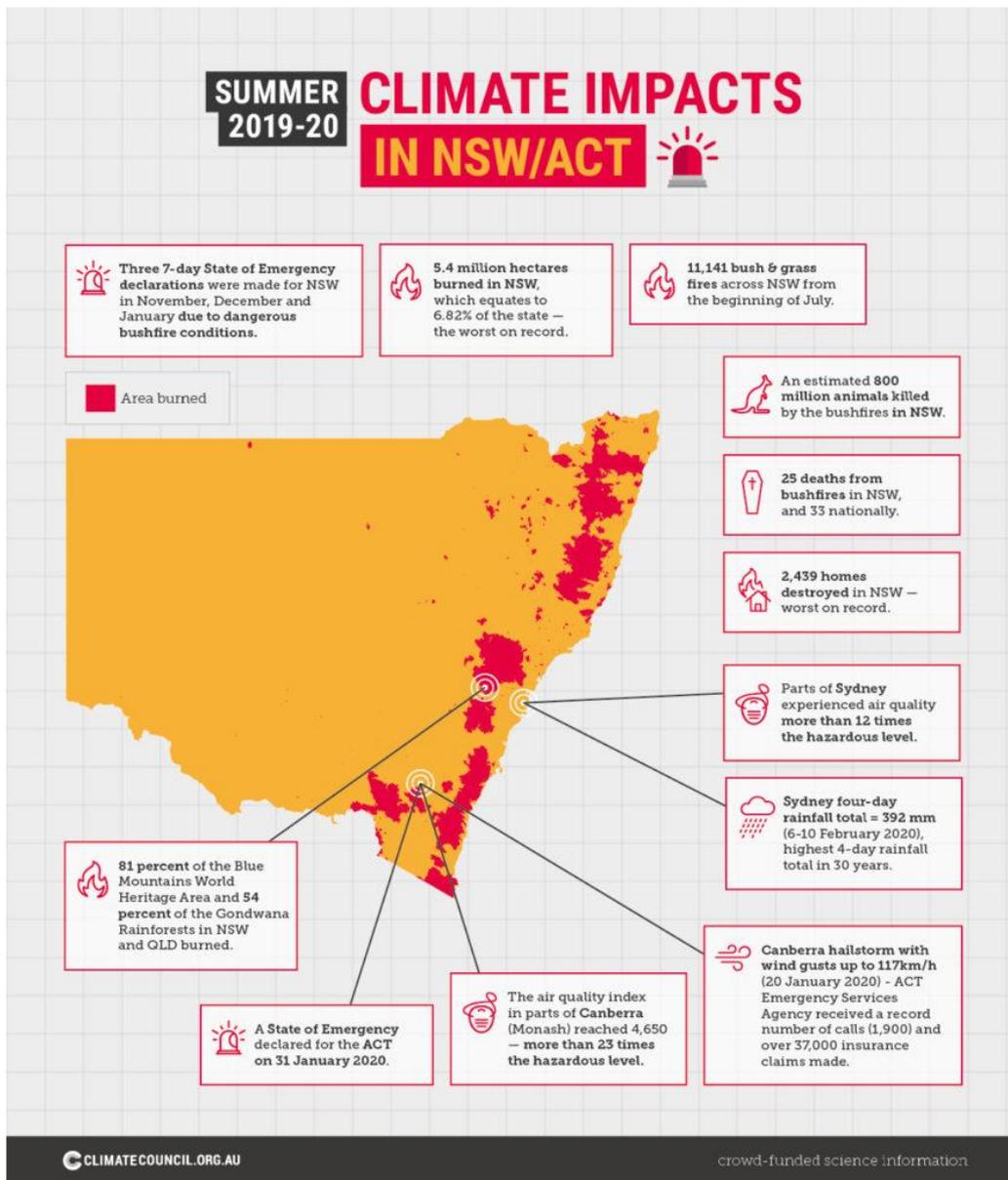
All organisations that identified themselves as having been impacted by COVID-19 stated they had remained open during the pandemic. Six identified that they operated as normal, while the remaining organisations operating on a restricted basis. Organisations operated using phone, email, video calls, and face to face meetings both on and off-site with social distancing. Only one organisation, located in a regional LGA, stated they had not been impacted by COVID.

## 4.2 Bushfires

*“The impact in our community was around preparedness [and] conflicting messages from Police, SES and Local Council. The biggest problem was the ‘Catastrophic’ rated day where Council ordered that all Council Buildings would be closed (including ours) but other services had advised frail aged, elderly people and people with disability to come to our Centre if a fire approached” (Independent Neighbourhood Centre, Medium, Metropolitan).*

Bushfires affected much of NSW during the 2019-2020 summer, including 22 of the survey’s 57 responding organisations. The fire season began in July 2019, when Port Macquarie-Hastings LGA experienced their first fire. Catastrophic fire conditions saw new fires igniting frequently, including on the NSW North Coast in September. Over summer, as earlier fires continued to burn, more began on the outskirts of Sydney and the NSW South Coast. Many fires continued to burn until February 2020 when heavy rain finally arrived. As seen in Map 2, an estimated 5.4 million hectares or 7% of NSW land was burnt during the 2019-2020 fires.

Map 2: Climate impacts, bushfire burnt area, NSW/ACT, Summer 2019-20



Source: The Climate Council 2020, 'Summer of Crisis'

## 4.3 Flooding

*“As Warragamba reaches 100% capacity, our community is on heightened alert as heavy rain or dam overflow will definitely mean flooding. 2020 - the year that keeps on giving!” (Medium Neighbourhood Centre, Independent, Metropolitan)*

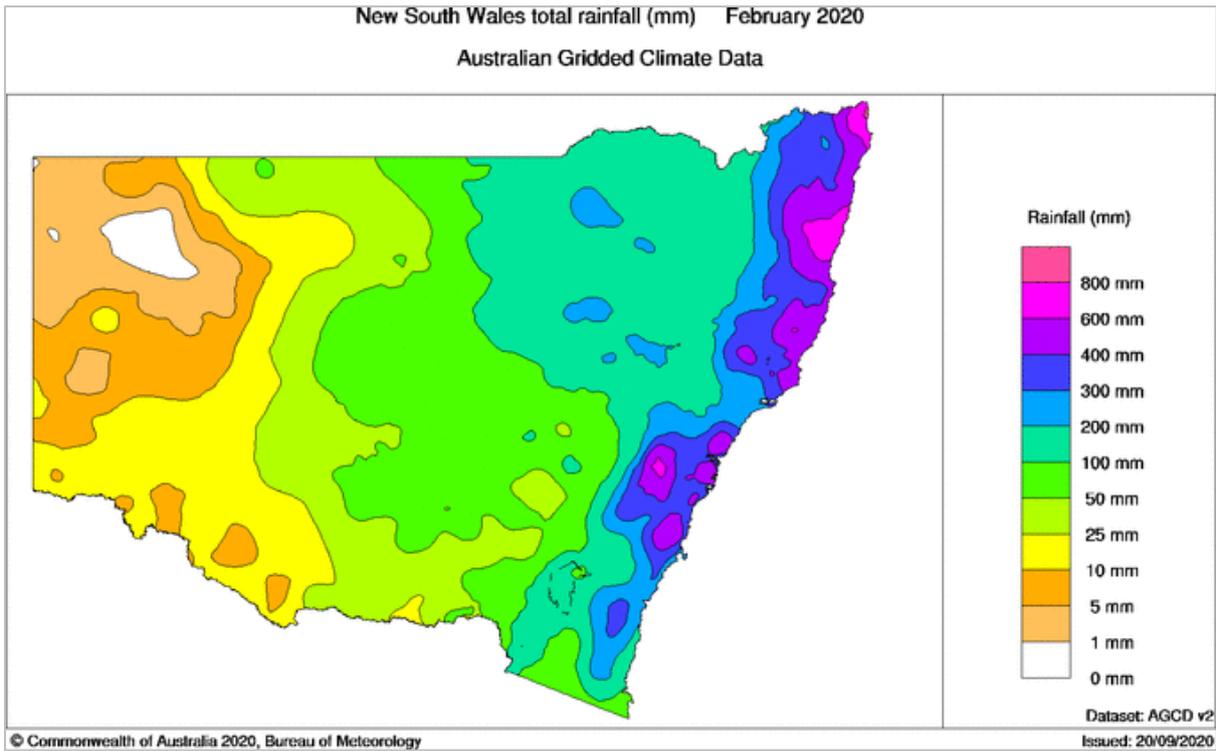
Following on from drought and bushfire, parts of NSW were then subjected to flooding. On 10 February 2020, the NSW Rural Fire Service (RFS) announced via Twitter that recent rain had helped extinguish 30 fires, some of which had been burning for months.<sup>2</sup> However, the heavy February rains, shown below in Map 3, also caused flooding on numerous rivers along the NSW coast. More rain fell in March, west of the Great Dividing Range, and above average rainfall continued into April. The next two months saw little rain but July brought heavy rain and flash flooding to many areas. The South Coast, for example, observed its highest total rainfall since 1922.

A total of 13 organisations, each located on the Eastern Seaboard, stated they had been impacted by flooding in the past year. The extent of the flooding rains is shown in the below Maps. Map 3, which shows NSW rainfall for the six months from 1 February to 31 July 2020, indicates which areas experienced above or below average rainfall in this six-month period. Evidently, much of NSW experienced rainfall that was either above average or very much above average. The only area to experience below average rain was in the far west, by the South Australian border.

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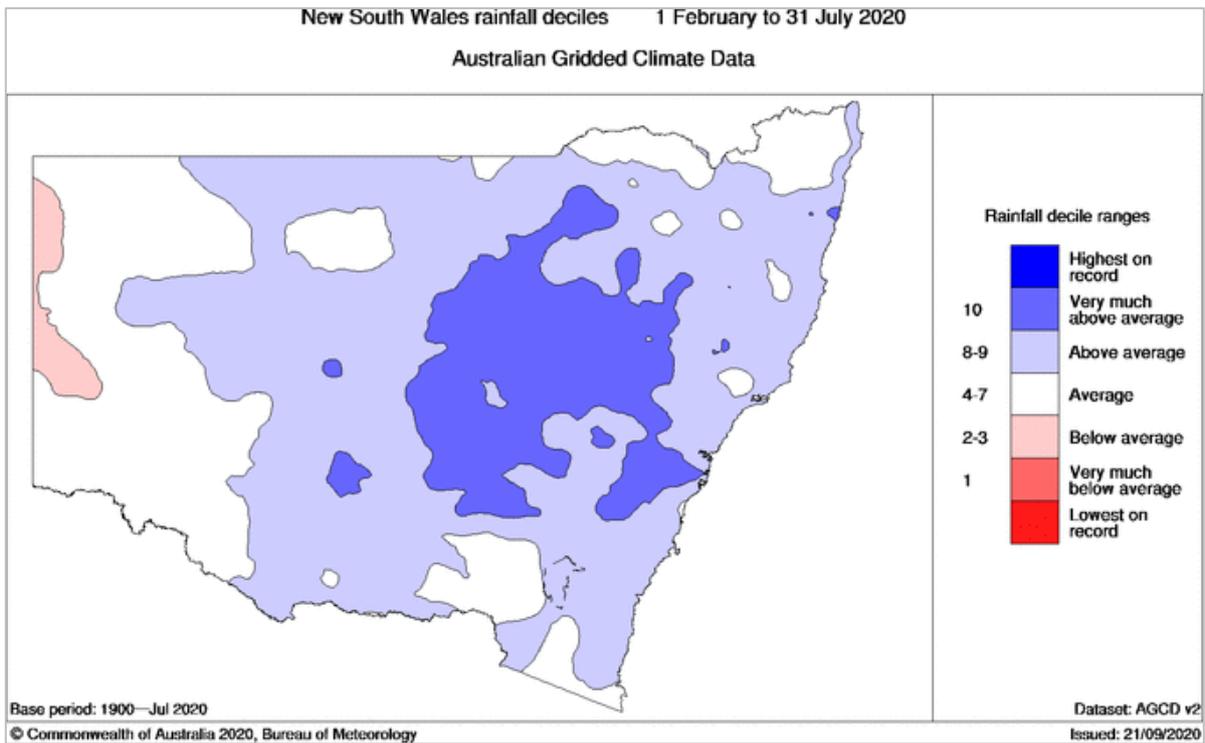
<sup>2</sup> NSW RFS, Twitter, 10 February 2020, <https://twitter.com/nswrfs/status/1226731913378840577?lang=en>

