

Planning for Natural Hazards: Communications and Engagement

[00:00:00] **Mark Maund:** Hi everyone and welcome to the People and Place Podcast by WSP. My name is Dr. Mark Maund and I'm WSP'S Planning and Approvals Team Lead for Regional New South Wales and ACT. This year on the People and Place Podcast, we are introducing a miniseries titled Planning for Natural Hazards. I'll be speaking with some brilliant specialists around Australia who can contribute to the conversation around planning for natural hazards and a better future.

Before we begin, I would like to do an Acknowledgement of Country. We acknowledge the traditional owners of the lands, where our projects take place throughout Australia, and their continuing connection to culture, community, land, sea, and sky. We pay our respect to elders past, present, and future.

Today I'm talking to Holly Love. She's a Technical Executive in Communications and Engagement at WSP. Holly has extensive experience in dealing with disasters, management, and communities that have been affected by disasters. I'm really looking forward to the chat today. Hello, Holly.

[00:01:03] **Holly Love:** Hi, Mark. Thanks for having me on.

[00:01:05] **Mark Maund:** Can you give us a little bit about yourself and some of your experience in disaster management?

[00:01:10] **Holly Love:** Yeah, sure. When I started my career in communications and engagement, I like many young whippets out of uni went into that media sort of politics space because I thought that was where the excitement was and where the cut and thrust is. And I loved it and it was great. And I still on occasion when I get to work in that media relations space, love it.

But what I realized is that, when you are liaising with the media on an issue such as contaminated land or a natural disaster, you play in that space for a week, but actually that stays with a community for an incredibly long time afterwards. And really the exciting work and the work where you can really make a difference is what comes after the newspaper and what comes after the next stories hit the front page.

So that's signified to me my time to move into more of this community engagement space. I've probably been working in this space since 2017, and I tend to deal with sort of large incidents that might occur with contamination as well as events such bush fires and flooding and particularly helping government to roll out services in that phase between the response and the recovery.

[00:02:23] **Mark Maund:** What I thought we could do today, Holly, is run through the disaster management cycle and talk about in order prevention, preparedness response, and recovery.

[00:02:31] **Holly Love:** Mm-hmm sure.

[00:02:33] **Mark Maund:** One of the big issues of prevention is around land use, planning, choosing where to buy, where to build, and even whether to onsell that risk as well. Can you talk to me a little bit about your experience in talking to people about their lifestyle choices, where they live, and how that informs their risk around natural hazards?

[00:02:50] **Holly Love:** Yeah, sure, Mark. So, it's an interesting one and I think it's an issue that we need to continue to talk about both at the community level and the government level because our communities are changing. I think COVID has taught us that need to be in a city, like Sydney or even like Newcastle, where we are today, doesn't exist as much as it used to, that need to be in an office. So, you do have people taking up the wonderful offerings that regional communities offer, sea changes, tree changes. But what comes with that is a change in that community and new people coming in that may not have the history of the area.

They may not know when to leave during a flood or a fire. They may not know where last time the community gathered or where the evacuation centre is, things like that. And they also potentially have a lower resilience, let's call it a resilience threshold. And so when an event does happen or is in the process of happening to them. Their recovery may not be as swift as the community before them.

So, I think that piece around preparation and prevention is becoming more and more important, these natural disasters, if we've seen anything over the last three years, this is the new norm. They're not going away. And so, we're, I think over the last few years, our investment has been a lot. Response phase and that recovery phase much more needs to go into those earlier phases around preparation and prevention.

[00:04:23] **Mark Maund:** That was a great point. Thanks Holly. We also talk and hear a little bit about personal accountability, and that's one of the things I guess in terms of education that's really important that people understand the risks that they take on. And also, what that means in terms of maintaining their property.

Some people may, for instance, buy a property in a bushfire prone area and not understand the extent of ongoing management that's required, or also being in, for instance flood prone areas and not understanding the need to be prepared in the event of a flood. Can you please talk a little bit about the importance of passing on that knowledge to people moving into areas or buying into areas?

