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**FOUNDATION**

# **RESEARCH, RESPOND, RECOVER:**

**The ongoing impact of the 2022 floods on  
not-for-profits in the Northern Rivers**



**Northern Rivers Community Foundation**  
May 2024

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### Acknowledgement

Two years on from the Northern Rivers Floods, we acknowledge what the people of this region have endured, and the heroism, strength, and resilience of our Northern Rivers communities. We are fortunate to have heard from those who have worked alongside residents and business owners from the worst impacted parts of the NSW Northern Rivers region. We have witnessed stories of recovery and heed the advice they have offered.

We acknowledge and thank the community organisations that have shared their knowledge, lived experience and time with us by contributing to this research, as well as the NRCF staff and volunteers for generously donating their time, including Kathie Heyman, Carolyn Adams, Victor Tawil and Marion McKillop.

The work that we do, including this research and our grant funding for grassroots organisations across the region, is made possible by the generous support of the Paul Ramsay Foundation. We thank them for their ongoing commitment and support.



We acknowledge the Traditional Owners of Bundjalung Country, the lands where we live and work, and their continuing connection to land, water, sea and community. We pay respects to Australia's First Peoples, to their unique and diverse cultures, and to Elders past, present and emerging.

# Overview



This report explores the findings of the Northern Rivers Community Foundation's (NRCF) third annual Flood Impact Survey, which tracks the trajectory of recovery of the Northern Rivers grassroots and not-for-profit sector following the 2022 flooding disaster.

The survey findings provide insights into the recovery journey and highlight the many and complex challenges they face in restoring pre-disaster levels of funding and service provision, as well as building their resilience for future disasters.

NRCF conducted the survey between 4 March and 31 March 2024. Two hundred

Northern Rivers-based not-for-profit community organisations participated in the survey, which was conducted by the NRCF staff and volunteers online, in-person and by telephone. Respondents were asked to provide information about the recovery progress of their community and organisation, including perceptions of funding, ongoing challenges, and barriers to recovery.

The Flood Impact Survey will be conducted annually for three years (with 2025 being the final year) to track the trajectory of recovery and use the findings inform our work and the work of others in the sector.

# Summary of Key Findings

## 1 Community recovery remains slow

There was a small increase in the overall community recovery rating from 4.8 in 2023 to 5.5 in 2024. The overall organisational recovery rating was ever smaller, increasing from 6.4 to 6.7.



Qualitative insights suggest that some communities are recovering faster than others.

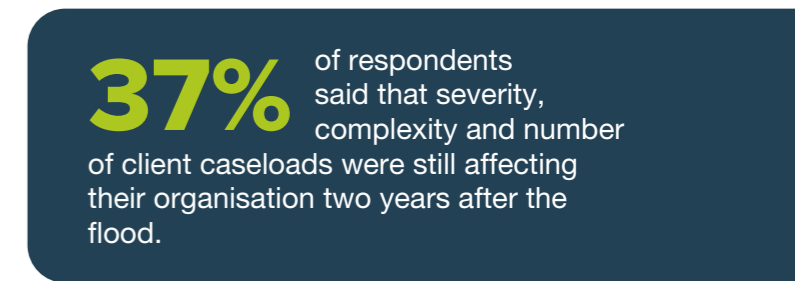
## 2 Support from the wider community is waning

Following any disaster communities naturally feel compelled to volunteer time and money to support community recovery, but the survey results suggest that as people's lives return to normal and the visible impacts of the floods are less obvious, people are less inclined to support charitable causes.



## 3 Workloads have increased, while funding has decreased

There is an implicit assumption within funding models that after a disaster, as time progresses, the community's need for support will reduce and less funding is required. However, the results of the survey showed that the workloads of community organisations are higher than ever two years on from the floods, despite funding becoming increasingly scarce.



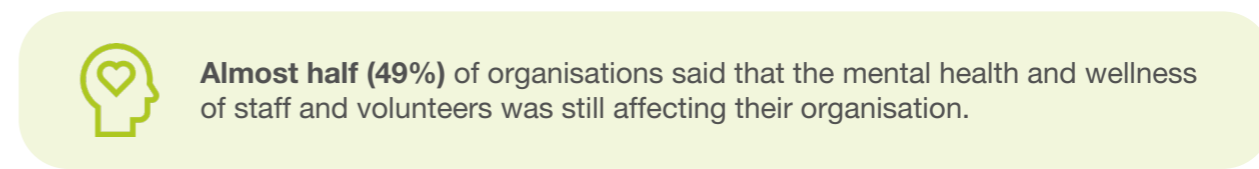
## 4 Organisations' fears of a funding cliff are now a reality

In 2023 around 60% of respondents said they were anticipating a funding cliff, in 2024 around the number (62%) said their organisation was affected by a lack of funding. Of greatest concern was the significant increase in organisations who said they received no funding from major funding sources the past 12 months.



