

COPRRRA

Session Summary



COPRRRA
Community of Practice on
Relocation, Retreat, and
Resilience in Australia

Locally-led and local government approaches to relocation and retreat 21 April 2026

Overview of session:

This was COPRRRA's second session for 2026, which brought together policymakers, researchers and frontline practitioners to explore locally led and local government approaches to planned relocation and retreat in Australia. We explored what they like in practice, what makes them possible, and where and why they run into difficulty.

Recap of COPRRRA

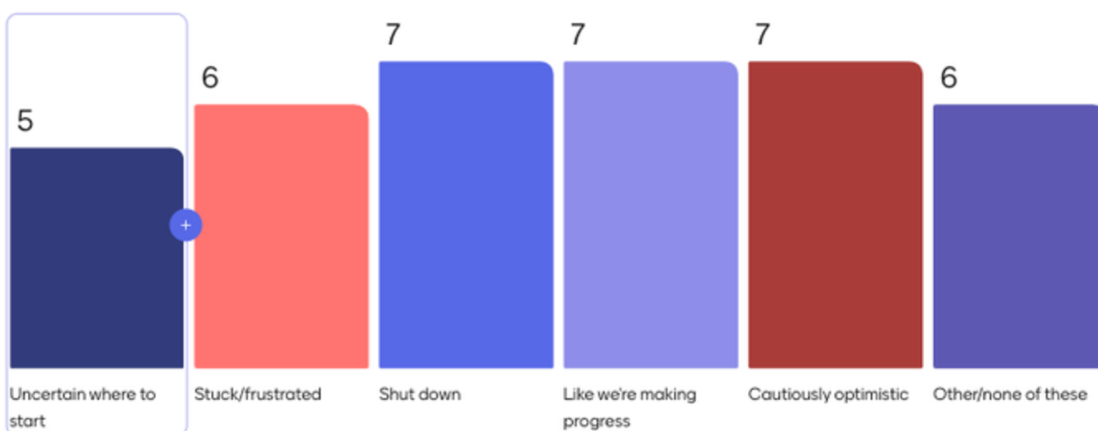
COPRRRA is a national community of practice focused on relocation, retreat, and resilience in Australia. Launched in October 2025, COPRRRA has grown to 115 members from across sectors, jurisdictions, and roles.

At its core, COPRRRA is a space to learn together, collaborate, develop shared resources, and influence how relocation and retreat are understood and implemented, not just in policy, but in practice. A key principle underpinning everything we do is the recognition that relocation is more than a technical or physical intervention. It's a deeply social, place-based, and values-driven process, touching on identity, culture, vulnerability, and questions of justice. COPRRRA exists to hold space for those complexities, and to work through them collectively.

Temperature check

Prior to the presentations, participants were asked 'when relocation comes up in your work, the room usually feels.....?' Participants were able to respond according to pre-determined answers, and were then able to input their own perspectives into a word cloud.

When relocation or retreat comes up in my work/community/context, it usually feels...



Presentations:

We were joined by three esteemed presenters who shared policy, practice and research perspectives from local contexts in Australian and New Zealand.

Haojin Tan, Climate Adaptation Planner with Hurunui District Council in New Zealand.

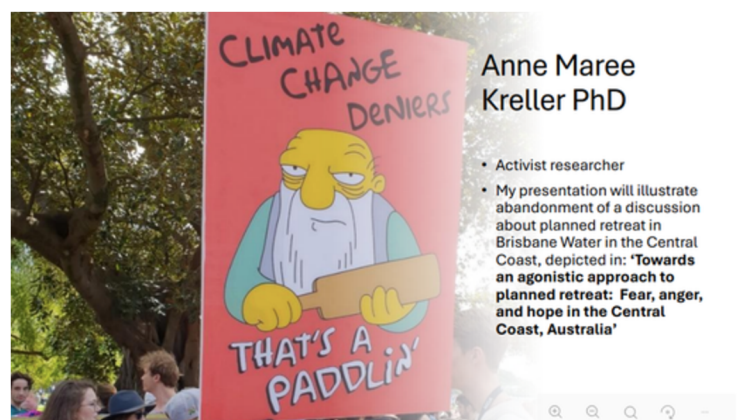
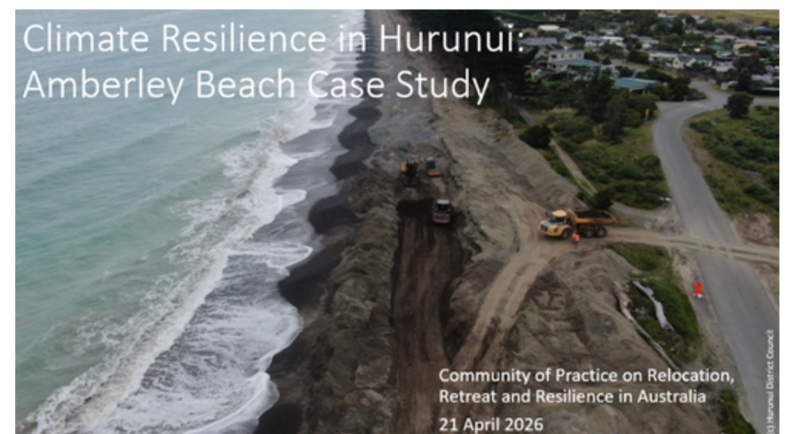
Haojin shared the award-winning Amberley Beach Coastal Adaptation Project, in particular, how a deliberative, community-centred engagement process was designed, what it achieved, and learnings along the way.

