

evaluation of acyp recovery youth support service.



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Executive Summary

The Recovery Youth Support Service is a two-year pilot of a youth-focused Recovery Support Service commissioned by the NSW Reconstruction Authority (NSWRA).

The NSW Advocate for Children and Young People (ACYP) tendered to deliver the RYSS in the Northern Rivers as part of disaster recovery after the 2022 flood events. ACYP and NSWRA negotiated design of a flexible service model that took account of the practical needs and priorities of children and young people. The RYSS service activities are advocacy; consultation; capacity building; community engagement; and supported care pathway (one-on-one disaster recovery support).

The RYSS has a specific focus on children and young people in the temporary 'pod housing' communities (pod villages) established throughout the Northern Rivers to address the high rate of homelessness in the region after the floods. However, its service is not limited to these communities and has broad eligibility criteria for any child or young person aged 8 to 24 years and impacted by the 2022 flood events.

This is a summative evaluation of the Recovery Youth Support Service that draws on 20 interviews with staff, service participants and service partners about their experiences of the program and what they would recommend for any future expansion or replication of the pilot model in future.

Stakeholders interviewed for this evaluation had positive program experiences. The consultation and advocacy activities were seen to meet a service gap in the Northern Rivers – primarily due to the program's flexibility and capacity for specialist consultation and advocacy with children and young people. While service partners recognised the need for better investment in consultation locally and within their own agencies, they also stated that the independent, expert and government-level role of the Advocate was invaluable in disaster recovery.

Young people reported impacts of: building social connections and belonging following displacement; growing their capabilities/confidence for advocacy and action; accessing needed housing; improved wellbeing/mental health; better engagement with education and/or employment; and better family dynamics. Young people reported knowing other young people and families who needed these kinds of services but who were not accessing them. RYSS' active engagement approach seems necessary in the post-disaster environment.

ACYP, and most service partners and participants, were of the view that disaster recovery support activities for children and young people are best delivered by a locally based service provider in future. While the team delivering disaster recovery support activities were highly respected for their active community engagement and developed trusting relationships with children, families, schools and service providers, ACYP raised the benefits of future delivery by a local service, and these were reiterated by stakeholders. They saw that a local service may achieve better continuity for service users, a higher program profile leading to broader access, and reduced program establishment timeframes. Service partners and ACYP stakeholders also observed the impacts of disasters and trauma on the local workforce and noted the value of the RYSS split local and remote staffing model for managing these impacts. For local delivery this may need to be replicated through external clinical supervision and contingency staffing/management options – especially for the initial 1-3 years following disasters.

There was a sense from some stakeholders that the RYSS was the right team at the right time. Individual staff members were singled out as exceptionally professional, practical, highly skilled at working with children and young people, and willing to adapt to community needs and challenges.

The most consistently raised program challenge was its lack of profile in the local area and an associated sense of frustration that it did not reach its full potential because not enough services, agencies or children and young people knew about it. Most stakeholders including some service participants indicated they were not aware of the full breadth of program activities and wished for more consistent communication from the RYSS team on their planned activities. We note that RYSS was establishing its profile and client base during a state of flux for social services in the Northern Rivers – driven by increases in both service demand and post-disaster funding – with a high volume of new service providers and support programs commencing at the same time.

The ACYP and its service partners and participants hope for long-term changes to disaster management planning and community planning, with local agencies and state and commonwealth governments taking on the key messages from the RYSS consultations with children and young people in the Northern Rivers.

This evaluation makes eight recommendations for further development of the RYSS model. In particular, it is recommended that NSWRA fund future RYSS programs in disaster recovery sites, delivered by locally based organisations, that retain the flexibility, professionalism and connectedness of the current program.

It is also recommended that ACYP consider, together with NSWRA, how they continue their systemic advocacy role with children and young people affected by disasters, and how ACYP may have a support and advisory function for any future RYSS program to augment local consultation with children and young people as communities plan their recovery and renewal.

Summary of Recommendations

1. The NSW Reconstruction Authority fund future Recovery Youth Support Service programs as part of local disaster recovery responses, which:
 - a. use a data collection and reporting framework focused on children and young peoples' wellbeing in the context of family and community wellbeing (not solely focused on individual case management goals)
 - b. have community development goals to resource investment in children and young people's natural support networks and encourage innovative responses to breaking down children and young people's experiences of isolation in disaster recovery.
2. The NSW Reconstruction Authority invest in a Child and Youth position or team to coordinate rapid youth responses during local disaster recovery responses, including oversight of a Recovery Youth Support Service model.
3. Local Councils in the Northern Rivers continue to pursue options to retain Youth Officer positions to support the inclusion of children and young people in community consultations and community strategic planning – including for disaster preparedness and recovery.
4. Any future Recovery Youth Support Service model be resourced to embed in impacted communities and supported to link with local schools.
5. Any future Recovery Support Service model:
 - a. be designed to deliver and advocate for trauma-informed support of children and young people
 - b. retain the ability to respond flexibly to local needs as they change or emerge over time
 - c. involve local children and young people in adaptation of the model for their community, drawing on ACYP benchmark practices for youth-led program design and establishment in this pilot program
 - d. resource outreach and place-based service delivery through funding for transport, staffing arrangements that account for travel, and protocols for operating in remote environments.
6. The NSW Reconstruction Authority consider ways to resource practical supports for children and young people specifically (not just families) in disaster recovery, including safe child and youth transport options in regional areas, and referral networks between local community-based support services and specialist services.
7. The Advocate for Children and Young People consider, together with NSWRA, how they continue their systemic advocacy role with children and young people affected by disasters, and how ACYP may have a support and advisory function for any future RYSS program to augment local consultation with children and young people as communities plan their recovery and renewal.
8. In any future service delivery, the Advocate for Children and Young People:
 - a. strategise to build their local profile as both an advocacy and service delivery body, highlighting how each of these activities mutually strengthen the other in disaster recovery
 - b. test and refine child-friendly methods of measuring service user satisfaction.

1. Recovery Youth Support Service – Background

The Recovery Youth Support Service (RYSS) is a team of Youth Support Specialists working with children and young people aged 8-24 years impacted by the major flood events which occurred in 2022 in the Northern Rivers Region of NSW. It is a NSW Reconstruction Authority (NSWRA) program delivered by the NSW Advocate for Children and Young People (ACYP).

The Northern Rivers is a large geographic area with diverse terrain and diverse communities that were impacted by the 2022 flood events in different ways. Communities were differently impacted by the major flood on 28 February 2022, landslides and smaller flood events, preceding bushfires and the COVID19 pandemic and associated closures of schools, sport and recreation teams and local services.

Temporary housing communities, or ‘pod villages’, were set up using pod houses to address the high rates of local homelessness after the 2022 flood events.

1.1 Purpose

The ACYP established RYSS with funding from the joint Australian Government-NSW Government Disaster Recovery Funding Arrangements 2018, managed in NSW by NSWRA, to continue the work and priorities identified in their *Children and Young People’s Experiences of Disaster 2020* report.

