EVALUATING THE PARTNERSHIP APPROACH ADOPTED IN THE GOULBURN FLOOD RECOVERY SERVICE

PREPARED FOR:
GOULBURN VALLEY FAMILY CARE

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Executive summary

> "You can't beat the local people who know the local community, who might need time to, you know, get their head around the technical skills that they need in this job. Like, all our caseworkers had to learn grants, and repair and rebuild, and all those kind of technical things. But they are connected in the local community. They sit in the local community. We are based physically in the local community."

Background

This evaluation was prepared for Goulburn Valley FamilyCare on behalf of the Goulburn Flood Recovery Service (GFRS), a collaboration between FamilyCare, OzChild, Uniting Care, Nexus, Primary Care Connect, Connect GV, and The Bridge Youth Service. In addition, the GFRS engaged Emergency Recovery Victoria (ERV), the Department of Families, Fairness and Housing (DFFH), and five local councils (Greater Shepparton City Council, Mitchell Shire Council, Strathbogie Shire Council, Murrindindi Shire Council, and Moira Shire Council).

The key aim of the GFRS was to deliver case management locally to those affected by the major Victorian floods of October 2022. The evaluation sought to document and assess the unique recovery delivery model developed by the GFRS. In particular, the project sought to answer the following questions:

1. What were the strengths of the partner model adopted by the GFRS?
2. How important was 'place' in the delivery of recovery service and support?
3. What was learned from GFRS design and delivery that could help inform responses to future natural disasters?

Working with FamilyCare, the project liaised with GFRS service partner organisations and stakeholders to develop insights that can inform the successful place-based delivery of future natural disaster recovery services, including future iterations of the GFRS.

Key concepts and literature guiding the evaluation

The evaluation was guided by the extant knowledge that partnership and place-based models enhance community recovery, particularly when coupled with trauma-informed service delivery models.

Disaster recovery processes can occur in a cyclical way, as community members experience perpetual psychological and place-based disorientation and reorientation during recovery (Cox and Perry, 2011). Yet, disaster recovery processes present opportunities for enhanced community resilience and connectedness (Aldrich 2012; Delilah Roque, Pijawka & Wutich 2020; Melo Zurita et al., 2018; Wei et al., 2018). In response to the benefits of enhanced community connectedness, trauma-informed partnership and place-based models of disaster response and recovery unite communities, local organisations, and governments to deliver positive outcomes and facilitate sustainable rebuilding processes across built, social, and cultural domains.

Prior research has established that coordination is a key practice in disaster response settings for the purposes of dividing activities, responsibilities, and resources between actors, with the effect of reducing duplication and disorder, and improving the effectiveness of relief efforts (Kovács & Spens 2007; Oloruntoba et al., 2018; Van Wassenhove, 2006). Trust is a core component of such partnerships, and although it is recommended that stakeholders seek to build relationships before a disaster event (McLachlin and Larson 2011; Pettit and Beresford 2009), the sudden realities of disaster events may not allow for this, so immediate trust becomes a necessity (Tatham & Kovács 2010).

To enhance the effectiveness of partnership models in disaster recovery, recent research also points to the criticality of embedding trauma-informed approaches to service delivery. Natural disasters frequently exacerbate systemic issues such as gendered violence, gender and race inequality, and socioeconomic disadvantage (Foote et al., 2024; Women's Environmental Leadership Australia, 2024; Williamson et al., 2020). In light of these compounding crises, the establishment of trust, safety, community voice, and connection are critical to the delivery of trauma-informed responses to disasters. Furthermore, Aboriginal knowledge about land management is fundamental to recovery from natural disasters, and culturally-safe, trauma-informed disaster preparedness strategies are essential to mitigate further trauma for Aboriginal peoples (Williamson et al., 2020).

Methods

The purpose of the evaluation was to identify areas that could further strengthen current organisational capacities. Using methods of appreciative inquiry (Cooperrider & Whitney, 2005), the evaluation sought to highlight positive current and future optimal performance that could be leveraged by Emergency Recovery Victoria should a place-based disaster recover model be required in future.

Following qualitative methodologies, data collected for this evaluation drew on semi-structured interviews highlighting participants' experience and beliefs. Responses from the interviews were coded and analysed based on predetermined categories, as indicated in the methodology section of this report.

Findings

In answering the three evaluation questions, our analysis identified key benefits of the GFRS that could be leveraged to maximise the success of future place-based disaster recovery efforts.

Key benefits

Community benefits: holistic, local, person-centred, and trauma-informed

By investing in local support services motivated to achieve shared recovery goals, long-standing issues and client difficulties were holistically tackled. Participants highlighted this benefit, noting that community members' ongoing challenges that would impede recovery may have otherwise been overlooked. Prior to the establishment of the GFRS, caseworkers were typically only able to work within the remit of their organisation. The connectivity and holistic approach embedded within the GFRS emboldened seconded caseworkers to address multifaceted and complex client needs. As the literature highlighted, resilience and a sense of community are strengthened through such interconnected disaster recovery responses, a “silver lining” to otherwise devastating events (Delilah Roque et al, 2020; Ingham & Redshaw, 2017; Silver & Grek-Martin, 2015; Winkworth, 2007).

The visibility and holistic responsiveness of the GFRS highlighted the benefits of local services with local knowledge leading service provision in disaster recovery. The importance of place was also a common thread throughout the interviews and had benefits for not just those impacted by the floods, but the organisations and responders themselves. Beyond the scope of this evaluation, it was clear for example that the availability of a local recovery platform helped facilitate other forms of local support, donations, and philanthropy.

Further enhancing the importance of place and local knowledge, deep understanding of pre-existing trauma was evident in the caseworkers’ reflections about their work within the GFRS. Seconded caseworkers were clearly aware of the importance of trauma-informed care (Kusmaul, 2021) with one caseworker estimating that nine out of ten clients had “some kind of underlying trauma or complexity of their lives” that directly impacted their recovery and resilience. The holistic, local, person-centred, and trauma-informed response of seconded caseworkers and the GFRS at large highlighted significant benefits for the community, as the clients of services were supported to have complex needs met to aid their personal recovery.

While the benefits of the GFRS included building local connections, networks and resilience, consistent with the strengths of and benefits to disaster affected communities identified in the literature, these advantages were not fostered from the outset. The funding and practical assistance afforded to the GFRS, in the form of timely contracts and long-term funding certainty, rendered these benefits precarious. Without the trust between organisations, it may have been the case that the benefits of a local response would not have been realised. It is worth noting that the benefits achieved through the GFRS are consistent with EMV’s policy priorities that seek to work with communities to support resilience (EMV, 2024). Developing policy and procedural tools within ERV to expedite community support is essential to achieving this vision.

Organisational benefits: inter-agency trust, knowledge sharing, accountability and career expansion

In addition to the significant community benefits outlined above, the GFRS also provided a range of benefits for the local organisations and staff involved in service delivery. Benefits included strengthening inter-agency trust, collaboration, and knowledge sharing, to personal accountability and professional fulfilment through opportunities for upskilling, networking, and 'giving back' to the community. Such work is a clear and powerful example of investing in a local workforce, a "workforce that is prepared to live and work in rural communities" (Dellemain et al, 2017, p 56).

At an organisational level, the GFRS leveraged the sense of trust that existed between services. In a context of uncertain funding, each of the partner organisations were willing to commit to the partnership and contribute seconded staff to support the front-line work. In addition, while there were a range of formal partners within the GFRS, other community organisations contributed to the GRFS's efforts through the provision of in-kind and material support. As such, by leveraging the capabilities of the local community, the GFRS built community capacity and organisational relationships that will extend well beyond the lifespan of the GFRS. This capacity will build resilience and allow the community to better respond to subsequent disasters.

The first, six-month funding agreement for the GFRS was signed just before December 2022, almost two months after service delivery started, with funding not flowing until the end of February 2023. The partner organisations placed great faith in FamilyCare that funding would follow. FamilyCare, in turn, placed significant trust in ERV that commitments to fund the place-based service would be honoured. Each party's trust was repaid, ultimately strengthening trust in each other that will serve the community well should future disasters arise. In terms of the practical impact of the trust that had been built across the community sector well prior to the floods, while there have been obvious learnings for the various organisations that result from 'building the plane while flying it', as will be detailed elsewhere in the report, the capacity that was built within participating organisations to quickly, efficiently and effectively respond to crises is remarkable. Given the ongoing engagement of organisations not formally connected to the GFRS, these benefits also extend well beyond the immediate organisations involved.

Ultimately, it was grassroots engagement and the expansion of skillsets that sustained many of the GFRS team. In addition to wanting to be part of the community's flood recovery efforts, caseworkers highlighted the appeal of the work in terms of broadening their skillsets that might not otherwise have been possible had they stayed in their roles at their home organisations. In that sense, collaborations were simultaneously supported by worker self-interest as well as the workers sharing a stake in the process and outcome of recovery – two key factors that contribute to successful collaborations as outlined by Mattessich & Johnson (2018).

Key challenges of the partnership model

In addition to the benefits outlined above, participants also highlighted key challenges that they navigated as part of being in the GFRS partnership. Many of the key challenges faced by the partnership were logistical and exacerbated by the regional location of the flood and responding services, where qualified staff are hard to recruit and retain (Dellemain et al 2017), as well as the rapid timescale required to 'stand up' the partnership while also providing services to people in trauma and desperate need. Overall, the challenges that the GFRS faced can be divided into 'hub' issues experienced within the partnership itself and those experienced in the 'home organisations' comprised of GFRS partners.

Given that the GFRS is in a close-down phase, the challenges reported here serve to inform the funding of future place-based disaster recovery services in order to mitigate or lessen similar issues.

Hub challenges: recruitment, retention and resourcing

A major and ongoing challenge for the GFRS was finding the right staff from the local community and retaining those staff as the recovery efforts evolved. This is often a challenge for place-based work in rural communities and clearly a challenge that many managers were aware of from the outset. The short-term nature of the contracts from ERV added to this challenge. In 'getting creative' with this challenge, managers recognised that there might be some skills shortages and the need for pragmatism.

Home challenges: competing services and responsibilities

While the clear strength of the GFRS was that staff worked seamlessly across organisational boundaries, the need to recruit staff quickly led to discrepancies in conditions and responsibilities between workers. Future contracts should allow scope for partnership models to balance the need for fast appointments through secondments with consistency across organisations through standardised conditions while working in the partnership.

The need for partner organisations to provide seconded staff to the GFRS while new staff were recruited meant that, in some cases, ‘sending’ organisations’ own services were compromised at a time of high demand. The secondment of staff enabled work to commence, while recruitment for the GFRS occurred concurrently. However, in future iterations of place-based disaster recovery models, the limitations of working with very junior or new caseworkers will need to be planned for and managed with funding for additional case managers and supports to train-up staff to deal with complex cases.

Conclusions and recommendations

The primary reason why the GFRS partnership model was successful was because it relied on the strengths of the local community organisations with deep and enduring connections within the community. The trust, connections, knowledge of and mechanisms to engage with services operating across the region will produce benefits to the community that extend well beyond the lifespan of the GFRS and will serve the community well when responding to future disasters. While it is not able to be quantified, these benefits are immeasurable in terms of building community resilience and supporting Goulburn’s most vulnerable and disadvantaged community members through natural disasters, which are almost certain to become more frequent as the effects of climate change intensify, and which are disproportionately borne by those with the fewest sociocultural and financial resources.

Prioritising place is not simply about maximising effectiveness and efficiency of recovery efforts. The evaluation revealed that place-based partnership models also promote long-term resilience and ‘togetherness’ in the community as a whole. As natural disasters become more frequent, there is increasing attention given to the sustainability of rural communities in Australia (Dellemain et al, 2017). Place is firmly at the centre of these concerns and will continue to demand attention in efforts to improve Australia's capacity to withstand and recover from emergencies.

The GFRS partnership model presents a powerful case study for future community-led responses to natural disasters, highlighting the value of established trust, relationships, and capacities, as well as the importance of a shared community vision and identity.

Building on existing research evidence (Ingham and Redshaw, 2017), the evaluation solidifies support for a shift away from understanding disaster recovery as something that is done to a community (top-down), to understanding the centrality of place and the potential when community is involved at all levels of disaster management. For place-based responses to be effective and sustainable, local partnerships and partnership systems need to be supported on an ongoing basis, not just directly following an event. Local responses support resilience for future disasters, not just recovery.