## 5 The mental health of staff and volunteers remains a serious concern

Mental health and wellness of staff and volunteers was the second biggest issue affecting community organisations two years on from the floods. While this had decreased from 62% in 2023 to 49% in 2024, it remains exceedingly high. The inability to meet high demand for their service was a key factor affecting the mental health and wellness of staff and volunteers.



# How we've adapted and responded to what we've learned...

## Feb 2022/Mar 2022

Two flooding events in close proximity cost lives destroyed countless homes and businesses across the Northern Rivers.



## Mar 2022

NRCF conducted responsive research immediately following the disaster to determine the extent of the impact and the need for immediate and ongoing support by the not-for-profit sector.



## Apr 2022

NRCF and the Byron Community Centre established the Flood Relief Fund and expedited emergency response grants worth \$1 million to community organisations responding to the disaster.

## Mar 2023

NRCF conducts its second Flood Impact Survey with 188 organisations responding.



## Nov 2023

NRCF awards flood grants to 20 community organisations through its Community Resilience Grants Program, in partnership with NSW Reconstruction Authority.



## Mar 2024

NRCF conducts its third Flood Impact Survey with 200 organisations responding.

## May 2024

2024 Flood Impact Survey analysis to inform design of Annual Community Grants Round for 2024-2025.

# Methodology

## Research Design

This research used a criterion sampling technique to identify survey respondents who were community-based not-for-profit organisations that were affected by the 2022 Northern Rivers Floods. The survey used an online survey tool with 16 questions in total. Of the 13 questions relating to the research topic, 12 had a multiple choice (single select) response option and one had a free-text field response option. Most questions were repeated verbatim from the 2023 survey to allow for comparisons between responses.

## Data Collection

NRCF created a distribution list of organisations that met the criteria (community-based not-for-profit organisations that were affected by the 2022 Northern Rivers Floods) using its extensive database of past and current grant recipients, applicants, and other organisations. Anonymous responses were permitted to encourage honesty in responses.



## Data Analysis

The data collected from the survey was downloaded and coded for analysis. Quantitative responses were used to produce descriptive statistics, with comparisons made between identical questions in the 2022 survey. Qualitative responses were coded for analysis to identify common themes, trends, patterns, challenges, and opportunities.

## Limitations

The survey captures data from not-for-profit organisations that may have been funded by NRCF, or which may be considering grant funding applications in the future. This may impact the information that has been shared in the survey and may include bias.

As the research used a non-probability sample, the findings are not statistically significant by research standards, however NRCF are confident that this sample size is large enough to provide a reasonable representation of the perspectives and experiences of this cohort of respondents.

# Research Findings

The survey findings provide insights into the recovery journey. They highlight the many and complex challenges still faced by not-for-profit groups and communities across the region in restoring services and funding to pre-disaster levels, meeting increased need, and building resilience for future disasters.

## Impact on Communities

### Overall Recovery

Respondents were asked to rate on a scale of 1-10 how well their community had recovered from the 2022 floods. The average rating given was 5.5 out of 10, a slight increase from the 2023 overall rating of 4.8 out of 10.

#### Recovery Rating

How well your community has recovered from the disaster to date?



In 2024, 29% of respondents provided a **community recovery rating of 7/10 or above**, compared to only 20% the previous year. In 2024, 27% of respondents provided a community recovery rating of 4/10 or below, compared to 43% the previous year.

This suggests that community recovery is improving overall, albeit slowly. There is a legitimate question as to whether communities will ever recover to their previous condition or whether the floods have fundamentally altered the social fabric of affected communities.

It is important to note that communities recover from disasters at different rates, therefore averages often conceal areas of locational disadvantage. This was a common theme in the qualitative data, with people living and working in certain communities feeling as though they had been forgotten.

