

## **NATIONAL LEARNING NETWORK PROJECT**

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## **DISASTERWISE**

## Acknowledgement

DisasterWISE acknowledges the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples as the Traditional Custodians of the Country on which we live.

We value and respect the deep and continued spiritual and cultural connections to the land, waters and seas, and pay respects to Ancestors and Elders past and present. We also acknowledge that sovereignty has never been ceded.

This report draws on knowledge shared through interviews, workshops, yarns, co-design, and participatory processes. The learning presented here is relational and collectively generated, grounded in lived experience and place. We acknowledge First Nations peoples for their generosity in sharing knowledge, stories, and ways of knowing, being, and doing. We pay respect to the ongoing custodianship of Country and recognise that this work is informed by Indigenous sovereignty, resilience, and care. We thank all community members whose stories, experience and expertise made this work possible.

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## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The DisasterWISE Communities Network was established as a key outcome of the Fire to Flourish initiative; a five-year program led by Monash University and funded by the Paul Ramsay Foundation and Metal Manufactures Pty Ltd, with additional philanthropic support from the Lowy Foundation.

The Fire to Flourish program aimed to enhance disaster resilience through innovative, inclusive, and community-led approaches, with the overarching objective of cultivating a national learning network capable of sustaining and extending these principles beyond the program's duration.

Grounded in a commitment to community-led practice, Fire to Flourish seeded and catalysed the establishment of the DisasterWISE Communities Network - a national initiative designed to reimagine disaster resilience through systemic approaches informed by relational practice and dynamic learning.

Co-developed through a participatory co-design process, DisasterWISE integrates both lived and learned expertise to create critical social infrastructure. This infrastructure enables communities to connect, share knowledge, and create the conditions necessary for transformative change. Building upon this foundation, the network positions itself as a bold, community-led learning movement advocating for stronger, just and thriving futures for all.



# 1 INTRODUCTION

Welcome to the DisasterWISE Communities Network report, a reflection on a journey of learning, collaboration, and community-led action in disaster resilience. This report celebrates the voices, experiences, and knowledge of people and communities who have lived through disasters, and highlights how their insights have shaped a national learning network. It shares the processes, achievements, and lessons from co-designing, growing, and driving meaningful change.

The DisasterWISE Communities Network is a growing learning network advancing disaster resilience through community-led action and self-determination. The network embodies the principles of connect, learn, and change, with an overarching aim to:

- Cultivate broad and diverse relationships across sectors and geographies
- Broker multiple ways of knowing and learning across the network
- Amplify community voices in disaster recovery and resilience dialogues

- Create pathways for communities to influence policy and practice
- Advocate for and support community-led initiatives

At its core, DisasterWISE integrates lived, local, and learned knowledge, enabling dynamic learning to strengthen community disaster resilience. The network provides multiple avenues for engagement, including discussion forums, events, and showcases of place-based innovation, highlighting the diversity and impact of community-led initiatives.

By nurturing relationships, brokering knowledge and advocating for local action, DisasterWISE advocates for community perspectives and expertise to influence disaster policy and practice.

As the network transitions into an independent not-for-profit entity (DisasterWISE Company Ltd), the network is positioned to sustain and grow its impact across Australia, centering communities to lead in place-based disaster adaptation, recovery, and renewal.

## Problem Statement

Disaster events expose the limitations of existing policy and practice. As disaster events increase in frequency and intensity, current systems are overburdened and often deflect to siloed approaches and top-down processes that inadvertently inhibit community-led action and cause harm. As a result, preventative, place-based initiatives remain under-supported, and the lived experiences and priorities of communities are frequently marginalised.

These structural barriers create a gap between policy intent and on-the-ground realities,

limiting the effectiveness and equity of disaster preparedness and recovery efforts. There is a clear need for mechanisms that elevate community voices, facilitate peer-to-peer learning, and strengthen locally led, context-driven resilience strategies. DisasterWISE responds to this need by growing a network designed to amplify lived experience, self-determination and community-led action. By enabling collaborative learning, DisasterWISE creates meaningful pathways for communities to influence policy and practice.



## 2 IMPLEMENTATION

Aligned with the Fire to Flourish intended outcome of creating “self-sustaining national systems of community connection and learning that strengthen resilience,” the Learning Network Project set out to achieve the following objectives:

- Establish a National Learning Network that connects communities, practitioners, researchers, and institutions engaged in disaster resilience and recovery.
- Enable community-led innovation by creating structures and processes that centre lived experience in the design, governance, and dissemination of knowledges.
- Foster relational and systems-based approaches that emphasise collaboration, peer to peer learning, and shared power.
- Develop and test an adaptive knowledge system that integrates varying ways of knowing to support ongoing learning and evidence-informed practice.
- Amplify community voices in national dialogues on disaster policy and practice, ensuring that those most affected by disasters influence decisions that shape their futures.
- Lay the foundations for long-term sustainability by transitioning the network into an independent, community-led not-for-profit entity capable of stewarding ongoing growth and impact.

