



WHITE PAPER - JUNE 2023

FROM THE GROUND UP:

Doing resilience differently
in the Blue Mountains

CONTRIBUTOR:

Renaë Hanvin

R Resilient
Ready

Acknowledgements

Resilient Ready would like to thank our grant partners Business Blue Mountains, particularly director Mark Barton who worked closely with us to successfully apply for grant funding to stand up a regional business network in the Blue Mountains, and director Emma Madison along with directors past and present, including Kieran Best, Nathan Smith, Robin Hilson, Anne Barrett, James Douglas, Mike Bowler, and Lawrence Atkinson. And we want to recognise the contribution of Blue Mountains stakeholder engagement lead Rebecca Lang, who was also there from the beginning, bringing her own ideas and making connections.

We would like to acknowledge the many local businesses who participated in our surveys and events, gave us feedback, and shared their business journeys post-Black Summer and during the challenging years that followed, overshadowed by a disaster no one saw coming – the Covid-19 pandemic.

And on a final note, we want to acknowledge our commitment to the important work of disaster recovery academic Professor Daniel Aldrich around building social capital in communities everywhere to help them withstand and recover from the impact of disasters.

We also want to recognise our two frequent Blue Mountains collaborators, Dr Val Ingham and David Parsons, who have made themselves available at every opportunity to offer guidance, advice and insight from an Australian disaster recovery and emergency management perspective, provided not just as subject matter experts but also as local residents with lived experience.

Acknowledgment of Country

We acknowledge the Dharug and Gundungurra People of the Ngurra Country. We pay respect to Elders past and present whose land we conducted this White Paper on. We recognise their deep connection to the land, water and air of the area and the knowledge, capability, and resilience of all Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in the Blue Mountains region.

Project Funding

This White Paper is funded under the Bushfire Community Recovery and Resilience Fund (BCRRF) project through the joint Commonwealth/State Disaster Recovery Funding Arrangements. Although funding for this product has been provided by both the Australian and NSW Governments, the material contained herein does not necessarily represent the views of either government.



Australian Government



FROM THE GROUND UP:

Doing resilience differently in the Blue Mountains



EXECUTIVE SUMMARY:

In the past two years through the Blue Mountains Business Community Resilience Project, Resilient Ready has guided and supported regional business network Business Blue Mountains to establish itself as a non-profit representative body that advocates on behalf of local businesses and provides services to help them thrive.

In that time, the Project has successfully engaged with the local business community to deliver an informative website and business directory and run events that have helped local owners and operators understand the need for and value of business networks as a critical part of building collective resilience.

The Blue Mountains Business Community Resilience Project has laid the foundations of Business Blue Mountains to succeed as a leading regional business network and thought leader on matters impacting the local economy.

Business Blue Mountains is now 100 per cent in the hands of the local business community and will continue to build momentum through strengthening local ties, sharing knowledge, and working towards common goals, while travelling at the pace of the community and navigating additional compounding disasters.



“THIS TWO-YEAR PROJECT HAS BUILT SUSTAINABLE FOUNDATIONS TO EMPOWER THE REGIONAL BUSINESS COMMUNITY TO THRIVE.”

Renae Hanvin
CEO + Founder, Resilient Ready

INTRODUCTION:

The Blue Mountains Business Community Resilience Project was launched by Resilient Ready (formerly corporate2community) and Business Blue Mountains two years ago to help the local business community connect, collaborate, and strengthen resilience to face future disasters.

To share a brief snapshot, the Blue Mountains business community is spread across 26 towns set along an 80km ridgeline, the majority of which are located within the Blue Mountains National Park. Many of the townships were badly impacted by the proximity of fires during the 2019-20 bushfire season which interrupted supply chains, closed roads and parts of the Blue Mountains National Park, and halted tourism.

The visitor economy dried up seemingly overnight, and even tourism-adjacent businesses such as food and cultural enterprises like galleries and cafes felt the brunt of significantly reduced foot traffic.