The evaluation provides a broad range of insights pertinent to the development and maintenance of future partnership models for disaster recovery. These insights will be useful to those responsible for developing and managing recovery service hubs, future disaster recovery partnership executives, and funders and policymakers. Such insights directly informed the evaluation recommendations, which we set out below.

Recommendations drawn from this qualitative evaluation are clustered based on the following target audiences: funders and policymakers, future disaster recovery partnership executives, and future hub management, highlighting the need to resource and support the intangible work of community relationship-building at executive and operational levels.

Recommendations for funders and policymakers

- Provide place-based recovery services with funding certainty in line with best practice regarding the expected timelines for disaster recovery;
- Allow for the fact that the recovery for more marginalised or vulnerable community members, particularly those with existing traumas, will take significantly longer (e.g. two years following the initial event);
- Support partnership-model recovery services like GFRS to work with more complex cases, as their practice frameworks and responsibility to community embed person-centred, holistic, and trauma-informed care;
- Provide services working with complex cases with long-term contracts at the outset to ensure that local services can attract and retain staff and provide client certainty;
- Develop funding guidelines and contracts that are specific to partnership services for complex cases to ensure appropriate support over a long term; and
- Ensure that recovery efforts are evaluated to develop an evidence base to support best practice models of service provisions. Where novel recovery approaches are implemented, such as that developed by the GFRS, ensure evaluations allow for the comparison of the strengths and weakness of place-based, intensive supports compared to more decentralised, remote or ‘fly in, fly out’ service provision.

Recommendations for future disaster recovery partnership executives

- Ensure that the trust and flexibility cultivated prior to and during a partnership between organisations at the executive level is purposively expanded to team leaders, case managers, and case workers. Such trust will reduce duplication in management oversight from both 'home' organisation and within the partnership service;
- Provide opportunities for partnership team leaders and case managers from various organisations to come together in the course of their regular 'pre disaster' roles, as is the case with CEOs engaging in various cross-community initiatives;
- Invite as many local and varied organisations as possible to be involved, cognisant that only a select number will be able to commit staff. This inclusive approach will ensure there will be staff on the ground as soon as possible while also delivering the benefits of a localised, place-based response; and
- Limit the number of staff seconded from direct-care-provision roles where clients have immediate needs that must be met and instead prioritise secondments to staff who conduct casework functions.

Recommendations for future hub management

- Ensure the service is visible, central, and nearby participating partner organisations;
- Provide caseworkers with a shared workspace so as to encourage knowledge sharing and support, as well as easily accessible breakout rooms for confidential phone calls and in-person meetings with clients;
- Establish clear parameters for seconded staff in terms of the level of responsibility and role that aligns with their skills and experience, including shared position descriptions;
- Cross-reference the skills and experiences of staff hired on short-term contracts specific to the disaster recovery service to ensure that the new staff member’s level of employment and remuneration is comparable to other working at the GFRS at a similar level; and
- Be prepared to provide extra training and support for frontline staff who may be engaging in their first casework experience, including support for vicarious trauma.

Introduction

Purpose and focus of the evaluation

In October 2022, significant flooding occurred along the Goulburn River downstream of Lake Eildon. The affected communities spanned three Local Government Areas (LGAs), namely Mitchell Shire Council, Greater Shepparton City Council, Strathbogie Shire Council, Murrindindi Shire Council, and Moira Shire Council.

The flooding peaked in Seymour on 14 October, and in Shepparton on 17 October (Goulburn-Murray Water, 2024), however, the impact on affected communities lasted far beyond this time. As Goulburn-Murray Water noted, “as water moves along the floodplain, it spreads out into the landscape” and does not necessarily flow back into the river system. As a result, people living and earning a living on the floodplains can experience inundation and flood-impacts long beyond the initial crisis.

Given the unique history and operation of the Goulburn Flood Recovery Service (GFRS), Swinburne University of Technology was contracted in February 2024 to conduct an evaluation of the unique disaster recovery delivery model developed by the GFRS, led by Goulburn Valley FamilyCare (FamilyCare).

To cover the significant geographic spread of the region and the scale of impact, the GFRS was set up in two physical locations or ‘hubs’: one in the regional Victorian town of Shepparton, located approximately 200 kilometres north of Melbourne, and the other in Seymour and approximately 100 kilometres north of Melbourne. Given the rural location and the widespread nature of the flooding over the Goulburn floodplains, the local community was presented with the challenge of establishing and operating an effective flood recovery casework service within the context of regional worker shortages and the tyranny of distance that beset all regional health and human service workforces. As Dellemain and colleagues (2017, p. 56) describe,

> “the literature had comprehensively detailed the challenges of delivering services to rural Australia including issues such as scarce resources, delivering services across vast distances and keeping a workforce that is prepared to live and work in rural communities”

Within the context of rural service provision within the context of a natural disaster, the evaluation sought to answer the following questions:

1. What were the strengths of the partner model adopted by the GFRS?
2. How important was 'place' in the delivery of recovery service and support?
3. What was learned from GFRS design and delivery that could help inform responses to future natural disasters?

As will be described in more detail later in the report, the project liaised with GFRS service partner organisations and stakeholders to develop insights to inform the successful place-based delivery of future natural disaster recovery services, including future iterations of the GFRS. The purpose was to identify areas that could further strengthen the GFRS and what learnings could inform other disaster recovery models.

Following methods of appreciative inquiry (Cooperrider & Whitney, 2005) the evaluation focused on positive aspects of the program in order to establish the conditions for future optimal performance. Appreciative inquiry (Cooperrider & Whitney, 2005, p. 3) seeks to identify how to "strengthen a system's capacity to apprehend, anticipate, and heighten positive potential". This form of evaluation seeks to maximise the positive qualities of an intervention, so that future imaginings of the program can capitalise on strengths while throwing off institutional shackles and barriers to optimal performance. The four strengths-based principles guided the evaluation were based on the work of Egan and Feyerherm (2005):

1. Recognise the best practice elements of the GFRS that should be carried into future iterations and or similar programs
2. Engage stakeholders in envisioning a better way to implement the service, with a particular focus on the role of 'place'
3. Create a blueprint for combining the best of the past with hopes for the future
4. Identify the resources, interests and abilities existing within the GFRS or required for future implementations to meet future ambitions

To these questions, we applied insights from the literature on disaster recovery, place-based delivery, trauma-informed service provision, and the interests and insights held by various actors in the service delivery system. In addition, in our work, as was evident in the work of the GFRS, we acknowledge the long tail of disaster recovery and the often-unpredictable nature of casework, caseworker management and service delivery in such a context.

Structure of the report

Our evaluation of the partnership model adopted within the GFRS is presented in the following order. In Part 2 of our report, we set out an evidence-based rationale in support of partnership approaches to disaster recovery.

In Part 3, we then turn to overview the GFRS, including its establishment, policy context and operational principles. We detail a timeline of the service, beginning with the floods in October 2022 through to the completion of the evaluation in June 2024.

In Part 4 of the report, we outline our evaluation methodology. Here, we detail our participatory and appreciative approach to the evaluation, as well as the organisational logic used to guide our recruitment and categorisation of the sample. Our methodology provides an overview of data collection practices and analytical framing.

Part 5 then sets out the findings of the evaluation, including the key benefits of the GFRS partnership as well as the challenges experienced. The key benefits are described in terms of those accruing to the community as well as those that were conferred upon the organisations involved in the GFRS. The challenges are organised in terms of learning for the 'home' organisations of GFRS staff and for the operational Hub itself.

Finally, in Part 6, we draw together the findings and the framing literature to provide answers to the evaluation questions. The evaluation then identified recommendations for future iterations of either the GFRS or of disaster recovery services overseen by Emergency Recovery Victoria.

Rationale for a partnership approach

> Although disasters are generally considered to be dramatic, they can also be gradual in their impact (Rowlands, 2013, p. 21)

The devastation of floods extends long beyond the initial crisis. The potential for place-based transformation post-disaster lies in harnessing the strengths of communities, building strong partnerships, and leading trauma-informed services. This literature review provides the background to the importance of partnership models in response to natural disasters, and the importance of embedding trauma-informed approaches to service delivery. Place-based disaster response and recovery that centres local and Aboriginal knowledge serves to mitigate against the perpetual disorientation and potential harm communities face post-disaster, as outlined in the following sections.

Disaster recovery can be cyclical

Recovery from disasters can operate cyclically, as members of the community endure perpetual disorientation and reorientation amid systemic failings in the wake of a disaster. Attempts to reorientate a community to ‘before’ a natural disaster is not necessarily possible, or even a goal of community recovery (Johnson & Hayashi 2012; Winkworth 2007). Disaster recovery instead presents an opportunity for creating a greater sense of community and a stronger and more integrated economy through the reconstruction process (Winkworth 2007).

Cox and Perry (2011) put forth the disorientation - reorientation framework to show how disruption to physical landscapes and the psychological experiences of place and identity are both essential parts of the experience of disaster, and as such, must be part of the recovery process. Silver and Grek-Martin (2015) confirmed their findings with further application of the framework, demonstrating that the events that follow a disaster can renew experiences of disruption and disorientation, and may involve activities relating to demolition, reconstruction, and insurance claims. Subsequently, the disorientation process is cyclical, potentially compounded by a lack of communication with public officials, difficult dealings with insurance companies, and the multiple stages in reconstruction efforts replicating disruptive elements of the initial disaster itself (Silver and Grek-Martin 2015, p. 38).

Disaster recovery can build resilient communities

Silver and Grek-Martin's research also highlights how the sense of community and togetherness can be enhanced by the disaster in a way perhaps not otherwise possible. During post-disaster recovery efforts, togetherness can be emboldened when generosity and shared resources become key elements of how a community recovers. Holistic connectedness is here enhanced by what Quinn and colleagues (2022) call 'recovery capitals', including social, cultural, political, human, built, economic, and natural capitals. Community-led approaches and contextual knowledges are central to the effective mobilisation of recovery capitals (Quinn et al., 2022). Further research into the factors affecting recovery has indicated that social capital, in particular, contributes to sustainable disaster recovery, as it strengthens community resilience (Aldrich 2012; Delilah Roque, Pijawka & Wutich 2020; Melo Zurita et al., 2018; Wei et al., 2018), particularly in circumstances of lagging government support (Chamlee-Wright & Storr (2011). Government attention has been paid to the critical aspects of community resilience and preparedness as natural disasters become more frequent (see the National Strategy for Disaster Resilience, 2011). The need for a coordinated effort between government, business, non-governmental organisations and individuals to improve Australia's capacity to "withstand and recover from emergencies and disasters" (Council of Australian Governments 2011).

Partnership and place-based models of disaster response and recovery

Prior research has established that coordination is a key practice in disaster response settings for the purposes of dividing activities, responsibilities, and resources between actors, with the effect of reducing duplication and disorder, and improving the effectiveness of relief efforts (Kovács & Spens 2007; Oloruntoba et al., 2018; Van Wassenhove, 2006). Trust is a core component of such partnerships, and although it is recommended that stakeholders seek to build relationships before a disaster event (McLachlin and Larson 2011; Pettit and Beresford 2009), the sudden realities of disaster events may not allow for this, so immediate trust becomes a necessity (Tatham & Kovács 2010).

In humanitarian logistics research it has been noted that there are generally low levels of collaboration among humanitarian organisations despite it being known that collaboration improves the level of humanitarian relief services (Moshtari & Gonçalves 2017). Actors "often fail to make the effort, or simply find it too difficult to collaborate" (Fenton, 2003) in disaster relief efforts for many reasons specific to the context, as well as general characteristics like the inherent chaos in post-disaster environments, lack of sufficient resources in that environment, and the often large number or variety of organisations involved (Balcik, Beamon, Krejci, Muramatsu & Ramirez 2010).