*“Casino was already under-resourced but, since the flood, has experienced a population surge of displaced people who need mental health support. This population increase has not been recognised”.*

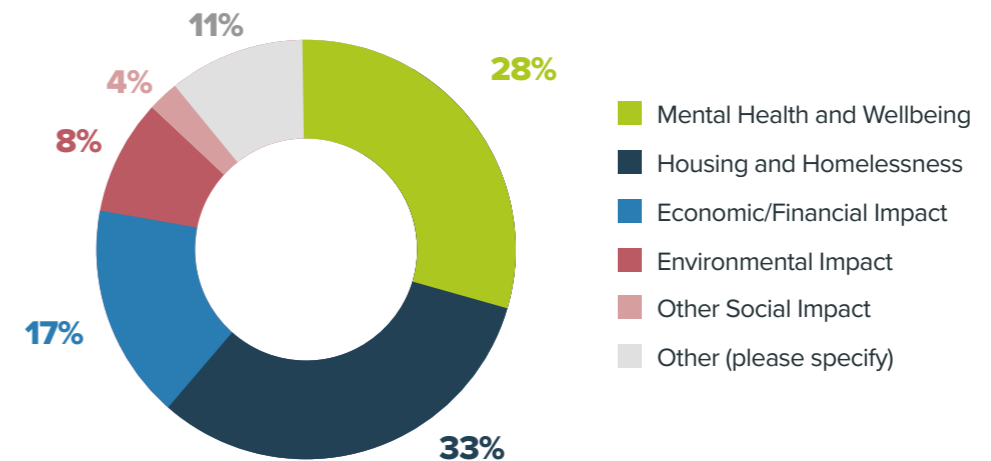
*“The Clarence Valley was overlooked for many of the vital recovery resources that our northern Neighbours received, resulting in a longer more protracted recovery for our community”.*

# Key Challenges

## In the last 12 months

One third (33%) of community organisations reported that housing and homelessness was the most significant issue affecting their communities over the past 12 months, followed by mental health and well-being (28%). The third biggest concern was economic impacts (17%).

What was the top flood-related issue your organisation has seen, that’s impacted our community in the last 12 months?



*“Jobs, economical wellbeing now double hit with cost or rent and living on top of still trying to repair personal assets”.*

*“The housing crisis is now beyond critical - it is now catastrophic as there’s no housing available. This org has given up trying to find accommodation, & now focussing on providing material aid for food, which is the priority, and vouchers (for basics such as clothing and petrol). People are living in cars and tents with not enough money for any basics, often working families can’t afford petrol so often can’t get to work. If people do have access to accommodation, it’s at risk because they are vulnerable to being removed if they fall behind on rent. All of this contributes to domestic violence and mental health issues”.*

*“The level of stress and depression is still very high”.*

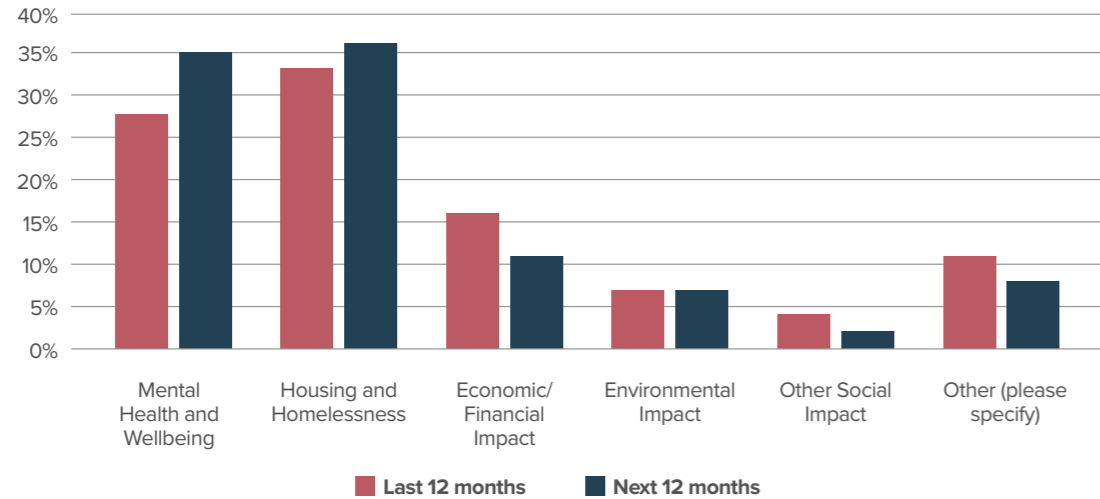
Qualitative insights revealed that these impacts were interconnected and that multiple stressors had eroded the resilience of their communities.

*“The cumulative impact of the fires/Covid /floods/housing crisis and cost of living is such an immense and compounding complex of issues for our community. This makes social inequities more pronounced.”*

## In the next 12 months

Community organisations anticipate that impacts of housing and homelessness and mental health and wellbeing would increase in the next 12 months, while other impacts would decrease slightly.

