



Disaster Recovery and Preparedness Report:

*Voices of children and young people
living in the Northern Rivers*

Acknowledgements

The Office of the Advocate for Children and Young People (ACYP) would like to acknowledge the traditional owners of Bundjalung Country upon which the Recovery Youth Support Service (RYSS) has the great privilege of working on. The work of the RYSS team has occurred on Country that always was, and always will be Aboriginal land. We acknowledge Bundjalung Elders past, present and young leaders emerging – many of whom we have had the opportunity to speak with through our work. ACYP acknowledges the strong leadership, Eldership and cultural expertise from Aboriginal elders and leaders in flood recovery efforts and disaster preparedness planning for future events.

ACYP would also like to acknowledge all children and young people living in the Northern Rivers who have so generously shared with us their experiences, ideas and thoughts on flood recovery and preparedness planning for future disaster events. This report reflects what 635 children and young people have shared with us about natural disaster recovery and preparedness.

The RYSS is funded under the joint Commonwealth NSW Government Disaster Recovery Funding Arrangements 2018. The views expressed herewith do not necessarily reflect the views of the New South Wales Government unless the views expressed in the project materials have been publicly supported by the Government or a Government agency.

About the Office of the Advocate for Children and Young People

The Advocate for Children and Young People (ACYP) is an independent statutory appointment overseen by the Parliamentary Joint Committee on Children and Young People. The Office advocates for and promotes the safety, welfare, wellbeing and voice of all children and young people aged 0-24 years, with a focus on the needs of those who are vulnerable or disadvantaged.

Under the *Advocate for Children and Young People Act 2014*, the functions of ACYP include:

- a.** Making recommendations to Parliament, Government and non-Government agencies on legislation, policies, practices and services that affect children and young people.
- b.** Promoting children and young people's participation in activities and decision-making about issues that affect their lives.
- c.** Conducting research into children's issues.
- d.** Holding inquiries into important issues relating to children and young people.
- e.** Providing information to help children and young people.
- f.** Preparing, in consultation with the responsible Minister(s), a three-year, whole-of-Government Strategic Plan for Children and Young People (the Plan).

Further information about ACYP's work can be found at:

acyp.nsw.gov.au

Advocate's Foreword

In our previous work in 2020 we heard from children and young people that they want to be involved in conversations relating to disaster events. We heard that they want their experiences to be listened to and they want to advise on what could be better.

Taking our own work and building on it, we have worked with over 600 children and young people in the Northern Rivers for over a year, and this culminated in a Roundtable event in 2023 with young people, government and community. I want to thank Minister Jackson for attending this important event and sitting with the young people in their space and hearing directly from them.

What we have now is unique insight into the experiences of the young people in the Northern Rivers who have, for two years experienced the impact of disaster. They have lived in pod villages, relocated to places away from their friends, community, and school. They have worked together as a community and stood tall when it has been hard to do so. They, like other young people across the state, are still recovering from the disaster event, but also have additional complexities that we need to understand. There is an important opportunity to lift these voices, include them in any policy and practice, and rebuild a community in a thoughtful and empathetic way.

I want to thank the children and young people of the Northern Rivers who have sat with our team, who have shared with us and who have challenged us to do better for them. I want to thank the community for their support of our work. I want to acknowledge the team in the Office of the Advocate for Children and Young People who have done this amazing work and have done it with those children at the forefront of their hearts and minds.

Thank you to our government colleagues who continue to engage in this work and who actively seek out the voices of children and young people. Together we can support these children and young people thrive post the disaster event.



Zoë Robinson

Advocate for Children and Young People

Scope of this Report

The purpose of this report is to provide an analysis of the themes identified during ACYP's consultations with children and young people living in the Northern Rivers¹ region between March and November 2023. The predominant analysis and content of this report is on the findings from the Northern Rivers Disaster Recovery and Preparedness Roundtable event and consultations with children and young people living across the temporary pod village sites in the Northern Rivers. Many of the themes identified by young people who attended the roundtable event were consistent with findings in the RYSS's broader flood recovery work in the Northern Rivers region in 2023.

In doing this work, we recognise that there are many children and young people who continue to be impacted by the February 2022 floods who do not reside in the temporary pod villages. The focus this report places on the pod village model is not to say that those outside the pod villages do not require or deserve ongoing support. Instead, it reflects that when the program was developed, the team quickly discovered that those in the pod villages face similar yet unique experiences to their peers. A decision was made to focus our attention on this community. However, as the program continues to evolve, our engagement across the region and community has also expanded.

This report does not seek to provide a comprehensive literature review or analysis of the existing research related to children and young people's experiences of natural disaster, nor is it an evaluation of the RYSS program.

¹The Northern Rivers region is located in Northern New South Wales. A map of the region can be accessed here: [Northern Rivers Map](#).

Summary of key recommendations

■ Natural disaster recovery and preparedness planning

- 1.1 Evaluate current recovery and preparedness responses with the purpose of developing a holistic, whole of government recovery continuum, which complies with our obligations under the United Nations *Convention on the Rights of the Child*.
 - 1.2 Develop policies, procedures and best practice guidelines for supporting children and young people in immediate natural disaster recovery with a particular focus on robust safeguarding, evidence based and trauma informed approaches.
 - 1.4 Commence an urgent evaluation into the temporary pod village and emergency accommodation models which considers alternative immediate housing solutions to these models and makes provision for a sustainable transition from pod village and emergency accommodation to long-term solutions.
 - 1.8 Review disaster funding arrangements to ensure a sustained long-term provision of supports for children and young people.
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■ The experiences of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and young people

- 2.1 Embed sustainable systems of co-design and two-way learning with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities to build genuine relationships and partnerships with Traditional Owners, Elders and community leaders grounded in the principles of local cultural protocols, self-determination and community control.
- 2.3 Consideration should be given to procurement practices for recovery and preparedness responses including the designation of specific funding streams for local Aboriginal community-controlled organisations (ACCOs).

■ The experiences of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and young people cont.

- 2.4** As part of the recommended evaluation into the temporary pod village model consult with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community members including children and young people.
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■ Cost of living

- 3.1** Review the application process for disaster recovery payments to implement a more streamlined, co-designed youth friendly application process.
- 3.2** Conduct a feasibility study into the implementation of a youth specific disaster recovery payment.
- 3.4** Explore the full implementation of the Advocate's recommendations contained within their Cost of Living Report
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■ Wellbeing

- 4.1** Resource ongoing clinically trained mental health practitioners specialising in working with young people in disaster recovery with support delivered in person by way of outreach. Clinical support should be flexible, and available after hours.
- 4.2** Increase the provision of school counsellors at all schools across the Northern Rivers, and ensure the provision of school infrastructure supports the confidentiality and privacy of students accessing counselling.
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■ Education

- 5.1** As part of the existing review into the NSW education curriculum, disaster literacy and financial literacy should be included as part of the updated curriculum.