The RYSS commenced work with people aged 8 to 24 years in March 2023, to:

- understand what forms of support would be most valuable to children and young people and their community as they move towards recovery, in an initial consultation and program design period and on an ongoing basis as part of individual and community-level advocacy
- provide direct disaster recovery support and link children and young people with local service providers to enable tailored support for their wellbeing and recovery journey
- build the capacity of stakeholders whose work touches the lives of children and young people.

The RYSS team comprised:

- 3 local Senior Youth Specialists who delivered outreach one-on-one and community-based disaster recovery support
- Sydney-based Youth Specialist and Program Manager
- Sydney-based ACYP central administration and executive teams

The Advocate and the broader ACYP team engaged directly with children, young people and service partners in the region as needed and supported the Roundtable consultation and advocacy event.

Insights into young people’s experiences and perspectives from continuous consultation and engagement in the RYSS program are intended to inform NSW Government policy and decision-making. ACYP’s March 2024 publication, *Disaster Recovery and Preparedness Report: Voices of children and young people living in the Northern Rivers*, summarises findings from the program’s work with over 600 young people in the Northern Rivers and makes eighteen recommendations for improving disaster planning.

RYSS is due to conclude in March 2025.

1.2 Structure

The RYSS has five key program elements:

- i. advocacy
- ii. consultation
- iii. community engagement
- iv. capacity building – with children and young people and with local staff working with children and young people
- v. supported care pathway (one-on-one disaster recovery support).

See Figure 1 below.



Figure 1: RYSS program structure

2. Evaluation

2.1 Methodology

2.1.1. Document and Data Review

Insight reviewed and analysed program documentation and data to answer Key Evaluation Questions particularly regarding program use and meeting objectives, and as background for collecting and understanding interview data on program value and lessons learned. This review examined documentation and data related to:

- design, delivery and report-back processes for child and youth consultations in pod villages and at Netball NSW events, Acmena juvenile detention facility, Casino Beef Week, Blue Light Nights, and local NAIDOC Week events
- consultations designed and conducted on behalf of Ballina Council and Richmond Tweed Regional Library
- monthly reports on individual disaster recovery support prepared for NSWRA
- planning and delivery of school holiday activities in Coraki, Ballina, Wardell, Brunswick Heads and Wollongbar pod villages
- Pod Village Engagement Working Group meetings
- RYSS policies and procedures including *Fieldwork Policy, Process Map, Privacy Policy, Supervision Protocol, Critical Incident Report Template, Complaints and Critical Incidents Register, Referral Process Flowchart, Client Exit Letter* and *Client Exit Survey*
- design and delivery of the Northern Rivers Youth Led Roundtable convened in November 2023 and ReadyFest convened in January 2025
- the *Disaster Recovery and Preparedness Report* (March 2024)
- input and advice to the *NSW Disaster Adaptation Plan*.

A rapid review of evidence relevant to program elements and objectives (disaster recovery support; capacity-building; practice benchmarks for engaging with vulnerable children and young people) was conducted to inform document review and data analysis.

2.1.2. Data Collection

Insight conducted the following qualitative data collection activities with stakeholders and service users on program experiences and impacts:

- 6 interviews with young people who accessed RYSS (5 in person, 1 by phone), 3 of whom were interviewed about their experiences with RYSS one-on-one disaster recovery support and all of whom were interviewed about their experiences with consultation and advocacy activities – referred to in this evaluation as ‘service participants’
- 9 interviews with program stakeholders involved with RYSS via referral pathways, joint activities, shared clients or other links, conducted in-person and online – referred to in this evaluation as ‘service partners’
- 5 interviews with RYSS/ACYP staff and the Advocate – referred to in this evaluation as ‘staff’.

Service partner interviews were arranged and conducted by Insight Consulting, following initial approaches by RYSS to introduce the evaluation and request participation.

Interviews with service participants were conducted by Insight Consulting and arranged by RYSS. Informal conversations with children, young people and stakeholders also occurred opportunistically at a program event and at program delivery in two pod villages.

2.2 Key evaluation questions

- 1.** How have children, young people and stakeholders used a youth-specific disaster recovery support, advocacy and capacity-building service?
- 2.** To what extent has the program met its objectives to:
 - a.** link young people with local service providers
 - b.** understand what forms of support would be most valuable to children and young people and their community as they move towards recovery
 - c.** build the capacity of stakeholders whose work touches the lives of children and young people?
- 3.** What was the value of the Recovery Youth Support Service to children and young people and to the local services and institutions supporting them? Specifically:
 - a.** What helped (if anything)?
 - b.** What will they take forward from their participation (if anything)?
 - c.** Would they recommend the program model for other disaster recovery contexts, and why or why not?
- 4.** What lessons have been learnt from the experience of this program in terms of
 - a.** What is needed to adequately support children and young people through lengthy disaster recovery processes?
 - b.** What do existing services and stakeholders need to be able to adequately include or support children and young people?
 - c.** Are there any ways in which this program's design or delivery could be further developed or improved for other situations?

3. KEQ1 – Program use

How have children, young people and stakeholders used a youth-specific disaster recovery support, advocacy and capacity-building service?

The Recovery Youth Support Service (RYSS) is a support and advocacy service for children and young people aged 8-24 years. It was delivered between March 2023 and March 2025 in the Northern Rivers area, as part of disaster recovery efforts following the major flood event in February 2022.

The RYSS was designed to deliver:

- disaster recovery support for children and young people including
 - one-on-one support
 - community-level support
- consultation and advocacy to raise the voices of children and young people in local disaster recovery planning and delivery.

To effectively deliver these services, RYSS engaged in networking activities to build trust and working relationships with local services, communities and representative groups and committees.

3.1 Disaster recovery support

The 'supported care pathway' disaster recovery support is a primary service activity of the RYSS, comprising (but not limited to): individual relationship-based support guided by the child or young person's agreed goals and action plan; information and referral, facilitating access to material support, financial assistance, psycho-social support including mental health services and any other services required in recovery; and immediate emotional support and psychological first aid.

The initial intent of this NSWRA program stream was to provide brief intervention support to 160-200 children and young people in the Northern Rivers area.

Following initial consultations with local children and young people on what kinds of disaster recovery support would work best for them, the ACYP determined to deliver flexible support that followed children and young people on their disaster recovery pathway for as long as required, to guarantee continuity of care during periods of rapid change at personal, family and community levels (see also Section [4.2](#)). Referral pathways and eligibility criteria were intentionally broad within the target age range of 8-24 years.

Intensive up-front work to recruit the team locally and establish service pathways and networks was a critical establishment step for ACYP as an agency without a local service presence to effectively deliver child-centred services in the Northern Rivers.

Between August 2023 and March 2025, RYSS delivered direct support to 70 children and young people who were referred primarily from local schools and community housing providers. The most common reasons for referral were for support with matters related to mental health and education, followed by employment, trauma and disability support.

RYSS submitted monthly reports to NSWRA on clients in progress, exited and ineligible, sources of referrals and reasons for referrals, and themes or trends in issues being addressed in support.

3.2 Community engagement

The RYSS delivered school holiday and after-school activities in pod villages, such as art and craft activities, cultural fishing days and barbecues, both independently and in partnership with local organisations like PCYC Lismore and local government partners such as the Department of Primary Industries and Regional Development.

