



2022-24 FLOOD RECOVERY: WHAT WE LEARNED, WHAT CHANGED, AND WHAT'S NEXT

Why this evaluation matters

In early 2022, following the NSW Northern Rivers floods, Healthy North Coast (HNC) received NSW Government funding to support recovery through 13 community-based projects. The funding was provided under the 2022-2025 Mental Health and Wellbeing Flood Recovery Package for the North Coast, to support social and community connection, cultural connection, trauma-based education and social and emotional wellbeing.

This work is increasingly important, given predictions of continued extreme weather and ongoing community impacts. HNC are evaluating the Community Wellbeing and Resilience (CWR) Program to understand what worked and to inform future funding approaches across the North Coast.

This document summarises the Community Wellbeing and Resilience Program Flood Recovery Grants 2022-2024 Evaluation Report produced by evaluation partner Synergistiq. HNC commissioned the evaluation to build evidence, share learnings and inform future work. The Evaluation Report provides insights into program appropriateness, effectiveness, outcomes and impact; strengthens knowledge to improve community wellbeing and resilience activities; measures shared outcomes that are meaningful to communities; and gives funded projects a platform to share their experiences.



Key Findings

Projects met a range of recovery needs. The 13 community-based projects reached people struggling with basics (food, housing, goods) and with mental health and wellbeing support after the 2022 floods. Outreach was targeted to support those who don't usually seek help, smaller or isolated communities, and groups disproportionately impacted (young people, older people, LGBTQ+, and Aboriginal peoples). Programs offered a range of supports (a safe place to rest, a meal, a conversation, a warm referral) to more intensive therapeutic care and school-based resilience models.

Programs focussed on rebuilding connection and capability. Staff and volunteers often supported their own flood-affected circles while serving the wider community. Workshops, healing activities, and peer spaces created time to reflect, learn practical skills, and support others. Events, creative pursuits, informal gatherings and shared meals re-knitted social fabric. In several places, peer networks and informal groups continue beyond project timelines.

Recovery continues. Projects described ongoing challenges: meeting basic needs, restoring identity and cohesion, finding and engaging those still struggling, and navigating limited access to timely mental health care in an overloaded system.

Signs of positive system change. Communities have reported being better prepared for later warnings. The projects helped re-establish confidence, normalise help-seeking, and embed trauma-aware, culturally grounded practice across community settings. To move from recovery toward resilience, communities will need sustained support.

Outcomes and impact

Collectively, the projects reduced the severity of flood impacts for many across the North Coast by delivering accessible, inclusive, trauma-aware supports that met diverse needs. People interviewed reported improved wellbeing, increased capability, and stronger connections through partnerships, networks and community life. Skills, resources and relationships seeded through the program are likely to persist, with some examples of advocacy and system shifts toward supporting more inclusive, trauma-informed disaster response and evidence of better preparedness in subsequent events.

At the same time, interviewees stressed the long arc of recovery: as projects taper, pressure rises on existing services, and safe transition mechanisms become critical. Building sustainability into design, from peer networks to community stewardship, will help communities move beyond recovery toward enduring resilience.

In response to early feedback, the CWR 2024-2026 round adjustments included: Longer project timeframes, simplified reporting, and larger grants per project.

What providers say would further strengthen the program:

Clearer funding criteria for community resilience (not just individual crisis response).

Allocate by demonstrated need and success, allowing scale-up of what works.

Small, ongoing grants to sustain outcomes and cover core costs of community-based enterprises.

Simple, aligned reporting and evaluation that fits existing processes and enables community input, especially critical early in a crisis and for smaller organisations.



Community resilience focus

Several projects observed that flood grants largely addressed mental health crisis and individual change, not community-level resilience. The next phase of work for HNC will focus on how future programs can support strengthening adaptive capacity at the community level.

Providers highlighted practical levers:



Capacity, connection, control: Invest in community capacity building, maintain connections post-project, and increase local decision-making and two-way communication with government.



Youth at the table: Involve young people in design, decision-making and evaluation, and create clear leadership pathways.



Care for carers: Recognise disaster fatigue and burnout; support compassionate employment practices, supervision, self-care, boundaries, and phase-aware planning.



Phase-matched delivery: Align activities to disaster phases (immediate, medium, long-term) with flexibility to pivot as needs shift.

Sustainability of outcomes. Communities need meaningful ways to stay connected after grant funding ends (peer groups, alumni networks, community stewardship). Some knowledge, skills and networks will endure; others require planned transitions and time for coaching, refreshers, and handover. Short timeframes and heavy demand made this difficult for several projects; designing exit/transition from day one will improve durability.

What worked well

Local staff and networks, plus new connections built through delivery.

Training that lifted team capacity to respond to community needs.

Strong project processes including reflective practice, continuous improvement and supporting staff who were themselves flood affected.

