

# Inquiry into the 2019–20 Victorian fire season



**IGEM**  
Inspector-General  
for Emergency  
Management

## **Phase 2**

Progress and effectiveness  
of Victoria's immediate relief  
and recovery arrangements





# **Inquiry into the 2019–20 Victorian Fire Season**

Phase 2 – Progress and effectiveness  
of Victoria’s immediate relief and  
recovery arrangements to the  
2019–20 fire season



Level 29, 121 Exhibition Street,  
Melbourne VIC 3000  
DX 210077

Phone (03) 8684 7900  
Email [igem@igem.vic.gov.au](mailto:igem@igem.vic.gov.au)  
Web [igem.vic.gov.au](http://igem.vic.gov.au)

30 July 2021

Our ref: CD/21/374718

Hon Danny Pearson MP  
Acting Minister for Police and Emergency Services  
Level 17  
8 Nicholson Street  
EAST MELBOURNE VIC 3002

Dear Minister Pearson

**IGEM Inquiry into the 2019–20 Victorian Fire Season – Phase 2 Report**

In accordance with the letter of request from Minister Neville dated 14 January 2020 under s.64(1)(c) of the *Emergency Management Act 2013* (the Act), and in accordance with the provisions of s.70(4) of the Act, I am pleased to provide you with a copy of the final report from the second phase of my *Inquiry into the 2019–20 Victorian Fire Season – Progress and effectiveness of Victoria's immediate relief and recovery arrangements concerning the 2019–20 fire season* (the Inquiry).

Relevant agencies have been consulted in preparing the report in accordance with s.70(1) and s.70(3) of the Act.

The Inquiry report will be published upon your approval in accordance with s.70(6) of the Act.

It pleases me to present this final Inquiry report to you for consideration.

Yours sincerely,

**Tony Pearce**  
Inspector-General for Emergency Management

**Attachment 1:** *IGEM Inquiry into the 2019–20 Victorian fire season: Phase 2 report*

# Preface

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.

This 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.

Another hallmark of this report is the depth of community input. 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.

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 this 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* (the 10 Year Review) 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 this 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**

## What is in the report?



**Executive summary**  
Summarises the key learnings from the Inquiry.



**Observations, findings and recommendations**  
Lists the observations, findings and recommendations of the Inquiry.



**Chapter 1 – Introduction**  
Provides an overview of the Inquiry and the approach taken to respond to the Terms of Reference provided by the Minister for Police and Emergency Services.



**Chapter 2 – Overview**  
Provides an overview of Victoria's approach to relief and recovery and the overall impacts of the 2019–20 fire season.



**Chapter 3 – Foundations of emergency management**  
Describes the basic concepts of relief, recovery and governance including the sharing of information and data.



**Chapter 4 – Relief and recovery capacity**  
Considers government and local capacity including the role of volunteering in relief and recovery and impacts of recovery work on personnel.



**Chapter 5 – Relief and recovery funding**  
Outlines relief and recovery funding arrangements and approaches to emergency recovery funding including donated money.



**Chapter 6 – Public communications**  
Provides an overview of operational relief and recovery communications and ongoing recovery public communications.



**Chapter 7 – Relief governance**  
Provides an overview of relief arrangements, operational governance in relief and relief activity during the 2019–20 fire season.



**Chapter 8 – Humanitarian relief**  
Outlines the relief activities that supported people's basic needs to ensure their safety and wellbeing during and immediately after the 2019–20 fires.



**Chapter 9 – Donated goods**  
Describes the arrangements and management of donated goods including the impact of donated goods on communities during and after the 2019–20 fires.



**Chapter 10 – Restoration of essential services**  
Provides an overview of the restoration of essential services that were impacted by the 2019–20 fires.



### Chapter 11 – Community reflections on relief

Reflects the experiences of community members in seeking relief from the impact of the 2019–20 fires.



### Chapter 12 – Recovery governance

Provides an overview of operational recovery governance and ongoing recovery coordination.



### Chapter 13 – Clean-up

Outlines how clean-up programs were managed in previous major bushfires and details the 2020 clean-up program including hazardous tree and roadside debris removal.



### Chapter 14 – Supporting local recovery

Addresses the activities related to community-led and community-focused recovery.



### Chapter 15 – People and wellbeing recovery

Outlines the people-focused recovery activities including housing, psychosocial wellbeing and health.



### Chapter 16 – Buildings and Infrastructure

Provides an overview of the impact on buildings and infrastructure and recovery of these assets including enabling planning and rebuilding.



### Chapter 17 – Recovery of the natural environment

Addresses the governance arrangements in place and developed to support the recovery of the natural environment and build resilience in Victoria's flora and fauna.



### Chapter 18 – Business and economic recovery

Provides an overview of the economic recovery plans and activities applicable to local and regional economies and employment, small businesses and the tourism industry including progress of business and economic recovery.



### Chapter 19 – Agriculture

Outlines the response and support provided to the agriculture sector including animal welfare, financial assistance and fencing support.



### Chapter 20 – Aboriginal culture and healing

Provides an overview of government's actions to support Aboriginal culture and healing following the 2019–20 fires including cultural heritage and Aboriginal community support.



### Chapter 21 – Community reflections on recovery

Reflects the experiences of community members as they seek to recover from the 2019–20 fire season.

# Contents

Preface	5
Contents	10
Image credits	15
Acronyms	16
Glossary	20
Executive summary	23
Observations, findings and recommendations	36
Terms of reference	51
<b>Chapter 1 Introduction</b>	<b>53</b>
1.1 The Inquiry	54
1.2 Inquiry aims and objectives	54
1.3 Scope of review	55
1.4 Key stakeholders	56
1.5 Approach	57
1.6 Acknowledgements	60
<b>Chapter 2 Overview</b>	<b>61</b>
2.1 Victoria’s approach to relief and recovery	62
2.2 Overall impacts of the 2019–20 fires	64
<b>Chapter 3 Foundations of emergency management</b>	<b>69</b>
3.1 Conceptualising relief and recovery	70
3.2 Emergency management governance	71
3.3 Resilience and preparedness for relief and recovery	75
3.4 Information and data	77
<b>Chapter 4 Relief and recovery capacity</b>	<b>85</b>
4.1 Government capacity and capability	86
4.2 Local capacity and capability	93
4.3 Volunteering in relief and recovery	96
4.4 The impacts of recovery work on personnel	99
4.5 Maintaining capacity and capability	100
<b>Chapter 5 Relief and recovery funding</b>	<b>101</b>
5.1 Summary of Australian Government funding	102
5.2 Summary of funding arrangements in Victoria	104
5.3 Approach to emergency funding	106
5.4 Community experiences with accessing funding and grants	111

5.5	Donated money	118
5.6	Insurance	123
<b>Chapter 6 Public communications</b>		<b>127</b>
6.1	Operational relief and recovery communications	128
6.2	Ongoing recovery public communications	136
<b>Chapter 7 Relief governance</b>		<b>141</b>
7.1	Emergency relief	142
7.2	Relief arrangements	142
7.3	Operational governance in relief	144
7.4	Relief activity during the 2019–20 fires	151
7.5	Effectiveness of relief during the 2019–20 fires	163
<b>Chapter 8 Humanitarian relief</b>		<b>167</b>
8.1	Emergency shelter	168
8.2	Food, water, and material aid	180
8.3	Psychosocial support	183
8.4	Emergency financial assistance	185
8.5	Reconnecting family and friends	186
8.6	Relief outreach	190
8.7	Healthcare, medical and first aid	194
8.8	Inclusivity and diversity in relief provision	201
<b>Chapter 9 Donated Goods</b>		<b>207</b>
9.1	Arrangements	208
9.2	Managing donated goods	209
9.3	The impact of donated goods on communities	213
<b>Chapter 10 Restoration of Essential Services</b>		<b>217</b>
10.1	Critical infrastructure	219
10.2	Telecommunications	220
10.3	Energy	223
10.4	Roads and transport	226
10.5	Food and grocery resupply	228
10.6	Drinking water	233
10.7	Restoration of essential services	238
<b>Chapter 11 Community reflections on relief</b>		<b>239</b>
	Access to essential support	240
	Timeliness of relief support	243
	Safe spaces	244

Information to communities	245
Diversity in relief services	246
Community resilience	247
Coordination of relief provision	247
Integrated relief services	249
Challenges for community members	250
<b>Chapter 12 Recovery governance</b>	<b>251</b>
12.1 Resilient Recovery Strategy	253
12.2 Operational governance	254
12.3 Ongoing recovery coordination	258
12.4 Effectiveness of recovery arrangements	271
<b>Chapter 13 Clean-up</b>	<b>273</b>
13.1 Past clean-up programs	274
13.2 Legislative framework for clean-up	276
13.3 BRV 2020 Clean-up Program	278
13.4 Effectiveness of clean-up arrangements	280
13.5 Hazardous tree and roadside debris removal	285
13.6 Effectiveness of the clean-up program	287
<b>Chapter 14 Supporting local recovery</b>	<b>289</b>
14.1 Community-focused recovery models	291
14.2 Community-led recovery	296
14.3 Other demonstrations of community-led recovery	306
14.4 Effectiveness of community-led recovery	308
<b>Chapter 15 People and wellbeing recovery</b>	<b>309</b>
15.1 People and wellbeing recovery coordination	310
15.2 Housing and accommodation	312
15.3 Psychosocial and mental health support	316
15.4 Financial counselling	325
15.5 Bushfire Case Support Program	326
15.6 Health and medical assistance	331
15.7 Children, young people and families	334
15.8 Overall effectiveness	338
<b>Chapter 16 Buildings and infrastructure</b>	<b>341</b>
16.1 Buildings and infrastructure recovery	342
16.2 Buildings and infrastructure impact	345
16.3 Enabling planning and rebuilding	345

16.4	Buildings and assets	357
16.5	Transport	358
16.6	Conclusion	362
<b>Chapter 17 Recovery of the natural environment</b>		<b>363</b>
17.1	Arrangements and governance	364
17.2	Forest re-seeding	365
17.3	Waterways	366
17.4	Biodiversity	368
17.5	Community grants	375
17.6	Park assets and visitor infrastructure	375
17.7	Firewood	376
17.8	Regional Forest Agreements	377
17.9	Community feedback	378
17.10	Summary of environment and biodiversity	380
<b>Chapter 18 Business and economic recovery</b>		<b>383</b>
18.1	Business and economy	384
18.2	Economic recovery objectives	387
18.3	Business and investment attraction and retention	389
18.4	Employment	389
18.5	Small business recovery initiatives	392
18.6	Other business grants and funding	396
18.7	Support in accessing grants and funding	397
18.8	Tourism	404
18.9	Progress in business and economic recovery	406
<b>Chapter 19 Agriculture</b>		<b>407</b>
19.1	State response to support agriculture	408
19.2	Animal welfare	411
19.3	Financial assistance	417
19.4	Fencing	423
19.5	Impacts of COVID-19	432
<b>Chapter 20 Aboriginal culture and healing</b>		<b>433</b>
20.1	Arrangements and governance	435
20.2	Cultural heritage	438
20.3	Aboriginal community support	439
20.4	Community feedback	440
20.5	Conclusion	441

<b>Chapter 21 Community reflections on recovery</b>	<b>443</b>
Understanding community context	444
Recognising the complexity	445
Use community-led approaches	446
Coordinate all activities	447
Communicating effectively	448
Recognising and building capacity	448
Strengthening communities	450
Ensuring an inclusive approach	451
Challenges for community	452
COVID-19 pandemic and bushfire recovery	453
Future directions for community recovery	454
<b>Chapter 22 Concluding remarks</b>	<b>455</b>
<b>Chapter 23 References</b>	<b>457</b>
<b>Chapter 24 Appendices</b>	<b>470</b>
24.1 Appendix A: Community engagement strategy and methods	471
24.2 Appendix B: Inquiry stakeholders	480

## Image credits

Front cover	Regrowth at Goongerah, East Gippsland/IGEM
Executive Summary	Original artwork from Growing Back East Gippsland student project/C O'Shannassy
Chapter 1	Original photo from Sarsfield Snaps youth photography project/Emma
Chapter 2	Regrowth at Goongerah, East Gippsland/IGEM
Chapter 3	Staff at Hume-Ovens Incident Control Centre/DELWP
Chapter 4	Incident briefing, East Gippsland/DELWP
Chapter 5	Mallacoota jetty, East Gippsland/IGEM
Chapter 6	Community blackboard, Clifton Creek, East Gippsland/IGEM
Chapter 7	Morning planning session at Wodonga Incident Control Centre /ADF ©Commonwealth of Australia
Chapter 8	Unloading Red Cross food parcels, Chandler's Creek, East Gippsland /ADF ©Commonwealth of Australia
Chapter 9	Local hall filled with donated goods/CFA
Chapter 10	Road clearing between Orbost and Mallacoota, East Gippsland /ADF ©Commonwealth of Australia
Chapter 11	Community meeting at Mount Beauty, North East Victoria/IGEM
Chapter 12	Bushfire Recovery Victoria field day stall, East Gippsland/BRV (C Trist)
Chapter 13	Fire impact and clean-up challenges/D Hogan-Doran
Chapter 14	Outdoor movie night - Walwa/Jingellic, Upper Murray/J Newnham
Chapter 15	Victorian Council of Churches Emergency Ministries volunteers talking with Mallacoota evacuees/ADF ©Commonwealth of Australia
Chapter 16	Road clearing between Omeo and Bairnsdale, East Gippsland/ADF ©Commonwealth of Australia
Chapter 17	Koala at Bairnsdale Wildlife Triage Centre/©State of Victoria, DELWP (M Riederer)
Chapter 18	Local recovery sign, Mallacoota, East Gippsland/J Kiefel
Chapter 19	Feeding cattle after the fires, Walwa, Upper Murray/J Newnham
Chapter 20	GLaWAC Bushfire Recovery Crew working with GHD to learn wildlife monitoring techniques in the Tarra Ranges east of Buchan, East Gippsland/©GLaWAC
Chapter 21	Community meeting at Nariel Valley, North East Victoria/IGEM
Chapter 22	Original artwork from Growing Back East Gippsland student project /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'

**Unless specified all images in this report supplied by IGEM**

## Acronyms

ACT	Australian Capital Territory
ADF	Australian Defence Force
AEMO	Australian Energy Market Operator
AgVic	Agriculture Victoria
AIIMS	Australasian Inter-service Incident Management System
AMR	Australian Medical Rescue
AVA	Australian Veterinary Association
BEWG	Business and Economy Working Group
AUSMAT	Australian Medical Assistance Team
AV	Ambulance Victoria
BAL	Bushfire Attack Level
BBRR	Bushfire Biodiversity Response and Recovery (program)
BIWG	Buildings and Infrastructure Working Group
BMO	Bushfire Management Overlay
BNHCRC	Bushfire and Natural Hazards Cooperative Research Centre
BPA	Bushfire Prone Area
BPVP	Bushfire Preparedness (Vegetation) Program
BRRT	Bushfire Response and Recovery Taskforce
BRV	Bushfire Recovery Victoria
CALD	Culturally and Linguistically Diverse
CAOG	Combined Agency Operations Group
CBBM	Community-Based Bushfire Management
CBEM	Community-Based Emergency Management
CEO	Chief Executive Officer
CERA	Community Emergency Risk Assessment
CFA	Country Fire Authority
CIR	Critical Infrastructure Resilience
CMA	Catchment Management Authority
CRC	Community Recovery Committee
CSIRO	Commonwealth Scientific and Industrial Research Organisation
DELWP	Department of Environment, Land, Water and Planning
DET	Department of Education and Training
DFFH	Department of Families, Fairness and Housing
DHHS	Department of Health and Human Services
DJCS	Department of Justice and Community Safety
DJPR	Department of Jobs, Precincts and Regions
DH	Department of Health
DoT	Department of Transport

DPC	Department of Premier and Cabinet
DRFA	Disaster Recovery Funding Arrangements
DTF	Department of Treasury and Finance
EMC	Emergency Management Commissioner
EM-COP	Emergency Management Common Operating Picture
EMJPIC	Emergency Management Joint Public Information Committee
EMLO	Emergency Management Liaison Officer
EMMV	Emergency Management Manual Victoria
EMV	Emergency Management Victoria
EPA	Environment Protection Authority (Victoria)
ERC	Emergency Relief Centre
FEMA	Federal Emergency Management Agency
FDR	Fire Danger Ratings
FFDI	Forest Fire Danger Index
FFMVic	Forest Fire Management Victoria
FRV	Fire Rescue Victoria
GEGAC	Gippsland and East Gippsland Aboriginal Co-operative
GERF	Gippsland Emergency Relief Fund
GLAWAC	Gunaikurnai Land and Waters Aboriginal Corporation
GVA	Gross Value Added
ICA	Insurance Council of Australia
ICC	Incident Control Centre
IEMT	Incident Emergency Management Team
IGEM	Inspector-General for Emergency Management
IMT	Incident Management Team
JSOP	Joint Standard Operating Procedures
LARO	Local Area Recovery Officer
LGBTIQ+	Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Intersex, Queer or Questioning
LER	Local Economic Recovery (Program)
LGV	Local Government Victoria
LIMP	Local Incident Management Plans
LRP	Local Response Plans
MAV	Municipal Association of Victoria
MEMP	Municipal Emergency Management Plan
MEMPC	Municipal Emergency Management Planning Committee
MERO	Municipal Emergency Resource Officer
MERP	Municipal Emergency Resourcing Program
MFMPCC	Municipal Fire Management Planning Committee
MFPO	Municipal Fire Prevention Officer
MoU	Memorandum of Understanding
MRM	Municipal Recovery Manager

MSAC	Minister’s Special Advisory Council
NBN	National Broadband Network
NBRA	National Bushfire Recovery Agency
NDFA	Natural Disaster Financial Assistance Scheme
NDRRA	Natural Disaster Relief and Recovery Arrangements
NSP	Neighbourhood Safer Place
NSW	New South Wales
OH&S	Occupational Health and Safety
PPE	Personal Protective Equipment
PHAP	Personal Hardship Assistance Program
PHN	Primary Health Networks
PV	Parks Victoria
RAAF	Royal Australian Air Force
RBERP	Regional Business and Economy Recovery Plan
RC	Regional Controllers
RCC	Regional Control Centre
RCT	Regional Control Team
RDV	Regional Development Victoria
RFMPC	Regional Fire Management Planning Committee
RFCS	Rural Financial Counselling Service
RFS	Rural Fire Service (NSW)
RJIF	Regional Jobs and Infrastructure Fund
RJF	Regional Jobs Fund
RRATS	Rapid Risk Assessment Teams
RRV	Regional Roads Victoria
RSPCA	Royal Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals
RSS	Rebuilding Support Service
RTB	Regional Tourism Boards
SBMS	Small Business Mentoring Service
SBRCC	State Bushfire Recovery Coordination Committee
SBV	Small Business Victoria
SCC	State Control Centre
SCoT	State Coordination Team
SCRC	State Crisis and Resilience Council
SCT	State Control Team
SEMC	Security and Emergency Management Committee
SERC	State Emergency Relief Coordinator
SEMP	Victorian State Emergency Management Plan
SEMT	State Emergency Management Team
SERP	State Emergency Response Plan
SERRP	State Emergency Relief and Recovery Plan

SHERA	State Health Emergency Response Arrangements
SHERP	State Health Emergency Response Plan
SOP	Standard Operating Procedure
SPOC	State Police Operations Centre
SReC	State Recovery Coordinator
SRC	State Response Controller
SRN	Sector Resilience Network
SRP	Sector Resilience Plan
SRRM	State Relief and Recovery Manager
SRRT	State Relief and Recovery Team
TEVE	Tourism, Events and Visitor Economy
TISN	Trusted Information Sharing Network
TNE	Tourism North East
TLaWC	Taungurung Land and Waters Council
UHF	Ultra-high frequency
VAGO	Victorian Auditor-General's Office
VBA	Victorian Building Authority
VBRRRA	Victorian Bushfire Reconstruction and Recovery Authority
VBRC	Victorian Bushfires Royal Commission
VCCEM	Victorian Council of Churches Emergencies Ministry
VCOSS	Victorian Council of Social Service
VFF	Victorian Farmers Federation
VCCI	Victorian Chamber of Commerce and Industry
VMIA	Victorian Managed Insurance Authority
VicPol	Victoria Police
VICSES	Victoria State Emergency Service
VPP	Victoria Planning Provisions
VPS	Victorian Public Service
VTIC	Victoria Tourism Industry Council

## Glossary

Term	Definition
10 Year Review	IGEM Review of 10 years of reform in Victoria's emergency management sector
1986 EM Act	<i>Emergency Management Act 1986</i>
2013 EM Act	<i>Emergency Management Act 2013</i>
Australasian Inter-service Incident Management System (AIIMS)	A nationally adopted management framework for organisations working in emergency management, providing a common language and consistent approach for the effective and efficient control of incidents.
All-communities, all-emergencies	A broad approach to emergency management, underpinned by 'working in conjunction with communities, government, agencies and business' and captured in the 'we work as one' sector principle. This approach is an adaption of the 'all-hazards, all-agencies' approach to emergency management.
2009 Victorian bushfires	Sometimes referred to as the 2009 Black Saturday bushfires.
2015 Wye River - Jamieson Track fire	Sometimes referred to as the 2015 Wye River – Separation Creek fire
South East Victoria Fires - March 2019	Fires in March 2019 sometimes referred to as the Bunyip-Tonimbuk and Yinnar South-Budgeree fires or the Bunyip Complex fires.
Black Summer	The 2019–20 Australian bushfire season – a period of unusually intense bushfires in many parts of Australia.
Class 1 emergency	As defined in the 2013 EM Act means: (a) a major fire; or (b) any other major emergency for which the Fire Rescue Victoria, the Country Fire Authority or the Victoria State Emergency Service Authority is the control agency under the State Emergency Management Plan
Community service organisations	A not-for-profit society, association or club established for community service purposes except political or lobbying purposes. Represented by VCOSS as a collective body in Victoria, they include charities, health organisations, frontline humanitarian organisations and social advocacy bodies.
Control agency	An agency nominated to control the response activities for a specified type of emergency.
Councils	A local government authority, municipality, shire, shire council or local council
Coordination	The bringing together of sector organisations, communities and resources to support the response to and recovery from emergencies.
COVID-19 pandemic	The worldwide spread of COVID-19 – the disease caused by a new coronavirus called SARS-CoV-2 identified in 2019.
Department	Victorian Government departments

Emergency	<p>As defined in the 2013 EM Act means:</p> <p>The actual or imminent occurrence of an event which in any way endangers or threatens to endanger the safety or health of any person in Victoria or which destroys or damages, or threatens to destroy or damage, any property in Victoria or endangers or threatens to endanger the environment or an element of the environment in Victoria including, without limiting the generality of the foregoing—</p> <p>(a) an earthquake, flood, windstorm or other natural event; and</p> <p>(b) a fire; and</p> <p>(c) an explosion; and</p> <p>(d) a road accident or any other accident; and</p> <p>(e) a plague or an epidemic or contamination; and</p> <p>(f) a warlike act or act of terrorism, whether directed at Victoria or a part of Victoria or at any other State or Territory of the Commonwealth; and</p> <p>(g) a hi-jack, siege or riot; and</p> <p>(h) a disruption to an essential service</p>
Emergency Alert system	The telephony-based system used by response agencies to send warning messages via mobile and landline telephones to targeted communities.
Emergency management sector	<p>As defined in the 2013 EM Act means:</p> <p>The sector comprising all agencies, bodies, departments and other persons who have a responsibility, function or other role in emergency management.</p>
EMLA Act	<i>Emergency Management Legislation Amendment Act 2018</i>
Government	Victorian Government
Hazard	A source of potential harm or a situation with a potential to cause loss. A potential or existing condition that may cause harm to people or damage to property or the environment.
Incident	<p>An emergency event, occurrence or set of circumstances that:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• has a definite duration</li> <li>• calls for human intervention</li> <li>• has a set of concluding conditions that can be defined</li> <li>• is or will be under the control of an individual who has the authority to make decisions about the means by which it will be brought to a resolution</li> </ul>
Minister	The minister responsible for the administration of the 1986 EM Act and 2013 EM Act or the Victorian Minister for Police and Emergency Services
Phase 1 Inquiry report	<i>IGEM's Report into the 2019–Victorian Fire Season – Phase 1 – community and sector preparedness for and response to the 2019–20 fire season</i>
PM 2.5	Particle matters usually found in smoke. They have a diameter of 2.5 micrometres or smaller.
Royal Commission into National Natural Disaster Arrangements	The Royal Commission into National Natural Disaster Arrangements established on 20 February 2020 in response to the extreme bushfire season of 2019–20 which resulted in loss of life, property and wildlife and environmental destruction.
Red Cross	Australian Red Cross
Resources	The people, equipment or services a sector organisation requires to perform its emergency response role and responsibilities.

Responder agency	As defined in the 2013 EM Act means any of the following: (a) Fire Rescue Victoria; (b) the Country Fire Authority; (c) the Victoria State Emergency Service Authority; (d) the Secretary to the Department of Environment, Land, Water and Planning; (e) any other agency prescribed to be a responder agency
Response and recovery regions	As defined in the <i>Emergency Management Manual Victoria</i> (Part 8): The emergency response and recovery regions are common to the eight State Government regions (three metropolitan and five non-metropolitan). Some departments and agencies may use alternative regional boundaries to deliver normal services efficiently, however the State Government regions are maintained for emergency response and recovery.
Sector	Victorian emergency management sector
Sector organisation	Any organisation or responder agency with roles or responsibilities in the Victorian emergency management sector
State Recovery Plan	Eastern Victorian Fires 2019–20 State Recovery Plan
VicEmergency	A centralised platform that supports the disseminations of emergency information and warnings through a number of communication channels.
Vulnerable person	A person who requires additional support to receive, understand or respond to information before, during or after emergencies.
Windermere	Windermere Family and Child Services

# Executive summary



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. This report 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.

## **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 Inquiry). The Honourable Lisa Neville MP, Minister for Police and Emergency Services (the minister) formally requested the Inspector-General for Emergency Management (IGEM) 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, and Phase 2 – this report – focused on emergency relief and recovery arrangements.

The Phase 1 Inquiry Report was delivered to government on 31 July 2020 and was 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 (10 Year Review)*, 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.

### **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.

The issues surrounding information sharing are discussed in Chapter 3.

### **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.

The issues around capacity and capability are discussed in detail in Chapter 4.

### **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.

Funding arrangements for relief and recovery, donated moneys and the role of insurance are discussed in Chapter 5.

### **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.

The challenges of public communications are discussed in detail in Chapter 6.

### **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.

A detailed discussion of the relief governance arrangements is at Chapter 7.

### **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.

Humanitarian relief to local communities, including the complexities of diversity and medical assistance, is discussed in Chapter 8.

### **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.

Issues around the management of donated good are discussed in Chapter 9.

### **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.

The role of critical infrastructure and the restoration of essential services as part of relief and recovery are discussed in Chapter 10.

### **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.

The detailed arrangements around recovery governance and the creation of BRV are detailed in Chapter 12.

## 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.

Clean-up is addressed in Chapter 13.

## 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.

The issues surrounding the support of community-based recovery are discussed in Chapter 14.

### **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

Individual and community health and wellbeing is discussed in Chapter 15.

### **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.

Issues around the reinstatement of buildings and infrastructure are discussed in Chapter 16.

### **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.

Recovery of the natural environment is dealt with in Chapter 17.

### **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.

A detailed assessment of business and economic recovery is at Chapter 18.

### **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.

These issues are discussed in detail in Chapter 19.

### **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.

Aboriginal culture and healing are discussed in Chapter 20.



Image: Growing Back East Gippsland - Samreen, 9 , Lakes Entrance Primary School

## Observations, findings and recommendations

Chapter 3 Foundations of emergency management	
<b>Finding 3.1</b>	Council capacity to conduct secondary impact assessment is stretched and further compromised by inefficiencies in impact assessment processes, guidance and tools.
<b>Finding 3.2</b>	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.
<b>Finding 3.3</b>	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.
<b>Finding 3.4</b>	Information-sharing practices between Victorian relief and recovery organisations during and after the 2019–20 Victorian fire season did not align with communities' expectations.
<b>Finding 3.5</b>	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.
<b>Observation 3.1</b>	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.
<b>Observation 3.2</b>	A recommendation has been made by the Victorian Information Commissioner to develop an information sharing framework to improve decision-making during emergencies.
<b>Recommendation 1</b>	<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"> <li>(a) timely and comprehensive sharing of data related to impacts and consequences of emergencies</li> <li>(b) increased ability to provide streamlined and proactive relief and recovery support services and financial assistance to affected individuals, families, businesses and community groups.</li> </ul>
Chapter 4 Relief and recovery capacity	
<b>Finding 4.1</b>	There is a shortage of dedicated relief and recovery capability and capacity across government organisations in Victoria.
<b>Finding 4.2</b>	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.
<b>Finding 4.3</b>	The reimbursement of costs associated with municipal resource sharing is burdensome and often unsuccessful for councils.
<b>Finding 4.4</b>	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.

<b>Finding 4.5</b>	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.
<b>Finding 4.6</b>	Community organisations and individuals provided an important source of capacity and capability during relief and recovery of the 2019–20 Victorian fire season.
<b>Finding 4.7</b>	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.
<b>Finding 4.8</b>	There is no Victorian system in place or defined lead agency to plan for and coordinate spontaneous volunteers.
<b>Observation 4.1</b>	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.
<b>Recommendation 2</b>	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"> <li>(a) identify the core capabilities required for operational relief and recovery roles at state, regional and incident levels</li> <li>(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.</li> </ul>
<b>Recommendation 3</b>	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"> <li>(a) for emergencies of variable scale, complexity and duration</li> <li>(b) in a manner that caters to the needs of diverse communities.</li> </ul>
<b>Recommendation 4</b>	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

<b>Finding 5.1</b>	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.
<b>Finding 5.2</b>	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.
<b>Finding 5.3</b>	Impact assessment data does not allow for the accurate estimation of recovery costs due to inconsistency and delays in data collection and reporting.

<b>Finding 5.4</b>	There is limited surety of recovery funding, which reduces government and organisations' ability to plan for and resource medium and long-term recovery needs.
<b>Finding 5.5</b>	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.
<b>Finding 5.6</b>	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.
<b>Finding 5.7</b>	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.
<b>Finding 5.8</b>	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.
<b>Finding 5.9</b>	Communities were motivated to invest in preparedness activities following the 2019–20 Victorian fire season.
<b>Finding 5.10</b>	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.
<b>Finding 5.11</b>	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.
<b>Finding 5.12</b>	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.
<b>Finding 5.13</b>	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.
<b>Observation 5.1</b>	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
<b>Observation 5.2</b>	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.
<b>Observation 5.3</b>	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.
<b>Observation 5.4</b>	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.
<b>Observation 5.5</b>	There is scope for government and the insurance industry to work towards building more equitable outcomes that address issues including mitigation and consumer affordability.

<b>Recommendation 5</b>	<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"> <li>(a) timely estimation of recovery costs based on the impact of the emergency</li> <li>(b) consistency in government-based recovery support for organisations, councils, communities, businesses and individuals</li> <li>(c) short, medium and long-term recovery planning and resourcing</li> <li>(d) immediate local recovery progress by reducing administrative funding impediments for local organisations while retaining appropriate accountability mechanisms for expenditure.</li> </ul>
<b>Recommendation 6</b>	<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"> <li>(a) clear and transparent overview of grant and financial assistance eligibility requirements</li> <li>(b) flexibility in the timing of application processes</li> <li>(c) a streamlined application process for individuals, families, businesses and community recovery groups</li> <li>(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.</li> </ul>

## Chapter 6 Public communications

<b>Finding 6.1</b>	<p>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.</p>
<b>Finding 6.2</b>	<p>There is no centralised source of information providing affected communities with time-sensitive relief and recovery information.</p>
<b>Finding 6.3</b>	<p>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.</p>
<b>Finding 6.4</b>	<p>The number of organisations involved in recovery from the 2019–20 Victorian fire season resulted in poorly coordinated public communications.</p>
<b>Finding 6.5</b>	<p>There are few strategies in place to guide relief and recovery organisations in communicating issues that require well-planned and implemented public messaging.</p>
<b>Finding 6.6</b>	<p>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.</p>
<b>Observation 6.1</b>	<p>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.</p>
<b>Observation 6.2</b>	<p>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.</p>

<b>Observation 6.3</b>	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.
<b>Recommendation 7</b>	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"> <li>(a) ensures time-critical response and safety information is clear and concise</li> <li>(b) provides a centralised information point for time-critical relief and early recovery information.</li> </ul>
<b>Recommendation 8</b>	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

<b>Finding 7.1</b>	There is no preferred, sector-wide set of outcomes for the provision of emergency relief in the Victorian emergency management system.
<b>Finding 7.2</b>	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.
<b>Finding 7.3</b>	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.
<b>Finding 7.4</b>	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.
<b>Finding 7.5</b>	The introduction of the State Emergency Relief Coordinator provided a much-needed focus on relief coordination at the state tier.
<b>Finding 7.6</b>	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.
<b>Finding 7.7</b>	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"> <li>(a) increased relief leadership, oversight and tasking ability</li> <li>(b) led to duplication and inefficiencies due to evolving role descriptions, accountabilities and reporting lines.</li> </ul>
<b>Finding 7.8</b>	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.
<b>Finding 7.9</b>	The role of a Deputy Incident Controller for relief provided a much-needed focus on relief at the incident tier.
<b>Finding 7.10</b>	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.

<b>Finding 7.11</b>	Existing relief documentation is inconsistent, lacking in detail and does not adequately describe how relief functions are operationalised at all three tiers.
<b>Observation 7.1</b>	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.
<b>Observation 7.2</b>	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.
<b>Observation 7.3</b>	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.
<b>Recommendation 9</b>	<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"> <li>(a) appropriate communication and tasking between the state, regional and incident/local tiers in relation to relief priorities</li> <li>(b) clear accountability and reporting arrangements for senior operational leaders including the Emergency Management Commissioner, State Response Controller and State Recovery Coordinator.</li> </ul>
<b>Recommendation 10</b>	<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"> <li>(a) incorporate local knowledge and leverage local capabilities in the development of these arrangements</li> <li>(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</li> <li>(c) coordinate multi-agency exercises to practise and refine these relief arrangements.</li> </ul>

## Chapter 8 Humanitarian relief

<b>Finding 8.1</b>	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.
<b>Finding 8.2</b>	The scale and duration of relief exceeded municipal council ability to establish emergency relief centres when and where required.
<b>Finding 8.3</b>	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.

<b>Finding 8.4</b>	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.
<b>Finding 8.5</b>	In the absence of supply and priority distribution protocols, relief agencies relied on existing relationships and just-in-time tasking.
<b>Finding 8.6</b>	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.
<b>Finding 8.7</b>	There were limited suitable options to provide emergency shelter and accommodation for people living with a disability.
<b>Observation 8.1</b>	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.
<b>Observation 8.2</b>	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.
<b>Observation 8.3</b>	There were inconsistencies between organisations in the approach to establishing emergency relief and safety considerations of staff.
<b>Observation 8.4</b>	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.
<b>Observation 8.5</b>	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.
<b>Observation 8.6</b>	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.
<b>Observation 8.7</b>	Further opportunity exists to extend and expand the collaborative relationship of all local healthcare providers through peak bodies or volunteer organisations into preparedness planning.
<b>Observation 8.8</b>	There are opportunities to better consider the capacity of young people to support their families, neighbours and communities in relief plans.
<b>Recommendation 11</b>	<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"> <li>(a) community isolation</li> <li>(b) prolonged emergencies</li> <li>(c) community-led activation of centres.</li> </ul>

Chapter 9 Donated goods	
<b>Finding 9.1</b>	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.
<b>Finding 9.2</b>	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.
<b>Recommendation 12</b>	<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"> <li>(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</li> <li>(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.</li> </ul>
Chapter 10 Restoration of essential services	
<b>Finding 10.1</b>	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.
<b>Finding 10.2</b>	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.
<b>Observation 10.1</b>	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.
<b>Observation 10.2</b>	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.
<b>Observation 10.3</b>	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.
<b>Observation 10.4</b>	There are opportunities to improve the extent to which essential services are considered in Victorian emergency relief planning.

Chapter 12 Recovery governance	
<b>Finding 12.1</b>	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.
<b>Finding 12.2</b>	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.
<b>Finding 12.3</b>	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.
<b>Finding 12.4</b>	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.
<b>Finding 12.5</b>	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.
<b>Finding 12.6</b>	There is a lack of role clarity between Bushfire Recovery Victoria, councils and other Victorian Government recovery portfolios.
<b>Finding 12.7</b>	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.
<b>Observation 12.1</b>	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.
<b>Observation 12.2</b>	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.
<b>Observation 12.3</b>	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.
<b>Recommendation 13</b>	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.
<b>Recommendation 14</b>	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"> <li>(a) the management and coordination of recovery across the continuum of all aspects of recovery (strategy, planning, operational and ongoing)</li> <li>(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.</li> </ul>

Chapter 13 Clean-up	
<b>Finding 13.1</b>	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.
<b>Finding 13.2</b>	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.
<b>Observation 13.1</b>	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.
<b>Observation 13.2</b>	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.
<b>Observation 13.3</b>	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	
<b>Finding 14.1</b>	Governments, councils and recovery agencies do not have a shared understanding of what 'community-led' means in practice.
<b>Finding 14.2</b>	The Victorian Government and statewide recovery agencies did not effectively leverage the skills, experience and local knowledge of community service and healthcare providers.
<b>Finding 14.3</b>	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.
<b>Finding 14.4</b>	The lack of communication and articulation in the community recovery committees' roles and responsibilities led to confusion and unnecessary workloads for committee members.
<b>Finding 14.5</b>	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.
<b>Finding 14.6</b>	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.
<b>Observation 14.1</b>	The lack of shared definition of 'community-led' creates confusion for individuals and communities.
<b>Observation 14.2</b>	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.

<b>Observation 14.3</b>	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.
<b>Recommendation 15</b>	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: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>(a) a common understanding of community-led recovery</li> <li>(b) the role of communities in recovery planning</li> <li>(c) the support, training and resources required to enable community-led recovery.</li> </ul>

### Chapter 15 People and wellbeing recovery

<b>Finding 15.1</b>	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.
<b>Finding 15.2</b>	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.
<b>Finding 15.3</b>	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.
<b>Finding 15.4</b>	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.
<b>Finding 15.5</b>	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.
<b>Finding 15.6</b>	Windermere's assertive outreach was a positive initiative that identified residents in need of support who might otherwise have been missed.
<b>Finding 15.7</b>	The Victorian Bushfire Case Support Program is an important source of practical and moral support for fire-affected individuals and families.
<b>Finding 15.8</b>	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.
<b>Finding 15.9</b>	Many aspects of recovery rely on councils' Environmental Health Officer capacity, which has been stretched throughout recovery to date.
<b>Finding 15.10</b>	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.
<b>Finding 15.11</b>	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.
<b>Observation 15.1</b>	The short-term modular housing program provides a viable, onsite temporary accommodation option for households that have faced extensive property damage.

<b>Observation 15.2</b>	The lack of certainty associated with securing appropriate temporary accommodation caused significant amounts of distress for community members and inhibited their broader psychosocial recovery.
<b>Observation 15.3</b>	The trauma of living through an emergency can limit a person’s ability to absorb information received during or immediately after the event.
<b>Observation 15.4</b>	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.
<b>Observation 15.5</b>	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.
<b>Observation 15.6</b>	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

<b>Finding 16.1</b>	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.
<b>Finding 16.2</b>	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.
<b>Finding 16.3</b>	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.
<b>Finding 16.4</b>	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.
<b>Finding 16.5</b>	The Complex Sites Taskforce is an effective model to streamline and coordinate complex planning and rebuilding applications.
<b>Observation 16.1</b>	A shortage of builders and registered tradespeople are causing considerable delays in rebuilding.

Chapter 17 Natural environment	
<b>Finding 17.1</b>	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.
<b>Finding 17.2</b>	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.
<b>Finding 17.3</b>	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.
<b>Finding 17.4</b>	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.
<b>Finding 17.5</b>	The Department of Environment, Land, Water and Planning successfully established a biodiversity recovery program that was delivered rapidly and collaboratively.
<b>Finding 17.6</b>	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.
<b>Finding 17.7</b>	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.
<b>Finding 17.8</b>	Strategies in place to support long-term monitoring of environment and biodiversity recovery and resilience are underdeveloped.
<b>Finding 17.9</b>	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.
<b>Finding 17.10</b>	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	
<b>Finding 18.1</b>	The government has provided regional Victorian business communities with appropriate retraining and upskilling programs to improve employment opportunities and resilience for future emergency events.
<b>Finding 18.2</b>	Small business owners were unable or reluctant to apply for financial support due to the poorly timed, frustrating and confusing application processes.
<b>Finding 18.3</b>	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.
<b>Finding 18.4</b>	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	
<b>Finding 19.1</b>	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.
<b>Finding 19.2</b>	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.
<b>Finding 19.3</b>	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.
<b>Finding 19.4</b>	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.
<b>Finding 19.5</b>	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.
<b>Observation 19.1</b>	Many of the grant programs provided to support agricultural recovery were indispensable and effective in supporting recovery.
<b>Observation 19.2</b>	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.
<b>Observation 19.3</b>	Delays in returning to stock as well as accounting for deceased stock negatively impacted the farming community's mental health.
<b>Observation 19.4</b>	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.
<b>Observation 19.5</b>	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	
<b>Finding 20.1</b>	The government's commitment to improving recovery outcomes for Aboriginal Victorians by introducing the Aboriginal Culture and Healing line of recovery has been beneficial.
<b>Finding 20.2</b>	The Aboriginal Reference Group was a key enabler of Aboriginal self-determination in recovery.
<b>Finding 20.3</b>	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.
<b>Observation 20.1</b>	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.
<b>Finding 20.4</b>	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.
<b>Finding 20.5</b>	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.
<b>Finding 20.6</b>	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.
<b>Finding 20.7</b>	There was a lack of culturally appropriate recovery support services for Aboriginal individuals and communities.

## Terms of reference

On 14 January 2020 the Honourable Daniel Andrews MP, Premier of Victoria announced that an independent Inquiry into the 2019–20 Victorian fire season (the Inquiry) would be conducted by the Inspector-General for Emergency Management (IGEM). The Inquiry tasked IGEM with examining Victoria's preparedness for and response to fires in large parts of Victoria's North East, Gippsland, and Alpine regions (Phase 1), and reviewing relief and recovery efforts (Phase 2).

Information collection focusing on preparedness for and response to the 2019–20 fire season (Phase 1) concluded at the end of April 2020. On 31 July 2020 IGEM provided the Phase 1 Inquiry Report to the Minister for Police and Emergency Services (the minister).

IGEM focused on the progress and effectiveness of Victoria's immediate relief, and recovery arrangements concerning the 2019–20 fire season (Phase 2) between August 2020 – July 2021. Data collection for Phase 2 concluded in March 2021.

The Inquiry's Terms of Reference provided to IGEM by the minister are listed below. The Phase 1 matters for consideration have been rearranged from the original terms of reference to link integrated points and to consolidate the matters for consideration in line with preparedness activities and response activities.

### **Phase 1: Community and sector preparedness for and response to the 2019–20 fire season**

Matters for consideration:

- Preparedness ahead of the 2019–20 fire season; including the effectiveness of regional emergency management work undertaken to inform and educate the community about the coming season, community engagement, impact of lengthening fire seasons, and any relevant legislation, policy and practice.
- In the context of bushfire preparedness, assess the readiness and responsibilities of statutory agencies, local government and state government bodies.
- Review of all opportunities and approaches to bushfire preparedness, including different methods of fuel and land management (for example 'cool burning', mechanical slashing, integrated forest management, traditional fire approaches) to protect life and property as well as ecological and cultural values.
- Consider all challenges and implications for bushfire preparedness arising from increasingly longer and more severe bushfire seasons as a result of climate change.
- Consideration of the adequacy of existing administrative and funding mechanisms in place at a state level to support the operational response efforts.
- Effectiveness of Victoria's operational response to the 2019–20 fire season. With particular consideration of:
  - effectiveness of the State's response priorities, including primacy of life
  - effectiveness of public information and warning systems, including cross-border coordination and communication
  - impact of increasingly longer fire seasons on the ability to prepare, deploy and sustain efforts directed towards emergency events in Victoria
  - impact of providing Victorian responder officers to other Australian jurisdictions to assist with emergency events (as early as September 2019 for the 2019–20 summer season)
  - availability and utilisation of private assets and resources (including plant equipment) to support emergency preparedness and response
  - planning and response mechanisms to protect biodiversity threatened by bushfire
  - effectiveness of the existing workforce model to support response, relief and recovery.

- Effectiveness of emergency management command and control and accountability arrangements in Victoria.
- Consideration of the effectiveness of Victoria’s Code Red Day arrangements and their application in practice.
- Review of the effectiveness of the declaration of a State of Disaster under the *Emergency Management Act 1986* – including the appropriateness of supporting legislative and administrative processes, communication, and community compliance.
- State evacuation planning and preparedness processes/practices and their effectiveness with an emphasis on remote/isolated communities and Victorian peak holiday season locations.
- The timeliness and effectiveness of activation of Commonwealth assistance, and Commonwealth resource availability. With particular consideration of:
  - effectiveness of current national resource sharing arrangements when multiple and simultaneous fire events are occurring
  - effectiveness of existing governance arrangements supporting access to Commonwealth and State air fleets
  - use and integration of Australian Defence Force (ADF) assets into Victoria’s emergency response and relief operations.
- Review support available to staff and volunteers in terms of mental health and wellbeing.

**Phase 2: Progress and effectiveness of Victoria’s immediate relief and recovery arrangements concerning the 2019–20 fire season**

Matters for consideration:

- Effectiveness of immediate relief and recovery work and arrangements, including at the regional and incident levels.
- Creation of Bushfire Recovery Victoria, the National Bushfire Recovery Agency and how these entities will work together for the benefit of affected Victorian communities, including consideration of long-term efforts directed at social, economic (including small business, tourism and agricultural sectors) and environmental recovery.
- Effectiveness of how roles and responsibilities for recovery have been divided between Emergency Management Victoria and Bushfire Recovery Victoria.

# Chapter 1

Introduction



The Inspector-General for Emergency Management (IGEM) is an independent statutory role providing assurance to government and the community regarding emergency management arrangements in Victoria and fostering their continuous improvement.

IGEM undertakes system-wide reviews, including reviews of the emergency management functions of responder agencies and government departments as defined under section 64(1)(b) of the *Emergency Management Act 2013* (2013 EM Act). In addition, the minister can also request IGEM to conduct reviews under the provisions of section 64(1)(c) of the 2013 EM Act.

All of IGEM's assurance activities are guided by the Assurance Framework for Emergency Management which provides the foundation for a coordinated and collaborative approach to sector-wide assurance issues.

## 1.1 The Inquiry

On 14 January 2020 the Premier of Victoria announced that IGEM would conduct an independent Inquiry into the 2019–20 Victorian fire season (the Inquiry). A formal request of IGEM to conduct the Inquiry followed from the Honourable Lisa Neville MP, Minister for Police and Emergency Services, and the Inquiry Terms of Reference were finalised shortly thereafter.

The Inquiry was conducted in two phases:

- Phase 1: Community and sector preparedness for and response to the 2019–20 summer season
- Phase 2: Progress and effectiveness of Victoria's immediate relief and recovery arrangements.

This report addresses Phase 2 of the Inquiry.

IGEM worked with emergency management organisations to collect information relevant to the Inquiry's Terms of Reference under section 69(1) and 69(3) of the 2013 EM Act.

## 1.2 Inquiry aims and objectives

Phase 2 of the Inquiry aims to provide independent assurance to the Victorian Government (the government) and community regarding Victoria's relief and recovery arrangements and progress to date of community recovery following the 2019–20 fire season.

The objectives of Phase 2 of the Inquiry are to:

- describe the relief and recovery arrangements in place prior to, and developed following the 2019–20 fire season
- summarise significant relief activities that occurred at the local (incident), regional and state level
- summarise recovery initiatives implemented (complete, ongoing or planned) to support communities recovering from the fires
- consider the appropriateness and effectiveness of emergency relief arrangements and activities in the context of updated emergency management arrangements specified under the Victorian State Emergency Management Plan (SEMP)
- consider the appropriateness and effectiveness of completed, ongoing and planned recovery initiatives in the context of existing recovery arrangements, and new arrangements established under the SEMF and as part of the commencement of Bushfire Recovery Victoria (BRV)
- evaluate emergency management sector (sector) and community satisfaction with relief and recovery activities and identify opportunities for further improvement.

The objectives are applied to all Terms of Reference as appropriate.

## 1.3 Scope of review

IGEM considers any documents, information, opinion and commentary related to the Inquiry's aims, objectives and Terms of Reference to be in scope for this Inquiry.

For the purpose of this Inquiry, IGEM considers the 2019–20 fire season to be the period 21 November 2019 – 29 February 2020.

Relief and recovery decision-making and activities to support those affected by the fires were often activated during response, and in many cases, implementation commenced while fire was still active in the landscape.

The Inquiry considers relief activities to have occurred across the state until formal handover from the control agency to recovery coordinators. However, IGEM recognises that there is no clear demarcation of response, relief and recovery for many activities.

This Inquiry does not evaluate the effectiveness of any national or international policy or arrangements but does consider evidence related to how national arrangements are implemented in Victoria to support capacity and capability in relief and recovery.

In September 2020 the *Emergency Management Manual Victoria* (EMMV) was replaced by the SEMP. Throughout this report, the arrangements in place at the time of the activity are used to consider roles, responsibilities and procedures.

As relevant, IGEM's observations, findings and commentary throughout this report will consider any differences between the EMMV and the SEMP. The Inquiry's recommendations will reflect the roles, responsibilities and broader emergency management arrangements detailed in the SEMP.

### 1.3.1 Timing

IGEM commenced this Inquiry in January 2020 following the formal request from the minister. Evidence relevant to Phase 2 of the Inquiry was collected between January 2020 and March 2021.

This Inquiry report was completed in July 2021 and provided to government on 30 July 2021.

IGEM notes that stakeholders and communities involved in the Inquiry provided evidence and commentary during periods of isolation and other public health restrictions associated with the COVID-19 pandemic.

IGEM recognises that a large amount of government and public attention was focused on mitigating and managing the impacts and consequences of the pandemic. This in turn had implications for data collation and collection methods, community debriefing opportunities, report validation and feedback, and significantly affected bushfire recovery in general.

The concurrent pandemic and bushfire recovery are considered throughout the report and provide important context for IGEM's observations, findings and recommendations.

## 1.4 Key stakeholders

### 1.4.1 Stakeholder engagement

The Inquiry engaged with stakeholders representing the sector, government, councils and community service organisations. A range of personnel involved in relief and recovery delivery (community-facing roles), relief operations, strategic planning and coordination and key decision-making at state, regional and local levels were involved in stakeholder interviews, focus groups and the provision of documentary evidence.

Evidence included a vast amount of documentation describing the planning, decision-making, activities and reporting associated with relief and recovery. Meeting minutes, plans, reports, needs assessments, internal and external briefings and organisational and multi-agency debriefs were provided as evidence.

IGEM also sourced publicly available information such as websites, media releases and media articles to further inform its analysis of relief and recovery before, during and after the fires.

### 1.4.2 Community engagement

To ensure the Inquiry considered the views and experiences of the Victorian community, IGEM offered communities a range of opportunities to contribute including:

- providing a submission
- joining a community meeting
- joining a focus group
- providing a one-on-one interview
- completing a survey.

Individuals and organisations were able to provide submissions, addressing the Inquiry's Terms of Reference and matters for consideration, through an online form, email or mail.

Although Phase 1 of the Inquiry focused on preparedness and response, submissions were received which discussed relief and recovery. These submissions were considered in Phase 2 of the Inquiry. Submissions focusing on relief and recovery were open from July 2020 until March 2021. In total, IGEM received 513 submissions to the Inquiry.

Community contributions were received from individuals from fire-affected areas as well as the broader Victorian community, industry groups, business and citizen associations, universities, peak bodies, researchers and academics, community health organisations and a broad range of community groups and organisations.

IGEM worked with communities, Community Recovery Committees (CRCs), Community Recovery Hubs and councils to provide location-appropriate engagement opportunities. In many areas, individuals advocated on behalf of their communities to schedule these opportunities with IGEM.

IGEM conducted 43 online, telephone and face-to-face interviews with individuals affected by the fires from October 2020 until April 2021. These were supplemented with three online focus groups, community meetings and drop-in sessions.

A total of six face-to-face meetings were held in November 2020 and 35 during February and March 2021. These meetings were in addition to the 26 meetings held in March 2020 that focused on preparedness and response to inform Phase 1 of the Inquiry.

Between October 2020 and March 2021 individuals were invited to complete a community survey – either online or in hard copy.

Details of the Community Engagement Strategy and Methods is provided at Appendix A, p 471.

In many cases, communities made suggestions and recommendations for improvements in relief and recovery. These recommendations were considered in line with the Terms of Reference and provided valuable insights of community priorities, experiences and preferences for ongoing and future relief and recovery efforts.

Some community members also provided supplementary evidence to better describe their experiences. These documents were considered with stakeholder evidence and offered opportunities to further understand community experiences and provided important detail for consideration in IGEM's overall report.

Information received from the community shaped the development of IGEM's observations, findings and recommendations. Specific examples provided by community were followed up to provide greater clarity of the issues facing communities before, during and after the fires.

While not all information and examples are explicitly included in the report, IGEM has reflected on all information provided by communities along with the evidence and experiences provided by stakeholders.

## 1.5 Approach

### 1.5.1 Lines of enquiry

IGEM developed lines of enquiry to guide the analysis of evidence for this Inquiry. The following high-level lines of enquiry were considered for each term of reference for the Inquiry.

#### **Relief**

1. What legislation, policies, plans and guidelines and governance arrangements are in place for relief in Victoria?
2. What relief activities occurred during and after the 2019–20 fires at the state, regional and local levels?
3. To what extent were the immediate relief arrangements and activities effective (including at state, regional and incident levels)?
4. What opportunities are there to improve current relief arrangements and practice in Victoria?

#### **Recovery**

1. What legislation, policies, plans and guidelines and governance arrangements are in place for recovery in Victoria?
2. What recovery activities occurred during and after the 2019–20 fires at the state, regional and local levels?
3. To what extent were the recovery arrangements and activities effective (including at state, regional and incident levels)?
4. What opportunities are there to improve current recovery arrangements and practice in Victoria?
5. How did the concurrent and cumulative impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic affect recovery activities and outcomes?

## 1.5.2 Information sources

IGEM analysed information from multiple sources to prepare this report and generate the observations, findings and recommendations.

These included:

- interviews with stakeholders, councils and sector agencies
- stakeholder surveys
- community submissions and survey responses
- third-party literature reviews
- desktop analysis of relevant legislation, guidelines and policies
- stakeholder and sector agency reports, reviews and evaluations
- news media including online, print and broadcast
- stakeholder feedback on the draft report.

## 1.5.3 Observations, findings and recommendations

All observations, findings and recommendations were developed through a triangulation process, validated by key stakeholders, community feedback, subject matter expertise, research and observations. Validation was also sought through a stakeholder workshop and feedback on the draft report.

Observations reflect a strong consensus of evidence that describes a positive reflection, potential problem or solution for the sector, however, IGEM cannot confirm the application or relevance of this evidence across the sector. As such, observations are strong indicators of existing, potential or emerging issues that would be useful to consider in emergency management planning.

Findings describe a significant amount of evidence that has implications across the sector and was consistently found to have important direct or indirect effects on emergency management.

Recommendations are made when multiple findings and observations identify a gap in emergency management strategy or practice and IGEM determines that a well-considered change across the sector would bring significant benefits to the safety and resilience of Victorians.

IGEM assigns organisations as accountable for implementing the recommendation based on their legislative responsibilities and assigned roles as per the EMMV/SEMP. IGEM considers the availability of resources required to implement the recommendation and other issues related to the viability of implementation.

## 1.5.4 Language and terminology

Relief and recovery organisations, government, responder agencies, communities and individuals used a range of language and terminology to describe the activities, policies, locations and experiences associated with the 2019–20 Victorian fire season. IGEM has attempted to use terminology that is most appropriate and descriptive, but some terms may be unfamiliar to all readers. The Glossary (see p 20) provides an overview of the specific terms relevant in this Inquiry report.

This report uses several terms to describe members of the community. The term 'community member(s)' is used to describe the experiences, priorities and reflections of the broad community affected by the fires. Additional descriptors are used to distinguish regional differences or varying levels of impact.

IGEM conducted specific work to capture the views and experiences of children and young adults (less than 25 years). The term 'young people' is used to describe community members who have identified as being under 25 years of age.

The term 'Aboriginal Victorians' is used throughout this report to represent the many diverse Aboriginal people in Victoria. The meanings of 'Traditional Owner' and 'First Nation' are described in Chapter 20. Much of the information included in this report regarding Indigenous peoples relates specifically to Aboriginal peoples. The term 'Indigenous' is used where there have been opportunities and learnings identified that that are applicable across Victoria to be inclusive of both Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. As appropriate, 'Traditional Owners' and 'First Nation' are used throughout the report to reflect ancestral connections to lands and water throughout Victoria and connections to Country more broadly (see Glossary, p 20).



Gunaikurnai Land and Waters Aboriginal Corporation (GLaWAC) Bushfire Recovery Crew (L-R) Jirra, Paula, Wayne, Malchiem and Mary (Source: © GLaWAC)

## 1.6 Acknowledgements

Many individuals and organisations have contributed to this Inquiry by collating evidence, sharing experiences, expertise and stories, responding to direct questions and reflecting on preliminary conclusions drawn by the Inquiry team. IGEM is grateful for the open and honest communication from all of those involved in the development of this report.

Most stakeholders and many communities were represented by a person or small group of people who liaised within their organisation or community to ensure IGEM was provided with evidence that was accurate, representative and up to date. IGEM appreciates the time and effort taken by these representatives to support the Inquiry, most of whom were concurrently contributing directly to relief and recovery efforts.

IGEM has considered community feedback in its commentary throughout the report and many of the Inquiry's observations, findings and recommendations. To do so, IGEM sought feedback from individuals, organisations and associations through individual and small-group interviews, community meetings, submissions and the survey.

Many people shared their experiences while managing their own recovery. IGEM acknowledges that retelling their story may have caused trauma for some community members, and the number of government organisations seeking to engage with recovering individuals and communities. Despite this, communities were generous with their time and resources to ensure IGEM had clear and meaningful information to use in the Inquiry.

Finally, the majority of data collection occurred during periods of increased stress, workload, altered working arrangements and public health restrictions due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Despite this, stakeholder contacts were able to coordinate internally to provide significant amounts of evidence to the Inquiry, participate in virtual data collection and validation activities and respond promptly to IGEM's requests.

Community members showed patience during periods where it was necessary to interact remotely with IGEM or make adjustments to typical face-to-face meeting arrangements to ensure appropriate public health procedures were adhered to.

# Chapter 2

Overview



---

*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.*

*Red Cross, Submission to IGEM Inquiry - Phase 2*

---

## 2.1 Victoria's approach to relief and recovery

Many people understandably think about relief and recovery as something that occurs after an emergency. The priority during a bushfire must surely be bringing it under control. Dealing with the dislocation and damage it causes is logically something that occurs later.

While this is true to a point, community relief and recovery must begin at the same time as an emergency event and planning for it should come long before. People's displacement and loss in a bushfire is immediate. In many cases it starts well before the fire front arrives. This was certainly the case in 2019–20 after widespread recommendations to evacuate East Gippsland were issued (and largely followed) in advance of deteriorating fire weather conditions.

Emergencies are not linear events and cannot be managed as such. Framing the different phases of any significant bushfire in a theoretical sense has been problematic for Australian emergency managers for many years. The convenient division of events into discrete segments – prevention, preparedness, response, and recovery – has traditionally been used in the hope of providing a framework to manage them. The 'comprehensive approach', to emergency management, sometimes known as 'PPRR', is an adaptation of a business risk management model. Even when characterised as a cycle, its application in emergencies is awkward.<sup>1</sup>

Over the past 20 years, the model has been progressively challenged and modified. Modern emergency management – as championed by Emergency Management Victoria (EMV) – places more emphasis on a collaborative 'all hazards, all agencies' or 'all emergencies, all communities' approach, and more recently, has increasingly placed a premium upon building resilience both before and after emergency events.

In reality, what happens when a large bushfire occurs is that response, relief and recovery intersect and quickly run over one another. This occurred in the 2019–20 Victorian fire season due to both their scale and duration. While some areas had already endured the worst of the fire impacts, other places remained under threat of fire days or even weeks later.

Relief is defined as the provision of assistance to meet the essential needs of individuals, families and communities during and in the immediate aftermath of an emergency.

Recovery is defined in the 2013 EM Act as the assisting of persons and communities affected by emergencies to achieve an effective level of functioning.<sup>2</sup>

Both relief and recovery begin when an emergency occurs and many response, relief and recovery activities are undertaken concurrently. Typically, relief is provided during and in the immediate aftermath of an emergency. Recovery is generally a longer-term process for affected individuals and communities.

There are challenges related to coordinating relief when activities are undertaken across response and recovery. Disengaging relief from recovery completely is problematic. More importantly, not affixing relief to emergency response in practice is even more so.

In reality, immediate relief measures – such as removing people from danger and finding them temporary accommodation – occur during both small and large emergencies. If anything, in larger emergencies the process is slightly more practiced and refined. The immediate relief arrangements for a family following a single house fire are applied more inconsistently through local support agencies than those that occur during a major bushfire.

A significant distinction between relief and recovery is that relief measures in a temporal sense invariably begin during response. The limited arrangements define relief as closely linked to this phase. Yet many personnel actively engaged in response tend not to look beyond the immediate objectives of containing the physical threat to life and property to the next steps.

Depending upon the extent and circumstances of bushfire impacts, large numbers of people may be displaced and unable to return to their communities and homes. The immediate needs of those displaced by bushfire are simple enough, reflecting physiological needs (food, water, shelter, clothing, medical treatment) and safety needs (secure environment, safe from danger). There is also a premium upon reconnecting with family and urgent psychosocial needs. In the context of relief, these are met either through private arrangements (for example, by seeking shelter with relatives or friends) or in temporary relief centres provided by relief agencies through the emergency management arrangements.

These basic needs are reflected in Victoria's relief and recovery arrangements, which refer to a set of relief principles setting out the basic requirements of providing relief services to the community.

The principles for the coordination and delivery of relief in Victoria are:

- emergency-affected communities receive essential support to meet their basic and immediate needs
- relief assistance is delivered in a timely manner, in response to emergencies
- relief promotes community safety, and minimises further physical and psychological harm
- relief and response agencies communicate clear, relevant, timely and tailored information and advice to communities about relief services, through multiple appropriate channels
- relief services recognise community diversity
- relief is adaptive, based on continuing assessment of needs
- relief supports community responsibility and resilience
- relief is well coordinated, with clearly defined roles and responsibilities
- relief services are integrated into emergency management arrangements.<sup>2</sup>

Responsibility for the provision of relief during bushfires is divided between the government and councils, with non-government organisations also playing a formal role. These include the Australian Red Cross (Red Cross) and the Salvation Army, along with other smaller organisations. In more remote communities, local service or church groups and spontaneous relief efforts can come into play.

While relief is largely human focused – with an extension into the realms of agriculture and wildlife – the process of recovery is more complicated and occurs over a much longer period. Since the 1983 Ash Wednesday fires, the idea of community-centred recovery has prevailed strongly, increasingly overlaid by various centralised structures. Following the 2003 Alpine fires, a Ministerial Taskforce on Bushfire Recovery was established. The 2009 Victorian bushfires led to the establishment of the Victorian Bushfires Reconstruction and Recovery Authority. The 2019–20 Victorian fire season saw the creation of BRV.

Beneath these high-level bodies are a layer of organisations with a recovery focus, either formally or informally incorporated into the arrangements. These include government departments and agencies, councils, the Red Cross and a multitude of smaller bodies. All of these operate to a greater or lesser degree at a community level.

## 2.2 Overall impacts of the 2019–20 fires

The first notable bushfire activity in Victoria commenced in late November 2019, by which time parts of Queensland and NSW had already experienced large-scale fire activity for several weeks. While this interstate activity entailed substantial commitment from Victorian response agencies, the impost on relief and recovery capacity in Victoria was minimal at this stage, as was the impact of the earliest Victorian bushfires.

As the 2019–20 fires progressed, the two geographical divisions of major impact and loss – the North East and East Gippsland – endured extensive losses to the built and natural environment. Those losses were similar in many respects but also reflected unique local conditions in terms of population, industries and the environment.

Beyond the immediate displacement of communities, meeting the relief needs of people who suddenly found themselves without a home, or with one so badly damaged that it was uninhabitable, became a matter of priority. One of the most difficult tasks during and after a major bushfire is determining – with accuracy – the extent of loss in those communities directly affected. This crucial task commences while response efforts are ongoing and with some urgency given the need to alleviate further suffering, be it human, animal or environmental.

A process of initial impact assessment was undertaken to ascertain the extent of physical losses across affected areas. The focus was on determining the number of houses and other buildings lost, the number of livestock and wildlife killed or injured, infrastructure destroyed (for example, roads, bridges and powerlines).

Data describing the impacts of the emergency is critical in determining next steps in the relief and recovery process. The speed and more importantly the accuracy with which this is achieved is vital in expediting effective relief and recovery.

### 2.2.1 The challenges of time and geography in relief

The need to provide relief measures as a result of these bushfires began in November 2019 and continued until February 2020, by which time more enduring recovery efforts had gained considerable momentum. Within the two separate areas of operation were significant logistical challenges particular to each. For example, both East Gippsland and the North East were broadly closed off during the impact phases and remained so for significant periods of time. In the case of East Gippsland, the isolation of some already geographically-remote communities which had lost both power and communications presented particular challenges. Not least of these was the immediate provision of food, drinking water, fuel, and temporary power and communications.

While it is impossible to completely separate relief from response for the purposes of analysis in this report, there are a number of important actions or events that help define the relief phase of the 2019–20 bushfires. Among the earliest of these was the decision to deploy smoke monitoring equipment in Gippsland locations from 25 November 2019. This recognised the potential impact of prolonged smoke exposure and the subsequent need to issue community warnings concerning this.

On 19 December 2019 Victoria made an initial request for ADF assistance in anticipation of the potential need for additional logistical and relief support in the event of an escalation of the fires.

In the North East, the first run of fires in late November was largely contained by 1 December 2019, meaning there were few relief issues that could not be handled at a local level. Similarly, in Gippsland many outbreaks were contained, but two major fires (covering a combined area of 20,000 hectares) and five smaller ones were still in play and potentially threatening communities on 1 December. Ten days later, the affected area had doubled in size.

The next marker of the need for a scaling up of relief activity in East Gippsland was the closure of the Great Alpine Road on 21 December 2019, as communities and properties in the path of the Tambo 35 Marthavale–Barmouth Spur and the Tambo 39 W Tree–Yalmy fires came under direct threat. Small towns between Bruthen and Swifts Creek lost power and some telecommunications, and communities along Buchan Road were also vulnerable to essential service disruptions as fire activity intensified.

On 22 December 2019 Red Cross was activated in anticipation of significant impacts from bushfires over the coming days. This was followed by the activation of the *Register.Find.Reunite* service five days later.

Up until 30 December 2019 relief efforts remained largely preparatory, in anticipation of a situation that could deteriorate rapidly. A Heat Health Alert issued for 29 December, along with a Total Fire Ban for the whole of the state on 30 December 2019 indicated that these fires would require a major relief effort on the part of the state and non-government agencies. Among 22 new fires that started on 29 December were those at Walwa (the main Upper Murray fire) and Cann River-Banana Track (the Mallacoota fire) which would have significant impacts, eventually isolating several communities for long periods.

The speed, gravity and extent of the fire impacts in East Gippsland and the North East are described in detail in the Phase 1 Inquiry Report, as are the evacuation of those stranded in Mallacoota and the steps taken to facilitate the passage of people displaced by the fires in the North East and East Gippsland.

The evacuations are worth revisiting briefly because of the impact these had upon relief operations. During the 2019–20 fire season, evacuations and relocations occurred on a scale never before experienced in Victoria. This affected both resident communities and thousands of tourists and travellers. Evacuations occurred before and after fires impacted, when roads were closed, and towns had become isolated.

The dislocation of large numbers of people from their communities – exacerbated in the case of tourists already detached from their normal environment – presented some unique challenges in the provision of adequate relief services. In East Gippsland and south-east NSW, 5500 people had gathered at relief centres and assembly areas by 31 December and at least 4000 people had assembled on the Mallacoota foreshore, leading to the need for an organised evacuation.

As fire weather conditions deteriorated again, from 3–6 January 2020 Victoria Police (VicPol) successfully facilitated the evacuation and relocation of more than 66,000 people from the potential impact zones in the North East, Alpine and East Gippsland areas.

In this context, the establishment of three new entities and one new role within the emergency management arrangements during the crisis are worthy of note. The first of these was the creation on 1 January 2020 of Operation Genesis, later renamed the Combined Agency Operations Group (CAOG), instituted to better integrate the use of Commonwealth resources – principally the ADF – into the State response and relief efforts. This was initially driven by the need for a sea and air evacuation of Mallacoota – a task that exceeded the capability and capacity of Victorian resources.

In line with the more recent use of ADF resources, CAOG drew upon its expertise in areas such as logistics and transportation, including emergency evacuations. This was later expanded through formal statements of intent to incorporate functions including community and emergency personnel welfare, restoration of critical and non-critical infrastructure, and protection of conservation assets.

The creation of CAOG extended existing arrangements with the ADF in view of the scale and criticality of the emergency. In execution it pursued objects set by the State Control Team (SCT) and the State Relief Team – a new structure also established during the fire season. This tested normal chain-of-command structures.

---

*Sometimes [CAOG] came up with their own relief arrangements, which included the drop of those community caches and things like that. That was a really great initiative and that totally came out of them. But what would be the best model, I think, is where the [CAOG] is being tasked by the key functional areas within the State Control Centre.*

*Stakeholder*

Another response to the lack of coordination of relief measures at state level was the creation of the new role of State Emergency Relief Coordinator (SERC), a senior functional role established during the fire season. This was notable in that it acknowledged an evident gap in the arrangements at state level for dealing with the relief of large numbers of people displaced in a major emergency and in need of assistance. It differed from the creation of CAOG in that it addressed a systemic deficiency in relation to the coordination of relief efforts at a state level.

The new role also reflected the ambiguous position of relief in its traditional pairing with recovery.

The historic emphasis in emergency management upon response – especially in bushfires – has always focused on the danger to life the hazard presents to those affected by an emergency rather than taking a more extended, holistic approach to their immediate wellbeing. In other words, once people are out of the immediate danger of being trapped and possibly killed by the fire, what happens next is not seen as the responders' business.

---

*... don't prioritise [relief] against response operations of which – when you've got live, active fire, they need to focus on that. But then there's also a broader relief coordination that's required as well.*

*Stakeholder*

---

The second ad hoc structure was the creation of the Bushfire Response and Recovery Taskforce (BRRT) on 3 January 2020. The reactive creation of a time-limited taskforce to deal with an emerging crisis is a familiar approach in Victoria and other taskforces and committees were established during the fire season to address particular response needs.

The BRRT was convened at a slightly higher level, co-chaired by the Department of Justice and Community Safety (DJCS) and Department of Premier and Cabinet (DPC), and comprised secretaries, deputy secretaries and senior officials from government departments and fire agencies. It met twice each week initially then transitioned to less-frequent meetings as circumstances allowed. The BRRT effectively sat alongside an existing structure – the State Crisis and Resilience Council (SCRC) – capable of performing the same role, as the key advisory body to government. On 24 March 2020 the BRRT was superseded by the State Bushfire Recovery Coordination Committee (SBRCC).

The creation of new, ad hoc, time-limited governance bodies in the immediate aftermath of an emergency can be problematic. While the BRRT was acknowledged as having adequately served its purpose, a key rationale of the State's new emergency management arrangements instituted following the 2009 Victorian bushfires was to eliminate the proliferation of committees that had emerged across the sector and streamline governance. Given that the membership of the SCRC and the BRRT was very similar, it raises the question of why the SCRC was not considered an appropriate forum to perform a strategic oversight and coordination role during the operational period.

The third structure to be put in place was BRV, established on 6 January 2020. The establishment of a 'one-stop shop' recovery agency following a major bushfire is not unique in Victoria or other jurisdictions. Following the 2009 fires, the Victorian Bushfire Reconstruction and Recovery Authority (VBRRA) was established as a time-limited recovery agency, eventually transitioning its activities into Regional Development Victoria (RDV) located in the then Department of Planning and Community Development. On the contrary, BRV is described as a permanent, ongoing agency – albeit at the time of this Inquiry – is limited in scope to recovery from the 2019–20 Victorian fire season.

Two other events in Victoria elicited key strategies that marked a significant change in the relief response. One was the decision to pre-emptively deploy emergency supplies to Bright and Harrietville in the North East as these centres faced the prospect of being cut off by fire. The idea that communities should be provided with essential supplies – and in particular communication equipment – represents a more proactive approach to relief measures than previously seen during Victorian fires.

Similarly, the decision to drop food to affected wildlife and pre-emptively extract insurance populations of endangered species from East Gippsland suggests a shifting approach to conservation priorities.

## 2.2.2 Moving towards longer-term recovery

Recovery from a bushfire event of this magnitude is measured in years rather than weeks or months. However, the most significant groundwork for recovery is laid in the weeks and months immediately after the event.

The cessation of the State of Disaster on 11 January 2020 marked the point at which relief activities began a rapid transition to recovery. Even so, it would be another three weeks before the Princes Highway was fully reopened to the NSW border and five weeks before *Register.Find.Reunite* was deactivated.

In the meantime, Victoria confirmed its first case of COVID-19 on 25 January 2020 with little realisation at the time of the drastic impact this would have upon recovery activities in fire-affected communities within a matter of weeks. The cascading impacts of drought, fire, pandemic and a short-term sharp economic downturn continue to ripple through the recovery of affected communities.

A determining factor for individuals, families, communities, businesses and other organisations after emergencies is the requirement for financial support to ensure they can meet their basic needs and return to some level of normalcy in the short to medium term. This financial support may come through various forms of government assistance, charitable donations and insurance.

Governments and councils activate numerous recovery activities after emergencies to support individuals. These are funded through state and federal mechanisms to meet immediate needs and longer-term recovery programs. In many cases, recovery programs transition into business as usual activities as additional responsibilities or considerations for ongoing work with communities, businesses or the local environment.

The complexities of these arrangements were often highlighted in evidence presented to this Inquiry. At both individual and community levels, the processes involved in accessing either individual assistance to meet immediate needs or grant money to effect longer-term recovery outcomes suggested a lack of coordination and a high degree of bureaucracy. This was clearly at odds with the circumstances of trauma and stress endured by people who had lost everything in a bushfire. There is both a need and scope to do better.

The scale of the event both in Victoria and across other parts of Australia drove a response in terms of donated money not seen before. The extent of fundraising and the spectacular and sometimes fraught outcomes of these efforts highlighted significant issues around the collection and disbursement of donated money following emergencies. At a national level, this prompted the Royal Commission into National Natural Disaster Arrangements to recommend that Australian, state and territory governments create a single national scheme for the regulation of charitable fundraising.

Even though BRV began its work in January 2020, the transition from relief to recovery began in practical terms in mid-February and concluded on 24 June 2020. The formal sign-off by the Emergency Management Commissioner (EMC) to the Chief Executive Officer (CEO) of BRV did not occur until September, reflecting bureaucratic processes rather than any delay in the recovery. However, this delay reflected stakeholder comments that relief and recovery priorities remain largely overshadowed by response priorities and the need to put all aspects of emergency management on equal footing.

Inevitably, there were issues with establishing a new structure in the context of undertaking recovery. Stakeholders often referred to building the aircraft while flying it or some similar metaphor. While BRV worked quickly to understand the community context, there was some confusion at state level as to where it fitted.

After more than 4800 impact assessments came confirmation that at least 700 residential and 653 non-residential structures had been damaged or destroyed by the fires.

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 was put in place by the Victorian Government in partnership with the Commonwealth. Clean-up was completed by August 2020, ahead of schedule but not without community concerns around lack of consultation and the exclusion of local contractors.

Physical reconstruction of both private premises and public infrastructure after major bushfires is always a protracted process. The normal planning and building permit requirements can be delayed further due to concentrated demand, and through a lack of tradespeople to assist with reconstruction. Finding more building surveyors, builders, electricians and the like to speed up the process is never simple, less so against the backdrop of a national emergency within which property losses in Victoria were a relatively small proportion.

By February 2021 more than 85 per cent of planning permit applications lodged across all bushfire-affected regions had been approved. The process of rebuilding has been slower. The innovation of temporary, high quality modular housing made available to residents who lost homes in the 2019–20 fires but wanted to return as soon as possible to their communities and properties is explored in this report.

Similarly, while major arterial roads were reopened within a matter of weeks, hundreds of kilometres of fire-affected roads, often with hazardous trees to be assessed and made safe, took many months to reopen. Likewise, reopening access to fire-affected national parks and state forests was a prolonged process.

The restoration of business and employment after the fires – especially for those in tourism dependent communities – is tied inextricably to the local impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic and in particular to the restrictions on movement imposed in Victoria in 2020. The agricultural sector also experienced the effects of prolonged drought, while for some communities the fires also need to be seen in the context of successive smaller bushfire events over the previous five years.

In Victoria and elsewhere in Australia, the scale of the fires focused public attention upon impacts to the natural environment in a more pronounced way than previous events. It also served to expose the limited planning in place for recovery of the natural environment after bushfires. However, an assortment of plans, policies and arrangements guiding the routine management of environment and biodiversity, along with the Victorian Response Plan for Wildlife Impacted by Fire, formed a basis for action and the development of an ongoing Bushfire Biodiversity Response and Recovery (BRRR) program.

As recovery continues, individuals, families, businesses, communities and government will continue to reassess their recovery priorities and seek appropriate resources and advice to return to a level of normalcy in their functioning. The new normal is likely to be different from what was previously in place and may take some time to achieve. The monitoring and evaluation of recovery efforts remains a critical activity for government and communities, to ensure that recovery efforts are achieving the desired outcomes.

Recovery is a long experience for those affected by major emergencies. As noted in the *10 Years Beyond Bushfires* report, a decade after the 2009 Victorian bushfires, two thirds of people affected felt mostly or fully recovered personally, however a lower percentage of respondents (44 per cent) felt that their community was mostly or fully recovered. Appropriately resourcing recovery and supporting the evolving needs of communities affected by the 2019–20 Victorian fire season will need to be a consideration for local, state and national governments for years to come.

## Chapter 3

Foundations of emergency management



Victoria's emergency management sector has governance arrangements, priorities and principles that underpin all phases of emergencies. The sector's overall approach to relief and recovery is moderated by its understanding of emergencies in general and basic governance principles.

This chapter describes the basic concepts of relief, recovery and governance and outlines fundamental issues that have implications for how government and the broader sector supports communities in relief and recovery.

## 3.1 Conceptualising relief and recovery

The Victorian emergency management sector underpins the way it plans, responds to and recovers from emergencies using the State Emergency Management Priorities. The primary priority is the protection and preservation of life and relief of suffering. This priority is in relation to the safety of emergency services personnel and community members – with specific inclusion of vulnerable community members and visitors/tourists.<sup>3</sup>

The other priorities include:

- issuing community information and community warnings detailing incident information that is timely, relevant and tailored to assist community members make informed decisions about their safety
- protection of critical infrastructure and community assets that support community resilience
- protection of residential property as a place of primary residence
- protection of assets supporting individual livelihoods and economic production that supports individual and community financial sustainability
- protection of environmental and conservation assets that considers the cultural, biodiversity and social values of the environment.

The priorities in relation to the protection of critical infrastructure, community assets, residential property, assets associated with financial stability, and environmental and conservation assets are all relevant to the preparedness and response phases of emergency management. The priorities should inform incident action planning and investment in preparedness and resilience.

All priorities – even when achieved in response – have major implications for relief and recovery.

Major damage to personal or community assets and infrastructure can influence where communities seek shelter during active emergencies, and access relief and recovery services during and after an emergency. Likewise, ongoing recovery is greatly influenced by any injury, trauma or death resulting from an emergency, as well as physical damage to the natural and built environment.

### 3.1.1 Positioning of relief and recovery in formal arrangements

In many emergency management arrangements and structures, relief arrangements are coupled with those for recovery. For example, Part 4 of the EMMV detailed the State Emergency Relief and Recovery Plan (SERRP), and response arrangements were detailed in isolation in the State Emergency Response Plan.<sup>4</sup> Chapter 7 provides a greater description of the operational governance arrangements in relation to relief. The operational and ongoing strategic recovery governance arrangements are described in Chapter 12.

Stakeholders discussed how the inclusion of relief with recovery had come about after the 2009 Victorian bushfires and was due – in part – to the common person-centred approach in both relief and recovery, compared to the task-oriented approach of response. It was also more likely that agencies with recovery roles would also have roles in relief.

In the EMMV, relief and recovery are illustrated as per Figure 1 (p 71). Relief is considered to be part of early recovery – and while potentially concurrent with response – is a distinct phase of emergency management.

While many agencies involved in relief are also involved in recovery, based on the experiences of the 2019–20 fire season, stakeholders noted some inherent difficulties in considering relief and recovery in combination.

---

*I think the governance for relief and recovery is still undercooked. And the fact that it's coupled with recovery I think is probably its number one downfall. Relief isn't recovery and I think the trigger – the obligations ... in the State Control Centre to trigger recovery, all of the funding at a Commonwealth level or all of those other obligations ... means that sometimes the relief is sort of second fiddle.*

---

Stakeholder

**Figure 1.** Emergency relief and recovery activities over time. (Source: EMMV, Part 4 SERRP, 2018<sup>2</sup>)



Throughout the 2019–20 Victorian fire season, it was clear that communities' relief requirements were extensive, time-critical and prolonged, due to the fire behaviour and extended periods of isolation and disruption to essential services. The vast extent of relief needs placed the emergency management arrangements' structures under significant strain, with changes made to divide relief from recovery responsibilities and to accommodate the escalating situation (see section 7.4, p 151 for further discussion).

## 3.2 Emergency management governance

Recovery governance is specified in the 2013 EM Act – albeit briefly. As noted previously, the 2013 EM Act defines recovery with the EMC responsible for its coordination. The 2013 EM Act makes no explicit mention of relief and hence no explicit legislative accountability for its control or coordination. However, the 1986 EM Act includes relief in its definition of response and makes the EMC and the State Response Controller (SRC) accountable for relief coordination and control.

The more detailed operational aspects of governance and coordination for relief and recovery are discussed in Chapters 7 and 12 respectively.

Underpinning the operational governance and coordination arrangements for relief and recovery are strategic structures and planning arrangements. These arrangements are in place to ensure the sector, broader government, councils and communities are prepared to activate the operational aspects of relief and recovery when necessary. This includes ongoing committees, standing organisational responsibilities and preparedness or resilience measures in place across all levels of government, private entities and communities.

### 3.2.1 Principles of effective governance

Australian governance responsibilities are outlined in the *Commonwealth of Australia Constitution Act 1900*, common law, specific legislation, guidelines, conventions and agreements. At the national level, the Australian Public Service Commission and the Australian National Audit Office publish documents that outline the key elements of better practice governance.

The Australian Public Service Commission defines public sector governance as:

---

*...the set of responsibilities and practices, policies and procedures, exercised by an agency's executive, to provide strategic direction, ensure objectives are achieved, manage risks and use resources responsibly and with accountability.*

*Australian Public Service Commission* <sup>5</sup>

---

Emergency management governance structures are similarly established by legislation and policy. The EMMV describes the sector's governance arrangements as:

---

*The system for governance in emergency management is based on networked arrangements across a wide range of agencies accompanied by an obligation to participate. Committees are a key element in the emergency management governance arrangements. The other main governance element is the implementation of statutory roles assigned to agencies or positions, such as the Emergency Management Commissioner.*

*Emergency Management Manual Victoria* <sup>6</sup>

---

Good governance in the delivery of public sector services and programs generally focuses on two key objectives – performance and accountability.<sup>7</sup> Achieving high performance and accountability relies on the development of fit-for-purpose governance frameworks, agreements and processes. This includes applying a risk management framework across both accountability and performance.

Good governance arrangements are an important foundation for the broad range of programs and services managed by the public service to deliver outcomes consistent with policy and legislation. This is particularly important in emergency management due to the range of emergencies encountered, and the associated complexity of arrangements and stakeholders involved.

The Australian National Audit Office's 'Better Practice Guide: Public Sector Governance – Strengthening Performance Through Good Governance' (2014) highlights both 'hard' (frameworks and structures) and 'soft' (people elements) aspects of good governance required to achieve high performance.<sup>8</sup>

The fundamental structures and elements required to achieve leading practice public sector governance include:

- strong leadership
- a focus on ethical behaviour and continuous improvement
- fit for purpose systems and processes
- strong planning
- risk management
- innovation and monitoring practices
- transparency
- openness and integrity
- clear reporting and lines of accountability
- collaborative partnerships within and external to government.

In its *Review of 10 years of reform in Victoria's management sector* (10 Year Review), IGEM discussed the significant governance reforms in the emergency management sector since 2009. The 2013 EM Act, the Strategic Action Plan, the SCRC and its sub-committees and the establishment of EMV and IGEM are all relatively new governance structures established in that 10-year period.

In the 10 Year Review, IGEM found that despite the improved structures, the sector's strategic governance arrangements remained complicated and unclear, which led to an under-utilisation of strategic decision-making committees. Despite initiatives to consolidate and streamline numerous governance committees, there remained numerous committees, working groups and other structures.

The sector has since commenced work to review some of its governance arrangements and update emergency management doctrine. However, this has not extended to relief and recovery.

### 3.2.2 State Crisis and Resilience Council and sub-committees

The SCRC is legislated in the 2013 EM Act in response to the 2012 'Victorian Emergency Management Reform White Paper'<sup>9</sup> and several significant reviews of the sector. The SCRC acts as the peak crisis and emergency management advisory body in Victoria with a focus on policy and strategy. It reports to the minister and the Security and Emergency Management Committee (SEMC). The SCRC is not an operational body and does not become involved in tactical decision-making or tasking during emergencies.

DPC chairs the SCRC and its membership includes department secretaries, the EMC, the Chief Executive of EMV and the Chief Commissioner of Victoria Police. SCRC membership also includes the CEO of the Municipal Association of Victoria. The Inspector-General for Emergency Management attends as an observer. The CEO of BRV has also been an observer since 2020.

In 2014, the SCRC established a plenary and three sub-committees:

- Capability and Response
- Risk and Resilience
- Relief and Recovery.

The SCRC and its sub-committees met every two months prior to the 2019–20 fire season.

In August 2019, all sub-committees were suspended pending further decision as to the most effective form of governance. Working groups and inter-departmental committees (IDC) continued or were established in a time-limited manner to address specific needs. These groups report directly to the EMC under the current arrangements.

Of most relevance to this phase of the Inquiry is the suspension of the Relief and Recovery Sub-Committee. The sub-committee last met in June 2019, discussing the Resilient Recovery Strategy, the Councils and Emergencies work led by Local Government Victoria (LGV) and the ongoing recovery from the South West fires (2018). A discussion paper on the management of spontaneous volunteers was circulated out of session.

### 3.2.3 Other strategic activities related to relief and recovery

In the absence of the Relief and Recovery Sub-Committee, a Resilient Recovery Inter-Departmental Committee continued to lead collaborative work on the development of the Resilient Recovery Strategy. The strategy was approved by the SCRC in September 2019, establishing agreed strategic outcomes, priorities and actions for recovery. In the 10 Year Review – completed in December 2019 – IGEM noted that a large body of work remained to operationalise and implement the strategy (see section 12.1, p 253 for a full discussion of the Resilient Recovery Strategy).

The Resilient Recovery Discussion Paper originally included both relief and recovery as a means to address an absence of a cohesive strategy for both in Victoria.<sup>10</sup> However, in response to stakeholder feedback the inclusion of relief was subsequently revisited, as the SCRC Relief and Recovery Sub-Committee noted a need to address relief separately. (see section 7.4, p 151)

Since the suspension of the Relief and Recovery Sub-Committee, relief and recovery have been considered in other ongoing strategic governance structures, including the SCRC Emergency Management Planning Reform IDC and workshops dedicated to finalise Victoria's first SEMP in 2020 and its subsequent updating in a 2021 review.

In its April 2021 meeting, the SCRC noted EMV's update on the Resilient Recovery Strategy and several proposed next steps related to further consultation with the sector, the development of an implementation and communications plan, and governance mechanisms.

Strategic consideration of relief has largely occurred through the finalisation and refinement of the SEMP.

Stakeholders discussed the lack of attention paid to relief planning and oversight given the focus on the Resilient Recovery Strategy throughout 2019 in the Relief and Recovery Sub-Committee and the suspension of the sub-committee in August 2019. The general consensus among stakeholders was that relief had long been overlooked in strategic planning discussion, and considered an 'add-on' to response or coupled as part of recovery – with no distinctions made as to its unique planning and coordination needs.

Following the 2019–20 Victorian fires the SBRCC has met regularly to discuss ongoing recovery progress and emerging risks in relation to recovery from those fires. The SBRCC is chaired by BRV and has been well-received by its member organisations as a forum to provide oversight of all recovery activities in relation to the 2019–20 fires. However, the SBRCC is incident-focused and while some of its targets and work are strategic in nature, it does not set broader Victorian recovery outcomes and objectives.

#### 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.

### 3.2.4 Municipal and regional relief and recovery arrangements

At the regional and municipal level, key governance and advisory committees include the Regional Emergency Management Planning Committee (REMPC) and the Municipal Emergency Management Planning Committee (MEMPC).

REMPCs give consideration to response and recovery to support an integrated approach to emergency management planning. At the time of the fires, the role of the MEMPCs was to develop and maintain the Municipal Emergency Management Plan (MEMP) for consideration by the council and representatives from local emergency management stakeholders. A change to this role has since occurred, and currently the 2013 EM Act, Part 6A, 6OADB, describes the role as 'the Municipal Emergency Management Planning Committee for a municipal district must arrange for the preparation of a MEMP to provide for an integrated, coordinated and comprehensive approach to emergency management in relation to that municipal district'.

### 3.2.5 Emergency Management Manual Victoria

The EMMV contains the plans, policies and responsibilities for emergency management arrangements in Victoria. The provisions for relief and recovery largely fall into Parts 3, 4 and 7.

At the time of the 2019–20 Victorian fire season, the EMMV was the primary source of guidance for response (State Emergency Response Plan - SERP), relief and recovery (SERRP), and agency roles and responsibilities (Part 7). These parts of the EMMV have since been superseded with introduction of the SEMP in September 2020.

The SERP outlines the Victorian arrangements for the coordinated response to emergencies. It uses a tiered approach to emergency management, with key functions of command, control and coordination performed at the incident and regional levels of response management when activated.

The SERRP specifies the arrangements for the coordination, planning and management of relief and recovery. It provides information for the coordination of agencies and describes the management principles for relief and recovery planning. It also establishes a framework within which the state, regions and councils interact to coordinate relief and recovery for communities.

Part 7 of the EMMV - Emergency Management Agency Roles - provides the context of response, relief and recovery arrangements. It provides a basic description of the lead and support roles in relief and recovery for all government departments, responder agencies and some community service organisations (for example, Red Cross).

The specific arrangements detailed in the EMMV and their effectiveness are discussed throughout this report.

## 3.3 Resilience and preparedness for relief and recovery

### 3.3.1 Sector preparedness

Throughout the year government, sector organisations and communities prepare for emergencies and build internal and community resilience through a range of initiatives that extend beyond the remit of emergency management.

Many of these preparedness activities and resilience-building initiatives focus on response. Government investment in emergency management has focused heavily on response preparedness through the purchase of training, equipment, technology systems and research.<sup>11</sup> There has been reasonable investment in emergency risk mitigation and significant measures in place to manage fuel load and bushfire risk across the state.

Much of this focus and investment has been driven by key reviews and inquiries following major emergencies. IGEM's analysis of Australian-based emergency management review data indicated that more than 75 per cent of recommendations clearly focused on response (45 per cent) or mitigation (30 per cent). Less than 15 per cent had a clear focus on relief and recovery.

Investment and focus for all phases of emergency management is necessary, however there has been relatively little investment dedicated to preparing for both relief and recovery. Relief and recovery preparedness activities are often confined to individual organisations with responsibilities in relief and recovery. There are limited multi-agency exercises, sector-wide training opportunities or other capability development initiatives dedicated to relief or recovery.

Inquiry stakeholders discussed that both relief and recovery were not as well considered in the sector's strategic planning structures, operational arrangements and overall investment. This has resulted in an overall lack of understanding of relief and recovery requirements and preparation. These issues are discussed specifically in Chapters 7 and 12 respectively.

### 3.3.2 Victorian Preparedness Framework

To sufficiently prepare for emergencies, it is important to understand emergency management capability and capacity requirements against current levels of capability and capacity within the sector. The Victorian Preparedness Framework was developed following consideration of emergency risks and capability priorities to address those risks.<sup>12</sup> It outlines 21 core capabilities and associated critical tasks.

The framework is a planning tool to assist in understanding the capabilities required before, during and after major emergencies. Its purpose is to identify key capabilities relevant to all phases of emergency management and the description of the critical tasks allows the sector and individual organisations to reflect on their ability to perform those tasks. There are no metrics specifically associated with the capabilities or critical tasks, and no reporting mechanism to encourage assessments of preparation to perform the capabilities or critical tasks.

As discussed throughout this report, one capability is associated with relief assistance and four capabilities are associated with recovery – aligning largely with the four environments of recovery.

The Victorian Preparedness Framework is incorporated into the SEMP to align agency roles and responsibilities with its core capabilities. By mapping agency contributions to the core capabilities, it is possible to identify lead and support agencies for each capability.

### 3.3.3 Consequence management

Consequence management is one of the more significant developments in emergency management doctrine in recent decades. It was formalised as part of the State's arrangements in the 2013 EM Act, with responsibility assigned to the EMC.

In essence, consequence management marks a shift away from a risk-based approach focused upon and dominated by response, to one in which all agencies are called upon to consider the longer and more complex impacts of an event at a state, regional and local level. Beyond the immediate impact of an event, consequence management seeks to identify the cascading and compounding effects that may influence response and limit the impact to the affected, upstream and downstream communities.

A consequence management approach moves the focus from planning for a specific hazard – such as fire or flood – and encourages planning and consideration of broader consequences, regardless of the hazard source.<sup>13</sup> For example, consequence management may encourage planning for prolonged disruption for energy supplies in Melbourne, the cause of which may be a heat emergency, cyber security incident, fire, earthquake or some other incident that is either unlikely or unforeseeable.

Regardless of the management of the hazard, the consequences will require a coordinated response across agencies to restore interrupted services or to re-establish communities.

Consequence management focuses on:

- building community safety and resilience prior to an event occurring
- managing the effects of an emergency event regardless of cause or expected likelihood mitigating an emergency's negative community impact
- exploiting opportunities for rapid recovery
- supporting resilient recovery
- post-recovery, where appropriate, building community resilience through revitalisation.

In its 2018 *Review of impact assessment and consequence management* IGEM found support for – and increasing adoption of – the approach across the sector in facilitating dynamic and adaptive decision-making during and after emergencies, and as an approach during response to mitigate and reduce the scale of relief and recovery efforts. It pointed, however, to a need for the refinement of consequence management products and better integration of local intelligence.<sup>14</sup>

While the review also highlighted potential for improvement in the application of consequence management principles – particularly across the tiers of emergency management – its findings were published a matter of weeks before the 2019–20 fires began.

#### **Use of consequence management during the 2019–20 Victorian fire season**

A State Consequence Manager was rostered throughout the season and the functional unit within the State Control Centre (SCC) was activated from December 2019 through to end-February 2020. The State Emergency Management Team (SEMT) met at least weekly throughout this period, although its schedule of meetings was less regular and consistent than the SCT meetings.

Consequence management planning was a standard part of the State Strategic Operations Plan prepared by the SCT throughout the season. The planning included both relief and recovery consequences, with distinction made as to the immediate (24–48 hours) and medium-term (48+ hours) priorities.

The consequence management planning conducted served to identify the risk, and the actions and consequences of the risk transpiring. Agencies were assigned as 'owners' of the actions based on their defined responsibilities in emergency management doctrine, or capacity and capability to appropriately initiate the proposed actions.

The SCT considered consequence management in relation to the provision of essential services in relief (for example, food and grocery supply, water, energy, transport), evacuation and relocation, humanitarian needs, animal welfare, and other longer-term recovery consequences (for example economic impacts). These categories were reasonably consistent throughout the season however changed as impacts became clearer.

In IGEM's observations of SCT, SEMT and Emergency Management Joint Public Information Committee (EMJPIC) meetings throughout the season, the approach of consequence management was regularly adopted in response. With the scale and complexity of relief needs and the predicted impacts, there was a high level of interest from all government portfolios in the projected consequences of the fires.

It is not clear from operational records as to the use and effectiveness of the formal consequence management planning processes in relief and recovery. Stakeholders discussed the application of consequence management thinking throughout relief and recovery, yet noted the creation of formal consequence plans took too much time to have a strong influence on relief and recovery plans and decision-making.

## 3.4 Information and data

Before, during and after an emergency, information regarding risks, impacts, affected communities and support services contributes to an overall level of understanding of the situation for the sector, government and the community. In relief and recovery, common understanding of the emergency supports a coordinated approach to addressing the impacts, managing consequences and supporting those affected.

There are many mechanisms for sharing information and data in the sector – some systematised and formal, others based on informal channels. The Inquiry heard numerous frustrations from the sector, government and community members in relation to the provision of information and information-sharing mechanisms.

### 3.4.1 Impact assessment

Impact assessment is a formal series of data collection and information-sharing activities that starts as soon as it is safe to document the impacts of an emergency and continues for a period after the emergency. There are three phases of impact assessment: initial, secondary and post-emergency needs.

Impact assessment is a core capability in the Victorian Preparedness Framework:

---

*Provide all decision-makers with relevant information regarding the nature and extent of the hazard, and any potential consequences during and after an emergency to ensure efficient, timely and appropriate support for communities.*

*Victorian Preparedness Framework<sup>12</sup>*

---

The framework outlines three critical tasks to support the capability: gathering information regarding the extent of the damage, loss of life and displaced people; collecting impact data related to the four environments of recovery; and providing meaningful impact assessment data to decision-makers.

Initial impact assessment was discussed in the Phase 1 Inquiry Report and has been addressed extensively in IGEM's 2018 *Review of impact assessment and consequence management*.<sup>14</sup> Initial impact assessment data needs to be suitable, accurate and quickly operationalised. There is still no common platform for sharing impact assessment data between state agencies and councils. As IGEM observed in the Phase 1 Inquiry Report, EMV should prioritise work on data sharing, including the authorising environment and mechanisms to do so.

Secondary impact assessment aims to describe the scale and characteristics of the emergency impact on the natural, social, built and economic environments. Multi-disciplinary teams undertake assessment of community impacts or assess impacts as relevant to their areas of responsibility to inform local, regional and state recovery planning.<sup>15</sup>



MFB and ADF conducting impact assessments in Sarsfield, East Gippsland  
(Source © Commonwealth of Australia)

Councils and government departments have lead agency responsibilities for conducting secondary impact assessment.<sup>16</sup> Councils collect secondary impact assessment data to describe community, business and local impacts, including information related to impacts sustained by infrastructure and natural assets owned or managed by the council. Government departments collect secondary impact assessment data that describes impact and damage that relate to their business-as-usual activities.

EMV is responsible for coordinating data collection and state impact assessment processes during and after an emergency. EMV has also led a number of initiatives to streamline and coordinate impact assessment, with a specific focus on clarifying data requirements and facilitating data collation and sharing between key stakeholders. This work is largely being conducted through the EM-Impact Project under Victoria's Emergency Management Strategic Action Plan.

EMV is continuing to develop and refine a centralised portal to collate impact assessment data. Its focus is on initial impact assessment collected primarily under the authority of the Incident Controller by the former Metropolitan Fire and Emergency Services Board (MFB; now Fire Rescue Victoria) and council's secondary impact assessment data collected by individual councils. The portal is also intended to facilitate information sharing across the sector. The portal was in development when IGEM reviewed impact assessment in 2018.

Following the 2019–20 fire season, many stakeholders reported that the portal was not usable or required significant amounts of effort to manually upload information. Council stakeholders in particular reported high levels of frustration with the ongoing restrictions for information sharing.

They were also not able to access initial impact assessment data for weeks after it had been collected, by which time recovery planning had commenced. In many cases, councils had sourced information to describe the types and magnitude of impacts through other mechanisms, including collecting the data again independently.

---

*And then the collection of initial impact assessment data and the transfer of that to councils so that they could get a head start on secondary impact assessment, that was a huge issue and continues to not be fully resolved despite it coming up every time.*

*Stakeholder*

---

Immediately following an emergency, the role of councils in supporting community relief and recovery is considerable. In addition to their role in secondary impact assessment, they have many other emergency management responsibilities and obligations to their communities. In addition, there are challenges with collecting small business impact assessment data. Not all councils have the capability to do this.

Since the 2019–20 fire season, the Australian Government has subsequently adopted greater flexibility with impact indicators and Small Business Victoria (SBV) is working with EMV to determine a more flexible approach to small business impact indicators.

From data gathered through IGEN's survey across councils, much of the resource sharing that occurred during and after the fires was to support secondary impact assessment. Council personnel reiterated their frustrations with the inefficiencies of the portal, information sharing limitations and the duplication of effort to re-collect data that was not able to be shared in a timely manner.

#### 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.

More broadly, other government stakeholders discussed the limitations of secondary impact assessment. Many personnel in relief leadership roles or recovery coordination roles discussed how the delays and inaccuracies of impact assessment data led to it not being explicitly considered in relief and other sources of information being used instead.

---

*We were getting much more informal impact data assessment than we were getting anything else... I knew that I was not going to get any good quality impact data. I've never got that in years of working in Victoria. So it's about being able to still make effective decisions in the absence of information.*

*Stakeholder*

---

IGEM notes that many of the positive accounts of secondary impact assessment come from stakeholders who collect and use data independently, or have existing, well-practised arrangements in place with partners through their business as usual activities. One example commonly identified as leading practice in impact assessment is the Department of Environment, Land, Water and Planning's (DELWP) Rapid Risk Assessment Teams.

Rapid Risk Assessment Teams (RRATs) work throughout the year to ensure their work and impact assessment activities are informed by relevant policy, procedures and research, in addition to ensuring data collected can be used to inform recovery planning and funding proposals. The teams work with DELWP's portfolio partners including Parks Victoria, CMAs, water authorities and corporations.

While many stakeholders find impact assessment to be a frustrating process, community members are also affected by the inefficiencies involved in the process. Following the 2019–20 fire season, community members noted that they had to recount or demonstrate their impacts to multiple agencies, and regularly allow government personnel onto their properties to assess seemingly the same impacts.

Community members often spoke of government in a broad sense to include responder agency and local, Victorian and Australian government organisations or personnel. In some cases, this term may also capture relief and recovery personnel from non-government organisations who were unknown to the community and acting in an official capacity.

There was a general perception that each government agency had a single focus on collecting its own data, with little communication as to what the data would be used for and how impacts would be addressed.

---

*We had so many people come and see the damage – count, measure, make notes. But not one of them actually did anything to help us fix things or clean-up. We had to reach out for that or do it ourselves.*

*Community member*

---

IGEM observed examples of agencies working together to collect data in a coordinated manner. It acknowledges that different specialists are required to accurately record various types of impact data and that different parts of government (including councils) have different needs for data.

For example, road damage can be described using road area, road length, road type and numerous other metrics. One department may ultimately need detailed information related to the road area to accurately estimate repair costs, while other agencies require road length estimates to initially communicate an approximate scale of the damage to government and the public. Both purposes are important, but the type of data and skills required to collect it vary considerably.

EMV is leading the ongoing development of a 'data dictionary' available to stakeholders with collection responsibilities. The document is being refined in consultation with councils and government departments to provide an overview and description of impact assessment metrics that might be collected after an emergency. However, it does not overcome the difficulties in collecting similar data more efficiently.

To many community members, it appeared that government was not working in a coordinated manner. At a time when the community was already feeling vulnerable, the lack of coordination and communication in relation to impact assessment data increased the trauma and stress associated with relief and early recovery.

### 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.

## 3.4.2 Information sharing

Community members and stakeholders discussed the difficulties and complexities of information sharing. The issue is relevant to secondary impact assessment, but restrictions and misunderstandings in relation to relief and recovery agencies' ability to share data affected many other aspects of relief and recovery.

In Victoria, privacy and information sharing is legislated in the *Privacy and Data Protection Act 2014*<sup>17</sup>, with personal health information protected under the *Health Records Act 2001*.<sup>18</sup>

Privacy and confidentiality legislation is principle-based and there are exemptions for information sharing during an emergency. Personal information can be shared between organisations if the secondary purpose of the information is related to the primary purpose, and there is a reasonable assumption that the individual whose information was collected may expect the secondary use or disclosure.<sup>19</sup>

Despite these allowances in the legislation and accompanying principles, personal information can only be shared if life and safety are under threat. Threat to life and safety can be easily argued in the response phase of an emergency, however, allowances for information sharing for relief and recovery purposes is less clear.

The SERRP stated that 'municipal councils and the Victorian Government are required to share any information they gather for impact assessment' but does not elaborate on any permissions and restrictions that apply, and to whom the information may be shared with.

The 2013 EM Act also permits information sharing with the EMC if the information is necessary in the performance of their legislative functions. However, the 2013 EM Act does not include a specific clause that expressly permits information sharing across organisations.

Many aspects of information collection during and after emergencies do not involve individual health records, however, much of the information collected is personal and sensitive. It can include information related to individual, family or business finances, insurance, address, employment, welfare arrangements and indeed, health records. Industries and businesses may also have commercially sensitive information that – if shared – could cause reputational damage with economic consequences at the individual business, regional and/or Victorian scale.

In a recovery context when an organisation collects personal information to assess eligibility for services it provides, it is not expressly able to share that personal information to another recovery organisation due to privacy and confidentiality obligations. This restriction remains even if the information sharing would clearly benefit the individual needing recovery support.

However, as noted previously the principles associated with the legislation do permit reasonable sharing in emergencies. The Victorian Information Commissioner recommends that organisations develop a framework for information sharing in an emergency that can be used to guide quick and confident decision-making. Frontline staff who are most often asked to provide information should receive training and be supported to appropriately share information.<sup>19</sup>

#### 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.

### Information sharing during and after the 2019–20 Victorian fire season

Community members who spoke about their relief and recovery expectations were often confused by the lack of information sharing. They assumed their details would be recorded in a centralised system allowing contact by government agencies. In some cases, community members waited for months to be contacted by recovery support providers, only to realise their information had not been shared. IGEM notes that in most cases organisations did not commit to sharing information, however, there is a clear community misunderstanding of government information sharing practices.

In most cases, stakeholders were very much in agreement with community members and expressed equal amounts of frustration regarding the lost opportunities to better support individuals and businesses during relief and early recovery. Stakeholders recognised that information collected in initial relief activities would allow better outreach and proactive support mechanisms to be activated, if that information could be appropriately shared across agencies.

As an example, community members and stakeholders reflected that most Emergency Relief Centres (ERCs) involved at least one registration process. In many cases:

- council staff took basic contact information
- Department of Health and Human Services (DHHS) staff recorded details related to emergency impact and personal circumstances
- Red Cross collected information to support affected people to reconnect with family and friends
- numerous other agencies may have collected information to provide immediate assistance.

However, there was no one mechanism for sharing that information between agencies to streamline immediate relief services or inform recovery organisations of affected individuals and communities that would benefit from outreach and support.

In most cases, relief and recovery agencies do not share information as they do not believe they have (and may not have) the authority to do so. They apply caution in information sharing to protect individuals' privacy and confidentiality. As individuals and communities transition from immediate relief into recovery, the number of organisations with formal and informal recovery roles grows considerably.

While some organisations are publicly recognised and experienced in recovery with very clear policies and procedures in place regarding provision of support, others can be small, localised and responding to an immediate need. In some cases these small organisations do not have appropriate procedures to ensure ethical use of data or an awareness of their responsibilities when requesting or using personal information.

Given the vulnerability of individuals and communities during recovery, the sector is right to apply a level of caution to information sharing. There is the potential for information to be used in a coercive manner, or to be shared in a manner where information is no longer securely stored and managed.

There are benefits to be had from a greater amount of information sharing provided there are clear protocols and appropriate understanding of organisational responsibilities for maintaining confidentiality.

One such example is a formal information sharing agreement formed after the fires between Windermere – a provider of the Bushfire Case Support Program – and one of the affected councils. The council held information related to individuals who sustained fire-related impacts during the fire season. However, many of the fire-affected individuals had not accessed the Bushfire Case Support Program as they believed they had already registered for assistance or thought they were not eligible.

Windermere was able to use the council's data to contact people who had sustained impact and then triage cases to ensure appropriate support was offered.

As of January 2021, Windermere had identified and contacted 2500 additional people.

---

*We were proactively like an assertive out-reach call to those residents and a lot of them were absolutely furious and incredibly vulnerable ...*

*These are individuals who believe they've either registered for supports and haven't been eligible, because nobody's ever got back to them ... So, in those early days of getting access to that data, we were able to identify a large number of people who had primary place of residence loss, had been injured during the fires, and had not been linked in with any supports whatsoever.*

*Stakeholder*

---

BRV has taken an interest in information sharing, noting the current practices do not support a person-centred, trauma-informed model of recovery. It acknowledges that a lack of suitable information sharing is increasing the level of difficulty for affected individuals, communities and businesses to receive practical, psychosocial and financial assistance.

BRV has commenced work to facilitate greater levels of information sharing. However, it is constrained by existing legislation, policies and systems, as well as its current remit constrained to coordinating recovery for East Gippsland and North East communities affected by the 2019–20 fires.

The National Bushfire Recovery Agency (NBRA) is also working with states to facilitate an end-to-end process that supports a proactive model of recovery for affected individuals to receive any assistance for which they are eligible. It is using a more streamlined approach to applications and interactions with government.

Data duplication and inefficiency was also identified in the 2020 Royal Commission into National Natural Disaster Arrangements which made a recommendation to ensure a greater amount of appropriate information sharing.<sup>20</sup> In submissions to both the Royal Commission and this Inquiry many organisations advocated for the importance of better information sharing and noted their willingness to share data with other agencies.

Red Cross has extensively considered the value of information collected for *Register.Find.Reunite* to reconnect family and friends for other relief and recovery purposes. It proposed potential mechanisms, procedures and measures to protect confidentiality, while supporting more efficient and effective proactive recovery practices.<sup>21</sup>

The issue of information sharing has been problematic in many other emergencies. IGEM made a recommendation (Recommendation 16) in relation to personal information sharing in its *Review of response to the thunderstorm asthma event of 21–22 November 2016 – Final Report*.<sup>22</sup> The response was led by DHHS and focused on incident casualties.

EMV also commenced work to better understand any issues with sharing health or personal information during emergencies. It advised IGEM that the development of the SEMP was an opportunity to strengthen responder agencies' understanding of information sharing provisions.<sup>23</sup>

Overall, there is a significant amount of duplication and inefficiency in relation to data collection and information sharing, underpinned by a lack of understanding of how the information is used outside of the collection agency. In addition, concerns in relation to data privacy and confidentiality, ethics and legislation, lack of suitable data sharing mechanisms and no standing guidance or arrangements are constraining appropriate information sharing.

#### 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.

#### RECOMMENDATION 1

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:

- (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.

### 3.4.3 Effectiveness of foundational aspects of relief and recovery

Throughout this Inquiry report, specific aspects of relief and recovery are assessed with a greater level of detail. However, some of the issues identified have underlying causes associated with foundational legislation, policy and structural governance arrangements, strategic emergency management planning and Victoria's overall approach to community resilience, relief and recovery.

There have been some improvements in Victoria's ability to plan for relief and recovery. The growing focus on a consequence management approach has encouraged a greater level of consideration for the short, medium and longer-term consequences of an emergency. During the 2019–20 Victorian fire season, consequence management was included in operational planning and there was strong representation for a diverse range of government portfolios involved in response, relief and recovery planning and tasking at the state level.

However, both relief and recovery seemed to have languished within the strategic governance of emergency management arrangements, with dedicated relief and recovery planning for the sector largely confined to the development of the Resilient Recovery Strategy. The dormant nature of the SCRC Relief and Recovery Sub-Committee has also left organisations with an interest in relief and recovery planning, without a forum to identify and address important multi-agency issues that relate to improving future arrangements.

As noted previously, stakeholders were very much aware of a long-standing lack of investment and planning for both relief and recovery and a historical focus on response. In IGEM's first dedicated stakeholder interview for Phase 2 of the Inquiry, the opening comments related to an overall lack of focus for both relief and recovery:

---

*Relief and recovery governance arrangements are undercooked, relief is tacked onto recovery which is not conducive to well-considered planning and activity. Relief and recovery have never been an equal consideration in relation to response.*

*Stakeholder*

---

# Chapter 4

Relief and recovery capacity



Building both a capacity and the capability within communities to cope with emergencies is important in strengthening their resilience. Prepared communities fare better in terms of both relief and recovery.

---

*A resilient community has the capacity to survive, adapt and thrive no matter what kinds of chronic stresses or acute shocks they experience.*

*EMV Community Resilience Framework for Emergency Management, 2017*

---

Equally important is ensuring that the agencies and departments responsible for assisting those communities have sufficient capacity and capability to deal with major emergency events.

Emergency management capability and capacity has been the subject of multiple evaluations and strategy development initiatives over the last 10 years. The Victorian Preparedness Framework includes relief and recovery core capabilities that have been applied in the SEMP to assign roles and responsibilities to sector organisations during emergencies.

In the preparation for and response to emergencies, the prevailing thinking is that communities share this responsibility with government and its agencies. The idea behind community resilience is that this sharing of responsibility extends into the relief and recovery of communities at a local, regional and state level. Moreover, Victoria's emergency management doctrine explicitly refers to relief and recovery as being a shared responsibility.

This chapter considers how capacity and capability from the sector, volunteers, broader community services sector and communities themselves was harnessed to support relief and recovery efforts before, during and after the 2019–20 Victorian fire season.

## 4.1 Government capacity and capability

Within the emergency management sector, building both capacity and capability to service the variety of roles remains an ongoing challenge. In the context of relief and recovery, many of these roles are delivered by departments and agencies in which emergency management is still not considered core business. This thinking has shifted over the past decade and especially since the creation of EMV, which placed a premium on encouraging a whole-of-government approach and providing training and resources to help build capability.

Some departments – notably the former DHHS (now Department of Health) and Department of Jobs, Precincts and Regions (DJPR) – have dedicated branches coordinating their emergency management responsibilities. However, even in these departments the number of personnel with a dedicated emergency management role is small relative to the escalating need when a major event occurs.

Under the emergency management arrangements in place at the time of the 2019–20 fires, DHHS, Department of Transport (DoT), DELWP, DJPR, councils, VicPol, Ambulance Victoria (AV), Red Cross, and the Salvation Army had lead responsibility for various aspects of relief.

Responsibility for recovery was vested in Victorian Government agencies including DHHS, DJPR, DoT, DELWP and EMV. The creation of BRV on 6 January shifted the leadership of functional responsibility for the coordination of recovery for communities impacted by the 2019–20 fires from EMV to BRV, which was established as an Administrative Office of DPC. EMV maintained responsibility for state-level recovery coordination. DHHS and local councils also retained recovery responsibilities at regional and local level.

For most government departments and agencies, relief and recovery during emergencies are comparatively small functions within the context of their broader portfolio responsibilities. For the non-government organisations with lead responsibility, these functions form a much larger part of their core business. Another critical difference is that both the Red Cross and Salvation Army use significant numbers of volunteers to deliver services in their emergency management operations. While volunteers are a feature of emergency preparedness and response (for example, the Country Fire Authority (CFA) and Victoria State Emergency Service (VICSES)), it is less common for other parts of government to deliver critical core services using volunteers.

The performance of the sector in building capacity and capability was explored in IGEN’s 10 Year Review, which noted there had been considerable work done since 2009. EMV developed the Emergency Management Capability Blueprint 2015–2025, which led to the publication of the Victorian Preparedness Goal in 2016 and the Victorian Preparedness Framework in 2017. A revised version of the Framework (Update #1) was released in 2018.

In events on the scale of the 2019–20 fires, even agencies with a large commitment to emergency management struggle to find sufficient resources to fill critical roles. The Inquiry was told of agencies having to train people in critical roles, such as public information, during the emergency over and above the normal mentoring of trained staff that takes place during such events.

#### FINDING 4.1

There is a shortage of dedicated relief and recovery capability and capacity across government organisations in Victoria.

### 4.1.1 Operational leadership in relief and recovery

During the 2019–20 Victorian fire season, Incident Controllers were focused on managing extensive and complex fires, significant evacuations and relocations and an influx of additional resources to support firefighting efforts. Understandably, their focus was on suppressing and containing the fires.

At various points throughout the fires, operational leaders were appointed at the state, regional and incident tiers to provide a focus on relief and recovery. This included roles such as Deputy Incident Controllers and functional leads and coordinators with assigned relief and recovery responsibilities.



Swifts Creek incident briefing (Source: © State of Victoria, DELWP)

In cases where this occurred, stakeholders discussed a greater level of clarity surrounding relief and recovery planning and tasking, and a greater level of consideration of community immediate and short-term needs. It also provided a necessary level of coordination for the government, council and community service organisations with responsibilities in relief and recovery.

There is currently no guidance or requirements to appoint operational leaders with relief and recovery responsibilities. The current command and control response arrangements allow flexibility to do so, but there are no clearly articulated trigger points for these appointments to guide response controllers at all levels.

Further, in most cases, operational leaders come from responder agencies. While they have a high level of capability and experience in managing response elements of the emergency, there is a variable level of capability for planning and activities required for relief and recovery. Undoubtedly, relief and recovery have a significantly greater focus on communication and communities, and require a coordination style of leadership, rather than command and control.

In many cases, those appointed to operational leadership roles in relief and recovery were appointed to the positions because they were well suited to the role. Consequently, the outcomes of these appointments were mostly positive. There was no consistent approach to the way personnel approached relief and recovery leadership, or their appointment across rotations.

The current training for operational leadership roles is already extensive. Accreditation requires many hours of accrued experience and exposes personnel to various aspects of relief and recovery. However, the level of relief and recovery training and capability required for operational leaders is very basic.

#### 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.

#### 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.

### 4.1.2 Council capability and capacity

A longstanding grievance in Victoria has been the extent to which councils' emergency management obligations are not matched with resourcing, which becomes apparent during major emergencies.

In its submission to IGEM's 10 Year Review, the Municipal Association of Victoria (MAV) noted:

---

*Maintaining a trained and willing workforce is also a challenge. Even council officers holding the key emergency management positions of Municipal Emergency Manager, Municipal Emergency Management Resource Officer and Municipal Recovery Manager usually hold these on top of their substantive roles. Without support from the State and from the council executive for professional development, these officers are often thrust into situations for which they aren't prepared.*

*Municipal Association of Victoria*

---

The LGV *Councils and Emergencies: Capabilities and Capacities Evaluation Report* (December 2019) clearly identifies the issue of lack of capacity at the council level.

Lack of staffing capacity is also an issue during and after emergency events, when council staff must be diverted from their normal duties to undertake emergency roles. Councils have limited numbers of staff available to resource emergency management during and after an emergency for the following reasons:

- the need to maintain business-critical functions (such as finance and aged care services)
- for a major emergency, the total number of staff within the organisation can be insufficient to maintain business as usual services and functions while undertaking emergency management responsibilities in activation, relief and recovery. This issue is amplified in smaller councils which will never be sufficiently staffed to resource a major emergency
- staff are not able to take on an emergency management role because they are not sufficiently resilient to deal with the trauma of affected communities, or they may have been personally affected by the emergency and are not able to undertake an emergency role
- not all councils have formal resource sharing agreements or detailed procedures about how to activate and carry out a resource sharing agreement.<sup>24</sup>

In addition, many council staff live in the area in which they work, meaning that they and their families may well be directly affected by the emergency. One-fifth of staff in Towong Shire Council endured direct impacts from the Upper Murray fires.

Other factors that can impact council capacity include that bushfires often occur, as they did in 2019–20, amid the holiday period when many staff are on leave. In the case of the Towong Shire Council, capacity was further diminished by the fact that it was undertaking a major restructure of key positions.

Like government more broadly, most small to medium-sized councils do not have specific emergency management staff available to work in relief and recovery.

---

*The emergency management planning function is commonly undertaken by one or a few staff, sometimes as an additional responsibility to their non-emergency-management substantive role. This results in reduced staffing capacity to undertake relief and recovery planning.*

*Councils and Emergencies: Capabilities and Capacities Evaluation Report<sup>24</sup>*

---

The report cited above found that around 80 per cent of councils were below target for maturity in relief and recovery planning and 71 per cent below target in being able to resource a major emergency.

In such circumstances, staff are reallocated from normal business as usual activity to cope with demand. The actual tasks they are called upon to perform may or may not be related to normal business as usual activity. In such areas as primary industry, road reconstruction or health services, the relief and recovery tasks may be directly related to and even an extension of normal activity.

In other areas the call upon staff may entail an adaptive response. In terms of capability, the extent to which departmental and agency staff have access to training and resources to work in emergency conditions, let alone experience, is likely to be quite variable.

The lack of a secure funding approach to recovery activities, the 'cannibalising' of staff resources and the failure to recognise the long-term demands of recovery have all been highlighted to the Inquiry.

---

*The lack of a dedicated recovery workforce and function within organisations with recovery responsibilities and other functions creates a significant barrier to meeting community and stakeholder expectations and effecting recovery and delivering outcomes efficiently. Use of untrained surge capacity and reallocating resources from other critical business as usual functions during every event is unsafe, inefficient, ineffective.*

*Stakeholder*

---

Evidence provided by one council suggests that supplementing relief capacity by using volunteers has limitations:

---

*There's a big difference between the availability of volunteers and capacity to sustain one or two relief centres as compared to – at one stage we were involved in seven relief centres. Obviously, that came back ultimately to a very restricted capacity – really focused around Bairnsdale because of the capacity – to be able to access and safely utilise the different locations.*

*Council stakeholder*

---

Councils struggled to locate and maintain capacity and the full complement of resources for ERCs. In places like Cann River, which was isolated due to road closures and fire behaviour, the focus was on establishing contact through local networks to verify and address the relief needs of those sheltering in the town.

East Gippsland Shire Council deployed 80 staff to work in ERCs and was able to draw 44 staff from neighbouring councils to assist in running these centres. In addition, 150 staff were engaged in impact assessment teams and recovery centres.

Within non-government organisations focused on relief and recovery, the ability to realign activities to meet the immediate needs of emergencies is also varied. Larger organisations with diverse teams 'were able to shift priorities and move teams quickly to focus on bushfire response'. However, smaller community-led groups:

---

*... had limited preparations in place, limited resources, less experience in emergency management and less capacity to support impacted staff. These organisations were often on the front line of relief and recovery efforts, fuelled by the passion and commitment of local staff and volunteers.*

*Victorian Council of Social Service (2020), Bushfire Recovery Project, Phase 1 – Engagement Progress Report 3*

---

The creation of BRV has prompted some questioning at the municipal level about the extent to which the cost of resourcing a new body might have better been directed to building capacity within existing local systems.