And really one of the best ways to manage that is through sharing that existing local knowledge, it's really important to gather that and collect it, but it's actually quite a challenge as well. So maybe if you could talk about some of the best ways to achieve that.

[00:05:12] **Holly Love:** Absolutely. So, I think straight off the bat, it doesn't sit with any one particular body. It doesn't sit with government; it doesn't sit with community leaders. It

needs to be everyone pitching in in some respect. When we think about a community, most people would agree it's best coming from those people in the community. But what if you went to the local RFS or the local community leaders, they would say that they're exhausted from the last few years potentially. So, I think it needs a multifaceted approach with councils and government in looking at this space and investing in this space.

It needs community leaders to play their role as well. And for them to feel supported by others behind them. And to your point around personal accountability, when people move into a rural or a regional area that they also play their part. In that self, accountability of seeking out the information and making it easy for them. There's some simple things that could be done in that space. If you purchase a block of land in a certain area, then perhaps we could integrate information into that sales process. I don't think it's a hard thing to solve. We just all need to start somewhere and grow from that.

[00:06:28] **Mark Maund:** And that's really part of the point of these podcasts is to share this information. I think that's important that the more we talk about the risk of natural hazards, impact of disasters and how we can each be involved in helping to manage that, the better off we'll all be.

[00:06:42] **Holly Love:** I think there's also a piece around acknowledging that this is not a quick fix. If you think about behaviour change campaigns, wearing seat belt. It takes a generation for that information to sink in and then be passed down and things like that. And so, continuing to have these conversations and acknowledging that these events will continue to occur is also an important part of that.

[00:07:06] **Mark Maund:** And Holly, as you know, good communication across all levels of business, government, and community is really important. And one of the important ideas to share is what is an acceptable risk to the community and whatever that community is defined as. It could be national, could be state, it could be a suburb. So, what level of risk in terms of a particular natural hazard is that community prepared to accept? And do they understand the associated risks involved with that or the approach to managing that risk? How do you think this could be captured and what does it mean for things like future development in areas that are prone to risk of natural hazards?

Do you, do we need to move out of some of these areas or do we just build differently? Does the community need to accept this level of risk? How do you think risk is incorporated into these communications or discussions throughout the community?

[00:07:54] **Holly Love:** I think it's about risk at multiple levels, so you will have your own personal risk and then where it could be built in at levels above that is, as you say, planning authorities, helping people to consider a risk through their design of their house building restrictions, things like that. I think it is important, and I think it's something that needs to be considered. 50 years ago, we probably didn't have the level of data and mapping and ability to predict that we do now. And so, this is a new space in terms of how we use the information at hand to make those decisions.

Just reflecting on the last few years in New South Wales alone, let alone other states in Australia, there is a role to be played by planning authorities thinking ahead into the future. And for example, a flood plain. Just because you might say that people can't build on that flood plain anymore, it doesn't mean it's any less valuable a land that land's incredibly valuable to cattle farmers because it floods and the nutrients that are then in that land. So, it's just about, I think, rethinking the value that we put on different pieces of land based on what we know.

[00:09:06] **Mark Maund:** I think that's a great point. People often see development or not development as an opportunity loss, but it really just creates other opportunities for that land, such as environmental protection, agricultural use, allowing waters to flow. There's many other uses that land can be put to that can also benefit the community.

[00:09:23] **Holly Love:** Absolutely.

[00:09:25] **Mark Maund:** Some of the things that people that live in these hazard prone areas need to consider is being prepared for disasters when they occur. So, it's not only being aware of the risk, as we talked about, but watching and anticipating disasters as they unfold and things like emergency kits, evacuation plans, et cetera. These are all really important for people that live in these hazard prone areas. But as we talked about, many people may not understand the level of preparedness that's required. Can you talk a little bit about how to communicate that to individuals who live in areas, move to areas, and how we, how they understand how to prepare for a disaster prior to it occurring?

[00:10:04] **Holly Love:** Yeah. Thanks Mark. So, I think we've touched on a little earlier where we talked about that, accountability, and that multilayered approach. So, I think it does sit with people to think about where they're moving and what the future might hold there. I also think that there are some simple things that community organizations, governments, the business community can do to be prepared.

