

Inquiry into the 2019–20 Victorian fire season



IGEM
Inspector-General
for Emergency
Management

Summary Report

Phase 2 – Progress and effectiveness
of Victoria’s immediate relief and
recovery arrangements



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Message from the Inspector-General

Bushfires can be life-changing events for those who become caught up in them.

Fortunately, most Victorians will never directly experience a bushfire. Most of those who do will endure such an event only once in a lifetime, yet for many the consequences will be profound and long lasting. Phase 2 of this Inquiry seeks to explore how relief and recovery are facilitated, how the impact of such events can be mitigated and outcomes improved through better planning and, if necessary, reforms to the emergency management arrangements.

In the 18 months since the 2019–20 Victorian bushfires were finally contained, the individuals and communities affected have passed through the intense challenges of the immediate relief efforts. They remain on a much longer journey. Past experience has shown the path to recovery after a major bushfire is neither quick nor without a myriad of complications. It is not simply about the physical restoration of what was there before but the reinvigoration – and sometimes even the rebirth – of entire communities.

None of this is new to Victorians; our communities have responded to and endeavoured to recover from many such events. Each of them is different, as are the experiences of those who live through their onset and aftermath. What is common to every major bushfire is the opportunity to learn and improve.

In the case of the 2019–20 bushfires, the onset of a global pandemic and the need for all Australians to respond to this threat posed additional recovery challenges, especially in Victoria which was the hardest hit of all jurisdictions.

Such compounding events are not unusual.

Bushfires are often soon followed by calamitous floods. Even the clash of major bushfires and pandemic is not without precedent. A century ago, huge fires in the Otway Ranges in 1919 that killed three people and left 500 homeless coincided with the first serious outbreak of the deadly ‘Spanish’ influenza pandemic across Victoria.

One difficulty with compounding events is determining with precision which subsequent impacts – especially economic and psychosocial – are caused by which event. While this Inquiry’s terms of reference did not contemplate the COVID-19 pandemic, its impacts have obviously informed both the evidence gathered and the report’s findings.

As I noted in the Phase 1 Inquiry Report, there have been marked improvements in Victoria’s emergency management system since the 2009 Victorian bushfires and 2010–11 floods. These were evident in the preparedness for and response to the 2019–20 fire season.

Less apparent, however, is the extent to which relief and recovery have enjoyed an equivalent level of attention or resourcing over the past decade. This is not to imply negligence on the part of those responsible, but it does suggest a lack of investment in the people, processes and entities that deliver both relief and recovery during and after emergencies.

It is apparent to my Inquiry that there are different understandings between government, agencies, non-government organisations and the community – especially in relation to recovery. Concepts such as ‘shared responsibility’ and ‘community-led’ remain elusive even though they are widely used across the emergency management sector.

Similarly, there is often a lag between administrative action by government and activity on the ground. Communities in crisis have little patience for inaction and zero tolerance of processes that do little more than impede recovery. Often this is a matter of poor communication. Sometimes its root cause is bureaucratic inertia.

The Inquiry Phase 2 report is particularly significant as the first wide-ranging, detailed examination of relief and recovery following a major bushfire in Victoria. The VBRC devoted just over 20 pages specifically to relief and recovery, topics which were beyond its terms of reference. Inquiries and reviews into other major Victorian fires – in 1983, 2003 and 2006 – have been similarly focused mainly on preparedness and response or limited to environmental recovery issues. More recently, however, the 2020 Royal Commission into National Natural Disaster Arrangements examined relief and recovery in some detail from a national perspective on the back of the 2019–20 fires.

This Inquiry has been informed more extensively by community than any previous IGEM review. During Phase 2 of the Inquiry, community contributions were received from individuals, industry groups, business and citizen associations, community health organisations and a broad range of community groups and organisations.

Between October 2020 and April 2021, IGEM conducted 43 online, telephone and face-to-face interviews with individuals affected by the fires. These were supplemented with online focus groups, community meetings and drop-in sessions. A total of 41 face-to-face community meetings with fire affected communities were held in November 2020, February and March 2021. These were in addition to the 26 conducted during Phase 1 of the Inquiry. People were also invited to complete a community survey – either online or in hard copy.

These inputs, in addition to engagement with communities as part of consultations during Phase 1 of the Inquiry, have meant that this has been one of the most community-focused examinations of a major hazard event in Victoria. The extent of consultation reflects the desire that people have to recount their experiences and to genuinely influence future pathways in emergency management. The expectation is that this input is given the attention and respect that it merits.

The Inquiry team again conducted interviews with key witnesses and held discussions and conducted other engagements with external subject matter experts and peak bodies. Further literature reviews and research activities were undertaken. Each individual contribution has been critical to the Inquiry's conduct and its outcomes.

Continuing COVID-19 restrictions affected my capacity to meet in person with fire-affected communities. However, I was fortunate between periods of lockdown to travel extensively through East Gippsland and the North East, and engage personally with communities directly affected by the fires. This was invaluable as it occurred at a time when these communities were deeply involved in constructing their recovery from the events of the 2019–20 fires.

Among the communities I met with, there was a strong desire to share those aspects of relief and recovery that worked well and those that did not. Community members offered suggestions and ideas for how activities could be improved in future with the hope that this information could benefit others. In recognition of these contributions this Summary Report dedicates two sections on community reflections which provide an undiluted account of the community experience in seeking relief and recovery from the impacts of these fires.

I believe that these engagements, the information gathered, and the analysis and assessments made, have in sum indicated priority areas for improvement in relief and recovery. Some measures since 2009 have directly influenced the relief and recovery efforts in this event. One such measure was the decision to create a body focused on recovery organisation (Bushfire Recovery Victoria). Another was the state managed clean-up, a process adopted in the 2009 fires and again following the 2015 Wye River - Jamieson Track fire and the 2018 South West fires.

At the time of finalising the Phase 2 report I note that the Victorian Government has announced that BRV will support the clean-up and recovery work for communities impacted by catastrophic storms resulting in major flooding, residential property damage and damaged vital infrastructure. I welcome the use of BRV and additional resources in this way to support the recovery of these communities and households.

The findings of IGEM's 2019 *Review of 10 years of reform in Victoria's emergency management sector* addressed several themes that are directly relevant to relief and recovery in the 2019–20 fires. These include governance, capability and capacity, resilience, community engagement, and rebuilding – all of which are revisited in the Inquiry's Phase 2 report.

In response to the 2019–20 fires, a new line of inquiry has examined the way in which Aboriginal Victorians impacted by this major event have experienced relief and recovery. Their perspectives offer insights into ways in which relief and recovery efforts need to embrace a wider range of traditions, cultures, values and needs.

It is clear to me that despite the significant reforms to emergency management in Victoria in recent years, the roles and responsibilities around relief and recovery have less clarity and less support than those which support response. Rectifying this can in part be addressed by adjusting and strengthening the governance arrangements to reflect the significance of both functions. An example of this has been the creation of the role of State Relief Coordinator.

There is now an opportunity to rethink the need for and focus of activity undertaken at various levels of relief and recovery to ensure the most effective and efficient structures are in place.

In order for our relief and recovery activities to contribute to a fully functioning emergency management system I acknowledge that many of the desired outcomes described in this report will be dependent upon an enhanced investment in enhancing sector agencies capability and capacity.

I remain extremely grateful for the assistance provided by fire-affected communities, agencies and other stakeholders who have also met the ongoing challenges in the submission of evidence and participation throughout this Inquiry. I am again indebted to my Inquiry team for their dedication and persistence in collecting, analysing and reporting on an enormous amount of information in difficult circumstances.

It remains my hope that this Inquiry will influence change leading to better community engagement, closer cooperation within and across government and agencies, well informed decision-making and, ultimately, better outcomes for all Victorians.

Tony Pearce
Inspector-General for Emergency Management



Growing Back East Gippsland/Samreen, 9, Lakes Entrance Primary School

A devastating season

Between November 2019 and March 2020, Victoria experienced the most extensive and severe bushfires for more than a decade, with more than 1.5 million hectares burnt.

The fires devastated communities and vast areas of Victoria’s natural environment.

Five people died, some 313 primary residences and 145 non-primary residences were destroyed or damaged, commercial properties and other buildings were also destroyed along with community infrastructure, cultural heritage sites and environmental assets.

Many regional small businesses, including hundreds not directly affected by the fires themselves, were – and continue to be – impacted by the events of that season and compounded by the COVID-19 pandemic.

Tourism was among the most affected industries at the height of the holiday peak and in the long period afterwards. Agriculture, logistics and small businesses were also affected.

Before the peak of each fire people followed advice to self-evacuate from large parts of Victoria’s North East and Gippsland or sought shelter from the fires in their homes or local places of temporary refuge.

Even as flames continued to consume the landscape, the immediate provision of relief and the longer task of recovery had begun. The terms ‘relief and recovery’ refer to the services and support provided to meet the immediate basic and ongoing needs of those affected by an emergency.

In the context of the 2019–20 Victorian fire season, relief included the provision of emergency shelter, food, water, material aid and psychosocial support. Individuals, families and businesses were also eligible for immediate financial assistance. At the community-scale, governments and other organisations worked to reconnect friends and families displaced by the fires, restore essential services, coordinate relief capacity and communications and restore safety across the affected towns and landscapes.

Recovery following the 2019–20 bushfires entailed a wide range of support provided by governments, councils, non-government organisations and communities themselves. details the evaluation of early recovery planning and program implementation. It also recognises that the pathway to recovery was compromised by the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Recovery can be a long-term process for communities and the environment, and will continue for many years. As time progresses, recovery priorities will change and those affected by the fires will need different forms of support and resourcing.

Much like fire suppression, rescue, or evacuation, relief is time critical, requiring control structures, skills, authorisation and clearance to be effective.

Unlike response and relief capacity, recovery capacity is often scaled up after significant disasters occur. This surge method creates an ad hoc recovery approach, unable to be proactive or responsive to early and ongoing recovery needs.

Australian Red Cross

The Inquiry

On 14 January 2020 the Honourable Daniel Andrews MP, Premier of Victoria announced an independent Inquiry into the 2019–20 Victorian fire season. The Honourable Lisa Neville MP, Minister for Police and Emergency Services formally requested the Inspector-General for Emergency Management conduct the Inquiry, and its Terms of Reference were finalised shortly thereafter.

This Inquiry has been conducted in two phases spanning 18 months: Phase 1 focused on sector and community preparedness and response, with IGEM's corresponding report delivered to government on 31 July 2020 and tabled by leave in Parliament on 18 September 2020.

On 14 October 2020 government responded to the Phase 1 Inquiry Report, accepting all 17 recommendations. In addition, government also released and responded to IGEM's *Review of 10 years of reform in Victoria's emergency management sector*, accepting all five recommendations which are relevant to the findings of the Inquiry and are referenced throughout the Phase 1 Inquiry Report.

In Phase 2 of the Inquiry IGEM has evaluated the relief and recovery efforts activated before, during and after the fires. IGEM makes a series of observations and findings related to both relief and recovery, and proposes 15 recommendations to government.

The recommendations aim to improve system-level aspects of Victoria's relief and recovery arrangements and generate changes that will result in better outcomes for individuals, families, businesses and communities during both relief and recovery.

At the government's request IGEM will report annually on implementation of all agreed recommendations from this Inquiry and the 10 Year Review.

Understanding relief and recovery

Major emergencies are not linear events. In the early stages of a major bushfire the response, relief and recovery activities can occur simultaneously. There is some misunderstanding that relief and recovery can only occur after an emergency, however dealing with the dislocation and damage caused by bushfire begins immediately.

Community relief and recovery begins at the same time as an emergency event and planning should commence long before. People's displacement and loss in a bushfire is immediate and may begin before the fire arrives.

IGEM noted in the Phase 1 Inquiry Report that this Inquiry is about learning, and not blame. Many of the issues and challenges identified here are not unique to the relief and recovery efforts after the 2019–20 fires. Those with previous bushfire experience and associated loss are familiar with some of the difficulties and challenges that flow from these events – such as financial assistance, planning and rebuilding and community recovery more broadly.

Likewise, many stakeholders involved in emergency management lament that there has not been enough planning, resourcing and strategic consideration of relief and recovery ahead of major emergencies. Many of the challenges associated with relief and recovery experienced during past emergencies were relived as communities began recovery in 2020.

Despite the frustration and fatigue described by those in recovery and personnel engaged in recovery efforts, IGEM observed numerous examples of hard work, dedication and innovation among communities and recovery organisations. There was also a clear and ongoing commitment to support relief and recovery as much as possible. As noted throughout this report, there are currently some foundational aspects in the arrangements that can hinder these efforts and inhibit the relief and recovery progress.

Information sharing

A lack of information sharing between relief and recovery organisations was frequently discussed as an impediment to efficient and effective relief and recovery. Individuals, families, business owners and community representatives were required to repeatedly share their stories and provide evidence to demonstrate impacts sustained.

Relief and recovery organisations were aware of this issue – and the distress, frustration and delays it created for those experiencing loss – however, there are legislative and policy restrictions, and implications arising from sharing personal information.

While it is possible for information sharing to occur, organisations must ensure a high level of data security and embed arrangements to guarantee the confidentiality of the information, and such arrangements take time to refine. However, there were limited examples of predetermined information sharing agreements in place and activated following the 2019–20 fires.

Capacity and capability in relief and recovery

The ability of fire and other first responder agencies to respond to bushfire emergencies has been the subject of repeated review – especially in the past decade. The capacity and capability of responder agencies has grown as a result, often with significant funding. The same cannot be said of the agencies and government organisations responsible for relief and recovery.

The shortage of dedicated relief and recovery capability and capacity across government organisations in Victoria was apparent during the 2019–20 fires. Despite the progressive integration of emergency management as an element of core business across government, it remains a comparatively small function in the context of broader portfolio responsibilities. For non-government organisations with lead responsibilities, relief and recovery functions are a larger consideration constrained by resourcing.

Local government has statutory responsibilities in relief and recovery, and there is longstanding grievance about the extent to which council obligations are not matched by adequate funding. IGEM previously reflected on this issue in its 10-Year Review.

Community organisations and individuals provided an important source of capacity and capability during relief and recovery of the 2019–20 Victorian fire season. Volunteers are a crucial resource in both relief and recovery. While some volunteers are integrated into state and locally-based organisations, there is also a level of informal volunteer activity during and after emergencies within local communities.

There is a growing trend towards spontaneous volunteering after a major event by people seeking to contribute without permanent attachment to a relief or recovery organisation. The emergency management sector is yet to come to terms with managing this potentially useful source of capacity and capability.

Funding the relief and recovery of affected communities

Individuals, communities and organisations affected by emergencies need urgent and ongoing financial support to ensure they can meet their basic needs and return to some level of normalcy. This financial support may come through various forms of government assistance, charitable donations and insurance.