### Scope

The project’s scope focused on building the enabling conditions, relationships, and infrastructure for community-led resilience learning and systems change at a national scale.

The scope of the National Learning Network project encompassed the co-design, development, prototyping and initial implementation of a national learning network over the five year Fire to Flourish program. Key areas of focus included:

- **Network Co-Design and Co-development:** Collaborative co-design processes engaging

community leaders, researchers, and practitioners to shape the network’s structure, vision, infrastructure, and operating model.

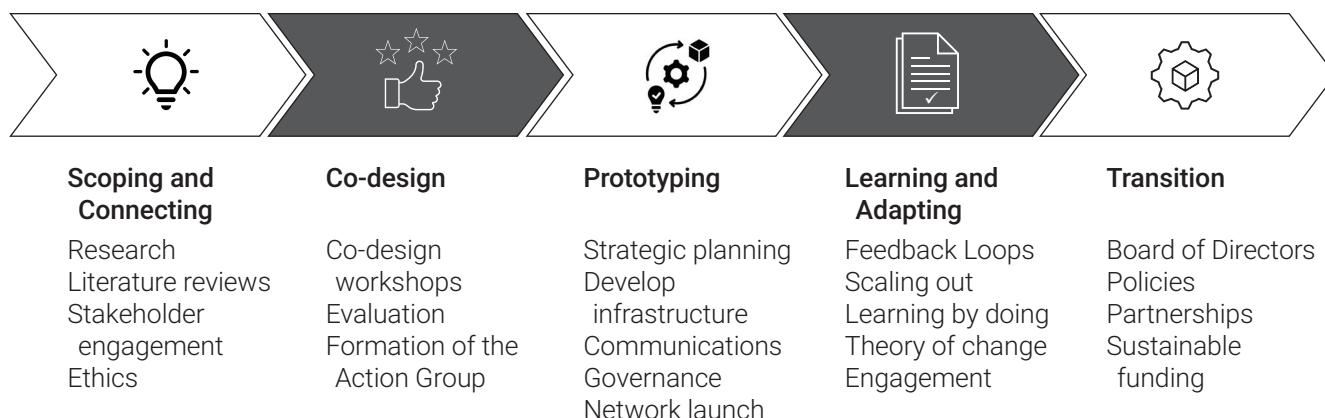
- **Community Engagement and Partnership Building:** Establishing relationships across sectors and geographies to ensure broad, inclusive participation.
- **Knowledge System Development:** Designing mechanisms for sharing, curating, and synthesising across varying ways of knowing.
- **Capacity and Relationship Building:** Facilitating learning exchanges, events, and forums that strengthen and enhance local and cross-sector resilience capabilities and capacities.
- **Policy and Systems Influence:** Brokering relationships and knowledge to create pathways to inform national and regional disaster resilience policy and practice.
- **Sustainability Planning:** Establishing governance, funding pathways, and strategic partnerships to support the transition of the network into an independent, enduring entity.

### Project Execution

The execution of the DisasterWISE project unfolded through five interrelated phases: Scoping and Connecting, Co-design, Prototyping, Learning and Adapting, and Transition. Each phase built upon the previous, reflecting a commitment to community-led practice, systems thinking, and continuous learning. Collectively, these phases guided the program from initial exploration and relationship-building through to the co-creation, testing, refinement, and establishment of structures for long-term sustainability.

#### Scoping and Connecting (Nov 2021 – Sep 2022)

The Scoping and Connecting phase laid the groundwork by engaging diverse stakeholders, nurturing relationships, and clarifying shared



DisasterWISE phases 2021–2025

purpose. This early stage involved broad discussions, research, and participatory workshops that drew on Fire to Flourish principles and highlighted community-led approaches, transformative learning, and systems change. Local knowledge, often untapped in conventional disaster recovery frameworks, was brought to the fore through forums such as MUDRI Fire to Flourish Forum Unheard Voices, and the NAP2 Community Voice workshops.

**Co-Design**  
(Oct 2022 – Apr 2023)

Building on this foundation, the Co-design phase commenced in October 2022, bringing together twelve participants from community, research, government, and agency sectors to collaboratively design the conceptual and relational foundations of the national learning network. The process was grounded in relational practice, inviting participants to engage authentically “with open minds, open hearts”. Workshops followed a rhythm of storytelling, seeding change, and learning by doing, allowing participants to share lived experiences, reflect critically on current approaches, and imagine more just and hopeful futures.