A really good example of that smoke alarm. So, I can remember as a child the advertising campaigns around smoke alarms and having them in your house, testing them that they worked, and also knowing what your escape route was from your house. And I can remember one Saturday afternoon mom, dad, my sister and I, and Dad turning the alarm on and right, what would we do if you heard this in night? And we practiced how to stop, drop, and roll and practiced how to commando crawl down the hallway and out the house. And that was probably half an hour in my childhood on a Saturday afternoon, but it's something that stuck with me for life that need to just pause and take that time to consider how you might escape.

I think the other thing we need to consider in all of this, some of the emergency services do some great work in this space. Helping people to prepare and to consider their risk. The other factor we haven't talked about is potentially new migrants to the country and people that are used to different forms of heating, are used to having multiple people in a house more so than we might be, and the need for education there.

And again, I know some of the emergency services do some great work here, so I think it definitely starts at that personal level, but the way that people are reminded to do that through, for example, advertising and things like that. Again, it's that multifaceted approach using government agencies, community organizations.

[00:11:53] **Mark Maund:** Yeah, I agree. I think we saw this during COVID as well, the importance of different forms of communication in different methods. Direct verbal communication, written communication, visual, and the importance of having all those multilayers of communication, making sure that message gets across and people are as prepared as they can be. Holly, moving into evacuation centres, being prepared, and knowing where to evacuate to is really part of that preparedness phase of disaster management. I find that there's still a lack of dedicated evacuation centres across Australia. The government I know and agencies are working towards improving that.

However, I still think there's this shared responsibility between organisations that also do a really good job. Places like RSLs, local communities or councils that offer their buildings for evacuation centres. However, moving into more of these permanent dedicated evacuation centres or what I describe as multipurpose buildings that can be used for community events, but also be retrofitted and made available as evacuation centres during disasters. There's different ways that these preparedness phase of evacuation could be established. Do you have any comments on that? And do, have you had any feedback in the work that you've done in terms. I guess the current status of evacuation centres and ways to improve them.

[00:13:12] **Holly Love:** Yeah, so I think you're right, Mark. It is a really timely topic and much like you, I'm aware that different levels of government are looking into this. We talk a lot about community led response and community led recovery. When we talk about emergency events, and I think that wording is interesting when you break it down because absolutely the best type of response and the best type of recovery is one that's centred around the community that you're talking about.

Be that at a postcode level, at a region level or the business community, a segment of people, however, There is, when we talk about evacuation centres, there is this lens of really important things such as safety of people, availability of electricity, availability of water, the ability to get resources such as food to those centres, and most importantly, the ability for those centres to have steady, reliable communications during an event and often during events and what we've seen over the last few years is evacuation centres pop up, which are brilliant and which serve a purpose of bringing the community together. But they may not have those really critical things that I've just mentioned.

They may not have the reliable communications to the outside world. They may not have a clear path or the services such as the SES may not know how to navigate to those centres to get things like food to them. And so, while there's a need in an event for perhaps more evacuation centres or different centres in different localities than they are pre-established. There's risk that comes with that, that needs to be considered. And so, there's some work I think, again, I've spoken a lot in the podcast so far about how multifaceted it is, but there's a lot of opportunity, in this space around services, government, community, working together

to identify locations and then making sure that those centres are appropriately geared up to reduce any risk.

[00:15:29] **Mark Maund:** Great, Holly. Last question in the preparedness phase is around communication and the different challenges that involves. There are people in the community who have different levels of mobility, different abilities to understand language, written or spoken, and trying to get this message across to all these different parts of the communities is quite a challenge. Can you run through some of the methods you used to do that and making sure that information is shared between all members of the community to trying to achieve the best outcome in terms of sharing information and building resilient communities.

[00:16:03] **Holly Love:** So first and foremost, I think simplicity is key, and that's something that you mentioned, the revised warning system earlier. And the simplicity about that is key to its success. It's around colours, it's around very succinct statements. And it's something that working with such a broad section of the community that you need to be really conscious of is targeting your communications and your language at, I believe an average reading age of around 10 to 12 years old is the guide of how to pitch communications. And as you mentioned, it's about having information across multiple channels so people like to absorb information in different ways. And so there should be that information in all those different ways, be it written, be it something visual to watch like YouTube clips, be it something you can listen to or something quick and visual that you can pick up.

