



# **The Creative, Community, Wellbeing and Resilience Hub**

**Blackheath Area Neighbourhood Centre**

**Executive summary report**

**June 2023**



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BANC acknowledges that they are located on and work in the never-ceded lands of the Darug and Gundungurra Nations.

### **Acknowledgements**

We acknowledge and thank the Commonwealth and NSW Disaster Recovery Funding Arrangements via the Bushfire Local Economic Recovery Fund.

We also acknowledge and thank all those who gave so generously of their time, energy, and trust in participating in this research.

### **Disclaimer**

The details provided in this report are based on information available at the time of preparation and terms of reference of the project. All statements made are given in good faith and in the belief that such statements are not false or misleading. All sources of information are detailed in the report. Readers are recommended to make appropriate enquiries and/or take appropriate advice before acting on information supplied in this report. BANC, the Bushfire Local Economic Recovery Fund, and Francesca Sidoti are not liable to any person for loss or damage incurred or suffered as a result of acting on or accepting any offer contained in this report.

# 1.0 Introduction

This summary report presents the key findings from the ‘Creative, Community, Wellbeing and Resilience Hub’ (“The Hub”) project, a disaster recovery and resilience initiative. It is a summary of the Final Report.

The Hub project delivered a program of events, workshops, and activities focused on social connectedness, practical support, education, and psychosocial and physical wellbeing between January 2022 and June 2023. This program was developed in response to recent adverse events, particularly the cumulative toll of numerous natural disasters and the Covid-19 pandemic, and to prepare for future ones. The report finds that participants in Hub program overwhelmingly benefitted from participating in the Hub with demonstrable improvements in community connectedness, experiences of belonging, participation in community events, and resilience.

The Hub demonstrates the effectiveness of community sector organisations (CSOs) as practitioners in disaster preparation, recovery and resilience work. It also provides a model for effective CSO disaster preparation, recovery and resilience work. The Hub was developed and implemented by Blackheath Area Neighbourhood Centre (BANC). The Hub was jointly funded by Commonwealth and NSW Disaster Recovery Funding Arrangements through the ‘Bushfire Local Economic Recovery Fund’.

## About Blackheath Area Neighbourhood Centre

BANC is a multipurpose not-for-profit community-based organisation servicing the Upper Blue Mountains in the Blue Mountains of New South Wales (NSW). BANC’s vision is for a diverse, inclusive, and connected community, which works together to build its resilience and its social, environmental, and economic sustainability. BANC’s role in achieving this vision is to be the heart of creative, inclusive services that support the sustained wellbeing and resilience of its Upper Blue Mountains community. BANC has demonstrated its capacity to successfully deliver funded programs for activities across the Upper Blue Mountains for nearly thirty years.

## The project

The Hub project was developed in response to the '2019-2020 disaster season' (Royal Commission into National Natural Disaster Arrangements 2020, p. 19) of extreme bushfires and rain and storm events, which were closely followed by the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic. The Hub project consisted of 217 workshops and events run over 18 months between January 2022 and June 2023. These workshops and events were attended by 2,586 people. The Hub model expanded dominant approaches to disaster preparation, recovery and resilience hubs' focus on practical supports by combining practical support with a focus on psychosocial support through four "streams" of activities: creative activities, community activities, wellbeing activities, and resilience activities.

## This report and research project

This summary report presents the key findings of the research project that ran alongside the Hub project.

The research project aimed to:

- inform BANC about participant experiences of attending the Hub;
- inform other disaster resilience stakeholders, such as CSOs and government, about the Hub model and its potential in community-based disaster response and preparation;
- engage with the effectiveness of CSOs as the frontline and most appropriate practitioners in disaster resilience and recovery work.

Data were collected throughout the Hub program using a mixed methods methodology of surveys (n= 432) and interviews (n=15) with Hub participants. The research project received ethics approval from the Nepean Blue Mountains Local Health District Ethics Committee.

## 2.0 Key Findings

### **There is a need for disaster preparation, resilience and recovery support for communities, including increased support for and inclusion of CSOs in this work.**

The project's data clearly indicate the need for support for communities affected by natural disasters and the Covid-19 pandemic. Participants describe experiences of disconnection from the community and others, isolation, and decreased wellbeing due to the cumulative disasters and Covid-19 pandemic. As Gordon (2004) identifies, emergencies cause 'widespread social disruption' (p. 16), and the 'social fabric can be seen as the more important recovery resource' (p. 19). Urgent foci in supporting community recovery include redressing recent emergencies' negative impacts on participants' lives, wellbeing, health, experiences of connectedness and feelings of belonging.