Issues affecting in the last 12 months compared to the next 12 months (anticipated)



## Barriers to recovery

Almost half (49%) of respondents said that building **more resilient communities** would have the most profound impact on the issues that were affecting their communities.

*“Focusing on regenerative communities (as it integrates personal, social and environmental healing). We need to move beyond a focus on resilience (as it suggests coping, rather than setting a vision for wellbeing)”.*

*“Ensuring that people who were moved from their pre-flood home, or who had their friends move away after the flood, can create a new network of friends, support people and services...we must create confidence again in our community, that we can strive and achieve with our new network of friends and support services”.*

This was more than twice the number of people who chose “better town planning”, which was the next most common barrier to recovery (22%).

## Impact on Communities

### Overall Recovery

Respondents were also asked to rate on a scale of 1-10 how well their organisation had recovered from the 2022 floods. The average rating was 6.7 out of 10, a slight increase from the 2023 overall rating of 6.4 out of 10.

In 2024, 23% of respondents rated their organisation’s recovery a 9 or 10 out of 10, an increase of 14% the previous year. This suggests an upwards trend in the overall recovery of organisations.

### Recovery Rating

How well your organisation has recovered from the disaster to date?



With the exception of funding, the survey revealed across the board improvements in the impact of the flood on community organisations,

What impacts, if any, are still affecting your organisation?

	2024	Rank	2023	Rank	Change
<b>Funding</b>	52%	1	48%	3	▲
<b>Wellness/ mental health of staff</b>	48%	2	62%	1	▼
<b>Staffing levels</b>	33%	4	45%	4	▼
<b>Client complexity/ severity and/or case load</b>	37%	3	49%	2	▼
<b>Damage to facility or office (not returned)</b>	15%	8	24%	5	▼
<b>Damage to facility or office (returned to location)</b>	16%	7	22%	6	▼
<b>Other</b>	28%	5	27%	5	▼

## Key Challenges

### Funding

Funding was ranked by most respondents (52%) as an issue that was affecting their organisation two years after the flood. This was the only issue that had increased in significance since the 2023 survey and reflects NRCF's observations of the tapering-off of dedicated disaster recovery funding in the region.

Qualitative insights revealed that available funding was usually short-term or one-off when **organisations needed long term funding.**

*"Long-term funding for community development is not available, this is a state and federal government flaw that needs to be addressed."*

*"Funding stopped which devastated the relationships and trust built."*

*"We're all really tired, and this is a result of having to constantly beg and convince organisations that we are a worthy cause. The model of constantly applying for grants results in burn-out and we would rather build long-term strategies with organisations who commit for longer than a single grant"*

Respondents also said that time spent on writing grant applications for relatively small amounts of funding took valuable resources away from service delivery.

*"...the grant fatigue has set in on our already stretched and small operating team".*

*"We don't even have the resources to write grants. The few we have gone all out for over the last 6 months have devastated us with their failed outcomes".*

In addition to the amount of funding, respondents said that the funding which was available was not sufficiently targeted or flexible.

*"We have money for case managers and services but no "brokerage" to pay trades bills or purchase ongoing essential items that are required through Emergency Relief programs."*

A new theme emerging in the 2024 report was the issue of funding not reaching local organisations. This issue is worthy of further investigation, as it seems to go against the now well accepted view that place-based, community-led organisations are best placed to support communities in their recovery journey.

*"The greatest challenge as an organisation has been entities from other areas such as Sydney or Tweed coming in with large amounts of funding to run projects. Not only has this seemingly reduced funding available but these organisations have relied on local orgs for connections, referrals and advice on how to engage communities. This remains a challenge for local grassroots orgs."*

*"Funding seems to be getting diverted to big organisations with many grassroots key organisations are at the verge of collapse".*

### Staffing levels

One third (33%) of respondents said that staffing levels were still impacting their organisation two years after the flood. This was closely related to increases in workload and difficulties securing funding.

*"We have gone from 20 staff working to 6 part time. We have severely lacked funding receiving no external funding other than small ongoing (funding) in 2023. As a main mental health provider in the area with key solutions it is crazy that we have not received any funding at all".*

Qualitative insights revealed that other factors affecting staff levels included housing affordability and cost-of-living issues, which particularly impacted people's availability for volunteering.