**Map 3: NSW total rainfall, February 2020**



Source: Bureau of Meteorology 2020, [Recent and historical rainfall maps](#)

**Map 4: NSW rainfall total, 1 February to 31 July 2020**



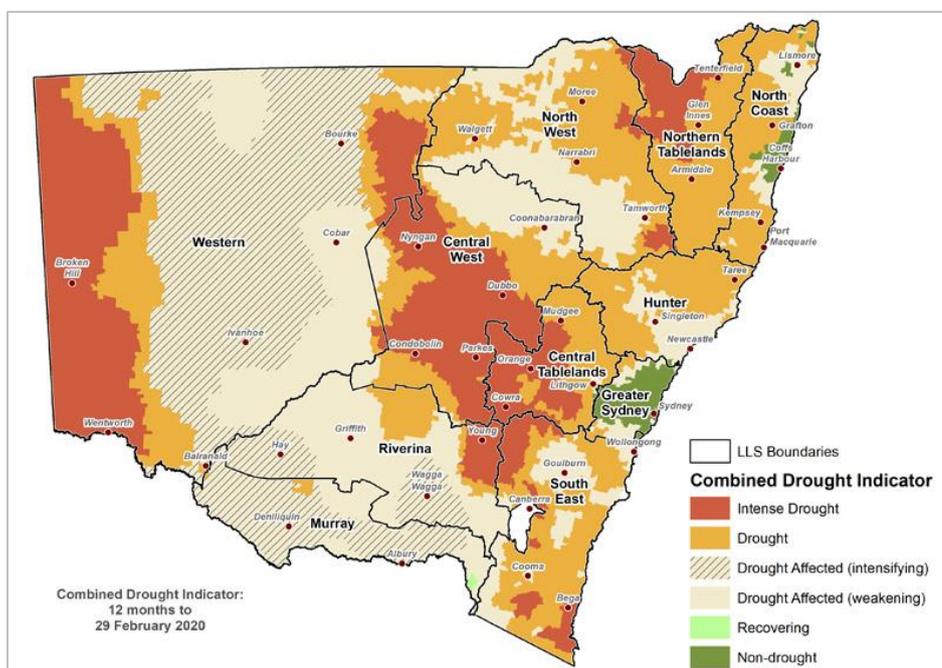
Source: Bureau of Meteorology 2020, [Recent and historical rainfall maps](#)

## 4.4 Drought

*“Community members had been so used to dealing with the impacts of drought, they did not identify themselves as being affected” (Small Neighbourhood Centre, Independent, Regional).*

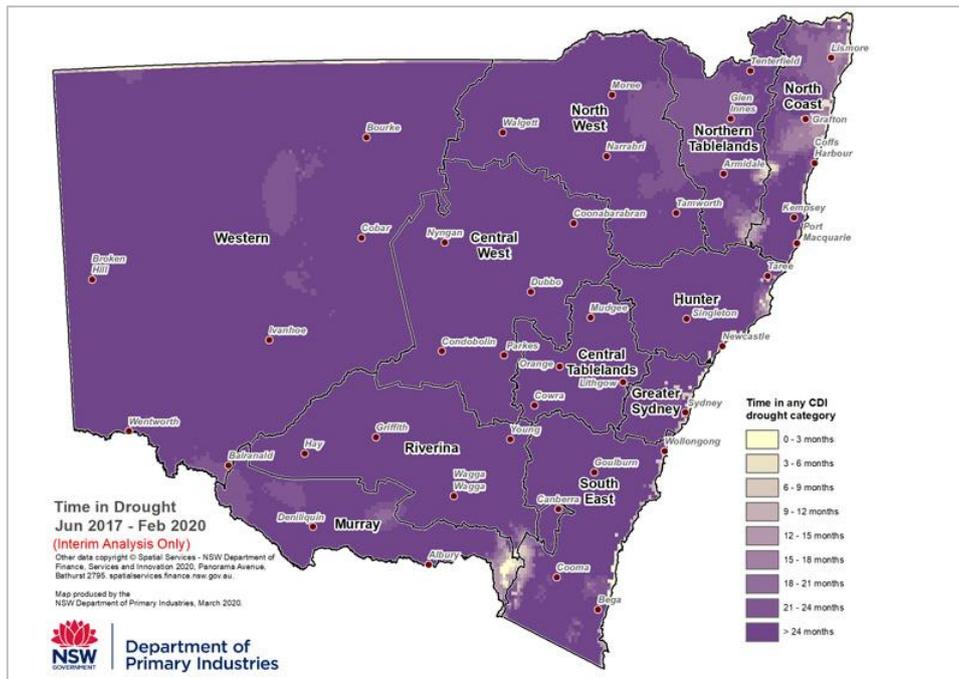
Prior to the flooding rains of 2020, all of NSW was in drought. Indeed, many areas were experiencing ‘intense drought’ and Greater Sydney was experiencing ‘intensifying drought’, as shown in Map 5. The drought, however, was not a new experience. As Map 6 demonstrates, a significant area of NSW had been in drought for more than 24 months. After the strong rainfalls of 2020, the area of NSW in drought was relatively small by August, as seen in Map 7. Even so, a total of 22 organisations said they had experienced the impact of drought in the past year.

**Map 5: Combined drought indicator, 12 months to 29 February 2020**



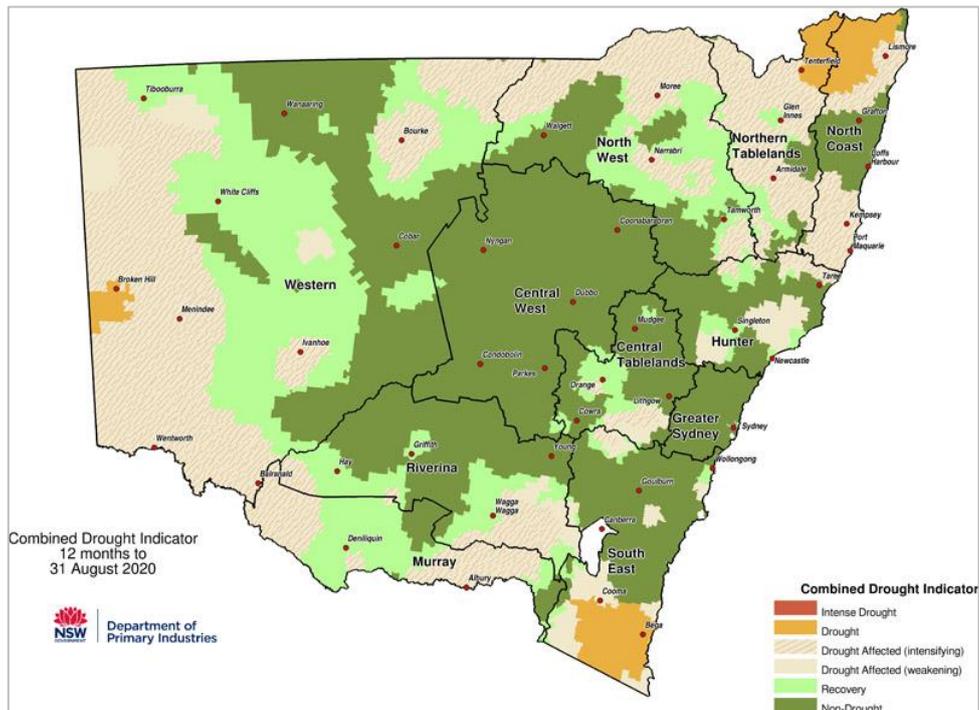
Source: [Department of Primary Industries](#), 2020

**Map 6: Time in drought, June 2017 to February 2020**



Source: [Department of Primary Industries](#), 2020

**Map 7: NSW combined drought indicator, 12 months to 31 August 2020**



Source: [Department of Primary Industries](#), 2020

## 4.5 Multiple disasters

*“Drought, fires, floods, COVID has all contributed to increased DV and family stress, trauma and break down. The long term financial and emotional costs of the drought have been over-shadowed by fires, floods and COVID” (Small Neighbourhood Centre, Independent, Metropolitan).*

Amongst the distinct challenges presented by COVID-19, bushfires, floods, and drought, many organisations have faced the combined and cumulative impacts of multiple – and sometimes simultaneous – disasters. The number of participating organisations that experienced different combinations of disasters is seen in Table 1. As this shows, five organisations identified that they had experienced impacts from COVID-19, bushfire, flood and drought. Each of these organisations were independent, either small (n=3) or medium (n=2) in size and were located in the NSW regions of the Hawkesbury, Far-North and Mid-North coasts. As this report will soon explore, a disaster will test the resilience of any organisation, while multiple disasters are pushing organisations such as these to the limit.

**Table 1: Multiple disaster experience by number of organisations**

Type of disaster	Number	Percentage
COVID-19 and Bushfire	3	7.0%
COVID-19, Bushfire and Flood	5	8.8%
COVID-19, Bushfire and Drought	9	15.8%
COVID-19, Bushfire, Flood and Drought	5	8.8%
COVID-19 and Flood	3	5.3%
COVID-19 and Drought	8	14.0%
COVID-19 alone	22	38.6%
Drought alone	1	1.8%
<b>Total responses</b>	<b>57</b>	<b>100.0%</b>

As the above quote emphasised, the cumulative impacts of multiple disasters were widely reflected on among participant comments. An ongoing theme throughout the comments was that COVID-19 had pushed bushfires and drought out of the spotlight, although community need has not decreased. The flow-on impacts of each disaster were also seen first-hand by one organisation, who noted that their community garden had suffered from the drought and water restrictions, which in turn affected:

- *“the contribution we have NOT been able to make to the local food pantry” (Small Neighbourhood Centre, Independent, Regional).*

From impacts on service demand, funding, volunteer numbers, and overall staff wellbeing, the impacts of the multiple disasters during 2019 and 2020 on NSW neighbourhood centres is difficult to comprehend. As one respondent commented:

- *“We have not begun to realise the impact on ourselves” (Small Neighbourhood Centre, Independent, Regional).*

Amongst these significant impacts and uncertainties, this report now turns to reflect on the findings of the LCSA 2020 Members Survey.

## 5 The Impact of Disasters on LCSA Members

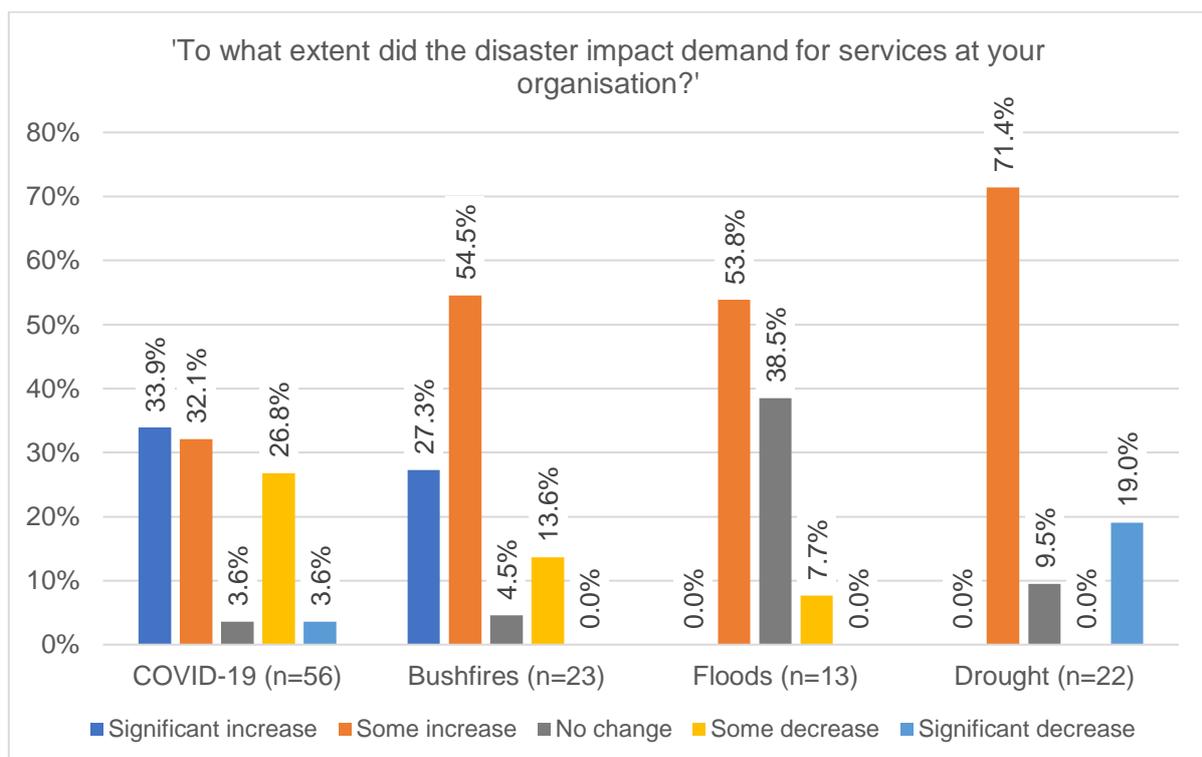
The following section explores the impact that the disasters of COVID-19, bushfire, flood, and drought have had on LCSA members in 2019 to 2020. The impacts can be categorised into three main themes: the impact on service demand, cost, and how members are looking to the future.