It is also widely acknowledged that there will be increased disaster events as the result of a variable and changing climate (Australian Institute for Disaster Resilience n.d., Commonwealth Scientific and Industrial Research Organisation (CSIRO) 2020). There is an increasing need for disaster preparation as a result. The disaster recovery and resilience literature identifies place-based community organisations that undertake disaster preparation work in an ongoing capacity and pivot to recovery and resilience work to disaster preparation, resilience, and recovery as an effective approach to these challenges (Coles & Buckle 2004; CSIRO 2020; Ingham & Redshaw 2017; Massola et al. 2022; Pascoe 2022). This approach utilises the organisations long-term connections with and knowledge of the community (Council of Australian Governments (COAG) 2011; Department of Home Affairs 2019) and 'can increase efficiencies through greater cross-learning, less duplication of effort through common solutions, shared platforms and tools, lower transaction costs, and better alignment of policies and plans' (CSIRO 2020, p. 25, see also Pascoe 2022).

### **The Hub is a successful project**

There were demonstrable positive impacts in every evaluative category. Data reveal significant improvements in participants' experiences of community connectedness, belonging, community participation, preparation, and resilience. Some significant changes in participants' experience included:

- 22.2% increase in participants who answered that they ‘strongly agreed’ that they felt connected to their community after undertaking a Hub activity.
- 16.7% increase in participants who answered that they ‘strongly agreed’ that they felt they belonged to their community after undertaking a Hub activity.
- 11.3% increase in participants who answered that they ‘somewhat agreed’ they were more prepared in case of emergencies after undertaking a Hub activity, and a 4.8% increase in those who ‘strongly agreed’.
- 11.5% increase in participants who answered that they ‘strongly agreed’ they could adapt to changing circumstances after undertaking a Hub activity.

There were commensurate decreases in participants’ answering that they “strongly disagreed” or “somewhat disagreed” to the above questions in all categories.

The Hub was also demonstrably an experience that an overwhelming majority of participants found enjoyable, meaningful, helpful, and useful. A vast majority learnt a skill, and several mentioned improvements in their wellbeing as a result of attending the Hub. These positive impacts were long-lasting and ongoing. Many participants mentioned the ongoing positive effects of participating in the Hub on other aspects of their lives.

- 98.9% of participants answered “yes” when asked if they had enjoyed the Hub activity.
- 65.6% of participants answered that the Hub activity was “extremely useful” and 31.6% answered it was “very useful”. Only 0.4% (one respondent) answered the activity was “not at all useful”.
- 89% of participants answered that they either “somewhat” or “strongly” agreed that they had learnt or developed a skill through their participation in the Hub.
- 97.5% of participants stated they would recommend the Hub activity they attended to other people.

Qualitative responses also demonstrated the effectiveness of the Hub in disaster preparation, recovery and resilience work across all dimensions of the Hub project, including improving community connectedness, belonging, preparation for future adverse events, resilience, wellbeing, enjoyment, skill development.

Some examples of qualitative responses in interviews include:

*It's made a huge difference. I don't feel so isolated. I feel connected to people in the community in Blackheath, in Katoomba.*

*It has boosted my self-confidence; helped me to connect with others, helped manage stress levels, encouraged me to continue with creative activities.*

*[The Hub has] definitely helped me to recover more. I mean, I use that word rather than bounce back, but recover more from the difficulties I was experiencing. I felt closer to, not necessarily being healed, but I felt more well.*

*I mean I also enjoyed myself, too. And I took away a lot from it. And I think it's all added something to our lives that's really valuable.*

## **The Hub is a successful model of community-led disaster preparation, recovery and resilience work**

The success of the Hub revealed in the data shows the effectiveness of CSOs as practitioners in disaster preparation, recovery and resilience work. The measurable increases in community connection, belonging, preparation, and resilience show the positive outcomes of a model that stems from a place-based, consultative, strengths-based framework and is delivered by a CSO. The Hub model is applicable to other communities as it can be developed to address specific community needs and specific place-base

## **The Hub is a model for disaster preparation, recovery and resilience hubs**

The success of the Hub offers an insight into the effectiveness of an integrated approach to disaster preparation, recovery and resilience. The Hub brought together psychosocial approaches with practical supports, a model that proved effective in producing positive outcomes for participants. Specifically, the Hub combined approaches from three intersecting areas: disaster preparation, resilience, and recovery; arts, health, environment, and wellbeing; and creativity hubs. The Hub was framed around the four pillars of creativity, community, wellbeing, and resilience and understanding these pillars as interrelated and interdependent. In doing so, the Hub extends the “everyday” mode of resilience hubs (Urban Sustainability Directors Network n.d., Ciriaco & Wong 2022), which primarily focus on practical supports, to encompass the complexity of the experiences of communities in preparing for and recovering from disasters.

