

Why Local Government Matters to Bellingen Shire

Prepared for Bellingen Shire

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Executive Summary

The member councils of the Mid North Coast Joint Organisation of Councils (MNCJO), including Bellingen Shire Council (Council), engaged the Centre for Local Government (CLG) at the University of Technology Sydney to run the landmark *Why Local Government Matters* (WLGGM) social research series across the Mid North Coast (the region).

CLG has conducted WLGGM nationally and for individual councils across most Australian jurisdictions. It profiles the attitudes of communities towards the place where they live and their local council and provides powerful insights on what makes each community unique and what they value about their local council.

WLGGM asks questions to understand how communities connect to the place where they live, what they think are the most important features of the place, the importance of different services and functions provided by their local council, service delivery, funding and governance preferences, and degree of attachment to their local council.

A total of 800 residents across the region were surveyed by phone in February 2019. Survey respondents were spatially matched to the regional population such that 149 residents of Bellingen Shire were surveyed.

This report documents findings of the sample of residents drawn from Bellingen Shire, and provides insights on how their views compare to regional neighbours and the Australian population more broadly.

Key findings

The findings of WLGGM reveal Bellingen Shire residents:

- Derive their connection to place from the environment. They find Bellingen Shire reflects their strong environmental values and this makes them feel at home here
- Find more intangible features of Bellingen Shire, such as community cohesion and social diversity, are the most important features of the place. They also find tangible things that reflect their environmental values, such as using resources efficiently, pollution levels, and the health of plants and animals, are very important
- Have a strong interest in the environmental and social sustainability of Bellingen Shire. They are very concerned about environmental problems and related sustainability issues, such as intergenerational equity, and consider the environmental services and functions Council provides are very important

- Have a somewhat narrow view of sustainability as environmental and social sustainability and do not consider the economic sustainability of Bellingen Shire as particularly important. Whilst they value Council's support for local businesses, Bellingen Shire residents do not see the importance of Council's economic development function. Similarly, not all residents recognise the contribution Council's social services and functions, such as community development, make to the social sustainability of Bellingen Shire
- Are worried about the impacts of climate change and potential for increasing natural disasters, but are not planning for what they might do in the event of a disaster and are uncertain of how they might plan for one. They worry about increased drought and bushfires and think government should do more to address water shortages, and are concerned about how increasingly intense rainfall events and storms might impact other community members, including future generations
- Want to be involved in deciding what services they receive and how these are delivered. They trust other community members and service users know enough to make decisions about the services they receive, and do not feel government and service providers are capable of making these decisions on their own. The residents of Bellingen Shire want the services they receive to contribute to a healthier and fairer society and are willing to pay for a broader range of services that achieves this
- Are well connected to their local council and understand who represents them and who to hold accountable for local services. However, they are reluctant to consider people who do not pay property rates as members of the community

From these findings there are a number of potentially important policy implications for Bellingen Shire. For instance, there appears scope to:

- Demonstrate Council is a service delivery centre of excellence and delivers high quality services that exceed community expectations
- Demonstrate to the community the importance of Council's social services and functions in fostering community cohesion and social diversity
- Broaden the community's understanding of sustainability to recognise the importance of economic sustainability

1 Introduction

Why Local Government Matters (WLGM) is a landmark national social research series designed by the Centre for Local Government at the University of Technology Sydney (CLG). It profiles the attitudes of communities towards the place where they live and their local council and provides powerful insights on what makes each community unique and what they value about their local council.

Questions are asked to understand how communities connect to the place where they live, what they think are the most important features of the place, the importance of different services and functions provided by their local council, service delivery, funding and governance preferences, and degree of attachment to their local council.

CLG has conducted WLGM nationally and for individual councils across most Australian jurisdictions. Through membership of the Mid North Coast Joint Organisation (MNCJO) the councils of the region, including Bellingen Shire, commissioned CLG to run WLGM.

1.1 This report


This report provides insights for Bellingen Shire Council and highlights differences in views of its residents compared to their regional neighbours and other Australians. The research objectives and survey question areas are outlined below.

Research objectives	Survey question areas
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Understand what matters about local government to Mid-North Coast residents• Understand what is valued about council services and functions• Understand what matters regionally as potential basis for MNCJO work program	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Place attributes for each LGA• What's important about place to residents• Environmental problems, concerns and impacts• Importance of local government services and functions• Service delivery, funding and governance preferences• Knowledge of local government

1.1.1 Method

WLGM for the Mid North Coast largely replicated the national survey. Some minor revisions to existing WLGM questions were made to better reflect the regional context, including testing strategic priorities of the MNCJO. The research method included:

1. Discussions with MNCJO Executive to scope questions
2. Review MNCJO Draft Strategic Plan to align questions to priorities



3. Review other surveys for comparison questions and data

4. Phone survey fieldwork in late February 2019

Almost 800 residents across the region were surveyed by phone during February 2019. The respondent profile was demographically and spatially matched to the regional population. This included a sub-sample of 149 Bellinghen Shire residents, and the results contained in this report are the findings of views expressed by these people.