The factors affecting collaboration between humanitarian organisations can be categorised as contextual, interorganisational, and intraorganisational factors (Moshtari & Gonçalves 2017). Contextual factors, for example, can include the nature of the disaster itself, or organisational and fiscal insecurity of other, non-governmental organisations. Key to forming good relationships for this work is understanding where the organisation sits in its network of stakeholders. Understanding its interdependencies assists in balancing the responsibilities within a partnership or collaboration and incorporating stakeholder interests in their approach (Schilling 2000). The willingness to collaborate can be negatively impacted by an organisations' perception that they are already skilled in the necessary logistics, cultural differences and mistrust between organisations, inadequate resources for the disaster, and a lack of transparency about the potential benefits of collaboration (Heaslip, Sharif, Althonayan 2012).

ngham & Redshaw (2017) studied the relationship between local community-based organisations and local emergency services following the 2013 Blue Mountains fires. They found a significant disconnect between these parties before the disaster, no formal connections, and limited knowledge of each other's skills, capacities, scope, and resources. Through the disaster response and recovery process they collaborated under the banner of the Resilience and Preparedness Working Group. During the first year of the Resilience and Preparedness Working Group, differences between the community organisations and emergency services became apparent. Community organisations were familiar with the consensus decision-making and collaborative approach embedded in the group structure. Emergency services personnel, on the other hand, were more familiar with a hierarchical command and control approach. The tension between the community organisations collaborative approach and emergency services instructive approach made resolution difficult. Initially they stuck to their own mission goals and over a year's time developed a combined vision for the project (Ingham & Redshaw 2017). Over time, however, both parties made compromises and a shared, decisive identity resulted. The Blue Mountains 2013 fires activated collaboration and brought awareness to how community organisations and emergency services had, until then, viewed each other's core business as irrelevant to their own activities. Since then, the community services organisations have advanced disaster preparedness programmes to their core business as they collaborate to "mandate to build resilient and sustainable individuals and communities" (Ingham & Redshaw 2017).

The success of interagency collaboration is determined by how strategically communities are engaged in disaster management and recovery approaches, in addition to bipartisan political support (Howes et al., 2014). Success in collaborative work can be assisted by organisations having a good understanding of their internal processes, formal and informal, ahead of shared work (Heaslip, Sharif, Althonayan 2012). The clarification of roles and responsibilities, and development of effective communication channels are essential to effective disaster recovery partnerships (Oloruntoba et al., 2018). Furthermore, as Oloruntoba and colleagues (2018, p. 563) highlighted, "Governments, disaster managers, and public actors should involve communities in the full range of decision-making concerning recovery and rebuilding activities." Partnership models that engage the community, local organisations, and the government stand to advance disaster recovery efforts and build resilient communities.

Trauma-informed casework and service delivery

To enhance the effectiveness of partnership models in disaster recovery, recent research points to the criticality of embedding trauma-informed approaches to service delivery. Natural disasters frequently exacerbate systemic issues such as gendered violence, gender and race inequality, and socioeconomic disadvantage (Foote et al., 2024; Women's Environmental Leadership Australia, 2024; Williamson et al., 2020). In light of these compounding crises, the establishment of trust, safety, community voice, and connection are critical to the delivery of trauma-informed responses to disasters.

Trauma-informed emergency responses prioritise safety, trustworthiness and transparency, connectedness, and collaboration. As Heris and colleagues (2022) highlighted, trauma informed response and recovery is further emboldened through the empowerment of community via personal agency and autonomy, opportunities to voice concerns and recovery strategies, and the organisational prioritisation of cultural safety and intersectionality. Clear communication and transparency in leadership are also fundamental to the successful delivery of trauma-informed emergency response (Heris et al., 2022). Trauma-informed service delivery includes holistic recovery actions that include social and economic support, in addition to built and environmental restoration (Ryan et al., 2016). To effectively respond to disasters in a trauma-informed way, holistic support must be delivered across multiple domains, including cultural, economic, and social (Heris et al., 2022).

Trauma-informed disaster recovery partnerships are mobilised through government, local organisations, and community unity. Oloruntoba and colleagues (2018) pointed to the success of the Cyclone Larry (North Queensland, 2006) recovery effort that saw non-partisan government support and provision of resources to community. Contrary to the effective unity seen in the Cyclone Larry response, the Black Saturday (Victoria, 2009) response led to the employment of external contractors to facilitate recovery, which ostracised community and exacerbated social and local knowledge exclusion, sparking debate about effectiveness of the recovery process. Such examples point to the need for community engagement, backed by government support, to engage and draw on the value of local knowledges. Drennan and colleagues (2016) argued for significant government investment into community level planning to enable "anticipatory resilience", amid recognition of the value of local and regional contextual knowledges in more effective outcomes to disaster response.

n light of the increased risk of gendered violence, safe spaces must be accessible for women and girls in the wake of a disaster (Foote et al., 2024). Trauma-informed service delivery is paramount to supporting children and young people in the wake of a disaster. The best interests framework for vulnerable children and young people (Department of Human Services, 2007) highlights principles of safety, stability, lived experience, and connection to community to embolden positive outcomes for children and young people. Local partnerships are a key component of ensuring positive outcomes for children and young people (Department of Human Services, 2007).

In addition, professionals working in the recovery space require additional support, as recovery processes can unearth past and vicarious trauma, amid the distress of potential loss of life and wide-swept destruction (Foote et al., 2024). Recognising the potential for the resurgence of past traumatic experiences during disaster recovery can embolden communities to protect community members and mitigate preventable harm. Kusmaul (2021) addresses trauma-informed care in disaster situations from the understanding that disaster survivors and staff involved in response and recovery may have experienced traumatic events directly before, during, and after the disaster, that may in turn have triggered previous traumas. Trauma-informed care literature often focuses on the individuals who are recipients of response and recovery efforts, but it is worth noting that responders often are part of the community, and even as they are involved in response and recovery work they may also have experienced traumatic events directly from the disaster. Their experiences in assisting others in their recovery process also presents opportunities for traumatisation, so trauma-informed care needs to include not only an organisation’s outward facing practices, but the care offered internally as well (Kusmaul 2021).

Prioritising local knowledge in trauma-informed disaster recovery cements the effectiveness of trauma-informed disaster recovery. First Nations frameworks are central to effective, place-based and trauma-informed recovery and require significant government and community level prioritisation (Foote et al., 2024; Heris et al., 2022). Williamson, Weir, and Cavanagh (2020) described the ‘perpetual grief’ Aboriginal peoples live with as a consequence of colonisation, systemic racism, and the dispossession of traditional homelands- all of which are profoundly exacerbated by increasing natural disasters in Australia. Aboriginal knowledge about land management is fundamental to recovery from natural disasters, and culturally-safe, trauma-informed disaster preparedness strategies are essential to mitigate further trauma for Aboriginal peoples (Williamson et al., 2020).

Background

> Nobody knew the flood was coming in October. And so, people were just working away as normal. And then within a week or two following the flood, the recovery centre had been started up at our local showgrounds and agencies were just sending people down to say. Can I help you? How are you? What's going on? (GFRS team leader)

The origin of the Goulburn Flood Recovery Service

The Goulburn Flood Recovery Service (GFRS) came about as a way to provide a locally delivered response to the October 2022 high water levels along the Goulburn River that occurred downstream of Lake Eildon. The immediate response to the flood involved the establishment of local relief centres, including at the Shepparton showgrounds, Tatura, and Seymour, which assisted with the provision of essential services and shelter. Staff from a number of the resultant GFRS agencies attended the Response Centre as a way to help their community.

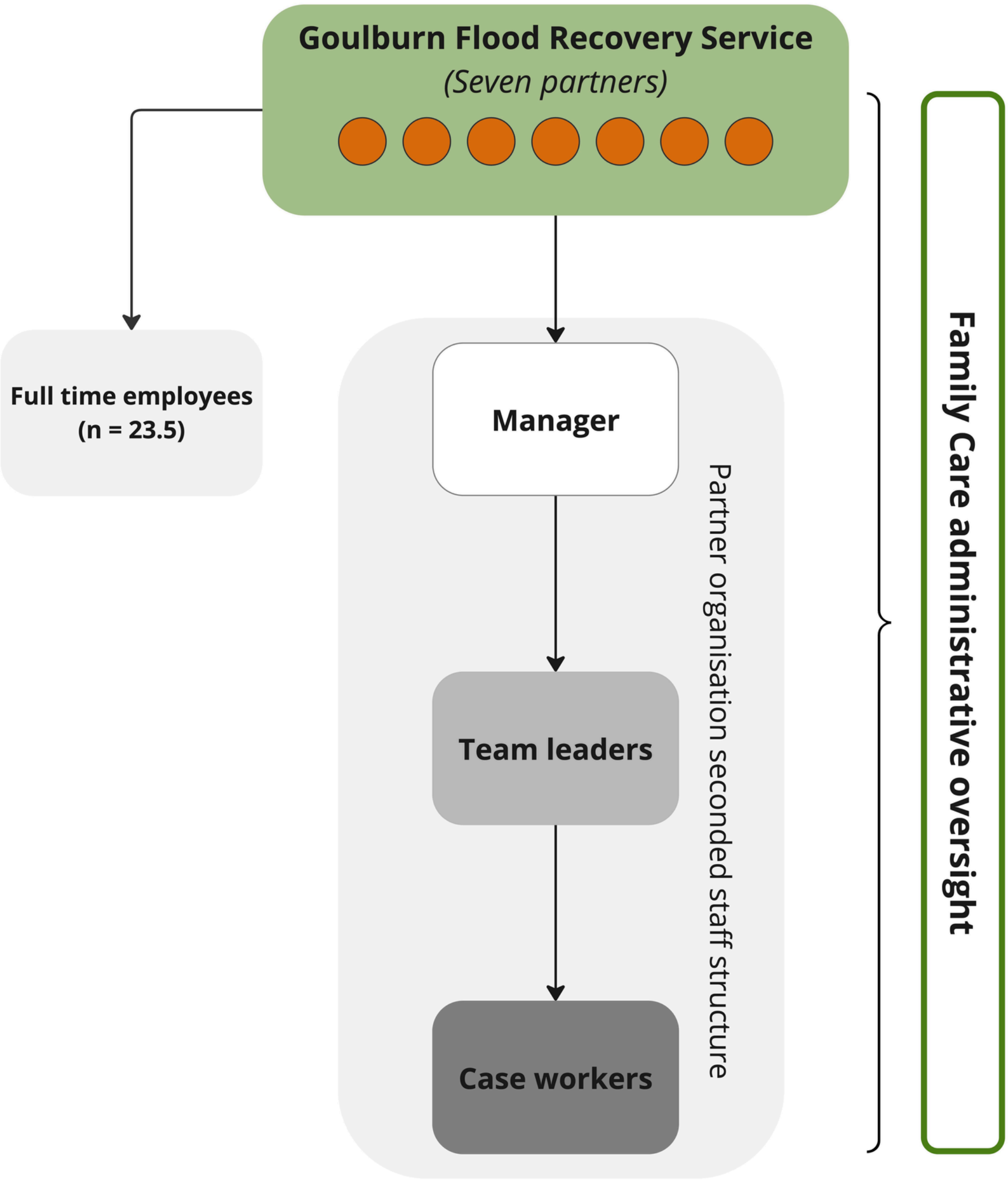
In late October, FamilyCare convened a meeting of a broad group of local service organisations, including Beyond Housing, Rumbalara, CatholicCare and the Caroline Chisholm Society, to discuss the impact of the flooding on front-line social welfare organisations, which ranged from “inconvenience, to evacuation and loss of property and homes” (Meeting Minutes 28 October 2022). The organisations present at these meetings also included front-line service providers, such as Primary Care Connect, Connect GV, TBYS, and FamilyCare, all of which were engaged in the Shepparton Community Share Group. From that group, the GFRS service partners self-selected and the GFRS then commenced with the following partners: FamilyCare, The Bridge Youth Service, ConnectGV, Primary Care Connect, Nexus, Uniting Vic Tas, and OzChild. Meetings continued – but others could attend if they wished and/or thought it was useful to do so, some offering assistance, even in circumstances where they were not participating in staffing. Wodonga-based Gateway Community Health (a previous bushfire recovery provider) was also invited to assist in Goulburn because of the scale of impacts and time-pressures. Gateway

Community Health became actively involved and continues to participate in regular meetings with the GFRS.

While some service providers in Seymour and Shepparton experienced flooding to their offices and facilities, community demand for social welfare services continued and increased. As minutes from the initial meeting noted, “client needs were also widely variable including inundation, evacuation, looking after family directly impacted and all of the related health and wellbeing concerns. [There were] more specific challenges for new arrival clients and other vulnerable groups … Housing challenge was acute before but the crisis is now of a whole other dimension” (Meeting Minutes 28 October 2022). It was noted that “At a service level, the flood emergency has added another layer to already burdened systems, especially in relation to requests for data”.

