

The Mintaro community kindly offered to take part in a short Community Disaster Planning workshop in August 2023. This is the story of that event.

The Case Study uses the Two Hour Workshop RESOURCE.

### Who to include

Organised by the Mintaro Progress Association, the workshop was open to all residents of the Mintaro and surrounds as well as people who owned property in Mintaro but were not full-time residents. The Progress Association made a special effort to include people who were newcomers or had not yet moved permanently to the area.

Thirteen people attended. The workshop was facilitated by the Community Disaster Preparation Project Manager Dr Kristine Peters.

### Room layout

Everyone sat around one large table. This is the ideal configuration for a group of this size because everyone is involved in the same conversation (which is harder to control in a café style layout).

### Looking after ourselves

Talking about disasters can trigger old fears and traumas. Be mindful of this and keep the tone positive and supportive. Be careful about drawing on people's own lived experience, it may trigger deep feelings that can be difficult to manage in a group environment. If someone becomes upset and wants to leave, make sure they have support.

### Welcome

The Chair of the Mintaro Progress Association welcomed participants.

### Introductions

Even though most people knew each other, it was useful to be reminded about the various groups in which they are involved. It was also useful to know who lived in town or on rural holdings, and who worked away from Mintaro. This gets people thinking about other people's situations, and how contingency plans need to incorporate a range of living and working arrangements.

The most important part of the introductions is finding out about people's concerns about community readiness for disaster. This raised a wide variety of issues:

- The need to look after ourselves and our families first, then take care of the community.
- What we need to do to help older people who live outside of the town and who may not have good telecommunications.

# Community Disaster Preparation

## Mintaro Case Study

[www.communitydisasterprep.com.au](http://www.communitydisasterprep.com.au)

This project is funded under the Disaster Risk Reduction Grants Program funded by the Australian Government and the South Australian Government.



## Mintaro Case Study: Short Community Disaster Planning Workshop

- Being realistic about what we can take on as a community and how we convey this to people who are not involved in the planning process.
- That the oval is not safe in a bushfire (it is a CFS 'Bushfire Last Resort Refuge' for travellers which means it is safer than being on the open road but is not a 'safe place'). [*This suggests a CFS session on Last Resorts and Safer Places would be worthwhile.*]
- Flooding due to the number of creeks in the Mintaro area, especially with the growth of feral ash trees in creek beds and many people not able to clear larger trees.
- The immediate concern is bushfire, but there have been chemical spills and misuse and most people don't know enough about hazardous materials.
- In regional areas it can take a long time for emergency services to arrive, people need to know what to do before first responder help is available. More people should know first aid.
- New residents, tourists and visitors to the many Bed and Breakfast (BnB) guests generally have no idea what to do in an emergency and it's difficult to get the message to them.
- The likelihood of a disastrous vehicle accident, especially with the number of trucks that go through the town.
- Coping emotionally until first responders arrive, and then during the recovery period where mental health support may be difficult to access.
- New residents need to know that there's a plan, who's involved and what they do, and what risks and hazards we might be facing.
- People don't know what to do in a bushfire. It's not just the newcomers, most people aren't adequately prepared.
- The olive trees around the cemetery are highly flammable.
- Do we know who needs help in an emergency and what resources we have in town?
- Do people know to call 000 in the first instance?

The introductions take some time but it's important to allow for this because:

1. It gets people involved – the longer the facilitator talks 'at' the group in the beginning, the more difficult it is to get people engaged in useful discussion.
2. We have a better understanding of the issues that people are worried about and as can be seen from the list above, all are valid and need to be factored into our planning. While bushfire is a serious risk, it's not the only disaster we should be thinking about.
3. It demonstrates that concerns can be about big issues (e.g. mental health support) and small (e.g. olive trees) and that's fine. Sometimes the smaller issues are also the easy fixes and you'll need 'runs on the board' to keep people engaged.
4. You find out what's important to each individual and they're more likely to put their hand up to help if you're addressing their particular concerns.
5. People can be thinking about solutions as the rest of the workshop unfolds. Good solutions aren't 'top of mind', they require careful consideration and while there's not a lot of time to do this at the workshop (that's what the draft Action Plan is for), it's better than tackling issues without forethought.

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### Purpose of the workshop

The purpose of the workshop is to develop a community disaster preparation plan. However you're unlikely to achieve this in a couple of hours. Even if you do, when the plan is drafted and distributed for consideration, there will be a lot of questions and new ideas that will need to be incorporated.