*"Lack of housing means people have left the area, or living in substandard/ crowded housing, this affects the businesses and thus our sponsors and the availability of volunteers".*

## Wellness/mental health of staff

Almost half of all respondents (48%) reported that the wellness and mental health of staff was still affecting their organisation. While this had reduced from 62% in 2023, it remained disturbingly high and the second most significant impact on respondents' organisations.

Qualitative responses suggested that inability to fulfill demand for their service was of the things having an impact on the mental health of staff.



*I would 100% say absolutely the challenges we face everyday impact the mental health and wellbeing of our staff & volunteers. When (our staff) have the need and will to help but are blocked due to lack of resources and funding, it causes sadness and frustration. The impacts of being overworked and tired are huge.*

*I think the resources that have been pulled back have definitely contributed to the mental health and wellbeing of staff. Yes, the waters have reduced however 2 years on, we are still living with disaster. Look around, places are still not built, people are still not in their home, businesses are still not functioning. We have people affected by the floods only now being able to reach for support due to their own processing (of the event).*

*We've experienced fires, followed by COVID lockdowns and then floods. We are seeing endless child protection concerns, mental health concerns, domestic and family violence and drug and alcohol abuse. We have parents with nowhere to live, no hope to get them and their children housed due to the housing crisis...this is what impacts mental health of staff.*

*I know in my stressful times I can bring that stress home, which can impact my personal life. We need an Employee Assistance Program (EAP) service for my staff to be able to access, I am not trained, nor do I have capacity to take on some of the devastating blows our staff live with – Better mental health services, free for staff of smaller organisation and their families are needed”.*

**Jade Bennett**

Manager, Kyogle Family Support Services 



*“We are beyond the two-year mark and some people are still quite impacted. Our staff and volunteers are out (in the community) working with folks who are still in a bad way. It's been more than two years, so it's just devastating that these people are still in this position.*

*The people that work for us are big hearted, compassionate people. And it's pretty easy to get into a vicarious trauma space when you're a big hearted compassionate person because that is what signifies you, the way that you do things; you care about people.*

*We had one of our volunteers come in the other day, and he was sharing how he had to step back from the work for a period of time because it was so heavy going, going into people's homes and supporting them through their flood recovery. So, he needed to take a break from that.*

*We have to manage our staff very carefully because the work that we do is so grounded in need and there is such great need. We really have to work hard to support people to maintain boundaries around how hard they work. We're only really just at a point now where we can look at being able to afford an Employee Assistance Program, (until now) we just didn't have the budget to cover it. We're not 100% sure exactly how we're going to resource it for the longer term.”*

**Elly Bird**

Manager, Resilient Lismore 

## Client complexity/severity and/or case load

Many respondents said that their **workloads had increased** two years after the floods, while funding was becoming scarcer.

*“We have no funding coming in and twice the work to do”.*

*“Our client base tripled as a result of cost-of-living crisis, COVID and the floods. We do not have the funding to support this increased need.”*

*“Recovery is still ongoing. Flood affected clients newly presenting 2 years on. We are still dealing with 2017 flood survivors- insurance claims. We worked in the evacuation centres on day one and continue to work with people”.*