During these early meetings in late October and early November 2022, after the immediate response phase of flood recovery was over, the services noted that the community was receiving mixed messages about what support was available, duplication of services and confusion regarding how longer-term flood recovery efforts would proceed. The group noted that recovery would require clarity and cooperation, and that a collaboration between the local service providers would offer a useful way to provide the holistic case-management required by community members who remained at the Relief Centre, including housing, emergency relief, as well as alcohol and other drug support (Meeting Minutes 2 November 2022).

By early November 2022, the focus of the group had moved from immediate relief efforts to ‘standing-up’ a flood recovery case management service model. The group agreed that “a name identifying the service collaboration rather than individual agencies” would be best (Meeting Minutes 2 November 2022), ultimately deciding on the name, Goulburn Flood Recovery Service. The structure of the GFRS is shown in Figure 1 (see overleaf).


Goulburn Flood Recovery Service
(Seven partners)
Full time employees
(n = 23.5)
Manager
Team leaders
Case workers
Partner organisation seconded staff structure
Family Care administrative oversight

Partner organisations:

- ● Family Care
- ● The Bridge Youth Service
- ● ConnectGV
- ● Primary Care Connect
- ● Nexus
- ● Uniting Vic Tas
- ● OzChild

FIGURE 1: STRUCTURE OF THE GFRS

In early November, the seven organisations that would become the Goulburn Flood Recovery Service (GFRS) signed a Memorandum of Understanding regarding the provision of caseworkers from their services to the flood recovery effort. Earlier discussions with Emergency Recovery Victoria referenced a three-month transition phase (Meeting Minutes 28 October 2022), which subsequently became the interim arrangement for staff appointments to the GFRS (Meeting Minutes 9 November 2022). At the same time, there were a range of out-of-region providers who were also providing case-management assistance in the Goulburn region. These services typically had little interaction with the GFRS.

The service model of the GFRS evolved over the 18-months following the November 2022 meetings to establish its organisational structure, governance, location, staffing and processes.

VISION STATEMENT

The Goulburn Flood Recovery Service is a client-centered service committed to building resilience and strength in our clients and, in turn, the diverse families and communities in which they live.

The GFRS team listen to our clients, allowing us to learn about our client's needs, so that our service delivery evolves in a responsive and dynamic way.

The GFRS draws on a network of community resources and is driven by collaborative work practice that sees our team offer resources, information, skills, and expertise in pursuit of the best outcomes for our clients.

At the time of writing, in June 2024, the GFRS spanned 20 months from initiation to contract completion in June 2024, as shown in the timeline below:

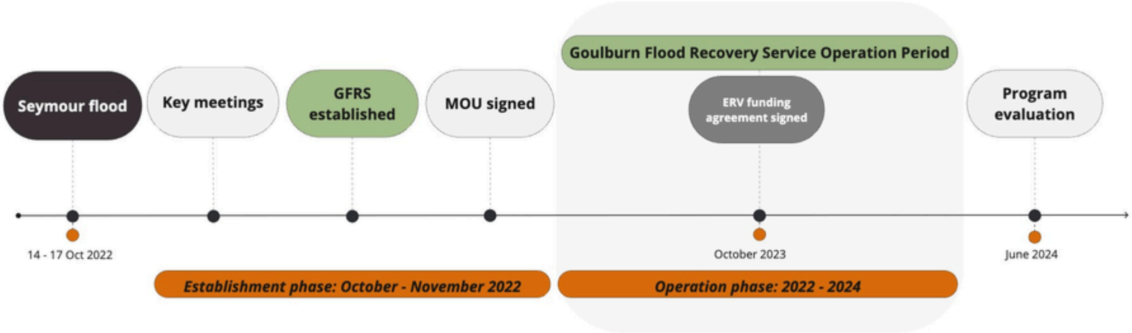

Goulburn Flood Recovery Service Operation Period
Seymour flood
Key meetings
GFRS established
MOU signed
ERV funding agreement signed
Program evaluation
14 - 17 Oct 2022
October 2023
June 2024
Establishment phase: October - November 2022
Operation phase: 2022 - 2024

FIGURE 2: A TIMELINE OF THE GFRS

Policy context underpinning the Goulburn Flood Recovery Service

Two Victorian Government policy units have relevance to the recovery of the Goulburn community. These are Emergency Management Victoria and Emergency Recovery Victoria.

Emergency Management Victoria is a statutory entity under the coordination of the Emergency Management Commissioner. The EMV was established in 2014 and “plays a key role in implementing the Victorian Government’s emergency management reform agenda”, including the operation of regional control centres during emergencies and – most relevant for this project – the “coordination of policies, programs and operations for relief and recovery for emergencies in partnership with a range of stakeholders” (EMV, 2023a). The government’s emergency management reform agenda has seen the expansion of the EMV’s remit from ‘Command, Control and Coordination’ during an emergency to now include ‘Consequence, Communication and Community Connection’. This widened remit provides an approach that is intended to be ‘inclusive and community focused [and] one that supports resilience in communities‘ (EMV, 2023b).

> How we recognise what is important to communities, the consequences of emergencies and work with those who can make a difference is fundamental (Emergency Management Victoria, 2024).

The wider focus on ‘consequence’ is designed to manage the physical and social impact of emergencies, in this case natural disaster, on the environment, infrastructure, individual residents and the community more broadly.

The ‘communication’ remit of EMV also includes a focus that extends beyond the immediate crisis. Here, EMV seeks to engage and provide information across agencies so that communities can best prepare for, respond to and recover from emergencies. What is of most relevance to GFRS is the framing of disaster recovery as engaging the whole of the community in both proactive and reactive ways in order to build resilience and support recovery.

Finally, within EMV's expanded remit, 'community connection' operationalises the acknowledgement of community networks and relationships. EMV seeks to connect with trusted networks and leaders within the community 'to support resilience and decision making'. Again, the centrality of the community to the resilience and recovery project is welcomed and mirrored in the work of the GFRS.

> Understanding the impact of an emergency, the consequences of the impact and how we reach in and acknowledge the community connections before during and after an emergency is vital to building a sustainable emergency management system and one that recognises the central tenets of wellbeing, liveability, sustainability and viability for communities (Emergency Management Victoria, 2023b).

It is the newly expanded remit of EMV, focused on consequence, communication and community connection that is of mot relevance to the flood recovery efforts being undertaken by the GFRS and is most instructive to future place-based service delivery models.

At a more operational level, the GFRS was funded and overseen by Emergency Recovery Victoria (ERV). ERV is a permanent agency of the Victorian state government that leads regional recovery efforts following emergency, such as natural disasters.

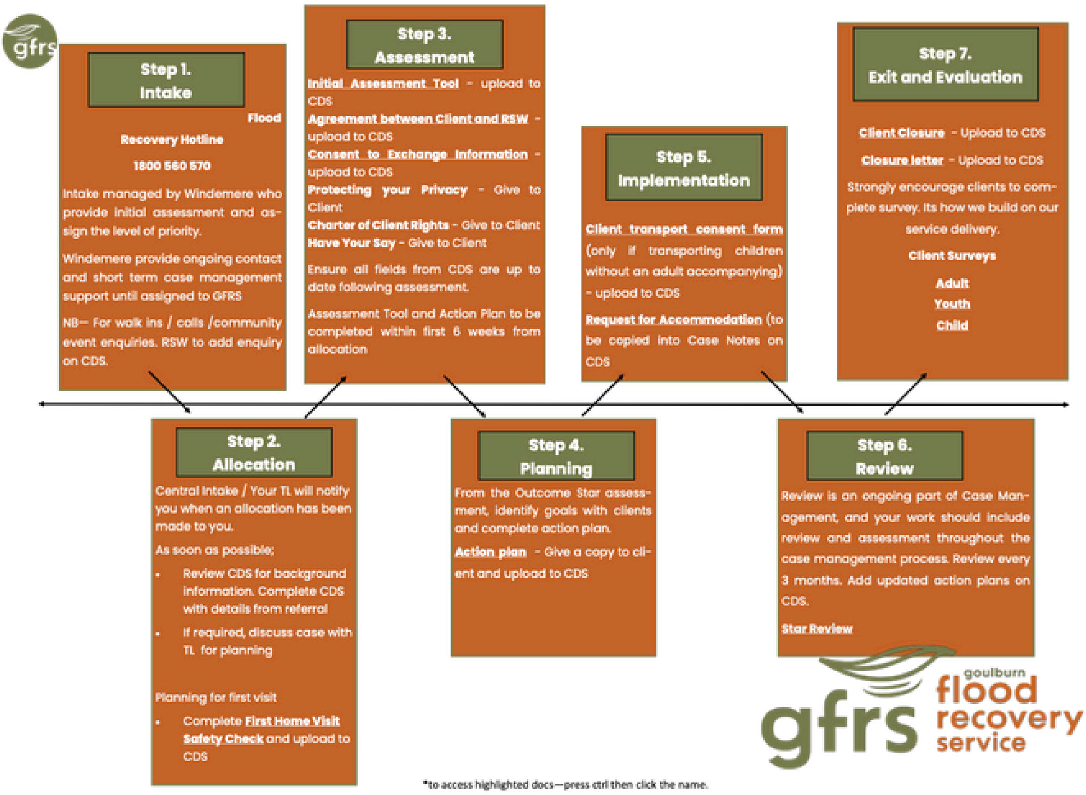
> We also support locally-led recovery efforts and councils, ensuring that community needs are at the centre of recovery (Victoria Government, 2024).

In October 2022, at the same time as the floods were occurring in the Goulburn region, Emergency Recovery Victoria was established (Department of Justice and Community Safety Victoria, 2023), having been renamed from Bushfire Recovery Victoria on the recommendation of the Inspector-General for Emergency Management (IGEM) Inquiry into the 2019-2020 fire season.

Operation of the Goulburn Flood Recovery Service

In the early months of the GFRS, tools for case management and assessment were developed alongside the operation of the program. The flood recovery service involved seven steps, of which, the first 'intake' step was operated externally to the GFRS. At this point, clients from the Goulburn region could either be referred to the GFRS, or to one of the various 'pop-up', state-wide or remotely located services.

A comparison of the strengths, weakness and effectiveness of the GFRS compared to other models of service delivery is beyond the scope of this evaluation. ERV responses to future disasters should include funding for such analyses to build an evidence-base for future triaging of disaster affected residents by intake operators to ensure that the form of service best matches the needs of the client. In this evaluation, our focus is on identify the strengths and unique contribution of a place-based model of service delivery, operated through a partnership of locally operated organisations.



Step 1.
Intake

Flood

Recovery Hotline

1800 560 570

Intake managed by Windemere who provide initial assessment and assign the level of priority.

Windemere provide ongoing contact and short term case management support until assigned to GFRS

NB— For walk ins / calls /community event enquiries. RSW to add enquiry on CDS.

Step 2.
Allocation

Central Intake / Your TL will notify you when an allocation has been made to you.

As soon as possible;

- Review CDS for background information. Complete CDS with details from referral
- If required, discuss case with TL for planning

Planning for first visit

- Complete **First Home Visit Safety Check** and upload to CDS

Step 3.
Assessment

Initial Assessment Tool - upload to CDS

Agreement between Client and RSW - upload to CDS

Consent to Exchange Information - upload to CDS

Protecting your Privacy - Give to Client

Charter of Client Rights - Give to Client

Have Your Say - Give to Client

Ensure all fields from CDS are up to date following assessment.

Assessment Tool and Action Plan to be completed within first 6 weeks from allocation

Step 4.
Planning

From the Outcome Star assessment, identify goals with clients and complete action plan.

Action plan - Give a copy to client and upload to CDS

Step 5.
Implementation

Client transport consent form (only if transporting children without an adult accompanying) - upload to CDS

Request for Accommodation (to be copied into Case Notes on CDS

Step 6.
Review

Review is an ongoing part of Case Management, and your work should include review and assessment throughout the case management process. Review every 3 months. Add updated action plans on CDS.

Star Review

Step 7.
Exit and Evaluation

Client Closure - Upload to CDS

Closure letter - Upload to CDS

Strongly encourage clients to complete survey. Its how we build on our service delivery.

