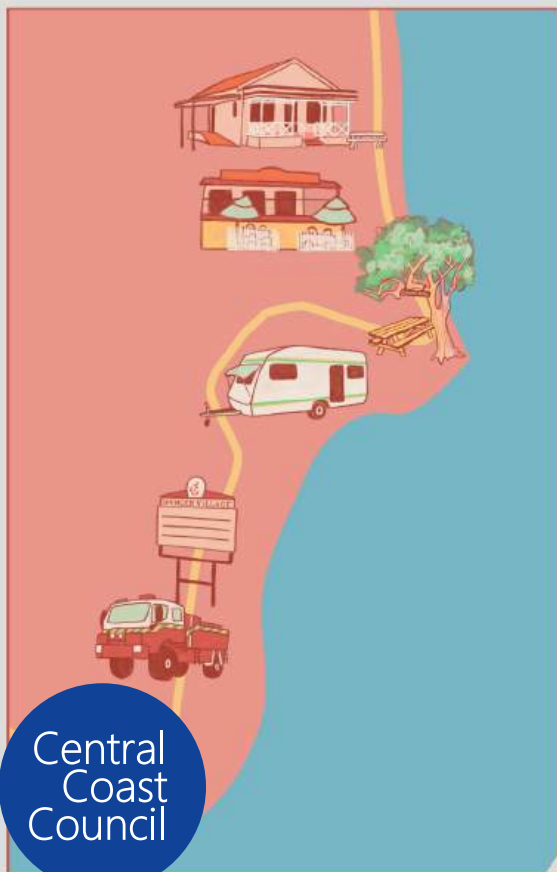


Hawkesbury River

# Our Connected Community Action Plan



Central  
Coast  
Council

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENT OF COUNTRY

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### **We acknowledge the Traditional Custodians of the land on which we live, work and play.**

We pay our respects to Darkinjung country,  
and Elders past and present.

We recognise the continued connection  
to these lands and waterways and extend  
this acknowledgement to the homelands  
and stories of those who also call this place  
home.

We recognise our future leaders and the  
shared responsibility to care for and protect  
our place and people.



# Definitions

## Resilience

According to the Australian Institute Disaster Resilience, resilience is the ability of a system, community or society exposed to hazards to resist, absorb, accommodate, adapt to, transform and recover from the effects of a hazard in a timely and efficient manner, including through the preservation and restoration of its essential basic structures and functions through risk management.

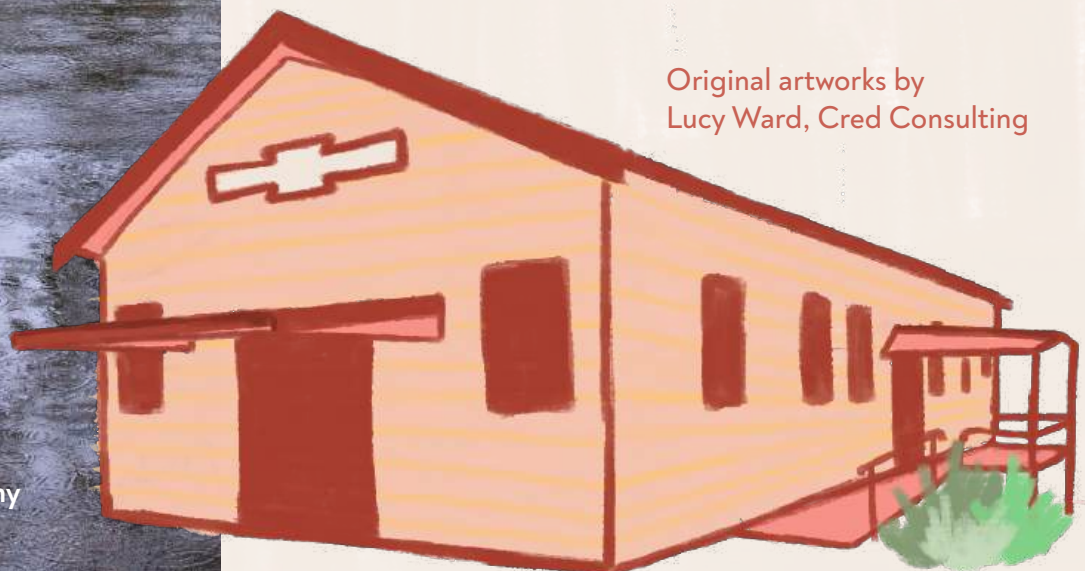
## Community resilience

The ability of communities to withstand, adapt, and recover from adversity.

## Social cohesion

Social cohesion is the foundation of community resilience. Strong social networks, a sense of belonging and trust enables communities to support one another during challenging times.