Anne Maree Kreller, researcher with the University of Wollongong.

Anne Maree shared insights from her recently published paper, 'Towards an agonistic approach to planned retreat: fear, anger, and hope in the Central Coast, Australia.' She explored the emotional tensions that arose when relocation is proposed before communities were meaningfully engaged in exploring their options.

Simon Woodland, Manager of Sustainable Environment at Bass Coast Shire Council, Victoria.

Simon shared perspectives from the council level, what adaptation pathway planning actually looks like in that context, and what he's observed in community engagement when relocation is part of the conversation.



Insights from Presentations:

Together, the presenters offered an honest and personal account of what it looks like to navigate these issues on the ground. The core message throughout the presentations was: Discussions about climate risk and relocation are not just technical or physical problems to solve. They are deeply social, emotional, complex, and values driven, and our processes need to reflect that. Other key takeaways from the presentations include:

- Language and framing matter. What you call it, how you take it to community, and at what stage of the process, changes how it is received.
- Communities are not homogenous. Everyone comes to these discussions with different values, fears, and relationships to place. Processes that treat communities as a single voice will miss the mark.
- Data, evidence and projections alone won't generate shared understanding of what's on the horizon and choices that may need to be made. What makes the difference is having people in the room with social, emotional, and psychological skill sets alongside technical knowledge...people who can hold space for hard conversations.
- Early engagement preserves agency and choice within the community. The difference between proactive preparedness and forced displacement is significant.
- Timeframes matter. The long view to 2100 is valuable, yet impacts are non-linear, compound and have social reach. Decisions need to reflect the changing nature of risk, and what those changes mean for place and home over time.
- In Australia, we lack formal guidance for working through these issues at the local, state and federal level (though some action is underway to provide state guidance).

Insights from Breakouts

After the presentation, participant broke into groups to discuss the following question:

What have you seen work, or not work, when leaders try to discuss relocation with their community, or try to move that discussion forward?

Enabling factors to progressing locally led relocation planning and discussions

Strong and decisive local leadership makes a real difference, as does having a local champion who can carry the conversation through difficult moments. Participants highlighted the surprising but important role of humour in facilitating hard discussions, and emphasised that extensive, consistent engagement over time builds the trust and foundation that everything else depends on. Having a plan ready before disaster strikes, rather than scrambling in the aftermath, was identified as a valuable.

International examples hold valuable lessons

Fiji offers positive examples to learn from, including on devolving decision making authority to communities and implementing planned relocation guidelines. At the same time, experiences there also illustrate what happens when top-down approaches with limited consultation fall short, reinforcing the importance of genuine community involvement at every stage.

Critical challenges

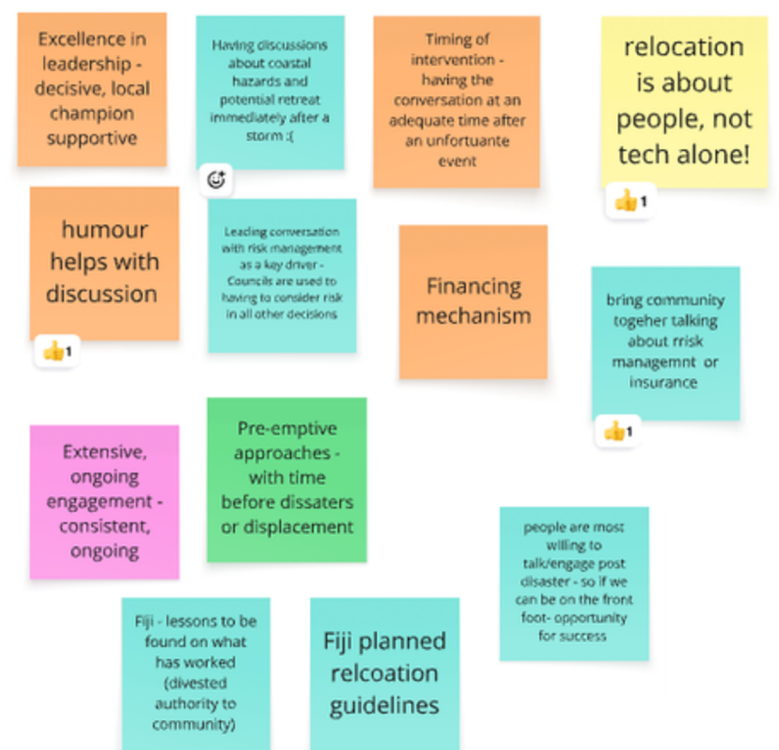
Timing and communication

Raising potential relocation and retreat immediately after a disaster event can overwhelm communities at their most vulnerable. Equally, conversations about long-term permanent relocation can overshadow the shorter-term actions that may be more immediately useful. Knowing when and how to open these conversations requires careful judgment and a sensitivity to where communities are at.