Mallacoota incident briefing (Source: Andy Beckett, FFMVic)

### 4.1.3 Municipal resource sharing

In complex or prolonged emergencies, councils need to ensure appropriate representation at Incident Control Centres (ICCs), resource ERCs, communicate with their communities, coordinate the provision of relief supplies at a local level and start planning for recovery.

In a major emergency, councils in Victoria recognise that the capacity required to deliver on their emergency management roles and responsibilities will exceed their internal resources within days. For example, many councils reflected that they can typically staff an ERC for up to 48 hours before needing to request support from an outside source.

Municipal resource sharing occurs to temporarily increase the capacity of affected councils. It occurs with various levels of formality. During the 2019–20 fires, MAV facilitated resource sharing using its Resource sharing Protocol, council CEOs called on other councils directly to provide specific support, existing council clusters activated pre-determined resource sharing arrangements and unaffected councils offered various forms of support directly to affected councils.

Capacity is not just about staff numbers, but about systems, training and resources. The issue of the lack of training available to council staff to equip them for emergency management roles has been highlighted to the Inquiry. Affected councils looked to their neighbours, many of whom are part of formal Municipal Emergency Management Enhancement Groups or collaborations of councils formed to develop a shared capacity and capability in emergency management. For example, Towong Shire Council – the smallest rural council in Victoria – drew heavily upon resources from 11 Hume region municipalities.

Councils reported that resource sharing started in December 2019 and was most prevalent during late December and January 2020. However, many councils were still providing support throughout February and March for secondary impact assessment, environment health support and building surveyance. One council reported it formally withdrew its final resources in April 2020 but continued to offer advice remotely throughout 2020.

Individual councils deployed numerous staff and committed to thousands of kilometres of travel to support the affected councils. For example, Baw Baw Shire Council deployed 18 staff and had another two staff providing support remotely. Darebin City Council deployed 13 staff and had nine additional staff providing remote assistance. In the survey conducted by IGEM, the estimation of time allocated to supporting affected councils exceeded 10,000 hours.

The value of this resource sharing is significant. Several regional councils estimated the costs of resource sharing as exceeding \$80,000. These costs were often reimbursed through the Disaster Recovery Funding Arrangements (DRFA) either directly or via the affected council. EMV instigated a significantly more streamlined approach to reimbursement than that which typically applies to relieve fire-affected councils of administrative burden. Instead of supporting councils being required to submit reimbursement claims to the council supported, they could submit directly to EMV.

Reimbursement of costs requires appropriate authorisation and documentation of resource sharing and is only applicable to eligible emergency management costs.

Most councils reported some discrepancy between the costs expended and what was reimbursed. Councils (both affected and unaffected) found it difficult to receive adequate reimbursement for time-related expenses – including travel time, leave periods associated with fatigue management policies and loss of business as usual capacity as only overtime was claimable.

In some cases, councils did not attempt to seek reimbursement for all costs, either anticipating the process to be too difficult or likely to be unsuccessful. A few councils reported that they absorbed the cost of their contribution and were comfortable to do so as their contribution to the emergency.

Government stakeholders reported that resource sharing can be difficult to appropriately reimburse as councils often did not seek or retain necessary documentation to support reimbursement through the DRFA. In particular, it was important to have evidence of a formal request for resource sharing. As many councils offered their support and showed up, this evidence was often non-existent, or not suitable for reimbursement. Record-keeping of hours and evidence to demonstrate the roles performed and support provided was very important, but often not of a suitable standard for reimbursement.

Councils discussed the lack of clarity in relation to the evidence required for cost reimbursement, and the eligibility criteria for reimbursement overall. They felt there was an overall lack of trust in the process and some commented that the process of reimbursement became somewhat adversarial with government.

---

*We stood up, did what was clearly necessary at the time and now have to convince them that our claims are fair and reasonable. There just seems to be no support to help us be reimbursed, I've had numerous conversations where I've been made to feel like I've done the wrong thing.*

Stakeholder

---

Councils also commented that despite knowing that evidence would ultimately be required to demonstrate resource sharing, they were unable to establish processes to ensure this evidence was collected systematically during the fire season. Councils noted that personnel fatigue, the fast-paced nature of the emergency and consideration of the affected councils' circumstances made it difficult to keep accurate and well-evidenced records.

---

*When you've got staff working long hours, away from home and doing really difficult things, to me it's not surprising that they forgot to record their hours, or don't hang onto a receipt. And the last thing I am going to do ... is hassle a tiny council reeling from fire to ask them to trawl through emails or ask for a formal request for assistance. I got the call and we just went.*

Stakeholder

---

#### FINDING 4.3

The reimbursement of costs associated with municipal resource sharing is burdensome and often unsuccessful for councils.

The value of resource sharing is clear through a simple assessment of the tangible costs associated with the support provided. Affected councils were very clear that they could not have delivered on their roles and responsibilities during relief and recovery without resource sharing. In addition to the hours of support provided, the advice and capability was essential as experienced staff from other councils could advise on aspects of relief and recovery, and support councils to plan for and implement relief and recovery activities in an efficient manner.

#### 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.

One issue experienced by council personnel during the fire season was the variability in approach and capability across councils. At times, there was limited levels of consistency in skill, which made it difficult to work together to deliver relief and recovery activities. Likewise, different councils have different approaches to delivering on their relief and recovery responsibilities.

Personnel who were deployed to support affected councils were understanding of discrepancies in skills and knowledge:

---

*Unfortunately, I've done this multiple times. Just that level of experience means I know what I'm doing. These [staff] had never worked in a relief centre, never been involved in a major emergency – of course they were going to be overwhelmed.*

*Stakeholder*

---

Council stakeholders reflected that there is a significant gap in capability development in emergency management. Currently, councils deliver training and exercising independently, or within existing council collaborations or clusters. As noted throughout this report, there is a limited amount of detailed and current doctrine describing the relief and recovery arrangements and the operationalisation of roles and responsibilities. As a consequence, each council independently interprets their roles and responsibilities and trains their staff according to this interpretation.

EMV still provides numerous online modules, however, has withdrawn in-person council training and exercising due to resourcing constraints. Councils reflected that this change has left a major gap in capability development. While they continue to train and develop their staff, there is no consistency in this training. Councils also struggle to dedicate the time required for training and skill maintenance as many emergency management staff have other council roles.

The LGV Councils and Emergencies work has identified areas for improvements and strengths in council capacity and capability. The work had not yet progressed into actions to address these areas for improvement at the time of writing, although IGEM notes DJPR has reported to the SCRC that the third phase of this project is currently under delivery.

During the 2019–20 fires, councils' role in relief was critical. Likewise, many recovery activities become the responsibility of councils as other recovery organisations scale back in their activities and communities adapt to their new normal.

#### 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.

## 4.2 Local capacity and capability

A range of local organisations have progressively become involved in relief and recovery activities. Many of these organisations are small, highly localised and unconnected to emergency management structures. However, especially in the immediate aftermath of these fires, they were crucial in assisting affected communities.

Making the most effective use of available human and physical resources, especially during the relief phase of an emergency, demands a clear understanding of what capacity is available and what is needed. The lack of investment in developing a coordinated and planned approach to relief at the state level has been highlighted in submissions to this Inquiry. The same need is even more apparent at a local level.

In many localities there are examples of formal and sometimes informal organisations that contribute to the social capital of communities. A study by the Monash University Disaster Resilience Initiative (2019) points to the significance of local organisations in building both resilience and capacity in relief and recovery. In addition to providing a pool of volunteers, not-for-profit organisations contribute significantly to local communities during and after disasters.



Sarsfield Tool Library (Source: IGEM)

This finds expression in a variety of ways, such as providing quick access to local assets (machinery ownership or skills, community kitchens), water, toilets, food, clean-up or shelter. In Mallacoota, a local opportunity shop quickly became a centre of relief activities. In terms of longer-term recovery, this might last years through actions such as establishing and funding Men's Sheds, tool libraries or community activities.

---

*The strengths of these organisations were found to enhance community resilience in the disaster setting. Rotary Clubs, Lions Clubs and Neighbourhood Houses are long-term local contributors to community development. These organisations are embedded in their communities, they have extensive community networks and connections, and people know and trust them. They often support the most vulnerable people and they are empowered to action, independent of government, to help their communities. With an underpinning drive to help, they have the potential to be sustainable contributors to communities before, during and after emergency situations.*

*Monash University Disaster Resilience Initiative*

---

Identifying, quantifying and managing such resources to greatest effect requires a more intimate understanding of the extent and ways in which such organisations operate locally. Integrating them in a more formal sense into the emergency management system at the local level is perhaps worthy of consideration.

Many community members spoke of the ways in which locals stood up to support their communities during relief and recovery. Local business owners and tradespeople became an important source of capacity in clean-up and initial rebuilding. Other community members drew on their various skill sets to provide practical and emotional support to affected individuals and families.

Existing community groups and recovery groups established in response to the fires also assumed local leadership and advocacy roles. In many cases, these groups provided essential capacity and leadership in the communities. There was a large amount of variability in their skills and capacity to maintain this contribution and ensure efforts were valuable to overall relief and recovery.

Many community members – particularly young people – discussed an interest in learning more about emergency management, and ways they could effectively support their communities in relief and recovery. Currently, most opportunities to become involved in emergency management require participation in ongoing, formal organisations (for example, membership in the CFA or Red Cross) and receiving training through those organisations.

#### 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.

#### 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:

- (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:

- (a) for emergencies of variable scale, complexity and duration
- (b) in a manner that caters to the needs of diverse communities.

## 4.3 Volunteering in relief and recovery

Just as the response phase of emergencies in Victoria is heavily reliant upon volunteers, the relief and recovery efforts are arguably more so. Aside from the work of organisations such as Red Cross and the Salvation Army, a diffuse and often largely unseen amount of volunteer work occurs in the aftermath of a major emergency. Much of this is highly localised, often informal and even ‘unrecognisable’ as relief and recovery.

There has also been a noticeable shift away from long-term, structured volunteering. Spontaneous volunteering remains a predictable and widespread response to major emergencies, including the 2019–20 fires. During these fires, hundreds of Victorians self-activated to assist communities affected by the fires. Many more reached out to government and other large organisations to work with them. In many cases, this spontaneous, incident-specific outpouring of donated time and labour is similar to Victorians propensity to donate goods (see Chapter 9). The goodwill is positive, but the approach can be burdensome for the sector and community.

Larger community service organisations have strategies in place to either divert spontaneous volunteers or recruit their services in ways that are safe for the volunteer and appropriate to the needs of the affected community and the organisation. The Salvation Army has a model where permanent volunteers assume team leadership roles and supervise new volunteers in tasks that are safe and quite often not public facing (for example, sorting donations).

In the height of response (the most common period for spontaneous volunteering), it is difficult to appropriately register, assess and assign volunteers. In some cases, organisations may be at risk of adverse occupational health and safety (OH&S) outcomes if they assign volunteers to relief and recovery work.

### 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.

In 2015 the peak body Volunteering Australia developed The National Standards for Volunteer Involvement. These are very much aligned to long-term, structured volunteering within organisations. The standards recognise a need that:

- Volunteer roles reflect current developments in volunteering, volunteer availability and ways of involving volunteers
- Volunteer roles and activities are designed to attract people with relevant attributes, and a diversity of experience and interest.

The standards do not appear to contemplate the sort of short-term, event-based volunteering for which there is a growing appetite.

This shift presents something of a dilemma for the emergency management sector. Response activities require a core body of personnel who are well trained and disciplined in the mechanics of responding to emergencies in a safe, continuous and sustainable manner. These volunteers have historically been ‘in it for the long haul’. Such activities require equipment (including PPE) and training that is expensive and time consuming.

Experience through involvement in emergencies over a long period adds immeasurably to the capability of responders. However, there is growing recognition in volunteer emergency response agencies of the value of investing in younger volunteers who may only remain with an organisation for two to five years rather than expecting 10–30 years of service. There are also certain roles in response (and certainly in relief) in which short-term volunteering can be used to fill the needs of surge capacity or other shortfalls.

During the 2019–20 fires, government agencies largely deflected the whole issue by referring people wanting to help to Volunteering Victoria, which in effect resolved nothing and simply created a problem for that organisation.

---

*We ended up taking on a register of interested volunteers, recognising that we really couldn't do a heck of a lot because our mandate wasn't in that position to supply volunteers because there are so many challenges and constraints associated with doing that effectively such as the insurance, the logistics of where are you going to put them, how are they going to get there? What sort of coordination are they going to have?*

*Stakeholder*

---

The failure to address this changed circumstance and demand denies people the opportunity to make a meaningful contribution and short-changes the sector's own development in terms of the diversity of skills on offer. The sort of approach outlined in the Volunteer model is one way to address the dilemma. However, this program (like a previous pilot program to harness spontaneous volunteers, HelpOut) is currently subject to time-limited funding. There has been an extension to this funding in May 2021.

The sector has attempted to develop strategies over many years to better coordinate spontaneous volunteers. DHHS led the most recent work in this area, but in the last SCRC Relief and Recovery Sub-Committee meeting (held August 2019), recommended that government does not have a role in spontaneous volunteer management. It recommended communities be encouraged to donate money or register with a local volunteer-based organisation well before an emergency strikes. The proposal has not been considered in subsequent sector-wide forums since. However, IGEM notes the lead and supporting agencies for the coordination of spontaneous volunteers is being discussed as part of the SEMP review due August 2021.

Despite a reluctance to engage in government-based coordination of spontaneous volunteers, evidence and experience suggests that spontaneous volunteers will continue to offer their time and expertise during and immediately after a major emergency.

The State of Volunteering 2020 report by Volunteering Victoria points to a wider global trend towards a new type of volunteer who is driven to make a high impact contribution but over a relatively short period. It is estimated that informal volunteering overall accounts for around 16 per cent of volunteering in Victoria, and that the activity itself often goes unnoticed. This growing trend is in part due to increasing work and family commitments and the need for greater flexibility than traditional models of volunteering provide. The report noted:

---

*This trend and the changing nature of work suggest that some organisations need to rethink the usual metric of 'volunteer retention'. Newer models that can better accommodate volunteers may involve people engaging and disengaging more frequently, rather than filling ongoing roles.*

*State of Volunteering 2020 report, Volunteering Victoria*

---

Such a model is particularly relevant in the context of relief and recovery in emergencies, where large scale events can be unexpected, diverse, broad in scale and demand both an immediate and longer-term effort. The COVID-19 pandemic has prompted one initiative in partnership between the Victorian Government and Volunteering Victoria. The online portal 'weVolunteer' was established in August 2020 as:

---

*A Community Recovery Volunteering initiative designed to support communities in times of need, bringing together volunteers, the organisations that involve volunteers in their work, and Volunteer Support Organisations that provide local solutions to volunteering and the communities that are enhanced through volunteer participation.*

*wevolunteer.org.au*

---

The characteristics of the 'weVolunteer' project is the matching of motivated, locally based, short-term volunteers with organisations in need of help in the context of recovery. Participants register online and are credentialled through a 'volunteer passport'. While initially focused on COVID-19, it has the obvious potential to extend to other emergencies. The project has initially been funded for 12 months. Volunteering Victoria has presented a business case and detailed project plan to government seeking an extension of the program to guarantee its long-term viability.

In its submission to the 2020 Royal Commission into National Natural Disaster Arrangements, the Red Cross commented:

*Volunteering has moved from a static commitment to an organisation to one that is more cause-focused and often time limited. This shift makes it challenging for organisations to recruit, train, engage and retain volunteers on a long-term basis. Expectations of volunteers have also changed, with a shift to a more educated and skilled workforce.*

*Australian Red Cross submission to the 2020 Royal Commission into National Natural Disaster Arrangements*

The work conducted by Volunteering Victoria, and experiences in many major emergencies suggests that Victorians will continue to volunteer spontaneously, and while registering with local organisations well before an emergency is positive for overall sector capacity, it does not address the spontaneous nature of this type of volunteering.

#### FINDING 4.8

There is no Victorian system in place or defined lead agency to plan for and coordinate spontaneous volunteers.

In addition to spontaneous volunteering, in recent years new groups interested in providing relief and recovery services during and after emergencies have emerged in Victoria. Some of these are short lived, others more enduring. The majority are not integrated into the broader relief and recovery arrangements and in an administrative sense are neither coordinated nor closely regulated.

Some organisations have arisen in response to a specific, apparent need. A prominent example of this is BlazeAid, which was formed after the 2009 Victoria bushfires to assist farmers rebuild fences after bushfires. While there have been other similar initiatives, this organisation has grown into a volunteer-based registered charity that marshals short-term, task oriented, voluntary resources in response to events across Australia. It has successfully tapped into a pool of several thousand temporary volunteers from both Australia and overseas visitors.

There are several examples of faith-based responses to emergencies beyond the ongoing and quite structured work of the Salvation Army. A small number of Melbourne-based Sikh organisations mobilised quickly to provide free meals and non-perishable items to those evacuating bushfires in Gippsland and the North East, working with local Indian community members. Similarly, Muslim community groups, such as the Australian Islamic Centre in Newport, embarked upon spontaneous activities around feeding responders and community members in both Victoria and NSW or fundraising for specific needs.



Australian Islamic Centre donations, Buchan (Source: IGEM)

Samaritan’s Purse is a global Evangelical Christian organisation with chapters in Australia and New Zealand which provides relief and recovery volunteers to work in emergency-affected communities, usually linked through local churches. The Samaritan’s Purse volunteering model is less structured than other organisations and more focused on responding to events.

An example of a highly trained, task-oriented relief and recovery response is that of Team Rubicon. Established as a non-profit organisation, Team Rubicon links the skills and experiences of military veterans with emergency services specialists to rapidly deploy volunteer disaster relief teams in Australia and elsewhere following major emergencies. With more than 3000 trained and equipped volunteers, plus a further untapped pool of veterans, the organisation positions itself as a resource of sizeable capacity in areas such as incident management, damage and impact assessment, disaster mapping and work-order management, debris management, hazard mitigation, and medical and mental health support. In its submission to the Royal Commission into National Natural Disaster Arrangements, Team Rubicon stressed the primacy of supporting local relief and recovery efforts.

However, there appears to be an essential tension between highly structured, ‘traditional’ volunteering legitimated through an emergency management organisation and newer forms of action. McLennan et al (2020) have characterised this as ‘insider’ versus ‘outsider’ volunteering.

---

*Outsider emergency volunteers are any volunteers who do not derive authority to deliver emergency management services to communities through their association with an [emergency management organisation]. Therefore, their legitimacy as service providers may be unclear, denied or contested by either governments or communities.*

McLennan et al (2020)

---

One unresolved issue is that outsider volunteering presents a challenge to emergency management organisations as it serves to weaken their control. The authors note ‘Community resilience and shared responsibility present challenges to the traditional foundations of authority and public accountability in emergency management’. They conclude that:

---

*the very formalised and defined foundations of authority and legitimacy in emergency management will need to soften and expand to become more networked and distributed.*

McLennan et al (2020)

---

There is a risk that in compelling outsider volunteers to work within rigid structures this will ‘kill off’ or mutate their initiative in a way that is unacceptable to them. McLennan et al propose a model of co-production, which allows for both emergency management organisations and less formal groups to work together, without imposing rigid and hierarchical structures on groups who wish to contribute to the common good, sometimes in the short-term and without necessarily becoming part of an emergency management bureaucracy.

#### 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.

## 4.4 The impacts of recovery work on personnel

Working in both relief and recovery can place enormous physical and emotional demands upon people tasked with their delivery. In recent years, response agencies in Victoria have developed established protocols around fatigue management and psychosocial support for operational staff and volunteers both in the field and in Incident Management Teams (IMTs). There is less evidence of such provisions in relief and recovery, and the experience of the 2019–20 fires has refocused attention on this.

Even employers with relatively small staff numbers such as councils have employee assistance programs in place. The extent to which such arrangements are attuned to the needs generated by staff involvement in emergency work is unclear to the Inquiry. The availability of appropriate support for volunteers, especially those working in smaller or local community-based services is also uncertain.

Given that for many local recovery workers, involvement in a major emergency will begin during the response phase, the long tail of their involvement can be problematic.

---

*Special attention needs to be given to the ongoing support provided to relief and recovery staff. Debriefing, trauma counselling etc should be consistently provided. If support isn't provided while they're deployed or afterwards, there will be reluctance by many to put themselves in that position again.*

*Stakeholder*

---

Despite recognition of the pressures, some stakeholders told the Inquiry insufficient attention was paid to the impacts of burnout, fatigue and vicarious trauma on recovery workers. Many people called upon to work in ERCs or in longer term recovery functions, may have little or no experience in other emergencies. The workloads faced by some, notably those working in Community Recovery Hubs, was seen as impacting upon their mental health and wellbeing (see section 4.5, p 100) The prolonged nature of the 2019–20 fires and the subsequent impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on recovery planning and activities were complicating dimensions.

Pressures on those working in recovery often stem from the disjointed nature of the work itself. Personnel who work in both response and recovery commented on the comparative ease with which funding can be accessed during an emergency, while afterwards access to money is subject to more stringent and sometimes frustrating bureaucratic barriers.

## 4.5 Maintaining capacity and capability

As noted throughout this report, relief and recovery are complex and prolonged elements of emergencies. Successful planning and implementation of relief and recovery requires resourcing and training across all tiers of emergency management, and potentially includes a greater number of organisations whose business as usual is outside the emergency management sector.

Stakeholder feedback and evidence provided to the Inquiry indicated that capacity and capability for relief and recovery is overlooked in many ways and its value under-estimated. Stakeholders were very aware that relief and recovery were often seen as the softer side of emergency management, and personnel working in these areas reported issues with being involved in important discussions related to overall response efforts.

The reality is that relief and recovery activities are complex and prolonged. Stakeholders noted many frustrations with limited resourcing and guidance, making their work more difficult. These staff and volunteers also work with distressed and frustrated community members – a mentally and emotionally draining part of the work.

IGEM spoke with many frustrated personnel who felt their work was important but undervalued and inappropriately resourced. This was relevant for personnel from all organisations – paid and volunteer.

Stakeholders reported that the lack of guidance, training and clarity of arrangements made their job more difficult and required them to be constantly reinventing the wheel.

Across the sector and community, there is a large level of recognition that relief and recovery work is important but under-resourced. As emergencies continue to increase in frequency and severity, Victoria cannot afford to lose capacity and capability in any aspect of emergency management, including relief and recovery.

# Chapter 5

Relief and recovery funding



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.

Government and councils activate numerous relief and recovery activities during and after an emergency to support individuals. These activities are funded through multiple state and federal mechanisms and cost sharing partnerships to facilitate expenditure on immediate costs and longer-term recovery programs. In many cases, recovery programs transition into business as usual activities as additional responsibilities or considerations for ongoing work with communities, businesses, economies or the natural environment.

State and federal government provide a large amount of financial support for individuals, communities and businesses, either directly or through the delivery of relief and recovery programs. Donors and charities also provide financial assistance and reimbursement of costs associated with relief and recovery. During and after the 2019–20 Victorian fire season, charities collected and disbursed amounts of money greater than that which had previously been experienced in Victoria. Donated money was directed to individuals, families, communities, businesses and relief and recovery organisations to support people, animals and places affected by the fires.

This chapter considers the funding arrangements in place to ensure individuals and communities have the financial means to support their basic and immediate relief needs, as well as the recovery priorities in the short to medium term. However, IGEM notes that long-term funding plans and arrangements are necessary to support the long tail of recovery as many needs and priorities take years to emerge and adequately address.

Funding was a major source of frustration and distress for communities and stakeholders throughout this Inquiry. Accordingly, this chapter aims to identify issues related to funding that have inhibited recovery for stakeholders, communities, businesses and individuals. As many of the funding arrangements involve various Australian policy instruments, this chapter does not provide a detailed analysis of each funding source.

## 5.1 Summary of Australian Government funding

In response to the Black Summer fires, the Australian Government committed more than \$2 billion to the National Bushfire Recovery Fund, administered through the NBRA and Emergency Management Australia. This fund is supported by administrative arrangements, rather than legislation. It is an incident-specific allocation of funding based on anticipated impact and recovery costs.

The NBRA is responsible for the allocation of funding and to develop programs and criteria for eligibility. Some payments from this fund are made to states for spending on approved programs, however some are made directly to individuals or through other third parties.

The other source of payments via the Australian Government is through the DRFA. This scheme pays the states a percentage of the state's eligible expenditure on emergency response, relief and recovery. It does not make these payments directly to individuals. Rather, the states make relevant payments and then report those to the Australian Government to claim a reimbursement.

There are multiple categories of DRFA based on the type of recovery cost and the organisation responsible for managing the recovery activity:

- **Category A:** assistance to individuals to alleviate personal hardship or distress arising as a direct result of a disaster. Category A assistance is provided automatically by the states without requiring approval from the Australian Government. Category A is cost shared 50/50 between State / Commonwealth.

- **Category B:** assistance to the state, and/or councils for the restoration of essential public assets and certain counter-disaster operations and includes:
  - restoration or replacement of essential public assets (that are not operating on a commercial basis) such as roads, bridges and schools to their pre-disaster function
  - concessional loans, subsidies or grants to small businesses, primary producers, voluntary non-profit bodies and needy individuals
  - counter-disaster operations for the protection of the general public.
- **Category C:** assistance for severely affected communities, regions or sectors. Category C assistance is only made available when the impact of a disaster is severe and must be approved by the Prime Minister. Category C includes a community recovery package comprising:
  - a community recovery fund
  - recovery grants for small businesses and not-for profit organisations
  - clean-up and recovery grants to primary producers.
- **Category D:** assistance for severe impact events only and exceptional circumstances beyond Categories A, B and C. Category D assistance is generally considered once the impact of the emergency has been assessed and specific recovery gaps identified. Category D funds are subject to approval by the Prime Minister. The states cost-share with the Australian Government based on emergency-specific agreements (generally 50 per cent of the agreed measures).

For some categories of assistance, the state contribution needs to exceed a specified threshold before the commonwealth contribution becomes available.

In addition to DRFA funding, the Australian Government also allocated a significant amount of funding to specific emergency relief and recovery funds, subsidies and concessions. These were administered via various charities, local organisations and key service providers. In many cases, funding was allocated directly to industry bodies, rather than via state governments. For example, the Australian Government allocated funding to recovery across the tourism sector (\$76 million), rural financial counselling services (\$15 million), native wildlife and habitats (\$149.7 million) and mental health support (\$53.4 million). While the states may have a role in advising on and delivering programs and projects funded by these allocations, the NBRA is responsible for administering the funds.

### 5.1.1 Financial assistance for individuals and families

Most national relief and recovery payments are provided for in the *Social Security Act 1991* (C'th). The relevant federal minister must determine if an event is a major disaster. A major disaster is an event that has such a significant impact on individuals that a government response is required. The Social Security Act then provides for the Disaster Recovery Allowance and Australian Government Disaster Recovery Payment.

The Disaster Recovery Allowance is a regular payment made to people who live in the affected area or are employed in affected industries and have suffered a loss of income because of the major disaster. Subject to the terms of the relevant (federal) minister's disaster declaration and prescribed eligibility requirements, the allowance can be paid for up to 13 weeks.

The Australian Government Disaster Recovery Payment is a one-off payment to people who are 'adversely affected' by a major disaster. The determination of who is 'adversely affected' is made by the relevant minister with respect to each disaster. The value of the payment is \$1000 or such other value as the relevant minister determines.

On 5 February 2020 the then federal Minister for Natural Disaster and Emergency Management determined that, with respect to the fires that occurred between November 2019 and February 2020 affecting the Victorian councils of Alpine, East Gippsland, Towong and Wodonga, a person is considered to be 'adversely affected' if they were seriously injured or had an immediate relative killed as a result of the fires. The consideration extended to people whose primary place of residence or other assets were destroyed or had major damage

## 5.2 Summary of funding arrangements in Victoria

The 2013 EM Act outlines that the EMC is responsible for recovery coordination. Both the SERRP and the SEMP detail arrangements for recovery funding including those related to Victoria's Natural Disaster Financial Assistance (NDFA) Scheme which is managed in accordance with the Australian Government's DRFA. The Scheme is administered by EMV and guidance is provided to councils and other government portfolios to ensure their spending meets eligibility requirements for reimbursement.

A key feature of the Australian and Victorian governments' financial assistance for individuals and families is that no two programs provide the exact same support. The differences between programs provide greater scope to address a wider range of needs for impacted individuals and families.

State government financial assistance for the 2019–20 fires provided an extensive range of programs addressing many aspects of fire related impacts. This was complemented by an array of funding options from charities and not-for-profit organisations (cash and vouchers) and potential insurance claims.

In addition to recovery programs funded through the NDFA scheme, the state government funds other relief and recovery initiatives. Some of these were approved through additional Treasurer's Advances and budget packages in the 2020–21 and 2021–22 state budgets.

A Treasurer's Advance is an annual appropriation to the Treasurer to meet urgent expenditure claims that were unforeseen at the time of the budget. Treasurer's Advance applications were approved for the following activities, some of which are the Victorian contribution to state/ Commonwealth co-funded payments:

- establishment of BRV and its operational funding
- \$2 million donation to the Victorian Bushfire Appeal
- Bushfire Recovery Clean-up Program
- Council Capacity Grants
- IGEM Inquiry into the 2019–20 Victorian fire season
- tourism marketing in fire-affected regions
- wildlife and biodiversity packages
- Bushfire Mental Health Package
- Case Support Program via the National Disaster Relief Trust
- short-term modular housing program.

The state government funded numerous other recovery programs directly via its departments. These included activities such as wildlife and biodiversity recovery packages (DELWP), school supports (Department of Education and Training; DET), tourism-related events and funding (DJPR) and fencing (DELWP).

Overall, there were some of the largest allocations of emergency-related relief and recovery funds during and after the 2019–20 fires. Both mental health and environmental recovery programs received significantly higher levels of funding than has previously been allocated. This funding came from both Australian and Victorian governments and was administered through various federal and state-based entities, and sometimes directly through service providers. Many of the costs were shared between the governments.

Table 1 (p 105) provides an overview of the various funding programs initiated in response to the 2019–20 fires in Victoria. Specified amounts are based on data available at the end of December 2020 and IGEM does not claim that they include all grants and funded programs.

**Table 1.** Selected grants/initiatives update (Source: BRV)

GRANT / INITIATIVE NAME	JURISDICTION	TOTAL FUNDS	FUNDING RELEASED AT DECEMBER 2020
Bushfire Recovery Round of the Regional Events Fund	VIC	\$300k	\$45,000
Bushfire Tourism and Business Fund	VIC	\$10m	\$2,265,000
Case Support Program	JOINT	\$14.4m	Reported by case support numbers
Clean-up	JOINT	\$75m	Reported by clean up numbers
Community and Emergency Services Mental Health Program	JOINT	\$10m	\$2,021,300
Community Recovery and Resilience Grants	JOINT	\$35m	\$3,387,457
Community Recovery Hubs	JOINT	\$15m	\$4,209,910
Emergency Re-establishment Payments	JOINT	Uncapped	\$2,668,926
Emergency Relief Assistance Payments	JOINT	Uncapped	\$14,599,886
Establishment of Bushfire Recovery Victoria	VIC	\$19.9m	\$19,889,950
Fencing	VIC	Uncapped	\$4,882,561
Freight Subsidy for Primary Producers	JOINT	Uncapped	\$925,846
Immediate Reconstruction and Rebuilding Program	JOINT	\$20m	\$881,053
Mental Health Bushfire Recovery Package	VIC	\$23.4m	\$8,484,848
Primary Industry Grants Program	JOINT	Uncapped	\$29,289,528
School support	VIC	\$13.45m	\$4,282,015
Small Business and Non-Profit Grants	JOINT	Uncapped	\$3,303,992
Small Business Bushfire Support Grant	JOINT	Uncapped	\$23,040,000
Solar Homes hardship provisions	VIC	Uncapped	\$24,054
TAFE Community Service Funding	VIC	\$325k	\$209,287
Tax Relief Package	VIC	\$64m	\$11,451,803
Various Tax and Levy Relief Measures	VIC	Uncapped	\$781,763
Wildlife and Biodiversity Package	VIC	\$17.5m	\$15,424,750
Business and Sport for Bushfire Recovery	VIC	-	\$0.00
Golden Tags	VIC	-	\$255,000
Tourism Campaigns	VIC	\$7m	\$264,000
Business Victoria Local Events Program	VIC	\$33k	\$33,000
Council Capacity Grants	VIC	\$7.31m	\$7,312,142
Grants for Wildlife Shelters	VIC	Uncapped	\$41,150
High Country Comeback Event	VIC	\$26k	\$26,000
Neighbourhood House Grants	VIC	\$150k	\$150,000
Tourism Grants	VIC	\$400k	\$400,000
Victorian Bushfire Appeal Fund Donation	VIC	\$2m	\$2,000,000
Community Recovery Committees	JOINT	\$6m	\$0.00
Wine Grape Smoke Taint Grant	JOINT	-	\$20,000
Bushfire Recovery Grants for Aboriginal Communities	JOINT	\$4.2m	\$0.00
<b>Total</b>			<b>\$162,570,221</b>

Multiple entities were involved in the provision and allocation of relief and recovery funding to support fire-affected communities. This included council funded grants, charitable funding and other bespoke arrangements. This led to a large degree of variability in public communications, eligibility criteria, application requirements, timing and selection processes in the case of competitive funds.

There is evidence to suggest that organisations with administrative roles for multiple grants and funding sources worked with stakeholders and communities to coordinate public communications, eligibility requirements and application periods. However, there was a limited amount of overall coordination in relation to grants and funding – particularly between the state and national levels.

IGEM notes that the COVID-19 pandemic significantly impacted funding allocation and decision-making regarding bushfire recovery in 2020. Both Victorian and Australian governments made decisions about bushfire recovery assistance in the context of assistance also being provided in response to the COVID-19 pandemic.

#### 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.



Trees for Trout planting trees along the Nariel Creek (Source: David Anderson)

## 5.3 Approach to emergency funding

### 5.3.1 Variability in approach to funding

One of the complexities of Australia and Victoria's approach to relief and recovery funding is the variability in the total value of financial assistance provided following different major emergencies. Additionally, the arrangements established to determine and distribute this assistance to government, communities and individuals also varies across each major emergency.

This variability in the declaration and structuring of Australian and Victorian government financial assistance following a major emergency results in significant differences between programs and emergencies.

There also appears to be a threshold of scale, as Victorian and Australian government financial assistance is only activated in major emergencies. Several stakeholders involved in recovery commented while it is never a positive outcome to experience property loss in any emergency, the financial assistance (and other support) activated when this loss is part of a major emergency is much greater than in comparison to a single-incident house fire or similar isolated emergencies.

As an example of this variability, Victoria's approach to coordinating and funding bushfire clean-up programs has differed considerably across emergencies. The government has previously supported fully funded clean-up models (for example the 2009 Victorian bushfires) and variations of partially funded models incorporating insurance claims and capped clean-up amounts for specific properties. In smaller emergencies, affected individuals fund their own clean-up costs either through existing insurance arrangements or other personal financial means. For the BRV Clean-Up Program offered to affected individuals and councils, all costs were covered by government (see section 13.3, p 278).

Councils were highly cognisant of and susceptible to these variations in Victorian and Australian government financial assistance. Many councils supported relief and recovery activities by diverting funds from business as usual activities or applied for reimbursement for relief and recovery expenditure with no confidence that accrued costs would be eligible. Councils reported being out of pocket when they were ineligible or could not provide the required evidence. Other councils did not apply for reimbursement due to the time-consuming and frustrating processes or as a contribution to the overall recovery. This applied to both affected councils and the other councils involved in resource sharing.

These funding differences elicit two responses. For families and individuals, the variability provides scope to deliver a wide range of assistance options and respond to differing needs. These stakeholders describe the difficulty for themselves and their families in planning for their recovery when past experiences cannot be used as a guide. For stakeholders from government, council, community service organisations and communities, they discussed this issue as hampering recovery program planning before, during and after an emergency.

#### 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.

### 5.3.2 Impact assessment and recovery funding

During and after the 2019–20 fire season the total figure of government assistance was based partly on initial approximations of impact and consequence but was not informed by comprehensive impact assessment data or evidence-based cost estimations. This was largely because accurate assessments of impact and recovery costs took time to collate and there was significant public and government pressure to announce financial assistance.

Councils, government departments and responder agencies needed to wait for safe access to the fire-affected areas before commencing impact assessment. In many cases, a specific level of capability was also required to conduct accurate impact assessments (for example municipal building surveyors). The limited availability of this expertise and the large scale of impacts caused delays in detailed impact assessment and recovery cost estimations.

As noted in section 3.4 (p 77), there are also systemic issues with impact assessment data collection and reporting, compounding inherent delays in data collection and reporting related to safety, capability and capacity.

#### 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.

### 5.3.3 Duration of recovery funding

Throughout the Inquiry, stakeholders and communities discussed the long tail of recovery. The *10 Years Beyond Bushfires Report*, which researches the recovery of communities following the 2009 Victorian bushfires, showed that communities were still facing significant recovery challenges five and ten years after the fires. The report recommends that governments:

---

*Establish a staged five-year framework for recovery from major disasters. This would account for extended mental health impacts and support short and long-term recovery, resilience and community connectedness.*

---

*10 Years Beyond Bushfires Report*

Recovery issues emerge and change over time as basic needs are addressed and people and communities focus on different needs and aspects of their recovery.

Despite the known, prolonged nature of recovery, funding models have a relatively short duration and require ongoing approval for the continuation of funding. There are significant impacts of short-term funding allocations. Without the surety of long-term funding, organisations are unable to provide stable or long-term resources for the community and partner organisations and are reluctant to develop long-term recovery plans or set medium and long-term objectives. Many organisations assumed recovery funding would reduce considerably or stop completely when the next big fire comes along. Stakeholders could also see government's focus shifting from bushfire to pandemic response and recovery priorities.

Another of the major impacts of short-term funding is finding and securing appropriate staff to deliver or coordinate recovery activities. Organisations reported using fixed-term contractors or where possible diverting other staff from their business as usual activities to recovery programs. Organisations reported that the lack of job security for staff on fixed-term contracts results in higher staff turnover as they seek greater security at the completion of their contract. This staff turnover is still seen when funding allocations are extended.

Windermere, a key provider of the bushfire case support program, commented that one of the key drivers of their effectiveness in case support was the ability to provide consistency in service provision. Staff needed to develop a rapport with clients to provide high-quality, consistent support.

Organisations utilising existing staff note the awareness of those staff that they would be transitioned back to their substantive roles in due course and asked to absorb recovery work into their business as usual activities, or abandon programs of work, before achieving intended outcomes.

BRV and EMV were able to secure financial assistance for some recovery programs with two and three year funding allocations. Other recovery programs have not had assurance of funding beyond 12 months. These are insufficient periods of financial support for many recovery programs

#### 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.

### 5.3.4 Funding amounts

The Climate Council and Australian Council of Social Service provided recommendations to the Royal Commission into National Natural Disaster Arrangements that the Australian Government Disaster Recovery Payment be increased from \$1000 to \$3000, and from \$800 to \$1000 per child. The Victorian Council of Social Service (VCOSS) also supported this in its submission to same, noting that payments have not increased since 2006.

In general, stakeholders and communities did not extensively comment on the value of government funding allocated to supporting relief and recovery. In combination with other sources of funding, donations, offers of in-kind assistance, insurance and existing program funding, there seemed to be suitable funding allocations, albeit sometimes difficult to apply for and receive.

### 5.3.5 Effectiveness of recovery funding

Stakeholders and community members discussed the complicated and time-consuming processes involved with identifying, applying for and using relief and recovery funding. Community issues with funding are elaborated on in section 5.4, p 111.

Government stakeholders noted that the approach to recovery funding is very different to that of response and relief, both of which have comparatively low levels of administrative burden in accountability and reporting. Stakeholders commented on the very different approach to funding across these phases of emergency management:

---

*During response, I'm ordering and authorising cheques to the value of \$800,000 easily and nobody bats an eyelid ... Yet, when the fires are out, and I need \$8000, there's forms, approvals, quotes. So, you trust me then in a fire, but 2 months later in recovery, I'm no longer able or trusted to make those decisions.*

*Stakeholder*

---

Stakeholders were frustrated with the time and processes involved in securing appropriate recovery funding, and commented that the short-term nature of funding, strict eligibility criteria and expenditure restrictions were not leading to positive recovery outcomes.

In particular, the Category D funding available following the most severe emergencies, was a source of significant frustration and concern to stakeholders. The arrangements and guiding principles that exclude new infrastructure and mitigation works as part of recovery are seen as lack of foresight and inhibiting governments' ability to build back better and potentially safer.

Assistance provided to date under Category D funding to alleviate distress or damage in circumstances that were considered exceptional has been in the form of Small Business Support Grants, funds for state coordinated clean-up and discretionary funds for councils. One example included the Local Economic Recovery (LER) program (funded for \$68.6 million, with costs shared at 50 per cent between state and Australian governments) in recognition of the scale of the impacts and necessary economic recovery.

However, the processes under Category D funding were time consuming and cumbersome and required far greater levels of scrutiny. In addition, the funds were assessed at an activity level, rather than a program level, unlike other recovery funding packages that align with broader recovery outcomes and objectives. As a consequence, Category D funding expenditure requires separate assessment. One specific example provided was the tennis court re-surfacing in the North East that required specific Commonwealth assessment to proceed.

The SBRCC discussed this issue and BRV worked with the NBRA to increase the workability of Category D applications. There had been some success and the issue is being considered in a broader review of the DRFA. IGEM notes that both EMV and BRV have supported government to increase its level of success in Category D funding applications.

#### 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.

Another issue discussed by stakeholders and the community was the accessibility of recovery funding for industries, communities and business indirectly affected by the fires. This was particularly relevant following the 2019–20 fires as many towns and communities were unable to operate normally due to the declaration of the State of Disaster.

Tourism operators, accommodation providers and small businesses in the North East, Alpine and Gippsland regions were severely impacted by the closure of roads and broad evacuation orders during peak periods of operation. Tourists and visitors were discouraged from visiting areas that had no direct fire impacts, and road closures prevented travel through small regional towns for months. These restrictions had severe economic consequences for businesses and communities.



Falls Creek was impacted by road closures and evacuation orders during the 2019–20 bushfires (Source: IGEM)

It is difficult for those indirectly impacted by an emergency to prove their eligibility for recovery funding, with impacts difficult to quantify. Insurance for interruptions to business is expensive and subject to very detailed criteria, making it an expense that many businesses do not see as a viable option.

Following the 2019–20 fires, both the Australian and Victorian governments recognised the large, indirect costs of the fires on communities and businesses outside the fire footprint. The LER Program included regional programs and project-specific funding allocations to support those indirectly affected by the fires. Several programs of work were funded to stabilise and strengthen regional economies and specific industries.

Both DJPR and BRV conducted economic impact assessments to quantify the impacts of the fires on smaller towns and regional economies. This process informed priority programs of work.

IGEM heard from community members of the perceptions that the distribution of, and access to funding was inequitable and unfair. Communities that had been directly impacted by the fires and were waiting for assistance to rebuild damaged homes and business premises felt challenged by the unfairness of funding announcements for those indirectly affected.

An example reported to IGEM was the announcement of the LER Program funds and other allocations of recovery support to towns in the Alpine region. Evidence to support the significant level of economic impact was provided to IGEM, however the lack of coordination, the timing of announcements and release of funding reinforced the perceptions of inequity and divided communities.

#### 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

## 5.4 Community experiences with accessing funding and grants

This section is based on community views provided to IGEM throughout a series of interviews, community engagement sessions and submissions to the Inquiry and focuses on community experiences when accessing grants and funding in the aftermath of the 2019–20 fires. Feedback was received from individuals as well as CRCs. Wider community experiences of the 2019–20 fires are explored in further detail in chapters 13 and 21.

Issues associated with accessing funding were a core source of distress and frustration for recovering communities. Many stakeholders advocated on behalf of communities and individuals, providing examples of where financial recovery assistance caused high levels of stress, confusion and perceptions of inequity within and between communities:

---

*Something has to change, we [government] do this every time to communities. We make them fill out form after form, provide significant amounts of evidence, treat them like they are lying to us and then we may or may not give them the assistance they are owed. And all of this is happening while they are experiencing some of the darkest days of their lives.*

Stakeholder

*The hundreds of people with whom I spoke were already traumatised by the danger they faced and the loss they experienced. In many cases, the 'system' for providing aid added to and magnified that trauma. The number of different delivery organisations, the different forms of aid and eligibility criteria, and mixed messages from the different levels of government and aid bodies, often made the situation worse, not better.*

Stakeholder

---

However, there was an acknowledgement from stakeholders and communities that government, councils, recovery staff and community service organisations worked tirelessly to help the affected population. Many community members noted that recovery staff were effective in communicating information about available grants, ensuring applications were lodged and in cutting down on red tape. This comment was particularly relevant to BRV Recovery Hub Coordinators and Bushfire Case Support Program staff where in many cases was facilitated through personalised phone calls with fire-affected community members.

Several themes emerged in the Inquiry's analysis of the community data, and these include:

- the approach taken in the delivery of relief and recovery funding and grants
- the onerous requirements of application forms
- the timing of Australian and Victorian government funding and grants
- the sharing of information between organisations

Along with the above key themes, individuals, community groups and the CRCs that support them spoke of opportunities to improve the funding and grant process that would help them to feel better prepared and safer during emergencies.

### 5.4.1 Approach to service delivery in relief and recovery funding

Communities and business owners commented that recovery staff they worked with were flexible and compassionate. Community members preferred personal communication, over online information sources, or automated enquiry and application systems. One Mallacoota resident noted that the DHHS team that came in to help community members through their entitlements were:

---

*...Incredibly flexible. ...they recognised ...that a lot of the locals that were involved in that ongoing relief effort could not get to the local services ... So they sent teams of people out to help us with applications and things onsite. And that flexibility was very much appreciated, and I know these people worked very long hours.*

---

*Community member*

The resident further elaborated that the DHHS staff were proactive in letting residents know exactly what they were entitled to in respect of assistance payments, recognising that most were traumatised and did not know what questions to ask.

A health worker in East Gippsland said that residents were slowly accessing the grants and services available after the second bushfire impact (5 January 2020), noting that the services operating out of the Bush Nurse Clinic were very supportive.

Some community members seeking financial support over the phone with other government service providers felt that the process was interrogative and intimidating. These experiences were quite common, and where in-person support providers were able to see the local context and level of impact and adjust their approach accordingly, over the phone support providers were perceived to lack compassion and required a large amount of basic information to provide support.

Community members identified a need for better liaison between government and other agencies, with a central repository of recipient details also seen as an important step in ensuring access to appropriate funding for fire-affected communities.

### 5.4.2 Application requirements

Stakeholders and community members identified multiple issues related to eligibility and application processes that caused confusion and added to their level of distress following the 2019–20 bushfires.

The overall process of accessing financial assistance was described by community members and stakeholders as overly complex and burdensome, particularly when those affected were still traumatised, in shock and confused. For many people the need to continually repeat their story and prove their eligibility added further stress and hindered their recovery.

Stakeholders expressed concern that the approach was not sufficiently trauma informed. One couple who submitted to the Inquiry weeks after they had lost their house, still found it difficult expressing what happened and answering questions in relation to their needs and impacts.

---

*There's so much available ... But when you don't know the questions to ask... I didn't realise that BRV would connect my power again to my short-term module house. So, I paid for power to come down to a box for my caravan when I potentially could have asked for BRV to do that for me.*

---

*Community member*

Community members spoke of complex application forms, of having to continually prove losses and not receiving timely responses from funding bodies.

---

*It's the worst written form I've ever seen in my life and the way it's administered is just appalling.....when Government's involved it's a nightmare and you end up – you feel a bit sort of unclean and you feel like you're out there with your beggars cup and it's just – it's terribly, terribly demoralising. I hated every aspect of dealing with the government. I've never been in – never had to apply for Centrelink, we've always made our own way in the scheme of things and then one time in your life when there's money supposedly, they can't wait to push it at you and then you apply for it and they say 'yeah, but no'.*

---

*Community member*

The immediate commencement of grants processes combined with the inflexibility of timelines was very damaging. IGEM notes that the timelines for various active DRFA grant programs were extended several times taking into account the significance of the fires, demand and the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic.

The end result for many eligible people was being turned down, as demonstrated in this summary:

- automatic rejection of online applications or inability to submit
- definition of an agricultural category which excluded genuine businesses below a fixed income
- small business criteria that excluded many legitimate claimants
- criteria based on being in a designated local government area rather than an address being affected
- community groups that did not have the required level of expertise/skill to develop and access grant funds
- the withdrawal of previously awarded grants.

This was particularly problematic for residents of Mansfield Shire Council, which was not named in several funding programs as a place of impact, despite residents having been directly impacted by fire as well experiencing evacuation orders and road closures.

Likewise, the Personal Relief Disaster Recovery Allowance provides individuals that can prove they have lost income due to an emergency with income support for up to 13 weeks. However, despite many Alpine Resorts employees having salaries impacted by the fires, they were initially ineligible for assistance as the Alpine Resorts are not a part of a local council, a requirement of the allowance.

One resident said:

---

*From the time the State of Disaster was announced on 2 January 2020, ... [they] were not eligible for this payment until 7 Jan 2020. It is understood that the resorts were initially omitted from this program by accident, as they are not a Local Council.*

*Community member*

---

Communities informed the Inquiry that the model for distributing recovery funds to affected communities needs to be simplified. They suggested that grant funds could be apportioned to eligible groups in the fire-affected area for use once priorities had been decided by the community.

#### 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.

### 5.4.3 Timing of federal and state funding support

As individuals, families, businesses and communities progress through recovery, their priorities and needs evolve. As such, individuals and communities are likely to seek different forms of financial assistance at different times throughout recovery.

Funding was offered and announced by Australian and Victorian government entities, councils, community service organisations and charities. As such, different considerations were made when announcing funding opportunities, and in some cases the recovery organisation did not have complete visibility of all aspects of recovery. For example, the Australian Government announced some recovery funding well in advance of it becoming available to the Victorian organisations that were responsible for administering the funds. This created distress in the community who were not necessarily ready to apply for funding of that nature and/or frustration that seemingly available funding was delayed or withheld without explanation.

Community members who had sustained personal impacts took time to consider their own personal needs and priorities. In communities with high levels of individual impacts, this led to a slower rate of decision-making for community recovery priorities.

In some cases, individuals and communities completed applications for support and projects that ultimately did not address key priorities. In these cases, they had been encouraged to apply rather than miss out.

Inadequate timelines for grant applications meant that those communities who took longer to form a CRC or who were still determining their community's priorities, missed out on funding rounds. The fear of missing out on potential funding was a serious concern for many CRCs and created a lot of anxiety and stress. Where possible, BRV, other government organisations and community service organisations held funding in reserve or offered staged application rounds. However, this was not always possible or clearly communicated to those recovering.

Community members also spoke about how individuals and groups without grant writing experience were significantly disadvantaged by the process and as a result their recovery opportunities were significantly impacted. Many commented that they did not have the time nor the brain space to write funding applications or engage in the necessary consultation to submit appropriate applications.

#### 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.

### 5.4.4 Information sharing between organisations

Community members noted a lack of information sharing and coordination between agencies and funding bodies, primarily due to privacy concerns.

A Cabbage Tree Creek resident related their experience of accessing both Victorian and Australian government financial assistance. State and federal organisations set up a physical presence at different locations in the town, did not share information, and all asked for a large amount of evidence. This led to significant confusion for agencies and impacted people over available funding and eligibility for funding.

Recovery organisations often required different evidence to demonstrate identity, place of residence and level of impact. Affected people needed to collect and negotiate the different evidence requirements on multiple occasions to be considered for financial support.

In Mallacoota, there was an issue with government not passing on the details of affected residents to other agencies and community service organisations (that were organising donation distributions). Community members noted a sense of frustration at having to repeatedly provide their details – not only to the many and various agencies but to the new shifts of staff of those agencies. This was reported in relation to grants and payments as well as to donated goods:

---

*... it was just so frustrating that there wasn't a databank of information ... a list of people that had different requirements and what their circumstances were was just not available. ... – a lot of people were walking around in shock. They had just lost their house. They had just been through this massive traumatic bushfire and really, I think that the facilitation of their needs was not really as good as it could have been in as much as recording who they were, where they were staying, what they needed, who was looking out for them sort of thing.*

---

Community member

Numerous organisations commented on the need to adopt a client-centric approach and recommended the streamlining of grant funding processes into one point of access, and improved coordination of available support to avoid confusion and duplication.

BRV has commenced work to develop a system that allows government recovery organisations to provide a more proactive model of funding. This involves assessing applications for financial recovery support and attempting to match applications with eligible funding sources. This work is currently constrained by BRV's ability to access funding applications external to the organisation but demonstrates an understanding of a more trauma informed and person centred approach to funding.

IGEM notes that the issue of information sharing is broader than funding (see section 3.4.2, p 80 for a more extensive discussion).

#### 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.

#### 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.

### 5.4.5 Community preferences for recovery funding

When providing feedback to IGEM, individuals, community groups and CRCs described the challenges they faced in accessing funding as well as making suggestions for how recovery funding could be improved in the future.

CRCs and community members viewed funding emergency preparedness and resilience activities in the community as a priority. Despite this being a key priority for all CRCs and something that was voiced very strongly by communities, many had not been successful in receiving funds for these projects.

Community members acknowledged that new infrastructure such as playgrounds and art murals were positive activities for community connection and improving the aesthetics of the local environment. They also found these projects were relatively straightforward to fund through recovery funding mechanisms and other community development initiatives.

However, communities discussed that these projects were not key priorities for recovery. Community members told IGEM that they did not feel any safer than before the fires and that their community wanted to take responsibility for being better prepared. They believed that being better prepared would greatly enhance their recovery.

An example of a community group that was actively seeking funding and support for community resilience activities and had some initial success was the Keep Calm Committee, a sub-committee of the Mount Beauty Neighbourhood Centre Inc. They would like to see government funded recovery initiatives for improving community preparedness by focusing on social wellbeing rather than investing in asset replacement after emergencies. They believe investment focusing on social capital would speed up recovery and be more cost effective.

---

*We continue to observe frustrations being expressed within the community when BRV funding with Alpine Shire appears to be weighted towards tourism with a commercial rather than community focus. The Keep Calm Committee focus is on enhancing community mental health through building capacity, when a community feels a sense of neglect in their funding pursuits, this sends an incongruent message, and is psychologically disempowering.*

---

*Community member*

CRCs and community groups told IGEM that funding resilience and preparedness projects was more difficult, as this work does not tick a recovery box on an application form. Some communities that were less affected by the fires and had greater capacity to seek out a range of funding opportunities from different sources had been successful in getting funding for equipment such as ultra-high frequency (UHF) radios and generators that would make them more prepared for future emergencies.

#### 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.

### 5.4.6 Funding challenges for community recovery committees

Participating CRCs provided feedback about the way the funding programs were administered, the application and administration processes. They identified lessons to improve future community-led recovery.

CRC and community members described the competitive process resulting in communities competing for funds. This was damaging, created conflicts between communities and favoured those who were less fire-affected than others. IGEM heard from community members that this did not promote communities coming together to work with each other to overcome the challenges they were all experiencing as a result of the fires.

---

*The funding processes and BRV involvement in community recovery committees have pitted Upper Murray communities against Upper Murray communities to compete for funding, resulting in reduced social cohesion and collaboration.*

*Community member*

*In the context of bushfire recovery, why would you make communities that are suffering or have gone through this stress compete with each other for different buckets of money? There just needs to be a better way in which to manage that money and distribute it in something that's compassionate rather than competitive.*

*Community member*

CRCs reflected similar challenges to the broader community when applying for grants and funding to facilitate community recovery. The process, timeliness, delays and appropriateness of funding for CRCs was a source of frustration. Community members were aware of the money being spent to set up BRV in Melbourne, but not in their community.

CRCs responded to the BRV request on what recovery initiatives were needed. When funding was provided this information had not been considered. A fixed budget was provided to all CRCs, spending was restrained by conditions and often did not meet the community and CRC needs.

---

*Further to frustrations, while we're on that, it just seemed to take an absolutely inordinate time for us to get a budget organised. We went into all sorts of negotiations. We were offered \$25,000 a year operational budget for three years. They said they'd be very happy to discuss all of our needs and after lots of consultation, we have finally got our budget of \$25,000 a year. So, no negotiation there really.*

*Community member*

---

In order to start the recovery process and identify community needs CRCs needed funds to send out communications, hire facilities, pay rent, purchase equipment and provide administration support and in other communities the CRCs were seeking to purchase a trailer or fund resident transport costs.

Stakeholders discussed that many of these expenses would have been reasonable requests, but often community groups could not identify an appropriate and simple source of funding and either paid for the activity themselves (through personal funds) or decided not to pursue the activity.

CRCs, councils and other community-based recovery groups were constrained by a level of administration and reporting requirements associated with funding. These organisations were responsible for maintaining a high level of evidence documenting the quoting, procurement, expenditure and reporting of spend on recovery funding. While none of the organisations were opposed to undertaking some administration and accounting in relation to the expenditure of government funding, it added to the time burden involved in local recovery coordination and at times exceeded the capability of community organisations.

CRCs advised that it would have been much easier if they had been allocated a discretionary amount of funding to kick start their early recovery activities. They were prepared to account for the money and understood there would need to be checks and balances, but this would have reduced a huge amount of stress on these volunteers.

From the community's perspective, supporting individuals, families, businesses and communities after emergencies with financial assistance is important in enabling them to get back on their feet and help in the early days and weeks after the emergency. Making funding as easy as possible to access, coordinated, timely and effective in meeting their needs is what is most important to community.

#### 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.

#### 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.

## RECOMMENDATION 5

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:

- (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

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:

- 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.

## 5.5 Donated money

### 5.5.1 Arrangements for the collection and distribution of donated money

Commonwealth and Victorian legislation guide the collection and distribution of donated money for emergencies in Victoria. The Commonwealth regulates charities and the Australian taxation system. To offer donors the benefit of being able to claim the donation as a tax deduction, charities collecting money for emergency relief and/or recovery need to comply with Australian tax and charities laws.

A charity is an entity that is operated on a not-for-profit basis and is established for a charitable purpose, which includes to advance social or public welfare or animal welfare. The purpose of advancing social or public welfare includes assisting the rebuilding, repairing or securing of assets after an emergency.

Commonwealth legislation and regulations require registered charities to act for their charitable purposes and ensure funds are spent on purposes outlined in their governing documents. Australian Consumer Law also prevents charities from misleading consumers (including donors to charities) and making misrepresentations about where the money they collect will go, or what proportion will be used to achieve the stated purpose.

Victorian law also governs charities, fundraising and the distribution of donated funds. The Australian Consumer Law is coregulated with Consumer Affairs Victoria through the *Australian Consumer Law and Fair Trading Act 2012* (Vic). Fundamentally it means anyone engaged in trade or commerce in Victoria, regardless of their operating structure (sole trader, partnership, corporation etc) must not engage in conduct that is misleading or deceptive or likely to mislead or deceive.

Consumer Affairs Victoria is also responsible for the *Fundraising Act 1998* (Vic). This Act states that any person who establishes a fundraising appeal must be registered, must not give and must not authorise or permit any other person to give, any of the net proceeds of the appeal to any person, cause or thing who is not a beneficiary of the appeal.

The key provision in Australian and Victorian fundraising laws and regulations is that those that collect money for charitable purpose are required to use the money for the purposes for which it is collected (including meeting the running costs of the charity). Those seeking charitable funds cannot divert the money to other good causes because they raise more than expected or because people misunderstood the purpose of the charity.

There are special circumstances to reallocate the proceeds of the appeal if disputes arise or the beneficiaries refuse to accept the funds or donations offered as a result of the appeal or the beneficiaries of a fundraising appeal cannot be found or no longer exist. In these cases, an application can be made to the Magistrates Court for an order directing on how the assets are to be distributed. The Court can then make an order to distribute the assets in what is deemed an appropriate manner based on the original stated purpose of the appeal.

These laws and regulations are in place to protect donors and ensures the charity collecting the money uses it in a manner that aligns with what they claimed to be collecting it for.

However, smaller, individual fundraising efforts, such as the collection of money outside of stores or workplace collection tins, are unregulated and it is difficult to provide oversight and ensure the collected funds are distributed as intended. Electronic forums such as Facebook and GoFundMe allow anyone to set up a fundraiser to either encourage donations to a registered charity or to their own bank account.

The 2019–20 fire season saw many people and organisations across Australia use a range of broadcasting, print and social media to fundraise for those impacted by the fires and various environmental and social causes. The Royal Commission into National Natural Disaster Arrangements noted that some fundraisers can lack an understanding of relevant legal frameworks, best practice on raising funds and limitations on the dispersal of funds.

There are many possible uses for funds donated to emergency relief and recovery and it would not be possible to have single binding guidelines and governance for bushfire or other emergency relief charities. The broad principle is that the money raised must be spent on the purpose for which it was raised and that charities remain charitable, operate lawfully, and be run in an accountable and responsible way.<sup>25</sup>

## 5.5.2 Fundraising in Victoria during the 2019–20 bushfires

It is impossible to know how many fundraising appeals there were or how much was donated and received following the 2019–20 fires. People may have been fundraising without registering or complying with relevant legislation. People may also have donated money that the collectors never intended to use for bushfire relief or have donated money that was handed over and never accounted for. The NBRA identified more than 90 charities with bushfire relief and recovery activities.<sup>26</sup> With these circumstances in mind, the full amount of money donated and distributed cannot be determined.

In media reports and social media commentary, several fundraising campaigns received a reasonable amount of criticism in the months following the fires due to the perceived delays in the allocation of donated money. The Red Cross in particular received some amount of criticism for its delayed disbursement of funds.

This report describes three key fundraising campaigns – the Victorian Bushfire Appeal, the Red Cross Disaster Relief and Recovery Fund and the Gippsland Emergency Relief Fund (GERF).

### **Victorian Bushfire Appeal**

The government partnered with Bendigo Bank and the Salvation Army to establish the Victorian Bushfire Appeal (the Appeal). The Appeal was launched by the Premier on 5 January 2020.

The Appeal is not registered as a charity with the Australian Charities and Not-for-profits Commission. The Appeal was conducted by the Bendigo Bank's charitable arm, Community Enterprise Foundation, which is a registered charity. The Community Enterprise Foundation did not collect any administration fees for the Appeal and funds were directed to communities in need.

As at May 2021, the Appeal website reported that \$20 million had been made available for those most affected by the bushfire. Recipients of the fundraising include: BlazeAid, the Salvation Army, Windermere Child and Family Services, Victorian Aboriginal Child Care Agency Co-Op, Gippsland and East Gippsland Aboriginal Co-operative (GEGAC) and other local causes. At that time, not all funds had been dispersed. The Appeal is scheduled to close donations on 31 December 2021.

All contract and administration obligations of the expenditure of funds, are managed by the Community Enterprise Foundation, who periodically report back to an independent advisory panel. To date, all of the Appeal funds have been appropriately acquitted against agreed deliverables. Any programs that are still open, remain actively monitored by the Community Enterprise Foundation. The advisory panel has allocated \$10 million to support long term recovery of community and these funds will be dispersed over the next 10 years through three community foundations in the impacted areas.

### **Red Cross Disaster Relief and Recovery Fund**

Between 1 July 2019 and 31 December 2020, the Red Cross had received over \$240 million in donations into its Disaster Relief and Recovery Fund. As Red Cross is a national charity, these funds were allocated to all Australian disaster relief and recovery needs.

Red Cross allocated all donations it received for the bushfires to bushfire related activities, including the administration costs required to deliver the activities. The Red Cross had multiple recovery funds and grants available to fire affected individuals, and systems in place to detect fraud and ensure appropriate allocation of funding based on impact.

As at 14 January 2021, it had disbursed or spent \$207 million to support people recovering from the fires across Australia. This included over 49,000 fire-affected people and the allocation of 5914 bushfire grants (value of \$187 million).<sup>27</sup> The remaining funds have been allocated to support ongoing recovery programs across Australia in 2021–22. Red Cross reported that 96 per cent of donations were distributed to people and communities affected by the fires, with the remaining 4 per cent funding administrative costs such as fraud prevention, IT, banking and platform fees.<sup>27</sup>

The Australian Charities and Not-for-profits Commission conducted an inquiry into three charities – one being the Red Cross. The commission found that the Red Cross had allocated all bushfire donations to bushfire related activities, including the administration of these funds. It also found that the Red Cross had made appropriate plans to reserve some of the funds for longer-term recovery programs. Importantly, it found the Red Cross had the appropriate skills and expertise to deliver its planned programs.

### **Gippsland Emergency Relief Fund**

The Gippsland Emergency Relief Fund (GERF) was established in 1978 and is a registered charitable organisation. It was established to provide immediate financial assistance to residents who suffer loss or hardship as a result of an emergency that occurs within the Gippsland region.

GERF has supported communities through previous fires, floods and drought. It is considered in East Gippsland Shire Council emergency relief and recovery planning documents and works closely with the council to determine impact and need across the municipality.

The GERF appeal raised almost \$8 million directly and received another \$2.5 million from the Victorian Bushfire Appeal. This amount has provided financial support to 2098 families and at the time of writing approximately 86 per cent of funds have been disbursed. The fund opened on 31 December 2019 and closed on 20 March 2020 and was the largest fundraising effort conducted by the organisation.

GERF worked with East Gippsland Shire Council to distribute supplementary payments of \$17,500 to those who had lost their principal place of residence. It also worked with the council, BlazeAid and Victorian Farmers Federation (VFF) to provide a coordinated program of assistance to those in East Gippsland.

GERF received favourable feedback from both donors and affected communities. It was largely reported that donations were paid to affected individuals quickly and with a straightforward application process.



GERF received more than \$150,000 from the communities of Quang Minh and Quang Duc Pagodas (Source: GERF)

### 5.5.3 Effectiveness of donated money arrangements

and receiving funding from charities. Some said that application processes were straightforward and grants were made efficiently and quickly – some reported the opposite. In particular, community members reflected that the eligibility criteria for the Red Cross grants and funds were particularly difficult to access due to the higher level of evidence required to demonstrate impact.

Others felt that grants were being made to people who had not suffered losses or were manipulating the system. Some community members noted that the need to verify losses was burdensome and suggested that grants should be made based on postcode.

Individuals affected by the fires were well supported by charities and organisations that were able to operate in a reasonably bespoke manner, by providing tailored funding allocations or purchasing goods and services based on their immediate needs. For example, one family had a caravan purchased for them by a charity – a purchase ineligible under other funding schemes.

IGEM heard from many community members across the fire-affected areas of how grateful and appreciative they were of the financial assistance that was provided after the fires by charities, not-for-profit organisations, church groups, businesses and others.

For some people who lost their homes and other infrastructure, or were under insured, this financial assistance enabled them to fill the gap between their insurance payments and the costs of rebuilding.

---

*It's been great. Really great. we couldn't build if we hadn't got those donations.*

*Community member*

---

The Australian Charities and Not-for-profits Commission estimated more than \$640 million was donated to charities for Black Summer bushfire relief. For many charities the sum of money received was significantly larger than what they were used to managing. This was further complicated by the fact individuals and organisations often collected money on behalf of the charity, reducing the charities' ability to coordinate communication regarding the likely and possible use of the donated money. This led to confusion and frustration across the affected communities who at times came to believe they were not receiving donations intended for their recovery.

Similarly, some donors were angered by a perceived misdirection of funds to causes that did not directly align with their expectations when making the donation. While government and charities continued to request and accept financial donations, there was no concerted, proactive effort to explain to the public how donations could and would be used.

IGEM notes the Royal Commission for National Natural Disaster Arrangements recommended Australian, state and territory governments create a single national scheme for the regulation of charitable fundraising.

While there is an opportunity for the government to assume a stronger level of oversight in the collection and distribution of donated money, more oversight usually requires additional administration and reporting – all of which require resourcing.

Like many elements of emergency management, donated money requires a level of shared responsibility from those donating money, affected individuals, the charities themselves and government. While there was a considerable level of goodwill shown by Victorians and Australians in donating money, there is a lack of coordination in supporting clear and consistent public communications in relation to making financial donations.

People are donating their own money and they should be free to donate it where they wish. People may want to donate to a fund that supports a local community or cause rather than a fund that will distribute funds and benefits across a large area.

This was seen in the GERF, which was reasonably small and agile enough to modify its distribution model to meet the needs of the community and expectations of donors. Its stated purpose as a registered charity directly aligned with donors' intentions for their money. It had existing relationships with council and other organisations with a local presence, which allowed it to quickly activate locally focused financial assistance plans.

Government is very clear in its preference for donations in the aftermath of an emergency to be financial in nature, as opposed to donated goods and services (see Chapter 9). However, there is an element of mistrust across the community as to how financial donations are used. Unfortunately, during and after the 2019–20 fires, this mistrust increased due to a poor level of communication from government and charities themselves as to how money would be used to support fire-affected communities. This was further amplified by well-meaning fundraisers inadvertently suggesting funds would be spent in ways that did not align with the stated purpose of the charities they were collecting funds for.

#### 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 5.4**

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.

## 5.6 Insurance

---

*Community recovery is impacted by the adequacy of insurance cover... When insurance cover is insufficient to allow for rebuilding, the recovery process will be stifled.*

*2009 Victorian Bushfires Royal Commission*

*We weren't properly insured, of course. So that was a big hit for me.*

*Community member*

---

The insurance taken out by individuals on homes, possessions, personal effects, businesses, farms, stock, vehicles and beyond is often crucial in both their own and their local community's early and long-term recovery from a bushfire.

Insurance against bushfires is usually incorporated into general insurance policies. It is a redistributive mechanism, shifting the cost burden away from the individual and government to the private sector, and spreads it over time. It does not alter or mitigate the hazard or risk of bushfire to individuals and property, nor does it modify its immediate or long-term consequences.

Insurance is also one of the most significant inputs the private sector makes into building individual and community resilience to the upheavals that flow from emergencies. It is considered an essential element in the concept of 'shared responsibility' in which the individual contributes to the mitigation of emergency impacts.

The frequency and severity of climate extremes exacerbating the incidence of bushfires is increasing. It is estimated that more than 445,000 Australian homes may become uninsurable within 30 years because of such extremes.<sup>28</sup>

The inability of people to access insurance raises significant issues of social justice and means that those who can least afford it may in time shoulder an unfair share of the burden of climate change as the value of homes diminishes. It also raises questions as to how this burden might be shared more equitably.<sup>28</sup>

The 2011 Natural Disaster Insurance Review described the different roles of insurance in community recovery from natural disasters. Insurance can provide financial protection to property owners through aggregating premiums and spreading risk. It can encourage mitigation to reduce future losses.

Critically, during the response phase of a bushfire emergency insurance coverage will almost certainly influence the decision-making of at least some property owners about whether to leave or to remain and attempt to defend their property. Often the decision is a last minute one and its consequences are potentially dangerous, even fatal. The driver behind this will largely be economic, especially in rural and farm settings where the decision tips in favour of staying to defend in the face of loss of property and livelihood in the absence of adequate (or any) insurance. Conversely, insurance can also act to dissuade people from engaging in mitigation activities themselves or serve as a substitute by shifting the risk elsewhere.<sup>29</sup>

### **Victorian losses in 2019–20**

The Insurance Council of Australia (ICA) told a House of Representatives committee in late April 2020 that the industry had received some \$2.2 billion in claims for damage and destruction caused to homes, vehicles, outbuildings, fences, livestock and other property arising from the 2019–20 fires. An additional \$2.4 billion in claims from other natural disasters such as floods and hail were recorded over the same period.<sup>30</sup> By late August 2020, the insurance industry had processed some 30,000 claims amounting to \$2.4 billion, of which three quarters were in NSW.<sup>31</sup>

The independent Zurich-based PERILS organisation put the Victorian insured losses during the New Year peak period in Victoria at 17 per cent of the national total (\$323 million in dollar terms), with NSW accounting for 70 per cent of the insured loss, and South Australia 13 per cent.<sup>32</sup>

Initial estimates by the ICA following the 2019–20 fires suggest that 20–40 per cent of affected residents were underinsured. In IGEM's survey of fire affected individuals, the majority of those who answered questions related to insurance indicated they were underinsured (68 per cent). Approximately half of these respondents had consciously decided that the cost of complete coverage insurance was too high and were aware of likely insurance gaps. The other half believed they were covered, however were anticipating coverage gaps for planning and rebuilding based on initial quotes and consideration of the impacts.

At the time of writing, with much of the rebuilding yet to commence, it was difficult for community members to estimate how much they would be left out of pocket for rebuilding and/or replacing their homes and other assets.

### **Barriers against adequate insurance**

There has been a significant amount of research to determine the main barriers that prevent individuals and businesses from taking out appropriate insurance to completely cover them against asset damage and destruction, or disruption to their typical business operations.

#### **Affordability**

The affordability of insurance at the domestic and small business level is increasingly being considered as an issue with social justice dimensions. It has the potential to adversely affect recovery following emergencies and in the longer term, to entrench dependency and poverty, especially in already disadvantaged small rural communities. A 2017 discussion paper prepared jointly by DHHS in partnership with the VCOSS pointed out that affordability was the key barrier to many Victorians taking out insurance. In its submission to this Inquiry, the Salvation Army noted that those who chose to not insure are often driven by cost.

Adding to the cost of insurance are the taxes and duties applied to policies. In its submission to this Inquiry, the Salvation Army noted the removal of stamp duty in insurance policies is one way of increasing affordability and called as a minimum for Victoria to '...evaluate the intended purpose of insurance stamp duty and its impact on insurance affordability and rates of un-insurance and underinsurance'. Similarly, Suncorp Insurance has also called for the removal of such taxes in its submission.

In Victoria, a flat 10 per cent stamp duty applies to general insurance policies, including home and contents. The ICA argues that this, coupled with GST, adds 21 per cent to the base premium of household policies.

Early steps towards the removal of stamp duty are beginning in some jurisdictions. In Victoria, stamp duty exemptions for certain crop, livestock and agricultural machinery insurance covers took effect from 1 July 2017. There is also continuing pressure for either their removal or adaptation.

### Policy disincentives

Under the current Victorian arrangements, in addition to emergency hardship payments, emergency re-establishment assistance is available to those who lose their homes in an emergency.

To be eligible for emergency re-establishment assistance:

- a home must be uninhabitable or inaccessible for more than seven days because of a natural disaster.
- the person must meet income-tests
- losses or damage must not be covered in part or in whole by insurance.

The provision of such payments are unlikely to compensate for the significant loss of property assets. The extent to which these arrangements act as a disincentive to adequately insure is however, worth considering. The impact of potential government and charitable payments to those who have endured bushfire losses on decisions around private insurance, especially among low-income earners, has long been considered significant, albeit uncertain as to its extent.

There is a rich tradition in Australia of charitable response to the losses endured by citizens as a result of bushfire. Major non-government organisations such as Red Cross are usually quick to respond in this field. Seen as compounding the 'hierarchy of denial' ('it will not happen to me') the effect is known as 'charity hazard', whereby people choose not to purchase insurance on the basis that the government, or someone else, will likely step in and provide financial assistance in the event of a major emergency.

These disincentives to insurance were again identified to the Inquiry, with stakeholders pointing to the 'moral hazard' of our replacement payments that basically encourages people to not take up insurance on the (at times) over-inflated assumption of what the state may provide, coupled with whatever might be forthcoming from charities and other relief funds.

### Market forces

A range of market influences affect insurance premiums, the most important of which is probably the way the market responds to reinsurance, which would appear to have a more profound effect upon market costs than the rate of consumer uptake of general insurance.

The bundled nature of general insurance policies means that there is little differentiation in consumer terms between the extent to which individual properties are rated as at risk of fire, flood, burglary or any other risk.

In rural areas and especially on farms, there are currently few incentives from an insurance perspective to undertake often costly mitigation activities. The drivers in these circumstances are otherwise based in part on the realisation that insurance will probably not provide an adequate coverage for the tangible, let alone intangible losses that will affect an agricultural business, such as loss of breeding stock.

The way in which risk is calculated by insurers is becoming increasingly more sophisticated. While bushfire is still some way behind floods, a more granular approach is emerging. For example, there are efforts to base premiums on individual property risk, rather than postcode, where ratings are informed by property specific characteristics.

Despite this, many large insurers still rate bushfire risk by suburb or postcode. Some movement towards use of finer, geographically specific factors is being made.

As the use of data and modelling to determine bushfire risk assessment increases, this will incorporate consideration of such factors as the proximity and orientation of buildings in relation to bushland, topography, type and density of surrounding vegetation, type of house construction and the assessed BAL. All of these factors have an influence on the survivability of structures in extreme fire conditions.

## Public policy

Overriding public policy approaches at both federal and state levels have clear implications for insurance, not just in relation to its regulation but in setting the broader context in which the market will operate.

There are multiple public policy challenges posed by climate change and the implication it has for major emergencies. These implications for planning policy potentially traverse both forward-looking and retrospective decisions. For example, the Emergency Leaders for Climate Action and the Climate Council have called upon the Australian Government to '[work] with insurance companies to develop a system to safely transition people out of high-risk properties and areas that are becoming uninsurable, to safer areas'.

Insurers have also expressed interest in working with government in the promotion of mitigation against the impacts of climate change. In its submission to this Inquiry, Suncorp called upon the Australian Government to implement the Productivity Commission's 2014 recommendation that there be a minimum five-fold increase investment in funding for emergency mitigation and resilience.

---

*Suncorp believes the insurance industry has a key role to play in advocating for public mitigation measures. As a result, we continually look to work with government and the community to further promote the importance of mitigation against disaster risk.*

*Suncorp submission to the Inquiry*

---

## Future of insurance

Losses from all types of natural disaster in Victoria average around \$1 billion annually, with a forecast three-fold increase by 2050.

In the short term at least, Victorians remain dependent upon the private insurance sector to provide cover for loss from bushfires, which sharpens the focus on the issue of what might be termed 'insurance literacy'. Few people properly understand the level of insurance they will require in order to re-establish themselves after a total loss. Simply insuring real property for the same amount you paid for it is highly unlikely to match the cost of rebuilding, especially where this has been inflated by recent regulatory requirements affecting the construction of homes in areas subject to high BAL ratings. The issue of adequate insurance for contents presents further complication.

Common concerns for bushfire affected residents, voiced again after the 2019–20 fires, are delays dealing with claims, disputes over the cost of rent for temporary accommodation and confusion over who should foot the bill for the clean-up.

The question is the extent to which government should be involved, either solely or in partnership with the private sector. There are a number of international examples of disaster insurance schemes in which government is a key player, such as those covering earthquakes in New Zealand and Japan.

DHHS and VCOSS have suggested subsidised insurance for low-income households as a way of incentivising the take up of insurance, and as an offset to post-disaster relief payments.<sup>33</sup>

One of the recommendations to emerge from a 2020 summit organised by the Climate Council and the Emergency Leaders for Climate Action focuses on trying to ensure equitable costs for insurance. It suggests the establishment of an independent insurance price monitoring scheme to increase the affordability and uptake of insurance and better protect Australians in high-risk areas.

Insurance is a key driver in the recovery of individuals and their communities after bushfires. In view of influences such as climate change and the likelihood of greater losses from bushfires in the future, there is scope for governments to consider their roles in facilitating and promoting greater levels of insurance and the need for oversight in the behaviours of insurance providers and policy holders.

### 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.



## Chapter 6

Public communications

Communicating with the public during and after an emergency is critical to people’s immediate safety, immediate relief and ongoing recovery.

Many of the state’s formal arrangements in public communications relate to communication during readiness and response, specifically through the use of community information and warnings. As community focus turns to relief and recovery, there is a sharp increase in the number of government and non-government organisations involved in supporting communities, a greater diversity of community needs and potential communication channels and a vast amount of information that needs to be shared between communities and those supporting their relief and recovery.

Throughout the 2019–20 Victorian fire season and the ongoing community recovery efforts, communication with affected communities has been challenged by geographic and social remoteness, fire-imposed isolation and damage to telecommunications, the establishment of new recovery organisations, a high volume of recovery activity and the COVID-19 pandemic.

This chapter will address the formal arrangements related to public communications and the procedures related to community information and warnings before describing the variety of ways communities seek and receive information related to relief and ongoing recovery.

## 6.1 Operational relief and recovery communications

### 6.1.1 Arrangements

During operational periods, the EMJPIC supports the SEMT. EMJPIC provides a forum for all government communications representatives to share key messages, concerns and tactics. This enables a coordinated, whole of government communications approach to an emergency. The EMMV description of EMJPIC was withdrawn in March 2018 but its role is now described in the SEMP.

At the time of the fires, existing public communications arrangements included an EMJPIC Executive with the role to provide strategic oversight and leadership to the EMJPIC and act as the direct conduit of information to the SEMT (during operational periods) and SCRC via the EMC (during business as usual periods), however, notably no EMJPIC Executive was formed for this emergency. The State Strategic Communications Cell can also be activated to provide a greater level of strategic communications support.

EMJPIC aims to ensure the whole-of-government approach for the delivery of public information in relation to emergencies is timely, tailored, relevant and accessible. EMJPIC also focuses on two-way communications to provide information for diverse communities.

At the regional tier, the Regional Controller can form a Regional Joint Public Information Committee to coordinate response, relief and recovery information across multiple ICC footprints. Likewise, the IC can form an Incident Joint Public Information Committee.

### 6.1.2 Operational communications during the 2019–20 fires

Throughout the 2019–20 fire season, the EMJPIC met regularly, peaking at five meetings per week in early January 2020. EMV typically chaired the EMJPIC from November – February, with personnel from DJCS Strategic Communications assuming the role sporadically.

IGEM observed many of the EMJPIC meetings and noted a significant amount of content repetition from the combined SCT/State Coordination Team (SCoT) and SEMT meetings. This was necessary in part to ensure consistent situational awareness. Notably, there was limited acknowledgement of direct reporting between the EMJPIC and SEMT. However, both meetings were minuted and recorded.

Throughout the emergency, the SCC released an extensive list of key messages and media talking points. There were several specific meetings to discuss relief matters (such as smoke impact). The talking points and key messages included a variety of relief issues including information related to health and safety, evacuation, immediate relief support services, donations and reconnecting with family and friends.

Attendees at these meetings typically included representatives from government departments, responder agencies, support agencies, community service organisations and MAV. Most meetings included representatives from the SCC Public Information Section and less frequently regional or incident level Public Information Section representatives. Total attendance and representatives naturally varied quite significantly throughout the event.

Both Hume and Gippsland regions established Regional Joint Public Information Committees with Regional Public Information Officers seeing their role being to connect and coordinate incident and state tiers, undertake strategic planning, maintain a regional focus and to act as a regional media contact.

At the incident level, there is limited evidence to suggest Incident Joint Public Information Committees were formally established. However, Public Information Officers and Information and Warnings Officers were typically in place. The Swifts Creek and Orbost ICCs did not always have a designated Public Information Officer. Instead they had Level 3 Information and Warnings Officers who worked with a Public Information Officer based at Bairnsdale.

By early February, the key whole-of-government messages in relation to the fires had shifted to thanking agencies and acknowledging the huge impacts of fire throughout summer. Throughout February, the focus largely shifted to messaging related to the rapidly emerging COVID-19 pandemic. This continued and increased throughout March and April 2021.

As agencies and communities transitioned out of response and relief to become more focused on recovery, several departmental representatives raised issues internally questioning the lack of discussion and planning for recovery communications. According to EMJPIC minutes these issues were not raised in this forum, however, individual organisations continued to discuss and outline the bushfire recovery communications at EMJPIC meetings.

### 6.1.3 Community information and warnings

The VicEmergency platform was used by personnel working in IMTs at all tiers to communicate vital hazard-specific information to community members. The VicEmergency platform interacts automatically with a mobile phone application, websites, telephone hotline, social media and email notifications to emergency broadcasters. There are five classifications of messaging:

- Emergency warning
- Watch and act warning
- Advice
- Evacuation
- Community information.

The EMC and SRC hold ultimate responsibility under the 2013 EM Act to ensure community information and warnings are issued during a major fire. This responsibility is often delegated to the Incident Controller who authorises and issues the community information and warnings before they are published and shared with the community. The Incident Controller can assign this role to a Deputy Incident Controller or Public Information Officer.

The information included in VicEmergency messages is predominantly focused on supporting people in the community to make informed decisions before and during significant fire activity in their area. While messages can – and often do – include information related to relief and recovery, their primary purpose is to provide time-critical response and fire behaviour information.

Many of the VicEmergency messages issued during the 2019–20 Victorian fire season included content related to relief, specifically information related to evacuation, designated ERCs and public health and safety.

The VicEmergency website's Relief and Recovery tab (that can also be accessed through a link in the phone application) was updated with a limited amount of basic information during the fires, however was not regularly updated and in the months following the fires provided outdated information in relation to recovery.

EMV stakeholders discussed how the VicEmergency website is not intended to be the primary source of information for relief and recovery. This was supported by commentary from other recovery organisations and the community, who use other communication channels to share and receive relief and recovery information.

Other stakeholders discussed that in its current form the Relief and Recovery tab of the VicEmergency website is not a suitable repository for relief and recovery information. This reflected the localised nature of many aspects of relief and recovery and the large volume of information.

There was a haphazard approach to updating the website and it was not clear whether it could be used as an accurate and up to date, albeit incomplete, source of relief and recovery information.

IGEM notes that EMV and BRV are leading work to develop a more comprehensive online information portal for recovery in response to IGEM's 10 Year Review and other ongoing reform in the sector. In principle, this will provide a more tailored and comprehensive repository of recovery information. However, it is unlikely that this will address the need for sharing time-sensitive and emergency-specific relief and recovery information.

#### FINDING 6.1

The Relief and Recovery tab 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.

IGEM notes that the primary purpose of VicEmergency messages is not to provide extensive relief and recovery information. The complex nature of the fires meant that frequent and detailed messaging was required to provide community members with sufficient information about expected fire behaviour, road closures, evacuation instructions and health and safety information.

IGEM has previously noted that VicEmergency messages can be quite long and complex, making it difficult for users to identify priority information in an emergency. It is quite appropriate that VicEmergency messages do not include relief and recovery information given the amount of information and the highly localised and personal nature of relief and recovery support.

However, some messages did include information related to financial relief assistance, community-specific relief advice and information related to places of shelter and relief (including ERCs). For any given location, this information was placed at different positions within the message and was added or withdrawn in subsequent messaging. This made it difficult to follow changes and updates in information.

Stakeholders suggested that the consistent inclusion of relief information in VicEmergency was problematic as it was difficult to identify the most accurate and up-to-date relief and recovery information. This information is determined and generated by councils, Incident Controllers, relief and recovery organisations and, in some cases Australian Government portfolios. Maintaining an accurate and location-specific record of relief and recovery information and attempting to include this information in highly time-critical information and warnings messages is fraught.

While it is appropriate that VicEmergency is not the primary source of relief and recovery information for communities, there is currently no defined alternative. Likewise, the inconsistent inclusion of a relief and recovery page in VicEmergency presents a risk of creating a reliance on that page. Communities may come to assume that all relief and recovery information needs can be addressed by using these pages.

**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.

**FINDING 6.2**

There is no centralised source of information providing affected communities with time-sensitive relief and recovery information.

### 6.1.4 Media's role in operational communications

Despite increases in the use of social media, and face-to-face communication channels, traditional media remains a critical mode of communication, especially in rural areas. This is especially the case with radio, the most transportable and least technically demanding electronic medium.

The experience of the 2019–20 fires in East Gippsland reinforces this. ABC Gippsland suspended normal programs and switched into the role of emergency broadcaster, becoming a key source of focused local information for several weeks during and after the fires. This transcended its emergency broadcaster role and continued into the resumption of normal broadcasting. The significance and impact of this locally was recognised in the Victorian Rural Press Club Awards in September 2020.

The VicEmergency platform automatically sends email notifications to emergency broadcasters who have arrangements in place to disseminate this information quickly.

The media is also well versed in communicating a greater variety of information during operational periods. Politicians and senior emergency management personnel used the media extensively throughout the fires to provide situational updates to the broader community, discuss known and emerging impacts and announce commitments of relief and recovery support.

Most IMTs include a media officer within the Public Information functional unit. These personnel are trained to manage media enquiries and provide key information based on information provided by EMJPIC. They also provide this information to the SCC to keep the state level key messages up to date.

There was an extremely high level of public interest in Australia's Black Summer. Media companies sent journalists from all around the world to fire-affected areas to report on the impacts. In Victoria, many journalists travelled to regional centres like Bairnsdale, particularly as road closures prevented them from travelling into smaller fire-affected townships.

During the fires, the number of journalists and media representatives arriving in regional centres placed a considerable strain on the capability and capacity of media officers. Incident-level media officers were initially forced to respond to numerous media requests in-place. State and regional media officers were deployed to regional centres such as Bairnsdale to provide additional support and coordination in recognition of the importance of handling the media.

Working with the media is a complex activity yet can have many advantages. A strong media engagement strategy can ensure accurate and timely information is disseminated to affected communities.

This was particularly important during the 2019–20 fires as there were large numbers of people seeking relief that were visitors to the area and unfamiliar with local media sources and emergency management communication channels such as VicEmergency. They were able to use traditional media to find information and make basic decisions in relation to their own safety and relief. The media was used extensively to share details about VicEmergency and other sources of credible emergency information.

The media also played a major role in communicating the needs of affected communities. As much as possible, Victorian politicians and emergency management spokespeople stressed the preference for financial donations and emphasised well-established charities and the Victorian Bushfire Appeal as the most appropriate recipients of donations.

Much of the media coverage of bushfires fell away sharply once the initial response and relief efforts occurred. The media caravan is usually quick to move on, although there is an inevitable point at which it returns at some point during the recovery phase.

Following the 2019–20 fires, media attention quickly moved onto the emerging COVID-19 pandemic and remained focused on pandemic-related issues throughout 2020 and 2021. While media is not always a welcome presence for communities in recovery, the sharp change in focus raised concerns of being forgotten for some communities. Media can be a very useful mechanism to raise awareness that a region is open for business, especially as locals start to consider the implications for economic industries related to tourism and small business.

## 6.1.5 Local information sources

### Community meetings

A long-standing method of distributing information to fire-affected communities is through community meetings, both small and large. The effectiveness of such meetings in distributing critical information varies greatly. In the immediate aftermath of most events, community meetings serve a number of positive purposes, they enable communities to come together, to share experiences, to access information, physical and emotional resources and support. There is, however, always some risk that such events may be diverted by vocal expressions of anger or even blame.

CFA became the lead agency in conducting structured community meetings related to bushfire almost by default. CFA has delivered a range of community education material and programs about bushfire since the 1950s. In the beginning this was strictly a one-way encounter. The earliest forms of community education were rudimentary, with information delivered in pamphlet or other print formats. The use of cinema and television advertising was added to this during the 1960s and 70s.

The *Report of Inquiry into the 2002–03 Victoria Bushfires*, in noting the significance of relief and recovery initiatives commencing while the emergency response was still underway, specifically recommended ‘that all agencies engaged in recovery participate in community briefings prior to and during emergency events, to ensure recovery issues are reinforced and communities are informed of processes established to assist individuals.’<sup>34</sup>

Other agencies and notably VICSES offer training and development opportunities for personnel interested in community engagement, particularly in the preparedness phase, but with an emphasis on the hazards for which the agency is responsible. Since 2015 CFA and VICSES have conducted joint forums at state and regional levels to share information on community engagement. Often, community bushfire meetings will have representatives present from agencies, such as DELWP, Parks Victoria, councils, DHHS and VicPol.

DELWP and Parks Victoria (PV) have in recent years initiated community engagement activities, notably in populated metropolitan fringe areas, where the interface between public and private lands presents particular issues in terms of mitigation works. As part of the Melbourne Fire and Emergency Program, which is run by Parks Victoria, focused community engagement activities have been held since 2009. Such meetings are normally also attended by Community Safety personnel from CFA.

### Training to facilitate community meetings

CFA facilitators undertake training that leads to unit competencies under the nationally accredited Public Safety Training Package. Within CFA this training focuses on presentation and facilitation skills and techniques, their application in delivering CFA programs ranging from small interactive groups to public meetings where hundreds of people might attend.<sup>35</sup>

These CFA facilitators are employed on a casual basis as Community Liaison Bushfire Engagement facilitators to deliver the range of community safety programs, including home fire safety, industry based and special interest group programs. A small number of CFA volunteers are also trained in this work. Most Community Liaison Bushfire Engagement facilitators are also operational or non-operational CFA volunteers. A number of CFA/Fire Rescue Victoria (FRV) staff working in operational or community safety roles are also qualified to perform this role.

The focus of the CFA programs is on preparing people and communities for bushfire, so most of the facilitators' work occurs leading into and in the early stages of the fire danger period. However, the skills and experience of CFA's community engagement facilitators have been used for over a decade to deliver community meetings both during and immediately after bushfires in affected areas. While the CFA's reference manual refers to the need for facilitators to be specially trained to facilitate meetings during fires, in reality these are normally conducted by more experienced facilitators drawn from the general cohort.

The skills and training of other meeting facilitators varies depending upon the agency to which they are attached. Council or DELWP personnel may perform the role of host in some circumstances. Some recovery agencies (for example, Red Cross) also have trained facilitators and experienced presenters.

### **Approach to community meetings**

The decision to conduct community meetings is usually made at the ICC level, often at the behest of the Incident Controller, and managed by the Public Information section of the IMT.

These meetings are mostly conducted in communities that have not yet been impacted or which remain under threat from a major event. Depending upon location, the meetings may also attract people from communities that have already been affected and people who may or may not know of the impact on their properties and loved ones. The content of these meetings should reflect the varied needs of those attending.

At these meetings residents might require specific advice about the bushfire that is occurring and information that will ensure survival during its passage. Their needs are immediate, and they are highly motivated to take on board advice from CFA and other agencies. It is normal practice for the Incident Controller or a Deputy Incident Controller to attend in such circumstances and provide a situational update.

Meetings during an incident share the following characteristics. They are:

- one hour or less in duration
- often delivered in partnership with CFA, DELWP/Forest Fire Management Victoria (FFMVic), Parks Victoria, DHHS, DJPR, councils and other agencies as appropriate to the needs of the incident and residents
- delivered to audiences who may be very motivated and more 'on edge'
- inclusive of content which is relevant to the situation at hand; and comprised of incident specific updates and community safety information.

While the Incident Controller might be the key speaker during such a meeting, facilitation is often the role of a Community Liaison Officer or a council representative. A facilitator in these circumstances is required to hold the space and provide a supportive and inclusive environment.

Meetings in such circumstances are often characterised by participants who are highly stressed and emotional and draw heavily on the communication skills of those coordinating and presenting at them. The facilitator needs to have a range of community engagement skills and attributes, as well as a strong understanding of the emergency and required actions of those in attendance.

During campaign fires, it is not unusual for successive meetings to be held in the same community and these meetings may continue into the relief and recovery phase.

### Community meetings during 2019–20 fires

In the 2019–20 fires, a range of government agencies were involved in the delivery of information to communities before, during and after bushfires. As the fires moved out of response into relief and early recovery, the key participants in these meetings changed, as the central role of the responder agencies declined and that of state and non-government recovery agencies predominates. The role of council was critical throughout all phases of the emergency.

Councils and responder agencies hosted community meetings immediately before, during and after fires threatened towns. In many cases, councils organised the meeting, which were then hosted by the Incident Controller, a Deputy Incident Controller or local responder agency leader (for example, the CFA Captain).

In many cases, community meetings were streamed online. This is in recognition of the isolation faced by some communities, where travelling to regional centres was dangerous or not possible due to road closures. Live-streaming was problematic for many isolated individuals and families as there were ongoing disruptions to power and telecommunications.

Depending on the timing of the meetings and the needs of the community, the host and representatives from supporting organisations provided critical information to attendees. This related to evacuations and relocations, emergency extractions, the availability of relief support and relevant information related to the fires and likely impacts. Where possible, the meetings were attended by staff and volunteers from organisations such as Victorian Council of Churches Emergencies Ministry (VCCEM) and Red Cross to provide psychological first aid and other forms of personal support.

Given disruptions in telecommunications and power, there were some difficulties in announcing the timing and locations of scheduled meetings. To overcome this limitation, signs were posted in prominent locations, and community members shared the information as broadly as possible. Council staff tried to schedule regular meetings at consistent times and venues to facilitate awareness and attendance.

Community members who spoke of these meetings to IGEM reflected that community meetings were useful forums for information sharing. In most cases, there were opportunities to ask questions and receive support, in addition to hearing the community-wide announcements. While they were able to monitor fire conditions and relief and recovery services via other channels, the meetings provided local context and speakers were able to tailor the information to suit the needs of the community.

The meetings also helped people to contextualise the vast amount of information circulating through the media, social media and on government websites. State and regional media and government announcements often excluded specific local information and discussed impacts, and relief and recovery support in general. Community members were able to verify and ensure they had relevant information to plan for their own relief and recovery.



Corryong Relief Centre (Source: Community submission)

### Community driven communications

In addition to formal community meetings hosted by council or responder agencies, communities also scheduled and ran gatherings to share information. These meetings varied in formality based on the type and size of the community.

Immediately after the 2019–20 bushfires, a number of communities were cut off both physically and due to loss of communications infrastructure, especially in East Gippsland. In one instance, around Lucyvale in the North East, daily meetings were organised by a local CFA brigade, eventually via UHF radio to connect with individual property owners.

Some communities met daily at a designated time to check-in and share information. For example, one small, isolated community gathered at someone's home each evening to have a meal, debrief from the day and share food and other supplies. As road access was restored, they planned coordinated supply runs to preserve fuel and ensure they could continue to monitor fire danger, commence clean-up and provide care to families and livestock.

Other larger communities used existing social media groups and networks to share information. Again, this allowed for the sharing of locally relevant and tailored information. In some cases, council or responder agency personnel contributed to these discussions remotely to answer questions and clarify information.

One downside of community driven communications is the potential for misinformation to be shared. While community members can access a vast amount of information online, this information is updated regularly and may include details that are complex or irrelevant for certain communities. In its observations of social media channels during and after the fires, IGEM noted instances where communities were struggling to interpret information that was either outdated or incorrect.

At times, this can create conflict within the community. During relief, there are heightened emotions and high levels of stress that can cause individuals to react negatively when incorrect or incomplete information is shared.

Community driven communication can also inadvertently exclude community members who are not well-connected to their community. These people may not subscribe to the channels used for information sharing or be unaware of their existence. In the cases of face-to-face communications, individuals may not be invited or known to small community gatherings.

Despite the potential gaps in community driven communications, there is great value in supporting this form of communication. While this mechanism of information sharing is useful for the increasing awareness of the emergency situation, it also provides an opportunity for communities to support themselves and develop resilience, which becomes increasingly important as the community starts its recovery.

#### 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.

#### 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.

## 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:

- (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.

## 6.2 Ongoing recovery public communications

As the immediate danger of the fires subsided, public communications changed considerably. For example, numerous recovery organisations started to communicate early recovery services to fire-affected areas; the Victorian and Australia Government made public commitments of support; councils and other government portfolios began to travel across the fire-affected regions; and community organisations began to form and reach out to individuals.

The breadth of recovery organisations involved in delivering support and services to the community led to a large number of organisations communicating with fire-affected communities and individuals. Understandably, each organisation had its own information to share and priority audiences.

Councils are instrumental in recovery based public communications. All councils directly and indirectly affected by the fires created recovery website pages as repositories for local recovery services. These websites often provide links to external support services and Victorian and Australian recovery initiatives. Council personnel reported that ensuring these websites remain up to date and accurate is a time-intensive endeavour.

Councils also created online and paper-based recovery newsletters or supplemented existing council correspondence with recovery information. Community members reported that they found these newsletters to be very useful and the physical delivery of this information was helpful.

---

*I could just stick it on the fridge and refer to the different [phone] numbers when I needed to. They have maps and addresses that were really useful for me, not always when I received it, but sometimes later.*

*Community member*

---

As BRV became established it attempted to provide some coordination of public communications. It worked with councils and government portfolios to ensure regular, targeted communication to affected communities. BRV appointed an internal public communications team to coordinate outgoing information. This internal team was able to develop a reasonable level of oversight for Victorian recovery activities and provide direction to state and local entities to increase the level of coordination in communications.

Nonetheless, communities were clearly overwhelmed and confused by the amount of information available to them to support their recovery. The different strategies of communication were sometimes well-received, but this depended on the readiness of the individual to digest this information. In the worst cases, poorly timed and crafted communications created high levels of distress and anger.

The public communications related to the LER program grants is an example of this. The LER program, co-funded by the Australian Government, saw the Australian Government make preliminary announcements about the funding, months before funding guidelines were developed and funding was actually made available. This created a perception within the community that funding was delayed or being withheld.



BRV 'cuppa and chat', East Gippsland (Source: Cain Trist, BRV)

Once applications opened, there was a degree of confusion as to the role of Community Recovery Committees, which created fears about inequity of funding distribution. When applications were eventually assessed, a preliminary tweet about successful applications that fell outside of the agreed communications strategy caused a large amount of anger and required a prompt and comprehensive response from BRV to minimise damage and inform the community of the outcomes of the funding process.

Another issue that emerged throughout 2020 was the need to communicate recovery outcomes and progress to fire-affected communities and the broader public. While large investments had been made and significant progress had occurred in some areas, government recognised that the messaging and timing of communications needed to be carefully considered.

These issues were raised in the SBRCC and some Line of Recovery working groups engaged with BRV to develop communication strategies regarding recovery progress.

Stakeholders reflected that although recovery progress was visible to government, it was not always visible to community, or aligned with community priorities and expectations. DoT for example were aware that while road drainage and foundational repairs to arterial road infrastructure was necessary for recovery, it was not visible to communities and possibly not aligned with community priorities. As such, communication was tailored to ensure progress was explained well and other community priorities (such as the appearance of roadsides and debris clearance) were not dismissed in public facing communications.

This was not always managed well, there were multiple examples of government communicating its progress with a lack of awareness of other community priorities. For example, communities were angered by the ongoing promotion of modular housing in areas where these homes were not suitable and other planning and building issues were causing significant amounts of delay and frustration.

#### FINDING 6.4

The number of organisations involved in recovery from the 2019–20 Victorian fire season resulted in poorly coordinated public communications.

Throughout both relief and recovery, there are multiple known issues that are easily anticipated. For example, past experience makes it clear that donated goods and spontaneous volunteering will be problematic in most major emergencies. Likewise, the communications surrounding evacuations and staying to defend are sensitive, but predictable.

Stakeholders reflected that poor communication on these known issues created a high level of stress for community members and relief and recovery personnel. They felt that communication during the emergency itself was often poorly considered, and many important messages were diluted by the volume of communications.

In many cases, these issues in relief and recovery could be addressed through ongoing education campaigns. Currently, bushfire education focuses on preparation and response to the fires and does not address relief and recovery issues. By raising awareness of basic relief and recovery needs and encouraging preparedness for relief and recovery, as well as response, stakeholders felt that communications during an emergency could be streamlined.

The State Relief and Recovery Communications Framework allows for the establishment of RJPICs for coordination of communications. This function can transition to council leadership and provide an opportunity for councils and all recovery agencies to develop tailored communication strategies.

#### 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.

#### 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.

#### CASE STUDY: THE RISE OF SOCIAL MEDIA

Characterised by one study as ‘anarchic’ in the context of the highly structured institutional world of emergency management, social media has progressively challenged the orthodoxies of traditional communications before, during and after emergencies over the past 20 years.

Ironically, given its instantaneous and often limited temporal nature, social media can provide a more permanent forum for communities to express ideas and exchange information during the recovery phase.

Paton and Irons (2016) examined the role one Facebook page played in recovery from the extensive Tasmanian bushfires in 2013. The study explored people’s interpretation of their experience and how information made available using Facebook influenced the nature and effectiveness of community-based emergency response and recovery.

Disaster communication plays a pivotal role in providing the information people need to respond to these problems. While emergency communication has predominantly been the province of formal response agencies (for example, emergency services), online emergent groups are increasingly playing active roles in communication and information exchange.

The traditional top-down, one-size-fits-all approach to emergency communications is ineffective due to the growing diversity of people circumstances and needs. However, social media is not a panacea and that it is as much about the way in which information is interpreted as the medium by which it is spread. This was borne out in IGEM community consultations following the 2019–20 fires, where misinformation spread on social media led to a degree of misinformation being spread between affected communities.

The strengths of such vehicles, however, can lie in the sense of community and it is possible to build both within affected areas and between interested parties outside the emergency footprint.

In the Tasmanian example, the Facebook page generated a sense of belonging, trust, access to immediate information, connection, emotional safety and other qualities usually missing from traditional forms of post-emergency communication. Some members of the Facebook page went as far as to feed the information it contained to those without access to the internet. It also facilitated opportunities for reciprocal communication that allowed people to engage with others through the page in meaningful ways with people with similar needs, goals, and expectations.

The study, while exploratory, found that social media can assist with ensuring that emergency-affected populations receive timely, consistent, and accurate information.

As in many aspects of emergency management, there is no ‘silver bullet’ when it comes to communicating information before, during and after emergencies.

In public policy terms, there is an opportunity in the post-event phase for recovery agencies to consider facilitating community resilience and recovery through a range of different approaches in which the affected communities are central. This might extend to providing funding and expertise to enable communities to develop a time limited or ongoing social media presence that is relevant to them; or to developing a low-tech equivalent such as a newsletter if that is more appropriate; or other forms of communication that take into account literacy skill and access to technology.

Such upskilling need not wait for major emergencies.

By providing community members with tools to engage in crisis preparedness, response, and recovery, social media may have a role to play in building community resilience—a measure of a community’s ability to respond to, withstand, and recover from adverse situations.

The importance of social media as a two-way information system is also only starting to be understood in the context of emergencies.

Emergency managers in Australia were alerted to the significance of this during the 2011 Queensland floods. As emergency management authorities have built their own social media presence over the past decade, this has also entailed dedicating staff on a scalable basis to dealing with social media activity during crises.

The bidirectional nature of such communications means that ‘inputs from the field’ often form a valuable source of situational intelligence for the authorities.

### 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.



# Chapter 7

Relief governance



This chapter describes the operational and incident-specific governance arrangements that were established to support relief during the 2019–20 Victorian fire season. The details of these relief activities and their effectiveness are described throughout this report (see Chapters 8–10). Additionally, there were both strategic and operational governance systems underpinning relief activities. The core strategic governance aspects of relief are discussed in Chapter 3.

## 7.1 Emergency relief

In the immediate aftermath of the fires many individuals and families needed to come to terms with the trauma of their experiences and the shock of seeing neighbours, friends or family suffer loss. There was extensive damage to homes and businesses, farms, public infrastructure and facilities.

Individuals, families and communities were dealing with the practical and emotional consequences of being displaced from their homes and properties, isolated from community infrastructure and disconnected from essential services. Tourists were stranded in regional towns with limited supplies, variable levels of familiarity with their surroundings and no easy way to return to their homes.

During this time communities and individuals relied heavily on the provision of relief services. For many of these people it was their first-time seeking government assistance and being dependent on others, which was a daunting and unfamiliar experience.

Affected communities needed emergency relief throughout December 2019 and January 2020. This involved sheltering in ERCs, accessing basic emergency supplies including food and water, reconnecting with family and friends, seeking financial assistance and various forms of health and psychosocial support.

The extent and behaviour of the fires meant that many communities were actively monitoring conditions to ensure their safety while seeking relief. They were also restricted in their movements and/or isolated for extended periods of time.

The emergency management sector, government more broadly, councils and many non-government organisations responded to provide an extensive and prolonged relief effort. The term ‘unprecedented’ was often used to describe the nature of the fires and the response effort. However, the scale and duration of the relief effort was equally if not more and markedly different from the relief required in previous major fires, such as the 2009 Victorian bushfires.

## 7.2 Relief arrangements

In Victoria, emergency relief is defined as ‘...the provision of assistance to meet essential needs of individuals, families and communities during and in the immediate aftermath of an emergency’.<sup>2</sup> It includes access to medical services, shelter, food, water, household items and financial assistance.

In this Inquiry report, the EMMV is used as a reference when considering relief arrangements and activities. At the time of the fires the EMMV provided the primary description of relief and recovery activities, and organisational roles and responsibilities.

IGEM notes that the EMMV was superseded by the SEMP in September 2020. While many of the core arrangements, roles and responsibilities are very similar, any notable differences were considered in reflections for future practice and as evidence of change that has already started to occur in the sector following the 2019–20 Victorian fire season.

While there is a clear definition of relief in the EMMV and the SEMP, the provision of relief is not legislated or defined in either the 1986 or 2013 EM Acts. As such, there is no explicit legislative recognition of relief in emergency management, and no defined legislated role for its delivery or coordination.

While not explicitly included in legislation, relief is considered in emergency management documentation and is frequently coupled with recovery (see section 3.2, p 71).

The Victorian Preparedness Framework lists relief assistance as a core capability in emergency management, describing relief assistance as:

---

*The provision of well-coordinated, integrated and timely assistance to meet the immediate health, wellbeing and essential needs of affected communities, during and immediately after an emergency event, with the aim to support social cohesion and build resilience.*

---

*Victorian Preparedness Framework* <sup>12</sup>

---

The Preparedness Framework outlines seven critical tasks to support the relief assistance core capability. These are:

- establish temporary shelter options for displaced persons
- coordinate and manage services to meet the physical needs of affected populations
- assess and manage services to meet the psychosocial needs of the affected populations
- assess and provide financial hardship assistance payments
- monitor emerging needs and adapt services to minimise the long-term consequences on health and wellbeing
- facilitate the reunification of family and friends separated during an emergency
- coordinate and manage services to meet the immediate needs of affected livestock.

In recognition of the variability of emergencies, the sector uses a series of principles to guide the coordination and delivery of relief. Use of these principles also reflects the sector's understanding that every community experiencing relief will require a tailored approach to relief and recovery activities.<sup>2</sup> Agencies that have relief responsibilities should incorporate these principles in the planning of delivery of their services.

The relief principles are outlined in the SERRP and include:

- emergency-affected communities receive essential support to meet their basic and immediate needs
- relief assistance is delivered in a timely manner
- relief promotes community safety and minimises further physical and psychological harm
- relief and response agencies communicate clear, relevant timely and tailored information and advice to communities about relief services, through multiple and appropriate channels
- relief services recognise community diversity
- relief is adaptive, based on continuing assessment of needs
- relief supports community responsibility and resilience
- relief is well coordinated, with clearly defined roles and responsibilities
- relief services are integrated into emergency management arrangements.

Internationally, relief is guided by the *Sphere handbook: humanitarian charter and minimum standards in humanitarian response*.<sup>36</sup> Sphere is an independent not-for-profit organisation established to improve the accountability and quality of humanitarian responses to major emergencies.

The Sphere handbook is considered as providing best practice guidelines for relief and comprises of a Humanitarian Charter, Protection Principles and the Core Humanitarian Standard. The Charter is based on two core beliefs:

---

*People affected by disaster or conflict have the right to life with dignity and therefore, the right to assistance; and all possible steps should be taken to alleviate human suffering arising out of disaster or conflict*

---

*Sphere Handbook 2018* <sup>36</sup>

The Charter applies three guiding principles for relief assistance to people affected by an emergency:

- the right to life with dignity
- the right to receive humanitarian assistance
- the right to protection and security.

The Charter states there are four vital areas of relief response: water supply, sanitation and hygiene; food security and nutrition; shelter and settlement; and health.

The Sphere handbook and existing policy documents, such as the SERRP, SEMP and the Victorian Preparedness Framework, provide a basis for the sector to develop a common set of relief outcomes.<sup>37</sup>

In principle, all documents are complementary, however, Victoria's emergency management arrangements do not include a common set of relief outcomes. Clear, sector-wide outcomes for relief could better inform governance arrangements, align principles and activities and support the identification of metrics to measure effectiveness of relief via the achievement of outcomes.

#### FINDING 7.1

There is no preferred, sector-wide set of outcomes for the provision of emergency relief in the Victorian emergency management system.

## 7.3 Operational governance in relief

Emergency relief operational arrangements exist across Victoria's state, regional and incident tiers of emergency management. Each tier has specific relief coordination responsibilities and there are defined protocols for inter-agency and cross-tier communications. The tiered approach is designed to be scalable according to the complexity of the emergency and provide greater oversight and appropriate resourcing for emergencies. Not all tiers are activated for every emergency. In general, the state tier is only activated for major emergencies.

The EMC is accountable for overall coordination during emergencies and ensuring control arrangements are in place for response activities. Controllers and emergency response coordinators are appointed to support the EMC as required.

Responder agencies, government departments, councils and non-government organisations are the key providers of emergency relief and have varying levels of involvement at each of the three tiers. They plan and perform various tasks and activities to ensure communities' immediate and basic needs are met in the immediate aftermath of an emergency.

### 7.3.1 Relief plans and policies

The SERRP is a well-established policy document that defines many relief roles and responsibilities. It also lists 11 relief activities and assigns lead and support roles to responder agencies, government departments and non-government organisations for each activity.<sup>2</sup> The relief activities ensure direct assistance is provided to individuals and communities and that essential goods and services are available to communities isolated in the aftermath of an emergency.

The 11 relief activities listed in the SERRP are:

- emergency shelter
- reconnecting family and friends
- emergency financial assistance
- drinking water for households
- community information
- healthcare, medical assistance and first aid
- food and water to individuals
- disbursement of material aid
- animal welfare
- food and grocery supply continuity
- psychosocial support

The SERRP lists 16 government and non-government agencies with lead or support roles in these relief activities (see Table 2). The lead agency of the relief activity is responsible for coordinating information sharing, facilitating the relief activity, monitoring issues, determining and implementing information sharing mechanisms and reporting any issues to the State Relief and Recovery Manager (SRRM). Councils may also have established Memoranda of Understanding (MoUs) and arrangements with local service providers to provide relief activities.

**Table 2.** Lead and support roles in relief activities for government and non-government agencies  
(Source: SERRP)

	LEAD AGENCY	SUPPORT AGENCY
<b>Government</b>		
Department of Environment, Land, Water and Planning	X	X
Department of Health and Human Services	X	X
Department of Jobs, Precincts and Regions	X	X
Municipal councils	X	X
Victoria Police	X	
Ambulance Victoria	X	
Control agency	X	
<b>Non-government agency</b>		
Red Cross	X	X
Australian Veterinary Association		X
Foodbank		X
Local water corporations	X	
Royal Society for the Protection of Animals		X
Salvation Army	X	X
St John Ambulance		X
St Vincent de Paul		X
Victorian Council of Churches Emergency Ministry		X
Victorian Farmers Federation		X

Other relief activities listed in the SERRP include the provision of legal aid and the coordination of goodwill, which includes the management of donated goods and services and spontaneous volunteers. The SERRP does not list any lead or support agencies responsible for donated goods. Both the provision of legal aid and the coordination of spontaneous volunteers have agencies assigned with responsibilities during the recovery phase of an emergency.

The SERRP is supported by numerous sector and organisational documents including Fundamentals of Emergency Management (Class 1 Emergencies), Victorian Emergency Operations Handbook, the State Control Centre Relief and Recovery Handbooks and the State Relief Coordination Plan.

In 2013, Red Cross in conjunction with the then Department of Health (as it existed in 2013) developed the Emergency Relief Handbook. The handbook is designed to assist with the preparation of local, regional and state emergency relief plans and operational procedures in Victoria. The handbook was written primarily for government and emergency relief agencies and provides comprehensive information for relief planning.

The Emergency Relief Handbook has not been updated since 2013. Since then, there have been significant changes in the Victorian emergency management sector – most notably EMV has been established and assumed responsibility for relief and recovery coordination– taking over from DHHS. EMV is supported by a range of organisations in this role

Despite some outdated aspects and references, the Emergency Relief Handbook still provides comprehensive relief planning and operational information, and many councils rely on the information it contains.

The State Relief Coordination Plan developed by the then Department of Human Services and Red Cross in 2014 is another source of relief information available to agencies through Emergency Management Common Operating Picture (EM-COP).

The purpose of the plan is to provide an overview of relief arrangements and it should be read in conjunction with the SERRP and the Emergency Relief Handbook. Like the handbook, the State Relief Coordination Plan has not been updated since 2014 and contains outdated information and governance structures but is one of few relief resources available.

#### 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.

### 7.3.2 Incident management

Victorian responder agencies use the Australasian Inter-service Incident Management System (AIIMS) to organise their response to emergencies. AIIMS supports a standardised approach to incident management and outlines a clear structure for managing emergencies. AIIMS is applied at each tier of control (state, regional and incident) and establishes appropriate leadership and span of control through the formation of IMTs. AIIMS identifies common functional areas, each with a lead officer and the option for specific units to be established under each functional area.

VicPol operates its own incident and operational management model known as the Incident Command and Control System yet adheres to the principles of AIIMS in multi-agency emergencies.

AIIMS is based on several principles and foundational concepts and provides a structure for incident management. One key principle of AIIMS is flexibility and the system does not require the application of highly prescriptive arrangements for all emergencies.

To maintain an appropriate span of control, the Controller at each tier can delegate the functional areas of planning, intelligence, public information, operations, investigations, logistics and finance. The lead officers of each functional area form the IMT alongside the Incident Controller and any Deputy Incident Controllers appointed to support the core functional area of control.

AIIMS is primarily used to support the response phase of emergency management and does not include a specific functional area for relief (or recovery). Relief and recovery activities may be included within other functional areas or under the direct supervision of the Incident Controller or Deputy Incident Controller.

### 7.3.3 Command, control and coordination

The Victorian emergency management arrangements are based on the functions of command, control, and coordination. These functions were discussed in the Phase 1 Inquiry Report as they underpin the sector's approach to response. However, given the concurrent nature of response and relief (and the initial planning and implementation of recovery), the way in which relief activities are planned and implemented relies heavily on their consideration in the context of command, control and coordination.

Command refers to the internal operation of an agency involved in response within an agency's organisational hierarchy. Each agency appoints commanders or managers to supervise their own agency's personnel and ensure they are working safely.

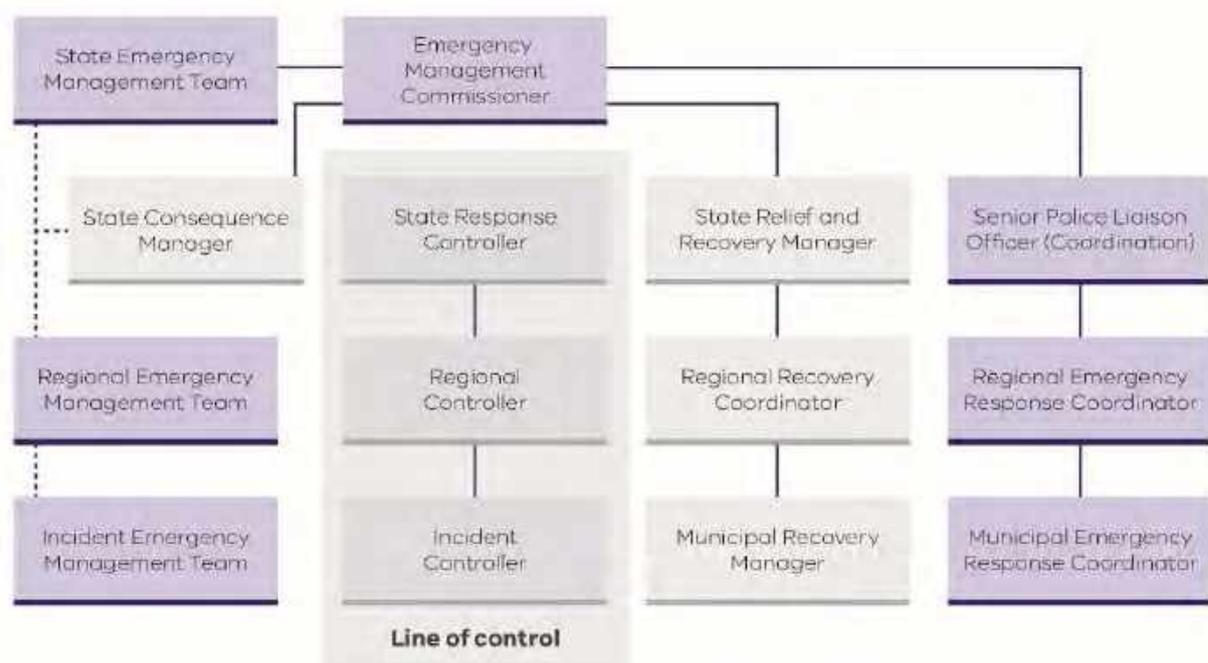
Control is the overall direction of response activities in the emergency and operates horizontally across all agencies involved in response.<sup>38</sup> The control function is responsible for emergency response activities and activating relief. The command and coordination function provide the support to those performing the control function.

The *'line of control'* refers to interactions between state, regional and incident tiers and the supervision of those working within each tier. For example, state should work via the regions to determine incident tier needs and priorities. Those in control leadership roles (for example SRC, Regional Controller and Incident Controller) are typically permanent employees of responder agencies and assume a non-agency role while rostered in these positions.

The coordination function brings together all agencies and resources to ensure an effective response to an emergency. Typically, those tasked with coordination functions consider a broader range of priorities and consequences. The coordination function works closely with control to ensure efficient information sharing. Throughout the 2019–20 fire season, most SCT meetings were combined with the SCoT and considered both control and coordination aspects of incident management.

At state tier, relief is functionally coordinated with recovery operations. Figure 2 illustrates the control and coordination arrangements at the state, region and incident tiers that were in place before and during the 2019–20 fire season. It demonstrates the direct reporting line between the EMC and the SRRM, and the regional and municipal recovery roles supporting the SRRM. Notably, there is no explicit mention of relief at either the regional or municipal/incident tiers.

**Figure 2.** Control, coordination and support arrangements at the state and regional tiers. (Source: Part 3, EMMV)



### 7.3.4 State tier

Relief functions at the state tier are in place to support regional coordination of relief and to provide additional capacity, management, coordination and oversight as required. The EMC is responsible for the coordination of state relief and recovery activities and is supported by the SRRM. This is an operational role and operates on a four-day roster. The SRRM reports directly to the EMC, providing strategic advice regarding progress, risks and emerging issues relevant to relief and recovery.<sup>37</sup>

The SRRM is supported by the State Relief and Recovery Team (SRRT) and a Relief and Recovery Functional Unit.<sup>37</sup> The SRRT reports directly to the SRRM. The Relief and Recovery Functional Unit is responsible for the coordination of activities by organisations who have relief and recovery roles and responsibilities as listed in the EMMV. The Relief and Recovery Functional Unit '*...works in unison with other functional units in the SCC, including Public Information, Intelligence, Planning and Logistics*'.<sup>37</sup> However, it sits within the coordination area of incident management.<sup>2</sup>

Another key operational team listed in the SERP is the State Emergency Relief Group. The role of this group is to provide expert relief advice and coordination for the delivery of relief operations. The State Emergency Relief Group was not activated during the 2019–20 fires.

DHHS can appoint a Strategic Liaison Officer to act as the interface between the regional and state tiers to facilitate the flow of information between regional relief and recovery coordination and the SRRM.

The SCoT, SCT and SEMT can also support relief and recovery activities as required. Figure 3 (p 149) depicts the SCC incident management structure during a Class 1 emergency.