■ Community Connection and Transport

- 6.1** Provide funding and resourcing for the increased provision of public transport in the Northern Rivers, which should include funding for private providers of transport.
 - 6.3** The NSW government embed the requirement to co-design services with children and young people as part of any procurement that involves the provision of space or support to children and young people. Initiatives considered for procurement should also include the provision of transport, after hours operation, brokerage to include the provision of meals and flexible service delivery.
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■ Housing

- 7.1** Urgently develop an exit strategy for families and individuals in the Pod Villages to transition to more secure housing.
- 7.4** Commission a feasibility study to determine the suitability of resourcing a rental cap in the Northern Rivers. Dependent on the findings of a feasibility study, a rental cap should be implemented as a matter of priority in NSW.
- 7.5** Immediately following a disaster, ensure all children and young people are placed in temporary accommodation closest to their local community and their school.

Introduction



In recent years, New South Wales (NSW) has experienced significant flooding events, prolonged drought and an unprecedented bushfire season. These disasters have directly or indirectly impacted hundreds of thousands of children and young people.

In 2020, the Advocate visited disaster affected areas of NSW and listened to more than 400 children and young people about their experiences of disaster. This was followed up with quantitative polling of a further 1,000 children and young people. The combined results of this research informed the development of the *Children and Young People's Experience of Disaster Report (2020)*.²

As a result of recommendations made in this report, ACYP was awarded grant funding from the Commonwealth Government and New South Wales Government to develop and deliver the Recovery Youth Support Service program (RYSS) through the Disaster Recovery Funding Arrangements 2018. The ACYP's RYSS is the only program funded under the Recovery Support Services stream to deliver supports specifically to children and young people impacted by the 2022 flooding event in the Northern Rivers. The service commenced in the Northern Rivers in March 2023.

²The Office of the Advocate for Children and Young People (ACYP), *Children and Young People's Experience of Disaster Report (2020)*, [Disaster Report 2020 \(nsw.gov.au\)](https://www.nsw.gov.au/disaster-report-2020), Sydney (Gadigal), New South Wales, Australia

The RYSS has five key program elements:



Advocacy through...



Consultation

Consulting and engaging with children and young people across the Northern Rivers in a variety of settings including those living at pod village sites, attending community events and local sporting tournaments.



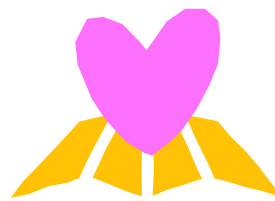
Community Engagement

Attending and hosting community engagement events and activities to build relationships with children, young people, communities and key stakeholders.



Capacity Building

The RYSS has worked closely with Reconstruction NSW and pod village personnel to identify training and development needs for staff working with children and young people. The RYSS also supports capacity building directly for individual children and young people through our supported care pathway and consultation work.



Supported Care Pathway (1:1 Support)

The RYSS supports children and young people aged 8-24 years with goals related to their disaster recovery journey. The supported care pathway is a flexible, voluntary support program delivered by way of outreach.



It is important to acknowledge from the outset that the experiences of children and young people in natural disaster recovery and preparedness responses often mirrors that of their experiences in other Government systems including the education, child protection, and youth justice systems, and more broadly in Government decision making processes. The commonality across these systems in their responses to children and young people is:

- That there is little opportunity for children and young people to have a voice in the decisions that impact them;
- They do not feel they are taken seriously by decision makers; and
- They feel unseen in the very systems that are meant to serve them.

Too often these systems require both persistence and resilience from the children and young people navigating them.

Many are experiencing complex intersectionality in their disaster recovery journeys and this is significantly impacting their wellbeing in recovery. Children and young people require a holistic, inclusive approach and response to their disaster recovery journey.

During consultations, several young people spoke about the failures of the current service system and the inadequacy of the service responses they may be receiving, particularly young people coming to the attention of child protection services or those already involved in the out-of-home care system. Those without any support described the significant barriers they continue to experience in both seeking and receiving support from the service system, which is expanded upon in upcoming sections of this report.

ACYP also notes the ongoing and detrimental impact that the practice of short-term funding cycles across the community services sector has on the provision of effective support to children and young people living in the Northern Rivers. Young people in the Northern Rivers and practitioners who work in the systems that surround them have spoken to ACYP about the impact that the lack of funding sustainability has on the wellbeing of young people, particularly those impacted by natural disasters and the challenges this creates in providing effective support to disaster affected communities. Short-term funding cycles see young people being required to repeatedly share their stories and build new relationships, which they describe as both tiring and frustrating. A number of flood recovery initiatives have been funded in the Northern Rivers however, this has been fragmented, uncoordinated and poorly communicated across the region. As a result, both service providers and their recipients are unclear about the provision and availability of services and supports. This is particularly the case for children, young people and families.

Methodology

The RYSS team consulted with **635** children and young people aged 4-24 years living in the Northern Rivers. In the following settings between March and November 2023:



Group consultations in the pod village sites located at:

- Ballina;
- Wollongbar;
- Coraki; and
- Wardell.



Group consultations with 28 young people at the Northern Rivers Disaster Recovery and Preparedness Roundtable event.³



Individual consultations at community events including:

- Casino Beef Week;
- Blue Light Night Casino;
- Regional netball tournaments at Ballina, Maclean, Grafton and Casino,
- NAIDOC week events at Ballina and Tweed Heads; and
- Colour run event held in Ballina.



Individual consultations through the RYSS supported care pathway.

Consultation findings have been transcribed and then analysed thematically for the purpose of this report.

³The Office of the Advocate for Children and Young People, (2023), Northern Rivers Disaster Recovery and Future Preparedness Roundtable, via webpage: <https://www.acyp.nsw.gov.au/support>, Sydney (Gadigal), New South Wales, Australia

Consultation themes

ACYP's consultation themes in the Northern Rivers region were informed by the *Children and Young People's Experience of Disaster Report (2020)*² and the *NSW Strategic Plan for Children and Young People 2022-2024 (2022)*⁴ and refined to include themes raised by children and young people during initial consultations conducted in the region in 2023.

The following themes were identified by children and young people as being key areas of their lives that are impacted by natural disaster recovery and preparedness planning:



Overarching lens:
Natural disaster recovery and preparedness planning



The experiences of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and young people in disaster recovery



Cost of living



Wellbeing



Education



Community connection and transport



Housing

⁴The Office of the Advocate for Children and Young People, (2023), *Strategic Plan 2022-2024* via webpage <https://www.acyp.nsw.gov.au/strategic-plan-2022-2024>, Sydney (Gadigal), New South Wales, Australia

Natural disaster recovery and preparedness planning

Children and young people were generous, thoughtful and kind when speaking about what is needed in their disaster recovery journey. Often, when asked what they need to support their individual recovery journeys, young people spoke about what others needed before themselves. They spoke about what their families, friends, schools or communities needed in response to the 2022 flooding event. Many who participated in consultations had experienced both the 2017 and 2022 flooding events and lived through bushfires in the region. They are acutely aware of the need to prepare well for future disasters, and that these are likely to occur in the very near future.