The Blue Mountains business community was still reeling from the economic impact of the Black Summer bushfires when the Covid-19 pandemic hit, and recovery efforts stalled, pushing many businesses to the brink of collapse.

Through conversations with individuals, business owners and chambers during the 2019-20 bushfires, and attendance by former Business Blue Mountains director Lawrence Atkinson at the Prime Minister’s Small Business Bushfire Recovery Forum in Canberra in early 2020, it was evident there was a high-level of support in the community for a resilience-building project such as this.

More than 200 business owners and operators attended a special meeting held in January 2020 to hear from business leaders in the Blue Mountains as to what resources were available and how to access them. It was evident that while there was much on offer, it was haphazard and just “too hard” for some people who were trying their best to keep their businesses alive.

As the community contemplated next steps, the seeds for this project were planted, and later brought to life and nurtured by Renae Hanvin from Resilient Ready and Mark Barton from Business Blue Mountains.

From those early conversations a government-funded project was devised and launched, focusing on bringing solutions into the region and facilitating a local culture of business resilience.

Thinking Differently: About Regional Resilience

Having fresh ideas isn't enough to initiate change and build resilience, and with that in mind we held the first of two 'Do Tanks' to land on some actionable outcomes as suggested and agreed to by representatives of the local business community.

In March 2022 we hosted a Do Tank with special guest, former Council of Small Business Australia (COSBOA) chief Peter Strong, that asked the question: 'How do we empower Blue Mountains small businesses in food, beverage and retail to thrive in the current era of disasters?'

The two-hour session guided local participants in identifying the existing barriers to networking and participation for the Blue Mountains business community and brainstorming immediate and lasting solutions.

A major theme that arose during the first Do Tank was one of connectivity, more so the lack of it, and how many businesses found themselves financially struggling post-bushfires and were consequently too time-poor to network as they tried to make ends meet.

Consequently, many felt adrift without a community of peers to share their challenges and successes, and no collective voice to represent them.



An approach developed by Resilient Ready, the 'Do Tanks' focus on delivering tangible outcomes.

Inspired by the conversations arising from that first gathering, which validated the direction of our Project, disaster recovery expert Professor Daniel Aldrich was approached to work on our first White Paper, Getting Connected: Using Networks to Build Business Community Resilience in the Blue Mountains.

That Paper identified networking as the key to building the capacity of businesses to withstand ongoing and future crisis events.

Professor Aldrich's work on social capital bonding and bridging and linking ties explores the value of social networks in disasters, which can form a conduit for important information, help coordinate collective activities, provide financial, administrative, and psychological support, and influence everyday behaviours.

The first White Paper incorporated data from a 2021 Disaster Resilience Survey conducted by Resilient Ready (formerly corporate2community) sent to business owners across the Blue Mountains, asking them about how they went about connecting with each other.

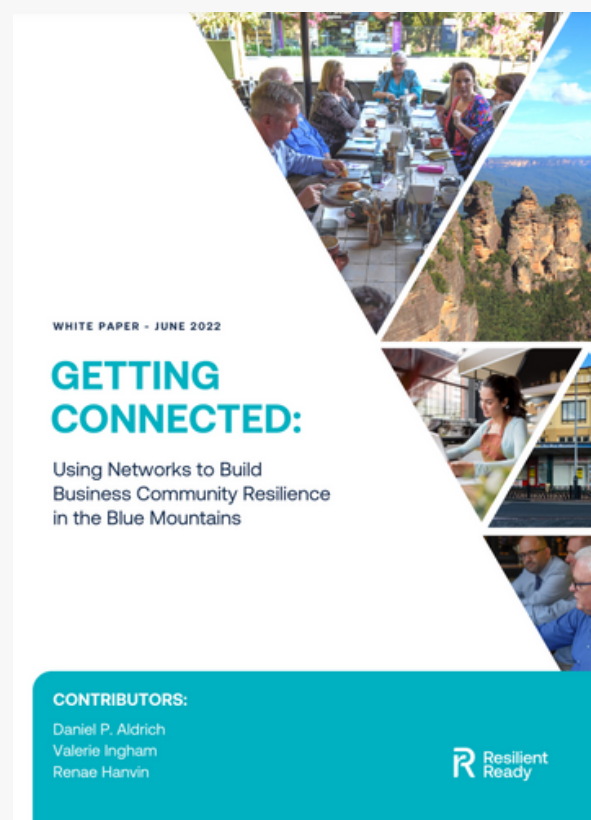
More than 60 businesses responded. Their responses highlighted that while business owners already recognised the power of networks and connections in building resilience, many lacked broad and diverse networks, and did not fully embrace or understand the value in networking, especially in terms of building disaster preparedness.