Original artworks by  
Lucy Ward, Cred Consulting





# Introduction

The Hawkesbury River community has shown great resilience and community spirit amid a long history of natural disasters including floods, bushfires and drought. In recent years we have faced many challenges together, including a global pandemic and frequent climate-related natural disasters. These successive events have impacted our ability to prepare, adapt and bounce back.

Research tells us that for communities to be resilient in the face of emergencies, they need to be connected with each other, their places, and local services. Knowing our neighbours, having good relationships with friends and family, and being part of a connected community means someone will notice if we're missing, help if we're in trouble, and get us back on our feet after a crisis has passed. We are home to an increasing number of new residents, holidayers and weekenders, along with people who choose to live off the grid, which can make connecting harder.

Central Coast Council (Council), with funding from the Australian Government through the NSW Disaster Risk Reduction Fund, has been working with local residents to prepare this Connected Community Action Plan (this Plan). It aims to build a more socially cohesive and resilient Hawkesbury River community.

Included in this Plan is:

- An overview of our community including what makes the Hawkesbury River community unique, who lives here and our strengths.
- Our challenges.
- Our community vision and values.
- Our opportunities for making Hawkesbury River more socially connected and resilient.

## Who is this Plan for?

**Community members and groups** can use this Plan to take action to improve social cohesion and community resilience. It can also be used to support grant funding applications.

**Council** can use this Plan for forward planning and resource allocation for infrastructure, strategic city planning and community development activities. Council can also use this Plan for advocacy, lobbying and promotion of community successes and challenges to industry and all levels of government for funding support or program delivery.

## Why was Hawkesbury River chosen?

Hawkesbury River was chosen for this Plan because the area shows moderate disaster resilience, with moderate coping capacity and ability to adapt to changes. The community's existing strengths and strong connections make it well-suited to handle and recover from challenges.

This Plan will build on the existing community resilience and connections to make the community even more prepared and connected for future events.

Please see Appendix 1 for more detailed research from the Australian Disaster Resilience Index detailing the area's capacity for disaster resilience.



## How this Plan was developed

This Plan reflects the vision, values, concerns, ideas and priorities of the Hawkesbury River community. The development of this Plan was rooted in the principle that the people who call Hawkesbury River home are best positioned to identify opportunities to create a more socially cohesive and resilient community.

Across four events, more than 50 community members from all walks of life contributed to this Plan. Each event lasted approximately 2 hours, with most participants staying for the entire duration to provide in-depth feedback and connect with one another.

### Step 1

#### Gathering ideas and information



In late 2023 a hazard mapping workshop was held to identify key hazards and risks facing the community during fires and floods. This information was used as basis for a pop-up event in March 2024. At this event, community members shared what they love about Hawkesbury River, the challenges their community experience, and their ideas to strengthen social cohesion and resilience.

### Step 2

#### Truth-testing the draft Plan



A draft Plan was developed based on community input at step 1. At a community event in June 2024 community members provided feedback on the draft Plan and suggested ideas to improve the Plan.

### Step 3

#### Closing the loop



Following community feedback, this Plan was finalised and presented back to the community at a community pop-up event held in July 2024. This was also an opportunity for local leaders to connect with the community and Council to plan next steps in delivering this Plan.

### Step 4

#### Working together to build resilience



Council and community will continue to work together to build resilience in Hawkesbury River. The opportunities in this Plan will help guide action and priorities going forward.





"I would like to see more shops and support for small businesses."

"My vision is for a more cohesive community with a focus on community self-reliance."



# Our community

## Our place

The Hawkesbury River community is a semi-rural community located on the traditional lands of First Nations people. Positioned where the Hawkesbury River meets Mangrove Creek, our community is approximately 50km from Gosford and 100km from Sydney. The main town is Spencer, which we often call the 'hub of the universe'.

The area is home to many natural areas, including national parks, rivers and creeks. The Hawkesbury River community is bordered by the Dharug National Park to the west and Marramarra National Park to the south. There are many recreational activities to do, including fishing, walking and kayaking. We also have rich history and heritage, including the convict-built Old Great North Road.

Although we are spread along the river, we are a close-knit community. We have people who have been living here for a long time, people who live here part time, and people who visit for the weekend.

We are also an ageing community meaning we are experiencing a shift in community needs, particularly around health, housing, recreation and leisure. We think it is important that people can age in their homes if they want to.

Living in the Hawkesbury River community means we are more susceptible to natural disasters. In recent years we have experienced bushfires, flooding and land slips. Although our roads and telecommunications can often be negatively impacted, our community pulls together to help each other out during these emergencies.