### 5.1 Service demand

Survey respondents were asked to identify the extent that disasters had impacted the demand for services at their organisation. Most respondents saw a significant increase (n=19; 33.9%) or some increase (n=18; 32.1%) in service demand during the COVID-19 pandemic. Interestingly, just over a quarter of respondents (n=15; 26.8%) saw some decrease in service demand during the pandemic.

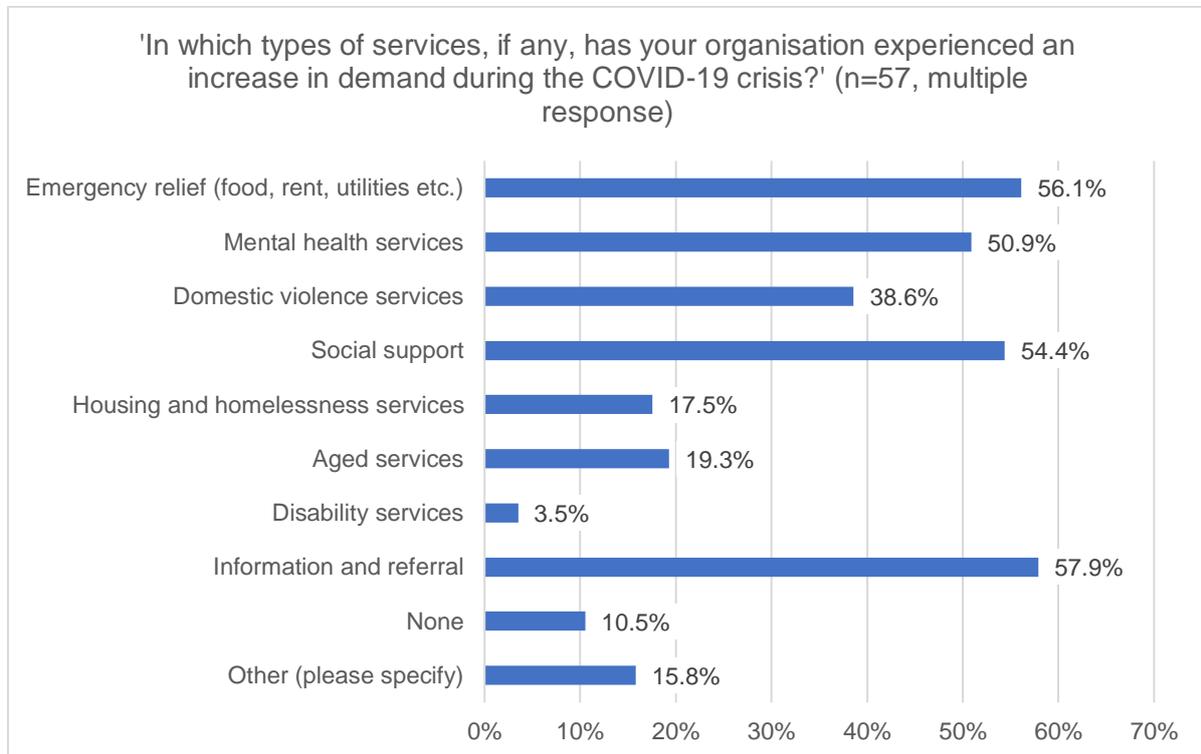
When looking at the other disasters, most respondents saw a significant increase (n=7; 30.4%) or some increase (n=12; 54.5%) in service demand during the bushfires, and some increase in service demand during the floods (n=7; 53.8%) and drought (n=15; 74.1%). Organisations were most likely to see no change in their service demand when experiencing floods (n=5; 38.5%), while those experiencing droughts were most likely to see a significant decrease in their service demand (n=4; 19.0%) (see Figure 3).

**Figure 3: Impact on service demand by disaster**



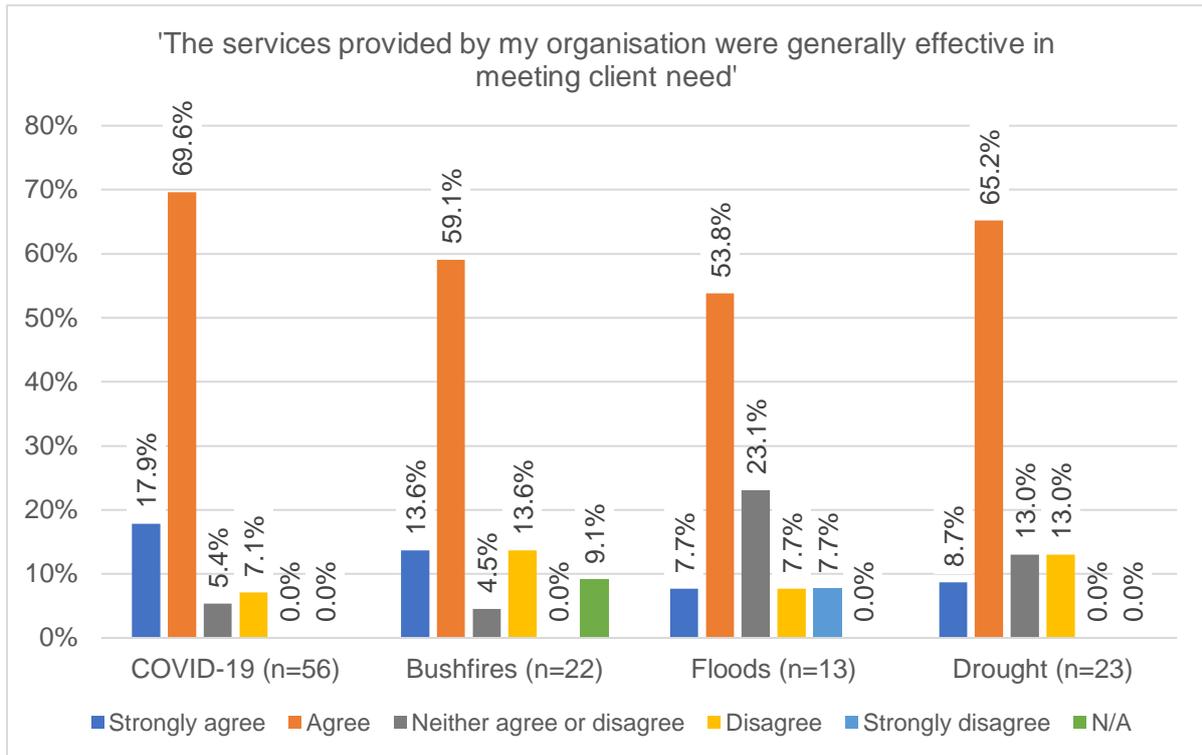
Survey respondents were specifically asked which types of services their organisations had experienced an increase in demand for during the COVID-19 crisis. The services that experienced the most demand were information and referral (n=33; 57.9%), emergency relief (food, rent, utilities etc.) (n=32; 56.1%), social support (n=31; 54.4%) and mental health services (n=29; 50.9%) (see Figure 4).

**Figure 4: Services with increased demand during COVID-19**



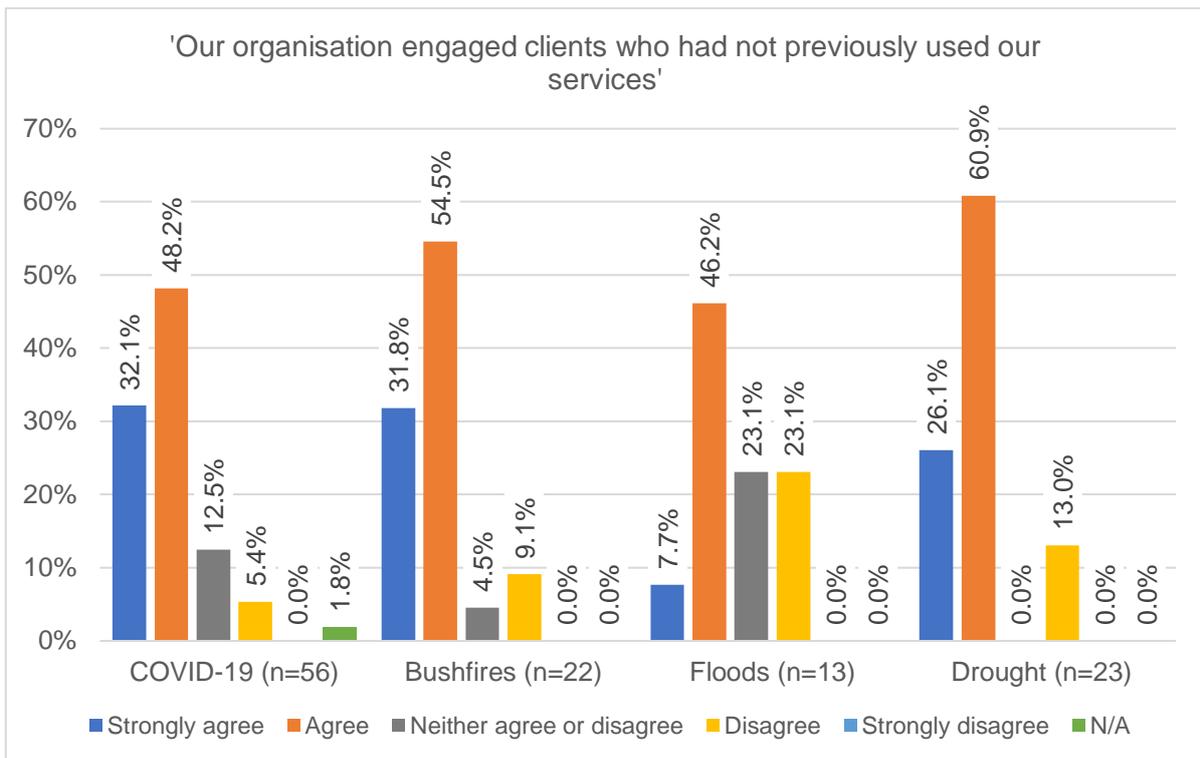
When asked whether their organisation was generally effective in meeting client need during the various crises, most agreed that they had been. Respondents who had experienced COVID-19 had the highest proportion who agreed they had generally met client need (n=39; 69.6%), while those who had experienced floods had the lowest proportion who agreed (n=7; 53.8%). There were still a proportion of respondents who did not feel that they had met client need during all the disasters, with highest levels of disagreement expressed by those who had experienced bushfires (n=3; 13.6%) and drought (n=3; 13.0%) (see Figure 5).

**Figure 5: Agreement that ‘the services provided by my organisation were generally effective in meeting client need’**



Most survey respondents strongly agreed or agreed that they had **engaged with new clients** during the various disasters (see Figure 6). Those who had experienced COVID-19 (n=18; 32.1%) and bushfires (n=7; 31.8%) were most likely to strongly agree that they were providing services to new clients during these crises. Organisations that experienced floods were found to be less likely to engage new clients. Indeed, almost a quarter of respondents (n=3; 23.1%) who experienced floods disagreed that they engaged new clients during this crisis. Approximately another quarter responded neutrally (n=3; 23.1%). Though potentially complicated by the lower number of respondents who stated they were impacted by floods, this finding does raise questions regarding community preparedness and responses to flooding.