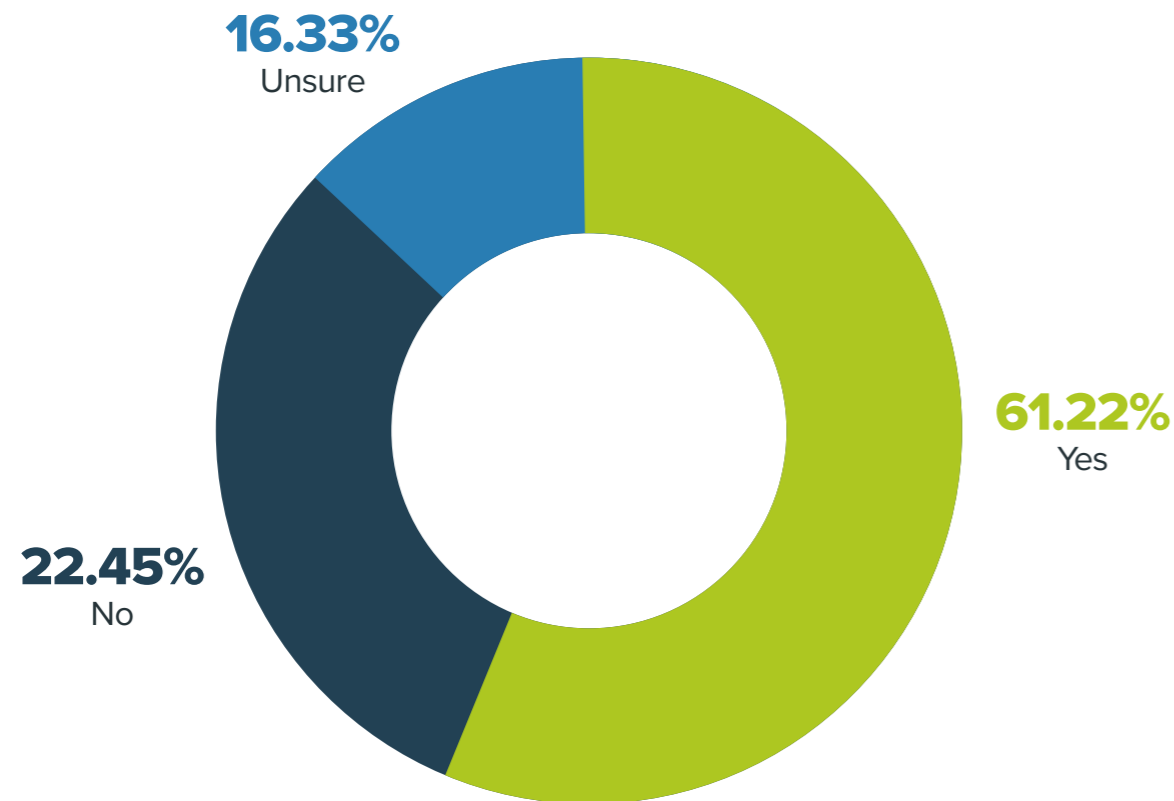


## Sources of Support

Community organisations reported a reduction in almost all sources of support, including grants, donations, and volunteer hours.

**61%** of respondents said a funding gap had impacted their organisation, which was supported by qualitative responses.

### Has a funding gap impacted your organisation, as recovery funding ended?



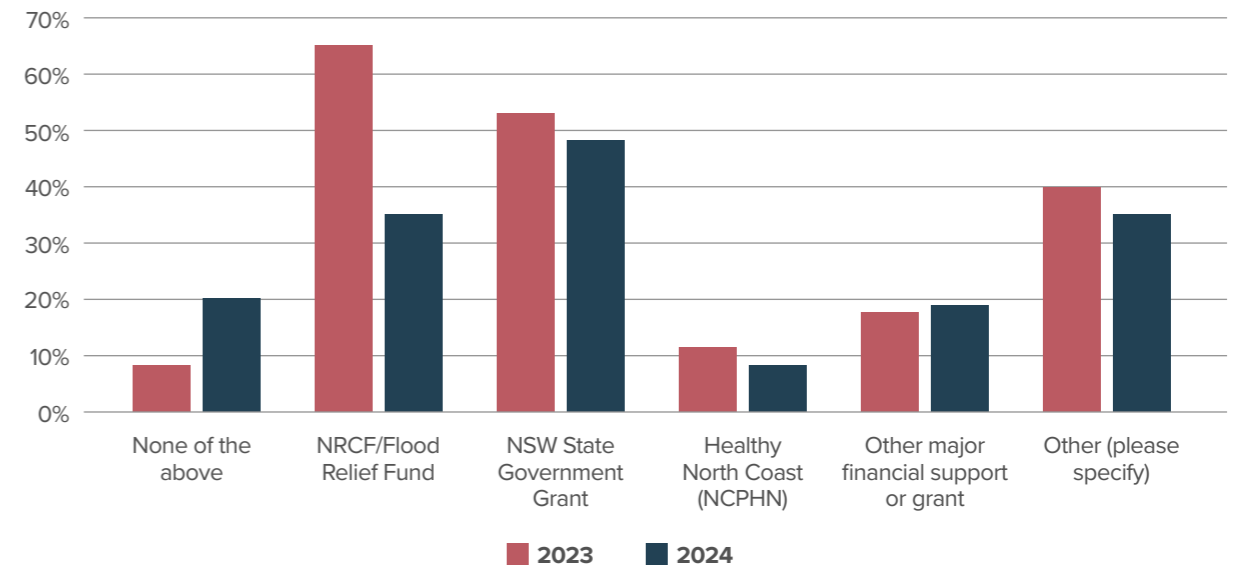
*"We are very worried about what will happen in the coming 18 months when the last of the community mental health supports for flood recovery come to an end. Who will be here to fill the service needs of the community?"*

## Support from donors

The survey results suggested that funding support from government agencies was stable between 2023 and 2024, with 23% of respondents saying they received "high/strong" support from government agencies in 2023 compared to 22% in 2024. On the contrary, funding from other donors reduced. For example, the % respondents who reported that they received "high/strong" support from NRCF decreased from 37% in 2023 to 19% in 2024, and from 17% to 11% respectively for "other funders".