The other really important thing to consider here, migrants to Australia, and people from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds. I'll give you a great example. I for many years was part of surf lifesaving. And one of the things I learned in surf lifesaving was that the red and yellow flags, while if you've grown up in Australia you see the red and yellow flags as the safe spot to swim. There was some research done that outlined that some tourists think red and yellow actually means danger. And so, you should swim outside of the flags because they're saying red and yellow equals danger within that area. So, I think that's a really good example of how something so simple can still be misperceived depending on your background. And we can't just assume that everyone takes information the same.

[00:17:49] **Mark Maund:** Holly moving into the response phase of disaster management. Communication during stressful times is quite difficult. People taking information differently and really may not dedicate the same amount of time cause they're dealing with lots of other issues. During a disaster, such as what we talked about evacuating, making sure everyone's safe, trying to communicate with each other. In these rapidly changing environments where information also comes out quite quickly. Can you talk a little bit about the best way to communicate with people in disaster prone areas during the response phase of a disaster?

[00:18:23] **Holly Love:** Yeah, so there's a few things I've observed over the last few years. One is this need to clearly articulate roles and responsibilities. And that is usually thought about in the context of the emergency management framework and who is the lead on the event. So, is it still at that local government level? Has it escalated to a state lead, or is it

perhaps the SES? And we've seen that in the media play out in different events in the past that who's leading? I think we've tended in the past to think about it in that emergency management framework perspective. The perspective we actually need to come from is where are the community going?

Who are they going to information from? Now, they may not be the lead. Under the emergency management framework. However, if that's where the community's going for information, you need to make sure that organization, for example, it's council. If you've got something going on in your local area, you'll usually call council to find out what's going on. Now, they may not be the lead. But they need to be geared up with the right information. The other thing I'd say is it's around creating a hub for people to go to. You can establish that in your peace time before your war time. And a lot of councils that are in these disaster-prone areas.

I'm thinking of Clarence Valley Council in my mind. They've done some great work in downtime to establish this great web platform that they can roll out during an event, which is easily updateable with information, so the community know to go to that platform, then it's about regular updates. I think what can be challenging is this need to make sure information is correct before it goes out, and that's really important, but it's a delicate balance between using time, valuable time to make sure things are correct with having an information void. Where information is then made up or rumours spread, and then you've got a whole other set of problems on your hand that you're trying to deal with. So, think about where the community's going for their information and make sure that avenue has the correct information.

[00:20:32] **Mark Maund:** That's great, Holly, as we've seen and as you said, if there is a gap in knowledge, someone will try and fill it. It may or may not be with the appropriate information. Equity is something we talk about a lot in disaster situations. Making sure that as much as possible, all different parts of the community have access to similar opportunities and services to help them deal with these disasters. Moving into the recovery phase of disaster management lessons learned is an important phase of all these processes that we're talking about. What do you think is the best way to capture the lessons learned after a disaster? To make sure that we can respond better in the future and prepare as well in the future, but also doing that without causing potentially any additional emotional harm to the people who have been affected by those disasters.

[00:21:18] **Holly Love:** Yeah, that's right, there's definitely a right time to do it but it should be non-negotiable that it's done. If we focus on the community, I think the best approach would be to engage with them and find out when they're ready to do it. Most people, when done at the right time, will find it a really cathartic exercise and most people during an event have felt some sort of loss of control.

And so, the ability to talk about that with your people around you, whether it be your colleagues in an organization or you know your neighbours and people that live in your suburb, the ability to talk and process that and hear that other people have gone through the same or similar things, helps people to lift themselves out of that feeling of isolation.

And when done at the right time, talking about what could have been done better, gives a sense of control back to people because they can start to do what we've just talked about, the preparedness possibly prevention and start to feel like the next event that might be coming along. Soon or in 10 years' time, that they would feel better prepared for that.