**Figure 6: Agreement that ‘our organisation engaged clients who had not previously used our services’**



The survey’s open-ended questions provided a greater insight into the impacts of the various impacts on service demand. During the COVID-19 crisis, many organisations experienced an **increase in demand for services** to help clients meet their basic needs and keep safe: As these quotes highlight, the increase in demand for services was evident across a wide range of organisation sizes:

- *“We had to source emergency relief resources e.g. food and vouchers” (Large Neighbourhood Centre, Independent, Metropolitan).*
- *“Community Events could no longer take place however delivery of food/toiletries to those in need increased for our Community Development Worker” (Medium Neighbourhood Centre, Independent, Metropolitan).*
- *“Services such DV work increased but we did not have the funds and staff to meet this demand” (Small Neighbourhood Centre, Independent, Metropolitan).*

Despite many experiencing an increase in demand, other respondents experienced **decreased service demand due to COVID-19 related lockdown directives**:

- *“Decline in new clientele during shut down” (Small Neighbourhood Centre, Independent, Regional).*
- *“We deliver services to older people living in their own home...Some family members instructed their parents not to put themselves at risk by going out into the community. This target group also utilise less technology so it was more difficult to keep them connected” (Small Neighbourhood Centre, Independent, Metropolitan).*

Some respondents also spoke about the **impact of larger community services closing** during the COVID-19 crisis, while many smaller services stayed open to address rising service demand:

- *“If our staff had not been prepared to volunteer extra hours and our volunteers also worked extra hours - we could not have met demand [at the beginning of the pandemic]. I did ask if any colleagues (from other centres in the LGA) who were 'working from home' were able to assist but alas no offers were forthcoming...”* (Medium Neighbourhood Centre, Independent, Metropolitan).
- *“Due to other NGO's closing their doors and the volunteers having to stay at home we worked longer hours and physically harder to ensure the financial and food relief services we provide continued... The funded services for emergency relief in our region closed their doors. We are exhausted and had to spend precious funds to equip team members with IT to work from home and join video meetings”* (Large Neighbourhood Centre, Independent, Regional).

Respondents also expressed an **increase in service demand due to other recent disasters**, such as bushfires, floods, and drought:

- *“People moved to our regional city looking for employment but housing was very limited to non-existent for low income families/individuals. Rental cost was a huge burden leaving people unable to pay for everyday needs e.g. food, utilities”* (Very Small Neighbourhood Centre, Independent, Regional).
- *“Our local community... were impacted by the floods and this causes extra expenses for these residents, including clean up bills which means they have less income available for food and utility bills. We certainly had an increase in flood victims accessing ER and EAPA and counselling appointments”* (Medium Neighbourhood Centre, Independent, Metropolitan).
- *“People from bushfire affected areas came here more - they had moved here and required assistance”* (Small Neighbourhood Centre, Independent, Regional).

Interestingly, the **length of service demand** varied between the disasters experienced. For example, respondents who experienced floods largely saw floods as a temporary disruption, while those going through drought experienced short- and long-term demand for services:

- *“Floods usually only cause temporary and minor disruptions... We are pretty used to floods... The impact on our organisation is relatively minor compared with the bushfires and COVID”* (Small Neighbourhood Centre, Independent, Regional).
- *“The extra clients are/were for short periods. As circumstances changed [surrounding the drought] clients no longer needed extra support”* (Medium Neighbourhood Centre, Independent, Regional).
- *“The drought has been ongoing here for over 18 months. Lots more people out of work and struggling”* (Small Neighbourhood Centre, Independent, Regional).

However, even short-term events can have unexpected flow-on effects and raise implications for long-term recovery. Whether in terms of building community capacity to access funds or navigate the trauma of disaster experiences, demand for support after disasters may only become apparent many months after the crisis. This was seen in responses regarding the 2019-2020 bushfires:

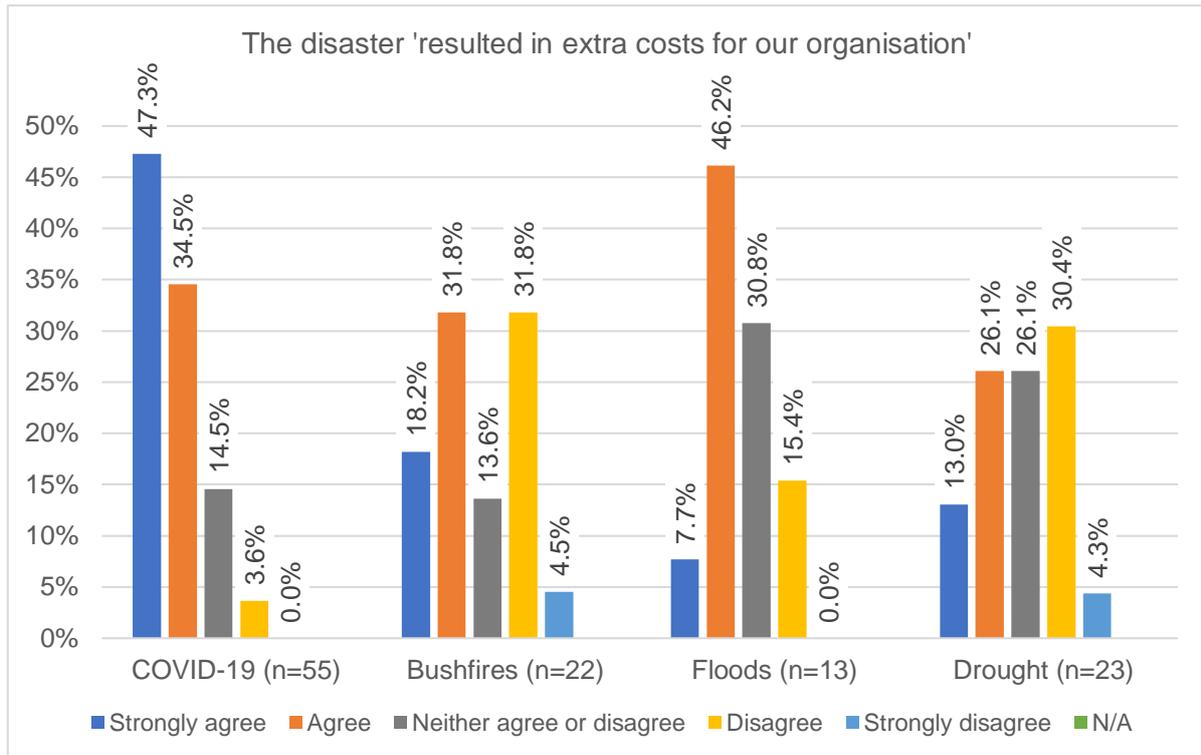
- “[Regarding bushfires, we are concerned about the] ongoing trauma in children impacted. The impact on the families financially due to loss of homes, businesses, employment is now beginning to become apparent” (Medium Neighbourhood Centre, Independent, Metropolitan).
- “Those impacted by the bushfires are still impacted but those needs have been overshadowed by COVID. We were seeing significant increases of DV from the bushfires prior to COVID” (Small Neighbourhood Centre, Independent, Metropolitan).

## 5.2 The cost of crisis

Disasters always have a cost to local community services, whether it be financial, time, or human resources. The survey asked respondents the costs that their organisation had incurred during the various disasters experienced. When asked whether a disaster had resulted in extra costs for their organisation, the answers varied depending on the disaster. Most survey respondents strongly agreed (n=26; 47.3%) or agreed (n=19; 34.5%) that the COVID-19 crisis had resulted in extra costs for their organisation.

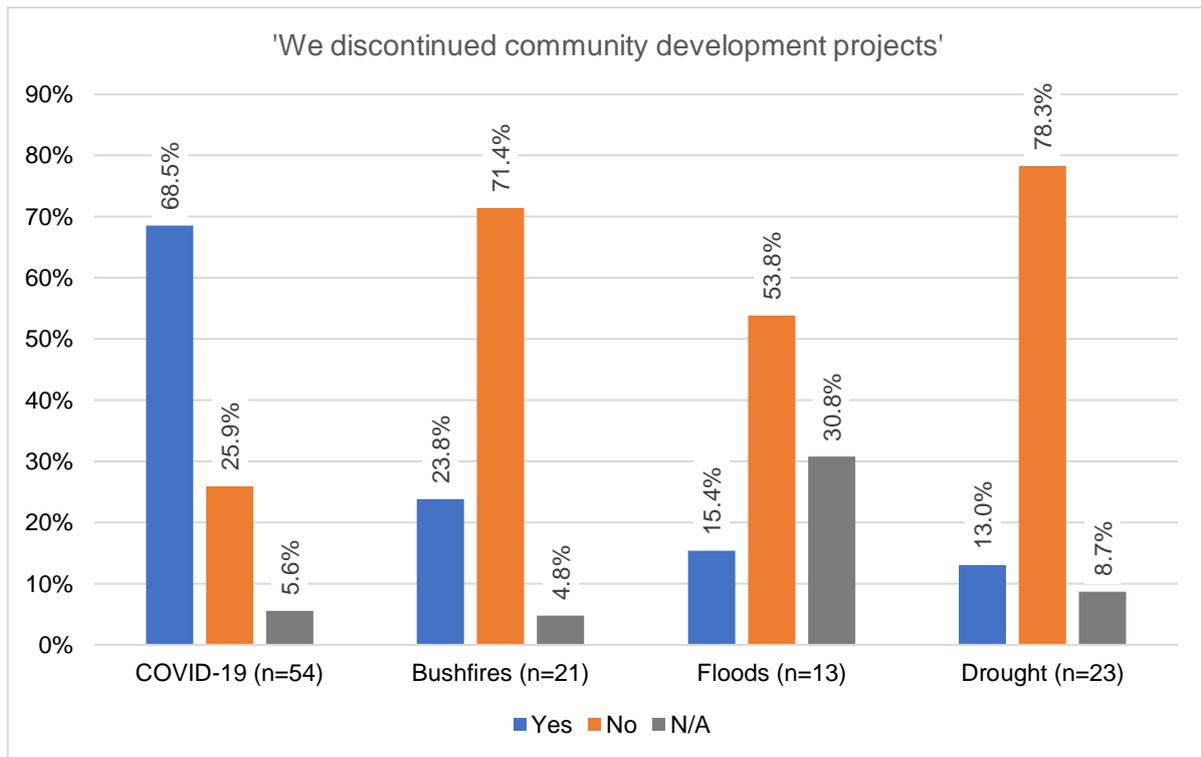
Many respondents agreed that the floods had created extra costs for their organisation (n=6; 46.2%). However, a notable proportion were unsure (n=4; 30.8%) or disagreed (n=2; 15.4%) that it had resulted in extra costs. For those who experienced bushfires, many agreed (n=7; 31.8%) had resulted in extra costs for their organisation, but the same proportion did not believe that there had been extra costs (n=7; 31.8%). Respondents impacted by the drought largely did not believe this disaster had created extra costs for their organisation (n=7; 30.4%) (see Figure 7).

**Figure 7: Agreement that the disaster ‘resulted in extra costs for our organisation’**



The survey also looked at the cost of the disasters on the organisation’s programming. For example, respondents were asked whether they had to discontinue community development projects during the respective crises. Over two-thirds of survey respondents (n=37; 68.5%) stated that they discontinued their community development projects during the COVID-19 crisis, likely due to lockdown and social distancing measures. As seen in Figure 8, most respondents stated that community development projects were not discontinued when experiencing bushfires (n=15; 71.4%), floods (n=7; 53.6%), or drought (n=18; 78.3%).