Young people feel that responses from Government and adults in disaster recovery can be undermining and paternalistic. They acknowledged that whilst the intention of this may be to keep them safe, they feel it does the opposite, creating a sense of feeling unseen and left out of important conversations about what is happening in their communities. This is detrimental to their wellbeing, and their sense of agency in their own lives.

Those experiencing existing vulnerability and comorbidity have experienced additional barriers in natural disaster recovery. The RYSS has received referrals for vulnerable young people living with multiple and complex needs.

Some of these young people have current or significant previous involvement in government and social service systems including the child protection system, and through our direct work with young people, the RYSS has seen that these particularly vulnerable young people continue to receive a poor and inadequate response from the broader service system. These children and young people remain at significant risk in both recovery and preparing for future disaster events.

During consultations, young people told ACYP about the importance of embedding safety for children and young people in recovery responses. They spoke about the importance of ensuring any staff member or volunteer working in flood recovery responses, including emergency services, at evacuation centres, pod villages and in other support roles, are trained in trauma informed practice and in working with children and young people.

Central to the safety of children and young people responding to natural disasters is the development of effective government policies, procedures and best practice guidelines that promote their safety and wellbeing. Robust child friendly, trauma informed, and evidence-based policy development is one of the most effective strategies that can support safe, effective and coordinated disaster recovery for children and young people across all stages of the recovery and preparedness continuum.

These policies and guidelines must also apply to any volunteers engaged in immediate disaster recovery responses. At a very basic level, this should include the provision of a current Working with Children's Check and identity verification. ACYP recommends that the Commonwealth and NSW Government commence urgent review and development of robust internal and external policies related to children and young people affected by natural disasters, in preparation for future disaster events drawing from both national and international evidence. ACYP recommends:

- The National Emergency Response Management Agency (NEMA) in partnership with their State counterparts review disaster funding arrangements to ensure a sustained long-term provision of supports for children and young people is provided as a separate stream under the Disaster Recovery Funding Arrangements 2018.
- Reconstruction NSW and NSW Treasury undertake a feasibility study for ongoing funding of Community Recovery Officer's in each affected Local Government Area.
- The NSW *State Emergency and Rescue Management Act 1989*⁵ be updated to include the requirement for a standing Committee of children and young people to be established to provide expert advice to the Regional and Local Emergency Management Committee's on the needs of children and young people in their communities during a disaster event.
- The NSW Disaster Assistance Guidelines 2021⁶ be updated to include the provision of specific funding for support for disaster affected children and young people.
- The NSW Advocate for Children and Young People or their delegate be invited to observe any State Emergency Management Committee⁵ meetings where the needs of children and young people are being discussed. In addition, the needs of children and young people in disaster should be made a regular standing agenda item at these meetings.

ACYP recommends the development of a recovery workforce strategy alongside policies, procedures and practice guidelines, to ensure designated child and youth worker roles alongside family support roles are universally embedded in all future recovery responses including across evacuation centres, pod village sites and in case management programs. These roles should be staffed with remunerated professionals who have extensive experience in working with children, young people and families that are responding to significant trauma. This is an imperative to ensure the safety and wellbeing of children and young people in future natural disaster events in NSW.

■ Immediate recovery responses

Consultation question:

Was there anything you wish was around at the time, that wasn't, but might have been helpful to you or your family, friends and community?



Stable temporary housing options – not having any options before the flood meant that there was not enough for those who were affected.

Better warning systems.

More boats. (Privately owned boats were the most prominent form of transport for food and rescue.)



⁵New South Wales Government, *State Emergency Management and Rescue Act No 165 (1989)*, accessed via webpage: [State Emergency and Rescue Management Act 1989 No 165 - NSW Legislation](#)

⁶New South Wales Government, *Disaster Assistance Guidelines (2021)*, accessed via webpage: [NSW Disaster Assistance Guidelines 2021](#)

During consultations, children and young people shared that they felt the immediate emergency services response during the 2022 flooding event was inadequate and poorly coordinated. Young people felt that there had not been sufficient warning regarding the need to evacuate their homes and that they had received mixed messaging from both emergency services and mainstream media regarding the status of the rain, the flooding and the need to leave their homes. They shared that the platforms used to communicate to community members did not meet the needs of children and young people in the community. It was suggested that communications needed to be tailored to children and young people, particularly those more vulnerable who may have been homeless or experiencing housing instability, and that this be via more accessible platforms such as Snapchat, Instagram and TikTok. Young people also shared that they felt greater backup systems were needed for telecommunication services given the absence of any stable phone carrier service or internet connection.

During consultations, young people expressed gratitude to the emergency services workers and community members who supported them in the immediate flooding response, but they also identified their families and fellow flood affected community members as most helpful. They shared stories of either being saved by community members with boats or watching others and their pets be saved. The community coming together to help each other was one of the most helpful things that occurred, and this is a theme that they remember the most from the event.

The process of applying for the immediate round of flood recovery payments was described as very complex and difficult for young people to navigate.

Some of the difficulty young people faced in applying for the recovery payment included:

- their residence being in their parents/ housemates' name;
- their home not being damaged enough; and
- losing their personal identification during the floods.

They described trying to navigate the application process whilst responding to a significantly traumatic event, as being overwhelming and complex, which meant some decided not to apply for recovery payments. Young people felt as though they should have greater agency regarding emergency payments and greater choices. The absence of an adequate emergency payment made them feel trapped and fearful of judgement for not having money to support their recovery.

■ Evacuation centres

During consultations, children and young people spoke about evacuation centres/hubs as being helpful overall in an immediate response to the floods however, they noted these centres were not child or young person friendly and they felt much could be done to improve the safety and wellbeing of those accessing these centres.

Young people provided the following feedback on improvements that are needed in evacuation centres.

- The physical and emotional safety of children and young people must be taken into account in the foundational design of evacuation centres.
- Evacuation centres should be staffed with designated youth workers who have experience in working with young people and can run activities for those accessing these centres.
- Evacuation centres need to be bigger. Children and young people identified the need for private spaces to be accessible for when people became upset, as this would mean younger children are not exposed to the overwhelming emotions of adults responding to disaster events, and there would be greater space for families to be together.
- Evacuation centres should feel like safe places for all young people, including those living independently or away from home who may not be receiving support from family or friends.
- Pets should be allowed to come to evacuation centres as they are an important part of children and young people's lives, and can help to support emotional regulation during periods of distress. Worrying about pets and animals being harmed or killed in the floods exacerbated the significant stress already being experienced by responding to the event.
- Evacuation centres should be made more accessible for people from already marginalised groups including the LGBTIQ+ community and for those living with a disability. Young people suggested that gender neutral and all access bathrooms should be made available at future evacuation centre sites.

- Improved transport options need to be made available for community members to physically get to the evacuation centres, observing that evacuation centres were hard for people to get to in the most recent flood disaster

Following discussions with our partners across government prior to the release of this report, we understand there is significant work being undertaken to improve the way evacuation centres operate in future disaster events.