First Nations and systemic design methodologies, including The Systemic Design Wheel (E. Blomkamp), Yarning for Purpose (V. Charles), Scaling Deep (T. Fraser) and Beyond Sticky Notes (KA McKercher) guided the process,

emphasising cultural and relational shifts as essential to systemic transformation. With support and mentoring from Lauren Anseline and Kerry Jones from The Australian Centre for Social Innovation (TACSI), the innovative design enabled safer spaces for connection, deep listening and foundational work.

*“We come together with open hearts and minds, to share and listen deeply with respect, acknowledging our differences as a collective strength. We draw on our experience to be creative and solve problems in innovative ways. We bring our authentic selves to this collective space to learn from our various ways of knowing to bring about change.”*

– Co-design Group Agreement

From co-design workshops emerged the vision and aims of the newly titled DisasterWISE Communities Network to build a movement of people committed to strengthening disaster resilience through community-led action, to provide spaces for connection and knowledge-sharing, and to support transformative learning that underpins systemic change.

*“I am interested in the sharing of ideas and learning from our trials, so that future events can be overcome and learned from quickly and as a society we are locally geared for recovery. The idea is not to get back to where it was before, but*

*to develop from the ordeal into a community that has grappled with issues and seen ways to prepare and mitigate impacts of future problems. We can all benefit from what each other has learned through adversity.”*

– Community Co-designer

**Prototyping Phase**  
(May 2023 to Sep 2023)

Following these workshops, the Network Action Group (NAG) was established to operationalise these ideas and build the foundations for a sustainable network. Composed of community leaders Peter Willams, Ronnie Ayliffe, Scott Lamshed and Sabrina Davis, who continued their involvement, the group focused on four key pillars: Governance, Knowledge Sharing, Infrastructure, and Sustainability.

Working groups were established to develop and prototype a community-led governance model, plan digital infrastructure including a public-facing website, and design a communications strategy with a style guide. Operating from January 2023 to June 2024, the Network Action Group facilitated monthly online Get-Togethers, developed an interactive website, refined the DisasterWISE brand, and contributed to the company constitution, laying the groundwork for a growing, adaptive network centred on lived experience and community knowledge. Consultants Steve Pascoe, Steve Cameron, Sabrina Davis and Jessie Robinson offered specialist expertise as members of the project team.

**Learning and Adapting**  
(Sep 2023 to Apr 2025)

The network was launched in September 2023 at the AFAC Conference in Brisbane as part of the inaugural Resilience Lane initiative - a dedicated space for not-for-profit and community-focused organisations to showcase their contributions to disaster resilience.

During the launch, the website also went live inhabiting a landing page, discussion board and knowledge library. For the duration of the learning and adapting phase, the group tested elements of the website, continued to prototype dynamic governance and expanded on Get-Togethers redefining ways of providing “Safer Spaces” for all members to develop

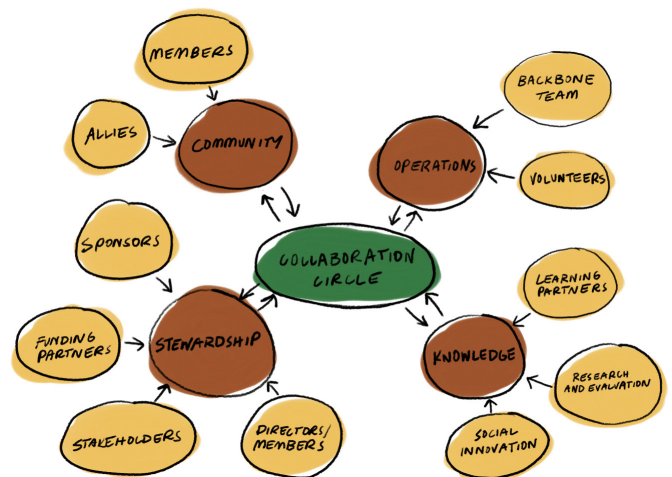
a sense of connectedness with the network.

Further activities were also tried and tested during this time with the introduction of DisasterWISE Book Club, Story for Purpose and the use of the Mighty Networks platform to support online interaction and sustainability.

**The Transition Phase**  
(May 2025 to Dec 2025)

The Transition phase marked the network’s evolution from a program initiative to an independent organisation dedicated to stewarding collaborative, community-led learning and action for disaster resilience. Efforts focused on designing governance, operational, and legal structures to support long-term sustainability. The Governance Working Group shaped the model for a public company and contributed to the formation of a dynamic governance framework. Monika Correa joined the project team as Knowledge Broker, refining the network’s Values in Practice, partnership approaches and supporting the growth of the DisasterWISE Knowledge Resource Library.