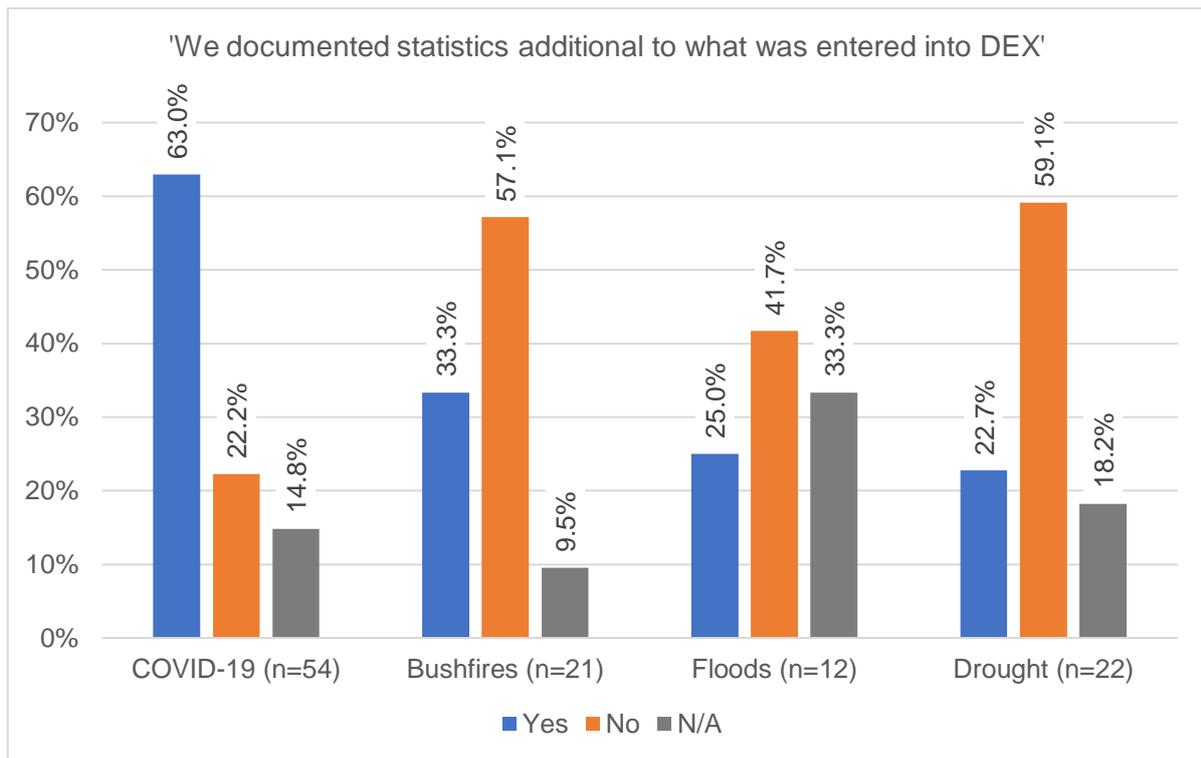
**Figure 8: Agreement that ‘we discontinued community development projects’**



Survey respondents were also asked whether the various crises had prompted them to take additional time to **document statistics** beyond their current reporting requirements through the Department of Social Services Data Exchange (DEX).<sup>3</sup> For COVID-19, most respondents (n=34; 63.0%) stated that they had documented additional statistics during the COVID-19 crisis. Conversely, when looking at other disasters, most respondents stated that they had not documented additional statistics while experiencing bushfires (n=12; 57.1%), floods (n=5; 41.7%) and drought (n=13; 59.1%) (see Figure 9).

<sup>3</sup> DEX is the main reporting system for Targeted Earlier Intervention providers who are funded through the NSW Department of Communities and Justice (DCJ).

**Figure 9: Agreement that ‘we documented statistics additional to what was entered into DEX’**



Through open comments, many survey respondents spoke about **the cost that the various disasters had on their work and organisation**. The COVID-19 crisis had forced some organisations to use their funds to provide crisis support or upgrade technology to work from home, while others are still grappling with the extra costs associated with making their organisation COVID-safe:

- “We needed to use our funding to purchase food (crisis support). We are not funded to purchase items like this, but due to meet[ing] the community needs during COVID this was an essential service especially at the beginning of lockdown” (Small Neighbourhood Centre, Independent, Regional).
- “COVID-19 has not affected our small rural communities in the same way as urban populations, however we have still had to adhere to the same rules... This has meant extra costs to our organisation in terms of extra staff hours (volunteered most of the time), safety measures (including masks), cleaning and cleaning products, etc.” (Small Neighbourhood Centre, Independent, Regional).
- “On the positive side, we have been innovative and some innovations will stay with us. On the negative side, we have had to spend money on technology which we can scarcely afford” (Small Sector Development, Regional).

Many survey respondents also spoke about other **indirect costs** experienced during COVID-19. These costs included the loss of volunteers, loss of revenue from centre activities, and the emotional toll on staff:

- *“We lost income from the rental of our hall. This still has not returned to normal” (Very Small Neighbourhood Centre, Independent, Rural).*
- *“Our resource centre does not allow us to have the usual number of participants in group activities due to social distancing” (Small Neighbourhood Centre, Organisation Branch, Metropolitan).*
- *“Our administration volunteers have not been able to attend the centre as we have limited space to accommodate them in a COVID safe way... Our staff are spending from 1.5 - 2 hrs each day (across 2 centres) undertaking additional cleaning activities so that we are COVID safe” (Medium Neighbourhood Centre, Independent, Regional)*
- *“[We experienced] stress and anxiety on staff, anxious clients and customer [and] some abuse from non-compliant COVID conspiracy theorists etc towards staff and volunteers... [also a] large increase in administration and staff management workload, manager is very stressed and worn out!” (Small Neighbourhood Centre, Independent, Regional).*

When reflecting on other disasters, most respondents spoke about **not being able to meet need during droughts and bushfires due to lack of funding** available:

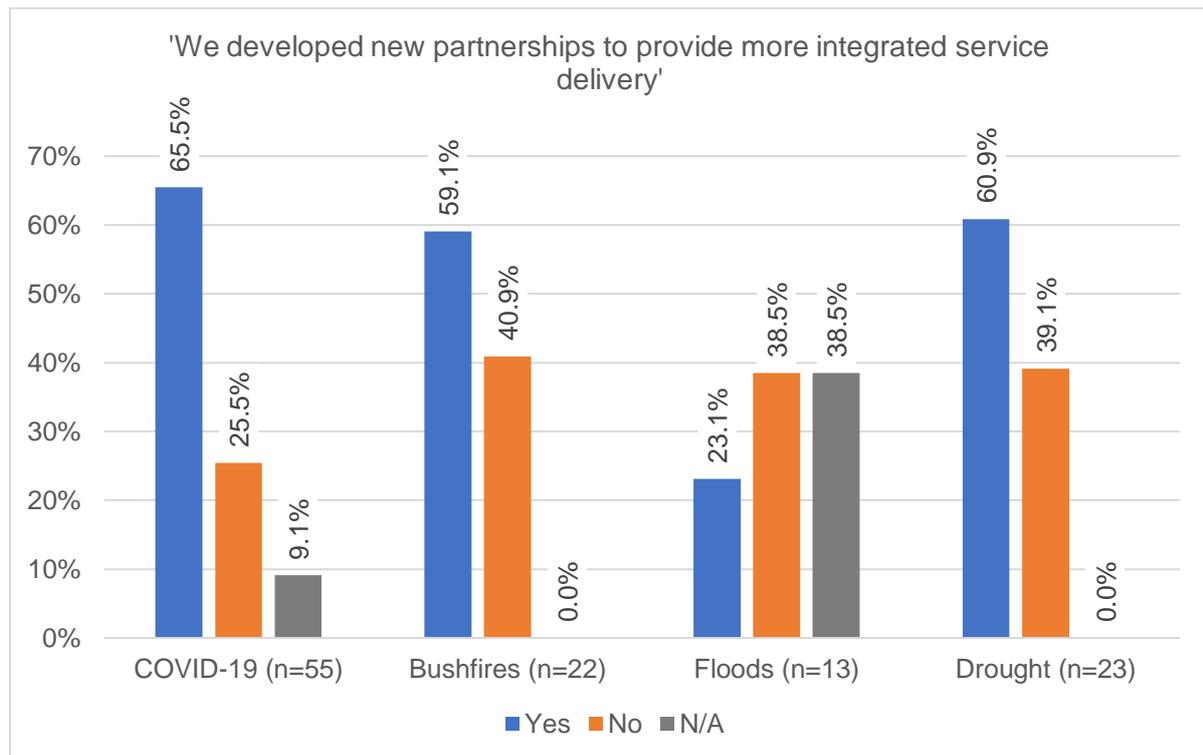
- *“Current funding unable to provide emergency relief or assistance with bill help, essentials etc. Most drought affected clients were seeking some form of monetary assistance so we outsourced a lot” (Small Neighbourhood Centre, Independent, Regional)*
- *“We have been continually advised that funding was available to support bushfire affected organisations however while this may well be true...being continually rejected for funding is taking its toll. We see money being thrown at other organisations who are not fulfilling their obligations or meeting the need” (Small Neighbourhood Centre, Regional)*

### 5.3 Looking to the future

Survey respondents were asked about changes they had made to service delivery during the disasters and what needed to change looking forward. These changes reflect key findings regarding the actions taken among organisations to remain resilient in the face of multiple crises.

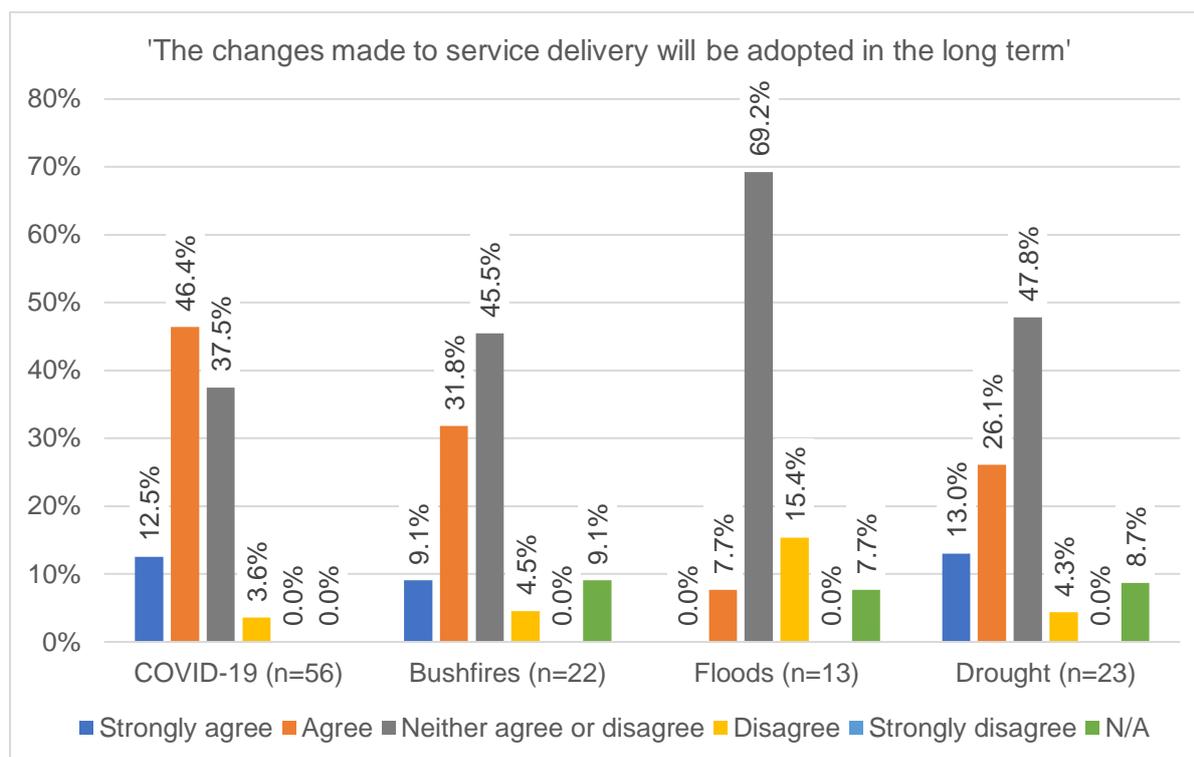
In terms of working together, most respondents stated that they had **developed new partnerships to provide more integrated service delivery** during COVID-19 (n=36; 65.5%), bushfires (n=13; 59.1%) and drought (n=14; 60.9%), as shown in Figure 10. Interestingly, less than a quarter of respondents (n=3; 23.1%) who had experienced floods had not developed new partnerships during the crisis, suggesting that more support may be needed in similar situations in the future.