A consistent theme in submissions to the Inquiry was the complexity of applying for assistance – be it the forms to be filled out or determining eligibility for assistance. This coupled with the need to constantly retell stories of loss unnecessarily compounded the trauma already experienced. Community members often told IGEM that accessing financial assistance was a confusing, bureaucratic, complex and stressful process. Inflexible application timelines and rigid eligibility processes effectively hindered recovery.

In addition to immediate relief funding is a need to support the long tail of recovery. The varied support provided by Australian and state government after an emergency makes it difficult for recovery organisations to develop recovery plans and financial assistance strategies. The relatively short duration of funding models fails to accommodate some projects that will take longer than 12 months. At an individual level, some people are not ready to contemplate what they need in the immediate aftermath of the emergency.

Failures in the communication and timing of grants and funding added to a perception of unfairness among affected communities. The timing of some grants prevented consideration of longer-term initiatives to help communities prepare for future fires.

While public donations of money to support bushfire recovery is supported by government, the Inquiry notes that the regulation, collection and dispersal of these funds is largely beyond its control. Government does not have a role in overseeing financial donations or in explaining how donations can be used by charities.

Insurance is a key driver in the recovery of individuals and their communities after bushfires, but its significance has been the subject of scant attention to date. The ongoing impact of climate change increases the prospect of even greater bushfire losses in future. There is scope for governments to consider their role in facilitating and supporting insurance and working towards equitable outcomes with insurance providers and policy holders.

Public communications around relief and recovery

Since 2009 the State has developed and refined a sophisticated and effective system for delivering emergency warnings and advice during the preparedness and response phases of bushfires and other emergencies. This relies upon access to smart phone applications, fixed and mobile telephony and internet. The system is widely accessed by the community.

As the focus shifts from response to relief and recovery in an emergency, there is a sharp increase in the number of government and non-government organisations involved in supporting community. The needs of the community change, as does the ways in which information is received. The information itself becomes more diverse and dispersed.

The 2019–20 Victorian fires highlighted the challenges of communicating with affected communities – geographic and social remoteness, isolation due to ongoing fires and the immediate aftermath, damage to telecommunications, emerging recovery organisations, high volumes of recovery activity and the added complication of the COVID-19 pandemic.

The fires also highlighted the ongoing importance of traditional, low-tech methods in an era of increasing reliance on digital platforms. Local radio, community meetings and face-to-face outreach proved invaluable, especially in remote communities where access to telecommunications and technology is limited or was compromised by fire.

The absence of a centralised source of information providing time-sensitive relief and recovery information coupled with the number of organisations involved in recovery resulted in poorly coordinated public communications. The quantity of information affected communities were expected to process, its multiple sources and repetition resulted in some people being overwhelmed and confused.

Relief governance arrangements

Emergency relief activities are provided by many different agencies – government departments, non-government agencies, local councils, and emergency management agencies – all play an important role in delivering immediate relief to individuals and communities in an emergency. There are both strategic and operational governance systems that underpin these relief activities.

The prolonged and extensive relief effort during the 2019–20 fires tested the strength of these emergency relief arrangements and systems. The emergency management sector had to adjust the existing relief and recovery model to reflect the scale of the fires and the relief effort.

This prompted the creation and activation of new entities and working relationships. The structures include the Combined Agency Operations Group, the Bushfire Response and Recovery Taskforce, the State Relief Team and the establishment of a new role – the State Emergency Relief Coordinator (SERC). The appointment of the SERC also saw the separation of relief from recovery management which reflected the scale and complexity of the relief and recovery effort required.

Stakeholders were clear that the emergency relief arrangements that existed before the fires were ‘underdone’ and unable to give effect to the time critical relief that was needed. Relief needs were also viewed as a secondary consideration compared to response. IGEM found that the existing relief documentation was inconsistent, lacked detail and did not adequately describe how relief activities are operationalised across all tiers of emergency management.

Providing humanitarian relief to local communities

People need shelter and relief from impacts during and immediately after an emergency. Humanitarian relief addresses the ‘people’ aspect of relief needs. This may include shelter, access to food and water, material goods, medical and psychosocial support and emergency financial payments.

Roles and responsibilities for relief provision are guided by state level plans and many government, non-government and community service organisations come together to provide relief support to communities and individuals.

The extensive fire footprint and prolonged nature of the 2019–20 fires affected how aspects of humanitarian relief were delivered. Local councils were sometimes unable to establish Emergency Relief Centres (ERCs) when and where they were needed. This was partly due to towns becoming isolated and the risk of sending staff into potentially dangerous areas.

Communities that became isolated needed to work together to provide places of shelter and relief. Sometimes this was supported remotely by local councils – sometimes wholly without assistance. Community stakeholders told IGEM that they wished to be more prepared in future. There is an opportunity to build contingencies into local plans to ensure that communities are supported and have places to shelter and support displaced people during an emergency.

In the case of small and remote communities – where a standing relief centre was either not warranted or possible – the value of providing relief support through outreach was evident. Similarly, the disparate way in which psychosocial support is delivered to communities impacted by emergencies suggests the need for a reappraisal.

In events affecting dispersed communities, the main health and medical needs are closely linked to primary care normally provided by local healthcare services. The need for pre-hospital responders often associated with emergencies – such as paramedics – is less pronounced. Prior to the 2019–20 fires there were limited plans to incorporate local primary healthcare providers into health operations.

The provision of relief services must recognise community diversity. Relief and recovery activities should be developed to meet the differing needs of all people, including people with disabilities and from diverse backgrounds. Councils, government and relief providers have a responsibility to plan relief activities around diversity.

The 2019–20 fires affected areas with significant populations of Aboriginal Victorians. IGEM heard from Aboriginal Victorians that they were often reluctant to leave Country to evacuate, stating that they felt unsafe and unwelcome to attend ERCs. ERCs did not cater for culturally-specific support services and there were no other community spaces provided where Aboriginal Victorians could gather to support one another.

Improving the management of donated goods

Australians are known for their generosity. During every major emergency in Victoria there is an outpouring of donated goods, money and offers of assistance.

While giving is an important part of community relief and recovery, it can have serious unintended consequences that many well-intentioned donors rarely consider.

Key among these is the logistical problem of dealing with vast quantities of untargeted and undirected material. There is no end-to-end process in place in Victoria for the management of donated goods in these circumstances.

Public communications about the donation of goods began on 31 December 2019 with donors encouraged to seek advice on how to best contribute. By 2 January 2020 communications had shifted to encouraging only donations of money through the Victorian Bushfire Appeal. As the emergency continued, messaging became more explicit in discouraging the donation of goods. Despite public communications the donation of goods continued, with the influx beyond community need leading to waste.

The 2019–20 fires showed a need for a concerted communications campaign to discourage the random donation of foodstuffs and other goods. There is an apparent need for development of agreed systems, processes, and partnerships to deal with managing targeted relief supplies and donations.

Reinstating essential services

All Victorian communities depend to a greater or lesser degree on the external provision of essential services. These include energy (electricity and gas), water, telecommunications, food and grocery supplies, banking and financial services, health services and transport.

Emergencies can disrupt the ability of critical infrastructure to deliver essential services. The bigger the emergency, the more widespread disruptions can become. Critical infrastructure and essential services are highly interconnected, and this is an inherent limitation for service providers.

During the 2019–20 fires widespread road closures, power and telecommunications impacts led to towns and small communities being isolated. The prolonged disruption of individual services had compounding effects on the restoration of other essential services and the provision of relief.

All essential service providers worked towards the earliest possible restoration of services, despite the scale of the impacts. More than 1400 kilometres of roads were closed, with bridges, barriers and signage damaged. The risk posed by damaged and falling trees was ongoing. The communications and energy sectors undertook the restoration of services in a timely manner. For each of these service providers however, there had been insufficient consideration of the procedures and training needed to allow safe access for personnel into fire affected areas to restore services.

The food and grocery sector acknowledged a lack of operational procedures and protocols for dealing with major emergencies. It built on existing relationships and relief principles to ensure food and grocery businesses in fire-affected and isolated communities were resupplied as soon as practicable.

The water services were able to meet the basic needs of fire-affected communities by providing clean drinking water in a timely manner. Water services were also able to draw upon resources from across the sector to quickly reinstate affected infrastructure.

The inter-connected nature of essential services – coupled with jurisdictional and commercial limitations – restrict the Victorian government from mandating service upgrades and operational procedures. However, the critical infrastructure arrangements and the regulatory mechanisms in place support sector-based planning and provide an opportunity for greater levels of operational planning and procedures.

Recovery governance arrangements and the creation of Bushfire Recovery Victoria

Recovery governance arrangements in place at the time of the 2019–20 fires were built upon existing relationships and forums which allowed for state, regional and municipal recovery planning, decision-making and coordination. However, some stakeholders noted limited clarity in relation to the appropriate level for the consideration of particular issues.

Local government struggled to be represented at the regional level and receive sufficient information from state recovery mechanisms, particularly during operational periods where staff were concurrently deployed to response and recovery.

IGEM has previously recommended the development of operational recovery guidelines with a focus on coordinating arrangements across all tiers. The 2019–20 fires underscored this need.

The establishment of Bushfire Recovery Victoria (BRV) during the fires – a new permanent recovery agency to work directly with impacted communities – was acknowledgment of the long recovery process ahead and of the increasing frequency and severity of bushfires.

BRV is limited by a lack of legislative and policy-enabled authority to lead strategic recovery planning and investment beyond the recovery coordination linked to the 2019–20 Victorian fire season. However, it is investing in recovery coordination activities that will be relevant and of benefit to future recovery efforts. As such, government tasked BRV with recovery coordination from the June 2021 catastrophic storms that caused damage and disconnection across Victoria.

Clean-up

The Victorian Government led clean-ups after three major bushfires: the 2009 Victorian bushfires, the 2015 Wye River - Jamieson Track fire, and the March 2019 South East Victoria Fires.

On 19 January 2020 the Victorian and Australian governments announced a fully funded clean-up program to demolish and safely clear residential and non-residential structures on private property, commercial and public buildings, and other outbuildings destroyed in the 2019–20 fires.

Established Victorian policy and guidelines around clean-up were in place at the time of the 2019–20 fires. Depending on the severity of an event, different models can be applied to manage the clean-up process, either through state or local government.

In this instance the comprehensive model adopted at the state-level led to the appointment of a contractor to conduct clean-up and hazard remediation on residential properties (both primary place of residence and investment/holiday homes), private agricultural land and private commercial premises. This model involved the removal of all structures, water tanks, septic tanks, fencing, hazardous trees, machinery, dead livestock and other debris.

The clean-up was completed by August 2020. At a program cost of \$91 million, a total of 2566 structures on 736 properties were cleared.

Community concerns around the clean-up program centred on the transparency of the tender process, the extent to which local contractors were included in the effort, and impacts due to potential spread of the COVID-19 virus.

The ancillary issue of hazardous tree clearance on roadsides and clean-up of debris also prompted a level of community concern.

Supporting local recovery

Crucial to the success with which a community re-establishes itself are the qualities of the community before it was overtaken by an emergency.

The long tail of bushfire recovery can take years in some communities, sometimes overlapping the next bushfire event. The focus and priorities of communities shift over time as individuals address their personal recovery needs and priorities. The current recovery structures in Victoria do not always recognise the longevity of the process.

While the emergency management sector has a clear focus on the importance of community involvement in planning and responding to emergencies, it has traditionally been less engaged in how communities participate in relief and recovery other than as passive receivers.

More recently, understanding and encouraging community resilience has become a priority and efforts are being made to better coordinate with wider resilience-building initiatives. The sector has also developed a clear focus on the importance of community involvement in emergency management. There is more recognition of the importance of understanding community context and the complexity of an emergency before developing recovery activities. However, the lack of shared definition of what amounts to 'community-led' recovery creates confusion for individuals and communities.

A lack of emphasis on the relief and recovery phases of emergencies saw many individuals and communities unprepared for the significant periods of isolation they faced following the 2019–20 fires. As communities started to recover, some recognised this vulnerability and turned their thinking to strategies that could be implemented to make them more resilient in future.

Local community service organisations reported that some external recovery organisations showed a lack of respect or awareness for the services and service providers that existed in communities prior to the fires.

There was also a degree of confusion between the roles of councils, existing service delivery organisations and BRV, leading to inefficiencies and duplication. In addition, the role, structure, membership and support accorded to local Community Recovery Committees (CRC) were all matters raised during the course of the Inquiry. The extent of the feedback would suggest further review is warranted of the efficacy of the CRC model.

Similarly, the use of recovery centres as a mode of delivering assistance was also queried by several community members. While these centres offered a convenient 'one stop shop', issues of coordination between services in this setting were raised. The need to retell their story repeatedly in this context cause frustration and stress.

Despite the difficulties posed by COVID-19 restrictions, the use of outreach approaches to deliver recovery services proved effective, especially in remote areas.

The Inquiry considers the experience of the 2019–20 fires demonstrated a lack of consistency in community-led recovery approach.

Individual and community health and wellbeing in recovery

Living through a major bushfire can be a profound, even life changing experience. Recovery from any emergency is a complex and often long-term physical and social process. The experience can translate from an individual to an entire community. Supporting a community's social functioning in recovery is crucial across the economic, built and natural environments.

The social environment focuses on individual and community health and wellbeing. The aim of social recovery activities is to prevent long-term harm by providing individuals and communities with timely and appropriate access to services appropriate to their needs.

Housing support was generally seen as successful in helping affected households but there remains scope to streamline processes. As in previous bushfire events, assisting people to access temporary housing was a priority for government. Non-government entities also provide support to address atypical accommodation needs – such as the provision of caravans and the construction of temporary dwellings. Many fire-affected households accessed temporary accommodation through insurance providers or other means.

A new initiative was the provision of short-term modular housing. Under this program people who lost their homes were able to rent a modular house to be installed on their property during their rebuild. Many of those who accessed this option were satisfied with the house and the convenience of being able to live onsite during property repair, clean-up and rebuilding.

The trauma of living through an emergency can limit a person's ability to absorb information received during or immediately after the event. A recurring theme in IGEM's community consultation was the lack of coordination in outreach. The lack of coordination between agencies visiting properties to collect information compounded the impact of fires – both for property owners who received multiple visits or those who were not visited at all.

It is too early to assess the effectiveness of the mental health initiatives introduced following the 2019–20 fires. It is very clear from previous events and research that mental health concerns are likely to emerge as people progress through their recovery. In the short-term however, many community members were less interested in a clinical intervention than in better information sharing and simply having a conversation with someone.

Another important aspect of community wellbeing included the provision of regional rural financial counselling services.

The importance of primary healthcare providers, including General Practitioners, Remote Area Nurses, pharmacists, and other allied health professionals in fire-affected communities is profound. Primary healthcare providers, particularly Bush Nursing services, are embedded within their communities. These services provided important support during and immediately after the bushfires. They continue to do so in recovery.

In February 2021 BRV identified primary prevention of family violence activities as a gap in existing recovery efforts in the context of emergency recovery, planning and preparedness.