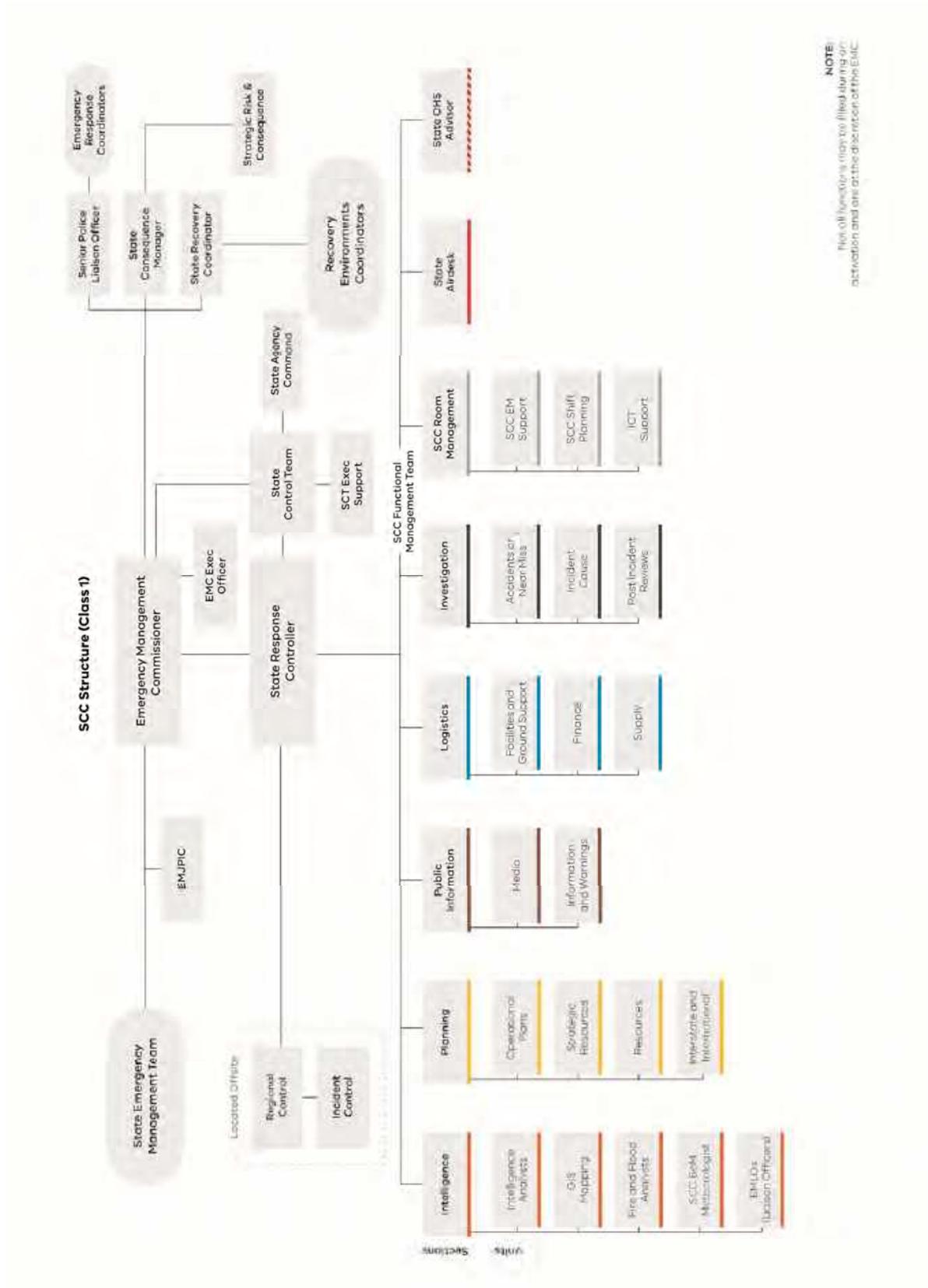
In effect, relief is operationally separate from response. Despite the existence of structures in place to coordinate relief and recovery, it is not clear how emergency relief activities integrate with incident control. The reporting relationship between the EMC and SRRM is clear, however, relief falls under a coordination function. There is no direct AIMS functional area or unit, or pathway for relief coordination to influence control.

The decision to include relief in control arrangements, for example through the allocation of relief functions to a Deputy Incident Controller, is based on the decision of the Incident Controller. This decision is not supported by any commonly applied procedures or escalation considerations to ensure consistency during a prolonged event, between regions or in different emergencies.

#### 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.

**Figure 3.** SCC incident management structure for a Class 1 emergency (Source: EMV <sup>39</sup>)



### 7.3.5 Regional tier

DHHS is responsible for the coordination of relief and recovery activities at the regional tier. The Secretary of DHHS appoints a Regional Recovery Coordinator to each of the Victorian Government administrative regions to perform this responsibility. A Regional Recovery Manager may be appointed to support the Regional Recovery Coordinator. DHHS is formally supported by the Red Cross in regional relief coordination.

The primary function of regional relief is to provide support to the incident tier. Key coordination responsibilities include the identification of capacity constraints and liaising with the State to secure additional resources and assistance to support relief - both at the incident and regional tier.<sup>40</sup>

Regional Recovery Coordinators must maintain regional relief and recovery plans and support and advise councils to develop municipal relief and recovery plans. During operational periods, each region may also develop a regional incident-specific relief and recovery plan.

Several key operational teams support regional relief and include the Regional Control Team and the Regional Emergency Management Team. These teams primarily consider emergency response, however, much like their state-tier equivalents, they can assume relief tasking and operations as required, pending appropriate resourcing. The Gippsland Regional Relief and Recovery Plan notes:

---

*Where an emergency has a significant community-wide impact, the Victorian Government may establish an event-specific relief coordination structure to oversee a whole-of-sector response.*

*Gippsland Regional Relief and Recovery Plan<sup>40</sup>*

---

The Regional Recovery Coordinator can request state tier coordination when the region's capacity is likely to be exceeded. However, escalation should build on existing arrangements rather than replace them. In practice, state tier coordination may self-activate based on the unfolding emergency and intelligence derived from various forecasting and response operations.

### 7.3.6 Incident tier

At the incident tier, relief is known as local relief. Local relief (and recovery) is coordinated by councils in conjunction with local partners and communities. Councils should work closely with local partners and ensure that local knowledge is considered in decision-making and ensure relief and recovery information is appropriately communicated to affected communities.

Councils appoint a Municipal Recovery Manager (MRM) and a Municipal Emergency Management Officer (MEMO). At the time of the fires, the MEMO role was known as the Municipal Emergency Resource Officer (MERO), a legislated position under the 1986 EM Act, with defined responsibilities and capabilities, while the MRM was a recommended position. As of December 2020, the MEMO and MRM are legislated positions under the *Emergency Management Legislation Amendment Act 2018* (EMLA).

The MRM and MEMO consider the relief and recovery needs of the local community. Upon initiating relief services, the Incident Controller will notify the MEMO who in turn contacts the MRM. The MRM may be included as a member of the Incident Emergency Management Team (IEMT) to ensure the provision of relief is integrated into response activities. The IEMT may also advise the Incident Controller on aspects of local relief.

In addition to their overall local relief coordination role, councils are the local lead agency for the activation of emergency shelter, personal support, and housing of displaced animals.

## 7.4 Relief activity during the 2019–20 fires

In Victoria, relief plans and arrangements assume a relative level of safety and are based on the premise that the immediate threat of the emergency has passed.

---

*Relief is generally a safe environment. You provide relief in relief centres or in areas that are safe.*

*Stakeholder*

---

The 2019–20 fires challenged this assumption as many of the communities requiring relief were within the fire footprint. These communities were physically isolated and experiencing significant disruptions to telecommunications and power supply, creating further isolation. Those sheltering in larger towns were arguably safer from impacts of the fires, but also experiencing isolation through lack of road access and poor supply of essential services. This placed significant pressure on all tiers of the emergency management system and tested the effectiveness of the emergency management relief arrangements.

At the commencement of the 2019–20 fires the provision of emergency relief at the state tier was considered within the coordination function, separating it from the line of control. Relief activities were also considered with emergency management teams at the incident, regional and state tiers. These teams are chaired by controllers and consider the management of the effects and consequences of the emergency. Their membership is broader to allow more comprehensive considerations of the direct and indirect effects of the emergencies, and consider short, medium and long-term consequences.

### 7.4.1 State relief activity

From mid-December 2019 the SRRT developed State Relief Plans which continued to be updated throughout the fire season. These plans provided an overview of the state relief operational structures and key relief priorities.

In late December 2019 the SRRM and the State Relief and Recovery Functional Unit were activated and began operating on a rotating four-day roster as a part of level 3 activation. State tier relief and recovery reporting commenced on 30 December 2019 to provide a summary of the relief situation and any emerging risks relevant to relief and recovery.

On 29 December 2019 a new fire was identified in the Wangan State Forest and there were immediate concerns that the fire was likely to cause significant impacts on Mallacoota. Operational personnel at the SCC discussed contingencies to ensure humanitarian relief would be available to Mallacoota's community and tourist population if road access was lost. On 31 December 2019 the government formally requested the support of the ADF, given the escalation of the fires and anticipated level of isolation and fire impact. This led to planning for emergency extractions and humanitarian relief via both sea and air.

The scale of the fires and the subsequent involvement of Commonwealth resources resulted in relief coordination being very quickly escalated to the state tier. SCC representatives worked with IMTs at regional and incident control centres to commence relief planning.

The SCC determined that both the region and incident tiers were focused on fire response and there was limited capacity to ensure an appropriate focus on the growing humanitarian relief need. It was also noted that the large-scale humanitarian relief effort and the urgency required was beyond the capability of either tier.

---

*So, our incident management teams and our regional control teams, [were] very focused on responding to the fire, protecting life and property. Which is fine, because that's typically been their remit.*

*Stakeholder*

---

SCC representatives made direct contact with divisional command in Mallacoota to determine relief needs and that's when we started to get some traction:

---

*What we experienced then was, we started to see some of the capability gaps in that on the ground and what people were able to do. And what we realised very quickly was, those skill sets existed within the ADF and others. So, for instance, how do you marshal a lot of people to get them on a boat? The ADF do that kind of thing. They can do that.*

*Stakeholder*

---

With the arrival of ADF personnel – and the growing need to ensure a dedicated focus on relief, Operation Genesis was formed. Its key focus was on the humanitarian efforts in relation to the Mallacoota evacuation and immediate relief needs of isolated communities.

Several state-led governing structures were established to strengthen the operational response to the growing relief needs of the community. These included CAOG, the BRRT, the SERC and the State Relief Team.

The structure of the SCC altered throughout December 2019 and February 2020 based on emerging needs, and the establishment and operation of the new operational relief structures. Figure 4 (p 153) depicts the state tier governance structure for response and relief, including both CAOG, BRRT and the SERC for the week starting 13 January 2020.

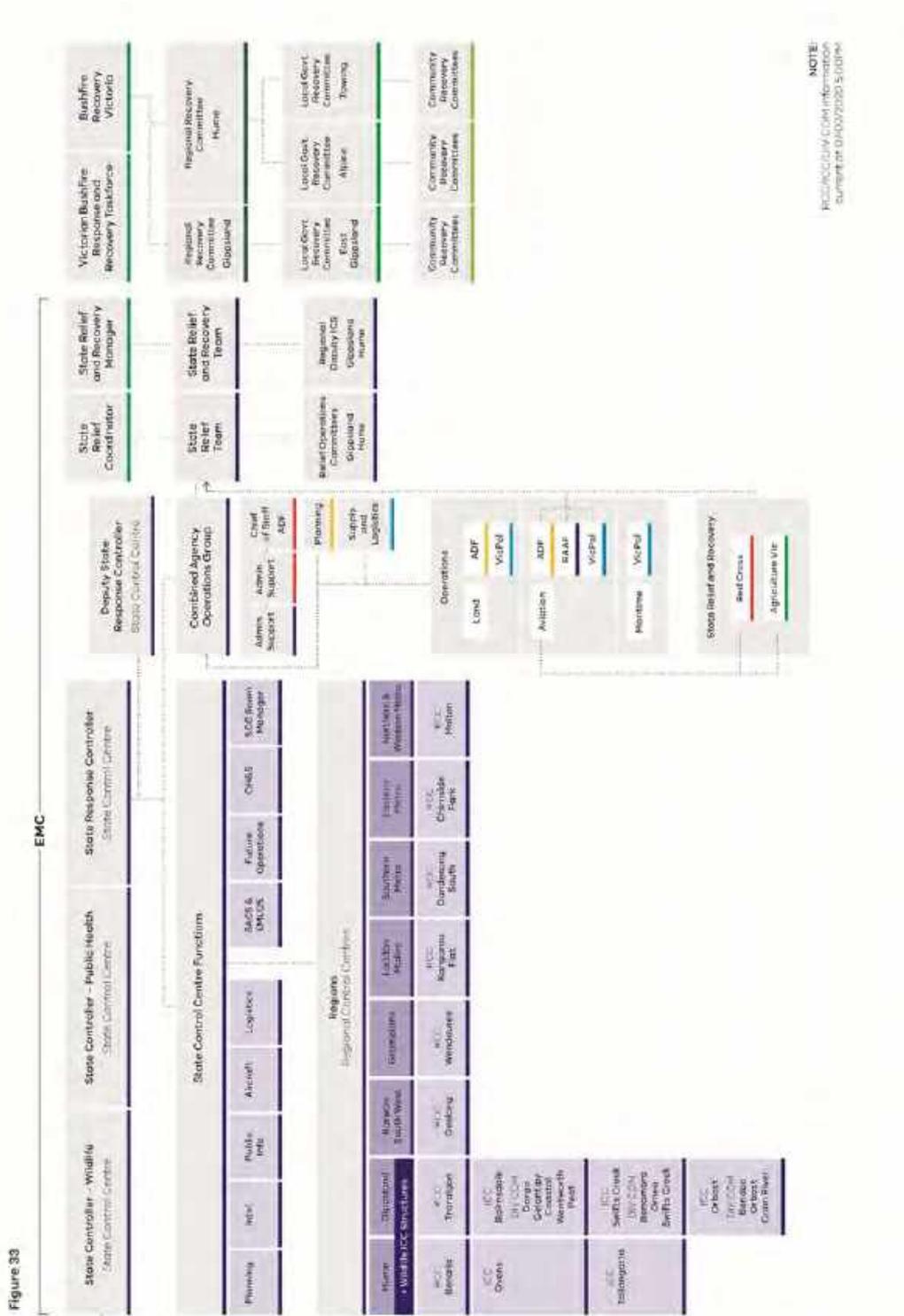
In IGEN's analysis of the new governance structures established at the state tier, there are duplications in membership, roles, jurisdictions and functions. The membership, leadership and function of each structure did evolve throughout the season, however, there appear to be opportunities to refine these committees to ensure a streamlined and clear approach to relief governance.

Table 3 (p 154) provides a comparison of the purpose, membership and remit of each of the existing and new governance structures established to provide enhanced state tier coordination of relief activities.



CFA media briefing with ADF and Papua New Guinea officers, Swifts Creek  
(Source: ©Commonwealth of Australia)

**Figure 4.** State tier governance structure for response and relief, including both CAOG, BRRT and the SERC for the week starting 13 January 2020 (Source: State Control Centre)



**Table 3.** Existing and new governance structures

	STATE RELIEF AND RECOVERY TEAM	COMBINED AGENCY OPERATIONS GROUP	BUSHFIRE RESPONSE AND RECOVERY TASKFORCE	STATE RELIEF TEAM
<b>Lead/Chair</b>	State Relief and Recovery manager	CAOG manager	Co-Chairs: DJCS Secretary; DPC Deputy Secretary	State Relief Coordinator
<b>Date of operation</b>	20 Dec 2019 – 28 Feb 2020	1 Jan 2020 – Feb 2020	31 Dec 2019 – 24 March 2020	11 Jan 2020 – 14 Feb 2020
<b>Functional area</b>	Relief and Recovery	Relief	Relief and Recovery	Relief
<b>Jurisdiction</b>	Existing and ongoing Strategic and operational focus Described in the EMMV Statewide	Developed in response to the 2019–20 fire season Operational focus Incident specific and time limited	Developed in response to the 2019–20 fire season Strategic and operational focus Incident specific and time limited	Developed in response to the 2019–20 fire season Strategic and Operational focus Incident specific Now described in the SEMP (post season)
<b>Key personnel in attendance</b>	SRRM, State Health Commander	ADF Chief of Staff	EMC, Department secretaries and deputy secretaries, Chief Commissioner of Police, State Relief Coordinator, State Health Commander	SRRM, State Relief Coordinator
<b>Organisations in attendance</b>	DHHS, Red Cross, EMV, DPC, VicPol, DJPR, DTF, DoT, DET, AgVic, AV, LGV, RDV, MAV, Parks Victoria, Salvation Army, VCCEM	Red Cross, ADF, VicPol,	DHHS, DPC, EMV, BRV, VicPol, DJPR, DoT, DELWP, DET DJCS, DTF, CFA, FRV, FFMVic, IGEM	DHHS, Red Cross, ADF, AV, VicPol, WorkSafe, DJPR, DoT, DELWP, EPA, FRV, AgVic, LGV

Stakeholders commented that the establishment of new structures, positions and arrangements during an emergency is never an ideal situation. However, the behaviour and footprint of the fires created a dangerous and dynamic relief situation that was geographically expansive, prolonged and complex. The nature of planning and tasking to meet communities' relief needs, and the anticipated extensive recovery needs, exceeded the capacity of existing relief and recovery structures.

Likewise, the magnitude of the relief and recovery efforts made it unfeasible for both relief and recovery to be managed by a single person and team. The SRRM and SRRT were not able to appropriately scale their function and operations within the existing relief structures and arrangements. This is due, in part, to the lack of clear integration of the SRRM role and its supporting team into existing response arrangements.

Stakeholders were consistent in their appraisal of the new structures. While there were clear issues with role clarity and the implementation of new structures, the leadership, capability and expert capacity harnessed through the formation of these structures was critical for the coordination of relief.

The three key new structures are discussed in greater detail over following sections.

#### 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.

### The Combined Agency Operations Group

The creation of CAOG (initially called Operation Genesis) aimed to better integrate Commonwealth resources, principally the ADF, into the state response and relief efforts.<sup>20</sup> The use of ADF resources in response to Victorian bushfire emergencies is not new, although the roles have changed over time.

In 1965 for example, the Victorian Government reportedly declared a ‘civil emergency’<sup>41 42 43</sup> and called upon almost 600 army personnel to assist in firefighting as fires burned through more than 315,000 hectares in Gippsland. This request would not be contemplated today due to a lack of firefighting training for army personnel. During this time Royal Australian Air Force (RAAF) resources from Sale were also used to drop supplies into remote areas.

In more recent events such as the 2009 Victorian bushfires, ADF resources were used to perform roles in which they have significant expertise, such as logistics, transport and the provision of temporary emergency accommodation.

In line with the more recent use of ADF resources, CAOG drew upon this expertise. Operation Genesis was initially formed to task the ADF with activities to meet the immediate life-sustaining relief needs of isolated and fire-affected communities. The ADF had the capability and equipment to reach isolated communities by air, sea, and land. As CAOG evolved, the following statements of intent were established by the SRC and the EMC to guide their activities:

- provision of need-based assistance for the immediate health and wellbeing of individuals, communities, and emergency management personnel
- planned and timely return of communities to bushfire impacted areas which minimises further physical and psychological harm
- return of reliable legislated critical infrastructure to communities (power, water, road access)
- opening of key tourist areas in a safe and controlled way to support local businesses
- minimise impact to environmental and conservation assets.<sup>44</sup>

---

*When it was humanitarian relief, it was about the safe evacuation of people from Mallacoota and their well-being. And then, we cascaded down from that ... then, it was supplying isolated communities, then it was providing relief to animal welfare, then it was transport of firefighters, and then it was repatriation of people back to Mallacoota. So, they went through a very rigorous process every day about what the risks were for that day, what they needed to do.*

*Stakeholder*

---

While Victoria’s emergency management arrangements have been significantly revised since the 2009 Victorian bushfires and 2010–11 floods, the new operating structures and models are not beyond improvement. The creation of CAOG, which built upon existing arrangements between the State and the Commonwealth, is an example of adaptive development during a large-scale emergency.

---

*You need leadership and you need flexibility, because emergencies and disasters, increasing intensity, all those kind of things, are presenting challenges that we haven’t seen.*

*Stakeholder*

---

#### 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.

### Bushfire Response and Recovery Taskforce

The BRRT first met on 1 January 2020 and was formally established by the Victorian government on 3 January 2020. It met twice per week throughout January and transitioned into a less-frequent meeting schedule as responder agencies began to contain the fires and relief needs became less dynamic.

BRRT had authority to report to the minister, Premier and SEMC as required. Its members included departmental secretaries and deputy secretaries and senior government officials, EMV, responder agencies and VicPol. BRRT was a time-limited taskforce co-chaired by DJCS and DPC until it was transitioned into the BRV-chaired SBRCC on 24 March 2020.

The purpose of the BRRT was to coordinate government support for locally led relief and recovery following the fires. The taskforce had a strong focus on cutting red tape, meeting community needs, and ensuring a coordinated response and recovery effort across local, state and Australian governments and community recovery committees.

The taskforce's role and functions included:

- overseeing the immediate response, by cutting through red tape, to meet the immediate needs of affected communities
- ensuring that all agencies are undertaking their responsibilities in response and recovery
- supporting the EMC in fulfilling his functions to coordinate the response of agencies, and deliver effective response and recovery efforts that meet the needs of the local communities
- ensuring Victorian Government agencies are coordinated and work closely with local government, not-for-profit organisations, the Australian Government, and community recovery committees
- coordinating social, economic, natural, and built environment consequence management in a timely and effective way
- oversee strategic communications for response, relief and recovery
- providing advice as required to ministers and government on relief and recovery needs and priorities to meet the needs of communities.

The BRRT provided senior officials with an appropriate tasking and authorising environment to ensure communities' immediate relief needs were addressed through actions implemented by EMV, BRV, government departments, responder agencies and other partnerships and mechanisms including community service organisations.

The chairs of BRRT maintained a detailed issues log, assigned actions to organisations and monitored progress and completion of the actions. The taskforce also conducted strategic planning and considered the short and medium consequences of the fires for government and the community, seeking to mitigate or minimise severe consequences as much as possible.

BRRT members discussed its value as being the high level of visibility of response, relief and recovery decision-making and tasking it facilitated for government. The taskforce also promoted a timely flow of information across the sector, within departments and to the executive government (ministers and Premier).

Stakeholders commented that one of the strengths of the taskforce was the attendance of appropriately briefed and authorised members. This allowed efficient decision-making to occur at the meetings and internal recovery planning to begin within each of the member organisations.

Throughout the fire season, BRRT tabled 80 actions. By the time the taskforce transitioned into the SBRCC all except two were completed.

The BRRT held a membership similar to SCRC, with the addition of responder agency personnel and the formal participation of relevant deputy secretaries. However, the taskforce's terms of reference, meeting schedule and operational focus allowed it to meet the serious and dynamic relief and recovery needs of communities, with the ability to work directly with responder agency leaders to ensure its actions were cognisant of response operations, personnel safety and known impacts.

In Phase 1 Inquiry Report, IGEM found that government worked outside of the existing strategic oversight structures, creating time-limited, fit-for-purpose structures to ensure an efficient and coordinated whole-of-government response (Phase 1 Inquiry Report Finding 7.1, p 282). Given the positive reflections of stakeholders on the achievements of the BRRT, this finding holds true for relief and recovery oversight through the taskforce.

Stakeholders individually reflected on learnings related to BRRT’s activation, function, and transition into existing governance arrangements. At the time of writing, no formal arrangements had been established to embed the positive outcomes of the BRRT in ongoing emergency management arrangements. Despite this, IGEM notes that elements of the BRRT were continued throughout the initial stages of Victoria’s response to the COVID-19 pandemic.

#### 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.

### State Emergency Relief Coordinator

In early January 2020 the immense scale of the relief effort required became apparent and senior emergency management personnel informally assumed responsibilities for relief coordination. On 11 January 2020 the EMC formally appointed the SERC to the SCC governance structure.<sup>37</sup>

The SERC was established to provide focus and coordination of relief activities on what was rapidly becoming one of the largest relief operations that Victoria has faced. The SERC’s role was to lead state strategic priorities for relief, in partnership with the regional and incident tiers, councils and key agencies and played an active role in tasking CAOG with relief objectives.

The key responsibilities of the SERC were to:

- develop and implement a State Relief Plan
- develop and manage the state relief governance arrangements, including establishment and chairing of the State Relief Team
- engage with BRV on operational relief and early recovery
- engage with NSW on operational relief needs and arrangements
- ensure state relief public communications and messaging is accurate and contemporary
- work in close partnership with Red Cross
- be the key escalation point for all relief issues.

The SERC was supported by a State Relief Team and worked with the SRRM. The State Relief Team had a small and flexible membership to allow for quick decision-making and focused on the coordination of immediate relief activities, such as the provision of supplies to isolated towns. Relief activities that were less time critical, such as the coordination of donated goods and spontaneous volunteers, were managed by the SRRM.

The SERC reported directly to the EMC allowing the SRC to both maintain a focus on fire response and overcome any inconsistencies in relief capability within its rostered role. Unlike most SCC roles, the SERC did not operate on a four-day roster. This increased the level of continuity for leadership in relief coordination. The position was filled by a small group of senior personnel to ensure appropriate fatigue management measures were taken.

From 7 January 2020 the SERC established daily meetings with both the Hume Regional Relief Operations Committee and East Gippsland Regional Relief Operations Committee. These meetings included RCC and/or ICC personnel, councils, BRV, Red Cross and relevant state organisations to ensure efficient decision-making processes. The meetings were reduced to three times per week in February 2020 and concluded on 19 February 2020. The SERC and State Relief Team also operated in conjunction with the SRRM and the SRRT.

The State Relief Team met daily from 13 January 2020 until 4 February when meetings were held twice per week. The meetings ceased on 14 February coinciding with the deactivation of the SERC.

Stakeholders who performed roles across the three tiers discussed the value of the SERC role. Representatives from both the State Relief Team and CAOG discussed efficient working relationships that prioritised community relief needs. In effect, the SERC and State Relief Team took charge of setting strategic relief priorities. In most cases CAOG operationalised these priorities.

There were some issues with role clarity of both the SERC and CAOG. Stakeholders that were not active participants in the State Relief Team or CAOG did not always have an appropriate level of visibility of decision-making or opportunities to provide more coordinated state relief support.

There were also some misunderstandings as to the reporting lines and accountability of the SERC. The position reported to the EMC, however, the lines of accountability and communication between the SERC, SRC and SRRM were not clear. In practice, these leaders worked together to support information sharing through established committees and information-sharing channels. There are opportunities to formalise these arrangements to support role clarity in future emergencies.

There was also no regional or incident tier direct equivalent of the SERC role established. As such, interactions between the tiers with the SERC and State Relief Team were somewhat ad hoc, driven by need and based on existing relationships.

IGEM notes that since the 2019–20 fire season the SERC has been formalised in the SEMP. The SEMP replaces the SRRM with two positions - the SERC and the State Recovery Coordinator (SReC), both appointed by the EMC as required. The SERC has a stronger remit to what was established during the fires and is responsible for determining and prioritising relief needs. The SRRM remains and reports to either the SERC or the SReC.

While there are now role descriptions for both the SERC and SReC, there is little supporting information to describe how both roles operate in unison or isolation, and how the roles are to be supported by the SRRM in each circumstance. The connections between the SERC and the regional and incident tiers remain unclear with no clear reporting lines between state, region and incident tiers and no equivalent of the role established at either tier.

#### FINDING 7.5

The introduction of the State Emergency Relief Coordinator provided a much-needed focus on relief coordination at the state tier.

#### RECOMMENDATION 9

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.

These documents should enable:

- 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.

**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:

- (a) increased relief leadership, oversight and tasking ability
- (b) led to duplication and inefficiencies due to evolving role descriptions, accountabilities and reporting lines.

## 7.4.2 Regional relief activity

During the 2019–20 fire season the Gippsland and Hume Regional Control Centres (RCCs) were activated in Traralgon and Benalla respectively. A DHHS Deputy Commander (Regional Recovery Manager) was appointed and responsible for coordination of relief within the region. This role was supported by Red Cross which was also present at the RCC.

Regional Relief and Recovery Coordination meetings were held in both Hume and Gippsland and included the SERC, SRRM, representatives from councils and other key relief agencies. These meetings were relief task focused and occurred daily throughout the peak of the fires.

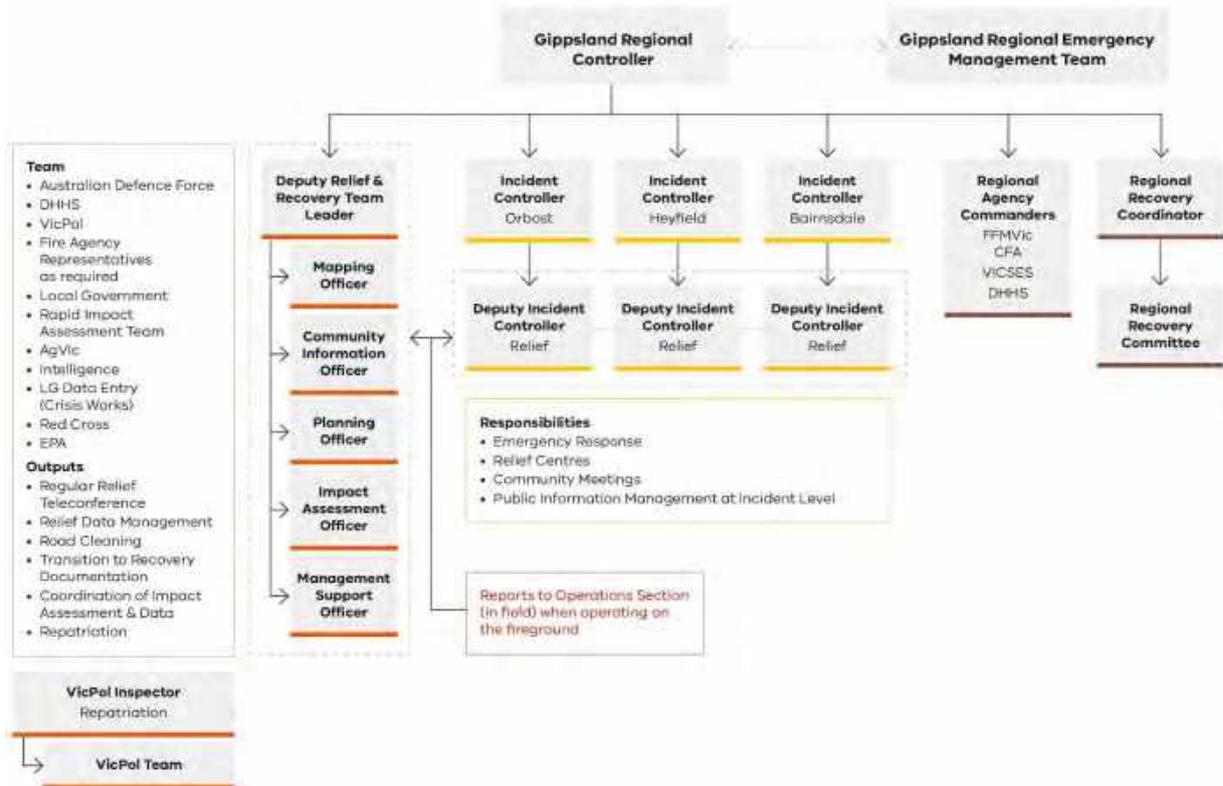
A regional incident-specific relief plan for the East Gippsland Fires was developed by DHHS and the East Gippsland Shire Council and endorsed by the DHHS Regional Health and Human Services Commander. The incident relief plan was a live document and updated regularly throughout the fires. The plan focused on relief coordination arrangements and the delivery of relief activities. A regional incident relief plan for the Hume Region was not developed.

In the Gippsland region a Regional Relief Cell was formed, based in the Bairnsdale ICC rather than the RCC in Traralgon. The aim of the Regional Relief Cell was to *'...run a multiagency regional relief cell to inform, plan and action relief needs pertaining to the East Gippsland Fires'*.<sup>40</sup> The membership of the Regional Relief Cell is illustrated in Figure 5 (p 160).

In a similar manner to that observed at the state tier, the creation of the Regional Relief Cell was required due to both the complexity of community relief needs and a lack of capacity with expertise in relief.

There was a consensus among key stakeholders that the location of a regional relief cell in the ICC caused some confusion over the line of control and coordination for relief between the incident, region and state tiers. This was further complicated by the function of the Bairnsdale ICC in general, as it assumed an oversight role for several Gippsland ICCs (see Phase 1 Inquiry Report, section 7.2.4, p 291).

**Figure 5.** Structure of the East Gippsland Regional Relief and Recovery Cell <sup>45</sup>



Despite this confusion, many stakeholders noted that the establishment of the Regional Relief Cell and its co-location in the Bairnsdale ICC improved the information-sharing process. Regional tier stakeholders further emphasised that by being closer to the incident and improved access to incident information better informed their decision-making.

*Once they were in the relief cell that worked really, really well because everybody was literally on the same page. We all knew what the expectations were.*

Stakeholder

Stakeholders discussed a general degree of confusion over the roles and responsibilities of the regional tier in relief coordination, along with a lack of clarity in relation to accountability for relief at the regional tier. This was compounded by the addition of the Regional Relief Cell. Stakeholders noted that the lack of clear, comprehensive processes and procedures for regional relief coordination contributed to this issue.

*At one stage we were told by DHHS that it had been escalated to regional relief coordination, but [had] no clarity on what that meant.*

Stakeholder

Several stakeholders felt there was a general reluctance by DHHS to take on a leading role in relief coordination at the regional tier.

*DHHS were really hesitant to put their staff into a much stronger relief and recovery coordination role at a regional level.*

Stakeholder

Regardless of perception DHHS assumed its designated regional relief coordination roles and provided significant Emergency Management Liaison Officer (EMLO) representation at all tiers of control to contribute to relief discussions and planning. However, the demands of the 2019–20 fires required a significantly higher level of relief coordination, operational tasking and liaison between the tiers than a typical major emergency.

The appointment of the SERC and establishment of additional committees at the state level did not explicitly incorporate the regional tier of relief coordination. There was a significant amount of evidence demonstrating that the regional relief coordination structures were often bypassed – with state going straight to incident or even divisional command centres.

It is likely that the bypassing of the regional level contributed to the role of DHHS in relief coordination becoming unclear and potentially exceeded the capability and capacity of the department given the comprehensive and complex relief needs being addressed through departmental activities. Stakeholders also noted during interviews:

---

*From a regional perspective, it appeared that there were a lot of decisions going from incident level to state level, and both ways. And at times the region got shut out a little bit – not intentionally I don't think, but just because the situation was so dynamic where people in the State Control Centre talking to people at the incident level.*

Stakeholder

*We definitely didn't have continuity on relief at a regional and incident level and that was quite concerning, which meant that the state played a much stronger role on relief coordination because we were totally across it, more so than they were at locally or regionally.*

Stakeholder

---

Stakeholders attributed the bypassing of the regional tier to the of lack continuity in regional relief leadership, with one stakeholder recalling eight different personnel assuming leadership of the regional relief team across a 20-day period. The lack of continuity and role clarity for regional relief coordination led to informal channels of communication between the tiers being used. Cross-tier communication was often based on existing relationships, particularly when time sensitive decisions and actions needed to occur.

Protocols for escalation between the tiers for relief coordination and decision-making is also poorly defined in the arrangements. Many relief personnel were unclear of what issues needed to be raised at the regional tier, as opposed to the state or incident tier. Likewise, it was not clear what relief activities needed to be discussed or authorised in inter-agency forums and where relief decisions could be managed internally within the organisation. In most cases, personnel communicated their actions in the most efficient way possible.

As noted in the Phase 1 Inquiry Report, the bypassing of the regional tier is not unique to relief and suggests there are opportunities to improve the understanding across the sector of the role of the regional tier.

#### 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.

### 7.4.3 Incident relief activity

At the incident tier, local, or municipal relief is coordinated by councils, in conjunction with communities, agencies and businesses. During the Victorian 2019–20 fire season seven ICCs were established – six of these in the Gippsland and Hume regions. Councils were represented in ICCs to provide local knowledge and to ensure they had the necessary information to fulfill their relief coordination role.

The Phase 1 Inquiry Report found that during response there was a degree of variability in the way Incident Controllers worked with support agencies, councils and broader emergency management structures. The variability was observed across ICCs and between shifts, leading to a lack of consistency and continuity in decision-making.

Deputy Incident Controllers with specific responsibility for relief or relief functions were appointed by Incident Controllers at various times throughout the fire season. In general, this focus on relief within the control and response arrangements was well received by stakeholders as there was improved coordination between communities, relief and recovery providers and other response operations.

One stakeholder noted:

---

*Once the Deputy Incident Controller was given the responsibility ... to oversee the relief component, we started to have regular twice-a-day meetings with the key agencies in there. So that was Red Cross, ADF, council and the Deputy Incident Controller initially and then it grew to more agencies. I think that's how we really demonstrated value through that process and the establishment of that as a system.*

Stakeholder

---

For a number of weeks, the Deputy Incident Controller Relief role at Bairnsdale was filled by a DHHS staff member. While the arrangement worked well, DHHS noted that this is not a role that it would normally assume due to capacity constraints and suitable capability to assume a Deputy Incident Controller role. DHHS is responsible for regional relief and recovery coordination, not relief coordination at the incident tier.

By directly assigning accountability for relief to a Deputy Incident Controller role, relief moves into the line of control and out of the coordination sphere. This has the potential to create further confusion regarding a direct and clear line of accountability for relief.

Stakeholders also noted a variability in agencies' approaches to relief activities and definitions – sometimes resulting in differing trigger points for action. Stakeholders acknowledged that although agencies were working towards a common goal, there were differences in approaches.

Stakeholders also commented on the difference in expectations across agencies in their approach to safe work environments. Some agencies were prepared to send their staff into environments that had the potential to become isolated, while others felt that their staff were not adequately trained for such environments and were unwilling to deploy relief personnel in those circumstances.

---

*You've got all different domains of relief under that but I don't necessarily think that that's well understood or how that actually works in practice.*

Stakeholder

---

#### 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.

## 7.5 Effectiveness of relief during the 2019–20 fires

Determining the effectiveness of relief during and after the 2019–20 fire season is complex.

There were many constraints that prevented the activation of well-practised relief measures, including the extensive nature of the fires, the prolonged presence of fire in the landscape and significant disruptions to roads, telecommunications, and power.

In the absence of defined relief outcomes, the Inquiry assessed the relief operational governance arrangements in consideration of the relevant relief principles defined in the SERRP and the core relief capability specified in the Victorian Preparedness Framework.

### Timeliness and integration

The sector maintained a focus on the timely provision of relief measures and recognised the time-critical nature of many such measures. Acknowledgment of this drove the creation of new structures and activated new working relationships requiring incorporation of a wider range of agencies with more diverse capabilities.

For example, the establishment of CAOG and the tasking of the ADF was crucial in the provision of timely humanitarian relief. CAOG – with the involvement of the ADF – provided the much-needed capacity and logistics to reach people quickly with air, sea, and ground capabilities.

The existing relief structures were not conducive to the high level of operational tasking and the necessary provision of relief alongside response activities. Stakeholders were clear in their view that the existing relief arrangements were *underdone*, lacking, and unable to affect the time critical decisions that large-scale relief within an active fire ground required.

The scale of the impacts meant that it was not feasible for relief – especially when coupled with recovery – to be managed by a single person and team. The establishment of the SERC within the SCC governance structure provided necessary relief leadership, and a dedicated point of escalation and coordination of relief activities. The appointment also allowed the SRRM to focus on planning and establishing early recovery measures. The separation of relief coordination from recovery management appropriately reflected the scale and complexity of the relief and recovery effort that was required.

The concept of separating relief from recovery is not new. From Resilient Recovery Strategy workshops held in 2018 stakeholders agreed that relief was distinct from recovery as it requires agility and better access to logistics and intelligence. Relief was removed from the Resilient Recovery Strategy, with the workshop outputs noting that a greater emphasis on relief in the emergency management arrangements was required. During this Inquiry stakeholders were clear that relief was fundamentally different from recovery:

---

*Relief occurs in response and when we saw these fires going for months and months and months, and we had isolated communities at the same time as live fires, we had smoke, we were evacuating people, like you can't just – relief can't wait, it needs to be done and actively managed at the same time as response*

*Stakeholder*

---

The 2019–20 fires showed that the need for relief can be urgent and lifesaving. A closer alignment of relief to response would provide for effective decision-making within a defined management structure with the appropriate authorisation to make to make time-critical decisions.

IGEM recognises that work to remove relief from functional coordination with recovery has already commenced. The SEMP lays a strong foundation for significant change by aligning relief to become a component of the response phase of an emergency. With the review of the SEMP scheduled for September 2021, there are opportunities to strengthen the arrangements that further define relief and complement recovery arrangements.

**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.

**Adaptive and needs-based**

During the 2019–20 fire season the existing emergency management arrangements were adapted based on the community's relief needs, sector capacity and capability, and additional resourcing drawn from the Australian Government and overseas. New structures were created that provided value, particularly in inter-agency relief coordination.

Stakeholders were consistent in their appraisal of the new structures. While there were clear issues with role clarity and the implementation of new structures, the leadership, capability, and expert capacity harnessed through the formation of these structures was critical for the coordination of relief.

At times, the creation of the new structures did not capitalise on existing structures and created redundancies in the system and duplication of efforts.

The creation of new committees caused confusion to arrangements that were already poorly defined. Roles and responsibilities, escalation triggers and inter-agency communication protocols are unclear across all tiers. IGEM notes that the role of the regional tier in relief is poorly understood across the sector and was often circumvented in an effort to achieve efficiency.

By the end of the 2019–20 fire season, significant learning had occurred based on the emergency itself and the measures implemented to manage relief needs. Several stakeholders noted that changes to the existing arrangements were necessary and demonstrated the adaptability of the sector. However, the changes created a highly taxing working environment that organisations felt was unsustainable for future emergencies.

Stakeholders commented that the development of operational procedures and guidance based on the learnings of the season would be valuable. The sector and organisations could then invest in capability development activities to facilitate a common approach to relief and relevant skills and knowledge among leaders in incident, regional and state control and coordination roles.

---

*Adaptability and flexibility should not become synonymous for chaotic and unorganised.*

*Stakeholder*

---

**Well-coordinated, clearly defined roles and responsibilities**

IGEM analysed the numerous structures, organisations and leadership roles with relief coordination responsibilities and noted differences across the tiers, unclear reporting structures and a lack of explicit accountability for relief in control and response functions.

These observations were strongly supported by stakeholder commentary. Senior personnel involved in relief coordination discussed how relief planning, resourcing and operations throughout the fires differed considerably from what is outlined in existing policies and plans. Commentary frequently described relief governance as being '*really messy*' and undervalued.

---

*And then, I suppose what I experienced was, during that event, it really started to show to me, the way our systems in Victoria are set up are very response-orientated.*

*Stakeholder*

---

Stakeholders discussed how relief is often seen as an element that sits as separate to the incident management structure in the Victorian emergency management system, with very little integration into incident control.

---

*It [relief] is almost there as something that sits on a side and we will give that to the local government or DHHS will run it.*

*Relief coordination is largely orphaned in the arrangements.*

*Stakeholders*

---

Stakeholders noted that when activated, existing plans, policies and procedures for relief coordination, escalation and tasking were not robust and lacked suitable clarity and detail. There were inconsistencies and gaps that made it difficult for organisations and relief leaders to determine responsibilities, reporting lines and inter-agency communication methods.

Stakeholders also reflected that relief is often seen as a less technical, secondary consideration compared to response. IGEM notes that overall levels of investment, planning and preparation for relief support this view.

Organisations involved in the provision of relief activities found that they had very little understanding or visibility as to how their activities were connecting to the overall relief picture. In most cases, organisations additional responsibilities to perform various roles and arrange relief activities based on perceived community needs – going above and beyond their defined responsibilities. While admirable and necessary, this resulted in some duplication, reduced efficiency and a lack of coordination.

#### 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.

#### RECOMMENDATION 10

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:

- (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



By nature, many relief activities are humanitarian – supporting people’s basic needs to ensure their safety and wellbeing during and immediately after an emergency. In an international context, humanitarian relief and aid often relates to large-scale efforts to support people who have been affected by major emergencies. In this report, the humanitarian side of relief refers to the activities that supported individuals, families, and communities.

While government and other relief agencies activated to support large-scale relief efforts, there were equal amounts of attention paid to more individual and ‘micro’ relief needs, to help people come to terms with the emergency, any impacts sustained and the likely pathway to immediate safety and long-term recovery.

The amount of damage and displacement that occurred during the 2019–20 Victorian fire season made large numbers of people vulnerable, or more vulnerable, and in need of individual relief. While operational relief activities focused on restoring essential services and activating arrangements to provide coordinated relief to large parts of Victoria, there were numerous organisations considering the unique and varied needs of the people affected.

This chapter considers the ‘people-focused’ aspects of relief, emergency shelter options, the appropriate supply of food, water and basic material aid, psychosocial support, health and medical care and financial assistance. It also includes discussion on important social aspects of relief including the reconnection of family and friends, and community diversity.

## 8.1 Emergency shelter

Emergency shelter is a temporary place of relative safety for people who are facing the impacts of an emergency. In Victoria emergency shelter is primarily provided for through the establishment of Emergency Recovery Centres. The SERRP defines an ERC as ‘...a building or place established by a municipal council to provide immediate and basic service to people affected by an emergency’. ERCs should supply food and water, provide items such as bedding and clothing, and services such as psychosocial support and financial assistance to those seeking shelter.

People presenting to an ERC have a range of complex and immediate needs. They may have left their homes in haste, have minimal possessions and be emotionally distraught and concerned for loved ones, pets, or property. Attending an ERC can be the first time a person has needed to seek government support or assistance, and this can be traumatising and confronting in and of itself.

A volunteer involved in relief explained what can be ideally be expected when entering an ERC:

---

*It can be a bit confronting at first. But we’ll sit you down, register your details and give you a cuppa if you like. If you want to talk, we’re here to listen. Pets are welcome in a cage or on a lead. There’s food and beds. Lots of people sitting at tables, just talking. The camaraderie is amazing. You don’t have to go through this alone.*

*Stakeholder*

---

People seek different services from ERCs. Some may use the facilities for shelter and stay one or more nights, some may use it to access information or financial support. Others may need a wider range of services – such as food, water or other material aid.<sup>46</sup>

### 8.1.1 Arrangements for Emergency Relief Centres

The objectives of emergency shelter in the Victorian emergency management context are set out in the 2014 State Relief Coordination Plan:

---

*To provide a safe place for people displaced by emergencies to shelter while the threat of the emergency passes. The shelter should meet immediate needs and provide basic bedding and amenities. Other relief functions such as food and water, material goods and animal welfare need to be considered in parallel.*

*State Relief Coordination Plan<sup>47</sup>*

---

The emergency relief principles outlined in the SERRP also apply to the provision of emergency shelter. There are no formally agreed standards or requirements for the establishment and management of ERCs. The Red Cross recognised the absence of standards within the sector and sought to establish a minimum requirement to 'safeguard public health, safety and general welfare for those seeking emergency shelter' by developing the Preferred Sheltering Practices for Emergency Sheltering in Australia.<sup>46</sup>

These preferred practices address five aspects of shelter:

- basic water supply
- sanitation
- shelter and space management
- food
- waste management.

The Red Cross Preferred Sheltering Practices for Emergency Sheltering in Australia are voluntary and designed to be self-regulatory and to help ensure life with dignity under emergency sheltering conditions (see Figure 6).

**Figure 6.** Red Cross Preferred Sheltering Practices for Emergency Sheltering in Australia (Source: Red Cross<sup>46</sup>)

**EMERGENCY SHELTERING** **Australian Red Cross**  
THE POWER OF HUMANITY

## Preferred Sheltering Practices

**Sanitation**

**INDOOR TOILETS:** 1 for every 50 people

**OUTSIDE TOILETS:** WITHIN 50m from the building, AT LEAST 20m away from the kitchen

**HAND WASHING:** One hand wash facility with soap for every 20 people, or a 2 litre bottle of washing liquid for every 400 people, with close proximity to the toilet.

**Water supply**

**SHOWERS:** 1 for every 30 people

**INSIDE SHELTER:** Drinking: 4 litres per day; Hygiene: 1.5 litres per day

**OUTSIDE OF SHELTER:** Access: Public water points are to be readily accessible (if the shelter water is not available); Storage: 2 x containers per family (2 people); 10-20 LITRES; 10-20 LITRES

**Shelter and space management**

**IMMEDIATE SHELTERING:** 1.2m<sup>2</sup> per person

**TEMPORARY SHELTERING:** 5m<sup>2</sup> per person

**TEMPERATURE:** 20-25°C

**VENTILATION:** 20-25 litres per person per hour

**SLEEPING:** 30-40cm; Double row of beds head to head; 10-15cm

**Waste management**

**SERVICES:** At least 4 fixed refuse bins (240L) is allocated per 40 people per day; 10-15kg waste per person per day

**DISPOSAL:** Arrangements must be made by shelter for removal and collection of waste disposal services.

Immediate sheltering includes up to 18 hours.  
Temporary sheltering is beyond 18 hours.  
For more information contact: [emergencysheltering@redcross.org.au](mailto:emergencysheltering@redcross.org.au)

[www.redcross.org.au](http://www.redcross.org.au)

Under the SERRP, councils are responsible for establishing and maintaining ERCs. Where councils cannot meet the demand for shelter, they were able to escalate any issues to the former DHHS at the regional tier. With the machinery of government changes and the establishment of Department of Health (DH) and Department of Families, Fairness and Housing (DFFH), councils now escalate to DFFH.

Requirements regarding ERCs are documented in the SERRP and Part 6 of the EMMV - Municipal Emergency Management Planning Arrangements Guidelines for Committees. The SERRP requires councils to describe management arrangements, activities and responsible agencies in their MEMP and recommends the Red Cross Emergency Relief Handbook as a source of guidance. MEMPs must also address relief arrangements including, staffing and capacity, the coordination of activities and training and exercising.

The establishment and management of ERCs is supported by individual council operational documents such as Standard Operating Procedures (SOPs) and guidelines. Many of these documents also reference the Emergency Relief Handbook to guide setup with the aim of providing standardisation of ERC provision across councils.

### Determining suitable relief centres

Determining the location and facility for an ERC is the responsibility of councils. There is no prescribed number of ERCs that each municipality should have.

The Emergency Relief Handbook provides the only guidance for councils on determining an ERC site and notes that minimum standards for facilities are not prescribed. However, the facility should have the following:

- power supply and communication equipment
- adequate ventilation
- accessibility (including provisions for people with disabilities)
- kitchen and food preparation area
- water supply
- toilets, washroom facilities and segregated areas.<sup>48</sup>

Within the ERC, the following spaces are listed as essential and desirable (Table 4):

**Table 4.** Emergency Relief Centre essential and desirable facilities<sup>48</sup>

ESSENTIAL	DESIRABLE
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Accessible main entry, including a reception area (one main entry point / restricted access via other doors)</li> <li>• <i>Register.Find.Reunite</i> area</li> <li>• First aid</li> <li>• Accessible toilet and shower facilities</li> <li>• Food preparation area</li> <li>• Eating area</li> <li>• Sleeping areas</li> <li>• Separate area for emergency relief centre operations and planning meetings by all agencies</li> <li>• Communications area / noticeboard</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Smoking areas</li> <li>• Personal support and privacy area</li> <li>• Prayer room</li> <li>• Child friendly space</li> <li>• Baby changing area</li> <li>• Visiting area</li> <li>• Recreation area</li> <li>• Staff rest area</li> <li>• Holding area for companion animals</li> </ul>

Councils compile ERC kits containing basic materials to facilitate the activation of ERCs. These kits and are either collected by staff on their way to activating the ERC or stored in a secure location at the centre.

## 8.1.2 Activating and staffing an Emergency Relief Centre

The Joint Standard Operating Procedure (JSOP) J03.12 - Evacuation for Major Emergencies, guides the Incident Controller's decision to activate an ERC made in consultation with both VicPol and the relevant council. There are eight general considerations in determining the activation of an ERC:

- the ability to register evacuees using *Register.Find.Reunite*
- the provision of timely and relevant public information
- the provision of basic needs (food, water, sanitation)
- contingency arrangements
- animal welfare
- health and safety including security
- exit strategies
- the ability to support services such as PHAP payments.<sup>49</sup>

A council can also request that another council activate an ERC in cases where internal capacity has been exhausted, or it is unsafe to locate the centre within its own municipality. As there are many agencies external to council that deliver relief services to communities from ERCs a centre's activation requires councils to coordinate and initiate other service providers. This may include (but is not limited to):

- DHHS (now DFFH) to provide financial assistance
- Red Cross to provide *Register.Find.Reunite* service, food and water and psychosocial support
- VCCEM to provide psychosocial support
- Salvation Army to provide material aid such as beds and blankets
- Ambulance Victoria to provide first aid.

Some of these roles are defined in the SERRP, such as the provision of *Register.Find.Reunite* by Red Cross and financial services by DHHS. Individual councils may have established MoUs with other service providers and local businesses to provide emergency relief functions.

### Staffing an Emergency Relief Centre

A council's provision of relief services is resource intensive and requires a significant number of staff. Given the number of councils' relief responsibilities, they can typically only resource emergency relief activities for a short duration before resource sharing arrangements need to be established.

The 2019 *Councils Emergencies Capacity and Capability Evaluation Report* found that the strengths of councils in planning for emergency relief include:

- establishing and managing ERCs
- supporting relief and recovery agencies including DHHS, VicPol and the Red Cross to provide services to the community following an emergency
- coordinating relief following an emergency.

However, when asked about their ability to coordinate relief in a major emergency, many councils reported that their capacity would last for only 24–48 hours. This indicates that while councils have capability to plan and deliver relief activities, they do not have the capacity to implement these plans for extended periods of time.<sup>24</sup>

The Gippsland Emergency Relief Centre Standard Operating Procedures indicates that for a large emergency, resourcing one ERC for a single shift would require at least four council staff members, with additional services provided by contractors and providers.<sup>50</sup>

Towong Shire Council, the smallest rural council in Victoria, indicated in its MEMP it has the capacity to establish one ERC in the shire and would only be able to staff the centre using internal resources for up to 48 hours. Alpine Shire Council indicated that its total capacity available to run an ERC with internal resources is 28 staff over six days.<sup>51 52</sup>

#### 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

### 8.1.3 Emergency Relief Centres during the 2019–20 fires

ERCs were established across East Gippsland and the North East. By 11 December 2019 planning for their activation was evident in the DHHS and East Gippsland Shire Council Incident Relief Plan.

The plan listed nine ERCs on standby for activation in the Gippsland region and noted that these would be capable of temporarily accommodating all likely-affected people in the East Gippsland Shire Council.

The ERC locations were largely located along the Princes Highway, but also in Omeo, Buchan and Paynesville (Figure 7).

**Figure 7.** Location and capacity of East Gippsland Emergency Relief Centres



In mid-December emergency relief agencies such as the Red Cross, VCCEM and Salvation Army were on standby and ready for deployment. There were two emergency relief trailers; one in Bairnsdale to support 200 people and one trailer in Orbost to support 50 people. ERC kits were located at Cann River, Mallacoota, Omeo, Orbost, Lakes Entrance and Bairnsdale and ready for collection by council staff once a centre was activated.

East Gippsland Shire Council identified the need for resource support and had sought endorsement from neighbouring council CEOs to enable staff to be released at short notice. At this stage planning for ERCs assumed they would be easily accessible and additional support would be available.

Communities in East Gippsland were divided into 10 clusters and assigned to at least one pre-identified ERC to assist with planning for evacuation, centre activation and other relief services. Some ERCs were intentionally located far from the fire zone to encourage tourists to leave the area.<sup>40</sup>

On 30 December 2019 the EMC urged all visitors to leave East Gippsland. Fires in the landscape and intermittent road closures impacted the supply of relief provisions and options for ERC locations.

On 31 December nine ERCs were operating across East Gippsland and the North East. Approximately 1705 people were using ERCs across the East Gippsland, Wellington and Latrobe municipalities, and 14 people were staying in the Delegate ERC in NSW.

In larger towns such as Lakes Entrance and Bairnsdale ERCs were established for long periods, while some of the smaller towns, such as Omeo and Orbost ERCs opened and closed rapidly, causing at times community concern and anxiety.

Due to escalating fire activity, on 31 December an ERC was established at the Corryong College, used by approximately 600 people.

The decision to base an ERC in Corryong was not ideal as the town had the potential to become isolated. However, the Incident Controller assessed it as defensible and it was determined that moving those already at the Corryong ERC from the location would only exacerbate the trauma they had already experienced. There were also no other suitable locations nearby.

The Corryong ERC was without mains power and telecommunications and was operating on a generator with the ADF assisting with food supplies. With only 2 council representatives available to manage the centre it was significantly understaffed

Figure 8 (p 174) illustrates the location of relief centres and sheltering communities on 1 January 2020

ERCs were also established at the Tallangatta Memorial Hall and at Wodonga's Cube Performing Arts Centre, complemented by the showgrounds being opened to cater for pets and animals, as well as self-sufficient evacuees such as those with mobile homes and caravans.

The ADF provided relief accommodation at the Latchford Barracks in Bonegilla, with 400 beds, space available for pets and unpowered accommodation facilities for caravans and mobile homes.

Concurrent to the Wodonga ERC's, the Rural City of Wangaratta activated three ERC's for evacuees predominantly from the neighbouring Alpine Shire.

During the State of Disaster, a total of 25 ERCs were activated for emergency shelter. These included four ADF bases that were used as transit facilities or to provide ERC services. Some 1686 people sought refuge at these centres.<sup>53</sup> No ERCs were activated in the Alpine Shire as fire behaviour and predicted weather forecasts made it too dangerous. However, a relief information collection centre was established in Myrtleford for Alpine Shire residents.

The capacity required to staff these relief centres was high. East Gippsland Shire Council reported 60 council staff were deployed to activate and operate ERCs and 41 staff from other councils assisted through resource sharing arrangements.

Councils were unable to consistently establish formal ERCs in all locations where communities needed to seek shelter: staff were unable to reach these locations safely due to the remote nature of the communities; the continuing threat of fire in the landscape; and failures in telecommunications services. There were also concerns that council staff may become trapped and isolated in a location once they arrived.



In one East Gippsland location, council staff called trusted community members to discuss urgent requirements and alert them to likely emerging needs. These conversations also allowed council staff to share information with the community as to the location of relief supplies and assign duties and tasks to those seeking shelter until council staff were able to attend to the location.

East Gippsland Shire Council attributed the success of these examples to the resilience building and emergency planning associated with the development of Local Incident Management Plans (LIMPs). One community member who assumed a leadership role commented that the end result of this collaboration was feelings of resilience and empowerment that transitioned into early recovery planning, as opposed to feeling abandoned by council and government.

Many people living in remote communities are already highly self-reliant in emergencies and have limited expectations of immediate assistance. However, where whole communities become isolated, fundamental survival needs will quickly emerge. Well-resourced and connected communities will respond and fare differently to emergencies than those facing pre-existing socio-economic challenges, and low levels of social capital.

In most places, communities self-activated and used the available resources and facilities to ensure those seeking shelter and relief were safe and well. This was the experience in Mallacoota, where an informal relief centre at the Mallacoota Hall was established and staffed initially by East Gippsland Shire Council staff that resided in the area and supported by volunteers and tourists.

At Cudgewa in the North East, relief services were provided from the local hotel. At Wairewa in East Gippsland, local residents staffed an informal relief centre at the local hall providing food, clothing, tools and information.

---

*The tourist volunteers and I got on with the business of turning a disaster area into a relief centre ...We quickly set up my generator and ran out a lot of emergency lighting so we could see what we were doing. We then set about cleaning up, emptying rubbish changing the seats to an auditorium style (for the community meetings), rearranging all the beds around the walls and cleaning toilets. I went and raided a few places of which I knew and got an electric jug, milk, tea and other life necessities. We set up a multiple phone charging station. We got a radio going so we could get fire updates from the ABC.*

*Community member*

---

However, the experience of community members who accessed these centres were vastly different. The informal activation of shelter locations was not always suitable and led to poor communication and coordination within isolated communities. Community members also reported delayed decision-making and a general lack of guidance and support in the provision of relief.

In Mallacoota and other locations, there was no clear handover from the community members and visitors initially running the shelter to council and government personnel that arrived once access became available. This left community members in unofficial local leadership positions as food aid and supplies arrived. It resulted in untrained community members being left to manage the needs of people continuing to seek shelter, sorting and distributing donations and resupply drops.

Communities did their best to support themselves. However, community members who assumed responsibility for operating the centres discussed experiences of poor behaviour from others, which left people feeling unsafe and unwelcome in the centres. This is not a criticism of communities who were doing their best to support themselves, but a reflection of an overall lack of preparation and support to establish places of relief without external staffing.

A lack of contingency planning meant that some communities felt let down by councils when it came to establishing a place of shelter. In the Phase 1 Inquiry Report, several community members identified a lack of planning by council and emergency management sector organisations to identify and prepare appropriate facilities that could be used to shelter people. This was particularly relevant for high-risk communities which had the potential to become isolated during an emergency. For towns with increases in population due to tourists, community members expressed dismay that this had not been adequately considered in pre-planning.

Communities sought refuge in places that were familiar to them and they were often places historically used to shelter during previous fires. Many people told the Inquiry that community members were always going to go to these facilities. Many held significant frustration that these facilities were not adequately prepared, including not having alternative power sources.

Across all the fire-affected areas IGEM also heard that communities want to be better prepared and become proactive in being able to support their community before, during and after emergencies.

There are positive examples and learnings that can be used to develop a more flexible model of relief centre activation. Many of these occurred in communities with:

- existing productive relationships with councils
- strong levels of social capital and cohesion
- involvement in emergency planning
- clear communication throughout the emergency between council and shelter users.

It must be acknowledged, however, that most communities and individuals are traumatised by the experience of a bushfire. To rely on small, local communities to drive the initial relief efforts may be problematic especially where many may have lost their home, livelihood or been otherwise affected.

#### 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.

#### CASE STUDY: BUSH NURSING CENTRES

Bush Nursing Centres and hospitals are an essential part of Victoria’s rural and regional health service. Victoria has six Bush Nursing Hospitals and 15 Bush Nursing Centres, several of which were impacted by the threat of fire or isolation during 2019–20. These facilities either closed or transitioned services to meet the relief needs of the community.

The Cann River Bush Nursing Centre housed approximately 35 response personnel who became isolated in the town due to road closures. Other Bush Nursing Centres provided and coordinated outreach services to vulnerable people, often partnering with volunteer agencies and trusted community members to ensure the safety and wellbeing of local vulnerable people.

---

*Lifeline counsellors went door-to-door – the Bush Nursing Centre gave them details and off they went*

*Community member*

---

Bush Nursing staff adapted to the dynamic situation and found innovative ways to support people within their community. Staff at some Bush Nurses Centres transformed their centres into places of shelter and refuge for their communities. Centres offered basic but invaluable support such as food, power supply and a place for community to congregate, all within in the safety of a medical facility. The centres also supported local personnel by providing food and accommodation.

---

*In total with support from volunteers and a tiny skeleton staff, one centre produced 600 meals over the period. Community and agency personnel slept on the floor in offices. As the only emergency medical provider, the centre remained online to provide an emergency response if necessary.*

*Community member*

---

Bush Nursing Centres are more than just a healthcare service provider to most rural or remote communities. Often, these centres are used for communal purposes such as organising activities and are used as a resource to share information.

DHHS' Bush Nursing Centres Project states that these centres are 'highly valued institutions in small rural communities' and contribute 'significantly to both people's sense of security and the economy'. This was evident during the fires when some centres acted as unofficial relief centres for their community.

### 8.1.5 Effectiveness of Emergency Relief Centres

One of councils' key contributions to the provision of relief, is their specific ability to provide local knowledge and to contribute to the understanding of local needs and priorities during an emergency. The provision and coordination of ERCs and local relief activities is largely considered a strength by councils.<sup>24</sup>

The scale, intensity, and duration of the 2019–20 fires and resulting isolation of towns affected councils' ability to respond to community needs and fulfil their obligations under the SERRP. A significant pressure point for councils was their ability to establish, resource and provide safe access to multiple ERCs over a prolonged period of time.

#### Planning, training and exercising

In anticipation of a high-risk fire season, councils had prioritised pre-season training where possible. Several councils had exercised and reviewed ERC procedures as part of their broader schedule of emergency management training and exercising.

The reliance on other councils' resources highlighted significant variations in preparation for and establishment of ERCs.

---

*In terms of the whole-of-state perspective on emergency relief centres I think we've always known that different councils, different municipalities have got different levels of maturity*

*Stakeholder*

---

During this Inquiry IGEM sighted ERC guidance documents or SOPs for most of the councils impacted by the 2019–20 fires. The content of these documents varied significantly. Both East Gippsland and Mornington Peninsula Shire Councils participate in a regional arrangement which aims to provide a standard and consistent approach to setting up and operating ERCs across the region. While the content of these documents varied between councils, in general all addressed activation, deactivation, and roles and responsibilities in ERCs.

The geographical scale, isolation of towns and cascading nature of the fires meant ERC activation and operational policies needed to be adapted to meet the relief needs of the community '...we had those plans in place and then they were continually expanding during the event'. East Gippsland Shire Council – with its large geographical footprint – found it difficult to undertake emergency management responsibilities due to travel distances and the need to undertake relief activities in multiple areas.<sup>24</sup>

Councils provided IGEM with evidence of their ERC training leading up to the 2019–20 fire season:

- East Gippsland Shire Council ran two training sessions involving approximately 50 staff members
- Alpine Shire Council ERC coordinators, staff and support agencies attended an exercise facilitated by DHHS
- Wodonga City Council ran a multi-agency ERC training exercise two weeks prior to the fires
- Mornington Peninsula Shire Council conducted an exercise in early December to activate an ERC and practise its ERC plans, guidelines and test communications with their Municipal Emergency Management Coordination Centre.<sup>51 37 54</sup>

Councils that undertook training and exercising of ERC procedures and processes all noted the benefits to staff who later undertook centre roles in the 2019–20 fires. Mornington Peninsula Shire noted that exercising ‘...planning and preparedness activities increased Council’s readiness to execute the existing governance arrangements in place for relief and recovery’ when establishing the reception centre for Mallacoota evacuees at Somerville.

While training and exercising is beneficial, councils’ ability to provide staff training in emergency relief activities, such as ERC operation, is affected by the limited capacity of emergency management personnel.<sup>24</sup> This refers to both the availability of council personnel with experience, and the opportunity for those with secondary emergency management roles to attend extensive and regular capability development activities. For many personnel within councils, their emergency management role is in addition to a more extensive business as usual role.

The provision of training is largely managed internally and conducted across council clusters or collaborations. These joint training arrangements support a great level of common practice across councils as neighbouring councils have a shared approach to emergency management, refer to common policies and procedures and serve to facilitate resource sharing.<sup>55</sup>

There are limited training opportunities or training materials developed centrally or regionally to provide a greater level of consistency in how councils prepare to activate and manage ERCs. Council stakeholders noted that the lack of centralised training was a major limitation in resource sharing for many emergency management activities, including ERCs.

IGEM’s survey of councils that supported the 2019–20 relief and recovery efforts showed variations in capability and approach which caused a degree of frustration and inefficiency in resource sharing to support ERC operation. Council staff needed to provide ‘just in time’ basic information and training to outside council staff to ensure a consistent level of relief support in the ERCs among all staff working in these centres.

#### 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.

### Capacity and resource sharing

Both Towong and East Gippsland Shire councils were overwhelmed by the number of ERCs that needed to be established. This capacity limitation was understood prior to the fire season, with all three of the most affected councils acknowledging they would struggle to staff an ERC for longer than two to three days with internal resources.

East Gippsland Shire Council implemented rosters over the Christmas and New Year period to ensure ERCs could be staffed. However, these rosters were based on the activation of one or two ERCs, not the quantity, up to seven at various times, that were ultimately required throughout the fire season.

Given the large numbers of tourists, and the extensive evacuation orders related to the declaration of the State of Disaster, displaced people accessed ERCs in volumes much higher than planned. Some ERCs (for example, Corryong and Bairnsdale) were overwhelmed by evacuees.

The Corryong ERC was run using minimal staff, with evacuees peaking at 1000. The isolation of the ERC prevented other government and relief agencies from providing surge capacity and pre-determined support services such as the provision of water, food, material goods and psychosocial support.<sup>56</sup> This created an even larger burden for ERC staff.

Victorian councils have a strong culture of collaboration. Most councils offered to assist those directly impacted by the fires in some form. There was heavy reliance on resource sharing and previously established relationships with neighbouring councils. Assistance was provided directly through council networks and through the MAV resource sharing protocol.

IGEM surveyed council emergency management personnel, which identified that a significant amount of all resource sharing between councils was to staff ERCs. Many staff from unaffected councils were deployed to ERCs to increase capacity and allow staff from affected councils to perform other emergency management roles, take breaks and attend to their own personal impacts.

Some councils withdrew their assistance to neighbouring councils to focus on emergency response and relief activities in their own municipalities. This was particularly evident in Towong Shire with Darebin City Council providing a large amount of remote assistance to support its resourcing and coordinated a supply line to help fill their roster from volunteer council staff in the metropolitan areas.<sup>56</sup>

#### FINDING 8.2

The scale and duration of relief exceeded municipal council ability to establish emergency relief centres when and where required.

#### Safety considerations

ERCs should be established in locations away from the direct impacts of the emergency for those using, staffing, and providing services. Incident Controllers authorise ERC activation in consultation with VicPol, councils and other relief agencies. The safety of ERC personnel is a key consideration in the decision to activate a centre and choice of location.

Risk assessments saw Incident Controllers (or designated deputies) in Gippsland authorising the establishment and staffing of ERCs within the State of Disaster area. However, in Hume, Incident Controllers did not establish ERCs in the Alpine area as it was deemed too unsafe.

Individual councils and relief agencies have accountability for their staff safety and their approach to managing this duty of care. There were differences in expectations across the sector of appropriate safe work environments for relief personnel. Some organisations were prepared to send relief personnel to areas that were – or had the potential to become – isolated, while others were not. As such, it was not clear as to what requests for deployment were appropriate for IMTs, councils and other relief organisations.

---

*Some agencies provided advice that they were not prepared to have staff attend beyond Bairnsdale. And we had requests from the ICC and MERC to establish a relief centre in Orbost ... what are the processes around agency being satisfied in respect of the safety of their [personnel].*

*Stakeholder*

#### OBSERVATION 8.3

There were inconsistencies between organisations in the approach to establishing emergency relief and safety considerations of staff.

#### Community experiences

Many community members had their basic needs met through the wide range of support available at ERCs. In sharing their experiences of ERCs with IGEM, many communities felt the centres were fit-for-purpose, however some also indicated opportunities for improvement.

Community members and ERC staff discussed inefficiencies in the multiple registration processes involved when initially accessing a centre. In some cases, there was limited clarity regarding the need to register with different organisations, or what support services were being offered.

Often no consideration was given to the urgency of someone's relief needs. Those who had lost everything were not prioritised or triaged in a manner that provided a higher level of support than a person whose impacts were minimal. Councils identified a need for an appropriate triage system staffed by suitably qualified personnel, noting this would ensure community members received the appropriate level of attention they require.

Community members also reflected that they felt they were repeatedly providing very similar information to different organisations in ERCs and perceived there to be a lack of coordination and appropriate information sharing. This reflects broader community commentary on information sharing in relief and recovery (see section 3.4.2, p 80).

Overall, people who attended council established ERCs found that they provided a relatively safe space and provided the necessary shelter from the fires. However, there were examples where people from diverse backgrounds and those with disabilities had difficulties in accessing facilities and the safety offered through these centres.

#### RECOMMENDATION 11

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:

- (a) community isolation
- (b) prolonged emergencies
- (c) community-led activation of centres.

## 8.2 Food, water, and material aid

The coordination and provision of food and water for emergency relief includes catering in ERCs and supply to isolated communities to ensure that those impacted are supported in their basic and immediate needs.

The SERRP nominates Red Cross as the lead agency for coordinating the provision of food and water in relief, supported by Foodbank Victoria and the Salvation Army. There is little other State policy to provide guidance on the co-ordination and provision of food and water emergency relief.

The Emergency Relief Handbook encourages food and water relief arrangements to address planning and preparedness, activation processes, training, exercising and financial considerations. It also suggests that councils understand the capacity of nominated food and water emergency relief suppliers and their communities' demographics.

IGEM noted a significant amount of variation in the level of detail provided in MEMPs regarding the supply of food and water to ERCs.

In the affected municipalities' MEMPs, Red Cross was the nominated provider of food and water supply to ERCs. Red Cross activated a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) with Foodbank to deliver this obligation as a partnership.

Local businesses noted that patronage decreased as the food relief increased. Government, councils and community service organisations including Foodbank were aware of the difficult balance between people needing food relief and taking away business from local traders. However, existing arrangements provided little clarity for relief agencies in determining when it was appropriate to scale back and ultimately cease food and water supply, and transition communities back to using local businesses.

Relief agencies worked together to balance communities' relief needs and support local businesses. Once local supermarkets were open and stocked, Red Cross only supplied ERCs with staple items and signs placed in the centres encouraged people to use the supermarkets. Government also worked with banks to ensure ATMs were supplied with money to facilitate patronage at local businesses.

However, one of the challenges, particularly in the North East, was the lack of power, limiting access to ATMs or EFTPOS. Cash quickly became scarce and it was difficult for people to purchase food, therefore increasing their reliance on the relief supplies.

One council stated that one of the biggest challenges faced at the ERC was the provision of meals within the first 48 hours. Councils noted the benefits of partnerships with local services such as the Lions Club, Rotary and the Kennel Club in providing catering at ERCs.

Not-for-profit volunteer organisations such as Sikh Volunteers Australia and the Rapid Relief Team also self-activated and provided food relief to fire-affected communities. During the peak of the fires, the Sikh Volunteers Australia's food van travelled to the Bairnsdale ERC where meals were provided. The Rapid Relief Team, a global volunteer organisation, commenced Operation Fire Relief providing food boxes and EFTPOS gift cards to fire-affected communities.

The size, scale and ongoing fire risk meant that the provision of immediate food relief had to be sustained over a prolonged period and the isolation of communities resulted in large quantities of food and water being provided outside of the ERC setting.

### 8.2.1 Relief supplies to isolated towns

Food and water relief to isolated communities presented multiple challenges and there was a risk isolated people would have insufficient access to drinking water, food and medical supplies. Of particular concern was the large number of tourists, as well as residents, isolated in Mallacoota.

On 31 December oil and gas company ESSO sent supply ship MV Far Saracen into Mallacoota with initial provisions of food, water, fuel and medicines. This was followed shortly after with another supply ship MV Far Senator and two helicopters from ESSO's nearby offshore drilling platforms.

Red Cross activated its MoU with Foodbank on 31 December to provide emergency food and water to the bushfire-affected communities of East Gippsland and the North East. On 1 January 2020 the first supplies were delivered into Bairnsdale by road and sea, with similar sent into Mallacoota the following day. The supply hampers included water, fresh produce, and non-perishable items such as tinned food, noodles pasta and rice, long life milks, cereal and personal hygiene items.

Working together the SERC, councils, ADF, Red Cross and DHHS sourced supplies for isolated communities including food, drinking water, medicines and P2 masks. An aviation liaison officer embedded in the Bairnsdale ICC assisted with direct tasking of air assets from the East Sale RAAF Base. A supply-route framework was developed based on geographical areas where immediate food and water relief could be air dropped and then once roads were re-opened, further supplies could be driven in.<sup>37</sup>

Multiple stakeholders commented that the role played by the ADF, coordinated through CAOG, was vital in transporting essential relief provisions to isolated communities. However, while the ADF could rapidly deploy supply vessels, there was a lack of food-specific transport vehicles. This caused some delays as ADF vehicles could not load pallets or transport cold or frozen products.

Given the large amount of supplies to be delivered, all with a level of urgency, no coordinated system was in place to ensure priority supplies reached the communities most in need. Similarly, no consistent reporting mechanism was in place for organisations to receive confirmation that communities had been appropriately supplied.<sup>40</sup>

---

*It was great working with the military, but there were some challenges working with the military. With trucks, for example, the military didn't send the types of trucks that are usually suitable for food, so it made it really slow loading those trucks and getting them out on the road*

*Stakeholder*

---

## 8.2.2 Donated food

The generosity of Australians in donating foodstuffs direct into communities created many challenges.

The self-activation of many smaller community service organisations and private donors resulted in inappropriate food and grocery supplies being delivered. Products including alcohol, lollies, perishable gourmet foods and expired foods created concerns among community members as they were distributed before some staple items.

---

*We had a lot of people that were dropping off firelighters and barbeque beads and stuff like that, that you go, 'Really guys? I don't think they want to see anything related to a fire.' I think in that respect, it would be much better if we could get the community to centralise donations, to sort them and send them that way. Because if it is like that the community's just going to do what they want to do, and they take the most inappropriate things to people.*

*Stakeholder*

---

It was unclear to communities where the donated food had come from, and a level of criticism was aimed at government for prioritising delivery of inappropriate items over basic food and medication. However, IGEM notes that designated agencies involved in supplying food, water and material aid had processes in place to ensure deliveries were appropriate.

While the initiative to collect and deliver food to affected towns is admirable, it became difficult for communities and relevant relief agencies to ensure food deliveries were appropriately prioritised and received in a manner that allowed appropriate distribution and storage once in the affected towns.

Stakeholders commented that the centralisation of spontaneous food donations would allow for only needed and appropriate food items to make their way to the communities in need and alleviate pressure on frontline relief workers. The problems associated with donated food are similar to the issues observed with donated goods in general and are further discussed in Chapter 9.

## 8.2.3 Disbursement of material aid

Material aid (non-food items) is defined as the requirements of individuals, families and communities affected by emergencies for items such as clothing, bedding materials and personal necessities to help ensure their personal comfort, dignity and wellbeing.

Under the SERRP the Salvation Army is responsible for the coordination of provision of material aid with support organisations St Vincent de Paul Society and Foodbank Victoria.

The Salvation Army was activated by the SCC to supply triage points and ERCs with necessities such as bedding, blankets, clothing and toiletries.

---

*We're well prepared and equipped to do that, so basically we get out to triage points, evacuation centres with the basics, whether that be bedding and blankets, clothing, toiletries, you know, just the things that people need to get through that first little bit.*

*Stakeholder*

---

The outpouring of donated material goods during the 2019–20 fires created challenges for the Salvation Army, describing the quantity of goods as a 'tsunami' which quickly overwhelmed the council processes established to manage them.

The Salvation Army worked with both the SRRM and the ADF to assist in sorting, storing and distributing donated goods and other forms of material aid (donated goods are discussed in Chapter 9). The Salvation Army noted that when it comes to the supply of material aid for immediate relief, the material aid donations are just not required:

---

*I mean we've got that basic initial relief stuff covered as far as material aid and what people need, and sometimes that may even be financial. It might be a voucher if they can still pop down to Woolies or Kmart or something like that. I think it comes back to that we don't really need all that extra material aid.*

*Stakeholder*

---

The Salvation Army is not represented at the RCC. A lack of presence in the RCC impacted the integration and coordination of relief efforts for the disbursement of donated goods as the Salvation Army were reliant on previously built relationships to gather intelligence.

In addition, many of the actions the Salvation Army took in providing material aid and other forms of relief, was based on its proactive reach and unofficial forms of inter-agency communication again based on existing relationships.

## 8.3 Psychosocial support

Psychosocial support is the provision of mental, emotional and social resources to a person or group of people to help them recover from an emergency. It helps normalise and validate common reactions to a traumatic event, major life change or ongoing stress.<sup>57</sup>

Emergencies can impact an individual's psychological and social wellbeing. Response to an emergency will vary across a community and for the individual. Each response will also change over time and present in various ways. For some people, the effects may not become evident until several years after the emergency event. Evidence shows that five to 40 per cent of people involved in an emergency are at risk of sustaining severe and protracted psychological injury.<sup>58</sup>

Timely intervention is essential to reduce the likelihood of more serious and longer-term psychological injury. Research and experience suggest that immediately after an emergency, those affected do not require a clinical mental health approach, an intensive patient model of care, and psychosocial support or psychological first aid is a more appropriate and effective model of support.<sup>59</sup> Psychological first aid draws on the essential elements of psychosocial support in emergency settings: ensuring safety, promoting calm, promoting connectedness, promoting self and group efficacy, and instilling hope.<sup>60 61</sup>

### 8.3.1 Legislative and policy context

The SERRP describes psychosocial support as a form of relief assistance that includes psychological first aid and emotional spiritual care. There is little other State policy in place to guide planning and preparation for psychosocial support in relief.

DHHS is the functional lead and overall coordinating agency for psychosocial support.<sup>2</sup> Councils coordinate the delivery of psychosocial support at the local level through relief centres and community outreach. If councils cannot meet demand, they can seek additional support from DHHS.<sup>2</sup> Red Cross and VCCEM are the designated providers of psychosocial support services through relief centres or outreach activities.

MEMPCs plan for psychosocial relief (and recovery) and detail the arrangements, roles and responsibilities in MEMPs or specific relief and recovery plans. There is a clear and partially mandated opportunity for organisations with psychosocial support expertise and service delivery capacity to participate in MEMPCs. Red Cross and DHHS were represented on the MEMPCs of the councils affected by the 2019–20 fires. VCCEM and other local services may also be involved in the development of MEMPs depending on their capacity and presence in the local area.

The MEMPs of the three municipalities significantly impacted by the 2019–20 bushfires all listed Red Cross and VCCEM as providers of psychosocial and personal support in relief and nominated additional local providers, including Gateway Health and Primary Care Partnerships.

While not formal policy, there are several national and Victorian resources available to assist councils and other organisations in planning for the provision of psychosocial support in relief. These include:

- Red Cross Emergency Relief Handbook
- DHHS Psychosocial support: a framework for emergencies <sup>58</sup>
- Psychological First Aid: Supporting people affected by disaster in Australia.<sup>59</sup>

### 8.3.2 Psychosocial support at Emergency Relief Centres during 2019–20 fires

As was practicable, council staff worked from ICCs or council coordination centres to activate psychosocial support in ERCs and other locations of shelter. This was often in discussion with IMTs, DHHS, Red Cross and VCCEM to determine the availability of personnel to service ERCs and the viability in deploying staff and volunteers to potentially unsafe locations.

The Red Cross and VCCEM provided psychosocial support at multiple ERCs including Wangaratta, Tallangatta, Wodonga, Lakes Entrance, Omeo, Orbost, and Bairnsdale.

Due to the volume of people using ERCs and their prolonged activation, additional organisations provided both formal and informal supplementary support at the centres. For example, Lifeline provided support at various centres through its pre-existing presence in some communities, and Save the Children established child-specific psychosocial support at the Wangaratta ERC. However, there is no clear evidence to suggest tailored psychological first aid was offered to young people or other specific cohorts using relief centres.

Some ERCs experienced significant over-crowding and under-resourcing, making it difficult to provide a safe and calm environment for psychosocial support. For example, more than 600 residents and tourists used Corryong's 150 person capacity ERC, with just two council staff and two Red Cross volunteers available to meet users' needs.

In community-led relief centres, community members stepped forward informally to provide psychosocial support to people evacuating. IGEM heard multiple examples of Bush Nurses and Remote Area Nurses providing ad-hoc psychosocial support due to the inability of nominated service providers and council to reach these locations in the short term.

In many locations outside ERCs individuals with backgrounds in psychosocial, personal and spiritual support also provided psychosocial support. For example, volunteers from a local church group provided care and support to evacuated people in Tallangatta. Likewise, volunteers from organisations such as Red Cross and VCCEM who had evacuated and were using the ERC provided psychosocial aid to community members with very little support available to them.

The propensity for individuals with an understanding of psychosocial, personal and spiritual support to take on service roles in relief centres is an example of community resilience.

However, in many cases these individuals were also escaping the fires, displaced from their homes, facing uncertainty regarding the health and safety of friends and family, property loss and other potential losses. While the Inquiry did not receive evidence suggesting systemic detrimental effects, in several cases there was no formal support or debriefing offered to these people following the fires.

IGEM spoke with many community members who had either assumed these informal roles or observed others doing so. They expressed various levels of distress, fatigue and frustration, and all recounted the extreme difficulty of the situation. There appeared to be little coordination in place to prioritise the deployment of trained providers to locations where community members were 'making do' with informal psychosocial support measures in place.

---

*There were times during the earliest stages when there [was no support] here and me and my team (of local volunteers) were dealing with quite distressed people - with no training ... the Reverend was one of the main people providing a proper response to people who were in trauma and who needed assistance.*

*Community member*

---

#### 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.

## 8.4 Emergency financial assistance

In an emergency, it is likely people will need to evacuate or relocate from their homes quickly, with minimal time and space to pack all their necessary belongings and supplies. This leaves many people needing to purchase essential goods in the places where they have evacuated or relocated to.

### 8.4.1 Arrangements

DHHS is responsible for the provision of emergency financial assistance through the PHAP.

There are two forms of financial assistance available under PHAP – the emergency relief assistance payment and the emergency re-establishment assistance payment. The emergency re-establishment assistance payment, which supports people to re-establish their homes including to replace essential household contents and to rebuild' is discussed in greater detail in Chapter 5.

Under specific criteria, emergency relief assistance may be available for up to seven days after the emergency event. A one-off payment is provided to help meet immediate needs, including emergency food, shelter, clothing, medication and accommodation. Payments can be made outside of the seven-day period in larger scale and longer running emergencies, or by exception.

A needs assessment is carried out by a Personal Hardship Assistance Officer to determine eligibility. As the payment is not income tested, there is a significantly lower amount of supporting evidence required to demonstrate eligibility than required for other government financial assistance.

All expenditure was administered and paid by DHHS and reimbursed by Department of Treasury and Finance (DTF). Given the scale of the emergency DTF sought partial reimbursement of these costs from the Australian Government.

In total DHHS released \$14,599,886 in emergency relief assistance payments through 14,778 successful applications. The amount provided to affected individuals and families varied depending on the number and ages of the adults and children in the household. The maximum amount provided to families was \$1960 for two adults and four or more children in a single household. A single adult received \$560.

### 8.4.2 Activation and distribution of PHAP payments

DHHS established personnel at ERCs and other convenient places, such as DHHS offices and through outreach teams into isolated communities, to support fire-affected people with their online or paper-based applications for emergency relief payments.

An online system was implemented in 2018 to facilitate faster and more flexible applications. However, the paper-based applications were particularly useful as a redundancy option in 2019–20 due to significant power and telecommunications disruptions in fire-affected areas.

Payments were predominantly made via debit card as the preferred method. However, other means were utilised such as cheque and electronic funds transfer. On some occasions where DHHS could not reach community members (e.g. evacuated into NSW or hard to reach communities) a phone assessment was conducted, and payment was made via electronic funds transfer. While DHHS does not advise PHAP recipients on where to spend the relief payments, it often links community members into other sources of support, supplies and donations.

In parallel, effective information sharing between organisations was needed to ensure assistance payments had been distributed and grocery stores appropriately restocked before donations and food, water and material aid relief supplies were withdrawn.

DHHS staff processing applications were asked to balance timeliness and responsiveness against eligibility criteria. There was also guidance to engage in proactive conversations with applicants to ensure they were offered support, as opposed to requesting.

Where possible, DHHS participated in relief outreach initiatives to support residents who were unable to access ERCs.

---

*Incredibly flexible. ... they recognised ... that a lot of the locals that were involved in that ongoing relief effort could not get to the local services ... So they sent teams of people out to help us with applications and things onsite. And that flexibility was very much appreciated, and I know these people worked very long hours.*

*Community member*

---

As noted previously, the existing minimal requirements to support payment applications were flexed to enable efficient payments to people clearly unable to return home. According to the PHAP guidelines tourists would not normally be eligible for payments. However, eligibility was relaxed due to the duration of isolation and prolonged need to seek relief supplies.

Community members and personnel involved in relief services reflected that the flexibility in processing applications created perceptions of inequality and feelings of injustice with financial assistance. Some community members reported examples of others taking advantage of the payments without having an urgent need for financial assistance, while some eligible people did not apply for financial assistance because they felt others were in greater need.

While ERCs are appropriate places for people to gather for relief purposes, stakeholders commented that the easy access to the assistance payment brought people into the ERCs where they also accessed other government-provided relief support services. Many people visited an ERC solely to collect the emergency relief assistance payment, encouraged by the flexible eligibility criteria. Stakeholders felt some of these recipients were in relatively little need of government relief services or support and placed additional burden on ERC personnel helping displaced people.

Another inequality noted was the differing treatment of evacuees who needed basically everything, and those who stayed and defended their property. People who stayed to defend often found it more difficult to access the PHAP payments, as they needed to travel to receive the payment and did not necessarily have evidence to demonstrate emergency impact in the early stages of relief.

Similarly, as the current system primarily involves face-to-face contact to provide the payment, some affected individuals were unable to receive timely payments due to their isolation.

However, given the complexity and duration of relief, recent modifications to the online PHAP system and the flexible approach of DHHS ensured that those in need of financial assistance had several options to apply, receive and use the money.

In general, the activation and distribution of PHAP emergency relief assistance payments was timely, flexible and responsive to the needs of affected individuals and communities.

## 8.5 Reconnecting family and friends

People who become disconnected from family and friends during and after a bushfire can find the experience very distressing and strategies to reconnect people with those they care about is recognised as a state-level relief activity.

### 8.5.1 Arrangements

VicPol is lead agency for the functional delivery of reconnecting family and friends, with Red Cross as the primary support agency to manage its operation. In practice, Red Cross uses the registration and enquiry system *Register.Find.Reunite* to provide this activity.<sup>21</sup> A 2019 MoU specifies the arrangement between VicPol, Red Cross and *Register.Find.Reunite* activation and management.

*Register.Find.Reunite* supports people affected by an emergency to register that they are safe. The system also allows loved ones to seek and enquire about the safety of others while maintaining people's privacy and safety.

In an emergency VicPol is responsible for advising Red Cross to activate *Register.Find.Reunite*. It remains the owner of any data gathered through the system. Red Cross collect and manage data on their behalf and any organisations involved in collecting or managing the data are bound to confidentiality, privacy and security requirements.

Once VicPol approves activation of *Register.Find.Reunite*, the Victorian Emergency Enquiry Centre is used to manage telephone enquiries and registrations, field-based registrations (paper forms) and the online matching system (self-registrations). The centre can also provide callers with psychological first aid. *Register.Find.Reunite* captures the movement of people undertaking planned and medical evacuations, and those using ERCs, recovery centres, reception centres, and some traffic management points.

Under the MoU sighted by IGEM, Red Cross had Victorian Government funding to maintain *Register.Find.Reunite* until June 2020. This MoU was due to be revised at the end of 2019 due to the renegotiation of a national agreement for Red Cross to provide *Register.Find.Reunite* through the Australian and New Zealand Emergency Management Committee (ANZEMC). The memorandum specifies a review period of two years (due May 2021) however at the time of writing, the 2019 MoU was still in place.

### 8.5.2 Use of *Register.Find.Reunite* during 2019–20 fires

At the request of East Gippsland Shire Council and with VicPol approval, Red Cross activated *Register.Find.Reunite* on 26 December 2019 allowing paper-based and online registrations in Victorian ERCs.<sup>21</sup>

In other parts of Australia, the service had been activated in September 2019 due to the fires in Queensland and later in NSW.

The Victorian Emergency Enquiry Centre was activated on 31 December 2019 when a strong likelihood of significant fire behaviour in Victoria's far North East became evident, and large numbers of people were sheltering-in-place in Gippsland townships such as Mallacoota and Cann River.

Red Cross registered 24,843 people in Victoria and received 5047 enquiries.<sup>62</sup> Those registering largely came from fire-affected areas and Melbourne (see Figure 9, p 188). Approximately 59 per cent of these registrations were paper-based forms that needed to be manually recorded and entered into the online system, a time and labour intensive process.<sup>63</sup>

*Register.Find.Reunite* was used as part of the maritime relocation of 1100 people from Mallacoota, in many ERCs across the state, and as much as possible at drop-in relief locations, community meetings and community-led relief initiatives. The paper-based registrations were used extensively in locations such as Omeo, Cann River and Mallacoota where telecommunication infrastructure was damaged, services were unreliable, or networks congested due to number of people accessing internet-connected devices.<sup>63</sup>

Stakeholders discussed a concerted communications effort strongly encouraging the fire-affected to register with *Register.Find.Reunite*. This effort recognised East Gippsland's large-scale evacuation coupled with the difficulty of maintaining oversight of what became a very transient population.

EMJPIC promoted *Register.Find.Reunite* details in its daily key messages for use across affected regions and the broader community. Red Cross, VicEmergency and responder agency communications promoted the use of *Register.Find.Reunite*, and various emergency management officials and politicians discussed its availability in media opportunities.

Red Cross deactivated *Register.Find.Reunite* on 13 February 2020 at the advice of VicPol and the SCC.<sup>21</sup>

### 8.5.3 Effectiveness of *Register.Find.Reunite*

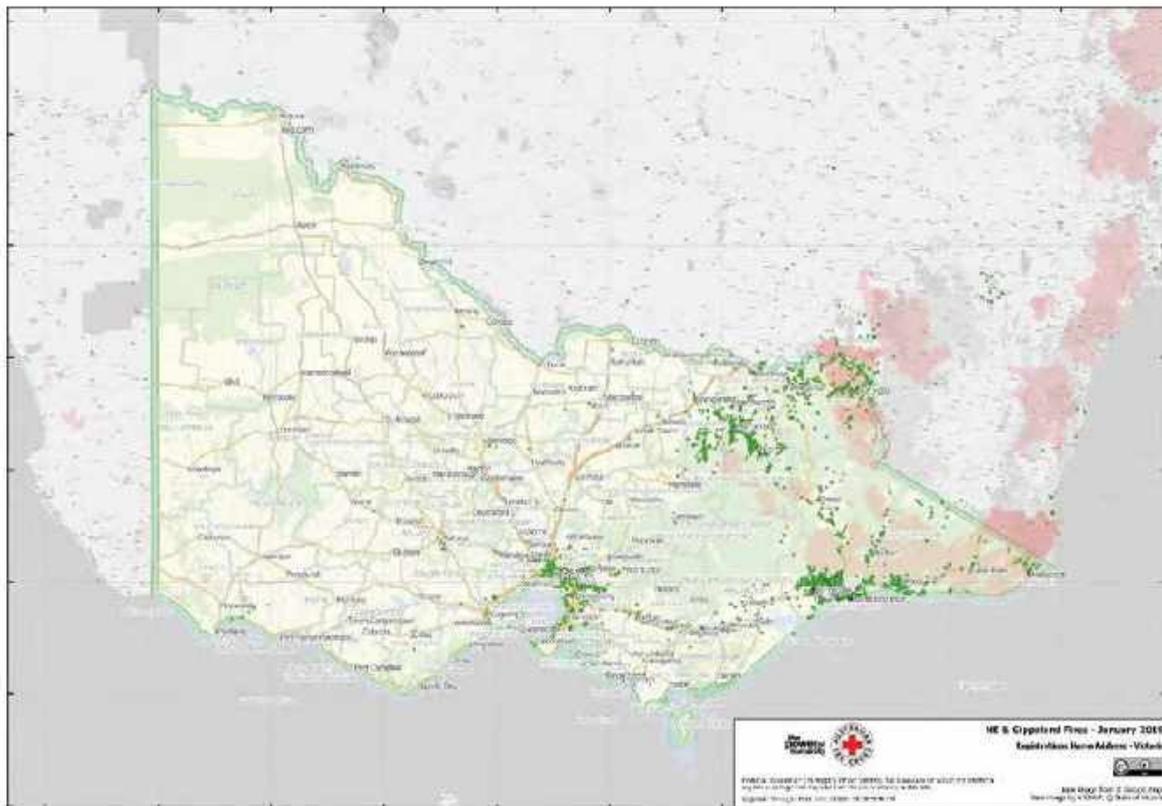
Given the use of paper-based registrations, it became difficult to ensure ERCs and other relief locations had access to the *Register.Find.Reunite* kits and enough supplies stored at 195 VicPol stations across Victoria.<sup>63</sup> This situation was exacerbated by road closures preventing resupply of forms and completed registration forms could not be easily transported to the Victorian Emergency Enquiry Centre or other locations where the details would be manually uploaded into *Register.Find.Reunite*.

Red Cross staff at relief locations uploaded as much information as quickly as possible but were constrained by capacity and connection to power and telecommunication supply. Managing the hand-written, paper-based registrations and ensuring data security and accuracy in its upload was difficult for volunteers and staff. While the *Register.Find.Reunite* registration process was conducted under very difficult circumstances, Red Cross has acknowledged there is an opportunity to improve the preparation for and management of personal hard-copy information.

Community members discussed some frustrations with both the process and time required to register at ERCs. In some cases, there seemed to be a misunderstanding about the process and community members were asked to register multiple times or prevented from entering ERCs until they had completed the *Register.Find.Reunite*.

The Inquiry heard from a small number of people who registered with *Register.Find.Reunite* online. While the registration process was straightforward, they reported that without a paper form to demonstrate registration, they were often asked to provide their personal information multiple times. However, it was unclear whether this was to re-register with *Register.Find.Reunite* or reuse the form to simplify applications and registrations for relief services such as PHAP or other council processes.

**Figure 9.** Heatmap showing *Register.Find.Reunite* registrations across Victoria (home address) as at 14 January 2020. (Source: Red Cross<sup>62</sup>)



### Value of data

VicPol and Red Cross (via the SCC EMLO) used information recorded through *Register.Find.Reunite* to inform relief and recovery planning and operations. The recorded data on the numbers and locations of displaced people, and their movement across the state, informed the deployment of personnel to remote areas and provision of emergency relief supplies. It also helped to prioritise the restoration of essential services and critical infrastructure such as road re-openings, power and telecommunications.

*Register.Find.Reunite* data also informed CAOG and SERC with the planning and coordination of displaced people needing to return home together with their possessions. This was a relatively unusual use of the data, but necessary due to evacuations by air and sea, and the complication of tourists and residents forced to leave vehicles and other belongings in relief locations for collection at a later date.

A known limitation of the paper-based registrations is the timeliness of data upload. In this emergency, the large number of paper-based registrations reduced *Register.Find.Reunite's* effectiveness in providing complete and accurate information to the SCC and the control agency. Despite, this Red Cross personnel were able to make well-informed estimations of people numbers and locations.

Multiple stakeholders commented throughout this Inquiry that information extracted from *Register.Find.Reunite* data was still considered among the most reliable and comprehensive available to inform humanitarian relief needs.

### **Data security**

A trauma-informed, human-centred approach to relief and recovery relies on access to safe, reliable and ethically managed data.

As reported in Red Cross submissions to both this Inquiry and the Royal Commission into National Natural Disaster Arrangements, privacy and security restrictions on *Register.Find.Reunite* data are in place to maintain individuals' confidentiality. While this is a legal requirement, it does restrict the Red Cross in sharing personal information with agencies other than VicPol, and general information outside of emergency control structures.

However, due to agency restrictions on data sharing, affected people are asked to provide the same information multiple times which is time wasting and can contribute to their trauma through frustration. Community members involved in this Inquiry experienced this in relation to *Register.Find.Reunite*, but also other data collection processes.

This issue was particularly prevalent for Victoria-NSW border communities who sought relief services and used ERCs in both states. Red Cross is also bound by differences in agreements across jurisdictions and state-based policies and legislation pertaining to *Register.Find.Reunite* data sharing.

Red Cross and others recognise there is an opportunity for *Register.Find.Reunite* data to be shared in an ethical manner with a broader range of relief and recovery agencies. This would streamline the provision of relief services and inform ongoing relief and recovery outreach. The issue of information sharing and data privacy is discussed more extensively in section 5.4, p 111.

A national *Register.Find.Reunite* working group, chaired by VicPol has been established to continually review the functionality of the system including the sharing of data with other agencies particularly those involved with the recovery phase of an emergency. A trauma-informed approach that is cognisant of data privacy and confidentiality legislation, will streamline relief and recovery service provision and outreach to those affected by emergencies.

During the 2019–20 Victorian fire season, *Register.Find.Reunite* was successfully activated and implemented at ERCs and other relief locations, enabling telephone, online and in-person registrations. *Register.Find.Reunite* served its primary purpose of locating displaced people and reconnecting them with family and friends. By stretching use of its information gathering, *Register.Find.Reunite* data also provided a greater level of intelligence to inform the planning and activities of response and relief agencies.

### **OBSERVATION 8.5**

There is an opportunity to improve data management of paper-based registrations of *Register.Find.Reunite* and facilitate information sharing to a broader range of agencies across jurisdictions.

## 8.6 Relief outreach

Relief outreach encompasses activities such as personal telephone-based check-ins, doorknocking, and highly localised service delivery in affected areas. Outreach aims to reduce the time and effort for affected community members to access relief information and services. It also aims to increase awareness and uptake of available services to community members who may not be actively seeking this support.

During the 2019–20 fire season, many people were displaced from their homes, farms and businesses for extended periods or were isolated from their towns and neighbours. As access to property was restored and travel across affected areas became possible, many people still found it difficult to travel into towns to access relief services due to the long distances and time spent away from the property. During and immediately after the fires, this was compounded by a concern that they would not be allowed back to their property.

### 8.6.1 Psychosocial outreach

As noted in the section 8.3 (p 183) the SERRP nominates DHHS as the lead agency for coordinating psychosocial support. Councils with the support of Red Cross and VCCEM coordinates its delivery at the local level and support may be offered at centralised locations or through community outreach programs.

During the 2019–20 fire season government, councils and relief agencies provided a variety of outreach services to individuals at their properties and local community facilities (for example town halls) to increase awareness and uptake of relief services.

Initially, councils did not actively deliver outreach services as their capacity was being drawn upon to provide liaison support at control centres and to manage ERCs. Several agencies were either activated by council, DHHS or the SCC, or self-activated based on perceived need or local knowledge and relationships.

IGEM noted many examples of trauma-informed, needs-based outreach occurring across the affected areas. Red Cross provided a large amount of support across the North East and Gippsland. It was often present in isolated towns as many Red Cross volunteers lived locally and provided psychological first aid and other psychosocial support through doorknocking activities and attendance at local meetings.

Red Cross was also present in the relocation and repatriation of people from Mallacoota, accompanying tourists to reclaim their vehicles and property, and residents returning to their homes.<sup>40</sup> Red Cross also provided a range of telephone outreach services based on information it had collected<sup>64</sup> and on behalf of other organisations such as Agriculture Victoria (AgVic).<sup>40</sup>

VCCEM provided psychosocial outreach in several communities, doorknocking and accompanying council and other relief providers on home visits for secondary impact assessment or other services. While based in local relief hubs VCCEM also provided psychosocial support to those accessing other services and information.

Community members and many community groups noted the value of psychosocial outreach, citing evidence demonstrating the large number of organisations providing these services, many of which were charitable, volunteer-based entities. Taking psychosocial support to those likely to be in need, rather than requiring them to travel into towns, is a well-informed person-focused approach to relief.

---

*When they get back to their properties, you'd barely be able to drag them away again for food and water, let alone mental health support. There's so much to do and that is just not a priority.*

*Community member*

---

The value of planning for psychosocial outreach in relief, existing relationships and arrangements was clear throughout the Inquiry. For example, in East Gippsland MEMP, Lifeline is specified as a provider of telephone-based psychosocial outreach support.

Lifeline counsellors also doorknocked in some districts, working with local Bush Nursing Centre staff to ensure they visited correct addresses and met with the right people. Lifeline has an ongoing presence in many East Gippsland communities due to its council engagement with supporting drought-affected farmers.

The organisation was able to activate existing plans, collaborate with knowledgeable local health service providers and provide a timely and appropriate level of outreach to the community.

---

*They would come here, we'd sit down and have a meeting and I would just give them a number of addresses and people's names and they would just go and talk to people. We were working together...I knew these people were [being] looked after...it was really well executed.*

*Community member*

---

In a similar manner Save the Children runs ongoing initiatives in East Gippsland. Immediately after the fires, Save the Children leveraged existing relationships in bushfire-affected communities to coordinate a series of pop-up play and activity spaces for children and young people.

While the Inquiry found some informed and well-intentioned examples of psychosocial outreach, there did not appear to be a great amount of coordination in place outside of agencies nominated in the EMMV and MEMPs. Many organisations self-activated based on local knowledge, capacity and a willingness to assist. Like all outreach services, there is a risk that people may become overwhelmed by numerous relief service providers.

## 8.6.2 Community-led outreach in relief

The Inquiry received numerous submissions and community commentary detailing the large amount of outreach initiated by communities themselves. This outreach often developed organically based on existing relationships, isolation from larger towns, disruptions to essential services and emerging community needs.

In many cases, those offering the outreach had public-facing positions in local organisations and perhaps a greater level of access to and understanding of emergency relief activities and information. For example, Bush Nurses, local religious leaders, responder agency volunteers and community service volunteers often led locally driven initiatives to ensure their neighbours' safety and wellbeing.

However, there were also many others who recognised a need within their community – either working individually or generating local momentum – to share information, provide goods and services, or simple psychosocial support. Often services and support were in the simple form of a cup of tea or hot dinner.

---

*There's been some people I've pinpointed and said, 'Look, are you travelling okay? I think you need to think about this. I can see every time you talk about it that you're getting upset'.*

*Community member*

---

### 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.

CASE STUDY: LUCYVALE AND BERRINGAMA

Lucyvale and Berringama are small, rural communities situated within the Towong Shire in North East Victoria. They are located very close to each other and approximately 300 km from Melbourne.

Both communities were significantly impacted during the 2019–20 fires – Lucyvale became isolated and Berringama suffered significant fencing and fodder loss.

Since the 2002–03 fires in the North East, each month the two communities come together at the Lucyvale Hall for 'Happy Hour' to share a meal, have a chat and build strong connections and relationships.

These relationships and experiences with previous fires held this community in good stead during the 2019–20 fires.

---

*Since the 2002 fires, that was when we started our gatherings at the hall, and it's happened every month since. We have 30-odd, 35 people still gather there once a month and support each other. It's a great community.*

*Community member*

---

Without power or telecommunications for two weeks, isolation due to road closures and the ongoing threat of fire, locals began to actively look out for each other.

During the fires, the community kept in touch by holding meetings and sharing information face-to-face. The strong relationships and community connections developed over time meant they were able to mobilise quickly and proactively support each other. They knew what they needed to do and who needed support. They knew this approach would assist them in the weeks and months after the fires.



Source: IGEM

Community members recognised that some of their neighbours would find it difficult to ask for or accept help. They cooked and delivered meals to others or simply dropped by to visit, which provided the opportunity for informal welfare checks and information sharing. Some elderly community members had sheltered in their homes during the fires and were reluctant to leave to access donations of food. They were supported through different people dropping food to them.

During the fires neighbours and friends worked together, supporting each other and coming together as much as possible for meals. Without power, food in freezers began defrosting and community members shared what food they had and supported each other.

---

*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 good to be able to help.*

*Community member*

---

Food at the risk of spoiling was used for cook-ups at homes with wood-burning stoves. A few people lived off silverside, bread and mustard until supplies arrived. Community members with an independent power supply shared fresh food with others.

---

*We're very lucky, we've only built in the last 10 years and built off-grid. We were the only house in the area that had enough power. I was madly going home and getting the bread-maker out and making fresh loaves of bread for the elderly people in our valley because they need to eat.*

*Community member*

---

Coming together for a meal also meant community members could check-in to see how everyone was going. They learned if anyone was leaving the area and who was coming back in. This allowed community members to think more strategically about what the community needed and conserve fuel by coordinating the collection of supplies from town.

Donations of food and other items gradually began to arrive in the valley. As road closures were still restricting travel into the closest town, this was a relief for everyone. Community members created a hub for all donations at local property. Food and supplies were bagged up and delivered to elderly members of the community and others were able to access what they needed.



Lucyvale Hall (Source: IGEM)

## 8.7 Healthcare, medical and first aid

During the 2019–20 fires several health risks emerged. Risks ranged from the need for general medical care, impacts of smoke inhalation, lack of prescription medicine in isolated towns through to contaminated drinking water.

Emergencies such as bushfires require a significant and coordinated health response to limit adverse health consequences on individuals and communities.

The SERRP recognises that health care, medical assistance and first aid is an essential activity in the relief phase. The SERRP lists AV supported by St John Ambulance, as responsible for pre-hospital assistance and DHHS as responsible across the broader health system and the control of public health emergencies.

The State Health Emergency Response Plan (SHERP), a subplan of the SERP, defines the arrangements for health and medical responses during emergencies are integrated, coordinated and appropriate.<sup>65</sup>

The Victorian Preparedness Framework outlines the core capability for emergency health response:

---

*The planning, provisioning, response and coordination of pre-hospital and health emergency care, including triage, treatment and distribution of patients, in a timely and structured manner, using all available resources to maximise positive outcomes.*

*Victorian Preparedness Framework<sup>12</sup>*

---

The framework promotes the notion that shared responsibility is the bedrock of building safer and more resilient communities and that government, voluntary organisations and private business such as private hospitals, mental health services, primary health, and aged care all have a role.

### 8.7.1 State Health Emergency Response Plan

The SHERP aims to facilitate a collaborative and scalable approach to emergency response. Pre-hospital care is defined as *a functional component of health emergency response, from response at the scene of an incident, to the receiving hospital or other healthcare facility*. The SHERP, developed in conjunction with the sector – lists the following objectives:

- reduce preventable death, illness and disability in all health emergencies and other emergencies with health impacts
- maximise health outcomes by providing treatment in a safe, timely and coordinated manner
- provide timely, tailored and relevant information and warnings to the community
- provide clarity on roles, responsibilities, escalation and communication channels to enable an effective and efficient health emergency response.

SHERP arrangements integrate the three key lines of health system communication – health command, health coordination and public health command. The SHERP is supported by a suite of emergency operational response plans and protocols that provide additional detail to assist all involved to meet their responsibilities before, during and after an emergency.

These additional arrangements are collectively referred to as the State Health Emergency Response Arrangements (SHERA) – the framework through which government and partner agencies work together to meet the health needs of Victorians during emergency events.

## 8.7.2 Roles and responsibilities

SHERP arrangements are activated when health system monitoring and notifications suggest an actual or predicted impact on day-to-day operations, or a control agency (such as VicPol or a fire service) is activated for a major emergency requiring a health response.

When SHERP arrangements are activated, the State Health Commander, State Health Coordinator and Public Health Commander form a State Health IMT. This team reports to the State Health Emergency Management Coordinator who liaises with the EMC and SRC as required.

Regional and incident tier Health Commanders can also form teams and liaise with Regional and Incident Controllers to inform a comprehensive health response. For emergencies where DHHS is a support agency (Class 1), the State Health Coordinator leads the State Health Incident Management Team at the state level and the Regional Health Coordinator provides leadership at the regional level.

When the health emergency management arrangements are activated under SHERP, AV and DHHS' state operational management teams are co-located, which provides an opportunity for real-time information sharing and collaboration across the two agencies. A DHHS senior liaison officer is also appointed to act as a strategic and operational interface between regional and state tiers of relief and recovery coordination.

## 8.7.3 Health sector planning

As part of planning and readiness activities, over 100 older people were relocated from facilities in impacted areas to alternative accommodation services in safer locations, often as far as 150 to 240 kms away. This required extensive coordination from the services to ensure the health, safety and wellbeing of their clients and patients during their relocation and return.<sup>66</sup> AV provided the relocation and return transport for highly acute patients and IGEM heard from a stakeholder that the collaboration between AV and the aged care section facilitated the effective movement of patients.

DHHS supports Victorian health services to undertake a range of emergency management planning activities to position the health sector to respond to the consequences of emergencies.<sup>67</sup>

The emergency management obligations and responsibilities of health services are contained in legislation, standards and guidelines. DHHS' Health and Human Services Sector Emergency Management Policy supports the health and human services sector to maximise the health, wellbeing and safety of Victorians who access services by defining responsibilities and requirements to prepare for emergencies. The policy notes that health services' plans must align with the SHERA and describe service continuity arrangements during the emergency.

Health services must plan to temporarily relocate, transport and accommodate patients, residents and staff from facilities, or the community as required. This includes the appropriate use of ambulance services and non-emergency patient transport resources, making consideration for the likelihood that ambulance services may be limited in the event of an emergency. Services located in high-risk bushfire areas must also take additional preparedness activities.

In addition to the Health and Human Services Sector Emergency Management Policy, DHHS developed a preparedness guide. The guide was dispatched to non-government agencies such as private aged care and disability providers to promote awareness about emergency management planning.

During September and October 2019 DHHS promoted the policy requirements to service providers and agencies) through nine forums attended by 518 attendees from the health and human services sector.

DHHS also chairs the Health Emergency Management Stakeholder Reference Group which provides advice for joint planning of health-based emergency management.<sup>66</sup> The group includes representatives from pre-hospital (ambulance and primary health including the Pharmacy Guild), hospital, field emergency medical care and aged care.

As part of its preparedness planning, DHHS also facilitated Emergo Train System exercises at health services with a broad range of health response personnel. This training is designed to determine the effectiveness of integrated pre-hospital and hospital emergency management plans in a mass casualty event.

The Red Cross Emergency Relief Handbook notes that, as members of Municipal and Regional Emergency Management Planning Committees, health agencies contribute to the health aspects of the MEMP and Regional Emergency Management Plans.

Councils and regions should engage and work with local hospitals and other health agencies to develop a consistent approach to planning, preparedness and resilience, to support one another in the response phase of an emergency.

#### 8.7.4 Emergency relief health arrangements

The State health arrangements were activated in December 2019 and DHHS continued to monitor the situation for impacts on health services and clients. By 29 December 2019 DHHS and AV were fully operational in their co-located Melbourne facility.

The State Health Emergency Management Coordinator, State Health Coordinator, Health and Human Services Commander, State Health Commander and Senior Liaison Officer were activated. At the regional level, the Regional Relief and Recovery Coordinator, Regional Health Coordinator and Regional Health Commander roles were activated.

The Senior Liaison Officer role located at the SCC was the conduit between the Regional Relief and Recovery Coordinator (DHHS) and the SRRM. Both Senior Liaison Officer and State Health Commander roles were represented at the combined SCT and SCoT, and SEMT meetings.

Due to the extensive cross government and executive coordination required, DHHS activated an additional operational role – Executive Liaison – to facilitate coordination between agencies at the executive level. Relief and recovery activities were further complicated by the establishment of a new Victorian Government agency – BRV – on 6 January 2020.

Given the protracted nature of the fires, isolated towns, smoke impacts, power outages, health needs and medical supplies, relief activities were occurring simultaneously in Gippsland and the North East.

#### 8.7.5 Role of local health services in the community

Rural and regional health services are provided across Victoria. These local, primary healthcare providers have much to offer during and after an emergency. Services include public health services and hospitals, Aboriginal health services, community health services, Bush Nursing Centres and Bush Nursing Hospitals.<sup>68</sup>

Aside from being highly skilled, these providers have existing connections with the community. In these areas, local primary healthcare providers, such as the general practitioners (GPs), are arguably the experts when it comes to the health and wellbeing needs of their community.

Localised health emergency management operational structures consist of trained emergency management personnel. The structures have a direct line of command and control to regional and state health operations. Although local volunteer healthcare providers have that trust and connection to community, in most instances they do not have emergency management training.

Local private healthcare services and professionals are not formally incorporated into local health incident structures, their roles in an emergency are at the discretion of the command of a health agency within the Health Incident Management Team.<sup>69</sup>

IGEM has previously recommended a greater level of local intelligence be considered by decision-makers across the sector regarding high-risk individuals and communities.<sup>70</sup> However, during and after the fire season there were multiple examples of local healthcare services being under-utilised or disregarded that suggest this is still a relevant recommendation.

---

*These primary healthcare businesses were in the community before the emergency incident and will likely be there long after the emergency, supporting their communities throughout, often to long-term recovery.*

*Community member*

---

The important and vital role that local healthcare services provide in rural areas is evidenced in the significant role that GPs, Bush Nurses and other community health services played during the fires.

Local primary healthcare services operated over significantly extended hours to support communities by offering a broad range of health services including responding to people requiring cardiac monitoring, respiratory issues, as well as general primary healthcare.

Many of the health and medical needs of community members presented during these fires were primary health concerns, which are not necessarily the expertise of the deployed emergency health personnel typically trained in pre-hospital care. These needs required a primary healthcare model, which arguably falls within the remit and expertise of primary healthcare providers.

---

*So, when emergency deployed staff came across primary issues, like mildly elevated blood pressures ... and elevated blood sugar levels, they referred them to the local service – which created additional workload for the already stretched service.*

*Community member*

---

The 2019–20 Victorian fire season generated an overwhelming response from volunteers. This included Ambulance Community Officers and Community Emergency Response Teams that remained within their communities to provide healthcare as well as other local medical professionals who remained, offering their services to support the health response.

The government engaged Rural Workforce Agency Victoria to manage the registration of volunteer medical professionals. This agency provided a dedicated hotline and point of contact for clinicians offering services, receiving in excess of 500 expressions of interest and more than 30 short-term locum contracts established to support health services and local GP practices. This further demonstrates a strong desire to assist under adverse conditions and with exposure to personal risk.

Another example of the value of local healthcare providers is that many remote health services maintain a list of local vulnerable people. DHHS and East Gippsland Shire Incident Plans noted the important role played by local healthcare services in maintaining records of vulnerable people that were more extensive than the Vulnerable Person Register, and they held important local knowledge relating to the vulnerabilities of the local community.

These incident plans identified that VicPol, AV and DHHS would work together to develop a comprehensive understanding of local health needs.<sup>64</sup> However despite this commitment, community stakeholders spoke about their knowledge not being used in a timely manner.

Beyond the information held in relation to vulnerable people, there were other examples of responder agency and relief personnel disregarding the work of local healthcare providers as part of their 'peacetime' community roles, or in the lead-up to and immediate aftermath of the fires. Further, it went unnoticed that many local healthcare workers were experiencing their own impacts from the fires.

---

*Had all lost farms, stock, possessions, a way of life. These outside providers came with demands of our time, with no respect for the fact that we were also fire victims, and for the work we had been doing.*

*Community member*

---

Stakeholders discussed that the support from local primary healthcare providers was recognised as effective at caring for the community. However, this additional capability was not formally integrated as part of the emergency response health structure. Instead, the decision was made by the incident health response team that local healthcare providers should focus on the business as usual issues rather than the strategic health operations.

The Royal Commission into National Natural Disaster Arrangements also recognised this issue. It recommended that the Australian, state and territory governments develop arrangements that facilitate greater inclusion of primary healthcare providers emergencies, including representation in governance and planning, and providing training, education and other supports.

However, the availability and accessibility of additional primary healthcare personnel, particularly in remote areas, varies and without clear government funding mechanisms or incentives, government is left without the necessary levers to ensure its inclusion in emergency management planning activities.

The value of incorporating local healthcare providers' skills and knowledge to bolster the capacity and capability of the health response at the local level is shared across the emergency management sector. However, attempting to integrate spontaneous healthcare professional volunteers into decision-making roles at the incident level with no prior training and while responding to the emergency is less desirable.

The Mass Casualty and Pre-hospital Operational Response Plan state that spontaneous health and medical volunteers are not part of any agency response and will require registration and checking of credentials before assisting in the health response and that volunteers will be specifically tasked under the command of a health agency within the Health IMT.

Emergency management personnel are trained and form part of a broader emergency management response that is observing potential and actual risks at the regional and state levels. By integrating emergency management trained, local healthcare professionals into local health command structures, there is an opportunity to build capability and capacity and to leverage local knowledge to improve patient outcomes.

The extension of this work is to embed primary healthcare networks into state emergency management planning arrangements with the aim to bolster incident health capability and capacity during an emergency and to improve patient outcomes by incorporating local knowledge. Promoting the roles and responsibilities of local healthcare providers to emergency management personnel should also be a factor of the inclusion.

While IGEM heard positive stories about collaboration between health services and the supportive relationships between them, at the primary healthcare level, it heard about fractured relationships between the local health IMTs and the local healthcare providers from both stakeholder and community evidence.

---

*we were told that we had no role in the disaster response. We weren't allowed to supply ourselves. So we were actually refused ability to bring in supplies, bring in staff, bring in workforce to be able to keep the doors of the medical centre open*

*Community member*

*Some local practitioners felt disenfranchised that they were not involved. However, we felt they should take care of business as usual health, but were offering to be part of emergency response, and didn't see that as being an appropriate role, but they did do a good job of caring for their communities more broadly.*

*Stakeholder*

#### 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.

**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.

**The role of pharmacies**

During the 2019–20 fire season many community pharmacies in impacted areas either scaled-down services or ceased operating altogether. DHHS' State Health Coordinator maintained communication with these businesses through pre-established protocols. The Pharmacy Guild and PHNs acted as a broker between the State Health Coordinator and local primary healthcare providers and community pharmacy owners.

Information related to local pharmacies was published on the Relief and Recovery tab of the VicEmergency website to inform communities about which primary healthcare options were available in their local areas. Communities and stakeholders discussed the measures pharmacies would go to ensure continuous support:

---

*Community pharmacies not in the immediate risk areas had no hesitation in supporting their colleagues. There were numerous cases of pharmacists sleeping in the pharmacy and in their cars to maintain community healthcare. Pharmacies also extended hours and provided their communities with emergency contact details.*

*Community member*

---

On 9 January 2020 the DHHS Secretary issued a Public Health Order under section 22D of the *Drugs, Poisons and Controlled Substances Act 1981*. The order enabled pharmacies registered under the Health Practitioner Regulation National Law 2009 to sell or supply certain medication to a person without a prescription. The purpose of the order was to prevent a serious risk to public health by enabling persons impacted by bushfire to obtain necessary medicines.

The incorporation of primary healthcare providers into emergency management structures is not a new concept. IGEM's report into the 2016 epidemic thunderstorm asthma event recommended that DHHS work with primary care providers to consider and define the role community pharmacies play during emergencies, and where appropriate, integrate community pharmacies into future planning for emergencies.

**Additional health resources – Australian Medical Assistance Team**

Australian Medical Assistance Team (AUSMAT) is a Commonwealth Government coordinated collection of multidisciplinary health teams that can be deployed to a location at short notice. AUSMAT teams are scalable and can include doctors, nurses, paramedics, firefighters, logisticians and allied health staff such as environmental health staff, radiographers and pharmacists.

The health professionals are drawn from state and territory health services and deployed as AUSMATs. Depending on the scale of the emergency, on short notice a small team of doctors, nurses, paramedics and logisticians up to a full-scale field hospital with 80 staff can be deployed.

On 5 January 2020 the Australian Government deployed an eight-member AUSMAT to Sale RAAF Base to support medical needs of evacuees. Its role was to assess community needs and support health services including Wangaratta, North-East Health, Myrtleford Hospital, Bairnsdale Rural Health, and Mallacoota District Health Centre and Mallacoota GP clinic.

Evidence indicates that while the deployment of the AUSMAT team was appreciated, Victoria had not requested, and therefore was unaware of, its deployment. Further to this, Victoria had already activated its Field Emergency Medical Officer program to assist in the coordination of health resources during the bushfires, and no gaps in health or medical support requiring national assistance had been identified.

However, IGEM heard community evidence that primary health care services in Mallacoota were stretched to capacity in responding to the community's medical needs. IGEM also heard community evidence that because of health services being stretched in Mallacoota, local healthcare providers directly called on the Australian Government for additional support.

A medical team was also deployed to Mallacoota by the independent volunteer organisation, Australian Medical Rescue (AMR). ADF medical teams consisting of doctors, nurses and Environmental Health Officers were also deployed to Mallacoota to support the local primary health provider. The ADF team remained in Mallacoota until the end of January when it was determined that the services were no longer required.

The Royal Commission into National Natural Disaster Arrangements identified the issue of the AUSMAT deployment prior to a request being made by Victoria and the initial impact this had on The FEMO teams and made a recommendation (15.1) in relation to building capacity for domestic deployments.