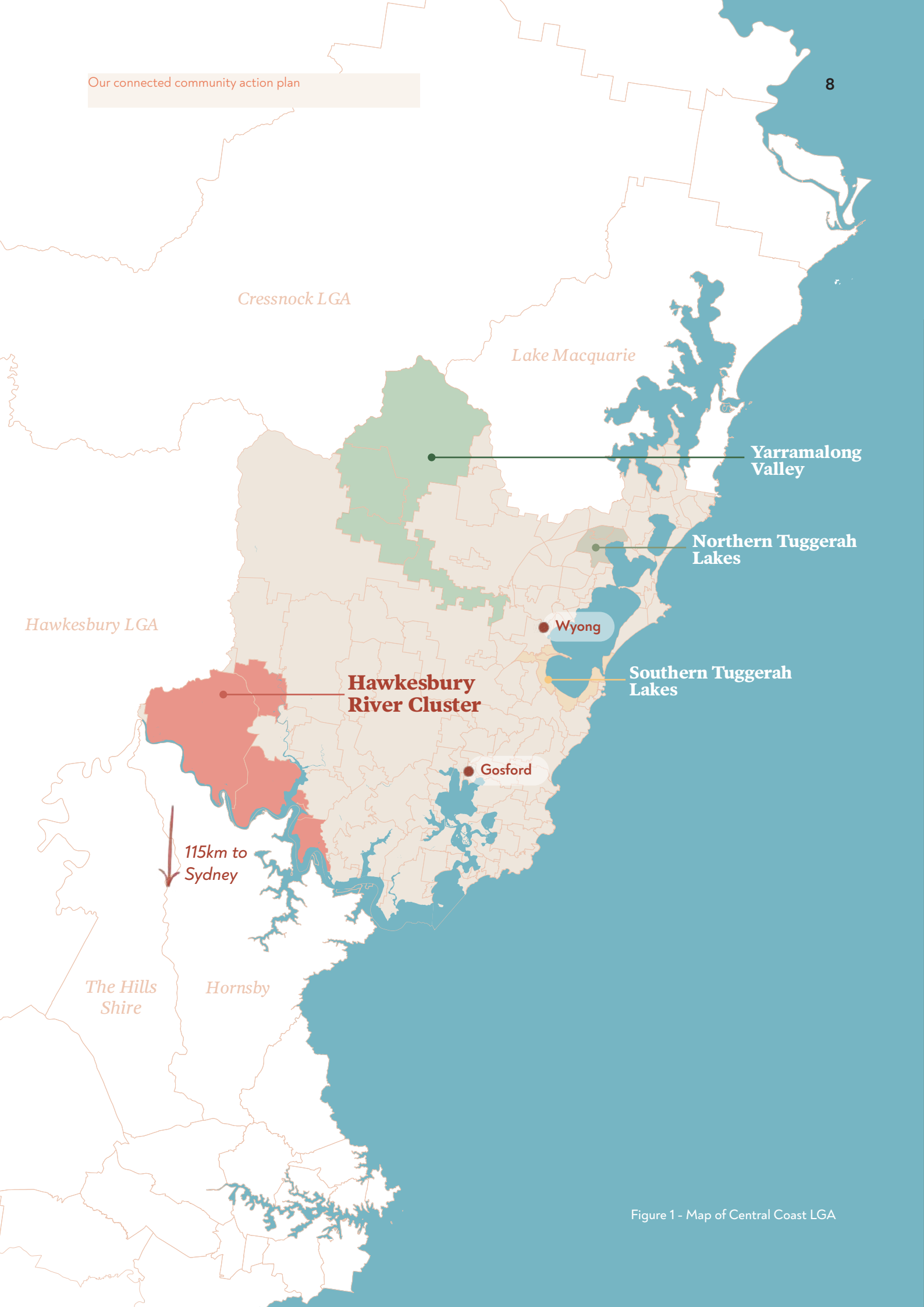


Figure 1 - Map of Central Coast LGA



## Our people

In 2021, there were approximately 821 people living in the Hawkesbury River community. This includes the suburbs of Spencer, Gunderman, Mangrove Creek, Bar Point, Wendoree Park and Marlow. A comparison of key demographics of the Hawkesbury River, Central Coast LGA and Regional NSW can be found overapge.

### We are home to First Nations residents

**6%** of our population are First Nations. This is higher than the Central Coast average (5%) and lower than Regional NSW (7%).

### We have a slightly lower household income

On average, we earn around \$70 less per week (**\$1,460**) compared to the Central Coast household average (\$1,534) and \$6 less per week compared to Regional NSW (\$1,466).

### We have an older population

Our median age is 50, higher than both the Central Coast and Regional NSW average (43). We also have a higher proportion of people aged over 60 (**32%**) compared to both Central Coast (30%) and Regional NSW (29%).

We have a lower proportion of children and young people aged under 18 (14%) compared to 22% in the Central Coast and 21% in Regional NSW.

