

Gawler River Flood Awareness and Preparedness Engagement



Project Background

The Department for Environment and Water (DEW) has partnered with the Gawler River Floodplain Management Authority (GRFMA) and SA State Emergency Service (SA SES) to develop flood awareness and preparedness campaign materials for the Gawler River region. Jointly funded by the South Australian government, project partners, and the Australian Government's Disaster Ready Fund, this initiative aims to improve community resilience to flooding.

The Gawler River floods on average once every ten years, with the most recent flood in 2016 causing an estimated \$51 million in losses to agricultural businesses and significant damage to infrastructure. Despite this, recent community research commissioned by DEW has shown that community awareness and preparedness is generally low, with only 10% of participants reporting they have a written flood plan.

To inform and support the community to be better prepared for floods, the flood awareness and preparedness campaign materials developed as part of this project will build on existing SA SES, Bureau of Meteorology (BoM) and DEW resources.

Introduction

From late July to mid-August 2025, stakeholder engagement specialist Strategic Matters conducted targeted interviews with key stakeholders across the Gawler River region, including local government officials, regional growers, and industry leaders, and facilitated focus groups at various locations. Throughout the process, they engaged with a wide range of community members, including Culturally and Linguistically Diverse (CALD) and First Nations groups.

This community engagement was undertaken to inform the development of the flood awareness and preparedness campaign materials to ensure they effectively raise awareness of flood risk in the area, support the understanding of SA SES and BoM flood messages and warnings, and encourage action and preparedness using existing SA SES tools.

Methodology

The project is being delivered in two stages - the first focusing on community engagement and the second on campaign development. The first stage explored the community's understanding of flood risk in the region, how SA SES, BoM and DEW resources are understood and used by different audiences, and what tools and information are missing.

As part of the community engagement process, Strategic Matters conducted eight interviews and facilitated eight community focus groups, including focus groups specifically for CALD and First Nations groups. It is important to acknowledge that the compressed timeframe for engagement did limit depth, reach, and opportunities to engage with the Gawler catchment community, in particular CALD, First Nations, and other vulnerable communities. To build trust and obtain in depth feedback, more time and continuous engagement is required.

Techniques used	Stakeholders	Dates
Interviews: 8 online interviews conducted 9 local councils / organisations 25 key stakeholders	Representatives from: - GRFMA - Barossa Council - Town of Gawler - Light Regional Council - City of Playford - Adelaide Plains Council - Adelaide Hills Council - Regional Development Australia - Northern Adelaide Plains Food Cluster	17 July 2025 – 25 July 2025

Focus groups: 8 community focus groups, including: 6 general focus groups 1 CALD focus group 1 First Nations focus group (participants from Kaurna Nation) 36 participants	Focus groups were held in: - Two Wells - Hewett - Virginia - Tanunda - Gawler - Angle Vale	29 July 2025 – 7 August 2025
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What We Heard

From the community engagement process, we heard that building a successful flood preparedness framework requires connecting the structured, **top-down communication** and support from agencies with the organic, **bottom-up social connections** and self-reliance of the community.

The long gaps between major flood events were identified as a challenge, contributing to a gradual loss of both community knowledge and organisational memory. This erosion of local and lived experience makes it harder to stay prepared and to communicate with newer residents.

Focus group attendees identified the need to have a defined role in their own safety. A sense of agency and empowerment is critical in helping people feel capable rather than helpless when facing a flood. But while most people understood the danger of floods, the full extent of the **risk was not widely understood** across the region.

This widespread lack of awareness was especially noted among new residents in flood-prone areas. Participants felt that **sharing personal flood stories**, particularly those highlighting successful coping strategies from past events, would be a powerful way to increase community awareness, therefore making flood more 'real' and evident for people.

Community connections were recognised as being strong across the region. When formal communication channels struggled to reach everyone, local networks were found to play a critical role in filling the gaps, demonstrating the value of neighbours helping neighbours and the power of existing community relationships in times of crisis.

Local councils noted the importance of empowering property owners to take an active role in their own safety. Local and State Government also play an important role in providing accessible information, such as easy-to-understand flood maps, and by advising landholders on what measures they can implement on their properties.

The engagement process revealed that existing resources, such as those on the SA SES and BoM websites, are often difficult to locate and access during a crisis. Many attendees also reported confusion about who is responsible for official communication during a flood event. This **lack of clarity has led to uncertainty** about who to trust during an emergency.

In a stressful situation like a flood, people need to quickly grasp what is happening and what actions they need to take. Complicated and/or overly technical language can lead to delays and poor decisions. There is a **need for consistent messaging** from all relevant organisations - such as the SA SES, BoM, and local councils. This approach would help the public to receive clear, unified advice and ultimately assist people to respond well to and in flooding events.

CALD: Although some authorities perceive language and digital barriers within CALD communities, participants explained that information is often shared effectively through extended family and social networks, with young people playing a key role in translating and distributing content online.

First Nations: First Nations participants shared deep environmental knowledge, noting natural indicators, such as changes in wind, cloud, and animal behaviour that often precede formal warnings. These insights offer valuable opportunities to enhance community preparedness and understanding.

Next Steps

The second stage of the project will focus on developing the flood awareness and preparedness campaign materials. Delivery of the materials is scheduled for completion by the end of March 2026. Once finalised, these materials will be provided to project partners - the GRFMA, SA SES and local councils - for distribution to the community.