### 8.7.6 Smoke impacts on the community

Fine particles in bushfire smoke called PM2.5 can cause short or long-term effects on a person's respiratory or cardiovascular system. Public information provided by the Environment Protection Authority Victoria (EPA) notes that the effects of smoke exposure is dependent on a person's age, pre-existing medical conditions, and the length of time exposed to the smoke. Children (up to 14), adults over 65, smokers, pregnant women, and people with a heart or lung condition are more sensitive to the effects of breathing in smoke. Their symptoms can be worse at lower smoke concentrations compared to other people.

Advice from Victoria's Chief Health Officer and the Chief Environmental Scientist was to limit exposure to smoke. For those in the high-risk groups, the advice was to consider temporarily relocating outside smoke-affected areas if safe to do so. However, due to the number of isolated towns, the people located in those towns were unable to relocate away from the smoke promoting the need to distribute masks into these high-risk locations.

In total more than 500,000 P2 and N95 masks, together with instructions for use, were distributed to smoke-affected areas. The guidelines included instructions on how to fit a mask, when to dispose of the mask, as well as broader public health advice about protecting yourself and family from smoke and ash, and where to receive further information.

To keep up with the demand for masks, the Victorian Government requested supplies from the National Medical Stockpile. The Australian Government maintains the National Medical Stockpile which is a strategic reserve of drugs, vaccines, antidotes, and PPE for use in national health emergencies.

However, while the ability to order protective masks through the National Medical Stockpile was useful and swift, Victoria experienced logistical challenges in prioritising mask distribution to community locations in a timely manner. IGEM heard from community members that in areas where stocks of protective masks were low, communities prioritised the distribution of masks to vulnerable individuals. While supply of protective masks could not keep up with demand initially, this quickly changed and the supply of protective masks into communities was appropriate for the demand. Victoria also received donated masks from private businesses.

In addition to the masks, portable large-scale air cleaners were used to reduce the impact of the smoke. These air cleaners – some of which were loaned free-of-charge – were transported to areas where people were congregating as well as locations with vulnerable people, such as aged care facilities. Coordinated by EPA, DHHS and local councils, the units provided temporary respite from the smoke in impacted areas. Approximately 30 units were dispatched to health services and relief centres across impacted areas.

### 8.7.7 Medical supplies to isolated towns

Issues regarding the distribution of supplies into remote and isolated communities were not limited to protective masks.

The distribution of medical supplies was identified at state operational meetings as an issue, particularly in East Gippsland. At the local level, shortages of Ventolin were initially identified by pharmacies in Mallacoota and Orbost. To ensure immediate needs were met VicPol transported medical supplies by sea to Mallacoota following the immediate fire impact. IGEM heard from a community member:

---

*The shelves were empty in the pharmacy and the pharmacist – we had the supplier sitting in – we had been ordering and ordering – for two weeks, we'd been trying to get their supplies in with two separate orders – when a supply did arrive it was full of orange juice. It was just crates and crates of orange juice, while our pharmacy supplies could not be prioritised at all.*

*Community member*

---

IGEM heard from a stakeholder that the reorder of pharmaceutical supplies in Mallacoota was a wholesaler process issue and when this was identified by DHHS and the Pharmacy Guild orders were promptly prepared and loaded onto an aircraft for emergency airlift to Mallacoota. However, the emergency airlift was unable to land due to smoke and dangerous flying conditions which further delayed the supplies.

As described in the Phase 1 Inquiry Report, the remote locations of impacted communities meant that as soon as they were cut off by road, it was difficult to ensure that adequate fuel, food and medical supplies were available. With many roads impassable, air transport was the other mode of accessing isolated and remote communities. However, the volume of smoke generated by the fires made this difficult and at times no air dispatches were possible. Without reliable access into communities, food, water, fuel and medical supplies became problematic.

Given the narrow windows available for distribution to isolated communities, prioritisation of supplies at distribution centres to ensure communities are receiving timely and appropriate supplies is paramount.

#### FINDING 8.5

In the absence of supply and priority distribution protocols, relief agencies relied on existing relationships and just-in-time tasking.

## 8.8 Inclusivity and diversity in relief provision

The provision of relief services should recognise community diversity and likewise, relief and recovery activities should be developed to meet the differing needs of all people, including people with disabilities and from diverse backgrounds.<sup>2</sup>

Councils, government and relief providers have a responsibility to consider community characteristics in emergency management planning and the provision of relief, including the cultural and structural make-up of the communities they serve. During this Inquiry IGEM sighted both MEMP and ERC guidance documents for most fire-affected councils. There was significant variability in the depth to which diversity was addressed in these guidance documents.

### 8.8.1 Experiences of Aboriginal Victorians

The 2019–20 fire season affected areas with significant populations of Aboriginal Victorians including Albury-Wodonga and Shepparton in the North East, and Cann River, Orbost, Lakes Entrance, Lake Tyers Aboriginal Trust and other towns and districts in East Gippsland. As residents of these areas, they were required to evacuate threatened areas with many seeking shelter and support at ERCs.

Aboriginal Victorians said they were reluctant to evacuate from their homes and communities because they feared ERCs would not be welcoming, or culturally-safe places based on previous interactions with government and other community-based organisations.

Aboriginal Victorians shared experiences of feeling unwelcome at ERCs. No Aboriginal people were working in these centres, no culturally-specific support services, and no community spaces where they could gather and support one another were provided. IGEM heard circumstances where feelings of being unwelcome were exacerbated by some staff who were openly racist to Aboriginal people seeking support.

As a result, some Aboriginal Victorians refused to access support services, preferring instead to stay at people's houses or sleep outside ERCs. Despite offers from the public to accommodate displaced people, some did not want to stay with non-Aboriginal families.

These experiences compounded intergenerational and racial trauma of some Aboriginal Victorians affected by the fires, creating a unique experience of the events. Some expressed regret at leaving their homes and Country and said they would have preferred to remain and shelter in their homes rather than evacuate. The experience of evacuating was traumatic, Aboriginal people have a strong connection to Country, with some community members never, or rarely leaving Country.

Red Cross recognised that ERCs were not culturally appropriate for Aboriginal people and it directed relief efforts and supplies directly into Aboriginal communities, such as Lake Tyers, where people felt safest.

---

*We ended up mobilising relief supplies out for weeks into places like Lake Tyers, for example, just to minimise those people having to go in and feel judged as they go into those relief centres, getting handouts which was the lived experience*

Stakeholder

Aboriginal stakeholders found it difficult to re-engage their community where there had been negative evacuation and displacement experiences. GEGAC established a culturally safe place for Aboriginal Victorians to access services, shelter, and food. Eventually, it became an established ERC.

---

*That's where we all started and we ended up becoming a bit of a refuge centre, and we ended up with DHHS grant officers here within GEGAC who were providing the DHHS financial assistance, but we also became our own foodbank effectively.*

Community stakeholder

Aboriginal stakeholders indicated that the establishment of the GEGAC relief centre resulted in Aboriginal people being turned away from other ERCs and being redirected to GEGAC. This was not the intention of the GEGAC-run centre, as it was not intended to become the sole offering of relief support and services for Aboriginal people.

---

*But from that evacuation [relief] centre perspective as soon as they found out that [GEGAC] had DHHS grants officers they're going, 'You're Aboriginal, go to GEGAC'. That's where a bit of the racism started creeping in.'*

Community stakeholder

### **Community and cultural specificity**

Aboriginal Victorians spoke about the need for the sector to have a better understanding of the functioning of Aboriginal communities and the role of culture in their daily lives.

One example of this lack of understanding was in relation of Aboriginal family dynamics. Once people were successfully evacuated, they found it challenging finding appropriate accommodation. Many Aboriginal families are large and span multiple generations. Given the evacuations occurred during school holidays, many local families were hosting visiting family members and it was difficult to find suitably sized emergency accommodation.

Staying together as a family unit is particularly important for some Aboriginal families given a mistrust of government and the stress and trauma associated with being forced off Country.

---

*The evacuation and displacement of people also presented circumstances where Aboriginal people were moved off their own Country and onto the Country of other Aboriginal communities. There was minimal consideration of the cultural needs of moving Aboriginal people into other Aboriginal communities or facilitation of appropriate cultural practices in relation to seeking permission to be on the land of others. There was no – they weren't taken into consideration because it was done very quickly. They had arrangements with the next clan/mob at Orbost, but they had no real emergency relationship with the nation here in Bairnsdale and Mallacoota. And so it was important to them that as soon as they got off the bus they had to go to the local mob and seek permission to be on land. And it's something that we've never considered.*

*Stakeholder*

---

Some spoke of the need to manage intra-Indigenous political friction. Some communities have long-standing conflicts between individuals, families or larger groups such as clans or language groups. The impacts and damage caused by the 2019–20 fires and the significant amount of community displacement meant that these frictions in communities were at risk of coming to the surface and deepening under the already stressful conditions.

Aboriginal stakeholders involved in the Inquiry discussed a perception within their communities that mental health services are not culturally informed or responsive. Many Aboriginal Victorians expressed a strong desire to have their own space where they could support one another. They spoke about the priority to be around their mob to console and make sense of what was happening with people they know and trust; of looking inward rather than out to the broader society during emergencies.

Aboriginal Victorians also shared experiences of the central role of community-controlled organisations in providing relief and support, especially the community health services. Some spoke explicitly about the community health centres as a refuge where they could go, feel safe and know that they would be looked after. Others spoke about how the community health service helped make decisions at key moments and that these likely saved lives. Community health services also provided a governing institution capable of communicating with external agencies and could provide accurate and timely advice at the height of the crisis.

The experiences of Aboriginal Victorians seeking relief during and after the fires indicates that there was insufficient planning done with a detailed understanding of their cultural needs and social dynamics. The implications of leaving Country were not well understood by the sector and not suitably considered in relief plans. East Gippsland Shire Council is now working with GEGAC to better develop ways to support Aboriginal Victorians in future emergency events.

#### 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.

## 8.8.2 Disability and access in emergency relief centres

During the 2019–20 Victorian fire season more than 60 people living with a disability reported to ERCs across Gippsland.<sup>71</sup> East Gippsland’s Social Inclusion Plan (2017–2019) indicates that the population of people living with a disability in the municipality is well above the average, as are the rates of people receiving disability support.

---

*Emergency relief centres should aim to meet current universal standards and consider the specific needs of children, young people, seniors, people with additional needs and culturally and linguistically diverse community members in the layout, design and services provided.*

*Red Cross Emergency Relief Handbook<sup>48</sup>*



Relief Centre Corryong (Source: IGEM)

Most council ERC procedures and guidelines provided to IGEM recognised that facilities should provide (at a minimum) basic wheelchair access. While wheelchair accessibility was provided at most established ERCs, there appeared to be minimal planning for other basic supports such as accessing toilets and suitable bedding.

---

*I live alone and I'm disabled. When my nephew said that it was a good idea to go to the [relief] centre I just hopped on the scooter and drove down there. They were unable to accommodate me because I can't walk. They had mattresses on the floors. I obviously couldn't get down to that or if someone helped me down, I couldn't get up.*

*Community member*

Where possible, ERC staff and community service organisations arranged for the person to be relocated to another facility that was able to meet their basic and immediate needs. However, at times supported accommodation was scarce and often required the person living with a disability to be relocated a considerable distance from their home. This caused distress and heightened feelings of vulnerability – particularly as there was often no clear guidance as to how long they would be welcome at the appropriate facility and when they could expect to return to their home.

---

*We also need, as do other organisations and people, the health/aged care providers to support more than 1 night accommodation for those who need help in aged and disability packages, it was scary for them to only have one night support and not know where they would be next.*

*Community member*

Additionally, some families who have a child living with a disability were reluctant to evacuate, as their homes have been modified with specialised equipment specific to their child's needs.

#### FINDING 8.7

There were limited suitable options to provide emergency shelter and accommodation for people living with a disability.

People living with a disability spoke of the difficulties they had understanding some of the services available. One example commonly referred to was applying for PHAP payments.

Disability advocates spoke of the benefits of having one-on-one assistance for people living with a disability, which was minimal in ERCs. IGEM heard reports of disability advocates and support providers being denied entry to ERCs. In many cases, services that were not explicitly included in ERC plans needed to spend significant time and effort justifying their entry into the ERC and were not always successful. The rationale for this denial of entry related to the numerous services attempting to operate out of the ERCs, and the desire to maintain calmness and control within the centre.

---

*There did not appear to be any provision for people with disabilities who had evacuated to the relief centre. Nobody seemed to be working with them or have the time to take care of their needs.*

*Stakeholder*

*They are quite overwhelming so for somebody like me where there is so much noise and hustle and bustle it can be quite frightening. Also I need to take a support worker with me which is tough during the bushfire season because all of my support workers are living in the same environment so if the fire is looming who's to say that support workers will want to come with me so that's a real barrier.*

*Community member*

---

Disability advocates were present in ERCs across East Gippsland. East Gippsland Shire Council discussed how valuable the disability advocate groups were within ERCs as they assisted in linking, supporting and raising awareness for people living with a disability. It has since established a relationship with the Gippsland Disability Advocacy Group in preparation for future emergency events.

Overall, the planning for the inclusion of people living with a disability was not comprehensive enough to ensure adequate preparation for these fires.

While councils and other relief agencies have roles in supporting inclusive access to all members of the community, there is also a role for greater levels of planning and preparation on an individual basis, to ensure those living with a disability in high-risk locations have pre-determined strategies in place to use existing relief services, access to alternative places of shelter and appropriate levels of support in the event of an emergency.

### 8.8.3 Children and young people

Children have unique vulnerabilities and are at their most vulnerable during and in the immediate aftermath of an emergency.<sup>72</sup>

The State Relief Coordination Plan recommends that councils should draw on the expertise of professionals specialising in the care and special needs of children and young people when developing relief plans. It suggests that establishing a child friendly spaces within an ERC can also help to alleviate some of the chaos and stress involving in communal shelter locations and provide some respite to parents.<sup>48</sup>

Save the Children described how children in fire-affected communities lacked appropriate safe places during and after emergencies.<sup>72</sup> Children's experiences and needs in the 2019–20 Victorian fire season were not always well considered or managed in relief. This was particularly evident in the provision of ERCs:

---

*These centres were often chaotic and challenging environments for families, filled with makeshift structures, long queues and exhausted and overwhelmed adults and children. Most people in these centres had stories of being evacuated multiple times, of driving in slow moving convoys while fires burned nearby, of having inadequate food, power and fuel supplies, of being separated from families where one parent had stayed behind to fight the fire ... Many families had lost pets and livestock and were experiencing substantial financial stress.*

*Save the Children submission*<sup>72</sup>

---

Save the Children attributed these problems to a systemic failing, rather than any individual council or agency and noted that child-friendly spaces during the fires were often established in a reactive and ad hoc manner. There were examples of child-friendly spaces being set up, such as in Wangaratta where there was an established play area supervised by qualified childcare workers.<sup>73</sup>

While children and young people have certain vulnerabilities during and after emergencies, they also have the potential to support their families and communities. While young children may require supervision and additional assistance, young people are often physically and cognitively able to contribute to relief efforts.

Young people who contributed to this Inquiry were very clear that they were a willing source of capacity that is equally able to gather, interpret and share information, and perform both simple and complex tasks in relief.

Despite an interest in assisting their families and communities during and immediately after the fires, young people felt that in many cases, they were not adequately prepared for relief or aware of existing community emergency protocols or relief plans.

Young people expressed an interest in participating in community-based emergency management planning before emergencies, recognising that this knowledge and understanding became very important during and immediately after the emergency.

IGEM heard that young people were told they could not assist at the ERCs and other relief activities despite offering to help their communities. This led to frustration and a sense that their skills and abilities were not valued by others. However, where young people were able to assist in relief efforts, they felt valued and appreciated and contributed value capacity to relief efforts.

#### OBSERVATION 8.8

There are opportunities to better consider the capacity of young people to support their families, neighbours and communities in relief plans.

# Chapter 9

Donated Goods



Australians are known for their swift and generous support to affected communities with offers of assistance during and after emergencies. This support is evident in the significant amounts of money donated to registered charities and fundraising events, the donation of new and second-hand goods, and the offer of specialist services, assets and equipment.

Many people also make general offers to donate time, expertise or other resources in whatever capacity is needed. These offers may come through established charities and not-for-profit organisations, businesses, community organisations and direct offers of support to government, affected councils, communities and individuals.

The donation of goods, services and assets is important for the relief and recovery process. However, donations require a level of coordination, management and integration – and can provide particular challenges when large volumes of offers and vast quantities of physical goods are involved. Challenges in donation management generally arise in the early stages of an event when sector agencies and government are focused on critical response activities and ensuring the safety and wellbeing of those affected.

The significant coordination effort required to manage donated goods and services has been broadly recognised by the sector and government.

Councils and communities have historically struggled to use, redirect and dispose of donated goods after major emergencies. Multiple debriefs, reviews and inquiries – including the recent the Royal Commission into National Natural Disaster Arrangements - have recommended strategies and investments to streamline the management of donated goods and services.

## 9.1 Arrangements

The National Guidelines for Managing Donated Goods (the guidelines) were published in 2011 following the overwhelming generosity of Australians in response to emergency events. The guidelines recognise that the influx of donated goods is often surplus to community needs, and that donations include significant amounts of unnecessary or inappropriate goods. The guidelines also acknowledge that managing donations can divert efforts from other response and relief activities.

The guidelines are intended to complement and inform national, state and territory arrangements and plans and define goods into two categories:

- solicited goods – those that have been expressly requested
- unsolicited goods – those which have not been expressly requested and may or may not meet assessed needs.

The guidelines outline key principles for successfully managing donated goods and recognise the importance of:

- understanding community needs
- the preference for monetary donations
- the value of clearly communicating the preferences of both government and impacted communities in regard to donations.

The guidelines suggest that effective management systems for donated goods should also be established and that the arrangements for donated goods be encapsulated in national, state/territory and local planning and policies.

In 2019 the Salvation Army developed a national Strategic Emergency and Disaster Management Plan to outline its approach. This plan advocates a preference for monetary donations and notes that in-kind donations are to be assessed on individual merit. It further suggests that the acceptance of goods should be avoided due to the costs associated with transportation, storage, logistics and waste disposal.

Neither the SERRP or the recently established SEMP assign roles and responsibilities for the management of donated goods. At the local level the responsibility falls to local councils and can be escalated through region and state as required.

## 9.2 Managing donated goods

### 9.2.1 Public Messaging

The response to Australia's 2019–20 fires saw a global outpouring of support that resulted in large amounts of donations for fire-affected individuals, families, businesses and communities. Councils and government also received significant offers of assistance in the form of both goods and services.

From 31 December 2019 Vic Emergency social media posts began directing potential donors to a dedicated relief and recovery page that provided basic information on how to donate goods (Figure 10).

From 2 January 2020 communication channels directed financial donations be made to the Victorian Bushfire Appeal, established by the government in partnership with the Bendigo Bank. EMJPIC's key messaging disseminated to media, departmental and other channels of communication – encouraged monetary donations over donated goods.

As the emergency continued, public messaging became more explicit in its discouragement of donated goods and described the time and effort being spent by both paid and volunteer personnel in sorting donations. The Premier addressed the issue in various press conferences and on social media:

---

*I don't want to appear harsh in any way, but we don't need any more clothes, food, trucks on our roads, we don't have the warehouse capacity, the people or the time to sort through, we are very grateful ... but it's really important that those donations stop because they are diverting resources away from firefighting and providing support to those who are in real need.*

*The Hon. Daniel Andrews MP, 5 January Press Conference*

---

**Figure 10.** Vic Emergency Facebook post on donated goods - 5 January 2020 (Source: Vic Emergency)



Government agencies and individual organisations used traditional and social media to strongly discourage donated goods. DoT engaged the Victorian Transport Association to provide advice that Gippsland and Hume regions were no longer accepting donated goods apart from fodder. On 7 January the SCC arranged for roadside signage along major access routes – into East Gippsland in particular – stating that donated goods were not needed.

Despite the messaging, large amounts of unsolicited goods were donated to ERCs, ICCs and community venues. By 11 February information on Vic Emergency directed members of the public to make donations of goods to major charities such as the Salvation Army and St Vincent de Paul Society.

## 9.2.2 Managing the donated goods

Throughout January 2020 daily SCC reports noted the volume of donated goods was surplus to requirements and included strategies to manage the goods and offers and to minimise further donations.

On 3 January EMV developed an Offers of Assistance Register for offers received by the SCC, EMV's recovery email inbox and DPC. The SCC used the register to capture, assess and allocate offers of assistance or donated goods to relevant agencies or organisations. State Relief and Recovery Officers used the register to follow-up with smaller donors individually. Food, PPE (masks), mattresses, underwear as well as hygiene and homeware packs are just some examples of donated goods listed on the register. Offers were then communicated to relevant organisations and portfolios of government for further consideration and acceptance.

The Offers of Assistance Register was transferred to BRV and GIVIT by 7 February 2020. GIVIT was engaged to assist in managing donations on behalf of BRV through its online virtual warehouse (see section 9.2.5, p 212).

The Offers of Assistance Register only captured a relatively small subset of offers and donations. It did not record local collection and distribution mechanisms that evolved organically to address the unexpected arrival of donated goods into local communities.

While EMV and BRV (through GIVIT) were managing offers of donations directed to the Victorian Government, local communities and councils were also dealing with offers of donated goods and personnel assistance, such as specific technical skills, labour and logistical capacities. Offers included accommodation, health supplies, logistical support, and donated items such as money, food, water, bedding, clothing, school items and hygiene products.

Councils and communities needed to develop strategies to store and distribute donated goods and manage offers of assistance emerging through a variety of formal and informal channels. Donors were sending or delivering goods directly into affected communities, or to central locations outside the fire footprint, such as Bairnsdale in Gippsland and Wodonga in the North East. In many cases, council staff or local residents took initial management ownership and additional support from within council or community evolved based on need.

Councils and communities established a variety of mechanisms to cope with the donations based on previous experience, the quantity of physical items delivered, available storage and sorting facilities, fire impacts and community needs. In some cases, local volunteers attempted to sort donations to facilitate distribution. However, in many cases donations were stored as best as possible and affected individuals were encouraged to collect what they needed.

One example of a community-led initiative that became well-coordinated and provided extensive community service was the Lucknow Memorial Hall. It started as a small-scale collection point for donations but evolved into a significant operation to coordinate donated goods in East Gippsland (see Case Study, p 211). There were many other significant, community-led efforts throughout fire-affected regions.

## 9.2.3 Storage and distribution of donated goods

By 22 January 2020 EMV had developed a Donated Goods Plan for the collection and distribution of donated goods. The Donated Goods Plan delegated responsibilities to the SRRM, the Salvation Army, ADF and BRV. The plan was updated on several occasions until 19 February 2020.

From 28 January the ADF was tasked with sorting a significant amount of donated goods. Goods were being stored at two sites, one in Bairnsdale and the other an ADF warehouse in East Sale. The distribution priorities were determined at the local and regional level.

A donated goods inventory for East Sale identified 12 main categories of donated items. The list included the items that were not immediately distributed to communities and required storage at the East Sale warehouse for distribution by the Salvation Army and Foodbank or possible destruction (expired foodstuffs).

Foodstuffs, clothing and toiletries were the top three items listed on the donated goods inventory. Other items included bedding, linen, PPE, bottled water, toys and items for infants and pets. In many cases, these items were surplus to the needs of community. As much as possible, the ADF and personnel tasked with sorting and storing the donations disposed of inappropriate goods.

#### CASE STUDY: LUCKNOW MEMORIAL HALL

Lucknow Memorial Hall was initially utilised to be a drop off and collection point for a few essential items donated for fire-affected communities. It soon became inundated with donated items and transformed into a collection and distribution centre, with its own transport network, three warehouse storage locations and over 100 volunteers supporting the work.



Lucknow Memorial Hall filled with donated items (Source: Community Submission)

Volunteers sorted and stored the donated items into categories. Each person or family who sought assistance was supported by a 'personal shopper' from Lucknow Memorial Hall. This support recognised the high amount of stress and discomfort likely to be experienced by affected community members in accepting donations, and helped them to navigate the large amount of donations and take everything they might need in the immediate aftermath of the fires.

---

*Walking into the hall was very difficult for most people, their brains still not fully comprehending what had happened. Having a person take them through slowly and with compassion saw so many people walk in and say 'I only need a toothbrush' or 'just need some shoes for the kids' and walk out with two or three shopping carts full of all the essential items they needed. I think it demonstrated how well our systems worked.*

*Community member*

The Lucknow Memorial Hall demonstrates the significant value provided by community organisations in coordinating donated goods for affected communities.

The volunteers of Lucknow Memorial Hall reflected that there was a lack of administration processes as they were unable to capture all the donations being received, who was attending the distribution centre and where the items were being distributed to.

Lucknow Memorial Hall accepted offers of assistance for logistical services and relied on these services to distribute donated items to other fire affected communities. The offers came from local businesses and community members across East Gippsland. However, the need for additional logistical support soon became apparent so volunteers sought help from the ICC and local council, but due to limited capacity were unable to assist.

The onset of fatigue also became an issue for the volunteers at Lucknow Memorial Hall as donations increased. Due to limited capacity, volunteers started to turn away donated goods, which was not well received by donors.

Lucknow Memorial Hall ceased operations due the lack of administration and logistic support, volunteer fatigue and poor treatment of volunteers. Lucknow Memorial Hall began on 31 December 2019 and was operational for approximately two weeks. Local council organised the ADF to remove the remaining donated items to another location.

## 9.2.4 The Salvation Army

Section 8.2.3 (p 182) discusses the Salvation Army's role in the provision and distribution of material aid during the fires. In addition, the Salvation Army also assisted the ADF, BRV, GIVIT and other agencies (see Chapter 9) in coordinating the distribution of donated goods.

The Salvation Army was present at the SCC and engaged in regular SRRT meetings though December, January and February. State evidence provided to the Inquiry on 4 February 2020 noted that the '*...SCC Relief and Recovery team is working with BRV, the Salvation Army and ADF on an operational plan for the large amount of donated goods at a variety of locations in East Gippsland*'.

The operational plan, which became the Donated Goods Plan, assigned the Salvation Army to manage the distribution of donated goods through its stores to people and communities as required. The ADF was tasked (predominantly through CAOG) with transporting the donated non-food items to the Salvation Army warehouse and transporting donated food items to Foodbank in Yarraville.

Stakeholder interviews discussed the large quantities of inappropriate or unusable donated items.

With mechanisms built into their business as usual systems, the Salvation Army and Foodbank were well-practised in sending inappropriate items for repurposing, recycling or to landfill, and both organisations assisted with disposal.

---

*So, we ended up with tip fees and different things, which is pretty much part of our day-to-day business in Salvo stores, which is a separate kind of business model to emergency management. But that's part of their daily kind of routine is a lot of people just dump unwanted goods upon them and we have ways of managing that.*

*Stakeholder*

---

However, the Salvation Army was not represented at RCC. A lack of presence in the RCC is likely to have affected the integration and coordination of relief efforts for the disbursement of donated goods as they were reliant on previously built relationships to gather intel.

The final distribution of donated goods was completed by the end of February, with the Salvation Army organising the distribution of donated goods using GIVIT's online systems.

## 9.2.5 GIVIT

On 31 January 2020 BRV formally contracted GIVIT to provide end-to-end management and coordination of individual and corporate donations (goods and services) associated with Victoria's recovery from the 2019–20 Eastern Victoria Fires until 30 January 2022

The contract states that GIVIT will receive quarterly payments to work with councils and local charities to ensure donations are made available to communities in affected areas in a safe, effective, equitable and simple way.

GIVIT uses an online system – referred to as a virtual warehouse – to match donations to the needs of registered charities and support organisations. Figure 11 illustrates GIVIT’s basic process for donors to support people in need.

A fundamental aspect of the GIVIT model is that all donated items are required to stay with the donor until a suitable match is found, meaning that no storage is required for surplus donations. If a donated item is not required for the communities impacted by the fires, GIVIT can suggest other appeals or organisations that may be in need.

Individuals in need of donations do not register directly with GIVIT, their needs are indirectly addressed through their relationships with registered charities and community organisations.

GIVIT staff can manually match donors and recipients, or donors and registered charities can search the virtual warehouse to seek, request or provide a donation. Once a donation is matched, the charity or support organisation arranges for the delivery of item with the donor. Under no circumstances does the donor deliver the donation directly to the person in need.

**Figure 11.** GIVIT’s basic process for donors to support people in need (Source: GIVIT website)



## 9.3 The impact of donated goods on communities

Donations did (and will continue) to make their way to towns impacted by emergencies. Councils and communities had to manage large and surplus amounts of donations, not all of which were necessary or of appropriate quality to address the needs of affected individuals. The amount of donations and circumstances of their delivery caused numerous issues for councils and fire-affected communities.

Councils did not have capacity to manage the influx of donations and attempted to escalate the matter to the state tier. East Gippsland Shire Council recognised very quickly that donated goods were going to cause a significant strain on an already stretched council and community capacity: ‘...donated goods were one of the very first issues we escalated for state assistance, which was not provided’.

Conversely, an SCC representative felt that councils were not supporting State messaging by continuing to accept donations:

---

*The councils were a bit frustrating in this respect, to be honest with you, because they – we were saying from the state level, 'We're not accepting donated goods. And if [councils] then accept those donated goods, that's not then our responsibility to help [them] manage those donated goods'.*

---

*Stakeholder*

Despite the State's public communications that donated goods were not being accepted, donations continued to arrive in large amounts to fire-affected communities. In many cases, donations were not accepted and left in locations that soon became unofficial collection points. Community members expressed how difficult it was to turn away well-intentioned people:

---

*They [State] were saying 'no more, no more, no more,' but we have people driving from Shepparton with soft toys, but I couldn't say to them, 'oh no, we're not taking that.' So, I would just say 'okay we'll take it.'*

---

*Community member*

Donations were difficult to sort, store, distribute and dispose of, and many areas such as town halls and CFA sheds were quickly filled. Stakeholders felt that not much had changed since the 2009 Victorian bushfires.

---

*[We are] in exactly the same place ... warehouses of goods that were not useable and were either sent back to Melbourne for the Salvos to use, and the things that perished obviously were disposed of.*

---

*Stakeholder*

The delivery of goods to townships, and in some cases private property, led to individuals and small community organisations assuming responsibility, sometimes reluctantly, for deciding who should receive donations and where donations should be distributed and stored.

IGEM heard examples where farmers had large amounts of fodder delivered to their property for storage with and without permission. However, there was no support or guidance to help them to distribute donated fodder to others within their local area. In some locations, fodder was desperately needed and not all needs could be addressed. This left farmers in the difficult position of having to deny the requests of their neighbours and others in the community – an extremely stressful and difficult responsibility.

---

*We got a lot of people come and a lot of people donated, and we felt enormous responsibility to try and get it to everyone, because we knew that the people who are burnt out weren't there and they weren't getting it. So, we tried really hard to distribute things fairly how we could see it, which was hard. Like sometimes we got it right, sometimes we didn't I guess.*

---

*Community member*

Both community members and stakeholders felt that this complex level of decision-making should not be the responsibility of community members without some level of guidance and support.

### 9.3.1 Effectiveness

There are two key issues in relation to the management of donated goods:

- Lack of pre-determined roles, responsibilities, and arrangements to manage and coordinate to collection, collation and distribution of donated goods.
- Public communications and education strategies in place to channel the inevitable goodwill of the broader community during and after an emergency.

### Lack of plans and policies

Planning for the management of donated goods prior to the fires was minimal.

The SERRP does not assign specific roles or responsibilities for the management of donated goods and there is no operational guidance support for government, councils or communities to deal with incoming donations. This is despite donated goods being a well-recognised drain on the capacity of the sector and communities.

During the 2019–20 fire season guidelines and procedures were developed and implemented to support the coordination of donated goods. However, the implementation of these guidelines, procedures and initiatives, particularly the activation of GIVIT, was too late for relief purposes, as fire-affected areas were already inundated with donated goods.

---

*But unfortunately, a lot of the damage of donations had already taken place and we were then reaching out to councils who were completely overwhelmed by this stage. And it's very hard for them to take a phone call from an organisation, they don't really know what we do in the midst of a disaster.*

*We felt like the government didn't get their full value for the service because it was too late. I hate to think about the amount of money that was actually used to manage those resources and move donations to where they needed to go.*

*Stakeholder*

---

Since the 2019–20 fire season, there has been some development of arrangements by BRV to manage donated goods, however there are no specific responsibilities for the management or coordination of donated goods outlined in the SEMP.

#### 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.

### Public communications and education

Experience has shown that Australians will demonstrate their support and empathy for communities affected by emergencies by donating goods. Also, many people feel they are unable to make a significant financial contribution, or do not trust that monetary donations will be used to support those affected by the emergency (see section 5.5, p 118). The sector is aware that managing donated goods creates a significant burden for the sector itself, councils and affected communities.

As such, there is a known communication challenge for the sector to ensure the broader community is discouraged from making donations in order to mitigate the volume of unsolicited donated goods.

As demonstrated by response to the 2019–20 fire season, simply instructing the public not to donate does not significantly deter large volumes of donations from being delivered to community service organisations, or directly into fire-affected towns. There is a need to offer alternative donation pathways and provide strong messaging to demonstrate the significant burden donors are inadvertently placing on communities already significantly distressed by fire impacts.

Stakeholders and communities suggested that it would be beneficial to educate the public with alternative ways to support communities prior to an emergency, such as by donating services, volunteering or simply directing the public on where to make donations.

---

*I think we need to have some kind of education piece that's put out to the public, when in non-emergency times, some kind of guidebook that says 'this is how you can really help in an emergency'... I think we just tend to be reactive ... we try and get the comms out all in that first 48 hours or whatever and it's too late and everyone's already loaded up their stuff and ready to go.*

Stakeholder

*The practicalities of managing [donated goods] are immense ... maybe it's just that there's got to be something built in earlier and part of it's our preparedness messaging ... I think we fell short of expectations from community members who were trying to do the right thing.*

Stakeholder

---

Given the fires in NSW and the early fire starts in Victoria, the sector should have been prepared for the response from community as fires ignited. State messaging could have started before 31 December 2019 and could have included more information on alternative ways to support fire-affected communities – thereby redirecting to other effective systems that could manage and coordinate donated goods.

IGEM acknowledges that communications before, during and after an emergency are constrained by a high volume of messaging, with priority communication directed to the immediate safety of those affected by the fires. However, with limited opportunities to communicate with the public on the topic of donations, there is an opportunity to increase the strength of messaging to promote behaviours that are most supportive of eliciting donations in a manner that reduces burden for communities and the sector.

#### 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

The Inspector-General for Emergency Management recommends that Emergency Management Victoria and the entity referred to in Recommendation 13, or otherwise responsible government department:

- (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



The health, safety and prosperity of Victorian communities depend on essential services. These services are supported by critical infrastructure – the physical assets in place that supply or distribute the services.

Essential services are defined in the *Essential Services Act 1958*, and in Victorian legislation and policy (see Chapter 10). Critical to the basic, everyday needs of individuals and communities, these services can include:

- energy supply
- telecommunications
- food and grocery supply
- water supply
- transport infrastructure.

Emergencies risk disrupting the ability of critical infrastructure to deliver essential services to the community. The complex interconnected and often interdependent nature of critical infrastructure increases the risk of wide-spread service disruptions.

During the 2019–20 Victorian fire season, responder agency personnel, relief providers and communities relied on the provision of essential services to keep informed and safe. Damage caused by the fires and the lack of access to critical infrastructure caused significant and sometimes critical disruptions to essential services. These disruptions started on a large scale from late December 2019 and continued for extended periods of time in January 2020.

More than 1400 kilometres of roads were closed due to damage and the ongoing risk of post-fire related hazards, such as damaged and falling trees. This severely affected access to isolated areas and the provision of relief services. Damage to the telecommunications network and power disruptions caused outages and limited communications to bushfire-affected communities. This prevented communities and relief providers from sharing information to understand impacts and relief needs. Interruptions in power supply throughout the fire season made it difficult to maintain other essential services and initiate relief activities.

Supply chains for fuel, food and groceries, and drinking water were also affected by disruptions in transport, telecommunications, and power. Isolated individuals were unable to assure their family of their safety. Access to money became problematic with limited access to electronic banking.

In its Phase 1 Inquiry Report IGEM described the disruption and basic restoration of essential services. The report's focus was on transport, water, power and telecommunications and the consequences of these disruptions in response activities, and the safety of those working or sheltering in the affected regions. The disruption of essential services also potentially jeopardised the safety of responder agency personnel and communities.

Throughout Phase 1 of the Inquiry, IGEM observed that the inter-dependency between critical infrastructure sectors creates a vulnerability in the supply of essential services. The 2020 Royal Commission into National Natural Disaster Arrangements made similar findings.

This chapter addresses the implications of the disruptions to essential services during the relief phase and extends the focus to include food and grocery supply and drinking water. As there were few enduring impacts on critical infrastructure following the immediate repair of damaged infrastructure during the fires, many sectors have turned their attention to increasing resilience.

As the supply of essential services is governed by both Victorian and Commonwealth legislative and regulatory requirements, the Inquiry focused on resilience building initiatives that have been completed, or are planned in Victoria.

The provision of health and medical services is also an essential service according to both the Critical Infrastructure Resilience (CIR) Strategy and *Victoria's Critical Infrastructure All Sectors Resilience Report*. However, the role of the health sector in relief and recovery extends beyond the provision of essential health services. Health services are addressed in sections 8.7 and 15.6 of this report in greater detail to reflect the critical roles and responsibilities of this sector in relief and recovery.

## 10.1 Critical infrastructure

Emergency risk management arrangements for critical infrastructure resilience (CIR) came into effect in 2015. These aim to ensure Victoria's CIR activities consider all potential hazards whether natural or human induced. The aim for the arrangements is to limit disruption to the supply of essential services to Victorians.

The arrangements include:

- Part 7A of the 2013 EM Act
- the Emergency Management (Critical Infrastructure Resilience) Regulations 2015
- the Ministerial Guidelines for Critical Infrastructure Resilience
- the Critical Infrastructure Resilience Strategy.

Under the 2013 EM Act IGEM has an ongoing responsibility to monitor, review and assess CIR at a system level.

Since 2015 IGEM has monitored the implementation of the CIR arrangements, assessed incremental improvements, and identified improvement opportunities through a continuous improvement lens. As such, the effectiveness of these arrangements will not be thoroughly explored in this Inquiry.

Infrastructure owners and/or operators have primary responsibility for CIR. However, the government takes appropriate measures to ensure that owners and/or operators are managing their risks and that vital service delivery is not interrupted.

EMV has the lead role in maintaining and coordinating Victoria's whole-of-government strategy and policy for CIR to ensure a consistent but flexible approach to emergency risk management across the eight critical infrastructure sectors. Portfolio departments provide the primary interface between government and critical infrastructure owners and/or operators (Table 5).

**Table 5.** Critical infrastructure sectors and respective portfolio department as at 1 January 2019

SECTOR	PORTFOLIO DEPARTMENT
<b>Energy</b>	Department of Environment, Land, Water and Planning
<b>Transport</b>	Department of Transport
<b>Water</b>	Department of Environment, Land, Water and Planning
<b>Banking and finance</b>	Department of Treasury and Finance
<b>Communications</b>	Department of Jobs, Precincts and Regions
<b>Food supply</b>	Department of Jobs, Precincts and Regions
<b>Government</b>	Department of Premier and Cabinet
<b>Health</b>	Department of Health and Human Services

The arrangements outline a range of activities to be undertaken in collaboration by government and industry, with the aim of reducing risk and building the resilience of Victoria's critical infrastructure.

Some of these key activities include assessing energy, transport, and water infrastructure by the relevant minister to determine their criticality.

Under the 2013 EM Act, responsible entities (owners and operators of critical infrastructure) that are designated as vital are required to undertake four activities under a Resilience Improvement Cycle.

The four activities consist of:

- preparing and submitting a statement of assurance to government
- preparing an emergency risk management plan
- developing, conducting, and evaluating an exercise
- conducting an audit of emergency risk management processes.

Each relevant portfolio department chairs a Sector Resilience Network (SRN) which is attended by industry representatives. These networks aim to improve the resilience of a sector's critical infrastructure assets and operations through joint planning, information sharing and reporting to government.

Each of the portfolio departments lead the development and drafting of an annual Sector Resilience Plan (SRP) in collaboration with industry, through their SRN. The SRP provides the government with the status of, and continuous improvement arrangements for, each critical infrastructure sector's overall resilience.

EMV collates each SRP to develop an All Sectors Resilience Report which is used to brief the SCRC, the minister and the community on Victoria's CIR. This report also assists the SCRC to determine if any further actions by portfolio departments are required.

The All Sectors Resilience Network Forum, comprising members from all eight SRNs, convenes regularly to highlight interdependencies between sectors and increase understanding of cross-sectoral vulnerabilities.

In 2003 the Australian Government established the Trusted Information Sharing Network (TISN); the primary national engagement mechanism for business–government information sharing and resilience building initiatives on critical infrastructure.

The network consists of eight groups:

- banking and finance
- food and grocery
- health
- transport
- water services
- communications
- energy
- Australian Government.

The TISN meets regularly to share information and to address security and business continuity challenges.<sup>74</sup>

## 10.2 Telecommunications

Nationally, telecommunications services are provided by privately-owned companies and regulated by the Australian Government, with each state responsible for related emergency management functions. Consequently, the policy and regulatory environment, the relationships between carriers and government, and the Commonwealth and states, require a cooperative and collaborative approach to the mutual best interests of the community with telecommunication services.

Telecommunications providers (Telstra, Optus, NBN Co and Vodafone being the main carriers) form part of the Communications SRN and participate in high-level planning and resilience building initiatives. DJPR is the portfolio department responsible for overseeing the resilience development and planning activities of this sector.

The scale, severity, and duration of the 2019–20 Victorian fire season had a significant impact on Victoria’s communications sector.

Communities of East Gippsland and the North East regularly experience telecommunications disruptions or a complete lack of coverage – particularly for mobile networks. Well-recognised vulnerabilities and limitations in the telecommunications networks such as these were further exposed during the fire season.

Many of the vulnerabilities and limitations ultimately led to network failures.

Communities affected by the fires experienced several, critical service disruptions throughout the fire season including the temporary loss of Triple Zero emergency communications, disruptions to mobile and internet-based communications and landline telephone disruptions.

Outages to the network were predominantly caused by mains power failures and the inability to refuel generators providing temporary emergency power supply. There were also cases of damage to the communications network infrastructure itself. The lack of road access, safety concerns due to the active fires and smoke prevented industry maintenance personnel being able to attend to damaged infrastructure in a timely manner.

### 10.2.1 Restoration of telecommunications services

The Phase 1 Inquiry Report discusses many of the activities that were performed during response to restore telecommunications services. In the most urgent periods of relief, existing relationships between DJPR and the communications sector provided a strong foundation for restoring telecommunications services in affected regions.

DJPR worked with carriers, retailers, and suppliers to support restoration planning and established a dedicated Communications EMLO function due to the high level of impact and the lack of alternative means of communicating with isolated towns. This EMLO liaised with the department and CAOG to share information. It also liaised directly with carriers, retailers, and suppliers – some of which were also represented at the SCC directly. Another function of this EMLO was to assist with mapping activities within the SCC.

Essential services workers accessed roads and areas impacted by the fires that were often not open to the public. To restore communications services, technicians accessed sites to inspect asset damage, make repairs and install generators. Truck drivers delivered supplies using roads not available for general use.

Throughout periods of relief, telecommunications personnel were not routinely admitted through traffic management points as they were not classified essential services workers. This restriction was in place to ensure the safety of personnel and is outlined in JSOP J03.10 - Traffic Management.

Recognising the likelihood of prolonged restrictions in access to telecommunications infrastructure Telstra formally requested – via the DJPR EMLO – safety guidance for essential service personnel working in fire-affected and restricted access areas. DJPR sought advice from the State Occupational Health and Safety Officer and the Learning and Assurance team, as technicians are not trained to work in fire-affected communities. A guidance note was developed to address the immediate concerns.

Carriers also worked with government and the sector to plan and implement contingency communications strategies to support basic communications with isolated communities until networks were fully restored. This included the provision of satellite phones that were delivered to isolated towns, and temporary mobile exchanges and generators to support towns likely to experience ongoing telecommunications and power disruptions while isolated through road restrictions.

## 10.2.2 Implications of telecommunications services disruption for relief

The disruptions to telecommunications services throughout the fire season had significant consequences for relief activities.

Communities, government, council, responder agencies and relief organisations were unable to reliably share information about health, safety and relief needs across the affected areas. Those providing services could not accurately determine the number of people needing relief and what their most urgent priorities were.

Relief organisations were required to make informed judgments as to the needs of those in the community. To ensure all circumstances were catered for food, water, fodder, fuel, basic health supplies and PPE were delivered in quantities based on estimations.

This was the most appropriate strategy in the circumstances, but communities noted that in these early stages of relief, they were receiving supplies that were not necessary (not needed or surplus) and in some cases receiving insufficient resupply of critical resources.

In the absence of reliable communications, many agencies were unwilling to deploy staff into dangerous conditions with the potential to become isolated and uncontactable. This inhibited support and relief staffing being sent in to support communities or personnel in isolated communities.

Telecommunications disruptions also caused issues with electronic banking services including EFTPOS and automatic teller machines. The Inquiry did not receive much evidence of this having a significant impact on individuals or businesses. Given the large numbers of tourists and displaced people in regional towns, access to money was an important consideration for people who were able to purchase supplies but did not have large amounts of cash with them.

The disruptions to telecommunications services also contributed to the overall lack of coordination in many relief activities described throughout this report. For example, DJPR and MetCash struggled to reach food and grocery businesses to determine what supplies were needed, and whether they were able to accept resupply of perishable items. Fodder was delivered across the affected regions with little communication as to its arrival time and appropriate locations for storing and distributing to those in need.

Community members and tourists were also unable to contact family and friends directly to inform them of their safety. For affected individuals who were largely safe, this inability to provide assurance to loved ones was particularly distressing. As discussed in section 8.5 (p 186), the lack of telecommunications also forced a reliance on paper-based *Register.Find.Reunite* registrations, which were more time consuming to complete and less transferrable. The inability to directly upload information into the online systems also created a time lag for reconnecting family and friends and use of the information to inform other relief activities.

## 10.2.3 Resilience building in the communications sector

Telecommunications coverage in the fire-affected regions and remote areas of Victoria is a known vulnerability for communities in general and the emergency management sector. There are multiple ongoing state and national initiatives to increase coverage and strengthen the resilience of the telecommunications networks.

For instance, the Australian Government has committed \$380 million to the Mobile Black Spots Program which aims to improve mobile coverage in regional and remote areas across Australia by investing in and expanding telecommunications infrastructure. The program is supported by the government, councils, major mobile network operators, businesses, and local communities. The program has committed to more than 1200 new base stations across Australia being operational by 30 June 2021. As of 31 March 2021, 920 base stations had been activated.

In Victoria the EMC and EMV are involved in the selection and prioritisation of 'black spots'. This involvement allows relevant emergency management considerations to be incorporated into planning and activity to strengthen mobile coverage. Multiple factors are included in the final decision including ability to provide reliable mobile coverage, consequence to residents and business owners, existence of alternative telecommunications technology, emergency risk and number of people set to benefit from the investment.

The Regional Connectivity Program was established to complement the Mobile Black Spot Program and the National Broadband Network (NBN) rollout. The Australian Government has committed \$90.3 million to fund 81 'place-based' telecommunications infrastructure projects in regional, rural, and remote Australia. The Regional Connectivity Program involved a competitive grant process in which applicants could propose different technologies that would improve telecommunications service in their region.

The Commonwealth Strengthening Telecommunications Against Natural Disasters package aims to improve the resilience of Australia's communication networks in bushfire and other high-risk areas. The Australian Government has committed \$37.1 million to upgrade connectivity at fire services depots and evacuation centres by installing NBN Co Sky Muster satellite connections. Some sites will also have batteries and solar panels installed. East Gippsland currently has eight STAND units as an initial trial.

The Federal Minister for Communication, Urban Infrastructure, Cities and the Arts, the Hon Paul Fletcher MP stated that:

---

*By offering broadband connectivity powered by the National Broadband Network's Sky Muster satellites - which have coverage of all 7.7 million square kilometres of Australia and operate even when terrestrial mobile or fixed line networks have ceased operating -- these dishes will help people in disaster affected locations stay in contact before, during and after a bushfire or other disaster.*

*The Hon Paul Fletcher MP Media Release 9 December 2020<sup>75</sup>*

---

Many investments in telecommunications resilience are initiated and supported by the Australian Government, with varying levels of involvement from Victoria's emergency management sector. Individual service providers also invest in the resilience of their own infrastructure and the network as a commitment to their customers and to remain competitive in the market.

As a portfolio department, DJPR advocates for Victoria's interests in national and private telecommunications investments and facilitates, where possible, the consideration of emergency management priorities and vulnerabilities. Despite the investments currently being made to improve the coverage and resilience of Victoria's telecommunications network, the geography and topography of areas and remote nature of some communities means that telecommunications will remain an ongoing vulnerability.

There are opportunities for individuals living in remote areas to adopt contingency strategies through purchasing satellite phones, maintaining landline connections and working with neighbours and communities to develop alternative information-sharing strategies that can be used when telecommunications are not available.

Throughout the Inquiry IGEM heard many contingency stories and notes communities that had considered their telecommunications needs and vulnerabilities ahead of time, were often well-placed to manage this aspect of isolation or were aware of the implications and could make more informed choices in relation to evacuating, sheltering in place or staying to defend.

#### 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.

## 10.3 Energy

Victoria's energy system is part of Australian electricity, gas, and solar networks. In relation to electricity and gas, there are national markets and regulatory frameworks that drive decision-making and preparation for natural hazards. Victoria has its own regulatory overlay for both power and gas suppliers and distributors.

From an emergency management perspective DELWP is the control agency for energy disruptions – electricity, gas, and liquid fuels. It has multiple oversight responsibilities under Part 7A of the 2013 EM Act and is the energy sector portfolio department under the emergency risk management arrangements for CIR.

DELWP as the control agency for energy supply disruptions maintains responsibility for coordinating sector intelligence, strategies and decision-making for energy supply restoration. In Victoria, there are five electricity and distribution businesses that are responsible for the provision of energy.

The Australian Energy Market Operator (AEMO) is responsible for maintaining electricity supply and balancing electricity demands for the national network. The government works closely with AEMO to ensure appropriate resilience measures are incorporated into supply plans and infrastructure. It is acknowledged that constant supply across all of Victoria cannot be guaranteed, however, there are guaranteed service levels and compensation arrangements for consumers when supply reliability falls below the regulated standard.

In Victoria, multiple service providers are responsible for restoring disruptions when there are issues with their own infrastructure. DELWP and government more broadly are not responsible for restoring energy supply. However, they work closely with the market operator and service providers to facilitate timely information sharing, access and egress to physical energy supply infrastructure and back-up temporary energy supplies (for example, generators).

Approximately 1000 kilometres of powerlines were affected by the 2019–20 fires and 7500 customers faced energy disruptions. In some towns, mains power supply was disrupted for weeks.

AusNet Services was the sole energy company responsible for servicing the areas affected by the fires. It deployed personnel into ICCs, RCCs and the SCC to facilitate information sharing and ensure its personnel were appropriately prepared in relation to imminent fire behaviour, safety, and service restoration priorities.

As described in the Phase 1 Inquiry Report, large-scale generators were pre-positioned into towns and communities likely to become isolated by the fires or transported into areas of need as soon as possible after the fires had passed. DELWP, AusNet Services, representatives from the energy sector and emergency management personnel worked with CAOG and the ADF directly to deploy equipment, staff, and fuel to maintain basic energy supply to as many people as possible.

Road damage and safety concerns prevented the immediate deployment of personnel to restore the energy supply in some areas. Access was further inhibited due to a lack of safe access to powerline easements, which prevented personnel from performing critical maintenance on physical infrastructure.

Access issues were compounded by telecommunications disruptions that made it difficult to liaise with communities to determine their needs based on the number and characteristics of people experiencing energy disruptions. It also increased the level of risk to personnel deployed into affected areas, as they were at risk of becoming isolated and losing contact with their employers.

### 10.3.1 Implications of energy services disruption for relief

Energy disruptions during the 2019–20 fire season limited the ability of the energy sector and government to provide relief services and increased community vulnerability following the fires.

In many towns, only small parts of the township had power supply restored immediately after the fires, often through the priority on resupplying key services and businesses. This left many residents within towns without power supply to their homes and properties. In smaller communities and at isolated properties, people were left without power for significant periods of time. These disruptions had both practical and psychosocial consequences.

The lack of energy supply created a high level of reliance on any existing generators within townships and communities. Community members spoke of sharing generators with neighbours and emergency services and needing to make important decisions to ration generator use, particularly as it became clear that fuel resupply was unreliable.

Energy disruptions had consequences for telecommunications and was the underlying cause for most disruptions to mobile, landline and NBN services. In places where telecommunications were available, many people needed at least intermittent access to power to recharge their phones and other devices that support telecommunications (see section 10.2, p 220).

Lack of electricity supply limited the relief provision possible from government and other relief agencies. The energy disruption created a heightened level of risk for many relief providers and in combination with other disruptions and safety concerns contributed to the decision not to deploy personnel into areas needing relief.

The lack of energy supply also prevented or slowed the provision of services including the processing of PHAP payments, registering displaced people, appropriate lighting in ERCs, suitable food safety protocols for perishable foods at ERCs and food and grocery businesses, and other relief measures to address basic community needs.

Stakeholders representing government and industry providers commented throughout both Phase 1 and Phase 2 of the Inquiry that existing relationships, arrangements, and exercising schedules allowed the energy sector to activate to support the community. AusNet Services provided proactive support in all tiers of control centres and directly into affected communities.

Despite the energy sector's readiness and capacity to restore services, there was an inability to fully activate this capacity due to response priorities, safety and insufficient pre-existing procedures to authorise essential service workers to access roads and areas that were deemed unsuitable for the broader public.

The sector's focus on response meant that procedures and arrangements in place to facilitate the timely provision of relief services and restoration of essential services were under-developed, untested and not appropriate for the scale of the 2019–20 fires.

Available capacity was not utilised in a timely fashion, despite a willingness from government and private companies for their personnel to receive 'just-in-time' training to safely access firegrounds and use roads not accessible to the public. Responder agencies were stretched in their own capacity and there was little clear guidance around safe escort procedures.

Controllers are responsible for providing permission to enter areas deemed to be unsafe or at heightened risk immediately before or after a fire. As such, they have a duty of care to ensure risks have been suitably mitigated or managed. The protection of life is the driving priority in the decision-making of controllers, and there is a high level of caution applied to allow access to restricted areas – particularly when there is limited visibility of the capability of those requesting access.

Changes have been made to existing JSOPs to ensure greater access allowance for essential service workers (including energy supply and distribution technicians). However, there are opportunities to learn from the 2019–20 fire season to support these procedures with additional training and briefings to provide response decision-makers with a greater level of confidence that those entering the restricted areas are capable of assessing and managing the many risks of working on a fireground.

#### 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.

## 10.4 Roads and transport

The road and transport sector is governed by the *Road Management Act 2004* and the *Local Government Act 1989*.

The Road Management Act establishes the statutory framework for the management of the road network that facilitates the coordination of uses of road reserves for roadways, pathways, infrastructure and similar purposes.<sup>76</sup> It allocates responsibility for the management and coordination of different parts of a road reserve including the roadside.

The Local Government Act establishes the powers of a council in relation to roads in its municipal district. Councils have responsibility for the construction and maintenance of its roads, road deviations and to provide temporary roads. The Local Government Act also specifies powers in relation to road fencing, gates, potholes, and other dangers. It also provides for councils to have the care and management of all public highways vested in council subject to the Road Management Act.<sup>77</sup> These powers are in consideration of other legislation related to roads, emergency management and land tenure.

In the EMMV, DoT is responsible for clearing and restoring major arterial roads, bridges and tunnels during relief and recovery. Where council is the manager of the asset, it has responsibility for the clearance and restoration roads and bridges. Councils typically have responsibility for smaller, local roads. DoT and councils have broader responsibilities for road recovery and resilience (see section 16.5, p 358).

### 10.4.1 Impacts and consequences of road closures

The 2019–20 bushfires impacted road infrastructure, particularly arterial roads in Gippsland and North East Victoria. At the height of the bushfires, over 1400 kilometres of arterial roads were closed, including large sections of the Princes Highway from 30 December 2019 until 4 February 2020 and all links between Victoria and NSW east of Omeo. Significant damage also occurred to local roads managed by councils.

Closures were caused by fire-related damage to roads and roadside infrastructure. Almost 1500 road signs and over 14,000 guideposts were damaged or destroyed by fire, as well as many kilometres of crash barriers and drainage infrastructure.

Roads were also made inaccessible by fallen debris and the presence of hazardous trees along roadsides. As noted in the Phase 1 Inquiry Report, there were ongoing issues with the assessment and management of hazardous trees.

Fire-affected communities were significantly impacted by the extensive and prolonged nature of road closures. The closures left towns and communities isolated for weeks, with residents and visitors unable to leave and relief agencies unable to transport relief supplies by road. The lack of road access prevented essential service workers from accessing energy and telecommunications infrastructure to undertake repairs and restore services. Relief agency personnel were unable to travel to ERCs or isolated communities to provide in-person support and relieve local service providers.

The broader consequences of the road closures were costly from an economic standpoint. The closure of the Princes Highway had significant economic consequences for Victoria as supply routes were disrupted, Tourists were prevented from travel across state borders and businesses were unable to operate as usual.

Individual businesses accrued significant costs in efforts to continue operation. For example, logistics companies were forced to spend hundreds of thousands of dollars on additional fuel and labour costs due to increased travel distances and times associated with the alternative routes.

## 10.4.2 Restoration of road access

In the early stages of relief, road repair and clearance were largely the responsibility of the Incident Controller, with DoT and Regional Roads Victoria (RRV) providing support and advice where possible. Repair and clearance were restricted due to poor road conditions and the large number of hazardous trees along the roadsides. Incident Controllers and road authorities were obliged to ensure the safety of personnel and restricted access until hazardous trees were assessed, felled, and cleared as required.

RRV and DoT worked with the ADF, DELWP, Parks Victoria, VicPol, VICSES and overseas military resources to reopen hundreds of kilometres of fire-impacted roads in East Gippsland and Hume regions. Based on access permissions provided by the Incident Controllers, RRV undertook essential works to rebuild infrastructure including repairing damage to the road surface, reinstalling guideposts, replacing curve alignment signs and checking that structures including bridges and retaining walls were safe. RRV partnered with council to provide resources to assist with the assessment of roads in need of repair. RRV was paid for this service and the personnel supplied were overseen by council.

Roles and responsibilities for the restoration of roads and road infrastructure are complex. The Incident Controller maintains responsibility until all roads are deemed safe and responsibility is transferred to DoT or councils. As IGEM observed in the Phase 1 Inquiry Report, there are opportunities to review roles, responsibilities, and procedures to ensure consistency across regions and shifts (Inquiry 1 Report, Observation 6.10).

Based on stakeholder accounts of road restoration, the main issues appeared to be in the management of hazardous trees and the level of restricted access imposed while trees were assessed, felled, and cleared. Due to safety concerns, access along roads was restricted to residents, essential service workers and relief workers. Responder agencies and the ADF provided escorted travel during road closures, however the lack of access inhibited progress for many other relief activities and delayed the restoration of other essential services.

Even as the integrity of the road system improved, restrictions remained in place and there were inconsistent interpretations of access allowances for various categories and classifications of relief providers. Essential service personnel and relief providers were often seeking to access roads under the assumption they were exempt from road usage restrictions, however, were at times prevented from passing Traffic Management Points.

IGEM acknowledges that personnel safety is of the utmost importance and recognises that Incident Controllers must consider safety in their classification of the roads and associated restrictions in access. However, the lack of consistency in the application of restrictions is problematic.

The EMC approved changes to JSOP J03.10 - Traffic Management in December 2020, with changes coming into effect from 11 January 2021. These changes make it possible for the Incident Controller to authorise road access to residents, essential service personnel and other relief providers.

The Incident Controller's authorisation of access to restricted roads (Categories A-C) is still subject to personal judgment in consideration of the risks and those requesting access. While this is completely appropriate given the unpredictable nature of emergencies and safety considerations that must be made, there is a potential to provide greater evidence to the Incident Controller to allow a more informed decision to be made.

As previously noted, essential service providers were willing to participate in training and exercising before an emergency or participate in just in time training to ensure their personnel were well-prepared to use restricted roads and able to assess safety hazards. They were also willing to join escorted convoys and work with responder agencies to ensure safe and appropriate access onto fire grounds.

Relief agencies were also open to working with responder agencies to facilitate access into dangerous areas following a bushfire. However, there was a lower level of tolerance for risk in many of these agencies given the nature of the relief services being provided and a lack of familiarity with the environment. For example, government departments were not comfortable deploying Melbourne-based staff who typically work in office environments to navigate areas still at risk of fire impact and isolation.

As with the restoration of other essential services, there was a willingness from service providers to address disruptions in a timely manner and assume a higher level of risk in order to efficiently restore road access. A lack of operational procedures and planning with responder agencies prior to the emergency meant that this willing capacity could not be effectively engaged due to safety concerns.

#### 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.

## 10.5 Food and grocery resupply

### 10.5.1 Arrangements

The food and grocery sector provides Victorian communities and businesses with food and groceries that are fresh, refrigerated, and packaged.<sup>78</sup> It is regulated by both the Australian and Victorian governments (Figure 12, p 229). Legislation and policies include:

- the *Food Act 1984*
- the *Meat Industry Act 1993*
- the *Dairy Act 2000*
- the Australia New Zealand Food Standards Code.

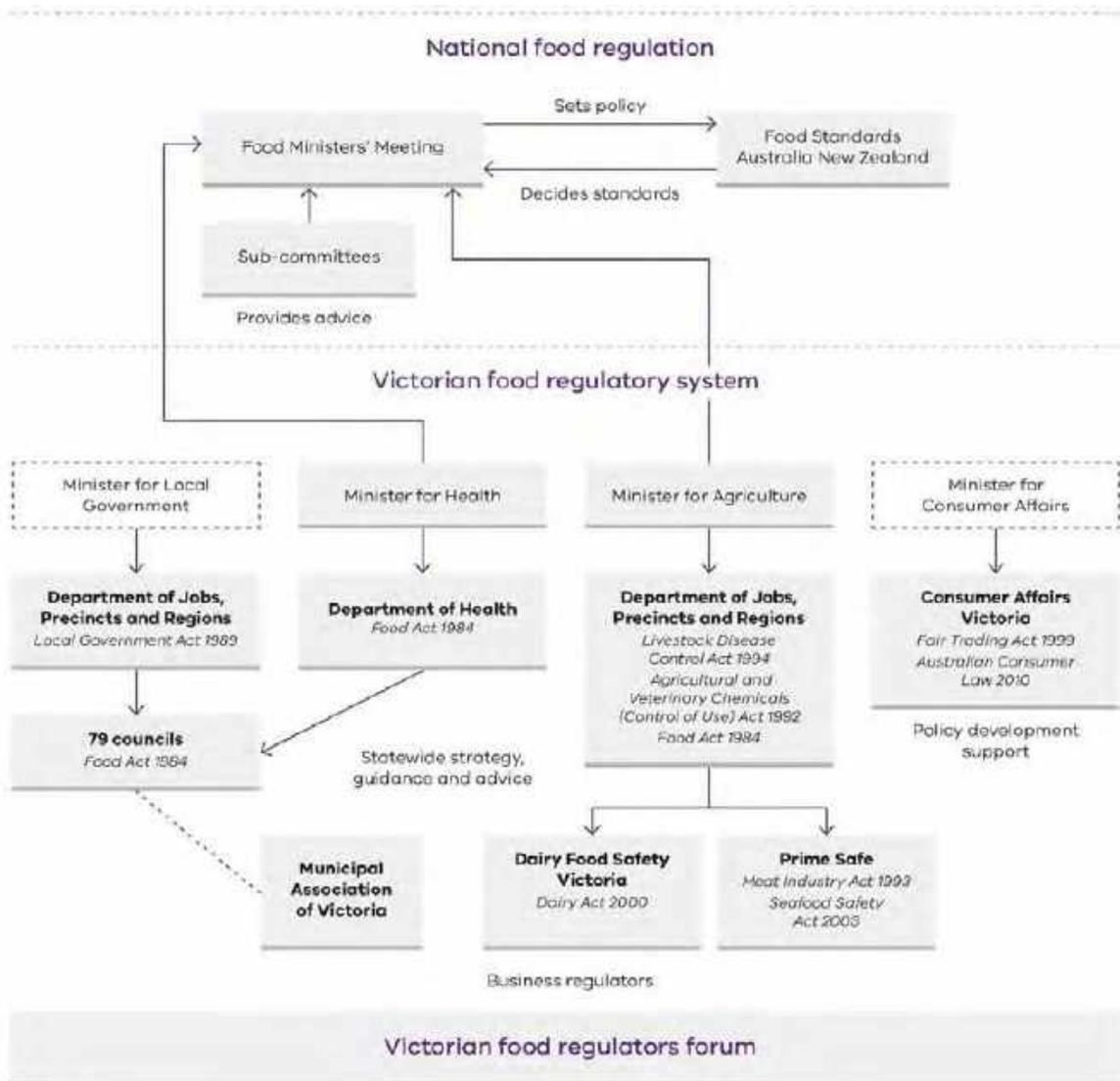
The EMMV lists DJPR as the lead agency for supporting continuity in food and grocery logistics by providing strategic and expert advice to government and emergency agencies regarding impacts on supply.

Food and grocery supply interacts closely with the relief activity of food and drinking water provision. Section 10.6 (p 233) describes Red Cross' coordination responsibilities to providing food and water in emergency settings and how it intersects closely with DJPR's role in coordinating food and grocery supply logistics. In recognition of the close alignment of these relief responsibilities, DJPR and Red Cross met to discuss the differences and determine roles and responsibilities under the EMMV ahead of the 2019–20 fire season.

The food and grocery sector is also included in the CIR framework. DJPR is the portfolio department for the food and grocery sector, and it chairs the Food and Grocery SRN, which was established in 2016. Membership of the network comprises major supermarkets and has recently expanded to include freight and logistic operators, and the Red Cross. The aim of this network is to build resilience, share information and work together on common concerns.<sup>79 78</sup>

SRNs are responsible for developing an annual Sector Resilience Plan. The Food and Grocery Sector Resilience Plan 2020-21 identifies emergency risks faced by the sector and outlines appropriate measures to address those risks.<sup>80</sup> Sector Resilience Plans have a strategic focus and maintain communication between the government and a given sector; however they are not designed to guide operations during an emergency.

Members of the Food and Grocery SRN actively participate in the Commonwealth's TISN Food and Grocery Sector Group. This group has a broader national focus on threats, vulnerabilities, and risk mitigation strategies for the food and grocery sector. The Food and Grocery SRN complements the work of the Australian Government's TISN Food and Grocery Sector Group. TISN Group met five times via teleconference during the fires.

**Figure 12.** Food Safety Regulatory Framework (Source: Department of Health <sup>81</sup>)

### 10.5.2 Supporting food and grocery supply during and after the fires

The 2019–20 fire season created several challenges for the continuation of food and grocery supply to fire-affected communities.

The relationships and sharing of knowledge were instrumental in organising food and grocery supply into isolated towns.<sup>82</sup> DJPR worked closely with EMV, Red Cross and VicPol to coordinate the supply logistics.<sup>78</sup>

At the SCC, DJPR's State Duty Officer actively liaised with Red Cross and the broader SRRT. DJPR had a food and grocery representative participate in the SRRT, who eventually became a dedicated EMLO for the sector. The food and grocery EMLO helped with consistency of reporting sectoral issues to the SRRM.

DJPR experienced limitations in capacity and resourcing in their efforts to support food and grocery resupply, particularly at the incident and regional tiers. DJPR was able to take advantage of existing relationships with regional and incident tier contacts to gather local intelligence to support decision-making across the sector. The relationship between DJPR and the Red Cross was particularly important. Earlier preparation between the two organisations proved beneficial as it supported greater awareness of roles and responsibilities and cemented productive working relationships.

DJPR gathered intelligence from multiple sources to inform its provision of relief. Staff at RCCs, ICCs and councils assisted DJPR in providing local knowledge of food and grocery businesses in fire-affected areas, as many lived within the community or knew the area well. DJPR also used the TISN group teleconferences to gather intelligence in relation to national matters and cross-border issues. National food and grocery distributor Metcash provided information about what was happening in regional supermarkets and the teleconferences were also used to relay information to other supermarkets.

Red Cross and DJPR worked towards a common goal of ensuring food was accessible to fire-affected communities. DJPR and Red Cross identified a need to balance immediate relief requirements and support the restoration of local businesses including supermarkets. However, local business owners expressed concern about the amount of free food available at the relief centres and the negative impact it was having on their business.

---

*So much food and welfare came into towns that local stores lost trade, had to lay off workers*

*Community member*

---

### **Delivery of food and grocery to impacted businesses**

Food and grocery store owners were inundated with calls from various departments, agencies, and other organisations. Businesses were overwhelmed and confused by the number of calls, changing contact people and various offers of assistance.

To streamline communication and offers of assistance DJPR became the main point of contact with the support of Metcash. DJPR compiled a list of possible stores impacted by the fires using the internet and social media as no database existed. After contact was made and relief needs determined DJPR, in collaboration with other departments and Metcash, arranged the supplies and identified alternative methods transport.

The extensive and prolonged closure of arterial and local roads across Victoria made it logistically challenging as supply routes were severely affected. When roads were accessible under restricted conditions, food and grocery deliveries were often prevented from passing Traffic Management Points, especially private operators.

As road closures impacted normal supply routes, alternative arrangements were necessary – DJPR and Red Cross used CAOG to coordinate airdrops to resupply food and grocery businesses with fresh fruit, vegetables, milk, and non-perishable items.

Due to unfavourable weather and smoke, some coordinated airdrops were cancelled or turned around. The ADF successfully delivered the first airdrop on 8 January 2020, with a regular delivery program established to assist in supplying food and groceries thereafter. The airdrops were critical in ensuring food and grocery businesses were able to continue operating. As an example, without the food delivery the two supermarkets in Mallacoota's town centre would likely have closed.

To overcome logistical issues the State Supply Route Proposal was shared with the SCC and included a mapping system outlining essential service outages and road closures. It identified delivery supply solutions from 23 January 2020 to some of the isolated communities along the Princes Highway and roads going north. The mapping system was a collaborative effort from DJPR and departmental agencies.

However, the ADF lacked the logistical equipment required to transport perishable food by road.<sup>82</sup> Metcash was able to identify logistical solutions and were assisted by Dyers Distribution to meet varying needs such refrigerated and frozen goods, and it was licenced to carry foods requiring a Prime Safe certification.<sup>82</sup> Other logistics companies and individuals also assisted with food and grocery supply, with many assuming the cost of transport.

The sector worked collaboratively to arrange delivery of food and groceries to affected communities. However, there was a lack of systems or processes to determine if food and groceries were successfully delivered. There are reports from community and businesses that resupply deliveries did not contain sufficient or useful items, some items were missing from orders and deliveries were made to the wrong location.

DJPR continued to support the resupply of grocery, business and fuel retailers until road access was re-established on 4 February 2020. Disruptions to road access and prolonged road closures significantly affected the resupply of food and grocery throughout the 2019–20 Victorian season.<sup>82</sup>

### 10.5.3 Effectiveness

#### Relationships

The food and grocery sector's role under the EMMV had never been activated to the extent required during the 2019–20 fire season, however DJPR noted that eight months prior to the fires, this sector had reviewed its roles and responsibilities.

The primary Victorian planning document for the food and grocery sector is the Sector Resilience Plan. It is important to note that whilst the SRP is the primary planning document, it is not operationally inclined, as it has a strategic focus and maintains communication between the government and sector.

A major theme in the Food and Grocery Supply Logistics Sector Resilience Plan 2018–19 was to 'develop and mature relationships within the sector, with dependencies and with government'.<sup>79</sup> Initiatives included reviewing the SRN memberships and participation in joint exercises to improve response capabilities and understand vulnerabilities.<sup>79</sup>

Stakeholder evidence suggests that the relationships built prior to the 2019–20 fire season were pivotal, especially as most the sector's operational procedures and protocols were developed during the fire season itself. Likewise, organisations involved in food relief had a clear vision of overall community and humanitarian needs and relief principles.

Government, non-government relief agencies and private entities from the food and grocery sector went above and beyond to resupply towns and communities, exceeding their defined roles and responsibilities to address community needs. Metcash for instance, assisted other stores (typically business competitors) by strategically coordinating supplies into isolated areas. The work done by DJPR to contact individual food and grocery businesses was not based on defined arrangements but an identified need to collate intelligence of community needs and provide a single point of contact for individual businesses.

The food and grocery sector were adaptive to the needs of local businesses and tailored deliveries based on the stores' requirements. This support continued until normal supply routes were re-established. This was achieved under difficult circumstances with many operational arrangements being developed and implemented during the fires.

#### Planning and roles

While the sector worked collaboratively and focused on community needs, there was a lack of operational arrangements to guide decision-making. The specific roles and responsibilities of organisations involved in the sector were not clear and there was a lack of information describing how the food and grocery sector should interact with the emergency management sector, particularly during an active fire response period.

The food and grocery sector found it difficult to determine how it should interact with the emergency management sector and its relief coordination structures more broadly. For example, the food and grocery sector had difficulty establishing what incidents or issues were local, regional, or state responsibilities and suggests that there needs to be clearer role descriptions and triggers for escalation.

---

*I look at some of it and go, you know, we had one area particularly impacted by supermarkets and it's like well, is that actually a state level incident or is that a regional level incident?*

*Stakeholder*

---

The involvement of CAOG and the ADF, while extremely valuable, unusual, and created an additional level of uncertainty in decision-making, authorisations, and tasking.

DJPR attested that the SERC was integral in implementing food and grocery relief arrangements. Representatives from the food and grocery sector commented that the separation of relief and recovery made it easier to focus on the time-critical relief activities, logistical challenges, and overall community relief needs.

Stakeholders noted consistently that the significant isolation of towns and communities posed problems to food and grocery resupply that were not considered in existing coordination arrangements and plans.

The EMMV provides a basic description of arrangements, roles, and responsibilities but without experience, exercising or supporting doctrine, it can be ambiguous and confusing to some. While organisations worked together to address community needs, the lack of operational plans and procedures led to examples of duplication and inefficiency.

For instance, some stakeholders were unclear as to who was responsible for supplying pharmaceuticals into pharmacies located within fire-affected communities. Representatives from the food and grocery sector decided to reach out to these businesses, despite recognising that other providers may be doing the same.

Likewise, there seemed to be no comprehensive strategy to determine key resupply priorities and locations, and coordinate ADF, government-sanctioned and private deliveries. This led to the delivery of grocery items that were not considered essential, while other groceries sat in storage awaiting delivery. As an example, pallets of alcohol were delivered to one business in a township that was still awaiting fresh fruit, vegetables, and medicine.

The sector reflected that roles and responsibilities were not clearly defined across jurisdictions. Given the significant amount of fire activity and community isolation in border regions of Victoria and NSW, there was often a need to resupply Victorian businesses largely using NSW roads. However, at times there was limited visibility of NSW road closures, projected conditions, and fire behaviour, which made it difficult for Victorian lead agencies to efficiently determine viable supply routes. Stakeholder evidence indicates that coordinating with other jurisdictions may help in assisting with food and grocery supply in future emergencies.<sup>82</sup>

The interconnected nature of essential services and critical infrastructure had consequences for the food and grocery sector. The storage and transportation of food and groceries relies heavily on the energy sector.<sup>79</sup> Due to energy disruption fire-affected communities were unable to control food storage temperatures and ensure food remained safe for human consumption. Businesses that faced prolonged disruptions without access to back-up generators needed to dispose of food and other perishable items requiring cold storage.

In locations that were able to maintain power supply, many regional food and grocery businesses had limited appropriate space and equipment to store and handle large quantities of fresh, chilled, or frozen products. This reduced the quantity of perishable items able to be delivered. In addition, with road closures and smoke making both land and air transport difficult, there was no guarantee of regular food and grocery deliveries, and resupply drops needed to ensure a greater quantity of non-perishable items was included.

Disruptions to telecommunications also caused difficulties in ascertaining community needs and making arrangements for resupply. DJPR representatives spent a significant amount of time calling businesses to determine their resupply needs and ability to receive perishable and non-perishable goods.

This task was a time-consuming, labour-intensive process that at times produced unreliable intelligence as business-owners did not answer or could not provide accurate information regarding community needs. Furthermore, many businesses experienced telecommunications disruptions, which made it difficult to determine whether a business was operating and what resupplies were most critical.

By working together, the food and grocery sector overcame many logistical challenges from the 2019–20 Victorian fires, ensuring fire-affected communities had timely access to essential food and groceries.

Many examples of positive relationships facilitating collaborative relief activities were observed between government departments, major community service organisations such as Red Cross and FoodBank, sector representatives and individual businesses.

#### 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.

### Debriefing in the food and grocery sector

Given the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic and the urgent response as the fires were being contained, many government departments and sectors involved in the 2019–20 fire season did not have the time or resources to engage in comprehensive debriefing activities. However, the food and grocery sector was able to conduct some debriefing at state and national levels.

In Victoria, the Food and Grocery SRN acknowledged a lack of operational procedures and protocols for major disruptions to food and grocery supply in its Sector Resilience Plan 2020–21. The SRN has committed to further developing, refining, and testing SOPs.<sup>78</sup>

DJPR has committed to refining the formalised Food and Grocery EMLO role to represent the department and sector at the SCC. Training for this dedicated function has been extended to supermarket representatives.<sup>82</sup> This model of involving private sector and business representatives in the SCC was successfully implemented by DJPR and DELWP for energy, water, and telecommunications.

In March 2020, the TISN and the sector produced a mapping product with all major supermarkets and distribution centre locations. The sector notes that it would be beneficial to create an emergency contact list for store owners.<sup>83</sup>

Relief services are integral to the emergency management arrangements. An amended version of the JSOP J03.10 - Traffic Management has now been endorsed by EMV and recognises access for critical infrastructure sectors such as food and grocery.

## 10.6 Drinking water

DHHS (now DH) administers the *Safe Drinking Water Act 2003* and associated regulations to protect Victorians from water quality hazards and is responsible for administering the safe drinking water regulatory framework.<sup>84</sup>

Victoria's drinking water quality is managed under the Safe Drinking Water Regulatory Framework which aims to ensure drinking water is consistent, reliable, safe and of good quality for the Victorian communities.<sup>84</sup> It incorporates both the Safe Drinking Water Act and the Safe Drinking Water Regulations 2015. The framework is also consistent with Australian drinking water guidelines and supports the *Health (Fluoridation) Act 1973*.<sup>84</sup>

The Food Act and the Guidelines for Drinking (Potable) Water Transport in Victoria are also relevant to drinking water supply and quality.

DELWP is the leading portfolio department for water and wastewater services and chairs the Water SRN. The Water SRN consists of government representatives, key industry members, and water corporation representatives and is responsible for developing an annual Sector Resilience Plan.

The Water Sector Resilience Plan stated that prior to 2019–20 fire season, DELWP implemented an extensive capability program which involved the training of 200 DELWP and water corporation staff in water emergency management. A pilot project was also undertaken to develop an AIIMS-based IMT training package that was tailored specifically to water corporations. East Gippsland Water trained 40 personnel and implemented the training package ahead of the 2019–20 bushfires.<sup>85</sup>

Leading into the fire season, DELWP's Water and Catchments Group had prepared emergency response plans and business continuity plans in partnership with water corporations. Water corporations tested these response plans by participating in a series of exercises. Code Red arrangements were also reviewed within the sector.

North East Water had undertaken water resource planning prior to and leading into the fire season due to significant drought periods.

Key stakeholders have produced guidelines and factsheets for communities reliant on private water supplies and how to prevent rainwater tank contamination during an emergency. Owners of a private water tanks are responsible for replacing water regardless of the situation. Where needed, councils may provide advice to property owners in relation to maintaining and reconnecting to water tanks before and after fires (see Wellington Shire Council's 'Protecting your tank water – It's up to you!'; Figure 13, p 235).

In 2009 DHHS released *Making sure your private water supply is safe – rainwater*. In the aftermath of an emergency, it refers readers to their council's environmental health officer for advice on how to best treat the water or for information about having water tested. It also discusses boiling contaminated water or topping tanks with carted water.

Water corporations are responsible for providing a range of water services to customers in their service areas and are constituted under s 163 of the *Water Act 1989*.<sup>85</sup> The EMMV lists water corporations as the lead agency responsible for providing reticulated (mains) drinking water to households and the restoration of this reticulated water supply post emergency. In co-lead with DELWP, water corporations restore wastewater management systems for reticulated systems; DHHS and local council are listed as supporting agencies, with DHHS providing advice about quality of drinking water; and local councils assisting with replacement of essential water used in bushfire fighting.

The Minister for Water appoints an independent board to oversee each water corporation is adhering to legislation and sets organisational objectives and performance targets that align with government policies.<sup>85</sup> The minister then reports to Parliament on the performance of businesses within the water sector.

Councils may also coordinate emergency relief arrangements for communities not connected to reticulated (mains) water supplies.

DELWP is listed in the EMMV as the lead agency for coordinating relief drinking water to households when there is a disruption to water services. Water corporations, councils, VICSES and PV are key support agencies.<sup>85</sup>

Water sector staff were integrated across all levels of emergency response arrangements during the 2019–20 fire season. DELWP's Water Services Specialist is a technical role providing expert advice to incident controllers at all levels. The specialist also assists preparation of maps, briefs, situation updates, risk and consequence assessments, inputs to incident or operational planning and communicates with water corporations, experts, and consultants.<sup>85</sup>

DELWP also has a Water Duty Officer – a dedicated 24/7 point of contact for water corporations to report incidents and emergencies.<sup>85</sup> With one phone number and one email account, it gives water corporations consistency with reporting information through to DELWP's State Agency Commander, its Executives, Secretary and the minister's office.<sup>85</sup>

Figure 13. Protecting your tank water – It's up to you! (Wellington Shire Council)



### When bushfires threaten Gippsland

Follow these steps to prevent water tank contamination

- Take action anytime bushfires start in Gippsland — ash clouds can be a threat even when the fire is far away.
- Divert or disconnect your water tank's catchment pipe. Cover any open inlets, i.e. the strainer.
- If you are away have someone organised to disconnect your tank for you.
- Monitor the bushfire — if there is ash on your car, it will be on your roof too!
- Leave the tank isolated until the fire is out.
- Wait for rain to wash your roof and flush the collection system — check the runoff is clear of ash.
- Reconnect collection pipe or switch off your diverter.
- Check water before you drink.
- Tank water is a private water supply and owners are responsible for replacing water even if its something out of their control.

For further information on diverting your water tank contact your local Registered Plumber or <https://www2.health.vic.gov.au/about/publications/Factsheets/after-a-fire-private-drinking-water-and-water-tank-safety>

### 10.6.1 Reticulated water supply to communities during the 2019–20 fire season

The fires affected water quality by contaminants such as burnt materials, soil, nutrients, sedimentation, and debris entering tributaries, storages, and water tanks.<sup>85</sup> Water treatment plants were placed under pressure to process raw water supplies for towns connected to reticulated water supplies.

Harrierville, Mount Beauty, Tawonga South, and Tawonga communities received messaging regarding reducing water consumption. Local demand exceeded the towns' supply and as a result, were hours away from losing their water supply. Water specialist situation reports confirmed that this messaging was effective, as households began to reduce their water consumption and treated water supply was replenished soon after.

Water corporations and DHHS issued boil water notices for areas including Buchan, Omeo, Cudgewa, and Mallacoota. Notices were issued for two days in Mallacoota, five days in Cudgewa, and 18 days in Omeo and Buchan:

---

*So when you actually add it up, it's really really quite small compared to the significant event that they were dealing with, and that kind of - it's one of those, you look back and think, oh, my god, how did they actually do that? It's just an enormous response from them. And I think the other thing is, whenever there is a 'boil water' notice or water supply is disrupted, emergency bottled water is always provided to the communities. So, it's not like the community didn't have water; they just weren't able to drink out of the tap.*

*Stakeholder*

---

Potable water was supplied to impacted communities by sea, air, and road. Situation reports noted that Buchan Recreation Reserve was supplied two water dispensing tanks and had bottled water available. In Mallacoota, a community water tank was installed, and bottled water was available at several locations.

Lower Murray Water donated a large quantity of bottled water to fire-affected communities.

Early in the response, mutual aid arrangements within the water sector were established, allowing resources to be shared. For example, machinery and equipment were deployed from all over the state, including generators to help supply power to water treatment plants. Waste-water treatment operators from Western Water went to Cann River to assist with workforce capacity. This is a prime example of water companies working together to support both East Gippsland Water and North East Water with continuity in drinking water supply to fire-impacted communities.

Traffic management points also caused issues for critical infrastructure contractors and water supply who were unable to travel to affected townships or transport replacement equipment in a timely manner.

### 10.6.2 Non-reticulated water

Towns not connected to a water supply usually rely on other storage facilities such as rainwater tanks. During the fires, tanked water was also impacted by contaminants from the fire area.

Councils are responsible for providing potable water to non-reticulated areas during an emergency. However, given the significant demands on councils during the fire season, it was decided that DELWP would oversee this responsibility.

A request was made to South East Water to act as the emergency relief coordinating corporation and was authorised to act on DELWP's behalf. Within four hours of the request, South East Water – which was not directly responsible for any of the impacted areas – was able to create a dedicated hotline that could be accessed from anywhere in the state for fire-affected residents needing emergency relief water.

South East Water also contracted water carters to flush private tanks and deliver water to households. The request was made on 8 January 2020 and by 10 January, 14 households had each received 5000 litres of water. This included the prioritisation of Sarsfield and Bruthen residents who were still under threat from fires. By 6 February water had been provided to 230 state residents, and by program's end water had been delivered to 488 households across the North East and East Gippsland.

DELWP has since formalised the relief and drinking water procedure which outlines the process for supplying emergency relief water to households in fire-affected areas. This procedure also plans for tank water decontamination to meet the needs of communities who are not connected to reticulated/mains water supplies.

### 10.6.3 Effectiveness

---

*I went and attended a town meeting in Buchan with East Gippsland Water, and the town community was just so blown away with what they had been able to deliver particularly when you drive into that township. It's just logistically incredibly difficult to make sure that they could continue to provide service into that town. Yeah, really significant event for them to be able to manage.*

*Stakeholder*

---

Stakeholder evidence supports that the preparation done prior to the fires was beneficial. The Water SRP 2020-21 stated that '...the Victorian water sector has shown great resilience and commitment to service delivery this year, sometimes during extreme circumstances. The benefits of well-prepared and practiced emergency response plans, a collaborative Water Sector Resilience Network and effective mutual aid arrangements to support needs across the sector were well demonstrated'.

A key principle is that relief and response agencies communicate clear, relevant, timely and tailored information and advice to communities about available services, through multiple appropriate channels.

Stakeholders noted that the feedback regarding the emergency relief drinking water program had been very positive. Throughout the Inquiry, IGEM heard some community accounts contradicting this view, with drinking water being delivered months after the fires and a lack of information for communities in relation to water tank cleaning and refilling, and domestic water supply.

Stakeholder evidence indicates that roles and responsibilities were clearly defined. Additionally, support was given to those who were unable to meet demands in a timely manner. A clear example is DELWP assisting councils, and water corporations from outside the affected regions sharing resources to support East Gippsland Water and North East Water.

Water sector staff were integrated across all levels of the emergency response arrangements. This was demonstrated by the presence of DELWP's Water Services Specialists and water corporations' representatives in RCCs and the SCC.

#### 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.

## 10.7 Restoration of essential services

In all of the essential service sectors assessed during this Inquiry, there were clear benefits from investments made in developing relationships across the sectors through pre-season initiatives. These included inter-agency training, preparation, and participation in SRNs.

These relationships helped facilitate timely and needs-focused restoration of essential services, particularly in cases where the operational plans and procedures were not sufficiently developed to guide relief activities. The relationships between organisations supported a greater level of intelligence gathering and sharing, laid the foundations for common goals in the provision of relief and allowed individuals to become acquainted with unfamiliar parts of the broader emergency management sector.

The inter-connected nature of critical infrastructure and essential services was an inherent limitation for essential service providers. The disruption of essential services left towns physically isolated and communities with limited reliable means to communicate with responder agencies, relief agencies, governments and their friends and family. Particularly in relation to roads, energy and telecommunications, the prolonged disruption of each service in isolation had compounding effects for the restoration of all essential services and the provision of relief more broadly.

Each individual sector continues to invest in resilience activities through participation in Victorian and national resilience networks. However, there remain vulnerabilities in the provision of essential services due to the geography and remoteness of communities and network limitations.

Infrastructure upgrades are often delivered and funded by long-term Australian Government and/or private company investments, with Victorian emergency management interests balanced across national and inter-state emergency and security needs, commercial considerations, and political drivers.

The inter-connected nature of essential services, and the jurisdictional and commercial limitations in place, restrict the Victorian government from mandating service upgrades and operational procedures that would improve coordination in the restoration of essential services and increase resilience. 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.

As discussed in Chapter 7, the operational plans and procedures for the provision of relief are not conducive for well-coordinated relief. This also applies to operational plans and procedures for essential services. In many cases, the sectors used existing operational plans – or developed arrangements during the event. Changes already underway in developing the SEMP and ensuring greater focus on relief will support a greater level of integration of essential services in relief planning and operations.

### OBSERVATION 10.4

There are opportunities to improve the extent to which essential services are considered in Victorian emergency relief planning.



## 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.

“

*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.

“

*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.

“

*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 (see section 14.3.2 p 306).

## 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.

## Chapter 12

Recovery governance



Recovery following an emergency is a prolonged phase of emergency management and evolves over time as government, communities, businesses, families and individuals come to terms with the immediate impacts of an emergency and start to rebuild. As mentioned in Chapter 2, recovery work happens before, during and after an emergency with governance and planning taking place in peace-time, and incident-specific recovery planning and tasking commencing as soon as the likely impacts of an emergency can be anticipated.

There are strategic, operational and ongoing aspects of recovery. In this report, strategic aspects of recovery include the ongoing strategic governance and foundational recovery arrangements in place to guide all Victorian recovery efforts.

Operational recovery refers to the immediate planning, decision-making and tasking that occurs in relation to the recovery for a specific emergency. These activities typically occur concurrently with readiness, response and relief as the immediate impacts and consequences of an emergency become known.

Ongoing recovery refers to the prolonged period of rebuilding, repair and adjustment based on the impacts and consequences of emergencies. This type of recovery involves numerous organisations, all levels of government, communities, businesses, families and individuals. Governance for ongoing recovery is relatively de-centralised, as communities and individuals are encouraged to lead their own recovery priorities, with the support of government and other organisations.

The existing strategic governance arrangements for recovery are largely coupled with those of relief and described in Chapter 3. The strategic governance arrangements established through the Resilient Recovery Strategy and BRV are discussed in this chapter. This chapter also includes commentary on the operational and ongoing recovery governance arrangements in place that influenced the early recovery period following the 2019–20 fires.

IGEM notes that during this period of early recovery, the SEMP became established as the foundational guidance for all phases of emergency management. It replaced the SERRP, which guided initial recovery planning and activities. As appropriate, distinctions between the two arrangements have been noted.

In Victoria, recovery is conceptualised across four recovery environments, that collectively include fourteen functional areas and a range of activities. Figure 14 outlines the four environments of recovery under the SERRP and the corresponding functional areas and coordinating agencies.<sup>2</sup>

**Figure 14.** Recovery environments and functional areas (Source: Reproduced from SERRP; Australian Institute of Disaster Resilience, Community Recovery Handbook<sup>2</sup>)



The following chapters of this report (Chapters 12–20) describe the recovery planning and activities that have occurred under each of these environments, noting that the establishment of BRV has resulted in minor amendments to the naming of environments to become lines of recovery, and adjustments to the name of each line of recovery. BRV also established the Aboriginal Culture and Healing Line of Recovery, which is discussed in Chapter 20. These amendments and additions were made specifically for the 2019–20 bushfires.

## 12.1 Resilient Recovery Strategy

EMV led the development of the Resilient Recovery Strategy in consultation with the sector, community organisations, businesses and communities for several years before its endorsement in November 2019. The initial discussion paper was released in 2017 and was significantly revised based on stakeholder consultation. The strategy had initially been proposed as a more comprehensive model of recovery and proposed enabling operational arrangements. Based on consultation, it was scaled back to become a more foundational strategy to underpin future recovery strategy, resourcing and planning.

The Resilient Recovery Strategy aims to provide a shared vision for those supporting recovery and articulates agreed outcomes and strategic priorities for the sector. The strategy aims to improve the partnership approach to recovery and empower councils and the broader recovery workforce.

The strategy draws upon national and international evidence and frameworks as well as broad engagement with those impacted by emergencies. It promotes a focus on community-led recovery and community outcomes as the driving priorities for recovery.

The strategy outlines four outcomes to guide the government's recovery programs and services:

1. Victorians are safe, resilient and healthy
2. Victorians are connected to people, places and culture
3. Victoria has thriving regions and a healthy environment
4. Government responses and services are people-centred, adaptable and sustainable.

To support the delivery of these outcomes, extensive consultation was undertaken with government departments, councils, community, non-government organisations, responder agencies, academics and others. Through this consultation key themes were identified which led to the development of the following four strategic priorities:

1. Deliver people and community-centred recovery
2. Strengthen recovery through better emergency management planning
3. Streamlined and flexible recovery system
4. Support the recovery workforce.

The strategy also provides an overview of Victoria's recovery model and outlines several high-level actions against each of the identified priority areas. These actions are strategic in nature rather than operational but also aim to improve the operational structure and recovery services within the sector.

IGEM notes that the development of the strategy took significant time and resources and there is uncertainty across the sector on its status and implementation. The current strategy does not operationalise recovery arrangements for early recovery and does not identify roles or responsibilities for operational recovery.

The Eastern Victorian Fires 2019–20 State Recovery Plan (State Recovery Plan) was developed with the intention to complement the strategy and the outcomes of both documents are well-aligned (see section 12.3.2, p 259).

## 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.

## 12.2 Operational governance

Authority and accountability for operational governance and leadership in recovery are provided under the 2013 EM Act. The 2013 EM Act and 1986 EM Act have been refined through further legislative amendments introduced under the EMLA Act 2018. The SERRP provided a description of roles and responsibilities in recovery and guided the sector's overall approach to recovery during the 2019–20 fires and in the months that followed. However, BRV's roles and responsibilities were not included under the SERRP, and significant work was required to establish, refine and clarify the recovery arrangements for the 2019–20 bushfires.

The EMC is responsible for the coordination of agencies with recovery responsibilities and is supported by the SRRM.<sup>87</sup> The SRRM is responsible for a range of initiatives including the coordination of resources, information sharing, recovery messaging and leading the state transition from response to recovery. The SRRM provides operational leadership for recovery within the SCC and works with the SRC and other functional leads to ensure recovery priorities are considered in response activities. The SRRM role was later replaced by the SReC and SREC under the SEMP.

The SRRM is supported by the SRRT to coordinate relief and recovery at the state level. The SRRT includes government agencies and partner agencies including WorkSafe, VCCEM, Red Cross, MAV and the Salvation Army. The SRRT is also supported by the Director, Relief and Recovery, EMV.

The SRRM is a rostered position, with a similar rostering arrangement to the SRC and other operational leadership positions. The incumbent SRRM works on a four-day rotation and the role is typically filled by EMV and responder agency personnel but can be drawn from across government.

DHHS is responsible for regional recovery coordination and councils have recovery coordination responsibilities at the incident or local level. At the regional level, DHHS appoint a Regional Recovery Coordinator and councils activate the MRM role.

All tiers of recovery coordination are required to share information and the state and regional levels provide oversight and support for the regional and incident/local tier respectively. The Regional Recovery Coordinator works closely with the SRRM to share relevant information with councils.

Councils can escalate some recovery responsibilities for regional or state tier coordination for more complex emergencies.<sup>88</sup> The escalation results in government coordinating recovery services at the regional or state level to support councils' delivery of recovery objectives. The escalation from local to regional to state under the EMMV (and the SEMP) is based on the following principles:

- wherever possible relief and recovery coordination should remain at the local level, supported by regional and state-based activities as required
- escalation builds on existing local arrangements, rather than replacing them
- responsibility is retained locally, but is aided by additional support
- specific relief and recovery activities within recovery functional areas or relief and recovery coordination may be escalated
- the escalation of specific relief and recovery activities does not necessitate the escalation of recovery coordination.<sup>88</sup>

Council CEOs are required under the SEMP to appoint one or more MRMs, and they work with the council MERO (now MEMO) to plan for local relief and recovery requirements, in consultation with response agencies. They can also request assistance from the DHHS Regional Recovery Coordinator to support the functional areas of recovery.<sup>89</sup>

At the time of the fires, the MRM was not a legislated position, although all affected councils had MRMs. With the enactment of the EMLA Act 2018, the MRM role is now a legislated council-based emergency management position. In many councils, the MRM position is not a fulltime role, with many splitting their time between other business as usual roles.

Regional Recovery Coordinators are responsible for maintaining recovery plans at the regional tier and developing incident-specific recovery plans as soon as the impacts of an imminent or current emergency can be anticipated.

At all levels of recovery, there are lead agencies and defined responsibilities. The Regional Recovery Coordinator is responsible for ensuring lead agencies have appropriate intelligence and direction to support affected communities in recovery. This includes coordinating secondary impact data collected by councils, activation of arrangements to support recovery activities and chairing recovery meetings as applicable at each level of coordination.

Councils' role in local recovery coordination is extensive and they are the lead agency for many relief and recovery activities. In the Councils in Emergencies report, councils reported a sufficient level of capability in recovery coordination. However, this contrasted with the general findings of the report. For example, there was acknowledgment across councils that there was limited capacity to deliver all recovery responsibilities concurrently with response and relief obligations, particularly for prolonged or complex emergencies.<sup>24</sup>

During and after an emergency, councils are responsible for activating municipal or other recovery committees, chaired by the MRM. These committees also meet throughout the year to develop recovery plans and ensure appropriate liaison with regional recovery structures and organisations.

For significant emergencies where the capability of the council to coordinate relief and recovery is likely to be exceeded, the MRM may prepare a post-incident relief and recovery plan to describe the arrangements for relief and recovery coordination, expected recovery needs, capacity constraints and recovery support required.<sup>89</sup>

The Incident Controllers at each level are responsible for developing a plan to transition arrangements from response to recovery with inputs from stakeholders including recovery coordinators.

### 12.2.1 Operational recovery during the 2019–20 fires

The SERRP aims to support the collaboration and coordination between individuals, communities, non-government organisations, businesses, all levels of government and other partners in recovery. It defines the roles and responsibilities for organisations with recovery roles and the basic tiered approach to recovery.

During the fires, the SRRM led the development of early state recovery plans through the SRRT. The plans were generated approximately every two–three weeks and included information related to early recovery priorities (state recovery priorities and recovery coordination priorities), impacts, emerging risks and state recovery operational structures. The plans concluded with a list of immediate recovery activities according to the four environments of recovery with defined responsible agencies.<sup>37</sup>

Later recovery plans described the role of BRV and noted that the SRRM would act as a conduit between the SCC operations, the Director Relief and Recovery EMV and BRV, as well as focusing on broader recovery across Victoria as required.<sup>37</sup>

An SRRM was first appointed in December 2019 and the role transitioned to COVID-19 relief operations in February 2020. As per the arrangements, the position was rostered on a four-day rotation. In its assessment of operational rosters during this period, IGEM notes approximately six personnel rotated through the SRRM position for the 2019–20 bushfires.

At the state level, the SRRT convened regularly to discuss current and emerging recovery risks and priorities and begin planning and tasking for recovery actions. These meetings were chaired by the SRRM and attended by a range of organisations. The membership was quite variable, with organisations being represented by multiple personnel during the season. This reflected the rostering system of operational roles, high volume of meetings overall and various fatigue management protocols in place across recovery organisations.

As well as the SRRT, recovery was considered in the SEMT and some of the combined SCT/SCoT meetings. Stakeholders noted that a large amount specific recovery planning and tasking was done offline in separate meetings between groups of organisations with defined responsibilities to support the aspect of recovery being considered or known capacity and capability in the area.

As noted in section 7.4.1 (p 151), the BRRT also assumed a relief and recovery tasking role at the state level. Given its membership, many of the recovery tasks related to strategic governance issues, state-level planning and the procurement of resources. The final recovery actions identified by the BRRT were transferred to BRV on 14 April 2020 and became action items for the SBRCC.

Regional Recovery Coordination meetings were held in both Hume and Gippsland regions in January and February 2020. These meetings were often combined with Relief Operations Coordination meetings.

The SRRM and SERC attended most Regional Recovery Coordination meetings in both the Hume and Gippsland meetings. Representatives from government departments, IMTs, VicPol, ADF, councils and community service organisations also attended Regional Recovery Coordination meetings throughout January and February 2020.

The Regional Recovery Coordination meetings were forums to discuss early recovery issues and assign initial responsibilities to appropriate agencies. Issues discussed included general recovery planning and responsibilities, cross border concerns, secondary impact assessment, initial clean-up discussions and donated goods. Discussions relating to return to community and transition from response/relief to recovery were also held.

While council representatives attended regional recovery meetings, councils also convened municipal recovery meetings. The affected councils drew on existing recovery planning conducted by the MRM and through their respective MEMPs. Each council established an incident-specific recovery committee to bring together representatives from local and state-based organisations to discuss local recovery issues. The councils also formed various recovery working groups to deliver specific tasks or consider various recovery environments/lines of recovery.

East Gippsland Shire Council and BRV developed a regional recovery plan, reflecting the large geographic footprint of its municipality and extensive impacts of the fires. Alpine and Towong Shire Councils developed municipal recovery plans. The plans identified local governance arrangements, coordination roles, recovery responsibilities, local priorities, impacts, risks and actions.

East Gippsland Shire Council also developed separate recovery sub-plans based on the lines of recovery developed by BRV.

### 12.2.2 Effectiveness of operational recovery governance

Stakeholders reflected that the operational recovery governance arrangements during the 2019–20 fires were largely suitable due to existing relationships between those in recovery roles. There were clearly identified forums for state, regional and municipal recovery planning, decision-making and coordination. Recovery organisations used the forums to make planning, operational and early recovery decisions.

However, there was no clear guidance as to how the basic arrangements in the SERRP were operationalised. Stakeholders were unclear of appropriate authorising environments for public communications, local and regional decision-making and overall recovery leadership outside the state level.

During the highly operational, response-focused phase of the fires, state level forums intended for high-level consideration of the consequences of the emergency and determination of recovery priorities were often focused on response priorities and tasking. While recovery leaders and personnel attended meetings such as the SEMT and combined SCT/SCoT, the consideration of recovery priorities (and relief priorities) was limited.

Some stakeholders commented that there was limited clarity in relation to the appropriate tier for the consideration of particular recovery issues. In these cases, most stakeholders worked with colleagues from their own organisations and personnel from other organisations to determine the most appropriate channel and level for collaborative recovery planning and decision-making. As necessary, issues were then raised at the appropriate committee.

IGEM acknowledges that during busy operational periods, it is not possible or appropriate to discuss all recovery plans and decisions in collaborative forums. However, on multiple occasions stakeholders noted that work was being duplicated or plans had to be discussed and approved in multiple forums before activity could commence. There was a lack of guidance as to what type of planning and decision-making needed to occur in sector-wide forums, or with the authorisation of the SRRM.

In its assessment of recovery committee meeting agendas, IGEM identified a similar range of members and agenda items at different meetings. Stakeholders confirmed that the purpose of the meetings was often not clear, and they felt obliged to attend multiple similar meetings just in case relevant issues were raised.

This resulted in a high volume of meetings for some organisations – particularly organisations that do not have a regional level of operation, or smaller community service organisations. Personnel from these organisations had to attend local, regional and sometimes state meetings to ensure appropriate representation. Despite being relatively small organisations, in many cases they have defined roles and responsibilities in recovery.

Councils also found it difficult to have an appropriate level of representation at the regional level and receive sufficient information from state recovery, particularly during operational periods, where staff were concurrently deployed to response committee/team meetings. One council stakeholder noted that there was no mechanism in place to receive information from some meetings in a timely manner if attendance was not possible.

IGEM noted that many recovery issues previously identified as being problematic in past emergencies (for example council capacity, spontaneous volunteers and donated goods) were again identified as issues during the 2019–20 fires. The current operational arrangements did not provide an appropriate level of guidance for mitigating or addressing these issues (see Chapters 4 and 9 for further discussion).

In its 10 Year Review, IGEM recommended (Recommendation 5) the development of operational recovery guidelines, with a particular focus on coordination arrangements for all tiers. Based on observations of the 2019–20 fire season, the need for such operational guidelines at all tiers remains an important priority for the sector. IGEM notes that this work has commenced through the iterative development of the Digital Recovery Guidelines and review of the SEMP.

#### 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.

### Implications of the State Emergency Management Plan

As noted, the SEMP now provides the seminal guidance for emergency management arrangements, including recovery. For the most part, the SEMP describes recovery arrangements in a similar way to the EMMV. However, it includes some additional recovery roles and arrangements.

Under the SEMP, the SRRM is replaced with both a SReC and a SERC, who are both appointed by and report to the EMC.<sup>88</sup> The SReC is responsible for leading the state's transition from response to recovery and ensuring state-wide recovery activities are coordinated. The role is largely operational and activated to support early recovery planning.

There was no SReC appointed during or after the 2019–20 fire season as this role was introduced later under the SEMP. For the 2019–20 bushfires, this role was performed by the SRRM. However, reflecting similar observations as those made in Chapter 7 in relation to the SERC, there is a limited amount of detail describing the processes for communication and accountability between key operational leaders in response, relief and recovery, and across the tiers/ levels (state, regional and municipal/local).

The decision to appoint the SERC was well-received and provided the SRRM with the necessary capacity and focus to address recovery issues, rather than both relief and recovery. The scale of the relief efforts coupled with the extensive nature of recovery required dedicated leadership for both relief and recovery.

There is scope to further refine the roles of the SERC and the SReC in the SEMP to ensure both roles have clear reporting, accountability and communication requirements. EMV and the sector continue to refine and add to the SEMP, and through ongoing work to address Recommendation 5 of IGEM's 10 Year Review. A greater level of clarity in the new relief and recovery leadership roles, and consideration of their interaction with regional and local counterparts would support the development of broader operational recovery coordination arrangements.

The other key change in recovery is the establishment of BRV. The timing of BRV precluded it from having a strong operational role in the 2019–20 fire season. However, in December 2020, the minister requested that BRV maintain a level of readiness to activate its recovery roles – roles that would have exceeded its defined role in the SEMP (for a full discussion see section 12.3.2, p 259).

Much of the work conducted under the pillars or lines of recovery occurs during recovery strategy and planning, and ongoing incident recovery work. However, incident-specific recovery plans often used the four pillars of recovery to guide immediate recovery planning and tasking. There would be value in ensuring a consistent conceptualisation of recovery and its various aspects (environments, lines or otherwise). This would provide greater alignment between recovery plans developed before, during and after emergencies at the state, regional and local levels of recovery coordination.

## 12.3 Ongoing recovery coordination

As the extent of the fires in Victoria and elsewhere in Australia became known and preliminary reports described the significant impacts for communities, businesses, infrastructure and the natural environment, both the Australian and Victorian governments determined the need for a dedicated entity to provide overall coordination of bushfire recovery.

Both entities – the NBRA and BRV – worked with existing government portfolios, community service organisations, private sector organisations and communities to plan for, enable and deliver recovery activities in the short–medium term.

### 12.3.1 National Bushfire Recovery Agency

The NBRA was established by the Prime Minister on 6 January 2020. The purpose of the NBRA was to lead and coordinate the national response to rebuilding communities affected by the 2019–20 bushfires.

The NBRA is led by the National Coordinator who reports to the Prime Minister through the federal Minister for Agriculture, Drought and Emergency Management. To support the roll out of recovery assistance, the NBRA coordinates across governments and businesses, undertakes community consultation (in partnerships with states), facilitates community access to support and services and monitors progress, providing advice and updates to the Prime Minister and other relevant federal ministers.

The NBRA was responsible for coordinating over \$2 billion in bushfire recovery funding allocated under the National Bushfire Recovery Fund. It worked with states to determine recovery priorities and allocate funding and support to fire-affected communities.

IGEM notes that the Australian Government announced the establishment of the National Recovery and Resilience Agency on 5 May 2021. The new agency brings together several emergency-focused entities, including the NBRA. It will:

---

*Assist communities with relief and recovery efforts following large-scale natural disasters. The Agency will also provide advice to Government on managing the impact of future disaster events.*

*Australian Government Media Release, 5 May 2021*

---

### 12.3.2 Bushfire Recovery Victoria

On 6 January 2020, the Premier announced that a new permanent and ongoing recovery agency, BRV, would be established to work directly with impacted communities. The establishment of BRV recognised the long recovery process ahead, the increasing frequency and severity of bushfires and committed BRV to support Victorians in future bushfires.

BRV was originally created as an administrative office of DPC and on 1 July 2020, through a machinery of government change, moved to DJCS. Following its establishment, recovery coordination and planning for the 2019–20 bushfires was progressively transitioned to BRV.

Mr Ken Lay AO APM, former Chief Commissioner of Victoria Police was appointed as the Chair of BRV for an initial 3-month period. There were two key aspects to this role:

- chair the Premier’s Special Advisory Council
- be the public face of the Victorian Government recovery efforts.

A CEO was also appointed to lead BRV’s operations and business functions. In this initial phase BRV worked closely with the Premier and the minister on critical recovery initiatives. BRV also worked with the NBRA to identify activities eligible for funding under the National Bushfire Recovery Fund.

BRV commenced its recovery planning in January 2020 and transitioned to state and regional recovery coordination from 15 February onwards with the CEO attending BRRT and Victorian Secretaries Board meetings.

The EMC delegated responsibility to BRV to coordinate state and regional recovery in communities impacted by the 2019–20 fires on 25 June 2020. The decision to delegate regional coordination away from DHHS was in part based on the significant resources required of DHHS to manage the COVID-19 pandemic.

The EMC did not formally sign off the transition from response to recovery to the CEO of BRV until 16 September 2020. However, the transition phase started on 15 February 2020 and ended on 24 June.<sup>90</sup>

The transition was supported by the State: Transition from Relief to Recovery (Transition Plan) which was developed by EMV and endorsed by the EMC and BRV on 16 September 2020. The plan highlights the importance of response, relief and recovery organisations working cooperatively during the initial transition to achieve desired outcomes. This includes cooperative information sharing, decision-making and delivery of activities.

Under these arrangements DHHS roles and responsibilities for recovery transitioned directly from DHHS to BRV.<sup>88</sup> The DHHS Senior Liaison Officer and Regional Recovery Coordinator roles under the EMMV are now accommodated by the BRV operations team.

BRV initially hired and seconded government staff and external consultants and sought to establish a regional presence quickly. This included the early appointment of regional leads for Gippsland and North East Victoria to coordinate local recovery efforts.

As a new organisation, BRV’s role is not included in legislation or the EMMV and was added to the SEMP during 2020. Its role in the SEMP is confined to recovery activities and planning associated with the 2019–20 Victorian fire season. It does not have a broader role in Victorian recovery arrangements. BRV’s roles and accountabilities are based on the delegated recovery coordination arrangement with the EMC. However, recognising the potential for BRV’s remit to be expanded, EMV and the sector have supported including BRV in state and national strategic policy, and BRV is delivering recovery policies and programs with sector-wide implications.

#### 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.

### BRV roles and responsibilities

The core role of BRV is to work directly with communities affected by the 2019–20 Victorian fire season. The CEO of BRV's delegated function draws from the EMC's legislated responsibility in the 2013 EM Act:

---

*to be responsible for recovery coordination ... responsible for the coordination of the activities of organisations, including agencies, having roles or responsibilities under the state emergency management plan in relation to recovery from all emergencies.*

*2013 EM Act (subsection 32(1)(g); section 46)*

---

The delegated role is applicable to recovery from the 2019–20 Victorian fires and the instrument of delegation includes 18 local government areas and four Alpine Resorts.<sup>37</sup> The delegation also includes the power to request information from organisations with roles and responsibilities in relation to recovery (as per section 47 of the 2013 EM Act).

In BRV's organisational strategy, it defines its role as:

---

*To work directly with Victorian communities to support their recovery.*

*To coordinate recovery activities by partnering with communities, governments, businesses and not-for-profit organisations.*

*BRV: An overview of our strategy; May 2020*

---

The strategy also outlines organisational values, a vision, a series of mindset aspirations and associated actions and four guiding principles. There is a strong focus on communities and person-centred attributes, local leadership and partnerships.

BRV's coordination responsibilities involve working closely with affected communities as well as collaborating across all levels of government (including the Commonwealth through the NBRA) and a broad range of industry, not for profit and business stakeholders. BRV chairs and provides the secretariat for the SBRCC and works with councils to support the development and/or strengthening of local governance and planning processes including CRCs.

BRV has coordinated, led and delivered numerous recovery activities including the establishment of appropriate governance arrangements with government and councils, delivery of the clean-up program, establishment of Community Recovery Hubs, administration of regional funding programs and community grants and coordination of donated goods.

BRV has advocated for and led several system-level programs of work to provide greater efficiency and effectiveness in recovery. It coordinated the 2020–21 and 2021–22 budget bids to fund medium-term recovery initiatives. It has also proposed a Privacy Management Framework and developed an internal privacy policy to initiate a more trauma-informed approach to information sharing.<sup>90</sup>

At the time of writing, BRV were also developing a Recovery Digital Transformation Program to design and deliver fit-for-purpose, recovery digital capability solutions to simplify and improve the recovery experience for communities, recovery data and insights and overall recovery operations and coordination. While this work was completed for the 2019–20 bushfires, it has potential to be applied more broadly to improve future recovery arrangements.

IGEM notes that BRV is limited in its ability to implement statewide change given its scope being confined to the 2019–20 fires. It currently lacks the legislative and policy foundations to invest in broader recovery strategy, planning and implementation. Stakeholder reflections from both BRV and EMV suggest that the confined scope of BRV is limiting in nature. IGEM notes that the CEO of BRV has held observer status at the SCRC since November 2020.

BRV has developed MoUs with departments to better articulate and formalise the working arrangements for recovery. This includes an MoU with DoT, DJPR, DET, DELWP, DJCS, PV and one awaiting finalisation with DPC. The MoUs outlined funding arrangements between the departments and BRV, and articulated information-sharing powers, roles and responsibilities.

BRV's specific roles in various aspects of recovery are discussed in Chapters 12–22.

#### 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.

### BRV Recovery Framework and State Recovery Plan

In June 2020, BRV published its BRV Recovery Framework to describe how to deliver on its recovery coordination responsibilities for the 2019–20 fires.<sup>91</sup> It then published the State Recovery Plan in August 2020.<sup>92</sup>

The framework references existing recovery strategies and other emergency management guidance such as the Resilient Recovery Strategy, the EMMV, the National Principle of Disaster Recovery and the Community Resilience Framework for Emergency Management.

The BRV Recovery Framework aims to place community at the centre of recovery and build upon existing recovery arrangements. It also describes the role of BRV as working closely with departments and agencies, with specific roles including:

- system-steward
- commissioning agency
- deliverer where the activity is not core business for departments
- coordinator of funding and effort across tiers of government
- coordinator of community solutions
- architect for community-led recovery and service delivery.

The framework identifies eight recovery principles (see Figure 15, p 262) and the processes for planning at the community, municipal, state and national levels, and articulates an iterative cycle of community-led planning. These principles are based on the National Principles for Disaster Recovery and are utilised across the sector.

The State Recovery Plan confirms the framework's approach to recovery and provides a more detailed description of how the government and BRV aimed to support the recovery of fire-affected communities. The plan aims to address a 12–18 month period with priorities outlined until December 2021.

One of the key differences in BRV's approach to recovery is the extended five 'lines of recovery'. The five lines of recovery mirror the four recovery environments outlined in the SERRP and SEMP but include an additional line of recovery – Aboriginal culture and healing. Both the BRV Recovery Framework and State Recovery Plan articulate five lines of recovery and associated community recovery outcomes (see Figure 16, p 263). The Aboriginal culture and healing line of recovery is discussed in greater detail in Chapter 20.

The State Recovery Plan uses the five lines of recovery to structure the state's approach to recovery. Each line of recovery has associated outcomes, a lead department and identifies specific areas of recovery. For each area of recovery, the plan identifies challenges, actions, priorities and a basic description of timing (short or medium term, or ongoing). Chapters 15–19 outline the specific elements of each line of recovery.

The State Recovery Plan outlines recovery priorities and actions for the first 12–18 months for each line of recovery. BRV also led the development of interim outcomes for improved monitoring and evaluation of shorter-term recovery outcomes.

**Figure 15.** BRV recovery principles. (Source: BRV Recovery Framework)

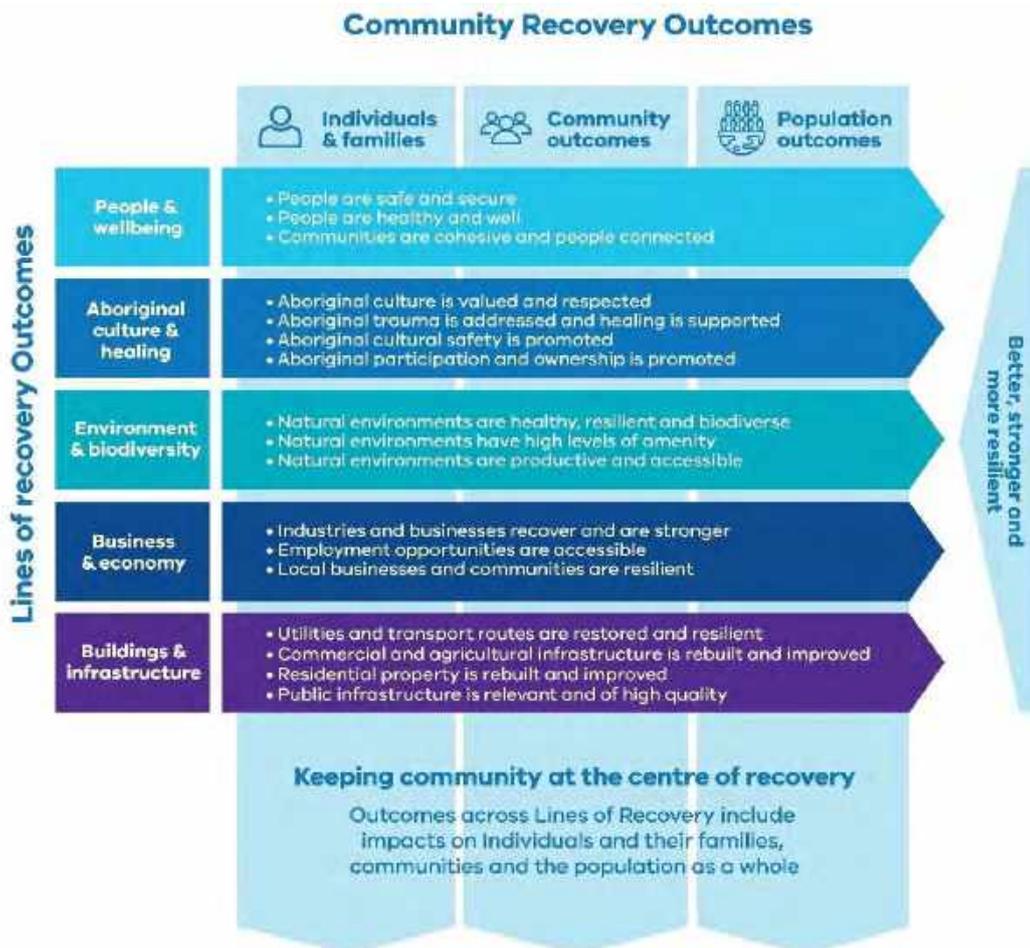


**BRV monitoring, evaluation and continuous improvement**

The BRV Recovery Framework outlines an overall approach for monitoring and evaluation of recovery activities, with longer term outcomes under development and a process outlined to develop appropriate outcome indicators and measures of success. These outcomes are being developed to align with the outcome-based approach adopted by government departments and agencies.<sup>91</sup> At the time of writing, the indicators and measures of success were being finalised for endorsement by the Victorian Government.

BRV has established reporting arrangements with various portfolios of government. It reports regularly to the NBRA and participates in Commonwealth recovery activities. BRV reports directly to the minister and chaired the Premier’s Special Advisory Council on Bushfire Recovery which became the Minister’s Special Advisory Council (MSAC) following BRV’s machinery of Government change.

**Figure 16.** Lines of recovery, associated outcomes and community recovery outcomes (Source: Eastern Victorian Fires 2019–20 State Recovery Plan<sup>92</sup>)



In its reporting to both the minister and NBRA, BRV adopted a risk-based approach. It articulates emerging risks and unmet needs – drawing on reporting from the SBRCC and ongoing community engagements in affected regions. Reports also include recovery activity proposals and updates on recovery progress. BRV also provides comparison data for the minister to contextualise Victoria’s recovery progress and expenditure against other jurisdictions and previous major emergencies.

BRV led several evaluation and assurance activities during 2020–21. It supported a review of the Bushfire Recovery Aboriginal Reference Group terms of reference to ensure fit-for-purpose governance arrangements. It also held an SBRCC workshop in February 2021 to re-evaluate priorities, consider emerging risks and consult with members as it finalised the state budget bid for recovery activities and considered the transition from early recovery to medium and longer-term recovery initiatives.

In the second half of 2020 BRV undertook a health check of recovery governance, largely via internal assessments and consultations with the SBRCC and the state recovery working groups for each line of recovery and key local council recovery committee members. The primary objectives set for the Health Check were to ensure the recovery governance in place:

- aligned with the principles of a community-led recovery as outlined in the BRV Recovery Framework
- enabled coordination, oversight, and effective decision-making
- appropriately linked into existing emergency management governance to maintain a common operating picture.

The four key recommendations identified through the governance health check were:

- clarify roles between tiers of coordination
- enhance integration and alignment between tiers of coordination
- opportunities for synergies between lines of recovery
- BRV engagement with broader emergency management system.

The governance health check identified a series of timelines for evaluation and reporting, and upon collection and analysis of data, proposed immediate and short-term changes to the governance arrangements in place. These included a scaled back SBRCC meeting agenda, with a focus on emerging risks and higher levels of offline discussion and digital reporting.

BRV also established partnerships with industry and research organisations to inform its ongoing planning and evaluation of recovery. Its partnership with The University of Melbourne identified several deliverables related to the collation of existing recovery evidence to inform planning, which were delivered in 2020. Likewise, it worked with the Victorian Centre for Data Insights to develop better data management and sharing protocols.

#### FINDING 12.2

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.

### Recovery progress under the coordination of BRV

In their assessments of BRV as a dedicated entity and coordinator of recovery, most government stakeholders reflected that the establishment of BRV had been positive – particularly in consideration of the COVID-19 pandemic, which drew considerable attention and resourcing from government.

Stakeholders recognised that strategic planning in recovery had been under-resourced for some time, and existing strategy and policy had been slow to evolve for this reason. The funding allocated to the establishment of BRV and its focus on the communities affected by the 2019–20 fires, allowed BRV to progress recovery coordination activities.

In IGEM's observations of BRV's strategic recovery planning and investment it has prioritised foundational, system-level initiatives to streamline recovery governance. These initiatives are also intended to create greater efficiency and improve the delivery of recovery to affected individuals, businesses and communities. Increased online and other forms of information sharing and evidence-based practice have aided this process.