### We have similar cultural diversity compared to the Central Coast

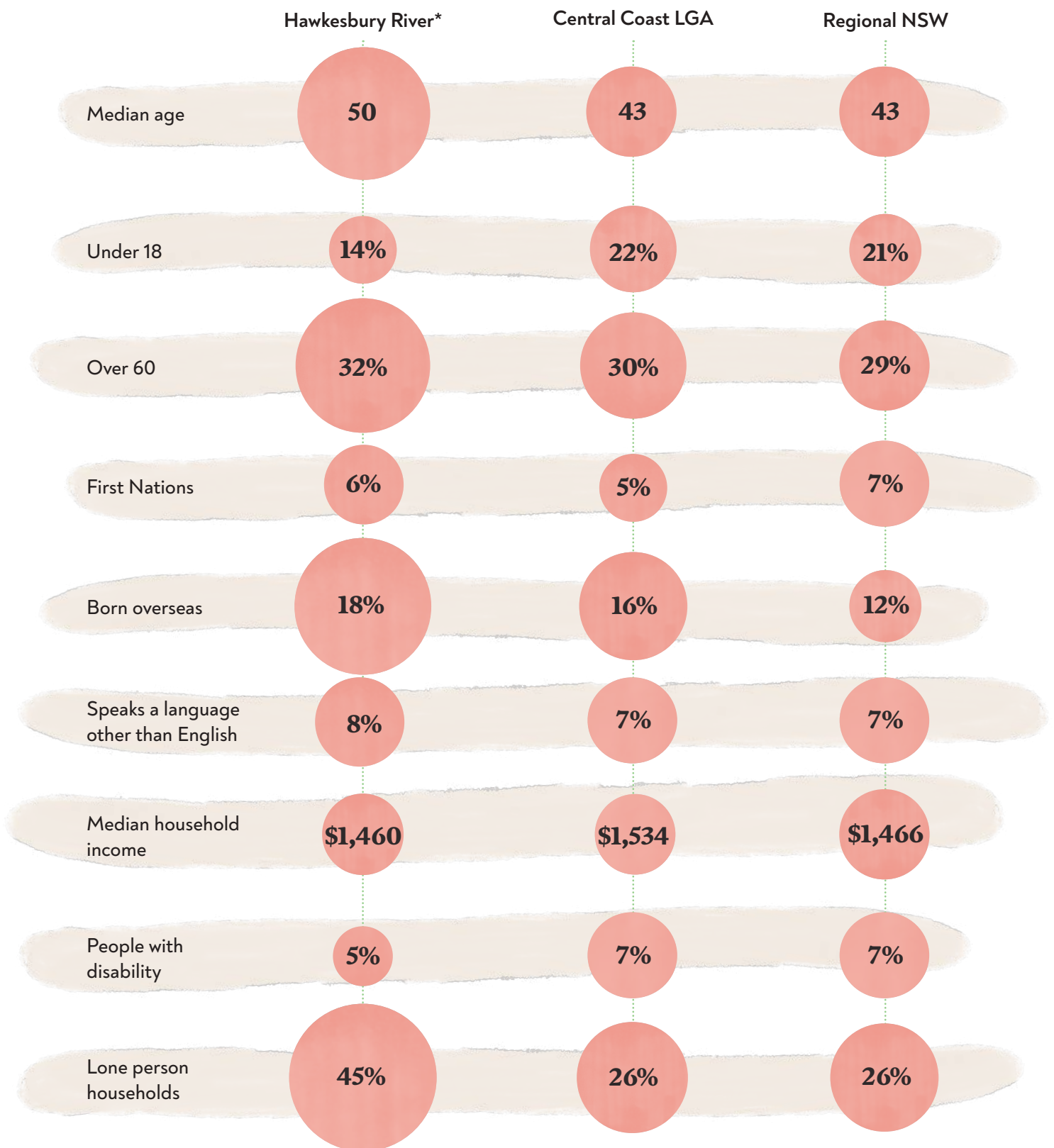
**8%** of our population speaks a language other than English at home, which is similar to the Central Coast (7%) and Regional NSW (7%). Mandarin, Greek and Filipino are some of the languages we speak, among others.

As cultural diversity grows across Sydney and NSW, it is likely we will become more culturally diverse in the future.

### We have more people living alone

We have a higher proportion of people living alone (**45%**) compared to the Central Coast and Regional NSW (26%). This means many of our residents are at risk of social isolation, and in particular, older people with mobility issues.

Figure 2- Hawkesbury River demographic comparison to Central Coast LGA and Regional NSW (Source: ABS Census 2021)



\* **Note** Hawkesbury River includes the suburbs of Spencer, Gunderman, Mangrove Creek, Bar Point, Wendoree Park and Marlow.





“There are a lot of people who want to participate in the community but don't know what to do. Fundraisers can generate local funds and bring people together.”



## Our strengths

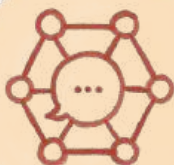
The Hawkesbury River community has many strengths that we can draw on when faced with challenges.

The map overpage shows a selection of the places identified as important by our community.