2 Place Connection and Features

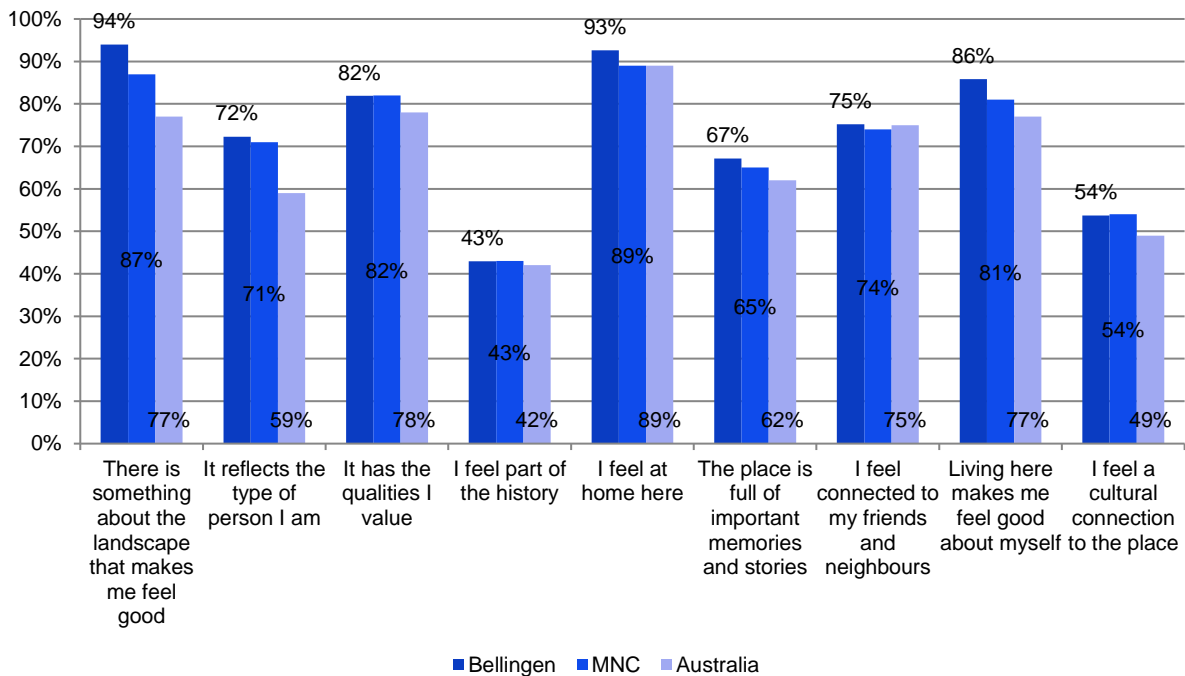
WLGGM asks questions to understand how residents connect to the place where they live and, therefore, what they value most about living there. Overall, the residents of Bellinghen Shire indicate:

- There is something in the landscape around them that makes feel good
- Living where they do makes them feel good about themselves
- The place where they live feels like home and reflects the type of person they are
- The place has qualities they value

These attitudinal statements received the highest levels of agreement, and residents of Bellinghen Shire were generally more likely to agree with these compared to regional neighbours and other Australians. In contrast, whilst the residents of Bellinghen Shire feel connected to their friends and neighbours, they are no more or less likely to feel this than their regional neighbours or other Australians.

Further, whilst the majority of residents feel Bellinghen Shire is full of important memories and stories, they do not necessarily feel part of its history or a cultural connection to the place. These attitudinal statements received the lowest levels of agreement.

Together, these findings indicate the environment and feelings of community connectedness are important place qualities of Bellinghen Shire.



2.1 Place Features

WLGGM asks questions about the relative importance of different place features. These include tangible features such as physical infrastructure and the provision of public and social services including roads and bridges, recreation areas, access to shops, schools and aged care, as well as more intangible aspects such as the level of creativity, vibrancy and diversity within a community as well as its economic outlook.