These findings paved the way for further exploration of how we could bring people together within the Blue Mountains business community.

The first Do Tank and subsequent White Paper doubled down on the thinking and gathering of the evidence to back it up, the next event would be very much about the doing.

“IT'S PEOPLE WHO BUILD RESILIENCE - NOT BATTERIES OR WATER BOTTLES.”

Professor Daniel P. Aldrich,
Global social capital expert



Doing Differently: Taking Small Steps To Thrive



This White Paper provides an overview of the Blue Mountains business community networking experience and discusses key barriers and obstacles – as well as positive change and future opportunities.

The need for greater connection, and the possibilities created by coming together have been recurring themes throughout engagements with the local Blue Mountains business community in the past two years.

These themes informed the second and final ‘Do Tank’ held by Business Blue Mountains and Resilient Ready in May 2023, which posed the question - ‘How do we connect better with each other as local businesses?’

The ‘Do Tank’ gathered representatives from local business chambers, business services and members of a refreshed Business Blue Mountains board of directors.

Facilitated by director Emma Madison, the ‘Do Tank’ focused on opportunities for collaboration to encourage fresh thinking and actionable outcomes.

Asked to help identify the challenges, pain points or friction that limit or prevent businesses across the Blue Mountains from connecting networks, sharing, and thriving, participants shared perceived obstacles and issues on a whiteboard, and eventually, these were grouped into themes and prompted a short discussion to further refine them.

These broadly included:

- Lack of time/availability
- Apathy/not knowing where to begin
- Geography – widespread across region
- Fear and vulnerability
- Poor experiences
- Resistance in collaboration
- Lack of competition between networks
- ‘What’s in it for me?’
- Little reward for effort
- Burnt out/run down
- Prejudice/preconceived ideas

Dominant Recurring Themes

We know from our earlier engagements with the Blue Mountains business community that local business communities face many obstacles when it comes to connecting with one another.

These include:

- **Limited Opportunities:** Some businesses struggle to find suitable networking opportunities or events that can bring them together.
- **Lack of Awareness:** Local businesses may not be aware of the resources and support available within their own community, which can prevent them from reaching out to potential partners, suppliers, or customers.
- **Competitive Mindset:** While healthy competition can drive innovation, it can also hinder collaboration among local businesses. Some may view their neighbours as rivals, leading to a reluctance to connect and share knowledge or resources.
- **Geographic Constraints:** The physical distance between businesses within a local community can present logistical challenges.
- **Time Constraints:** Running a small business can leave little room for business owners, operators, and employees to actively engage with the local business community.
- **Lack of Collaboration Initiatives:** The absence of coordinated programs, initiatives, or platforms can make it challenging for businesses to connect and work.



When asked to evaluate and whittle down the list of perceived problems and obstacles even further using coloured stickers to 'vote' on the themes that most resonated, two key themes emerged:

1: Competition vs Collaboration: How might we change people's perception about competition vs collaboration in the local business community?

2: Not seeing value in networking: How might we help local businesses understand the value of local connections and networking, and know where to start?