It was also clear that the "funding cliff" that respondents had feared in 2023 was beginning to eventuate, with the percentage of organisations who reported receiving funding from major funders decreasing across almost all categories. Of significant concern was the increase in the number of respondents who said they received no funding from major funders from 8% in 2023 to 20% in 2024.

### % of organisations who received funding from major donors



## Support from the wider community

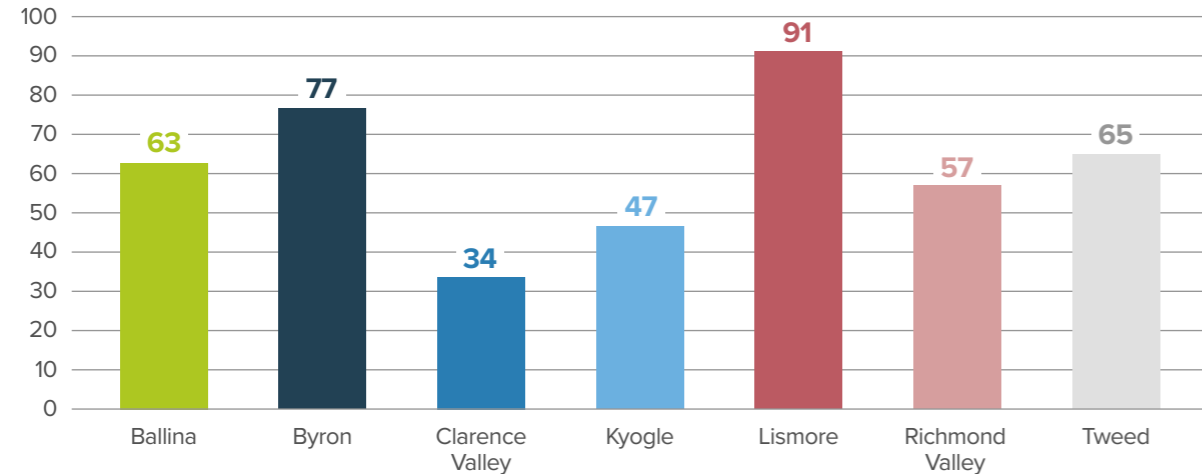
18% of organisations reported that they received a "high/strong" level of support from the wider community (including volunteers and donations). This was a significant decrease from the 2023 survey, where 28% of organisations said that they received a "high/strong" level of support from the wider community. This was supported by qualitative responses, which indicated that less people were available to volunteer their time than 12 months ago.

*"...community networks are also stretched as there is less capacity/fewer able to volunteer time and give to projects as people are struggling to take care of their own needs".*

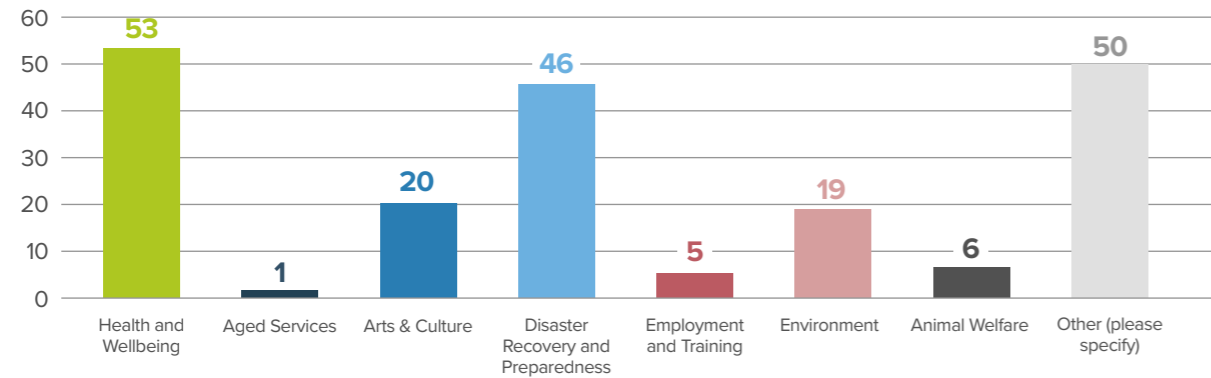
Not only does this indicate a decline in an important source of unrestricted funding for community organisations, but it also suggests a degree of compassion fatigue in the community.