These initiatives include:

- the development of an Evacuation Centre Manual to provide guidance to staff around a variety of scenarios they may come across in their work;
- additional training opportunities having been rolled out for staff who choose to be redeployed into evacuation centres during a disaster;
- the State Emergency Management Committee scheduling a review of the Guidelines into Major Evacuation Centres, to better acknowledge the different complexities, operations and structures of these centres; and
- creating a partnership and MoU with 54 Reasons to establish child safe spaces in larger evacuation centres that are expected to operate for a number of days.

We also understand that pets are welcome in evacuation centres. As this was not the experience of the young people we spoke with, we would encourage greater promotion of this, as we appreciate the concern young people may have for their pets and the safety they create.

■ Temporary pod village model

In the immediate aftermath of the February 2022 floods, temporary housing villages (pod villages) were constructed in the following areas:

- Ballina Shire; • Byron Shire; • Lismore;
- Richmond Valley; and • Tweed Shire

These villages were set up as an immediate short-term emergency housing solution and are jointly managed by the NSW Reconstruction Authority and community housing providers.

Consultation question:

What do you like about living in the pod villages?



Socialising with other children and young people.

Finding it easy to relate to one another.

Everyone is respecting one another's boundaries.

Financial safety and security.

Living with friends.

Riding bikes and having good places to hide.

Not having to keep moving around.



Consultation question:

What don't you like about living in the pod villages?



No youth services coming into the pods.

No internet.

Not a lot of space to keep our belongings.

No communication about rules.

Getting yelled at for riding bikes, scooters or playing.

Security hassles us about bikes and made me sister cry.

No fun activities.

Boredom.

Fighting and arguing.

Houses are too close together.

Privacy issues – close proximity to other pods.

Belongings being stolen.

Bad people entering the villages, syringes in the garden.



We acknowledge the genuine collaboration we have experienced with the NSW Reconstruction Authority who are committed to improving disaster recovery responses for children and young people in NSW, and the important work they are doing to make improvements in preparation for future disaster events. We look forward to continuing to work together with the NSW Reconstruction Authority to ensure that current and future disaster recovery responses better meet the needs of children and young people living in NSW.

ACYP also acknowledges the significant work of pod village housing providers and their staff, and the dynamic and challenging environments that they work within.

ACYP has experienced a positive and collaborative working relationship with all pod village community housing providers. All pod village community housing providers have been very receptive to ACYP's work and to hearing feedback from children and young people shared from the consultations at some of the temporary pod village locations. ACYP has witnessed a positive increase in both the overall focus on children and young people from community housing providers, which includes increased provision of age-appropriate activities operating at some pod village sites and greater connections with community service organisations that can provide support to children and young people.

Many pod village staff have shared with us their concerns for children, young people and community members living in the temporary pod village sites and are deeply committed to doing what they can in their current roles to improve the experience of children and young people living in these environments. As three different community housing providers deliver the temporary pod village model, there is disparity in how each site operates given the differing needs of both the village communities and how each community housing provider has designed their service response. ACYP does not consider the temporary pod village model as child or young person friendly. Consultations with children and young people make it clear the physical infrastructure and design of pod villages sites is not an appropriate long-term housing model for families and young people.

It is also important to note from the outset that many children and young people have spoken positively about their experiences living in the temporary pod villages across the Northern Rivers. Pod villages have provided them with a sense of safety and stability, and have provided access to peers who are sharing the lived experience of flood recovery.

Despite these positives, ACYP was also informed of some of the significant worries, concerns and challenges children and young people living in the temporary pod village sites experience. During consultations, children and young people identified key issues related to both the initial physical infrastructure and design of pod villages alongside the challenging experience of living in a village environment.

Many children and young people at these sites are being exposed to adverse experiences and community fatigue associated with living in pod villages, compounded by the challenges of the physical infrastructure. They provided the following feedback on the physical design of pod village sites.

- Pods have been built very close together so this means children and young people can hear what is happening in the neighbouring pods that are next to them or in communal spaces at village sites.
- There are a number of pod villages that still do not have adequate, shaded areas, for children and young people to play safely. Whilst playgrounds have been added at some villages, this is not consistent practice and many play areas remain unshaded. This has led to children playing in communal areas at some village sites including in the public toilets and laundry areas.
- Due to local village guidelines, children and young people are often told off by security or community housing provider staff for riding their bikes and scooters in communal areas at some of the village sites. This means some children and young people are using places like carparks to ride their bikes and play.

- They often feel targeted by security at village sites. They do not identify security members as safe people to talk to. Whilst this has been remedied at some locations, there remains a significant barrier in the development of a meaningful relationship between children and young people and security members.
- Pod villages are sterile in nature, often with no colour and lots of concrete.
- Some sites do not have secure fencing, which means members of the public can enter the village sites. In some instances, children and young people are aware that intruders have entered a village site, and they have informed ACYP that this makes them feel unsafe, worried and scared.
- Used syringes have been found around the surrounding areas of some pod village locations that do not have secure fencing.
- During initial consultations in early 2023, boredom and the absence of any meaningful, age-appropriate activities at temporary pod villages was spoken about consistently during all pod village consultations. ACYP notes that there has been a positive increase in the number of activities that are being run for children and young people at many pod village sites, and a marked increase in the focus on the needs of children and young people living in these environments from community housing providers.
- No access to Wi-Fi at some pod village sites means children and young people in some cases have been unable to complete their homework or school assignments. Some schools are not aware that a child or young person is living at a temporary pod village site, therefore are not aware of the complex living environment a child may be residing in that may be significantly impacting their capacity for attendance to, and participation at school.
- They can feel isolated from their broader peer network – pod villages are not safe or appropriate environments to have friends visit.

Children and young people provided the following feedback about their overall experience of living in pod villages.

- In some cases, they have been exposed to community violence, drug or alcohol affected community members and domestic violence at some village sites. They describe being exposed to this as scary, and that it makes them feel unsafe living in this environment.
- Children and young people have witnessed the attendance of police or other emergency services due to serious concerns including domestic and family violence, arguments between residents and health-related concerns.
- They have described being unable to sleep because village sites can be noisy at night which impacts on their capacity to maintain a healthy routine and get up for school

Children and young people were not considered or consulted with in the overarching design of the villages as a form of emergency response. ACYP has concerns about the conditions and living standards for those residing in temporary pod village sites, and previously at emergency accommodation sites, and believes that consideration must be given to whether the current living standards at these sites complies with the United Nations *Convention on the Rights of the Child* Articles three (3), four (4), six (6) and 27⁷.

⁷United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC), (1989), accessed via webpage: <https://www.unicef.org/au/united-nations-convention-on-the-rights-of-the-child>, Treaty Series 1557:3

ACYP considers that the current temporary pod village model being used now as a longer-term housing solution, is not conducive to positive wellbeing or the effective recovery for children and young people. Furthermore, the model may be detrimental to their development, health and happiness in childhood. ACYP advocates for the temporary pod village model to be evaluated as a matter of urgency so as to prioritise the safety and wellbeing of children, young people and families who will be residing in these environments during future disaster events.