Significantly, despite the additional funding schools received, many young people felt the support from their school was inadequate, inappropriate and not youth centred. Twelve months on from the fires young people reported their schools had employed qualified staff to undertake counselling with students. However, there is no consistency across schools. Young people who have completed school, enrolled in TAFE, disengaged from education or are home schooled miss out on this support.

The Bushfire Case Support Program is the backbone of the psychosocial support offerings. Overall, it has been effective, providing people with much needed practical and moral support. However, it could reach more fire-affected people if it included an appropriately resourced outreach component.

Buildings and infrastructure

Private and public Infrastructure is central to the daily lives of all Victorians. When homes, businesses and community assets are destroyed by bushfire or other emergency events, restoration is central to individual and community relief and recovery.

The speed with which residential dwellings and other infrastructure can be reinstated after bushfires is affected by multiple factors and seldom meets community expectations. In addition to the normal build time that might be expected in non-emergency conditions, factors such as a lack of local tradespeople, the need to clear debris and site reassessment add to the burden of rebuilding following bushfire.

In the case of the 2019–20 fires, there were added factors such as geographic location, the demands of concurrent rebuilding on a ten-fold scale in New South Wales (NSW), and the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic lockdowns. Lack of resources also limited council ability to effectively provide rebuilding support activities to affected communities.

Delays in rebuilding after bushfires are often attributed to 'red tape' and bureaucracy. Victoria has established planning controls and building regulations that directly affect the construction of all new homes in bushfire-prone areas. These are designed to improve the survivability of structures in the event of another bushfire rather than expediting construction.

Amendments to the Building Code in 2010 incorporating Bushfire Attack Level (BAL) ratings can also add significantly to the cost of rebuilding. A decade later, most landowners have little visibility of the implications of BAL ratings for planning and rebuilding.

The need of community to be rehoused and to have public infrastructure reinstated needs to be balanced against supporting a rebuild that is sustainable, resilient, safe, affordable and meets the needs of our communities. The replacement of community assets needs to consider resilience and climate change in design and ensure community needs are met.

Despite provisions in place and support made available to help communities, businesses and individuals rebuild, communities were frustrated and confused by the complicated regulations in place. There were perceptions of recovery works being delayed and inequities across affected areas. Navigating the planning and building approval processes remains challenging for individuals.

Transport infrastructure and networks have been fully restored to at least the state they were in before the bushfires. IGEM notes a lack of measures that enable state infrastructure assets to be built back to a standard that would be more resilient, reducing risk to communities and prevent further reconstruction costs from future emergencies.

Recovery of the natural environment

The impact of the bushfires on the natural environment was the focus of intense public interest in 2019–20 not just in Victoria but all along the eastern seaboard of Australia.

Over 1.3 million hectares of Victoria's native forests burned. Important ecosystems were destroyed, and thousands of animals were killed or injured. The consequences for Victoria's biodiversity and landscapes are significant.

Department of Environment, Land, Water and Planning (DELWP) is primarily responsible for recovery efforts across public land, in conjunction with other bodies such as catchment management authorities (CMAs). Priority areas for action include forest re-seeding, waterways, biodiversity, park assets and visitor infrastructure, and firewood. The 2019–20 fires triggered community grants for local recovery work and a Major Event Review of Victoria's Regional Forest Agreements to assess the impacts of the fires and identify if future remedial actions need to be taken.

In general – and taking into consideration the scale of the event – the delivery of recovery efforts across the natural environment were seen to be effective, although these will continue for years and so are necessarily integrated into ongoing policies and programs of work. The fires have also accelerated DELWP's efforts to progress its seed management program for post-fire re-seeding of ash forests.

While there was no specific plan for waterway recovery after bushfire, the Victorian Waterway Management Strategy provided an enabling framework for post-fire planning and delivery of on-ground actions. Similarly, while the Biodiversity 2037 plan was not designed for emergency management, work towards its targets produced outputs that were beneficial to recovery efforts following the fires.

Short-term actions such as threat management and emergency extractions of threatened species were arguably opportunistic with unclear procedures and authorisations but produced dividends. Action on pest animals and weed will require an ongoing commitment.

Immediate works to reinstate park assets and infrastructure was delivered in a coordinated and effective manner.

While arrangements were made to ensure fire-affected communities had adequate access to firewood, there appeared to be no well-established processes among agencies to manage the end-uses of salvaged wood from hazardous tree works.

Business and economic recovery

Ordinarily, business and economic recovery following a major bushfire is just that. By the time of impact of the 2019–20 fires, much of the area affected was already in the grip of a protracted drought. Some districts in Gippsland had already endured a round of bushfires at the end of the previous summer. Just as the fires were contained, the first COVID-19 infections were being reported in Victoria.

The complications of cascading events are discussed throughout this report. However, in the context of business and economy, impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic are difficult to remove from the overall recovery of local communities affected by the fires. Given the significance of tourism to East Gippsland and the North East, the closure of many communities to visitors over the summer period – traditionally the busiest time – had an immediate impact.

In the first quarter of 2020, there was an estimated decline of 13–23 per cent in gross value added (GVA). In total, by one account the three directly fire-affected local government areas sustained an estimated loss of \$110–\$195 million, while the adjacent councils were estimated to have lost \$75–170 million in GVA. The greatest losses were in the tourism and retail sectors.

Given the need to repeatedly close visitation to key areas due to fire impacts, fire recovery work and during four COVID-19 pandemic lockdowns through 2020–21, many of these businesses missed key trading dates upon which they are heavily dependent, such as Easter, school holidays and long weekends. The COVID-19 pandemic introduced significant restrictions that prevented regional travel and tourism. Many of the planned government and council initiatives to support businesses, industries and economies after the fires became untenable as consumers were unable to access the regions.

The state and Australian governments developed initiatives to provide business owners, communities, peak industry bodies and industry leaders with opportunities to discuss the economic impacts of the fires, local economic and community needs, and – along with local government – opportunities to support and coordinate business and economic recovery.

While a range of assistance packages in the form of grants and low interest loans were offered, the Inquiry heard repeatedly from stakeholders and business community members of the complexity involved in applying for financial assistance. Many business owners were not aware of the support available or were ineligible to apply. There were also lengthy delays in receiving the money, by which time some businesses had closed.

However, in terms of business priorities, the recovery process for tourism and accommodation businesses, and major tourist destinations appear positive. Although the economic recovery process has been slow, financial support has increased and accelerated, providing regional Victoria with more opportunities to return to normal business operations. The introduction of travel vouchers and various government incentives has been important.

Agriculture

The agriculture sector invariably faces considerable risk during major bushfires. While most of the area burnt in 2019–20 was on public land, the North East and East Gippsland include large areas of farmland – parts of which were severely affected. Agriculture in these areas involves extensive cattle and sheep grazing, dairying, vineyards, beekeeping operations and general farming.

With a history of long-term crises, Victoria's agriculture sector came into the 2019–20 fire season with a strong emergency management plan, especially in relation to animal welfare. Stock losses were not as extensive as in previous major bushfire events, yet were nonetheless significant.

The State's response included the development and roll-out of meaningful recovery and support programs. Even so, the agricultural sector encountered issues with animal welfare, grant program coverage and eligibility and the distribution of fodder.

Several financial assistance programs are available within this sector, and these are detailed in the report. While many of these programs are critical to the early recovery, issues remain with narrow eligibility criteria. The classification of primary producers, location within a defined disaster area and continuation of business within a specified timeframe excluded many community members.

The fires added to the duress experienced by the agricultural sector through many years of drought. The relief and recovery effort had to address not only the immediate post-fire losses but also issues of longer-term psychosocial trauma and business viability. What was already a complicated, multi-agency recovery operation at the start of 2020, became a drawn-out process due to the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic.

The loss of more than 6000 km of farm fencing again highlighted the complex issue of replacing boundary fencing between private and public land, especially where fire emanates from public land. The cost of replacement and difficulty of insuring farm fencing compounds problems faced by landowners.

Aboriginal culture and healing

The needs and values of Aboriginal Victorians have been poorly recognised or understood by the government during recovery from past emergencies. Aboriginal Victorians have lived through generations of disconnection, discrimination and trauma which has influenced their concepts of culture and healing – and their experiences during emergencies.

The recovery of Aboriginal people from emergencies such as bushfires is influenced by a history of intergenerational trauma. Contemporary discrimination is a further barrier to recovery. The wariness some Aboriginal people have of government and its agencies means it is crucial that those involved in emergency management learn to work with their communities in a way that is culturally sensitive and appropriate.

Physical Aboriginal heritage is at risk of damage and irreplaceable loss during bushfires. Damage to tangible cultural heritage can in turn damage intangible heritage by restricting the ways that Aboriginal people can continue their cultural, knowledge and material practices. A significant issue from the 2019–20 bushfires for Aboriginal people was their separation from Country.

Culture can be considered an indicator of health. By extension, the health and post-emergency recovery of Aboriginal people is dependent on the rights to their land, language, cultural heritage and practices as well as self-determination rights and freedom from discrimination.

Notably, a dedicated line of recovery for Aboriginal culture and healing and an Aboriginal Reference Group were both initiated (for the first time) by Traditional Owner groups rather than government. Although this line of recovery progressed at a generally slower rate than others, it was a sign of self-determination in action. The overall sentiment from Traditional Owners who were leading recovery efforts was that it was important to get the process right, even if that slowed the outputs.

The establishment of a reference group as part of the governance structure was a key enabler of self-determination for Aboriginal Victorians.

The lack of preparedness and practice for Aboriginal culture and healing after emergencies was a barrier to timely and culturally appropriate recovery actions.

Opportunities for the future

The extensive nature and prolonged presence of the 2019–20 fires in the Victorian landscape resulted in many challenges that hindered or prevented the activation of many well practised relief measures. The relief effort required was on a scale that had not been experienced previously, and the capability and capacity of the emergency management sector and supporting relief arrangements were tested considerably.

Given the impact that climate change is having on our environment, the likelihood of similar events occurring in the future is real. There is now the opportunity to learn from the experiences of the 2019–20 fires and strengthen the relief arrangements by providing a dedicated relief function within the emergency management system that would better support both emergency management agencies and communities.

Communities and individuals should be confident that they will receive essential support to meet their basic needs after they have been impacted by an emergency. The 2019–20 fires illustrated the diversity of individual relief circumstances and potential community needs that can arise during prolonged and dispersed emergency events. There are opportunities to build further contingencies in relief planning at the local level which in turn will increase the resilience of the community and the path to recovery.

With the development of clearer and more robust relief arrangements for responder agencies and emergency management personnel, improved relief outcomes for the community should in turn be achieved.

The 2019–20 fire season saw the establishment of BRV as a dedicated entity to support recovery efforts. While there were some aspects of BRV's approach to recovery that caused inefficiencies and frustrations across the community and other recovery organisations, most could see the value in its establishment and focus on recovery.

The Victorian and Australian governments made some of the biggest investments in community recovery ever seen in the aftermath of a major emergency – particularly to support mental health and environment recovery. However, communities and stakeholders found much of this financial support difficult to access and poorly timed. It is also important to acknowledge that BRV was established as a reaction to these fires and was to some extent learning as it went without the benefit of having functioned through previous emergencies and the learnings that provide.

BRV and other government departments discussed and attempted to implement a strong community-focus in recovery – and in IGEM's assessment, there is a strong reflection of this focus in recovery plans. However, in many ways communities have felt overwhelmed and frustrated by the community-led approach, noting that it seems have different meanings in different contexts and often results in a high workload, but low levels of autonomy for the community.

Throughout the Inquiry Phase 2, IGEM has made observations, findings and recommendations in relation to specific relief and recovery strategies, plans, activities and outcomes.

One of the most prevalent themes emerging from the Inquiry was the incredible volume of time and effort being invested by government, councils, community service organisations, the private sector and local community organisations to support affected communities, business, families and individuals.

Likewise, those affected are working hard to support themselves. Unfortunately, there are still examples of inefficient relief and recovery work, limited government support for the community to increase their levels of resilience, and misunderstandings of roles and responsibilities that hamper relief and recovery efforts.

Stakeholders discussed the lower level of focus on relief and recovery in the context of Victoria's overarching emergency management arrangements. In IGEM's assessment of relief and recovery in relation to the 2019–20 Victorian fire season, this proved to be an accurate assessment. However, there is a vast amount of learning to be had from these fires, and previous relief and recovery efforts, that can be used to inform future arrangements and ongoing recovery for the 2019–20 fires.

There is certainly a high level of good will, compassion and commitment across the sector and community that if directed and resourced appropriately will place Victoria in good stead to respond to the Inquiry recommendations and improve future relief and recovery outcomes for all Victorians.



Growing Back East Gippsland/Lydia, Delegate Public School

My drawing is of two hands holding the burnt trees with the green in the middle. The hands represent all humans, the burnt trees represent the bushfire and its impact, the green tree represents hope during hard times and the light at the end of the tunnel



Community reflections on relief

The 2019–20 Victorian fire season had a profound effect upon individuals, families and entire communities impacted by bushfires in East Gippsland, North East and Alpine regions. For many people, remembering their experiences and providing their feedback about what happened during and immediately after the fires was traumatic and emotional.

However, there was a strong desire to share with IGEM those aspects of relief that worked well and those that did not. Further to this, community members offered suggestions and ideas for how relief activities could be improved in future with the hope that this information could benefit others.

In documenting this information, IGEM has considered the Emergency Relief Principles as outlined in the SERRP.

This section provides an undiluted account of the community experience in seeking relief from the impact of the fires. Several consistent themes emerged which IGEM has highlighted through quotes. Images in this section are illustrative of the themes, and do not represent those providing quotes.

Access to essential support

IGEM heard from communities that they generally received essential support to meet their basic and immediate needs. This support was provided at ERCs – local community facilities where people sheltered or gathered, or was delivered directly to individuals and communities.

In a number of cases, road closures made it very difficult for essential supplies to be delivered and individuals and local communities relied on each other to provide essentials such as food, water and fuel until relief agencies and organisations were able to get into the area.

Government, councils, responder and relief agencies, community organisations, church groups, private organisations and businesses worked together to address the basic and immediate needs of affected communities. Essential support was also provided by individuals, family members, friends, neighbours and community.

IGEM heard many stories of communities rallying around each other, particularly in more isolated and rural areas. IGEM also heard of families supporting each other, working together to manage fuel, conserve power, look after elderly relatives and share information. There were stories of neighbours and locals conducting welfare checks on others before emergency management relief staff or volunteers could come in. They told of meals shared together, power shared by generators, of stock being fed and cared for, and of genuine concern and camaraderie amongst those who had stayed behind to defend.

Local leaders stepped up and local organisations and businesses filled the void when relief staff or volunteers could not quickly get to some fire-affected areas. Those communities that were well connected and had established networks and relationships before the fires were able to mobilise quickly after the fires to support their own.