# 3.0 Project details

## Location

Blackheath Area Neighbourhood Centre serves the Upper Blue Mountains within the local government area of the Blue Mountains. This area encompasses the towns of Blackheath, Mount Victoria, Medlow Bath, Megalong Valley, Bell, Mount Wilson, Mount Irvine, and Mount Tomah. There are approximately 5,918 residents across these towns. All of these towns are categorised as Inner Regional. The location is geographically challenging, with towns spread across relatively removed locations, limited public transport in some areas and non-existent public transport in others, and limited road access to some villages.



Figure 1 Blue Mountains Local Government Area (Blue Mountains City Council 2022a, p. 20)

Demographic category	Upper Mountains	Blue Mountains	Greater Sydney	NSW
Median age	54.5	45	37.1	39
Median weekly household income	\$1,574	\$1,756	\$2,077	\$1,829
Those with a bachelor degree and above	45.8%	32.7%	33.3%	27.8%
Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander	3.1%	2.7%	1.7%	3.4%
Top 3 ancestry	English, Australian, Irish	English, Australian, Irish	English, Australian,	English, Australian, Irish
% who only speak English at home	83.2%	90.1%	57.3%	67.6%
Unemployment rate	4.9%	3.9%	5.1%	4.9%
SEIFA (disadvantage index)	989	1,045	1,018	1,001

Table 1 Demographic data for the Upper Mountains, Blue Mountains LGA, Greater Sydney, and NSW (ABS 2018, 2021a, 2021b, 2021c, 2021d, 2021e, 2021f, 2021g)



## Project context

The Hub was initially developed in response to the '2019-2020 disaster season' (Royal Commission into National Natural Disaster Arrangements 2020, p. 19), including bushfires and storm and rain events, which followed a severe fire season in 2013 with significant property loss in Mount Victoria, within the Upper Mountains region, and Winmalee, another Blue Mountains suburb. The bushfire season from July 2019 to March 2020 was the worst bushfire season New South Wales has recorded, and the 'impact on NSW communities, farmers, local businesses, wildlife and bushland was unprecedented' (Australian Institute for Disaster Resilience n.d.) The Upper Blue Mountains experienced significant bushfires, particularly from the mega-blaze that encompassed the Gospers Mountain and Grose Valley fires. The Upper Blue Mountains was declared a natural disaster area and suffered loss of properties, loss of wildlife, infrastructural damage, extreme environmental destruction, and physical and mental health effects. The danger to towns and lives peaked in December 2019 and January 2020. The mega-blaze was eventually extinguished by a storm and rain event in February 2020, which caused significant damage and meant the Blue Mountains was, once more, declared a Natural Disaster Area (NSW Government 2023).

In the course of developing and implementing the Hub, the initiative also increasingly responded to the Covid-19 pandemic. Stay-at-home orders were implemented in the Blue Mountains LGA between the 23rd of March-1st May 2020 and the 26th of June-11th October 2021, with significant restrictions on activities and requirements for social distancing continuing outside of these periods. As such, the Upper Blue Mountains community, like so many in New South Wales, experienced 'cascading disasters' (Massola et al. 2022, p. 2) in close succession: bushfires, rain and storms, and an ongoing pandemic. There were also ongoing significant rain events, with the Blue Mountains being declared a Natural Disaster area due to rain events in March 2021, November 2021, February/March 2022, and June/July 2022 (NSW Government 2023). Overall, since August 2019, the Blue Mountains has been declared a Natural Disaster Area six times, been subject to the highest level of stay-at-home orders for a total of 146 days (almost 21 weeks), and navigated the ongoing implications of the Covid-19 pandemic. One of the most significant effects of the cascading disasters experienced in the Upper Mountains was the community response to the 2019-2020 disaster season, which brought people together, was almost immediately interrupted by the Covid-19 pandemic, which isolated people from one another and support systems at a time of great need.

These experiences significantly affected on the Upper Blue Mountains community's connection and wellbeing. This reflects the national trend, where a national survey (Climate

Council 2023) found 80% of respondents had experienced a natural disaster since 2019 and, of those affected, more than 51% stated that their mental health had been somewhat impacted, with one-fifth of that group stating there had been a 'major or moderate impact (Climate Council 2023, p. 6).

## The Hub project

The development of the 'Hub' was a response to these experiences and a way of assisting these communities in developing, maintaining, and strengthening forms of resilience for future challenges. The project stemmed from BANC's long-term involvement in supporting community connectedness, including a focus on disaster preparation, recovery and resilience. Much was learned from the experiences during and after the 2013 bushfires in the Blue Mountains. The Hub model combined practical and psychosocial supports to develop an integrated, place-based, whole-of-community disaster recovery and preparation model.

