

ANDREW LEIGH & NICK TERRELL



RECONNECTED

A community builder's
handbook

‘This inspiring collection of strategies and stories brings hope for the future. *Reconnected* shows that we are the revolution.’

DR CATHERINE BARRETT, founder of The Kindness Pandemic

life satisfaction. The effects eroded gradually as the earthquake receded into memory, suggesting the crisis point was a factor in these changes.⁵

A similar pattern occurred in the United States after the terrorist attacks on 11 September 2001, which killed almost 3000 people. Social capital surveys before and after the attacks found that Americans were 6 per cent more likely to work on community projects.⁶ They were also more trusting of government, co-workers and neighbours. But these effects faded over the subsequent years. Unlike the way that World War II moulded the lifetime volunteering habits of the birth cohort sometimes dubbed 'the greatest generation', the September 11 terrorist attacks did not leave a lasting impact on social capital in America.⁷

To optimise resilience and recovery, Japanese local government areas have learnt that where evacuees need temporary resettlement, they should be kept in groupings that maintain local bonds. Organised activities and volunteering can strengthen social networks among disaster-affected residents and help them maintain morale. The activity could be a tea ceremony or having an elderly resident tell a story to a group of children. One study found that regular attendees gained around one extra friend. Their sense of agency and belonging increased.⁸ Participants were more likely to share their opinion in public meetings, vote and interact with elected officials.

Such studies suggest that low-cost social infrastructure investments can have better returns than physical infrastructure. The challenge is to build smart structures that turn disaster-inspired altruism into volunteering efforts that are useful in the short-term and benefit the community in the long term.

COVID-19 generated a range of spontaneous social infrastructure. In coastal northern New South Wales, Bellingen Shire Council's preparation for the oncoming challenges of the pandemic provides a good example of how local organisations can help small community units form a regional web. The Bellingen Shire Pandemic Response Group

was created in early March as a precautionary collaboration to prepare the community for upheavals across social support, clinical services, council activity and local business. The group was administered and resourced through the council, and guided by community members. 'It's all about helping the community help itself,' explained the facilitator, Dean Besley. 'We don't know what we're facing, we just know we're better if we do it together.'⁹ The Response Group gave a role to each of the major sectors in the town – health, council, business – and created a new Neighbourhood Care Network specifically to sustain connection and social support. A radio ad told shire residents, 'The more of us who register, the easier it will be to get help for people who really need it. And this will be important if things do really get tough.' Local 'Champions' were encouraged to take initiative in their area and set up neighbourhood networks of about fifty people: large enough to spread the load, but small enough to make communication simple – through emails, text messages or Facebook. The council hopes that the preparation has strengthened the district's resilience, making the community safer and more connected.

We'll return to some other examples of COVID-driven volunteering in the final chapter, but for now it's worth noting that Bellingen Shire Council's response both addressed an immediate need *and* helped build resilience. This kind of positive synergy needs its own name. In his dystopian novel *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, George Orwell imagined a world in which a totalitarian regime had replaced all superlatives with the word 'double-plus-good'. We think it's time to repurpose Orwell's Newspeak term for a more positive purpose. When community groups deliver a dual benefit, we call it 'doing double-plus-good'. Because setting up and maintaining local resilience networks strengthens local ties, it's double-plus-good.