The group was then asked to vote on actionable ideas that fell under one of the two themes. Ideas included:

Competition vs Collaboration:

- Partner with highly visible organisations – Council, local media campaign
- Teach businesses the positive impacts collaboration can have
- Case studies on how businesses help each other
- Show people some surprising collaborations
- Set simple trusting examples as a group
- Find ways businesses can work together rather than compete
- Create opportunities for businesses to learn and collaborate
- Asking them to try
- Educate business owners about how collaboration can help grow the business
- Make it easy to collaborate close to home
- Offer people a place to share and connect
- Start small collaborations
- Help local businesses collaborate with similar businesses

Not seeing value in networking:

- Community or business leaders to speak or promote on the web, socials, email etc about the many benefits of networking
- Use the Service NSW business concierge to promote and refer local support networks to local businesses
- Community event to promote value of networking and collaborating
- Run a specific project with this aim
- We lead interactive sessions with enablers
- Foster and promote networking events and invite businesses to experience the value firsthand
- Create opportunity to connect
- Conferences
- Single cooperative entity: too many organisations e.g. chambers of commerce, interest groups
- Can we find commonality? Touchpoints, suppliers, government + communicate through them
- Mail out / email to all registered businesses in the Blue Mountains with links to networks



Next Steps

Participants agreed to work towards identifying and exploring ways to build the resilience of members of the Blue Mountains business community.

Having discussed potential deliverables, the following actions were suggested and agreed upon with Business Blue Mountains taking on the role of driver:

- Creation of a small local collaboration partnership event program to strategically align businesses within and across industries.
- Do Tanks to be held every 6-9 months, facilitated by Business Blue Mountains, to drive actionable outcomes.
- Creation of a WhatsApp group, facilitated by Business Blue Mountains, to build on the outcome of the 'Do Tank' and maintain momentum.

Summary

Sustainable and resilient businesses are fundamental to the wellbeing of the Blue Mountains community.

A failure to invest in upskilling businesses and supporting local businesses to thrive before, during and after disasters can only have a devastating impact on the social and economic viability of the overall Blue Mountains community.

Through our genuine and innovative collaboration, Business Blue Mountains and Resilient Ready have laid the foundations for positive and productive business community relationships in the Blue Mountains moving forward.

There is now a clear commitment from local business community leaders to maintain momentum within the Blue Mountains business community.

Building and expanding local networks requires proactive efforts from local business communities, government entities, and other stakeholders.

Creating networking events, promoting collaboration initiatives, and fostering a cooperative mindset are now squarely on the Blue Mountains business community agenda.

Moving forward, the ongoing focus will be to support all businesses still in recovery mode as well as to plan and respond to the many potential events ahead.

Preparing businesses in the Blue Mountains community to ready themselves for bushfires will also support greater preparedness for other direct and indirect impacts and disruptions from natural and unnatural disasters like the Covid-19 pandemic.

What is clear is that the Blue Mountains business community is stronger together, and by better connecting businesses and bringing everyone along on the journey, we can create a more resilient local economy.



Contributor



Renae Hanvin,
CEO + Founder, Resilient Ready

Renae founded her first certified social enterprise, corporate2community, in 2018, motivated by her personal experience of disasters and understanding of the role businesses can play in helping Australian communities before, during and after impacts. After successfully running corporate2community for several years, she re-branded the social enterprise to Resilient Ready in 2022. As a leading partnership broker between industry and government, Renae shapes private sector solutions while bolstering government efforts in the delivery of community resilience-led outcomes.

References

[Blue Mountains Business Directory](#), created as part of the Blue Mountains Business Community Resilience Project

[Blue Mountains Business Resilience Roadmap](#), created as part of the Blue Mountains Hub Project

[BusinessBM.com.au](#) website, the website created as part of the Blue Mountains Business Community Resilience Project

[Doing Disasters Differently podcast interview](#) with Lawrence Atkinson, then-director of BusinessBM, 14 September, 2021

[Getting Connected: Using Networks to Build Business Community Resilience in the Blue Mountains](#), June 2022