We had a barbeque in the shed, and we cooked, and we invited neighbours and whoever was left in the district, for breakfast and dinners. It was just good to be able to help.

The thing at the time was, and I don't know that people think about it, a lot of farmers now are aging, like we're all aging. So, I think somebody should have been welfare checking around. I mean, we did our valley, my daughter and I kind of hovered around anyone that we thought needed someone knocking on the door and saying, 'How you going?'

Community member



While some communities naturally assumed these roles, IGEM also heard from some communities that felt abandoned by government and responder agencies during and immediately after the fires – mostly in more isolated and remote areas.

These communities felt let down and are still angry. They expected that someone would come and help them and the delays they experienced have left people feeling that more needed to be done by government, council and the sector to support them.



There is a whole little tiny group of us out there and out of Cobungra that have been burnt out and [it's like] we don't exist.

Community member



Many community members were able to receive essential support and have their basic needs met at ERCs. Official, council-managed centres were situated away from the fires and provided support to residents and visitors. Many community members shared their experiences of the wide range of support available at these centres.

Community members and visitors also sought shelter and support at various locations across the fire-affected areas that became unofficial or community-managed relief centres. These facilities were often local community halls or rooms at recreation reserves, which were initially used for shelter and morphed into relief centres.

These were often locations where community members had sheltered in previous fires and many people told IGEM that community members were always going to go to these facilities, rather than travel to official ERCs. A significant frustration for many people was that these facilities were not adequately prepared. For example, the buildings often did not have alternative power sources, despite community telling council and others that this is where people will go.

Community members who had lost their homes and attended official ERCs spoke of large numbers of people presenting with various levels of need.

Community members who lost everything told of lining up behind someone for hours and progressing through the system in parallel with a person who had evacuated their home but otherwise was not significantly impacted. IGEM heard suggestions for a triage system, so that the most severely impacted could have their needs quickly assessed and receive assistance as a priority.

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So we were a total loss. We lost the house, three sheds, a weekend. But the woman next to me couldn't get to her house, which is terrible. I understand that and her house was there, but she'd been away and they came back and they had their dog in a kennel. So their issue was getting to their house and not having power.

Community member



A significant amount of support came through donations and goodwill.

Community members were overwhelmed by the generous support they received from across the state and the nation. Donations and offers of assistance were most effective where they were targeted and met the community's needs. Where community leaders or those managing facilities on behalf of the community were asked what they needed and what their priorities were, donations were well coordinated, of an appropriate standard and distributed appropriately.

“

Like there's slabs of water, dog food, everything. There's heaps of stuff sitting there. And I just started – well, at some stage, I'm unloading hay. Not a lot of people probably realised, but I'm sitting in the tractor unloading, crying. The generosity of everyone was unreal.

I got rung up by a mob who basically said, 'Do you have a list of things you need?' I sat down with the Red Cross people and we wrote a list and sent an email off to them ... several days later we had this big fat helicopter arrive, full of fabulous stuff, like more phone recharging stations, generators and all that kind of stuff ... And the first lot of masks arrived.

Community member



Unfortunately, much of the donated support and goodwill inadvertently caused high levels of burden and stress for communities. Large volumes of unwanted, poor quality and inappropriate donations made their way to communities. Many community members spoke of the significant challenges these donations presented and, in most cases, it was left to communities to manage them.

Halls, sheds, shipping containers, Neighbourhood Houses and CFA stations began to fill, and it became almost a full-time job for numerous volunteers to manage and distribute what could be used by community.

Twelve months after the fires, some communities were still trying to find homes for remaining donations. Due to the lack of coordination and adequate management of the distribution of various donations, there were many instances where community members were asked to decide who got what which caused friction and anger.

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The mental toll on volunteers during the 2019–2020 fire season having to argue with people bringing in supplies that weren't asked for and that they didn't have anywhere to put.

I put my hand up for – we knew there was going to be a heap of hay coming in and donated materials. I thought, 'It's going to last probably two to three months'. 13 months on, we've still got stuff in our shed that's got to go out.

Community member



Timeliness of relief support

Depending on where a person lived, whether they stayed and defended, whether they evacuated and the impacts they suffered, influenced the timely delivery of emergency relief. Communities also felt the timeliness of relief support was affected by the significant and extended road closures.

There was a clear understanding and recognition in rural communities that generally on a day-to-day basis they had to be self-sufficient. For some community members, a visit to the supermarket is a weekly or monthly journey – given the remoteness of where they live.

Despite being self-sufficient, access to some essential supplies and services – such as fuel and telecommunications – proved extremely challenging in the immediate days and weeks after the fires.

Many community members spoke of timely access to initial emergency financial assistance through the PHAP which enabled them to purchase food, clothing or necessities. For some community members who evacuated, this money was used for accommodation or travel costs. This initial assistance was greatly appreciated, although there were some community members who shared concern about people rorting the system.

Dealing with the burial of dead stock was both an animal welfare issue and a health and wellbeing issue for farmers. Delays in burying dead stock – particularly in the North East region – had a significant psychological impact on these farmers. Despite some stock agents and council staff doing their best to expediate this process, delays and the lack of formalised processes meant that animal carcasses lay in paddocks for days. The vast amount of road closures also contributed to this. IGEM also heard that while hay trucks were able to get in within the first few days, cattle trucks to transport animals to the abattoirs could not.

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I was using my contacts with other stock agents, trying to get strings pulled. And they were trying like mad, but 24 hours on a burned animal is a fair bit of time and it just took ages. There was no common sense to say, 'Hang on, these cattle are going to Melbourne to be killed because they've been burned. Let the trucks in to get them out'.

Community member



Safe spaces

The scale of the 2019–20 fires and the vast areas that were affected meant that government, councils and relief agencies were stretched in providing relief assistance. Some communities became isolated, and in some cases, it took days before essential supplies and outside help could be delivered. In the interim, community members took the lead as they knew what their community wanted and needed.

ERCs normally provided a safe space for most people. However, IGEM heard that some community members did not feel safe but had nowhere else to go. In centres which were not staffed or managed by councils, IGEM heard of issues with alcohol, drugs and damage to property.

Aboriginal Victorians spoke of their deep connection to Country and the challenges associated with evacuating from the fires. They did not feel ERCs were culturally safe places and wanted to get back on Country as quickly as possible.

Young people spoke of wanting to help out in ERCs but being told they could not. This led to frustration and a sense that their skills and abilities were not valued. Where young people were able to assist in relief efforts, they felt valued and appreciated.

Community members spoke about managing and supporting large numbers of traumatised people before qualified personnel arrived. They found themselves having to provide psychological first aid – and this at times became overwhelming. Community members discussed that to train and upskill local people to provide psychological first aid would benefit community not only in emergencies but in day-to-day situations.



There were times during the earliest stages when there weren't Red Cross here and me and my team were dealing with quite distressed people, with no training and all that kind of stuff.

Community member



An example where a community recognised the need to minimise physical and psychological harm from the fires and responded to a direct need, was the establishment of the Sanctuary at Mallacoota. The Sanctuary emerged out of the fires when it became apparent that young people needed a safe place to come together and support each other.

Information to communities

IGEM heard from communities that accessing clear, timely and tailored information and advice about relief services was critical to individuals and communities being able to commence their recovery journey.

In the early days of the emergency, inaccurate information about road closures caused significant frustration and angst in the community. Community members were very concerned about leaving their homes to access essential supplies for fear of not being able to return. Some people told IGEM that direct communication with the services operating the roadblocks was poor and disrespectful.

IGEM heard from community members that information was often communicated through only one or two channels. They spoke of the need to vary these channels and to capitalise on local avenues to spread information.

Community members relied on receiving information from trusted local sources.

A constant theme was the challenge accessing information and details about available services during power and telecommunications disruptions. This meant they were not able to get timely information and were reliant on word-of-mouth. For many isolated and remote communities this was their only source available. Put simply, if they did not hear about it through word-of-mouth they missed out.

IGEM did hear of direct face-to-face property visits by relief agencies, council and government staff who provided information about relief and recovery services. Unfortunately, these were often uncoordinated and resulted in numerous visits to properties by different groups of people. Property owners found this increasingly frustrating, as well as traumatic, as they were repeatedly providing the same information.



Diversity in relief services

Communities are made up of people from all walks of life, different cultural backgrounds, genders, abilities, ages and sexes. Meeting the needs of a diverse community needs to be considered on a day-to-day to basis, but also needs to be recognised and planned for in emergencies.

As the closest level of government to the community, councils are best placed to understand the needs and diverse characteristics of their community. Local community organisations that provide direct services and programs to community also have a critical role to play in understanding the needs of people they work with.

IGEM heard that many local community organisations provided relief services that met the needs of people and were delivered respectfully. As trusted providers who know their community well and who were already providing a service, their involvement was welcomed.

Community organisations told IGEM that it was challenging to get a 'seat at the table' for broader relief initiatives and they were often overlooked or not considered in the delivery of relief services in favour of outside organisations. The impact on community was that those who were more vulnerable or less trusting of outsiders slipped through the cracks.

There were examples of trusted local providers stepping in to ensure that the needs of people with a disability were considered in ERCs. Some venues were not fully accessible, and it had not been considered where people with a disability would sleep. In some local halls that were used as informal relief centres, accessible toilet facilities were non-existent and people with a disability had to rely on others to help them.

IGEM also heard that many isolated, rural and older community members do not have access to technology such as mobile phones, computers and the internet. For these people, the delivery and communication of relief services was best done face-to-face, although this was not undertaken consistently.

Young people also expressed concern about not knowing what was happening or what support was available because they did not own a mobile phone. They also told of the need for more safe spaces where they could come together and debrief.

Aboriginal Victorians told IGEM if they had to evacuate again, they would prefer to have a relief centre solely for Aboriginal people as they did not feel culturally safe in other ERCs. Some experienced racism and discrimination at relief centres. Their preference overall was to shelter-in-place on Country.



Community resilience

IGEM heard from individuals – particularly those who had lived in their area for many years and had experienced bushfires before – that knew they needed to take responsibility for being prepared to respond and recover from the fires. This was more apparent in the rural areas and farming communities where people were generally self-sufficient. Generators, pumps, solar power, radios, freezers full of food, slip-ons and fuel stores were common in these areas and neighbours worked together to pool resources.

While individuals and communities did not expect government to provide everything for them, they did expect timely and accurate information and to be able to access essential supplies once theirs began to run low. Community members spoke of frustration and anger at not being able to access supplies quickly and easily, of bureaucratic processes and a lack of urgency. Some community members felt as though they were being punished for staying and defending.

IGEM heard from communities across all the fire-affected areas that they want to be better prepared and more proactive in the future to support their community before, during and after emergencies. This included suggestions such as working with the sector to develop local plans, purchase equipment that will help them be more resilient (such as generators, UHF radios and slip-ons) and to upgrade community facilities for use in emergencies.

Coordination of relief provision

One of the strongest themes IGEM heard from communities across all fire-affected areas was a lack of coordination in the provision and delivery of relief services.

Many different community organisations, government, councils, private companies, relief agencies and businesses were on the ground providing relief to communities in the days and weeks after the fires. This was challenging for community as they tried to navigate their way – often unsure of what support they needed or wanted.

This lack of coordination meant that community members had to repeat their story and circumstances. IGEM heard from people who had lost everything that continually having to retell their story and prove their loss exacerbated their trauma. They could not understand why there was not one system which enabled individuals to provide their details, impacts and needs which could be shared among all agencies and organisations working in relief and recovery.



We sat there and gave our bank details, our phone number, our dates of birth, drivers licence for them to photocopy – to table after table after table, and I thought, 'Why can't one mob collate all of this information?' And then every time you must reapply, they've got all our details.

Community member



Staff and community representatives from local services, including health and medical, community service organisations and church groups, also shared their frustration and anger about a lack of coordination and consultation between government and agencies. They indicated they were not engaged or involved in initial conversations about what support they could provide and what was already in place in the community before external groups and service providers came in to deliver a service.

In some cases, they had planned who would respond and what was to be delivered but this was ignored. They spoke of it taking weeks before they were able to share their local knowledge.

“

I discovered in about week four that the visiting VCC chaplains had a seat on the REMT. Whereas myself, as a local priest and also a chaplain, didn't. So, I had to really fight my case to even get in there and to be able to have a local voice on those meetings.

Community member

There seems to be this crazy notion that all of a sudden the local service providers are unable to provide service to their communities when it's most needed and we've got to get the flying [sic] what's me what's in who don't know the communities.

Community member



IGEM also heard that in some isolated areas – such as Mallacoota– the continual rotation of agency and government staff meant that it was not clear who was doing what as handovers did not often occur. Locals felt their voices were not being heard and that those who came in from outside were not interested in gaining their input. This caused quite a lot of conflict as the locals had been there since the beginning and felt they were not being respected.

“

In that initial response stage, the continual rotation of the others, the police, the emergency experts, the charity workers, the DHHS heads, the professional disaster managers, that was really difficult. They came and they were here for three days and then they left. And then we might not have one. And then we didn't see them again.

Community member



Integrated relief services

As noted previously, IGEM heard many examples of different community service organisations and groups of volunteers who stepped up to provide relief services to affected communities. Many of these groups mobilised quickly and seemed to be able to get into communities more quickly than government or formal relief service providers. Most of these groups were not part of formal emergency management arrangements or plans.

Local health and medical services were not initially invited to participate in discussions and decisions with control agencies about the relief services that would be provided in their community. In some cases, they were not included for a number of weeks which led to frustration and concern for their community.

These organisations had existing relationships with community members – they were trusted and were already providing a range of services in the community. Despite trying to engage with emergency management planners well before the fires, IGEM heard that they were completely ignored once the fires hit.

“

We had meetings for half a year, we had every local health service at the table, even from Traralgon, the Chief of Mental Health was there. It was all prepared, pulled together what service would be delivered by whom during what stage of the emergency or recovery. It was fully costed out.

Community member



The formal recognition of these local services and their integration into emergency management arrangements is something that both the organisations and community support. It will be the local services who carry on after the visiting and short term funded services leave. This issue was raised regarding the provision of relief services and was also a consistent theme in recovery.

“

It's the fact that local essential services must be incorporated into a disaster response, in a robust fashion.

Community member



Challenges for community members

As communities became isolated due to road closures, government and relief agencies were forced to consider different approaches to the delivery of relief services – particularly the delivery of food, water and fuel.

Community members overwhelmingly provided positive feedback about the ADF and how it was deployed to deliver essential support. Food and water drops were a welcome relief to those who had remained at their properties. Other essential supplies were also provided through these relief drops which enabled community members to continue to protect their homes from fires still occurring around them.

“

When the helicopters turned up, they said, 'What do you need?' And I said, 'We need petrol and we need diesel'. Two hours later a Black Hawk chopper turns up with four drums of petrol, which was just fantastic. The turnaround time in that was only two hours we had petrol.