The team attended a broad range of community events in order to engage with children and young people and their families, consult with them on their disaster recovery experiences and support needs, and raise the profile of the RYSS. These included Netball NSW events; PCYC events like the Colour Run at Ballina; Casino Beef Week and Blue Light Nights; and local NAIDOC Week events.

3.3 Consultation

The RYSS team designed and delivered community consultations with children and young people, independently or on behalf of local agencies conducting disaster recovery and/or community planning. They:

- worked with Richmond Tweed Regional Library to design and conduct consultation of high school students on their priorities for development of a Youth Space as part of post-flood refurbishment of Lismore Library
- collaborated with Ballina Council on the design of a youth survey as part of community consultation on their Community Strategic Plan, and conducted the survey with more than 394 children and young people – leading to arrangements for the Advocate and ACYP team to facilitate a Youth Forum for Ballina Council in May 2025
- conducted survey and focus group consultations in a range of settings, to report back to local service providers on children and young people's needs, and to inform their *Disaster Recovery and Preparedness Report* (see Section [3.5.2](#)), including:
 - focus groups and interviews with young people at Acmena juvenile detention facility
 - surveys and focus groups at Coraki, Lismore, Ballina, Brunswick Heads, Mullumbimby and Wollongbar pod villages, on experiences and priorities in disaster recovery and living in pod village environments
 - surveys and focus groups at community events throughout 2023 including: Casino Beef Week; Casino Blue Light Night; Netball NSW Gala Day; NAIDOC Week events at Ballina and Tweed Heads; and the PCYC Colour Run at Ballina.

These consultations were reported by service partners as successful because of the program's community engagement focus. The RYSS team utilised the networks they had developed with children and young people and their families at community events and facilities to conduct consultations on behalf of Ballina Council and Richmond Tweed Regional Library.

Overall, the RYSS engaged with 2,909 children and young people in the Northern Rivers, primarily through their consultation, advocacy and associated capacity building activities.

3.4 Capacity building

3.4.1. Formal and informal capacity building activities with children and young people

The RYSS convened formal capacity building activities such as advocacy workshops with Casino Beef Week Beef Queen and Ambassador Program participants.

Their advocacy activities also had a focus on building children and young people's confidence and experience in advocating for themselves. Service participants involved in the Disaster Roundtable (see Section [3.5.1](#)) spoke about the confidence and skills they gained for identifying their own support needs and community support needs and advocating for those.

3.4.2. ReadyFest

ReadyFest was convened by RYSS on 30 January 2025, as a disaster readiness capacity-building event for children and young people in the Northern Rivers. It was attended by 143 children and young people, plus their families, aged from 0-24 years. Most participants were between 3 and 9 years of age.

Children and young people had the opportunity to meet with and learn from representatives of 19 local support providing agencies and emergency management authorities, via a range of workshops and interactive activities, and information stalls which participants were incentivised to visit and engage with.

ReadyFest had an objective to strengthen children and young people's connections to local services including local emergency management authorities, to raise awareness of the support networks that activate for children, young people and families in a crisis and build their capacity for disaster readiness. By fostering these connections, RYSS also aimed to ensure that children and young people had trusted sources of information and support in the local community as their own program wound up.

3.4.3. Local organisations working with children and young people

RYSS collaborated with local agencies including Ballina Council and Richmond Tweed Regional Libraries to strengthen their child and youth consultations, for example by advising on survey designs and distributing surveys. RYSS provided ongoing advice in relation to consultation/engagement and in interpreting and applying the results of the surveys.

Local community service organisation Plan C was supported by RYSS to receive a Multicultural NSW Community Partnership Action (COMPACT) grant for the 'NextGen Navigator' four-year disaster readiness program for young people in the Northern Rivers. With ongoing ACYP support for youth recruitment and evaluation and iterative improvement program activities, Plan C has enhanced capacity to deliver disaster readiness outcomes related to youth disaster resilience, leadership and community organisation.

The RYSS team also initiated a working group between Pod Village Engagement Coordinators to progress integrated service responses for children and young people and their families in pod villages.

While RYSS did not host formal capacity building workshops or professional development activities for service partners in the Northern Rivers, service partners described the programs impact on their understanding and approach to child and youth consultation and inclusion (see Section [4.3](#)).

3.5 Advocacy

Advocacy was a focus across all RYSS program activities (see [Figure 1](#)). At an individual level, staff advocated on behalf of children and young people, and supported them to skill up in advocating for themselves, in a range of settings including schools and government schemes such as NDIS.

Broader advocacy activities described at Sections 3.5.1 and 3.5.2 below also assisted participants to develop their confidence and skills in self-advocacy and this was recognised by service participants interviewed for this evaluation.

3.5.1. Youth Led Disaster Recovery and Future Preparedness Roundtable

The RYSS team hosted a roundtable event on 17 November 2023, which brought together local young people, community leaders and government decision-makers and representatives to discuss children and young people's disaster recovery experiences and priorities for future disaster preparedness.

The roundtable was attended by 27 young people (aged 15+ years) alongside the Hon. Rose Jackson MLC, Minister for Youth; Zoë Robinson, Advocate for Children and Young People; Chris Cherry, Mayor of Tweed Shire Council; and representatives of the NSW Reconstruction Authority, Department of Communities and Justice, Office for Sport and Department of Planning, Housing and Infrastructure.

3.5.2. Disaster Recovery and Preparedness Report

In March 2024, the ACYP published *Disaster Recovery and Preparedness Report: Voices of Children and Young People Living in the Northern Rivers*. This report summarised findings from the November 2023 roundtable event and RYSS consultations in communities including pod villages throughout the Northern Rivers. It made 38 recommendations to decision makers including the Commonwealth and NSW Governments, NSW Reconstruction Authority and the Department of Communities and Justice.

The *Disaster Recovery and Preparedness Report* was launched at the Disaster Ready Together Summit convened in Lismore in March 2024, around the two-year anniversary of the 2022 flood events. The report was presented at a session facilitated by the Advocate, a Senior Youth Specialist and three service participants. This was a further opportunity for RYSS advocacy and for service participants to gain experience in representing the needs and priorities of themselves and their peers to local support providing agencies and emergency management authorities.

3.6 KEQ1 conclusion

The RYSS has been involved with a high volume of children and young people across their diverse service activities which were unique in their youth-led development. Because staff understood the importance of connecting children and young people with the help they needed where it could not be provided directly by the RYSS team, their capacity to connect with this broad group of children and young people became a disaster recovery safety net across the Northern Rivers region.

4. KEQ2 – Meeting program objectives

To what extent has the program met its objectives to:

- a. link young people with local service providers
- b. understand what forms of support would be most valuable to children and young people and their community as they move towards recovery
- c. build the capacity of stakeholders whose work touches the lives of children and young people?

4.1 Linking with local service providers

4.1.1. *Supporters referrals and collaborative case management*

The Recovery Youth Support Service delivered a ‘no wrong door’ approach in their disaster recovery support program activities. This was reported by stakeholders as highly valuable, especially in geographically isolated communities with limited local support and referral options. Service partners appreciated being able to refer young people to RYSS and be confident that they would be linked to the help they needed through advocacy and supported referrals.