■ Long-term recovery and future preparedness

During consultations, young people expressed that they feel long-term recovery from a natural disaster goes hand in hand with preparedness for imminent future disaster events. Recovery is in its essence, preparing for future events. Children and young people have expressed they want their communities to be disaster resilient, and ready to respond to future events effectively. Future preparedness should begin with learning from past events, particularly the 2022 floods. They want government and decision makers to listen to them and learn from what has and has not worked well in current recovery efforts.

What was initially built to be a short-term, emergency housing response has now become a longer-term housing option, but not a housing solution, in the absence of any housing exit options or intermediate and long-term disaster recovery responses. The current situation regarding temporary pod village sites is reflective of the significant need for increased provision of social and affordable housing in the Northern Rivers region, which has existed well before the 2022 flooding event. It further evidences a significant gap in New South Wales' approach to disaster recovery and preparedness planning.

There remains no current plan or response for both medium and long-term recovery planning after an immediate disaster response. This is also the case for preparedness for future events, which will require a whole of government planning and response in preparation for future events.

Recovery does not end after the need for an immediate response diminishes or reduces. It is essential that a recovery and preparedness continuum for NSW is properly designed to incorporate a whole of government approach, with very clear departmental responsibility for all stages of disaster recovery.

This includes the immediate recovery, medium term recovery and long-term recovery responses allowing for the provision of housing exit options from any emergency accommodation options such as temporary pod villages that are 'stood up' in the immediate aftermath of a disaster. This approach must be co-designed to meet the unique experience and needs of disaster affected children and young people.

Underpinning this continuum must be a comprehensive, evidence-based preparedness strategy and approach for NSW to ensure that all stages of recovery are underpinned by the imperative need to prepare well for imminent future disasters. This preparedness strategy must be informed by lessons from previous disasters, and act on current contemporary, place-based research on climate change, natural disaster recovery responses and preparedness sourced both nationally and internationally. This strategy should operate on an ongoing cyclical basis, supporting future disaster responses to be underpinned by learnings from previous events, and the growing evidence base on best practice design and responses in disaster recovery and preparedness.

At ACYP's Roundtable event in November 2023, young people spoke about the strong desire to be involved in their communities' recovery efforts and the preparation planning for future events. Notably there are no formal opportunities or spaces made available for young people to support recovery efforts, and they do not feel as though they are seen as having meaningful skills or experience to contribute. They want to mobilise and support their communities' recovery and preparation efforts through a youth led recovery response. They want support from adult allies to coordinate and develop their own youth led response, with access to training, professional development, resources and mentorship, to work towards being a self-sustaining model of youth led disaster recovery support in the Northern Rivers.

In preparation for future events, young people have also identified the crucial role that both education and research have in preparedness efforts. They suggested that a natural disaster centre be established in the Northern Rivers that can focus on conducting research on the changes in climate and the environment in the region, supporting the community to prepare for inevitable future disaster events, and focus on education for both primary and high school students on natural disasters, climate change and caring for the environment. This centre could also be mobile with a van or bus that could visit more regional communities in the Northern Rivers to ensure all communities have access to education, engagement and current research. Young people also identified the absence of preparedness plans for schools, expressing these needed to be more detailed and further developed as well as separate to a schools' general evacuation plan.



Recommendation	Responsibility
<p>1.1 As a matter of priority, evaluate current recovery and preparedness responses with the purpose of:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• better understanding the significant gap that exists between the immediate government recovery response led by the NSW Reconstruction Authority and the communities' long-term recovery;• developing a holistic, whole of government recovery continuum that embeds effective mechanisms, responses, and clear responsibility between key departments;• enabling communities long-term recovery from disaster and improved preparedness for future disaster events; and• complying with our obligations under the <i>United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child</i>.	NSW Premier's Department, NSW Reconstruction Authority
<p>1.2 As a matter of urgency, develop policies, procedures and best practice guidelines for supporting children and young people in immediate natural disaster recovery with a particular focus on:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• robust safeguarding, evidence based and trauma informed approaches;• the establishment of emergency responses and evacuation centres; and• clear guidelines for the recruitment and training of staff and volunteers in emergency.	NSW Reconstruction Authority, NSW Department of Communities and Justice
<p>1.3 Develop a disaster recovery and preparedness workforce recruitment strategy that includes:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• the requirement to have child and young person specific roles; and• appropriate mechanisms and safeguards for child protection.	NSW Premier's Department, NSW Reconstruction Authority

Recommendation	Responsibility
<p>1.4 Commence an urgent evaluation into the temporary pod village and emergency accommodation models which:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • considers alternative immediate housing solutions to these models; and • makes provision for a sustainable transition from pod village and emergency accommodation to long-term solutions. 	<p>NSW Reconstruction Authority, Homes NSW and Community Housing Providers</p>
<p>1.5 Update the State Emergency Plan (the EMPLAN) to include a specific section on responding to disaster affected children and young people.</p>	<p>NSW Reconstruction Authority</p>
<p>1.6 Establish a disaster recovery and preparedness youth advisory group mechanism that acts as an expert reference group to provide youth specific advice on the needs and experiences of children and young people living in disaster affected communities.</p>	<p>NSW Reconstruction Authority, NSW Advocate for Children and Young People</p>
<p>1.7 Develop a disaster recovery and preparedness workforce recruitment strategy that:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • mobilises young people to be prepared to support communities responding to natural disaster events; and • supports the development of relevant systems, processes and support for the community. 	<p>NSW Reconstruction Authority, NSW Advocate for Children and Young People</p>
<p>1.8 Review disaster funding arrangements to:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • ensure a sustained long-term provision of supports for children and young people; and • create a separate stream for youth focused RSS providers under the Disaster Recovery Funding Arrangements 2018. 	<p>National Emergency Management Agency, NSW Reconstruction Authority</p>

Recommendation	Responsibility
<p>1.9 Undertake a feasibility study for ongoing funding of Youth Community Recovery Officer's in each affected Local Government Area.</p>	<p>NSW Reconstruction Authority, NSW Treasury, Office of Local Government NSW</p>
<p>1.10 Update the <i>NSW State Emergency and Rescue Management Act 1989</i> to include the: requirement for a standing committee of children and young people to provide expert advice to the Regional and Local Emergency Management Committees.</p>	<p>NSW Parliamentary Counsel's Office</p>
<p>1.11 Update the <i>NSW Disaster Assistance Guidelines 2021</i> to include the provision of specific funding support for disaster affected children and young people.</p>	<p>NSW Reconstruction Authority</p>
<p>1.12 The NSW State Emergency Management Committee (SEMC) should:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • invite the NSW Advocate for Children and Young People or their delegate, to observe any meetings where the needs of children and young people are being discussed; and • have as a standing agenda item, the needs of children and young people in disaster preparedness and recovery. 	<p>State Emergency Management Committee, NSW Advocate for Children and Young People</p>

The experiences of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and young people

ACYP acknowledges the significant devastation that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children, young people and communities have continued to experience as a result of the 2022 flooding event and subsequent recovery efforts, including the displacement from Country, community and family. We acknowledge that the cultural protocols, practices and expertise of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in understanding the environment and caring for Country have not been respected in broader natural disaster recovery and preparedness efforts. This has had a detrimental impact on the wellbeing of Aboriginal children, young people and communities.