A stewarding board was established to safeguard these principles. Formalising the network as DisasterWISE Company Ltd would enable secure and diversified funding, the establishment of paid roles, and the development of partnerships, all while maintaining the values and vision of the network. With ongoing support from Fire to Flourish, allies, and volunteers, DisasterWISE is positioned to extend its reach, strengthen disaster resilience, and champion community-led action into the future.



DisasterWISE sociocracy and governance model

# DISASTER WISE



Community led  
Indigenous knowledge a  
peer to peer learning  
Storytelling with a purpose  
Generating evidence of real change



# 3 PRINCIPLES AND APPROACH

*“Connecting as people from a place of care... rather than the stakeholders around an issue...the starting point sets the tone and if it’s cultivated from the beginning, there’s an opportunity to take an exciting and different path.”*

– Co-design Participant

## Decolonising Practice

Decolonising practice starts with humility. This project held deep listening at its core, with community members with lived experience shaping the network foundations. The project approach acknowledged varying ways of knowing, working to dismantle hierarchies of knowledge and prioritise First Nations and local knowledges. Embedding reciprocity into the DisasterWISE Values in Practice aimed to avoid extractive behaviours, particularly around community stories.

## Community-Led and Lived Experience

DisasterWISE was guided by the principle that lived experience is a vital source of knowledge in building meaningful disaster resilience. People from disaster-affected communities were active partners throughout the project, shaping the network’s design, governance, and operations. This ensured that outcomes were contextually grounded and meaningful, addressing real barriers and opportunities identified by those closest to the context.

*“Decision makers need to give more time for listening to all stakeholders and enabling spaces and opportunities for community to be decision makers in things that affect them.”*

– Co-design Participant

## Co-Design and Collaborative Development

Co-design was central to how DisasterWISE worked. First Nations knowledge holders,

community members, practitioners, researchers, and institutional partners came together through workshops and iterative sessions to share perspectives and collaboratively shape the network. This approach brought lived, local, and learned knowledge together, creating a way of working that reflects diverse experiences and produces insights that can inform pathways to influence practice and policy.

## Systems Thinking and Emergence

The project identified a clear gap: there was no dedicated space for cross-sector collaboration in the disaster ecosystem that genuinely included people with lived experience. While networks existed for academics, emergency management professionals, and agencies, these often excluded the voices of those directly affected by disaster. By prioritising relationships, safer spaces, and shared purpose, the network created a space where ideas could emerge, evolve, and adapt to the needs and insights of all members.

*“Having conversations across communities to surface similarities is so important – so that people realise that there’s a bigger picture and that they’re part of it – and that they have a voice.”*

– Co-design Participant

## Decentralising Power

As the network matured, attention was given to decentralising power and supporting community-led governance. Working groups co-developed governance models, and prototyped sociocratic principles in making decisions, focusing on consent over consensus.

This approach reinforced community leadership, recognised diverse forms of knowledge, and ensured the network’s structures and values can continue beyond the program.

## Dynamic Learning and Reflective Practice

Dynamic learning was embedded throughout the project. Feedback loops, participatory evaluation, and regular reflection sessions with community members, network core members, and the Network Action Group allowed the team to identify emerging needs, surface insights, and adjust strategies as an iterative process.

Workshops, surveys, and informal check-ins provided multiple opportunities for shared

sense-making, ensuring that lessons from one context could inform decisions in another. Evaluation was framed as a collaborative and developmental process, focused on strengthening practice and emphasising collective improvement, adaptive problem-solving, and the co-creation of knowledge across the network.

This approach reinforced a culture of curiosity, responsiveness, and continuous learning, ensuring the network remained relevant and meaningful for its members.



# 4 OUTCOMES AND ACHIEVEMENTS

Over the past five years of the Fire to Flourish program, the network team has:

- Researched, designed and implemented a robust co-design process,
- Synthesised the findings into emergent practice (and established the network)
- Developed infrastructure to support connection and dynamic, peer to peer learning
- Prototyped sociocratic principles of governance with a dedicated team of volunteers
- Engaged broadly with community and key stakeholders
- Established the company (DisasterWISE Company Ltd.) with supporting infrastructure to steward the network.

## Key Deliverables

The DisasterWISE project delivered a national, community-led learning network for disaster resilience through the following key initiatives:

- Scoping and Literature Review: Reviewed Australian and international learning networks to identify best practices. Participated in the ‘Community Voice and System Change’ Workshops (18 and 20 May 2022) hosted by Fire to Flourish which informed the Transformative Actions for Community-Led Disaster Resilience paper and early network design.
- Stakeholder Engagement and Co-Design: Brought together communities, practitioners, researchers, and institutions to co-develop the network’s purpose, values, and structure through story sharing, seeding change, and learning by doing.
- Knowledge Framework: Developed the Connect-Learn-Change framework, integrating lived, local, First Nations, and research-based knowledge to support dynamic learning, action and pathways to influence policy.
- Network Establishment and Infrastructure: Launched the national learning network, providing forums, events, and platforms for

peer-to-peer learning, knowledge exchange, and member-led initiatives.