We have **dedicated community groups and local leaders** who lead us in emergency preparedness and response. Spencer RFS works closely with the SES to save lives and properties during disasters. River Cares, Spencer Progress Association and the Mangrove Emergency Planning & Communication Committee also do important resilience work.

We are a **resilient and capable community** that has a lot of experience in responding to and bouncing back after disasters. As many of us live on isolated properties we know how to prepare and make our homes resilient.



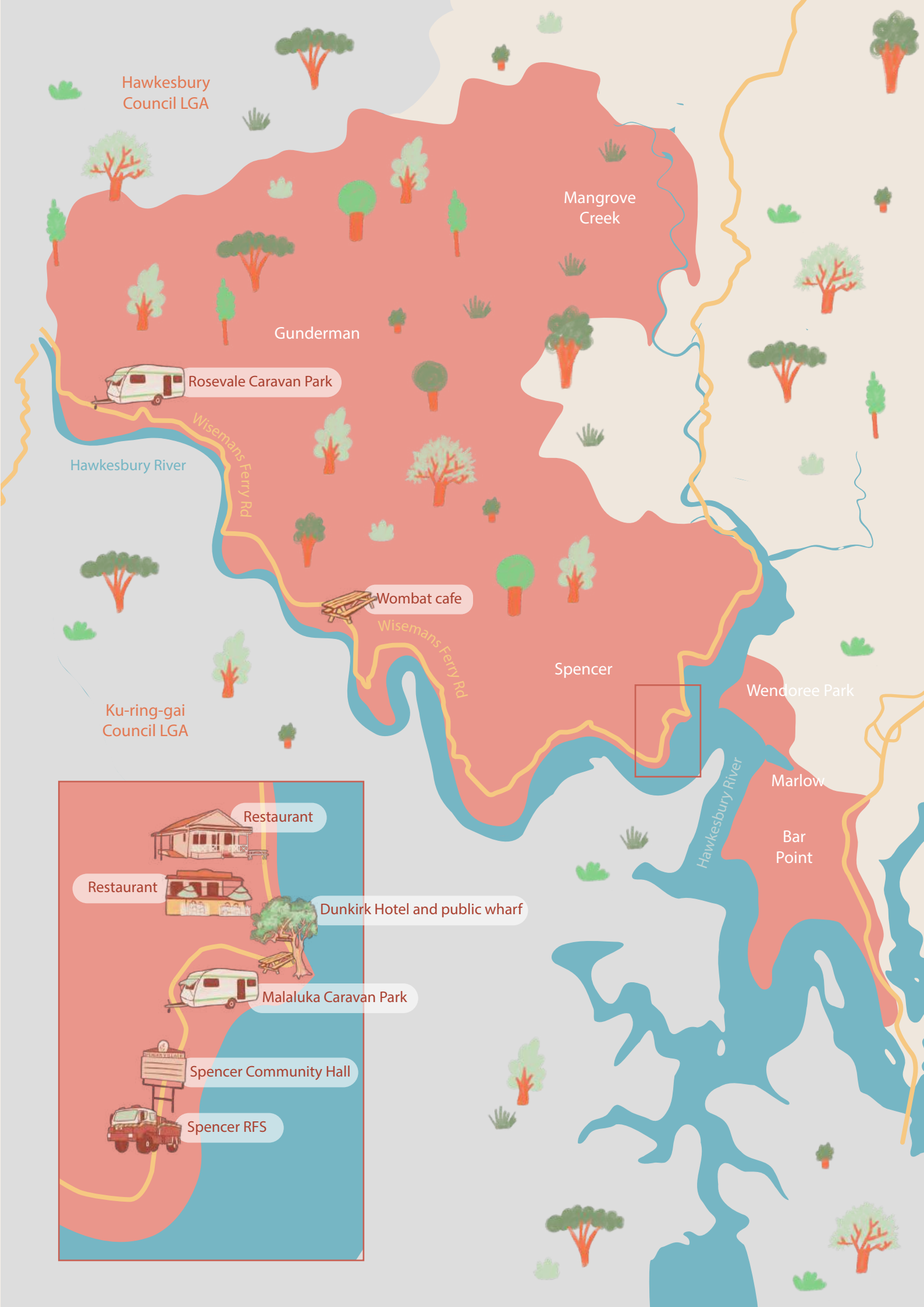
We have **strong communications networks**. Our local Facebook pages allow us to share information and connect both during disasters and in day-to-day life. Our CB radio network keeps us connected during disasters when we can't access the internet or phone lines.

We have **local businesses** that provide spaces for connection and boost our local economy. This includes local restaurants, caravan parks and oyster farms.



We have **important spaces and places** that connect us and act as safe spaces during disasters. This includes Spencer Hall, Dunkirk Hotel and the public wharf.