**Don't overstate your ability to achieve a detailed plan in a short workshop** – it's different if you're doing the full day workshop which gives you time to work through ideas. Instead, introduce the idea of **"Planning to Plan"** where you identify the most important issues that need to be addressed, and set aside time at future meetings to plan for each of these according to priority. That way you're building people's planning skills and keeping it achievable.

**Be realistic and know what resourcing is available** – there's no benefit in developing plans that rely on people or funds that simply aren't there. If people suggest grandiose ideas, bring them back to reality by asking exactly who would drive the project and do the legwork. Similarly if the suggestion starts with "Get a grant and ...", ask exactly which grant and be realistic about your community's ability to source funds of that type. If you're new to grants, it's unlikely you'll be able to attract big funds. Start small and achievable, you'll get more done in the long term.

**The best outcome from a short workshop is to identify a couple of issues that the community can address.** For example: by the end of this workshop Mintaro came up with two: risk assessment to identify priorities (this would lead into a more detailed action plan for the priority issues); and better preparation of the three refuge sites (Oval, Institute and Bowling Club).

### Planning, Preparation, Response, Recovery

Keep saying it! Partitioning people's thinking into these four stages reduces confusion about what we need to do when. Your initial action plan will focus on the Preparation stage (for both Response and Recovery), keep the group focused on that.

### Using scenarios

The purpose of using scenarios is to get people thinking laterally. If we focused on an emergency that has actually occurred in our community, people tend to analyse the way they responded to that particular situation. By using an abstract idea, they are more likely to suggest responses that are 'outside the box', which in turns activates more creative thinking.

For the Mintaro workshop, the facilitator used the Earthquake scenario (with the earthquake damage centred in Clare).

Here's where facilitation skills are

#### Earthquake

**At 2:43 am, a major earthquake strikes the largest town in your area.**

The noise and shaking woke you up, but no-one in your home is injured. You check the Geoscience Australia website – the epicentre was in your neighbouring town. It looks like a big one. People are posting on social media, there are blurry photos of building collapses. You try to ring friends in that town but all calls all go to voicemail. Your electricity goes out. Emergency vehicles rush through town, sirens blaring.

You and your neighbours gather at the Institute Hall. There are different opinions about what to do. An argument starts. Some people get in their cars and race toward the affected town. Others start preparing for an influx of people fleeing the disaster, although without electricity they're restricted in what they can do.

By dawn, frightened people are flooding into your town ...

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useful. We could have spent ages talking about earthquakes and what would actually happen if there were a major earthquake in the region, but the facilitator kept people on track by cutting short conversations about earthquakes and repeating that all is known about the emergency is what's written in the scenario, that's what the group needs to address.

### Group work

Participants worked in four groups with about 20 minutes allowed for this activity. They were asked to brainstorm what the community should do to respond to the earthquake scenario and write each separate idea on a post-it note.

It is always interesting listening to the different approaches suggested by each group. This is one of the reasons we do this exercise in smaller groups, not only does the activity move faster (because we're not trying to manage one big conversation), it also helps people to understand that there are different ways of addressing the situation. This realisation is really important when an incident does occur because the default position is "My idea is best and you can all get on board", however if they've already understood that there could be many good approaches – and they've worked through the process of picking out the best actions from a range of ideas – you're less likely to have power-based conflict in an actual event.

The Mintaro community did a great job of this activity, with no-one deferring 'community' responsibility to government (you'd be surprised how often that happens). So, we didn't need to go through the additional task of separating 'community' from 'other' responses.

### Ready, Possible, Future

Each group then sorted their post-it notes into three categories:

**READY:** Are we ready to do this without any further planning or preparation?

**POSSIBLE:** Could we do this with a bit of planning or preparation?

**FUTURE:** We know we should do this, but we're a long way from being ready.

This is the point where we asked groups to describe the activities in each category. We've all been to workshops where the facilitator asks groups to share everything at all stages, but that doesn't contribute to disciplined thinking – in fact it gets harder to bring people back to the main topic. By delaying whole-group discussion until the ideas are refined, participants have the 'mind space' to think about specific responses and fine-tune these for practicality and usefulness.

The main facilitation role at this point is to guide people away from detailed solutions. The way most people's minds work is to grab an idea and work at it, either to solve all details or find reasons it won't work (that depends on individual wiring). We don't have time for that in the short workshop so remind people about Planning to Plan: as long as we have agreement on the main tasks, we can work out the detail later.