BRV has also developed multiple SOPs and descriptions of early recovery functions. These documents clearly detail the organisations with roles and responsibilities. The documents identify relevant supporting policies and plans. The procedures and functions included range from activities (for example, clean-up and the establishment of CRCs) to more strategic and programmatic work (for example, coordination activities and funding agreements).

#### FINDING 12.5

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.

Multiple stakeholders also noted that BRV had assumed a problem-solving role for several key issues emerging from the fires during recovery. In some cases, it had played a mediator role, bringing relevant communities, departments and councils together to address local recovery concerns involving various parts of government.

This was seen in the final clean-up efforts of roadside debris that was left following the road clearance efforts immediately after the fires. This issue often plagues communities after major bushfires, serving as a physical reminder of the fires and becoming a hazard as the debris are overgrown with weeds (see Chapter 13 for a complete discussion of this issue).

BRV brought together councils, DoT, DELWP and communities in specific locations to provide an impetus for progress, as there was no clear accountability for any single government entity to finalise this specific part of clean-up and remove the piles of debris.

BRV also created the Complex Sites Taskforce in the building and planning line of recovery work. This group provided a centralised point of communication to support landowners in complex planning and rebuilding matters (see section 16.3, p 345). While the taskforce was not necessarily able to quickly solve all problems for landowners, it provided a continuity of service in the planning and rebuilding process.

A key criticism of BRV across communities and local organisations has been its large Melbourne presence. Community members frequently reflected that there was an over-representation of BRV personnel in Melbourne and BRV's presence in fire-affected regions was lacking.

### **Role clarity of BRV**

Stakeholders noted a lack of clarity in the role of BRV.

At the state level there was some initial confusion around the intersection of roles of BRV, EMV (EMC) and the then DHHS. The transition from response/relief to recovery document was drafted in February 2020 and updated in August to reflect the delegation from EMC to BRV. The delegation was seen as providing improved clarity, but also departed from the usual arrangements outlined in detail under the EMMV and the new SEMP. There were also some delays in executing the formal delegation and as noted, the delegation was not formally signed off until 25 June 2020.

Much has been done to improve clarity across the sector around the division of roles and responsibilities for recovery between BRV, EMV, DHHS and councils. BRV had initiated EMV-DHHS-BRV joint guidelines (at the time of writing) to provide additional clarity. However, additional improvements in role clarity across the sector is still required. See Chapter 14 for further discussion of the coordination role at the local level and BRV-council interactions.

On 3 December 2020 the minister wrote to BRV to confirm the EMC's role for determining recovery coordination, and to confirm the expectation that BRV retain a heightened state of readiness in the event its service delivery functions were required.

The current version of the SEMP details BRV's role for recovery across the footprint of the 2019–20 bushfires, however, further revision of the SEMP is required (and planned) to ensure improved consistency and clarity.

#### **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.

State agencies noted that there was some uncertainty early on around BRV's role at the regional level. IGEM notes that the transition to recovery took several months to be formalised, and the transition of regional coordination from DHHS to BRV was a significant departure from previous arrangements.

While there were some role clarity issues between DHHS and BRV, IGEM notes that these issues were likely minimised by BRV's formal coordination of the People and Wellbeing line of recovery work. DHHS formally handed over its coordination responsibilities in this line of recovery to BRV and had a smaller regional recovery presence due to its significant role in Victoria's response to the COVID-19 pandemic.

The recovery governance structure developed by BRV includes state, regional, municipal and community levels. However, there is variability in how regional tiers are considered in recovery. Recovery planning typically starts in consideration of emergency management regions defined in the EMMV and operational aspects of recovery align with these regions. However, as recovery plans start to be implemented, other organisations have different definitions of regions or may not operate at a regional level at all.

This was evident in the production of recovery plans. Both Towong and Alpine Shire Councils prepared municipal recovery plans. The impacts and experiences of those indirectly affected in nearby councils were quite different and additional regional recovery plans were not created. However, East Gippsland Shire Council and BRV produced a regional recovery plan, reflecting the large geographic footprint of the municipality and the impacts in surrounding councils that affected the recovery activities within the council. In practice, both types of plans are supporting recovery governance and activities.

The role clarity concerns were most prevalent in BRV's regional and local public-facing activities. Many community members were not concerned as to which part of government was supporting them in recovery. However, local organisations felt BRV was providing duplicate services, or diverting affected individuals, businesses and communities away from existing local services.

These stakeholders felt that this was ineffective as it did not leverage local capacity and existing relationships. It also presented a risk to communities that recovery services would be withdrawn as funding ceased, or another emergency occurred requiring the deployment of BRV resources elsewhere.

IGEM notes that in some of its service delivery activities, BRV was under-resourced, reducing the effectiveness of the recovery support and creating an extremely high workload for those in service delivery roles. See Chapter 14 for a complete discussion of this issue.

#### FINDING 12.6

There is a lack of role clarity between Bushfire Recovery Victoria, councils and other Victorian Government recovery portfolios.

### 12.3.3 State Bushfire Recovery Coordination Committee

On 5 March 2020 the Victorian Government endorsed new recovery governance arrangements for approval. The new governance arrangements included the SBRCC (replacing the BRRT) and five State Recovery Working Groups, one for each line of recovery:

- environment and biodiversity (lead agency: DELWP)
- buildings and infrastructure (lead agencies: DELWP/DoT)
- people and wellbeing (lead agency: DHHS, then BRV)
- business and economy (lead agency: DJPR)
- Aboriginal culture and healing (lead agency: Aboriginal Victoria, DPC).

On 7 April 2020 the SBRCC was established as a time limited committee by the Victorian government. The CEO of BRV is the Chair of the SBRCC and reports to SCRC and Cabinet as required.

The purpose of this committee is to provide appropriate governance of recovery activities following the 2019–20 Victorian fire season. A key aim of the committee is to ensure that the approach to recovery is community led through prioritisation of input through community, municipal and regional recovery committees.

Each working group is chaired by the lead agency, with a BRV program director being appointed as deputy chair. The People and Wellbeing Working Group was initially set to be chaired by DHHS, however, transitioned to BRV in April 2020 due to DHHS' role in the COVID-19 pandemic. As part of this process, BRV assumed state level oversight of the people and wellbeing pillar of bushfire recovery.

Each working group includes cross-portfolio representation to support collaboration and effective delivery of outcomes. Each State Recovery Working Group can appoint sub-groups to address relevant issues.

The SBRCC holds decision-making powers, except where there are departures from existing government policy, financial implications exceeding the existing agreed funding allocations, or sensitive topics that might result in strong community or stakeholder reactions. In these circumstances, SCRC or Cabinet endorsement will be sought.

The SBRCC assumed responsibility for the six remaining priority items of the BRRT. Due to COVID-19 three of these were closed for later consideration and the three remaining health portfolio items were transitioned from the then DHHS to BRV.

The SBRCC met monthly initially, before transitioning to less frequent meetings in 2021. At the time of writing, SBRCC was scheduled quarterly with more regularly interactions between the working groups and offline reporting established to ensure an appropriate level of oversight across the working groups and BRV.

The format of SBRCC evolved throughout 2020–21 to reduce its focus on working group updates and turn its attention to system-wide recovery initiatives, emerging risks and unmet needs of communities. Later meetings included dedicated agenda items for briefings from BRV based in fire-affected regions. Other business was included in a dashboard reporting system to allow follow-up between relevant organisations as required.

The shift in format was brought about by the Governance Health Check and ongoing assessment of the purpose of the SBRCC.

Members of the SBRCC were largely complimentary of the committee and its current function. Stakeholders noted that BRV provided a high level of secretariat support that facilitated participation and productivity across the SBRCC itself and the working groups.

#### 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.

## CASE STUDY: 2019 BUNYIP COMPLEX FIRES – REFLECTIONS ON RECOVERY



Bunyip Complex Community Recovery Committee members in the Tonimbuk Hall (Source: IGEM)

During Phase 2 of the Inquiry, IGEM was contacted by the Bunyip Complex Community Recovery Committee (CRC) who were eager to share their learnings on recovery from the fires that occurred in south east Victoria in March 2019. The Bunyip Complex CRC was established in May 2019 and has 10 members representing the affected communities.

From a recovery perspective, the people and communities affected by these fires were nearly 12 months ahead of those impacted in the 2019–20 fires.

The reflections of the Bunyip Complex CRC indicate that many recovery issues observed in the 2019–20 Victorian fire season are similar to those experienced by communities affected by previous fires. However, it also demonstrates the value of high levels of dedicated government funding and recovery support following a major emergency.

On Friday 1 March 2019, lightning strikes in the Bunyip State Forest in West Gippsland ignited a bushfire. By Sunday afternoon, fire had burnt more than 14,500 hectares of forest and farmland, impacted 297 properties, destroyed 29 houses and 69 outbuildings. There was no loss of life.

The Bunyip State Forest Fires affected approximately 960 residents across four townships: Garfield North, Bunyip North, Tynong and Tonimbuk.

Community members described the bureaucracy as traumatising, the clean-up exhausting, impacts on their mental health, of recovery being disorganised, disjointed and disconnected. They spoke of many visits to their property from agencies, insurance companies, council staff and others, often asking the same questions.

---

*We've been living on adrenaline for two years pretty much, and really only just at this point now can we say that we are finished or we're pretty close to finishing all of our recovery.*

*Community member*

---

Managing issues such as fencing have been challenging. The community had tried to access additional support to assist with fencing for the Bunyip fires, such as a tractor, but this had not been forthcoming. Many of the properties that were affected had stock and as one community member said:

---

*You can't farm without a fence, you can't get your stock back without a fence, and just a visible sign of having a fence is the start of recovery*

*Community member*

---

Community members spoke of the challenges of rebuilding and the impact that dealing with Bushfire Attack Level ratings and other building and planning regulations had on those who lost their homes. There was a general lack of awareness among the community as to the implications of the building requirements, and many people found they were under insured.

Community members found it took much longer to finalise plans due to additional costs, that insurance payouts for temporary accommodation ran out and people were forced to live in inappropriate temporary accommodation as they could not afford anything else.

One of the biggest challenges CRC members shared with IGEM was what they saw as the inequity of the funding and support their community received compared to the level of support available to those affected by the 2019–20 fires. The CRC described their fires as the forgotten fires.

Despite 29 homes being destroyed in the fires, those who lost their homes were not able to access Red Cross funds. Clean-up was conducted in a cost sharing arrangement with Grocon unlike the 2019–20 fires where clean-up was conducted on behalf of property owners. It took strong advocacy from the CRC for the community to be able to access funding through Centrelink.

---

*Why are we treated so differently to other people? Isn't a house that's burnt down here the same as a house that's burnt down there? Like we said, we're not begrudging people assistance that they've well deserved and earned and whatever, but it should be equitable. There is no equity in the response.*

*Community member*

---

When community members were able to access federal funding, there were issues with meeting timelines and record keeping that caused confusion and frustration. Community members feared missing out on what little funding there was available.

When the CRC was established, members were surprised to find no clear guidance for establishing a community committee to facilitate recovery, particularly as CRCs and other community recovery groups have been commonplace in many previous major emergencies. In the absence of formal guidance, Cardinia Shire Council and external experts assisted in establishing the CRC.

The CRC conducted a survey immediately after the fires and followed-up with a second survey 18 months later. The CRC was interested to understand what the longer-term impacts of the fires had been, what support had been effective in recovery and what needed to be done differently in the future. It engaged researchers to conduct the survey and analyse results.

While the community was moving forward with their recovery, the surveys indicated only minor improvements had been made. This lack of progress was a concern as it had been 18 months since the fires and many community members had not achieved basic recovery outcomes.

Community members identified that they had not received adequate support to enable them to recover. More troubling was that in areas such as mental health and stress, community members indicated that these issues got worse over time and had significant impacts.

---

*The ongoing high levels of emotional stress and mental health impacts are a direct result of the failure of the recovery effort and a lack of adequate ongoing support, rather than from the fires themselves.*

*Community member*

---

Other key themes to emerge from the surveys include:

- recovery progress has been slow and there has been a lack of communication from government about matters such as the reopening of public land
- suitably timed support such as financial assistance, labour provided by volunteer groups and access to materials to assist property owners with their recovery
- economic impacts are ongoing and business owners expect their recovery to take some years
- mental health issues and stress have increased and are a concern for the community
- mental health support needs to be provided in a variety of formats, easily accessible, coordinated, communicated widely and meet the needs of the community
- lack of adequate communications infrastructure impacts the community's ability to prepare for and respond to emergencies.

#### **Similarities to the 2019–20 recovery experience**

In reviewing the information and feedback provided by the Bunyip Complex CRC and comparing this to feedback provided by fire-affected communities from the 2019–20 fires there are many similarities in the stories and feedback that were shared about recovery experiences.

It is obvious that many of the issues that have been raised by the Bunyip CRC are not incident specific. These experiences of those affected by these fires have played out again in the recovery from the 2019–20 fires.

Stakeholders involved in this Inquiry have made similar comments, unfortunately many of the issues confronting those recovering from the 2019–20 fires are well known to government and would benefit from an ongoing and well-resourced effort to identify underlying causes and implement permanent, system-wide processes to reduce or mitigate future occurrence.

#### **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.

## 12.4 Effectiveness of recovery arrangements

Recovery following a major emergency is always long and complex, unique to the characteristics of the emergency, its impacts, and the communities affected. The prolonged nature of the 2019–20 Victorian fire season and significant isolation of communities led to a long period of transition from response to recovery and delayed early recovery planning. This made for a difficult environment for recovery to commence, notwithstanding the establishment of a new Victorian recovery entity in BRV and its Commonwealth counterpart – NBRA, also established within this period.

As discussed in section 3.2.1 (p 72), effective governance relies on both performance and accountability. Good performance is required to deliver appropriate community recovery outcomes efficiently and effectively. This relies on close adherence to the foundational principles underlying effective community led recovery.

Emergency management arrangements are complex, and rely on collaboration across government, non-government, the private sector and communities. IGEM notes that the scale of this emergency, and the compounding effects of the COVID-19 pandemic placed significant pressure on Victoria's emergency management system, including recovery.

The government acted quickly to establish BRV as a dedicated agency to lead state and regional recovery coordination. These adaptations occurred during a time of emergency management reform as the SEMP was implemented. IGEM notes that BRV and the sector have undertaken considerable work to establish the frameworks, agreements, resources and processes to support a revised approach to recovery governance. Further, IGEM notes that reforms and improvements are ongoing.

BRV has undertaken considerable planning and policy development since its inception. It has produced the BRV Recovery Framework and the State Recovery Plan. It is now working on system-level recovery initiatives that would have positive outcomes for current and future recovery efforts. These are supported by a broad range of supporting documents, funding arrangements, record management systems, fact sheets and toolkits.

Initiating significant reforms during such a large and prolonged emergency is challenging, as sector organisations are required to understand the changes and adjust their roles, partnerships, resource prioritisation and reporting requirements. Nonetheless, the scale and duration of this emergency, overlaid with the impact of drought and the COVID-19 pandemic placed immense pressure on communities and the emergency management sector. These factors combined created a need for a dedicated recovery coordination body beyond what existed prior to the fires.

### 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:

- (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



The destruction of property and assets during the 2019–20 Victorian fire season occurred on a wide geographic scale.

Despite being eclipsed in extent by some previous major Victorian bushfire events, more than 4800 impact assessments confirmed at least 700 residential and 653 non-residential structures were damaged or destroyed by the fires.<sup>93</sup> The concurrent loss of property and infrastructure in NSW was far greater in 2019–20.

On 19 January 2020 the Australian and Victorian 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 out-buildings.

There have been other extensive government-led clean-up operations following major bushfires in recent years. From these have come numerous learnings and commitments to improve future clean-up efforts.

After the 2009 Victorian bushfires, the Australian and Victorian governments jointly funded a \$92 million clean-up operation overseen by the VBRRRA. The program covered all costs for property owners, by arranging for clean-up to be conducted by the managing contractor – Grocon – or reimbursing the costs of privately-arranged contractors.

Efficiencies delivered through large-scale clean-up programs can be perceived by community members to be at the expense of engaging local contractors. Communities have also identified a lack of consultation regarding plans and activities on private property and a lack of empathy in working with grieving and traumatised families and communities.

The government has demonstrated recognition of the importance of working with the community and supporting the engagement of local contractors to complete clean-up. However, there have been ongoing difficulties in balancing efficiency and economies of scale with community recovery needs and leveraging of local contractors.

## 13.1 Past clean-up programs

Over the last decade, three major events – the 2009 Victorian bushfires, the 2015 Wye River – Jamieson Track fire and the South East Victoria Fires in March 2019 – have determined how the Victorian Government approaches state coordinated government-led clean-up operations.

### **2009 Victorian bushfires**

During the 2009 Victorian bushfires, more than 2300 properties were destroyed with an additional 2300 incurring heavy damage. In the aftermath, the Victorian and Australian governments announced a jointly funded property clean-up program to be managed by the VBRRRA. Both governments made a commitment to clear all affected properties at no cost to the owners and without seeking reimbursement from insurance payouts. Participation was voluntary and owners who had already arranged their own clean-up using a licensed contractor were reimbursed.

VBRRRA then oversaw the demolition and clearance of the destroyed or damaged properties. Grocon was appointed as managing contractor for the clean-up program following a Request for Select Tender.

VBRRRA aimed to complete the clean-up in six months, but effective completion took four and a half months. A total of 3053 properties were cleared and a further 360 owners reimbursed for clearing their own properties. The total cost of the clean-up program amounted to approximately \$92 million, with costs shared equally between the Victorian and Australian governments.

The clean-up program was widely regarded as a success under very challenging conditions and a good example of innovative and flexible government in action, given the significant uncertainties, complexities and risks involved in committing to such a major operation. The completion of the program within four and a half months of the fires meant that a significant impediment to recovery was removed and property owners were able to start rebuilding within a relatively short period of time.

### **2015 Wye River - Jamieson Track fire**

In late December 2015, the Wye River - Jamieson Track fire destroyed 116 properties, which included a mix of primary homes, holiday homes, and rentals situated in precarious terrain along Victoria's Great Ocean Road. Grocon was the selected contractor and commenced scoping works on individual properties in Wye River and Separation Creek throughout February 2016.

Under the arrangements between the government and ICA, clean-up costs of up to \$25,000 per property were covered by insurers (or private landowners) and costs over \$25,000 per property were paid by government. Clean-up costs on uninsured properties were completely covered by the government.

Grocon covered any work on council owned, managed or controlled properties which was required to facilitate clean-up of residential homes (for example, any clean-up of the property, repair to roads or road widening).

Grocon completed clean-up works on 177 properties by 30 June 2016. Further work continued throughout 2016 to ensure community safety and the stability of the fire-affected landscape. Grocon finalised all works in April 2017.

The cost of the clean-up operation amounted to approximately \$22 million. Costs were particularly high due to the significant complexity of the works required. The original cost of property clean-up was underestimated, rendering the gap with insured properties greater than expected.

### **South East Victoria Fires - March 2019**

The South East Victoria Fires in March 2019 destroyed 33 homes and 150 outbuildings. On 12 March 2019 the Victorian Government endorsed a state supported recovery model and state coordinated clean-up.

The endorsed clean-up model included place of residence (plus sheds, water/septic tanks), tree and other debris within residential footprint. The Treasurer approved activating the EMV Clean-Up Panel as per the ministerial activation process in the Victorian Relief and Recovery Guideline - Natural Disaster Clean-up Arrangements.

From the panel, EMV engaged Grocon to undertake the clean-up. Due to timing, insurance companies had already undertaken independent arrangements for clean-up of some customers' properties. This meant that a property-by-property assessment, with reimbursement was adopted.

Grocon conducted on-site assessment and cost-estimates for 18 properties that had requested a quote and were within the scope of the clean-up program.

The clean-up model selected for the South East Victoria Fires - March 2019 had two components:

- a) Uninsured - If the property owner opted into state coordinated clean-up Grocon undertook clean-up of the property based upon agreement with the property owner. Government and property owners shared the cost with government funding 75 per cent of the clean-up cost.
- b) Insured - The government funded up to 50 per cent of the cost of clean-up (capped at \$12,500) undertaken by insurers or an appropriately qualified contractor. Property owners needed to provide supporting documentation to receive reimbursement from government for these costs.

There were 92 registrations for clean-up, of which 77 were insured property owners and 15 uninsured. Three additional properties received clean-up through Grocon. Eighty-nine property owners registered for reimbursement having chosen their own provider (privately or via insurance).

The approximate cost of the clean-up was \$1.2 million. Of that approximately 25 per cent covered Grocon project management and site assessments, while 75 per cent went to individual property claims (based on a current average of \$10,000 per property). The DRFA only covered primary place of residence and uninsured properties.

Overall, there was a low uptake of the Grocon supported clean-up. The delayed start meant that many property owners had already commenced their own clean-up which reduced Grocon's role.

Grocon was unable to provide economies of scale due to property owners completing clean-up more cheaply and quicker – albeit potentially less safely. Property owners focused on cost reduction, with safety of clean-up a secondary priority. The preference was for locally-sourced clean-up providers which in turn diluted the overall value of Grocon’s clean-up program.

## 13.2 Legislative framework for clean-up

### 13.2.1 Clean-up

Between 2017 and 2018 DJCS, EMV and DTF developed a process for the procurement and management of post-emergency clean-up service providers. The objective was to create a panel made up of pre-qualified contractors in order to speed up access to clean-up services and avoid having to engage in a lengthy contractual negotiation following a major emergency. A panel was established consisting of two providers: Grocon and Johns Lyng.<sup>94</sup>

As previously detailed, the government had twice engaged Grocon for clean-up services during the 2009 Victoria bushfires and the 2015 Wye River - Jamieson Track fire. While undertaken in accordance with government procurement requirements, the tender process to pre-select the two preferred contractors, unavoidably, did not consider the situational engagement of local contractors or the circumstantial concerns of bushfire-affected communities. On the one hand, having experienced and capable operators to activate quickly is beneficial in starting the recovery process. On the other hand, pre-selection of major contractors does not consider the potential needs and requirements of affected communities, and puts local contractors, in an affected area, at a distinct disadvantage.

In April 2018 the Victorian Government endorsed the updated *Victorian Relief and Recovery Guideline – Natural Disaster Clean-Up Arrangements*.

---

*Cleaning-up and disposal of debris from residential properties following a natural disaster, including damaged building, green waste, building material and household and other types of hazardous waste. Clean-up is an end-to-end process of assessment, demolition, collection and disposal and the arrangements required to support the delivery of those activities.*

*Relief and Recovery Guideline – Natural Disaster Clean-Up Arrangements*

---

These arrangements detail the governance and decision-making arrangements for State coordinated clean-up following an emergency event, and the State policy on triggers and thresholds. This endorsement included the policy on the ministerial activation process for the clean-up panel.<sup>94</sup>

Approval from the Treasurer is required to activate the panel as the financial commitment attendant upon activation is beyond the financial approval and authorisation limits of the Secretary of DJCS and the minister.<sup>94</sup>

---

*Cleaning-up and disposal of debris from residential properties following a natural disaster, including damaged building, green waste, building material and household and other types of hazardous waste. Clean-up is an end-to-end process of assessment, demolition, collection and disposal and the arrangements required to support the delivery of those activities.*

*Relief and Recovery Guideline – Natural Disaster Clean-Up Arrangements*

---

The *Relief and Recovery Guideline* also offers three models of clean-up coordination.

- Council led – where councils maintain broad responsibilities for waste management within their municipalities and have significant expertise in coordinating the additional clean-up requirements
- Victorian Government supported - where the scale of damaged or destroyed properties may require the coordination of private property clean-up, more targeted responses may be required
- Victorian Government coordination - when clean-up requirements extend beyond a single local government area, and where the scale of clean-up works require expertise and resources that are beyond the capacity of the affected local councils.

The EMC, supported by the SRRM and EMV's Relief and Recovery Directorate, work with impacted councils, DHHS (regional coordination), and LGV to identify whether State intervention in the clean-up process is required after a major emergency.

This includes a preliminary assessment of the key considerations based upon:

- an assessment of the risk to the immediate public health and safety of impacted communities
- the ability of the relevant local council to meet these needs in a reasonable period of time
- the extent of the damage and destruction
- the nature of the terrain
- the presence of hazardous materials in the impacted region
- implication of a prolonged clean-up on the broader community.

Discussions are also held with the relevant local councils to understand their capability and capacity to undertake the required clean-up needs. The EMC makes their recommendation to the minister, who consults with the Premier and the Treasurer to determine whether to jointly approve a State-managed clean-up operation.

Depending on the nature of the event, the minister also seeks the views of the Minister for Energy, Environment and Climate Change, and the Minister for Health.

Following the consultation and decision-making process, EMV activates a clean-up panel. The activation requires the authorisation of both the minister and the Treasurer, and this process is led by EMV. The IGEM notes that the responsibility for management and activation of the clean-up panel was transferred to BRV on 18 January 2020 to enable the organisations efficient and effective delivery of the 2020 Clean-Up Program.

The clean-up panel process is utilised when activation approval is required. Once activated, EMV selects a supplier from the panel – primarily based on demonstrated expertise and experience in the specific type of works required. EMV seeks agreement from the Treasurer that the costs associated with activating the panel will be met by either a Treasurer's Advance or budget appropriation.

#### 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.

### 13.2.2 Hazardous trees and roadside debris removal arrangements

While the *Relief and Recovery Guideline* primarily provides a decision-making framework for State coordinated clean-up of residential properties, the removal of hazardous trees and roadside debris is covered by different parties with different roles and responsibilities.

A hazardous tree is typically defined by one or more of the following characteristics:

- dead and/or decaying tree or major branches
- suspected loose or broken branches
- significant lean with recent cause or indicators of failure
- evidence of longitudinal cracking
- evidence of roots lifting, or an undercut or disturbed root system
- other indicators of serious weakness based on local knowledge.<sup>95</sup>

DELWP is responsible for the removal of hazardous trees that are damaged by bushfires and pose an immediate safety risk along roads, tracks and public sites on public or Crown land.<sup>85</sup> DELWP regularly undertakes hazardous tree assessment and removal from public land and roads in order to provide a safe working environment its personnel, adjoining landholders and for public visitation and use.<sup>95</sup>

Regional Recovery Teams coordinate and prioritise the assessment and removal of hazardous trees on roads managed by Regional Roads Victoria, councils and DELWP. When there are hundreds of kilometres of fire-affected roads, assessment and removal of hazardous trees on minor roads can take many months.<sup>95</sup>

Managing hazardous trees on private land is the responsibility of the property owner. Large trees that have been burnt by fires are likely to have some level of impact that may put them into a hazardous category.

## 13.3 BRV 2020 Clean-up Program

Three options were considered as approaches to the clean-up operation following the 2019–20 fires:

- Option 1 - Comprehensive State Coordinated Clean-Up
- Option 2 - Partial State Clean-Up Support
- Option 3 - Limited State Clean-Up Support.

The comprehensive model option selected involved BRV appointing a clean-up 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 involves the removal of all structures, water tanks, septic tanks, fencing, hazardous trees, machinery, dead livestock and other debris.

On council land, the State-appointed contractor would share clean-up responsibilities with the council and Regional Roads Victoria. The contractor would be responsible for the clean-up and restoration of essential public assets assessed to pose 'significant' and 'high risk' to life (such as asbestos, retaining walls). Councils and VicRoads would be responsible for the clean-up and restoration of essential public assets that did not pose risk to life.

DELWP would be responsible for clean-up on Crown land, which includes forests. It would cover the assessment and mitigation of risks limited to edge of townships, residential and commercial land.

The partial and limited State clean-up support options were similar to the option that was ultimately chosen, but with progressively less support provided to councils and Regional Roads Victoria. This left councils responsible for the majority of clean-up and restoration of council-owned land and assets.

Given the extensive damage incurred and the nature of the clean-up required, it was recognised that the efficient coordination and completion of council clean-up programs would be significantly compromised by capacity limitations.

Several funding models were considered to support the Comprehensive State Coordinated Clean-Up model. Government drew on experiences from the 2009 Victorian bushfires, the 2015 Wye River - Jamieson Track fire and the South East Victoria Fires of March 2019. The different models offered varying levels based on existing insurance arrangements ranging from fully funding clean-up as per the 2009 Victorian bushfires model, to partially funding clean-up based on insurance contributions and reimbursing individuals for work conducted independently.

While a partially funded model (similar to that used following the 2015 Wye River - Jamieson Track fire) was initially considered, BRV and government more broadly ultimately offered a fully funded model to reduce the delay in rebuilding properties and to minimise risks to the environment and community.

Past experience with partially funded models indicated that while these models reduced the costs to the State, they caused delays and increased the administrative complexity for government and landowners. Cost recoveries also resulted in lower levels of participation in the State scheme.

In January 2020 the Premier and minister successfully applied for an initial Treasurer's Advance of \$75 million to fund a clean-up program to be administered by BRV. This was extended by an additional \$30 million in July 2020. The Australian Government contributed 50 per cent through a cost-sharing agreement.

The BRV 2020 Clean-up Program was announced by Federal Minister for Agriculture, Drought and Emergency Management, and the Victorian Minister for Police and Emergency Services.

Under the program model, Grocon, the selected contractor was paid by government with landowners reimbursed in cases where they had undertaken management of their own clean-up. Insurers were not liable for any costs under the program.

The ICA assured the government that all savings accrued by insurers from the government-funded clean-up would be passed directly to policy holders to help fund the rebuilding of their assets.

The core function of the clean-up program was the demolition, removal and disposal of all buildings (including residential, commercial, public and out-buildings) destroyed or damaged beyond repair by the 2019–20 fires.

Removal of fencing, trees, and vehicles was not generally within scope, but was included where part of, or necessary for, the safe clean-up of destroyed buildings. Grocon was also available to carry out other essential works for councils and government agencies. Where possible Grocon prioritised local contractors for the work, which included destruction, removal and disposal of affected buildings and sheds including residential, commercial and public buildings.

Affected owners were required to register their destroyed buildings for clean-up. While participation was voluntary, BRV and Grocon communicated the program extensively to maximise take-up.

BRV managed the contract to ensure consistency of recovery efforts across communities. As the extent of the required works could not be defined at the outset, the contract was a flexible contractor style arrangement where scope was approved on a property-by-property basis.

As with the clean-ups of the 2009 Victorian bushfires, the 2015 Wye River - Jamieson Track fire and the South East Victoria Fires - March 2019, the services of local community suppliers were used as part of the recovery process.

This included:

- utilising local subcontractors and consultants
- purchasing supplies from local suppliers – including water, construction materials and fuel
- utilising local facilities for staff for accommodation, meals and transport
- using local landfill operators where possible
- hiring site amenities from local companies or branches
- using local contractors for cleaning and services of site amenities.

#### 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.

## 13.4 Effectiveness of clean-up arrangements

BRV established a Bushfire Recovery Industry and Worker Advisory Group to monitor and report on the roll-out and progress of the clean-up program. The group also ensured that industry, employers and unions could advise on BRV's activities and help guide the government's rebuilding efforts.

During the clean-up and rebuild, the advisory group provided advice on local employment, worker safety and the procurement of goods and services. This ensured that recovery and rebuilding activities helped to support local industry, create local jobs and support skills development where possible.

The Bushfire Recovery Industry and Worker Advisory Group met on a monthly basis, and its agenda included a progress report on the ongoing clean-up operation. It first met on 12 February 2020 and reported on the scope and status of the clean-up program.

As of 6 February 2020, 433 property owners had registered with BRV for the clean-up program – Alpine (2), East Gippsland (334) and Towong (97). Grocon had received registrations from 253 contractors and other interested parties to collaborate on the delivery of the clean-up program.

All bushfire waste is classified under law as asbestos contaminated. As such, clean-up focuses on establishing strict site inspection and air monitoring processes, and having crews qualified to handle asbestos waste. Clean-up crews involved in the program are required to hold a Class A licence, which allows the handling of friable asbestos, or asbestos contaminated dust (other than asbestos contaminated dust associated with or derived from the removal of nonfriable asbestos).

Stakeholders involved in the clean-up program acknowledged that recruiting Class A licensees would take time, and that many contractors would have to travel from Melbourne, as there were few licensed contractors in the fire-affected areas.

BRV advocated for the relaxation of regulatory asbestos removal requirements to expedite clean-up and maximise the involvement of local contractors. One of the primary arguments for this proposal was that many fire-affected properties either do not have any asbestos present or the asbestos that is present can be classified as non-friable.

BRV had held a workshop with WorkSafe, EPA and relevant local authorities to discuss the approach to the management of hazardous waste. In February 2020, WorkSafe was asked to consider making an order under section 55 of the *Dangerous Goods Act 1985* permitting Class B licence holders to undertake the removal of bushfire waste under Class A conditions. No agreement was made during the workshop or at subsequent meetings, however, WorkSafe advised BRV of the correct process to follow to apply for a section 55 order, and WorkSafe encouraged BRV to follow this process.

The EPA issued section 30A approvals – a provision of the *Environment Protection Act 1970* under which it can authorise discharges, emissions, storage, treatment, disposal and handling of waste in emergencies and other temporary situations that would otherwise be an offence under the Act. This allowed landfill sites in Wangaratta, Bairnsdale, Orbost and Cann River to accept bushfire waste.

EPA expedited these landfill approvals to enable clean-up to proceed. Councils commended EPA for its prompt handling of both the decision and the process.

On 7 February 2020 EPA also issued a section 30A approval to Grocon to enable the transportation of bushfire waste in non-EPA permitted vehicles subject to a vehicle assessment checklist.

During the BRV workshop on hazardous waste management arrangements, a proposal was put forward for an approach to maximise local employment and procurement. To prioritise the use of local sub-contractors and suppliers, Grocon:

- created a registration link on its website for interested sub-contractors to register their interest in participating in the clean-up
- visited Mallacoota, Orbost, Buchan, Bairnsdale and Corryong to allow local sub-contractors to discuss their participation in the clean-up (February 2020)
- engaged a training company to upskill applicants to relevant qualifications if required.

Grocon commenced works on 3 February 2020, contacting registered property owners to complete a questionnaire and arrange an inspection. On 10 February 2020 site inspections with property owners commenced. Actual clean-up works on properties started a week later on 17 February 2020.

On 15 April 2020, BRV updated the minister on the progress of recovery efforts, in which it highlighted that WorkSafe had not proceeded with making the section 55 order. Despite the discussions held in February, including with WorkSafe, the Order was not made under section 55 of the Dangerous Goods Act permitting Class B licence holders to undertake the removal of bushfire waste under Class A conditions.

WorkSafe did not proceed with the making of the Order due to stakeholder concerns regarding the possible diminution of safety standards, and a belief that there were already sufficient Class A licence holders to perform the work necessary to conduct the clean-up. All 736 registered clean-up sites, incorporating 2000 structures, were cleaned up by the end of August 2020.

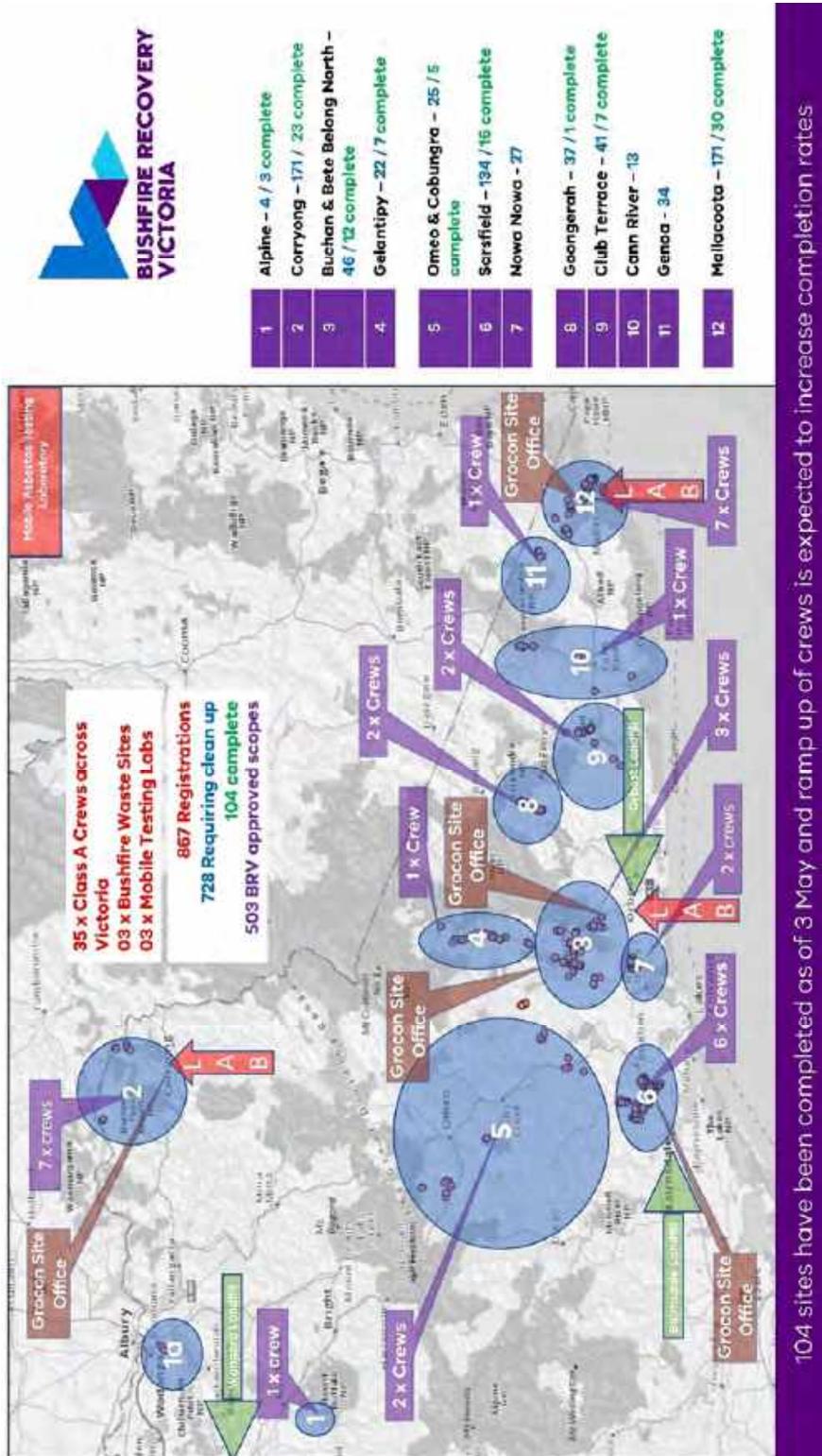
Grocon engaged third parties to provide air monitoring for asbestos particles at clean-up sites before works commenced each day.

#### 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.

BRV regularly updated the minister on the progress of the clean-up works, including any issues encountered, ongoing community feedback, actions taken and preparedness activities. Figures 17 and 18 (p 282 and 283) are examples of the progress of works and deployment of clean-up crews and timeline of the clean-up operation as of 4–5 May 2020.

Figure 17. Progress of works and deployment of clean-up crews as of 4 May 2020. (Source: BRV<sup>96</sup>)



The bushfire clean-up program was completed on 26 August 2020, with final certificates issued by 25 September 2020. A total of 2566 structures on 736 properties were cleared. As of 28 August 2020, the cost of the program amounted to \$91 million. BRV initiated an audit of the clean-up program with the final report being made available at the end of March 2021.<sup>97</sup>

According to Grocon’s final assessment, 38 clean-up work crews plus other trades worked six days a week, totalling more than 372,000 hours, to complete the required works. Almost 75,000 tonnes of bushfire waste were removed from properties registered with the clean-up program. At its peak, 420 people were employed on the clean-up, including 40 Grocon employees, 49 sub-contractors/businesses and one consultant<sup>98</sup>

Outside of the Grocon works, councils offered free bushfire waste vouchers to impacted properties with burnt items that were not removed through the clean-up program. These vouchers could be used to dispose of any bushfire waste, excluding prescribed waste as per the contractor clean-up requirements. The vouchers could be used at any nominated landfill or waste transfer station.

**Figure 18.** Timeline of clean-up operation presented on 5 May 2020. (Source: BRV<sup>96</sup>)



### 13.4.1 Community engagement

Clean-up was a significant focus for communities. Recent experiences with major fires had left memories of prolonged and difficult clean-up experiences – particularly in East Gippsland.

As part of the community engagement phases of this Inquiry, many community members talked about the mental health impacts of having destroyed homes and structures on their properties for extensive periods after the fires had been extinguished. They commented that it made it impossible to focus on their recovery and a better future when they were constantly reminded of their losses, both physical and in the context of a previous life as they had known it.

Communities were initially concerned about how long it would take to start clean-up, and the effects of asbestos removal. The community was also frustrated that the government intended to use a large, Melbourne-based contractor rather than utilising local people and businesses.

Grocon held community meetings in February 2020 as a means of encouraging local contractors to become involved and sharing clean-up information with communities. At the time of the meetings, communities were not satisfied with the information provided by Grocon and it was still unclear whether it would clean-up all properties.

Prior to the start of the clean-up program, official landfill sites were still not identified and there were issues with the dumping of bushfire waste in the bush. Communities noted with frustration the illegal dumping of waste, the build-up of debris in the Wallagaraugh River mouth and trees that had not yet been cleared.

Community anxiety was heightened due to the large quantities of debris requiring disposal. Councils and EPA representatives asked the community to be patient and to refrain from trying to clean up asbestos contaminated properties without proper equipment and procedures.

In response to the community's concerns about information on clean-up operations, BRV and Grocon developed a media communications plan to provide an overview of the planned clean-up schedule. The plan was implemented from early March 2020.

BRV and Grocon prepared community newsletters with information regarding clean-up activities which were distributed by councils to impacted communities. Newsletters and other communications included information regarding clean-up schedules and landfill locations accepting bushfire waste. The communications also reminded communities about asbestos risks and relevant regulations and procedures necessary for the handling and removal of hazardous materials.

Affected landowners wanted certainty as to scheduling of their clean-up, but BRV was unable to provide notifications out past 30 days for scheduled clean-ups because of variability in weather and the impact of COVID-19.

Subsequent community newsletters provided clean-up figures, statistics and completion rates to inform the community as to the progress of the operation.

### 13.4.2 Engagement of local contractors

Throughout the clean-up operation Grocon continued to prioritise local contractors and provided training in workplace health and safety regulations to maximise local employment. It established a partnership with East Gippsland TAFE that resulted in more than 30 locals undergoing training to enable them to work on clean-up.

At various times throughout the clean-up program more than 50 per cent of Grocon employees were locals. An ongoing restriction in the employment of local contractors was the need to engage Class A licensed asbestos removal contractors. The availability of local licensed asbestos removal contractors was very low. This caused a considerable amount of frustration among locals (both property owners and contractors) who knew that in many cases the specialist license was unnecessary due to the absence of asbestos.

Grocon used its newsletters to update communities about local contractor engagement in the clean-up program and its intention to maximise opportunities for local contractors. For example, one newsletter informed readers that over 400 expressions of interest from local subcontractors to work on the program had been received. Local subcontractors – such as plumbers, surveyors, arborists, electricians – were also advised on how they could be employed as part of the clean-up process.

#### 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.

## 13.5 Hazardous tree and roadside debris removal

As part of the BRV 2020 clean-up program, Grocon assessed, managed and removed hazardous trees where it was necessary for the safe clean-up of destroyed buildings. Grocon employed local logging contractors to harvest saleable timber and stockpile firewood from highway, roadside and firebreak tree clearing.

Additional support was made available to assist in the removal of hazardous trees if they were within the residential component of a rural property, within the area immediately surrounding the main access to the house, or where there was a potential health and safety threat to residents.

For rural properties, the residential component was defined as the area clearly identifiable as residential and not used for farming purposes (for example, a residential premise and its immediate surroundings).<sup>95</sup>

### CASE STUDY: HAZARDOUS TREE ASSESSMENT AND TREATMENT: OVENS 41 – ABBEYARD – YARRARABULA SOUTH BUSHFIRE

A number of roads were severely impacted by the Ovens 41- Abbeyard - Yarrarabula South bushfire that started on 31 December 2019. These fires and the precarious conditions led to the closure of many roads for several weeks.

While the threat to safety from active fire may have passed, hazardous trees and debris pose new dangers. Crews continued to work within the fireground to assess and treat individual hazardous trees adjacent to roadsides however on several sections of road, fire severity, tree species and hazard tree density made it impractical to safely remove all hazards, both immediate and future. These hazardous trees had to be removed in order to safely reopen the roads.<sup>85</sup>

The removal works occurred under the authority of the Incident Management Team responsible for the Ovens 41- Abbeyard - Yarrarabula South fire. As the works occurred on land managed by two government organisations, PV and DELWP, the approval was sought to commence operations on PV-managed land.<sup>85</sup>

Clearing and re-opening of these roads required a multi-agency effort. Regional roads worked with DELWP, FFMVic, Parks Victoria, VicForests and ADF to clear roads and undertake emergency repairs to enable safe access for the community. Where possible debris was dispersed to the bottom side of the road for future burning.

Road managers, primarily Regional Roads Victoria and councils, are responsible for roadside fuel management. However, during a fire event and the immediate aftermath hazardous tree clearance is often managed under the authority of the Incident Controller.

In many remote locations with stretched resources, fire services are likely to be fighting fires elsewhere and not simultaneously able to appropriately ensure safety of the fireground, conduct hazardous tree assessments or clear roads. This leaves many non-responder agency personnel unable to enter firegrounds due to safety concerns, despite having the capacity and capability to assist.

On 22 October 2020 BRV consulted with communities impacted by the 2019–20 fires and determined that the management of hazardous trees resulting from a bushfire event was an issue of significant focus for them. It noted that the timely reopening of roads was a priority after a fire event, but that it would have to be done safely and with clear accountability.

BRV identified three issues that currently hinder the timely and safe reopening of roads.

1. Currently trees that are on the road reserve and do not pose a clear and present danger to road users, are not assessed and managed. While these trees may not directly affect road reopening, they still present a danger to other public and private assets such as fencing. As such, non-removal of trees from the road reserves continues to hinder recovery operations. If the landowner whose fence may be damaged by hazardous trees attempts to clear the debris on their own, they put themselves at risk and incur additional liability.

2. The removal of trees from the road often leaves debris, but if this debris does not pose a clear and present danger to road users then it may be left on site. At present, there is no consideration whether this debris is beneficial (as habitat) or hazardous (unacceptable fuel loads). The priority of the Road Authority is to ensure the road itself is safe to use and may not have the resources to assess or manage the debris left on site.
3. Impacted communities that believe hazardous trees and debris have not been managed appropriately become anxious over time about the risks to their safety and assets.

BRV recommended to EMV that all trees in road reserves be assessed in the response phase for their hazard to road users and other public and private assets on the reserve and immediately adjacent to the reserve. All trees and debris identified as hazardous should be managed to remove the risk before handing the road back to the road authority. Doing this in the response phase of the event would most likely require multiple assessment and management steps, the first for road safety considerations and a follow-up to manage other risks

In reply, the EMC expressed the need to develop a specific doctrine or guidance to assist the Incident Controller in determining when the road is safe to hand back to the road authority. This doctrine would also include appropriate engagement with the road authority. Consequently, a working group of subject matter experts has been assembled to develop such a policy. This new doctrine would complement the current 'JSOP J03.10 - Traffic Management at emergencies' and 'JSOP J08.03 - Tree hazard - bushfire response' doctrines that are already being reassessed as part of an annual review.

Communities commented that hazardous trees and debris moved to the side of the road often linger for months. One agency may be responsible for moving the debris off the road, but another agency is then responsible for clearing the debris from the roadside altogether.

Initial road clearance is paramount for immediate relief and recovery efforts, yet debris that is left on the roadside for weeks or months leads to an ongoing sense of concern and unease in the community. Communities expressed anger and frustration that the clean-up operation never seems to end and that no government agency appears to take control for the disposal of the debris.

IGEM was taken to areas to view the roadside debris during its February 2021 community engagement visits. In some locations piles of debris had become overgrown with weeds and wattle to the extent that it is probably now already too late to try and clear it. This debris continues to increase community anxiety as it provides an ongoing reminder of the fires and poses a significant ongoing fire risk as the debris dries out.



Overgrown roadside debris, Sarsfield, February 2021 (Source: IGEM)

## 13.6 Effectiveness of the clean-up program

The outcomes of the BRV 2020 Clean-up Program were positive – it was well monitored, and reporting and works were completed within the designated timeframe. IGEM saw evidence of regular communication between government, Grocon and the community regarding the overall program and opportunities for local involvement.

IGEM heard from communities about issues related to individual scheduling and communication. Land and property owners were unclear of when their properties were due for clean-up beyond a 72 hour window. Owners of properties scheduled in the later stages of the clean-up program, went months without confirmation of clean-up activities and this was a cause of inordinate anxiety and frustration.

While those individuals whose properties were cleared early in the operation were satisfied, others often feared their properties were ineligible or had been forgotten. The lack of clarity regarding clean-up at an individual property level hampered recovery and a return to normality difficult for many.

The BRV 2020 Clean-up Program was completed to the government's schedule, not that of the community. The community, while assured that clean-up would occur and financial costs would be covered by the State, had no involvement, input or knowledge of the ongoing schedule and timeline.

The management of hazardous trees and roadside debris continues to be an issue for communities and government. During response, there are clear safety issues that restrict access to firegrounds and slow the assessment and felling of hazardous trees. However, as access to burnt areas is restored, the management of debris associated with hazardous trees is very problematic.

Government is restricted through numerous legislative and regulatory mechanisms related to environmental and land tenure policies. The end result for communities is that piles of debris are left unmanaged for months, with no government agency taking accountability for their removal.

Public health restrictions associated with the COVID-19 pandemic had implications for clean-up. The process was slowed down primarily due to travel restrictions, and also the general consternation concerning the resolution of the pandemic. Many local community members grew anxious that clean-up contractors travelling from Melbourne, an area under lockdown, could possibly be spreading infection to already vulnerable communities.



# Chapter 14

Supporting local recovery



Community remains a collective term is used throughout this chapter and the report more broadly. Communities are groups of people who have something in common. Communities may be based on geographic locations, similar interests, characteristics of the individual or a shared common experience.

In recovery from the 2019–20 Victorian fire season, communities are largely based on a geographic location, however, in many cases there is also the common experience of direct or indirect fire impact.

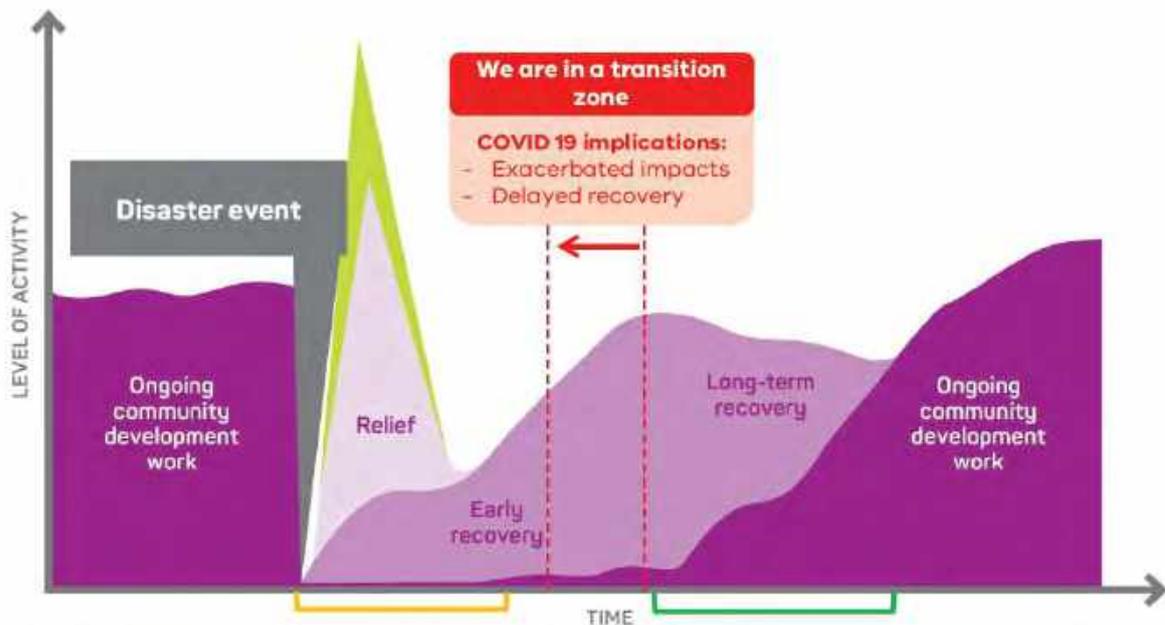
IGEM acknowledges there is diversity among people living in the same district or town including values, opinions and experiences, income, employment, cultural background, age, sexuality and family composition. Likewise, each individual will have a different experience of the fires, due to differing impacts and their own unique response to the fires.

Community recovery is known to take years, with the focus and priorities of communities shifting over time as individuals address their personal recovery needs and priorities. Figure 19 demonstrates the conceptual level of activity expected throughout community recovery, which BRV adapted specifically for 2019–20 fire season recovery to acknowledge the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic.

At the time of Phase 2 of the Inquiry communities were transitioning into longer-term recovery activities.

This chapter addresses the activities related to community-led and community-focused recovery. These activities focus on communities bonded by their shared location and being directly or indirectly affected by the 2019–20 fires. It also addresses the specific initiatives that included, consulted, or involved recovering communities.

**Figure 19.** Conceptual diagram of recovery activity for the 2019–20 Victorian fire season (Source: BRV)



Since the 2019–20 fires, communities have established and championed customised approaches to recovery that incorporated their collective dynamics, the effects of fire impacts and specific recovery priorities. Government and other community service organisations have also led or delivered recovery initiatives with varying levels of consultation with and involvement from the community.

The success with which a community supports and re-establishes itself, rebuilds infrastructure and social cohesion during and after a major emergency is largely determined by the type of community that existed before it was overtaken by the emergency.

For many years, the strength of communities has been measured in terms of their social capital. A study of the dimensions of social capital in the context of emergencies points to a growing trend of considering it as just one aspect of building and rebuilding stronger communities. More recently, concepts of community resilience have come to reframe the theoretical underpinnings as to why some communities bounce back better after an emergency.

Most communities, even relatively small ones, have a range of networks and organisations that both represent and promote their social cohesion. In rural Victoria, these typically manifest as sporting clubs, local emergency services, clubs and societies, school organisations, environmental groups, churches and service clubs. Larger centres may also have organisations based on business interests.

Research into social capital and experience suggests that using existing social units and authority structures is more effective than creating new ad hoc ones. It suggests that families are central to local systems and that responders need to think in terms of serving family units rather than individuals when organising relief or evacuation.<sup>99</sup>

Increasing community resilience has become a priority in the sector, and efforts are being made to better coordinate with resilience-building initiatives occurring in other sectors.

## 14.1 Community-focused recovery models

Communities are a central part of emergency management, and community-focused approaches to relief and recovery are not new.

Victoria's shift to encourage a more sophisticated resilience-based approach to emergency management followed the 2009 Victorian bushfires. This is in recognition of Victoria's environmental and social conditions continuing to become more complex, as will the scale and frequency of emergencies in the future.

As the key set of Victoria's arrangements for relief and recovery, the SERRP notes the importance of using existing structures and building on previous community development work rather than starting over. The SERRP describes a community-led approach as leading to greater ownership of decisions. The SEMP reflects what is in the SERRP, however uses the language of shared responsibility rather than community resilience.

Community-led recovery has taken various forms in Victoria. For example, the Community Based Emergency Management (CBEM) approach has been used to help communities and organisations to connect and work together before, during and after emergencies. CBEM is supported by the Community Resilience Framework for Emergency Management and can be used in a range of community contexts. CBEM continues to evolve to support community-based planning. The principles of CBEM have been applied to support large scale recovery efforts following the 2018 Barwon South West fires and the March 2019 Eastern Victorian fires.

Other resources have been developed to further support community-led recovery such as the Disaster Recovery Toolkit for Local Government. Produced in collaboration with the 10 councils most affected by the 2009 Victorian bushfires, it aims to help councils plan for and manage emergency recovery. The toolkit comprises a series of booklets addressing different aspects of recovery, including readiness for recovery. 'Community focus' is identified as one of five contributors to recovery success.<sup>100</sup> It uses the International Association of Public Participation Spectrum of Public Participation to guide a community-based approach to recovery.

Victoria's approach to community resilience and community-led recovery reflects the National Principles for Disaster Recovery. These principles suggest recovery uses community-led approaches, recognises and builds capacity, recognises complexity and understands context – all relevant to community-led recovery.<sup>101</sup>

In 2019 the SCRC endorsed the Resilient Recovery Strategy to guide recovery in Victoria. The strategy reflects a strong focus on community-centred recovery and shared responsibility. It is designed to underpin all recovery planning and activities in Victoria, and outlines actions and outcomes – several directly relevant to community-led recovery. See section 12.1 (p 253) for a full discussion of the Resilient Recovery Strategy.

### 14.1.1 Community Resilience Framework for Emergency Management

The 2011 National Strategy for Disaster Resilience set the tone for further work undertaken in Victoria.<sup>102</sup> In 2017 EMV published the Community Resilience Framework for Emergency Management which seeks to position the emergency management sector within a much broader social context, and to extend the thinking of emergency management practitioners in that regard.<sup>103</sup>

Community resilience is defined in the framework as ‘the capacity of individuals, communities, institutions, businesses and systems to survive, adapt and thrive no matter what kind of chronic stresses and acute shocks they experience’.<sup>103</sup>

The framework identifies seven resilience characteristics for the sector to encourage in communities:

- safe and well
- connected, inclusive and empowered
- dynamic and diverse local economy
- sustainable built and natural environment
- culturally rich and vibrant
- democratic and engaged
- reflective and aware.<sup>103</sup>

These characteristics focus on qualities that enable communities to better mitigate and manage emergencies and support them to rebuild and re-establish after emergencies.

The framework is based on the following guiding principles, which extend the national principles for recovery:

- each community is unique with existing and evolving levels of safety and resilience
- volunteers are critical and perform a fundamental role in building and strengthening communities
- listening is vital, and support should be relevant to, and respectful of, communities’ needs and pace
- locally tailored planning and engagement processes should support community and organisational leadership, through the development of mutual goals and solutions
- these processes draw upon combined community and organisational strengths and are accessible to, and inclusive of, all in the community
- partnerships between agencies, community service organisations, business and industry and with the community will be essential to supporting the community to achieve their goals
- collaborative processes aim to support people to manage long term challenges (chronic stresses) while better preparing to cope and recover from emergencies (acute shocks).<sup>103</sup>

The framework promotes a collaborative approach to community resilience through greater opportunities for government, councils, community service organisations, businesses and communities to connect and work together – particularly at the local level.<sup>103</sup>

The framework has not been implemented explicitly, rather it formalises the sector's desired approach to emergency management. Concepts such as community-led recovery and structures such as CRCs adopt the framework's approach and attempt to ensure communities have a strong level of involvement in their own recovery.

## 14.1.2 Bushfire Recovery Victoria's Recovery Framework

BRV's planning for how it would deliver on its responsibilities and commitment to community-led recovery went through several iterations, starting with its Community Engagement Framework. This framework outlined its approach to working in partnership with local councils and community.

It was informed by lessons and insights from previous emergencies and drew on existing resources including DHHS' Community-led Recovery Workbook and EMV's Disaster Recovery Toolkit for Local Government, Community Resilience Framework for Emergency Management and Resilient Recovery Strategy. Much of the content in BRV's Community Engagement Framework around community-led recovery was later incorporated into its Recovery Framework.

The purpose and intent of BRV's Recovery Framework was presented to the Victorian Government on 25 February 2020. The concept of five lines of recovery was approved in principle at that meeting, with the fifth line being Aboriginal Culture and Healing<sup>90</sup>

It is evident that BRV has drawn on key emergency management plans and community resilience models to develop its Recovery Framework. BRV has also added its own perspective. For example, BRV's recovery principles include the National Principles for Disaster Recovery plus two new ones: 'Strengthen communities' and 'Ensure an inclusive approach'.

BRV states it adapted existing emergency management policy and approaches to ensure community-led recovery is front and centre of recovery activities. The framework outlines how BRV will work with Victorian Government departments and agencies, noting that it retains responsibility for recovery services allocated under emergency management arrangements.

BRV defines 'community-led' as communities leading their own engagement processes, collectively deciding on their priorities and planning how they will achieve them.

BRV recognises the need for communities to take back control after the disruption of a major emergency and to lead in the decision-making process (see Figure 20). BRV does not mention any regulatory or other constraints on the control of a community over decision-making.

**Figure 20.** Key recovery activities and priorities under BRV's Recovery Framework (Source: BRV<sup>91</sup>)



An interim State Recovery Plan was produced for internal BRV purposes to support the transition and early recovery periods. The community-facing State Recovery Plan draws on the Recovery Framework to outline what the Victorian Government will do medium-term to help communities rebuild and recover. Each state line of recovery working group developed their respective chapter in the State Recovery Plan. The Recovery Framework and the State Recovery Plan were endorsed by the SBRCC and the SCRC. 2020.<sup>90</sup>

### 14.1.3 Reflections on the models

The sector has a clear focus on the importance of community involvement in emergency management – evidenced by numerous models drawn to support multi-agency planning, investment and broader strategy. The models recognise the importance of understanding the context of each community and the complexity of the emergency before developing new recovery activities.

One point of interest is that the terms ‘community-led’, ‘community-focused’ and ‘community-centred’ are used interchangeably, with community-led seeming to be the most salient across different plans. However, there is no common definition of each term and stakeholders discussed various interpretations and approaches when involving communities in their own recovery.

For example, the National Principles for Disaster Recovery describe community-led as community-centred, responsive and flexible, engaging with community and supporting them to move forward. The question of what ‘led’ means and the extent to which communities can make or have control over decisions is unclear.

#### FINDING 14.1

Governments, councils and recovery agencies do not have a shared understanding of what ‘community-led’ means in practice.

#### OBSERVATION 14.1

The lack of shared definition of ‘community-led’ creates confusion for individuals and communities.

### 14.1.4 Shared responsibility

Victoria’s emergency management sector has never had the capacity to guarantee the safety of everyone during a major emergency. First responders know that during a bushfire, with limited resources, they must address strategic rather than tactical objectives: it will not be possible to save every individual home, every farm or even every township. Even in jurisdictions such as California, which spends billions of dollars annually on vehicles, aircraft and response personnel, the outcome is no different.

Victorians have been told for years not to expect a fire truck at their door during a bushfire. Since the 2009 Victorian bushfires and 2010–11 Victorian floods, the message that everyone needs to take responsibility for their own safety and wellbeing, and that of their dependents has been re-emphasised and reinforced. It is a concept which extends beyond the impact phase.

In the context of emergencies, shared responsibility refers to the collective accountability of governments, councils, responder agencies, non-government organisations, businesses, community groups and community members in relation to emergency mitigation, preparedness, response and recovery.<sup>88</sup>

The concept of shared responsibility is discussed in the SERRP and the SEMP. The government and councils are responsible for coordinating relief and recovery. Business owners have a responsibility to develop business continuity procedures, particularly those that have carriage of critical infrastructure and essential services. The SERRP notes that businesses can also provide resources and expertise to support emergency relief and recovery.

Non-government organisations also have a responsibility to consider business continuity and how they will provide services to support affected communities.

Individuals have a responsibility to find out how to prepare for an emergency and to do so. This includes practical things like clearing their properties or writing an emergency plan, as well as ensuring their psychological preparedness.

Under the SEMP emergency management agencies are encouraged to empower community members with the knowledge and skills they need to take their share of responsibility. The intention is that achieving a higher level of shared responsibility will increase a community's resilience and give them the ability to recover from an emergency faster. According to the SEMP, achieving shared responsibility means:

- roles and responsibilities are clearly articulated
- people/organisations understand their role and the roles of others
- people/organisations can influence the decisions that affect them
- arrangements are flexible and can be negotiated
- people/organisations have the knowledge, skills and resources to fulfil their responsibilities
- people/organisations have the freedom and agency to make decisions when carrying out their roles and responsibilities
- people/organisations are accountable for their actions.

In its 10 Year Review, IGEM observed many examples of community resilience and shared responsibility that led to positive outcomes before, during and after emergencies. Despite this, the sector noted several examples of the community demonstrating reliance on the sector when they had anticipated resilient behaviour.

### 14.1.5 Community preparedness for relief and recovery

In addition to community resilience and the value this provides to both individuals and communities facing emergency relief and recovery, more tangible preparedness activities can be undertaken to increase emergency preparedness.

In Victoria, there is a strong focus on bushfire prevention and preparedness – whether that be through making properties defensible, identifying shelter options or ensuring appropriate levels of awareness of fire warnings. However, throughout the Inquiry there was less discussion among communities about the strategies they employed to prepare themselves for relief and recovery phases of emergencies.

IGEM noted preparedness trends across fire-affected communities. Generally, remote communities lack convenient access to services and townships. Many residents in these areas were better prepared for the significant isolation resulting from the fires. In many cases, these communities also had alternative sources of power and adequate food and water supplies to enable them to remain self-sufficient for a reasonable period.

However, in regional towns the isolation that eventuated due to road, energy and telecommunications disruptions was more problematic. Residents assume reasonable access to food and grocery resupply, reliable access to essential services and the ability to travel to regional centres using arterial roads.

Tourists in regional towns were particularly vulnerable and ill-prepared for the effects of these fires being in unfamiliar environments and not having the resources to store surplus supplies in preparation for the consequences of an emergency.

In countries such as New Zealand, residents are explicitly encouraged to prepare for periods of isolation lasting up to 72 hours. The directive in Victoria is not so explicit.

Many residents in the fire-affected areas discussed plans and practices that suggested they would be able to support themselves and their neighbours for several days if necessary. However, many individuals and communities were not prepared for the significant periods of isolation they faced following the 2019–20 Victorian fires.

As communities have started to recover, some have recognised this vulnerability and turned their thinking to strategies that could be implemented to make them more resilient in future. They have identified improving local resources to support periods of isolation – such as relief supplies stored in local facilities, purchasing generators for community use and building fit-for-purpose facilities that could be used for shelter or as gathering points after an emergency.

Communities were highly motivated to engage in resilience-building activities to support future emergency response and relief needs. IGEM notes that communities saw many of these preparedness activities as important for their own recovery. It reduced feelings of vulnerability and provided opportunities for local empowerment and social connection, all of which are important underlying factors for community resilience and recovery.

## 14.2 Community-led recovery

Following the establishment of BRV, a substantial amount of work was undertaken – in collaboration with all levels of government, community service organisations, and community groups – in planning, developing, and implementing community-led recovery activities.

Typically, local councils lead and coordinate local recovery and have responsibilities for coordinating local service providers to address community recovery needs. Some councils have long histories of working with community service organisations and communities directly to support recovery following emergencies or periods of community stress (for example drought, economic downturns and changing community characteristics).

While the establishment of BRV provided a dedicated focus for recovery and secured resources and funding to support local recovery following the 2019–20 Victorian bushfires, its presence complicated some aspects of local recovery coordination.

BRV needed to develop and refine its overall role in recovery and establish productive relationships with councils and other local organisations that normally work in the community. IGEM notes BRV's intent to leverage existing services, ensure a community focus and support community-led recovery where possible, however these aspirations were not always realised.

### 14.2.1 Leveraging community services

According to the Australian Disaster Resilience Community Recovery Handbook, successful recovery relies on a community-led approach that builds on local service capacity. Generally, local service providers know their communities well and are trusted. In rural areas, staff and volunteers of community service organisations usually live locally – deepening local knowledge and credibility.

Evidence to the Inquiry suggests that after the 2019–20 fires the Victorian and Australian governments often allocated funding to external organisations rather than local providers, particularly during early recovery. Local stakeholders and councils noted this trend with frustration and commented on the time and costs associated with establishing new service delivery providers, developing community trust, understanding community characteristics and identifying community priorities.

This negatively impacted a range of community service organisations, including those that offer rural financial counselling, small business support, psychosocial services, and health and medical services. Their business as usual service provision was affected by the additional service providers supporting recovery-specific activities and in some cases, this led to inefficiencies in, or duplication of service delivery. It also excluded some community service organisations from understanding the community recovery plans and contributing to broader community recovery efforts.

Some community service organisations applied to deliver recovery services through contract or sub-contracting arrangements. There were varying levels of success for smaller community service organisations that could not always meet the tender eligibility criteria or needed to adjust their typical operating model to be successful. Again, there was a level of frustration at needing to apply for funding to perform the roles and deliver the services they typically provide to the community.

Community members and stakeholders talked about how ‘fly-in, fly-out’ services sometimes did more harm than good, leaving local service providers to address issues created by external service providers, or to continue service delivery when short-term recovery providers finished short-term contracts.

---

*The worst part about that is that they had no idea what they were doing. They had no experience of delivering bushfire service, they had no understanding of working with stressed people... I called it a sausage factory approach. It was very much you do this, you do that, you do this, you do that and then they're all fixed which is absolute rubbish when it comes to working with stressed people and people with complex needs.*

*Stakeholder*

---

Local community service organisations noted 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. Rather than feeling they were able to provide local insights or perform supporting roles in community recovery, local community service organisations were excluded from planning and service delivery. This experience extended to council-based service providers.

The evidence on local community services’ capacity and capability is mixed. Some stakeholders said the local healthcare and community service workforce was too small and not specialised enough to meet demand, and that services had difficulty recruiting and retaining workers. Local providers agreed the local talent pool was small, but they attributed the difficulty in recruitment to short-term contracts and competition with statewide organisations that could offer more certainty and better pay.

VCOSS consulted community service organisations as part of its Bushfire Recovery Project and reported similar experiences to IGEM. For example, Neighbourhood Houses talked to VCOSS about how government-funded services work across or over rather than collaborate with them. Neighbourhood Houses are often described as the heart of communities, where people of all ages, abilities and backgrounds can learn, contribute and make connections they might not otherwise make. In rural areas, Neighbourhood Houses also facilitate access to Centrelink and other government services.

VCOSS found there was significant variation in the extent to which local community service organisations were involved in formal recovery processes. It reports that in East Gippsland larger regional or state-funded service providers were involved in leading recovery efforts, while in the North East local organisations were more meaningfully involved. VCOSS attributes this variation to the different approaches of councils, the breadth of existing networks, the extent of local knowledge and – perhaps most importantly – the degree to which an organisation makes itself known.<sup>104</sup>

IGEM heard that in some cases, community service organisations preferred to work with each other – working around the formal recovery processes which they found cumbersome.

#### 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.

### 14.2.2 Council and regional support

According to the EMMV and the SEMP, councils provide local recovery coordination following a major emergency, with the ability to escalate coordination issues and needs to regional and state level as required. Following the 2019–20 bushfires, councils had to work with BRV as the newly established incident-specific coordinators for regional and state recovery.

In addition to their recovery role, councils have legislated roles in working with communities to tackle a range of community issues including:

- health and wellbeing, and prevention of violence against women under the *Public Health and Wellbeing Act 2008* (Vic)
- disability access under the *Disability Act 2006* (Vic) and *Disability Discrimination Act 1992* (C'th)
- gender equality under the *Gender Equality Act 2020* (Vic)
- emergency management under the 2013 EM Act.

They also have an ongoing presence in community development activities and broader community resilience initiatives.

Stakeholders commonly spoke about councils being the closest level of government to communities and that it was appropriate for them to be the main contact point for community recovery, noting that communities often look to them for support.

Councils shared this sentiment and discussed their interest in maintaining the coordination role for local recovery. However, they were aware of their own limitations in capacity to coordinate all aspects of recovery and/or deliver all recovery services.

As an example, the capacity of Towong Shire Council is very small in comparison to East Gippsland Shire Council, with a less experienced cohort of staff available for allocation to recovery efforts. Council staff are often part of the recovering community themselves and may be experiencing personal impacts.

Despite capacity constraints, the affected councils implemented numerous initiatives to support community-led recovery. Towong and East Gippsland shire councils created place-based positions to support CRCs as they consulted on their community's priorities and developed action plans. Towong's five Local Area Recovery Officers (LAROs) and East Gippsland's seven Place Managers also provide information and act as a sounding board for individuals in their catchments.

BRV referred to place-based council staff as the first tier of support for CRCs, together with its regional staff. However, councils discussed examples of Place Managers and Local Area Recovery Officers being excluded from community recovery activities and local recovery planning.

Allocating council staff to defined geographical areas appears to have worked well. Generally, people in Towong and East Gippsland shires were very positive about their Local Area Recovery Officers or Place Managers and noted how hard they worked to support the communities in their catchment.

IGEM received mixed feedback from individuals and communities on the effectiveness of other recovery support they received from council, particularly concerning rebuilding.

Community recovery organisations and communities did not have a clear pathway to approach government to seek financial and practical support for community-led initiatives and there were often mixed messages as to how communities could be best supported by government and councils.

During the Inquiry, IGEM heard from councils and other stakeholders about a lack of clarity between council staff and BRV when it came to coordinating recovery and supporting community-led recovery initiatives. As noted in Chapter 12, role clarity in relation to BRV was problematic in various aspects of recovery. However, this confusion and frustration was most prevalent in the area of recovery service delivery and local recovery coordination.

Both BRV and councils were starting to build more productive and positive relationships to ensure communities were supported in a consistent manner. Given the nature of BRV's establishment, the issues experienced are not entirely unexpected and there is a motivation to build on recovery learnings to develop more streamlined and efficient mechanisms to support communities as they continue their recovery.

There were several positive examples where BRV assumed a behind the scenes coordination role and boosted local and council capacity in the planning and management of recovery activities, yet left the delivery of the services and public-facing roles to council and local organisations. Some recovery centres operated in this manner with positive outcomes (see section 14.2.4, p 302).

Likewise, multiple agricultural recovery services were offered by regionally-based AgVic personnel who have existing relationships with farmers. In cases where BRV activated its own recovery communication initiatives and attempted to reach farmers through BRV-delivered recovery initiatives, communities discussed their reticence in accessing these services. They described the support as not quite right and were hesitant to travel to new locations and interact with unknown people. AgVic on the other hand has a well-practiced model of outreach and familiarity with the local agribusinesses, ongoing agricultural stresses in the community and greater expertise that can be applied to support bushfire recovery.

#### 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.

### 14.2.3 Community Recovery Committees

According to the SERRP Community Recovery Committees (CRCs) as the name suggests are the main mechanism for supporting community recovery after an emergency. Under the SERRP, councils are responsible for setting up and leading a 'municipal/community recovery committee'.

While it seems that the SERRP blends these committees, MEMPs generally treat the two as separate groups which serve different purposes. In general, MEMPs note that one or more CRCs will be established in addition to a municipal recovery committee, depending on the magnitude of the event.

In the State Recovery Plan BRV refers to community recovery committees as a primary recovery mechanism which brings local voices, knowledge and expertise to the fore.

Across the fire-affected areas 22 CRCs had either formed or were in the process of forming in one of three ways:

- pre-existing community groups that expanded their remit or set up a sub-committee, for example Lucyvale in Towong Shire and Sarsfield in East Gippsland Shire
- new groups initiated by community in response to the bushfires, for example Mallacoota and District Recovery Association in East Gippsland Shire
- new groups formed through an expression of interest process run in partnership by BRV and councils, for example Alpine CRC.

CRC locations comprised Alpine Shire (one), Towong Shire (11) and East Gippsland Shire (10).

Community Recovery Plans developed by CRCs in consultation with their communities are at various stages, with some complete and some yet to be finalised.

Some communities reported they were not encouraged or allowed to establish CRCs in ways that best reflected the characteristics of their community. However, there was no clear guidance during early recovery to help communities determine the criteria for establishing a CRC and provide consistency across affected communities.

One community member discussed hopes to establish a CRC to include several small townships and isolated properties. However, BRV did not allow this to occur and provided feedback that the committee would be too small. However, the evidence indicates that other small CRCs have been successfully established, and CRCs servicing large geographic footprints are too large to effectively engage all parts of the community.

#### Support for community recovery committees

Towong and East Gippsland shire councils have appointed dedicated, place-based recovery staff (see 14.2.2 p 297) who support CRCs to determine local priorities, share information and build community connections. They also support two-way communication between CRCs and council.

BRV assists CRCs to develop annual operating budgets. CRCs can access up to \$25,000 per year for three years to cover operational expenses. This includes direct operating costs, costs associated with community engagement and community recovery planning. Examples include venue hire, catering, IT costs, reimbursement of expenses incurred by members (phone, travel), newsletters, advertising, and surveys.

CRCs can apply to BRV for additional funds as required to effectively fulfil their role in community-led recovery. The additional funds are over and above the base operating budget. CRCs are expected to report quarterly on their expenditure.

More recently, CRCs can also access BRV's Support Services Catalogue, a panel of professional service providers including workshop facilitators, engagement and communications specialists, project management, mentoring and wellbeing professionals. These services are funded by BRV at no cost to the CRC. CRC members reported that this professional support was much needed from the time of establishment of the committees and had become available too late. However, for CRCs using the service providers, there had been positive outcomes.

BRV developed several resources and tools for CRCs including charter and action plan templates and *The First 100 Days*, a guide on what to expect.<sup>90</sup> IGEM heard very positive feedback on the value of this support.

### Community recovery committee membership

CRC members are volunteers who have self-nominated or are nominated by their communities. In most (if not all) cases, CRC members are from within the community. As community members they are also likely to be managing their own recovery and supporting neighbours, friends and family to recover.

Many CRC members talked about the high level of fatigue and stress experienced as a result of their committee participation.

For most, there was a strong sense that their involvement was *the right thing to do* and they were committed to being involved. However, there were many examples of members withdrawing or scaling back their participation, or limiting timelines for continuing with their committee.

The stress and fatigue were derived from multiple factors:

- the amount of work assumed by the CRCs varied considerably
- there were different interpretations and a lack of clear guidance as to the expectations of CRC membership and outputs of the committees
- some CRCs were assuming a huge amount of work – much of it involving difficult and onerous work within their communities – with very little tangible support from council or BRV, at least initially.

CRC members also said they needed more tailored guidance or support that suited the community they represented. They acknowledged members of their group had varying levels of experience or understanding in what it meant to represent community. CRCs identified a need for additional training or mentoring to improve their decision-making throughout the recovery process.

It appears CRCs were not equally aware of the support available to them, or that they lacked the ability to anticipate what support may be useful.

As an example, one committee discussed labouring through intensive funding application processes, not knowing they could access grant writing support through BRV. As a result, it was unsuccessful in multiple funding applications and unable to progress work on community recovery priorities.

Most of the BRV developed resources were not available until December 2020. This raises questions about the timing of the package's development and how well it was communicated with CRCs.

Committee members felt like they had wasted their own time and let the community down. Members felt abandoned in their recovery and that there was little support from BRV in their recovery efforts.

In addition to a high volume of work, many CRCs felt their level of effectiveness was constrained by government factors that resulted in misdirected time and effort. IGEM heard from members about issues they felt impacted their effectiveness as a CRC. One such issue was the lack of clarity around roles and responsibilities, particularly in relation to the determination of community recovery priorities and the activities being planned to address those priorities.

For example, as LER applications were being prepared, some CRCs took an active, and onerous role of contributing to the development of applications. This included providing significant advice and endorsement to applications being prepared by community groups and planning work to incorporate potentially funded projects into existing community recovery plans.

However, with announcement of the LER applications, some CRCs were surprised to see their feedback and contributions not considered in the successful applications. This was part of a broader misunderstanding of the LER between government and community organisations, which caused a considerable degree of frustration for CRCs that felt excluded or disregarded in the overall process.

IGEM received mixed feedback about the degree to which CRCs represented their communities. For example, young people repeatedly expressed a desire to contribute to their community's recovery, to have a say and be heard. IGEM also heard that young people felt excluded from the formal CRC process.

Community members and stakeholders told IGEM that it was often the 'usual suspects' who volunteered or were nominated as CRC members.

There were some examples of concerted efforts to broaden CRC membership to be more reflective of the community. For example, the Mallacoota and District Recovery Association made a deliberate decision to ensure they had young people on their committee – and have two younger people on the CRC (less than 30 years old). They felt this was important to ensure the CRC members reflect the characteristics of the community.

BRV commented that other CRCs it had supported in partnership with councils, were giving 'new people' the opportunity to participate in their community's recovery. In one North East CRC both the chair and deputy chair are under 30 years old. IGEM heard that these non-traditional or new leaders were coming up with innovative ideas, and that they do not have legacy projects.

There was not a strong level of representation of Aboriginal people on CRCs. However, one CRC in East Gippsland includes an Aboriginal Elder. This member has provided valuable insights into the needs and preferences of Aboriginal people living in the area and has been able to advocate for the relief and recovery priorities of Aboriginal people in the area. Other community members and stakeholders spoke about the extremely positive outcomes associated with this person's involvement in the CRC.

Stakeholders and some community members noted that in some cases local business leaders seemed to be the leading forces behind the CRC as opposed to community leaders.

Stakeholders also commented that many people involved in establishing CRCs were from the more affluent side of the community, which intimidated those from lower socio-economic backgrounds. Stakeholders also noted that CRCs needed cultural awareness training.

---

*It's very hard as an Aboriginal person to walk into a room full of white people and feel like they're going to be heard – it's uncomfortable.*

*Stakeholder*

---

#### 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.

### 14.2.4 Community recovery centres

Under the SERRP, councils are responsible for setting up and staffing recovery centres. Recovery centres host a variety of recovery support services with the intention of providing a single point of entry for emergency-affected individuals, families and households.

Following the 2019–20 fires eight recovery centres were established – of these only two were initially set up by councils, the remaining six by BRV. Community recovery centres fall into three categories:

- council-run
- council-run with BRV support
- BRV-run.

#### **Bairnsdale Bushfire Recovery Centre**

In January 2020 East Gippsland Shire Council set up its Bairnsdale Bushfire Recovery Centre. IGEM heard that more than 15,000 referrals were made through the centre, noting that an individual or family could be referred to more than one service.

At the time of writing, the Bairnsdale Bushfire Recovery Centre was promoted on the council website, however IGEM heard that demand had decreased significantly. While some stakeholders said people preferred to visit a BRV-run recovery centre closer to home; others said people were not interested in attending one at all.

#### **Upper Murray Community Recovery Hub**

BRV identified Corryong as a recovery centre location. It funded and worked with Towong Shire Council to turn an existing facility into the Upper Murray Community Recovery Hub.<sup>105</sup>

The Upper Murray Community Recovery Hub operates as a base for the Towong Shire Council's recovery team and its statutory planning, building and environmental health services. Other agencies operating from the Hub included Red Cross, Salvation Army, Gateway Health, Small Business Mentoring Service, DHHS, NBRA, Grocon (during clean-up), AgBiz Assist, AgVic, Anglicare, Upper Murray Family Care and Legal Disaster Relief.<sup>105</sup>

IGEM heard that BRV staff supported council staff in coordinating this large facility. Stakeholders told IGEM that the open plan set up was not conducive to private conversations with distressed residents.

However, IGEM also heard positive stories about the benefits of co-location, with staff of various recovery services supporting each other to fulfil their complex and challenging roles.

#### **BRV Community Recovery Hubs**

BRV identified multiple community recovery centre sites in East Gippsland. These sites were based on an assessment of community needs, community feedback and geographic considerations to allow accessibility for affected people to travel to the centre. BRV called their recovery centres Community Recovery Hubs.

Four locations were selected, these being Buchan, Orbost, Cann River and Mallacoota. Following strong community advocacy, Sarsfield. BRV also established a Community Recovery Hub in Bright for residents of the Alpine Shire Council and the nearby Alpine Resorts.

Recovery hub coordinators in East Gippsland and Alpine shires generally worked out of small facilities with residents dropping in or calling the coordinators for assistance when required. They regularly worked alone, with less co-location with staff from other recovery agencies. IGEM heard accounts of some coordinators making outreach visits to individuals or communities who found it difficult to visit the Community Recovery Hub.

Recovery hub coordinators were praised extensively by recovery agencies and communities for their hard work and dedication. However, the roles and responsibilities taken on by the hub coordinators varied considerably and, in many cases, exceeded their training and capacity to serve the community. Community members also said how much the Community Recovery Hubs were under resourced and needed more staff on the ground. Many were concerned for hub coordinators' health and wellbeing.

The Inquiry heard that hub coordinators covered social work skills, psychological first aid, technical recovery advice, practical assistance and support with funding applications.

Many recovery hub coordinators dealt with a high volume of complex issues, with community members only travelling to the Community Recovery Hub when all other avenues for support had been tried and exhausted. This meant that many coordinators were working with people with very complex cases that had been unsuccessfully supported through other more targeted means. These people were highly distressed and frustrated by their recovery experiences.

IGEM notes that these tasks are not the defined role of the hub coordinator. However, the reality of the recovery experience for many led to coordinators being face-to-face with affected community members and placed in a position where it became very difficult to refer that person onto another service, or refrain from providing ad hoc psychosocial support.

BRV was aware of the high level of pressure placed on coordinators and commenced initiatives to provide a higher level of support to them and their communities. These initiatives included the appointment of five wellbeing officers to provide initial psychosocial support to community members and relieve the hub coordinators of that function.

At the time of the Inquiry this role had been embedded into BRV Community Recovery Hubs, however IGEM notes that the magnitude of the support required appears to exceed the additional capacity of five staff.

Several training and rostering arrangements had also been offered to increase the capability of hub coordinators to perform these additional roles. In addition, BRV has offered psychological first aid training, greater flexibility in rostering and leave, and ongoing communication with hub coordinators to better understand their needs. In many cases however, hub coordinators felt they could not take the time away from the community to take up these opportunities.

A key issue for hub coordinators was the lack of a well-formed role description. A poorly framed role description meant hub coordinators did not know which avenues to appropriately refer community members to other support services when requests fell outside their remit. Hub coordinators had attempted to clarify their role descriptions multiple times with BRV but were not satisfied their concerns had been appropriately addressed.

Additional resourcing (extra staff and wellbeing officers) has increased BRV Community Recovery Hub capacity, however, the demands on the hub staff are still very high and many of the underlying issues relating the capacity and capability remain of concern.

### **Effectiveness**

IGEM observed stark differences between styles of community recovery centres.

Staff in the council-run and council-run/BRV-supported centres were aware of opportunities for improvement, but largely felt they were providing a fit-for-purpose recovery service to address community needs. Hub coordinators in East Gippsland were over-worked, stressed and in some cases traumatised by their work and perceived inability to meet the needs of communities.

One of the main differences in the model used was the co-location of council with BRV, and other community recovery agencies from the area. East Gippsland BRV Community Recovery Hub coordinators discussed that requests for co-location of case support workers and other services had been explicitly denied or discouraged. Council staff felt their presence was not encouraged at Community Recovery Hubs and felt that despite holding significant amounts of relevant knowledge they were excluded from this aspect of community recovery.

In many of the examples heard by IGEM, community members were not finding the recovery centres to be an essential part of their recovery support network. The distance required to reach the centres discouraged many from visiting in person. This was particularly relevant for smaller BRV Community Recovery Hubs that did not have multiple services on site. Community members reported that the effort and time to make a long trip into town was not worthwhile when they were only able to interact with one person who could refer them onto other information.

As noted, some recovery centre designs were not conducive to privacy. Recovery personnel working out of the centres noted that on many occasions, they used the facility to make an initial appointment with community members and conducted ongoing appointments at a more appropriate location. Like many aspects of relief and recovery, there was limited proactive community engagement to encourage visits to a recovery centre, even if just for an initial information sharing appointment.

The co-location of recovery services in recovery centres was not coordinated other than by service providers individually helping community members to access available services on any given day. Community members were often overwhelmed by the number of services and did not understand how to interact with each service.

Community members reported feeling confused and frustrated at the lack of information sharing between services and felt that they repeatedly told their story during visits to a recovery centre. IGEM notes that the lack of information sharing is not unique to recovery centres and reflects a broader coordination and information sharing theme observed throughout both relief and recovery.

Despite the lack of coordination between recovery centre services, stakeholders saw the opportunity that co-location afforded.

The co-location helped to raise awareness among recovery organisations of other services that could then be communicated to community members as required. They could easily suggest a community member meet other service providers during a single visit, or provide written information, contact details or schedules to facilitate future engagement between affected individuals and those providers.

Despite these considerations of the effectiveness of recovery support offered via recovery centres, IGEM's main concern is the model's sustainability and the health and wellbeing of the staff working in Community Recovery Hubs. Based on the early recovery experiences following the fires, it is not appropriate to have minimal staffing at recovery centres. The co-location model and collaboration between council and BRV appears to support a more comprehensive level of support for the community and ensures a recovery centre's effectiveness does not sit with one or two individuals.

The BRV-run recovery centre model does not leverage existing capability or capacity of council and other local services that have roles in community recovery. While the council-run/BRV-supported model experienced issues in relation to role clarity, these recovery centres were established quickly and provided a comprehensive service to communities, without the same level of stress and burden observed in the BRV-run recovery centres.

#### 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.

#### 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.

## 14.2.5 Outreach

Many fire-affected people have not visited a community recovery centre. People are busy looking after their families and animals, clearing up their properties and helping neighbours. The terrain and distance from towns is an added barrier for people living in remote areas, particularly if they are loath to seek help.

Outreach is an approach to service delivery where service providers travel to potential recipients. It can involve travelling from property to property or setting up in remote settlements so that people only have a short distance to travel.

The Inquiry notes that BRV intended each of its Community Recovery Hubs would be a base for a 'mobile hub', which would travel to surrounding communities. However, the public health restrictions associated with the COVID-19 pandemic meant the BRV Community Recovery Hubs were largely operating online or by phone.

IGEM heard that recovery centre staff activated outreach services as soon as they could. For example, the Bright Recovery Hub organised 'outreach hub' sessions, taking service providers to Myrtleford, Mount Beauty and the Alpine Resorts so that people could 'drop-in' for information or support. IGEM heard attendance increased as people understood what the drop-in sessions were about.

Other examples of outreach occurred in Towong and East Gippsland shires. Following advocacy from the Walwa community, the Upper Murray Community Recovery Hub operates an 'outreach hub' from the Walwa Bush Nursing Centre two days a week.

In East Gippsland, the Orbost Community Recovery Hub started outreach to remote communities such as Bendoc, Tubbut and Goongerah in December 2020 and established a program of regular monthly visits in partnership with other recovery services and organisations.

BRV reported it found this an effective way to respond to the compounding impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, particularly given the job losses experienced in the Alpine Resorts as a result of the cancelled ski season. BRV told IGEM that since restrictions have lifted its Recovery Hub staff have increased the number of outreach visits to individuals, particularly those who live in remote areas or are less likely to seek access to services.

Many other community-focused organisations delivered outreach services. For example, rural financial counselling services visited farmers and small rural business owners on their properties. Salvation Army outreach workers visited clients in rural areas and the Catholic Diocese of Sale's outreach service visited remote areas of East Gippsland.

IGEM heard repeatedly across Alpine, Towong and East Gippsland shires that communities wanted more outreach. This need was present in relief and the early stages of recovery. Based on its final interactions with communities, IGEM notes that the need for recovery outreach programs is ongoing.

### 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.

## 14.3 Other demonstrations of community-led recovery

BRV, government agencies, councils and community organisations all provided local, community-focused recovery services with varying levels of effectiveness. However, throughout the Inquiry, communities discussed very organic community initiatives that started with very small organisations or individuals who saw a need within the community.

### 14.3.1 Corryong Youth Space

The Corryong Youth Space was established before the bushfires, providing a youth-focused community space as early as 2012. It operates as a hangout space for young people and is a base for organised activities throughout the year. The Corryong Neighbourhood Centre has fully funded this youth space since 2018.

The Corryong Youth Space received some donations following the bushfires, largely for equipment such as televisions. But the space was constrained by the COVID-19 pandemic and did not run a face-to-face program for much of 2020. In 2021 the resident youth worker reported it is now more actively used as a hub and bushfire recovery space for young people.

In terms of effectiveness, young people reported that being able to meet with friends in a safe space and talk, or just be, has played a significant role in their recovery. The pre-existing youth space in Corryong has given young people a physical place that they have been able to make their own.

The use of the Corryong Youth Space for bushfire recovery has leveraged existing knowledge, leadership and structures. As a result, young people have been provided recovery support through a familiar location. Services and facilities have been boosted rather than completely rebuilt making it a more efficient use of resources.

### 14.3.2 The Sanctuary

The Sanctuary in Mallacoota is a good example of a youth-led community initiative. In recognising the need for young people to have a place to come together and support each other, VICSES personnel, young people and other community members worked together to convert the vacant newsagency into a youth-focused, youth-friendly space.

The Sanctuary opened in the first week of January 2020 – less than a week after the fires reached Mallacoota.

Like the Corryong Youth Space, the idea for The Sanctuary arose because young people needed their own place to gather and support each other while cut off from the rest of the world, with no internet, power or access. The physical space is vital to the young people, but the success of The Sanctuary is not just a story about a physical space.

The Sanctuary's organic nature has seen it emerge as a vital part of the Mallacoota community – developing strong community relationships and engagement and establishing an active online presence through its website and social media channels. Following the widespread and often unwanted national and international media interest in their community, The Sanctuary has taken a proactive stance, working with young people to build their skills and capabilities in media engagement.

A search of The Sanctuary's Facebook page demonstrates the reach of this youth-led, community-based association. The site advertises a multitude of events and activities, including educational training and skills development, volunteering and funding opportunities, community events and programs, and promoting visits from external organisations and visitors.

Relationships with other community groups are evident, and the website celebrates The Sanctuary's engagement with the community including Mallacoota Surf Life Saving Club, VICSES, Mallacoota Prep-12 College, Wilderness Coast and Friends of Mallacoota.

### 14.3.3 Sarsfield Snaps

Stakeholders and community members told IGEM that Sarsfield was a loosely-connected community before the fires, with little organised community activity other than the Recreation Reserve Committee of Management.

Following the fires, in January 2020 community members opened Sarsfield Hall to offer practical and moral support, host 'Friday Night Dinners' and identify community recovery needs.

The Committee of Management set up a recovery sub-committee which evolved into the Sarsfield Community Association. Sarsfield Snaps was an early initiative, aiming to bring local children and young people together after the fires to offer a non-threatening, creative way for them to process their feelings and emotions.

Using cameras donated by Fujifilm, thirty young photographers from across Sarsfield and surrounds took images of the things around them throughout 2020, including documenting their personal bushfire recovery journey. The project coordinators set different themes the children and young people could follow.

This program offered an opportunity for children and young people to learn new skills while helping to bring the community closer together. It also helped the community show the world that the region was recovering from the fires. The end product of the children and young people's efforts was a two-year calendar that included a piece of each photographer's work.

### 14.3.4 Community-Based Bushfire Management

Victoria's bushfire risk management program 'Safer Together' drives an integrated approach across the state, encompassing risk mitigation, community preparedness and response work. The approach is delivered jointly by FFMVic, CFA, EMV and councils, in partnership with Traditional Owners.

Safer Together's Community-Based Bushfire Management (CBBM) project is another positive example of community-led recovery. The CBBM is a community engagement tool that focuses on working with local communities to reduce bushfire risk in Victoria. The approach recognises that each geographical landscape and its community are different, and decisions should be made by those residing in the region. At present there are 21 CBBM projects operating within Victorian communities.

CBBM's approach aims to ensure that a community is at the forefront of the decision-making and planning process to reduce bushfire risk in their local area. The Safer Together program emphasises the importance of understanding what risk means to them, their values, and the collective actions that can be taken to create a safer and more resilient community.

Three of the 21 CBBM communities (Mallacoota, Buchan and Cann Valley) were impacted by the 2019–20 fires. Stakeholders reported that the pre-existing networks and relationships between these communities and emergency management agencies has assisted the recovery process in these areas.

### 14.3.5 Effectiveness

These four examples are by no means exhaustive, but they provide a picture of how communities have worked with government and non-government organisations to develop different community-led recovery programs. IGEM also heard of the great work of other community organisations in supporting community recovery including church groups, Rotary and other smaller self-funded community groups.

Some of the common success factors in these examples include recognising the importance of local knowledge, local leaders, existing structures and networks. Unfortunately, despite being one of the key principles of the community-led approach, there have been relatively few examples where the government has effectively leveraged the skills, experience and local knowledge of community members.

Another common factor is that most community groups were connected and had good relationships with other community groups before the 2019–20 Victorian fire season. These groups had a good grasp of community priorities and were able to quickly activate and identify what support was needed by their community.

## 14.4 Effectiveness of community-led recovery

Community-led recovery is not a new concept. It is concerning that community members and stakeholders repeatedly identified it as something that needs considerable improvement.

Specifically, there is a lack of consistency in how the concept of community-led recovery is applied. Based on stakeholder and community feedback, it is evident that the community's roles and responsibilities are not clearly articulated.

Furthermore, the community has not felt adequately involved, believing that recovery agencies have already made decisions rather than genuinely listening to what they need.

It has been repeatedly suggested to IGEM that in operationalising community-led programs, the community end up with higher than necessary workloads. This stress is compounded by the fact that many community members are also managing significant personal impacts from emergencies.

Stakeholders and community members have noted that it would be more effective for the community-led component of recovery to mean '*community-supported and consulted*'.

---

*We know what we need. We just need people to listen to us. Don't come in with your solutions. Just listen to what we need.*

*Community member*

---

Stakeholders commented on a perceived lack of engagement, forced decision-making, or prioritisation and that the community often does not have a clear line of sight of the roles and responsibilities of government.

It has been noted that there are often times where the community cannot be involved as certain tasks are legislated as part of an organisation's statutory obligations. Overall, the local, regional and state recovery coordinators' roles are not well understood by the public, which can lead to individual community members' priorities not aligning with their expectations of agencies.

Another issue noted by stakeholders is the misalignment in timing in terms of engagement with the community. The recovery process is long-term with many communities are not ready to conduct recovery activities until 12–18 months after the initial incident. However, by this time the work of many agencies has started to wind up. Resourcing and support then become more restrained and harder to access.

### 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

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:

- (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



Emergencies disrupt people's lives. Their impact can be profound, long lasting and life changing. Recovery from emergencies is a long-term, complex social and physical process. The Australian Disaster Resilience Community Recovery Handbook notes that supporting a community's social functioning is crucial for work to be effective across the economic, built and natural recovery 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 access to services appropriate to their needs.

Social recovery must consider many factors such as age, gender, disability, Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Intersex, Queer or Questioning (LGBTIQ+) identity, homelessness, rurality, physical or social isolation and how these may impact a person's capability in recovery. Recovery agencies are also encouraged to include fire-affected tourists or seasonal workers who may lack local knowledge or social networks.<sup>106</sup>

In BRV's Recovery Framework social recovery is conceptualised as the people and wellbeing line of recovery. The term people and wellbeing was chosen rather than social because it was easier to understand. IGEM notes that BRV, councils and other recovery agencies have used the terms social and people and wellbeing interchangeably throughout recovery activities.

This chapter covers people-focused recovery activities including housing, psychosocial wellbeing and health. Financial assistance for individuals and households is covered in Chapter 5.

## 15.1 People and wellbeing recovery coordination

### 15.1.1 State-level arrangements

BRV's Recovery Framework lists DHHS as the lead department for the people and wellbeing line of recovery, in line with pre-existing emergency management arrangements. It also notes the contribution of DET to health and wellbeing.<sup>91 107</sup>

The People and Wellbeing State Recovery Working Group is responsible for leading and coordinating implementation of people and wellbeing recovery actions in the State Recovery Plan. The working group is tasked with identifying and responding to emerging needs or risks and reports to the SBRCC.<sup>90</sup>

Despite DHHS having the lead role in this line of recovery, the People and Wellbeing State Recovery Working Group is chaired by BRV.<sup>108</sup> This is because the greater part of DHHS capacity was dedicated to operations associated with the COVID-19 pandemic. Also, machinery of government changes resulted in DHHS being renamed 'Department of Health' and the establishment of the Department of Families, Fairness and Housing in February 2021.

The People and Wellbeing State Recovery Working Group has two cross-departmental subgroups:

- the Children, Youth and Families Subgroup - which plans and monitors the implementation of funded initiatives and provides expert advice to the working group
- the Bushfire Mental Health Package Steering Group - which coordinates stakeholders involved in the rollout of the \$23.4 million bushfire mental health recovery fund.

The working group also plans to set up a Community Services Advisory Group.<sup>109</sup>

### 15.1.2 Municipal level

Alpine and Towong shire councils both include social recovery matters in their Municipal Recovery Plans and East Gippsland Shire Council has a Social Recovery Sub-plan. Each Municipal Recovery Committee established a working group to coordinate social/people and wellbeing recovery. Alpine and East Gippsland shire councils set up additional subgroups that focus on psychosocial and mental health matters.

Member organisations of these groups include, but are not limited to, the council, DHHS, BRV, DET, Regional Arts Victoria, the relevant Primary Health Network (PHN) and Primary Care Partnership, Red Cross and/or VCCEM as well as organisations funded to deliver bushfire case support, financial counselling, and mental health services. Apart from BRV as a new entity this largely aligns with pre-existing emergency management arrangements.

East Gippsland groups include representatives from the Registered Aboriginal Party, Gunaikurnai Land and Waters Aboriginal Corporation (GLAWAC), and one or more of the local Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisations. In each shire, organisations are members of multiple groups/subgroups. Membership of the Alpine Mental Health Service Coordination Action Group is restricted to the Murray PHN and organisations funded to deliver case support or mental health and wellbeing services. All groups report to the Municipal Recovery Committee.

### 15.1.3 Recovery plans, outcomes and risks

The people and wellbeing line of recovery aims to ensure people are safe, healthy and connected, and communities are cohesive.

The State Recovery Plan lists the five priorities for this line of recovery:

- housing and accommodation
- individual and household financial assistance
- psychosocial recovery
- health and medical assistance
- children, youth and families.<sup>91</sup>

These are based on the pre-existing SERRP although BRV has not included community development as a separate recovery priority and has added children youth and families.<sup>2</sup>

The people and wellbeing recovery areas addressed by each council largely align with those in the State Recovery Plan. The main difference is that all three councils have retained separate community development-focused actions or recovery areas in their plans.

In June 2019 DHHS developed the comprehensive Gippsland Region Emergency Relief and Recovery Plan. The regional plan highlights the need for those driving social recovery efforts to consider the psychosocial impacts of displacement, separation from family and disruption of social support networks; understand and work with Aboriginal communities; and manage community anger and resentment.<sup>40</sup> The extent to which recovery organisations and councils working in Gippsland used the plan was not clear to IGEM during the Inquiry.

The state and municipal plans for social recovery all aim to help people and communities recover from the 2019–20 bushfires and to prevent long-term harm. Community driven action seeks to achieve similar outcomes.

The risks identified by the People and Wellbeing State Recovery Working Group in 2020–21 resonate with concerns individuals and communities have expressed to IGEM. For example, a key risk identified by the group and by this Inquiry is that individuals and communities would not receive the support they need because bushfire recovery is deprioritised due to the competing public health emergency of the COVID-19 pandemic.

The People and Wellbeing State Recovery Working Group also identified that other line of recovery activities will not be person-centred or rolled out in a trauma-informed way due to the potential siloing effect of dividing recovery. Ensuring a person-centred and community focused approach to recovery has remained a theme in SBRCC meetings and underpins many plans and objectives across all lines of recovery.

## 15.2 Housing and accommodation

During the 2019–20 bushfires 264 homes were destroyed and another 48 significantly damaged, displacing hundreds of families and households.<sup>110</sup> The devastation these people experienced from losing their homes, possessions and animals was immense.

Helping people access temporary housing became a priority for government. Non-government entities also provide tailored funding or 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 their insurance providers or other avenues.

This section covers short to medium-term accommodation support for people whose homes were destroyed or extensively damaged. Emergency accommodation such as ERCs is covered in section 8.1 (p 168). Amendments to planning and building regulations to facilitate the construction of temporary accommodation on private property are covered in section 16.3.1 (p 345).

The State Recovery Plan includes key housing and accommodation actions from pre-existing emergency management arrangements:

- helping people secure temporary accommodation and prepare plans to transition back to permanent housing
- providing building maintenance and safety information to affected households.

The plan includes additional actions related to meeting the needs of people who are homeless, social housing tenants and residential services clients, and another action related to exploring options for rent relief. DHHS is the lead for most of these actions, working in partnership with BRV, community housing agencies, the Victorian Building Authority (VBA) and councils as appropriate.

### 15.2.1 AirBnB and short-term accommodation

The Open Homes Program is an international initiative of AirBnB's not-for-profit arm. EMV has an arrangement with AirBnB to activate the Open Homes Program following an emergency.

The program involves hosts with appropriate accommodation offering free, temporary housing. Emergency-affected people seeking accommodation register online; the eligibility criteria are straightforward and minimal evidence is required to demonstrate impact.

AirBnB supports the program by waiving its fees and providing an online platform to match offers of assistance with requests for accommodation.

On 3 January 2020 the Open Homes Program was activated in Victoria.<sup>111</sup> By 4 January 216 hosts were offering free accommodation; this grew to more than 2200 by mid-January 2020. Initially, most homes offered were in and around Melbourne, but the program extended to include homes in regional areas. Homes in rural areas covered by the State of Disaster declaration were ineligible.

The program concluded on 31 January 2020 by which time more than 600 guests had received free accommodation.<sup>111</sup> The Inquiry did not see evidence indicating the length of stay or characteristics of those who were accommodated via the program.

In addition to the Open Homes Program, many informal offers of accommodation were made via social media. Families outside the fire-affected areas offered their homes or rooms to those needing accommodation. In many of the cases observed by IGEM, these offers were made with no expectation of payment and an open invitation to 'stay as long as you like'. There is little evidence of the uptake of these offers – however, it demonstrates the good will of Victorians.

## 15.2.2 Additional housing assistance

Between January and December 2020 DHHS provided housing support to fire-affected households. The program included:

- rental subsidies for public housing tenants temporarily away from their homes
- rental assistance in the form of bond loans and 12 weeks' rental payments for those moving into private or social housing. Social housing includes public and community housing
- support to access social housing. This means the 'emergency management' priority access category of the Victorian Housing Register will be applied to applications from bushfire-affected people whose homes have been destroyed or are uninhabitable due to the fires.

Housing Assistance Coordinators were appointed until the end of August 2020 to deliver the housing support program. The coordinators could be accessed directly or through the Bushfire Case Support Program. DHHS continued to support those receiving the 12-week rental payments until the program formally concluded in December 2020. A total of 43 households received financial housing assistance: 17 from Towong Shire and 26 from East Gippsland Shire. This included a rental subsidy for those in public housing; a bond loan, the 12-week rental payment or both for those in private or social housing. Some households receiving housing assistance moved away from bushfire-affected shires.

The total cost of rental relief payments made to households was approximately \$84,000. Eleven households received help applying to the Victorian Housing Register. It is not possible to determine the total number of households supported through the program because the data provided to IGEM is not mutually exclusive.<sup>90 40</sup>

Stakeholders reported that the housing support program was successful in helping bushfire-affected households, and that feedback from recipients and agencies had been positive. However, stakeholders found coordinating housing support services challenging and indicated that future service delivery could be streamlined.

Stakeholders noted that it was difficult for households to understand the various eligibility and application processes as the financial assistance ended, and other temporary accommodation initiatives or funding streams became available.

The role of the Housing Assistance Coordinators was also considered to be valuable, however there was some confusion among stakeholders and households over what support they provided compared to other recovery support such as case support workers.

## 15.2.3 Short-term modular housing

The short-term modular housing program is a new BRV-led initiative. Under the program people who lost their homes in the 2019–20 bushfires can rent a modular house which will be installed on their property.

According to BRV policy, renters who lost their home are also eligible for the program, although associated requirements are more complex.

The program aims to complement existing DHHS housing support by providing a 'bridge' between accommodation options in the weeks and months after the bushfires, and the rebuilding of permanent homes. Planning and building regulations were amended following the bushfires to allow for the installation of this housing on private property with minimal permit requirements (see section 16.3.1, p 345).

The modular homes are available in one, two or three-bedroom units, ranging in size from 30 to 50 square metres. Rent for modular houses is capped at a reduced rate – similar to rental rates for public housing – ensuring that the amount does not exceed 25 per cent of a household's total income.

People who rent modular dwellings can access housing financial assistance. The government also covers reasonable costs for delivery, installation and removal of the modular home. Case support workers helped people with their applications for short-term modular housing, and the applications were assessed by BRV.

Modular dwellings were delivered to cleared sites across Towong and East Gippsland shires – no homes were lost in Alpine Shire. Most people decided to have these delivered to their current address. The delivery and installation of dwellings required cross-government and private business collaboration to ensure appropriate road access and suitable connection of essential services and site preparation. BRV worked with Victorian manufacturers Ausco and Modular Spaces on this project.

BRV worked with GIVIT and case support agencies to furnish the modular homes. GIVIT sourced furniture and other items based on the type of family moving into the house, their basic needs and preferences. For example, some modular houses were furnished with basic office items to allow the occupiers to conduct business from their home. Children’s toys and furniture were also sourced based on the number and ages of children expected to live in the home.



Delivering short-term modular housing (Source: Cain Trist, BRV)

While the modular housing program is branded as a short-term program, those who choose to can rent it for up to three years while their home is being rebuilt. According to BRV policy, recipients can request to purchase the temporary unit from BRV at market value. If the status of the unit changes from temporary to permanent, recipients must meet all statutory planning and building requirements including the Bushfire Management Overlay (BMO).

The short-term modular housing program remains a work in progress. In total 69 site inspections were conducted. About 60 modular houses have, or will be, provided to fire-affected individuals and families. As of March 2021 \$9 million was spent against the program.<sup>110</sup> By April 2021, 47 modular houses were built with 42 occupied and another three houses on order.<sup>110</sup>

Opinions about the modular housing program vary among bushfire-affected communities. Those who chose to participate in the program were particularly pleased to be 'home' and noted how this improved their mental health.

Some community members have pointed to a lack of community consultation before the program was announced. They felt that input from fire-affected households would have improved the design of the housing units.

IGEM heard examples of fire-affected residents feeling pressured to decide on whether to accept a modular home without time to consider their options or sufficient information about the characteristics of the home such as floor plans and design photos. There was a general misunderstanding with people feeling they had to make decisions by set cut-off dates in order to be eligible for the program.

IGEM also heard that as lead agency, BRV did not enforce critical decision dates and considered new applications throughout 2020.

The modular houses were not suitable for all property types. This was the case for smaller residential blocks in townships where there is no room to install a modular house and rebuild the permanent home. Despite this obvious limitation, property owners of smaller blocks were offered – and in some cases felt pressured – to install a modular home.

A recurring theme in community feedback on the modular housing program was the requirement to pay rent. Some felt the costs associated with renting the houses did not offer good value in comparison to other temporary accommodation options. Those considering the program felt the rent amount and arrangements were not clear, and that it was difficult to understand what financial support was available to reduce costs.

In publicly available material describing the program, there is clear information about the rental arrangements and links to appropriate financial support resources. However, stakeholders and community members frequently mentioned it was difficult to ensure the most accurate information was available at a time that was suitable to fire-affected people's recovery needs and their ability to digest information.

While the modular housing program was not suited to some community members, many of those who opted to access the program were satisfied with the process and the house itself. They discussed the convenience of being able to live onsite to participate in property repair and clean-up, attend to their businesses, feed stock and manage farms, and – more recently – oversee planning and rebuilding processes.

Approximately 21 per cent of those whose primary residences were destroyed or damaged as a result of the fires have taken up the short-term modular housing program.<sup>110</sup> This seems to be a reasonable uptake given the houses are not suitable for all blocks, that many people had access to secondary residences or other accommodation options, and the untested nature of the program.

#### OBSERVATION 15.1

The short-term modular housing program provides a viable, onsite temporary accommodation option for households that have faced extensive property damage.

#### 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.

### 15.2.4 Effectiveness of housing and accommodation support

Government provided or supported a range of temporary housing and accommodation options for those whose homes were destroyed or extensively damaged. The short-term modular housing program gives people the chance to live and work on their property, or in nearby townships, as well as to oversee clean-up and rebuilding processes.

IGEM did not receive significant community feedback on temporary accommodation. Most community commentary related to planning and rebuilding. However, there were several examples where the authorities were seen to be inflexible because the apparently cost-effective temporary accommodation solutions proposed by community were not approved.

IGEM heard it was not the decision that caused distress and frustration, but a perception that an arbitrary set of rules had been applied with little recognition of personal circumstances or willingness to engage in productive negotiations. Community members did not always understand the rationale for the decisions. People also compared their own circumstances with others in the community and noticed inconsistencies, and perceived inequities.

Stakeholders from government and community service organisations noted that many of the temporary housing support mechanisms and programs were complicated and sympathised with the difficulties faced by community members.

Up until August 2020 housing and domestic property was the second most common issue raised with the Bushfire Case Support Program after financial assistance. However, housing is an ongoing issue with 18 per cent of issues raised with the Bushfire Case Support Program related to housing and domestic property at February 2021.<sup>110</sup>

#### 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.

## 15.3 Psychosocial and mental health support

Two of the five people and wellbeing priorities in the State Recovery Plan cover psychosocial and mental health support: psychosocial recovery and children, youth and families. The intent underlying these priorities is similar in that psychosocial support services are appropriate, accessible, and available to all.

Both priorities list cohorts with high-support needs, for example isolated and vulnerable people. The children, youth and families priority adds culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD) people and those at risk of family violence.<sup>112</sup>

Most of the psychosocial supports described in pre-existing emergency management policy appear in the State Recovery Plan, although 'family violence information and services' have been shifted to the children, youth and families priority. Other children, youth and families recovery actions include providing psychosocial support for children and young people, supporting parents and families to help their children, and strengthening the resilience, capability and capacity of schools.<sup>112</sup>

Actions under the psychosocial recovery priority include:

- public communications about the impacts of trauma
- counselling and mental health support services
- funding for a range of community-based initiatives through the Bushfire Mental Health Plan
- tailored psychosocial support for key population groups
- providing a Bushfire Case Support Program and supported access to tailored grief services.<sup>112</sup>

Each council has identified psychosocial recovery actions in its recovery plan. Psychosocial recovery actions can be divided into four themes, noting that each recovery plan does not include all examples:

- Providing information to community. For example, information about disaster trauma and the different types of psychosocial support available, including counselling, mental health services, family violence and sexual assault services.
- Service coordination. For example, service mapping, gap analysis, general and population group-specific referral pathway processes, mechanisms for services to exchange information, coordinating psychosocial checks on isolated communities, coordinating mental health and wellbeing services, and evaluation.
- Service delivery. For example, recruiting case support workers, delivering psychosocial support through health and community services, offering personal support from recovery hubs and via outreach, providing support to help people access counselling and mental health services.
- Training and support for recovery staff. For example, Red Cross' Support the Supporter briefings by Dr Rob Gordon, Anne Leadbeater, and David Younger.

Service coordination is the only action area that appears in all three recovery plans.<sup>113 114 51</sup>

### 15.3.1 Personal support, counselling and mental health

Psychosocial support in recovery builds on the personal support, psychological first aid and emotional and/or spiritual care offered at relief centres and through outreach during and immediately following emergencies.

Pre-existing emergency management policy draws on the psychosocial recovery model described in 'Psychosocial support: a framework for emergencies'. The framework considers recovery across a time continuum (early to long-term) and individual recovery in the context of community recovery. It acknowledges that individuals and communities are affected in different ways and require different supports. A pyramid is used to explain the model, showing how psychosocial recovery starts with ensuring access to basic services and can, if required, lead to specialised mental health services (see Figure 21, p 318).<sup>58</sup>

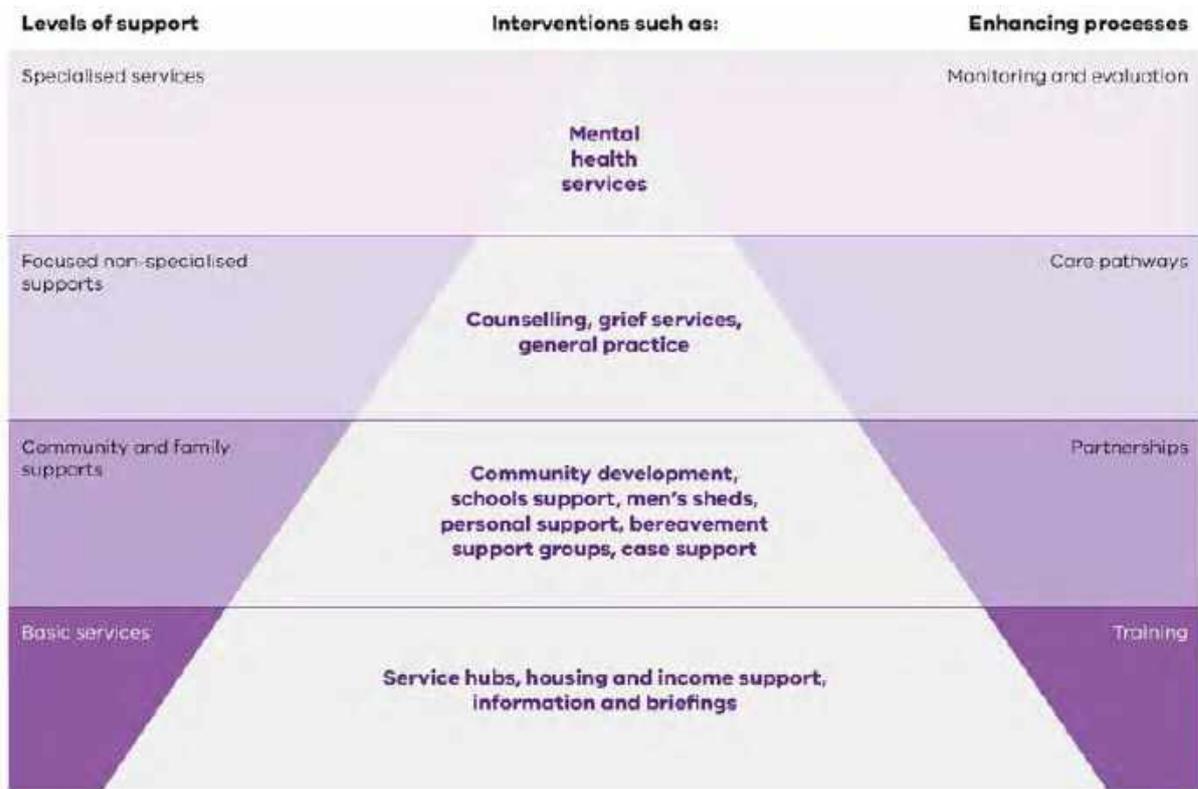
The State Recovery Plan does not explicitly use the psychosocial recovery model, with its differentiation between personal support, counselling and mental health services as increasingly specialised supports.<sup>112</sup>

#### Information about trauma

In January 2020 DHHS drafted a Social Recovery Plan which included public communications to help people understand the impact of trauma and to think about self-care strategies and caring for others. DHHS also proposed that a member of its Psychological Services Panel attend community meetings.<sup>40</sup> Before BRV was established, DHHS disseminated its pre-prepared set of factsheets relating to trauma, most of which aimed to help parents support their children, from newborns to primary school age.

DET works through early years services, primary and secondary schools to disseminate similar information aimed at educators supporting students and parents.

**Figure 21.** Psychosocial recovery model (Source: DHHS)



The State Recovery Plan acknowledges the compounding impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on trauma already experienced by fire-affected individuals and communities.<sup>112</sup> BRV commissioned a series of recorded webinars and accompanying one-page documents on managing anxiety about bushfires. The emphasis of this series is on emotional preparedness as part of bushfire preparedness.

East Gippsland Shire Council is the only council to have an action in its recovery plan relating to providing information to community about the impacts of trauma.<sup>114</sup> The council organised three webinars on how people and communities respond after a bushfire event. Recordings of webinars for Club Terrace, Clifton Creek and Orbost are available from the council's website.

IGEM heard from community members that listening to a psychologist speak about recovery had improved their understanding of what to expect. Demand for this method of receiving information continues. It is well-known that it can take people time to be ready to make sense of their experience. IGEM also heard from community members that it was difficult for them to retain the wellbeing information they received at relief centres and community meetings during and immediately after the bushfires.

**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.

## Personal support

Personal support workers are trained in psychological first aid and can help people affected by emergencies feel safe, capable and connected with others. They listen to people's stories and help identify their needs. Personal support workers provide information, practical help, emotional support, and/or refer to other supports. Delivered well, personal support is a low-key but highly effective psychosocial recovery activity.

Personal support was delivered by Red Cross, VCCEM, the Salvation Army and Lifeline Gippsland in recovery centres and through outreach.

In January 2020 East Gippsland Shire Council converted a mobile library van as a base for recovery agency personnel, including Red Cross volunteers. This multi-agency mobile service travelled to 39 fire-affected communities over eight weeks.<sup>115 116</sup>

In some cases, personal support was offered alongside other recovery activities. For example, VCCEM volunteers accompanied East Gippsland Shire Council staff during secondary impact assessments in early February 2020. In Alpine Shire Council secondary impact assessments were conducted in part over the phone or by videoconference. A Red Cross or VCCEM volunteer was involved if the assessment was made by videoconference. Council staff provided information about psychosocial support services.<sup>51</sup>

The efforts of councils and personal support providers to coordinate visits to fire-affected properties helped to support people during other recovery activities.

However, a recurring theme in IGEM's community consultation was the lack of coordination in outreach.

It is well-documented that multiple visits from a range of agencies collecting a variety of information can compound the impacts of the event itself and may adversely affect an individual or family's recovery.<sup>117</sup>

Some property owners had no outreach visit, which left them feeling forgotten. By contrast, other property owners had many agency staff visit at different times over several days to conduct various recovery assessments. This was overwhelming, frustrating and distressing and did not inspire confidence in the ability of government to coordinate recovery.

### 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.

## Counselling and mental health

The education and training required for people to become accredited counsellors and mental health workers takes longer and is more formal than that for personal support. In the context of an emergency, counselling helps people resolve personal or emotional problems that may have been triggered or aggravated by the event. Mental health services support emergency-affected people living with a pre-existing mental illness or people for whom the event has triggered a mental illness, such as anxiety or depression.

In evidence reviewed by IGEM there is a distinction between personal support and counselling/mental health services, but no clear line between counselling and mental health services. Community members who told IGEM they were seeing a counsellor did not specify what type of support they were receiving.

In the immediate aftermath of the 2019–20 bushfires, organisations were offering mental health services in East Gippsland Shire at the same time as personal support was delivered through initial outreach. For example, in February 2020 Gippsland PHN and Latrobe Regional Mental Health Service offered additional psychological services in Mallacoota.<sup>64</sup>

### Tailored psychosocial support for key population groups

The State Recovery Plan refers to tailoring psychosocial supports for different population groups including Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders, farmers, children and young people, older people, CALD communities and impacted tourists from Victoria, Australia and overseas.<sup>112</sup>

The 2020 Victorian Bushfire Case Support program was designed with some of these population groups in mind. For example, cohealth was appointed to support impacted tourists. Appointing two Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisations as case support agencies for Aboriginal residents ensures they receive culturally appropriate services – although GEGAC noted the absence of culturally-appropriate mental health services to which they could refer.

BRV identified connecting with farmers and other harder to reach cohorts as the main gap in case support program delivery. BRV could draw on the experience of rural financial counselling services in how they build and sustain engagement with farmers.

While there have been a range of tailored psychosocial initiatives to support particular cohorts in the community, there are some that have not been included in planning or service delivery. As an example, older adults and CALD communities have not been specifically included in communications or program design for psychosocial support services.

### Resourcing

Stakeholders and community members including young people from Alpine, Towong and East Gippsland shires told IGEM that access to counselling services was challenging before the 2019–20 fires. Stakeholders attributed this to a lack of secure funding.

