

Co-designing a disaster resilience strategy for South Australia

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In September 2016, a supercell thunderstorm and seven tornadoes with wind gusts of 260 km an hour destroyed major transmission lines across South Australia, triggering a state-wide blackout. Many households and businesses were unprepared for the loss of power, communications, fuel and food supplies.

A review of the incident made a number of recommendations including the need for South Australia to have a common understanding of disaster resilience and an agreed policy for building resilience. To address this, the South Australia Fire and Emergency Services Commission (SAFECOM) developed a Disaster Resilience Strategy for South Australia.

Improving resilience involves working across systems and organisations including the emergency services, government and non-government agencies, business and communities. To design a strategy in this complex environment SAFECOM partnered with the Department of the Premier and Cabinet to apply a user-centred design process. The user-centred design approach challenged existing work practices as traditional projects are generally solution-focused and have little flexibility to change or incorporate input or feedback. Alternatively, user-centred design places the needs, wants and limitations of the end users at the centre of the process.

'Mobilisation' is the first of the user-centred design phases and is about establishing the team, developing a user research plan and sharing the problem statement to eliminate any preconceived solutions. In this case the problem statement was:

If a community is not resilient it is at greater risk during an event and its recovery delayed.

The 'discovery' phase is about gaining a deep understanding of the problem. Through this process, over 500 participants contributed from across the state through one-to-one interviews, workshops and meetings. Contributors were asked what disaster resilience meant to them, what could make South Australia more resilient (programs, services, legislation, etc.) as well as their thoughts on barriers to resilience and roles and responsibilities.

Resulting data were analysed for pain points, needs and opportunities and grouped into themes. This mapping

exercise identified 47 ideas and opportunities ranging from an information sheet on the Emergency Services Levy to a long-term behaviour-change campaign. The next phase was to test and refine the opportunities. This was achieved by over 100 further consultations. The team invited stakeholders to vote for their favourites, performed cost-benefit analysis and looked at the viability of each opportunity. This process resulted in the list of 47 opportunities shrinking to 15 as some were merged, dropped or deferred.

Stakeholder engagement has already resulted in benefits to the sector. There is increased awareness of disparate resilience-building activities, creating opportunities for collaboration and shared learning in the future. Throughout the project the team received feedback that the process motivated participants to think about what actions they could take and what influence they could have in their home, work or community to strengthen resilience.

The strategy will reflect the findings from the discovery phase. It will document and define what disaster resilience looks like and will focus short- and long-term goals. Everyone has a role to play. The challenge is to create the right environment for communities, including businesses, to adopt significant roles in leading and building resilience.

For sustainable behavioural and cultural change to be achieved, a long-term, bi-partisan commitment of resources and support is required. A challenge will be to facilitate collaboration and joined-up approaches across government and external to government and to involve communities in the development of solutions.

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