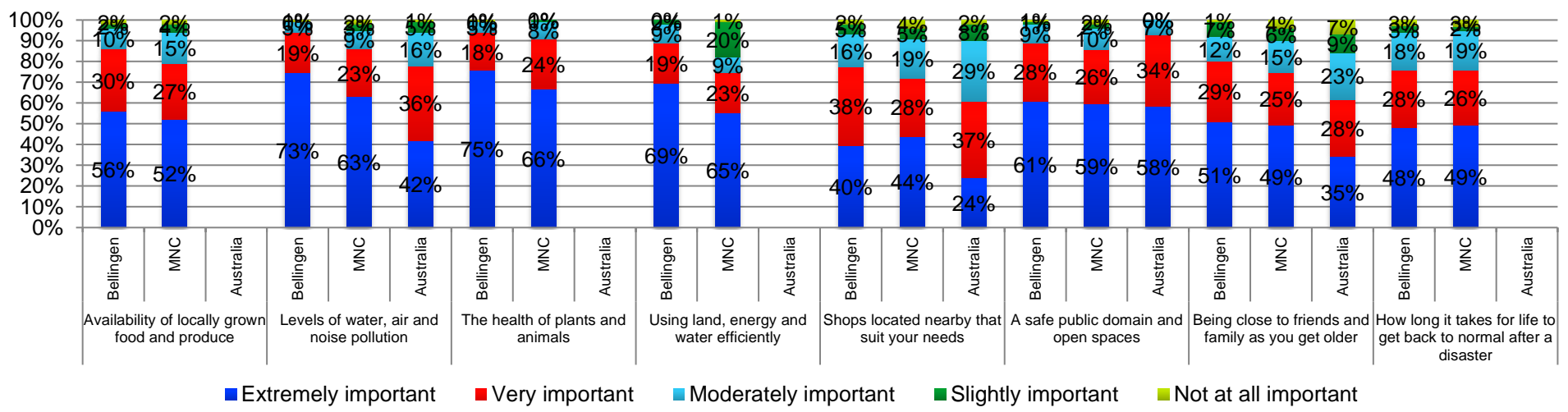
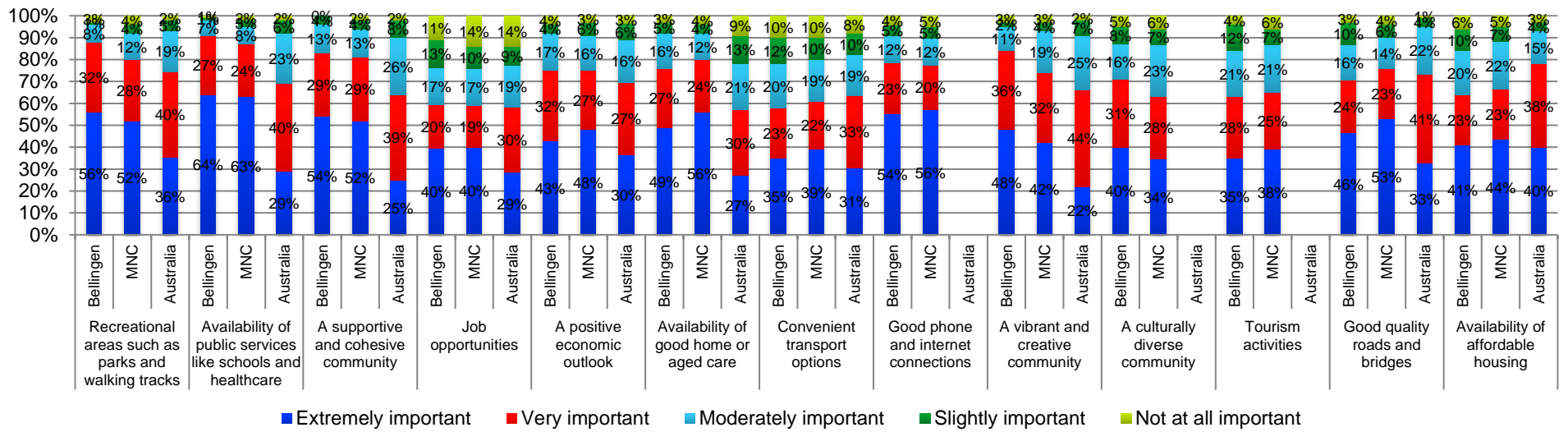
Overall, residents of Bellingen Shire were more likely to indicate intangible features, such as levels of social cohesion and cultural diversity, safety in the public domain, and being close to friends and family as they get older, are important features of Bellingen Shire. Other important features nominated by residents include:

- Efficient use of land, water and energy resources
- The health of plants and animals
- Recreational areas
- Pollution levels
- Good phone and internet connections
- Availability of locally grown food, and
- Availability of essential public services such as schools and hospitals

They were less likely to nominate tangible features such as convenient transport options and shops located nearby that meet their needs as important.

When comparing those things that define how residents connect to Bellingen Shire and those features they rate as more important parts of the area, residents clearly value the environmental and social sustainability of Bellingen Shire.

In contrast, residents appear not to value economic sustainability of Bellingen Shire, such as the economic outlook and availability of job opportunities.



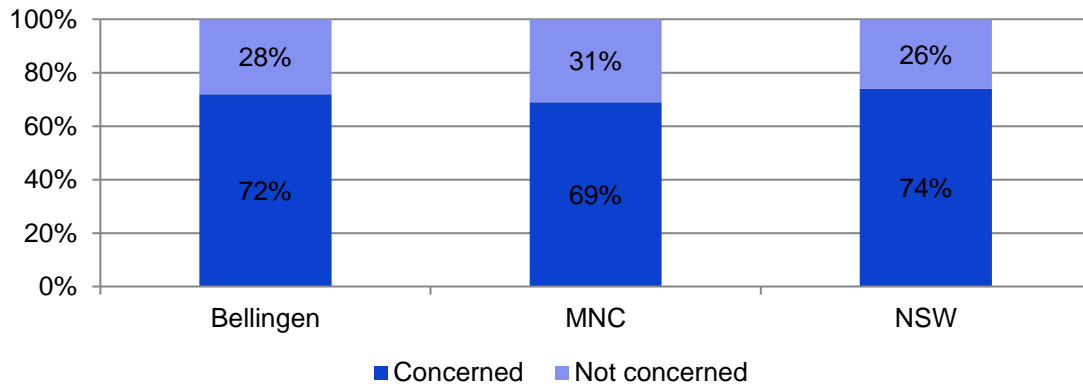
3 Environmental Issues

The version of WLGM fielded across the region asked some new questions specifically about the environment. These were designed to test the strategic priorities of the MNCJO and replicate other social research series such as the NSW Government’s *Who Cares About the Environment in NSW?* to provide comparative insights.