On 12 January 2020 the Australian Government announced \$76 million towards supporting the mental health and wellbeing of bushfire-affected people across the country, including first responders. Free counselling support was to be offered at recovery centres in bushfire-affected areas without the need for referral or mental health care plan. Of the funding, \$10.5 million was allocated to providing another 10 free sessions to the 10 psychological therapy sessions currently available under Medicare.<sup>118</sup>

On 10 March 2020 the Victorian Government announced \$23.4 million funding for immediate and long-term mental health and wellbeing support services for fire-affected communities. This included \$8.75 million for specialist mental health advisory services for clinicians, \$6.6 million for practical mental health support programs and \$3.3 for Aboriginal Community Controlled Health Organisations to establish social and emotional wellbeing programs.<sup>119</sup> The state-level Bushfire Mental Health Package Steering Group coordinates the stakeholders involved in rolling out this fund.

On 8 July 2020 most of the organisations that received a share of this funding were announced:

- Albury Wodonga Health and Latrobe Regional Health - for specialist early intervention mental health advice to GPs and community health clinicians.
- Austin Health's Victorian Trauma Treatment Service - for post-disaster treatment and advisory services
- Phoenix Australia - to provide training and mentorship to community leaders and mental health providers.

Phoenix Australia started delivering psychological first aid training to frontline workers and community leaders from October 2020.<sup>120</sup>

Providing \$6.6 million for practical community-based mental health support programs is a psychosocial recovery action in the State Recovery Plan. Gippsland Lakes Community Health Consortium, Alpine Health in partnership with North East Support and Action for Youth (known as NESAY), Corryong Health Service, Tallangatta Health Service, Beyond Blue, and others received a share of this allocation.<sup>121</sup> Examples of community-based initiatives include:

- The Outer Gippsland Drought and Fire Mental Health and Wellbeing Partnership, led by Gippsland Lakes Complete Health, commissioned the development of a documentary series *Beyond the Fires*, which aired in January 2021. In seven episodes it explores the mental health impacts of the 2019–20 fires. The series is available online. The partnership is also developing a suite of training for individuals, community groups and frontline workers.<sup>120</sup>
- Tallangatta Health Service is establishing a community garden to help people come to terms with their bushfire experience. Through the health service's Future Earth Australia community science partnership, an urban agriculture expert will help the community design and create the garden.
- Reclink Australia used its Sports Share program to deliver sports equipment across some East Gippsland communities. It also developed a Gippsland Reclink Connect online program.<sup>120</sup> In January 2021 Reclink announced the appointment of two local sport and recreation coordinators who would oversee the delivery of a range of activities catering to a variety of ages, abilities and interests for Mallacoota, Genoa, and Cann Valley districts.

BRV reported that the public health restrictions associated with the COVID-19 pandemic delayed delivery of some funded activities.<sup>120</sup>

### Long-lasting effects

At this point it is worth noting the long-lasting impacts on mental health and wellbeing from previous bushfire events.

The Beyond Bushfires longitudinal study of personal impacts from the 2009 Victorian bushfires provides important insights into personal recovery. There was evidence of extended impacts on mental health and wellbeing for many, especially those who had to deal with other major life stressors like relationship breakdown or loss of employment. Elevated levels of anger and exposure to violence were also identified.

The study found that exposure to the 2009 Victorian bushfires increased the risk of experiencing a mental illness. Ten years after the bushfires, the likelihood of having one or more diagnosable mental health disorders was more than twice as high for people from high impact communities compared to those from low/no impact communities. This includes post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), depression, and psychological distress.

There were many reports of post-traumatic growth, particularly for people from high-impact communities. According to the Beyond Bushfires study, people directly affected by the 2009 bushfires showed remarkable capacity to adapt and recover. Ten years after the bushfires, 66.5 per cent of participants across high, medium and low impact communities reported they felt 'mostly' or 'fully' recovered.

The study's *10 years Beyond Bushfires* report recommends for government and service providers to establish a staged five-year framework for recovery to account for extended mental health impacts.

The Royal Commission into Victoria's Mental Health Service refers to the 2019–20 bushfires and the COVID-19 pandemic as large-scale disruptions. The commission's final report notes these events highlighted the weaknesses in the mental health system, but also raised awareness of the importance of mental health and wellbeing.<sup>122</sup>

It is very clear from past experience and research that mental health concerns are likely to emerge as people progress through their recovery and clinical mental health support is a necessary investment. However, in the early stages of recovery psychosocial and personal support were more appropriate and sought after by communities. Engaging with clinical mental health services was not a priority for many community members who were more interested in the 'cup of tea and a chat' approach that could be combined with other practical recovery information sharing.

IGEM received mixed feedback from community members on how they received psychosocial support, and who delivered it. For example, people struggled with telehealth appointments, finding it much easier to talk face-to-face. Generally, people preferred to see a counsellor who was local, someone they could rely on, rather than external providers who came and went. IGEM is aware that counsellors who live locally are also likely to be fire-affected and grappling with similar feelings and frustrations as those experienced by people in their care.

Many people expressed a preference for someone regularly popping in to see how they were going to offer personal support rather than an intense mental health intervention. This raises questions about the most effective way to pitch psychosocial recovery support after emergencies and the timing of that support.

IGEM acknowledges that the funding apportioned to Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisations and community-based initiatives is intended to deliver more practical wellbeing support. However, apart from engaging Phoenix Australia to deliver psychological first aid training, a fundamental requirement for delivery of personal support, most of the remaining \$8.75 million has been channelled to advisory services.

Research on the long-term mental health impacts of emergencies may have prompted state and national organisations to focus on providing clinical mental health support. For example, the combined Australian and Victorian Government investment in mental health services in the first few months after the 2019–20 bushfires was significantly greater than that in personal support.

However, in early recovery the highest level of need appeared to be for low-key forms of personal support with local providers.

Despite the significant funding for mental health and wellbeing, IGEM heard stories of community members not being able to access appropriate psychosocial support when they needed it. Individuals and communities told IGEM they did not see the increase in funding announced for regional service providers translate to an increase in local psychosocial support.

#### 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.

#### 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.

### 15.3.2 Effectiveness of psychosocial and mental health support

It is too early to assess the effectiveness of the initiatives funded as part of the government's \$23.4 million mental health package.

However, IGEM received a significant amount of feedback from stakeholders, individuals, and communities on psychosocial and mental health support. Four recurring themes emerge from an analysis of this evidence.

These are that governments, councils, and other recovery agencies need to:

- understand the rural and remote context
- listen to community and reduce red tape
- strengthen coordination
- share data.

### Understand the rural and remote context

Communities across Alpine, Towong and East Gippsland told IGEM that psychosocial support services need to recognise that – for whatever reason – farmers and people living in remote communities are not going to travel to an office, clinic or hub. Communities want services to make the time to travel to people’s properties, to check in with farmers, people living in remote areas and others who are unlikely to actively seek help.

Communities also want more consistent outreach, where recovery workers travel from property to property. IGEM heard through community engagement that the lack of face-to-face outreach has had negative impacts on people’s recovery.

In February 2021 BRV identified connecting with farmers and other harder-to-reach cohorts as the main gap in case support program delivery.<sup>123</sup> However, it does not mention outreach as the way to bridge this gap.

IGEM also heard from many farmers and people in remote areas that they do not want intense mental health support, they just want someone to ‘pop in’ to see how they are going.

A peer outreach program for farmers, foresters and small business owners was announced in March 2020 as part of the \$23.4 million bushfire recovery mental health package.<sup>119</sup> IGEM notes this initiative will likely address some of the issues raised during the Inquiry.

Once implemented, the recommendations of the Royal Commission into Victoria’s Mental Health System will also address some of the issues raised by stakeholders, individuals and communities throughout the Inquiry. Key recommendations in this regard include:

- Recommendation 39: Supporting the mental health and wellbeing of people in rural and regional Victoria. This recognises the needs of small or geographically isolated rural communities.
- Recommendation 40: Providing incentives for the mental health and wellbeing workforce in rural and regional areas. This acknowledges that attracting, and retaining, staff is a critical issue.<sup>124</sup>

### Listen to community and reduce red tape

IGEM heard repeatedly throughout its community consultation that if there was greater investment of resources in getting things done, and listening to what individuals and communities require, there would be less need for mental health services.

---

*I do appreciate that addressing people’s mental health is really important, but one of the best things to fix people’s mental health and anxiety around the bushfires is to fix the things. You can only talk about it for so long before you look and you’re still living in a caravan. It’s like well, ‘maybe you wouldn’t need to invest so much funding in mental health if you just helped that person get their house back’.*

*Community member*

---

As part of their recovery from the 2019–20 bushfires, communities want to feel a greater sense of control over their preparedness for future bushfires. They want to install water tanks and generators, upgrade equipment, develop or update community emergency plans. Many of these proposals remain unfunded because they do not meet funding eligibility criteria.

Residents across all three shires told IGEM they do not feel any more prepared for bushfires than they did in late 2019, which has significantly increased their anxiety levels. The public health restrictions associated with COVID-19 pandemic are responsible for some delays, but not for the complexity of grant applications, eligibility screening processes and the narrow definition of what ‘recovery projects’ entail.

### Strengthen coordination

The State Recovery Plan and the three council recovery plans include psychosocial recovery actions. This demonstrates an understanding of the expectations written into emergency management arrangements, but it is also an acknowledgment of the importance of psychosocial recovery for those affected by the fires.

However, there was no consistent approach to psychosocial recovery planning across councils and no explicit link to the State Recovery Plan's psychosocial recovery actions.

Service coordination is the only action area that appears in all three council recovery plans. This suggests the recovery committees and working groups understand that service coordination underpins timely and sensitive delivery of psychosocial and wellbeing support.

Psychosocial support in recovery is offered by national, state and council organisations as well as by a variety of non-government organisations such as charitable and commercial entities. Service coordination is complicated by new services established in response to the 2019–20 bushfires added to the range of existing local services that offer psychosocial support to communities in an ongoing capacity.

Formal groups at the state and municipal levels provide a level of oversight and coordination of psychosocial recovery. The breadth of oversight provided is less clear.

#### 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.

#### Sharing data collection tools and information

Local, regional and state agencies gather information on the needs of individuals, families and communities affected by the 2019–20 bushfires. For example, councils have conducted needs assessments as part of municipal recovery planning, the regional disability advocacy organisation has assessed the needs of new and existing clients, and, at the state level Red Cross has completed needs assessments for the North East (Alpine and Towong) and East Gippsland.

Other local and regional services like Bush Nursing Centres, Neighbourhood Houses, Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisations, personal and rural financial counselling services, and community health agencies also hold intelligence on the needs of their clients and communities. While needs assessments conducted by recovery agencies vary in scope and depth, there would be benefit to community if recovery agencies shared their knowledge, assessment tools and findings.

Many community members told IGEM how upsetting and frustrating it was to have to repeatedly describe their experiences of the fires when asked to provide their personal information multiple times. This occurred when they contacted, or were contacted by, different recovery agencies; or the same organisation on a subsequent occasion, with some feeling as if they kept getting lost in the system.<sup>125</sup>

This theme is further discussed in section 3.4.2 (p 80).

#### 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.

## 15.4 Financial counselling

Unlike the State Recovery Plan, pre-existing emergency management arrangements do not use the term financial counselling or rural financial counselling. IGEM heard that the service models and clientele of personal and rural financial counselling services are different. However, according to one stakeholder, both service providers spend a lot of time dealing with people with mental health issues because financial stress and poor mental health go together.

### 15.4.1 Personal financial counselling

Personal financial counselling is an element of the 2020 Victorian Bushfire Case Support Program.<sup>126</sup> Financial counselling is delivered by accredited counsellors free of charge and aims to help people manage their finances in the wake of the bushfires. Services include:

- telephone and face-to-face information about financial issues
- face-to-face practical support including establishing financial plans and budget planning
- information on entitlements and forms of government assistance
- advocacy and negotiation with financial institutions and insurance agencies on behalf of clients in relation to financial matters
- referrals to other community services and/or legal services where required.<sup>126</sup>

Two community service organisations are funded under the Bushfire Case Support Program to provide personal financial counselling, Upper Murray Family Care and Anglicare Victoria.

Upper Murray Family Care delivers services to people in the North East from its Wodonga office, from Alpine Community Health in Bright and Gateway Health in Myrtleford.<sup>40 51</sup>

Anglicare Victoria delivers services from BRV and council-run recovery centres in the North East and East Gippsland.<sup>40</sup> In November 2020 BRV extended funding for personal financial counselling until 30 June 2021 (an additional five and a half months).<sup>90</sup>

Referrals to personal financial counselling come via the case support program, people self-referring or direct referrals from other organisations.<sup>51</sup> Case support agencies report to BRV on the type of assistance they provide. The financial assistance type has three sub-categories – access to grants, access to financial counselling, and assistance with flexible funding. BRV does not report sub-category trends to the SBRCC.

The proportion of families and individuals referred to financial counselling who also received money from grants or the case support program's flexible funding is not known. Based on their observation, one stakeholder highlighted that people who receive grants should be offered basic financial advice at the same time.

---

*When people who haven't had money are given a lump sum, they're just thinking about now and may not necessarily under the stressful situation make good decisions or do what's best for them.*

*Stakeholder*

---

BRV reported in February 2021 that it was anticipating demand for financial counselling services will further increase and be needed for the long-term.<sup>123</sup>

### 15.4.2 Rural financial counselling

Two rural financial counselling services received funding to support bushfire-affected farmers and owners of small rural businesses:

- Melbourne Innovations Centre - subcontracted AgBiz Assist to deliver business support services in the North East.
- Rural Financial Counselling Services Gippsland - received funding from Australian and Victorian governments to employ additional rural financial counsellors.

Each organisation has been serving their respective communities for nearly 30 years, supporting farmers and small business owners to recover from financial hardships, economic downturns and emergencies including the most recent drought. They also cross-refer to the personal financial counselling services in their catchments.

Rural financial counselling staff talked about the difficulty some fire-affected people have taking in and processing information, planning and anticipating future needs, setting priorities and making decisions.<sup>58</sup>

---

*We found this situation time and time again...really competent and capable people [were] so traumatised that they just needed help to do the very, very basics, not because they didn't have the skill or capacity but just they had – we called it bushfire brain. It's a real reaction to trauma.*

*Stakeholder*

---

Rural financial counselling services noted their staff were well trained in dealing with people with trauma, but as general counselling was not their area of expertise, they worked closely with the limited mental health services available locally.

IGEM heard that the rural financial counselling sector has been lobbying for funding to employ dedicated wellbeing officers to work alongside their rural financial counsellors. This is because the sector recognises that making it easy for people, getting wellbeing services to go where people are, and not relying on people to go to the wellbeing services increases the likelihood of better mental health and financial outcomes. At the time of writing Rural Financial Counselling Services Gippsland had received funding to employ a wellness officer and rural skills coordinator.

#### 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.

## 15.5 Bushfire Case Support Program

The Bushfire Case Support Program aims to support the personal recovery of people and the social recovery of communities. The program delivers tailored case coordination and limited case management for individuals who were significantly affected by the 2019–20 bushfires. This includes people who lost a loved one, home or business, or experienced other major psychosocial or physical trauma.

Case support workers provide information, referrals and advice, and assistance with paperwork. Case management is more intense, providing more hours of support per week over a longer period than case support/coordination.<sup>127</sup>

The program contributes to social recovery by working with local organisations to encourage people affected by an emergency to participate in local events to strengthen their connectedness to their community, family and friends. Case support providers do this by contributing to recovery committees/working groups, supporting community engagement activities and strengthening service coordination.<sup>127</sup>

This section uses examples drawn from the experiences of two case support providers:

- Windermere - which also runs the intake service
- GEGAC.

IGEM acknowledges the important work of all case support providers in supporting the recovery of fire-affected individuals and families.

In the lead up to the 2019–20 Victorian fire season DHHS was developing an Emergency Case Support Program as a scalable model for future use, drawing specifically on the Bushfire Case Support Program offered to people affected by the Eastern Victoria fires of early 2019.<sup>127</sup>

In early January 2020 DHHS drew on its established partnerships to activate the 2020 Victorian Bushfire Case Support Program. On 12 January 2020 the government announced funding of \$14.4 million towards the program for immediate start.<sup>128</sup> By 23 January DHHS had formalised arrangements with four mainstream organisations and two Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisations to deliver case support. Two organisations were also funded under the case support program to deliver generalist financial counselling (see section 15.4, p 325).

### 15.5.1 Case support program delivery

In early January 2020 DHHS worked with Windermere to activate the 1800 Bushfire Case Support hotline. Windermere is a large, funded, family services organisation with an existing call centre and 1800 number that was repurposed to specifically support residents impacted by bushfires in designated State of Disaster areas.<sup>90</sup>

In the first week of the Bushfire Case Support program Windermere received 333 calls. By the end of the first four weeks it had received a further 1143 calls.<sup>37</sup> With most of the calls lasting between 45 minutes to an hour, Windermere reported it was not able to meet expected response times.

Windermere observed that in answering calls from fire-affected people there can be a tension between providing a trauma-informed response versus a quick turnaround time. This tension was noticeably high following the 2019–20 bushfires because callers were more aware of their mental state, and more open about how traumatised they felt, compared to those seeking support following the Eastern Victoria fires of early 2019.

---

*That's where we saw the blowout in call times... [we were] responding to really highly traumatised members of the community who needed a psychological first-aid response as well as information and support.*

*Stakeholder*

---

BRV assumed responsibility for oversight of the Bushfire Case Support Program, although the funding agreements between case support providers and DHHS remained in place.

BRV transferred management of the 1800 hotline to DELWP's larger call centre, expanding the scope of the hotline to encompass all recovery related queries. The call centre staff were given information to help them answer and direct bushfire-related queries, including referrals for case support.<sup>90</sup>

Windermere continues to run the Bushfire Case Support Program intake service. It refers callers to the relevant funded agency based on their primary residence and Aboriginal identity. For example, Aboriginal residents of Alpine or Towong shire councils are referred to Victorian Aboriginal Child Care Agency; non-Aboriginal residents are referred to Gateway Health.

Windermere's intake service collects information about the caller and seeks consent to share their personal information with the allocated service provider. Intake staff also ask a risk trigger question around family violence and assess the need for different types of services, for example financial counselling, general counselling, or clinical mental health support.

State Recovery Reports indicate that the DELWP hotline was the primary source of referrals for the Bushfire Case Support program. However, people can, and do, contact case support agencies directly by phone or through online forms from provider websites. In February 2021 BRV noted most referrals came via local organisations or people self-referring to the case support agency.<sup>129</sup> This indicates greater local awareness of the program.

## 15.5.2 Case support reporting and trends

Case support providers submit reports to BRV using a template to ensure consistency. Reports include information related to the type of support provided (case coordination or case management), the referral pathway, housing impact, and the type of assistance provided. Case support providers report on whether people who had lost their home or business were insured. They also report on their flexible funding expenditure.

BRV aggregates the data provided by all case support agencies on the number of cases and type of assistance provided. The latter is reported as key issues by percentage, noting that one person may require assistance with multiple issues.

In early February 2021 BRV noted that one-year on, the Bushfire Case Support program had experienced a surge in cases, with new clients presenting with increasingly complex issues.<sup>130</sup>

As at 19 February 2021 there have been 2064 cases recorded with the Bushfire Case Support Program.<sup>110</sup> Financial assistance continues to be the most common issue since reporting to BRV began in late May 2020. As the intake service, Windermere observed that some people were in dire straits in terms of needing material aid and financial relief. Since August 2020 health and wellbeing has been the second most common issue, prior to that it was housing and domestic property.

IGEM heard case support agencies have their own databases for managing client data, but that the software systems used do not ‘talk to each other’.

Windermere set up a database to record intake data for the Bushfire Case Support Program. Windermere reported it had received multiple information requests from BRV and other sources, for different cross-tabulations of data. While Windermere understands data is needed to inform planning, it noted that some of the data requested fell outside anticipated reporting requirements and was either not collected at intake or raised privacy concerns.

### CASE STUDY: GEGAC BUSHFIRE CASE SUPPORT PROGRAM

In late December 2019 GEGAC provided fire-affected Aboriginal community members with social and emotional support and assistance with food, clothing and shelter as part of their normal business (GEGAC’s Bairnsdale office became an evacuation centre, see section 8.8, p 201).

After the Bushfire Case Support Program was established in January 2020, GEGAC’s new case support workers focused on helping individuals, families and households access financial assistance, specialist services and alternative housing.

GEGAC’s case support workers actively encourage social, emotional and cultural wellbeing. They deliver outreach services directly to Aboriginal communities, and a case support worker provides services from the Orbost office of the Moogji Aboriginal Council one day per week. GEGAC and Moogji also work together to develop and deliver healing activities for community, for example, yarn circles and weaving workshops.

In February 2021 GEGAC’s case support workers reported seeing an increase in the need for mental health, alcohol and drug referrals. In part they attribute this to the intense feelings of isolation experienced as a consequence of the public health restrictions associated with the COVID-19 pandemic. GEGAC noted that trends observed in previous emergencies, like an increase in family violence, have been delayed.

---

*We were expecting to start seeing a lot of negative trends, especially around family violence, within that three-month period after the fires, so around April/May-ish thereabouts... But because we transitioned...from the bushfires...into COVID-19 ...we started seeing an increase in family violence around July or August.*

---

*Stakeholder*

### 15.5.3 Phone outreach

While working with people impacted by the early 2019 Eastern Victoria fires, Windermere identified a prevalent misunderstanding across communities whereby fire-affected people thought that when they gave their information to councils, government or community service organisations in relief or early recovery, it automatically registered them for further support.

With this experience in mind, Windermere agitated for the 2019–20 CrisisWorks data to be reviewed to identify people who may need support but were not involved in the Bushfire Case Support Program.

Windermere developed formal Memoranda of Understanding with Alpine, Towong and East Gippsland shire councils to access council CrisisWorks data collected throughout relief and recovery. It found that many people on the databases may have received a PHAP payment but had not reached out for any other type of support.

As at January 2021 Windermere had reviewed about a third of the 9000 East Gippsland Shire Council CrisisWorks cases. This review was over and above what Windermere was contracted to deliver. It identified several people who were not connected to support services but had lost their home or experienced other significant impacts from the fires.

Using the council's CrisisWorks data to inform case support assertive outreach, Windermere reported calling residents who were absolutely furious and incredibly vulnerable because they had received little to no support – despite believing they had registered for it at the relief centre.

#### FINDING 15.6

Windermere's assertive outreach was a positive initiative that identified residents in need of support who might otherwise have been missed.

### 15.5.4 Effectiveness of the 2020 Victorian Bushfire Case Support Program

Between 12 January 2020 and the 19 February 2021 more than 2000 individuals and families were supported across the six funded case support providers. Demand for the case support program is steady.<sup>110</sup>

Individuals and communities were overwhelmingly positive about the Bushfire Case Support Program. Many community members found the program to be very effective, particularly if they had a good connection with their case support worker. Most case support workers provided informative, practical and personal support.

Not all stories were positive and some people reported that service delivery could be inconsistent. They attributed this to case workers not having enough life experience, the time it took for people to find the right case worker, and/or staff turnover. Case workers were not available to all community members, it depended on their assessed level of loss.

Community members who engaged with the program early on found it much easier to negotiate the recovery system with the help of a case support worker than those who engaged later and had to do it alone up to that point.

Case support workers helped people navigate unfamiliar processes, such as clean-up, government and philanthropic grants, and referred them to other services that were new to them, for example, family therapy or financial counselling.

Fire-affected residents mentioned how much they appreciated the regular phone calls from their case support workers during the lockdown associated with the COVID-19 pandemic. GEGAC's case workers also dropped off care packages during this lockdown period.

Community members' response to Windermere's assertive outreach was mixed. Some people told IGEM how annoying it was to have Windermere contact them to offer yet another form of support when they had so much else to think about. Other people said they appreciated the calls, particularly during the lockdown associated with the COVID-19 pandemic.

#### FINDING 15.7

The Victorian Bushfire Case Support Program is an important source of practical and moral support for fire-affected individuals and families.

Based on a balanced consideration of what IGEM heard from the people who use and provide the case support service, the program model is sound. However, IGEM also heard from people who are not connected with any services that the case support program is not reaching fire-affected farmers, people in remote communities and others who are unlikely to actively seek help.

Communities want more consistent outreach, where workers travel from property to property – although this was not specific to case support.

Case support agencies have demonstrated their willingness to engage in assertive outreach. While the public health restrictions associated with the COVID-19 pandemic limited their opportunity to do so face-to-face, it is likely that lack of resources was the biggest barrier. This includes number of staff, company cars and/or allocation for fuel reimbursement.

Overall, the Bushfire Case Support Program has been effective. The program is largely delivering the State Recovery Plan outcomes sought for people who are receiving the service. The program would reach more emergency-affected people if it included an appropriately resourced outreach component that could be scaled up as needed, depending on the number of isolated farmers and/or people living in remote areas.

The program contributes to social recovery in communities. It works collaboratively with local agencies, including councils, to facilitate the participation of people affected by an emergency in local events and activities and strengthening their connectedness to their community, family and friends.<sup>126</sup>

Case support agencies are members of their respective council's People and Wellbeing Working Groups, and psychosocial-specific working groups. There is evidence to suggest they share information about trends, case numbers and experiences of case support with these groups. It is less clear how this information is used to progress psychosocial actions in the three councils' recovery plans or the State Recovery Plan, including broader community psychosocial initiatives.

The decision to apportion case support agencies by place/geographical catchment was welcomed by councils and other recovery agencies. For example, it meant council recovery staff and case support workers could work together to identify and resolve common issues at a community level – which would not have occurred if case support agencies were taking clients from across the entire fire-affected area.

With the relaxing of the public health restrictions associated with the COVID-19 pandemic, case support workers are initiating or supporting community events in recognition of the long overdue opportunities to debrief, share experiences and heal.

The case support program is not sustainable under the current funding arrangements. The time-limited nature of the program was known from the outset, but the six-month funding extensions create unnecessary uncertainty for the case support agencies and their workers.

Agencies were funded until 31 December 2020. In January 2021 they received notification the program funding would be extended until 30 June 2021. BRV has indicated the program has been extended until 31 December 2021.

#### 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.

## 15.6 Health and medical assistance

In line with pre-existing emergency management policy, the State Recovery Plan has health and medical assistance actions related to public health advice and continuity of primary and acute services. DHHS coordinates this recovery area.

The wellbeing component of public health advice, which includes information about trauma, self-care strategies and caring for others, sits under the State Recovery Plan's psychosocial recovery priority.<sup>91</sup> Information about trauma is addressed in section 15.3 (p 316).

### 15.6.1 Public health advice

The discipline of environmental health underpins public health advice. Environmental health aims to prevent ill-health and disease by promoting health-supportive environments. This includes assessing and controlling risks to public health arising from physical, chemical, biological and social environmental factors.

Monitoring and risk assessments are the first steps in understanding environmental hazards arising from an emergency. Undertaking enhanced monitoring and risk assessments is an action in the State Recovery Plan.<sup>91</sup> During the bushfires, monitoring of air and water quality, food safety and the risk of communicable diseases rapidly escalated. To keep on top of all the information coming in, DHHS activated its Public Health Advice Cell for the first time.

The EPA is responsible for air quality monitoring and providing associated public health advice. EPA and DHHS worked together to update and release community information using different channels including face-to-face community meetings, printed factsheets, social media and online communication.

Providing public health advice on how to mitigate identified risks was seen by some stakeholders as a relief function. However, environmental hazards, like smoke, persist and therefore the need for information and advice continues from relief to recovery.

IGEM heard that environmental health risks could be overlooked in safety assessments:

---

*At meetings regarding recovery and access and was it safe, it was mostly from a damaged-buildings-falling-on-people issue rather than thinking about: have they got water, have they got hygiene, what about the asbestos risk, what about the dust, are people getting advice about PPE that they need for the clean-up?*

---

*Stakeholder*

## 15.6.2 Bushfire smoke and health

Research published in the Medical Journal of Australia in March 2020 estimated that bushfire smoke over eastern Australia during the 2019–20 fire season was responsible for:

- 417 excess deaths
- 1124 hospitalisations for cardiovascular problems
- 2027 hospitalisations for respiratory problems
- 1305 presentations to emergency departments with asthma.<sup>131</sup>

To understand the short-term health impacts of the 2019–20 bushfire season, the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (AIHW) studied national health data between September 2019 to March 2020.

This study showed large increases in sales of inhalers for shortness of breath coinciding with bushfire activity. In the Hume region as three fires burned on the NSW and Victorian border, prescription inhaler sales increased by 74 per cent in the week beginning 5 January 2020. AIHW notes that the full health impacts of the 2019–20 bushfires will not be known for some time.<sup>132</sup>

Community concern about the long-term health impacts of their six-week exposure to smoke and ash from the 2014 Hazelwood mine fire prompted DHHS to commission the longitudinal Hazelwood Health Study. In 2019 the study found that ‘in people with asthma, short term coal mine fire smoke exposure did not appear to have long term impact on the severity of asthma symptoms or lung function, but it may affect asthma control’.

In mid-2020, the Australian Health Protection Principal Committee’s Environmental Health Standing Committee reviewed evidence on the known health effects of prolonged bushfire smoke exposure. The Standing Committee reported that the fine particles in bushfire smoke – referred to as PM2.5 – are of greatest concern. These are too small to see and when breathed in, penetrate deep into the lungs and enter the bloodstream.

The Standing Committee found that the risk of long-term health effects from exposure to bushfire smoke is extremely low for most people. However, it recommends more research is needed, particularly into the long-term effects of bushfire smoke on vulnerable people.<sup>133</sup>



Bushfire smoke blankets Sale (Source: Shutterstock)

### 15.6.3 Environmental health workforce

Councils are responsible for environmental health at a local level and employ Environmental Health Officers (EHOs) to work directly with communities on issues such as food safety.

Following an emergency, EHOs play an important role at the frontline, as noted in DHHS' response to the Royal Commission into National Natural Disaster Arrangements' Issues Paper - Health arrangements in natural disasters:

*The environmental health workforce is at the forefront of managing the direct and indirect health impacts of natural disasters ... There will be an increasing need for this workforce given the rising frequency and intensity of natural disasters due to climate change... Sustaining this workforce's capability and capacity is essential to health emergency management arrangements for future natural disasters.*

*Issues Paper - Health arrangements in natural disasters, DHHS<sup>66</sup>*

Stakeholders advised IGEM that small rural councils may only have one or two EHOs or may even share this function with a neighbouring council. They have limited capacity to scale up services following an incident like the 2019–20 bushfires.

DHHS and councils worked with MAV in an attempt to make sure there were enough EHOs on the ground to support communities in recovery. IGEM heard resource sharing between councils to meet the demand for EHOs was valuable, but that councils found it difficult to be reimbursed for services provided.

DHHS Regional Health Protection staff also supported bushfire-affected councils during relief and early recovery.

#### FINDING 15.9

Many aspects of recovery rely on councils' Environmental Health Officer capacity, which has been stretched throughout recovery to date.

### 15.6.4 Primary and acute health services

During the 2019–20 bushfires, information about primary and acute healthcare facilities in the bushfire-affected areas was published on VicEmergency. These services may have temporarily closed, been scaled-back or transitioned.

From mid-January 2020 onwards, the focus shifted from providing community advice about service availability to supporting primary and acute health services, to managing increases in demand. This included setting up the 2020 Victorian Bushfire Case Support Program as well as additional funding for local and regional service providers.

Most of this early activity occurred before BRV was established. The action related to primary and acute health services in the State Recovery Plan is about ensuring primary healthcare providers and telephone helplines have accurate information and understand the referral pathways.<sup>91</sup>

Primary healthcare providers include General Practitioners (GPs), Remote Area Nurses, chemists and other allied health professionals. Remote Area Nurses work in Bush Nursing Centres (see section 8.7, p 194). Primary healthcare providers, particularly the Bush Nursing services, are embedded within their communities. Community members and stakeholders told IGEM how these healthcare services were an important source of support during, and immediately after, the 2019–20 bushfires. IGEM also heard these healthcare providers continue to support their communities through recovery and will likely do so in the years ahead.

PHNs were set up by the Australian Government to support primary healthcare providers, encourage collaboration and undertake population health planning. PHNs aim to improve the efficiency and effectiveness of medical services for patients, which includes the coordination of care that patients receive. PHNs do this by commissioning services tailored to the needs of their catchment, building the capacity of healthcare professionals and encouraging service integration at the local level.<sup>134</sup>

The Murray PHN catchment includes Alpine and Towong shires and the Gippsland PHN includes East Gippsland Shire. Both PHNs are members of each council's people and wellbeing/social recovery working group and relevant subgroups.

The work of PHNs arguably becomes more important following an emergency with the influx of additional workers and service providers. For example, Murray PHN set up a 'Basecamp' account as a single repository of information, scheduling and resources for all service providers working in the Rural City of Wangaratta, Alpine, Towong and Mansfield shires.

The public health restrictions associated with the COVID-19 pandemic fast-tracked the widespread use of videoconferencing and phone calls (telehealth) by GPs, counsellors, mental health practitioners and other health professionals. Telehealth service delivery has the potential to increase the reach of healthcare services, particularly in rural areas. Georgie Harman, CEO of Beyond Blue has however cautioned against relying on this method, noting the inequities in digital access and expertise across Victoria.<sup>122</sup>

## 15.7 Children, young people and families

### 15.7.1 Family violence information and services

The SERRP explains research has demonstrated an increased risk of escalating family violence after emergencies. It notes that specific vulnerabilities exist for people of all genders, and that factors such as age, culture, and disability, can further impact the experience of family violence and access to support services.

The SEMP includes 'family violence services and information' as a psychosocial recovery action but does not provide any detail on the factors that increase risk, such as gender identity, age, culture and disability.

In 2019 DHHS developed the comprehensive Family Violence Framework for Emergency Management. This document supports planning and response to family violence during and after emergencies.

In the State Recovery Plan, family violence and sexual assault services and information come under the Children, Youth and Families priority. Recovery actions include alerting specialist family violence services about the potential increase in post-emergency referrals and the compounding impact of COVID-19 pandemic. They also include monitoring increases in demand for services, providing tailored therapeutic interventions, and training frontline staff to recognise family violence and know how to respond and refer.

There is also an action relating to supporting research into the impacts of emergencies on gender-based violence, and another around supporting councils in affected areas to deliver primary prevention initiatives.<sup>122</sup> DHHS has primary responsibility for this recovery area.

The East Gippsland Social Recovery Subplan is the only council recovery plan that includes providing information about and support to access family violence and sexual assault services.<sup>135</sup>

In September 2020 the Victorian Bushfire Appeal panel announced that Gateway Health, Gippsland Lakes Complete Health and the Centre Against Violence would receive Appeal funds to expand existing prevention and intervention programs aimed at reducing the instances and impact of family violence.<sup>136</sup> Centre Against Violence and Gateway Health are delivering services in the North East, Gippsland Lakes Complete Health deliver in East Gippsland.

Family violence services receive referrals from three sources: Bushfire Case Support Program, self-referral and direct referrals from other organisations. As discussed, GEGAC reported observing a delay in the anticipated spike in family violence referrals, due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Apart from this anecdotal evidence IGEM has not received any data on the number of family violence referrals.

IGEM notes that BRV does not report on case support 'Type of Assistance' sub-categories. Family Violence is a sub-category of Health and Wellbeing. Regardless, it is too early to comment on broader trends.

In August 2020 Family Safety Victoria reported it was rolling out a training package aligned with the Victorian Multi-Agency Risk Assessment and Management Framework. The training aims to build the capacity of case support workers and other frontline staff to identify family violence in bushfire-affected communities and respond appropriately, including referring to local family violence and sexual assault services. The training uses a gender and disaster lens so workers understand how family violence might manifest in communities impacted by bushfires.<sup>137</sup>

In September 2020 BRV engaged the Gender and Disaster Pod to deliver family violence training for case workers from the six case support agencies as well as frontline workers from BRV, Red Cross, Salvation Army, Alpine and East Gippsland shire councils.<sup>138 120</sup>

### **Effectiveness of family violence information and services**

It is too early to assess the effectiveness of family violence initiatives put in place following the 2019–20 bushfires. Research indicates reports of family violence emerge for years after an emergency – and many initiatives are only just starting. For example, in November 2020 BRV funded DHHS to deliver additional activities including training in family violence awareness for regional BRV staff, hub staff and local shire and bushfire case support staff. It is not clear however if this is additional to the training already run, or different training.

Other funded activities include providing therapeutic interventions tailored to address recovery and supporting research to study the impacts of emergencies on gender-based violence.<sup>90</sup>

In February 2021, BRV identified primary prevention of family violence activities in the context of emergency recovery, planning and preparedness as a gap in existing recovery efforts. It also listed the following as continued requirements:

- capacity of recovery workforce to identify and respond to family violence, work with perpetrators of family violence and address complex needs of victim survivors
- emergency and ongoing housing for victims of family violence.<sup>123</sup>

IGEM notes that the increased risk of family violence after the 2019–20 bushfires has been recognised at the state level. Specialist family violence services have received funding to expand their prevention and early intervention programs. DHHS and BRV are working together to prepare the recovery workforce. However, this is an issue that requires long term ongoing funding.

#### **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.

## 15.7.2 Support for schools and early childhood services

The children, youth and families priority in the State Recovery Plan includes recovery actions that focus on supporting children, young people and families through early childhood services and schools.<sup>112</sup> Most of these actions are those funded as part of the \$13.45 million community support package announced by the Victorian Government on 24 January 2020, including setting up a Trauma Recovery Team and deploying place-based recovery workers.<sup>139 140</sup> DET coordinates early years and school-based actions.

In addition, on 2 March 2020 the government announced it would fast-track the rollout of the Mental Health Practitioners in Schools initiative to ten schools across East Gippsland. This initiative will provide every government secondary school campus with support from a mental health practitioner between one to five days a week by 2022.<sup>141</sup>

The Trauma Recovery Team provided psychosocial recovery support to bushfire-impacted communities in Alpine, Towong and East Gippsland shires from January 2020. For students this included the opportunity to talk about their experiences with Youth Affairs Council Victoria (YACVic), who were engaged by DET to facilitate workshops with young people and report on 'student voice'.<sup>139</sup>

The Bushfire Recovery Practitioner positions were created to support the psychosocial recovery of school communities, which included helping school leaders identify psychosocial recovery needs and implement recovery and resilience building programs.<sup>142</sup>

Forty-nine schools across the three shires were each given \$15,000 for student psychosocial recovery.<sup>139</sup> DET's decision to allocate funds was made at the request of the three local Principal networks.

The DET-funded 'Appraise Tool' was specifically designed to help school leaders select psychosocial recovery programs suited to their school communities. A range of wellbeing supports were provided for students, including different forms of therapy and subsidies for school camps and recreational activities.

IGEM heard it was difficult for some schools to source and implement psychosocial recovery programs during the COVID-19 pandemic and that it would have been easier if DET had sourced, selected and created a panel of offerings, rather than providing a payment.

DET delivered face-to-face community sessions to school and early childhood staff and parents from Term 1, 2020. The format was adjusted in response to the public health restrictions associated with the COVID-19 pandemic. DET developed 'Connection without contact' online facilitated trauma recovery support sessions. These sessions gave school staff and parents an opportunity to engage with speakers who had expertise and lived experience in bushfire recovery, including a parent and a principal affected by the 2009 Victorian bushfires. Up to June 2020, 50 facilitated sessions had been delivered.<sup>139</sup> The sessions were bespoke, with content tailored to each group according to information provided by principals and other staff.

In mid-2020 DET connected with the Australia National University's Australian Child and Adolescent Trauma, Loss and Grief Network, following its receipt of UNICEF funding to support bushfire impacted school communities. The university has since worked intensively with Corryong College and Bairnsdale Secondary College to provide targeted supports, including information and training to staff, community leaders and families about the impacts of traumatic events and ways to support young people. Advice was also provided to school leaders related to supporting staff, students and families dealing with the cumulative impact of bushfires and the COVID-19 pandemic.

DET developed factsheets that include similar information to those produced by DHHS and BRV but are addressed to school staff and principals. It also developed one factsheet on the importance of self-care and two on family violence. All factsheets are available on the DET website.<sup>139</sup>

DET also supported the 25 services delivering a funded kindergarten program in the bushfire affected areas. These services could apply for grants for incursions, resources or projects. A dedicated pool of relief teaching staff was also made available to allow early childhood staff to take time off for their own mental health and/or to participate in professional development.

### Other programs and projects for early years services and schools

Schools and early learning services in Towong Shire are also receiving support via:

- the Be You Bushfire Response Program – the national mental health in education initiative funded by the Australian Government. This program supports bushfire-affected schools and early learning services across the country. The program offers a package of support including contact liaison officers, trauma support and guidance, recovery planning and community support service mapping.<sup>143</sup> Be You is delivered by Headspace in primary schools and by Early Years Australia in early years services.<sup>144</sup>
- Australian Childhood Foundation’s two-year Child Resilience Officer pilot. This role acts as a catalyst and support for local early years’ services. The Foundation has offered to place this officer in Towong Shire with the University of Melbourne providing support for the pilot.<sup>144</sup>

DET representatives attend the Towong Early Years’ Meeting chaired by BRV and maintain connections with the Be You program and Australian Childhood Foundation.

Corryong Health Service’s Community Resilience Project is also working with schools, young people and the broader community to facilitate existing connections and help socially isolated people form networks.<sup>120</sup>

### 15.7.3 Effectiveness of support for schools and early childhood services

DET’s Trauma Recovery Team was established promptly following the funding announcement made in late January 2020. From the end of January onwards it was providing support to schools. The team worked with expert advisors in trauma and disaster recovery to develop and deliver these supports.<sup>139</sup>

The role of the Bushfire Recovery Practitioner was created to support school leaders, staff and students, including short-term interventions for individual students. Two of the six Bushfire Recovery Practitioners had been deployed by June 2020.<sup>139</sup>

IGEM conducted a range of consultation activities with individuals and communities but did not hear if the support offered by early childhood services and/or schools to children and their families was helpful. Young people talked about many issues, but school was a common topic. The recurring theme in relation to schools was the lack of consistency in the information provided and support offered.

Many young people reported that their school acknowledged the bushfires in the first assembly of 2020 but included little reference after that. They said the focus on bushfires ceased with the arrival of the COVID-19 pandemic so they felt they just had to get on with things. Others reported that school staff phoned families in the immediate aftermath of the fires and ran bushfire support programs throughout 2020.

A review of school newsletters confirmed that in some schools’ concern quickly shifted from bushfires to the COVID-19 pandemic, while others were better at keeping bushfires on the agenda. Young people told IGEM they believed being directly informed would reduce their vulnerability, and that of others, to future emergencies. They identified a need to address how and where they obtain information about emergency management from their local communities.

Schools closed on 25 March 2020 and moved to online learning in Term 2 as part of the response to the COVID-19 pandemic. The inability to interact in person would have been a major impediment to providing effective psychosocial support.

Schools were providing post-bushfire support to students and families, although there were some inconsistencies between schools and across the DET, Catholic and Independent education sectors.

Young people provided mixed feedback on whether offering psychosocial support in schools works. Some shared experiences of young people being bullied for attending counselling at school, and of the lack of confidentiality around school counsellors. Others reported being targeted for counselling and being openly pulled out of class to attend sessions. The stigma of being singled out in the school environment is a real concern for young people.

---

*They need to normalise this [mental health support] for all the students, like it's not a problem to access these services and here is how. They didn't do this.*

*Community member*

---

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 now employed qualified staff to undertake counselling with students.

While schools play a significant role in supporting emergency recovery of young people the limitations of this approach are clear – there is no consistency across schools and schools do not engage with young people who have completed school, enrolled in TAFE, disengaged from education or are home schooled.

Young people questioned the efficacy of relying on schools as the main avenue for engaging with and providing psychosocial support to young people after an emergency.

#### 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.

Many young people reported a need for youth-centred safe spaces where they could meet and debrief with their friends. There were great examples of community support for young people that emerged after the bushfires, including The Sanctuary at Mallacoota, Sarsfield Snaps in Sarsfield and the pre-existing Youth Space in Corryong (see section 14.3, p 306).

One of the challenges for young people during and following an emergency is the tendency of recovery agencies and the media to focus on their vulnerability. The role of schools and family is emphasised, particularly how adults, parents, guardians, teachers help young people after emergencies. Less is known about the role of a young person's sense of agency and their access to peer support.

The way people adjust after experiencing emergencies is complex, and a more nuanced understanding of how young people respond to and draw from personal, social and cultural support structures is essential.

## 15.8 Overall effectiveness

The State Recovery Plan is underpinned by eight principles. BRV has added two principles to the six National Principles for Disaster Recovery (see section 12.3 p 258) – strengthen communities and ensure an inclusive approach.

### 15.8.1 Ensure an inclusive approach

BRV has justly raised the profile of the rights and needs of fire-affected Aboriginal community members through its Aboriginal Culture and Healing line of recovery.

It is not clear how BRV has applied its 'Ensure an inclusive approach' principle more broadly, other than listing key population groups requiring tailored psychosocial supports. In addition, the State Recovery Plan does not mention population groups who are known to be at risk of missing out on services and supports because they are outside mainstream communities. This includes but is not limited to people living with a disability and people who identify as LGBTIQ+.

Alpine, Towong and East Gippsland Shire councils refer either to community inclusion or inclusive communities in their recovery planning documents.<sup>113 51 44</sup> Their pre-existing MEMPs mention CALD people and people living with a disability to varying degrees., however, there is no reference to either group in their recovery plans.

In East Gippsland the needs of people living with a disability are being addressed by the regional specialist service Gippsland Disability Advocacy Incorporated (GDAI). Through Australian Government funding, GDAI has appointed a part-time Bushfire Disability Advocate to support people with disabilities affected by the bushfires.<sup>145</sup> This work is not mentioned in the East Gippsland Shire Council Recovery Plan.

Despite the Australian Community Recovery Handbook including people of diverse gender and sexual identities as a group with specific needs, none of the recovery plans at municipal or state level mention people who identify as LGBTIQ+.<sup>106</sup>

#### 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.

## 15.8.2 Effectiveness

Key people and wellbeing recovery activities offered to fire-affected individuals, families and communities include housing and accommodation, psychosocial and mental health support, financial counselling, case support, and support for children and young people.

It is evident that recovery agencies have good intentions and work very hard to support individuals, families and communities. The lack of long-term resource planning has resulted in recovery agencies having to contend with multiple short-term funding extensions

From a community point of view, the support provided has not always aligned with their needs. In addition, individuals and communities told IGEM there is a gap between the efforts and level of understanding of the workers on the ground compared to those further removed.

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 that could be scaled up as needed to include farmers, people living in remote areas, and others who are unlikely to actively seek help.

Initial outreach during early recovery lacked coordination and was inconsistent across the fire-affected shires and was therefore not as effective as it could have been. This was a missed opportunity. Communities expressed a strong desire for this type of low-key personal support. As noted previously, this raises questions about the most effective way to pitch psychosocial recovery support after emergencies and the timing of that support.

It is still too early to assess the effectiveness of initiatives that have been put in place to address emerging issues related to mental health, family violence and increased demand for financial counselling.



# Chapter 16

Buildings and infrastructure



The Built Environment or the Buildings and Infrastructure line of recovery considers the impacts or effects that an event may have on essential physical infrastructure including essential services, commercial and industrial facilities, public buildings and assets and housing.

Infrastructure assists individuals and communities in the management of their daily lives and underpins the ability of private and public community services to function. If essential infrastructure and services are affected by an emergency, its restoration is considered a priority to ensure that response, relief and recovery activities are not compromised.

Community recovery is underpinned by the restoration of essential infrastructure and services. The restoration of essential infrastructure also enables the resumption of essential business operations and services, such as banking, education, health, and retail trade.

Local infrastructure may also form an important part of community identity and connectedness. For example, some public buildings have an important symbolic role and their loss can have a severe negative impact on community morale.

## 16.1 Buildings and infrastructure recovery

Buildings and Infrastructure recovery has five functional areas: transport; buildings and assets; energy services; telecommunications; water and wastewater management (see Chapter 10).

Under BRV's State Recovery Plan, the recovery priorities were structured around six building and infrastructure areas:

- fencing
- building and assets
- support the restoration of telecommunications and energy services
- drinking water and sewerage
- restoration and resilience of transport infrastructure
- enabling planning and rebuilding.

### 16.1.1 Governance arrangements

#### State level

At the state level, the Buildings and Infrastructure Working Group (BIWG) established by the SBRCC provides guidance, fosters relationships and coordinates initiatives to ensure that:

- Victoria's roads and utilities are restored and resilient
- Victoria has quality public infrastructure
- Victoria's residential and commercial infrastructure is restored and improved.

BIWG's role is to provide leadership on buildings and infrastructure reconstruction. It has contributed to plans and fostered partnerships between state and local government entities. The group also coordinates monitoring and reporting of these plans and partnerships to the SBRCC, SCRC, ministers and other government entities as required.

BIWG aims to support the proactive, timely and effective implementation of recovery activities and advocate for infrastructure resilience projects.

BIWG's role and function will continue to evolve to ensure that community voice, through Community and Municipal / Regional Recovery Committees, is appropriately prioritised.

As a working group, BIWG has a coordination and governance role, but does not deliver projects.

The Chair of BIWG reports to SBRCC as required. BIWG is co-chaired by DoT and DELWP and supported by BRV. Other members include Towong, Alpine and East Gippsland Shire Councils, and government departments, agencies and infrastructure organisations (including the VBA).

### Regional and municipal levels

At the regional and municipal levels, East Gippsland has established five working groups to focus on specific areas of recovery including the Built Environment Working Group. The East Gippsland Working Group reports to the East Gippsland Recovery Committee.



Great Alpine Road (Source: © Commonwealth of Australia)

In the North East Gippsland region, the Towong Shire has also established working groups which report to the Towong Shire Municipal Recovery Committee. The Alpine Shire does not have a Built Environment Working Group.

Working Groups contribute to the Municipal Recovery Plan. They also consider and secure appropriate resources for project delivery and work with state and local government entities with roles in buildings and infrastructure.

### 16.1.2 Roles and responsibilities

Like other recovery environments, the Buildings and Infrastructure recovery functional areas describe a community need and bring together a number of related recovery activities. They provide the sector and broader public with a clear understanding of recovery services and the agency responsible for coordinating them.

The lead agency for a recovery functional area is responsible for overseeing the service delivery of recovery elements for that function. It also monitors and reports on risks, consequences, progress and capacity issues to ensure service delivery is being achieved to impacted communities in a timely manner. This agency also determines and implements communication and information sharing mechanisms with relevant departments, agencies and key stakeholders.

#### Recovery support agencies

Each functional area has several recovery activities with a government lead agency responsible for its delivery and other agencies supporting them.

As shown in Table 6 (p 344), each functional area includes recovery activities (programs, services and products) that assist in community recovery, the responsible government lead agency and the supporting agency/ies.

**Table 6.** Recovery roles and responsibilities. (Source: Emergency Management Victoria<sup>88</sup>)

FUNCTIONAL AREA / LEAD COORDINATING AGENCY	ACTIVITY	RECOVERY LEAD AGENCIES	RECOVERY SUPPORT AGENCIES
<b>Energy Services (DELWP)</b>	Electricity services assets reinstatement & return to reliable supply	DELWP	AEMO, electricity companies, Energy Safe Victoria (ESV)
	Gas services assets reinstatement & return to reliable supply	DELWP	AEMO, ESV, gas companies, pipeline companies
	Restoration of liquid fuel supply	DELWP	Fuel companies, pipeline companies
<b>Public Tele-communications (DJPR)</b>	Public telecommunications assets reinstatement & return to reliable supply	DJPR	Telecommunications carriers
<b>Reticulated water and wastewater services (DELWP)</b>	Recovery & rehabilitation of reticulated water supply	DELWP Water corporations	
	Restoration of reticulated wastewater (sewerage) services	DELWP Water corporations	
	Replacement of essential stock & domestic water used in bushfire firefighting operations	CFA DELWP	Water corporations
<b>Transport (DoT)</b>	Airports restoration to normal activity	DoT lead government liaison	Airport owners & operators, other agencies & businesses as required
	Restoration of port infrastructure	DoT lead government liaison	Port managers, other agencies & businesses as required
	Restoration of major arterial roads, bridges and tunnels	DoT	DJPR, infrastructure operators, VMIA, VicTrack
	Restoration of tram, bus, rail services	DoT	DJPR, VMIA
	Assist with logistics interdependencies, contingencies and reconstruction	DJPR	DoT, freight, warehouse, port, airport & railway operators, other agencies & businesses
<b>Buildings and Assets (activity leads)</b>	Coordination of clean-up and restoration activities on local roads & for council-owned community infrastructure	Councils, DJPR, DoT	DELWP, EMV, DJPR (RRV), DoT (Vic Roads)
	Provision of financial assistance to municipal councils for the restoration of essential municipal assets	EMV	
	Assessment, clearing and rehabilitation of public buildings & assets where an agency is the owner or manager of that respective building or asset	Respective asset owner or managing agency	
	Oversight & inspection of rebuilding/ redevelopment	Councils	

## 16.2 Buildings and infrastructure impact

The 2019–20 fires resulted in wide-ranging devastation of the built environment. Table 7 shows the extent of destruction or damage caused by the fires on buildings and infrastructure.

**Table 7.** Summary of impacts for buildings and infrastructure (Source Bushfire Recovery Victoria<sup>112</sup>)

BUILDING TYPE	TOTAL
Residences damaged or destroyed	458
Business buildings and community facilities destroyed or damaged	51
School destroyed (Clifton Creek Primary School)	1
Buildings destroyed, damaged or closed	1162
Fencing destroyed	6350 km
Arterial roads closed	1400 km
Road signs and guideposts damaged or destroyed	1,500 and 14,000
Telecommunications facilities in Victoria impacted by fire	324

## 16.3 Enabling planning and rebuilding

The Victorian planning and building systems play an important role in preventing and reducing bushfire risk and in rebuilding and recovery from bushfires.

### 16.3.1 Planning and rebuilding legislative arrangements

The *Planning and Environment Act 1987* (Planning Act) establishes a framework for planning the use, development and protection of land in Victoria. It provides for a single instrument of planning control in each municipality, the planning scheme, which sets out the way that land may be used or developed. It contains state and local planning policies, zones and overlays and other provisions that affect how land can be used and developed.

The Planning Act also provides for the Victoria Planning Provisions (VPP) – a template document of standard state provisions from which all planning schemes are derived. It is not a planning scheme and does not apply to any land. The VPP is a statewide reference used, as required, to construct an individual planning scheme.<sup>146</sup> It contains a comprehensive set of planning provisions and ensures that consistent provisions for various matters are maintained across Victoria and that the construction and layout of planning schemes is always the same.

Under Victoria’s planning system, councils and the state government develop planning schemes to control land use and development.

The Planning Act sets out procedures for preparing and amending the VPP and planning schemes, obtaining a permit under a planning scheme, settling disputes, enforcing compliance with planning schemes, and other administrative procedures.<sup>146</sup>

#### Planning Schemes

A planning scheme is a statutory document which sets out objectives, policies and provisions relating to the use, development, protection and conservation of land in the area to which it applies. A planning scheme regulates the use and development of land through planning provisions to achieve those objectives and policies.<sup>146</sup>

Planning schemes set out policies and provisions for the use, development and protection of land for municipalities in Victoria. These are legal documents prepared under the Planning Act by the council or the Minister for Planning and are approved by the Minister for Planning.

Planning schemes contain planning policies, zones, overlays and other provisions that affect how land can be used and developed.

Proposed changes to the zoning of land or to the controls in a planning scheme can be introduced as an amendment to the existing scheme. Generally, an amendment is prepared by council and is subject to prescribed public notice and consultation processes.

The Minister for Planning can authorise the preparation of an amendment to a planning scheme by a council under the Planning Act for various reasons such as:

- to enhance or implement the strategic vision of a scheme
- to implement new state, regional or local policy
- to update the scheme or correct errors
- to allow some use or development currently prohibited to take place
- to restrict use or development in a sensitive location
- to set aside land for acquisition for a public purpose or to remove such a reservation when it is no longer needed in the scheme
- to incorporate changes made to the VPP.

Councils are required to give public notice when proposing amendments to their planning schemes and other specific stakeholder consultation arrangements apply in relation to proposed amendments. These enable a person to make a submission to the council about an amendment to its planning scheme, or to a panel appointed to consider a planning scheme amendment.

### **Planning permits**

A planning permit is a legal document that allows a certain use or development to proceed on a specified parcel of land, if specified in the planning scheme. In other instances, a planning scheme will specify that a planning permit is not required for a use or development, that it may be exempt from a permit or that it is prohibited.<sup>146</sup>

A planning permit is required before a building permit can be obtained. Usually planning permits are a local council responsibility, but in some settings the Minister for Planning is responsible for issuing a planning permit. A planning permit is required before a building permit can be obtained.

Recent changes to the bushfire planning controls have led to the incorporation of some of CFA's standard permit conditions into planning schemes, specifically water supply and vegetation management requirements. This provides more certainty for permit applicants regarding what bushfire protection measures must be undertaken at their site and included in their application to reduce the bushfire risk to an acceptable level.

The standard planning permit conditions strongly align with the bushfire planning requirements and the bushfire protection measures required under the planning scheme. They are often used as a starting point when assessing what requirements should be applied to any given application. However, they may change based on the merits of the application and its individual characteristics.

These conditions can also be used as a starting point for applicants preparing a permit application under the BMO.

### **Building permits**

The *Building Act 1993* (the Building Act) and Building Regulations 2018 (the Regulations) state that all building work requires a building permit unless an exemption exists under the Regulations.

Victorian law makes a clear distinction between a planning permit issued under the Planning Act and a building permit issued under the Building Act.

A building permit is a written approval by a registered private or municipal building surveyor that authorises the construction or demolition of a building or structure if it complies with the building regulations. These cover things like the siting of most single dwellings, protection of adjoining property during construction, structural adequacy, light, ventilation, and drainage.

Having a building permit provides you with protection by ensuring:

- the building practitioner named on the permit for your project is registered and carries the required insurance
- adequate documentation is prepared so the construction can be carried out compliantly and according to regulatory requirements
- key stages of the work are independently inspected
- an occupancy permit is to be issued to advise your building is suitable for occupation.

A building permit may only be issued by a registered building surveyor. Most councils have municipal building surveyors on staff or contract, and they are responsible for the building control functions of councils. This includes the issuing of building permits. Councils are responsible for the administration and enforcement of certain parts of the Building Act and building regulations in their municipality.

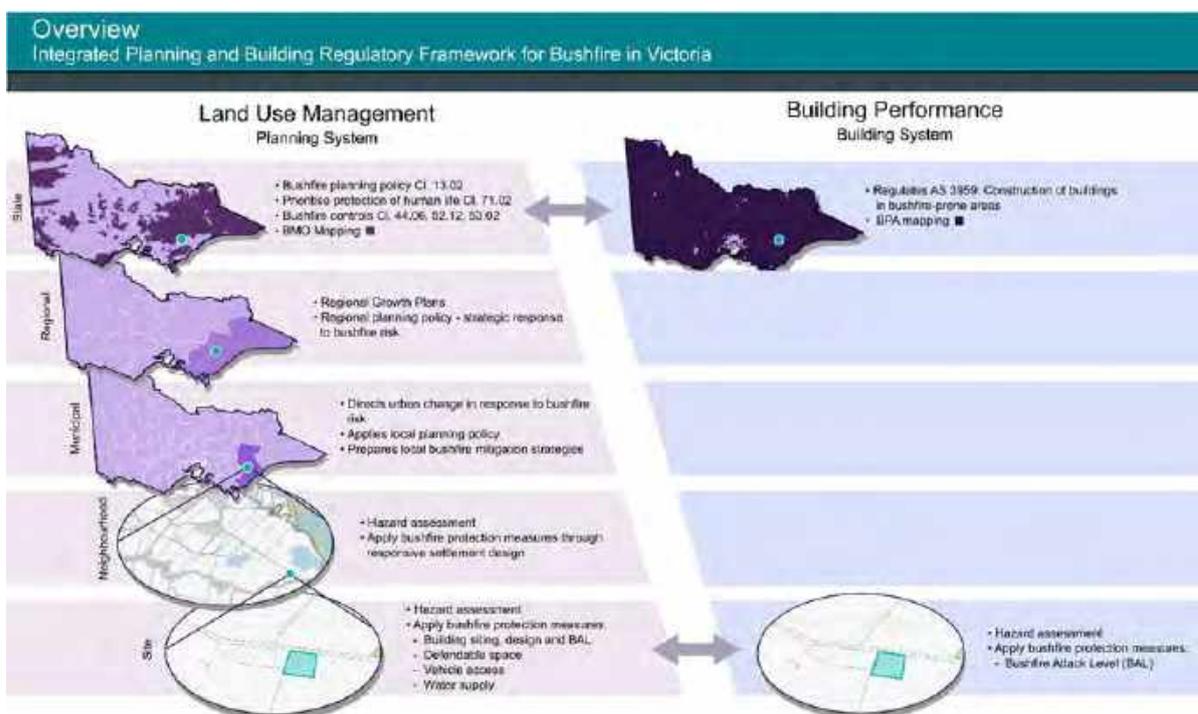
Permits may also be issued by private building surveyors. Councils are not responsible for work undertaken by private building surveyors. A list of registered building surveyors is available from the VBA.

### Integrated Planning and Building Regulatory Framework for Bushfire in Victoria

Victorian planning and building systems regulate land use and development to ensure bushfire hazard and risk are considered and managed. Together they form the integrated regulatory framework for bushfire<sup>147</sup>

The key elements of the regulatory framework are the bushfire hazard mapping, bushfire planning provisions and building regulations. The key elements of the regulatory framework are illustrated in Figure 22.

**Figure 22.** Integrated Planning and Building Regulatory Framework for Bushfire in Victoria (Source DELWP).



### **Bushfire hazard mapping**

Bushfire mapping considers the location, size, and type of vegetation (fuel) in each area and is informed by the best available science.

Mapping criteria identifies whether an area should be designated a Bushfire Prone Area (BPA), and if a Bushfire Management Overlay (BMO) should apply. The mapping triggers planning and building system requirements.<sup>147</sup>

### **Bushfire Prone Areas**

BPAs are areas that are subject to or likely to be subject to bushfires. Since November 2011 the Minister for Planning has formally designated BPAs under the Building Act. Specific construction and planning requirements apply to development in a BPA.

BPAs include grasslands and other vegetation types, and therefore include most of the State of Victoria except for some urban areas.<sup>148</sup>

Building construction and planning controls apply to developments in designated BPAs. They aim to improve bushfire protection for residential buildings and other sensitive land uses.

Designated BPAs are shown on the BPA Map. The BPA Map was introduced in response to the recommendations made by the 2009 Victorian Bushfires Royal Commission (VBRC). The Minister for Planning makes a formal determination to designate BPAs under section 192A of the Building Act. This determination is based on a detailed review process.

An area is designated as a BPA based on its Bushfire Hazard Level. This is an indicator of how extreme a bushfire can be, based on landscape conditions. Bushfire Hazard Levels can be different across areas.

DELWP has committed to work with local councils, emergency services and other key stakeholders to ensure the map is accurate and as up to date as possible. The map is reviewed twice a year. It was last reviewed and updated on 1 February 2021.<sup>149</sup>

### **Bushfire Management Overlay**

The BMO is a planning scheme provision used to guide the development of land in areas of very high to extreme bushfire hazard. The location, design and construction of development and the implementation of bushfire protection measures must be considered under a BMO.

The BMO applies to areas where there is potential for extreme bushfire behaviour, such as a crown fire, extreme ember attack and radiant heat. All areas where the BMO applies are also BPAs.<sup>148</sup>

### **Bushfire Hazard Assessment**

The BPA and BMO hazard maps trigger specific building and planning requirements.

Bushfire hazard assessments are required to inform planning and building permit applications. The assessment determines a BAL based on the level of risk (Figure 23, p 349).

The BAL is a measure of the severity of a building's potential exposure to ember attack, radiant heat, and direct flame contact. It is expressed in increments of radiant heat exposure and provides the basis for establishing the requirements for construction to improve the protection of building elements from bushfire attack. There are different 'risk' levels ranging from '12.5' to 'flame zone.'

The level of risk depends on vegetation, which is the primary source of fuel for a bushfire, and topography (or slope) which influences the rate of spread and intensity of a fire.<sup>150</sup>

**Figure 23.** Bushfire Attack Level (Source BRV).


Bushfire Attack Level	BAL - 12.5	BAL - 19	BAL - 29	BAL - 40	BAL - FZ Flame Zone
Predicted levels of exposure to radiant heat	<b>Low</b> Ember attack and radiant heat below 12.5 kw/m <sup>2</sup>	<b>Moderate</b> Ember attack and burning debris ignited by wind borne embers and radiant heat	<b>High</b> Ember attack and increased risk of burning debris ignited by wind borne embers and radiant heat	<b>Very high</b> Increasing levels of ember attack and burning debris ignited by embers Direct exposure to flames possible	<b>Extreme</b> Direct exposure to flame contact from fire front is likely

*Note: While the standards provide relative bushfire protection for houses in bushfire-prone areas, it is important to note that the standards do not guarantee a building will survive the unpredictable and often devastating nature of a bushfire. The standards are set for a Fire Danger Index (FDI) of 100.*

### Bushfire planning provisions

The State Planning Policy (clause 13.02-1S Bushfire Planning) provides the broad framework for integrating bushfire policy and provisions in planning schemes. Its aim is to strengthen community resilience to bushfire by considering bushfire in planning our cities and towns and ensuring that bushfire protection measures are part of new development.<sup>147</sup>

This policy must be applied to all planning and decision-making under the Planning Act relating to land that is:

- within a designated BPA
- subject to a BMO, or
- proposed to be used or developed in a way that may create a bushfire hazard.<sup>151</sup>

BMO (Clause 44.06) regulates development on land with the potential to be affected by extreme bushfires and must implement the Planning Policy Framework. The BMO includes a statutory provision in planning schemes and a map showing where the provisions apply to land. Most development in the BMO requires a planning permit. The following bushfire issues will need to be considered: bushfire hazard at a landscape, local, neighbourhood and site level, building siting, defensible space, on-site water supply and emergency vehicle access.

Local planning schemes can include BMO schedules. These specify development requirements tailored to suit the local bushfire risk. A schedule is labelled as 'BMO' followed by a number on planning maps and in planning schemes.<sup>147</sup>

Clause 53.02 Bushfire Planning sets out the bushfire protection measures and other requirements for development in the BMO. The application of bushfire protection measures, such as building siting, design, and defensible space, ensures it responds to the bushfire hazard and protects human life.<sup>147</sup>

Under Clause 52.12 Bushfire Protection: Exemptions, some buildings and works and vegetation removal are exempt from planning permit requirements for bushfire protection. These include community fire refuges, private bushfire shelters and managing vegetation around existing homes and along fence lines.

### **Building regulations**

The Building Act and Building Regulations specify requirements for some new buildings in declared BPAs. These are used to ensure that bushfire protection is considered as part of the building permit. AS 3959 Construction of Buildings in BPAs is, as the title suggests, an Australian Standard for construction of buildings in BPAs. It also provides the methodology for calculating the BAL, which will then guide in determining the BAL rating. AS 3959 also prescribes the requirements for how to build a house that meets BAL 12.5, 19, 29, 40, and Flame Zone.

As noted above, BAL ratings relate to the bushfire construction requirements applied to sensitive land uses such as residential buildings, schools, and hospitals in the BPA. A site assessment will be required to determine the BAL. Where the site assessment is done as part of the planning permit, a second assessment is not required at the building permit stage.<sup>147</sup>

### **16.3.2 Roles and responsibilities**

There are four key agencies involved in planning and providing permission for rebuilding after bushfires: DELWP, the VBA, councils and the CFA.

The Planning, Building and Heritage portfolios of DELWP have a critical role to play supporting community response and recovery following major fires. They assess fire and property loss impacts through mapping services, facilitate building assessments and streamline planning and related approvals to support temporary accommodation and rebuilding. DELWP also provides support for the assessment of local and state heritage places and objects that may have been damaged through fires.

DELWP also plays a role in supporting local government, or where necessary, leading in strategic settlement planning to ensure post-fire development appropriately prioritises the protection of human life.<sup>85</sup>

As a key part of DELWP's recovery function it provides ongoing capacity support to bushfire affected councils in various ways: regional based planning support for councils' bushfire recovery work; policy coordination and issues resolution for planning, building and heritage bushfire recovery matters; direct supports and resources to councils; and strategic planning work in collaboration with councils, based on local priorities that builds resilience into planning schemes. This includes oversight and administration of any issues with the Planning and Building Assistance Rebate Scheme and support for the Complex Sites Taskforce.

The VBA is the principal regulator for building and plumbing in Victoria, overseeing compliance with regulations, legal requirements, and professional standards. The VBA audits and inspects building and plumbing work on sites across Victoria to ensure it is safe, compliant, and completed to meet all relevant standards and codes.

In recovery the VBA works with recovery coordinators such as EMV and BRV in recovery building and plumbing activities and provides further information to (displaced) residents on returning safely to their properties after an event, rebuilding and temporary occupation of buildings within affected areas. It supports planning and related approvals for temporary accommodation and rebuilding. The VBA also participates in building inspections with industry experts and other agencies to determine safety and recovery requirements for affected buildings.<sup>152</sup>

Councils have numerous responsibilities in the planning and rebuilding process throughout recovery. Councils issue planning permits in accordance with the Planning Act and municipal building surveyors may also issue building permits under the Building Act and regulations.

Councils also have responsibility for a range of other land use planning functions, and for enforcing certain parts of the Building Act and Building Regulations.

In many respects, councils are at the coalface of building regulation as they are responsible for the administration and enforcement of key parts of the Building Act and Building Regulations within their municipal district. Building owners appointing private building surveyors in respect of building work cannot limit the responsibilities of councils.

The Municipal Building Surveyor appointed by council has numerous powers with which to promote and protect public safety within their municipality. These include powers to enter and inspect buildings, issue building notices, building orders, and emergency orders, require work to be carried out or buildings to be evacuated, and the issuing of infringement notices.<sup>153</sup>

CFA has a role in several aspects of the planning process. It acts as a referral authority under the Planning Act when the development or subdivision is located in the BMO and/or subdivisions where fire authority access and water supply need to be considered.

CFA is also a relevant fire authority that must be consulted under clause 13.03 -1S Bushfire Planning of the VPP to receive their recommendations and implement appropriate bushfire protection measures.

CFA provides advice to councils on permit applications so that informed decisions can be made, and the council then liaises with the permit applicants. Ultimately the council is responsible for making the decision about permit applications, however CFA may participate in discussions with applicants.

In some circumstances CFA also provides informal advice to councils in relation to planning applications. This may occur where there is no formal trigger to refer the application to CFA, but the council recognises the need for some additional advice on bushfire or emergency service requirements.

CFA is often consulted as part of the strategic planning process, particularly in the preparation of planning scheme amendments to ensure bushfire risk is considered at a strategic level. CFA also provides advice in relation to land use strategies and structure plans.<sup>154</sup>

### 16.3.3 Objectives

As stated in the State Recovery Plan, the recovery priorities for enabling planning and rebuilding are:

- communities have permanent planning provisions (temporary dwellings, streamlined planning controls and building regulations) in place to assist communities rebuild and to improve resilience to future fires
- communities can navigate the approval process, reducing the stress of rebuilding
- landowners are supported, informed and aware of rebuilding costs in bushfire-impacted communities
- local councils have the resources to effectively lead local recovery planning
- a reduction in time and cost from engaging community in design/ rebuild with industry.<sup>112</sup>

### 16.3.4 Recovery activities and initiatives

The 2019–20 Victorian bushfires triggered notable changes to government policy and strategies to support community resilience. These included new planning provisions to help communities impacted by the fires and all future bushfires to rebuild homes and businesses.

DELWP has implemented a new streamlined planning process for applications for dwellings or businesses destroyed or damaged by fire, ensuring fire-affected Victorians can rebuild faster and more easily on their properties.

### Setting up permanent planning provisions to assist rebuilding

On 20 March 2020 the Minister for Planning introduced a new clause (Clause 52.07 Bushfire Recovery) to all Planning Schemes as an amendment to state planning provisions (Planning Scheme Amendment VC177). Clause 52.07 enables the building of temporary residential or commercial accommodation in areas affected by the fires without the need for a planning permit. It includes the establishment of temporary accommodation, the continued operation of businesses and services and repair of fences and other bushfire recovery activities.

While Clause 52.07 exempts some bushfire recovery activities from planning scheme requirements, other requirements, laws and regulations may still apply. For example, a building permit may be required for any building work. The amendment allows the accommodation to be used for three years.

The amendment also includes planning exemptions for vegetation that is to be removed, destroyed or lopped to allow buildings, equipment or other material damaged or destroyed by a bushfire to be removed and to provide an area clear of vegetation around a temporary building for bushfire protection. Simplified requirements are introduced for land subject to erosion or land slip, flooding or a heritage control.

The exemption in Clause 52.07 only applies to planning scheme requirements. It does not override restrictive covenants, agreements made under section 173 of the Planning Act or other laws and regulations that may apply to the use and development of land.<sup>155</sup>

Most notably, the exemptions in Clause 52.07 also do not apply to the permanent replacement of buildings. Figure 24 (p 353) provides an illustration of the process, requirements and exemptions of Clause 52.07.

The new clause in the planning schemes is complemented by an amendment to the Building Regulations – Part 11A Emergency accommodation buildings, which commenced on 18 August 2020. The amendment allowed the installation and occupation of temporary accommodation without a building permit. The home must have been the landowner’s principal place of residence and been destroyed or rendered unfit for occupation as a result of the emergency.

To facilitate planning for the reconstruction of permanent dwellings, on 6 May 2020 an amendment (Planning Scheme Amendment VC179) introduced a new planning provision Clause 52.10 to planning schemes. The clause is applicable to bushfires that occurred after 1 January 2019.

The new provision aims to speed up the planning approval process, provide certainty and save a considerable amount of time by exempting the need to give notice of your planning application and exempting third-party (objector) appeals to the Victorian Civil and Administrative Tribunal.

The provisions also provide for the CEO of a council (or delegate) to decide on planning permit applications instead of at a full council meeting.<sup>156</sup>

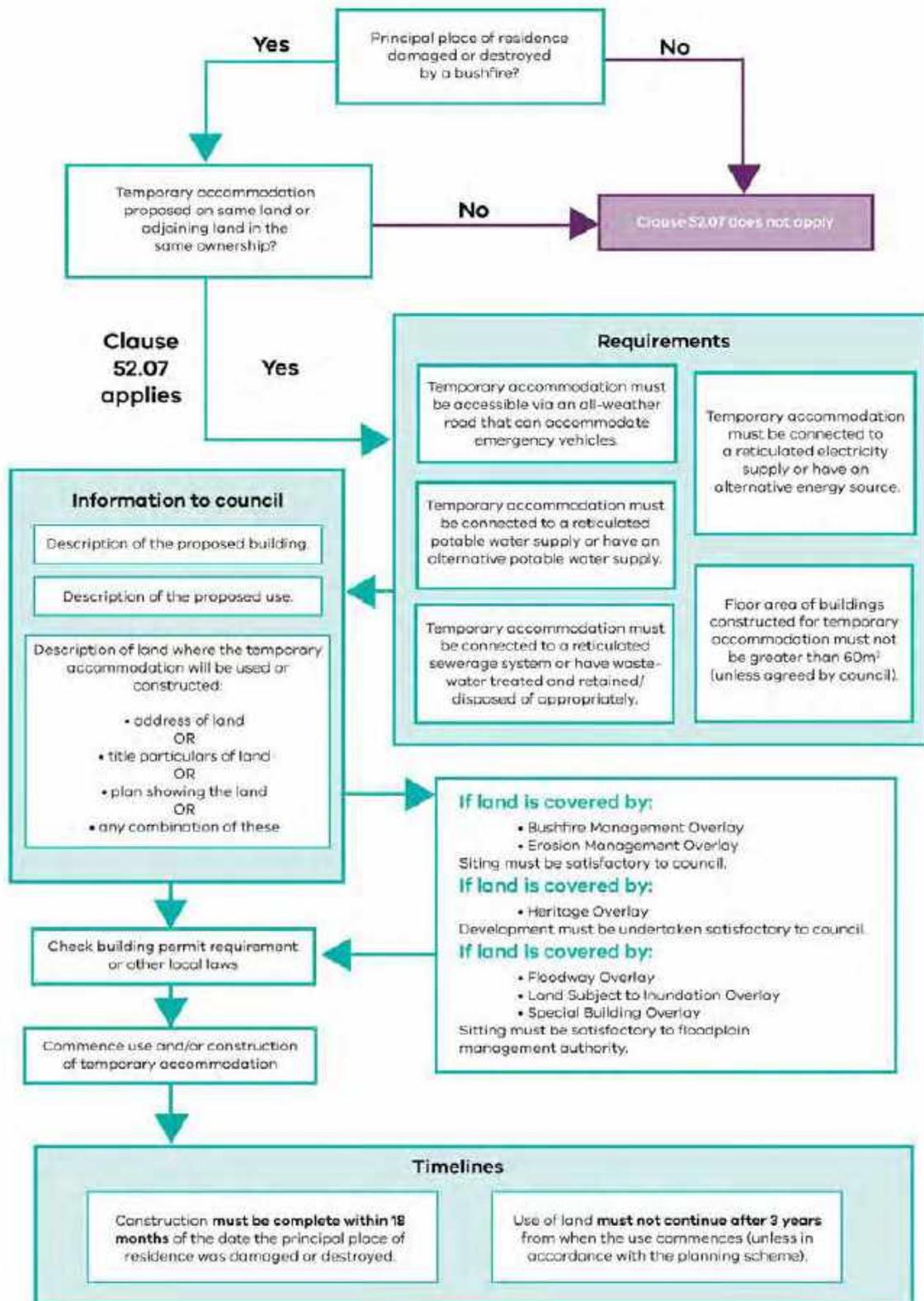
The combined changes to the VPP (clause 52.07 and 52.10) and Building Regulations for temporary accommodation support the immediate to medium-term recovery actions for communities impacted by the 2019–20 Victorian bushfires.

The new provisions are permanent and apply to all future bushfires, regardless of scale and impact. This removes the need to amend planning schemes each time there is another bushfire.

#### 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.

**Figure 24.** Clause 52.07 – Planning Scheme for Temporary Accommodation (Source DELWP).



### Rebuilding support services

A component of the Rebuilding Support Program, the Rebuilding Support Service (RSS) is delivered through the East Gippsland Shire and Towong Shire councils. Staff were in place and residents started to receive their preliminary BAL assessments in East Gippsland from July 2020 and in Towong from August 2020.

The objective of the RSS is to provide specialised advice to help streamline both planning permit application requirements and the overall rebuild, supporting the process from planning to rebuild, to submission of planning permit application.<sup>157</sup>

Through this service, delivered by council and BRV, property owners can get support to navigate planning and building permit processes. The support includes access to a bushfire hazard assessment and the use of planners, building surveyors and environmental health officers. They are also eligible for \$27,400 in rebates for other essential assessments and infrastructure required as part of the rebuilding process.

People rebuilding can apply for several rebates with eligibility dependent on their circumstances. Rebates are for permit related assessments and infrastructure required as part of the rebuilding process. Rebates programs are being administered by Melbourne Water on behalf of DELWP and BRV in a coordinated approach, with the Melbourne Water website providing a one-stop-shop for residents.

BRV, East Gippsland and Towong Shire Councils, DELWP and providers of the Bushfire Case Support Program are key partners delivering elements of the RSS.

### Progress and effectiveness

As of April 2021, there have been 218 planning permit applications lodged across all bushfire affected regions. Of these total number of planning permit applications, 197 have been approved with 14 still under assessment and 29 where no permit was required.<sup>110</sup>

The number of landholders whose planning permits are approved is only a portion of the people who lost either their dwellings or sheds or other structures.

Councils have been struggling with limited capacity and resources to deliver services through the RSS. Municipal Building Surveyors are not readily available in the numbers required to action recovery support services in a timely manner. Resource sharing across councils is also problematic as reimbursement for these services is not guaranteed under recovery funding mechanisms.

The delayed information sessions to broader community about navigating through the planning and rebuilding process have also contributed to this issue. It has taken the government a long time to commence the RSS. In East Gippsland the service started around September 2020.

Overall planning permit applications were almost doubled, particularly in East Gippsland, as at November/December 2020 compared to normal, however, only a small portion of that increase was associated with the bushfire rebuilding.

There were also delays in reconstruction due to shortage of builders and registered tradespeople.

#### FINDING 16.2

A lack of capacity and resources limits the councils' ability to effectively implement rebuilding support activities to communities affected by the 2019–20 Victorian fire season.

#### OBSERVATION 16.1

A shortage of builders and registered tradespeople are causing considerable delays in rebuilding.

### **Environmental risk assessments**

BRV is coordinating environmental risk assessments. These assessments identify natural hazards and help to guide an approach to reconstruction and recovery.

### **Bushfire Hazard Assessments and Bushfire Attack Level Assessment**

All properties impacted by the 2019–20 Victorian fire season are in a designated BPA. As such, new houses must be built to national bushfire construction standards. The required standard is identified by undertaking an assessment of the surrounding bushfire hazard. The assessment will result in the determination of the BAL.

More than 80 per cent of houses lost are also subject to the BMO. Development in these areas may require additional bushfire protection measures including water supply, access for emergency services and vegetation management requirements.

BRV is working with councils and the CFA to prepare bushfire hazard assessments for all properties with destroyed houses, saving individual landowners up to \$3000.

The assessments consider topography, vegetation classifications and the impact of fuel management scenarios on the severity of a building's potential exposure to ember attack, radiant heat and direct flame contact.

The funded bushfire hazard assessments aim to:

- reduce the need for landowner to privately engage consultants to prepare assessments
- ensure coordinated approach to managing risk across settlements, localities and regions
- support council and the CFA to assess permits effectively
- help to identify opportunities to strategically manage bushfire risk
- reflect the shared responsibility of government, communities and individuals to manage risk.

The preliminary assessment will identify a proposed BAL along with any other bushfire protection measures. This information can be used by landowners for both planning and building permit applications.

The preliminary assessment results are not mandatory and only recommend a BAL and other protection measures to manage risk based on controls that apply to a property. Planning applications still need to be referred to the CFA for review to ensure designs are appropriate.

As of 28 April 2021, the program had assessed 506 properties.

### **Effectiveness**

Navigating the planning and building approvals has been a challenge for landowners whose properties fall within BPA.

The government initiative to fund the bushfire hazard assessments has not had any significant impact. This is because the preliminary BAL assessments prepared by the independent consultants are only recommendations and can be overruled by government authorities which have different BAL assessment results and will consider potential landscape bushfire behaviour and impacts.

Building standards for BAL ratings of BAL-40 and BAL-Flame Zone impose significant costs in comparison to ordinary builds, due to the requirements of specialised fire-resistant materials prescribed under AS3959. This means that some rebuilds are either not possible or are very expensive if those requirements are applied.

It was clear from community meetings throughout the Inquiry that there was a degree of confusion among those seeking to rebuild. There were often substantial differences between the BAL proposed through the BRV contractor, and the final, and binding BAL rating of the CFA.

Those who had used the BRV contractor had often waited for the BAL to be assessed, thinking it would expedite future approvals. However, the degree of variance of the BAL rating required plans to be substantially reconsidered, projected costs to increase and ultimately a lengthier end-to-end planning and rebuilding approval process. Those affected highlighted other local residents who had not used the complementary service and appeared to have progressed through the approvals process quicker and with less frustration.

#### 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.

### Support for complex site properties

The Victorian Government has provided options to families and individuals who are rebuilding on a small number of properties identified as complex sites as part of the free bushfire hazard assessments. These types of properties are rated at the highest BAL rating (BAL 40 or BAL FZ), or are located in an extreme bushfire risk area. Complex site property owners will face more challenges building a home that is safe to live in.

As well as being eligible for a range of support and step-by-step advice for planning applications from the RSS, owners of complex sites can also get the expertise of an independent Complex Site Taskforce.

The Complex Site Taskforce will help complex property owners resolve difficult building issues and identify rebuilding options and solutions at the 'drawing board' stage. The taskforce will assist with concept planning and building design, supporting property owners to retreat from the previous house site and rebuild in a lower risk location if practical.

For those property owners where an alternative house site is not possible, a voluntary Resettlement Program is available.

In line with previous bushfires, owners of complex sites also have the option of selling their property to the Victorian Government at the 2019 site value approved by the Government Land Monitor. This option is offered as a last resort and will be administered in line with previous Victorian Government resettlement schemes.

The Bushfire Recovery Case Support Program will also work closely with owners of complex sites on further options for support.<sup>158</sup>

### Effectiveness

The Complex Site Taskforce has increased the opportunity for individuals to have a consistent level of support throughout the planning process.

Coordination through BRV and participation of other key government entities has provided an opportunity to resolve complex rebuilds.

#### FINDING 16.5

The Complex Sites Taskforce is an effective model to streamline and coordinate complex planning and rebuilding applications.

## 16.4 Buildings and assets

Following a bushfire there can be significant damage to buildings and assets through direct flame impact and/or smoke, wind and heat damage. Measures taken by responder agencies can also damage buildings and assets. This section will assess the rebuilding of buildings and assets damaged by the 2019–20 Victorian fire season including homes, other privately owned buildings, community facilities such as town halls and schools, and business property. Road recovery is considered in section 16.5 (p 358).

### 16.4.1 Roles and responsibilities for the recovery of building and assets

The State government, councils, the private sector, community and individuals all have responsibilities when structures are damaged or destroyed. Buildings and assets can be publicly or privately owned.

Residential damage includes a combination of structural and non-structural damage that renders entry to the residence dangerous or allows entry but prevents occupation of the building. The structure may require building repairs, be fixed through minor work and/or be structurally sound with damage to contents.

Critical public buildings and assets need to be pre-identified as priorities in the recovery planning process and adequate arrangements developed for their restoration or replacement if required. Public community facilities have the potential to assist a community in its recovery process, but if damaged will be unfit for community use and function. Likewise, the damage might take the form of structural damage to buildings or damage to furnishings and contents, or both.

Recovery activities should also recognise the key elements of the built environment that have social value, such as landmarks and significant community sites, which are symbolically and functionally important in community recovery.

Those agencies and organisations that manage public assets should undertake the assessment, restoration, clearing and rehabilitation of facilities within their portfolios (e.g. sporting facilities, public amenities, schools, hospitals). Councils are responsible for the oversight and inspection of rebuilding and any redevelopment.

### 16.4.2 Objectives

The buildings and assets recovery objectives are to:

- support the rebuild of housing that is sustainable and resilient, safe, and affordable and meets the needs of our communities, including support services to assist communities through the planning and rebuilding processes
- rebuild community assets that considers resilience and climate change at the core of its design and service principles and meets community needs.

### 16.4.3 Recovery activities and initiatives.

There are several state government support services available to people who lost their homes or properties in the Victorian 2019–20 bushfires. These include support of payments from the Victorian Bushfire Appeal and grants, modular housing and expert planning advice.

People who lost their primary place of residence are receiving an additional \$15,000 Housing Assistance Payment from the Victorian Bushfire Appeal on top of the \$25,000 Housing Assistance Payment disbursed from April.

This is on top of other Victorian and Commonwealth grants, such as up to \$42,000 in Emergency Re-Establishment Payments for underinsured households and up to \$75,000 in grants for directly impacted farm businesses.

As discussed, BRV has been working across government and with councils to deliver the Rebuilding Support Program, which provides a series of services, supports and grants that aim to help these households rebuild successfully – and safely.

### Community facilities

Within in the Community Recovery and Resilience Grants initiative, an initial \$5 million was allocated to the Bushfire Recovery Grants for Community Facilities. This program has been established to support local organisations or community groups to build, upgrade or repair damaged or destroyed community facilities in fire-affected communities. Community Recovery and Resilience Grants are jointly funded by the Commonwealth and Victorian Governments under the DRFA and are administered by BRV.

The projects that were funded under the community facilities grants include:

- Repair of surfaces at Clifton Creek Tennis Club and for multi-purpose markings for different sports (\$50,000)
- Back-up power supply to the Corryong Youth Hall to support the community in an emergency (\$37,450)
- Repair the Anglican Parish of Corryong’s church hall (\$7000).<sup>159</sup>

### School building and facilities

The State Government has provided more than \$4.25 million funding for the rebuilding of the burnt-down Clifton Creek Primary School. The rebuild includes kitchen and sensory gardens, shade sails and additional space for community use. A further \$29,000 was provided to build a bus shelter within the school property.

Another four schools in bushfire-affected areas in East Gippsland have also received funding for the upgrading of their school facilities. Mallacoota P-12 College, Cann River P-12 College, Metung Primary School and Buchan Primary School will share in \$1.3 million.

Mallacoota P-12 College received \$904,000 to upgrade its roofing, install a new electrical system, repair and replace building and school facilities, administration and staff areas. In addition, up to \$2.5m has been allocated to deliver a new kindergarten for Mallacoota. Following community consultation and cultural site investigation works, it has been determined that this new facility will be delivered on the site of the Mallacoota P-12.

Cann River P-12 College will receive \$168,000 for new carpets and to build a new fitness station, while Metung Primary School will receive \$146,000 to demolish and replace its toilet block.

Buchan Primary School will receive \$84,000 to undertake minor maintenance works, including painting the school and upgrading fluorescent lights to LED lights. Three schools in Towong also received funding for upgrading of school sport facilities. Bethanga Primary School, Corryong College and Tallangatta Primary School will share in \$2.2 million for upgrades and repairs.<sup>160</sup>

The Bushfire Preparedness (Vegetation) Program (BPVP) was introduced in 2018 to support the de-risking of schools on the Bushfire-at-Risk Register for essential vegetation clearance and maintenance activities. \$7m was allocated to 347 Victorian Government schools for works ahead of the 2019–20 season. \$9.15m was allocated to 347 schools leading into the 2020-21 season.

## 16.5 Transport

### 16.5.1 Legislative framework

The *Road Management Act 2004* (Road Management Act) establishes the statutory framework for the management of the road network which facilitates the coordination of the various uses of road reserves for roadways, pathways, infrastructure and similar purposes.<sup>76</sup> The Road Management Act allocates responsibility for the management and coordination of different parts of a road reserve including the roadside.

Section 206 of *Local Government Act 1989* (Schedule 10) (Local Government Act) sets out the powers of a council in relation to roads in its municipal district. Section 205 of the Local Government Act also provides for councils to have the care and management of all public highways vested in council subject to the Road Management Act.<sup>77</sup>

The Guidelines for the removal, destruction or lopping of native vegetation (the Guidelines) outline how native vegetation removal is assessed and offset.

Native vegetation are plants that are indigenous to Victoria, including trees, shrubs, herbs and grasses. Native vegetation provides habitat for plants and animals and delivers a range of ecosystem services that make land more productive and contribute to human well-being.

In Victoria, a permit is usually required to remove, destroy or lop native vegetation. These regulations are known as the native vegetation removal regulations and are primarily implemented through local council planning schemes.

Incorporated under Clause 52.17 (Native Vegetation) of the Victoria Planning Provisions, the Guidelines sets out, and describe the application of Victoria's statewide policy in relation to assessing and compensating for the removal of native vegetation.<sup>161</sup> This does not apply to emergency works where native vegetation needs to be removed, destroyed, or lopped to create emergency access or where it presents an immediate risk of personal injury or damage to property.<sup>162</sup>

There are also applicable exemptions for road safety that allow native vegetation to be removed, destroyed or lopped to the minimum extent necessary by and on behalf of a public authority or municipal council to maintain the safe and efficient function of an existing road in accordance with the written agreement of the Secretary of DELWP (as constituted under Part 2 of the *Conservation, Forests and Lands Act 1987*).

## 16.5.2 Roles and responsibilities

DoT is responsible for overseeing the management of infrastructure related to:

- arterial road network
- rail network (passenger and freight)
- public transport services
- ports and marine.

DoT's governance arrangements are part of the broader bushfire recovery governance overseen by BRV.

At the regional level, the Regional Roads Team continue to deliver business as usual activities and undertake bushfire recovery activities under the coordination of the Director, Regional Bushfire Recovery. They work with and act consistently with BRV's Regional Recovery Committees, and sub-groups as appropriate.

At the State level, the Executive Director, Transport Recovery and Resilience (now replaced by Chief Network Operations) represents DoT on BRV's State-level governance forums, and approves bushfire-related documentation to the minister or external to DoT.

RRV was established in September 2018, to respond to community needs, focus on regional issues and improve the condition of regional roads. On 1 July 2019, RRV and VicRoads came together with Public Transport Victoria (PTV) and the broader transport portfolios of government, to form a new, integrated DoT.

RRV is a division of VicRoads focused on providing safer and better roads that support regional communities' growth and prosperity. RRV manages the roads across its five regions: Eastern Victoria, North Eastern Victoria, Northern Victoria, South Western Victoria and Western Victoria.

Councils are responsible for the construction and maintenance of some, however not all roads in their municipality. It is the smaller, local roads that are usually the responsibility of council and this involves monitoring the standard of these roads and undertaking repairs when required. It should be noted that the costs of maintaining roads can be significant and councils usually have to prioritise road construction and maintenance projects.

Both the DELWP and PV manage a significant length of road network within State forests, parks and reserves. Most of the roads are of relatively low- standard and are generally unsealed. Approximately 2,500 kilometres of the managed roads are public roads as defined under the Road Management Act.

DELWP is managing recovery and associated funding for its roads.

### 16.5.3 Objectives and priorities

Under the State Recovery Plan, the long-term transport recovery outcomes seek to ensure that utilities and transport routes are restored and resilient.

To support this long-term outcome, the BRV has developed the following recovery priorities (over 12 to 18 months from when recovery commenced sometime in August 2020):

- Transport infrastructure and networks are fully restored to at least the state they were before the bushfires.
- The transport network is more resilient to bushfires in the future.<sup>112</sup>

In planning for recovery from the bushfires, DoT has the following outcomes as objectives:

- Fully restored transport infrastructure and networks to at least the state they were before the bushfires.
- Collaborative and cooperative relationships with other agencies across the public and private sectors, and DoT supporting broader recovery activities for regional communities affected by the bushfires.
- A transport network that is more resilient to bushfires in the future, through improvements to:
  - infrastructure
  - processes and systems
  - preparedness
  - emergency services support.
- Costs of bushfire recovery activities are met from specific state and Australian government funding sources.
- Resilient employees who have the support and skills they need to work effectively and safely during all emergency management stages.

East Gippsland Shire Council's recovery objective for transport is to rebuild roads where resilience and climate change are at the core of its design and service principles, and where it meets community needs.

Towong Shire Council's recovery objective for transport is that utilities and transport routes are restored and resilient.

### 16.5.4 Impacts

The 2019–20 bushfires impacted road-related infrastructure, particularly arterial roads in Gippsland and North East Victoria. Significant impact was also experienced on local roads, managed by councils.

At the height of the bushfires, over 1400 kilometres of arterial roads were closed, including all links between Victoria and NSW east of Omeo. Almost 1500 road signs and over 14,000 guideposts were damaged or destroyed by fire, as well as many kilometres of crash barriers and drainage infrastructure.

The bushfires have severely damaged the road surface, compromised structures like retaining walls and bridges, and destroyed signs, line markings and safety barriers across East Gippsland and North Eastern Victoria.

Impacts on other state transport assets (rail networks, public transport, ports and marine infrastructure) were negligible.

By removing ground vegetation, bushfires make environments (particularly those in hilly areas) much more susceptible to further damage from extreme weather, notably heavy rainfall. Heavy rain in bushfire-affected areas has already resulted in further road closures and costs due to landslips, debris across roads and siltation of drainage infrastructure. These impacts will continue until ground vegetation recovers, likely to be 6–12 months.

### 16.5.5 Recovery activities

The fire severely damaged the road surface, compromised structures like retaining walls and bridges, and destroyed signs, line markings and safety barriers. While re-opened roads were considered safe for travel, they are not always back to their optimal safe operating condition.

Bushfires damage and destroy vegetation, verges and trees surrounding roads making the area more prone to flooding, landslips and debris as there's no vegetation to stabilise the soil.<sup>163</sup>

RRV was dealing with a dramatically altered landscape in their recovery works. There were a total of 123 bridges and major culverts needing repairs. Among the most severely affected roads were Mallacoota Road and the Princes Highway.

Poddy Creek bridge on Princes Highway was badly damaged by a large fallen tree that had smashed the bridge barrier and cracked the outer concrete supports on the road section of the bridge.

The scope of work for this activity was complete restoration works to bring road infrastructure back up to at least pre-fire condition and remove speed limits (for example crash barriers, culverts, batters, Poddy Creek bridge).

As of October 2020, repair works for damaged infrastructure were completed with both lanes of Poddy Creek Bridge already open and speed limits have returned to normal following the \$570,000 restoration project.

East Gippsland-based contractor Tambo Constructions delivered a range of repairs to the bridge including a new safety barrier rail system, repairs to the bridge deck, reinforcement works and a new road surface across the bridge.

Significant bushfire recovery works have also been completed on other East Gippsland roads, with all 400 kilometres of bushfire-impacted arterial roads reopened, more than 1000 road signs repaired or replaced, and 12,600 guideposts replaced.

The bridge repair works were funded under the Victorian Government's \$22.8 million statewide investment from the \$2.7 billion Building Works package, to help regional towns recover and rebuild following the 2019–20 bushfires.

### 16.5.6 Effectiveness

IGEM notes the efficient implementation of recovery works for heavily damaged road infrastructure. However, given that the planned repair works were only limited to restoration of assets to pre-fire standards, betterment opportunities, like improving the function and resilience of the asset were missed and not appropriately considered.

During the 2019–20 bushfires FFMVic undertook a range of activities in managing the fires including immediate suppression works, emergency stabilisation and planned prevention works. As a result of these activities timber is felled during the fires or immediately after the fires to improve safety in the short and long term. Some trees are felled adjacent to roads and in the vicinity of powerlines.

Removal of the felled by-product logs and other debris from these sites is necessary for the prevention of fire. In August 2020 DELWP entered into an agreement with VicForests to facilitate the removal and disposal or utilisation of felled timber from specified locations in East Gippsland and North East Victoria. The agreement requires VicForests to remove all logs it is able to utilise from the identified sites and would be doing so in accordance with section 62(2) of the *Forests Act 1958*. Removal of the remaining debris will occur separately.<sup>85</sup>

A year on since the 2019–20 bushfires, some concerns have remained on the removal of burnt-down roadside vegetation. Residents of Sarsfield in East Gippsland have raised concerns about increased fire hazards after RRV halted works to clear scrub and waste vegetation piles along the Princes Highway.

RRV halted roadside clean-up works at Sarsfield and Gelantipy sections in view of the ongoing investigation undertaken by the Office of Conservation Regulator into the removal of the felled logs and waste vegetation.

RRV was also required by DELWP to undertake value assessments and obtain the necessary permits before they could continue roadside vegetation clean-up works due to the regeneration of flora in the area.

Roles and approaches to manage clearance and removal of hazardous trees and other vegetation along roadsides following the 2019–20 bushfires were not well-established among relevant agencies including DELWP, DoT, EMC and Local Councils. This has caused some road safety issues among road users.

The CEO BRV wrote to the EMC with regards to the management of hazardous trees post bushfire on private and public land. In particular, the letter focused on the legacy issue of hazardous trees being left unmanaged where they do not pose a threat to public roads access and use. In this scenario, hazardous trees are often left in situ and may pose a risk to rebuilding activities such as fencing, private land rehabilitation, roadside reserve revegetation and the replacement, upgrade or installation of utilities.

The EMC's response advises that this issue remains unresolved and should be the subject of a recommendation flowing from the IGEM's Inquiry.

## 16.6 Conclusion

The recovery progress of buildings and infrastructure since the fires highlights the huge concerted efforts and key achievements of the sector in helping bushfire-affected communities reopen, restore, rebuild and recover.

Victoria already has in place permanent planning provisions for temporary dwellings, streamlined planning controls and building regulations to assist communities rebuild and improve resilience to future fire emergencies.

Despite provisions in place and support made available to help communities, businesses and individuals rebuild, communities were still frustrated and confused by the complicated regulations in place and there were perceptions of recovery works being delayed and inequitable across affected areas. Navigating the planning and building approval process however remains a challenge for communities.

Transport infrastructure and networks are now fully restored to at least the state they were before the bushfires. IGEM however notes the lack of 'build back better' measures that will enable state infrastructure assets to be built back to a standard that would be more resilient, reducing risk to communities and prevent huge reconstruction costs from future emergencies.

## Chapter 17

Recovery of the natural environment



The natural environment refers to Victoria’s environmental and biodiversity assets, encompassing forests, parks, waterways, soil and wildlife. Following an emergency, efforts to support recovery of the natural environment consider the regeneration of environmental assets, how communities interact with nature and the long-term resilience of the natural environment.

During the 2019–20 Victorian fire season, communities watched in horror as over 1.3 million hectares of native forests burned, important ecosystems were destroyed, and thousands of animals were killed or injured. Not only did communities recognise the immediate devastation of the natural environment, but they recognised the significant consequences of the fires for Victoria’s biodiversity and landscapes.

The natural environment is one of the four traditional environments of recovery recognised in the EMMV, SEMP and other key recovery documents, and BRV articulated numerous recovery priorities and actions under its environment and biodiversity line of recovery in the State Recovery Plan.

This chapter addresses the governance arrangements in place and developed to drive key programs of work to support the recovery of the natural environment and build resilience in Victoria’s flora and fauna. It considers forest re-seeding, waterways, biodiversity initiatives, park and visitor infrastructure and firewood.

## 17.1 Arrangements and governance

Prior to the 2019–20 Victorian fire season the SERRP and the *Code of Practice for Bushfire Management on Public Land* were the main policy documents setting the objectives for recovery of the natural environment following bushfires.<sup>164</sup>

In the SERRP the objective is to manage consequence and mitigate risk to the natural environment on public land with consideration of air and water quality, land degradation and contamination, plant and wildlife damage or loss, and impacts on national parks and cultural and heritage sites. That objective remains unchanged in the SEMP.

The recovery objective in the *Code of Practice for Bushfire Management on Public Land* is to mitigate risks to the environment following the damage caused by bushfire to maintain or improve the resilience of natural ecosystems and their ability to deliver services such as biodiversity, water, carbon storage and forest products.

BRV’s State Recovery Plan sets three intended outcomes for environment and biodiversity recovery:

- natural environments are healthy, resilient and biodiverse
- natural environments have high levels of amenity
- natural environments are productive and accessible.

The plan acknowledges that recovery of environment and biodiversity involves recovery from the impacts of the fires as well as adaptation and resilience-building to mitigate future fire impacts.

DELWP is designated as the lead department for recovery of environment and biodiversity in the State Recovery Plan. This aligns with the SERRP, which designated DELWP as the agency responsible for coordinating the assessment and monitoring of environmental impacts of emergencies. The EMMV listed DELWP as a lead agency for all recovery activities related to the natural environment.

The SEMP is largely similar, however it includes a role related to scientific and technical advice to maintain species diversity and presence within an ecosystem.

Parks Victoria is designated as a co-lead or support for DELWP in many recovery activities related to the natural environment. CMAs and the EPA have some responsibilities in restoration of public land and waterways and in the provision of information and technical advice to councils and the community. DoT is a co-lead agency for erosion control on public land related to roads.

Before the 2019–20 fires, the only emergency plans for recovery of the natural environment were the SERRP and Victorian Response Plan for Wildlife Impacted by Fire. Nonetheless, various plans, policy documents and arrangements that guide ordinary management of environment and biodiversity provided a basis for determining the actions required for recovery after bushfire.

The key areas for recovery of environment and biodiversity following the 2019–20 fires are outlined in the DELWP State-wide Portfolio Recovery Plan - Eastern Victoria Fires 2020<sup>85</sup>, which informed the recovery priorities and actions in the State Recovery Plan. Those key areas are:

- forest re-seeding
- waterways
- biodiversity
- community grants
- park assets and visitor infrastructure
- firewood
- Major Event Review of the Regional Forest Agreements.

Since the establishment of the SBRCC the Environment and Biodiversity Working Group provides guidance for recovery under BRV's Environment and Biodiversity line of recovery.

The Environment and Biodiversity Working Group is chaired by DELWP with support from BRV. Membership includes representatives from BRV, DELWP, Parks Victoria, councils, CMAs, Traditional Owner groups (Gunaikurnai Land and Waters Aboriginal Corporation, Taungurung Land and Waters Council), Zoos Victoria, the Office of the Commissioner for Environmental Sustainability, and non-government organisations (Conservation Volunteers Australia, Greening Australia, Landcare Victoria).

## 17.2 Forest re-seeding

Large areas of Victoria's ash forests were burnt during the 2019–20 fire season and a significant proportion of the burnt ash forest was at risk of not regenerating.

The tree species that dominate the ash forests – Alpine Ash and Mountain Ash – are killed by bushfires and regenerate from seeds released by fire. However, large areas of ash forest in eastern Victoria have been burnt multiple times in recent decades so the trees have not grown to maturity to produce seeds. After the 2019–20 fire season, the areas of immature ash forest could not regenerate without immediate intervention to artificially re-seed them.

DELWP led a project to re-seed Victoria's burnt ash forests and had prepared a Forest Restoration Project plan by March 2020. Initially DELWP received \$3.33 million government funding for the project. In 2020 it received a further \$7.7 million through a BRV funding bid to the government to further support this work.<sup>85 90</sup>

Based on experiences in 2003, 2006–07 and 2009, DELWP produced a guideline document for forest recovery after the 2009 Victorian bushfires.<sup>165</sup> The guidelines identified that DELWP needed to ensure it had sufficient quantity of seed in storage for future use. Victoria Auditor-General's Office (VAGO) reviews in 2013 and 2018<sup>166 167</sup>, and a DELWP report in 2020 identified the need to store more seed for forest regeneration, and the department committed to jointly develop a strategic seed bank with VicForests.<sup>168</sup>

In 2019 DELWP began to implement changes to its seed management governance and practices but a joint seed bank with VicForests had not been established by the start of the 2019–20 fire season.<sup>169</sup>

After the 2019–20 fires, DELWP did not have enough stored seed to re-seed the total area of immature ash forest that was burnt.<sup>85</sup> DELWP also did not have sufficient capability and capacity to implement a rapid seed collection and sowing program, so it contracted that work to VicForests.<sup>170 171</sup> <sup>172</sup> VicForests undertook this work but progress was partially slowed due to issues with authorisations for collecting seed on land managed by Parks Victoria.<sup>173 171</sup>

Despite the rapid arrangement to collect seed to boost stocks, there was still insufficient seed to sow the total area of immature ash forest that was burnt. DELWP was compelled to prioritise which areas to re-seed so it collaborated with university-based scientists who had expertise in the required modelling.<sup>174 175 176</sup> This rapid collaboration was possible due to DELWP's pre-existing relationships with scientists through a partnership with The University of Melbourne and goodwill on the part of the scientists.<sup>177 178</sup>

Re-seeding of the ash forests was successfully completed during autumn and winter 2020 and DELWP began monitoring seed germination in spring.<sup>179 180 181 182</sup> By November 2020 administrative steps were underway to restock seed stores for the future, but additional seed collection had not yet commenced.<sup>183</sup>

IGEM notes that following the 2019–20 fires DELWP intended to progress its work towards developing a joint strategic approach with VicForests for seed management and forest restoration programs.<sup>171</sup> DELWP has also commissioned further research from university-based scientists that will help to optimise re-seeding of ash forests in the future.<sup>184 185</sup>

#### 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.

## 17.3 Waterways

Bushfires can cause long-term damage to waterways. Erosion of the burnt landscape following rainfall carries ash, soil, and debris into waterways, affecting water quality and killing aquatic animals and plants. Bushfires also damage fencing, erosion control structures and riparian vegetation. Weed spread and bank trampling by livestock can cause further damage to riparian habitats after fire.

DELWP is the lead agency for recovery of waterways and CMAs have responsibility as a support agency. Well-established governance arrangements exist between DELWP, CMAs and water corporations through the Victorian Waterway Management Strategy. The strategy provides a policy framework for waterway management including response to emergencies.<sup>186</sup> Non-government organisations, private landowners and local communities also contribute to waterway recovery through activities such as weed control and revegetation.

Responsibility for water quality monitoring is divided among state agencies and regional authorities including CMAs, water corporations and the EPA.<sup>187 188</sup> Victoria's business as usual water quality monitoring is managed through the Regional Water Monitoring Partnership, which has developed communication channels and centralised data management among the many agencies involved.<sup>187</sup>

Following the 2019–20 fires EPA and DELWP completed initial assessments of water quality throughout the fire-affected regions. In February 2020 the EPA drafted a plan in collaboration with other members of the Regional Water Monitoring Partnership to coordinate post-fire water quality monitoring.<sup>187</sup>

Water quality monitoring was delivered in a coordinated way but there was a lack of clarity in the roles and responsibilities of the organisations involved. Monitoring of waterways used for drinking water was given priority over ecologically significant waterways.<sup>188</sup> Relief drinking water is discussed in Chapter 8.

Intelligence gathered through DELWP's Rapid Risk Assessment Teams was used to inform waterway recovery planning. The Rapid Risk Assessment Team assessments of flooding and erosion risks relied upon modelling developed by university-based scientists.<sup>189 190</sup> While the modelling has improved waterway recovery planning, one limitation to its use has been that the scientists who developed the modelling are not necessarily available for troubleshooting during the deployment of Rapid Risk Assessment Teams.<sup>189</sup>

There are a range of post-fire actions that can mitigate bushfire impacts on waterways. Rapid intervention can reduce the ongoing resources required to restore and maintain waterway health.<sup>191</sup> The actions undertaken by CMAs and DELWP after the 2019–20 fires were largely an intensification of their routine waterway management actions.

North East CMA and East Gippsland CMA undertook initial urgent works at priority sites to stabilise banks, replace riparian fencing and control weeds.<sup>192 193</sup> IGEM was advised that CMAs consulted landowners to verify damage to waterway assets on their properties and plan works. The CMAs had pre-established relationships and communication channels with landowners through their non-emergency role.

Impacts on iconic fish species and threatened aquatic species also required immediate mitigation actions. DELWP's Arthur Rylah Institute initiated a project to extract or translocate Macquarie Perch and Murray Cod to safe locations until conditions were safe for re-release.<sup>194</sup>

The Arthur Rylah Institute is working with CMAs, the Victorian Fisheries Authority and university-based researchers to manage these fish population stocks and genetics as part of long-term recovery.<sup>195 196</sup> The Institute led the emergency extraction of threatened aquatic species through DELWP's BBRR program (see section 17.4.1, p 369).

IGEM heard that the Arthur Rylah Institute played an integrative role for projects with linkages between waterway and biodiversity recovery. Information sharing between DELWP's Waterways and Catchments division and Biodiversity division was also facilitated through biodiversity response planning workshops and meetings (see section 17.4.1, p 369).

Communities were provided with opportunities to engage in early waterway recovery.<sup>197</sup> East Gippsland CMA and Arthur Rylah Institute ran boat tours in some areas to inform locals about the fires' effects on water quality and aquatic wildlife. North East CMA involved Landcare groups and networks in delivery of early waterway recovery activities.<sup>198 199 200</sup>

Overall, planning and delivery of short-term waterway recovery activities following the 2019–20 fires was timely and coordinated. This was largely due to clear governance and communication between DELWP and the CMAs in conjunction with pre-established communication channels between CMAs and landowners. Although 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.

A key barrier to CMAs implementing immediate, time-critical works was the timing with which recovery funding became available, but that was overcome via an interim funding agreement with DELWP.<sup>201</sup>

Longer-term recovery of waterways is being funded by a \$6.5 million Building Works Stimulus Package from the government for the project 'Restoring waterways and catchments to support regional communities and local economies'. The project is being delivered by North East CMA and East Gippsland CMA and is due to be completed by 30 June 2022.<sup>202 203</sup> It aims to restore natural assets along waterways and involve local communities in on-ground works. The planned outputs are primarily riparian fencing, weed control, repair and installation of erosion control structures, and community engagement events.<sup>85</sup>

North East CMA and East Gippsland CMA began waterway recovery works in spring 2020 for the Restoring waterways and catchments project.<sup>198 197</sup> North East CMA met with landholders in the Upper Murray area where there was strong landowner desire to have a large-scale program to remove woody weeds and control grazing along waterways, but it was uncertain whether funding could be made available to support this.<sup>199 109</sup>

By the end of 2020, East Gippsland CMA noted that the project was becoming uncoordinated in its region due to the variety of stakeholders and complexity of on-ground works involved. The Regional Natural Environment Recovery Working Group worked to improve coordination across the project.<sup>197</sup>

It is unclear whether sufficient resources will be available to monitor the effectiveness of all on-ground works following the 2019–20 fires. Nonetheless, IGEM notes that DELWP and its collaborators already have routine waterway monitoring programs underway. In particular, the Riparian Intervention Monitoring Program established in 2014 has provided an evidence base for the effectiveness of certain on-ground interventions used to restore riparian land, thereby providing confidence in the recovery actions taken following the 2019–20 fires.<sup>204</sup>

#### 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.

## 17.4 Biodiversity

The 2019–20 fires burnt large areas of Victoria’s ecologically significant parks and reserves that are home to many rare and threatened species. The fires increased the likelihood of biodiversity decline in Victoria and put some species at risk of extinction.

Monitoring and aiding the recovery of species and ecological communities after the fires can help conserve biodiversity in the long term.

At the time of the 2019–20 fires there was no pre-existing plan for establishing an overarching program of work to protect biodiversity after a disaster, so there were no arrangements to guide coordination of the various stakeholders required. The key supporting framework that did exist was Protecting Victoria’s Environment – Biodiversity 2037 (the Biodiversity 2037 plan), which DELWP produced as a requirement of the *Flora and Fauna Guarantee Act 1988*. It aims to stop the overall decline of threatened species and improve the overall extent and condition of native habitats. Its two overarching goals are:

- Victorians value nature – Victorians understand that their personal wellbeing and the economic wellbeing of the state are dependent on the health of the natural environment
- Victoria’s natural environment is healthy – Victoria has functioning plant and animal populations, improved habitats, and resilient ecosystems, even under climate change.

Although the Biodiversity 2037 plan was not designed for emergency management, DELWP’s work towards delivering its targets produced outputs that were beneficial to recovery efforts following the 2019–20 fires. These included decision-support tools, assessments and plans for threatened species, and the VicEnvironments leadership forum.<sup>205</sup>

The VicEnvironments forum was established by DELWP in 2018 to facilitate coordination among government environment portfolio agencies in delivering the Biodiversity 2037 plan. The recurring meetings strengthened the relationships that then enabled rapid collaboration and coordination in response to the fires.

An intended action as part of the Biodiversity 2037 plan was to ‘...develop a Biodiversity Emergency Response Framework that enables rapid decision-making for biodiversity after major events such as bushfires or floods’. In 2018 this action commenced with the initiation of a literature review and stakeholder workshops. IGEM saw no evidence of further progress on the framework by the time of the 2019–20 fires.

The Victorian Government invested a large amount of funding in protecting biodiversity following the 2019–20 fires. That enabled DELWP to deliver biodiversity response and recovery actions on a scale that exceeded past events. In response to the 2019–20 fires, DELWP quickly used its internal biodiversity expertise and initiated extensive collaboration with external experts to plan a program of work aimed at protecting Victoria’s biodiversity. DELWP received \$17.5 million funding from the government that was used to develop the BBRR program. The program’s funding was later supplemented with a further \$5 million from the Victorian Government, \$3 million from the Australian Government, and \$29 million received through the 2021 Victorian Budget.<sup>206</sup>

Key collaborators in the BBRR program were DELWP’s Biodiversity Division – including its applied ecology research group, the Arthur Rylah Institute for Environmental Research – DELWP’s Forest Fire and Regions Group, Parks Victoria, Zoos Victoria, Royal Botanic Gardens Victoria, Traditional Owner groups, scientists, and environmental non-government organisations.

DELWP had pre-established working relationships with Zoos Victoria, Royal Botanic Gardens Victoria, and Traditional Owner groups through the Biodiversity 2037 plan and the VicEnvironments forum. More recently DELWP had begun strengthening connections with environmental non-government organisations through roundtable events to discuss their involvement in the Biodiversity 2037 plan.

DELWP has an ongoing partnership with scientists from the University of Melbourne that included biodiversity research, and it also had connections with biodiversity experts from other universities through various past and present project-based collaborations.

DELWP prepared a plan for the first phase of the BBRR program by April 2020. Phase 1 of the program was originally due to be delivered by December 2020 but was extended to June 2021, largely due to delays caused by the COVID-19 pandemic.<sup>90</sup>

Ultimately, many aspects of biodiversity recovery will dovetail into DELWP’s broader biodiversity management practices which are predominantly guided by the Biodiversity 2037 plan.

DELWP’s BBRR program delivers biodiversity recovery actions under the following themes:

- immediate reconnaissance
- emergency extraction
- threat management
- maximising long-term resilience
- knowledge and preparedness
- reading and healing Country
- nature-led community recovery.

#### 17.4.1 Reconnaissance, prioritisation, and short-term actions

DELWP responded rapidly to begin assessing the impacts of the fires on Victoria’s biodiversity and to plan response and recovery actions. The objective was to identify the plant and animal species and ecological communities (or habitats) that were most at risk and then prioritise both immediate and long-term protective actions. DELWP used a combination of desktop analysis, on-ground reconnaissance – including input from DELWP’s Rapid Risk Assessment Teams – and consultation with subject matter experts.

DELWP’s reconnaissance and prioritisation process was expedited by its pre-established biodiversity knowledge and data, along with its decision-support tools such as Strategic Management Prospects. It also quickly commenced consultation with external subject matter experts through Biodiversity Bushfire Response Workshops held on 10 January and 20 February 2020.

Stakeholders at the workshops included Parks Victoria, Zoo Victoria, Royal Botanic Gardens Victoria, scientists, non-government organisations, and Traditional Owner groups. These workshops were supplemented with smaller taxa-specific workshops to plan specific interventions as required.

The results of DELWP’s reconnaissance and the Biodiversity Bushfire Response Workshops were funnelled into the national-level prioritisation process being undertaken by the Wildlife and Threatened Species Bushfire Recovery Expert Panel. DELWP published a report *Victoria’s bushfire emergency: biodiversity response and recovery* to communicate the effects of the fires on biodiversity to a broad audience.<sup>207</sup>

IGEM heard that DELWP’s initial stakeholder engagement through the workshops was appropriate and successful overall, however it was reactive and unplanned. DELWP’s engagement of subject matter experts was considered by some to be somewhat restricted.<sup>208</sup> The stakeholders DELWP invited to the workshops were largely those that it had previously engaged with in a non-emergency context, and in some cases relied on informal relationships to initiate contact.

The main short-term actions delivered through the BBRR program were threat management and emergency extractions of threatened species. Threat management was an intensification of routine land management practices and its delivery was strategic, coordinated, and timely.

In the initial phase of the BBRR program DELWP invested a substantial proportion of program funding in controlling pest animals and weeds and achieved major outputs, particularly in reducing the population sizes of pest animals.<sup>209 90</sup> The additional \$5 million government investment into the BBRR program in mid-2020 was dedicated to managing pest animals and weeds.<sup>90</sup>

While the burnt forest provided ideal conditions DELWP utilised this window of opportunity to advance aerial shooting of feral species.<sup>210</sup> A taskforce was formed to undertake immediate post-fire aerial shooting – the Aerial Shooting Operations Team – which involved staff from DELWP, PV and the CFA. The Aerial Shooting Operations Team was embedded in local IMTs.<sup>211</sup>

DELWP and Parks Victoria, in collaboration with CMAs, non-government organisations and Traditional Owner groups, deliver ongoing threat management activities to support biodiversity recovery. The delivery of those activities is greatly assisted by the fact that they are well-practised and have established inter-agency governance arrangements. The threat management activities being delivered through the BBRR program will ultimately transition back to routine weed and pest animal control through DELWP's programs such as the Weeds and Pests on Public Land program.

Emergency extraction can safeguard species for which a key population is likely to be killed by fire. Following the fires, a total of 14 threatened animal species were extracted and kept in temporary housing until being returned to their habitat later in 2020. Extracted species include the Eastern Bristlebird and a variety of threatened freshwater fish, crustaceans and molluscs.<sup>183 85</sup> Iconic fish species were also extracted (see section 17.3, p 366). The extraction of those species was possible due to pre-established research and monitoring that DELWP and collaborators had undertaken for those species.



Release of extracted Eastern Bristlebirds (Source: © State of Victoria, DELWP)

DELWP, Parks Victoria, Zoos Victoria, university-based scientists, and non-government organisations collaborated to extract the Eastern Bristlebird ahead of the fire front. That rapid response was enabled by prior planning for Eastern Bristlebird translocations that had occurred as part of Biodiversity Response Planning under the Biodiversity 2037 plan.

Key relationships had already been established and procedures were in place. Nonetheless, the planning was not designed for an emergency response which meant additional planning was required and there was confusion about authorisations.<sup>212</sup>

Immediately after the fires DELWP's Arthur Rylah Institute led the extraction of freshwater aquatic species before post-fire waterway pollution damaged their habitat. The Institute had in-house experts on freshwater ecosystems, specialised holding facilities, and past experience in extracting aquatic species. Those capabilities enabled the successful extraction of threatened aquatic species.<sup>183 195 213</sup>

In contrast, opportunities for plant extractions ahead of the fire front were missed. DELWP had not established the foundational planning and collaborations before the fires that would have enabled rapid plant extractions akin to those achieved for the Eastern Bristlebird and threatened aquatic wildlife. There also tended to be greater focus on threatened animals than threatened plants during the workshops run by DELWP.<sup>214</sup>

Royal Botanic Gardens Victoria is leading post-fire plant extractions and seed banking in collaboration with DELWP and Parks Victoria.<sup>183</sup> In future, pre-emptive plant and seed collection before fires would be a more reliable way of reducing risk to threatened plant species compared to post-fire collection.

The emergency extractions following 2019–20 fires were laudable but largely opportunistic and primarily focussed on fauna. A key logistical constraint was getting authorisation to access the fireground due to safety protocols that prioritise protection of human life. Greater planning and strengthening collaborations with external stakeholders would improve DELWP's capability to undertake emergency extractions in the future.

#### 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.

### 17.4.2 Long-term recovery and future preparedness

DELWP is planning to deliver long-term recovery actions for biodiversity primarily through two themes in the BBRR program, maximising long-term resilience, and knowledge and preparedness. Planning under those themes is being aligned with the Biodiversity 2037 plan, which is currently the government's key framework for conserving biodiversity.<sup>85</sup>

Biodiversity recovery is a long-term process that necessarily addresses impacts and processes occurring on spatial and temporal scales that exceed the effects of the 2019–20 fires. The Biodiversity 2037 plan emphasises the need to improve knowledge and data. It also emphasises that biodiversity conservation needs to consider the effects of climate change and focus on how ecosystems and ecological processes can be managed for the benefit of all species – rather than focusing on threatened species one at a time.

Key actions planned by DELWP under the knowledge and preparedness theme are to continue progressing scientific knowledge acquisition and to improve data management systems. This will provide strategic guidance on DELWP's planned long-term recovery actions for threatened species such as translocations and managing population genetics. DELWP's other key planned long-term recovery action is to develop a 'safe haven' network of ecological refuges.<sup>85</sup> To deliver those long-term recovery actions DELWP intends to collaborate with Parks Victoria, Zoos Victoria, Royal Botanic Gardens Victoria, scientists and environmental non-government organisations.

The outcomes of the planned long-term recovery actions for biodiversity conservation will only become apparent in many years or decades. Monitoring biodiversity trends in the meantime will enable an adaptive management approach, generate new data and knowledge, and ultimately help assess whether the desired outcomes have been achieved.