Policy and implementation gaps

A persistent gap exists between policy development and local decision-making, evidenced by continued approval of development in hazard zones despite policies intended to prevent it. Local governments at times lack the capacity, skills, and community trust needed to lead these processes effectively, and planning too often proceeds without adequate funding for implementation, creating expectations that cannot realistically be met.

What has worked?



What hasn't worked or been challenging?



Critical challenges (continued...)

Emotional and cultural dimensions

There is an over-reliance on science and technical evidence, with insufficient attention to what it means for people to lose their home. The emotional weight of these decisions is consistently overlooked in planning processes. A telling disparity exists in how connection to place is acknowledged: deep cultural connection to land is recognised in contexts like Fiji and the Torres Strait, while emotional connection in Australia, New Zealand, Canada, the US, and the UK is largely ignored. This is reflected in the language itself: "planned relocation" when referring to people and communities, "managed retreat" when referring to infrastructure and assets.

Finance

Funding models lack innovation and rarely account for the full scope of what relocation involves, for both land and buildings, and over extended timeframes. Planning too often proceeds without any funding to implement it, and insurance pressures compound an already difficult picture. Addressing the financing gap is one of the most underdeveloped and urgent challenges in the field, and will be the focus of our next COPRRRA session.

Language and framing

Retreat is often interpreted as "admitting defeat," running against a dominant community narrative of standing and fighting, how to change this to be more optimistic. Policies lag behind necessary decisions and become entangled in political cycles. Disagreement on risk persists, with no local entity willing to accept responsibility, while the complex language surrounding coastal hazards interacts with multiple physical and social constraints to make communication even more challenging.

Research Opportunity

We're very excited to launch a research project focused on understanding local government perspectives on the barriers, enablers, and pathways for relocation and retreat planning.

Funded by the QUT Centre for Environment and Society, the project will explore:

- what's getting in the way of proactive relocation planning
- what conditions make it possible
- what practical and justice informed pathways could help councils move forward.

If you work in or with local government and would be interested in participating, or if you know someone who might be, please do get in touch with jess.vanson@qut.edu.au



RESEARCH PROJECT

Barriers, Enablers, and Pathways for Relocation Planning in Australia: Local Government Perspectives

Funded by the QUT Centre for Environment and Society (CES) ECR Ignite Scheme 2026

What is this research about?

Australian local governments are increasingly at the frontline of climate risk, facing complex decisions about land-use planning, infrastructure investment, and in some cases, the prospect of managed retreat or relocation of households and communities. Australia's first National Climate Risk Assessment projects that by 2050, more than 1.5 million people could be living in high-risk coastal areas, underscoring the urgency of proactive planning rather than waiting for disasters to force action.

Yet little is understood about how councils are navigating these responsibilities, what barriers they face, and what support they need. This research explores what constrains proactive relocation planning, what conditions enable it, and what practical, justice-informed pathways are needed to support local governments to move forward.

What are the research objectives?

The research aims to:

- Identify the barriers that constrain proactive relocation planning within local government adaptation planning
- Examine the enabling conditions that could strengthen local government capacity to plan for climate-related relocation
- Explore and develop practical and justice-informed pathways that support local governments in transitioning to proactive, community-centred relocation planning

Why is this research important?

The knowledge and experiences shared through this research will benefit councils planning to or considering relocation as part of a suite of measures to address current and future climate risk, as well as communities who may need to consider relocation in the future. It will support the design, implementation, and management of planned relocations to be more equitable, effective, and community-centred, goals that sit at the heart of COPRRRA's work.

What will this research produce?

The research will generate insights into how local government actors are experiencing and navigating the barriers, enablers, and pathways for relocation and retreat. Findings will be shared with government representatives at local, state and federal levels, the broader COPRRRA community and other networks. It will contribute to the development of future relocation planning tools, guidance, research and policy recommendations. This is particularly timely given that relocation is increasingly being considered and implemented as an adaptation and risk reduction approach across Australia.



COPRRRA Updates

Jess and Annah provided an update on COPRRRA's recent activities, upcoming workplan and pipeline for 2026:

- COPRRRA website Updates – Directory with 38 member profiles and resources page live soon
- COPRRRA panel session at AIDR conference 19/20 August, Melbourne – Relocation and Retreat in Practice: What's Working, What's Hard, What's Next
- COPRRRA Symposium – Brisbane 2-3 September
- COPRRRA bi-monthly PULSE – news, articles and research on relocation and retreat - out early May

SAVE THE DATE: Next COPRRRA online session: The insurance gap and financing relocation – Wed 17 June. Members are welcome to reach out if they would like to present.

Interested to join COPRRRA or want to learn more? Visit our website coprrra.org