Community member



Many people shared the challenge of accessing government assistance for the first time in their lives after the 2019–20 fires. This was something they had not previously needed, and they found the processes unfamiliar and difficult to manage. For some, asking for help or putting their hand out for donations or assistance was demoralising. However, with many people saying they were underinsured, donations helped fill the gap. IGEM heard that pride was swallowed, and assistance was accepted but it was not easy.

Across the fire-affected communities, people spoke of the challenges of living and working or volunteering in the same town or region. IGEM heard examples of community members being asked to lead or support relief efforts in their town while also being personally fire-affected. In many small communities it was often the same people who were being asked to help.

There was a lack of recognition by responder agencies and organisations working in relief that these people were fire-affected themselves. Deciding where their priorities lay, looking after themselves and their family or looking after their community was a difficult decision.

IGEM is grateful to those who shared their stories and experiences of relief, despite it being a difficult conversation. These stories and experiences have helped to identify what did and did not work during relief from the community's point of view and have provided a clear insight into what community would like to see done differently in future relief efforts.



Community reflections on recovery

For many people, remembering their experiences and providing their feedback about what happened after the fires was traumatic and emotional.

However, there was a strong desire to share with IGEM those aspects of recovery that have worked well and those that have not. Community told IGEM about their recovery experiences up to a point in time, for some people up to 15 months after the fires. IGEM recognises that for many people their recovery may only just be starting and can take many years.

While discussion focused on recovery, IGEM notes that this recovery occurred in the midst of another major emergency – the COVID-19 pandemic. Communities were grappling with both emergencies concurrently, with the COVID-19 pandemic affecting recovery from the fires.

Community members offered suggestions and ideas for how recovery programs, services and activities could be improved in the future with the hope that this information could benefit others.

Feedback and stories were gathered via written submissions, surveys, interviews, focus groups and community meetings. IGEM heard many similar stories across fire-affected areas and several consistent themes emerged, which are highlighted in this section through the use of quotes. Images in this section are illustrative of these themes, and do not represent those providing quotes.

In documenting this information, IGEM considered the eight recovery principles as outlined in the Recovery Framework prepared by BRV. Challenges faced by the community, impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on recovery and what the community would like to see done differently in the future are also discussed.

This is what the community shared with IGEM.

Understanding community context

IGEM heard that organisations working in recovery spent time understanding the context of individual communities before delivering recovery programs and services, and that councils were best placed to provide this information. For some communities, the 2019–20 fires brought back memories of past fires and unresolved issues. Understanding this history was important in shaping how recovery was delivered in these areas.

Unfortunately, some communities and individuals felt they were forgotten. Community members said that listening to local recovery providers about the range of issues communities face is important to recovery. They said locals know better the local environment, the people and local leaders who can assist recovery, communication channels that work for specific communities, and have an in-depth understanding of local issues.

Communities also said that local recovery providers either knew or understood where people live in the community, and this helped with people in outlying areas, such as farmers. IGEM heard that every community is different, with different values and dynamics and that it is important for those working in recovery to be aware of this and to ensure that a one-size-fits-all approach is not used.

The fires impacted many rural areas where farming was the main occupation. For many farmers, characteristics of being self-sufficient, stoic, believing there is always someone who is worse off than them, not relying on others and just getting on with the job are everyday traits. These traits continued to be displayed after the fires.

IGEM heard stories of farmers not accessing recovery assistance, especially when this meant a trip into town and a visit to the Community Recovery Hub. A consistent concern raised was that community organisations and support services relied on people actively seeking help. There were suggestions that some people did not seek recovery assistance as they did not feel comfortable asking for help, that they felt judged and that there were others more deserving.

Farmers and other property owners were busy fixing fences and worrying about stock and feed, making it difficult to come into town and access support. IGEM heard that some direct outreach to properties did occur, but this did not happen everywhere and was sporadic.

Community members told IGEM that ongoing outreach is required, and that support needs to be taken to the people – including mental health support. They suggested a more informal approach of a cup of tea and a chat would work well. Not understanding the makeup of the community and not delivering recovery services in a way that meets the needs of individual community members may lead to less successful recovery outcomes.

IGEM also heard that community members who lived close to the NSW border were not able to access services across the border – despite it being closer and reflecting what they would normally do. Townships close to the NSW border felt like there was a physical division and that they could not move between states nor access support services from across the border.

This did not make sense for Victorian communities living within very short distances of the border. It meant support had to be state-based, even if services were closer and available in NSW. People reflected that this worked both ways; that people in NSW could not access BRV support.

Community members were frustrated and annoyed that they had to travel further to access support and in circumstances that were unfamiliar to them. They felt that organisations working in recovery did not understand how and where individuals and communities accessed daily essential services prior to the fires or apply this to the recovery context.

Recognising the complexity

Community members greatly appreciated the support provided by local recovery staff working on the ground in affected communities. Recognition from government departments and councils that recovery is complex, and that community needs a place-based approach to recovery saw key roles and relationships established in communities.

Community members received practical and psychological support and assistance from Place Managers in East Gippsland, LAROs in Towong and BRV Recovery Hub coordinators in East Gippsland and Alpine shires. IGEM heard from many community members how these staff assisted them to navigate the recovery system and were highly complimentary of the empathy, care and concern showed.

However, communities were very concerned that these staff were going above and beyond their roles and were not provided with additional resources to ease the burden. This was particularly relevant in Alpine and East Gippsland where hub coordinators were essentially working on their own. IGEM did hear that some recovery hubs received additional part time staff but this was not until 2021.

One of the strongest themes IGEM heard from community across all fire-affected areas was the positive impact of the Victorian Bushfire Case Support Program. This was an excellent example of government recognising that recovery is complex and that for many people emergencies exacerbate pre-existing vulnerabilities.

Case support was a very valuable tool in assisting individuals in navigating their recovery. IGEM heard that case support was able to assist people with multiple and complex needs and that it was most effective when people were able to access it early. The most effective examples were when the case support worker was matched to the needs of the individual allowing for the establishment of a good connection. In some cases, people felt that the case support worker had taken on their every issue, and brought relief for them and their family.

“

If I did not have my case manager life would have been so much harder when I reached breaking point... she helped so much. Always listened, offered support and pointed me in the right direction.

Community member



While IGEM heard many examples of excellent support, not all stories of working with case support workers were positive. Some reflected that not all case support workers have enough life experience, nor a human-centred approach, to be supporting families who have gone through significant and often life changing trauma.

In some circumstances case support workers were not available due to the level of loss through the fires and delays with recruitment.

Some people were not able to access a case support worker until many months after the fires.

Use community-led approaches

From the community's perspective, a community-led approach in recovery was continually spoken of by government but was not truly happening on the ground.

IGEM heard many times from community that 'community-led means nothing or what does community-led actually mean?' The level to which communities were involved in their own recovery and their capacity to make and influence important recovery decisions was variable across fire-affected areas.

IGEM heard that despite being told communities would make their own decisions about their recovery and in their own time, government was making all the decisions.

IGEM heard about government's micro-management, inflexible timelines for grant applications, and community priorities being constrained and restricted. IGEM also heard that community recovery decisions were being made in Melbourne or Canberra.

An example shared from East Gippsland was of several small communities wanting to set up their own CRC. These communities felt it would be more relevant to set up their own committee than joining in with a larger district. These communities were told they would need a representative group, which they believed they had in their Hall Committee, only to be told they were not big enough to be a CRC.

Community members were told that if they were able to 'drum up interest in a couple of weeks', BRV would consider it – conversely, they were also told that BRV did not want too many CRCs. As this occurred during the COVID-19 pandemic, health restrictions were in place affecting peoples' movement, and it was very difficult for community members to meet up, so it did not proceed.

This left the community feeling frustrated. There was not enough time to get the best outcome for their community which they believed was more appropriate than joining a larger district committee.

This story conflicts with the sector's community-led approach. It was inconsistent with IGEM's experiences with other CRC members who had formed committees in small communities.

CRCs told IGEM that they provided information to BRV, council and other government departments, however information did not always come back down to the committees on the ground. They spoke of providing feedback about grant processes and timelines but did not feel as though their voices were heard. They also shared that despite being directed to undertake community consultation and develop a list of priorities for funding, other community groups had not done this yet received funding.



Community-led CRCs who have taken the time to engage with their community and have workshopped and formally ratified a set of community agreed recovery priorities are not receiving grants, in favour of other entities that have not completed the same.

Community member



IGEM heard that in many cases, communities knew what they needed to do to help their community recover from the fires, but a lack of timely and appropriate levels of funding hampered their ability to do this. IGEM also heard that it was a delicate balance between community leading and community doing everything.

Some members of CRCs told IGEM that being on the committee was like a full-time job – even though they were volunteers. The level of expectation as to what the committees needed to do was overwhelming for many. Community members told of a lack of recognition by organisations working in recovery that many people on the committees were fire-affected themselves and dealing with their own recovery.

Coordinate all activities

One of the strongest themes IGEM heard from community across all fire-affected areas was a lack of coordination in the provision and delivery of recovery services, programs and activities. The most frequently heard issue was that people had to repeatedly tell their story and their situation to multiple agencies, making them feel unheard, frustrated and cynical that anything would get done for them and their community.

They could not understand why agencies could not share information about communities and individual requirements nor why they had to continually provide more information – and this was extremely traumatic. Community members said there was no evidence of a coordinated approach to supporting communities.



I'd say for the first six months every other day there was some other agency ringing me and I'd have to go through the story from the beginning to the end – over and over and over.

Community member



IGEM also heard of a lack of coordination and consultation with local service providers – particularly in provision of community health – and of duplication of services in some areas. This caused confusion for community members who were not sure where to access support and did not necessarily want to engage with a new service provider.

Some local health and medical providers were already delivering a service in their community and had established relationships with clients that had been built over time. There was an opportunity to leverage off these key community service providers and give additional funding to them rather than bring in a new service. Community also recognised that it was these local services who would be left to support the community after funding for new services had been exhausted and external providers had moved on.

Small business owners told that many services and programs were offered to businesses. Like the general community, business owners found it hard to navigate the many services and also experienced a lack of coordination.

The same service being offered by multiple providers did not make sense from a business perspective. Many businesses were facing financial hardship, particularly as result of the COVID-19 pandemic following the fires.

Grants were available to support businesses, but these often focused on providing additional services or were for business planning or providing mentors. Small business owners told IGEM they knew how to run their business and they did not need more business support programs, what they really wanted was actual financial support so they could keep afloat.

Many community members had very positive and successful experience with clean-up. Assessments were conducted early and communication was effective between parties. Some commented on how respectful local contractors were who worked on their clean-up.

Unfortunately, not all community members had positive experiences, and IGEM heard that clean-up was another area which lacked coordination. Some community members told of having multiple assessments, of registering for clean-up multiple times, not being informed as to when their property would be cleaned up and that the blanket asbestos approach which applied even to properties with no likelihood of containing asbestos caused long delays and additional stress.

IGEM also heard that community members experienced damage to their property as a direct result of clean up activity which proved very challenging to rectify, with most giving up as it was just too hard to follow up.

While community members expressed their concern about a lack of coordination in the provision and delivery of recovery services, programs and activities, there was acknowledgment of the role and place of BRV in recovery coordination in the future.

Communicating effectively

There was acknowledgement by community that people recover at different paces and that communication is essential to support the different stages throughout recovery. Community members felt that the communication and support had fallen away in some circumstances, particularly with attention turning to the COVID-19 pandemic.

Community members also raised telecommunication issues which prevented them from hearing about recovery services as they did not have access to the internet or had poor mobile phone coverage. As was evident during the relief phase of the fires, many community members relied on word-of-mouth to learn about what services or support was available in recovery.

Key contacts in the community such as Bush Nurses, local store owners and community leaders were trusted sources who community members relied upon to access information. As noted earlier, many community members in rural areas did not go into community recovery hubs to access information.

Some community members spoke of a lack of information from government departments about progress in recovery. This was particularly relevant to environmental recovery as community members were not aware of what progress was being made about restoration and reopening of public assets such as parks and park infrastructure.

As CRCs established themselves, many focused on communications and set up community newsletters, email distribution groups, websites and Facebook pages. With the support of BRV and councils, these local communication tools helped share a range of recovery information and have become trusted and well regarded.

Recognising and building capacity

The fires affected a range of different communities across East Gippsland, the North East and Alpine regions. Some communities were well connected before the fires, and some were not. Many communities told IGEM that since the fires they have realised that they need and want to do more to build their community's resilience to a range of emergencies.

IGEM heard examples where individual communities were able to mobilise quickly after the fires to bring their community together to discuss their recovery needs and priorities. These communities were generally well connected, often smaller and some had experienced significant fires in the past.

IGEM also heard from communities that were not well connected – where people did not necessarily come together much and where people knew their neighbours but did not really interact at a broader community level. These communities took much longer to establish and build connections, but all agreed the fires had brought them much closer together and that this was extremely positive.

The capacity of a community to come together and plan its recovery had a direct correlation to the level of impact that occurred. While all communities were affected by the fires, it was obvious that where many homes were lost and the community was more dispersed, the capacity for community members to engage with and participate in recovery planning was much less than in areas that did not have such significant impacts.



I think we've been proactive in seeking funding, and that was the beauty of – we did have those early happy hours before COVID got in the way where we had debriefs and we actually listed things people wanted, so we were doing that well before any of the bushfire recovery stuff came about. This is just the way we operate as a community.

Community member



Communities that suffered significant impacts and did not have a strong community connection before the fires, have found it challenging and difficult to manage the recovery process.

Issues raised with IGEM include meeting government and council funding timelines, being ready to apply for grants, conducting community consultation and undertaking community led recovery. They also expressed concern and frustration that government and organisations working in recovery did not acknowledge that most of the people on CRCs, and attempting to do this work, were fire-affected themselves.

“

By the time our community has focused on building community (trust and relationships) and set legitimate priorities for recovery we have found the grants are now in their third iteration.

Community member

The current model has a significant failing due to this, as it appears to have been established with the assumption that affected communities will not only have a sufficient number of people available to draw from, but most significantly that these people will have the necessary skills and time available for them to be able to coordinate and achieve the intended outcomes of the CRC whilst also trying to manage their own individual recovery for themselves, their families and their property.

Community member



As in relief, community members told IGEM that government and organisations working in recovery did not take into consideration the community and local organisational capacity when determining what recovery programs and services the community needed. While they acknowledged that local organisations may have had limited resources, they did have local knowledge and pre-existing relationships. With additional resources, these groups would have been able to increase their capacity. They saw this as a missed opportunity to support and build capacity and resilience in their community.



Strengthening communities

Building community resilience and making their community stronger and better prepared for future emergencies was a high priority for all communities that IGEM spoke with over the course of Phase 2 of the Inquiry. Many community members saw this as a key outcome of recovery and had identified a range of preparedness actions that they wanted to implement to increase their resilience.

Some actions include purchasing equipment that could be used by individuals such as firefighting slip-ons, generators and UHF radios. Other priorities were developing local emergency management plans, working in partnership with the fire agencies on fuel reduction around their community and developing community education campaigns. For most communities, actioning these priorities required accessing funding from a range of different sources.