- Policy Influence and Transition: Developed advocacy strategies to amplify community voices, and formalised DisasterWISE as an independent not-for-profit entity with sustainable governance, partnerships, and funding pathways to ensure long-term impact.

## Key Achievements

Over the course of the project, the DisasterWISE Communities Network achieved significant progress in establishing a robust, community-led learning network advancing disaster resilience across Australia. The outcomes outlined below demonstrate growth in participation, knowledge exchange, capacity building, and systems influence.

### 1. Network Growth and Membership

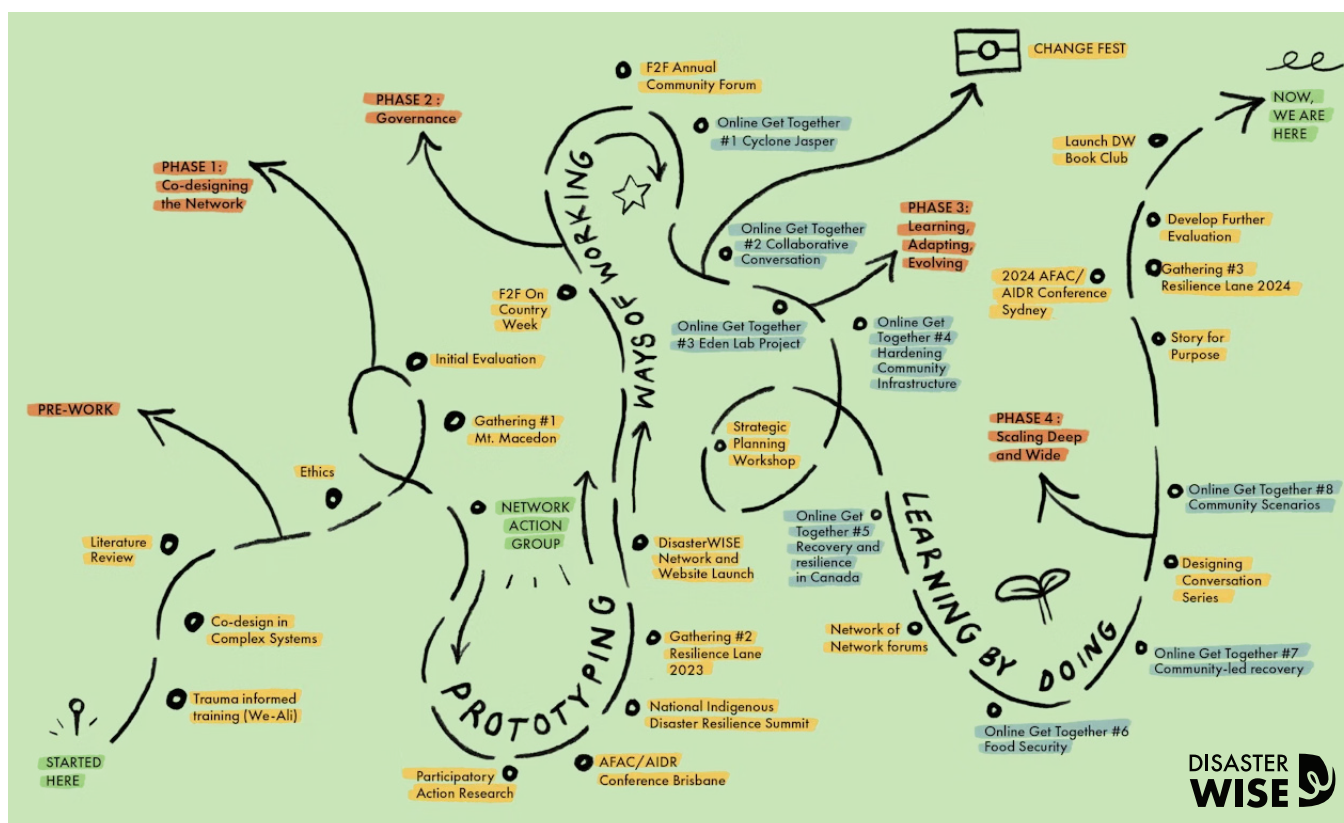
The DisasterWISE Communities Network has expanded considerably since its inception, cultivating a diverse and dynamic membership base.