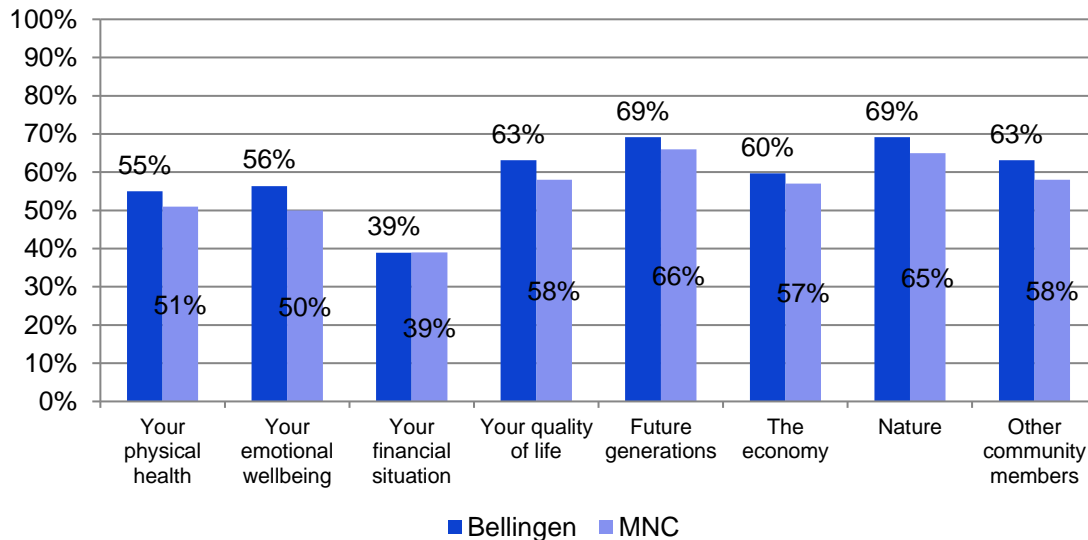
Overall, residents of Bellingen Shire are more concerned about environmental problems, such as a changing climate, than their regional neighbours. When asked what they were concerned about, most indicated the impact on future generations and other community members.

In contrast, they were less concerned about the impact of these problems on their physical and mental wellbeing and their own financial situation. Again, these findings appear to reflect the community’s strong focus on environmental and social sustainability and related issues such as intergenerational equity.

Concerned about environmental problems



Why concerned about environmental problems



3.1 Climate Change

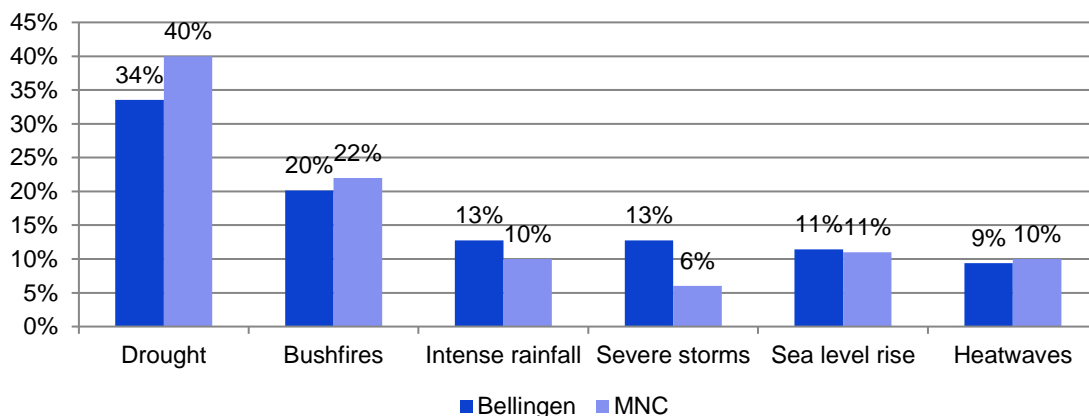
The MCNJO strategic plan includes a focus on helping the regional community prepare for and respond to natural disasters. Residents were asked which of a range of impacts from a changing climate they are most concerned about, and which they think require greatest attention from government.

Overall, residents of Bellingin Shire are most concerned about the impact of drought and bushfire, although they are slightly less concerned about the impact of these than their regional neighbours.

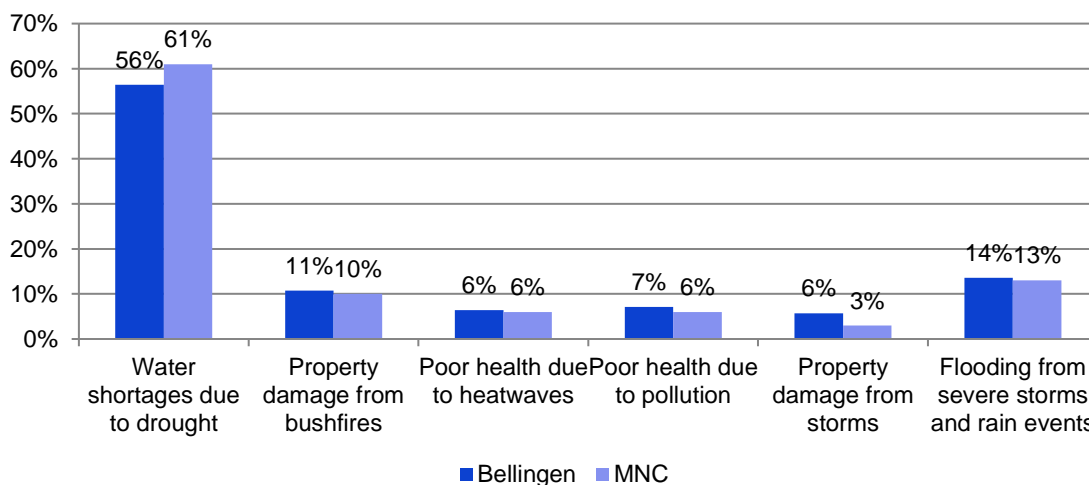
Following this, when asked which impacts require greatest attention from government residents indicated governments need to pay more attention to securing water supplies in the event of drought.

Similarly, whilst residents overall are less concerned about the impact of intense rainfall and severe storms, they are more concerned about the impact of these than their regional neighbours. This is perhaps related to the area’s history of flooding.