Examples provided by stakeholders included helping children and young people to reapply for NDIS funding; to access psychology and social work services; and to access employment support services.

There was recognition that part of the program’s effectiveness in linking children and young people with specialist services was the responsiveness of government agencies and institutions to the ACYP as a government agency associated with protecting and advocating for the rights of children and young people. A staff member observed that:



One of the more unique ways we’ve been able to support people – rather than working for an NGO or another government department – is the Office is so unique, and we’ve really been able to, I feel, have a stronger stance on advocating for young people. And that’s been definite in schools, and with the NDIS, and employment agencies.



Consultation, advocacy, activities, and child-focused events such as ReadyFest, effectively linked children and young people with local service providers, and also local emergency management authorities such as the NSW Reconstruction Authority, SES and RFS and local Councils.

Local and remote staff were highly regarded as engaged, reliable and communicative people who worked collaboratively with a broad range of local services to build support teams around vulnerable children and young people and their communities.

4.1.2. *Community networks*

RYSS participated in local networks such as the Lismore Youth Interagency network and also initiated the Pod Village Engagement Working Group in an effort to facilitate joint work supporting children and young people in disaster recovery.

Staff, service partners and participants did note that the team had a relatively low profile in the context of the multitude of disaster recovery services that were funded as surge support in the immediate aftermath of the 2022 flood events. Some service partners expressed frustration at the time it took for their organisation to ‘discover’ RYSS and take advantage of the service they were providing.

This is considered further at Section [6.3.4](#).

4.2 Understand children and young people's disaster recovery support needs

Development of the RYSS program and service approach was informed by the ACYP's consultations to understand children and young people's disaster recovery support needs, at every step:

- i. ACYP conducted a broadscale consultation with children and young people impacted by disaster in 2020, and published findings in their *Children and Young People's Experiences of Disaster Report*
- ii. ACYP consulted with families in the Northern Rivers in the immediate aftermath of the 2022 flood events and also with children and young people impacted by floods in the NSW Central West later that year, to understand their immediate support needs after a disaster
- iii. following receipt of grant funding to establish RYSS, the new RYSS team conducted an initial period of consultation with children, young people and families especially in pod villages to understand what they needed from a local child and youth disaster recovery support service
- iv. on an ongoing basis, consultation was a parallel part of every RYSS community engagement activity and continued to inform their service delivery priorities
- v. they were able to draw from consultations with 635 children and young people in the Northern Rivers to publish their Disaster Recovery and Preparedness Report (2024).

Examples of program elements informed by co-design consultations with children and young people include their:

- focus on pod villages (deliver recreational activities and advocate for improved recreational space)
- prioritisation of onsite support in communities (especially pod villages) and schools, to reduce transport barrier
- flexible length of service, to support continuity of care in a period of local post-disaster instability.

Service partners involved with RYSS consultation and advocacy activities stated that their agencies were better informed of children and young people's disaster recovery needs and priorities as a result of the program.

Service partners familiar with the Disaster Recovery and Preparedness Report considered it a benchmark of child and youth advocacy because it conveyed the views of a large and diverse cross-section of local children and young people – presented in a professional and accessible way – and had meaningful recommendations that appeared to be effecting change at every level of disaster management planning.

4.3 Capacity of stakeholders

Service partners mostly described their own work with children and young people as under-resourced. They placed high value on the need to consult directly with children and young people on the services and infrastructure intended to support them, but were rarely able to invest the time and staff resources to do so.

Most service partners described the RYSS remit and expertise in this space as a critical enhancement of their own efforts to prioritise the voices of children and young people in disaster recovery.

They also recognised that the program’s disaster recovery support activities operated in settings where the support environment was limited or complex – including pod villages, especially in the early stages of pod village establishment, and schools, especially for students with limited natural support networks.

Service partners who participated in the program’s consultations and advocacy activities reported a renewed understanding of, and commitment to, the importance of actively engaging with children and young people on their support needs and priorities, rather than assuming their needs. A service partner stated:



They taught us that decisions about young people need to be youth-led.



All service partners stated that their preference for future approaches to supporting children and young people was to secure additional resources for their own agencies and other local agencies to engage better with children and young people. They recognised this was an activity that should be locally embedded and continuously resourced.

However, most also made a case for internal capacity-building activities to be invested alongside continued presence of RYSS in some form because:

- RYSS has been an independent voice for children and young people in the region, and this has strengthened their platform for advocacy toward local and high-level changes
- as a ‘one stop shop’ for children and young people, agencies that worked with RYSS to consult on their policies, program or infrastructure achieved a high response rate from diverse cohorts
- RYSS was run by ACYP, a trusted government agency with the credibility and authority to initiate action and request changes from other government agencies
- as part of ACYP, RYSS staff had specialist skills when it came to consulting with children and young people, supporting them directly, and advocating on their behalf – local agencies appreciated being able to draw on this expertise and saw it as difficult to replicate locally within individual agencies.

A service partner described the ‘one-stop-shop’ advantage as:



Just to have that singular point was so stabilising and it was so much easier for me to action the results of their consultation than to probe the community or go to certain points. So I think it was just that central access.



4.4 KEQ2 conclusion

The RYSS team met their program objectives, especially related to understanding how to support children and young people in disaster recovery and how to make changes at a local level to help ensure that children and young people and their families can access the supports they need.

Local and remote members of the RYSS team were highly regarded by service partners and stakeholders for their capacity to engage children and young people with services and providers including schools and health services.

Their highly professional and expert approach to consulting with children and young people on their experiences and priorities in disaster recovery – and to bringing together stakeholders to progress these priorities – was highly valued by stakeholders interviewed for this evaluation.

From the sample of service participants interviewed, it is foreseeable that a legacy of the RYSS will be that the high volume of children and young people who participated in the program's consultation and advocacy activities are more aware of how to ask for change for themselves and their communities. Among service partners, RYSS capacity-building looked like resourcing a higher standard of consultation with children and young people than was possible within their own resources, and delivering services in areas where child-focused support was complex or sparse, including pod villages and schools (for students with limited natural support networks).

5. KEQ3 – Value

What was the value of the Recovery Youth Support Service to children and young people and to the local services and institutions supporting them? Specifically:

- a. What helped (if anything)?
- b. What will they take forward from their participation (if anything)?
- c. Would they recommend the program model for other disaster recovery contexts, and why or why not?

5.1 What helped?

5.1.1. *Reduced isolation for children and young people*

Young people spoke about the positive impact of feeling like part of a larger community or network when accessing RYSS activities and advocacy events. These impacts included:

- validation – realising they were not alone in the issues and challenges they were facing
- empowerment – being part of discussions with high-level decision makers
- access – RYSS was able to connect them with local services and opportunities.

Stakeholders (the following quotes are from a service partner and a service participant) also observed the unifying effects of the school holiday and after school activities delivered by RYSS in pod villages.

“

When ACYP have come out and run an activity [for children in the pod villages] I see that their behaviour has settled down when they're gone ... For the following week or two there's a bit of calm. They're happy, they're engaging more ... Without it, the children wouldn't be the same.

”

“

Before ACYP, kids [in the Pod village] were not really talking to each other or were starting fights over little things.