Trauma-informed, culturally appropriate models embedded in everyday settings.

Flexibility to adapt to changing needs.

Supportive commissioning from HNC that allowed adaptation and practical delivery.

"It allowed us to develop a local experienced disaster recovery workforce. We have been a pathway for community people to actively participate in the disaster recovery." Interviewee

"It created capacity for us and demonstrated that we can do more." Interviewee

"The gift of this project has been empowering individuals within our neighbourhoods to understand that, through the mere act of connection, they can have an impact on their own and their neighbours' mental wellbeing." Report

What was challenging

Staffing: Recruiting/retaining qualified staff amid local housing constraints; sudden departures by flood-affected staff; limited availability of specialists.

Timeframes: Some felt funding was too short to embed outcomes; extensions helped, but demand varied widely.

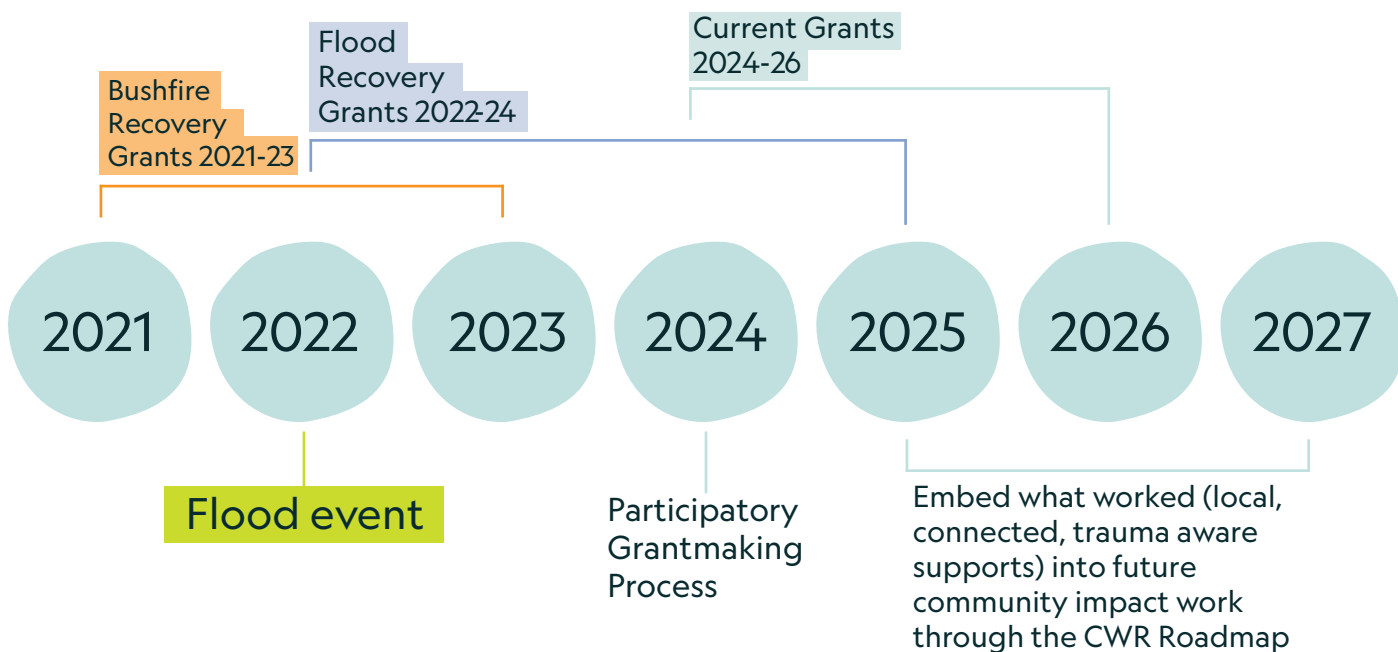
Demand and participation: Some services faced relentless demand for basics and low-intensity aid; others saw lower-than-expected attendance for structured programs (not unusual but impacts delivery plans).

Complex needs: Limited referral options in an overloaded system complicated safe wind-down and transitions.

Organisational capacity: Smaller or volunteer-led groups needed more start-up/scale-up support (communications, IT, admin).

Expectations and burden: Reporting/evaluation expectations felt heavy for some; clarity and proportionality matter.

Program Timeline



Activities and Reach as reported by Healthy North Coast

29,987	General/community participants (events/outreach)	1,595	People trained in mental health skills
27,612	Occasions of service	882	Workshops and sessions held
8,293	Registered programs and 1:1 support participants	700	Warm referrals
	Aboriginal-led trauma-informed, culturally grounded activities (yarning, weaving, bodywork, art, and ceremony led by Aboriginal practitioners)	593	School and young people participants
3,079		144	Yarning groups (recurring and/or one-off gatherings)