IGEM consistently heard that despite these key priorities for communities being identified in local community recovery plans there was not much assistance from government, councils and fire agencies.

Only some communities had been successful in acquiring funding for preparedness activities and this was causing a significant amount of frustration. Community members said that despite this being a high priority for them, their projects did not meet the criteria for available funding. Many people told IGEM that this lack of action was having a direct impact on individual and community recovery. There was a high level of anxiety about the 2020–21 fire season – most felt nothing had changed; the risk was still present and they did not feel any safer.

Despite there being a lack of action in the preparedness space, IGEM heard many stories of communities supporting each other and working together in recovery. Communities recognised that government, councils and fire agencies will not always be able to help them during and after a fire and so they need to help themselves. What they told IGEM they did need is the financial support of these organisations to enable this to happen.



Ensuring an inclusive approach

Communities are made up of many different groups including those who have lived in an area all their lives and those that are new to the community. There are older people, children and young people, people with a disability, people from different cultural backgrounds, Aboriginal people, people who are gender diverse, people from different religious groups and more.

IGEM heard that some CRCs had been able to attract a diverse range of people to their membership and had worked hard to ensure there was appropriate representation from different groups in the community. Others had struggled to get the balance right.

Young people reported limited opportunity to be actively engaged in relief and recovery efforts in their community. Overwhelmingly, young people reported a desire to be involved and acknowledged for their skills and capability.



Involving young people in recovery, because it doesn't just make the program better, it makes the community stronger.

Community member



Aboriginal community members told IGEM that the BRV Line of Recovery – Aboriginal Culture and Healing had created some division among different mobs as they felt they were competing against each other for funding. Smaller groups who were not recognised reported that it was harder to commence recovery work when funding was delayed.

In one Aboriginal community there was a level of discomfort that there was money for Aboriginal families (some of whom were not seriously affected), yet other members of the community who were badly affected were still suffering not having their basic needs met. They felt that this created division in the broader community and was not inclusive.

There was a consistent theme across many fire-affected communities that recovery services and programs needed to be delivered to the people rather than the people coming to the service. This was very strong in more rural areas where community members indicated that they were not comfortable going into recovery hubs to access support. Understanding and responding to the diverse needs of the community would ensure a more inclusive approach to recovery.

Challenges for community

IGEM heard from across the fire-affected areas that a significant challenge facing community was the workload and expectation placed on CRCs whose members are volunteers and who are supporting their communities, as well as trying to recover themselves. Community spoke of a need for a balance between bringing in the right people to do the work and enabling the communities to lead the recovery work.

CRCs are an example of community leadership in action however there is a concern that it is the same people putting their hand up to support their local community and that this is not sustainable. IGEM heard that in many instances, women were taking active roles in leading recovery and supporting community, while men were busy 'working and fixing things'.

Understanding who does what in recovery and knowing the roles and responsibilities of various agencies working in recovery is challenging for community. IGEM heard examples of community being unable to resolve issues as no-one would take responsibility. Community members were sent back and forth to different organisations which caused a large degree of frustration and angst.

The removal of and clean-up of debris and dangerous trees on public land and roads and fencing on some public land (not state and national forests) were two areas raised many times with IGEM.

Another challenge for individuals and communities included having to manage the expectations of some volunteer organisations working in recovery that dictated what they wanted in return for providing their service. This included the provision of meals and locations where they could set up camps. Where individuals and communities could not meet these expectations, they missed out.

A significant challenge was how recovery progress affects the health and wellbeing of individuals and community. Many people told IGEM that recovery was so slow, that there were so many processes and delays and they just could not get going.

Delays in re-opening parks and spaces enjoyed by the community before the fires was impacting on their health and wellbeing. While delays in receiving a concessional loan meant businesses could not get moving and may have put their recovery back years.

The timeliness and complexity of planning and rebuilding delayed rebuilding. Confusion over BAL ratings caused frustration and delays, and the lack of tradespeople and contractors meant community members were waiting a long time to see any work on their property. Many people said that this was the hardest part of recovery – 'waiting for things to happen'.

Living in the areas affected by the fires was a constant reminder of the event and the trauma that goes with it.

The lack of community-focused debriefing in the fire-affected areas was extremely challenging for many communities. Not being able to debrief with the fire agencies and councils until more than 12 months after the fires had a significant impact on community recovery. Some communities were able to participate in debriefs in 2020, however this was limited by the COVID-19 pandemic.

Community felt responder agencies and government could have planned to hold formal debriefs, or schedule less formal debriefing opportunities. The delayed debriefs contributed to a large amount of community anger. It prevented many communities from accepting what occurred during the emergency, repairing relationships with responder agencies and government and from shifting their focus to recovery.

Insurance is a widespread concern for the community including those who did not have enough to cover all the aspects of their loss – from the house and fencing, through to the loss of income for those who worked the land. There is also concern for future needs with some reporting that they are unable to obtain suitable insurance. Those that can get insurance found that their premiums are increasing.

A further challenge for some community members, especially in East Gippsland and the North East region, was the secondary events that occurred following the fires such as severe rain which led to flooding. These events and associated damage and impact on properties were eligible categories for funding or compensation. Some farmers had rebuilt fences only for them to be washed away multiple times. Paddocks and roads were damaged as debris including trees, rocks and silt were washed down the hills.

COVID-19 pandemic and bushfire recovery

For individuals and community, the COVID-19 pandemic had a significant impact on recovery.

IGEM heard from many people who shared stories of communities coming together after the fires for community barbecues, get-togethers and dinners. This gave people the chance to talk about the fires, they felt close and connected and they did not need to repeat their story as everyone who came to these events already knew the story.

For some communities, it also gave them a chance to think and talk about what they needed to make their community safer and to discuss their recovery priorities. This time brought community closer together and this was important in their recovery.

Unfortunately, when health restrictions were introduced across the state in late March 2020, all of this stopped. Communities were no longer able to come together face-to-face which had a direct impact on their recovery. Some community members felt forgotten, as though the broader community had forgotten about the bushfires.

Community members saw the COVID-19 pandemic as being responsible for the delay in community debriefing, establishment of recovery hubs and CRCs. They also said that the COVID-19 pandemic impacted community and support organisations in their ability to maintain services locally. The lockdowns across Victoria meant that many services were delayed or not available in person.

As community members were not interacting with each other in their usual ways, it was harder to check in on people and see how they were going. IGEM heard that over time, and with the impact of COVID-19, some communities and individuals have drawn further apart.

Twelve months on, young people looked back on 2020 as a missed opportunity to provide support for them in local communities.



Twelve months on we are still struggling.

Community member



Most young people felt that the COVID-19 pandemic took bushfire support and recovery off the agenda. It was only in 2021 that they were starting to see evidence of recovery through accessible support services, although they remain largely unaware of, or uninvolved with community recovery efforts. They also clearly stated that COVID-19 has had a significant impact on their recovery from the bushfires.



The fires got forgotten with COVID and home schooling/working. As a result, none of us have even talked about the fires. Nothing has been recognised after COVID, there has been very little opportunities to talk as a group.

Community member

It was isolating, there was no opportunity to come together as a community and just talk, as soon as we could return back home, everyone outside the area stopped talking about the fires. School was something that was good about recovery, I could be with people my age who understood the experience and that was comforting.

Community member



Community members were open and honest and spoke from the heart.

IGEM is grateful to those who shared their stories and experiences of recovery despite it being a difficult and often emotional conversation. It has helped to identify from the community's point of view of what did and did not work, and has provided a clear insight into what community would like to see done differently in future events.

Overall, what communities shared was that most of the fire-affected communities do not feel any safer than they did before the fires. They want to be more resilient and better prepared for emergencies. They said this will help them to recover from these fires. They want to be safe and secure, healthy and well, cohesive and connected.

They are not there yet.

Future directions for community recovery

Some communities had very clear expectations for recovery, the roles they would like to assume and the most helpful roles for government. Some of these expectations were in place prior to the fires based on previous experience and interactions with the sector and government. Other ideas formed in light of positive and negative experiences during recovery from the 2019–20 fires.

Communities are self-sufficient and equipped to look after themselves during and immediately after an emergency. This was often overlooked by government and responder agencies. Specific cohorts felt particularly excluded from recovery, including young people.

Young people were interested in being involved in all phases and stages of emergency management. They wanted community organisations, councils, the sector and broader community to recognise their capabilities and desire to take an agentic role in reducing their vulnerability and supporting their community.

Youth-focused organisations recognise the importance of funding youth workers in regional and rural areas, particularly those areas prone to emergencies. This ensures a holistic, effective, efficient and sustainable solution that supports young people to build resilience and connection before emergencies, and to cope through the longer-term recovery period.

Young people told IGEM that they wanted to be better and directly informed about a range of issues they experienced through the 2019–20 fires. These issues included bushfire risk and threat, personal and community response plans, as well as practical knowledge of evacuation strategies, communication and support. They also wanted to be better prepared for how adults respond in stressful situations.

Young people also benefitted from having dedicated, youth-safe spaces in communities as part of building resilience for emergency management. In places where this occurred, there was greater opportunity for localised support and information sharing between peers.

Aboriginal Victorians were also excluded from recovery initiatives and poorly represented on CRCs.

Cultural safety and feelings of being an outsider made it difficult for Aboriginal Victorians to participate in community initiatives. However, they were adamant that many aspects of their culture, connection to Country and knowledge of the land has provided them a valuable skillset that could benefit all aspects of recovery. These differences were a strength, rather than a vulnerability.

Communities raised several ideas to facilitate stronger and more efficient community-led recovery. While communities were able to identify recovery needs and priorities, there were logistical supports that would have streamlined their ability to shape these ideas into tangible requests and applications for government support.

Communities recognised the need for administration and project management support for CRCs. They were frustrated by the ongoing need to provide information and evidence to demonstrate their impacts and recovery priorities and strongly supported a system that facilitated appropriate data sharing during recovery.

Grant applications were a major burden and source of frustration for individuals and community organisations. Communities told IGEM they want a coordinated, consistent and simple approach to grants. They want support going through recovery and help to assess which grants they are eligible for.

Developing a grants program that provides flexibility for when people can apply and provision of resources to support people in the application and implementation of the grant will enable communities to recover at their own pace.

Observations, findings and recommendations

Chapter 3 Foundations of emergency management

Finding 3.1	Council capacity to conduct secondary impact assessment is stretched and further compromised by inefficiencies in impact assessment processes, guidance and tools.
Finding 3.2	The centralised portal for sharing impact assessment data did not facilitate efficient information sharing between agencies due to system-based errors, usability constraints and unresolved information access permissions between organisations.
Finding 3.3	The systems and procedures for collecting and collating data did not support more informed relief and recovery planning, and increased community stress following the 2019–20 Victorian fire season.
Finding 3.4	Information-sharing practices between Victorian relief and recovery organisations during and after the 2019–20 Victorian fire season did not align with communities' expectations.
Finding 3.5	Information-sharing practices are not meeting the needs of affected communities and individuals who are required to re-tell their stories, compile various forms of evidence to demonstrate impacts and navigate systems and processes that were stressful and difficult.
Observation 3.1	Throughout 2020 and 2021 the operation of an incident-focused recovery forum has provided oversight for recovery following the 2019–20 Victorian fire season. Despite this, there is no dedicated, strategic body to provide system-wide direction for emergency relief and recovery from all emergencies in Victoria.
Observation 3.2	A recommendation has been made by the Victorian Information Commissioner to develop an information sharing framework to improve decision-making during emergencies.
Recommendation 1	<p>The Inspector-General for Emergency Management recommends that Emergency Management Victoria and the entity referred to in Recommendation 13, or otherwise responsible government department – in consultation with the emergency management sector – establish policies and platforms to improve operational and personal information sharing between relief and recovery organisations. These policies and platforms should enable:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> (a) timely and comprehensive sharing of data related to impacts and consequences of emergencies (b) increased ability to provide streamlined and proactive relief and recovery support services and financial assistance to affected individuals, families, businesses and community groups.

Chapter 4 Relief and recovery capacity

Finding 4.1	There is a shortage of dedicated relief and recovery capability and capacity across government organisations in Victoria.
Finding 4.2	During operational periods, there is a lack of consistent leadership capability to ensure relief and recovery priorities are considered as part of the overall response.
Finding 4.3	The reimbursement of costs associated with municipal resource sharing is burdensome and often unsuccessful for councils.
Finding 4.4	Municipal resource sharing was essential in providing the capacity and capability required to deliver on councils' roles and responsibilities during the prolonged and complex relief and recovery efforts of the 2019–20 Victorian fire season.

Finding 4.5	Despite councils having critical roles in relief and recovery and known capacity constraints, there are limited centralised capability development opportunities to increase skill and knowledge consistency across councils and facilitate municipal resource sharing.
Finding 4.6	Community organisations and individuals provided an important source of capacity and capability during relief and recovery of the 2019–20 Victorian fire season.
Finding 4.7	Large numbers of Victorians spontaneously volunteered their time and services to support fire-affected communities during and immediately after the 2019–20 Victorian fire season.
Finding 4.8	There is no Victorian system in place or defined lead agency to plan for and coordinate spontaneous volunteers.
Observation 4.1	In cases where relief roles and responsibilities were assigned to operational leaders, there was better planning and consideration of community’s relief and early recovery needs. However, these leaders drew on personal experiences and advice rather than formal training and guidance.
Recommendation 2	The Inspector-General for Emergency Management recommends that Emergency Management Victoria and the entity referred to in Recommendation 13, or otherwise responsible government department – in collaboration with the relevant relief and recovery organisations: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> (a) identify the core capabilities required for operational relief and recovery roles at state, regional and incident levels (b) coordinate capability development opportunities to develop a consistent level of capability in relief and recovery for relevant agencies at the state, regional and incident levels.
Recommendation 3	The Inspector-General for Emergency Management recommends that the Department of Jobs, Precincts and Regions works with the entity referred to in Recommendation 13, or otherwise responsible government department and/or Municipal Association of Victoria, councils and local relief and recovery organisations to provide centralised capability development opportunities to increase local capability and capacity to plan and deliver on their relief and recovery responsibilities: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> (a) for emergencies of variable scale, complexity and duration (b) in a manner that caters to the needs of diverse communities.
Recommendation 4	The Inspector-General for Emergency Management recommends that Emergency Management Victoria and the entity referred to in Recommendation 13, or otherwise responsible government department develop and resource an ongoing strategy to coordinate spontaneous volunteers that can be activated before, during or after emergencies.

Chapter 5 Relief and recovery funding

Finding 5.1	There were a large number of government entities and non-government organisations distributing relief and recovery grants and funding with limited coordination of eligibility requirements, application processes, communication strategies and timings.
Finding 5.2	The amount of support provided by the Australian and Victorian governments to Victorians after an emergency varies greatly between emergencies, making it difficult for recovery organisations to develop pre-determined recovery plans and financial assistance strategies.
Finding 5.3	Impact assessment data does not allow for the accurate estimation of recovery costs due to inconsistency and delays in data collection and reporting.