”

The early decision by the ACYP to establish a program focus on children and young people in pod villages addressed some of the risks to children and young people's safety, wellbeing and community links that are associated with both geographic isolation and exclusion from planning and decision-making. In pod villages the RYSS:

- successfully advocated for child-friendly changes to physical environments to allow for safe play, such as shading and designating areas for children and young people to use bikes and play ball sports
- delivered support care pathway one-on-one support
- provided supervised recreational activities outside of school hours including during school holidays, relieving pressure on families and allowing children and young people to build connections with each other

- initiated a Pod Village Engagement Coordinators Working Group to support collaboration across pod villages on shared issues
- continuously consulted with children and young people and represented their needs and priorities in high-level advocacy for change in disaster response planning and management, for example in their *Disaster Recovery and Preparedness Report (2024)*.

5.1.2. Visibility, inclusion and voice

A powerful message from program stakeholders was the impact of consultation with children and young people on local disaster recovery and broader community planning. Stakeholders observed:

- the scale of child and youth participation that ACYP achieved in the consultation activities they conducted independently and on behalf of other stakeholders such as local councils
- the richness of findings from these consultations (often, when specific cohorts are properly consulted, we are surprised that their responses are not what we would have guessed or surmised)
- children and young people commented on the value of the process for their sense of confidence and wellbeing while navigating the personal and community effects of disaster
- over-all sense of optimism for the future as stakeholders felt better equipped to act in the best interests of children and young people when planning for the future of the Northern Rivers.

5.1.3. Flexible service delivery model informed by the needs of children and young people

Stakeholders appreciated that the RYSS was able to complement casework-style disaster recovery support with program activities that were responsive to identified needs, such as in-school advocacy and pod village recreational activities in school holidays and after school hours.

Referring agencies identified that RYSS had broad eligibility criteria compared to some disaster recovery models, and also that staff worked hard to connect referred children and young people to other local and/or specialist services. Service partners and service participants said that the program was genuinely committed to this 'no wrong door' approach.

Outreach activities in more remote communities such as Casino and Coraki were highly valued, and stakeholders sought expanded investment in this outreach approach in future.

5.1.4. Delivery by a trusted independent Office adjacent to the NSW Government

The status of the ACYP – as an independent rights-based government agency, with a role in holding decision-makers to account for the wellbeing of children and young people – was recognised by staff and some service partners as critical to the program's success in both support and advocacy.

As outlined at Section **4.1.1**, this status facilitated the development of working relationships with government-based systems such as schools and the National Disability Insurance Scheme (NDIS) and generally fast-tracked trust and responsiveness of service providers and local decision-makers in advocacy settings.

The RYSS team also had the resources of the ACYP Finance, IT and Human Resources teams to manage the program's reporting requirements, assist with team recruitment and function across dual remote and local locations.

5.1.5. Highly skilled staff

As a team the RYSS program staff were generally seen as uniquely solution-oriented, problem-solving and energetic in a fatiguing service delivery environment characterised by burnout from direct and vicarious trauma and the effects of the flood on local housing and essential services.

Staff members described the positive impact of working in a culture of flexibility, and some stakeholders observed this as program and individual staff willingness to work beyond key performance indicators, which tend to be based on client outcomes, to achieve community development goals.

While the RYSS was not immune from staff turnover they had some protective factors including their split local/remote staffing model (which afforded consistency at the team management level) and the ability to offer salaries above the non-government market as a NSW Government employer.

Some individual staff members in the RYSS program were singled out by stakeholders for achieving positive change in the Northern Rivers community because of their approachability, professionalism, skill in engaging children and young people, innovation and ability to deliver service activities to a high standard. This speaks to the importance of a workplace culture of proactive program delivery and a high team standard of professionalism in working with children and young people.

One service participant described the difference in working with RYSS staff as their commitment to:



...having a plan and backing it up with morals and values that guide staff conduct and commitment. It takes a very particular kind of person to do the work and do it well.



5.1.6. Longevity

The program's completion date of 31 March 2025 extends its service delivery period beyond most disaster recovery support programs by more than 12 months. This was recognised by service partners and staff as both a program strength and weakness.

They were able to provide extended support to children and young people that more adequately mirrored the actual recovery rate for many individuals and families who had experienced the compounding effects of multiple disasters since major floods in 2017.

However, the pending conclusion of the RYSS pilot adds to the effect, for some stakeholders, of the recent mass withdrawal of disaster recovery support services. The 'surge' funding of support programs in the Northern Rivers intended to meet the immediate needs of individuals and families in crisis and withdraw when the crisis was over. Unintended consequences of this surge approach were, that the service delivery landscape became confusing for people to navigate during the crisis period, and the foundations of trust and continuity critical to trauma-informed care were hard for short-term programs to achieve with their service users. Service partners identified that the exit of RYSS will leave a gap, especially regarding expert child and youth consultation and advocacy in the next cycle of disaster prevention planning and community renewal.

These impacts were recognised by the ACYP, and their decision against extending the program beyond its end date of 31 March 2025 was intended as a mitigation. It allowed for a transparent and planned withdrawal from the local area in order to prevent the risk of confusion and delayed adjustments for stakeholders associated with short-term program extensions.

5.2 What will participants take forward?

Reflecting on what they will take forward from their participation in the program, children and young people discussed their renewed ability to 'look to the future' and reduced sense of being 'stuck in crisis'. They reported that the program's one-on-one support and advocacy activities had given them the tools to understand what was possible in their local area and how they might achieve positive change for themselves and their peers.

One service participant described how the program was:



...an avenue to contribute to positive change for other young people with similar experiences.



Interviews with service participants provided clear case study examples of young people moving forward from program participation with improved housing, education and social inclusion outcomes and more optimistic expectations for their future. As examples, service participants variously described being supported by RYSS to:

- re-engage with school through practical supports and school/student liaison and advocacy
- enrol in vocational or higher education, through support to clarify their goals and navigate systems of application and enrolment
- advocate for themselves, for example in welfare and disability schemes
- strengthen their relationships with family members
- secure housing in the local area and outside of the area.

For service partners, the *Disaster Recovery Report* was a tangible program result that they hoped would impact future disaster planning. They valued the report as a comprehensive and well-written document that amplified the voices of children and young people in the Northern Rivers area in government decision-making settings.

Most service partners described the ways that their agencies are strengthening their internal capacity for inclusion of children and young people in consultation and planning as a result of the involvement with RYSS consultation and advocacy in disaster recovery (see Section [6.2.1](#)).

5.3 Value of the model for future disaster recovery contexts

Stakeholders were highly satisfied with the Recovery Youth Support Service and considered it to be useful for other service delivery contexts.

Nine stakeholders – a mix of service participants and service partners – were asked to rate their level of satisfaction with the RYSS on a scale of 1 to 5. Most stakeholders were highly satisfied (see [Figure 2](#) on the next page).