ACYP has had the privilege of consulting with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and young people from communities including Cabbage Tree Island, Coraki, Wardell, Casino, Tweed Heads and Ballina. Whilst the broader impact of natural disaster recovery and preparedness planning for all children and young people may be described as similar, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and young people experience disaster recovery and preparedness in a way that is unique and different to that of their non-Aboriginal peers.

ACYP understands for the community that lived and worked on Cabbage Tree Island, they felt a lack of meaningful consultation had taken place following the floods about how they might return and rebuild.

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children, young people and families who were impacted by the 2022 flooding event have experienced significant displacement from Country and community, particularly for children and young people from the Cabbage Tree Island community. During ACYP's consultations, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people expressed that in some instances, flood recovery efforts have further exacerbated, and replicated, the ongoing impacts of colonisation. Flood recovery efforts in some examples have undermined principles of self-determination and community control for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and communities. This is felt strongly by many, and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and young people describe the heaviness of longing to return home to Country:

Consultation question:

What don't you like about living in the pod village?

“

This is not our home... and they're not going to rebuild Cabbo.

It makes us sad because we want to go home.

”

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and young people have shared during consultations how important living back on Country with family is to them. It is central to their wellbeing, their identity and their hopes for the future. Living on Country must be understood as a basic human right for all Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and young people. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and young people have told us that support from family and community were two of the most important factors in the 2022 flooding event.

It is imperative that the voices of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and young people are included in the development of culturally led, culturally safe and culturally informed approaches to reduce their exposure to ongoing trauma from poor flood recovery efforts and future preparedness efforts. Preparedness planning for future events must be co-designed with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and communities who have the experience of caring for, listening to and understanding Country. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and communities must be seen as the experts in their communities, and future preparedness efforts must be underpinned by principles of self-determination and community control through the lens of two-way learning and cultural authority. This is imperative for the safety and wellbeing of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and young people living in disaster affected communities.

Consultation question:

How can the government better support you?



Rebuild our houses back on Cabbo and rebuild our school.

Rebuild the footy field and basketball courts.

I want to go back home.



Recommendation	Responsibility
<p>2.1 Embed sustainable systems of co-design and two-way learning with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities to:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• develop culturally inclusive and safe practices in both disaster recovery and preparedness;• include the requirement to meet on an ongoing basis with Traditional Owners, Elders and community leaders;• invest in and focus on building government capacity, knowledge and understanding of local cultural protocols of disaster affected areas; and• build genuine relationships and partnerships with Traditional Owners, Elders and community leaders grounded in the principles of local cultural protocols, self-determination and community control.	NSW Premier's Department, NSW Reconstruction Authority
<p>2.2 Adequately resource local Aboriginal community-controlled organisations and corporations to:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• be able to support their communities to be both prepared for and respond to disaster events; and• include dedicated funding for support for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and young people.	NSW Reconstruction Authority
<p>2.3 Consideration should be given to procurement practices for recovery and preparedness responses including the:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• designation of specific funding streams for local Aboriginal community-controlled organisations (ACCOS);• requirement for non-Aboriginal organisations to demonstrate commitment to best practice partnership principles with ACCOs as developed by the Secretariat of National Aboriginal and Islander Child Care (SNAICC).	NSW Treasury

Recommendation	Responsibility
<p>2.4 As part of the recommended evaluation into the temporary pod village model:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• consult with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community members including children and young people; and• ensure the provision of future disaster responses are culturally informed and culturally safe.	NSW Reconstruction Authority
<p>2.5 Resource ongoing identified roles in preparedness and recovery for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in all levels of Government.</p>	NSW Premier's Department, NSW Reconstruction Authority

Cost of living

Children and young people have identified the cost of living as a significant factor affecting their wellbeing in both their current recovery journey and in preparation for future events. Increases in the cost of living are being felt by children and young people in recovery. In particular, there is an awareness of the increasing cost of commodities such as food and petrol which is impacting their parents and carers.

Young people experiencing vulnerability, particularly those living independently or in the temporary pod villages, are acutely feeling the effects of the cost-of-living crisis. They reported that the cost of food, petrol, transport, and water seemed to increase following the floods, which has impacted their wellbeing and ability to care for themselves, their families and their pets. Young people described feeling deterred from seeing a general practitioner or specialist health providers given the costs associated with services that do not bulk bill. Those who were employed explained that incremental pay rises are not matching cost of living increases, which is a similar experience for young people in receipt of social security payments such as Youth Allowance. This is amplified for young people who are caring for siblings, parents or other family members.

The need for greater and more equitable access to supported employment pathways for young people generally was raised, with specialised support needed to support vocational outcomes for young people living with disabilities and young parents.

Housing was identified by many young people as one of their most significant concerns and pressures related to cost of living. Many young people spoke about experiencing housing instability before the 2022 flooding event, which was further exacerbated after the event by the ongoing lack of affordable housing provision in the Northern Rivers, the discrimination that young people experience when applying for rental properties and the ongoing increases to rent in the region. While housing is discussed as a separate theme later in this report, ACYP notes that housing affordability and accessibility remains one of the most significant areas related to cost of living that is detrimentally impacting the lives of children and young people across the State.

Young people spoke about the need for financial literacy and independent living skills to be embedded in the education curriculum. Many have experienced intergenerational financial difficulty, expressing that conversations about finances and budgeting feels overwhelming, and that feelings of guilt, shame and embarrassment around finances can create complex dynamics between families in financial discussions.

They want to feel empowered with the skills and knowledge regarding making positive financial decisions, saving, investing and budgeting. They feel these areas along with essential independent living skills such as how to navigate the housing market, home loans, repayments and life after disaster, should be included in the education curriculum in NSW.

During consultations, young people identified the need for more low-cost supermarket alternatives and the provision of affordable nutritious, healthy food, coupled with education to assist them in being able to make healthy food choices.

These findings are consistent with the broader consultation project the Advocate recently conducted across the State exploring how children and young people are impacted by the Cost of Living⁸.