Impacts most concerned about



Impacts that need most attention from government

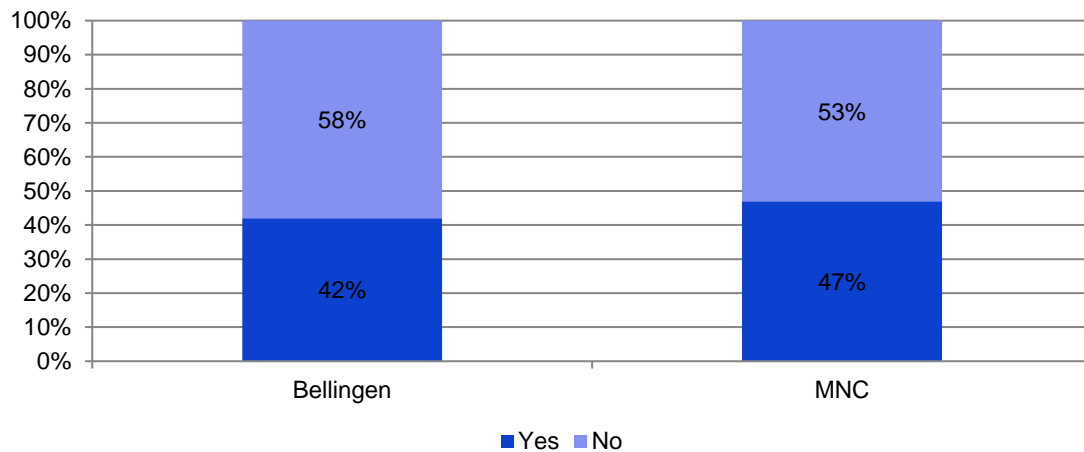


4 Disaster Planning and Recovery

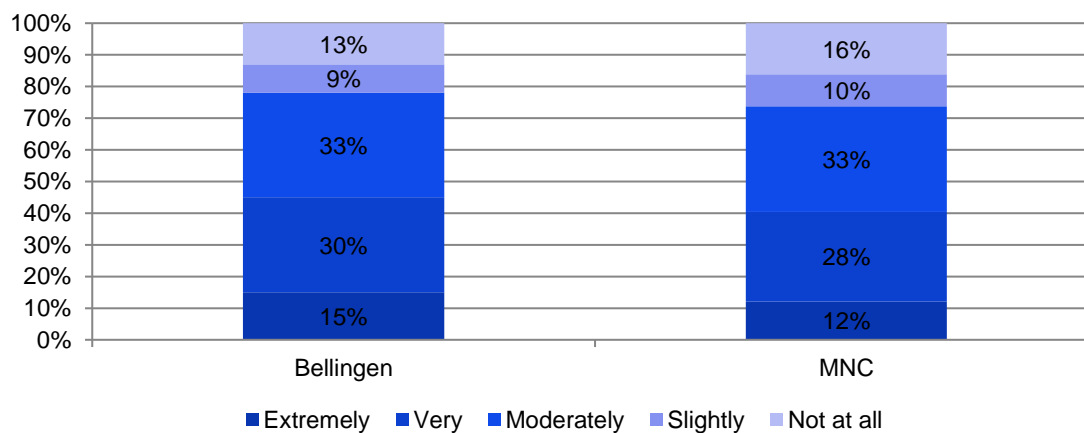
Reflecting the focus of the MNCJO strategic priorities on assisting the community prepare for and respond to disasters, residents were asked whether their household has a plan for what to do in the event of a natural disaster and, if not, whether they felt confident they have the information they need to prepare one.

Overall, less than half of Bellinghen Shire households indicated they have a disaster management plan, and this figure was also lower than the regional average. However, those households that indicated they do not have a disaster management plan feel slightly more confident than their regional neighbours that they have the information they need to prepare one.

Have a household plan for what to do in the lead up and after a natural disaster



Confident they have the information needed to make a plan for what to do in the event of a disaster