Client Surveys

Adult

Youth

Child

*to access highlighted docs—press ctrl then click the name.

FIGURE 3: GFRS CASE MANAGEMENT FLOW CHART

After the initial set-up of the GFRS, Emergency Recovery Victoria advised flood recovery services to assess clients using the Disaster Recovery Star (Triangle Consulting Social Enterprise, 2024) outcome assessment tool (figure 3). This tool maps a large range of dimensions of the client's life, from their home and property, finances, daily life, health and well-being, family and close relationships, connection to community, and hope and trust. For each dimension, workers or service users (or both) assess the client's recovery on a scale from 1 'not ready' to 5 'managing well'. Assessments of recovery can be made upon first presentation to a service, at a review consultation or retrospectively, following the conclusion of service use. Reviews occurred every three months.

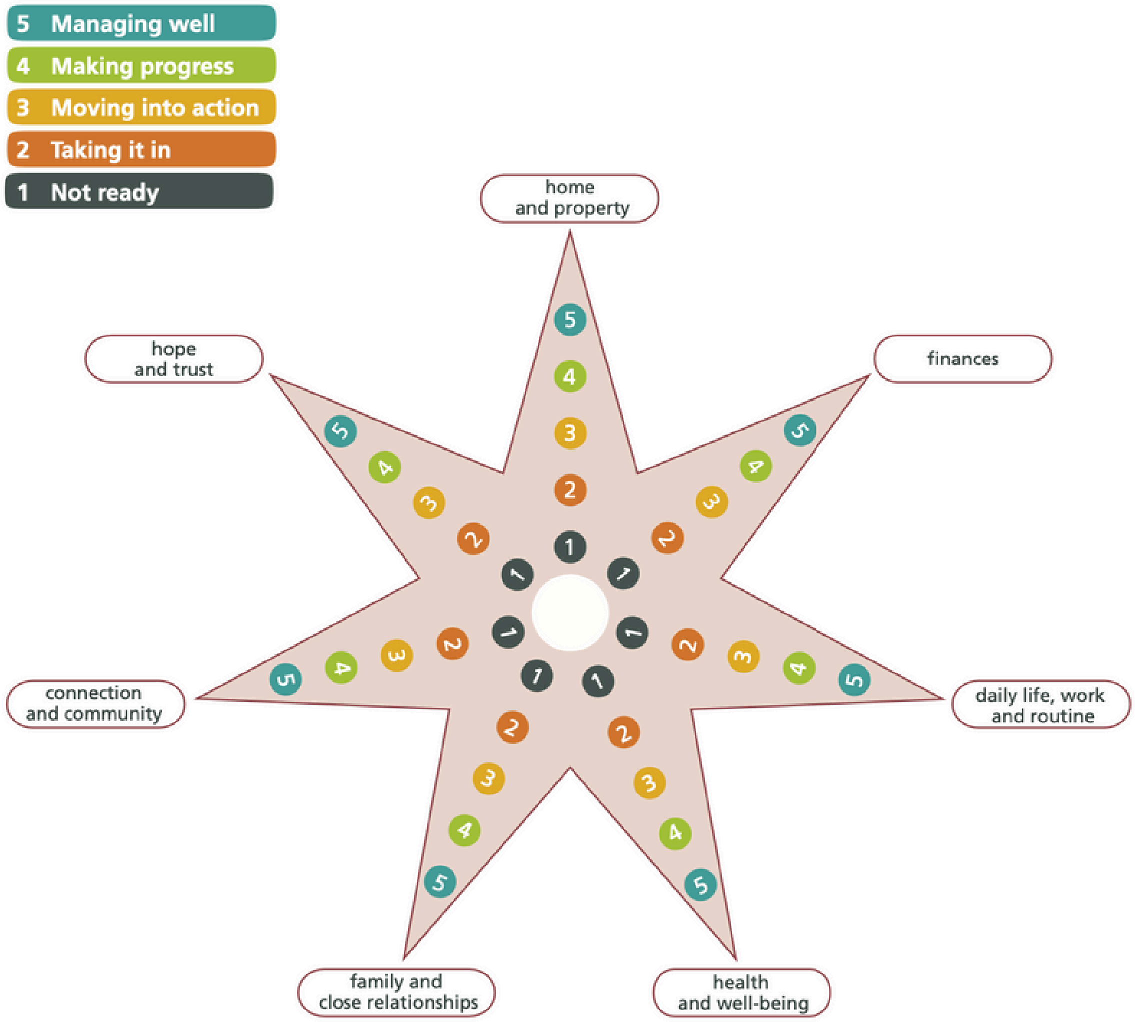

5 Managing well
4 Making progress
3 Moving into action
2 Taking it in
1 Not ready
home and property
finances
daily life, work and routine
health and well-being
family and close relationships
connection and community
hope and trust
1
2
3
4
5

FIGURE 4: DISASTER RECOVERY STAR (TRIANGLE CONSULTING SOCIAL ENTERPRISE, 2024)

As the star outcome assessment tool illustrates, disaster recovery is multifaceted, and occurs over the long term, aligning with the disorientation that can be experienced across many ‘recovery capitals’ of impacted community members’ lives (Cox and Perry , 2011; Quinn et al., 2022; Silver and Grek-Martin, 2015). The Star outcome model also offers a useful means of providing a trauma-informed service model that attends to cultural, economic and social domains (Heris et al., 2022).

Operationally, GFRS activities spanned three key areas, comprising the GFRS team, clients and program (GFRS Operational Plan, 2022/2023). Focusing most specifically on the Team and Program, as is of most relevance to the evaluation of the partnership model, the actions of the team sought to “maintain commitment to and cohesion amongst the GFRS team and partnership”, “identify and implement training and education needs for the team”, “build knowledge”, and “build risk assessment skills in violence and child safety”. In terms of the program, actions included “maintaining program requirements”, “promoting [the] service within the community”, “participate in state-wide review of Recovery Support Program”, and finally, “contribute to the review and evaluation of the GFRS program and consider the framework used for future events.”

Methodology

This participatory and process evaluation was underpinned by a commitment to the integrity and transparency of the analysis (Rallis, 2015). As a form of applied research, this qualitative evaluation aimed to produce trustworthy evidence, which could provide reasoning to improve further actions.

To maintain integrity, the evaluation of the GFRS was conducted by a third independent party, namely researchers from the School of Social Sciences, Media, Film and Education from Swinburne University of Technology. The majority of funding and conceptualisation of the evaluation project was provided by FamilyCare, with the results and recommendations to inform future ERV place-based recovery efforts. ERV did not specifically provide resources for the evaluation, rather indirectly through funds provided to support the general running of the GFRS. Their participation in responses to the research is the most direct input.

The evaluation took the form of an appreciative inquiry (Cooperrider & Whitney, 2005, p. 3) that sought to identify how to "strengthen a system's capacity to apprehend, anticipate, and heighten positive potential". This form of evaluation seeks to maximise the positive qualitative of an intervention, so that future imaginings of the program can capitalise on program strengths while throwing off institutional shackles and barriers to optimal performance.

The four principles that guided our evaluation are based on the work of Egan and Feyerherm (2005):

- Recognise the best practice elements of the GFRS that should be carried into future iterations and or similar programs
- Engage stakeholders in envisioning a better way to implement the service, with a particular focus on the role of 'place'
- Create a blueprint for combining the best of the past with hopes for the future
- Identify the resources, interests and abilities existing within the GFRS or required for future implementations to meet future ambitions

The evaluation provides GFRS participants and other interested partners, such as Emergency Recovery Victoria, with evidence regarding the strengths of a localised disaster recovery response, and a means of fostering the benefits of such a place-based service, while minimising the challenges involved. It is hoped that the findings and recommendations identify how governments, local communities and organisations can best support people following natural disasters, including areas of strength and areas for improvement of future GFRS iterations or reincarnations.

Perspectives on service provision

When examining the provision of social resources, such as a flood recovery service, different understandings of the success or failure of an intervention will be held by people with varying vantage points, such as policymakers, administrators, front-line workers and clients. When evaluating the strengths and weaknesses of a program, an understanding of the actors and their interests is essential.

Viewpoint	***Interests***			
	Manifest	**Assumed**	**Extant**	**Requisite**
Executives	●			●
Administrators	●	●		
Front-line staff		●	●	
Clients			●	●

TABLE 1: DIVERGENT VIEWS ON THE TECHNICAL MANAGEMENT OF SOCIAL PROBLEMS. ADAPTED FROM JAMROZIK AND NOCELLA (1998, P. 52)

Presenting a framework to understand these differing vantage points, Jamrozik and Nocella (1998) contend that there are four distinct views, each with a unique frame of reference (Figure 1). Describing each row in the figure before turning to describe their particular interests, first Jamrozik and Nocella identify people with policy making and resource allocation responsibilities. With respect to the GFRS, such people might include organisational CEOs, Council Executives and ERV officials. These senior people's interests are in what Jamrozik and Nocella describe as the manifest and requisite versions of the program, summarised as 'what the program is' and 'what the program should', respectively. What the program 'is' entails a focus on the program's intent, operationalised in its overall aims, mission and funding. What the program 'should' then speaks to this mission in terms of what the outcomes of the program should be for program recipients. As such, at the executive level, the interests are high-level and values-based, with a direct relationship between program intent and outcomes, but with little focus on the activities in between.

In the second row of Jamrozik and Nocella's framework, program administrators – who are responsible for designing and overseeing the implementation of the program – share executives' interest in what the program 'is' in that they understand and adhere to the intention of the program, but then take up this intent in operational documents. The procedural arrangements of the program comprise the 'assumed' interests, or what the program 'does'. Administrators draw on practice wisdom regarding what works and how to develop such documents as operational plans, service blueprints, and reporting tools.

Third, front-line staff take up administrators' operational tools in the provision of the service. However, in doing so, front-line workers, in this case of the GFRS, the front-line caseworkers, take up the formalised practice wisdom contained within operational documents but imbue these with a focus on 'what the program does'. This extant view of the program foregrounds implementation which may reference operational plans and models to assess what is or is not needed in a particular service encounter.

Finally, like executives, program clients have an interest in 'what the program should' in terms of whether it meets their needs. Then, like front-line workers, clients also have an interest in 'how the program does' in terms of how they are treated by front-line staff and the ease of their engagement.

In our evaluation of the Goulburn Flood Recovery Service, we access each of the four interests, but only via professionals engaged in the GFRS or related services. We exclude clients' experiences, as these have been described elsewhere. In addition, GFRS employed a systematic and comprehensive approach to gathering service user feedback, embedding these perspectives within the service design. While we exclude one viewpoint on the program's requisite experience – what the program should do – we maintain a focus on the program's intended outcomes in terms of the purpose of disaster recovery programs, particularly those that take a trauma-informed and person-centred approach.

Data collection

Ethics approval for the evaluation was obtained from the Swinburne Human Ethics Sub Committee for low-risk projects in February 2022. Following approval, the project team worked with FamilyCare to identify GFRS staff and stakeholders to invite for interview. All interview participants provided informed consent, and the data that they provided about their experiences of the GFRS was kept confidential.

In total, 20 staff members working within or in roles related to the GFRS were interviewed for this evaluation. The specific roles of participants are set out in Table 2, following the outline of varying organisational views of programs set out by Jamrozik and Nocella (1997).

Service viewpoint	***Organisational roles***	***No of participants***
Executives	GFRS partner organization CEOs	3
Administrators	GFRS administrators and team leaders	8
	Council staff, ERV	4
Front-line staff	GFRS case workers	5

TABLE 2: PARTICIPANTS INTERVIEWED FOR THE EVALUATION

Semi-structured interviews were used to gather participants' perception of the GFRS, their thoughts and beliefs about the program's operation, its strengths and opportunities for improvement (Collins, et al, 2013; Darlaston, 2007; Smith, 2008). Open ended questions allowed conversations with GFRS executives, administrators, and front-line staff to flow in unexpected directions that may raise new issues (Delamont, 2012; Lancy, 1993). Each interview lasted an average of 45 minutes, was digitally recorded, transcribed using online AI software and corrected for accuracy. Where requested, participants received a copy of their transcript and were invited to make corrections or remove sections that they did not wish to have included in the report.