Recommendation	Responsibility
<p>3.1 Review the application process for disaster recovery payments to implement a more streamlined, co-designed youth friendly application process.</p>	<p>Service NSW</p>
<p>3.2 Conduct a feasibility study into the implementation of a youth specific disaster recovery payment.</p>	<p>NSW Treasury, Service NSW</p>
<p>3.3 Deploy additional staff and expand offices to include mobile responses with outreach staff who can door knock and complete home visits to support disaster affected communities to apply for renewed identification and relevant emergency payments.</p>	<p>Service NSW</p>
<p>3.4 Explore the full implementation of the recommendations in the Advocate's <i>How Children and Young People are Impacted to and Responding to the Cost of Living in NSW</i> report.</p>	<p>NSW Government, NSW Advocate for Children and Young People</p>

⁸The Office of the Advocate for Children and Young People, (2023), *How children and young people are impacted by and responding to the rising cost of living in NSW* via webpage <https://www.acyp.nsw.gov.au/cost-of-living-report>, Sydney (Gadigal), New South Wales, Australia

Wellbeing

Natural disaster recovery and future preparedness planning remains a central issue to the wellbeing of children and young people in the Northern Rivers. Children and young people have spoken about the greater need for wellbeing focused support in their recovery journeys. Reduced access to both school counsellors and other mental health professionals in the Northern Rivers is having a significant impact on mental health and wellbeing. Young people are advocating for greater access to school counsellors and mental health professionals, suggesting that greater access to in-person, face-to-face confidential support is needed. This is particularly the case for those at schools reporting a reduction in school-based counselling appointments due to capacity, and stating that the physical space at schools to access counselling is not always private and confidential, which can lead to young people experiencing stigma.

Short-term funding cycles, and the lack of sustainable, continued funding for youth mental health services has had a negative impact on young people's experience of accessing the service system, and on the effectiveness of the youth mental health service system overall. Repeated changes to programs and workers has meant that some young people develop a sense of mistrust in the service system, describing the heavy weight of having to constantly re-tell their stories and build trust with new services whilst already responding to significant trauma.

Young people feel Telehealth is not accessible for many due to the requirements to have stable internet access or access to a phone or laptop. Whilst positives of Telehealth were acknowledged, young people also expressed they felt this is an impersonal service preferring to build an in-person relationship with the mental health professional they are engaged with. Gender responsive wellbeing approaches were also identified as being very important by young people, as was support delivered by way of face-to-face outreach.

Importantly, young people identified limited public transport options in the Northern Rivers as one of the most significant barriers to accessing both supports and activities that would enhance their wellbeing. They spoke of the barriers to getting to appointments, including the provision of public transport alongside the affordability of petrol for those with parents, friends or carers supporting them to attend appointments. Overall, young people have described the wellbeing support available for flood affected young people as minimal, noting that if support does exist, it needs to be communicated more effectively to young people as the target audience. They are impacted by ongoing changes to mental health service provision, and where funding has been committed to mental health services for young people, they reported that they are still yet to experience effective support for their wellbeing.

Young people spoke of the importance of relational, specialised youth friendly mental health support that is trauma informed. They want to feel seen, understood and heard by mental health professionals and school counsellors, and able to trust the practitioner they are working with. They also spoke about the importance of peer connection and peer support as a factor that promotes and supports wellbeing, alongside access to meaningful, accessible and fun recreational activities in their local communities.

Recommendation

Responsibility

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|--|---|
| <p>4.1 Resource ongoing clinically trained mental health practitioners specialising in working with young people in disaster recovery with support delivered in person by way of outreach. Clinical support should be flexible, and available after hours.</p> | <p>NSW Health,
Healthy North Coast Local Primary Health Network</p> |
| <p>4.2 Increase the provision of school counsellors at all schools across the Northern Rivers, and ensure the provision of school infrastructure supports the confidentiality and privacy of students accessing counselling.</p> | <p>NSW Department of Education,
School Infrastructure NSW</p> |
| <p>4.3 Transition school counsellors to be mobile and deliver outreach support to students in immediate disaster recovery responses, wherever safe and practicable.</p> | <p>NSW Department of Education</p> |
| <p>4.4 Specific funding to be provided to Lismore, Ballina, Richmond Valley, Kyogle, Tweed, Clarence Valley and Byron Shire Councils to co-design and develop peer led mentoring programs for young people or resource existing programs to continue, as well as the provision of funding to enable the establishment of child and youth friendly drop-in spaces in each LGA.</p> | <p>NSW Treasury,
Office of Local Government NSW</p> |

Education

Children and young people living in the Northern Rivers have experienced significant, compounding and ongoing disruptions to their education over the past several years. COVID19 followed by the 2022 flooding event that destroyed or badly damaged a number of schools in the Northern Rivers, has meant many have not been able to attend school. Many schools in the Northern Rivers remain in active recovery, with some still operating in temporary premises or co-located with other existing schools. For some students, they continue to attend school in temporary premises with the uncertainty of what their schooling future looks like or whether they will ever be able to return to their school campus. This uncertainty is both stressful and unsettling for young people and impacts on both their wellbeing and their education.

During consultations, children and young people identified the significant pressure that had been placed on principals, teachers and school communities impacted by the floods. They expressed that principals and teachers should not be relied upon to lead sole recovery efforts at their schools, and that greater government support is needed to rebuild and restore schools in current disaster recovery efforts. Schools need support to enable better preparation for future disaster events, and they could also be avenues to mobilise young people wanting to volunteer in community disaster recovery efforts.

Young people have expressed that the current education curriculum is not meeting their needs and is not setting them up effectively to navigate the challenges of modern life. Some believe the current education curriculum needs to be updated to include important topics such as independent living skills, financial literacy (including loans, tax and budgeting), disaster literacy (including disaster recovery and future preparedness), environmental management, career planning and First Nations cultural practices, including the resourcing of bi-lingual education focused on local First Nations languages.

They also identified that schools could be better prepared to respond to natural disasters by having hard copy disaster education packs of schoolwork and that schools and TAFEs should have access to budgets to support children and young people with purchasing new school uniforms, books and school resources as part of a disaster recovery budget.

In ACYP's direct work with young people in the RYSS program, we have seen that the use of punitive approaches including the use of suspension and expulsion has continued to impact some of the most vulnerable children and young people impacted by the floods.

These practices see vulnerable children and young people further marginalised and at risk of long-term disengagement from education. ACYP advocates for the greater use of restorative approaches in supporting children and young people at risk of suspension and expulsion, with a focus on keeping vulnerable students affected by natural disasters, connected to and engaged at school.

Young people also advocate for the need for greater focus on alternative education options such as TAFE and remote learning initiatives that are tailored to meet the needs of diverse learners in future disasters.

Following discussions with our partners across government prior to the release of this report, we understand there was a range of initiatives to support the community following a disaster event. These initiatives have included:

- The Department of Education staff doing outreach in their local community to support their students to re-engage with education.
- The provision of funding at a local school level for students to support them to buy provisions for their education. This funding model should not be at the discretion of a Minister but inbuilt into payments such as the Disaster Relief Grant.
- Ongoing funding for Student Support Officers in the Northern Rivers. These roles play a critical role in the medium to longer term recovery of students and community. Their funding arrangements must be sustained to reflect this critical need.



Recommendation

Responsibility

5.1 As part of the existing review into the NSW education curriculum, disaster literacy and financial literacy should be included as part of the updated curriculum.

NSW Education Standards Authority

5.2 Sustainably resource schools and tertiary education providers to provide a recovery fund to each student to enable the purchase of school uniforms, school books, stationary and required learning equipment such as laptops.

NSW Department of Education,
TAFE NSW

Community connection and transport

Connection to the community is a key theme that has been raised during consultations. Community connection enhances children and young people's sense of wellbeing, safety and belonging to the communities that they live in. This is particularly important in disaster recovery for children and young people, as many have described feelings of disconnection, isolation and the absence of belonging as key themes in their recovery experience.