- The interactive network platform now connects 250 core members representing communities, organisations, academia and government across multiple regions, including rural and urban areas, with some international members.
- Membership continues to grow reflecting increasing recognition of the value of community-led approaches to disaster adaptation, recovery and resilience.
- Inclusivity remains a central value in practice, with representation across cultural, geographic, and professional backgrounds.

### 2. Knowledge Sharing and Learning

A key focus of the project has been enabling communities to exchange knowledge, build capacity, and strengthen connections.

- Over 22 online learning events, 3 workshops,



DisasterWISE timeline 2021–2025

and 1 national online ‘Community Congress’ forum were convened, engaging over 1,498 participants from across Australia.

- 40+ resources were co-created with the membership including learning synthesis documents, recorded sessions and blogs that were disseminated through the network’s digital platforms.
- The network’s collaborative, dynamic learning approach has nurtured an environment where lived, learned and acquired knowledge is valued, promoting ongoing reflexivity and innovation.

### 3. Community Capacity and Local Impact

The Story For Purpose project was prototyped with members of the Mallacoota Community highlighting the importance of community voices and lessons learned after disaster events. These stories were curated and shared for other communities to learn from with 570 views. The project foundations are ready to be built upon to expand the stories and form a basis for online learning modules.

The network has served as a conduit for collaboration, enabling communities to share stories, strategies, access resources, and build mutual support across boundaries.

### 4. Systems Influence and Policy Engagement

Through its advocacy and knowledge-brokering activities, DisasterWISE has begun to influence broader disaster resilience policy and practice.

- The network contributed insights to community consultations and submissions such as the NEMA Disaster Ready Fund Review, the NHRA Emergency Management Volunteers Blueprint Workshop, The NIDR Victorian Roundtable, The Activating Civic and Community Participation project with The Good Shift and The Australia Journal for Emergency Management (Oct 2025), amplifying community perspectives in national and regional dialogues.
- DisasterWISE hosted 500+ cross-sectoral conversations as part of Resilience Lane, AFAC 2022-2025 including poster presentations.

DisasterWISE representatives have participated in strategic forums and events, showcasing community-led initiatives and practice at:

- Unheard Voices Forum 2023 (The MUDRI/Fire to Flourish)
- Emergency Management Conference 2024 (EMV/IGEM)
- ChangeFest 2024: Rivers of Change - People, Places, Possibilities
- The Climate Adaptation Fair in Melbourne 2024 (Act on Climate)
- The Climate Adaptation Forum 2025 (University of Tasmania)
- Changefest 2025: Creating a New Way (Collaboration for Impact)
- The Per Capita Community Tax Summit 2025 (Oxfam)
- Community Congress 2025 (DisasterWISE & Resilient Lismore)
- Transforming Systems 2025 (Collaboration for Impact and Menzies Foundation)

The team has also actively engaged in broader network dialogues:

- Organisations Supporting Community Centred Emergency Preparedness network meetings (OSCCEP)
- Renew Australia for All Campaign - Building Community Resilience
- Guest Speakers at the Gippsland Emergency Relief Fund meeting (GERF)
- Care Through Disaster Community of Practice (WHNGE/Australia reMADE)
- National Indigenous Disaster Resilience Community of Practice (NIDR)
- Eurobodella Community Support Network (ECSN)
- Changesfest Learning Network
- Future of Communities Network (TACSI)
- Bushfire Survivors for Climate Action (BSCA)

## 5. Communication and Reach

The network's communication and engagement efforts have significantly extended its reach and visibility.

- DisasterWISE social media accounts have 1,465 collective followers. With 39,357 organic impressions on LinkedIn in the past 12 months.
- Regular newsletters, blogs, and media features

have highlighted community innovations and strengthened the network's public presence.

- The DisasterWISE website has attracted 5.8K views since launching in April 2025.

## 6. Organisational Development and Sustainability

The reporting period also marked a major organisational milestone; the transition of DisasterWISE into an independent not-for-profit entity (DisasterWISE Company Ltd).

- The Not-for-Profit charity was established in September 2025 to steward the network beyond end-of-program with an appointed Board of Directors.
- DisasterWISE are currently seeking foundational funding partnerships to support the network's next phase of growth, impact and sustainability.
- A monitoring and evaluation framework is being implemented to track long-term outcomes and ensure ongoing learning and accountability in accordance with the DisasterWISE Theory of Change.

## 7. Ambition for Transformational Change

*"We discussed influencing the way things are happening in the system currently... by connecting to others and holding a space to listen to other mindsets... and learning from stories to influence policy."*

— Co-design Participant

DisasterWISE worked with Clear Horizons to develop an innovative Measurement, Learning and Evaluation (MEL) framework and Theory of Change in October 2024.