DELWP intends to dovetail monitoring from the BBRR program with the Biodiversity 2037 Monitoring, Evaluation and Reporting Framework.<sup>85 215</sup> The framework emphasises the importance of investing in research and having systematic long-term monitoring of biodiversity trends. DELWP recognises that having sufficient resources and expertise to achieve this will require broad collaborations with scientists.

DELWP's mid-2020 review of the BBRR program identified that there was no defined approach to program-level monitoring.<sup>208</sup> DELWP commissioned research to inform the design of a post-fire monitoring program for threatened species. However, over a year after the fires IGEM did not see evidence that DELWP had begun implementing a systematic and sustained monitoring program. IGEM also notes that the intentions in the Biodiversity 2037 Monitoring, Evaluation and Reporting Framework had not been realised by DELWP at the time of the Biodiversity 2037 Implementation Framework Progress Report in 2018. At that time the Commissioner for Environmental Sustainability Victoria made the following recommendation:

---

*That DELWP streamline the governance and coordination of investment in the science and data capability of all government biodiversity programs and improve the coherence and impact of the publicly-funded, scientific endeavour. Further, that DELWP establish the position of the chief biodiversity scientist to oversee this coordinated effort and provide esteemed counsel to the DELWP Secretary and the Minister for Environment to improve the impact of investment in biodiversity research across the Victorian environment portfolio. That DELWP improve biodiversity outcomes on public land by streamlining and coordinating governance arrangements.*

*Commissioner for Environmental Sustainability Victoria*<sup>216, 217</sup>

---

In response to this recommendation, in 2019 DELWP established a Scientific Reference Panel to provide advice on integrating science into its activities.<sup>218</sup> IGEM did not see evidence that DELWP's Scientific Reference Panel was involved in the BBRR program. Furthermore, there were no arrangements to guide how non-government scientists would be engaged in the event of an emergency to contribute to biodiversity recovery, including monitoring and knowledge acquisition.

### 17.4.3 Reading and healing Country

Reading and healing Country activities were included in the BBRR program to support the recovery of Aboriginal Victorians. Reading and healing Country was allocated \$1.75 million of the initial \$17.5 million BBRR program funding to deliver on Country activities that contributed to cultural and biodiversity outcomes such as species surveying and monitoring, sharing knowledge and building Traditional Owner skills.

DELWP consulted with Traditional Owner groups during program planning and design and followed their preferences for leading or partnering in various activities.<sup>85</sup> The incorporation of reading and healing Country activities in the BBRR program was fully approved in July 2020.<sup>85 179</sup> Initial funding of up to \$100,000 per Traditional Owner group was made available in July 2020 once the model for funding distribution was decided through consultation with Traditional Owner groups.<sup>85 179</sup>

DELWP and PV had pre-existing engagement channels with Traditional Owner groups that enabled their early and meaningful consultation and collaboration. The principle of self-determination was followed which meant that Traditional Owners set their own pace for design and delivery of the activities, which was necessarily slow at times because it was a novel process that required collective decision-making. Nonetheless, the government's lack of pre-existing arrangements to enable reading and healing Country as part of bushfire recovery also contributed to the time lag for Traditional Owners to get out on Country.

The delivery of reading and healing Country activities commenced in July 2020 for some Traditional Owners groups in some regions, while it took longer for some groups to make their first trip on Country.<sup>90 179 181 219</sup>

Traditional Owner groups were also involved in other parts of the broader BBRR program. DELWP and PV partnered with Traditional Owner groups for threatened species monitoring and management of pest animals.<sup>220 221 90</sup>

IGEM heard positive feedback from Traditional Owners and the government about the reading and healing Country component of DELWP's BBRR program, which facilitated comparatively early recovery opportunities for Traditional Owners. Further discussion of Aboriginal culture and healing is in Chapter 20.

#### 17.4.4 Nature-led community recovery

Recovery of the natural environment is beneficial for the psychological recovery of fire-affected communities. One of the recovery priorities following the 2019–20 fires was to provide opportunities for community members to be involved in activities that contribute to recovery of biodiversity. That priority was aligned with one of the two goals in the Biodiversity 2037 plan: Victorians value nature.

Opportunities for community involvement are being provided through the nature-led community recovery theme in the BBRR program.

The program originally had six themes – a seventh theme on nature-led community recovery was added after suggestions from a roundtable with environmental non-government organisations run by DELWP on 16 April 2020.<sup>214</sup> Activities occurring under this theme will include local place-based activities as well as broader whole-of-Victoria community initiatives.<sup>85</sup> The activities will contribute to achieving the vision of the Biodiversity 2037 plan and align with DELWP's Victorians Volunteering for Nature – Environmental Volunteering Plan.<sup>222</sup>

The planned activities are primarily environmental volunteering, citizen science projects and facilitating storytelling about nature recovery. Key stakeholders in delivery will be DELWP (including the Arthur Rylah Institute), BRV, Zoos Victoria, Royal Botanic Gardens Victoria, non-government scientists, non-government organisations and volunteer groups. It is intended that communities are provided with access to scientific expertise to educate and involve them in the monitoring of environment and biodiversity recovery.<sup>85</sup>

Zoos Victoria contributed funding for delivering community engagement activities under the nature-led community recovery theme to supplement funding through the BBRR program. Progress on the nature-led recovery theme during 2020 included initial planning and forming connections with the Community Recovery Hubs established by BRV.<sup>182</sup> It is intended that work occurring under this theme will eventually be integrated with work done by CRCs.<sup>90</sup>

Various opportunities for Victorians to volunteer in environmental and citizen science projects are being promoted through the government's Protect Nature portal and the DELWP website.<sup>223 224</sup> Opportunities directly related to the 2019–20 fires include:

- Bushfire Recovery - community wildlife reporting. A citizen science project started by DELWP for community members to report observations of six key species in areas affected by the fires promoted through the Statewide Integrated Flora and Fauna Teams network.<sup>225</sup>
- Environment Recovery Project: Australian Bushfires. A citizen science project started by the Centre for Ecosystem Science at the University of New South Wales for community members to report observations of a broad range of species in areas affected by the 2019–20 fires across all states.<sup>226 227</sup>
- Bushfire Recovery Project Finder. Produced in partnership by Commonwealth Scientific and Industrial Research Organisation (CSIRO), the Australian Citizen Science Association, and the Atlas of Living Australia. A central point for community members to search for bushfire recovery citizen science projects in their area.<sup>228</sup>

As activities under the nature-led community recovery theme were still being established in late 2020, it was too early to determine their effectiveness for aiding environmental or psychological recovery in fire-affected communities. DELWP intends to undertake its own internal evaluation within the BBRR program to determine the impact of work under this theme on the Victorian community's recovery outcomes.<sup>85</sup>

IGEM heard from fire-affected communities that they were generally not ready to participate in biodiversity recovery projects in the short term, but some communities were motivated to be involved later on during their recovery. The exception was young people who were keen to have volunteering opportunities soon after the fires. The environmental recovery aspirations of communities are discussed further in section 17.9, p 378.

### 17.4.5 Summary of biodiversity recovery

DELWP's work to produce the BBRR program was praised within government as being visionary. The BBRR program has provided a framework that could be reused for biodiversity recovery after future emergencies. DELWP and its collaborators achieved commendable short-term recovery actions for biodiversity following the 2019–20 fires despite the identified areas for improvement.

There was ample goodwill among non-government stakeholders in contributing to the BBRR program. A key barrier to their involvement was a lack of formal arrangements to initiate and guide collaborations in an emergency management setting. Greater pre-planning and stakeholder engagement would help ensure DELWP engages the full breadth of expertise available for biodiversity recovery in the future. A barrier to the continued involvement of non-government stakeholders in long-term biodiversity recovery following the 2019–20 fires – or future fires – is uncertainty about if and how their involvement will be funded.

During the initial months following the 2019–20 fires DELWP was planning and designing the BBRR program, while simultaneously beginning to deliver immediate and short-term actions. DELWP's output reporting for the first phase of the BBRR program was inconsistent and many proposed timelines were delayed. Furthermore, IGEM did not see evidence that DELWP had developed a systematic way to monitor long-term outputs and outcomes of the BBRR program.

BRV and DELWP are working together to improve reporting and data capture as part of an extensive recovery reporting and monitoring system for all portfolios of recovery. Such a system requires the consideration of business as usual data and monitoring requirements of DELWP and other agencies, existing technology and platforms and data sharing requirements.<sup>90</sup>

One of BRV's intended recovery outcomes is that natural environments are healthy, resilient, and biodiverse. Achieving that will depend on what long-term actions and strategies DELWP prioritises for biodiversity conservation, which so far do not appear to be fully meeting the principles of the Biodiversity 2037 plan.

There are shortcomings in DELWP's approach to biodiversity monitoring and knowledge acquisition that need to be addressed to ensure the best possible long-term biodiversity outcomes – it needs to be more systematic, collaborative, and comprehensive.

DELWP's Biodiversity 2037 Monitoring, Evaluation and Reporting Framework identifies the need to invest in science to ensure an evidence-based and adaptive management approach is used. IGEM notes that realising that intention would improve biodiversity monitoring and recovery outcomes following the 2019–20 fires.

#### FINDING 17.5

The Department of Environment, Land, Water and Planning successfully established a biodiversity recovery program that was delivered rapidly and collaboratively.

## 17.5 Community grants

Various grants were made available to communities to facilitate their involvement in recovery of environment and biodiversity. The Biodiversity Bushfire Recovery Grants were a dedicated action for Environment and Biodiversity in the State Recovery Plan. However, there were also opportunities for communities to initiate environmental recovery projects through the LER program and funding distributed through philanthropic and community-based organisations.

IGEM heard that the community often found the grant application process difficult, poorly timed, and inequitable. In addition, the grant criteria were often not well-aligned with the aspirations and circumstances of communities (see section 17.9, p 378).

### **Biodiversity Bushfire Recovery Grants**

The Victorian Government provided \$900,000 funding for the Biodiversity Bushfire Recovery Grants to support environmental rehabilitation projects on both private and public land in three CMAs: North East, East Gippsland, and Glenelg Hopkins. These grants were the primary way in which biodiversity recovery was supported on private land.

The grants were available to environmental volunteer groups and networks, and private landowners who had a Trust for Nature covenant or had been recipients of previous government biodiversity investment in conservation projects on their land. Eligible projects could involve biodiversity on-ground works or community capacity building activities including community education.

Grant applications submitted through the three CMAs closed on 20 July 2020. A total of 52 projects were approved and are required to be completed by 31 December 2021. The approved projects comprised 30 private landowners, 14 environmental volunteer groups and 8 Landcare networks.<sup>229</sup> Grants to groups and networks were distributed among the three CMAs with most in East Gippsland (13) followed by North East (7) then Glenelg Hopkins CMA (2).

### **Local Economic Recovery Grants**

The LER program (see section 18.5.2, p 393) funded a small number of projects that simultaneously boosted the local economy while contributing to Victorians' appreciation of the natural environment. These were predominantly through investment in visitor infrastructure for walks and hot springs. In addition, one of the funded projects will provide training for young Aboriginal Victorians in East Gippsland to prepare them for a career in natural resource management.<sup>230</sup>

## 17.6 Park assets and visitor infrastructure

Visiting Victoria's parks and forests for recreational activities is an important way that people can enjoy nature. It also contributes to psychosocial and economic recovery. Accordingly, BRV's outcomes for recovery of the natural environment included that it has amenity and is accessible.

There was extensive damage to park assets and infrastructure that needed to be repaired or replaced before people could visit. The areas burnt included two major tourist destinations: Cape Conran Coastal Park and Buchan Caves Reserve.

The reopening of parks for tourism was made a priority by the Environment and Biodiversity Working Group. The Victorian Government provided \$14 million funding for reinstatement of visitor assets and infrastructure in parks and an additional \$7.15 million specifically for works at Cape Conran Coastal Park.<sup>85</sup>

PV and DELWP are leading the reinstatement of assets and infrastructure in parks. The government committed to upgrading the accommodation and other visitor facilities at Cape Conran Coastal Park and the Buchan Caves Reserve.<sup>112</sup> PV also planned for betterment of facilities at some other damaged sites such as Cudgewa Bluff Falls.<sup>200 231</sup>

Reinstatement of park assets and infrastructure was reliant on having safe access to the sites, which meant it could not commence until roads were repaired and clean-up activities were completed, including site decontamination and hazardous tree removal.<sup>232</sup> Once safe access was established and impact assessments were complete, PV could initiate repairs and rebuilding. Some activities were delayed due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

Impact assessments in parks occurred gradually throughout 2020's remaining summer and into autumn. The ADF assisted IMTs and PV with clean-up and engineering, which expedited works in some parks such as reinstatement of bridges at the Buchan Caves Reserve.<sup>233 234 235</sup>

PV and DELWP commenced works to repair and rebuild park assets and infrastructure in the timeliest way possible. Some park areas were open to public before winter 2020.<sup>85</sup> By the end of 2020 many sites had been opened to the public but there were also sites that remained closed for ongoing works.<sup>183 236</sup> At Cape Conran Coastal Park and Buchan Caves Reserve some campgrounds opened by the September 2020 school holidays and other areas of the parks were progressively opened in time for the December 2020 holidays.<sup>183</sup>

PV ran online information sessions in August 2020 for Mallacoota, Cann River, Orbost, Buchan and surrounding areas to provide an update on recovery works and an opportunity for community members to ask questions.<sup>237 238</sup> PV also consulted the broader Victorian community through the Engage Victoria platform to hear their views about the rebuilding of the activity centre and accommodation at Banksia Bluff in Cape Conran Coastal Park.<sup>239 240</sup>

Some fire-affected communities believed the government's prioritisation of works to be lacking transparency. Some were upset that there was substantial investment and progress towards reopening major tourist destinations while smaller nature-based tourism sites in their locality were still inaccessible.

IGEM notes that the natural spaces that fire-affected communities wanted to regain access to quickly for their wellbeing were not necessarily managed by PV and could include other areas of public land (see section 17.9, p 378). It is unclear how the priorities of fire-affected communities were considered in the government's planning for reopening of parks and forest.

#### 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.

## 17.7 Firewood

Domestic firewood collection from state forests and parks is managed by FFMVic. Each year Victorians can collect firewood from designated collection areas that are opened for a set time in spring and autumn. The designated firewood collection areas are in parts of forest that avoid unnecessary damage to natural and cultural values and can include utilisation of by-products from other forest activities such as timber harvesting.

The 2019–20 fires burnt parts of forest that would have otherwise been used as firewood collection areas.<sup>179 241</sup> That limited the availability of firewood to the community in some fire-affected areas where it is an important source of home heating during winter. One of BRV's recovery priorities

following the 2019–20 fires was to ensure firewood was made available to the communities, and DELWP was designated as the lead agency.

In autumn 2020 DELWP opened a selection of the usual firewood collection areas that had not been burnt and could be safely accessed by the community.<sup>179 242, 243 219</sup> DELWP also planned to ensure there would be firewood collection areas opened in spring 2020.<sup>179 180</sup>

To supplement the amount of firewood made available to the community in autumn 2020, DELWP worked with councils in fire-affected areas to set up sites where salvaged wood from hazardous tree removal on roadsides could be safely accessed.<sup>241 179 242</sup> This was the first time that such an arrangement had been made after bushfires. It was a priority in the Upper Murray area where availability of firewood collection areas was particularly restricted after the fires.<sup>241</sup>

Further release of salvaged wood was made available to fire-affected communities from spring 2020 onwards through an agreement made in August 2020 between DELWP and VicForests.<sup>85</sup> The agreement was for VicForests to remove any usable timber left from hazardous tree works near roads and powerlines at specified sites and to make some of that timber available to community.

There were clear governance and arrangements for DELWP's planning and opening of the usual firewood collection areas following the 2019–20 fires, leading to timely opening of available areas in autumn 2020. In contrast there was a lack pre-planning, including by DELWP and councils, for making salvaged wood available to the community.

IGEM saw evidence suggesting that there were no well-established processes among agencies to manage the end-uses of salvaged wood from hazardous tree works. See section 16.5.6, p 361 for further discussion about roadside vegetation.

IGEM did not hear any concerns from the community about availability of firewood during conduct of the Inquiry.

The Office of the Conservation Regulator reported that there was a spike in illegal removal of domestic firewood following the 2019–20 fires, particularly by commercial operators.<sup>244 245 85</sup> Illegal removal of firewood can damage wildlife habitat that is critical to maintaining biodiversity. In response the Office of the Conservation Regulator worked with PV to curb illegal firewood collection following the fires.<sup>85</sup>

#### 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.

## 17.8 Regional Forest Agreements

Regional Forest Agreements are agreements between the state and Australian governments that provide a framework for sustainable management of forests with consideration of cultural, social, recreational, environmental, and economic benefits. There are five Regional Forest Agreements in Victoria.

The Regional Forest Agreements allow for the initiation of a Major Event Review to assess the impacts of major events, such as significant natural disturbance events like bushfires on Victoria's forests. One of the recovery priorities following 2019–20 fires was to conduct a Major Event Review of the Regional Forest Agreements. This is the first time that a Major Event Review is being performed and DELWP is responsible for delivering the project by October 2021.

The scoping agreement between the Victorian and Australian governments was finalised on 5 November 2020.<sup>246</sup> The Victorian Commissioner for Environmental Sustainability, an independent reviewer and a Traditional Owner member will form a panel to oversee the review and there will be opportunities for Traditional Owners, key stakeholders and members of the community to contribute to the review.

Many fire-affected community members expressed concerns about post-fire logging in forests. IGEM notes that the Major Event Review of the Regional Forest Agreements provided an opportunity for the Victorian community's views about logging to be considered in future forest management.

## 17.9 Community feedback

There was widespread concern about the environment following the 2019–20 fires, not only among fire-affected communities but also the broader Australian and international community.

During the Inquiry IGEM heard from many Victorians that they are concerned about how the state's fuel management practises and climate change are affecting bushfire risk. Many people were concerned about how changes in fire frequency and severity might damage the environment and contribute to biodiversity decline.

Victoria's fuel management is discussed in the Phase 1 Inquiry Report and the government's approach to mitigating climate change is beyond the scope of the Inquiry. IGEM notes that DELWP is committed to using climate change adaptation strategies to help conserve biodiversity as per its Biodiversity 2037 plan.

Among fire-affected communities, those that were less severely affected tended to have comparatively more attention on environmental recovery issues and were more likely to have the capacity to progress their own local initiatives. That was seemingly because they were less burdened by more urgent recovery needs such as re-establishing their home or livelihood. Similarly, young people tended to be more ready and eager than adults to participate in environmental recovery initiatives.

IGEM heard from fire-affected communities that the most common immediate concerns regarding recovery of the natural environment were erosion, waterway health, regaining access to local natural spaces, and revegetation. Multiple communities also aspired to increase ecotourism to promote the local environment while simultaneously benefiting the local economy.

Young people wanted more environmental volunteering opportunities, and many wanted to be involved in developing ecotourism in their area. The Activators Program, sponsored by the Royal Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals (RSPCA) Victoria, provided young people with opportunities to use their ideas to deliver projects with an animal welfare or environmental focus. The program was well-received by the participants.

The community was concerned about the severe erosion in burnt forests after rainfall, especially in the North East region. The community was generally accepting of the fact that erosion was unavoidable after such extensive and severe fires, but also wanted to see the government take action to manage its negative impacts on waterways, roads, and private land.

The community was generally aware that CMAs have a role in mitigating the effects of erosion on waterways but were unsure what it could expect and who was responsible for other aspects of erosion management and damage repair on public and private land.

In the Nariel Valley, the CRC plans to contact North East CMA to discuss waterway recovery priorities and to be involved in restocking the rivers for recreational fishing. This was a good sign that that the *'Restoring waterways and catchments to support regional communities and local economies'* project is being promoted to communities.

A priority for many fire-affected communities was regaining access to local natural spaces for recreation activities to help improve their wellbeing. Multiple communities reported wanting their local trails for walking, and bike or horse riding to be restored. Many also wanted to see new trails established not only for the benefit of locals but also to encourage greater tourism. A few communities were able to access funding through the LER program for ecotourism projects, but not all.



Tambo River (Source: IGEM)

Community members in some areas were disappointed about how long it took to regain access to public land, and some were dissatisfied with the treatment of hazardous trees, fire breaks and control lines. IGEM observes that the government could improve its public communication about emergency stabilisation to better manage community expectations about rehabilitation and reopening of public land after bushfires.

Revegetation and weed control was a priority in many communities.<sup>247</sup> Weed control is a cross-tenure issue and landowners, particularly farmers wanted more targeted government support for it following the fires. Lack of clarity about and access to government support for recovery of private bush blocks was also an issue. IGEM saw multiple examples of communities engaging with Landcare groups for environmental restoration projects. There were barriers to communities accessing government community grants; they found the process of applying for community grants onerous or that the criteria were not aligned with their aspirations or circumstances.

Contributing to biodiversity recovery activities was generally a long-term rather than short-term priority for fire-affected communities, even those who were passionate about environmental conservation. This was exemplified by the Clifton Creek CRC, which identified recovery of local biodiversity as one of their community's priorities but recognised that first, in the short term, they simply needed a chance to engage with nature for their wellbeing.

The nature-led community recovery project that DELWP will deliver from 2021 onwards under the Biodiversity Response and Recovery Program may be better timed and aligned with the aspirations of communities compared to the Biodiversity Bushfire Recovery Grants.

Some communities expressed an interest in collaborating with scientists and Traditional Owners in the future to learn about biodiversity recovery and monitoring projects. Although that is one of the objectives of DELWP's nature-led community recovery project, IGEM did not see evidence that communities were aware of that opportunity yet.

Overall, there was a disconnect between the government's environmental recovery programs and the priorities of fire-affected communities. An exception was waterway restoration where the CMAs' recovery program was largely addressing the needs of communities. The community was generally uncertain of their options for addressing cross-tenure environmental recovery issues such as erosion and weeds.

Ensuring the community has access to nature for their wellbeing is an important precursor to their capacity to be involved in biodiversity recovery initiatives.

## 17.10 Summary of environment and biodiversity

Achieving an outcome of healthy, resilient, and biodiverse natural environments is necessarily a long-term process. Accordingly, DELWP is integrating many of its post-fire recovery actions for the natural environment with its ongoing policies and programs of work, such as the Victorian Waterway Management Strategy, Biodiversity 2037 plan, and Weeds and Pests on Public Land program. The 2019–20 fires have also accelerated DELWP's efforts to progress its seed management program for post-fire re-seeding of ash forests, which is intended to become an ongoing program of work.

Monitoring is crucial to determine whether the desired outcomes for natural environment are achieved and will also provide knowledge and data to improve preparedness for responding to future emergencies. IGEM saw evidence that DELWP has systems or projects in place to monitor recovery outcomes at least partially for waterways, regeneration of ash forests, and survival of the threatened species that were extracted then re-released. Recovery outcomes for biodiversity are intended to be monitored through DELWP's Biodiversity 2037 Monitoring, Evaluation and Reporting Framework, but it is unclear how that will be implemented or how comprehensive it will be.

Recovery of the natural environment involves many stakeholders both within and external to government. DELWP, PV and CMAs are established participants in emergency management. IGEM saw evidence that these agencies collaborated effectively to deliver recovery projects for waterway restoration, control pest animals and weeds, and reinstate park assets and infrastructure.

Stakeholders that were not well-integrated in the arrangements existing prior to the 2019–20 fires included Zoos Victoria, Royal Botanic Gardens Victoria, researchers, and environmental non-government organisations. DELWP's collaboration and communication with those organisations was comparatively less coordinated.

IGEM heard there is scope and willingness to strengthen the role of Zoos Victoria and Royal Botanic Gardens Victoria in emergency management arrangements by building on DELWP's existing collaboration with those organisations through the Biodiversity 2037 plan. Similarly, DELWP has been progressing its collaborations with environmental non-government organisations through a series of roundtable events. In contrast, IGEM did not see evidence to demonstrate how DELWP plans to strengthen and streamline its collaborations with external scientists.

Scientists provided crucial expertise for various aspects of recovery of the natural environment following the 2019–20 fires. Long-term biodiversity recovery will require DELWP to collaborate with scientists for knowledge acquisition and to deliver evidence-based actions as per the principles set out in both state and national biodiversity policies. The knowledge and data gained through business as usual investment in research and monitoring will be crucial to DELWP's preparedness for recovery of the natural environment after future emergencies.

One of the roles of the State Environment and Biodiversity Working Group was to increase understanding of unique and vulnerable ecosystems before events and develop processes to mitigate those risks in future bushfires. Non-government scientists were not represented in the working group's membership, and IGEM did not see evidence to demonstrate how the working group was advancing that task.

A common theme across many areas of natural environment recovery was that recovery funding arrangements were a barrier to achieving desired outcomes. In some cases, funding was not available early enough to support critical immediate interventions, while in other cases the uncertainty about long-term funding was an issue. Funding is discussed further in section 17.4, p 368 and Chapter 5.

Many communities had local natural areas of high value to them that they wanted reopened and restored as soon as possible. However, those areas were not necessarily priorities in the government's recovery program and did not fit the criteria for community grants. This reflected a lack of community consultation during planning to determine which aspects of natural environments were most important to the recovery and wellbeing of fire-affected communities in the short term.

The longer-term aspirations of fire-affected communities to be involved in recovery of environment and biodiversity could potentially be met through the nature-led community recovery program and the waterways recovery program.

#### 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



Our environment  
slowly recovering.  
For your \$ our planet.  
Please follow Warrin  
Buy Local. Stay  
MADRA Sept

The impacts of the 2019–20 Victorian fire season will continue to be felt in regional and local economies and businesses for some time. The significant economic challenges resulting from the fires were compounded by the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic throughout 2020–21, on top of pre-existing drought conditions in much of East Gippsland, regional industrial decline, and economic transition. This chapter discusses the economic recovery plans and activities applicable to local and regional economies and employment, small businesses generally, and the tourism industry specifically.

The Alpine, East Gippsland and Towong Shire Councils endured extensive direct fire impacts. There were broad directions during the fires asking people to leave large parts of the North East and East Gippsland, which were emphasised and expanded with the State of Disaster declaration. Many tourists were forced to leave the area or were unable to visit at all due to the prolonged threat of fire and significant road closures. This all occurred over the summer period, traditionally one of the busiest times of the year, and caused significant economic impacts across councils both directly and indirectly impacted by fire.

The fires and their immediate aftermath restricted travel and business as usual activities throughout the 2019–20 summer. Public health restrictions associated with the COVID-19 pandemic then prevented extensive business, tourism and personal travel in regional Victoria throughout 2020.

Shorter intensive Victorian lockdowns due to the COVID-19 pandemic occurred over the New Year period 2020–21 and again in February 2021. These restrictions also had significant impacts on global trade markets, international tourism, and typical business operations.

Following the 2019–20 fires BRV and DJPR worked with the Boston Consulting Group to develop a report detailing the estimated economic impact sustained by Victoria. The report showed the three fire-impacted councils experienced an estimated decline of 13–23 per cent in gross value added (GVA) in the first quarter of 2020, while GVA in the adjacent councils (Indigo, Mansfield, Wangaratta, Wellington and Wodonga) fell between three to seven per cent in the same period. In total, the three directly fire-affected areas sustained an estimated loss of \$110–\$195 million, while the adjacent councils were estimated to have lost \$75–\$170 million in GVA.

It was estimated that of all the directly and indirectly affected councils, East Gippsland experienced the greatest impact on tourism, with a total financial loss of \$35–\$45 million in the first quarter of 2020. Alpine followed with an estimated loss to its tourism of \$25–\$35 million GVA.

East Gippsland also suffered the greatest loss in retail trade across all eight directly and indirectly affected councils, with an estimated loss of \$3–\$9 million GVA. For the three directly impacted councils, it is estimated that between 1450 and 1770 jobs were put at risk.

## 18.1 Business and economy

### 18.1.1 Arrangements in place prior to fire season

The government and the emergency management sector support local economies to recover through economic and business programs and activities based on roles and responsibilities outlined in the SERRP and SEMP.

The SERRP outlines several broad recovery outcomes that are relevant to the functional areas of economic recovery. In the business functional area, the objective is to provide information, advice, and support to businesses to facilitate good decision-making and assist their recovery. The SEMP in relation to small business also includes agency roles and responsibilities for assessing and identifying business and economic needs and assisting impacted businesses to access information and advice to support decision-making and encourage a return to business.

Under the EMMV and SEMP, economic recovery is divided into local economies and businesses. DJPR is the lead agency responsible for both functional areas, supported by councils.

DJPR is accountable for coordinating strategic information sharing, facilitating, and delivering collaborative activities before, during and after events. The coordination for these areas is primarily conducted by Regional Development Victoria, Small Business Victoria and Tourism, Events and Visitor Economy (TEVE).<sup>248</sup>

### 18.1.2 Local economies

The local economies functional area of economic recovery aims to mitigate the impacts of emergencies on economic activity in affected communities. DJPR works with councils to plan and implement approved actions and projects to assist economic recovery and encourage the resumption of local trade.

Such actions and projects include:

- tourism visitation when safe to do so
- use of local business in recovery activities
- ‘buy-local’ initiatives
- events that attract visitors
- other relevant activities.

Under this functional area, DJPR is required to monitor the broad economic impacts and consequences and share the results across government to inform responses. In doing so, DJPR works with agencies, organisations and councils providing economic and business recovery support.

### 18.1.3 Businesses

DJPR is the lead coordinating agency for most activities in the businesses functional area, with EMV responsible for administering financial assistance under the DRFA. DJPR provides information, advice and support to facilitate decision-making and assist in the community’s economic recovery following an emergency. Its activities include assisting businesses in accessing available information and advice from sources such as the Australian Tax Office, Australian Securities and Investment Commission, Centrelink, other Victorian Government departments and financial institutions.

DJPR is required to provide information and advice to small businesses to support better decision-making in business recovery. This includes assisting in accessing support services such as mentoring and business counselling, support through the SBV and connecting business owners with other related services.

DJPR is also required to provide small businesses with opportunities to enhance knowledge and skills by supporting workshops and training delivery. The particular focus of the workshops and training is on resilience building and business continuity.

Furthermore, as with the local economies functional area, DJPR is responsible for working with the council to develop and implement necessary actions and initiatives supporting business recovery.

At the regional level, there are economic recovery working groups that report to the incident-specific recovery committees. The committees provide strategic oversight and leadership in supporting the region and sub-region coordination and planning of economic recovery activities. The committees have a focus on providing support that is also community-led.<sup>249</sup>

Councils also have a role in economic recovery planning for local economies and businesses. Planning is carried out in partnership with local organisations and recovery agencies including small businesses. If required, DJPR can lead and coordinate government assistance to councils at a regional and state level.<sup>117</sup>

Municipal economic recovery arrangements are documented in MEMPs. These arrangements are identified in the SERRP, which outlines the developmental process for recovery assistance for individuals and communities. These arrangements are currently set out in the SEMP. More specifically, there is a section dedicated to providing considerations for the economic environment. The MEMPs of the three affected councils vary in the level of detail specified for economic recovery arrangements.

### 18.1.4 Arrangements in place during and after the fire season

There was extensive economic recovery planning following the establishment of NBRA and BRV in January 2020. The establishment of BRV and publication of the State Recovery Plan in August 2020 resulted in the formulation of key economic recovery outcomes and objectives and the implementation of arrangements to achieve these.

NBRA led and coordinated the national response to rebuilding communities affected by the 2019–20 bushfires. The agency is responsible for administering up to \$2 billion across Australia to fund services and support national recovery. Of this, \$448.5 million is allocated to economic recovery through the LER Program and Complementary Projects Fund.<sup>250</sup> NBRA allocated \$34.3 million of the \$448.5 million to supporting Victoria’s economic recovery efforts. The Victorian Government also provided \$34.3 million towards the LER Program. NBRA oversees the LER Program in partnership with states, territories, and councils.

Working in collaboration with all levels of government, industry experts, business and charity sectors, NBRA seeks to address three immediate economic recovery-related priorities: to provide additional support for small business; to attract tourists back to regions; and to enable infrastructure projects to support economic, community and industry recovery and resilience.<sup>251</sup>

The Business and Economy Working Group (BEWG) chaired by DJPR, is one of the state recovery working groups established by the SBRCC. The BEWG is chaired by the Rural and Regional Victoria Deputy Secretary and consists of other senior executive members, including deputy secretaries from AgVic, Jobs, Innovation and Business Engagement, DTF and the Executive Director of BRV’s Recovery Programs.<sup>40</sup>

The BEWG provides input and leadership into BRV’s State Recovery Framework, State Recovery Plan – and other business and economy action plans – and approval for regional economic plans. This planning supports regional-level governance, councils, and CRCs. The BEWG also provides leadership in addressing cross-portfolio issues or otherwise escalating issues for resolution to the SBRCC.<sup>40</sup>

Under its terms of reference, the BEWG is supported by the time-limited Business and Economic Team. The Business and Economic Team’s primary role is developing key documents such as the business and economy action plan and regional economic recovery plans. It also takes responsibility for leading the substantive work across government departments. Through leading this work, the Business and Economic Team enables BEWG to increase focus on decision-making and providing oversight for economic recovery.

In talking with various stakeholders, IGEM heard that the BEWG has been effective in cross-portfolio coordination. The Business and Economic Team has also effectively dealt with a range of complex tactical issues in supporting the BEWG. Stakeholders noted that BEWG members were already working with each other before the 2019–20 fire season. The existing relationships facilitated effective working relationships and collaboration during and after the 2019–20 bushfires.

There are also further economic recovery sub-committees independent of the BEWG. For example, the Economic Recovery Working Group is a sub-committee that reports to the East Gippsland Recovery Committee, chaired by Council and BRV.

The sub-committee developed and monitored a sub-plan with a response proportionate to the impact sustained. The sub-committee was also required to make recommendations to the East Gippsland Economic Recovery Committee.<sup>112</sup> Information relevant to the state is channelled through the committee at the BEWG meetings.

## 18.2 Economic recovery objectives

The State Recovery Plan outlines the recovery challenges, actions and priorities defined for the business and economy line of recovery over the first 12–18 months. The Recovery Plan’s priorities address the issues and challenges concerning regional businesses and primary producers having to resume operation and recovery without ongoing financial support.

BRV’s priorities also focus on helping regional businesses gain confidence in investing, growing and better preparing themselves for future emergencies and economic challenges.<sup>112</sup>

In terms of economic recovery, BRV’s short to medium-term priorities focus on returning visitor numbers and tourism expenditure to levels equivalent to, or better than, before the fires. BRV also aims to reduce unemployment rates and increase workforce participation to levels consistent with other Victorian regional areas.

A BRV priority is the quick identification and support for declining sectors. There is also an emphasis on developing plans and strategies to make regional economies stronger and more resilient to future emergencies.

BRV’s priorities aim to help strengthen the local business community and networks to become more connected, organised and collaborative.<sup>112</sup>

The long-term economic recovery outcomes aim to ensure that:

- industries and businesses recover and are stronger
- employment opportunities are accessible
- local businesses and communities are resilient.<sup>112</sup>

Each priority outlined in the State Recovery Plan has challenges and actions identified. The challenges include associated time periods for resolution.

As the lead agency for the recovery of business and economy, DJPR’s work has links to the broader business and economy initiatives led by other departments and BRV. It identified similar outcomes to BRV in its initial recovery plans.

DJPR intends to support a community-driven approach to empower communities in economic recovery and support community engagement. This is achieved through delivery of the Economic Recovery Practice Framework endorsed by the SCRC as a whole of government approach. The key elements of the framework include industry and business, employment, community resilience and enabling infrastructure (i.e. strategic economy-wide investments and supports to underpin recovery and development).

The Regional Business and Economy Recovery Plans (RBERPs), developed for both Hume and Gippsland emergency recovery outcomes and objectives align with BRV’s recovery framework.

The long-term outcomes aim to ensure that industries and businesses recover from the emergency and become stronger. For example, a key outcome is to ensure that there are employment opportunities in the future, and these are accessible to all community members. Another key business and economy-related outcome is for local businesses and business communities to be more resilient to future emergencies.<sup>252</sup>

The RBERPs emphasises working closely with local communities, industry, and different tiers of government to ensure that local strengths, knowledge, and resources are heard and leveraged to achieve a community-led approach. Both the Hume and Gippsland RBERPs noted that BRV will be working closely with the community and the councils to establish CRCs to support community-led recovery efforts.<sup>252</sup>

### 18.2.1 Council outcomes

East Gippsland's economic recovery outcomes are outlined in its 2019—20 Economic Recovery Sub-plan. According to the sub-plan, the short-term economic recovery goals are to revitalise rural communities' economies, attract customers back into local communities, and reduce the immediate and ongoing impacts to the community's restoration and rebuilding. The medium and longer-term outcomes of the sub-plans are divided by two themes, business and local economies.

Under the business theme, the sub-plan aims to have local businesses and primary producers resume normal operations and performance, remain sustainable without the need for financial assistance or support, be confident to invest and grow and be prepared for future emergencies.<sup>249</sup>

In terms of local economies, although not specifically mentioned, the sub-plan has similar medium to long-term outcomes articulated by BRV. For example, there is a strong emphasis on recovering local visitor numbers and tourism expenditure, for local industries to be competitive, for industries to attract local talent and for declining sectors to be identified and supported. Similarly, the sub-plan aims to restore unemployment numbers to the levels before the fires and support upskilling and reskilling. Finally, in line with BRV, the sub-plan's goal is to ensure that the local economies are resilient and can withstand future emergencies.<sup>249</sup>

Under the Towong Economic Recovery Action Plan, seven individual goals are outlined, each with its own objectives and nominal actions. Although there is no mention of its alignment with the BRV outcomes, the goals are very similar. For example, the plan aims to have businesses work collaboratively with councils, other industries, and different tiers of government in their recovery efforts.

The plan also aims to inform the public that the region is a great place to establish a business and have the necessary services to thrive and attract local residents. Like the BRV outcomes, one of Towong's outcomes is attracting visitors and returning visitor expenditure to what was before the fires. Towong also aims to support local industries to rebuild and become sustainable and resilient.<sup>253</sup>

While there is no Alpine Shire Council business and economic recovery plan, the general outcomes and objectives for recovery in its MEMP, are defined in the EM Act 2013 as '*...the assisting of persons and communities affected by emergencies to achieve a proper and effective level of functioning*'. Furthermore, in dealing with economic impacts, the Alpine Shire Council also follows the recovery objectives under the SERRP.<sup>51</sup>

Under their MEMP, the Alpine Shire Council is responsible for developing and delivering a range of activities to assist in the economic recovery of local businesses. The activities are also aimed at reducing reputational damage to the industries and geographical areas.

The Alpine Shire Council is focussed on returning visitors and visitor expenditure to normal operational levels, while also increasing investor and consumer confidence. Although there is no official business and economic recovery plan, some of the Alpine Shire Council activities align with the BRV outcomes identified early in this section.<sup>51</sup>

Following the analysis of all the different plans and associated goals and outcomes, IGEM concludes there is a close alignment between the state and regional business and economic recovery plans. However, there is some variability across council economic recovery plans. Although the council plans do not expressly mention BRV's goals, many of the councils' economic recovery actions are aligned with BRV and ultimately aim to achieve consistent outcomes.

## 18.3 Business and investment attraction and retention

The federal and state governments both 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 opportunities to support and coordinate business and economic recovery.

The NBRA held stakeholder forums to consult with communities to understand their needs. The forums support a greater level of coordination across governments, businesses, and not-for-profit organisations to harmonise recovery and rebuilding activities.<sup>251</sup>

These forums included the Peak Bodies Bushfire Recovery Forum, State/Federal Coordinators Bushfire Recovery Forum, National Charities Bushfire Recovery Forum, and the State/Federal Local Government Areas Bushfire Recovery Forum. Business and economic recovery were also topics throughout the community-based recovery discussions held across Victoria's fire-affected regions between January and March 2020.

The Peak Bodies Bushfire Recovery Forum aimed to connect advocacy groups, trade associations, and industry groups to better coordinate recovery efforts and to build stronger consultation and collaboration with key stakeholders and impacted communities. This forum's participants included business representatives, health services, Aboriginal groups, and representatives across environmental, agriculture, infrastructure, housing, and transport portfolios.

On 14 January 2020 the Prime Minister and federal Treasurer invited more than 70 local and national representatives to attend a small business roundtable for bushfire recovery in Canberra. The participants consisted of small business groups from fire-affected areas who discussed their economic and cash flow concerns in person or by dialling into the roundtable.

A similar roundtable was held on 16 January 2020 to focus on the tourism industry. The Council of Small Business Organisations Australia roundtable recommended that post-disaster regional/rural promotion assistance – with a particular focus on the tourism industry – be provided in an ongoing manner.

In Victoria, the August MSAC meeting focused on the development of economic recovery planning, small business outreach program, and planning to boost tourism and regional economies in fire-affected areas following the relaxing of public health restrictions in response to the COVID-19 pandemic.

## 18.4 Employment

During and after major emergencies, not only are businesses left without cash flow and unable to operate but jobs are often lost or put at risk. Moreover, unpaid job entitlements to employees may result in greater debt for business owners and further economic impacts in the future.

The COVID-19 pandemic compounded employment difficulties for some individuals in fire-affected areas as travel and social distancing restrictions limited job opportunities. These restrictions also meant that several events created to stimulate economic activity following the fires were postponed or cancelled, increasing unemployment, financial insecurity, and health and wellbeing risks.

Financial counsellors and advisors were critical in assisting small business owners and their workers seeking financial assistance. This assistance ranged from guidance in seeking the right organisations to apply for grants, support with filling out funding applications and facilitating access to training to upskill for other employment opportunities.

It was noted by various government stakeholders and business community members that business owners often required an accountant's assistance in applying for various forms of economic and financial assistance due to the difficult application process. Many business owners were not aware of the support available or were ineligible to apply.<sup>254</sup>

Table 8 shows some of the support programs to help the business community improve their skills.

**Table 8.** Existing/previous initiatives that support the business community in upskilling. (Source: BRV<sup>210</sup>)

SKILLS SUPPORT	DESCRIPTION
<b>Businesses</b>	
Upskill my business	Connecting businesses to short courses, online events and resources from Victoria's top education providers and industry experts
Small Business Victoria workshops and seminars	Free online workshops delivered for small businesses, with a focus on start-ups, marketing, finance, building resilience and business planning.
Digital Opportunities Roadshow	Free online digital workshops for businesses in regional Victoria, with a focus on improving digital skills. First round ran from February to June 2020
Small Business Bus	A 'travelling office on wheels' which offers friendly, professional assistance and expert advice from an experienced business mentor in regional Victoria. Tour visits are suspended from Monday 13th July 2020 due to COVID-19 restrictions.
<b>Communities</b>	
Free TAFE for priority courses	Free TAFE courses that provide skills for jobs in Victoria's growing industries.

### 18.4.1 Job creation, training, and upskilling

One of the BRV's desired outcomes is for employment opportunities to be accessible. According to the State Recovery Plan, one of the recovery actions is to boost employment numbers by linking businesses, job seekers and providers. Through the \$10 million Bushfire Tourism and Business Fund, it is expected that more than 260 jobs will be created by attracting visitors.

BRV also aims to create more tailored traineeships and apprenticeships to target some of the concerns relating to employment gaps raised by the local businesses. However, according to a survey conducted for the Alpine Shire Council Industry Sector Economic Assessment Baseline Report, when asked about whether they had accessed or utilised support in the form of free training sessions, the majority of the survey participants replied in the negative.<sup>51</sup> Participants said they were simply not aware that it existed. Although the survey results were focused on the fires, it is unclear the extent to which results were compounded by the COVID-19 pandemic that followed immediately after.

Despite the recent emergencies, DJPR tackled unemployment from 2015–19 through the \$500 million Regional Jobs and Infrastructure Fund (RJIF) – \$200 million of which was assigned for the Regional Jobs Fund (RJF). The RJIF was provided \$156 million for the period of 2020–2022 to continue creating and retaining jobs and driving economic growth in regional Victoria.

The RJF has successfully provided many employment opportunities by providing financial assistance to larger businesses wanting to relocate or start new businesses in regional Victoria. One of the biggest barriers to the RJF after the fires was its ability to expand due to the fiscally challenging environment brought on by the COVID-19 pandemic. DJPR may fund some of the projects that were not successful through the LER Program however this is to be confirmed.

According to the Recovery Action Plan documented in Alpine Shire Council's Municipal Recovery Plan, the council aims to support local businesses to re-establish. Council plans to achieve this by working closely with small business mentoring services and business groups to deliver small business coaching and identifying other training and resources to support local businesses. Council notes that business networking and training opportunities should be provided based on topics and needs identified through Chamber of Commerce groups and business groups.

The Alpine Shire Council also identified that tools and resources are required to help businesses shift to a web-based e-commerce platform to sell their goods or services. For example, community survey results show that many business owners are not completely knowledgeable in marketing and wish to be better trained in this area.

---

*Support and knowledge on how to do marketing and how to get things happening I am just circling again and again and again*

*Upskill and improve, particularly in the digital marketing and booking space - so as to be in a better position once through this difficult period.*

*Stakeholder*

---

The Alpine Shire Council aims to help the region retain and improve local employment opportunities by working with the local businesses and business groups to attract, retain and upskill local employees. As a live document the Recovery Action Plan will continue to evolve based on the needs and priorities identified by the Municipal Recovery Committee, CRC and Community Resilience Committee.

One of the largest uptakes in training was for Tourism North East's (TNE) free Zoom training to help business owners improve their digital skills.<sup>254</sup> A total of 48 people attended these sessions.

According to one economic impact assessment report, the lack of overall significant uptake of free financial support and training was because '...many people did not think of it'. Despite the promotion by TNE and the council partners, Victoria Tourism Industry Council (VTIC) and Wine Australia's other training courses were also not well attended.<sup>254</sup>

The RBERP notes that the Gippsland Regional Partnership as one of nine partnerships established across Victoria to better understand local challenges and opportunities. For example, two identified priorities are job creation and investment attraction incentives, and skills and education.<sup>255</sup>

Job creation and investment include the visitor economy, manufacturing, food and fibre, construction, and health and aged care. The partnership has identified innovation, skills, and education as critical enablers to creating new jobs and the economy's ongoing diversification.

In terms of skills and education, improving attainment, completion rates, school engagement and aspirational levels were identified as the critical areas for improvement. Access to facilities; programs that partner schools with local industry to equip students with enterprise and employment skills; and exposing students to opportunities for work and study in science, technology, engineering and mathematics, will increase the chances of students successfully gaining employment.<sup>255</sup>

## 18.4.2 Better preparedness training

DJPR delivered a comprehensive report on impact assessment to support the economic recovery following the fires, through leading a consultancy activity with Boston Consulting Group. The report was made available to BRV to inform recovery planning. Some of the methods the report detailed include:

- launching campaigns to improve small business awareness of their need to make better plans and arrangements, grow their abilities to identify risks and make decisions to mitigate these risks
- increasing the number of SBV resilience workshops for small businesses as well as including training on other relevant resilience and recovery topics such as risk management and insurance
- partnering with insurance companies to receive more training relating to benefits and risks.

### 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.

## 18.5 Small business recovery initiatives

A small business is any business (other than a farm) that hires no more than a full-time equivalent of 20 employees.<sup>249</sup> Small businesses make up 98 per cent of all the businesses in the three most fire-affected regions. Small businesses include a range of accommodation providers (such as campsites, caravan parks and motels), tourism and recreation businesses, eateries, artists, crafts makers, performers and shops.

BRV worked closely with DJPR, and later the BEWG, to determine a series of steps needed for local economies to reopen. The goals are to provide immediate stabilisation and to consider and support long-term resilience by partnering with business communities to form more tailored approaches. In terms of immediate stabilisation measures, it was important for departments and agencies to do as much work as possible within the first three months of the 2019–20 bushfires to increase business survival chances, in alignment with responsibilities under the SEMP.

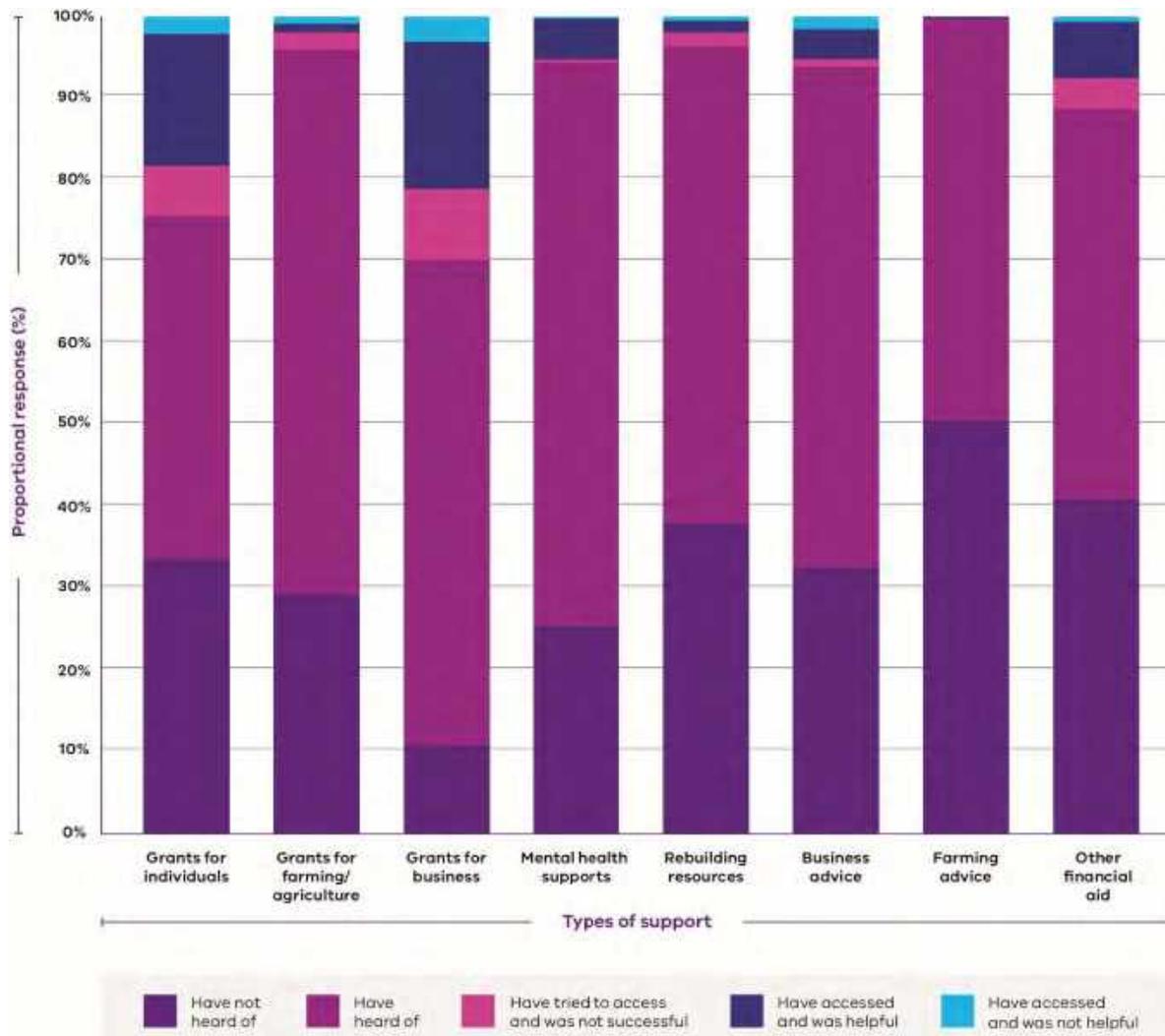
Victorian Government financial support for small businesses, some of which was jointly funded by the Australian Government under the DRFA, was available to address five areas of need (damaged assets, reduced markets/demand, disrupted supply chains, financial challenges, and unreliable infrastructure). At the time of this report supports included:

- \$50,000 to directly affected small businesses
- concessional loans of up to \$500,000
- payroll tax, PAYG, land tax, stamp duty, water rates, landfill levy relief
- grants to regional industry groups and chambers of commerce
- small business financial support line
- Business Recovery Advisory Services
- \$10,000 small business grants.

### 18.5.1 Loans and financial relief

Access to financial support has been one of the most important topics IGEM heard from the community. Results from the Alpine CRC survey show more than 30 per cent of respondents had not heard of business advisory support (see Figure 25, p 393). Similarly, more than 40 per cent of respondents were not aware of other financial aid. Based on the community feedback, business advisory support and financial aid are still not effective in reaching all of those affected by the fires.

**Figure 25.** Regional awareness of, and experience with accessing support for bushfire impacted individuals and businesses. (Source: Alpine CRC <sup>256</sup>)



## 18.5.2 Local Economic Recovery Program

BRV administers the LER Program at the regional and municipal level. The LER Program supports the various programs and initiatives that contribute to the continual economic and broader recovery of those impacted by the 2019–20 fires. It aims to balance programs that benefit the regional economy (60 per cent) and local community projects (40 per cent).

The Australian and Victorian governments co-funded \$68.6 million to support regional and local economic recovery projects. This figure is further divided into:

- \$34 million for Regional Economic Stimulus and Resilience Grants
- \$8 million Regional Economic Programs
- \$26.6 million Local Community Project Grants, to be delivered in three rounds of funding to support local community recovery.

At the time of writing two rounds have been announced - in January and May of 2021.

There is an approvals pathway for projects for local and regional programs/projects. Local projects focus on stabilisation and stimulus for economies and businesses.

Applications for funding to support projects and programs to facilitate community recovery can be made by community groups, local governments, and economic stakeholders. An applicant's proposed initiatives must align with one of the six following categories:

- new or upgraded infrastructure
- business and industry development
- Aboriginal Culture and Healing
- social development
- natural environmental and resources
- built environment future-proofing.

In January 2021 the Victorian Government announced the approval and funding of \$5.1 million to 15 Victorian local community projects as part of the LER Program. An analysis of the successful applications shows that the funds will support a range of recreational projects and projects that aim to help prepare the communities for future emergencies.

Recreational projects include those that help with upgrades or repairs to facilities, including tennis hubs, basketball and netball courts, revitalisation and modernisation of parks and other meeting places. Projects that help prepare the community include those that deal with building relief centres, multi-purpose community facilities, improvements and repairs to critical infrastructure, and places used as a base for firefighting operations.<sup>257</sup>

Although there is a range of preparedness initiatives, IGEM continues to hear community comments that not enough money is allocated to fixing telecommunications blackspots on key roads, having more backup generators, and improving access hubs.

The second funding round for Victoria Local Community Grants opened in March 2021 with \$14.6 million available.

Other successful initiatives will go towards supporting regional Victoria in bringing visitors back to Gippsland and the High Country. The initiatives aim to create new apprenticeship and traineeship positions, to provide coaching, mentoring and micro-finance access and other resources to support sole traders, Aboriginal cultural tourism and local small businesses. Some of the programs that have been successfully funded under the LER regional economic programs fund at the time of writing include On-farm Recovery Support Services, Gippsland and High-Country Visitor Reactivation Program, Victorian Apprenticeship Bushfire Recovery Program, Microenterprise Development Program and the Taungurung Bushfire Recovery Economic Prosperity Program.

As the delivery agent for BRV, Regional Development Victoria delivered 20 projects in February 2020 in East Gippsland, North East, and the Alpine Shire Council resorts, which aimed to increase employment and bring visitors back to the council areas boost economic activity. These projects were funded under the LER Regional Economic Stimulus and Resilience grants.

## Communication

The LER Program faced early problems in its development and roll-out, particularly in the timing of public communications, funding availability and readiness to open and support applications.

Stakeholders noted that although the LER Program was a positive government initiative it was announced too early. At this time many of the CRCs were just being established, and the community members involved still re-establishing themselves. In dealing with the urgency, BRV worked to complete some 'quick win' projects, recognising that many different communities were at different stages of recovery, and worked with them to complete the applications.

The initial announcement for LER funding was made on 11 May 2020, however stakeholders noted that information was limited. There was no funding allocation and no framework from the NBRA until July 2020. Some stakeholders told IGEM that it would have been more beneficial and efficient for the government to fund the regional economic recovery plans and activities identified through recovery planning processes, developed eight months before the LER funding announcement.

The LER funding issues were further compounded by an uncoordinated Australian Government announcement on 31 December 2020 of several successful LER projects relating to the \$8 million regional economic recovery programs. The announcement marked the 12-month anniversary of the 2019–20 bushfires. The announcement was problematic as many applicants assumed that they had missed out or were unsuccessful for funding. The announcements also undermined what the agencies were trying to achieve in working with the community to improve communication.

### **Issues with process**

In terms of the CRCs, the community expressed concerns over the confusion and constantly changing roles and responsibilities they were required to perform. According to BRV, the intent of the CRC was to reach out to its communities and networks to discuss initiatives they felt would benefit local community recovery. The CRC would then receive and read all the applications to gain a better line of sight across all the different projects. This step also provided the CRC with the knowledge required to provide feedback to the regional coordinators.

Some committee members misinterpreted that it was their responsibility to rate applications and decide whether they should be approved. The misunderstanding also led to some CRCs thinking that they were providing advice directly to the minister. BRV provided refresher sessions to eliminate any confusion regarding the roles and responsibilities and engagement in the entire process.

IGEM also heard of the imbalance and underrepresentation in the socio-economic diversity of members representing the CRCs. Community and various stakeholders repeatedly noted to IGEM that CRCs often consist of more affluent community leaders – such as industry leaders and well-established business owners and community members.

Representation is seen as particularly critical for towns with socio-economic challenges as community members represented on the CRC may focus only on economic development, forgetting about other recovery or preparedness priorities. Furthermore, despite being volunteers, a committee is often required to read and understand various long and complicated legal documents to assist the members applying for support.

Some stakeholders noted that, despite the LER Program being rolled out quickly, the entire consultation is a slow process. For example, following consultation with the community, information is fed back to BRV and then re-prosecuted. This long process ultimately doubles the amount of work required for grants to be processed. It was also noted that the community has been 'over consulted' throughout this event resulting in a level of consultation fatigue.

### **Issues with successful applications**

Despite some pitfalls, many stakeholders noted that the entire process was locally led and that the community felt listened to when they said they wanted a transparent process. The community did not want the government to choose the successful applications for them, but rather wanted a merit-based competitive process, particularly for the economic stimulus round. The LER Program guidelines also considered the balance and need of the three most significantly impacted council areas, noting that they would receive more support through a merit-based competitive round.

One of the most common concerns that IGEM heard was the perceived lack of equity in funding and resources allocated by the LER Program to directly and indirectly impacted communities. Some community members were comparing those directly impacted against those who were indirectly impacted, citing issues of fairness. Although it was often harder for community members to receive funding if they were indirectly impacted, they were not left unsupported due to the \$10,000 small business grants that were made available.

## 18.6 Other business grants and funding

### 18.6.1 Small business recovery grants

The Victorian Government offered Small Business Recovery Grants for the first time following the 2019–20 fires. As of 9 April 2021, there had been 2620 successful applications out of the 3524 applications received. In total, \$26.2 million in funding has been released (see Figure 26).

Stakeholders reported that the grants were over-subscribed and data indicates that approximately one quarter of the applications were not successful. The community reported that the application process for these grants was difficult and the eligibility criteria restricting.

The application process required applicants to categorise their businesses in quite arbitrary ways with no opportunity to explain unique circumstances. For example, community members told IGEM that because they had received income from sources other than the fire-affected business, they were not eligible for these grants.

Other strict eligibility criteria were also applied to these grants. Businesses needed to be classified as commercial businesses to receive financial assistance. Criteria also applied to the size of business, the definition of sole traders, operational small businesses that did not have an Australian Business Number before the fires and the exclusion of social enterprises that were not for profit.

Some community members decided not to apply as they considered the grant was not worth the effort and time required to apply and the risk that their circumstances would not meet the eligibility criteria.

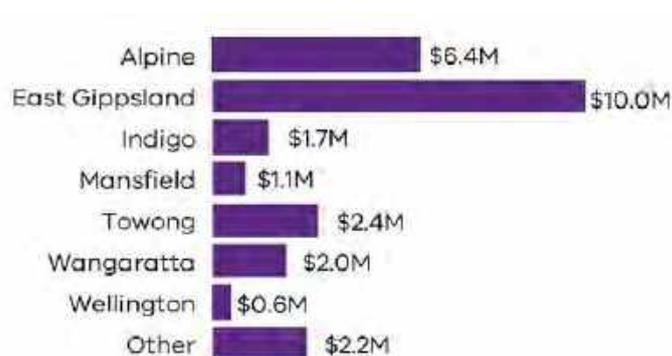
While the eligibility criteria in isolation are not unreasonable, they do not reflect the needs of the business community in the affected areas. Families and individuals who relied on income from businesses that did not align with the eligibility criteria were unable to receive support, or explain their circumstances.

Despite changes to the funding arrangements to include all businesses inside the State of Disaster areas, some licensed tour operators were ineligible to receive support because their registered business address was outside the State of Disaster area – despite their business being completely reliant on access to the Alpine Resorts to operate.

Although these criteria were later changed through the exceptional circumstance provisions, it was too late to provide any effective support for many affected businesses. Consideration of these circumstances was also quite limiting and required significant time, work, and effort for business owners. This was particularly difficult for those who were already trauma-impacted.

Overall, business owners encountered many difficulties in applying for the \$10,000 financial support, whether to do with the classification of the business or other unknown issues relating to definitions and eligibility criteria. This issue leads to further discussion regarding the level and effectiveness of financial mentorship provided to impacted business owners.

**Figure 26.** Funding for small business bushfire support grant released by council area. (Source: BRV <sup>110</sup>)



## 18.6.2 Other grants

Grants of up to \$50,000 were made available to support Victorian small businesses affected by the bushfires. At the same time, concessional low-interest loans were also made available to those that suffered significant damage to their assets or significant loss of income. Of the 169 applications received for the small business recovery \$50,000 grants, 99 were successful, receiving a total of \$2,824,852.<sup>82</sup> In contrast, of the 88 applications received under the \$500,000 low-interest concessional loan, only four were successful, lending a total of \$640,000.

Communities reflected to IGEM that both the \$50,000 grants and the low-interest loans have involved long and complicated processes. Many community members have noted they received the grant money too late and had borrowed money from other places or closed their business altogether. Some community members have noted that the time it took to receive concessional loans was generally between six and eight months.

Despite being eligible for financial support, many small business owners did not apply as they were not ready to deal with the application process or had previously experienced difficulties with government financial support and were unwilling to apply again. Some felt embarrassed to seek government assistance, or felt there were others more deserving of assistance.

### 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.

## 18.7 Support in accessing grants and funding

BRV is responsible for monitoring any financial assistance offered by the Australian and Victoria Governments and agencies. Additionally, BRV ensures that its website, case support, and hubs are informed to help community members access financial assistance and counselling services.

Despite some of the comments that IGEM heard from the community, BRV continues to work collaboratively across all government levels to increase the number of small business owners applying for grants.

BRV has undertaken a range of activities to improve the economic recovery process. One of the activities is a communication drive on grant programs, including physical mailouts (to the three impacted council areas), social media engagements and local media advertisements.

BRV has worked with Rural Finance to develop and implement a simplified five-minute online application to make it easier for those applying for the \$10,000 grants. It has also worked with Victorian Chamber of Commerce and Industry (VCCI) to simplify the \$50,000 grants application form and collaborated with DJPR to develop a proactive phone outreach program. BRV has also developed a streamlined approach to assess cases of an exceptional nature, such as those that have circumstance outside of the eligibility criteria.

In collaboration with SBV, BRV also ran pilot programs across Towong and East Gippsland as a means of identifying those businesses that had not applied for grants and other financial assistance with a view to directly targeting them. Despite the program's success, it was not run in the Alpine region.

BRV also relocated staff and assigned them to be 'business and grant buddies' to help small business owners better understand some of the financial complexities in applying for support and grants.

The most consistent messages that the community has provided to IGEM is the difficulty in successfully gaining access to grants and other funding support. There has been a consensus that there is too much bureaucracy involved, often hindering the entire economic recovery process.

IGEM heard that many different support services do not provide accurate advice. As a result, business owners are often forced to tell their story multiple times to different people. The inflexibility of the eligibility criteria has further compounded an already difficult process.

According to community feedback, the evidence and time required to apply for some of the grants for programs and services did not represent a profitable use of time for many business owners. They would have preferred money and cash flow to keep their businesses open.

### 18.7.1 Potential adverse impacts from donations

Businesses can have a significant role during emergencies by providing local resources, expertise, and essential services to support recovery. A significant action for the government is to drive economic and sustainable economic recovery to ensure that businesses and their workers can continue to operate despite the emergency's challenges and disruptions.

An issue that emerged for small businesses affected by the 2019–20 fire season was in-kind support. Food packages and other material goods, and the influx of donations need to be balanced with transitioning those in fire-affected areas back to using local businesses and spending money locally. Stakeholders noted that issues raised and considered in the early stages of the fires were managed effectively by the SRRT. Some of the potential impacts considered were those related to small businesses such as supermarkets and local suppliers

### 18.7.2 Financial counselling and business support

At the state level, the roles and responsibility for financial counselling and advice regarding insurance and other related matters are facilitated by BRV under the Bushfire Case Support Program.

SBV established the Business Recovery Advisory Service which commenced on 24 January 2020. In East Gippsland, Alpine, Mansfield and Towong regions, local businesses were offered ongoing business-specific case support.<sup>82</sup>

In Figure 27 (p 399), the Business Recovery Advisory Service is divided into three phases, including Phase 1 - initial triage/concierge, Phase 2 - business recovery planning and Phase 3 - business resilience mentoring.<sup>82</sup>

Phase 1, the initial triage process, is an impact assessment of the business community to determine the type of immediate support and advice required to minimise risk and loss. In Phase 2, the Business Recovery Advisory Service facilitates and delivers relief packages and provides plans to help local businesses develop strategies to reduce risks and economic impacts and resume normal trading.

The SBV worked with the Melbourne Innovation Centre in late May 2020 to deliver Phase 3 of the advisory service, which focused on providing professional financial advisors to the business community. The Business Recovery Advisory Service provides local businesses with free direct one-on-one assistance with administrative challenges. The program helps businesses recover and develop plans to strengthen and grow their businesses based on prevention, risk mitigation, resilience, and future emergency management.<sup>82</sup>

Figure 28 (p 400) presents a closer look at the decision-making process that all SBV clients undertake.

Figure 27. The three phases of the Business Recovery Advisory Service. (Source: SBV<sup>82</sup>)

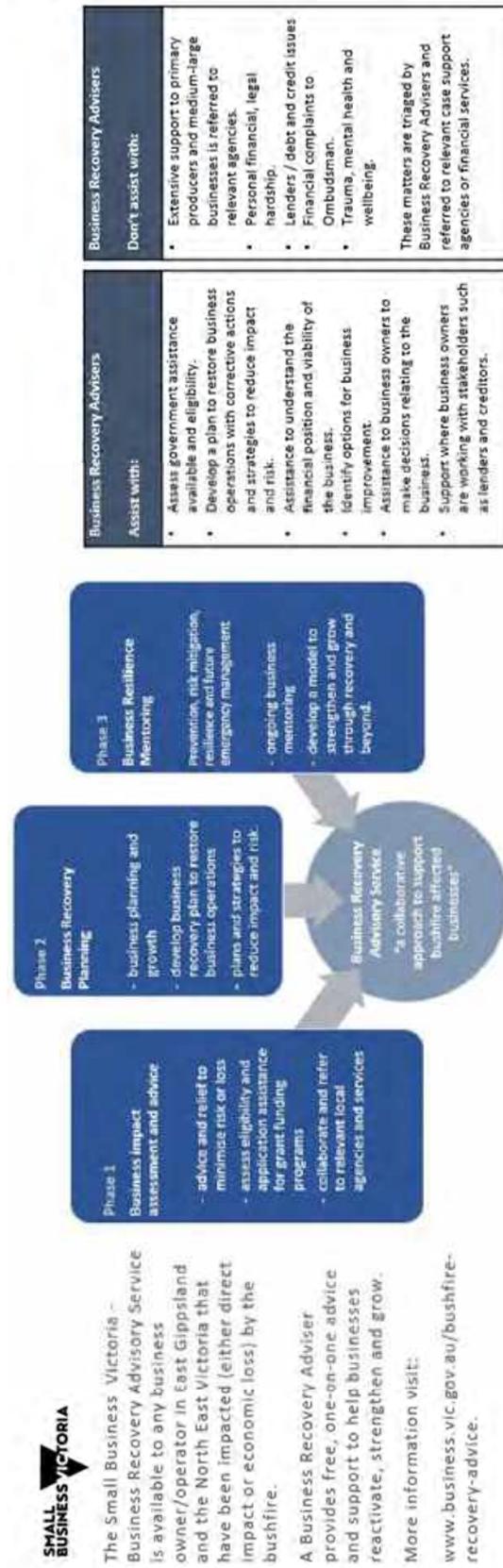
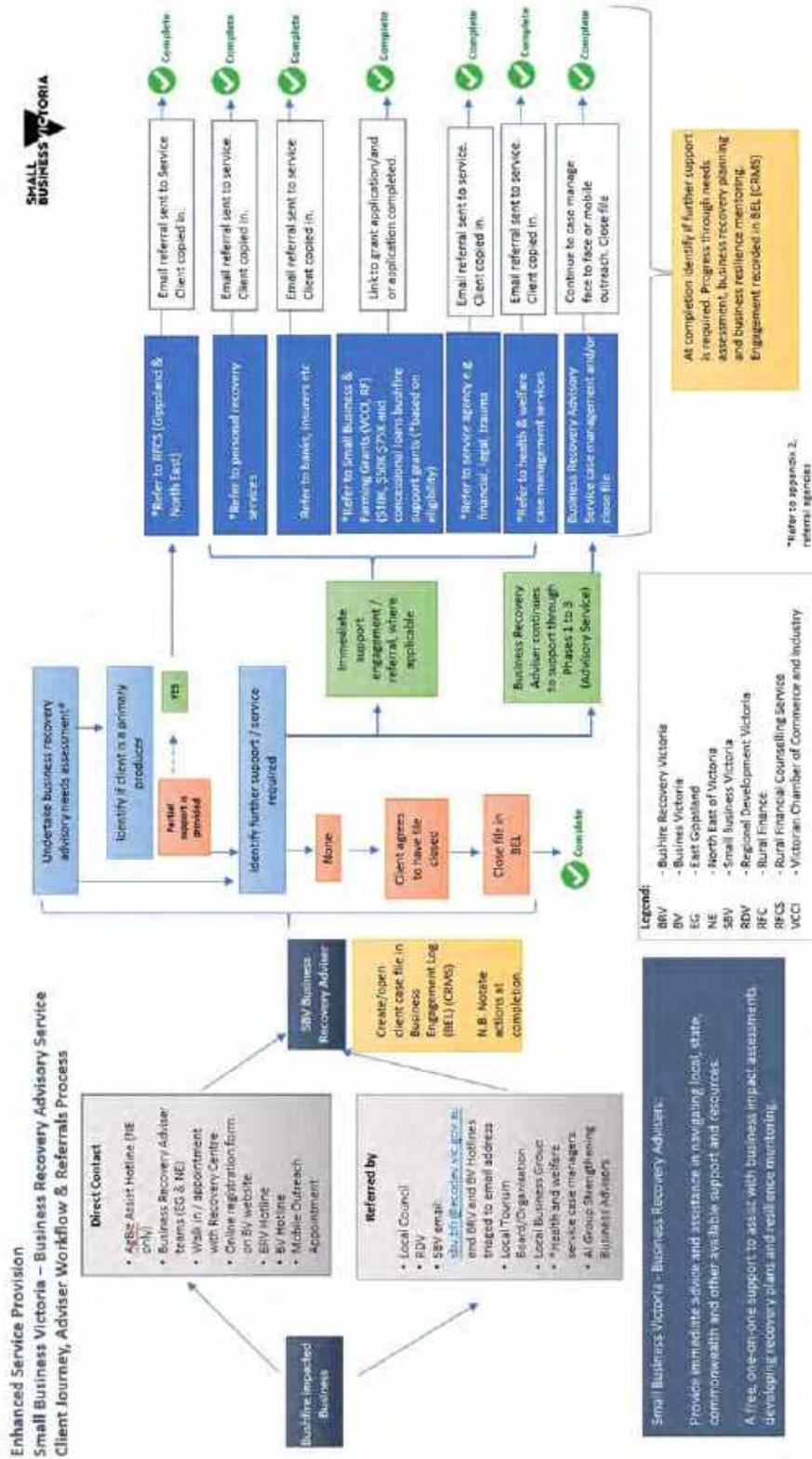


Figure 28. Small Business Victoria – Business Recovery Advisory Service client journey, advisor workflow and referrals process. (Source: SBV<sup>82</sup>)



The Australian Government provided funding for a small business bushfire financial counselling support line. Operated by Financial Counselling Australia, the support line launched on 18 March 2020 with an accompanying website.

The support line has provided information and advice to small business owners and sole traders in financial difficulty through their financial counsellors. The support line counsellors have provided advice on matters concerning managing business debts, business dispute resolutions, repayments, tax, bills, suppliers and helping business owners better understand the different services available to them.

Financial counselling and business support services were activated specifically for communities affected by the 2019–20 fire season. The Small Business Mentoring Service (SBMS) and the VCCI have also expanded their service delivery to address heightened needs.

The SBMS is a not-for-profit association that provides skills and experience to help small businesses. The SBMS provided support to more than 1800 affected businesses during major emergencies such as the 2009 Victorian bushfires, the 2014 Hazelwood Mine fire, and the 2015 Wye River – Jamison Track fire. Mentors from the SMBS assist in planning, finances, marketing, and business recovery. All the SBMS mentors are volunteers who provide free of charge mentoring services.

VCCI also provides eligible businesses one-on-one mentoring sessions over a three-month period to help with business recovery, market transformation, digital literacy and engagement, market and supply chain diversification and reskilling and retraining.

### 18.7.3 Effectiveness of financial counselling and business support

IGEM heard that the correct services are not always chosen to deliver small business financial counselling. Rather than providing funding for specialists, in many cases the government has chosen to fund generalist financial counselling services to support small businesses. According to some stakeholders, the information and delivery models that generalist financial counsellors provide are different to specialists and are not suitable for small business and farming.

Stakeholders and the community commented that referrals were regularly provided in error – agencies were receiving referrals for cases that were not small business or farm related. This caused anger within the community having to tell their story multiple times to different financial counselling services.

One explanation provided to IGEM for the lack of understanding of the communities' needs is because of the high turnover of fly-in-fly-out services and their sub-contractors. These external services are not attuned to the needs of local communities. In contrast, local financial counsellors have been in the area for a long time and have dealt with the community one-on-one through previous emergencies. Furthermore, the existing relationships that local financial counsellors have with their clients is often closely linked to the psychosocial support that comes with working with community members that are stressed and have complex needs beyond financial advice.

Although there are no definitive figures on the number of people who engaged in these mentoring services, comments from both agency stakeholders and the community note that there were too many coaching and mentor support services available.

It was estimated that up to six different support services were offered at one stage, none of which were coordinated by a single entity. Rather, each of the services was acting independently and did not share information. The business community also noted that many of the support service workers were from outside of the region and did not have an awareness about their needs or local issues.

#### 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 of the community and its recovery needs.

### 18.7.4 Business networking and promotional campaigns

As part of the \$64 million Victorian Government Recovery Package, VCCI received \$400,000 towards a Regional Industry and Chambers of Commerce Program.<sup>82</sup> Funding for the program has been allocated to local and regional business networking events.

Local and regional businesses can apply for these grants to provide networking opportunities (including best practice workshops, seminars, conferences, and industry award events) and opportunities to raise awareness of local, state and national bushfire support services and develop digital tools to help impacted businesses.

As part of empowering Victorian businesses to recover from the 2019–20 fire season and the COVID-19 pandemic, VCCI waived its membership fees valued at up to \$700 and credited existing members.

VCCI also planned to hold a series of roadshows in metropolitan and regional Victoria for businesses to discuss financial concerns and learn different ways to prepare for future emergency events. At the same time this engagement aims to allow businesses to discuss issues that they want the VCCI to raise with government policymakers.

#### CASE STUDY: CAMPAIGNS AND INITIATIVES SUPPORTING SMALL BUSINESSES

Immediately after the fires there were many examples of how the recovery of the business community was supported. The following are examples of different campaigns and initiatives highlighted to IGEM during agency and community stakeholder meetings.

##### **High Country Comeback**

As a result of the lack of visitors to Victoria's High Country region, many businesses could not sell their products. The lack of sales was particularly vital for growers and producers with perishable products. One initiative developed to help with this was the High Country Comeback. More than 100 regional business owners travelled to Melbourne to set up stalls at Port Melbourne's Timber Yard. In the course of one day, attendees spent roughly \$500,000 and contributed \$10,500 to local programs. This event also provided the opportunity that regional Victoria needed to talk to attendees and let them know that the regions are once again safe to visit.<sup>51</sup>

##### **Empty Esky**

Empty Esky has been heralded as one of the most successful campaigns to help bring business back into fire-affected areas. Completely not-for-profit, the goal of the campaign is for owners to sign up and register their fire-affected businesses, while community members also sign up and pledge to visit one or more of the businesses to stock up with produce and wares purchased from these local traders. At present there are 718 businesses registered to this campaign.

##### **Buy from Bright and Surrounds**

A collaboration between the Victorian councils, Issimo Markets and Start-Up Shake-Up helped relocate businesses to an online trading platform. The platform is low cost, easy to use and maintain, and gives many businesses who previously could not sell online an opportunity to do so. The platform helps businesses recover while also supporting them become more resilient to future emergency events.

There are plans to extend the platform to include other fire-affected areas through Buy from Myrtleford and Surrounds and Buy from Mount Beauty and Surrounds. A more extensive marketing campaign will be required to encourage more businesses to participate.

According to BRV, far fewer small businesses closed down due to the various financial incentive programs offered to Victorians, encouraging visits and travel to regional Victoria. However, long-term monitoring will be required to differentiate the impacts between the impacts caused by the bushfires compared to COVID-19 pandemic.

### 18.7.5 Locally driven small business initiatives

Several Victorian and local government agencies, along with private organisations, actively supported training and upskilling within small business community following the fires. For example, AgBiz's Rural Financial Counselling Service ran a workshop in the Alpine Shire Council attended by 20–25 business community members seeking financial advice.

SBV and Alpine Shire Council also co-facilitated multiple resilience-style workshops for local, small business community members, however the workshops were halted due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

Alpine Shire Council facilitated several online e-learning training and Business Crisis Management courses with more than 20 businesses within its municipality.<sup>51</sup> These community training and upskilling initiatives have aligned closely with some of the BRV Economic and Hume RBERP priorities, such as supporting councils to deliver workshops and increasing small business owners' capability to become more resilient with issues of unemployment.<sup>112</sup>

East Gippsland Shire Council organised in-person workshops and virtual roundtables to engage key business and industry leaders, local and Victorian Government agencies in business recovery. These gatherings helped the council assess impacts and consequences, understand support and identify gaps in data and services. In addition to aligning with the BRV and Gippsland RBERP priorities, there was a moderate uptake of the free training sessions.<sup>254</sup>

The council engaged business recovery advisors (short and medium-term) through SBV who supported 626 businesses (as of 1 June 2020) in East Gippsland and Wellington Shire Councils. These advisors provided businesses with information, support and services needed for recovery.<sup>112</sup>

East Gippsland Shire Council delivered a range of industry development and capacity building programs and provided business mentors. It engaged with 12 business and tourism associations to better understand the fire-related issues and determine recovery strategies.<sup>112</sup>

Training is provided to small business owners regarding employment issues, financial and risk management, and their obligations under industrial relations laws. To better understand the community's needs, consultation for this type of engagement was first carried out with the CRCs and business and tourism associations.<sup>112</sup>

All of the initiatives highlighted in this section align with the BRV State Recovery Plan and Gippsland RBERP priorities.<sup>255</sup> The initiatives have also aligned with many of the economic recovery outcomes noted in the East Gippsland Economic Recovery Sub-plan, including providing reskilling and upskilling. Businesses are confident to invest and grow and are provided with the information and advice small businesses need to recover.<sup>249</sup>

One of the East Gippsland Shire Council's next goals is to develop a five-year overarching Economic Recovery Strategy as part of the Economic Sub-Plan recovery activities. The strategy will consider the issues impacting climate change and lessons learned from the COVID-19 pandemic.<sup>112</sup>

In May 2020, the Towong Shire Council invited Tourism North East to Mitta Mitta, Bethanga, and Tallangatta to run a series of free business development workshops. The workshops helped business owners familiarise themselves with digital channels and to create an operator listing in preparation for the release of the council's second tourism website.

The Towong Shire Council passed a resolution in March 2020 to waive business registration renewal fees to help many struggling businesses. The exemption was available to all food premises, prescribed accommodation and Health Act premises such as aquatic facilities, pest control, hair, beauty, colonic irrigation, skin penetration and tattooing industries and any other activity deemed to be a public health risk.<sup>258</sup>

BRV provided the Towong Shire Council with \$3.2 million as part of a Bushfire Rates Relief Package. This package is comprised of three components, one of which is relief for businesses.<sup>258</sup>

These initiatives are directly in line with priorities delivered through the State Recovery Plan and endorsed through the BEWG. For example, supporting councils in growing local trades and business capacity through training and workshops, and stabilising impacted small businesses and primary producers with financial support such as rates relief.

Although these initiatives were favourably received, a few business community members noted that rate relief in some council areas came a little too late.

## 18.8 Tourism

The tourism industry is one of the largest contributors to the economies of East Gippsland, Alpine and Towong shires, with an estimated \$294 million in GVA and employing approximately 3000 people in the regions. Unfortunately, the tourism industry was one of the sectors that experienced the greatest impact of the fires.

### 18.8.1 Impact of the fires directly and indirectly

As a result of the fires, the tourism industry was threatened through direct damage and reduced visitation. The combined financial impact on tourism in the three main fire-affected councils is estimated to range between \$75 and \$92 million in decreased revenue in first quarter of 2020. The five adjacent councils saw a combined loss between \$34 and \$51 million.

Although many tourist attractions or town-based accommodation facilities were not directly impacted, there was significant damage to national and state parks and associated trail/accommodation infrastructure.

Large sections of the Princes Highway in East Gippsland were closed from 30 December 2019 until 5 February 2020 (37 Days).<sup>112</sup> Extensive and prolonged road closures such as this prevented tourists from visiting the regions between Christmas and the end of the summer school holiday period – a typically busy and profitable period for tourism providers.

Community members have commented that many people chose to stay away from certain regional areas in the early days after the fires due to smoke impacts and fears that they would be a burden on local resources.

There are four key reasons identified that attract visitors to the regions: leisure, visiting friends and family, business, and education. The largest group of visitors comprise the leisure travellers representing 84 per cent of all visitors. The recovery process for leisure visitation is expected to take the longest.

The impacts of the fires on built attractions were relatively limited, with most affecting park infrastructure, including accommodation. The tourism industry has also been affected by the cancellation of events such as sports matches, school events, festivals and the closure of public spaces such as galleries.<sup>112</sup>

The Alpine Resorts reported that one of the biggest issues businesses are worried about is finance and insurance becoming less available. While some are investing significant amounts of money into their year-round resorts, they are at the same time worried about the risks involved.<sup>51</sup>

Only one business at Mt Hotham remained open after the fires, catering for emergency management staff on the mountain. No other business operated during this time. Despite having invested heavily in readiness for the snow season and preparations for visitors to return to the region, the COVID-19 pandemic effectively ended the winter season.

### 18.8.2 Support from agencies

Before the 2019–20 fire season, DJPR's TEVE Branch worked with the tourism industry to focus on recovery. The work undertaken by TEVE was on two different levels, including working with the Regional Tourism Boards (RTB) and individual businesses.

TEVE provided support across all 11 Victorian RTBs to prepare them to recover from different crisis events. The support included giving advice and helping the RTBs develop recovery plans focusing on marketing. TEVE – in collaboration with Consumer Affairs Victoria – also provided advice to individual businesses in relation to cancellation policies.

TEVE also collaborated with the East Gippsland Shire Council and Destination Gippsland's RTBs to deliver a series of forums specifically targeted at advising tourism business owners. The forums were conducted over six different townships across East Gippsland, including Mallacoota.

### 18.8.3 Accommodation

The 2019–20 bushfire season, compounded by the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic, has resulted in a significant reduction in trade for accommodation providers. The effects included 100 per cent of cancellations for many accommodation and hospitality businesses. There were also cancellations of future and planned visitation trips by people from outside of the region and those that needed to cut their trip short due to bushfire behaviour.<sup>254</sup>

However, despite accommodation being one of the hardest-hit sectors, there have been positive reports of business owners carrying out maintenance activities or upskilling digitally. There was confidence that businesses were seeing returning numbers of bookings in the late January to March 2020 period before health restrictions introduced in response to the COVID-19 pandemic.<sup>254</sup>

### 18.8.4 Support for tourism

At the time of writing, government support was available to the tourism sector to address the five areas of need is aimed at the following:

- regional marketing
- travel incentives
- small business relief advisory
- small business funding relief (covered in Chapter 5).

Travel incentives have also been promised through the Victorian Government to encourage businesses and sports events to be held in affected regions as a means of reigniting local economies. More than 115 businesses, sport and government agencies have already backed the initiative by pledging to hold meetings, events and other business-related activities in East Gippsland and North East Victoria over a six-month period.

Following the fires and before the COVID-19 pandemic, an extensive marketing campaign encouraged visitors back to the region. The campaign focused on the High-Country region, Alpine Shire (valleys) and Dinner Plain. While this campaign was put on hold due to the COVID-19 pandemic, planning is continuing to prepare visitors to return at a more suitable time.<sup>51</sup>

The findings of many economic impact analysis reports note marketing as the number one economic recovery priority to attract visitors and guests back to the regions.<sup>254</sup> A marketing campaign aims to ensure that the regions are front of mind for potential visitors in the future. It is also hoped that through marketing, Victoria and Australia are able to combat some of the negative perceptions of interstate and international audiences that regional Victoria is completely burned (see Case Study, p 402).

The introduction of the regional travel voucher initiatives has helped Victorian accommodation providers, businesses, and the community to recover from the financial impacts caused by the 2019–20 bushfires and the COVID-19 pandemic.

In total, \$32 million was allocated to creating 160,000 regional travel vouchers distributed throughout three application processes. The Victorian regional travel vouchers scheme is the largest travel scheme that Australia has ever delivered. Similar smaller schemes have been run in South Australia (\$5 million), Tasmania (\$12.5 million) and the Northern Territory (\$16.2 million).

Although no money was directly receivable by accommodation providers, the Victorian Government's regional travel voucher scheme had a positive impact by increasing the number of people travelling to the 11 impacted regional tourism regions. The scheme covers 48 regional and rural council areas (plus several interface councils, including the Yarra Ranges and Mornington Peninsula, Victoria's six ski resorts, French Island, Lady Julia Percy Island and Gabo Island).

One of the goals achieved by introducing vouchers was the Victorian Government's ability to track where each of the vouchers was used, which helped with more accurate bushfire recovery planning. The data showed that East Gippsland was one of the top three regions where people used the vouchers. Eventually, the vouchers data will lead to broader work surrounding the development of other sector recovery plans.

## 18.9 Progress in business and economic recovery

In addition to the significant direct and indirect impact of the 2019–20 fires for many Victorian communities, the difficult task of recovery has been compromised further by the COVID-19 pandemic, existing long-term drought, and past fires in some regional areas.

The pandemic introduced significant restrictions that prevented typical regional travel across Victoria and severely inhibited domestic and international tourism. Many of the planned government and council initiatives to support businesses, industries and economies following the fires became untenable due to consumers being unable to access the regions.

The restrictions were in place for much of 2020, with all school holiday periods affected and periods of closure over the 2020–21 New Year period and into 2021.

Work stoppages caused by the COVID-19 pandemic further exacerbated the economic recovery process. For example, some food businesses continued to operate by altering to suit the take-away style and budget and having reduced or different menus focused on new clientele (mainly, emergency relief and recovery personnel and community-based services). Many businesses also included online bookings and ordering systems to decrease waiting time.

BRV continues to work closely with fire-affected businesses, government departments and agencies to ensure that pandemic recovery activities and measures complement bushfire recovery activities.

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 due to the COVID-19 pandemic, financial support has increased and accelerated, providing regional Victoria with more opportunities to return to normal business operations. With the introduction of travel vouchers and various government incentives to help accommodation business owners, regional businesses are reporting a return of visitors.

Despite the many different grants available to the business community, IGEM continues to hear concerns from both stakeholders and community members about the different challenges involved in applying for financial support.

Although the business and economic recovery process has been slow and COVID-19 has presented additional challenges to the fire-affected business community, it is evident that progress is being made.

# Chapter 19

Agriculture



The 2019–20 bushfires severely impacted agriculturally significant areas of Victoria. The North East and East Gippsland include large areas of farmland, with extensive cattle and sheep grazing, dairying, vineyards, beekeeping operations and general farming. As a result of the fires, there were notable livestock deaths, further compounded by extensive pasture and fencing losses.

The fires destroyed more than 30,000 hectares of pasture, more than 600 hectares in field crops, softwood plantations, in excess of 11,000 tonnes of hay and silage and 100-plus hay sheds.<sup>259</sup>

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

The fires added to the duress the agricultural sector had already experienced 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 already presented as a complex, multi-agency recovery operation at the start of 2020, became a drawn-out process due to the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic.

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. Lessons had been learnt over the decade since the 2009 Victorian bushfires.

The VBRC noted that the coordination of animal relief after bushfire was fragmented and that attachment between individuals and their animals can adversely influence an individual's decision-making when threatened by fire, especially in relation to staying to defend properties or leaving to seek shelter.<sup>260</sup>

While the VBRC did not issue recommendations regarding animal welfare, the then Department of Primary Industries (DPI) produced a booklet, *Recovery after fire*, that outlined the practical steps landholders could take to safeguard their livestock, their own health and finances.<sup>261</sup> The booklet also covered such topics as fencing repair, pasture recovery and pest control, issues integral to bushfire land management and property planning.

For relief and recovery to be effective, practices need to be in place to assist landowners to restart their lives and businesses as quickly and efficiently as possible. Effective management and support is required in critical areas, animal welfare, financial assistance, psychosocial support programs, fencing repair and replacement to help the agricultural sector to recover from the 2019–20 bushfires.

DJPR covers a range of portfolios. Within DJPR, AgVic has primary responsibility for the relief and recovery efforts across the agricultural sector. Its longstanding experience and local networks in regional Victoria were complemented with the 2020 introduction of BRV. Whereas AgVic brought sector specific know-how, BRV provided affected communities with advice and support primarily related to the immediate financial stabilisation and long-term support of small businesses and primary producers.

## 19.1 State response to support agriculture

### 19.1.1 Agriculture Victoria

Following the 2019–20 fires, AgVic developed the State Agricultural Recovery Operational Plan (Feb–June 2020).<sup>82</sup> The plan aimed to guide the coordination and management of planning and delivery of agricultural support and recovery activities to fire-affected East Gippsland and North East landholders. The desired outcome was to assist the agriculture sector to recover and minimise the long-term social and economic impact for primary producers and other animal owners.

AgVic identified four objectives to be fulfilled in a coordinated multi-agency recovery effort.

### Ensure immediate support

- Ensure landholders receive immediate support for agricultural needs, animal welfare and referrals to other agencies.

A key strategy was regular relief team field visits to provide animal welfare assistance, inform stakeholders of recovery programs, and refer stakeholders to and from other agencies. This required close collaboration between AgVic, private veterinarians, VFF, DHHS, BRV and councils.

### Assist and support decision-making

- Ensure landholders and other stakeholders have the agricultural information, support services and knowledge for good decision-making.
- Informed recovery considering future challenges and opportunities.

The key strategy was the provision of technical advice to help landowners and farmers in their decision-making (together with CMAs, Landcare networks, and industry – Dairy Australia, Meat and Livestock Australia). This was complemented with collaborative projects with industry, collaborative issue identification, the promotion of recovery events and community engagement – especially with the BRV, councils, DHHS and the Rural Counselling Service. The offer of regular support services was essential to this approach, whether one-to-one with landowners or group events.

### Coordinated support services, activities and recovery programs

- Delivering recovery programs and advice to primary producers, rural land managers.
- Ensure effective communication and a joined-up approach between various agencies, organisations and communities to ensure coordination of support activities.

Strategies included the establishment of an AgVic Recovery Team to collaborate and share information for planning with other partner agencies and organisations such as VFF, councils, BRV and DEWLP. The Recovery Team was also required to gather intelligence and interact with Ag Policy to address developing issues and challenges with grant programs, coordinate agricultural impact information to inform Regional Economic Recovery Plans, develop recovery guides and monitor recovery progress with various partners.

### Awareness and use of support services

- Ensure farmers are aware of the broad range of supports available (Ag advice, mental health, financial support, social support).
- Referring primary producers to relevant services.

Strategies included the active promotion of Rural Financial Counselling Service to assist with grant applications. It also provided high-quality agricultural information and services through a range of media channels, regular engagement at community events and working with health services, DHHS and primary care partners to promote health and wellbeing support programs.

## 19.1.2 Bushfire Recovery Victoria support for the agricultural sector

Under the State Recovery Plan, the agricultural sector's recovery priorities are for regional businesses, including Aboriginal businesses, and primary producers to:

- resume operations, where feasible
- recover without ongoing financial support
- gain confidence to invest and grow
- be better prepared for challenges and economic shocks.<sup>112</sup>

The objectives of the plan are, initially, to focus on stabilisation of businesses and workers affected by the dual challenges and disruptions of the bushfires and the COVID-19 pandemic. The pandemic significantly delayed the recovery activities, in turn concentrating medium to long-term objectives on growth and resilience in the sector.<sup>112</sup>

The plan recognises that other bushfire recovery activities are being delivered through local councils, AgVic, RDV, Regional Financial Counselling Services (RFCS) and other community providers, and highlights two challenges with respective recovery actions where BRV has taken the lead.

### **Challenge 1**

Financial performance declined for small businesses and primary producers as a direct result of the bushfires.

In the short to medium-term, the recovery objective is to ‘stabilise impacted small businesses and primary producers with financial support’. The priority is for regional businesses and primary producers to have resumed operations, where feasible, and help them recover without ongoing financial support.

Addressing this challenge and fulfilling this objective includes the following actions:

- provide Small Business Bushfire Recovery Grants (\$50,000) for businesses that suffered direct bushfire damage
- provide Small Business Bushfire Support Grants (\$10,000) for businesses impacted by the bushfires in seven heavily fire impacted LGAs
- provide Victorian Bushfire Concessional Loans (up to \$500,000 per loan) to assist small businesses, primary producers, and non-profit organisations impacted by the bushfires
- provide Emergency Bushfire Primary Industries Grants (up to \$75,000 per grant) for primary producers that suffered direct bushfire damage
- establish the Victorian Bushfire Emergency Transport Support Program (up to \$15,000 per grant) to support impacted primary producers struggling to transport their goods
- provide AgVic’s Wine Grape Testing Rebate (\$1.2million) to support growers accessing smoke exposure tests from specialist labs.
- provide a range of tax relief measures, including payroll tax relief in State of Disaster Areas, stamp duty concessions and waiving water rates for businesses destroyed or significantly damaged by fire for 12 months following the fires.<sup>112</sup>

### **Challenge 2**

Businesses and primary producers lack confidence in the future business climate and fear further economic shocks.

In the longer term, the recovery objective is to ‘support businesses and primary producers. The priority is for regional businesses and primary producers to gain confidence to invest, grow and to be better prepared for challenges and economic shocks.

Addressing this challenge and fulfilling this objective includes the following actions:

- Provide expert advice and support to small business owners in impacted areas through Business Recovery Advisers. Advisers assist with business impact assessments, developing recovery plans and resilience mentoring. These strategies help businesses develop sustainable business models to strengthen and grow through the recovery period and beyond.
- Ensure that businesses that were directly or indirectly impacted are aware of the government support and financial assistance available to them through the BRV small business and primary producer outreach program.
- Provide agricultural and technical advice to primary producers, including farm management and recovery, animal welfare and biosecurity management, smoke taint technical advice for growers whose crops may have been smoke affected and other industry specific support as required.
- Provide free, confidential financial and business advice through the Rural Financial Counselling Service and financial counsellors.

- Provide support services to farmers, including activities such as regional agriculture industry coordination, consultations, farm visits, workshops, information sessions, field days and impact assessments.
- Provide targeted support for Aboriginal businesses to recover and associated creation of employment pathways. This includes funding provided to GLAWAC to recruit a Business Development Manager.<sup>112</sup>

## 19.2 Animal welfare

Prior to the 2019–20 fire season, governance frameworks were in place that established roles, responsibilities and courses of action related to animal welfare, financial recovery and psychosocial support.

Stock losses in the 2019–20 fires were significant. In total some 3329 head of beef and dairy cattle were lost, and 2161 sheep were recorded as having perished. Other animals including horses, goats and pigs, along with beehives, were also lost. These figures compare to stock losses of more than 11,400 head during the geographically much smaller 2009 fires.<sup>262</sup>

The SERRP states the sector’s lead agency was the then Department of Economic Development, Jobs, Transport and Resources (DEDJTR). Now known as DJPR, it took over the responsibility for animal welfare in emergencies.

DJPR relies on the comprehensive and regularly updated Victorian Emergency Animal Welfare Plan to manage relief and recovery activities that promote animal welfare.<sup>263</sup> The plan stipulates that acceptable standards should be maintained and outlines key animal welfare considerations:

- maintaining acceptable animal welfare standards for all animal species
- destroying the minimum number of animals during the emergency response
- using best available resources (personnel, infrastructure, feed and water).

### 19.2.1 Victorian emergency animal welfare arrangements

The Victorian Emergency Animal Welfare Plan (the plan) was established following VBRC recognition of the importance of the bonds people form with their animals. The VBRC also noted more effective relief to all animals (livestock, companion and wildlife) could be provided with improved agency coordination.

In addition to delineating animal welfare support services and the general arrangements regarding emergency management in Victoria, the plan clarifies the roles, responsibilities and formal arrangements between the various stakeholders for the delivery of all emergency response, relief and recovery activities in relation to animal welfare. DJPR administers the plan.

The current version of the plan (Revision 2 – October 2019) considers the experiences with animal welfare management in emergencies over the previous decade, changes to the state’s emergency management arrangements, and the changes to Victorian government agencies.

Councils play a key role in supporting emergency animal welfare activities. Councils are responsible for the coordination and operation of ERCs, and support emergency relief and recovery operations and planning (see section 19.2.1, p 411).

In addition to the plan, further strategies, arrangements and resources that assist planning and delivery of animal welfare support services following an emergency event in Victoria. These include the EMMV and multiple Commonwealth and Victorian legislative arrangements.

The plan identifies the formal roles and responsibilities of agencies and organisations regarding animal welfare support but does not override individual and/or company legal obligations to provide for the welfare of animals they own, manage or control.

The following agencies and organisations have key roles and responsibilities for emergency animal welfare: DJPR, DELWP, Australian Veterinary Association - Victorian Branch (AVA), CFA, DHHS, EMV, local government, RSPCA (Victorian Branch), VFF, FRV, VicPol, VICSES, and wildlife shelters and carers.<sup>263</sup>

In the relief phase, DJPR liaises with other agencies and organisations to enable effective and timely delivery of managed animal welfare support services, which includes information for public and media communications, resource allocation and animal injury identification and assessment. In doing so, it provides advice on treatment, disposal and destruction of affected animals. DJPR also reports to government on losses and damage to agricultural assets and animals and the needs of affected persons and communities.

In the recovery phase, DJPR advises farmers on feed planning and pasture management, water supplies including dam management, and animal health considerations, which vary depending on the incident type.

The plan acknowledges that in the event of an emergency, standards of animal care may be compromised. Those in charge of animals may have to relocate quickly, potentially leaving animals behind, and may be restricted in their ability to care for animals. For this reason, the underpinning principle in addressing animal welfare in an emergency is for those in charge of animals to take pre-emptive action by planning for animal needs, implementing these plans and acting early so that welfare problems can be minimised.

### 19.2.2 The role of Agriculture Victoria

In leading companion animal and livestock welfare (other than wildlife) support services, DJPR is supported by DELWP, AVA (Victorian Branch), CFA, FRV, DHHS, EMV, local government, RSPCA (Victorian Branch), VFF, VicPol, VICSES, and wildlife shelters and carers.

In *Recovery after an emergency*, updated in January 2020, AgVic outlines how it supports farmers who have experienced impacts such as losses of stock and farming assets during an emergency. In addition, AgVic provides support for animal welfare in the shorter and longer terms. During an emergency – or shortly afterwards – AgVic conducts agricultural asset assessments and refers cases of urgent need to the relief IMT. As part of a long-term recovery approach, AgVic provides information about managing livestock, crops, water supplies, soils and pastures affected by emergencies.

Where livestock has been directly affected by fire, AgVic provides resources to advise, in detail, how to assess livestock. This includes information for farmers on available aid and assistance in the assessment and potential disposing of deceased livestock. Farmers are encouraged to euthanise and/or dispose of carcasses themselves if they feel confident and if assistance cannot reach a property due to impediments (such as smoke hazard, road closures).

Councils are responsible for coordinating clean-up activities, including disposal. AgVic is responsible for the provision of advice about the disposal needs of dead or injured animals and the EPA is responsible for the provision of emergency approvals in line with the *Environment Protection Act 1970* where required (for example, mass animal burials and; ensuring that appropriate waste disposal methods are adopted, and environmental clean-up activities conducted).

### 19.2.3 The role of councils

Councils can but are not required to produce Municipal Emergency Animal Plans pursuant to section 60ADB of the EM Act 2013 to assist in the management of animal welfare during an emergency.

Within the scope of a Municipal Emergency Animal Welfare Plan, councils describe the emergency risks relevant to the municipality, include relevant animal population data (companion animals, livestock, and wildlife) to understand the potential scope of services needed, and list animal welfare support services relevant to the municipality that will be addressed in the plan.

Councils are tasked with ensuing emergency relief and recovery components of MEMPs detail local emergency animal welfare arrangements and providers for relevant animal welfare services including consideration of:

- DJPR (livestock and companion animals) and DELWP (wildlife) contacts for animal assessment activities
- carcass transport providers and disposal sites
- options for the housing and management of displaced animals, including those presenting at ERCs
- potential sites for donated fodder distribution
- alternative emergency water sources for animals
- systems for the management of offers of assistance or donations made to councils.

#### 19.2.4 Emergency Fodder Distribution Agreement

The 2012 agreement between DJPR and the VFF details how the organisations work together to facilitate the distribution of fodder after emergencies. Under the arrangement, DJPR scopes the initial phase of the emergency to assess fodder needs for the welfare of animals in affected areas, and VFF provides fodder for a period of four weeks from the commencement of operations following an emergency. The period of provision of fodder was extended from four to eight weeks for the 2019–20 fires.

Under the agreement in place for 2019–20, based on DJPR's initial assessment of the situation, an advance payment is made to VFF to establish depots, set up the VFF State Coordination Centre, employ the state coordinator/depot managers and pay for initial freight costs. VFF, in turn, agrees to source transport from the nearest location to the local depot, or property where the fodder is required.

Following the 2019–20 fires, the Emergency Fodder Distribution Agreement was reviewed and updated. New arrangements are now in place whereby the VFF will coordinate emergency fodder distribution and DJPR will administer payment of freight costs associated with emergency fodder transport.

#### 19.2.5 Response to support animal welfare following the fires

By 1 January 2020 AgVic was already actively collecting intelligence on the agricultural impacts of the fires via other agencies.<sup>259</sup> With the fires still active, access to begin animal welfare and loss and damage assessments was not immediately possible. Over the coming days, AgVic was able to deploy staff, at times with DELWP escorts, to travel across the regions to complete agricultural impact assessments. Road closures and persistent smoke made travel arrangements unpredictable and often precarious.

AgVic was informing the farming community that they could proceed with destroying their injured livestock without waiting for its staff to visit if they were confident in undertaking the task safely and humanely. A recommendation that landholders photograph the animals for insurance claim purposes was also communicated.

By 2 January 2020 a situation report identified that the VFF was coordinating fodder delivery convoys to Bairnsdale aerodrome.<sup>259</sup> An animal relief centre was also set up at the Bairnsdale Saleyards. Milk collections were also undertaken where possible.

In the Upper Murray complex, information gathering from landowners was greatly delayed due to damaged communications infrastructure. Milk and feed companies seeking information regarding access to farms were advised this was unlikely for several days.<sup>259</sup> When access was granted AgVic managed to initially assess 50 properties. At this early stage, the agency's focus was on attending to animal welfare concerns, conducting agricultural asset assessments (including fences, sheds and water infrastructure) and referring cases of urgent personal need to the fire IMT.<sup>259</sup>

A fodder depot was set up at the Corryong Saleyards due to fire risk concerns for fodder stored at the Cudgewa football ground. Milk tankers also arrived in Corryong on 2 January 2020.

Where possible over the coming weeks, AgVic staff in collaboration with other partner agencies and organisations such as the AVA, visited properties and actively collected intelligence on the ground or over the phone. Daily situation reports and incident action plans were compiled and distributed to stakeholders. AgVic provided information to farmers about managing livestock, crops, water supplies, soils and pastures after a bushfire.<sup>259</sup>

AgVic also established its own State Control Centre for agricultural relief and two regionally positioned IMTs – one in Gippsland and one in the North East.

Under the Emergency Fodder Distribution Agreement, VFF led the drive to provide fodder to affected farmers and established depots in Corryong and Bairnsdale (with further distribution to Omeo, Swifts Creek, Buchan and Gelantipy) where fodder could be delivered and collected.

The Victorian Emergency Animal Welfare Plan partners participated in a daily teleconference chaired by AgVic which coordinated the utilisation of animal welfare resources and assets. Through CAOG, AgVic linked ADF support for tasking livestock burial in Towong. The ADF was also engaged for emergency fodder delivery, at times by air when visibility allowed.

A whole-of-government BRV Hub was established in Bairnsdale on Tuesday 7 January with AgVic presence.<sup>259</sup>

Feedback from community meetings held on 9 January at Tallangatta Valley town hall and Mitta Mitta recreation centre indicated that the AgVic bushfire relief was well received.<sup>259</sup>

Table 9 (p 415) shows the livestock, agricultural and farming structure impacts.

As of 14 February 2020, the VFF had received donations of approximately 8365 tonnes of fodder (of which 5143 tonnes had been delivered) and approximately 113 tonnes of livestock feed pellets for fire-affected areas. The VFF scaled down its fodder depot operations in early February 2020 with the Bairnsdale depot ceasing operation on 5 February and the Corryong depot ceasing operation on 16 February.<sup>82</sup>



Emergency fodder (Image: Janice Newnham)

**Table 9.** Livestock, agricultural and farming structure impacts as of 10 February 2020 <sup>259</sup>

LIVESTOCK IMPACTS (AS A DIRECT RESULT OF FIRE)	GIPPSLAND	NORTH EAST	TOTAL
Dairy cattle deaths	16	186	202
Beef cattle deaths	302	3,021	3,323
Sheep deaths	581	1,580	2,161
Goat deaths	7	155	162
Horse deaths	9	33	42
Pig deaths	2	0	2
Poultry deaths	86	40	126
Beehives destroyed	49	85	134
<b>Livestock impacts (AgVic intervention)</b>			
Dairy cattle euthanised	0	9	9
Beef cattle euthanised	94	364	458
Sheep euthanised	5	473	478
Goats euthanised	0	1	1
Horses euthanised	0	1	1
Pigs euthanised	1	0	1
<b>Agricultural impacts (as a direct result of fire)</b>			
Field crops (ha)	0	926	926
Hay and silage (t)	2,331	19,839	22,070
Pasture (ha)	16,858	35,164	52,022
Softwood plantation (ha)	10	821	831
<b>Structural impacts (as a direct result of fire)</b>			
Wool sheds	12	23	35
Dairy sheds	3	2	5
Hay sheds	65	129	194
Machinery sheds	152	92	244
Irrigation pumps	28	16	44

### 19.2.6 Effectiveness of animal welfare support

The ADF was engaged to provide various forms of aid in early recovery. For example, along with members of AgVic, it supported different shires in stock disposal. Towong Shire, for example, indicated that burial of known dead livestock was well in hand and likely to be completed within several days of the fires passing. The support for the burial of the livestock came through additional resources acquired through the Municipal Resource Sharing Agreement and support from agencies. In other instances, support was delayed.

Plans were enacted to offer additional aerial surveillance over remote areas (supported by the ADF) to identify dead and injured stock and gather intelligence for fodder needs, however this was inhibited at times by smoke cover.

Roads in various parts of the North East were closed to ensure safe access, but this often resulted in farmers, who had left their properties, not being able to return to tend to any surviving livestock for several days.

Trauma was exacerbated for farmers by the helplessness of not being able to return to their properties. The lack of access and information was mentally taxing with farmers not entirely sure whether or not they had any stock to return to. Even if they knew that their stock had not perished, there was further suffering knowing for example that dairy cows were left un milked. Unmilked cows can develop infections and subsequently die.

When farmers returned to their properties, they often found that their boundary fencing was damaged or destroyed. As a result, while they attempted to repair and replace fencing, these farmers had to quickly find agistment options for their stock. Several community members told the Inquiry that farmers had to rely on neighbours, community members or nearby containment areas to store their livestock. Uncoordinated emergency agistment also led to feed issues for community members asked to take on stock as they were also underprepared.

Many farmers made major decisions regarding their business' viability early in the recovery process. If they were not able to feed their stock themselves or move them elsewhere for agistment, they were often forced to sell stock to abattoirs or other farmers. After selling stock, these farmers told IGEM that re-entry into the industry is cost-prohibitive.

#### 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.

## Fodder

To kickstart the recovery process, fodder was collected from across NSW and Victoria and transported to the affected areas in the state's north-east. In early January 2020, the ADF was delivering fodder to inaccessible areas by way of aerial drops. The VFF distributed donated fodder to properties in East Gippsland in the areas of Clifton Creek, Sarsfield, Buchan, Bete Bolong, Bruthen, Gelantipy, Omeo, Wiseleigh, Wairewa and surroundings districts. VFF fodder loads in the North East were directed to properties in multiple fire-affected areas.

Over the course of VFF's Fodder Drive, enough bales of hay and tonnes of pellets to feed 80,000 animals including cattle, horses, sheep and alpacas were delivered to affected landholders.

Fodder delivery and distribution was not without its issues. In one case shared with IGEM, an independent convoy of over 50 trucks was organised carrying fodder from NSW to Victoria but no infrastructure was in place to deal with the delivery. It was difficult to communicate with local farmers in the Alpine region because mobile communications were down and the power was cut in early January.

The initial plan was to use the local showgrounds as a distribution centre, however, having B-double trucks driving through towns posed too great a hazard, leading to the need for a new transport and logistics centre elsewhere. Taking delivery of a large quantity of fodder required an escort comprised of NSW and Victorian police and CFA trucks. The challenge was further compounded by movement of the trucks in and out of the area during a five-hour window so as to not be caught out during rapidly changing fire weather conditions.

Farmers told IGEM of the lack of a formalised process of distribution of emergency fodder. In some instances, loads of donated fodder were delivered to a private property with the advice that it should be redistributed by members of the community. This caused tension and angst among farmers who in some cases either did not have the means to collect it or did not want to be responsible for determining its fair distribution.

#### 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.

## 19.3 Financial assistance

The SERRP provides the legislative framework for DJPR to ‘assist the agriculture sector to recover and minimise long term social and economic impact on primary producers and other animal owners’.

The focus of a DJPR rural recovery program is on:

- supporting the wellbeing of rural communities
- revitalising the economy of rural communities through reestablishment of agricultural enterprises
- rehabilitation of productive land and the surrounding environment.

The framework outlines the activities that DJPR should include in a recovery program.

Financial assistance is to be implemented under the DRFA, to assist primary producer recovery. Under the DRFA, a low-interest concessional loan scheme and recovery grants for primary producers are administered by EMV subject to approval by the Australian Government.

DJPR collects impact and loss information for primary producers and provides this information to BRV and EMV.

EMV/BRV support DTF as the lead agency for this activity by advising the minister to request that the Treasurer activate Category B (direct concessional loans and/or consequential effect concessional loans for primary producers) where the NDRRA criteria are met; and/or the Premier requests the Prime Minister activate Category C (clean-up grant funding) where the DRFA criteria are met.

Under the DRFA Category D (exceptional circumstances), co-funding may also be available, subject to the Prime Minister’s approval.

### 19.3.1 Financial assistance and support programs

AgVic along with other organisations set up a range of essential recovery programs including technical support services for farming, wine grape industry assistance, fire damaged agricultural fencing, Rural Financial Counselling Service, HiveAid for beekeepers, as well as health and wellbeing services.

The following agencies and organisations provided and led recovery programs in the agricultural sector:

- AgBiz Assist (farm business support)
- AgVic (technical advice)
- AgVic with Meat and Livestock Australia (targeted business planning support)
- BRV (bushfire recovery support)
- Business Council of Australia (BizRebuild)
- DEWLP (fire damaged agricultural fencing; replacement of farm water taken for firefighting purposes)
- DHHS (wellbeing support)
- DHHS (farm household allowance)
- East Gippsland Shire Council (recovery coordination)
- EPA (managing bushfire waste)
- RFCS (farm business planning support)
- Rural Finance (grants and loans).

AgVic coordinated with other organisations through monthly Agriculture Recovery Guides developed to: support the development and delivery of Regional Agricultural Recovery Plans and Economic Recovery Pillar Committees; collate information to inform regional recovery and support planning; monitor the situation and identify issues for action; assist with coordinated promotion, development and delivery of events and support services; and support and enhance recovery communication.

The Agriculture Recovery Operational Plan 2020-21 nominates AgVic as a supporting agency for other agencies in their respective roles to deliver recovery activities including the DTF in implementing financial assistance under DRFA.<sup>264</sup> These responsibilities are grouped under the Economic Recovery Environment within the State Relief and Recovery Plan.

The following financial and economic assistance activities were rolled out as part of the recovery program.

#### **Meat and Livestock Australia's Back to Business Program**

The Back to Business Program in Victoria was coordinated by AgVic and allowed producers in fire-affected regions to access up to three free one-on-one-sessions with local farm business consultants to help put their business back on track.

#### **Small Business Bushfire Recovery Grants (federal/state support)**

In an initiative between the Victorian and Australian governments, grants of up to \$50,000 were made available for small businesses and non-profit organisations (who are not primary producers) that had suffered direct damage as a result of bushfire. Grants were created to help pay for costs of clean-up and reinstatement of eligible small businesses.

#### **Small Business Bushfire Support Grants (federal/state support)**

In an initiative between the Victorian and Australian governments, grants of up to \$10,000 were made available to support small businesses (including primary producers) significantly affected by the 2019–20 bushfires to recover and rebuild resilient businesses.

Eligible activities included meeting standard business costs, seeking financial advice, adjusting the business to be viable in the changed local context following bushfire and improvements to make the business more resilient to future emergencies. These grants were available to eligible small businesses in the local government areas of East Gippsland, Towong and Alpine that had suffered a decline in revenue of 40 per cent or more in a relevant three-month period.

### Emergency Bushfire Response in Primary Industries Grants

The Emergency Bushfire Response in Primary Industries Grants Program was cost-shared by the Victorian and Australian governments. Grants of up to \$75,000 per business to assist primary producers directly affected by the 2019–20 bushfires could be used for anything from fodder and water, to sheds, fencing, and agricultural equipment, where those needs were not covered by an existing insurance policy. The grants could also be used for the costs of cleaning up, salvaging and harvesting crops damaged by fire, smoke, ash and/or soot.

### Victorian Bushfire Concessional Loans

Concessional loans of up to \$500,000 were made available to assist primary producers, small business and non-profit organisations that had suffered significant damage to their assets and/or significant loss of income due to the 2019–20 Victorian bushfires. These loans were jointly funded with the Commonwealth Government under the DRFA. The loans were for the purpose of restoring and/or replacing damaged assets and/or to meet working capital expenses.

### Emergency Transport Support Program: Primary Producers

Fire-affected primary producers (including apiarists) could claim up to \$15,000 to support: emergency fodder to fire-affected properties; stock to agistment (including return), sale, or slaughter; emergency stock drinking water. Up to 50 per cent of costs could be claimed for a maximum of 1500 kilometres per movement, or a maximum of 500 kilometres for water movement.

### Rural Financial Counselling Service

Rural Financial Counselling Service (RFCS) provided free financial counselling to farmers and small related businesses who found themselves in, or at risk of financial hardship. Counsellors were able to provide referrals to other professional services including accountants, agricultural advisors, education, or counselling as well as assist applicants to apply for financial supports.

Table 10 shows the uptake of the various financial assistance programs in East Gippsland as of 5 August 2020. Figures are provided for both general and successful applications.

**Table 10.** Indicators of recovery progress in East Gippsland (Source: EPA<sup>265</sup>)

INDICATORS	PROGRESS				
<b>Uptake of fire recovery grants and loans (as of 05/08/2020)</b>	Primary industry grant (\$75,000)	Transport subsidy (\$15,000)	Concessional loans applications (up to \$500,000)	Small Business Bushfire Support Grants (\$10,000)	Wine Grape Testing Rebate (up to \$1,200)
	471 applications (187 in East Gippsland Shire)	188 applications (70 in East Gippsland Shire)	81 applications (26 in East Gippsland Shire)	2386 applications (1077 in East Gippsland Shire)	147 applications (4 from East Gippsland Shire)
	397 approved (158 in East Gippsland Shire)	171 approved (65 in East Gippsland Shire)	3 approved (1 from East Gippsland Shire)	1905 approved (864 in East Gippsland Shire)	138 approved (4 from East Gippsland Shire)
			(17 of the total are primary producers)	(352 of the total applications are primary producers)	
<b>Uptake of Back to Business Program</b>	24 farmer applications for the back to business program (statewide)				

### **Wine Grape Smoke Taint Grant**

The Victorian Government provided a rebate to growers for smoke impact testing of wine grape, grape juice and wine samples submitted for laboratory analysis between 1 January 2020 and 30 April 2020. The Technical Support Package delivered by Wine Victoria, provided winemakers and growers access to technical advice to help manage any effects of smoke exposure in their wines.

Initiatives delivered through the package included technical workshops, support to produce mini-ferments (test batches), evaluations of 2020 wines by an expert sensory panel or kits for winemakers to assess their own products, as well as research activities into treatments for smoke-affected wines and the impacts of smoke on locally important varieties. Wine Victoria delivered the Technical Support Package until September 2021.

Grants of up to \$10,000 (with dollar-for-dollar co-contribution) were made available to eligible wine grape producers who suffered crop damage from smoke taint caused by the bushfires and who were located outside the areas that were eligible for Emergency Bushfire Response Primary Industries and Small Business Bushfire Support Grants. The program was fully funded by the Australian Government and administered by the Victorian Government under DRFA.

### **Animal welfare, technical and decision-making support for managing livestock after a bushfire**

AgVic provided technical and decision-making support for managing livestock, property, domestic animals and pets before and after fires. Specifically, this included the provision of advice on animal health, animal nutrition and feed budgeting, grazing and pasture management, farm water planning and management, soil erosion management, farm planning, livestock water quality, stock containment areas, and irrigation systems and management.

### **Emergency livestock water**

Emergency stock drinking water was made available and could be accessed from Emergency Water Supply Points within each region.

### **Rural Aid – disaster assistance for farmers**

Rural Aid for disaster assistance was available for farmers and primary producers affected by drought, fire and floods. The assistance program included domestic water deliveries, fodder deliveries, financial assistance (subject to meeting Rural Aid criteria) and Farm Army volunteers to help on affected farms.

### **Perennial seed funding for Victorian fire-impacted farmers**

BlazeAid provided eligible farmers (those registered with BlazeAid) with perennial grass seed to re-establish pastures in burnt paddocks.

### **HiveAid**

Hive Aid was established as a drought and bushfire relief campaign aimed at supporting all Australian professional beekeepers struggling from the difficult conditions being experienced across the country. It was managed by Rural Aid and overseen by the Australian Honey Bee Industry Council.

#### **OBSERVATION 19.1**

Many of the grant programs provided to support agricultural recovery were indispensable and effective in supporting recovery.

Table 11 (p 421) shows the uptake of the various AgVic support programs as of 5 August 2020. Figures are provided for referral requests, BRV Hub requests as well as engagement with the farming community.

**Table 11.** Indicators of AgVic support program uptake Source: EPA<sup>265</sup>

INDICATORS	PROGRESS			
<b>Progress with AgVic referral requests</b>	94 requests for agricultural support. 94 phone calls have been made	Requests: Technical advice (39), Feed Planning (27), Pasture advice (93), Water quality (23), Dam water quality (29), Pest plant control (14), Pest animal control (7) and On-farm erosion (15). Landholders might have requested more than one issue.		
<b>Progress with AgVic BRV Hub requests</b>	3 requests (Gippsland) for agriculture support completed	AgVic can provide farm-related technical support in the following areas: Animal health, animal nutrition & feed budgeting, grazing & pasture management, farm water planning & management, soil erosion management, farm planning, livestock water quality, irrigation systems & management		
<b>Additional AgVic engagement with the farming community</b>	<b>Event/activity</b>	<b>Gippsland</b>	<b>North East</b>	<b>Total</b>
	<b>Farmer interaction</b>			
	One-to-one farm visits for agricultural recovery advice	8	11	19
	Farmers visits to drop in centres	154	220	374
	27 Field days, workshops, webinars, teleconferences providing information on agricultural recovery & support services across Gippsland & North East	164	141	305
	Phone calls; technical assistance and support	248	118	366
	<i>Total</i>	<i>574</i>	<i>490</i>	<i>1064</i>
	<b>Service provider interactions</b>			
	Field days, workshops, and webinars providing information on agricultural recovery & support services for use with clients	83	58	141
	Phone calls; technical assistance & support	23	18	41
	<i>Total</i>	<i>106</i>	<i>76</i>	<i>182</i>
	<b>Media and communications</b>			
	Number of social media posted			218
	Number of print media items & fact sheets developed			80
Letters regarding support & agricultural advice	555	733	1288	
Emails regarding support & agricultural advice	278		278	

### 19.3.2 Grant program coverage and eligibility

As a result of the precarious financial position in which many farmers found themselves, various recovery programs were established at the National, State and Regional levels. Grants were made available to cover the cost of clean-up, reinstatement activities and emergency measures associated with the immediate recovery of primary production enterprises.

However, the eligibility criteria made these grants unattainable for many in the agricultural sector. Eligibility criteria could partly explain the difference between the number of grant applications in East Gippsland and those that succeeded, as seen in Table 10 (p 419).

Emergency Bushfire Response in Primary Industries Grants were primarily aimed at helping primary producers. Under the grant criteria, the term 'primary producer' was strictly defined. It did not cover all farmers and farming enterprises.

The term 'primary producers' is described under the Australian New Zealand Standard Industrial Classification 2006 (ANZSIC) 1292.0 (Revision 2.0) Codes 01 (Agriculture), 02 (Aquaculture), 03 (Forestry and Logging), 04 (Fishing, Hunting and Trapping) and 05 (Agriculture, Forestry and Fishing Support Services).

According to the grant guidelines, primary producer means either:

- a sole trader who spends part of their labour on, and derives the majority of their income (at least 50 per cent) from a primary production enterprise in agriculture (including aquaculture, horticulture and viticulture), fisheries, hunting or trapping, private forestry or apiary
- in relation to a partnership, private company or trust that carries on a primary production enterprise, the partners in the partnership, shareholders in the company or beneficiaries of the trust who spend part of their labour on, and derive the majority of their income from, the primary production enterprise.

Such a classification in effect excludes many members of the agricultural community. Other eligibility criteria for the grants stipulated that:

- the applicant's primary production enterprise is located outside the defined disaster area for the eligible disaster but is carried on at least sometimes on a regular basis in the area
- plant or equipment of the primary production enterprise situated in the defined disaster area has been damaged or livestock has died as a result of the eligible disaster.