I also think when we talk about lessons learned, it should be non-negotiable within an organization as well. So, if you've had staff involved in an incident of any sort before those people come off that project, yes, a lesson learned is important. But a debrief as well is incredibly important and that allows people to. Put that line in the sand that piece of work, that project is now done. It allows people to whinge, to cry, but also to congratulate each other because the effort that people bring to these types of projects is much, much more than any normal projects because you're bringing your best work self and you're bringing all your professional skills, but you're also bring. What you feel as a human to that situation and so the ability to talk through that and recover from that is vital to people not burning out and being able to go onto the next project in this sort of space.

[00:23:33] **Mark Maund:** That's a great point, Holly. Mental health is really important part of this process, so I'm glad you brought that up. The other thing, I don't expect you to answer the question, but maybe assist us understanding how we could get to the answer to this question. That is existing developments in high-risk areas that are exposed to natural hazards, where there's already developments. We've seen the example in the North Coast of New South Wales. What to do with finding a way forward in those situations. I don't believe, is an individual led process that is a community wide process that needs to help manage these existing developments in existing hazard prone area.

How do you think we can move towards getting an answer on what to do with some of these historical planning decisions?

[00:24:17] **Holly Love:** So, when we were working on the bushfire clean-up program, we had a huge amount of data on where properties were burned. We had a huge amount of registrations for people that required assistance, and we were posed with a challenge of someone had to be the first person to be cleaned up and someone had to be the last person to be cleaned up. And where do you start within? That. And so, we approached an ethicist at the ethics centre in Sydney who developed an ethical framework for us to help us in our decision making through that program. And it's a framework that I have since reflected on in my work in flood response and contaminated sites and things like that.

But one of the eight principles he came up with, and it's the one that sticks with me the most is do no extra harm. So, this acknowledgement that the event that has happened, be it a bushfire or a flood cyclone covid as an event, that event, the services that are rolled out and the decisions that are rolled out, the policies that come from it should do no extra harm to the community. The event should be the worst thing that could happen to someone. And everything else from there needs to be productive, collaborative, restorative. So, when we think about these decisions around land use planning in the future, what I would say. There are some tough decisions to be made. There are some future policies and programs that need to be thought out, but those decisions should do no extra harm.

So, the decision to take buybacks and things like that should be done in conjunction with programs that look at meeting that housing need, because what we don't want is to make these planning decisions too quickly and have an extra type of harm on people, which is potential risk of homelessness.

[00:26:13] **Mark Maund:** A good point. And the other thing in planning that we obviously need to be aware of and we need to achieve is that we can avoid areas of high risk from natural hazards, which I think is important. However, we still need to house people, we still need to create opportunity for employment. We still need to protect the environment. So, all these decisions are overlaid by other requirements as well. That's a great discussion. Thanks Holly.

Holly, you obviously work a lot in this space during disasters and communication and engagement is really important. Also, safety's a primary concern both in the community and also in the people who are going into these areas that have been affected by disasters. So, there's obviously the need for balance between understanding the disaster that has occurred, what stage it's at, if there's future potential for the situation to become more dangerous, and also how to deal with the safety of the people going into those areas, the people already living in those areas.

And the urgent need to get communication and supplies and support out to people. So, finding that right balance between the need for an immediate response and the need for a safe response. With clear direct education, I'm sure you have different priorities from different agencies and different community leaders. How do you find that balance in between, how to approach the information, how to get the right information out, and how to take the time to plan? How you'll approach that communications and engagement during a really stressful time for a lot of people.

[00:27:40] **Holly Love:** Thanks, Mark. I'm really glad you asked this because if you'd said to me, you can have two minutes to talk about whatever you want, this is exactly what I would've picked. Community engagement, people by their very nature want to get out there. They want to be talking to people, they want to be learning from the community, they want to be helping people. And so, when I am put in these situations, in that delicate balance between the response phase and the recovery phase. You've been given a program of work, let's say. It's some sort of government service to roll out. It's incredibly tempting and there's a lot of pressure on you as well to just get out there and start talking to people.