Hawkesbury  
Council LGA

Mangrove  
Creek

Gunderman

Rosevale Caravan Park

Hawkesbury River

Wisemans Ferry Rd

Wombat cafe

Wisemans Ferry Rd

Spencer

Ku-ring-gai  
Council LGA

Wendoree Park

Marlow

Bar  
Point

Hawkesbury River

Restaurant

Restaurant

Dunkirk Hotel and public wharf

Malaluka Caravan Park

Spencer Community Hall

Spencer RFS

# Our challenges

We also experience challenges living in the Hawkesbury River area. This section outlines some of the challenges we face under the following themes: social, built environment, economic, and natural environment.

## Our social challenges

We have an ageing community with a need for appropriate health, housing and recreation services.

New residents and a growing number of people staying in Airbnbs for the weekend are less connected and prepared for disasters.

Community groups have differing priorities and interests which can make it hard to work together.

Our mental health is negatively impacted by ongoing disasters.

We are experiencing a decline in the number of people volunteering, including for the RFS.

There are not enough community events where we can connect.

We have an ageing community with a need for appropriate health, housing and recreation services.

A lot of us own animals and livestock which can make it hard to evacuate.

We have a high number of people living alone which increases risk of social isolation.



## Our built environment challenges

Pedestrian safety is a challenge, and we need to build more footpaths and address speeding.

Our telecommunications system is poor which makes it hard to access information during disasters.

Our roads are poorly maintained and dangerous, particularly after floods, and we only have one evacuation route in a crisis.

Our drainage system is poor which exacerbates the impacts of rain and flooding.

We don't have access to enough public or community transport services.

Spencer Hall is in a bushfire risk area, meaning we have no staging area for combat agencies.

We do not have easy access to fuel, and when our electricity is down we cannot pump water.

## Our economic challenges

We have less disposable income to spend on emergency preparedness.

We find it hard to access affordable and timely tradespeople.

Many of us do not have property insurance.

## Our natural environment challenges

Our location means we experience more natural disasters, including fires, floods and landslips.

### Flooding

In March 2021, we experienced flooding that impacted over 60 properties and several caravan parks. Less than a year later, in July 2022, we experienced some of the worst flooding we have ever seen, with the Hawkesbury River reaching a new maximum flood level of 5.56m at Wisemans Ferry. During this flooding event, over 100 properties were impacted. These cumulative flooding events have compounded issues around road maintenance, and caused further isolation for our outlying communities.

During flooding events, our community experiences many challenges, including road closures, lack of telecommunications coverage and power outages. This impacts our ability to access emergency information or evacuate to safer spaces, and often leaves community members isolated for days or weeks.

The impacts of these floods can last for many weeks, or even months. Not only do we have to rebuild all of, or parts, of our properties, we have to spend time and energy navigating insurance and government websites and processes. This can have lasting effects on mental, physical and financial wellbeing.

In particular, we are impacted when Warragamba Dam spills.

### Fires

In 2001, the Black Christmas fires burnt over 73,000 hectares of land and destroyed 109 homes, including some in our community. Lasting over 23 days, the fires required over 20,000 regular and volunteer firefighters to help put out.


Almost 20 years later we experienced the 2019-2020 NSW bushfires. These bushfires were some of the worst Australia has ever seen. Although we experienced less devastation than other areas of NSW, some of our community lost homes and outbuilding and the road was closed for over nine days.

Similar to flooding events, we experience road closures, lack of telecommunications coverage and power outages during bushfires. This means we can be isolated and unable to access important information.

The impacts of bushfires on our community are long-lasting and devastating on the mental, physical, social and financial wellbeing of our residents.





A photograph of a painted fish sculpture, possibly a mullet, mounted on a vertical pole. The pole is decorated with horizontal stripes of blue, green, and red. The fish is painted with red, green, and blue stripes, and has a small eye. It is set against a background of dense green foliage and trees. Two speech bubbles are overlaid on the image, one in the upper left and one in the lower right. A copyright notice is in the bottom left corner.

“Everyone along the river helps each other out. There is a sense of community even though the river is so long.”

“This Plan will help us create a cohesive community group that can work together for resilience.”



# Our vision and values for the future

## Our vision for a connected community

We will continue to be a close-knit, caring and welcoming community that pulls together in times of disaster.

We want to improve community connections by activating our community facilities. This includes running affordable social events and expanding our network of community facilities, such as community gardens or a library.

Our location among the river and the bush means our infrastructure needs to be resilient to floods and fires.

We will have safer roads and transport routes that allow us to get in and out with ease. This includes expanding our blue and green links with more walking routes, boat ramps and ferries.

Self reliance is important to us. We will continue to support our community groups and the local leaders who guide us in emergency preparedness and response. We will also continue to build on this in partnership with local services, businesses and Council.