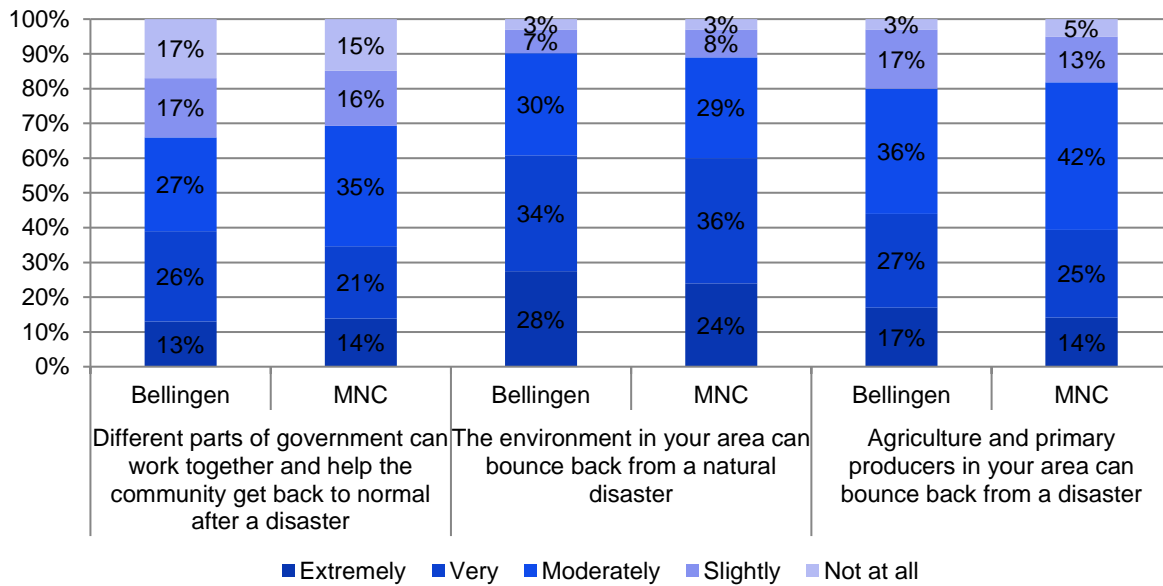


4.1 Disaster Recovery

Survey respondents were also asked how confident they are different parts of government can work together to help the community bounce back from disaster, and how confident they are the natural environment and agriculture and primary producers across the region can bounce back.

Overall, residents of Bellingen Shire were slightly more confident than their regional neighbours that governments can work together to help the community recover from disaster, and that the environment and agriculture and primary producers across the region can bounce back.

How confident residents are that...



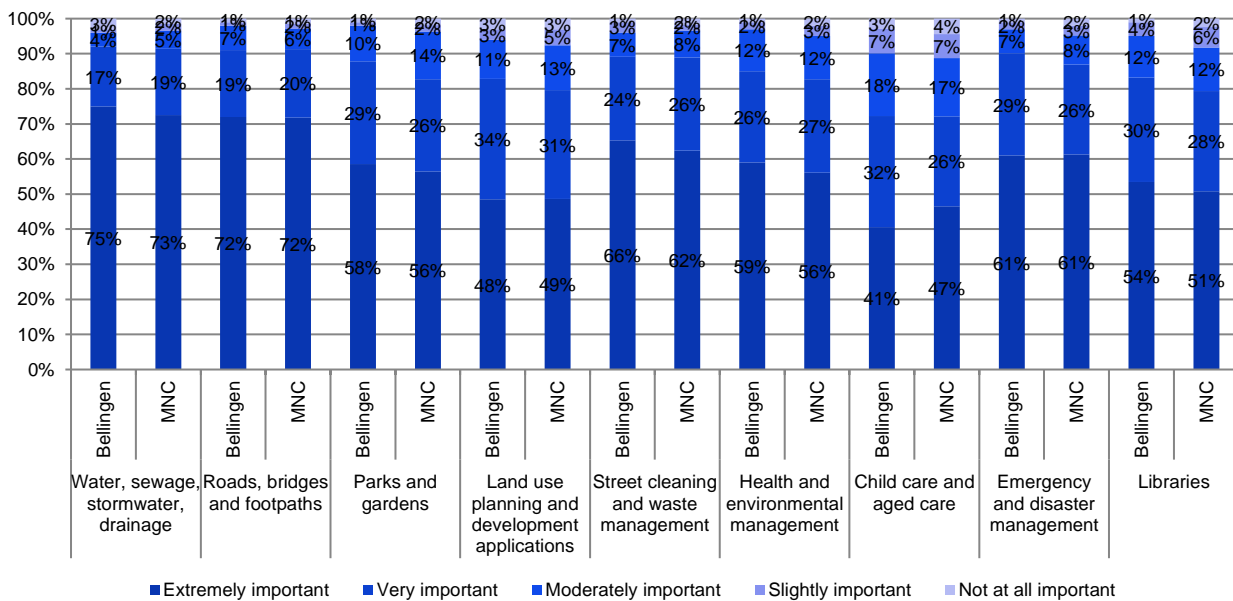
5 Council Services and Functions

WLGM asks questions testing the relative importance of different economic, environmental, and social services and functions provided by local councils.

Overall, residents of Bellingén Shire nominated core services to property, such as water, sewage, stormwater and drainage, roads, bridges and footpaths, and street cleaning, as the most important activities undertaken by Bellingén Shire Council. The next most important related to Council’s strategic planning function and included planning for the future and advocating for the needs of the community.

Residents were also more likely to nominate services and functions that contribute to Bellingén Shire’s unique place qualities as important activities undertaken by Council. For example, they nominated environmental services and functions such as parks and gardens, land use planning, and health and environmental management as particularly important.

Council Services and Functions
(1 of 2)