Finding 5.4	There is limited surety of recovery funding, which reduces government and organisations' ability to plan for and resource medium and long-term recovery needs.
Finding 5.5	The current funding system makes it difficult for government and organisations to build back better as there is a higher level of scrutiny for Category D applications under the Disaster Recovery Funding Arrangements.
Finding 5.6	The application and eligibility requirements for community and individual grants and funding is inflexible, onerous, confusing and distressing for affected individuals and communities and does not reflect the person-centred and trauma-informed approach to recovery supported by the Victorian Government.
Finding 5.7	The coordination, communication and timing of grants and funding creates a large amount of distress, anxiety and perceptions of unfairness across affected communities as they feel they may miss opportunities or be required to apply when they are not completely aware of their recovery needs and priorities.
Finding 5.8	The lack of data and information sharing across government recovery entities results in inefficient grant application processes for affected individuals as they need to repeatedly share information in order to apply for recovery support.
Finding 5.9	Communities were motivated to invest in preparedness activities following the 2019–20 Victorian fire season.
Finding 5.10	The current funding arrangements make it difficult for communities to support their recovery through investments in emergency preparedness initiatives that increase their resilience for future emergencies.
Finding 5.11	The ability of Community Recovery Committees, councils and other locally-led recovery groups to develop and progress community-led recovery is constrained by the level of oversight administration involved in government recovery funding.
Finding 5.12	There is a very high level of reporting required to demonstrate appropriate expenditure of recovery funds, which limits the ability of government to support early community recovery expenses and community-led recovery initiatives.
Finding 5.13	The collection and disbursement of financial donations caused frustration and mistrust for donors and affected individuals as the obligations of charities and their plans for using donated money were not clearly communicated to the public.
Observation 5.1	Bushfire Recovery Victoria has established funding mechanisms to support individuals and businesses experiencing indirect impacts of the fires. These mechanisms could be further refined and communicated to support those who did not suffer direct fire-impacts and ensure the broader community understands the need for this type of financial assistance
Observation 5.2	The current funding system is based on individuals finding and applying for financial assistance where they meet the eligibility criteria. There are opportunities to support a more proactive funding system using available data to facilitate applications for which individuals are known to be eligible.
Observation 5.3	The early recovery needs of communities often required a high level of flexibility but low levels of funding to meet the diverse and unique needs of fire-affected communities.
Observation 5.4	The Victorian Government strongly encourages financial donations during and after major emergencies. However, it does not have a role in overseeing financial donations provided and does not assume a clear role in explaining how financial donations can be used by charities.
Observation 5.5	There is scope for government and the insurance industry to work towards building more equitable outcomes that address issues including mitigation and consumer affordability.

Recommendation 5	<p>The Inspector-General for Emergency Management recommends that the entity referred to in Recommendation 13, or otherwise responsible government department, works with the emergency management sector to develop a recovery funding model that enables:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> (a) timely estimation of recovery costs based on the impact of the emergency (b) consistency in government-based recovery support for organisations, councils, communities, businesses and individuals (c) short, medium and long-term recovery planning and resourcing (d) immediate local recovery progress by reducing administrative funding impediments for local organisations while retaining appropriate accountability mechanisms for expenditure.
Recommendation 6	<p>The Inspector-General for Emergency Management recommends that the entity referred to in Recommendation 13, or otherwise responsible government department, leads the development of a comprehensive, person-centred, trauma-informed recovery financial assistance system that establishes:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> (a) clear and transparent overview of grant and financial assistance eligibility requirements (b) flexibility in the timing of application processes (c) a streamlined application process for individuals, families, businesses and community recovery groups (d) proactive outreach from relevant government agencies to affected individuals, families, businesses and community recovery groups to facilitate and encourage receipt of financial assistance where eligible.

Chapter 6 Public communications

Finding 6.1	The Relief and Recovery section of the VicEmergency website was not used as a primary source of information sharing with the public and was not kept up to date during and after the 2019–20 Victorian fire season.
Finding 6.2	There is no centralised source of information providing affected communities with time-sensitive relief and recovery information.
Finding 6.3	Localised sources of information such as formal community meetings and community initiated gatherings were found to be beneficial to those seeking information about relief and early recovery support during and after the 2019–20 Victorian fire season. As well as providing a locally relevant source of information they also provided opportunities for personal and practical support.
Finding 6.4	The number of organisations involved in recovery from the 2019–20 Victorian fire season resulted in poorly coordinated public communications.
Finding 6.5	There are few strategies in place to guide relief and recovery organisations in communicating issues that require well-planned and implemented public messaging.
Finding 6.6	There is a high volume of recovery information that is valuable to communities, but there is a limited amount of information that communities can effectively digest and retain during and immediately after an emergency.
Observation 6.1	It is appropriate that public information critical to life safety, health and predicted fire behaviour takes priority over relief and recovery information in VicEmergency information and warning messages.
Observation 6.2	Community driven communications in relief and recovery rely on people within the communities having access to accurate and up-to-date information. The reach and relevance of these communications is potentially very high, however, relies on well-established connections across all parts of the community.

Observation 6.3	Social media is a valuable means of communicating with communities affected by emergencies. There are opportunities for this communication medium to be better resourced and used by the Victorian emergency management sector.
Recommendation 7	The Inspector-General for Emergency Management recommends that Emergency Management Victoria and / or the entity referred to in Recommendation 13, or otherwise responsible government department, work with councils and government to refine an operational relief and recovery public communications strategy that: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> (a) ensures time-critical response and safety information is clear and concise (b) provides a centralised information point for time-critical relief and early recovery information.
Recommendation 8	The Inspector-General for Emergency Management recommends that Emergency Management Victoria and the entity referred to in Recommendation 13, or otherwise responsible government department, coordinate ongoing education campaigns to increase public awareness of community roles and responsibilities during periods of emergency relief and recovery.

Chapter 7 Relief governance

Finding 7.1	There is no preferred, sector-wide set of outcomes for the provision of emergency relief in the Victorian emergency management system.
Finding 7.2	There is a lack of consistent, comprehensive and current plans and policies describing the provision of emergency relief activities in the Victorian emergency management system.
Finding 7.3	State operational procedures do not provide a clear and consistent description of the interaction between response and relief activities and the relevant reporting lines for relief.
Finding 7.4	The emergency management sector needed to make changes to existing relief arrangements and form new structures and committees to ensure the provision of relief responded to needs.
Finding 7.5	The introduction of the State Emergency Relief Coordinator provided a much-needed focus on relief coordination at the state tier.
Finding 7.6	The separation of relief and recovery roles during the 2019–20 Victorian fire season was appropriate as the scale of the relief and recovery efforts required exceeded the capacity of the State Relief and Recovery Manager and State Relief and Recovery Team.
Finding 7.7	The establishment of the Combined Agency Operations Group, the Bushfire Response and Recovery Taskforce, the State Emergency Relief Coordinator and State Relief Team during the 2019–20 Victorian fire season: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> (a) increased relief leadership, oversight and tasking ability (b) led to duplication and inefficiencies due to evolving role descriptions, accountabilities and reporting lines.
Finding 7.8	During the 2019–20 Victorian fire season the role of the regional tier relief coordination was not clear due to a lack of understanding of plans, processes and the addition of the Regional Relief Cell.
Finding 7.9	The role of a Deputy Incident Controller for relief provided a much-needed focus on relief at the incident tier.
Finding 7.10	There were inconsistent understandings of organisational roles and responsibilities in relief. The escalation points between state, regional and incident tiers were not well understood by organisations, which created further confusion across the emergency management sector.

Finding 7.11	Existing relief documentation is inconsistent, lacking in detail and does not adequately describe how relief functions are operationalised at all three tiers.
Observation 7.1	The creation of the Combined Agency Operations Group built upon existing arrangements between the Victorian and Australian governments and provided the necessary capacity and logistical expertise to support humanitarian relief with air, ground and sea capabilities.
Observation 7.2	The Bushfire Response and Recovery Taskforce provided a necessary forum to ensure communities' relief and recovery needs were identified and addressed. The structure and membership of the taskforce allowed appropriate government oversight, efficient tasking and relief coordination.
Observation 7.3	The Victorian emergency management sector has begun the process of separating the functional coordination of relief from recovery in the State Emergency Management Plan. However, there remains a need for greater clarity in operational procedures, role descriptions, accountability and reporting.
Recommendation 9	<p>The Inspector-General for Emergency Management recommends that the Emergency Management Commissioner strengthen the State Emergency Management Plan and supporting operational arrangements in accordance with his legislative obligations to ensure the roles and responsibilities of the State Emergency Relief Coordinator and the State Relief and Recovery Team are clear.</p> <p>These documents should enable:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> (a) appropriate communication and tasking between the state, regional and incident/local tiers in relation to relief priorities (b) clear accountability and reporting arrangements for senior operational leaders including the Emergency Management Commissioner, State Response Controller and State Recovery Coordinator.
Recommendation 10	<p>The Inspector General for Emergency Management recommends that Emergency Management Victoria lead the development of relief arrangements to achieve greater clarity of roles, reporting and accountability in relief across state, regional and incident tiers. These arrangements should:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> (a) incorporate local knowledge and leverage local capabilities in the development of these arrangements (b) be used to develop training opportunities and materials to increase relief capability across the sector, with a particular focus on capability development of operational leaders (c) coordinate multi-agency exercises to practise and refine these relief arrangements.

Chapter 8 Humanitarian relief

Finding 8.1	Council resource sharing to support the activation and prolonged operation of emergency relief centres was constrained by differences in planning, capability and approach across councils.
Finding 8.2	The scale and duration of relief exceeded municipal council ability to establish emergency relief centres when and where required.
Finding 8.3	Local healthcare providers held valuable local knowledge and offered a capacity that was under-utilised during and immediately after the 2019–20 Victorian fire season due to a lack of collaborative planning and integration with health emergency management structures.

Finding 8.4	The community's predominant health and medical needs were more aligned with the primary healthcare expertise of local primary healthcare services than the pre-hospital expertise of responder personnel. Despite this, there were limited plans made to incorporate local primary healthcare providers into the strategic health operations during the 2019–20 Victorian fire season.
Finding 8.5	In the absence of supply and priority distribution protocols, relief agencies relied on existing relationships and just-in-time tasking.
Finding 8.6	The needs and values of Aboriginal Victorians are not well understood across the Victorian emergency management sector and there is a limited amount of planning to ensure Aboriginal culture and connection to Country are considered in the planning and provision of relief.
Finding 8.7	There were limited suitable options to provide emergency shelter and accommodation for people living with a disability.
Observation 8.1	Staffing an emergency relief centre is resource intensive and councils are generally only able to staff an emergency relief centre for 24–48 hours from within their own council resources.
Observation 8.2	The current approach to planning emergency relief centres does not recognise the diversity of relief circumstances and potential community needs. There are opportunities to build contingencies into emergency relief centre planning to accommodate the learnings of the 2019–20 Victorian fire season in relation to community isolation, prolonged periods of shelter and community-led activation of centres.
Observation 8.3	There were inconsistencies between organisations in the approach to establishing emergency relief and safety considerations of staff.
Observation 8.4	Community members often self-mobilised to provide psychosocial support in relief centres where formal support was not available or insufficient. There was little formal planning or coordination in place at the local, regional or state level to support or relieve these community members who were working in stressful and difficult circumstances with many traumatised people.
Observation 8.5	There is an opportunity to improve data management of <i>Register.Find.Reunite</i> paper-based registrations and facilitate information sharing to a broader range of agencies across jurisdictions.
Observation 8.6	While government and organisations with specified roles in relief need to provide outreach in a coordinated manner, organic community outreach initiatives should be encouraged, supported and acknowledged.
Observation 8.7	Further opportunity exists to extend and expand the collaborative relationship of all local healthcare providers through peak bodies or volunteer organisations into preparedness planning.
Observation 8.8	There are opportunities to better consider the capacity of young people to support their families, neighbours and communities in relief plans.
Recommendation 11	<p>The Inspector-General for Emergency Management recommends that the Department of Jobs, Precincts and Regions work with the Municipal Association of Victoria and councils to build contingencies into emergency relief centre planning to ensure places of shelter are inclusive, recognise diversity and are better placed to support all displaced people in circumstances of:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> (a) community isolation (b) prolonged emergencies (c) community-led activation of centres.

Chapter 9 Donated goods

Finding 9.1	There was no end-to-end process in place in Victoria’s emergency management arrangements to guide the coordination and management of goods donated to fire-affected communities prior and in the immediate aftermath of 2019–20 fires.
Finding 9.2	Public communications in relation to donated goods did not address the inevitable public desire to donate nor provide timely information to promote alternative donating pathways or encourage financial donations.
Recommendation 12	<p>The Inspector-General for Emergency Management recommends that Emergency Management Victoria and the entity referred to in Recommendation 13, or otherwise responsible government department:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> (a) coordinate the development of agreed systems, processes and partnerships that can be activated as soon as potential emergencies are anticipated to ensure greater coordination and management of donated goods (b) incorporate public communication strategies to mitigate the donation of goods as much as possible and socialise appropriate donating channels as defined in the arrangements.

Chapter 10 Restoration of essential services

Finding 10.1	In the absence of strong operational procedures and plans, the food and grocery sector built on existing relationships and a common understanding of relief principles to ensure food and grocery businesses in fire-affected and isolated communities were appropriately resupplied in as timely a manner as possible.
Finding 10.2	The water sector, together with relief agencies were able to meet the basic and immediate needs of fire-affected communities by providing potable water in a timely manner. Incident Control Centres used several transport methods such as road, air, and sea to ensure bottled water was supplied.
Observation 10.1	Victorians were well-supported by the communications sector to ensure services were restored in a timely manner. However, despite known vulnerabilities in the provision of telecommunications services, processes needed to be developed throughout the 2019–20 Victorian fire season to allow safe access for technicians to perform the necessary repair work for the restoration of services.
Observation 10.2	Representatives from the energy sector drew on existing relationships and arrangements to activate the capacity required to restore energy supply and manage energy disruptions in affected areas before and after the fires. However, the capacity was under-utilised due to the scale of the fires and a lack of integration of energy restoration consideration into response arrangements.
Observation 10.3	A greater amount of preparation and planning between responder agencies, government and essential service providers would facilitate faster access to roads to commence road repairs and travel to isolated communities while ensuring safety was maintained.
Observation 10.4	There are opportunities to improve the extent to which essential services are considered in Victorian emergency relief planning.