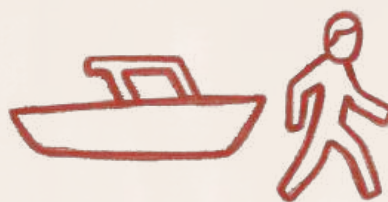




## Our values



**Social cohesion**



**Connection to blue and green links**



**Safe roads and transport routes**



**Spaces and places for social connection**



**Local community groups and businesses**



**Strong and resilient communications networks**

# Our opportunities

There are a number of opportunities for our community to improve community resilience. Some of these are short term opportunities we can implement in the next year, while others may take us a bit longer. Some of these we can do on our own, and others might require partnerships or funding from Central Coast Council or the NSW Government.

This section provides an overview of the key opportunities we have identified for community resilience in the Hawkesbury River community, including:

- Develop a “Living in our area” manual and register of tradespeople.
- Host more community events.
- Investigate community transport options.

There are also a number of opportunities for us to advocate to local, state and federal government for better resilience outcomes, including around:

- Install flood gauges.
- Develop a local renewable power capacity and micro-grid





## 1

## Develop a “Living in our area” manual and register of tradespeople.

New residents moving to Hawkesbury River are often not fully aware of local hazards and the importance of emergency preparedness. Developing a “Living in Our Area” manual will provide essential information to assist newcomers in understanding potential risks ensuring they are prepared for floods.. It will also help residents know who to contact in different emergency scenarios. The register of tradespeople will provide us with quick and easy access to trusted professionals who can deliver services efficiently.

### Information we need in this manual:

- Planning for emergencies including what supplies and equipment are needed, evacuation points and emergency contacts.
- Tips for living in the Hawkesbury River area.
- Animal rescue information.
- First aid.
- Contact information of local tradespeople who travel to the area. This includes carpenters, electricians, plumbers, builders and mechanics.
- Information on medical and health services.
- Council clean up days.
- Information on snakes.

### Who should create this manual?

Either Council or local community groups can take ownership of the manual.

**“It is so difficult to get tradespeople to come to the area. You often end up waiting months for repairs or to make changes to your house to make it flood proof.”**

- Hawkesbury River community member

### What format should this manual be in?

The manual and register should be available in both hard and soft copy. It is important that this is a living resource that can be continually updated.

The hard copy versions could be available at local businesses and Spencer Community Centre.

### How should this manual be promoted?

The manual and register can be promoted in many ways, including:

- Facebook.
- Letter box drops.
- Email.
- At local businesses.
- Community events.

### Timing

Short term (Less than 1 year)

**“It is important to have one source of information. However, this needs to be a living resource, not something static so it remains useful.”**

- Hawkesbury River community member

# 2

## Host more community events

We want community events that bring us closer together, reduce isolation and create a strong sense of belonging. Events are also a great way to welcome new community members to the Hawkesbury River community.

### Events we want in Hawkesbury River:

- Trash and treasure days.
- Fishing camps.
- River walks.
- Live music.
- Markets.
- Beanie festival.
- Exercise groups.
- Computer classes.
- Historical events.
- Darts.
- Book club.
- Bingo.
- Cooking events.
- Community dances.
- Art nights.
- Christmas in July.
- Community dinners.

Typically we want these events to be hosted on the weekends, lunchtime or late afternoons.

### Who should organise these events?

Community groups and volunteers.

**“I would like to see a variety of community-based local activities, either no cost or very low cost.”**

- Hawkesbury River community member

### Where should these events be hosted?

Community events can be hosted at Spencer Community Hall.

### How should these events be promoted?

Our community events can be promoted in a number of ways, including:

- Facebook.
- Email.
- Newsletters.
- Signage.

### How can we fund these events?

Funding of these events could come through paid events or Council grants.

### Timing

Medium term (1-3 years)

**“I really want to see more community dance events at the hall focused on social connections. They have often been really popular with the community.”**

- Hawkesbury River community member



## 3

## Investigate community transport options

There is no public transport in the Hawkesbury River area. While many of us drive, there are some of our community who don't own cars or are unable to drive. These community members struggle to access important spaces like shopping centres or medical centres. Their only option is local community transport, which is infrequent and often expensive. Having more affordable and regular community transport services will ensure everyone in the community is able to access the important spaces and places they need.

### What type of community transport we want:

Given our location, we think a community bus would be the most effective type of community transport. We want this service to be provided at least weekly, ideally with a morning and afternoon service.

The days that work the best for us are Tuesday and Thursday.

### Where should the community bus go?

The community bus should connect us to the following locations:

- Wisemans Ferry.
- Glenorie.
- Shopping centre.
- Medical centres.
- Train stations (e.g. Gosford or Berowra)
- Entertainment options.

### Who should manage this?

NSW Transport, community transport companies or Council.

### Timing

Long term (3-5 years)

University of Technology (2022) Accelerating Innovative Local Transport: Community transport of the future, available at: <https://www.uts.edu.au/news/health-science/improved-community-transport-key-wellbeing>

Research from the University of Technology Sydney found that community transport is an essential part of social and community infrastructure.