The interviews followed a protocol with guiding questions, which has been developed based on the key evaluation questions. The development of the interview protocol was underpinned by the following four key areas of accountability for learning and development (Patton & Blandin Foundation, 2014):

1. to understand changes to learn, adapt and develop.
2. to inquire deeply into the framework, its elements and its impacts.
3. to explore interrelations and interconnections between partnering organisations and,
4. to examine how diverting parts aligned and fit into the whole.

Data analysis

As the evaluation canvassed many of the people involved in the operation and administration of the GFRS, as well as other key members of the emergency response to the Goulburn flood, participants in the evaluation may be easily identifiable. In the subsequent analysis, care was taken to obscure or remove details that may identify contributors. As such, in places in the analysis, we refer to the data in general terms rather than providing direct quotations.

Following transcription, checking, correction and deidentification, the researchers read the transcripts to familiarise themselves with the key themes pertaining to the evaluation questions. Working from within a naturalistic paradigm, the data analysis involved identifying and sorting propositional statements (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Any regularities from the initial categories were reviewed, and themes were extracted for reporting purposes (Delamont 2012).

Findings

Evaluating the GFRS partnership model revealed multifaceted impacts on community resilience and recovery processes. This findings section outlines the key benefits of this collaborative approach as described by interviewees at all levels of involvement. By leveraging the strengths of diverse organisations in the Goulburn Valley region, the partnership model has facilitated resource sharing, enhanced coordination, and comprehensive recovery strategies, as well as enabling a holistic, trauma-informed, and person-centred approach with sustainable, long-term community impact. The findings also highlight operational and organisational challenges pertaining to the roll-out of the GFRS, especially in relation to resourcing and staffing. These insights provide a balanced perspective on the efficacy of the partnership model, offering valuable lessons for future disaster response initiatives.

What were the key benefits of the GFRS partnership model?

Interview participants highlighted how the GFRS made a positive and lasting community impact, as well as strengthening collaboration and trust between local organisations, and fostering personal accountability and career progression among GFRS staff.

Community benefits: holistic, local, person-centred, and trauma-informed

> “It's a pretty big privilege when people invite you into their homes and to get like, you know, some really intimate details about people's lives, they open up their bank accounts and their family history.”

A major benefit mentioned by various participants was how investing in local support services working together for a shared goal enabled multiple client issues to be addressed at once, including long-standing issues that might have otherwise been overlooked. For many, in their roles at their ‘home’ services, caseworkers were typically only able to work within the remit of their organisation. However, within the GFRS, the client’s entire suite of needs were able to be assessed and addressed. This holistic response was a ‘silver lining’ to the disaster and what has been highlighted in the literature as an opportunity to build resilience and a stronger sense of community (Delilah Roque et al, 2020; Ingham & Redshaw, 2017; Silver & Grek-Martin, 2015; Winkworth, 2007).

For example, one caseworker described how a home visit to a family impacted by the floods led to their also discovering that there was a child in the household who was not attending school and hadn't been for some time. Subsequently, the caseworker was able to draw on the knowledge and networks of the GFRS team to ensure relevant services were also able to support that child. As several caseworkers reflected on a shared analogy:

> "The river has just washed away the sand to what's beneath ... it left the bones of what was needed in the community and what supports were available are available that no one had ever tapped into, or people were managing in quite dire circumstances and also some of them really below the poverty line. But they're just managing in life. And I think the lens in this area, although through the tragedy, has given a lot of people a better life by providing services or attaching them or just emotional support in different times in their lives."

> "People's lives have all this sort of sand on them, and then we mask and we cover up and we cope with things … going through a disaster like this has sort of washed all of that off"

This 'washing away of sand' was made possible because the GFRS team had local knowledge and connections; the social capital that is crucial to recovery efforts (Aldrich, 2012). They were able to work with people directly and in context, referring people to additional services as needed. A program manager shared a similar sentiment regarding the holistic nature of the GFRS and its contribution to building resilience in the community:

> "We've had clients come in and new clients kind of come into our building all the time, being able to kind of connect like disaster brings out people at, you know, changing life stages. We've had people who were at the relief centre who are now in kind of low-income aged care facilities who were homeless at the time of the floods ... We've been able to connect people into more appropriate kind of services with the links and things that we have."

Those external to the GFRS also highlighted the value of the local and personalised approach of the GFRS team. A member of the ERV, for example, mentioned that GFRS are more likely to receive the more 'complex' cases due to their ability to take a place-based and holistic approach to support; "the know all the agencies, they know all the services in the town, and they probably know all the back doors as well". Similarly, a local council member, reflecting that people in the community often have very "transactional" experiences when dealing with outside services, described "the hearts, the pride, the care" of the GFRS, contending:

> "One of the biggest things and the benefits of the Goulburn Food Recovery Service is they're local. They're locals, full stop. But also, they have, they have the in-between stuff."

The 'in-between stuff' described here by the council member speaks to Quinn and colleagues' (2022) notion of 'recovery capitals', that enabled the GFRS team to draw on their local networks and knowledge to find local solutions for clients. The council member lamented situations where those from outside the community were brought in to support recovery but simply didn't have the social capital needed and would contact her asking for help with finding local contractors. Her response to these outsider queries highlights how much a local response also supports the work of council:

> "I'm like, 'you're the case manager, I'm not case management, find it out yourself. Get into my community.' Whereas I never have had that from [the GFRS team] because they live here and they know and they're connected. They might have a brother that's a builder. They might have a sister that's a builder. So that local place-based stuff is super invaluable."

Other participants also mentioned how being locals enabled the GFRS team to foster personal rather than transactional relationships with clients. Clients were often neighbours, friends of friends, or people they might bump into at the grocery store. Some caseworkers and leaders had themselves been impacted by natural disasters and knew first-hand what it was like to be "wiped out". This speaks to the collective narratives and shared identity (Chawlee-Wright & Storr, 2011) between clients and GFRS staff that motivated their work. It also ensured the clients at the receiving end were more likely to be treated as people, rather than numbers on a spreadsheet. Sometimes this person-centred approach meant that cases were kept open suggests that local caseworkers were actively engaged with clients in an ongoing capacity. Far from an issue, these longer-term connections with community were better able to respond to the ‘long tail’ of the recovery process. For example, as one CEO explained:

> “We offer so many complementary services so my thoughts around the flood recovery have always been, you know, it's for a specific purpose, but long after the government funds Goulburn Flood Recovery Service, we're going to have clients who are going to need other services because of that long tail of trauma post a natural [disaster]”

There was a sense among participants that they were in it for the ‘long haul’, reflecting a sense of ‘togetherness’ that extended beyond the ‘honeymoon phase’ of the recovery effort (Silver & Grek-Martin, 2015). This mentality was especially important given the long-term trauma associated with flood recovery. Participants were clearly aware of the importance of a trauma-informed care (Kusmaul, 2021) with one caseworker estimating that nine out of ten clients had “some kind of underlying trauma or complexity of their lives” that directly impacted their recovery and resilience. Similarly, a case manager reflected “we all know that any disaster takes that much longer than just one or two years, that it needs to be a trauma-informed lens and we need to be able to support that over a period of time”.

Recognition of trauma was just one way that caseworkers demonstrated their person-centred approach to the local community, as one contended, “we can assist with flood recovery on a practical level, but you're actually engaging with people”. The GFRS team understood that to ‘engage people’, simply giving money to flood-affected people was not going to strengthen the community long-term.

> “Most people are not used to, there’ll be like a large percentage of people that and not used to managing a large sum of money … The level of education and education about money… I think it's just human nature with trauma, too. ‘I deserve this. I've been through so I have to have this. I have to have that.’ … Yeah, you can't make anyone do anything. But strategically plan the roll outs and educate the staff that are working with clients” (GFRS caseworker)

Being local also meant a high frequency of contact in response to shifting client situations and the gradual impact of disaster (Rowlands, 2013). Caseworkers could be quickly on the ground to be there for clients as needed. That physical presence with clients had a powerful impact on their ability to withstand the cyclical disorientation/reorientation nature of the disaster-response-recovery experience (Cox & Perry, 2011). As one caseworker shared:

> "Last week I had a massive crisis with a client. I had to respond immediately … We had to be in court online by like 2:15 that afternoon. Her solicitor had rang her that morning and said 'I'm not representing you anymore'. So I had to work out a plan for her to face the judge and give a rational explanation of why we weren't being represented … So trying to keep her really calm, because she was hysterical. I had to keep myself calm and just try and mentor her through the process, and thank Christ it was online, it made everything so much easier. Because I was able to hold her hand tight and, you know, rub her feet, keep the energy down and just breathe next to her. Just sort of try and keep her focused through that. And then I had to find another lawyer really quick to start engaging. 'Cause we had timelines until this happened Wednesday and we had to have this stuff submitted into court by Monday morning."

Holding a client's hand and breathing with them are simple gestures and yet they had a profound impact on the client's emotional resilience during a crisis. The caseworker's care and compassion in this situation, her recognition that her client's trauma was not the result of a singular event but a series of events (Silver & Grek-Martin, 2015), would be difficult to replicate by someone outside the community who might only be in contact with clients via phone.

Person-centred support was not only important for existing clients but potential clients, i.e. those community members who initially were not sure they 'qualified' as needing support after the floods, some of whom did not enquire about support at all or until many months later. These were often farmers whose default position tended towards self-reliance. As community members themselves with an understanding of the 'collective narratives' of the region (Chawlee-Wright & Storr, 2011), the GFRS team were aware of the prevalence of this stoic mentality, as one program manager described, "a lot of these people were, you know, people who don't want to reach out at the best of times, so actually going to get help and support is a big step really". The GFRS was proactive and strategic in ensuring those affected were supported and not just in the ‘honeymoon phase’ following the flood (Silver & Grek-Martin, 2015). As one program manager described,

> “In regional Victoria and country areas, a lot of the people who were flooded are farmers, so it’s really that we found that [recruiting male caseworkers from the local community] really critical in terms of being able to provide a really diverse response, but particularly the old-fashioned bloke talking to a bloke, particularly about these things around mental health”.

Sometimes such holistic and person-centred support involved welcoming a potential client who had walked in off the street, reassuring them that they were in fact eligible for support, and sitting down with them at a computer to navigate the online application process step by step. Such support was only possible because the GFRS had a visible and accessible presence in the community. One program manager described the GFRS hubs as maintaining a “happy kind of status” in the community, whereby “people aren’t afraid to go there [to the GFRS hub] or they don’t feel like they’re being stigmatised. So absolutely open arms, come in!”

Maintaining a positive and inclusive reputation with locals whereby the GFRS was recognised as a ‘legitimate leader’ in the community (Mattessich & Johnson, 2018) was vital to ensuring those impacted received the short-term and long-term support that they needed. The visibility and responsiveness of the GFRS again highlights the benefits of local services with local knowledge leading service provision in disaster recovery. As a program manager argued:

> “You can’t beat the local people who know the local community, who might need time to, you know, get their head around the technical skills that they need in this job. Like, all our caseworkers had to learn grants, and repair and rebuild, and all those kind of technical things. But they are connected in the local community. They sit in the local community. We are based physically in the local community.”

This perspective from the program manager speaks to the EMV’s (2024) contention that “how we reach in and acknowledge the community connections before, during, and after an emergency” matters. These community connections were also clear in the way that the GFRS partnership provided a focus for other forms of local support, donations, and philanthropy. The GFRS was sought out and facilitated distribution of aid to people impacted by the floods, from individuals, businesses and service clubs, including Rotary and Lions.

The importance of place was a common thread throughout the interviews and had benefits for not just those impacted by the floods, but the organisations and responders themselves, as the next section will outline.

Organisational benefits: inter-agency trust, knowledge sharing, accountability, and career expansion

> “Shepparton is not huge and quite well networked in community services. If you’ve been in it just for a few years generally you know everybody. … So I knew what this was looking like.”

In addition to the significant community benefits outlined above, the GFRS also provided a range of benefits for the local organisations and staff involved in service delivery, from strengthening inter-agency trust, collaboration, and knowledge sharing, to personal accountability and professional fulfilment through opportunities for upskilling, networking, and ‘giving back’ to the community. Such work is a clear and powerful example of investing in a local workforce, a “workforce that is prepared to live and work in rural communities” (Dellemain et al, 2017, p 56).