Transport was identified as one of the key barriers to young people feeling connected to their communities. The lack of effective public transport provision across the Northern Rivers means that young people are not able to engage in meaningful and pro-social activities and services, or connect with peers to support their wellbeing.

Young people also identified the need for safe and accessible spaces to be created for them in their communities. They want to be consulted on the development of any youth spaces in the Northern Rivers and spoke about the importance of being involved in the co-design of any initiatives that are being developed for children and young people.

During consultations, children and young people from various communities spoke about the absence of meaningful, age-appropriate activities to engage in.

For many, sport remains the only recreational activity option in their local area. They suggested that they would like to see more activities related to creativity, nature, self-expression, games nights, discos, entertainment and youth led events in the areas they live in. Aboriginal children and young people spoke about their strong desire to be engaged in meaningful, culturally grounded and community led activities in their communities.

Children and young people identified the need for flexible hours of service delivery for youth friendly spaces and activities that include after school hours that also extend later into the evening. Often evenings remain higher risk times for those who do not feel safe at home, and for some this can lead to increased risk of contact with police or the justice system. They identified the importance of youth spaces or activities having food or meals readily available, given food security concerns associated with the rise in cost of living.

Recommendation	Responsibility
<p>6.1 Provide funding and resourcing for the increased provision of public transport in the Northern Rivers, which should include funding for private providers of transport.</p>	Transport for NSW
<p>6.2 As part of the tender and procurement process for private providers of transport, the transport needs of children and young people must be considered as part of the application process. This should include provisions for children and young people to attend school and activities that support their wellbeing, and for transport to occur after hours. Consideration must be given to the transport needs of children and young people living in more regional and remote areas to include access to larger town centres.</p>	Transport for NSW, NSW Treasury
<p>6.3 The NSW Government embed the requirement to co-design services with children and young people as part of any procurement that involves the provision of space or support to children and young people. Initiatives considered for procurement should also include the provision of transport, after hours operation, brokerage to include the provision of meals and flexible service delivery.</p>	NSW Department of Planning, NSW Transport, NSW Department of Communities and Justice, NSW Treasury
<p>6.4 Increase access to the School Student Transport Scheme (SSTS) by removing the distance criteria.</p>	Transport for NSW
<p>6.5 Further promote the School Drive Subsidy for those with limited access to public transport.</p>	Transport for NSW

Housing

During consultations, children and young people described feeling a sense of hopelessness regarding long-term housing outcomes. Many children and young people ACYP heard from during consultations have described experiencing housing instability prior to the 2022 flooding event. This event has further exacerbated housing stress and instability for them.

Long-term housing remains one of the key concerns for many in recovery, particularly for those residing at temporary pod village sites. For many living across these sites, they feel their future remains unknown and dependent on whether access is available to an affordable rental property in their community. For some, this may likely mean moving out to a more regional area away from connections to their school, peers and community. Young people in out-of-home care who were impacted by the flooding event have identified the need for greater living care planning with a focus on long-term, sustainable housing, particularly for those preparing to transition to independence. They remain in uncertainty about their future, identifying housing as a key stressor in preparation to leave care.

Young people have identified that current government schemes such as the Resilient Homes⁹ program has caused them both direct and indirect stress, particularly those supporting or observing their parents, family members or carers who have been going through the application process.

This relates particularly to the uncertainty regarding living circumstance that this creates, and the stress young people have witnessed their loved one's experience through this process. They also spoke of the insurance claims process for their parents, family members or carers as being another barrier to being able to access stable housing.

During consultations, young people spoke about wanting to stay in the Northern Rivers in their local communities however, due to limited and affordable rental options, young people are considering moving away from their community and in some cases interstate in order to access affordable housing. They want to see tangible solutions that address the current housing crisis in the Northern Rivers, suggesting more transitional housing options be made available specifically for young people, and a landlord incentive scheme and a rental cap be initiated in lower socioeconomic areas.

⁹Resilient Homes Program, (2023), accessed via webpage [Resilient Homes Program | NSW Government](#), New South Wales, Australia

Recommendation	Responsibility
7.1 Urgently develop an exit strategy for families and individuals in the Pod Villages to transition to more secure housing.	Reconstruction NSW, Homes NSW, Community Housing Providers
7.2 Identify existing opportunities to expand youth crisis and transitional accommodation in the Northern Rivers.	Homes NSW
7.3 The Rental Commissioner to conduct a feasibility study on the possible impacts of implementing a rental incentive scheme for landlords and property owners to rent to people aged 24 years and under. Dependent on the findings of a feasibility study, this rental incentive should be designed and implemented as a matter of priority in NSW.	NSW Department of Communities and Justice, Homes NSW, NSW Department of Customer Service
7.4 Commission a feasibility study to determine the suitability of resourcing a rental cap in the Northern Rivers. Dependent on the findings of a feasibility study, a rental cap should be implemented as a matter of priority in NSW.	NSW Department of Communities and Justice, NSW Department of Customer Services, NSW Treasury
7.5 Immediately following a disaster, ensure all children and young people are placed in temporary accommodation closest to their local community and their school.	Homes NSW, Reconstruction NSW
7.6 Expand resourcing for all young people leaving care to access safe, secure and affordable housing before they transition from care, and provide designated disaster recovery support to all young people who are transitioning from, or who have exited care arrangements.	NSW Department of Communities and Justice

Conclusion

Children and young people in the Northern Rivers are kind, courageous and resilient, and they care deeply about the communities that they live in. They have survived multiple natural disaster events and are acutely aware that further natural disaster events are likely to occur in the very near future. They feel that recovering from a disaster is multifaceted, and requires a trauma informed, holistic response to ensure all aspects of a child or young person's life are both seen and supported in their disaster recovery journey.



Illustration by Jimmy Patch Creative Pty Ltd 2023

Children and young people share a strong desire for their communities to become more disaster resilient, and they want to be involved in disaster recovery and preparedness efforts in their communities. Young people have significant skills, experiences and ideas to contribute to disaster recovery and preparedness efforts in their own right. They must be seen as experts from their lived experience of surviving multiple natural disaster events, and they must be consulted in relation to decisions in recovery and preparedness that impact on them.



They want to see tangible and meaningful work from government to better prepare and respond to future disaster events. They want greater care to be taken of the environment, learning to be undertaken from First Nations communities and for the education curriculum to be revitalised to better meet the needs of all children and young people in NSW.

Cost of living, housing stress and transport are all factors that impact significantly on the wellbeing and recovery of children and young people in the Northern Rivers. They want to feel hopeful about their future and the future of their communities. We must, as adults, do better by them, be allies in their recovery journeys and listen to their voices as the future leaders of our community.

Office of the Advocate for
Children and Young People

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Office of the Advocate for Children
and Young People

Report:

Disaster Recovery and Preparedness Report:

*Voices of children and young people living
in the Northern Rivers*

Date:

March 2024



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