**Figure 10: Agreement that ‘we developed new partnerships to provide more integrated service delivery’**



Survey respondents were asked **whether changes made to services during disasters will be adopted in the long term**. Most (n=26; 46.4%) who had experienced COVID-19 agreed that the service changes would be adopted in the long term, although over a third of respondents (n=21; 37.5%) neither agreed nor disagreed that there would be long term changes. There was also a level of uncertainty from those who went through bushfires (n=10; 45.5%), floods (n=9; 69.2%) and droughts (n=11; 47.8%) whether the changes made to service delivery during these crises would be adopted in the long term, as seen in Figure 11.

**Figure 11: Agreement that 'The changes made to service delivery will be adopted in the long term'**



There were several lessons that respondents learnt for future disaster situations or pandemic-related shutdowns. Many spoke about **the need to be flexible and adaptable in adversity to keep serving the community:**

- *“Need to be adaptable. Need to remain committed to what the community needs rather than what funding bodies need. We play a key role in our community in these situations - for ALL of the community - not only targets within it” (Small Neighbourhood Centre, Independent, Regional).*
- *“The need to be flexible, adaptive, confident and brave. To have the autonomy and courage to keep providing for our community in the face of adversity. To be resilient and forbearing. To keep our heads, be helpful and kind to those who are fearful and struggling” (Large Neighbourhood Centre, Independent, Metropolitan).*

There were several areas where respondents believed changes needed to occur moving forward. This included **the development and implementation of disaster preparedness plans and systems:**

- *“It is important to have policies and procedures in preparation for emergency eventualities” (Small Neighbourhood Centre, Independent, Regional).*
- *“We are now more aware of the role we need to play on behalf of the community and will be working on developing response systems and preparedness plans to assist us to be even more effective should the need arise in the future” (Large Neighbourhood Centre, Independent, Regional).*

- *“We now have an epidemic policy in place and we are all much better informed and prepared” (Small Neighbourhood Centre, Independent, Regional).*

Other areas of change that were suggested included **ongoing networking, disaster preparedness training, and IT funding and support to provide more online services:**

- *“Improved technology and relevant staff training are critical... Contingency for additional resources in paramount” (Large Neighbourhood Centre, Independent, Metropolitan).*
- *“Increased ability to switch service delivery arrangements... increased capacity to run work from home well and increased capacity for online services” (Small Neighbourhood Centre, Independent, Metropolitan).*
- *“I think community centre staff could be offered more training to ensure we are ready and able to offer sensible advice during disaster situations” (Small Neighbourhood Centre, Independent, Regional).*
- *“We have partnered with the Department of Industries and local council to form a service delivery and bushfire recovery network and are currently visiting those areas most seriously effected in our region and putting into place plans to ensure a better emergency response should the unthinkable happen again” (Large Neighbourhood Centre, Independent, Regional).*

## 6 Disaster Resilience

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As the responses of survey participants reveal, times of crisis result in intensifying demands, requirements, and uncertainties for community services such as neighbourhood centres. To ensure service continuity amongst such challenges, organisations and their communities require strong disaster preparedness and strength in resilience.

The following section demonstrates respondent's views of their organisation's disaster preparedness through their engagement with local emergency management. It also assesses how respondents reflected on their resilience to disasters, both practically and financially, and the innovations they developed to support their communities.

### 6.1 Local emergency planning and management

Research into disaster resilience emphasises the critical importance of planning and preparation to mitigate potential impacts of disasters. As highlighted by the NSW Government's disaster preparedness division, Resilience NSW, it is critically important to develop and maintain measures to "prevent, prepare for, respond to and recover from emergencies". This is visualised in the 'PPRR' model, seen in Figure 12.

**Figure 12: PPRR Model**

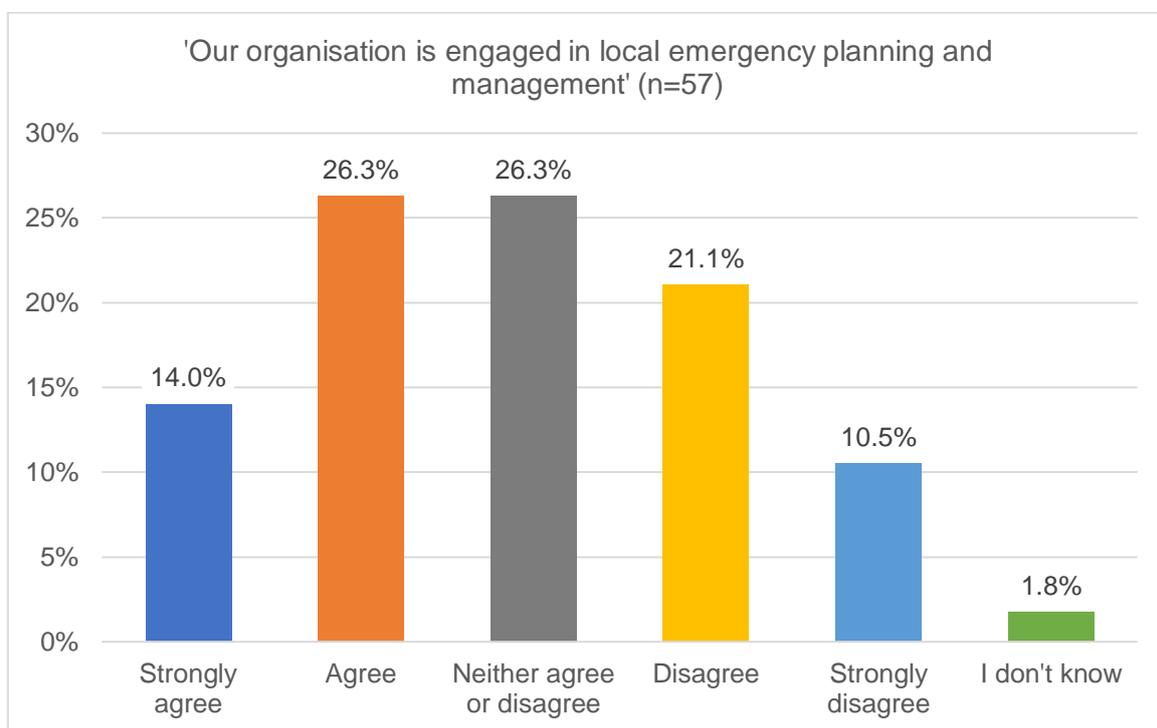


Source: Adapted from [Resilience NSW](#)

When faced with multiple disasters, communities and services can find themselves operating in multiple stages of the PPRR model. This may involve preparing for one disaster, while responding to or recovering from others. For neighbourhood centres and members of LCSA, the critical stages of disaster prevention and preparation can be improved by engaging with local emergency planning and management. This may include strengthening relationships with local emergency services, fellow community service providers, and community members themselves.

When asked whether their organisation was **engaged in local emergency planning and management**, survey participants were most likely to agree (n=15; 26.3%) or respond neutrally (n=15; 26.3%). The high proportion of responses responding neutrally suggests that uncertainty may surround what is meant by 'local emergency planning and management'. Even so, 8 respondents (14.0%) strongly agreed that their organisation was engaged in local emergency planning and management, reflecting the networks already in place for some participants and their organisation's disaster preparedness (see Figure 13).

**Figure 13: Engagement with local emergency planning and management**



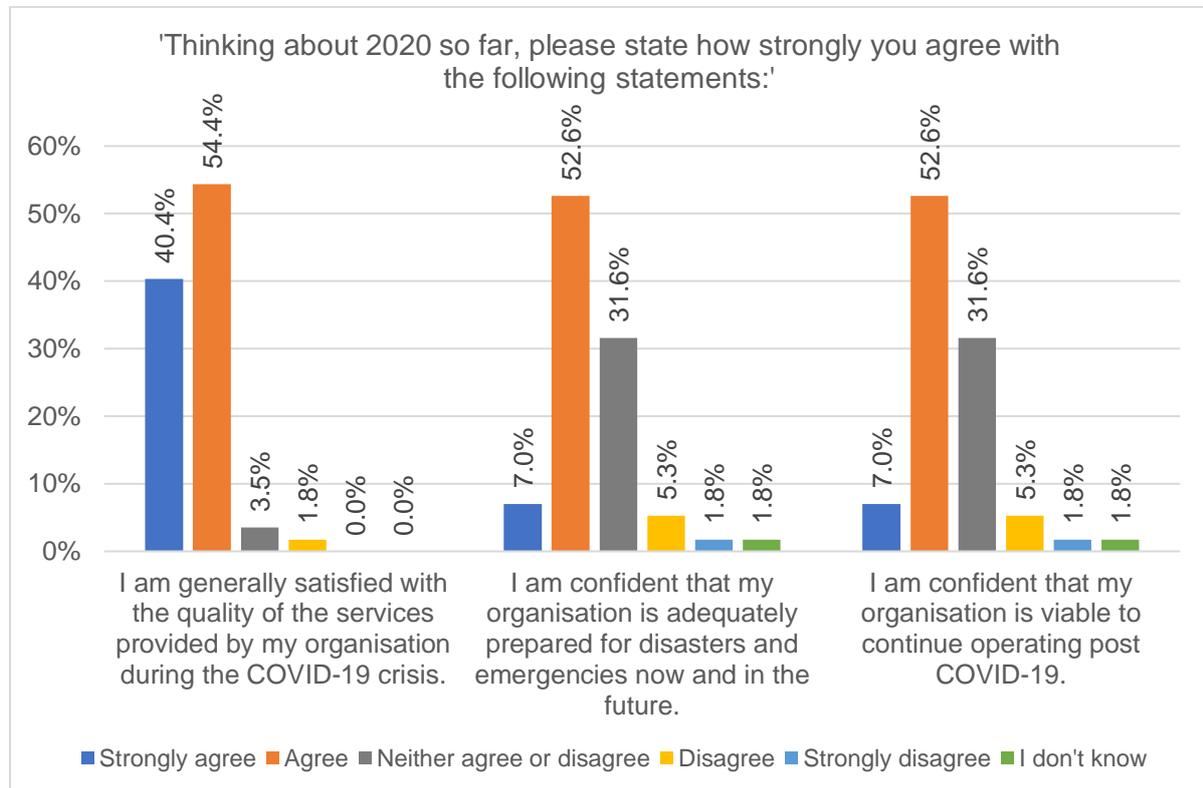
No notable difference was observed in how disasters were experienced by organisations engaged with local emergency services (either agreeing or strongly agreeing) and organisations not engaged (either disagreeing or strongly disagreeing). This may be complicated by the survey response rate and the high 'neutral' response to this question.

## 6.2 Views of resilience

Three questions were raised in the survey to measure respondent's views of their organisation's resilience through disasters and emergencies. Figure 14, which visualises

these findings, depicts a strong image of community centres that have confidence in their organisation’s capacity to deliver services and bounce back from times of crisis.

**Figure 14: Views of disaster resilience**



Overwhelmingly, respondents were generally satisfied with the **quality of the services provided by their organisation during COVID-19**, with 94.7% (n=54) of respondents in agreement (n=31; 54.4%) or strong agreement (n=23; 40.4%). Such a confident response is a strong reflection of the well-justified pride among neighbourhood centres who have adapted and responded to communities needs in the face of such overwhelming challenges.

While similarly positive, the degree of confidence was slightly weaker among the two remaining questions. For example, among respondents, 31 (52.6%) agreed that they were confident their organisation was adequately prepared for disasters and emergencies now and in the future. However, only 4 respondents (7.0%) strongly agreed with this statement. The same moderate degree of confidence was seen in responses to the statement of being “confident that my organisation is viable to continue operating post COVID-19” (n=4; 7.0%).