Guided by the vision of "growing a movement of people building disaster resilience through self-determination and community-led action," DisasterWISE have adapted the Two Loops model; supporting what is emerging while respectfully challenging what no longer serves communities. By amplifying people and practices already demonstrating self-determined, community-led approaches ('pioneers'), the network is helping to enable and strengthen a new emerging system of community-led resilience practice. In doing

so, DisasterWISE was set up to disrupt dominant paradigms and make space for new ways of working.

## Stakeholder Feedback

*“DisasterWISE has offered a current example of encouraging a focus on how residents and groups in communities can be stood up, supported and encouraged to understand how much they have and can use to lead their own recovery and resilience. I have used this group as an example to others I work with to encourage more of the same ideas, beyond Australia.”*

– Network Member

Feedback from network participants consistently highlighted the value of DisasterWISE as a supportive and inspiring space for connection, learning, and collaboration. Members described the online gatherings as warm, inclusive, and uniquely conducive to authentic exchange; qualities that have influenced how they now facilitate and engage in their own work.

Many participants emphasised that the network not only provided access to valuable information and resources but also cultivated a sense of solidarity and confidence through shared experience. For some, DisasterWISE offered creative and hopeful ways to engage with disaster preparedness, while for others it served as a trusted hub to connect peers, share knowledge, and strengthen capability across diverse contexts.

*“The online get togethers foster a warm, comfortable and inspiring environment that is so rare online. I now strive to foster a similar environment when facilitating online. DisasterWISE has influenced the ways that I connect with others.”*

*“I find the information, resources and networks from Disaster WISE incredibly useful to not only learn about new information, but to connect others into as well.”*

*“DisasterWISE has connected me to a community of peers and invaluable information sharing + ability to learn.”*

*“Feeling a network of support has inspired confidence and a sense of solidarity in all areas of my work.”*

*“I often point people who are working in this area to DisasterWISE.”*

*“I am only new to the network - but after attending one of the network meetings there is clear benefit of DisasterWISE connecting folks and aiding knowledge sharing and capability building.”*

*“It's provided creative avenues to engage with disaster preparedness which are hopeful rather than despairing.”*

*“I have gained more perspective due to being directly connected with other disaster-impacted community members globally.”*



# 5 LESSONS LEARNED

The network project reaffirmed the importance of process as a site of transformation. Deep change occurred not just through outcomes, but through the way the work was carried out.

The project reaffirmed that meaningful change is not achieved through quick fixes, top-down interventions or extractive practice. It emerges when time, care, and trust are genuinely invested in the process.

We learned that moving too quickly, holding assumptions, or underestimating the time needed for building trust, shared decision-making and collaborative approaches can create challenges.

Creating the right conditions, like safe spaces for dialogue, opportunities to reflect, and an openness to complexity, enabled people to show up authentically and actively participate. It allowed space for deep listening, for all voices to be heard and stories to be shared. When we slowed down and acted with intention, we saw deeper connection, shared purpose and broader understanding, and outcomes with the potential to endure well beyond the life of the project.

## Lived Experience as Expertise

Lived experience continued to be one of our strongest sources of knowledge. People who have navigated disasters and recovery firsthand bring insights that cannot be replicated through research or learned experience. Recognising lived experience as a form of expertise strengthened decision-making, grounded our work in the raw realities of disaster, and ensured that community perspectives remained central. This project highlighted the importance of recreating structures where lived experience is highly valued and respected.

## Relationships, Relationships, Relationships

Relationships remained the heartbeat of the network. Trust built slowly through reciprocal, respectful engagement enabled effective



collaboration opposed to transactional or extractive processes. Many successes stemmed from the quality of the relationships holding the work together, drawing on each other's strengths, skills and knowledge. Investing in connection; checking in and showing respect, proved essential in navigating challenges and sustaining momentum.

## Embracing Complexity and Discomfort

Building genuine community-led processes required embracing the inherent complexity and discomfort of collaborative work. The DisasterWISE project highlighted that meaningful collaboration often

involves navigating competing priorities, power imbalances, and uncertainty. Rather than seeking to simplify or control these dynamics, institutions and practitioners should recognise them as productive spaces for learning and transformation. Creating environments that value reflexivity, shared decision-making, and adaptive practice enables innovation to emerge from complexity and strengthens the relationships that underpin systemic change.

## Power Shapes Dynamics

Power dynamics influenced every interaction, decision, and process. Whether visible or subtle, power shaped whose voices were heard, whose knowledge was prioritised, and how people felt able to participate. Naming and addressing power dynamics helped create more equitable spaces and again prevented extractive or tokenistic practices. This project demonstrated the importance of continuously examining positionality, creating opportunities for shared decision-making, and decentralising power.