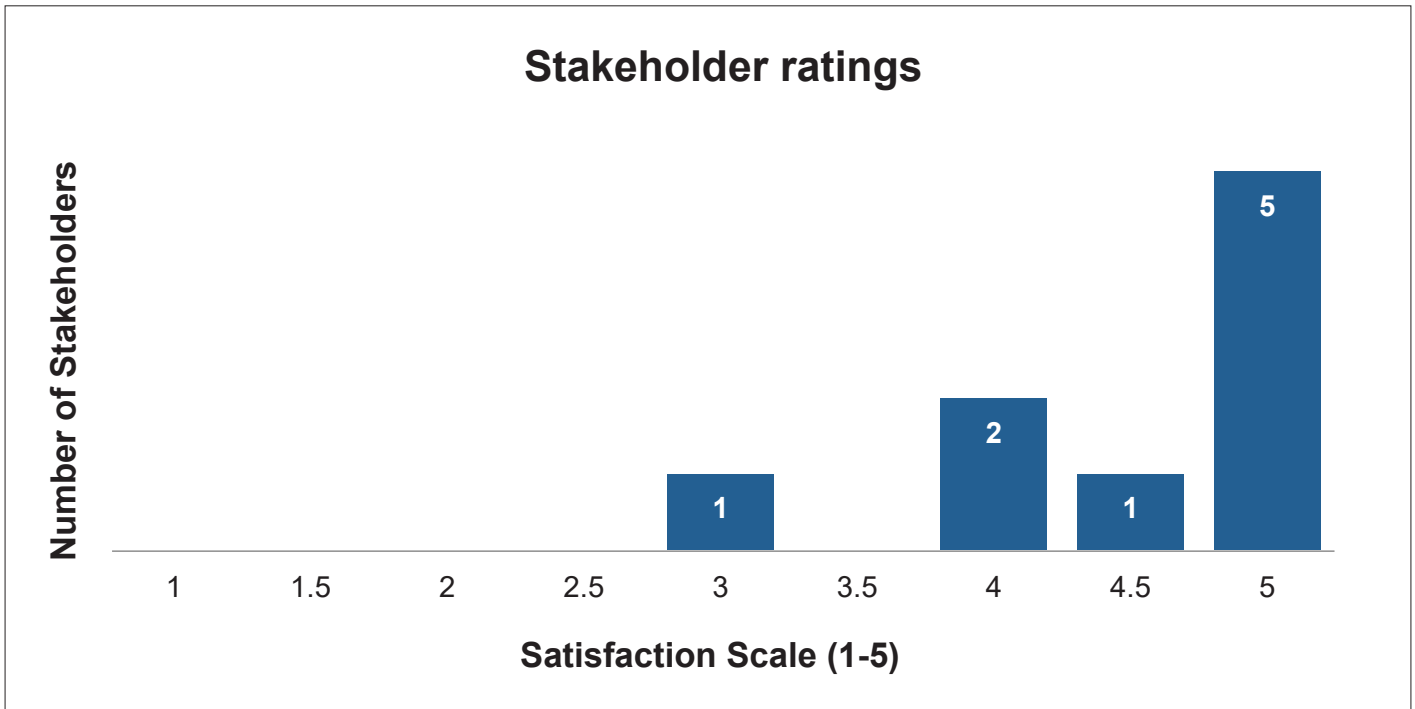


Figure 2: Stakeholder satisfaction ratings

The main reasons for support of the program were its flexibility, staff professionalism and its delivery by the ACYP as an independent government agency, as outlined at Section 5.1 above.

Parts of the model that reduced stakeholders' satisfaction ratings related to the non-permanence of the program; a sense that its direct support component was under-resourced and not sufficiently locally embedded; and under-promotion of the program which left stakeholders with a sense that it had not achieved the reach it could have. These are outlined further at Section 6.3.

5.4 KEQ3 conclusion

The RYSS was valued as a service for children and young people in disaster recovery that had the unique standing and resources to flexibly meet the needs that children and young people identified (collectively and at an individual level). It has built their capacity for self-advocacy, supported effective community consultation with children and young people on post-disaster community planning and raised their voices in disaster management decision-making. Stakeholders also raised the value of the program's continued presence in the local area until March 2025, after most programs funded to support immediate post-disaster recovery wound up.

Service partners and service participants were satisfied or highly satisfied with the program and both groups of stakeholders identified that they were taking forward a renewed understanding of the importance of children and young people's views in community planning and decision-making.

Service participants described improved confidence and optimism for the future.

For these reasons stakeholders want to see the program model employed in future disaster recovery contexts, in line with feedback outlined at [Section 6](#).

Recommendations

1. The NSW Reconstruction Authority fund future Recovery Youth Support Service programs as part of local disaster recovery responses, which:
 - a. use a data collection and reporting framework focused on child and young people's wellbeing in the context of family and community wellbeing (not solely focused on individual case management goals)
 - b. have community development goals to resource investment in children and young people's natural support networks and encourage innovative responses to breaking down children and young people's experiences of isolation in disaster recovery.

6. KEQ4 – Lessons learned

What lessons have been learnt from the experience of this program in terms of

- a. What is needed to adequately support children and young people through lengthy disaster recovery processes?
- b. What do existing services and stakeholders need to be able to adequately include or support children and young people?
- c. Are there any ways in which this program's design or delivery could be further developed or improved for other situations?

6.1 Adequate support through lengthy disaster recovery processes

6.1.1. *Early inclusion in disaster response planning*

Some staff members observed that the RYSS had a six-month establishment stage while the team consulted with local communities to co-design their disaster recovery support approach. While a co-design approach is best practice, staff reflected on how this might be streamlined in future – on the basis of the learnings from this program – to ensure that children and young people can start accessing practical support as early as possible.

Community consultation is a best-practice approach that takes account of local strengths, challenges and support needs. Future iterations of the RYSS (or similar) may benefit from using the ACYP establishment experiences in the Northern Rivers as a benchmark process so that they may efficiently and effectively develop a service that is responsive to the needs of children and young people in their local area (see Recommendation 5(c)).

The case for better planning for the needs of children and young people at every level of disaster management and planning has been clearly made by the ACYP in their recent *Disaster Recovery and Preparedness Report (2024)* and the preceding *Children and Young People's Experiences of Disaster Report (2020)*. Service partners supported this need and the reports' recommendations in this regard.

In future if a RYSS service is delivered in the context of:

- increased child-focused resources within NSWRA, emergency accommodation policy and planning, and other critical disaster recovery governance structures, and
- better child and youth representation in community decision-making bodies such as emergency management committees,

then that service can be more rapidly informed of local children and young people's support needs and relevant service delivery networks, and commence operation sooner.

Rapid deployment of a child and youth response after a disaster may also prevent or reduce some of the unsuitable disaster recovery environments in which this RYSS model operated, such as families living for extended periods in pod villages.

6.1.2. *Place-based support*

Service partners observed that a key strength of the ACYP service delivery approach was that they came to children and young people to deliver services close to them. They connected with children and young people and their families through outreach to pod villages, sport and recreation centres and schools. They built professional networks in these spaces and also trusting relationships with children and young people and their families.

One service partner described ACYP's prompt response to a request for assistance:



They went straight down. They already had relationships with family...the fact they were already working with families was helpful.



As a result of this approach the program was described as highly accessible despite the flood's impact on community isolation and transport. Children and young people used the service by getting to know RYSS staff in the environments in which they lived, played and went to school.