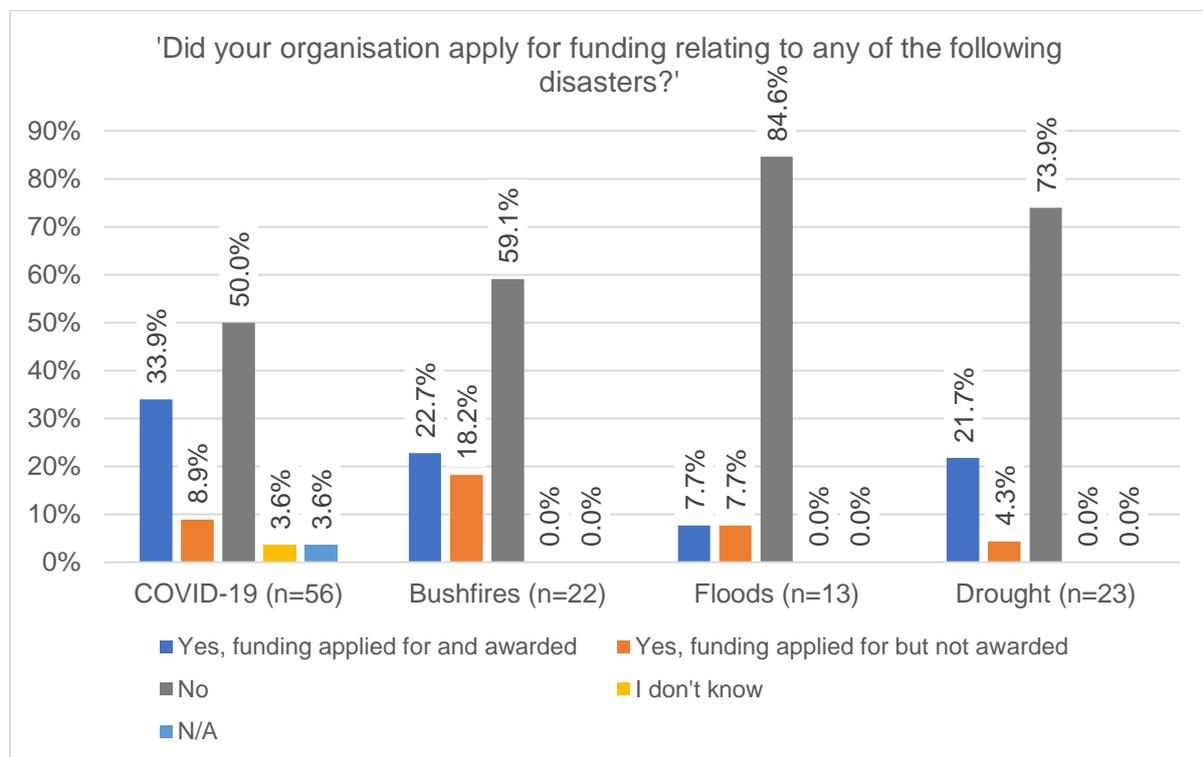
Considering the high frequency of neutral responses to these final two statements, it is reasonable to assume that a significant degree of uncertainty continues to surround visions of the future. This is despite the strong satisfaction with how organisations have provided services throughout times of crisis. Questions of funding certainty may be one factor contributing to such doubt.

## 6.3 Funding

With disasters impacting the service delivery, staff capacity, and expenditure across the LCSA network, seeking funding was one resilience strategy adopted by numerous neighbourhood centres across NSW. However, the frequency at which funding was sought greatly differed between the disasters impacting each organisation. For example, as shown in Figure 15, respondents who identified their organisation as being impacted by COVID-19 were most likely to apply for and successfully receive funding (n=19; 33.9%). This funding likely included the JobKeeper subsidy and Stimulus Cash Boost, managed by the Australian Tax Office (ATO).

Interestingly, while a smaller proportion of bushfire-affected organisations applied for funding successfully (n=5; 22.7%), a much higher proportion saw their funding application denied (n=4; 18.2%) compared to those who were denied funds for COVID-19 (n=5; 8.9%). This may be indicative of the strong economic supports available nationwide for COVID-19 relief and suggests that COVID-19 economic supports were more easily accessible than equivalents for other disasters.

**Figure 15: Applications for disaster-related funding**



## 6.4 Innovating for resilience

The unprecedented challenges presented by the multitude of disasters during 2019 and 2020 necessarily prompted rapid thinking among community organisations. As the survey responses reflected, approximately 3 in 5 respondents either agreed (n=22; 39.3%) or strongly agreed (n=14; 25%) that disasters had prompted their organisation to develop innovative solutions for operations and service delivery (see Figure 16).

**Figure 16: Developing innovative solutions through disasters**



Reflecting on the innovations – or, as some respondents preferred, ‘alternatives’ – that organisations developed illuminates how members of LCSA experienced disasters in 2019-2020. More importantly, it also highlights how lessons from this period of disasters can be adopted among community organisations moving forward. Details on innovations developed were provided by 35 participating organisations, and included changes to procedures, service delivery, and partnerships.

Some respondents identified that **innovating policies and procedures** was the priority within their organisation. This included procedures for intake and client contact, as well as human resource (HR) arrangements. HR changes included coordinating ‘A’ and ‘B’ teams to cycle work onsite (Medium neighbourhood Centre, Independent, Metropolitan) as well as working-from-home:

- “[We] revised entry criteria ... revised intake procedures... [introduced] new safety screening; new work from home arrangements; new client contact arrangements... new team communication arrangements [and we] increased development and sharing of resources (eg: business continuity planning and safety measures)” (Small Neighbourhood Centre, Independent, Metropolitan)

Other organisations considered new ways to connect people, who were now limited in face-to-face contact. **Social media and other online platforms** such as video conferencing service Zoom featured frequently among respondent comments, emphasising the critical need among community services for reliable and secure IT:

- “[We developed] fun and interactive social media posts, weekly phone calls to our elders and more vulnerable, social media competitions” (Medium Neighbourhood Centre, Branch, Regional).
- “[We began) offering yoga and playgroup via Zoom [and] conducting a virtual bring your bills day” (Medium Neighbourhood Centre, Independent, Regional)

Connections, however, were not limited to online or virtual spaces. Some centres adopted **activities to help facilitate their delivery at home:**

- “In order to continue to support families who attend our weekly Play and Learn group, we provided fortnightly home-based activity packs which were really well received by parents and children. This not only helped parents with things to do with their children in ‘lockdown’; but had an extra effect of teaching parents how to play with their children in the home and sharing the experience with their children” (Small Sector Support organisation, Regional).
- “[We] prepared activity packs and worked in partnership with [a local arts centre] to make and distribute packs to our most isolated seniors. We based our packs around significant occasions, i.e. ANZAC Day and NAIDOC Week” (Large Neighbourhood Centre, Independent, Metropolitan)

Just as some organisations shifted their thinking to connect with clients at home, several identified that they had adapted to the challenges of multiple crises by **developing partnerships or strengthening connections with other community services:**

- “[We] increased focus on supporting other services / workers respond to increases in community need (e.g. DV)” (Small Neighbourhood Centre, Independent, Metropolitan).
- “[One innovation was the] establishment of a group of NGOs to set up a co-op for food relief” (Small Neighbourhood Centre, Independent, Metropolitan)

One metropolitan-based centre reflected on the power of independent services to adapt quickly when faced with impacts on service delivery, such as COVID-19:

- “COVID-19 has illuminated gaps in services delivered. We have taken the opportunity to shift focus and redirect. We have refreshed and reinvented programs to suit the current climate. It is the beauty of independent services, we can refocus and move quickly to respond according to need with our massive red tape barriers in our path” (Large Neighbourhood Centre, Independent, Metropolitan)

## 7 LCSA Support

The goal of LCSA to provide collaborative leadership among locally governed not-for-profit organisations in NSW means that supporting members to prepare for, manage, and recover from disasters is crucial. To gain perspective on this concern, the survey closed by asking participants to reflect on their engagement with LCSA during the crises of 2019 and 2020.

### 7.1 Support from LCSA

Respondents identified that the best support offered by LCSA in times of disaster was **information and resource sharing**. This was a theme chosen by 52 of the 57 responses (91.2%), as shown in Table 2. Of similar importance to respondents were advocacy to relevant government bodies (n=50; 87.7%) and facilitating networking and discussions (n=50; 86.0%). Education and professional development (n=32; 56.1%) and research (n=29; 50.9%) were also identified by many participants as a powerful tool of support to assist them in their disaster preparedness and resilience.

**Table 2: How LCSA can best support organisations during disasters**

Type of support	Number	Percentage (n=57)
Information and resource sharing	52	91.2%
Advocacy to relevant government bodies	50	87.7%
Networking and discussions	49	86.0%
Education and professional development	32	56.1%
Research	32	56.1%

Some respondents proposed further ways in which LCSA could offer support in times of disaster and emergency. For example, respondents highlighted their desire to see increased support of joint funding submissions (Small Neighbourhood Centre, Independent, Metropolitan) and support measures for surge staffing (Large Neighbourhood Centre, Independent, Metropolitan). Similarly proposed were further measures that LCSA may consider supporting through advocacy or training:

- *“Advocate for a funding pool that organisations can access at the time of a disaster to assist in their response, respite and recovery activities” (Small Neighbourhood Centre, Independent; Regional).*
- *“Help us to draw attention to the great work we are doing - through marketing and media strategies. It’s a skill set many of us don’t have” (Medium Neighbourhood Centre, Independent, Metropolitan).*

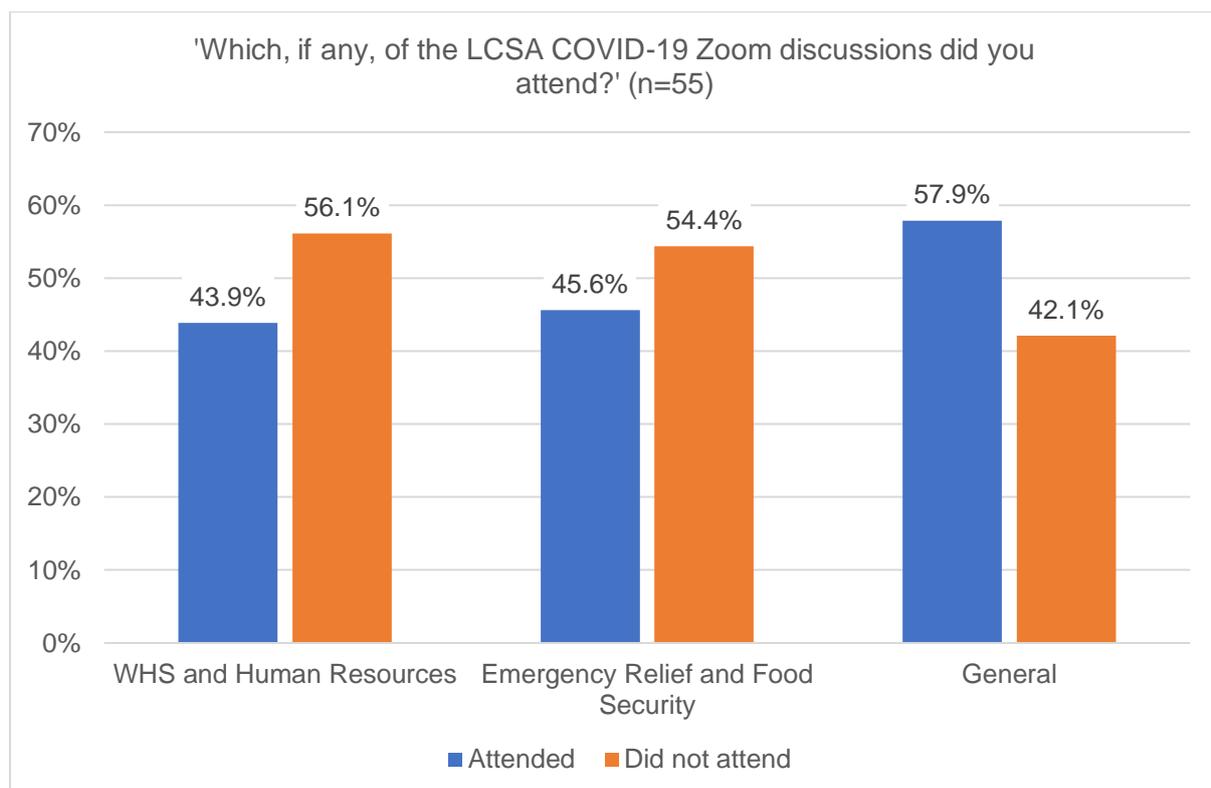
### 7.2 Online Member Forums

One tool through which LCSA shared information and resources, as well as opportunities for networking and discussions, were online member forums. From late March, LCSA hosted weekly forums for members over the online video-conferencing program, Zoom. This later

transitioned to monthly forums. The forums were sparked by the public health measures put in place across NSW to prevent the spread of COVID-19. Forums cycled between three different themes: General, Emergency Relief and Food Security, and Workplace Health and Safety (WHS) and Human Resources.