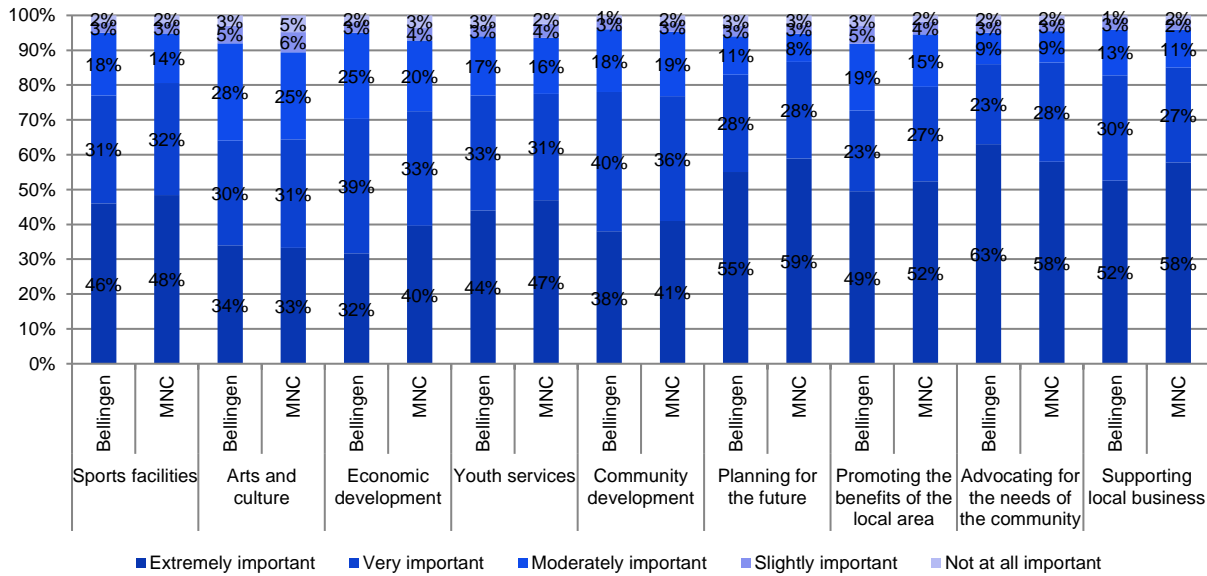
However, whilst residents indicated the area’s social sustainability, such as social cohesion and cultural diversity, is important, they did not nominate Council’s services in this area, such as community development, youth services and child and aged care, as particularly important.

Similarly, residents were less likely to nominate aspects of the area’s economic sustainability, such as job opportunities and a positive economic outlook, as important to them and, accordingly, did not nominate Council’s services and functions in this

area, such as economic development, as particularly important. Despite this, residents nominated Council's role in supporting local businesses as particularly important.

Council Services and Functions

(1 of 2)



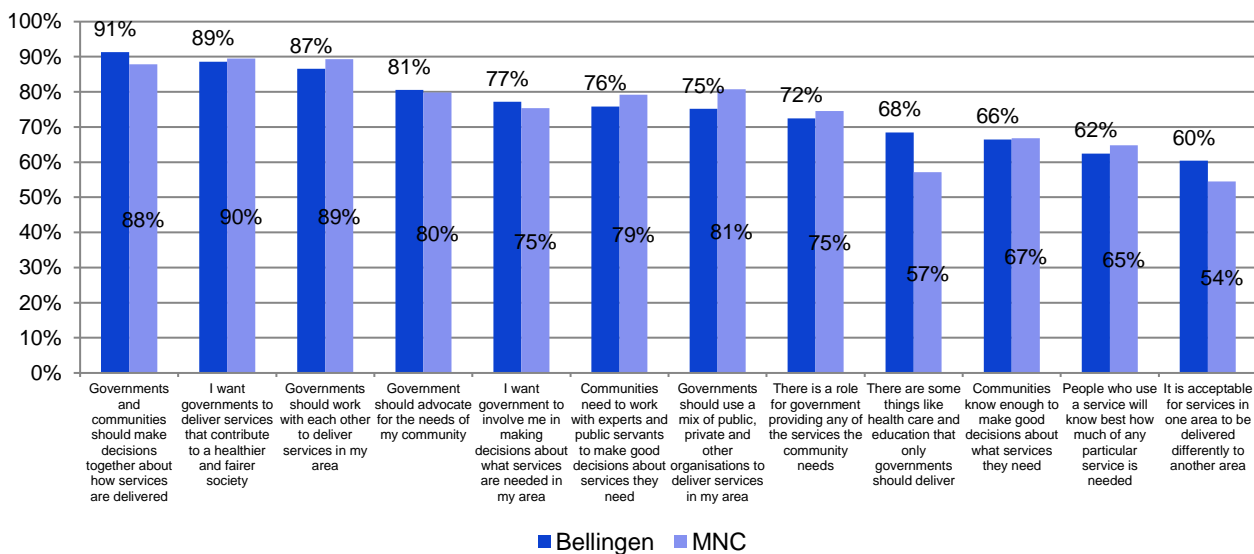
6 Service Delivery, Funding and Governance Preferences

WLGGM asks questions to identify the service delivery, funding and governance preferences of communities.

Overall, residents of Bellingin Shire indicated a strong preference to be involved in making decisions about what and how services are delivered in their area, and that they want these services to contribute to a healthier and fairer society. Residents also expressed a preference for governments taking on a strong community advocacy role.

The majority of residents indicated a preference for working with experts and public servants to make decisions about services delivered in their area, and believe service users and the community more broadly know enough to make good decisions about the services they need. Relatedly, residents were sceptical public servants and service providers know enough to decide what services are needed in their area.

Service Delivery, Funding and Governance Attitudinal Statements - 1/2
(Strongly + Moderately Agree)