Some stakeholders sought more program resources for pod villages as they identified unmet needs such as outcome-focused recreational activities, for example with goals to teach life skills or educate children and young people in practical ways. Another unmet need was diverse therapy options for children and young people less comfortable with talking therapy models – such as art, music or animal therapy. Some stakeholders reported that young people needed in-person mental health supports (and were not taking up e-health models) but that talking therapies were often less helpful than models which engaged them in activities and social groups – also enabling peer support.

6.1.3. Trauma-informed support

Children and young people require trauma-informed disaster recovery support, not only in the immediate aftermath of a disaster, but in the following months and years. The length of time for which any one child or young person requires access to specialist one-on-one trauma-informed support depends on individual circumstances including but not limited to:

- compounding vulnerabilities such as poverty, isolation and social exclusion (for example related to race, disability or gender identity)
- nature and scale of disaster/disasters experienced, and the rate of recovery for the local community and critical infrastructure including housing, roads and schools
- the child or young person's confidence in the recovery process and trust that the individuals and systems on whom they rely are acting in their best interests.

Staff and stakeholders described the compounding effects of previous disasters that Northern Rivers families had experienced prior to the record-breaking devastation of the 2022 flood events. These included major floods in 2017, the national 2019/20 'Black Summer' bushfire crisis and the COVID19 pandemic and associated long-duration closures of schools, sporting associations and social groups and venues – including up to the present for some venues/services.

6.1.4. Child-focused planning and design

While a critical foundation of children and young people's wellbeing is the safety and wellbeing of their family unit, the pilot of the RYSS demonstrated the importance of complementing family-based support services with specialist child and youth support and advocacy.

RYSS direct consultation and high-level advocacy elevated the voices of children and young people in a way that consultation with parents or youth services on behalf of children cannot – and taught children self-advocacy skills and confidence that they may bring into other life domains or future periods of crisis.

Child-focused activities such as the provision of supervised play during school holidays in pod villages, and child-friendly improvements to pod village environments had ripple effects observed by stakeholders and staff of relieving pressure on family units.

Investment in child and youth services augments local expertise and raises the profile of children and young people to ensure their safety and wellbeing is prioritised in local planning including disaster management planning.

Recommendations

2. The NSW Reconstruction Authority invest in a Child and Youth position or team to coordinate rapid youth responses during local disaster recovery responses, including oversight of a Recovery Youth Support Service model.
3. Local Councils in the Northern Rivers continue to pursue options to retain Youth Officer positions to support inclusion of children and young people in community consultations and community strategic planning – including for disaster preparedness and recovery.
4. Any future Recovery Youth Support Service model be resourced to embed in impacted communities and supported to link with local schools.
5. Any future Recovery Support Service model:
 - a. be designed to deliver and advocate for trauma-informed support of children and young people
 - b. retain the ability to respond flexibly to local needs as they change or emerge over time
 - c. involve local children and young people in adaptation of the model for their community, drawing on ACYP benchmark practices for youth-led program design and establishment in this pilot program
 - d. resource outreach and place-based service delivery through funding for transport, staffing arrangements that account for travel, and protocols for operating in remote environments.

6.2 KEQ4(b): lessons learned for existing service landscape

6.2.1. *Organisational resources for child-focused planning and service delivery*

Service partners' involvement with the RYSS has raised for them the need for long-term investment in child and youth focused planning within their own organisations and/or the organisations they work with to support children and young people in the local community.

As part of longer-term investment in community resilience and disaster readiness, local agencies and institutions need to be appropriately resourced to consult with children and young people on their support needs and priorities, and work with each other to ensure that children and young people's basic safety and welfare needs are met in the event of a disaster. This includes local government, community-based services and providers of essential services like housing, education and health including mental health services. In the context of increasing and more intensive demands on existing services this capacity is often quite limited.

6.2.2. Flexible resources to provide practical support

Staff, service partners and service participants were aware that some of the practical supports that children and young people require after a disaster event are systemic in nature and not readily resolved by a single support program. These include:

- Transport: public transport systems (where present in regional communities) are often incapacitated after a disaster and families may have limited or no private transport either. Together with displacement of homes, schools and places of work and recreation, this means that children and young people need access to innovative transport solutions to reduce isolation and disruption of their routines and access to formal and informal supports
- Access to specialist services: The RYSS was reported to be particularly effective in linking children and young people with mental health, social work, occupational therapy and other specialist services, because they were assisted by the status of the ACYP as a government office with a rights-based advocacy profile. Local services and future RYSS program would benefit from strengthened referral pathways after a disaster between schools and community-based organisations, and specialist services.

Recommendations

6. The NSW Reconstruction Authority consider ways to resource practical supports for children and young people specifically (not just families) in disaster recovery, including safe child and youth transport options in regional areas, and referral networks between local community-based support services and specialist services.

6.2.3. Future working relationships with ACYP

Existing services and stakeholders benefited from the presence of the Advocate as an independent, high-level voice for children and young people impacted by floods. See Section [4.1.1](#).

6.3 KEQ4(c): developing RYSS program design and delivery

6.3.1. Locally-based service provider

The overriding message from the ACYP and from service partners was that future disaster recovery service models for children and young people should be locally based to support rapid start-up and more staff on the ground to improve local reach.

While the program is seen as working effectively at a local level and at a high level (impacting state and federal disaster recovery planning) there was agreement that their local presence could have been better resourced or better delivered by a locally embedded organisation, and that this might also improve continuity for service participants when the program ends.

For local organisations to deliver effective disaster responses – where their own staff are affected to varying degrees – may require design which reflects some of the lessons of this program. This may include offering local organisations support in the form of external clinical supervision for staff affected by trauma, vicarious trauma and/or severe fatigue, and back-up or surge staffing and management capacity from external organisations for a range of contingencies. These offers go some way to replicating the advantages ACYP was afforded by having out-of-region managers and organisational infrastructure.

Staff members and stakeholders appreciated that the program's split staff model of local and remote/Sydney-based team members had advantages, such as maintaining team energy and morale. Service partners generally stated that the split local and remote staffing model made no difference for them as they were still able to meet team members in person when necessary and otherwise staff were readily available by phone or video conferencing. However, some service partners thought the split model reduced program presence in local communities, for example in pod villages, and this impacted their networks and relationships with community-based services.

6.3.2. Role of the Advocate

The Advocate was able to gain rapid trust especially of government agencies based on the Office's place and reputation as an independent oversight agency operating within the NSW Government and with expertise in working safely and effectively with children and young people.

This was a key strength of the RYSS pilot. We recommend that the Advocate maintain an advisory and systemic advocacy role in any future youth-focused disaster recovery service so that locally-based service providers may draw on the Advocate to liaise with schools and health services if necessary and to escalate matters that require the attention of the NSW and/or Australian Governments.

Recommendations

7. The Advocate for Children and Young People consider, together with NSWRA, how they continue their systemic advocacy role with children and young people affected by disasters, and how ACYP may have a support and advisory function for any future RYSS program to augment local consultation with children and young people as communities plan their recovery and renewal.

6.3.3. Retain flexibility and responsive innovation

Flexibility was recognised by team members as a program strength even in its earliest design stages. ACYP were given the space by NSWRA to consult with children and young people on what they needed from a local recovery support service and design a response accordingly. They were able to deliver the one-on-one support expected in the RSS model and also deliver local consultations and advocacy events in line with ACYP organisational strengths and expertise.