For every \$1 invested in community transport, there is an estimated social value of between \$8 and \$40.

There are many innovative examples of community transport that can deliver benefits to customers and providers.

**“We need to provide transport for people without vehicles or family who can help them.”**

- Hawkesbury River community member

## Other opportunities

### Advocate for flood gauges

Installing flood gauges along the Hawkesbury River near Spencer is essential to providing us with accurate and timely data on water levels. The closest existing gauge at Wisemans Ferry does not accurately reflect the water levels in Spencer, which impacts our ability to respond during flooding.

We have an opportunity to identify potential locations for these flood gauges and advocate to Council to have these installed.

### Develop a local renewable power capacity and micro-grid

Developing a local renewable power capacity and micro-grid for the Hawkesbury River area will improve our energy resilience. During floods we often have power outages. A local renewable energy source and a micro-grid, will ensure we have a reliable power supply during disasters.

We need to explore grant and partnership opportunities to make this happen.

### Other opportunities

- More signage to help emergency services identify properties and for community members to identify evacuation routes.





# Appendix 1: Disaster Resilience Index

## Disaster resilience capacity

Disaster resilience is the capacity for communities to prepare for, absorb and recover from natural hazard events and to learn, adapt and transform in the face of future events. Below is an overall measure of disaster resilience formed from coping and adaptive capacity. The index values range from 0 to 1, where 1 indicates the highest capacity for resilience, and 0 represents the lowest.

### Hawkesbury- .6016

This area is assessed as having moderate capacity for disaster resilience.

Communities in areas of moderate disaster resilience have some capacity to use available resources to cope with adverse events, and some capacity to adjust to change through learning, adaptation and transformation.

Moderate disaster resilience is generally contributed by moderate levels of coping and adaptive capacity, which in turn are associated with moderate levels of economic capital, moderate provision of and access to services, moderate community cohesion and variable encouragement for adaptive learning and problem solving.

## Coping capacity index

Coping capacity is the means by which communities or organisations can use available resources and abilities to face adverse consequences. The coping capacity index also ranges from 0 to 1, with 1 being the highest capacity to cope.

### Hawkesbury- .5459

This area is assessed as having moderate Coping Capacity.

Communities in areas of moderate Coping Capacity have some capacity to use available resources to cope with adverse events and to prepare for, absorb and recover from a natural hazard.

## Adaptive capacity index

Adaptive capacity is the arrangements and processes that enable adjustment through learning, adaptation and transformation. The index ranges from 0 to 1, with 1 representing the highest adaptive capacity.

### Hawkesbury- .6009

This area is assessed as having moderate Adaptive Capacity.

Communities in areas of moderate Adaptive Capacity have some capacity to adjust to change through learning, adaptation and transformation.

## Disaster resilience factors

### Social character

The social and demographic characteristics of the community. Factors such as household and family composition, age, sex, education, employment, disability, language, and length of residence have well-known influences on capacity to prepare for, respond to and recover from natural hazards.

### Economic capital

The economic characteristics of the community. Economic capital can contribute to the reduction of losses from natural hazard events through improved mitigation and risk management, individual flexibility and adaptation, enhanced recovery, market continuity and business continuity.

### Emergency services

The presence and resourcing of emergency services. Emergency management is a core government service and is integral to natural hazard preparation, response and recovery. Emergency services undertake a range of activities to assist communities before, during and after natural hazards.

### Planning and the built environment

The presence of legislation, plans, structures or codes to protect communities and their built environment. Land use planning articulates and regulates relationships between development and hazards. Planning reduces current and future risk and enhances the readiness and capacity of organisations to respond to events.

### Community capital

The cohesion and connectedness of the community. Social capital is a resource that facilitates collective action for mutual benefit. Sense of community fosters participation, community competency, pro-social behaviour

and preparedness through working with others to solve shared local problems.

### Information access

The potential for communities to engage with natural hazard information. Telecommunication and internet access is vital to information sharing before, during and after natural hazard events. Community engagement activities benefit communities through capacity building, social connectedness, self-reliance, training, awareness of risk and psycho-social preparation.

### Governance and leadership

The capacity within organisations to adaptively learn, review and adjust policies and procedures, or to transform organisational practices. Adaptive institutions have conditions suited to the development of the skills, knowledge and culture for managing complex change. They have flexibility and can learn from experience, innovate and adjust.

### Social and community engagement

The capacity within communities to adaptively learn and transform in the face of complex change. Adaptive communities have support and resources to manage complex change and to renew for mutual benefit. Characteristics of adaptive communities include social engagement, trust, cooperation, learning and wellbeing.

The identified communities possess the above strengths and have the common barrier of:

### Information access

The potential for communities to engage with natural hazard information. Telecommunication and internet access is vital to information sharing before, during and after natural hazard events. Community engagement activities benefit communities through capacity building, social connectedness, self-reliance, training, awareness of risk and psycho-social preparation