# Profile of Respondents

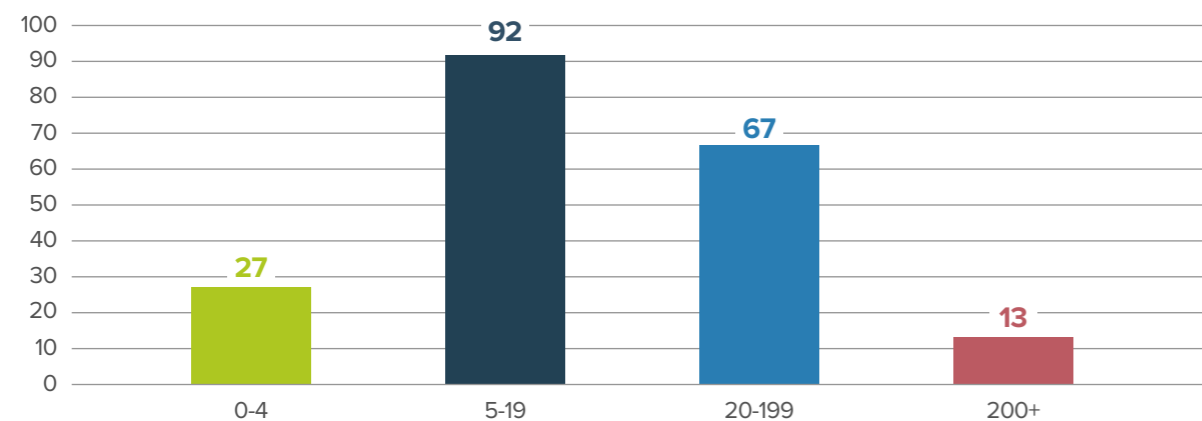
## Which local government area/s do you operate in?



## What are your organisation's key areas of impact?



## Approximately how many staff, including volunteers, does your organisation have?



# Final thoughts...

Like elsewhere in Australia and globally, climate change is a reality for the NSW Northern Rivers. In future years, this will result in increased temperatures, increasing rainfall in Spring and Autumn and increased fire weather. This means that future disasters are not only likely, but inevitable.

The last 12 months has seen a myriad of inquiries and reviews examining the response to the 2022 floods and how it could be improved. In considering these, it is important that we recognise that the ability of government to respond to disasters will always have its limits.



*“Before we criticise the failure of government or emergency services in a major emergency, we should pause to acknowledge that what we are actually seeing is not the failure of government, but actually its inherent and unavoidable limits”.*

**Aidan Ricketts**

Flood survivor and community activist

The results of this research remind us that it is community organisations, not governments or corporations, that are best placed to help build the resilience of their communities in preparation for the next disaster and to support them to respond and recovery when it occurs. Community organisations are grounded in place and steeped in local knowledge. They know the strengths and weaknesses of the communities they operate in and hold trust. They may be small, but they are mighty.

Community Foundations are uniquely placed to support community organisations engaged in disaster response and resilience building. Collectively, Community Foundations have an expansive network and have built trusted relationships across rural and regional Australia, which allows them to identify and support community-led initiatives. Most importantly, they are agile in a way that governments simply cannot be, which allows them to get funding and resources where they are needed. Fast.

As the local Community Foundation servicing the Northern Rivers, NRCF stands ready to support community organisations in the critical role they play in disaster resilience, response and recovery through developing our networks and partnerships, continuing to conduct research on relevant issues, providing financial resources and capacity building support now and into the future.

# About Us



**F**or almost 20 years, the Northern Rivers Community Foundation has responded to the changing needs of our community by connecting those who care with those in need. With around \$4.5M under management, NRCF works with 360 community and not-for-profit organisations

With around

**\$4M**

under management, NRCF works with

**360**  
community and  
not-for-profit  
organisations

and a range of donors from individuals to notable large philanthropic foundations.

As an independent, ACNC-registered Public Ancillary Fund, donations are pooled and invested in sustainable and ethical investment funds. Revenue from these investments supports our grant programs, meaning we provide a permanent source of funds to the community year after year. NRCF is building a sustainable legacy for our community.

Join the collective giving movement to support local communities by donating to NRCF today at [www.nrcf.org.au](http://www.nrcf.org.au)



**Connecting people who care, with causes that matter, to enhance community wellbeing.**

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