Due to the dynamic nature of the disaster recovery environment, funding for the GFRS was not immediate yet organisations were still willing to take a ‘leap of faith’ and agree to contribute staff. Their willingness to take this leap of faith was primarily thanks to a mutual trust and respect developed over many years of servicing the same community together prior to the floods in 2022 and highlights the importance of building relationships prior to an emergency event (Pettit & Beresford, 2009). Ultimately, the partnership relied on the lead agency, FamilyCare, being trusted to deliver on promises. As the CEO reflected:

> “Trusting each other, which does not mean agreeing with each other all of the time, just means that we know that we'll be straightforward. Yeah, that's important. And for four of the initial partners, we were part of that. Shepparton Community Share Group, so we already had. We already had long experience of doing that and talking about difficult things regularly. Yeah. So. If it's trust in this community. Then I think that's a really fantastic thing. If it's trust in individuals. Then that's also kind of cool, but it's less good than creating a community environment where people are inclined to be straightforward with their job.”

While the benefits of the GFRS included building local connections, networks and resilience, consistent with the strengths of and benefits to disaster affected communities identified in the literature, these advantages were not fostered from the outset. The funding and practical assistance afforded to the GFRS, in the form of timely contracts and long-term funding certainty, rendered these benefits precarious. Without the trust between organisations, it may have been the case that the benefits of a local response would not have been realised. It is worth noting that the benefits achieved through the GFRS are consistent with EMV's policy priorities that seek to work with communities to support resilience (EMV, 2024). Developing policy and procedural tools within ERV to expedite community support is essential to achieving this vision.

From various accounts of the partnership's formation, it was clear the GFRS simultaneously relied on and reinforced established trust and respect between local agencies. Conflicts happened, but they were worked through. As a program manager explained:

> "We have a lot of place-based organisations. I think it's very different to other areas that have, you know, statewide organisations. … I think that holds us in good stead that we're very confident in knowing key areas of expertise and have genuine respect. There are definitely arguments from time to time about different things, but most of the time we value each other's contribution to the sector."

Interorganisational collaboration is far from the standard approach to disaster recovery (Moshtari & Goncalves, 2017), and yet the benefits of inter-agency collaboration was recognised by participants across the board, from CEOs to caseworkers. One CEO, for example, described that the agencies had a "mutual understanding that we work together collaboratively where we can and we don't duplicate, replicate." Notably, this understanding, or what Mattessich and Johnson (2018) describe as a 'shared vision', also meant acceptance of staff moving between organisations:

> "We try to support each other with, you know, if we train somebody up and they move to [another agency], then that's okay, you know, because we're all helping each other. We're not pinching from each other. It's all best for community"

This vision of prioritising the greater good over competition and fostering a sense of collaboration was also felt at the caseworker level. The 'open door' management approach was highly valued. Far from a competitive culture that one might expect when different organisations come together, most caseworkers identified the collegiality as a highlight of their experience:

> "I've never felt like there's any competition, like competitiveness [between caseworkers from different home organisations]. … I've never felt anything like that."
>
> "Well our benefit is each other's support. If we didn't have that it would be a tough gig."
>
> "The office culture was really … fantastic, like everybody gets along well, celebrates different wins, supports each other. It's not like competing like 'uh which organisation are you? Okay, right'. It never ever felt like that once at all".

Tied to this collegiality was a sense of knowledge sharing and opportunities to learn from each other. Such opportunities were enabled because staff were physically in the same space working alongside each other in the GFRS hub. This knowledge sharing was frequently mentioned as one of the most enjoyable aspects of their work.

> "You would ask questions of someone that was more knowledgeable and then you would work with that. That's just an example. Yeah. So that's what I think was the best, that knowledgeable wise to be able to grow." (GFRS caseworker)

The ability to draw on each other's areas of expertise was especially important given that many caseworkers had no casework experience when they began working at GFRS. Many GFRS staff were initially motivated to apply for their positions, not because they thought they held the necessarily skills or expertise, but because they wanted to 'give back' to their community in a time of need. As local community members, they were confronted with the impacts of the floods on a daily basis and being involved in supporting those impacted solidified their sense of personal accountability. At times, this sense of responsibility to the community did blur the lines between the personal and professional, but it was ultimately recognised as beneficial for staff:

> “Operating in regional areas, we don't have the luxury of anonymity and division between work and private life quite often. Yeah, and it can be a curse, but it can also be a brilliant thing. Yeah.” (GFRS caseworker)

The personal motivations for taking on the work with the GFRS, despite so many unknowns, were reflected in all interviews. Some mentioned taking pay cuts, demotions, or leaving stable employment for the opportunity to be involved. And yet, the benefits of working with the GFRS were clear. The dynamic nature of a brand-new team coming together and working things out together in response to the floods was a key part of the appeal. As one team leader recalled,

> “When I saw the role advertised, I was really keen because I wanted to work in flood recovery. … I was really interested in coming to use some of my skills towards helping a team develop and I knew that they were starting up a new team here as well”

The team leader described the experience as “kind of design it as it starts … running it while you’re building it basically”. Though not without challenges, other participants also shared this enthusiasm for being at the front face of ‘building the plane as you fly it’ and affecting change. One caseworker described how the decision to take on the role was not a strategic “career move” per se but a pragmatic decision when their stable employment was unexpectedly terminated and they were at a “loose end”. However, ultimately the decision to join GFRS had been a beneficial one for their career:

> “I ended up here and I'm so glad I did. Yeah. Yeah. Been a really great move for me. … It's been good to dip my toe back into human services in this like a really public facing role. [My previous work was] just a little bit more removed. We dealt with [clients] and stuff, but you're thinking on the policy level and affecting change in terms of community ideas and sentiments and that kind of thing, which I really I love that. Yeah, that's my background, probably really ideally where I'm headed towards, but it's been really good to just have that grassroots engagement with people in their lives”

Ultimately it was this grassroots engagement and expansion of skillsets that sustained many of the GFRS team. In addition to wanting to be part of the community's flood recovery efforts, caseworkers highlighted the appeal of the work in terms of broadening their skillsets that might not otherwise have been possible had they stayed in their roles at their home organisation. In that sense their collaborations were simultaneously supported self-interest and their sharing a stake in the process and outcome – two key factors that contribute to successful collaborations as outlined by Mattessich & Johnson (2018).

What were the key challenges of the GFRS partnership model?

In addition to the benefits outlined above, and beyond the challenge of uncertain funding outlined earlier, participants also highlighted key challenges that they navigated as part of being in the GFRS partnership. These related to 'hub' challenges, those issues primarily pertaining to the workings of the GFRS hubs, and 'home' challenges, those issues primarily pertaining to the home agencies. In terms of 'hub' challenges, participants cited the challenges of recruiting and retaining GFRS staff locally, with flow-on delays in the onboarding process.

Some participants also spoke about the challenges of upskilling and emotionally supporting local front-line workers who were completely new to case work. Caseworkers also described some of the difficulties of working in a shared office space when attempting to engage with vulnerable clients. In terms of the impact on home organisations, some middle managers highlighted the challenges of managing seconded staff who might be seen as being 'double-managed' by the GFRS team. Challenges pertaining to home agencies specifically also related to the impact on existing services.

It is worth noting that these challenges were often a double-edged sword; both enabling and constraining the work of those involved the GFRS. For example, a shared office space meant caseworkers could ask questions and work more holistically, but simultaneously it also made it difficult to speak confidentially with clients, especially those clients in heightened states. This was more of a problem in open plan offices where there were limited break-out areas.

Hub challenges: recruitment, retention, and resourcing

> “when I heard that they were gathering a team for Shepparton and it was going to be 16 case managers… I know what it's like to recruit here having worked trying to do that. Where are you gonna get 16 case managers? It's difficult to get one sometimes. Right, so I figured would have some challenges in there to get creative”

A major and ongoing challenge for the GFRS was finding the right staff from the local community and retaining those staff as the recovery efforts evolved. This is often a challenge for place-based work in rural communities and clearly a challenge that many managers were aware of from the outset. In ‘getting creative’ with this challenge, managers recognised that there might be some skills shortages and the need for pragmatism:

> “Our criteria around hiring was about right, we’ve had to compromise between obviously wanting the most experienced and effective people for their role versus we need them yesterday.”

The flow-on effect of these staffing challenges was the slowing down of the onboarding process, something which obviously stood out for people given the urgency of the need for services in the aftermath of the floods. As one team leader reflected,

> “I think probably the biggest frustration for me was how long it took to get off the ground. But then also knowing, I guess that this was new for everybody. Like, that's understandable, but I think when you see people in crisis and … you wanna just get in there and do stuff, you know, all the formalities of signing agreements and, you know, getting staff on board and like that to me seemed to take a long time. … because it's like, the longer that takes, the less assistance the community is getting.”

There were a range of caseworkers coming into the role, some with a lot of experience and some with none. Delays were understandably slower for entirely new hires, compared with those being seconded who were already in ‘the system’ and therefore their processing was more straightforward. Of course, simply being seconded did not mean that all staff were experienced in case work. Subsequently, training needs were varied but, in some cases, significant.

One type of training that was emphasised by participants concerned the mental health of caseworkers and a recognition of vicarious trauma (Foote et al, 2024; Kusmaul, 2021). For example, one GFRS caseworker described feeling exhausted and hardly able to move after an intense week of supporting a client through a very difficult time. She spoke about responding well in the moment but her body responding later:

> “And then Friday afternoon, we both went, ‘oh my God’. But the level of anxiety... all weekend I was exhausted. Hardly moved. I slept nearly all weekend. I was so tired because there's a whole lot of other stuff in it that sort of, really had to be. Um and the [team leader] was really good. He goes like, ‘are you alright? Cause that was really quite...’ I go ‘no no I’m alright’. … 'Cause I respond better in emergencies. My body responds later. But I could have easily rang up Tuesday and said look, ‘can I have another day off?’ Like I need to. I lost the weekend and now I just need to have a day to myself, regroup.”

The flexibility and support highlighted in this excerpt was vital in responding to the vicarious trauma experienced by front line workers. However, some aspects of the work arrangements remained less flexible for some. For example, there was some discrepancy about whether or not staff could work from home, despite all service partners supporting the opportunity to do so, which suggests some level of miscommunication between management and staff. For some, being physically present in the hub enabled knowledge sharing and support. However, at times, being in the hub made the work with clients difficult for some to conduct confidential phone calls and in-person meetings with clients. One caseworker explained the difficulties of a shared workspace with limited break out areas:

> “We’re on the phone all day, we're talking to clients in highly volatile situations, highly stressed. And we were always running outside, sitting in the car, you know... We're not allowed to work from [home]. Well, we usually just … use [a small meeting room], but if they’re all booked out we can’t go in...and we’re supposed to book them.”

While this caseworker's experience does not suggest a rejection of the benefits of a shared space, it does point to the need for physical workspaces that are conducive with the sensitive work being undertaken.

Home challenges: competing services and responsibilities

While the clear strength of the GFRS was that staff worked collaboratively across organisational boundaries, the need to recruit staff quickly led to discrepancies in pay rates and responsibilities between workers. Pay rates were a matter for home agencies, and while most workers did not take any issue with these differences, there was an awareness among caseworkers in particular and some – particularly those who came to the roles with previous experience – were critical of their pay and conditions vis-à-vis those of others.

> "There's definitely a pay discrepancy among all of us. That needs to be noted. Because all the other [caseworkers] don't get paid as much as I do, from [home org] I get paid more. … [We're doing] exactly the same roles and the only thing that I could say to them was, I didn't know if it was right or not, I just went 'oh it goes on level of experience, like this isn't my first disaster … so you're learning'. And they went 'oh ok'."

Because caseworkers and leaders were being employed by a home organisation but working the majority of the time at the GFRS hub, communication was vital. Sometimes this left staff feeling 'double-managed', an effect of a dynamic where sources of authority are less straightforward (Bharosa et al, 2010) which was difficult for both caseworkers and the managers based in their home organisations. Some managers described how they managed this by ensuring transparency and consistency between what they communicated with GFRS and what they communicated with the caseworker:

> "How I work is that I'll always share with them what I'm sharing with their home agency because I just think yes, I'm the one that sees them every day. I don't think it's fair that I tell them, you know, 'such and such has been late six times in a row.'"