## Community-Led vs Community-Centred

Guided by “Nothing for us without us,” the project grounded its work in a community-led approach, drawing on the Tamarack Institute’s definition of community-led processes as those directed by collective, community leadership rather than external actors. This orientation reaffirmed that meaningful change requires decentralising power, engaging in iterative and adaptive practices, and investing time in relationships to avoid tokenism. It also highlighted that genuine community leadership cannot be realised without supportive structural conditions; particularly adequate and accessible resourcing for community members to participate, lead, and sustain their contributions over time.

## Adaptability, Emergence, and Structural Barriers

Communities, contexts, and needs continually shift. Embracing emergence allowed new ideas, opportunities, and partnerships to surface, but true adaptability also requires the structural conditions that enable community-led initiatives to thrive. Many

grassroots organisations face significant barriers to employing staff and securing ongoing, sustainable funding due to the lack of accessible funding mechanisms and the restrictive requirements of DGR1 status. These limitations disproportionately affect community-driven networks like DisasterWISE, which struggle to access the level of investment needed to scale their impact, resource their work, and remain sustainable over time.

Despite these constraints, dynamic learning, flexibility, and a willingness to adjust course kept the work responsive. Adaptability ensured that the network could continue evolving and be shaped by ongoing feedback from its membership; even within a sectoral system that does not yet fully support or resource genuine community-led leadership.

Lessons learned from this process underscored the importance of early and inclusive planning, clear role definition, and transparent communication to maintain trust and alignment. Investing time in relationship building and shared learning proved essential to sustaining the network’s values and purpose. The experience reaffirmed that effective governance in a community-led process requires not only structural readiness but also relational integrity and collective commitment to the values and principles that underpin the work.

Finally, the project showed that even in the context of disruption and loss, communities hold a strong orientation toward hopeful futures. By focusing on strengths, relationships, and possibilities, rather than solely on problems or risks, DisasterWISE helped to build momentum toward futures that are not only stronger but also just and thriving.



# 6 LEGACY

## Transitioning to a New Company

In June, an Expression of Interest process was undertaken to appoint the inaugural Board of Directors as the network transitioned from a program-supported initiative to an independent entity. The EOI process was designed to be transparent, inclusive, and aligned with DisasterWISE values in practice and Ways of Working, whilst also meeting governance and accountability requirements. It surfaced a range of skills and experiences, highlighting varying levels of familiarity with formal governance roles.

Alongside the establishment of the Board, ZEST HR were appointed to support the recruitment of managers and oversee the transition to independence. These appointments focused on ensuring operational continuity, strengthening coordination, and providing consistent support during a period of structural change.

A successful transition to the DisasterWISE Board of Directors required clarity and continuity across governance, operations, and relationships. Key considerations included documenting roles, responsibilities, policies, and decision-making frameworks, alongside providing orientation and mentoring for incoming board members to maintain alignment with the network's values, vision, and community-led principles.

Operational handover has covered ongoing projects, partner relationships, digital infrastructure, and financial and IT systems, ensuring seamless continuity. Maintaining and prioritising key stakeholder relationships and sustaining knowledge-sharing platforms and activities have been critical to preserving the project's legacy. Communications have reinforced consistent messaging and public confidence while updating the network's branding to reflect its independent status. Finally, identifying potential risks and developing a sustainability roadmap for funding, staffing, and partnerships has supported the network's resilience and long-term impact.

## Final Word

Since beginning in 2021, DisasterWISE has grown steadily and we learned a great deal along the way. Convened, co-developed and guided by people with lived experience of disaster, the network's foundations are strong because they have been built collectively, through patience, care, and shared commitment by community, for community.

As 2025 comes to a close, the DisasterWISE Communities Network is entering an important next chapter; transitioning from a project-based initiative into an independent, community-led learning network with national reach.

In closing, we acknowledge that this report represents only one part of a much larger and longer story; one that the members and board will continue to shape as DisasterWISE transitions into an independent, organisation dedicated to supporting community-led action for disaster resilience. With gratitude for the learning and relationships built throughout the program, we now respectfully pass stewardship of this work to the Board, future supporting staff and members, knowing they will continue to uphold the values, integrity, and purpose that communities have entrusted to us all.





# FIRE to FLOURISH



## DISASTER WISE



Fire to Flourish is a pioneering five year program, working in partnership with communities affected by the 2019/20 Australian bushfire season to trial innovations in community-led disaster resilience.

Pathways for scaling the insights, models and tools developed through the program are being created through partnerships with Government, philanthropic, not-for-profit and private sector organisations.

Fire to Flourish is led by Monash University and supported by cornerstone philanthropic partners, the Paul Ramsay Foundation and Metal Manufactures Pty Ltd. Additional philanthropic support is provided by the Lowy Foundation.

For more information, go to:  
[firetoflourish.monash](http://firetoflourish.monash)