Chapter 12 Recovery governance

Finding 12.1	Recovery organisations relied on existing relationships and face-to-face recovery meetings to guide recovery planning, coordination and decision-making rather than defined operational arrangements during the response-focused period of the 2019–20 Victorian fire season.
Finding 12.2	Bushfire Recovery Victoria is limited by a lack of appropriate legislative and policy-enabled authority to lead strategic recovery planning and investment beyond the incident-specific recovery coordination associated with the 2019–20 Victorian fire season.
Finding 12.3	Bushfire Recovery Victoria has established several forms of evaluation, reporting and assurance to promote continuous improvement in its approach to recovery coordination for the 2019–20 Victorian fire season.
Finding 12.4	While Bushfire Recovery Victoria’s remit is currently limited to the recovery from the 2019–20 Victorian fire season, it is investing in recovery coordination activities that will be relevant and of benefit to future recovery efforts.
Finding 12.5	The State Emergency Management Plan provides a basic description of Bushfire Recovery Victoria’s role in recovery coordination for those affected by the 2019–20 Victorian fire season, however, includes conflicting information in relation to Victorian recovery coordination in general.
Finding 12.6	There is a lack of role clarity between Bushfire Recovery Victoria, councils and other Victorian Government recovery portfolios.
Finding 12.7	The State Bushfire Recovery Coordination Committee provides government with an appropriate level of oversight for recovery activities and Bushfire Recovery Victoria – with the support of lead government agencies – have refined systems to ensure a high level of transparency in recovery reporting at the state level.
Observation 12.1	The Resilient Recovery Strategy identifies high level, strategic recovery priorities, outcomes and actions. It is not intended to guide recovery operations or define organisational roles and responsibilities.
Observation 12.2	The timing of the establishment of Bushfire Recovery Victoria was not conducive to its inclusion in operational recovery coordination and leadership. Any ongoing recovery entity should be clearly included in operational recovery arrangements, with clear accountabilities, roles and responsibilities across the continuum of recovery – strategic, planning, operational and ongoing recovery.
Observation 12.3	Many of the issues that have been problematic for individuals, businesses and communities in their recovery from the 2019–20 Victorian fire season were also experienced by those impacted by other major emergencies.
Recommendation 13	The Inspector-General for Emergency Management recommends that the Victorian Government establish a permanent and comprehensive entity dedicated to recovery management with the authority, capability, capacity and resourcing to coordinate the planning and delivery of recovery functions for all emergencies.
Recommendation 14	The Inspector-General for Emergency Management recommends that the entity referred to in Recommendation 13, or otherwise responsible government department, work with councils, relevant recovery organisations and communities to develop clear roles and responsibilities for: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> (a) the management and coordination of recovery across the continuum of all aspects of recovery (strategy, planning, operational and ongoing) (b) recovery service delivery to ensure that local service delivery organisations and community networks can be quickly activated to support individuals, families, businesses and communities.

Chapter 13 Clean-up	
Finding 13.1	The outcomes of the Bushfire Recovery Victoria 2020 Clean-Up program were achieved. The program was well monitored and reported on, and works were completed within the designated timeframe.
Finding 13.2	Communication from contractors and coordinators during the Bushfire Recovery Victoria 2020 Clean-Up program did not align with community expectations and caused heightened levels of anxiety and frustration.
Observation 13.1	The Emergency Management Victoria Relief and Recovery Guideline – Natural Disaster Clean-Up Arrangements provides a clear and structured approach to managing clean-up, noting updates are required to reflect that BRV has responsibility for activating the clean-up panel.
Observation 13.2	While the tender process for the pre-selection of clean-up providers in 2018 was competitive, it did not take in to account the circumstantial concerns and potential needs and requirements of affected communities in 2020.
Observation 13.3	A fully funded, comprehensive, state-coordinated clean-up model was selected over a partial state-supported clean-up arrangement co-funded through insurers' contributions. The chosen approach alleviated some community anxiety.

Chapter 14 Supporting local recovery	
Finding 14.1	Governments, councils and recovery agencies do not have a shared understanding of what 'community-led' means in practice.
Finding 14.2	The Victorian Government and statewide recovery agencies did not effectively leverage the skills, experience and local knowledge of community service and healthcare providers.
Finding 14.3	The roles of councils, existing service delivery organisations and Bushfire Recovery Victoria in recovery coordination are unclear and initially inhibited community recovery through inefficient coordination and duplication of effort.
Finding 14.4	The lack of communication and articulation in the community recovery committees' roles and responsibilities led to confusion and unnecessary workloads for committee members.
Finding 14.5	The establishment of Bushfire Recovery Victoria Community Recovery Hubs did not leverage existing local capability and capacity of council and other local services or adequately consider complex community recovery needs.
Finding 14.6	Where communities were supported with appropriately resourced and coordinated outreach, bushfire recovery services effectively connected with people in need of recovery support, particularly those living in remote areas.
Observation 14.1	The lack of shared definition of 'community-led' creates confusion for individuals and communities.
Observation 14.2	The capacity and capability of Bushfire Recovery Victoria Community Recovery Hub Coordinators was largely exceeded due to the complexity of community recovery needs they were facing. There is an urgent need to review the service delivery model for Community Recovery Hubs to optimise community recovery outcomes and ensure recovery personnel are well-supported in their work.

Observation 14.3	Bushfire Recovery Victoria’s community-led recovery model and commitment to working directly with individuals and communities overlaps with councils’ roles in coordinating community recovery.
Recommendation 15	<p>The Inspector-General for Emergency Management recommends that the entity referred to in Recommendation 13, or otherwise responsible government department work with councils and communities before, during and after emergencies to strengthen:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> (a) a common understanding of community-led recovery (b) the role of communities in recovery planning (c) the support, training and resources required to enable community-led recovery.

Chapter 15 People and wellbeing recovery

Finding 15.1	The short-term modular housing program increased the number of temporary accommodation support options. However, the lack of consultation, complexity and rigidity of arrangements caused frustration, confusion and distress for many fire-affected individuals and households.
Finding 15.2	The timing of psychosocial support offerings did not match community need with too much emphasis placed on clinical mental health supports in the very early stages of recovery. Greater focus and investment in low-key personal supports would have suited people better.
Finding 15.3	There is no explicit strategy at the state and municipal levels for capturing and monitoring the entirety of psychosocial recovery activities – including those offered by non-government organisations.
Finding 15.4	Information sharing practices in people and wellbeing recovery programs and broader recovery do not facilitate a streamlined approach to the delivery of recovery services and cause significant levels of frustration and distress for community members.
Finding 15.5	Regional rural financial counselling services are a key source of practical and moral support for farmers and small rural business owners directly and indirectly affected by the 2019–20 Victorian fire season.
Finding 15.6	Windermere’s assertive outreach was a positive initiative that identified residents in need of support who might otherwise have been missed.
Finding 15.7	The Victorian Bushfire Case Support Program is an important source of practical and moral support for fire-affected individuals and families.
Finding 15.8	The lack of long-term resource planning for the Victorian Bushfire Case Support Program creates unnecessary uncertainty for agencies, their workers and the fire-affected individuals and families they support.
Finding 15.9	Many aspects of recovery rely on councils’ Environmental Health Officer capacity, which has been stretched throughout recovery to date.
Finding 15.10	The reliance on schools to provide psychosocial support to young people after the 2019–20 Victorian fire season was not inclusive of those who do not attend school and did not reflect the preferences of young people affected by the fires.
Finding 15.11	There is a lack of acknowledgement in state and municipal recovery arrangements of people outside mainstream communities including people living with a disability, culturally and linguistically diverse people and people who identify as Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Intersex, Queer or Questioning. This gap in current planning increases the risk that these communities and individuals will not receive the services they are entitled to.
Observation 15.1	The short-term modular housing program provides a viable, onsite temporary accommodation option for households that have faced extensive property damage.

Observation 15.2	The lack of certainty associated with securing appropriate temporary accommodation caused significant amounts of distress for community members and inhibited their broader psychosocial recovery.
Observation 15.3	The trauma of living through an emergency can limit a person’s ability to absorb information received during or immediately after the event.
Observation 15.4	The lack of coordination between agencies visiting properties to collect information after the 2019–20 Victorian fire season compounded the impact of fires – both for property owners who received multiple visits or those who were not visited at all.
Observation 15.5	By investing heavily in mental health and wellbeing, the Australian and Victorian governments have raised the profile of – and potentially normalised – the strong emotional reactions of people who were affected by the 2019–20 Victorian fire season.
Observation 15.6	A sustained effort and investment is required from the Victorian Government and recovery organisations to mitigate and respond to the emerging risk of post-emergency family violence.

Chapter 16 Recovery of buildings and infrastructure

Finding 16.1	The Victorian Government has effectively put in place appropriate and relevant planning provisions for temporary dwellings and streamlined planning and building regulations to assist communities to rebuild.
Finding 16.2	A lack of capacity and resources limit the councils’ ability to effectively implement rebuilding support activities to communities affected by the 2019–20 Victorian fire season.
Finding 16.3	Landowners do not have good visibility of the implications of Bushfire Attack Level (BAL) ratings for planning and rebuilding, and the costs associated with BAL compliance.
Finding 16.4	The calculation of Bushfire Attack Level (BAL) ratings varied substantially between independent bushfire consultants conducting preliminary BAL assessments and those of the Country Fire Authority.
Finding 16.5	The Complex Sites Taskforce is an effective model to streamline and coordinate complex planning and rebuilding applications.
Observation 16.1	A shortage of builders and registered tradespeople are causing considerable delays in rebuilding.

Chapter 17 Natural environment	
Finding 17.1	The Department of Environment, Land, Water and Planning was not prepared for re-seeding ash forests at the scale required despite it being a known gap in preparedness for post-fire forest restoration.
Finding 17.2	The Department of Environment, Land, Water and Planning and Catchment Management Authorities are delivering waterway recovery actions in a coordinated way and are engaging with communities.
Finding 17.3	The Department of Environment, Land, Water and Planning, and Parks Victoria delivered actions to control pest animals and plants in a coordinated way with substantial outputs on public land.
Finding 17.4	The Department of Environment, Land, Water and Planning did not have sufficient pre-planning to support a strategic approach to emergency extraction of threatened species, including prioritisation, coordination and approvals.
Finding 17.5	The Department of Environment, Land, Water and Planning successfully established a biodiversity recovery program that was delivered rapidly and collaboratively.
Finding 17.6	The Department of Environment, Land, Water and Planning with Parks Victoria delivered works to reinstate park assets and infrastructure in a coordinated way and according to government plans.
Finding 17.7	Arrangements were made to ensure sufficient firewood was available to fire-affected communities, however the process for making salvaged timber available as firewood lacked planning and clarity about roles and responsibilities.
Finding 17.8	Strategies in place to support long-term monitoring of environment and biodiversity recovery and resilience are underdeveloped.
Finding 17.9	There are many stakeholders that provide expertise and capacity for recovery of the natural environment that are not well-integrated into emergency management arrangements, including Zoos Victoria, Royal Botanic Gardens Victoria, academics, not-for-profit organisations, and Traditional Owners.
Finding 17.10	The timing, duration and modes of recovery funding were a barrier to effective planning and delivery of recovery actions for the natural environment.

Chapter 18 Business and economic recovery	
Finding 18.1	The government has provided regional Victorian business communities with appropriate retraining and upskilling programs to improve employment opportunities and resilience for future emergency events.
Finding 18.2	Small business owners were unable or reluctant to apply for financial support due to the poorly timed, frustrating and confusing application processes.
Finding 18.3	The eligibility criteria for general financial support were too narrow and often in opposition to the grants' intended nature. Small businesses' classifications were not appropriately assigned, causing unnecessary financial harm and stress during an already difficult recovery phase.
Finding 18.4	There were many financial support service providers offering small business holders financial support such as coaching and mentoring but not all had a comprehensive understanding the community and its recovery needs.

Chapter 19 Agriculture	
Finding 19.1	While many of the grant programs were indispensable, farming communities experienced many problems, namely with narrow eligibility criteria. Limiting eligibility to primary producer classification, location within a defined disaster area and continuation of business within a specified timeframe excluded many community members.
Finding 19.2	In some instances, there was a lack of coordination of fodder distribution during recovery. This placed significant burden on some farmers who had to personally assist in coordinating fodder distribution.
Finding 19.3	With the increased frequency of emergencies, the costs of insuring fence replacement, as encouraged by the Victorian Government, is becoming prohibitive and in some cases unavailable.
Finding 19.4	The Victorian Government has committed to covering fifty percent of the cost of materials for boundary fences between private and public land. This does not include labour and machinery costs which are a significant additional cost for landholders.
Finding 19.5	There is no state-coordinated approach to recovery for fencing. This is in part due to the Victorian Government not holding responsibility for replacement of boundary fencing between private and Crown land.
Observation 19.1	Many of the grant programs provided to support agricultural recovery were indispensable and effective in supporting recovery.
Observation 19.2	Farmers experienced a range of animal welfare related issues (for example, un milked cows) in the relief and early recovery stages. Road closures were a key cause for delays in returning to properties.
Observation 19.3	Delays in returning to stock as well as accounting for deceased stock negatively impacted the farming community's mental health.
Observation 19.4	While the <i>Fences Act 1968</i> stipulates that owners are liable to contribute in equal proportions to a sufficient dividing fence, it does not apply to unalienated Crown lands, which de facto absolves the Victorian Government from any ownership or financial stake in fences along the boundary of private and public land.
Observation 19.5	Due to the high cost of labour for fencing replacement, landowners often rely on volunteer and charity organisations such as BlazeAid, Uniting Church or Rotary and Lions clubs. However, the experiences of landholders and the quality of fence replacement offered under such arrangements is variable.

Chapter 20 Aboriginal healing and culture	
Finding 20.1	The government's commitment to improving recovery outcomes for Aboriginal Victorians by introducing the Aboriginal Culture and Healing line of recovery has been beneficial.
Finding 20.2	The Aboriginal Reference Group was a key enabler of Aboriginal self-determination in recovery.
Finding 20.3	The Victorian Government is maturing in how it facilitates Aboriginal self-determination during emergency recovery. Improvements have been made in governance structures to facilitate Aboriginal self-determination and lessons are being learned in the process, however it is not yet delivering all the desired outcomes for Aboriginal communities.
Observation 20.1	The current capacity of Victorian Government portfolios with suitable understanding of and expertise in both emergency management and Aboriginal culture is limited and made it difficult to appropriately resource planning and work conducted through the Aboriginal culture and healing line of recovery.
Finding 20.4	The Department of Environment, Land, Water and Planning's Bushfire Biodiversity Response and Recovery program was effective at facilitating Aboriginal-led reading and healing Country activities and was well-received by Traditional Owners.
Finding 20.5	Traditional Owners were not supported to undertake post-fire cultural heritage assessments in a timely way. They were also not well-integrated into impact assessment or emergency stabilisation procedures to protect cultural heritage values.
Finding 20.6	The Victorian Government's safety policies for re-opening public land after bushfire meant that Aboriginal Victorians experienced prolonged separation from Country, which was a barrier to their recovery.
Finding 20.7	There was a lack of culturally appropriate recovery support services for Aboriginal individuals and communities.





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