At times, ensuring consistency between management approaches was not possible and team leaders based at their home organisations were particularly constrained. There was a sense that, especially in the early months, not everyone was on the same page regarding appropriate roles and responsibilities, a key to collaboration success (Mattessich & Johnson, 2018). As one reflected:

> “We kind of got pulled and pushed in a lot of different directions in that really that first critical period. … even the Council was saying ‘ohh so next … go and pick up all these people from their houses and bring them shopping’. And it's like, what, like, no. News to me. Yeah, but there was just that expectation that you would just do whatever you would drop your normal business and just focus on that. … So we had to do a lot of pushback and say, no, actually we can't do that. You know, but we could give you our buses, but we can't provide staff to take clients to and from the shop. And you know, like we'll try and come up with a bit of a happy medium, but we couldn't just stop servicing everything on a day-to-day basis just to focus on that. … there was a little bit of tension initially because we were saying and especially a lot of that felt … our CEO, was, ‘No, no, we aren't going to be doing that’.”

Relatedly, seconding staff from existing organisations to reduce the time taken to deliver front-line casework resulted in service gaps in some of the ‘staff-sending’ partner organisations. Partner organisations and the staff therein were keen to contribute to the flood recovery efforts, resulting in many service staff volunteering for the GFRS to ‘give back’ and ‘help their community’ at a time when many felt helpless given the scale of the devastation. As one case manager explained, at times “it was just expected” that you would be able to prioritise GFRS activities over the home services:

> “So, you know, plans would be put in place and it would be like well, ‘okay, so you know clients in these areas need to do shopping or whatever. They've got no access to cars, cause their cars are flooded around.’ It was like, you know, ‘okay, so you can use the bus here and go and pick him up’ and it's like, ‘no, we've actually got clients of our own, but we need that bus. You know, because then it's about reputation. Yeah. As, as you know,in terms of ...

> ...and filling your primary purpose, if you're no longer able to do that… Look, I think we were flexible where we could be flexible, but then there's obviously things you know like if you've got 20 clients booked in to come in and do a particular service, but then you pulled that staff member away for the day for something for flood recovery. Then you've let down 20 clients. So it was that balance between what can we reasonably do and the staff plugging in.”

Ensuring the home organisation’s services and reputation were not compromised as a result of their involvement in the GFRS was coupled with an awareness that being involved in the GFRS was a valuable opportunity to come together and serve the community. Nobody appeared to be under the false impression that the GFRS was perfect or couldn’t be improved upon. But ultimately, they valued the contribution it was making and its potential for use in future disasters. This hopeful pragmatism was front of mind of one council member we interviewed, whose words provide a neat conclusion to this section of the report:

> “We know that we’re not going to solve all our problems in this disaster recovery programme, but we’re going to have a crack. That’s the intent, the vision. It’s that step change approach.”

Conclusions and recommendations

Answering the evaluation questions

What are the strengths of the partner model adopted by the GFRS?

The primary reason why the GFRS partnership model was successful was because it relied on the strengths of the local community organisations with deep and enduring connections within the community. There was a strong sense of local responsibility and respect, which was a valuable resource during what Rowlands (2013) describes as the 'impact' and 'response' phases of a disaster when individual and community responses include such responses as heroism; altruism; concern for others, concern for shared survival and optimism. For clients, as a result of most staff from the GFRS living and working in the flood affected community, staff felt a significant amount of responsibility for delivering a quality service and meeting people's needs.

At an organisational level, a strength of the partnership approach lay in the trust that each partner organisation had in the lead organisation. This trust was built on established connections between the various organisational CEOs, which was built during their engagement in the Shepparton Community Share Group that served as a beneficial foundation amid other collaborative relationships. The level of trust that existed between the CEOs allowed front-line staff to start work on the recovery effort before contractual agreements were finalised. This expedited the time to establish the service as efficiently as possible. While multiple organisations were involved, the administrative complexity and management of the partnership were lessened by one organisation taking responsibility for the financial management and logistics. In this way, partnership CEOs were relieved of the burden of managing the system.

The trust, connections, knowledge of and mechanisms to engage with services operating across the region will produce benefits to the community that extend well beyond the lifespan of the GFRS and will serve the community well when responding to future disasters. While it is not able to be quantified, these benefits are immeasurable in terms of building community resilience and supporting Greater Shepparton's most vulnerable and disadvantaged community members through natural disasters, which are almost certain to become more frequent as the effects of climate change intensify, and which are disproportionately borne by those with the fewest sociocultural and financial resources.

The significant benefits that the GFRS partnership provided relied on the trust developed within the local community and the sense of responsibility that community members had to those experiencing crisis. However, these benefits were rendered precarious by uncertain funding. Delayed, short-term and iteratively-extended contracts made recruiting and retaining staff difficult and extended the trust that existed between organisations to its limits. Future iterations of local disaster recovery efforts should provide long-term and expedient funding to local organisations who are best placed to serve the most complex and trauma-affected cases.

How important is ‘place’ in the delivery of recovery service and support?

Place played a critical role in the success of the GFRS partnership, ensuring local people were involved and local needs prioritised at every stage and level of the service. Prioritising place through local partnerships was about valuing the local resources, capacity, leadership and resilience already evident in the community. Recognising this local knowledge is not out of charity, but because such an approach ultimately made for a more effective, holistic, and trauma-informed response to the those affected by the floods.

The place-based GFRS partnership enabled the effective mobilisation of holistic recovery capitals (Quinn et al, 2022) in the local community. These forms of capital include social, cultural, political, and natural, and in the work of recovery services, operate in a multitude of intangible ways, or what one participant aptly described as the ‘in-between stuff’. The generation of these recovery capitals is inextricably tied to place and not something that can be easily outsourced. There is clear appeal in a top-down approach recovery services for efficiency reasons. And yet, as highlighted in this report, this can present a false or limited efficiency, especially when factoring the long tail of disaster recovery. Ultimately, considerations of place are also considerations of effectiveness.

Prioritising place is not simply about maximising effectiveness and efficiency. The report shows that place-based partnership models also promote long-term resilience and ‘togetherness’ in the community as a whole. As natural disasters become more frequent, there is also increasing attention given to the sustainability of rural communities in Australia (Dellemain et al, 2017). Place is firmly at the centre of these concerns and will continue to demand attention in efforts to improve Australia’s capacity to withstand and recover from emergencies.

What has been learned from GFRS design and delivery that could help inform responses to future natural disasters?

The GFRS partnership model presents a powerful case study for future community-led responses to natural disasters, highlighting the value of established trust, relationships, and capacities, as well as the importance of a shared community vision and identity.

Building on Ingham and Redshaw (2017), this evaluation solidifies support for a shift away from understanding disaster recovery as something that is done to a community (top-down), to understanding the centrality of place and the potential when community is involved at all levels of disaster management. For this to be effective and sustainable, local partnerships and partnership systems need to be supported on an ongoing basis, not just directly following an event. Ultimately, it is about supporting resilience not just recovery for future disaster management and recognising that natural disasters will happen so managing organisations need to reflect this in their core business objectives and activities.

This report has provided a broad range of insights pertinent to the development and maintenance of future partnership models for disaster recovery. These insights will be useful to those responsible for developing and managing recovery service hubs, future disaster recovery partnership executives, and funders and policymakers. Such insights have directly informed our recommendations which we set out below.

Recommendations

Recommendations for funders and policymakers

While the secondment model offered significant strength to the disaster recovery service, the loss of staff created issues within the 'home' organisations. It was difficult to attract staff to short-term positions, which was exacerbated by the very short-term nature of contracts and the uncertainty of how long the GFRS would last. In future funding iterations, ERV planning should reply on best practice regarding the expected timelines in disaster recovery, which typically stretch into years rather than months.

While response and immediate recovery efforts may occur within a few months, particularly for those community members who were least impacted or with the fewest barriers to recovery, the recovery for more marginalised or vulnerable community members, particularly those with existing traumas, is going to take significantly longer. Partnership model recovery services are best placed to work with complex cases, as their practice frameworks and responsibility to community require such person-centred, holistic, trauma-informed care.

ERV should issue contracts to complex-needs, partnership services to ensure a small sub-set of staff can work with complex cases over a long term. These contracts should be provided at the outset of the recovery planning process. Funds should cover the small-scale operation of a partnership service for a long term (for example two years following the initial event). Such a model would provide certainty to partner organisations that they can provide a trauma informed and appropriate service. It would also fulfil the state's obligations to society's most vulnerable members.

When new or novel recovery models are implemented, funders should provide funding for comparative as well as process evaluations to discern the strengths and weaknesses of the various models, which clients they serve best, and how best to make use of state funding for disaster recovery purposes. Over time, ERV should develop evidence-based best-practice guidelines for disaster recovery and a suite of approaches that support the diverse needs of communities and in different geographic or disaster contexts.

Recommendations for future disaster recovery partnership executives

First, while an obvious strength of the partnership was the trust that the CEOs had in the lead organisation, the downside was that the trust held by the executive group did not necessarily flow down to the operational level. Within the GFRS, a lack of systems and communication and deferral to existing ways of working caused the felt need for individual organisations to want more accountability and responsibility for the staff that were seconded to the GFRS. In future iterations of a disaster recovery service, one learning is that the flexibility and trust that existed at the executive level should be purposively expanded to GFRS team leaders, case managers and GFRS caseworkers so that they can do the job without a duplication in management oversight from both 'home' organisation and within the GFRS. Trust between partner organisation managers may be achieved by developing opportunities for team leaders and case managers from various organisations to come together, as the CEOs had been able to do over a period of time prior to the disaster.

Acknowledging that numerous partners were given the opportunity to provide staff to recovery efforts, and some partners provided supported in alternative ways (such as CatholicCare's mobile support unit) future iterations of a disaster recovery program would also benefit from seconding greater numbers of staff. Greater numbers of staff would assist with having a full complement on the ground as soon as possible, while also delivering the benefits of a localised, place-based response. However, while partner organisations encouraged all interested staff to take on secondments within the GFRS, in future iterations it would be best to limit the number of staff seconded from direct-care-provision roles where clients have immediate needs that must be met. Instead, secondments should be offered to staff who conduct casework functions. While waiting times may extend in the sending organisations, the secondments would then not cause gaps in meeting clients' direct care needs. In the context of regional and sector staff shortages and difficulties with recruitment, careful consideration of how to balance staff shortages in either the sending organisations or the GFRS must be planned for up front.

Recommendations for future hub management

Given the tight timeframe within which a suitable location could be found, the physical attributes of both the Shepparton and Seymour services is understandable. Both choices took advantage of serendipitous vacancies in existing spaces so that staff could move in almost immediately. In Shepparton, there was also a desire to ensure the service was visible, central and nearby the partner organisations. These attributes made a positive contribution to the GFRS as resources, such as cars, from the partner organisations could be shared, people knew about the GFRS and came to appointments in person or combined their appointment with other errands. However, where possible, sites that contain more private rooms would be preferrable. However, the provision of caseworker privacy for phone calls and in-person meetings should not come at the cost of shared workspaces for caseworkers, as enormous benefit was derived from staff being able to ask colleagues for immediate guidance, advice, and support.

In future iterations of the program, clear parameters should be established for seconded staff in terms of the level of responsibility and role that aligns with their skills and experience. For staff hired on short-term contracts specific to the disaster recovery service, appointments to the ‘home’ organisation should also cross-reference the skills and experience of the new hire and ensure that the new staff member’s level of employment and remuneration is comparable to others working in the GFRS at a similar level.

While one of the benefits of the GFRS was that staff could take advantage of training offered by each of the partner organisations, the informal training delivered by GFRS team leaders, and provided by ERV for flood recovery services, there was significant variation in the amount of experience staff brought to casework. For some workers, the GFRS was their first casework experience. Team leaders were crucial to ensuring less experienced caseworkers understood case management, case note writing, safe home visiting practices, and dealing with complex clients. In addition, working in an holistic practice increased the scale and scope of work to be completed. As caseworkers felt high levels of responsibility and accountability to the community and given that client trauma was likely to be unearthed as caseworkers interacted with flood affected clients, future iterations of the service could draw on the resources developed by the GFRS as it evolved to manage the tensions experienced by staff. One resource that should be central to any future iterations is how to support staff to minimise and manage vicarious trauma that may be experienced when working in your own disaster-affected community.

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