The project was grounded in a commitment to a consultative program that delivered community-driven events as requested by the local community to meet their specific needs. The Hub was developed using a strengths-based and consultative framework to engage the community, maximising their experiences, knowledge, and capacities in order to strengthen and support the existing networks and resources. Of particular importance was a responsiveness to the specific needs of the Upper Mountains community. This responsiveness includes responding to the barriers to community connectedness and resilience due to vulnerabilities associated with age, challenging economic circumstances and/or mental health issues and understanding entrenched disadvantage, geographical isolation, and vulnerability. As such, the project was developed in consultation with the community to ensure the Hub was fit-for-purpose and accessible. A survey was distributed to community members to ascertain the preferred content, delivery model, location, times, and days, what barriers potential participants may be experiencing and how the Hub could support people to mitigate those barriers.

The Hub project consisted of four "streams" of activities: creative activities, community activities, wellbeing activities, and resilience activities. 2,586 people attended 217 Hub events, constituting over 514.50 hours, over the course of 18 months.

Hub activities included:

- One-off and ongoing workshops and events for adults. These included art therapy, art play, the Inkblots Writing group, public speaking workshops, community Resilience psychoeducation sessions, “Learn More about Local Aboriginal Culture” workshop, bee workshops, permaculture workshops, “Rekindling Connection” workshop, senior’s art workshops, eco-dying, First Nations weaving workshop, “Bright Ideas to Save on Household Energy Bills” – an adaption to climate change community workshop, “The Art of Dying” workshop, shared reading (BANC and in partnership), post-traumatic growth workshop (in partnership), bushfire preparation (in partnership), “Forest Voices – learning about the ecosystem of The Mounts area” workshop (in partnership), “Lyrebird Stories and Art” workshop (in partnership).
- One-off and ongoing workshops and events for families and children. These included “Art, Fun and Feelings” creative psychoeducation groups for children and families/carers, bee workshops, craft workshops, family art play, animation workshops, “Learn More about Local Aboriginal Culture” workshop (with a local school), Reconciliation week activity, and “Waste to Art” (in partnership).
- One-off and ongoing workshops and events for young people. These included a film-making workshop, graffiti workshop (in partnership), drawing for a mural workshop (in partnership), and a youth event (in partnership).
- Community projects. These included the Blackheath Mural, a Community Art Exhibition, the Blue Shorts Short Film Festival, the Colombiana Festival (in partnership), the Megalong Valley information sharing event (in partnership), the Mt Victoria Family Fun Night (in partnership), the Blue Mountains Creative Arts Network Arts exhibition (in partnership), a Community Choir performance (in partnership), and the Headspace Mural (in partnership).
- The Hub also made financial contributions to volunteer-led community projects. These included “The Thin Yellow Line”, a community fabric banner sewing project to celebrate the local RFS units, World AIDS day – Medlow Bath Memorial Event, Blue Gum song-writing project, “Climate Action Superheroes”, and the “Dancing Wombats” book creation workshop for people living with a disability and community volunteers.

# 4.0 Future directions

Some initiatives were identified as possible directions in future strategic planning:

## Ongoing funding of the Hub

The effectiveness of the Hub is demonstrated in the data. There was significant investment from a majority of research participants that the Hub continue. Investigating the possibility of further funding is a productive avenue to pursue. This reflects the success of the Hub and the ongoing and urgent need for disaster preparation, recovery and resilience in the Upper Mountains.

## Funding of Hub-based projects for other CSOs

The data demonstrates that the Hub is an effective disaster preparation, recovery and resilience model with wide applicability to other communities. In particular, the Hub draws on the strengths of a place-based CSO to build capacity and address needs during 'business-as-usual' times and quickly move into "surge capacity" when disasters occur. Further funding of Hub projects for other CSOs would enable a faster and more effective response to disasters and ensure that CSO's have the required financial and other assets available at short notice.

## Further investigation of the effectiveness of integrating psychosocial activities with practical supports

The Hub model is an innovative integration of psychosocial activities and practical supports to address disaster preparation, recovery and resilience. The effectiveness of this approach is evident in the simultaneous change in participants' experiences of connection *and* learning of enjoyment *and* preparedness, of recovery *and* skill development. The data reveal that an integrated model has a positive effect across a range of aims, and it is worthy of further investigation as to whether an integrated model that includes a focus on psychosocial dimensions is *more* effective in addressing practical supports than practical support provision alone, as is the usual model of resilience hubs.

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