Flexibility enables a stronger focus on outcomes rather than on services delivered, and is a good approach for learning where there are not yet suitable evidence-based models. But an outcomes focus may also require greater intensity or duration than models which deliberately limit or ration services to maximise reach or models which restrict eligibility. One learning through this pilot seems to be that, following disaster, most children and young people, if they are able to access a service, do not utilise one-on-one support beyond the period for which it is needed. However, for adequate coverage a higher level for staffing than that delivered by RYSS for one-on-one support seems indicated by feedback from service partners and participants.

The program's broad eligibility criteria and flexible approach to service delivery – for example, not limiting the length of support periods, and making effort to ensure children and young people could access the program in the places they lived and went to school – were seen by stakeholders to be unique and critical in a disaster recovery support context. Stakeholders observed that other programs they had experienced tended to be limited because of overly prescriptive contractual arrangements – inhibiting person-centred, place-based and outcomes-focused delivery.

This flexibility allowed better continuity for children and young people who benefited from trauma-informed service delivery approaches, and meant that the program had an effective reach within different age cohorts, cultural groups and with a broad range of support needs.

It also allowed program staff to adapt their service delivery in response to community needs (see Section [4.2](#)).

Program flexibility needs to be supported by outcomes-based reporting and data collection frameworks that take account of child and young person wellbeing individually and in the context of family and community. Monitoring the outcomes of community development activities in disaster recovery assists investment of program time and resources in informal activities to build people's relationships, natural support networks, self-advocacy, confidence and other long-term protective factors in disaster recovery and local disaster readiness.

This is a consideration for both NSWRA and ACYP as program outcomes data is limited to RYSS monthly reports on their provision of one-on-one disaster recovery support. The RYSS team trialed outcome measurement strategies including exit surveys and Outcomes Star tools. As the program evolved in response to youth-identified priorities and support needs (for example, longer and less structured one-on-one support periods than initially planned), practical considerations for outcome reporting also changed. In the end, a fit-for-purpose method for measuring outcomes was not realised.

(See [Recommendations 1 and 8](#).)

6.3.4. Raise program identity and profile

The flexible approach of the RYSS was from the foundation of a clear mandate and structure.

It appears that the breadth of service delivery was not fully communicated. Staff, service partners and service participants highlighted that they were not fully aware of all the program's activities, and had examples of times that local services and communities were not aware of the RYSS or the support it might provide for children and young people.

Flexibility within their mandate did lead sometimes to confusion and/or unrealistic expectations, especially in pod villages where there was a high level of need and a small number of services with the expertise, funding and sufficient local presence to do the work.

While the multiple service delivery arms that ACYP developed for the RYSS strengthened each other to the benefit of children and young people in the Northern Rivers, stakeholders involved in one service type were often not aware, or were only peripherally aware, of their other service delivery activities.

For some stakeholders the RYSS was identified as the ACYP and its work in the Northern Rivers was understood as meeting the Office's broader remit to raise the voices of children and young people within and outside of a disaster recovery context. Others were more closely involved in the program's one-on-one support and pod village activities and had less feedback to provide on their advocacy and consultation activities for children and young people in the Northern Rivers.

To a degree, this limited awareness of the RYSS or of its different dimensions reflects the stretched nature of three local staff and a focus on service delivery with children and young people.

Recommendation

8. In any future service delivery, the Advocate for Children and Young People:
 - a. strategise to build their local profile as both an advocacy and service delivery body, highlighting how each of these activities mutually strengthen the other in disaster recovery
 - b. test and refine child-friendly methods of measuring service user satisfaction.

6.4 KEQ4 conclusion

The lessons learned from the RYSS program experience are drawn from staff and stakeholder experiences of RYSS' program design and delivery, as well as broader staff and stakeholder experiences of supporting children and young people after a major disaster.

From the program's activities in the Northern Rivers, and from their consultations with children and young people on their broader disaster recovery experiences, there are clear lessons that children and young people benefit from child-focused planning and design in disaster recovery for earlier responses that are trauma-informed and accessible to children and young people regardless of their family or community resources in times of crisis.

Existing services benefit from expertise in working and consulting with children and young people – both within organisations and through links with specialist agencies such as the ACYP. With this expertise, they have more capacity to be flexible and innovative in the ways they work alongside families and communities to meet children and young people's needs.

There is a strong call for any future RYSS model to be delivered by a local service with established networks and relationships, ideally connected with the Advocate so that policy matters can be more rapidly advocated at a higher government level.

The primary lesson learned is that children and young people do need a specific focus within disaster recovery planning and services, and that without such a focus they can be left in an unsafe place physically and/or in terms of their current and long-term wellbeing.

Prior to this program and the wider work of ACYP the needs of children and young people in disaster recovery had not been well examined. The lessons learned are strategic and critical for future disaster responses.

7. Conclusion

The Recovery Youth Support Service had an important role in flood recovery in the Northern Rivers after the 2022 flood events. The program's consultations and advocacy with children and young people highlighted the need for priority consideration of child wellbeing and safety in disaster planning. As disasters increase in frequency and intensity, all levels of government are focusing on advance mitigation through investment in prevention infrastructure and emergency management planning.

The RYSS program was operating in a disaster recovery environment in which children and young people's needs were insufficiently considered and therefore insufficiently resourced. It was able to deliver to a high level of stakeholder satisfaction in this environment because of its flexible, youth-led approach to eligibility and disaster recovery support. As delivered by ACYP with its capacity for specialist child and youth consultation and advocacy, the RYSS is also a vehicle for reform to improve the recovery experiences of the youngest community cohorts in future disasters.

The program's design and lessons learned in its delivery have highlighted the importance of having a specific focus on children and young people separate from families. The program's child-focused delivery helped it to:

- facilitate children's pro-social engagement in pod villages where conflict, isolation and a general sense of disengagement were observed in the program's absence
- re-engage children and young people with critical supports – for example schools and NDIS – while their family networks were unable to advocate on their behalf in these spaces
- identify systemic disaster recovery needs such as transport and child-friendly spaces in temporary disaster recovery housing communities.

More broadly, some of the key issues that challenged the program's operation were:

- the need to provide an immediate targeted response to children and young people after a disaster so that they are as safe and supported as possible while their immediate family and natural support networks are in crisis
- the need to stabilise post-disaster housing more rapidly so that children are not spending their formative years in temporary housing environments not designed for their long-term wellbeing or resilience.

These are the subjects of recommendations in ACYP reports published both prior to and during their delivery of the RYSS.

The presence of the Advocate for Children and Young People in the Northern Rivers had an impact through their staff and expertise. While it was agreed that future RYSS programs are best delivered by local community-based organisations, most stakeholders asked for pathways to access the expertise of the ACYP in disaster recovery and even community development and strategic planning more generally.

Locally, children and young people, especially in – but not limited to – pod villages, received one-on-one support and community-based activities that were effective in supporting pathways in mental health, education and community connection.

This is an effective service model for cohort-specific disaster recovery that may be adapted for other vulnerable groups such as seniors.



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