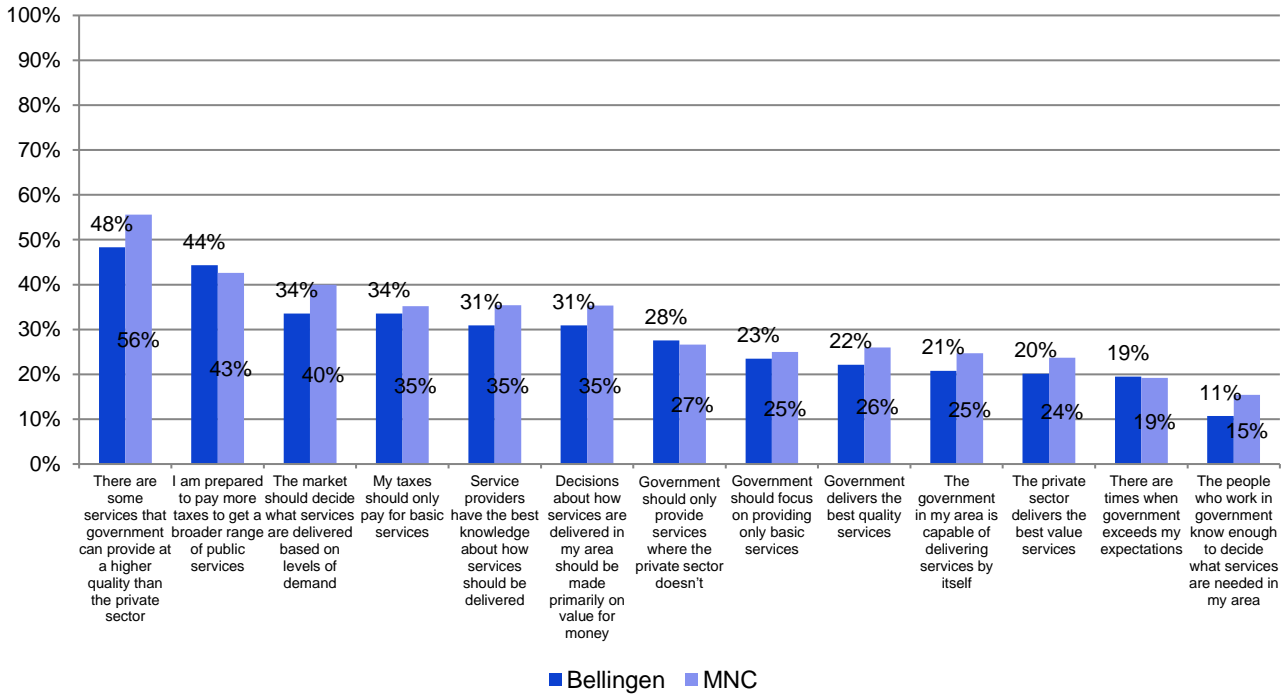


Whilst the residents of Bellingin Shire support a mix of public, private and non-profit providers, they indicated there is a role for government in providing any of the services the community needs and that there are some services only government should deliver. Relatedly, fewer residents agreed with the proposition their taxes should only pay for basic services, and a larger share of residents indicated they are prepared to pay more to receive a broader range of services.

Most residents were sceptical with the proposition the private sector delivers the best value services, and do not agree decisions about services should be based on value

for money or other market factors. However, whilst residents were more likely to agree governments can provide services at a higher quality than the private sector, they are somewhat sceptical of the capacity of governments to deliver high quality services and few indicated there are times when government services exceed their expectations.

Service Delivery, Funding and Governance Attitudinal Statements - 2/2
(Strongly + Moderately Agree)

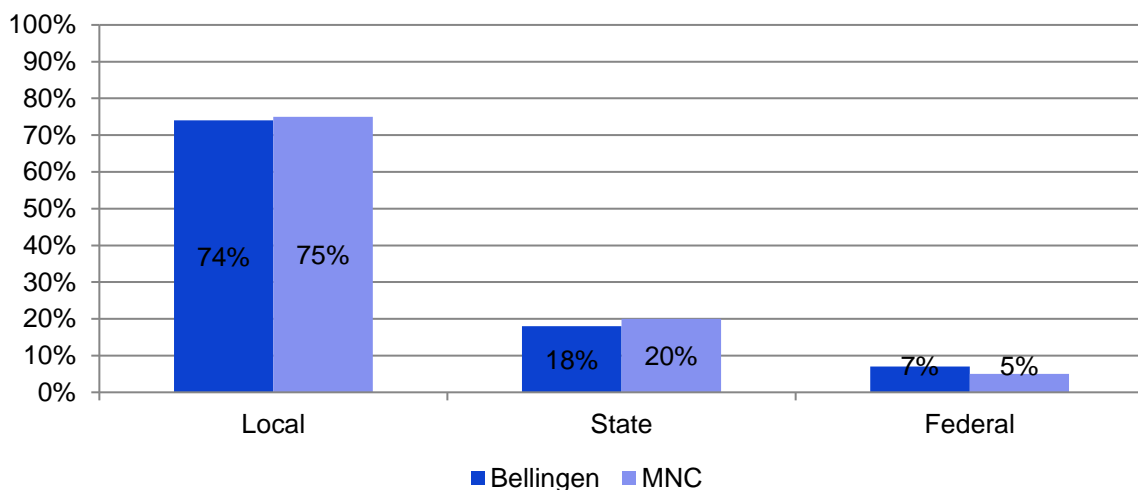


7 Local Government and the Community

WLGM asks questions to understand how connected residents feel to their local council, how inclusive they are of the different types of people that make up a community, and which level of government they believe is best able to make decisions about their area.

The vast majority of Australians believe their local council is the level of government best able to make decisions about their area, and the residents of Bellingen Shire are no different. Often this reflects the shorter physical and social distance between communities and councils when compared to other levels of government, with local government widely regarded as the layer of government 'closest to people'.

Level of government best able to make decisions about the area



Bellingen Shire residents are more aware of their council than most Australians. They are more likely to correctly answer the name of their council (97%) and Mayor (44%) than other Australians (86%, 32%).

Bellingen Shire residents do not appear as inclusive as other Australians. Almost all Australians, including Bellingen Shire residents, think ratepayers are part of their community. However, Australians are more likely to consider potentially transient community members such as renters, students and workers are members of the community than residents of Bellingen Shire.



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