The eligibility criteria of these grants address some of the exceptions (such as the issue of drought) in a limited manner only.

Specifically, the grant guidelines state:

*4.3 Where an applicant's income from primary production is less than 50 per cent of their total income, the applicant may nonetheless be eligible for a grant if it can be demonstrated that:*

4. a) *in the ordinary course of business the applicant would meet that requirement, but:*
  - *their primary production income is currently reduced due to drought; and/or*
  - *due to long lead times to full production, (e.g. an orchard or vineyard is in early stages of development), the applicant expects to earn such an amount of income within an eight year period; or*
  - *the applicant is a forest plantation grower, or a private land holder who actively manages forest resources, with the intention of deriving income from commercial timber and/or wood fibre production; or*
5. b) *the applicant derives at least 50 per cent of their total income from primary production and value-added products (eg wine) made directly from raw produce grown by the applicant.*

**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.

## 19.4 Fencing

For rural landowners, the loss of fencing is among the most enduring and devastating impacts from bushfire. It is also one of the most protracted, as replacing farm fences is laborious, expensive work that can take months or even years to complete. In the case of solo farmers, fence replacement becomes a priority in order to contain stock and can become overwhelming in the face of other recovery needs. Following major bushfires, the availability of skilled fencing contractors if a landowner can afford external help is often stretched.

The question of who pays for fencing damaged by fires that emerge from public lands and burn to private property has a long and nuanced history. It has also taken government and fire authorities many years to consider at an appropriate level. Despite vast fencing losses in the 1983 Ash Wednesday fires, it would take further significant losses in Gippsland and the Grampians before an identifiable policy position was adopted. Even then, the scale of fencing losses in the 2009 bushfires was such as to prompt several new philanthropic responses as farmers struggled to replace fencing.

The issue has taken on a sharper focus in recent years with the increasing incidence of large uncontrolled fires. Additional layers of complexity arise in relation to land tenure when private land fronts rivers and streams, railway easements and other forms of public ownership.

Whether government, as land manager of the public estate, should be held liable for damage to boundary fencing from fires that originate on that land, whatever the cause, is at the heart of community debate.

To date, government has made significant concessions, particularly where fire mitigation efforts have caused the fire or response activities have damaged fencing, but these are still well short of the obligations attached to neighbouring private landholders. Statutory indemnities from liability for damage more generally caused by fire add weight to the government's legal position in a way that is less clear for private landowners whose liability is governed by common law.

---

*Public landowners are governed by statutory provisions that give rise to defences and immunities that are not available to private landowners.<sup>266</sup>*

---

The government has no obligation to share in the cost of constructing boundary fences between Crown and private land. Central to the question of 'who pays' when a boundary fence is destroyed by bushfire is a general immunity from liability enjoyed by the government under section 31 of the *Fences Act 1968*, which otherwise provides as a general principle that all landholders will share the cost of constructing and replacing damaged fencing between their properties.

**OBSERVATION 19.4**

While the *Fences Act 1968* 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.

In 1998, the Law Reform Committee of the Victorian Parliament noted that most government departments and agencies did not invoke the immunity and contributed 50 per cent to the cost of fencing replacement. One exception was the then Department of Natural Resources and Environment (now DELWP) which did rely upon the exemption, 'given the vast area of land under its administration and the potentially significant financial burden of sharing fencing costs'. The committee recommended that the government pay half of the cost of fence replacement where damage was due to natural disasters, but only where the cost was not otherwise recoverable.

An inquiry into the major fires in the Alpine areas in 2002–03 revisited the fencing issue as part of a broader suite of financial relief measures. The inquiry reported a general lack of consistency in available financial assistance.

While not seeking to dilute the need for landowners to take appropriate measures to mitigate potential loss through insurance, it suggested that a policy framework for recovery should enshrine a principle that such measure 'be predictable, equitable, and consistent'. Importantly, in relation to boundary fencing, it pointed to a need to 'provide an imperative for appropriate land management on public land at the public/private interface'.<sup>34</sup>

The government responded with a \$5.75 million commitment and a raft of piecemeal measures which included:

- \$1.2 million to clear areas around fence lines
- \$200,000 to coordinate a volunteer/paid workforce for fencing work
- \$600,000 for subsidies for temporary stock containment areas; and
- up to \$3.75 million towards wild dog fencing the boundary with public land.

The government also pledged to reimburse any insurance excess paid by farmers for the replacement or repair of fencing on the boundary with public land, up to a maximum of \$400. An allocation of \$100,000 for fencing repairs undertaken by volunteer groups amounted to a signal of intent that the state sought to be absolved of further responsibility.

The 2006–07 Great Divide fires again prompted community disquiet around a lack of consistency and certainty in relation to compensation for lost fencing. The government announced supplementary policy measures which included 100 per cent compensation for fencing destroyed due to escaped planned burns or due to firefighting operations.

A subsequent 2008 Victorian parliamentary inquiry by the Environment and Natural Resources Committee into public land management practices and bushfires recommended that the Victorian Government establish 'a clear and consistent Bushfire Fencing Policy for damage caused by all future bushfires and prescribed burns'.

It proposed that the policy be ongoing rather than event specific and include the following provisions:

- the government contribute half the cost of replacing or repairing for fencing on the boundary between public and private land that is destroyed or damaged by a fire which has emerged from public land, but only where the cost of replacement or repair was not otherwise recoverable
- the government pay a contribution, of up to 100 per cent, of the cost of restoring fences or other assets destroyed or damaged by backburning conducted during fire suppression operations
- the government will pay the full cost of fences or other assets destroyed or damaged if prescribed burns on public land escape onto private land
- the government will pay the full cost of rehabilitation of fire control lines on private property established by the CFA or the Department of Sustainability and Environment during wildfire suppression activity for fire originating on public land
- the government will pay the full cost of repairing or replacing fences on private land that are damaged or destroyed by machinery used in controlling bushfires that originate on public land.<sup>267</sup>

The government accepted the recommendation in principle but was careful to note that it wished to ensure that 'that disincentives are not created to under insure assets against bushfire or other damage'.<sup>268</sup>

Estimates of the amount fencing lost during the 2009 Victorian bushfires vary from 8600 kilometres to 12,500 kilometres.<sup>269</sup> However, the issue of fencing received scant attention at the VBRC, which despite many submissions claiming the prevailing arrangements were unfair, concluded 'there was insufficient time to consider in any depth the question of whether change is required'.<sup>260</sup>

The VBRC noted that fencing bordering public land remained 'a problem' because private landowners potentially bore the full cost of restoring damaged fencing between their property and public land. In its final report, the VBRC added:

---

*That the landowner is invariably solely responsible for the cost of replacing fencing that borders public land does seem unreasonable, particularly as the landowner has very limited ability to ensure that fire prevention activities on adjoining public land adequately reduce the risk of fencing damage from bushfires. The Commission encourages the State to re-examine its position on this matter.*<sup>260</sup>

---

One upshot of the 2009 bushfires was the rise in the number of volunteer-based initiatives to assist farmers clear and rebuild destroyed fencing. Some of this was coordinated by VFF, some by councils and some through service clubs such as Rotary. BlazeAid, a volunteer-based organisation established initially to assist farmers with fencing, was borne out of these fires and has operated as a registered charity for more than decade to assist in the aftermath of emergencies across Australia.

#### 19.4.1 The legislative and policy framework before the 2019–20 bushfires

In 2014, the government introduced a new policy in relation to the repair of fences damaged by bushfire, fire suppression or planned burning activities: Repair of Fences Damaged by Bushfire and Fire Control Line Rehabilitation Policy.<sup>85</sup> In 2015, the policy was modified to include damage from bushfire fires starting from private land.

The policy represented a shift from the position at the time of the 2009 fires and partly addresses the 'unreasonable' position alluded to by the VBRC by agreeing that the State would pay 50 per cent of cost or replacement materials of fences destroyed by bushfire.

The policy noted there was approximately 60,000 km of boundary fencing between public (Crown land) and private land in Victoria and maintained the position that landowners share the responsibility of boundary fencing, while encouraging them to 'assess and manage their risks with regard to fire by taking up adequate insurance where available'. In addition:

- Landholders are expected to manage risks to their assets from the potential impact of bushfire.
- All landholders are expected to have appropriate levels of insurance cover for boundary and internal fences, in the same way any business venture or private householder should protect and insure their assets.
- In line with the Fences Act, the State Government of Victoria does not have any ownership or financial stake in fences along the boundary of private and public land except in cases where specific fencing agreements have been entered into with landholder.

#### FINDING 19.3

With the increased frequency of emergencies, the costs of insuring fence replacement, as encouraged by Victorian Government, is becoming prohibitive and in some cases unavailable.

It is the responsibility of the owner of private land to fence their property and secure stock within their boundary. The policy referred to section 31 of the Fences Act, which states:

---

*This Act except as is in section 30H otherwise provided shall not apply to any unalienated Crown lands; nor shall the Crown the Governor nor any public officer appointed by the Governor or by the Governor in Council for the administration management or control of the Crown lands or public works or who by virtue of his or her office however styled has any such management or control be liable under this Act to make any contribution towards any fencing works and any subsidiary works for any dividing fence between the land of any owner and any Crown land.*

---

The section 31 exclusion stands in stark contrast to the general principle of co-dependency set out in section 7:

---

*s. 7 General principle—owners are liable to contribute in equal proportions to a sufficient dividing fence*

*(1) If there is no dividing fence between adjoining lands, the owners of the adjoining lands are liable to contribute in equal proportions to fencing works and any subsidiary works for the construction of a sufficient dividing fence for the adjoining lands.*

*(2) If there is a dividing fence between adjoining lands for which fencing works and any subsidiary works are required so that the dividing fence would be a sufficient dividing fence, the owners of the adjoining lands are liable to contribute in equal proportions to the fencing works and any subsidiary works for a sufficient dividing fence.*

---

Essentially, the government claimed that while it is the managing authority on Crown land it does not act as an owner. As such, it is absolved of the legal responsibility to contribute in equal proportions to fencing works, which includes material costs, labour and machinery costs.

The scope of the policy included:

- fences that adjoin National Park, State Park and State Forest damaged by bushfires
- fences damaged as a result of bushfire suppression activities
- fences damaged as a result of planned burning activities
- fire control lines constructed by fire agencies during bushfire emergencies
- fences covered by an agreement between the Victorian Government and the private landholder.

It excluded internal fences damaged by bushfire, repair or replacement of any losses, other than fencing or other fencing assets and replanting of trees, re-establishment of pasture, or any other agricultural crop.

The policy covered specific scenarios of damage and rehabilitation:

1. Repair of fences damaged by bushfire on the boundary of private land and public land.
2. Government will meet half the cost of materials to replace or repair fencing between private land and all national parks, state parks and state forests destroyed or damaged by bushfires. The Lead Agency is not responsible for the repair or replacement of internal fences that have been impacted by bushfire, unless damaged by machinery during fire suppression activities. Assets damaged by bushfire are the responsibility of the land holder and may be able to be claimed through the land holder's insurance.
3. DELWP planned burns that escape from public land and damage private land.
4. Government will pay the cost of restoration if fences or other fencing assets are destroyed or damaged by planned burns on public land escaping onto private land.
5. Note - DELWP planned burns are burns undertaken as part of the yearly planned burning program and do not include fire suppression back-burns undertaken by the fire agencies during a bushfire emergency in order to try to control a bushfire.
6. The land holder must contact the Lead Agency as soon as possible after the fire event. Claims for assistance MUST be lodged within 12 months of the incident.
7. Damage to private fences (internal and boundary) by fire agency staff or machinery during bushfire emergencies
8. The Victorian Government will pay 100 per cent of the restoration costs of fences damaged on private land as a result of machinery used by fire agencies to control bushfires, or fire agency staff cutting through fences to allow access for suppression efforts.
9. This includes damage to fences by machinery such as bulldozers entering the property and/or constructing fire control lines, and other fire emergency vehicles obtaining access.
10. Rehabilitation of fire control lines constructed by fire agencies during bushfire emergencies.
11. Government will assist private landholders with the rehabilitation of fire control lines, established by fire agencies, during the suppression of bushfires.

In the event of fire that starts on private land and is under the control of the CFA, the authority will provide some limited assistance for the rehabilitation of fire control lines and repair to fences damaged by machinery. DELWP will assist the CFA with fencing and control line rehabilitation works when requested.

The main area of contention remained the State's unwillingness to cover or share the costs of labour and machinery for the repair and replacement of damaged fences between private and Crown land. The '50 per cent' referred to by the government relates to materials only. In the case of private landholders, the equal division of costs refers to 'fencing works', in other words both materials and labour costs.

By leaving the labour cost burden with landholders, the government is compelling them to either acquire insurance, rely on the aid of volunteer organisations or complete the work themselves.

#### FINDING 19.4

The Victorian Government has committed to covering 50 per cent 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.

### 19.4.2 Recovery activities and initiatives after the 2019–20 fires

An estimated 6000 kilometres of agricultural fencing was destroyed or damaged in the 2019–20 bushfires. A reassessed figure in November 2020 from AgVic put the fence loss in East Gippsland at 2873 km (down from 5206 km) of which 1324 km was boundary fencing. Towong Shire estimated that 3200 km of fencing was damaged or destroyed within its municipality. Smaller losses were recorded in Alpine Shire. The East Gippsland Catchment Management Authority reported losing 100 km of water frontage fencing.

In January 2020 – during the fires – DELWP published the Repair of Rural Fencing Damaged by Bushfire and Fire Control Line Rehabilitation Policy for the 2019–20 Bushfire Season. The new policy reiterates the substantive 2015 principal positions, noting that the policy is based on shared responsibility between the government and private landholders and that 'government encourages landholders to assess and manage their risks with regard to fire by taking up adequate insurance where available'. It again notes that landowners are expected to manage their risks from bushfire impacts, have appropriate levels of insurance, reiterates that the government has no ownership of boundary fences and that it is the responsibility of landowners to secure their stock.

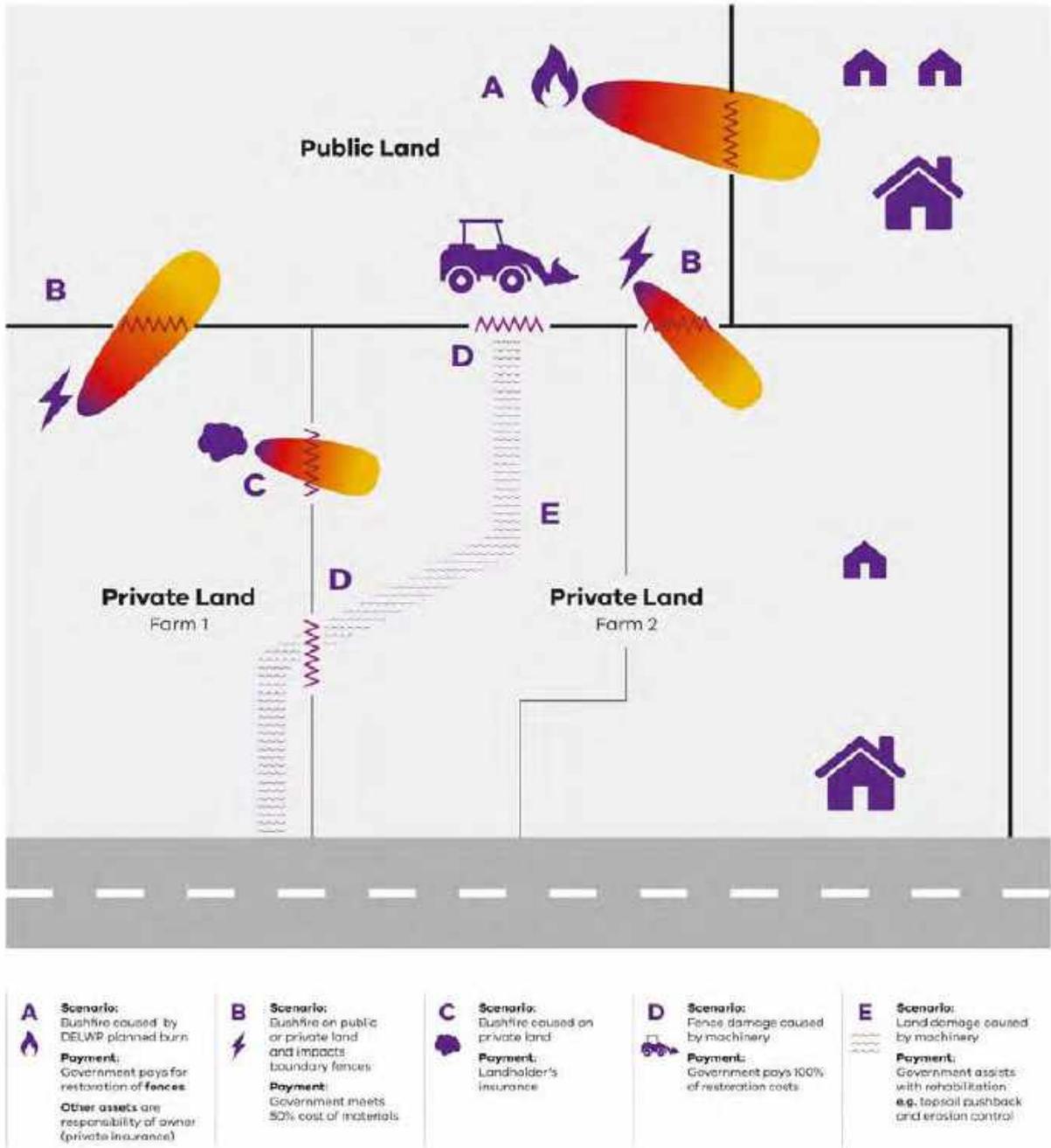
Moreover, the 2020 policy:

- clarifies that reimbursement for up to 50 per cent for materials for boundary fences includes damage from fires, whether the bushfire started on private or public land
- places a limit of \$5000 per kilometre on the reimbursement of material costs for boundary fences
- stipulates that the fence may be of a standard that is fire resistant and designed to keep out predators such as wild dogs
- provides specifically that the owner is responsible for paying labour and any other costs and for arranging the carrying out of the work.

Where the damage is caused by fire agency staff or machinery during bushfire emergencies, the government will arrange for the works to be carried out and pay 100 per cent of the costs. This includes internal fences and fences between private properties.<sup>270</sup> These incremental changes, while providing clarity, do little to address the fundamental liability issue that remains of concern to many landowners.

Figure 29 (p 428) sets out the scenarios for the different levels of compensation that apply under the 2020 policy.

**Figure 29.** Repair of Rural Fencing Damaged by Bushfire and Fire Control Line Rehabilitation Policy for the 2019–20 Bushfire Season. (Source: FFMVic <sup>270</sup>)



### 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.

In April 2020 the NSW Government committed \$209 million to assisting landowners rebuild boundary fencing through the Supporting Our Neighbours – Public Land Boundary Fencing Program. While it similarly set a \$5000 per kilometre limit, one significant difference in the NSW scheme was that the grant money could be used to pay fencing contractors for labour as well as materials.

The Inquiry has heard mixed reports around the issue of fencing following the 2019–20 fires. Due to the scale of fires in Victoria, NSW and elsewhere, there was significant pressure on the availability of fencing contractors and fencing materials. The impact of COVID-19 pandemic imposed further duress, especially on imported materials.

There appears to have been a growing reliance by both government and community on charitable and volunteer groups which have positioned themselves as key providers of fencing assistance following emergencies. The experience of consumers of these services, notably in East Gippsland has been mixed. Perhaps with the best of intentions, some of their efforts have led to long delays in critical fencing being erected. Some landowners have taken issue with the quality of the fences erected to the point where they have declined further involvement with volunteer groups.

#### 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.

### 19.4.3 Fencing waste removal, disposal and recycling

The EPA provided environmental and safety advice regarding the disposal and recycling of fencing waste.<sup>265</sup>

Grocon was contracted to conduct the clean-up on behalf of the Victorian Government. While fencing was not included as part of the clean-up program, it was removed where necessary for the safe clean-up of destroyed buildings. Grants of up to \$75,000 were made available for fire affected primary producers which could be put towards a variety of clean-up and restoration works including fencing removal and disposal.

The government, through DEWLP, helped landholders in bushfire-affected communities who did not receive these grants to repair damaged or destroyed fences between private land and national parks, state parks and state forests.

In addition, volunteer organisations such as BlazeAid or Rotary had the capacity to help sort recyclable (wire) from non-recyclable materials (timber). Immix Integrated Metal Management, a privately-owned metal recycling company, was able to collect burnt fencing wire and metal posts and for transport to its facility for recycling. Separated timber posts were sent to lined landfills as part of the broader clean-up operation.

In some communities, however, these organisations were neither available or engaged, and fencing waste remained alongside roads and on properties for months.

### 19.4.4 Fencing replacement and repair

BRV's *State Recovery Report* dated 4 December 2020 indicates that in relation to boundary fencing and all fences damaged during response operations, some \$4.9 million in funding had been released for fencing (\$3.61 million to East Gippsland, \$1.22 million to Towong) in respect of 480 successful applications of 789 received.

FFMVic assisted in the repair of bushfire damaged fences on the boundary of public land providing financial support for materials to replace or repair fences located on the boundary of private land and national parks, state parks and state forests. Other bushfire damaged property boundary and internal fences were not covered by this assistance.<sup>85</sup>

## 19.4.5 Other fencing support

### **Gippsland Fencing Grant and the Victorian Farmers Federation**

GERF (see section 5.5.2, p 119) established the Gippsland Fencing Grant. The GERF provided \$1.4 million to the VFF to distribute to East Gippsland farmers affected by the fires who needed fencing work completed. Individual grants for up to \$5000 were made available, with allowance also made available for those farmers in urgent need of fodder for the coming season.

### **BlazeAid**

BlazeAid, a volunteer-based organisation established after the 2009 Victorian bushfires, provides in-kind assistance for the clearance, repair or re-establishment of fences for all types of livestock. BlazeAid most commonly helps people, who require fence repair and rebuilding, who are not insured or are under-insured.

The organisation is comprised of volunteers and depends on donations for its continued operation. It does not have the capacity to attend to every request for help, in turn creating situations that may be perceived as giving preferential treatment. By operating in a range of different emergencies over the last decade, it has developed a level of expertise and reputation.

Community members shared with IGEM their experiences and interactions with BlazeAid, with some suggesting the organisation often enters engagements with a specific manner of working and a distinct set of expectations. Many community members lauded BlazeAid for their help, but others found that their own views were not adequately considered and that engaging Blazeaid actually created burdens for them that they found difficult to manage. Fire affected landowners described requirement to have cleared the fence-line before Blazeaid would commence work which was frequently very difficult, and being required to provide morning and afternoon tea for workers often in situations where it was difficult and/or impractical to do so.

In January 2020 BlazeAid established camps at Corryong in the North East and Bruthen in East Gippsland. The organisation often worked with local Uniting Church Fencing Teams, Rotary and Lions clubs as a way of extending their resources more efficiently.

### **Uniting Church Fencing team, Rotary and Lions clubs**

Across the North East and East Gippsland volunteer support groups such as the Uniting Church Fencing team, local Rotary and Lions clubs collaborated with each other in different configurations to help farmers with clearing property boundaries and erecting new fences.

The Uniting Church team has been in operation offering fencing repair services since the 2009 Victorian fires, and has reported assisting over 30 landholders and providing over 6000 hours of volunteer work hours. The team has worked in the Upper Murray with BlazeAid and in Benalla with the local Rotary club since January 2020.

#### CASE STUDY: SARSFIELD LUCAS MILL PARTNERSHIP

In early 2020, several farmers stayed and defended their Sarsfield properties. Some managed to save their homes and vehicles yet lost valuable assets, such as sheds and fencing. Many of these farmers had taken insurance out on their homes but not on fencing due to the prohibitive cost.

With an urgent need to repair and replace fencing so as to recreate containment areas for their stock, several farmers came together through a community-led initiative between the Bruthen Lions Club and the East Gippsland Rotary Fire Aid Group. Together they purchased a portable Lucas Mill in order to make new fence posts out of timber salvaged after the fires had passed. The salvaged timber was considered too valuable to use as firewood, so the group raised over \$200,000 to acquire the portable mill.

The project also received an initial \$30,000 boost under the Bushfire Recovery Response package, delivered by DELWP. The contribution funded the initial month of operating costs. The initiative also gained support from the local BRV Community Recovery Hub in Sarsfield which helped with promotion and registration of interested parties.

From early March 2021, many landholders in the region signed up to have works undertaken on their properties. A contract operating team was engaged, trained in the safe operation of the mill, and accredited through local providers.

Initially, the project aimed to service farms within the fire footprint area in East Gippsland for the next two years, with the possibility of ongoing operations in future recovery efforts as needed.



Portable Lucas Mill demonstration, Sarsfield February 2021 (Source: IGEM)

## 19.5 Impacts of COVID-19

The COVID-19 pandemic had a substantial impact in slowing the recovery process for agricultural communities affected directly and indirectly by the bushfires. These communities did not have to contend with virus transmission but were affected by statewide lockdowns. Since these communities are already very isolated, the inability to retain physical connections was debilitating psychologically.

Previously community would attend local gatherings, with in-person relief and recovery meetings encouraged.<sup>265</sup> However, throughout 2020, most contact moved online - especially with recovery agencies providing support and advice. In addition to being somewhat detached mediums, online communication platforms (for example, Zoom) posed two concurrent problems in these communities.

First, communications networks in these regions tend to be unstable and unreliable. Many landowners still rely primarily on high-frequency radios and traditional phone trees to communicate and exchange vital information. Second, becoming proficient and comfortable to use new communication platforms has required some upskilling in the community. The development of these new competencies can be considered one silver lining of the COVID-19 pandemic, however broadband networks remain underdeveloped.

The COVID-19 pandemic added another level of distress for communities and for agencies providing relief and recovery services. Agencies, such as AgVic, that already have strong local footprints were considerably challenged by the numerous travel restrictions.

In March 2020, recovery organisations were assessing the way they could deliver recovery services and finding alternative ways to engage with the community. As an example, two webinars were successfully run on pasture recovery for the Sarsfield, Gelantipy and surrounding areas with a combined total of 17 farmers and service providers engaging.<sup>265</sup> Others have been delivered in the meantime while COVID-19 travel restrictions were in place.

The COVID-19 pandemic also affected agricultural communities economically. During the relief and early recovery phase of the event, some landholders decided to sell stock because they were either not able to contain animals appropriately, find agistment arrangements, or reduce the amount they would need to feed during the winter. Due to the pandemic restrictions, there was concern that access to saleyards would be limited and sales would be difficult to complete.<sup>265</sup>

However, the farming community effectively realigned its provision of goods to metropolitan Melbourne during lockdown. Relationships with grocery providers such as Woolworths and Wesfarmers strengthened due to urgent need to source locally, quickly and efficiently.

The multiple and layered impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic forced many members of the agricultural community to consider income diversification. Whilst the idea had already been considered over past years of persistent drought, the COVID-19 pandemic provided an impetus to further reconsider agricultural business viability.

## Chapter 20

Aboriginal culture and healing



Aboriginal Victorians have unique needs and values that have been poorly recognised or understood by the government during recovery from emergencies in the past. They have lived through generations of disconnection, discrimination and trauma, which have influenced their concepts of culture and healing. That past influences the experience of Aboriginal people during emergencies and requires consideration when using the concepts of Aboriginal culture and healing to underpin strategies for their recovery.

Aboriginal people have been treated differently to non-Indigenous people by successive governments through discriminatory policies of eradication, segregation and assimilation among others.<sup>271</sup> As a result, Aboriginal people are disadvantaged in society, and many of them today are cautious about accessing government services to avoid further discrimination.<sup>272 273</sup>

As First Nations, Traditional Owners and Aboriginal people are distinct political-legal groups who pre-date the arrival of English common law, and whose rights are ongoing.<sup>274</sup> Some of these are formally recognised by the Federation of Australia, including through native title, cultural heritage and land rights laws. The Australian Government is also a signatory to international agreements protecting First Nation rights, including the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples.<sup>275</sup>

Aboriginal people in Victoria have a strong history of political activism and community organising.<sup>276</sup> Recently they have led conversations with government to highlight issues they face and offer solutions to those challenges. The outcomes of those Aboriginal-led processes include legislative reforms such as the *Aboriginal Lands Act 1970*, *Aboriginal Heritage Act 2006*, the *Traditional Owner Settlement Act 2010*, and more recently the establishment of the First Peoples Assembly of Victoria and the creation of the Yoo-rook Justice Commission.<sup>277 278 279</sup>

In Victoria, the Aboriginal Heritage Act governs Aboriginal peoples' cultural and heritage rights. One of the key functions of the Act is to facilitate the creation of Registered Aboriginal Parties. The Traditional Owner Settlement Act and the *Native Title Act 1998* also provide a basis for Aboriginal groups to have their cultural and heritage rights recognised. Those three Acts together provide the basis for the formal recognition of Aboriginal groups. However, there are some areas in Victoria where formal recognition of Aboriginal people has not yet occurred.

In 2020 there were 11 Registered Aboriginal Parties in Victoria. Registered Aboriginal Parties have significant cultural and heritage responsibilities as outlined in the Aboriginal Heritage Act. One of their functions is to protect and manage the cultural and heritage rights of Traditional Owner groups. This is done through site identification, site registration on the Victorian Aboriginal Heritage Register, and cultural heritage assessments carried out with land managers and private landowners.

One potential driver of change in the government's approach to Aboriginal peoples and emergency management is the new 2020 National Agreement on Closing the Gap. For the first time since the 2008 Closing the Gap framework, the agreement now includes consideration of emergency management. It commits all Australian Governments to engage with Aboriginal representatives before, during and after emergencies and to ensure that Aboriginal people are not disproportionately affected so that they can recover as quickly as other Australians.<sup>280</sup>

The trauma that Aboriginal people experience from emergencies such as bushfires is compounded by a history of intergenerational trauma from colonisation, and that influences their recovery. Contemporary discrimination also hinders their recovery. Since Aboriginal people are wary of the government, a legacy effect of colonisation, it is crucial that the government and other stakeholders in emergency management learn to work with Aboriginal communities in a way that is culturally sensitive and appropriate.

Aboriginal culture and heritage involve tangible and intangible values such as material objects, song, and knowledges of land, water and climate.<sup>281</sup> Although heritage is often associated with the care of material objects, buildings and sites, the meaning of heritage is much broader. It encompasses all that is valued in the present to be passed on down through generations, and it shapes identity, memory, and sense of place.<sup>282</sup>

Well known examples of Aboriginal peoples' heritage in the landscape include bora grounds, middens, scarred and modified trees, stone features, tools, rock art, engravings, fish traps, village sites and burial grounds. However, Aboriginal peoples' heritage also encompasses their relationships with particular ecosystems or species, and with knowledge systems passed on through languages, cultural practices such as storytelling, and material practices such as land management.<sup>283 284 285</sup>

There is much Aboriginal heritage at risk of damage and irreplaceable loss from emergencies such as bushfires. Damage to tangible cultural heritage can damage intangible heritage by restricting the ways that Aboriginal people can continue their cultural, knowledge and material practices. Since tangible cultural heritage is inseparable from Aboriginal cultural, knowledge and material practices, management of culturally significant sites alone is not an adequate way to protect cultural heritage.

Scholars studying the health and wellbeing of Aboriginal people have emphasised how culture is an essential component. For Aboriginal people, health is a physical, psychological and spiritual state where all elements must be developed and maintained, and all elements occur in relation to kin and Country.<sup>286</sup> As such, 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.

In the sections that follow, the government's actions to support Aboriginal culture and healing following the 2019–20 fires are discussed in relation to the two overarching themes in the State Recovery Plan: cultural heritage and Aboriginal community support. IGEM acknowledges that there are many inter-dependencies between those aspects of recovery that influence whether positive outcomes are achieved for Aboriginal Victorians.

Throughout this report, the term 'Aboriginal Victorians' is used to represent the many diverse Aboriginal people in Victoria. The term 'First Nation' indicates a group of Aboriginal people who are connected to particular Country, and thus is often used to specify a Traditional Owner group. In addition to their connection to Country, First Nations share social institutions (such as language, stories, and ceremony) and rights to access plants, animals and other resources. First Nations are not separate entities; they are bound by complex connections and networks that bring unique and multi-layered rights both collectively and at the individual level. Identifying as First Nation has political and legal consequences as these groups often hold and administer rights communally. Native title and other laws such as the Traditional Owner Settlement Act recognise communal ownership of Country.

The term 'Traditional Owner' is used to describe Aboriginal people who assert ancestral connections to specific lands and water within Victoria, as regulated through intra-Indigenous governance processes.<sup>287</sup> The term 'Traditional Owner' refers to people with these connections irrespective of whether they have been formally recognised through mechanisms such as native title, Traditional Owner settlement agreements, or as Registered Aboriginal Parties. The term 'Country' describes physical geographic locations where Traditional Owners assert rights as well as acknowledging the deep, reciprocal, ongoing connections that Traditional Owners have with their Country.<sup>281</sup>

## 20.1 Arrangements and governance

In the SERRP and the SEMP, protection of cultural heritage sites on public land is listed as a component of natural environment recovery. DELWP is the key agency with responsibilities for protecting cultural heritage sites with support from other stakeholders. DPC – through Aboriginal Victoria – has responsibility in supporting the protection of Aboriginal cultural heritage on public land. The SEMP expands on the SERRP by specifying the critical tasks of coordinating and undertaking cultural heritage values rehabilitation work in consultation with affected communities. Neither the SERRP or the SEMP specify any roles for Traditional Owners or Registered Aboriginal Parties in recovery.

Following the 2019–20 fires, the government aimed to improve recovery outcomes for Aboriginal Victorians by making Aboriginal Culture and Healing its own line of recovery in the State Recovery Plan. BRV's intention was to ensure that the needs of Aboriginal Victorians received dedicated focus and funding while also being considered in the delivery of all the lines of recovery.

BRV's initial recovery framework did not include a line of recovery for Aboriginal Culture and Healing. Its subsequent inclusion was the result of feedback and suggestions by Gunaikurnai Land and Waters Aboriginal Corporation and then consultation with government and other Traditional Owner groups.

BRV is using the Victorian Aboriginal Affairs Framework 2018-2023 (VAAF) to guide the Aboriginal Culture and Healing line of recovery and has accordingly embedded the principle of self-determination into its recovery governance and planning. The government's Self-Determination Reform Framework was released in 2019 and defines self-determination according to the *United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples*. Self-determination is the ability for Indigenous people to freely determine their political status and pursue their economic, social and cultural development. It is a right that relates to groups of people, not individuals.

The Victorian Aboriginal Affairs Framework 2018-2023 (VAAF) links to various other policy frameworks and legislation and BRV aims to ensure recovery efforts are aligned with those to fully involve and support the Victorian Aboriginal community.

The State Recovery Plan has four intended outcomes for Aboriginal Culture and Healing that are aligned with the self-determination enablers in the VAAF:

- Aboriginal culture is valued and respected
- Aboriginal trauma is addressed, and healing is supported
- Aboriginal cultural safety is promoted
- Aboriginal participation and ownership are promoted.

Aboriginal Victoria was the designated lead agency for Aboriginal Culture and Healing in the State Recovery Plan. A Bushfire Recovery Aboriginal Reference Group (the Reference Group) was formally established to include Aboriginal-led organisations in the governance and to set the agenda for recovery of Aboriginal Victorians.

The Reference Group developed from a community-led initiative in Gippsland that was then supported by Aboriginal Victoria to officially become the Reference Group after expanding to include representatives from the north east region. Membership of the Reference Group includes representatives from the following organisations:

- Gunaikurnai Land and Waters Aboriginal Corporation
- Taungurung Land and Waters Council
- Far East Gippsland Traditional Owner Representatives
- Gippsland and East Gippsland Aboriginal Cooperative
- Yoowinna Wurnalung Aboriginal Healing Service
- Moogji Aboriginal Council East Gippsland Inc
- Lakes Entrance Aboriginal Health Association
- Lake Tyers Health and Children's Service
- Lake Tyers Aboriginal Trust
- Ramahyuck District Aboriginal Corporation
- First Peoples Assembly of Victoria (North East member)
- Mungabareena Aboriginal Corporation
- Albury Wodonga Aboriginal Health Service.

Aboriginal Victoria and the Reference Group worked with the Aboriginal Culture and Healing Working Group which comprised senior representatives from government departments including DELWP, Parks Victoria, DJCS, DJPR, DHHS and DET.

IGEM consistently heard positive feedback about the role of the Reference Group in the governance of Aboriginal Culture and Healing. It was an effective channel for the voice of Aboriginal Victorians to be heard by government and a key facilitator for their self-determination during recovery.<sup>210</sup> The Reference Group championed the involvement of smaller Traditional Owner groups that are not formally recognised by government and that face greater barriers to accessing resources for projects. Nonetheless it was recognised by the Reference Group that more needs to be done in future to better support all Traditional Owner groups irrespective of their prominence.

Aboriginal Victoria and the Reference Group were involved in consultation, decision-making, project implementation and reporting across all lines of recovery. The workload generated for them was disproportionate to their staff capacity.<sup>210</sup> At times there was a lack of clarity about responsibilities regarding the governance of Aboriginal culture and healing where it intersected with broader programs of work.

The government and the Reference Group recognised that flexibility was needed in the design and delivery of recovery actions for Aboriginal communities so that it could be responsive to emerging and changing needs of those communities. There was willingness from government to allow the pace of decision-making to be set by the Aboriginal community. Although the Aboriginal culture and healing line of recovery progressed at a generally slower rate than other lines of recovery, this was a sign of self-determination in action. The overall sentiment that IGEM heard from Traditional Owners who were leading recovery efforts was that it was important to get the process right, even if that meant slower delivery of outputs.

Aboriginal Victorians were not well represented on CRCs due to cultural safety issues and their general under-representation in the Victorian population.<sup>109</sup> They generally did not feel comfortable being involved with CRCs. Consequently, the voice of Aboriginal Victorians was often not captured in CRC or Municipal Recovery Plans. This was particularly problematic in the north east of Victoria where – unlike in East Gippsland – there are very few formally recognised Traditional Owner groups or Registered Aboriginal Parties. BRV staff working in the North East recognised that the voice of Aboriginal people was not represented in Municipal Recovery Plans, so they arranged for the councils to develop a Reconciliation Action Plan to improve their connection with the Aboriginal communities.

The principle of community-led recovery has parallels to the principle of self-determination for Aboriginal people, however they were implemented independently using different governance structures following the 2019–20 fires. IGEM did not receive much feedback from stakeholders to indicate whether Aboriginal Victorians would benefit from – or want to have – greater involvement in CRCs in future. IGEM notes that if and how Aboriginal Victorians participate in CRCs in future should be their decision, and alternative engagement processes should be made available for negotiation and developed as needed.

#### FINDING 20.1

The Aboriginal Reference Group was a key enabler of Aboriginal self-determination in recovery.

#### 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.

## 20.2 Cultural heritage

### 20.2.1 Cultural heritage assessments

The 2019–20 fires burnt areas where there were known culturally significant sites and artefacts, which are recorded in the Victorian Aboriginal Heritage Register. Post-fire assessments are required to determine the extent of fire damage to cultural values. Fire response operations and emergency stabilisation activities can do further damage to culturally significant sites and artefacts.

The fires also exposed culturally significant sites that had not previously been identified.<sup>210</sup> There was a valuable opportunity to undertake Aboriginal heritage surveys immediately following the fires to identify and record new cultural heritage values while the burnt vegetation allowed easy access and visibility.<sup>85 200</sup>

According to the SERRP and the SEMP, DELWP and PV are responsible for protection and rehabilitation of culturally significant sites following bushfires with support from DPC's Aboriginal Victoria. Registered Aboriginal Parties have no formal role in Victoria's emergency management arrangements, despite their responsibilities to protect cultural heritage sites as per the Aboriginal Heritage Act 2006.

Immediately after the 2019–20 fires, DELWP and PV undertook impact assessments that included damage and risks to cultural heritage values.<sup>85</sup> DELWP's Rapid Risk Assessment Teams drew on knowledge from Aboriginal Victoria and Traditional Owners to inform their assessments.<sup>189 85</sup>

The initial impact assessments recommend that land managers partner with Traditional Owners, including the local Registered Aboriginal Parties, to conduct comprehensive Aboriginal heritage place assessments and surveys. This was particularly important for areas within the fire footprint where there had previously been limited or no cultural heritage assessments.<sup>85</sup> Another recommendation was that Traditional Owners be engaged during emergency stabilisation and clean-up operations to help mitigate further damage to cultural heritage values.<sup>85</sup>

In future it could be beneficial if Traditional Owners were more involved in DELWP's Rapid Risk Assessment Teams. It not only provides an opportunity for Traditional Owners to give advice to land managers about protecting culturally significant sites and artefacts, but also may provide some opportunities for Traditional Owners to return to and survey their Country.

Traditional Owners in collaboration with DELWP began cultural heritage assessments in autumn 2020 and gradually progressed that work throughout the year.<sup>194 200 109 183</sup> There were delays in funding post-fire cultural heritage assessments and that was identified by the government as an issue that needed to be rectified for future fire seasons.<sup>109 288</sup>

There was also a lack of clear protocols for post-fire cultural heritage assessment. The government planned to amend that for the future by developing a manual and creating secondment pathways between Registered Aboriginal Parties and DELWP.<sup>109 109</sup>

#### FINDING 20.2

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.

## 20.2.2 Reading and healing Country

Reading and healing Country is a cultural right for Aboriginal Victorians and is a crucial part of their psychosocial recovery. While the purpose of impact assessments and cultural heritage assessments is protection of sites and artefacts, reading and healing Country activities are the practice of culture.

Following the 2019–20 fires, reading and healing Country projects were determined by Traditional Owners with support from government and included activities such as mapping culturally significant species and sites, knowledge sharing, and skill development.

DELWP's BBRR program initially allocated \$1.75 million funding for Traditional Owners to undertake reading and healing Country activities that were related to biodiversity (see section 17.4, p 368). The activities were initially planned and coordinated independently of the Reference Group, Aboriginal Victoria and BRV, although many of the Traditional Owner groups that DELWP partnered with were also represented in the Reference Group.

DELWP's pre-established relationships and prior experience working with Traditional Owners enabled the comparatively early commencement of reading and healing Country activities through the BBRR program. Planning had commenced in early 2020 and some Traditional Owners made their first field trips on Country in winter 2020. Ten Traditional Owner groups were involved in either the planning or implementation of reading and healing Country activities by November 2020.<sup>183</sup>

Other opportunities for reading and healing Country activities were provided later in 2020 through the Bushfire Recovery Grants for Aboriginal Communities program, which is administered by BRV and allocated \$1.86 million to its funding stream on cultural heritage recovery. Four of the eight funded Aboriginal organisations will deliver cultural heritage recovery projects that involve reading and healing Country projects. Those projects are not restricted to biodiversity-related outcomes as was required through DELWP's BBRR program. The Bushfire Recovery Grants for Aboriginal Communities program also funded Aboriginal community support projects (see section 20.3, p 439).

Although reading and healing Country projects were being funded through two separate programs that were out of phase in their delivery, those projects largely involved the same Traditional Owner groups. Consequently, there was some duplication of effort and administration for the Traditional Owner groups. That burden of work on Traditional Owners could potentially be reduced in future by consolidating the government's funding and administrative channels for reading and healing Country activities.

Funding for reading and healing Country activities was not confirmed early enough after the fires to enable Traditional Owners to get out on Country in a timely way. This is an important issue to resolve in future because prolonged separation from Country can be an additional source of distress for Aboriginal people (see section 20.4, p 440).

### FINDING 20.3

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.

## 20.3 Aboriginal community support

There were various funds that allocated a portion of the funding exclusively to fire-affected Aboriginal Victorians to support their recovery. Up to \$4 million of the Victorian Bushfire Appeal Fund was allocated to Aboriginal Victorians and distributed via three Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisations (ACCO).<sup>210</sup> That funding supported people whose primary residence was damaged or destroyed by the fires.

DHHS's Bushfire Case Support Program was announced in January 2020 and included allocations of funding to two ACCOs: Gippsland and East Gippsland Aboriginal Cooperative received \$938,488 and the Victorian Aboriginal Child Care Agency received \$1,852,376.<sup>90 289 290</sup> The Mental Health and Wellbeing Recovery Package was announced in July 2020 and allocated \$3.3 million to ACCOs.

The Victorian Aboriginal Community Controlled Health Organisation was responsible for coordinating the establishment of social and emotional wellbeing teams within ACCOs in fire-affected areas.<sup>291 210 210</sup>

In addition to the funding already mentioned, the government provided a couple of grants exclusively dedicated to Aboriginal community support. The Bushfire Recovery Grants for Aboriginal Communities program was launched in spring 2020 and allocated \$2.33 million to its funding stream on Aboriginal Community Support. The funding was released to the successful applicants in late 2020.<sup>109</sup> Eight Aboriginal organisations received funding to deliver projects that contributed to the psychosocial, health and economic recovery of Aboriginal communities.

In 2021 the Aboriginal Community Mitigation and Crisis Management Grants were made available to increase the preparedness and resilience of Aboriginal communities to emergencies. There are two streams of funding; one to support Aboriginal organisations to undertake emergency planning and mitigation initiatives on bushfire-affected Country, and the other to support projects that improve Aboriginal infrastructure in a way that increases preparedness for future emergency events.

During 2020 the Reference Group advocated for the government to improve employment opportunities and economic recovery for Aboriginal Victorians, acknowledging that their disadvantage prior to the fires was a barrier to their post-fire recovery. That issue was raised at meetings and recognised by the government.<sup>109 210</sup> DJPR planned to work with BRV and the Reference Group to strengthen Aboriginal employment and economic opportunities.

The Regional Business and Economic Recovery Plans included targeted support for Aboriginal businesses and workers. The plans also included an activity to support the development of a Gippsland Aboriginal Economic Strategy, which will be undertaken by the Gunaikurnai Land and Water Aboriginal Corporation.<sup>255</sup>

DJPR worked with Kinaway, GLaWAC and Taungurung Land and Waters Council (TLaWC) during 2020 to plan targeted business and economic recovery initiatives in fire-affected areas.<sup>109</sup> Funding was sourced differently for initiatives in Gippsland (Kinaway and GLaWAC) and Hume (TLaWC). IGEM did not see outputs from these initiatives during the timeframe of this Inquiry and acknowledges they will be forthcoming during 2021.

## 20.4 Community feedback

During IGEM's community consultation the concerns raised by Aboriginal community members were often focused on cultural safety issues during relief (see section 8.8.1, p 201). Another commonly raised issue was the distress caused by separation from Country after the fires and how that was a barrier to recovery.

The common sentiment was that the sooner Traditional Owners can be on Country after the fires the better their recovery outcomes. It is important to Aboriginal Victorians that they have permission to access fire-affected areas as soon as possible so they can connect with their Country and carry out their cultural responsibilities such as surveying and protecting culturally significant plants, animals and sites. Aboriginal Victorians who were evacuated emphasised the importance of returning to Country as soon as possible.

There were barriers for Traditional Owners to get back on Country following the 2019–20 fires. One main barrier was the government's safety protocols for reopening fire-affected public land. Another barrier was the length of time the government took to release funding to support reading and healing Country activities.

The government has safety policies that determine when fire-affected public land is re-opened. Those policies do not provide arrangements for Traditional Owners to visit Country prior to the general re-opening of fire-affected areas. In some instances that prevents Traditional Owners from practicing their culturally significant responsibilities on Country. For example, IGEM heard about a Traditional Owner who wanted to visit Country to check on native yams but was not supported to do so by emergency service agencies.

It would be beneficial for the government to establish arrangements that, wherever possible, support Traditional Owners with culturally significant responsibilities to safely visit fire-affected Country sooner after bushfires. More planning is also needed to ensure the earliest possible funding and facilitation of the broader suite of reading and healing Country activities.

In relation to Aboriginal community support for health, rebuilding and financial recovery, IGEM heard that there was lack of culturally appropriate recovery services. Staff in both government and non-government organisations were not necessarily aware of locally and culturally appropriate engagement protocols. Aboriginal people spoke about the need for people working in emergency recovery to have a better understanding of the functioning of their communities and the role of culture in their daily life. The lack of cultural awareness and sensitivity was noticeable in the delivery of various community support services.

Aboriginal people spoke about how they wanted to be supported but were reluctant to access services that they perceived were not culturally informed or sensitive, such as mental health services. Many Aboriginal people expressed a strong desire to have their own space where they could support one another after an emergency rather than having to seek support from outside services. That was evident in how many Aboriginal people prioritised remaining proximate to their community during recovery for consolation and to make sense of events with people they knew and trusted.

#### FINDING 20.4

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 20.5

There was a lack of culturally appropriate recovery support services for Aboriginal individuals and communities.

## 20.5 Conclusion

Overall, IGEM heard from stakeholders that inclusion of a line of recovery dedicated to Aboriginal culture and healing has been beneficial. It elevated Aboriginal community recovery as a priority and ensured it was not overlooked in any aspects of recovery.

The establishment of the Aboriginal Reference Group as part of the governance structure was a key enabler of self-determination for Aboriginal Victorians. Notably, the dedicated line of recovery and the Reference Group were both initiated by Traditional Owner groups rather than government. It was positive that the government adopted those Aboriginal-led initiatives.

Stakeholders were pleased with the government's commitment and approach to Aboriginal self-determination following the 2019–20 fires, notwithstanding that the implementation was a process of learning through doing. The major success has been in the process rather than the outcomes. Despite the successful establishment of an enabling governance framework for Aboriginal culture and healing, the tangible outputs for fire-affected Aboriginal Victorians did not consistently meet their needs.

The lack of preparedness and practice for Aboriginal culture and healing after emergencies was a barrier to timely and culturally appropriate recovery actions. Nonetheless stakeholders believed they were on the right track and were optimistic that the lessons learned during recovery from the 2019–20 fires will lead to better outcomes in future.

Key issues during recovery were delays for Aboriginal Victorians to get back on Country and a lack of culturally appropriate support services for Aboriginal individuals and households.

Regarding Traditional Owner access to Country after bushfires, discussions and pre-planning are needed to negotiate new arrangements that balance safety protocols set by the government's land management agencies with the rights of Traditional Owners to enact their cultural responsibilities on Country. In addition, post-fire protection of culturally significant sites and artefacts could be improved through greater involvement of Traditional Owners in emergency stabilisation and impact assessment.

IGEM heard positive feedback about the self-determination approach to reading and healing Country initiatives. In contrast, Aboriginal communities did not seem empowered by the government to determine what type of support they needed for mental and physical health, financial assistance or rebuilding. The lack of culturally appropriate support services is an issue that is not confined to emergency recovery and requires improvement in general.

Consideration needs to be given to how Aboriginal communities can be better resourced to provide support services within their communities in self-determined ways rather than having to rely on the government's generic services. A more holistic approach to health outcomes is needed for Aboriginal communities that recognises the inter-connectedness of their culture, community, physical health and mental wellbeing.

Self-determination could potentially be further enabled by changes to how Aboriginal culture and healing is funded after emergencies. Consolidation of funding sources could reduce the burden of administrative work on Aboriginal leaders and groups while also enabling them to have more control in deciding when and how funding is distributed according to their priorities.

#### FINDING 20.6

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 20.7

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.



Forestec - Gunaikurnai Land and Waters Aboriginal Corporation (Source: IGEM)



## 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 (see section 14.1.2 p 293). 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.

## Chapter 22

Concluding remarks



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 report, 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.

# Chapter 23

References

## References

- [1] Rogers, P. Development of Resilient Australia: enhancing the PPRR approach with anticipation, assessment and registration of risks. *Australian Journal of Emergency Management* (26) 54-58, 2011.
- [2] Emergency Management Victoria. *Emergency Management Manual Victoria Part 4: State Emergency Relief and Recovery Plan*. State Government of Victoria. Melbourne, Australia, 2015.
- [3] Emergency Management Victoria. *Victorian Emergency Operations Handbook*. Edition 3. State Government of Victoria. Melbourne, Australia, 2020.
- [4] Emergency Management Victoria. *Emergency Management Manual Victoria Part 3: State Emergency Response Plan*. State Government of Victoria. Melbourne, Australia, 2016.
- [5] Australian Public Service Commission. *Building better governance*. Australian Government, 2018.
- [6] Emergency Management Victoria. *Emergency Management Manual Victoria Part 5: State and Regional Emergency Management Committees*. State Government of Victoria. Melbourne, Australia, 2014.
- [7] Australian National Audit Office. *Better Practice Public Sector Governance*. Australian Government. Canberra, Australia, 2003.
- [8] Australian National Audit Office. *Public Sector Governance: Strengthening Performance Through Good Governance*. Better Practice Guide. Australian Government. Canberra, Australia, 2014.
- [9] State Government of Victoria. *Victorian Emergency Management Reform: White Paper*. Melbourne, Australia, 2012.
- [10] Emergency Management Victoria. *Resilient Recovery Discussion Paper*. State Government of Victoria. Melbourne, Australia, 2017.
- [11] Australian Government Productivity Commission. *Report on Government Services*. Australian Government. Canberra, Australia, 2018.
- [12] Emergency Management Victoria. *Victorian Preparedness Framework Update #1*. State Government of Victoria. Melbourne, Australia, 2018.
- [13] Emergency Management Victoria. *Consequence Management*. State Government of Victoria. Melbourne, Australia, 2017.
- [14] Inspector-General for Emergency Management. *Review of Impact Assessment and Consequence Management*. State Government of Victoria. Melbourne, Australia, 2019.
- [15] Emergency Management Victoria. *Impact Assessment Guidelines for Class 1 Emergencies*. State Government of Victoria. Melbourne, Australia, 2015.
- [16] Emergency Management Victoria. *Emergency Management Manual Victoria (EMMV) Parts 1-8*. State Government of Victoria. Melbourne, Australia, 2018.
- [17] Office of the Chief Parliamentary Counsel Victoria. *Privacy and Data Protection Act 2014*. State Government of Victoria. Melbourne, Australia, 2014.
- [18] Office of the Chief Parliamentary Counsel Victoria. *Health Records Act 2001*. State Government Victoria. Melbourne, Australia, 2001.
- [19] The Office of the Commissioner for Privacy and Data Protection. *Information sheet: Emergencies and privacy*. State Government Victoria. Melbourne, Australia, 2016.
- [20] Binskin, M. Bennet, A. and Macintosh, A. *Royal Commission into National Natural Disaster Arrangements Report*. Australian Government. Canberra, Australia, 2020.
- [21] Australian Red Cross. *ARC Internal Documents*, 2021.
- [22] Inspector-General for Emergency Management. *Review of Response to the Thunderstorm Asthma Event of 21-22 November 2016: Final Report*. State Government of Victoria. Melbourne, Australia, 2017.
- [23] Inspector-General for Emergency Management. *Implementation of Recommendations from the Review of response to the thunderstorm asthma event of 21-22 November 2016 - Progress Report - 2019*. State Government of Victoria. Melbourne, Australia, 2019.

- [24] Department of Environment, Land, Water and Planning. Councils and Emergencies: Capacity and Capability Evaluation Report - December 2019. State Government of Victoria. Melbourne, Australia, 2019.
- [25] Australian Charities and Not-for-profits Commission. ACNC Governance Standards. Australian Government. Canberra, Australia, 2021.
- [26] National Bushfire Recovery Agency. Charities with bushfire relief and recovery activities. Retrieved: 2021, Available: <https://www.bushfirerecovery.gov.au/talk-us/other-contacts#charities>.
- [27] Australian Red Cross. Australian Bushfires Report - Twelve months into your grants and recovery program. Australia, 2020.
- [28] Moss, J. and Burkett, D. Social Justice and the Future of Fire Insurance in Australia. University of New South Wales. Sydney, Australia, 2020.
- [29] McLennan, B. J. and Handmer, J. Reframing responsibility-sharing for bushfire risk management in Australia after 'Black Saturday'. *Environmental Hazards* 11 (1): 1-15, 2012.
- [30] Rollins, A. Bushfire insurance claims net \$4.6 billion from disastrous summer. *The Canberra Times*. Canberra, Australia, 2020.
- [31] McDonald, P. Last summer's bushfire season in top five disasters for insurance payouts. Australian Broadcasting Corporation, 2020.
- [32] Insurance Journal. Insured Losses for 2019/2020 Australia Bushfires Estimated at A\$1.9B (US\$1.3B): PERILS, 2020.
- [33] Victorian Council of Social Services and Department of Health and Human Services. Addressing non-insurance and underinsurance for emergencies in Victoria. State Government of Victoria. Melbourne, Australia, 2017.
- [34] Esplin, B. Gill, M. and Enright, N. Report of the Inquiry into the 2002-2003 Victorian Bushfires. State Government of Victoria. Melbourne, Australia, 2003.
- [35] Country Fire Authority. CFA Internal Documents, State Government of Victoria. Melbourne, Australia, 2019.
- [36] The Sphere Project. Humanitarian Charter and Minimum Standards in Humanitarian Response, 2011.
- [37] Emergency Management Victoria. EMV Internal Documents, State Government of Victoria. Melbourne, Australia, 2019.
- [38] Emergency Management Victoria. Victorian Emergency Operations Handbook. Edition 2 - December 2019. State Government of Victoria. Melbourne, Australia, 2019.
- [39] Emergency Management Victoria. Fundamentals of Emergency Management (Class 1 Emergencies). State Government of Victoria. Melbourne, Australia, 2015.
- [40] Department of Health and Human Services. DHHS Internal Documents, State Government of Victoria. Melbourne, Australia, 2018.
- [41] McHugh, P. 1965 Gippsland Bushfires: a reconstruction of events from February-March 1965. Forest Fire Management Victoria. Melbourne, Australia, 2020.
- [42] Parliament of Victoria. State Disaster Plan. Hansard [Assembly]: 2680, 1965.
- [43] Parliament of Victoria. Bush Fires: Ministerial Statement. Hansard [Assembly]: 2791-2801, 1965.
- [44] Emergency Management Victoria. Operational documents. Melbourne, Australia, 2019.
- [45] Emergency Management Victoria. East Gippsland Regional Relief & Recovery Cell - Final Structure. State Government of Victoria. Melbourne, Australia, 2020.
- [46] Australian Red Cross. Preferred sheltering practices for emergency sheltering in Australia. Queensland, Australia, 2015.
- [47] Department of Human Services. State Emergency Relief Coordination Plan. State Government Victoria. Melbourne, Australia, 2014.
- [48] Department of Human Services. Emergency relief handbook: A planning guide 2013. State Government of Victoria. Melbourne, Australia, 2013.
- [49] Emergency Management Victoria. Joint Standard Operating Procedure: Evacuation for Major Emergencies J03.12. State Government of Victoria. Melbourne, Australia, 2019.

- [50] East Gippsland Shire Council. Evidence to assist the Inspector General 2019-20 Summer Bushfire Inquiry. Bairnsdale, Australia, 2020.
- [51] Alpine Shire Council. Victorian Inquiry 2019-20 Fire Season Phase 2 - Alpine Shire Council Submission. Victoria, Australia, 2020.
- [52] Towong Shire Council. Municipal Emergency Management Plan. Towong, Australia, 2018.
- [53] Victoria Police. VicPol Internal Documents. State Government of Victoria. Melbourne, Australia, 2021.
- [54] Mornington Peninsula Shire Council. Mornington Peninsula Shire Council - Phase 2 Inquiry Response Mornington Peninsula. Australia, 2020.
- [55] Municipal Association of Victoria. MAV Internal Documents. State Government of Victoria. Melbourne, Australia, 2021.
- [56] Towong Shire Council. Attachment 2: Council's emergency management responsibilities and activities - during an emergency. Towong, Australia, 2021.
- [57] Save the Children. Journey of Hope - a workshop for parents and caregivers: understanding and coping with stress. Melbourne, Australia.
- [58] Department of Human Services. Psychosocial support: a framework for emergencies. State Government Victoria. Melbourne, Australia, 2014.
- [59] Australian Red Cross. Psychological First Aid: An Australian guide to supporting people affected by disaster. Melbourne, Australia, 2013.
- [60] Australian Red Cross. Psychological First Aid: An Australian guide to supporting people affected by disaster in Australia. Melbourne, Australia, 2020.
- [61] Hobfoll, S.E. Watson, P. Bell, C.C. Bryant, R.A. Brymer, J.M. Friedman, M.J. Friedman, M. Gersons, B.P.R. Jong, J.T.V.M. Layne, C.M. Maguen, S. Neria, Y. Norwood, A.E. Pynoos, R.S. Reissman, D. Ruzek J.J. Shalev, A.Y. Solomon, Z. Steinberg, A.M. and Ursano. R.J. Five essential elements of immediate and mid-term mass trauma interventions: empirical evidence. *Psychiatry*, 70 (4): 283-315, 2007.
- [62] Australian Red Cross. IGEM Inquiry Phase 2 Submission. Melbourne, Australia, 2021.
- [63] Australian Red Cross. IGEM Inquiry Phase 1 Submission. Melbourne, Australia, 2020.
- [64] East Gippsland Shire Council. Regional Emergency Response Planning Committee Terms of Reference. Bairnsdale, Australia.
- [65] Emergency Management Victoria. State health emergency response plan. Edition 4. State Government Victoria. Melbourne, Australia, 2017.
- [66] Victorian Government Solicitor's Office. Response to Issues Paper 2: Health arrangements in natural disasters. State Government of Victoria. Melbourne, Australia, 2020.
- [67] Department of Health and Human Services. Health and Human Services Sector Emergency Management Policy Version 1.1. State Government of Victoria. Melbourne, Australia, 2020.
- [68] Department of Health and Human Services. Rural health regions and locations. State Government of Victoria. Melbourne, Australia, 2015.
- [69] State Government of Victoria. Mass Casualty and Pre-Hospital Operational Response Plan. Melbourne, Australia, 2017.
- [70] Inspector-General for Emergency Management. Review of Emergency Management for High-Risk Victorian Communities. State Government of Victoria. Melbourne, Australia 2018.
- [71] Gippsland Disability Advocacy. Bushfire effects in East Gippsland. Gippsland, Australia, 2020.
- [72] Save the Children. Children's experiences and needs in the 2019-20 bushfires: consolidated submission to inquiries into the 2019-20 bushfire season. Melbourne, Australia, 2020.
- [73] Rural City of Wangaratta. Rural City of Wangaratta Internal Documents, 2021.
- [74] Australian Government. Critical Infrastructure Resilience Strategy: Plan. Canberra, Australia, 2015.
- [75] Minister for Agriculture and Northern Australia and Minister for Communications, Cyber Safety and the Arts. Media Release: Hundreds of satellite dishes to give better broadband connectivity during natural disasters. Australian Government. Canberra, Australia, 2020.

- [76] Office of the Chief Parliamentary Counsel Victoria. Road Management Act 2004. State Government of Victoria. Melbourne, Australia, 2004.
- [77] Office of the Chief Parliamentary Counsel Victoria. Local Government Act 1989. State Government of Victoria. Melbourne, Australia, 1989.
- [78] Department of Jobs, Precincts and Regions. Food and Grocery Sector Resilience Plan 2020-21. State Government of Victoria. Melbourne, Australia, 2020.
- [79] Department of Economic Development, Jobs, Transport and Resources. Food and Grocery Supply Logistics Sector Resilience Plan 2018-19. State Government Victoria. Melbourne, Australia, 2017.
- [80] Emergency Management Victoria. Critical Infrastructure Resilience Strategy. State Government of Victoria. Melbourne, Australia, 2015.
- [81] Department of Health and Human Services. National food regulation system. State Government of Victoria, 2019. Retrieved: 2021, Available: <https://www2.health.vic.gov.au/public-health/food-safety/food-safety-laws-local-government-and-auditors/food-safety-laws-and-regulations/victorian-food-agencies/national-food-regulation-system>.
- [82] Department of Jobs, Precincts and Regions. DJPR Internal Documents. State Government of Victoria. Melbourne, Australia, 2019.
- [83] Department of Jobs, Precincts, and Regions. Draft Minutes for TISN Food and Grocery Sector Group meeting including item on lessons learned from 2019-20 bushfires. State government of Victoria. Melbourne, Australia, 2020.
- [84] Department of Health and Human Services. Water Unit regulator plan. State Government of Victoria. Melbourne, Australia, 2018.
- [85] Department of Environment, Land, Water and Planning. DELWP Internal Documents. State Government of Victoria. Melbourne, Australia, 2021.
- [86] Department of Environment, Land, Water and Planning. Governance and planning. State Government of Victoria. Melbourne, Australia, 2021.
- [87] Emergency Management Victoria. Emergency Management Legislation Amendment (Planning) Bill 2016 – Exposure Draft. State Government of Victoria. Melbourne, Australia, 2016.
- [88] Emergency Management Victoria. Victorian State Emergency Management Plan. State Government of Victoria. Melbourne, Australia, 2020.
- [89] Emergency Management Victoria. Emergency Management Manual of Victoria Part 6: Municipal Emergency Planning Arrangements – Guidelines for Committees. State Government of Victoria. Melbourne, Australia, 2018.
- [90] Bushfire Recovery Victoria. BRV Internal Documents, State Government of Victoria. Melbourne, Australia, 2021.
- [91] Bushfire Recovery Victoria. Recovery Framework. State government of Victoria. Melbourne, Australia, 2020.
- [92] Emergency Management Victoria. Eastern Victorian Fires 2019-2020 State Recovery Plan vol 3.0. State Government of Victoria. Melbourne, Australia, 2020.
- [93] Department of Parliamentary Services. 2019-20 Bushfires. State Government of Victoria. Melbourne, Australia, 2020.
- [94] Emergency Management Victoria. Relief and Recovery Guideline – Natural Disaster Clean-Up Arrangements. State Government of Victoria. Melbourne, Australia, 2018.
- [95] Bushfire Recovery Victoria. Hazardous Trees. State Government of Victoria. Melbourne, Australia, 2020.
- [96] Bushfire Recovery Victoria. Update for Minsiter Neville – May. State Government of Victoria. Melbourne, Australia, 2020.
- [97] Bushfire Recovery Victoria. Bushfire Recovery Senior Executive – Ministerial Update. State Government of Victoria. Melbourne, Australia, 2020.
- [98] Grocon. Bushfire Recovery 2020. Retrieved: 2021, Available: <https://www.grocon.com/bushfire-recovery-2020>.
- [99] Dynes, R. R. Social Capital: Dealing With Community Emergencies. Homeland Securities Affairs 2, 2006.

- [100] Emergency Management Victoria. Disaster Recovery Toolkit for Local Government: 07 Engaging the Community in Disaster Recovery. State Government of Victoria. Melbourne, Australia, 2014.
- [101] Australian Institute for Disaster Resilience. National Principles for Disaster Resilience. Australian Government Department of Home Affairs. Melbourne, Australia, 2018.
- [102] Council of Australian Governments. National Strategy for Disaster Resilience. Australian Government. Canberra, Australia, 2011.
- [103] Emergency Management Victoria. Community Resilience Framework for Emergency Management. State Government of Victoria. Melbourne, Australia, 2017.
- [104] Victorian Council of Social Services. Perspectives from the frontline, 2020.
- [105] Towong Shire Council. Attachment 3: Council's emergency management responsibilities and activities - after an emergency. Towong, Australia, 2021.
- [106] Australian Institute for Disaster Resilience. Australian Disaster Resilience Handbook 2. Community Recovery. Australian Government Department of Home Affairs. Melbourne, Australia, 2018.
- [107] State Government of Victoria. Victorian State Emergency Management Plan: Roles and Responsibilities. Emergency Management Victoria. State Government of Victoria. Melbourne, Australia, 2020.
- [108] Bushfire Recovery Victoria. State Bushfire Recovery Coordination Committee Agenda. State Government of Victoria. Melbourne, Australia, 2021.
- [109] State Bushfire Recovery Coordination Committee. SBRCC Internal Documents, State Government of Victoria. Melbourne, Australia, 2021.
- [110] Bushfire Recovery Victoria. State Recovery Report. State Government of Victoria. Melbourne, Australia, 2021.
- [111] AirBnB. AirBnB Internal Document, 2021.
- [112] Bushfire Recovery Victoria. Eastern Victorian Fires 2019-20 State Recovery Plan. State Government of Victoria. Melbourne, Australia 2020.
- [113] Towong Shire Council. Towong Municipal Recovery Plan. Towong, Australia, 2021.
- [114] Bushfire Recovery Victoria. State Recovery Report. State Government of Victoria. Melbourne, Australia, 2021.
- [115] East Gippsland Shire Council. East Gippsland Shire Council submission to Inspector-General for Emergency Management inquiry into the 2019-20 Victorian Fire Season. East Gippsland, Australia 2020.
- [116] East Gippsland Shire Council. IGEM Inquiry into the 2019-20 Victorian Fire Season: Phase 2 (Relief and Recovery). Bairnsdale, Australia, 2020.
- [117] Australian Red Cross. Needs assessment and psychosocial support after emergencies: A multi-agency outreach framework and guidelines. Melbourne, Australia, 2016.
- [118] National Mental Health Commission. Australia's mental health and wellbeing is priority for bushfire recovery. Australian Government. Canberra, Australia, 2020.
- [119] Premier of Victoria. Media Release: More Support For Mental Health And Wellbeing After Bushfires. State Government of Victoria. Melbourne, Victoria, 2020.
- [120] Bushfire Recovery Victoria. Inspector-General for Emergency Management (IGEM) Inquiry into the 2019-20 Victorian Fire Season: Phase 2 – relief and recovery. State Government of Victoria. Melbourne, Australia, 2021.
- [121] Minister for Health. Media Release: Mental health support for bushfire communities. State Government of Victoria. Melbourne, Australia, 2020.
- [122] Armytage, P. Fels, A. Cockram, A. and McSherry B. Royal Commission into Victoria's Mental Health System: Final Report. Parliament of Victoria. Melbourne, Australia, 2021.
- [123] Bushfire Recovery Victoria. Unmet Needs Register. State Government of Victoria. Melbourne, Australia, 2021.
- [124] Armytage, P. Fels, A. Cockram, A. and McSherry B. Royal Commission into Victoria's Mental Health System: Summary and recommendations. Parliament of Victoria. Melbourne, Australia, 2021.

- [125] Deloitte Consulting Pty Ltd. Bushfire Recovery Victoria: People and Wellbeing Operational Review Final Report. Bushfire Recovery Victoria. Melbourne, Australia, 2020.
- [126] Department of Health and Human Services. 2020 Victorian Bushfires (East Gippsland and North-East Victoria) Bushfire Case Support Program - Program Guidelines (version 1). State Government of Victoria. Melbourne, Australia, 2020.
- [127] Windermere. Emergency case support program: Key priorities for Emergency Managers. State Government of Victoria. Melbourne, Australia, 2020.
- [128] Premier of Victoria. Media Release: Case support program for fire affected communities State Government of Victoria. Melbourne, Australia, 2020.
- [129] Bushfire Recovery Victoria. SBRCC - February 2021 - Meeting cancellation and 2019/20 Eastern Victorian Fires Dashboard. State Government of Victoria. Melbourne, Australia, 2021.
- [130] Bushfire Recovery Victoria. SBRCC Planning Day (5 February). State Government of Victoria. Melbourne, Australia, 2021.
- [131] Arriagada, N. B. Palmer, A. Bowman, D. Morgan, G. Jalaludin, B. and Johnston, F. Unprecedented smoke-related health burden associated with the 2019–20 bushfires in eastern Australia. *Medical Journal of Australia*, 213 (6): 282-283, 2020.
- [132] Australian Institute of Health and Welfare. Australian bushfires 2019–20 Exploring the short-term health impacts. Australian Government. Canberra, Australia, 2020.
- [133] Department of Health. Bushfire smoke and health: Summary of the current evidence. State Government of Victoria. Melbourne, Australia, 2020.
- [134] Department of Health. Primary Health Networks Frequently Asked Questions. Australian Government. Canberra, Australia.
- [135] Emergency Management Victoria. Operational documents. Melbourne, Australia, 2020.
- [136] State Government of Victoria. More bushfire appeal funds to help communities and families (17 September 2020). State Government of Victoria. Melbourne, Australia, 2020.
- [137] Department of Premier and Cabinet. Victorian Government Submission - House of Representatives Standing Committee Inquiry into Family, Domestic and Sexual Violence. State Government of Victoria. Melbourne, Australia, 2020.
- [138] Department of Premier and Cabinet. DPC Internal Documents, State Government of Victoria. Melbourne, Australia, 2021.
- [139] Department of Education and Training. Regional services meeting briefing paper. State Government of Victoria. Melbourne, Australia, 2020.
- [140] Department of Education and Training Victoria. Media Release: Supporting Victorian schools through bushfire recovery. State Government of Victoria. Melbourne, Australia, 2020.
- [141] Premier of Victoria. Media Release: Students To Get Mental Health Support After Bushfires. State Government of Victoria. Melbourne, Australia, 2020.
- [142] Department of Education and Training Victoria. DET Internal Documents, State Government of Victoria. Melbourne, Australia, 2019.
- [143] Beyond Blue. and Be you. Bushfire Response Program. Melbourne, Australia.
- [144] Towong Shire Council. Towong Shire Council Internal Document, Towong, Australia, 2021.
- [145] Gippsland Disability Advocacy. Bushfire effects in East Gippsland - May & June Report 2020. Gippsland, Australia, 2020.
- [146] Department of Environment, Land, Water and Planning. Using Victoria's planning system. State Government of Victoria. Melbourne, Australia, 2015.
- [147] Department of Environment, Land, Water and Planning. Regulatory framework: learn about the planning and building regulations for bushfire. State Government of Victoria. Melbourne, Australia, 2020.
- [148] Department of Environment, Land, Water and Planning. Bushfire Mapping Methodology and Criteria. State Government of Victoria. Melbourne, Australia, 2020.

- [149] Department of Environment, Land, Water and Planning. Building in bushfire prone areas. State Government of Victoria. Melbourne, Australia, 2020.
- [150] Bushfire Recovery Victoria. Bushfire Hazard Assessments (May 2020). State Government Victoria. Melbourne, Australia, 2020.
- [151] Department of Environment, Land, Water and Planning. State Planning Policy - Bushfire Planning Clause. State Government Victoria. Melbourne, Australia, 2018.
- [152] Emergency Management Victoria. Role statement - Victorian Building Authority. Retrieved: 2021, Available: <https://www.emv.vic.gov.au/responsibilities/sempr/roles-and-responsibilities/role-statements/vba>.
- [153] Municipal Association of Victoria. Local government's role in building control - An introduction for councillors. Melbourne, Australia.
- [154] Country Fire Authority. Our role in Victoria's planning process. State Government of Victoria. Melbourne, Australia, 2021.
- [155] Department of Environment, Land, Water and Planning. Fact Sheet: Planning permit exemptions for bushfire recovery State Government of Victoria. Melbourne, Australia, 2020.
- [156] Department of Environment, Land, Water and Planning. Fact Sheet: Planning for exemptions for bushfire reconstruction. State Government of Victoria. Melbourne, Australia, 2020.
- [157] Bushfire Recovery Victoria. Fact Sheet: Rebuilding support program. State Government of Victoria. Melbourne, Australia, 2020.
- [158] Bushfire Recovery Victoria. Rebuilding Support Program. State Government of Victoria. Melbourne, Australia, 2020.
- [159] Minister for Police and Emergency Services. Media Release: More community recovery projects in bushfire-affected areas. State Government of Victoria. Melbourne, Australia, 2020.
- [160] State Government of Victoria. Major Boost For Towong Schools (03 April 2020). State Government of Victoria. Melbourne, Australia, 2020.
- [161] Department of Environment, Land, Water and Planning. Guidelines for the removal, destruction or lopping of native vegetation,. State Government of Victoria. Melbourne, Australia, 2017.
- [162] Department of Environment, Land, Water and Planning. Victoria Planning Provisions - All Clauses. State Government of Victoria. Melbourne, Australia, 2018.
- [163] Regional Roads Victoria. The road to recovery: North East Victoria update. State Government of Victoria. Melbourne, Australia, 2020.
- [164] Department of Sustainability and Environment. Code of Practice for Bushfire Management on Public Land. State Government of Victoria. Melbourne, Australia, 2012.
- [165] Poynter, M. Fagg, P. Basset, O. Slijkerman, C. and Lutze, M. Forest Recovery After Bushfire. Department of Sustainability and Environment. Melbourne, Australia, 2009.
- [166] Victorian Auditor-General's Office. Managing Victoria's Native Forest Timber Resources. State Government of Victoria. Melbourne, Australia, 2013.
- [167] Victorian Auditor-General's Office. Follow Up of Selected 2012-13 and 2013-14 Performance Audits. State Government of Victoria. Melbourne, Australia 2018.
- [168] Department of Environment, Land, Water and Planning. DELWPs Seed Management. State Government of Victoria. Melbourne, Australia, 2018.
- [169] Department of Environment, Land, Water and Planning. Ash Eucalypt seed and seed store management review. State Government of Victoria. Melbourne, Australia, 2019.
- [170] Department of Environment, Land, Water and Planning. Alpine Ash Fire Risk Project Debrief. State Government of Victoria. Melbourne, Australia, 2020.
- [171] Department of Environment, Land, Water and Planning. Seed Collection Agreement with VicForests. State Government of Victoria. Melbourne, Australia, 2020.
- [172] Department of Environment, Land, Water and Planning. Forest Restoration Project. State Government of Victoria. Melbourne, Australia, 2020.

- [173] Department of Environment, Land, Water and Planning. Letter Bushfire Impacts. State Government of Victoria. Melbourne, Australia, 2020.
- [174] Department of Environment, Land, Water and Planning. Forest Fire and Emergency Management Steering Committee. State Government of Victoria. Melbourne, Australia, 2020.
- [175] Department of Environment, Land, Water and Planning. Forest Restoration Project Control Board. State Government of Victoria. Melbourne, Australia, 2020.
- [176] Department of Environment, Land, Water and Planning. Forest Restoration Project Minutes. State Government of Victoria. Melbourne, Australia, 2020.
- [177] Nitschke, C. R. Alpine Ash Fire Risk Mitigation Project - Final Report. The University of Melbourne. Melbourne, Australia, 2019.
- [178] McColl-Gausden, S. Ababei, D. Circulis, B. Bennet, L. and Penman, T. Alpine ash Fire Risk Mitigation Project: Bushfire Risk Assessment. The University of Melbourne. Melbourne, Australia, 2020.
- [179] Department of Environment, Land, Water and Planning. Forest and Park Progress Report. State Government of Victoria. Melbourne, Australia, 2020.
- [180] Department of Environment, Land, Water and Planning. Forest Fire and Regions Progress Report - August. State Government of Victoria. Melbourne, Australia, 2020.
- [181] Department of Environment, Land, Water and Planning. Forest, Fire and Regions Progress Report - November. State Government of Victoria. Melbourne, Australia, 2020.
- [182] Department of Environment, Land, Water and Planning. Forest and Park Progress Report - November. State Government of Victoria. Melbourne, Australia, 2020.
- [183] Department of Environment, Land, Water and Planning. SET Recovery Program Reporting - November. State Government of Victoria. Melbourne, Australia, 2020.
- [184] Department of Environment, Land, Water and Planning. Integrated Forest Ecosystem Research Program. State Government of Victoria. Melbourne, Australia, 2020.
- [185] Department of Environment, Land, Water and Planning. Integrated Forest Ecosystem Research Program Project Plan. State Government of Victoria. Melbourne, Australia, 2020.
- [186] Department of Environment and Primary Industries. An overview of the Victorian Waterway Management Strategy. State Government of Victoria. Melbourne, Australia, 2013.
- [187] Environment Protection Authority Victoria. Post Bushfire Water Quality Monitoring Coordination Project. State Government of Victoria. Melbourne, Australia, 2020.
- [188] Environment Protection Authority Victoria. East Victoria Fires Resource Report Final Summary. State Government of Victoria. Melbourne, Australia, 2020.
- [189] Department of Environment, Land, Water and Planning. Rapid Risk Assessment Team Debrief. State Government of Victoria. Melbourne, Australia, 2020.
- [190] Department of Environment, Land, Water and Planning. Bushfires and Knowledge: Forest, Fire and Regions Group Science Catalogue 2019-20. State Government of Victoria. Melbourne, Australia, 2020.
- [191] Department of Environment, Land, Water and Planning. Delayed Budget Outcomes. State Government of Victoria. Melbourne, Australia, 2020.
- [192] Department of Environment, Land, Water and Planning. Bushfire Recovery Expenditure. State Government of Victoria. Melbourne, Australia, 2020.
- [193] Department of Environment, Land, Water and Planning. Upper Murray Early Recovery Phase. State Government of Victoria. Melbourne, Australia, 2020.
- [194] Department of Environment, Land, Water and Planning. Hume Regional Natural Environment Recovery Minutes. State Government of Victoria. Melbourne, Australia, 2020.
- [195] Department of Environment, Land, Water and Planning. ARI Aquatic Quarterly Update. State Government of Victoria. Melbourne, Australia, 2020.
- [196] North East Catchment Management Authority. Media Release: Cudgewa fish survey yields signs of bushfire recovery. State Government of Victoria. Melbourne, Australia, 2020.

- [197] Department of Environment, Land, Water and Planning. Progress Report Template. State Government of Victoria. Melbourne, Australia, 2020.
- [198] Department of Environment, Land, Water and Planning. Progress Report 1st Quarter of 2020/2021 - July to September 2020. State Government of Victoria. Melbourne, Australia, 2020.
- [199] Department of Environment, Land, Water and Planning. North East CMA 19/20 Bushfire Recovery Project - 29 October 2020. State Government of Victoria. Melbourne, Australia, 2020.
- [200] Department of Environment, Land, Water and Planning. Regional Natural Environment Recovery Minutes - June. State Government of Victoria. Melbourne, Australia, 2020.
- [201] Department of Environment, Land, Water and Planning. 2019/20 Bushfire Response and Recovery Actions. State Government of Victoria. Melbourne, Australia, 2020.
- [202] Department of Environment, Land, Water and Planning and North East Catchment Management Authority. Funding Agreement. State Government of Victoria. Melbourne, Australia, 2020.
- [203] Department of Environment, Land, Water and Planning and East Gippsland Catchment Management Authority. Funding Agreement. State Government of Victoria. Melbourne, Australia, 2020.
- [204] Department of Environment, Land, Water and Planning. Riparian Intervention Monitoring Program Improving the condition of our waterways. State Government of Victoria. Melbourne, Australia, 2018.
- [205] Department of Environment, Land, Water and Planning. Biodiversity 2037 Implementation Framework Progress Report. State Government of Victoria. Melbourne, Australia, 2018.
- [206] Minister for Energy, Environment and Climate Change. Media Release: Protecting our wilderness and ensuring more people enjoy it. State Government of Victoria. Melbourne, Australia, 2020.
- [207] Department of Environment, Land, Water and Planning. Victoria's Bushfire Emergency Biodiversity Response and Recovery. Preliminary Report - version 1. State Government of Victoria. Melbourne, Australia, 2020.
- [208] Department of Environment, Land, Water and Planning. Bushfire Biodiversity Response and Recovery: Mid-program survey results and recommendations. State Government of Victoria. Melbourne, Australia, 2020.
- [209] Todd, J. and Whyte, M. Bushfire Biodiversity Relief and Early Recovery Program Plan. Department of Environment, Land, Water and Planning. State Government of Victoria. Melbourne, Australia, 2020.
- [210] Bushfire Recovery Victoria. Premier's Special Advisory Council Agenda. State Government of Victoria. Melbourne, Australia, 2020.
- [211] Department of Environment, Land, Water and Planning. DELWP Case Study: IGEM Phase 2 - Emergency Response Aerial Shooting Operation. State Government of Victoria. Melbourne, Australia, 2020.
- [212] Department of Environment, Land, Water and Planning. Stakeholder Reference Group Meeting #3. State Government of Victoria. Melbourne, Australia, 2020.
- [213] State Wide Integrated Flora and Fauna Teams. Biodiversity emergency rescue and response after the January 2020 bushfires in Eastern Victoria. Retrieved: 2020, Available: [https://www.swift.net.au/cb\\_pages/swift\\_seminar\\_notes\\_-\\_biodiversity\\_after\\_bushfire](https://www.swift.net.au/cb_pages/swift_seminar_notes_-_biodiversity_after_bushfire)
- [214] Department of Environment, Land, Water and Planning. Virtual Environmental Roundtable Victoria's Bushfire Emergency: Biodiversity Response & Recovery. State Government of Victoria. Melbourne, Australia, 2020.
- [215] Department of Environment, Land, Water and Planning. Biodiversity 2037 Monitoring, Evaluation and Reporting Framework Version 1.0. State Government of Victoria. Melbourne, Australia, 2018.
- [216] Commissioner for Environmental Sustainability Victoria. Media Release: Commissioner recommends appointment of a Chief Biodiversity Scientist. State Government of Victoria. Melbourne, Australia, 2019.
- [217] Commissioner for Environmental Sustainability Victoria. Summary of recommendations and SDG targets for future reporting. State Government of Victoria. Melbourne, Australia, 2019.
- [218] Department of Environment, Land, Water and Planning. Victorian Government response to the State of the Environment 2018 report. State Government of Victoria. Melbourne, Australia, 2020.
- [219] Department of Environment, Land, Water and Planning. Forest, Fire and Regions Progress Report - May. State Government of Victoria. Melbourne, Australia, 2020.

- [220] Department of Environment, Land, Water and Planning. Great Dividing Range Long-footed Potoroo population monitoring in response to bushfire & fox baiting. State Government of Victoria. Melbourne, Australia, 2020.
- [221] Parks Victoria. FW: FOR ACTION: Approval of Fire Recovery Ground Shooting Program\_RD Approved. State Government of Victoria. Melbourne, Australia, 2020.
- [222] Department of Environment, Land, Water and Planning. Victorians Volunteering for Nature - Environmental Volunteering Plan. State Government of Victoria. Melbourne, Australia, 2018.
- [223] Department of Environment, Land, Water and Planning. Victorians Volunteering for Nature. State Government of Victoria. Melbourne, Australia, 2021.
- [224] Department of Environment, Land, Water and Planning. 7 ways you can help nature recover from the bushfires. State Government of Victoria. Melbourne, Australia, 2020.
- [225] State Wide Integrated Flora and Fauna Teams. Bushfire Recovery - community wildlife reporting. Retrieved: 2020, Available: [https://www.swifft.net.au/cb\\_pages/team\\_bushfire\\_recovery\\_-\\_community\\_wildlife\\_reporting.php](https://www.swifft.net.au/cb_pages/team_bushfire_recovery_-_community_wildlife_reporting.php).
- [226] Ooi, M. Keith, D. Cornwell, W. Lyons, M. Fisher, A. Callaghan, C. Rowley, J. Gibson, C. Le Breton, T. Munoz-Rojas, M. Hay, S. and Kingsford, R. Post-fire Recovery of Threatened Ecological Communities. University of New South Wales. Sydney, Australia, 2021.
- [227] Gibson, C. Cornwell, W. Kingsford, R. and Callaghan, C. Environment Recovery Project: Australian Bushfires. University of New South Wales. Sydney, Australia, 2021.
- [228] Australian Citizen Science Association. Bushfire Recovery Project Finder is Live. Sydney, Australia, 2020.
- [229] Department of Environment, Land, Water and Planning. Biodiversity Bushfire Recovery Grants. State Government of Victoria. Melbourne, Australia, 2020.
- [230] Mallacoota and District Recovery Association Inc. Community Led Recovery Plan. Victoria, Australia, 2021.
- [231] Parks Victoria. PV fire recovery bids - same information split into two documents. State Government of Victoria. Melbourne, Australia, 2020.
- [232] Department of Environment, Land, Water and Planning. Regional Recovery Debrief. State Government of Victoria. Melbourne, Australia, 2020.
- [233] Parks Victoria. Recovery Update Ben Skinner. State Government of Victoria. Melbourne, Victoria, 2020.
- [234] Bushfire Recovery Victoria. Issues Log. State Government of Victoria. Melbourne, Australia, 2020.
- [235] Emergency Management Victoria. ADF Tasking options v1.0. State Government of Victoria. Melbourne, Australia, 2020.
- [236] Parks Victoria. Fire Affected Parks. State Government of Victoria. Melbourne, Australia, 2021.
- [237] Parks Victoria. Re: PV community engagement. State Government of Victoria. Melbourne, Australia, 2020.
- [238] Parks Victoria. Media Release: Community invited to attend Parks Victoria bushfire recovery update. State Government of Victoria. Melbourne, Australia, 2020.
- [239] Parks Victoria. Rebuild of Banksia Bluff activity centre at Cape Conran Coastal Park. State Government of Victoria. Melbourne, Australia, 2020.
- [240] Parks Victoria. Cape Conran Coastal Park roofed accommodation. State Government of Victoria. Melbourne, Australia, 2021.
- [241] Alpine Shire Council. Alpine Community Recovery Newsletter. Victoria, Australia, 2020.
- [242] Department of Environment, Land, Water and Planning. Pillar Leads Recovery Activities Report - Towong. State Government of Victoria. Melbourne, Australia, 2020.
- [243] Department of Environment, Land, Water and Planning. Pillar Leads Recovery Activities Report - Alpine. State Government of Victoria. Melbourne, Australia, 2020.
- [244] Conservation Regulator Victoria. Regulatory priorities. State Government of Victoria. Melbourne, Australia, 2020.
- [245] Department of Environment, Land, Water and Planning. Bushfires and COVID-19 Impacts on Conservation Regulator Business. State Government of Victoria. Melbourne, Australia, 2020.

- [246] Australian Government and State Government of Victoria. Victorian Regional Forest Agreements - Scoping Agreement for the Major Event Review to assess the impacts of the 2019-20 bushfires. Canberra, Australia, 2020.
- [247] Department of Environment, Land, Water and Planning. Towong Natural Environment Recovery Working Group Minutes. State Government of Victoria. Melbourne, Australia, 2020.
- [248] Department of Jobs, Precincts and Regions. DJPR EMMV Responsibilities by Group and Branch. State Government of Victoria. Melbourne, Australia, 2019.
- [249] Regional Development Victoria, East Gippsland Shire Council and Bushfire Recovery Victoria. East Gippsland 2019-20 Bushfire Recovery Plan - Economic Recovery Sub-plan. State Government of Victoria. Melbourne, Australia, 2020.
- [250] National Bushfire Recovery Agency. Bushfire Recovery News - Edition 11. Australian Government. Canberra, Australia, 2020.
- [251] National Bushfire Recovery Agency. National Bushfire Recovery Agency. Australian Government. Canberra, Australia.
- [252] Department of Jobs, Precincts and Regions. Victorian 2019-20 Bushfires Regional Business and Economy Recovery Plan - Hume. State Government of Victoria. Melbourne, Australia, 2020.
- [253] Towong Shire Council. Towong Economic Recovery Action Plan v2. Towong, Australia, 2020.
- [254] Tourism North East. Victoria's High Country Tourism Sector Economic Assessment. Australia, 2019.
- [255] Department of Jobs, Precincts and Regions. Victorian 2019-20 Bushfires Regional Business and Economy Recovery Plan. State Government of Victoria. Melbourne, Australia, 2020.
- [256] Alpine Community Recovery Committee. Community Survey. Victoria, Australia, 2021.
- [257] National Bushfire Recovery Agency. Bushfire Recovery News - Edition 16. Australian Government. Canberra, Australia, 2020.
- [258] Towong Shire Council. Towong Shire Community Recovery Newsletter. Towong, Australia, 2020.
- [259] Agriculture Victoria. AgVic Internal Documents, State Government of Victoria. Melbourne, Australia, 2021.
- [260] Teague, B. McLeod, R. and Pascoe, S. 2009 Victorian Bushfires Royal Commission Final Report Volume 2: Chapter 8 - Relief and Recovery. Parliament of Victoria. Melbourne, Australia, 2010.
- [261] Department of Primary Industries. Recovery after fire. State Government of Victoria. Melbourne, Australia, 2009.
- [262] Teague, B. McLeod, R. and Pascoe, S. 2009 Victorian Bushfires Royal Commission Appendixes. Parliament of Victoria. Melbourne, Australia, 2009.
- [263] Agriculture Victoria. and Department of Environment, Land, Water and Planning. Animal Welfare Plan (Revision 2). State Government of Victoria. Melbourne, Australia, 2019.
- [264] Agriculture Victoria. Agricultural Operation Plan DRAFT. State Government of Victoria. Melbourne, Australia, 2020.
- [265] Environment Protection Authority Victoria. EPA Internal Documents, State Government of Victoria. Melbourne, Australia, 2021.
- [266] Eburn, M. and Cary, G. You own the fuel, but who owns the fire? International Journal of Wildland Fire 26: 999–1008, 2017.
- [267] Parliament of Victoria. Inquiry into the Impact of Public Land Management Practices on Bushfires in Victoria. State Government of Victoria. Melbourne, Australia, 2008.
- [268] State Government of Victoria. Victorian Government's response to the Environment and Natural Resources Committee's Inquiry into the Impact of Public Land Management Practices on Bushfires in Victoria. State Government of Victoria. Melbourne, Australia, 2008.
- [269] Stephenson, C. The Impacts, Losses and Benefits Sustained from Five Severe Bushfires in South-eastern Australia (Report No.88). Department of Sustainability and Environment and Bushfire Cooperative Research Centre. State Government of Victoria. Melbourne, Australia, 2010.

- [270] Forest Fire Management Victoria. Repair of Rural Fencing Damaged by Bushfire and Fire Control Line Rehabilitation Policy for the 2019-20 Bushfire Season. State Government of Victoria. Melbourne, Australia, 2020.
- [271] Horton, J. Rewriting political history: Letters from Aboriginal people in Victoria. *History Australia*, 9 (2): 157-181, 2012.
- [272] Doyle, J. Atkinson-Briggs, S. Atkinson, P. Firebrace, B. Calleja, J. Reilly, R. Cargo, M. Riley, T. Crumpen, T. and Rowley, K. A prospective evaluation of first peoples health promotion program design in the goulburn-murray rivers region. *BMC Health Services Research*, 16, 2016.
- [273] Follent, D. Paulson, C. Orcher, P. O'Neill, B. Lee, D. Briscoe, K. and Dimopoulos-Bick, T.L. The indirect impacts of COVID-19 on Aboriginal communities across New South Wales. *Medical Journal of Australia*, 255 (5): 199-200, 2021.
- [274] Department of Economic and Social Affairs. United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples. United Nations.
- [275] Australian Human Rights Commission. UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples. Australian Government. Canberra, Australia, 2007.
- [276] Broome, R. Aboriginal Victorians—A history since 1800. Allen & Unwin, 2005.
- [277] Aboriginal Victoria. Truth and Justice in Victoria. State Government of Victoria. Melbourne, Australia, 2021.
- [278] First Peoples' Assembly of Victoria. The Treaty journey so far. Melbourne, Australia, 2020.
- [279] Grant, S. After the Yoo-rrook Truth and Justice Commission, Aboriginal people are not obliged to forgive. Australian Broadcasting Corporation. Australia, 2021.
- [280] Australian Government and Convener Coalition of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peak Organisations. National Agreement on closing the gap. Canberra, Australia, 2020.
- [281] Bird-Rose, D. Nourishing Terrains: Australian Aboriginal views of landscape and wilderness. Australian Heritage Commission. Canberra, Australia, 1996.
- [282] Gentry, K. and Smith, L. Critical heritage studies and the legacies of the late-twentieth century heritage canon. *International Journal of Heritage Studies*, 25 (11): 1148–1168, 2019.
- [283] Pardoe, C. and Hutton, D. Aboriginal heritage as ecological proxy in south-eastern Australia: A Barapa wetland village. *Australasian Journal of Environmental Management*, 28 (1): 17-33, 2021.
- [284] Sculthorpe, G. Recognising Difference: Contested Issues in Native Title and Cultural Heritage: A section devoted to issues in Applied Anthropology. *Anthropological Forum*, 15 (2): 171-193, 2005.
- [285] Spennemann, D. H. and Graham, K. The importance of heritage preservation in natural disaster situations. *International Journal of Risk Assessment and Management*, 6 (6-7): 993-1001, 2007.
- [286] Gee, G. Dudgeon, P. Schultz, C. Hart, A. and Kelly, K. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Social and Emotional Wellbeing. Working together: Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander mental health and wellbeing principles and practice, 2: 55-68, 2014.
- [287] Edelman, D. Broader native title settlements and the meaning of the term 'traditional owners.'. National Native Title Tribunal. Canberra, Australia, 2009.
- [288] Bushfire Recovery Aboriginal Reference Group. Meeting notes. Victoria, Australia, 2020.
- [289] Department of Health and Human Services. Re: Victorian Bushfire Case Support Program Funding in 2020 - Gippsland and East Gippsland Aboriginal Cooperative. State Government of Victoria. Melbourne, Australia, 2020.
- [290] Department of Health and Human Services. Re: Victorian Bushfire Case Support Program Funding in 2020 - Victorian Aboriginal Child Care Agency. State Government of Victoria. Melbourne, Australia, 2020.
- [291] Department of Health and Human Services. Mental Health and Wellbeing Bushfire Recovery Package - Overview. State Government of Victoria. Melbourne, Australia, 2020.
- [292] Office of the Chief Parliamentary Counsel Victoria. Emergency Management Act 2013. State Government of Victoria. Melbourne, Australia, 2020.

# Chapter 24

Appendices

## 24.1 Appendix A: Community engagement strategy and methods

To ensure the Inquiry considered the views and experiences of the Victorian community before, during and after the fires, the Inspector-General offered communities a range of opportunities to contribute.

Under Phase 2 of the Inquiry, views and experiences of bushfire relief and recovery were invited through to 30 March 2021 by:

- providing a submission
- joining a community meeting
- joining a focus group
- providing a one-on-one interview
- completing a survey.

IGEM acknowledged that for many, recovery can be a long-term process and planned its engagements in two stages guided by a Community Engagement and Communications Plan.

The first stage gathered feedback about the effectiveness of the emergency relief and initial recovery activities (six months after the fires). The second stage gathered feedback on the progress and effectiveness of recovery activities in the medium term (12 or more months after the fires).

The purpose of the community engagement was:

---

*To identify opportunities to improve emergency management arrangements that will support Victorian communities before, during and after emergencies.*

---

The following provides a summary of IGEM's strategy and approach and includes community feedback.



Community meeting – Tambo Crossing (Source: IGEM)

### 24.1.1 Understanding the context of each community

IGEM commenced Phase 2 engagement with fire-affected communities in July 2020. These early discussions emphasised that understanding the context of these communities would inform development and delivery of IGEM's community engagement program.

IGEM engaged with local government staff, BRV Hub coordinators, key community contacts and others to learn as much as possible about each community and to understand what methods, timing of engagement and communication channels would best meet their needs.

These initial discussions aimed to create awareness of IGEM's role and the Inquiry, and gain an understanding of how each community had been affected and progress with recovery.

It was an opportunity to develop relationships and establish trust that the community engagement program was appropriate and would not add further pressure to those affected by the fires.

### 24.1.2 Best ways to communicate

IGEM developed and distributed a short online survey across fire-affected community organisations across the fire-affected :

- to gather data about the best way to communicate with community
- identify key contacts
- ascertain communication channels in use including social media and community newsletters.

Follow-up phone calls with respondents provided further insights to assist with the planning and implementation of the community engagement program. From the information gained through the survey process, IGEM compiled a database of community organisations which became a valuable resource throughout the Phase 2 engagements.

#### **Reducing community burden**

IGEM was aware of a number of consultations and engagements were being undertaken in fire-affected communities by agencies, government departments, not-for-profit organisations, researchers and others.

Not wanting to add to consultation fatigue, IGEM was guided by key leaders as to their community's interest in participating in providing feedback into the Inquiry – and how and when this would be best done. IGEM actively worked with those interested communities, tailoring the engagement to each individual community's needs. It was pleasing and somewhat humbling to note that there was almost unanimous interest in engaging directly with the Inquiry from fire affected communities, this was often cited as being a far more important opportunity for them than engaging with other entities also seeking to gain access to their precious time.

#### **Reaching communities**

A detailed analysis identified the broad range of community stakeholders, the benefit their feedback could bring to the Inquiry, their level of interest, what they were likely to expect by participating and their communication needs. This analysis enabled IGEM to determine whether external expertise and assistance was required to reach some community cohorts.

IGEM engaged Youth Affairs Council Victoria (YACVic) to undertake consultation with young people from fire-affected communities. Other peak bodies such as VCOSS and Regional Tourism Boards provided vital information about local community stakeholders and how best to engage.

IGEM is very grateful to Community Recovery Committees (CRCs) particularly the committee Chairpersons for their dedicated support in enabling their community members to provide feedback into the Inquiry. Their knowledge of their community, recognition of the importance of participating in the Inquiry and active promotion of engagement opportunities provided much value to the community engagement program.

The COVID-19 pandemic influenced the planning and development of the Community Engagement Plan. With varying public health restrictions introduced from March 2020 onwards, face-to-face engagement was postponed until late November 2020.

While IGEM was able to adapt and hold some engagements online, it was important to understand the capacity and capability of community members to access these opportunities. A lack of reliable telecommunications infrastructure – particularly in remote communities – affected many people being able to successfully participate using online methods.

Some communities also advised IGEM that their preference was to meet face-to-face which influenced the timing of collecting community data.



Community meeting – Nariel Valley (Source: IGEM)

### Engagement methods

Informed by the community stakeholder analysis, and response to the COVID-19 pandemic health restrictions, IGEM used the following engagement methods to gather community feedback on experiences of relief and recovery.

#### INTERVIEWS

Between October 2020 and April 2021, IGEM held 43 personal interviews, either face to face or by use of the Zoom online platform. Interviews were mostly one-on-one though some community members participated with their partner.

Interviews were held at a time convenient for the participant, generally lasted for an hour and were recorded and transcribed.

These interviews enabled community members to provide a submission to the Inquiry in an efficient and effective manner and proved a valuable tool for gaining feedback – especially while public health restrictions were in place.

One-on-one interviews also provided a safe space for community members who wanted to provide their feedback but did not want to do this in a public forum.

#### ONLINE FOCUS GROUPS

IGEM held two online focus group discussions for community members from Mallacoota and district in September and October 2020. The first session focused on emergency relief and the second on the progress of recovery.

These were facilitated discussions with a small group of people from a particular community. Key to the success of these focus groups was the size of the group (up to 10 people) and that it provided a safe space to provide feedback.

In December 2020, a further online focus group was held for five small business owners from East Gippsland. Discussion revolved around their experiences of relief and recovery as business owners.

### COMMUNITY MEETINGS AND FOCUS GROUPS (FACE-TO-FACE)

In November 2020 IGEM held six face-to-face focus group meetings in East Gippsland, engaging with 37 community members.

The style of meeting was chosen by the community – some were informal drop-in sessions, some focus groups and others were more formal facilitated sessions.

Face-to-face focus groups followed a similar structure to those conducted online.

IGEM held 35 community meetings over a four-week period in February and March 2021. Meetings were held across East Gippsland, Towong and Alpine Shires with a total of 335 people attending.

External consultants were engaged to facilitate seven community meetings in larger townships with smaller meetings facilitated by IGEM staff. Opportunity was provided to individual community members to speak directly with the Inspector-General and staff after the meetings if they did not wish to speak in front of the group, many took up this offer.



Community meeting – Mount Beauty (Source: IGEM)

### SURVEY

An online survey was made available in October 2020 covering various aspects of relief and recovery.

IGEM received 95 completed surveys with 81 per cent of respondents being residents from fire affected areas who were impacted in the fires.

Hard copies of the survey were also sent to key locations across the fire affected areas, with some personally delivered to residents in remote locations. A reply-paid envelope was provided to facilitate the return of responses. Community members were also able to complete the survey over the telephone.

The survey remained open until April 2021.

## SUBMISSIONS

Written submissions were invited from individuals and organisations and were open from July 2020 until April 2021.

Submissions could be completed online, via email or mailed.

IGEM received 67 written submissions in this Phase of the Inquiry with 88 per cent being provided from fire-affected areas and 12 per cent from non-fire areas.

### Community wellbeing

A participant information sheet and a guide to health and wellbeing resources was provided to community members who participated in interviews, focus groups and community meetings.

These resources were also made available on IGEM's website.

Interactions were conducted in a supportive and empathetic manner, recognising the emotional impact that re-telling their story and sharing their experience had on participants.

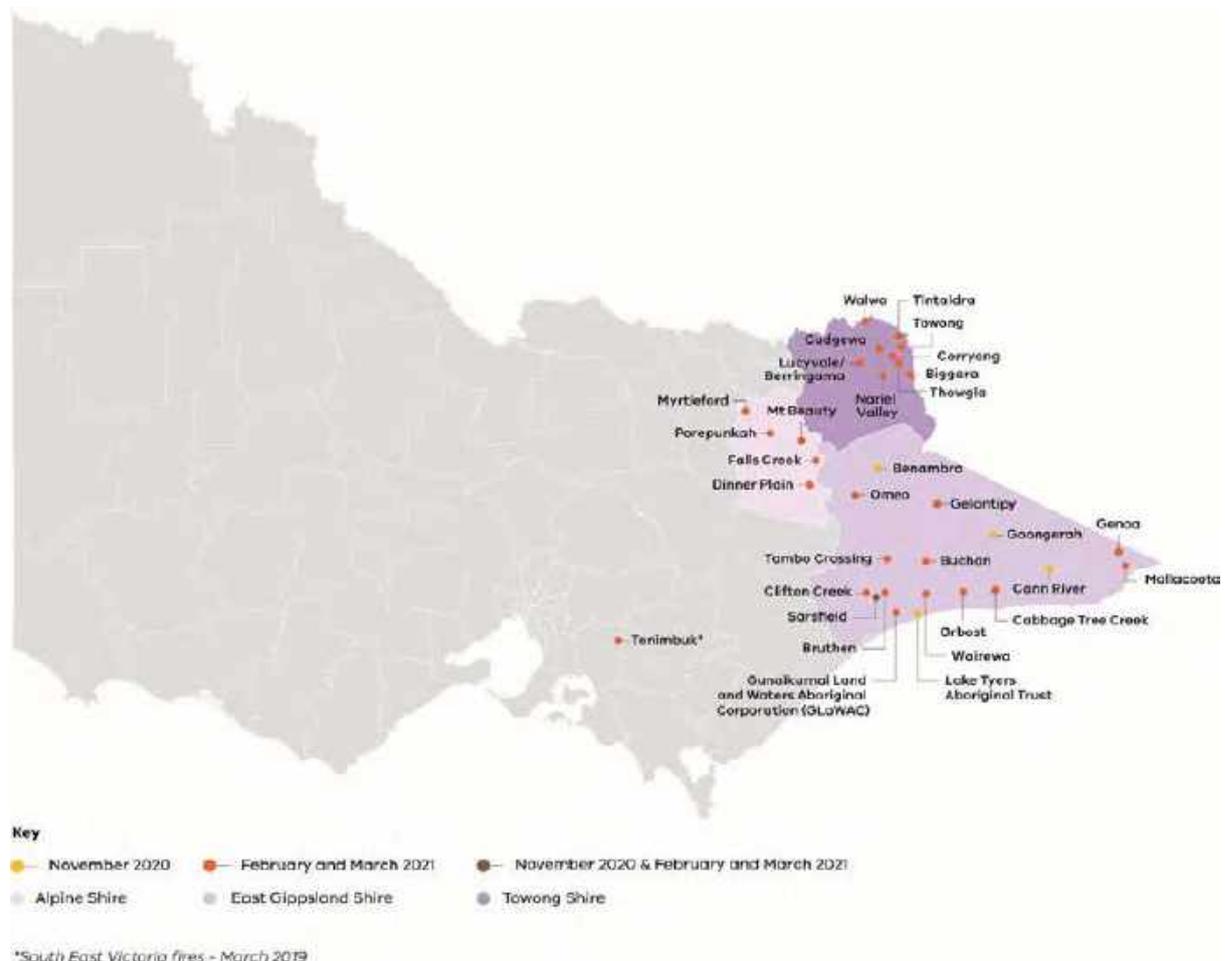
### Communication channels

A variety of communication tools were used to promote the community engagement activities. IGEM worked with communities to tailor promotional materials to their needs and raise community awareness of feedback opportunities.

<b>Media releases</b>	IGEM prepared and distributed media releases to a variety of print, broadcast and online outlets at key points in the Inquiry.
<b>Print advertising</b>	Paid advertising promoting community engagement activities was undertaken in relevant local, regional and metropolitan newspapers and community newsletters. Articles and advertisements were also placed in local and community recovery newsletters produced by councils and BRV.
<b>Flyers</b>	Flyers were prepared for each community session and circulated electronically. Some communities requested printed versions of the flyers which were delivered as a letterbox drop. Flyers were displayed in key locations such as recovery hubs and neighbourhood houses.
<b>Direct email/mail</b>	Regular IGEM Community Updates were developed and provided to 776 subscribers by email or hard copy. Community members and organisations were encouraged to share the update to help spread the word. Updates were also posted to IGEM's website and shared through its social media channels.
<b>Website</b>	IGEM's website was the central port of information regarding the Inquiry. Community members could lodge a submission via the website, complete a survey or register for an interview, community meeting or focus group. Details of all engagement activities were included on the website as well as general information about the Inquiry.
<b>Social media</b>	IGEMs Facebook and Twitter channels were consistently used to promote engagement activities. Facebook tiles were prepared for community meetings and provided to local contacts and Community Recovery Committees for posting on relevant local pages.
<b>Radio interviews</b>	The Inspector-General conducted a number interviews with regional and local radio stations leading up to – and during – visits with fire affected communities.
<b>Word-of-mouth</b>	Many community members told IGEM that word-of-mouth was also a very good channel for providing information, especially when it was delivered by a trusted local.

### 24.1.3 Communities visited

**Figure 30.** IGEM community meetings held during November 2020 and February–March 2021



### 24.1.4 Key engagement questions

Community members were asked a series of key questions to guide discussion. These questions were used in all engagement methods and across both stages of the engagement process.

Participants were encouraged to provide examples to support the feedback they provided.

- *What worked well for you and your community in the delivery of emergency relief?*
- *What didn't work as well?*
- *What opportunities for improvement are there in the delivery of emergency relief?*
- *What has worked well for you and your community in relation to recovery activities, services and programs?*
- *What hasn't worked as well?*
- *What opportunities for improvement are there for recovery activities, services and programs?*
- *Given the added complexities that the COVID-19 pandemic has had on bushfire recovery, what impacts both positive and negative have you and your community experienced?*

### 24.1.5 Community feedback on IGEM's approach

IGEM undertook a short evaluation at the end of some of the community meetings and focus groups, asking participants to provide simple feedback on the session. At seven of the externally-facilitated community meetings, participants were asked three questions:

- *How comfortable did you feel with the approach at this session?*
- *How effective was the advertising/communication about these events?*
- *To what extent were participants heard and understood at this session?*

In response to these questions, 96 per cent of participants indicated they were very comfortable with the approach used at the session. A further 94 per cent felt very well understood and listened to.

When asked how effective the advertising/communication was for the events, 45 per cent indicated it was very effective, further 45 per cent indicated mid-level effectiveness and 10 per cent said it was not very effective.

Community members were invited to provide further comment about the scores they provided.

Although overall the feedback was very positive, some community members expressed some confusion about the various meetings and who was invited or able to attend which meetings. This was especially relevant in Towong Shire where a number of meetings were held in small communities.

IGEM heard that community members were unclear whether they could attend a meeting which was not specifically promoted for their local area, and that clearer communication in the advertising materials may have alleviated this confusion.

In Towong Shire, agency bushfire debriefs – delayed through COVID-19 pandemic restrictions – held at a similar time to IGEM's meetings also caused some confusion. IGEM heard that some community members were unsure which meeting they were attending.

Despite IGEM using a number of channels to promote community meetings, some community members indicated that they only heard about the meeting through one channel. IGEM will continue to work with communities to identify the most effective methods for promoting future community engagement activities.



Community meeting – Orbost (Source: IGEM)

Participants in the online focus groups for Mallacoota and district residents were asked whether they would recommend others to participate and were also invited to provide any further comments about the sessions. Positively all participants indicated that they would recommend other resident to join a focus group.

Comments included:

---

*'Great open talk. Thanks to all, and the IGEM team'*

*'I like the flexibility, allows the flow of ideas'*

*'Opportunity to capture lessons learned'*

*'Feels like our experiences is valued'*

---

While participants felt valued and heard, there was a strong desire to see something useful come from the information they provided. This was a strong theme across all community engagement activities.

Small business online focus group participants indicated that it was valuable knowing others had experienced similar predicaments to themselves and that they were not alone. They acknowledged the value in sharing the experience and enabling those not as significantly impacted as others to hear about their issues with recovery.

### **Informal feedback**

In many cases, it was not appropriate to undertake a formal evaluation of community meetings and focus groups. Reasons for this included the style of meeting and IGEM considered it inappropriate to ask people to provide feedback on the meeting or session when many were quite emotional after sharing their story.

However, many community members expressed their thanks and gratitude in person after the meetings or focus groups. They thanked the Inspector-General for visiting and listening to community members. Overwhelmingly, they provided positive feedback on how the sessions were run and how they felt their voices had been heard.

Community members who participated in an interview spoke of being pleased they had been able to share their story and to get things off their chest. They felt safe speaking one-on-one with IGEM.

IGEM also received written feedback from participants indicating they valued the opportunity to provide feedback to the Inquiry and the format of the sessions.

Some comments received included:

---

*'Many thanks for your visit yesterday. It was an excellent opportunity to vent our frustrations but what we all really appreciated was your willingness to listen and take on board the issues that were raised. Two people who attended have already emailed me to say how useful and informative the session was.'*

*'A very professionally run and empathetic meeting!'*

*'It was a pleasure to meet you all. I was extremely impressed, as we all were with your compassion and empathy in regard to our experience. I look forward to seeing the final recommendations.'*

*'I think the session was productive and it did give people an opportunity to air their issues, whether they be with regards to operational response or recovery.'*

---

### Opportunities for improvement

In most instances, agency staff introduced themselves at the start of the meeting and were simply observers. In most cases agency personnel were attending as community members and had not specifically been invited as formal attendees even though their agency benefitted from their attendance.

However IGEM received feedback that some community members were uncomfortable when they discovered – after a meeting – that recovery agency or government staff had been in attendance and they did not know who they were.

These community members felt that the meetings should have been only for community members or that recovery agency or government staff should have made clear who they were.

For future meetings, IGEM will ensure that an open dialogue is held at the start of the meeting so that all are aware of who is in attendance and what their role is.

IGEM was provided with a wealth of valuable data from the Victorian community in these engagement activities and considers the program an overall success.

IGEM would like to sincerely thank all the individuals, communities, organisations, recovery agencies and councils for their support and contribution to this community engagement.



## 24.2 Appendix B: Inquiry stakeholders

ABC Friends Bendigo  
 Aboriginal Victoria  
 AgBiz Assist  
 Air Affairs Australia Pty Ltd  
 Alpine Community Recovery Committee  
 Alpine Region Community Recovery Hub  
 Alpine Shire Community Recovery Committee  
 Alpine Shire Council  
 Ambulance Victoria  
 ArtScape Cottage Beechworth  
 Australian Banking Association  
 Australian Business Roundtable for Disaster Resilience & Safer Communities  
 Australian Communications Consumer Action Network  
 Australian Defence Force  
 Australian Environment Foundation  
 Australian Fire and Emergency Service Authorities Council  
 Australian Parents for Climate Action  
 Australian Red Cross

BAI Communications  
 BDCA Committee  
 Beef Industry Discussion Group  
 Benambra Neighbourhood House  
 Berringa Support  
 Berringama Lucyvale Community Recovery Committee  
 Biggara Community Recovery Committee  
 BlackBerry Australia Limited  
 Blairgowrie Community Fire Prevention Action Group  
 Brown Hill Community Fire Aware Network  
 Bruthen and District Citizens Association  
 Bruthen and District Community Recovery Committee  
 Bruthen and District Neighbourhood House  
 Buchan Community Recovery Inquiry  
 Buchan District Community Recovery Hub  
 Buchan Gelantipy & District Renewal Association  
 Buchan Neighbourhood House  
 Buchan/Gelantipy and Districts Renewal Association  
 Bunyip Community Recovery Committee  
 Bureau of Meteorology  
 Bushfire and Natural Hazards Collaborative Research Centre  
 Bushfire Building Council of Australia  
 Bushfire Recovery Victoria

Cabbage Tree Creek Hall  
 Cameron Consulting  
 Cann River Community House  
 Cann Valley Bush Nursing Centre  
 Cann Valley District Community Recovery Hub  
 Cann Valley District Reference Group  
 Centre for Air Pollution, Energy and Health Research  
 Centre for Future Landscapes, La Trobe University  
 Centre for Rural Communities  
 Clifton Creek Community Recovery Team  
 Climate Council of Australia  
 Colac Otway Shire Council  
 Community House Swifts Creek  
 Corporate2Community  
 Corryong Community Recovery Committee  
 Corryong Health  
 Corryong Neighbourhood Centre  
 Country Fire Authority  
 Cradlepoint  
 Croydon Conservation Society  
 Cudgewa Community Recovery Committee

Department of Education and Training  
 Department of Environment, Land, Water and Planning

- Climate and biodiversity
- Energy
- Forest, Fire and Regions
- Water
- Planning Systems and Heritage Victoria

Department of Health and Human Services  
 Department of Jobs, Precincts and Regions

- Agriculture Victoria
- Emergency Management
- Food and Grocery
- Regional Recovery and Development
- Telecommunications
- Tourism Events Visitor Economics Branch

Department of Justice and Community Safety  
 Department of Premier and Cabinet  
 Department of Transport  
 Department of Treasury and Finance  
 Destination Gippsland  
 Disaster Legal Help Victoria  
 Djillay Ngalu (Healthy Together)

East Gippsland – Bushfire Recovery Centre  
 East Gippsland Marketing Inc  
 East Gippsland Shire Council  
 East Gippsland Wildfire Taskforce  
 Eildon Boulevard Caravan Park  
 Emergency Leaders for Climate Change  
 Emergency Management Australia  
 Emergency Management Victoria  
 Emergency Services Telecommunications Authority  
 Environment East Gippsland  
 Environment Protection Authority Victoria  
 Environment Victoria  
 Errinundra to Snowy (E2S) District Community Recovery Team  
  
 First Nations Cann Valley  
 Fire Rescue Victoria  
 Food and Fibre Gippsland  
 FoodBank  
 Forest Fire Victoria  
 Foundation  
 Friends of Crusoe Reservoir & No. 7 Park  
 Friends of Leadbeater's Possum  
 Friends of Mallacoota  
 Friends of the Box Ironbark Forests  
 Friends of the Earth Melbourne  
 Friends of the Koalas  
 Future Foundation  
  
 Geelong Environment Council  
 Gelantipy District Bush Nursing Centre  
 Genoa Hall Committee  
 Gippsland and East Gippsland Aboriginal Cooperative  
 Gippsland Apiarist Association  
 Gippsland Disability Advocacy  
 Gippsland Emergency Relief Fund  
 Gippsland Environment Group  
 Gippsland Lakes Complete Health Limited  
 GIVIT  
 Goongerah Environment Centre  
 Grattan Institute  
 Gunaikurnai Land and Waters Aboriginal Cooperation  
  
 Hamilton Field Naturalists Club  
 Healesville Action Group  
 Howitt Society  
 HVP Plantations  
  
 Institute of Foresters of Australia and Australian Forest Growers  
  
 Jesuit Social Services  
  
 Lake Tyers Aboriginal Trust  
 Lake Tyers Health and Children's Service  
 Lakes Entrance Action and Development Association  
 Landari  
 Liberal Party - Eastern Victoria Regional Electorate Council  
 Lighter Footprints  
 Local Government Victoria  
 Lucknow Memorial Hall  
  
 Macnamara Community – Australian Conservation  
 Mallacoota and District Recovery Association  
 Mallacoota Community Health Infrastructure and Resilience Fund  
 Mallacoota Community Precinct Committee of Management  
 Mallacoota Medical Centre  
 Mallacoota P-12 School  
 Mallacoota Progress Association  
 Mallacoota Recovery Hub  
 Mansfield Shire Council  
 Melbourne Sustainable Society Institute  
 Melbourne Water  
 Metropolitan Fire and Emergency Services Board  
 Monash University Disaster Resilience Initiative  
 Mount Beauty – Keep Calm Committee  
 Mount Beauty & District Chamber of Commerce  
 Mount Beauty & District Mens Shed  
 Mount Beauty Neighbourhood Centre  
 Municipal Association of Victoria  
 Myrtleford Chamber of Commerce and Industry  
 Myrtleford Neighbourhood Centre  
  
 Nariel Valley Community Recovery Committee  
  
 Omeo Business and Tourism Association  
 Omeo District Community Recovery Hub  
 Omeo District Health  
 Omeo Region Community Recovery Association  
 Orbost and District Community Recovery and Transition Committee  
 Orbost Chamber of Commerce and Industry  
 Orbost District Community Recovery Hub  
 Orbost Regional Health – Mental Health  
 Outdoors Victoria  
  
 Parks Victoria  
 PC & BJ McConachy Pty Ltd  
 Planning Institute of Australia – Victoria

Realm Executive Group  
 Regional Victorians Opposed to Duck Shooting Inc  
 Rotary Club Lakes Entrance  
 Royal Botanic Gardens Victoria  
 Rural City of Wangaratta  
 Rural Councils Victoria  
 Rural Financial Counselling Service Victoria

Sarsfield and District Community Recovery Hub  
 Sarsfield Community Association  
 Sarsfield Recreation Reserve Committee  
 Small Business Commission  
 South East Timber Association  
 Speaker Alert and Advise for Everyone  
 Suncorp Group Limited

Tallangatta Memorial Hall Committee of Management  
 Tawonga and District Community Association  
 Telstra  
 The Gender and Disaster Pod  
 The Salvation Army  
 The Wilderness Society Victoria  
 Thowgla Community Recovery Committee  
 Tintalra Community Recovery Committee  
 Towong Community Recovery Committee  
 Towong Shire – Community Hub  
 Towong Shire Council  
 Tubbut Neighbourhood House

United Firefighters Union  
 University of Melbourne Cultural Burning Research Group  
 Upper Beaconsfield Association

Upper Kiewa Valley Community Association  
 Upper Murray Community Recovery Committee  
 Upper Murray Incorporated  
 Upper Murray Regional Neighbourhood House Network

Victoria Police  
 Victoria State Emergency Service  
 Victorian Association of Forest Industries  
 Victorian Council of Churches – Emergencies Ministry  
 Victorian Farmers Federation  
 Victorian National Parks Association  
 Victorian Scientific Advisory Committee  
 Volunteer Fire Brigades Victoria  
 Volunteering Victoria

Wairewa Community Recovery Committee  
 Wairewa Hall and Recreation Reserve Committee of Management  
 Walwa Bush Nursing Centre  
 Walwa Community Recovery Committee  
 Western Sydney University  
 Wildlife Highways Pty Ltd  
 Wildlife Victoria  
 Windermere  
 Windermere Child and Family Services Inc  
 Wodonga Council  
 Women's Health Goulburn North East  
 World Wildlife Fund Australia

Yarra Ranges Shire Council  
 Youth Affairs Council Victoria

Zoos Victoria





**IGEM**  
Inspector-General  
for Emergency  
Management

**Postal address**

GPO Box 4356  
Melbourne VIC 3001

**Street address**

Level 29  
121 Exhibition Street  
Melbourne VIC 3000

 03 8684 7900

 [igem@igem.vic.gov.au](mailto:igem@igem.vic.gov.au)

 [igem.vic.gov.au](http://igem.vic.gov.au)

 [twitter.com/IGEM\\_Vic](https://twitter.com/IGEM_Vic)

 [facebook.com/IGEMVictoria](https://facebook.com/IGEMVictoria)