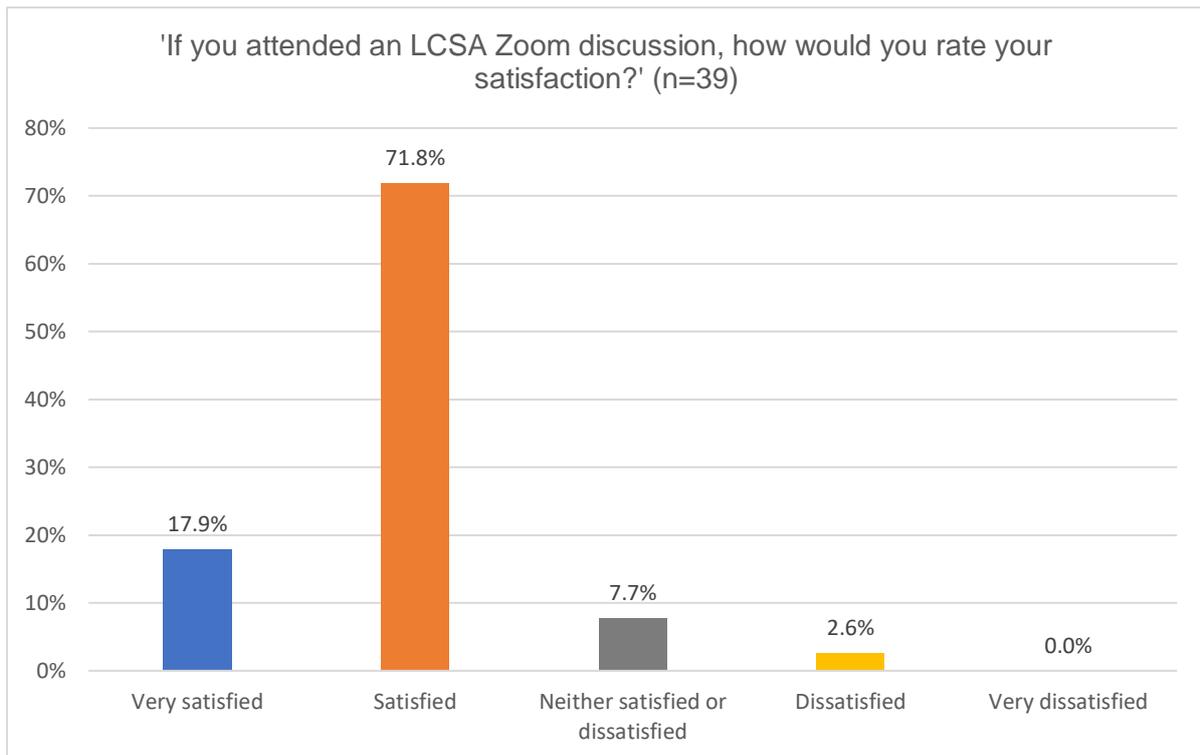
When asked about these Zoom forums for members of LCSA, 39 survey respondents (70.9%) stated that they had attended at least one LCSA forum event (see Figure 17). Attendance was most frequent at LCSA 'General' discussions (n=33; 60.0%), followed by discussions of Emergency Relief and Food Security (n=26; 47.3%) and WHS and Human Resources (n=25; 45.5%).

**Figure 17: Attendance of LCSA Zoom forums**



Each type of forum was quite popular among participants, with respondents most likely to have attended all three types of forums (n=17; 30.9%). A further 11 respondents attended two types of forums (20.0%) or one type (n=11; 20.0%). Even so, a notable number (n=16; 29.1%) did not attend any forum. Of the 39 respondents who attended at least one discussion forum, the majority were satisfied (n=28; 71.8%) or very satisfied (n=7; 17.9%) with the forum. This is shown in Figure 18, below.

**Figure 18: Satisfaction with LCSA Zoom forums**



Respondent's comments shed further light on the above figures. Approximately two in five respondents (42.1%; n=24) provided extended feedback on the support provided by LCSA through these membership forums. For example, there was a great sense of appreciation towards LCSA for their support during the disasters of 2020. As the following quotes reflect, the **LCSA forums helped people feel connected, informed, supported, and in control**:

- *“Thank you LCSA. You kept the sector informed of updates on how we are going. This prevented us from feeling isolated at our own little patch” (Small Neighbourhood Centre, Branch, Metropolitan).*
- *“...the meetings were a place of acknowledgement, sharing, debriefing and support. Thank you” (Medium Neighbourhood Centre, Independent, Metropolitan).*
- *“The weekly Zooms (were) not only informative but provided a professional platform were free and open discussion meant feeling less isolated and 'in this together'. Being kept up to date on happenings also assisted with feeling in control and able to manage situations as they arose” (Small Neighbourhood Centre, Independent, Regional).*

Respondents who were not able to attend the LCSA online membership forums identified several **barriers to attending online meetings**. To some, attending an online forum was simply not feasible or within their organisation's capacity. Reasons for this included the workload of staff, available desk time, and other priorities. As one respondent argued:

- *“...we were busy delivering on the ground services face to face” (Small Neighbourhood Centre, Independent, Regional).*

With online meetings becoming far more prominent nationwide due to COVID-19 measures and social distancing, **fatigue** also arose from attending multiple online meetings. This discouraged attendance for some, who identified that:

- *“The sheer volume of Zoom meetings was overwhelming” (Medium Neighbourhood Centre, Independent, Metropolitan).*
- *“Having free, online access to agencies, organisations and networks that we don't usually hear from was exciting to start with but just became too overwhelming [...] As a result, I have opted out of most of the live Zoom meetings” (Medium Neighbourhood Centre, Branch, Regional).*
- *“The support has been great, but it isn't that practical or necessary to engage in the multitude of zoom meetings. It's good to know we can find the support if needed” (Small Neighbourhood Centre, Independent, Metropolitan).*

One respondent identified that **recording webinars** for later viewing was an important step to alleviate barriers such as scheduling and fatigue:

- *“What is great is when the meetings are recorded and uploaded to YouTube so I can watch them when I have time and headspace so I am still in the loop” (Medium Neighbourhood Centre, Branch, Regional).*

## 8 Conclusion and Recommendations

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The LCSA Member Survey provides an insight into how community and neighbourhood centres across NSW have experienced disasters in 2019-20. All but one organisation surveyed (98.2%) were impacted by COVID-19, 38.5% of organisations were impacted by bushfires, 22.8% were impacted by floods and 40.4% were impacted by drought. Most organisations surveyed had been impacted by multiple disasters, with 8.8% of organisations impacted by all four disasters during this period.

Most surveyed organisations saw an increase in service demand during recent disasters, particularly throughout the COVID-19 pandemic. To date, the service types that experienced the most demand during the pandemic was information and referral, emergency relief, social support, and mental health services. While most surveyed organisations felt that they had generally met client need during all recent disasters they had experienced, they were also learning to work with new clients they had never engaged with prior to the different crises. It should be noted that community and neighbourhood centres continue to help their communities deal with and recover from disasters, with the length and type of support varying across the different disasters experienced and the centre's available resources.

The survey also highlighted the direct and indirect costs that each disaster has created for community and neighbourhood centres in NSW. Most surveyed organisations strongly agreed that the COVID-19 crisis had resulted in extra costs for their organisation, with varying costs also incurred by those that experienced bushfires, floods, and drought. The indirect costs have also been notable. For the COVID-19 crisis in particular, many community development projects had to be discontinued and more time and effort was put into documenting statistics additional to current reporting requirements. Other indirect costs of the pandemic to date have been loss of regular volunteers, loss of revenue from centre activities and the emotional toll on staff.

Most surveyed organisations have developed new partnerships to provide more integrated service delivery during COVID-19, bushfires, and drought, but less so when experiencing floods. At this stage, there is a level of uncertainty as to whether changes made to service delivery during the respective disasters experienced would be adopted in the long term. In saying that, the recent challenges had prompted many organisations to start developing a range of disaster preparedness plans, policies, and systems.

There was still a level of optimism possessed by surveyed organisations, with many confident they will be viable post COVID-19 and are adequately prepared for disaster and emergencies in the future. Many organisations had sought additional funding during the respective disasters, but there was more success in securing funding earmarked for COVID-19 than bushfires, floods, or drought. There was also a general appreciation for the support that LCSA had provided during the disasters, reducing the sense of isolation and hopelessness often felt during times of crisis.

Overall, the survey highlighted several issues that need to be addressed to help community and neighbourhood centres better prepare for, respond to, and bounce back from disasters in NSW. The following recommendations are proposed to address these issues:

- **Recommendation 1: Provide ongoing, targeted funding for community and neighbourhood centres to adequately cover the costs of disasters.**

The survey clearly showed that neighbourhood and community centres have experienced extra costs when going through disasters. During COVID-19, organisations have used existing funding to meet increased service provision, as well as fund equipment to keep staff safe (whether it be PPE when working with clients or IT infrastructure to work from home). Surveyed organisations also highlighted the inadequate amount of funding available specifically for bushfires and drought. It is recommended that the NSW Government allocate a specific disaster funding pool for community and neighbourhood centres so they can adequately cover the extra costs associated with all types of disasters now and in the future. Considering the potential for disasters impacts to be delayed, as this report has revealed, it is critical that funding be allocated to community and neighbourhood centres who are deeply grounded within their local communities, and operate year-round as trusted hubs of support.

- **Recommendation 2: Enhance mental health support for clients and workers of community and neighbourhood centres.**

The psychological and emotional toll of recent disasters has become apparent through this survey. Community and neighbourhood centres are increasingly playing a role in providing mental health support during these times of crises, often supporting clients who are dealing with the trauma of multiple disasters. The survey also revealed the emotional impact that the disasters have had on centre staff, with many overworked workers feeling stressed, anxious, tired, and on the verge of burnout. While DCJ provided free access to the NSW Government's Employee Assistance Program (EAP) to all funded services during the COVID-19 crisis, further strategies and supports need to be put in place to care for the mental health of both clients and workers during times of disaster.

- **Recommendation 3: Encourage greater collaboration and coordination between community services and local emergency management agencies.**

The survey confirmed that many community and neighbourhood centres had not been involved in local emergency management planning. In an effort to reduce this siloed approach, there needs to be a greater recognition by key emergency management agencies (such as Resilience NSW, formerly the NSW Office of Emergency Management) of the vital role that community and neighbourhood centres play in preparing for, managing, and recovering from disasters in their local communities. There also needs to be a greater effort by all stakeholders in communicating, collaborating, and coordinating during disasters to ensure an integrated service delivery response.

- **Recommendation 4: Encourage innovative practices and partnerships for community and neighbourhood centres to respond to disasters.**

The survey showed that some community and neighbourhood centres found it difficult to adapt their services during disasters (for example, the suspension of community development projects during COVID-19), while others have introduced new initiatives to better respond to the disasters they have experienced (for example, the establishment of a multi-stakeholder bush recovery network). It is recommended that LCSA and their members continue to explore and showcase innovative ways to deliver services during times of crises.

During COVID-19, LCSA online member forums also provided a space where members from across the state could come together and seek support. It is recommended that LCSA continue providing this online support for members (where and when required), with meeting recordings made available where possible for members who cannot attend due to limited availability and staff capacity.

- **Recommendation 5: Adequately resource sector planning, training and infrastructure to help community and neighbourhood centres better prepare and respond to disasters.**

Surveyed organisations shared their need to better prepare and respond to disasters, with many spurred by COVID-19 to develop appropriate policies, plans and processes for their operations. It is recommended that further ongoing resourcing be provided in the following areas to help community and neighbourhood centres better prepare and respond to crises: emergency and disaster planning and policy development, disaster preparedness training, and IT infrastructure to facilitate working remotely and additional data reporting requirements during disasters.

- **Recommendation 6: Undertake further investigation into how community and neighbourhood centres navigate flood events and support flood victims.**

When compared to the other disasters explored, the survey showed that community and neighbourhood centres in NSW had a different experience when experiencing floods and supporting its victims. Overall, survey organisations that experienced floods were most likely to report no significant change in service demand, were most likely not to have new clients, and were least likely to develop new partnerships out of all disasters. The full reasons for this are unknown and it is recommended that further investigation be undertaken to better understand the experiences of these services during flood events and how they can best be supported.

## 9 References

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