And I constantly, in those situations reflect on something. A mentor said to me, which was sometimes you've got to go slow to go fast. And I think in these situations, that's exactly what you have to do. You need to take the time to understand what the service offering is, the steps involved, the timeframes, and particularly pinpointing where the uncertainties might be in that, because that will help you communicate that according.

We talked a little bit before around doing no extra harm and one of the greatest sort of risks of harm that can come to someone after an event. Unmanaged expectations. So, for example, people think that a service is going to be quick or potentially more comprehensive

and do something that they need it to do. But if you're able to take the time to plan those key messages, it's a step towards doing no extra harm. So, you can appropriately say to someone, we'll be able to help you with X, Y, but we won't be able to help you this other thing.

So, we talked a little bit before around mental health of staff and helping staff set those boundaries to maintain their sort of health and wellbeing in the team. Being able to sign post people in that response and recovery phase to another service, which might do what you can't do is really imperative for you managing your own need to make sure that person's okay or make sure they've got everything they need.

And then what I would say is to continuously test those messages. So once, once you have planned them and you know what you can say and you know where you have to be honest with people and say, I'm really sorry, I don't quite know the timeframes yet, for example, but I'll let you know as soon as I do. Once you get into the job, once you get into the ground, you're learning more about the community, you're learning more about, the programs morphing and shaping as you deliver it. It's about continuously changing those messages to improve them and to challenge your thinking and share learnings with each other.

But what's really key is to keep that principle at the heart of doing no extra harm and to question. At each point of a project or a service that you're rolling out, are we. Doing what's best for the community right now? Are we saying what's best for the community right now? How can I continue to offer a service? That's great because really our role is to deliver that service, for example, but you play a key role in creating certainty in that very uncertain environment, and it doesn't mean you need to have all the answers. In fact, filling the space with answers that may not be correct is more harmful. What it means is you create an environment where people feel like they have the information they need to make the decision for them, and they have that choice and control in what's been a really uncontrollable situation.

[00:31:24] **Mark Maund:** That's a great answer, Holly and I do like the concept of giving people the information they need to go away and make informed decisions or where to get more assistance. Last question for me, it's really a bit of an open-ended question where to from here for communications and engagement in the natural hazards and disaster space.

[00:31:42] **Holly Love:** Yeah, so if I was to think ahead in the next five to 10 years, I had really startling fact the other day when I was at a conference around emergency management, and that was currently 97% of the resources be it investment into local community funding, available councils, things like that. Currently 97% of that is during the response and recovery phase, and only 3% is in that preparation and prevention phase. So, if I thought ahead, I would love to see. If not flipped, then at least brought down to parity. The other thing I'd say on that point is I think we've always thought about PPRR as this linear or cyclical model, but it would be great if we imagined it like, A triangle like the food pyramid that the CSIRO have, where the bottom two levels your chunkiest bits of effort are in that PP phase.

And if you do that, then the need for effort and investment in the RR phase isn't as much, but hopefully that harm that we've talked about isn't as much. So, when I think about comms and engagement over the next 10 years, I'd like to think about us flicking our work to be more in that PP space. I'd like to think about how we'd I reflect on communities that are going through concurrent or cascading disasters where it's one after the other.

And hopefully at some point we'll have some clear air. Or we'll create some clear air because it may not come where we can think about what the service offering is for the future that assists people that are going through one event after the other. And, and not just the community, but our staff and our teams and our people that work in this space, because we're all a bit tired after the last couple of years and I think it's not going to stop. And working together to look at rostering, to look at subbing people in and out so we can keep up in this space.

[00:33:52] **Mark Maund:** That's a great answer, Holly and I completely agree with the increased focus on prevention and preparedness. Thanks for the chat today. I've really enjoyed it. I've learned a lot. So, thank you for your time.

[00:34:02] **Holly Love:** Thanks, Mark. It's been great to chat to you.

[00:34:05] **Mark Maund:** Thank you so much for joining me, and thank you to our listeners for tuning in. If you're interested in the work we're doing, please get in touch. Our links will be in the podcast show notes. Goodbye.