It expedites the process if the facilitator can 'massage' the discussion into topics, either by writing on a whiteboard/butchers paper or on a laptop connected to a screen. Don't be afraid to change the headings to capture the main purpose of each group of ideas.

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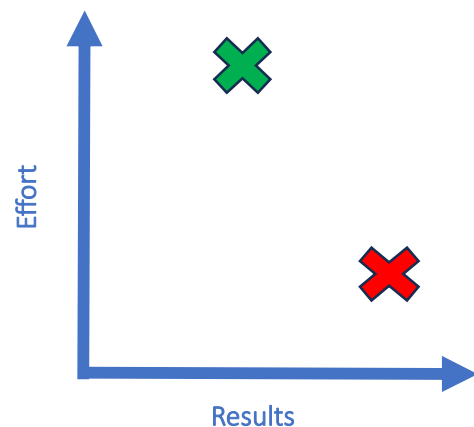
At the end of this discussion, the Mintaro action headings were:

- Get the Oval, Institute and Bowling Club better prepared for use as refuges.
  - Include heatwaves as a disaster, how to help people without air con
- How to remove ash tree saplings from the base of the creeks
  - Grants?
  - Working bees
  - Service clubs
  - Telling people how to kill young trees after the event
- Establish processes for:
  - Checkpoint/registration
  - Triage/Concierge (understanding role/training/criteria)
  - First Aid/injury/medication – training and first aid kits
  - Backup if the main person isn't available
  - A plan if the phones aren't working (messenger/runner)
  - Understanding community resources (e.g. water)
- Contacting 'isolated' people (visitors, elderly, remote)
  - List of all the BnBs with phone numbers and where they are – info sheet in BnB's
  - What about the people not on phone/internet?
  - What about visitors? Holiday/temporary visitors. VIC/BnB provide info to visitors.
  - People working out of town.
- Looking after ourselves and our community:
  - Check in with core group of people/organisers (check that 'your group' is OK)
  - Phone numbers of vulnerable people and how to contact them (contact tree)
  - Mental Health First Aid, Accidental Counsellor
  - Gas BBQs for cooking (home and community cookup).
  - List of everyone with a generator
  - CFS bushfire preparation programs

As you can see, a number of ideas need further development and there's no sense of priority. That's where Planning to Plan comes in!

The Mintaro Chair suggested we start with a risk assessment. That's a great idea because it shifts the focus from a list of ideas to identifying issues that are both urgent and important, and – essentially at this early stage of planning – produce results with minimal effort.

In terms of effort and results (see diagram) doing a risk assessment ticks the red cross – it's low effort (can be done in a meeting) and generates huge results (everyone is on the same page and knows what needs to be done).



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### The Action Plan

The outcome of the workshop was a simple plan with four Actions:

1. At the next Progress Association meeting, set aside time to do a risk assessment across the community, then prioritise actions (including ideas suggested at the workshop)
2. Start thinking about what we need to do to better prepare the Oval, Institute and Bowling Club as emergency centres/refuges.
3. Set aside time at each Progress Association meeting to (initially) plan and then activate the plan. This might include inviting the CFS Community Engagement team to run a bushfire readiness workshop, or organising a Mental Health First Aid or Accidental Counsellor session – as well as activities like working bees (e.g. for the feral ash trees) and preparing information about what to do in an emergency for BnB owners to provide to their guests.
4. Communicate our disaster planning activities to the community.

Technically, Item 2 (emergency centre preparation) is a subset of the risk assessment, but it was deemed important enough to be listed as a separate action. That's fine, the plan needs to suit the community and including it as one of the key outcomes of the workshop reinforces the significance of this action in the workshop discussions.

**Are four actions enough?** If they're the right ones, yes! A strategic approach will always deliver better results than a scattergun approach to random ideas. It sounds too simple to have one of the actions as 'allow time at meetings', but Progress Associations (and Community Management Committees and Business Associations and Sporting Committees) are often so focused on their day-to-day pressures, they forget to allow time to look up and outward.

### Where to from here?

Participants in emergency planning workshops often feel overwhelmed and frustrated that there are too many things to do and not enough time. That's why your Action Plan needs to be simple and achievable. You should be able to achieve everything in your first plan in less than six months. Once you've done those tasks, you'll be in a better position to revisit your priorities and develop actions for the next few months.

**You're far better to have achieved a few small things, than a failed start on the big things.**