

Evidence from Experience:

Young people's perspectives on the effectiveness of Bushfire Relief and Recovery

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Youth Affairs Council Victoria (YACVic) is the peak body and leading advocate for young people aged 12–25 and the youth sector in Victoria.

Our vision is that the rights of young people in Victoria are respected, and they are active, visible and valued in their communities.

The recommendations in this report were developed in collaboration with more than 80 young people from across East Gippsland, Towong and Alpine regions, youth workers, researchers and other experts. YACVic is thankful for the support and expertise of everyone who contributed to this work.

The thinking, collegiality and contribution of Derm Ryan, Carla Hall, Sam Champion and Alyssa Jeffrey to the development of this report is gratefully acknowledged.



YACVic respectfully acknowledges the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people of this continent. We pay our respects to the ancestors and Elders past and present of all Aboriginal nations in Victoria.

Front cover shows an example of the nesting boxes produced by Orbost Secondary College students undertaking the YACVic Rural Activator program. Sponsored by RSPCA Victoria, Activators provides support and training to young people from bush fire effected areas who are undertaking a community project with an animal focus.

Contents

Executive Summary.....	3
Introduction.....	8
Background.....	10
Top Six Themes.....	11
Methodology.....	12
Theme 1: Information and Knowledge.....	18
Theme 2: Communication.....	21
Theme 3: Psychosocial Support.....	24
Theme 4: Agency and Capability.....	36
Theme 5: Community Engagement.....	39
Theme 6: Paradigm Shift.....	44
Detailed Commentaries.....	50
<i>Relief</i>	50
Public Communication.....	56
Opportunity to volunteer and offer donations.....	59
Psychosocial Support.....	60
<i>Recovery</i>	68
Opportunity to participate in community recovery initiatives.....	68
Employment and employability after the fires.....	69
Education and training opportunities after the fires.....	70
Perceptions of recovery in the natural environment.....	70
The Impact of COVID-19.....	71
Being Heard.....	72
<i>12 months on</i>	73
People and wellbeing.....	73
Aboriginal culture and healing.....	74
Buildings and infrastructure.....	74
Biodiversity and environment.....	75
Business and economy.....	76
Bushfire and recovery funding.....	76

What could be done better.....	77
Return to normal.....	78
Citations.....	80
Appendices.....	83
Appendix A — Youth-focused Disaster Recovery Protocol	83
Appendix B — Sample of school newsletter items from 2020	90
Appendix C — School bushfire procedure.....	92
Appendix D — Online survey instrument.....	93
Appendix E — Interview focus.....	97

Executive Summary

We understand that bushfires and other disasters have a profound impact on young people's mental health, education, housing, employment, family and peers, community ties, local communities and the natural environment. What is less known is what resources, people, spaces and places, programs and activities have been supportive from the perspectives of young people themselves.

The aim of this research was to prepare a unique and comprehensive insight into young people's experiences and perceptions of relief and recovery following the 2019–20 Victorian bushfires and to understand what was relevant, effective and what opportunities there are for improvements. The research focused on three specific lines of inquiry:

- What relief and recovery activities that were relevant to young Victorians occurred during and after the 2019–2020 fires at the state, regional and local levels?
- To what extent were relief and recovery arrangements and activities, including at state, regional and Incident levels effective from the perspectives of young Victorians?
- What opportunities are there to improve relief and recovery arrangements and practice in Victoria for young Victorians?

Young people were encouraged to share their experiences and to offer recommendations and suggestions for improvement. As a result, the focus of the report is predominantly on things young people identified as not working well. This should not be seen as ignorant criticism, but rather as informed critique from young people who are best placed to report on their own experience and perceptions.

It was evident that relief and recovery activities and arrangements for young people overlapped across relief and recovery, and in many instances during, and in preparation, as they offered their suggestions for improvements before the next bushfire or event. As a result, the first two lines of inquiry were analysed concurrently and identified five key themes and areas of concern for young people. These have been reported on as:

1. Information and knowledge
2. Communication
3. Psychosocial support
4. Agency and capability
5. Community engagement

Information and knowledge Young people told us that they wanted to be better and directly informed about a range of issues they experienced through the 2019–20 Victorian bushfires, including

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.

Communication is vital during bushfires and young people felt that they were not well supported, or informed, with limited access to communication during the fires and in the relief period. They felt that transition communication, which was unpredictable and kept changing, was particularly lacking for their age group, and they expressed concerns for younger children who did not have access to communication outside their familial relationships.

Psychosocial support was a significant concern for young people, particularly the absence of mental health support in their local communities. While some young people reported mental health support immediately following the fires, they referred to this as a one-off opportunity that fell short of what they needed. They were critical of the lack of support in schools and from organisations such as headspace.

Many reported a need for youth-centred, safe spaces where they could meet and debrief with their friends. They were open to these spaces being used by professional people and trusted adults who could provide support.

There were also great examples of community support for young people that emerged from the bushfires, including The Sanctuary at Mallacoota (see page 32), Sarsfield Snaps in Sarsfield (see page

35) and the pre-existing Youth Space in Corryong (see page 30).

Agency and capability For the most part, 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. In many instances young people played a significant role in family preparedness and response plans but were frustrated when they were denied the opportunity to contribute to their community.

Community engagement Young people expressed concern for the impact of the bushfires in their community, for individuals, their peers, family, neighbours, businesses, and flora and fauna. Many young people talked about a desire to be more involved and felt they have a vital role to play in rebuilding their communities and building resilience for future bushfires and events. There are examples of young people leading community recovery, including The Activators (see page 42 and 48) and The Amigos (see page 36).

Twelve months on

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 (young person, Alpine Shire).

Most felt that COVID-19 took bushfire support and recovery off the agenda and 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.

The research highlights the benefits for young people where youth-focused spaces and activities were available but also reveals the absence of community activities and programs through relief and recovery in 2020.

Young people also felt that much of the messaging and support that was provided in 2020 was directed to or by adults and parents, and there was less evidence of adults or organisations who would *'talk with us, not to us'*.

Opportunities to access bushfire recovery funding were also limited through 2020, although several young people were actively involved in programs or are now seeking funding in 2021.

Overwhelmingly, the message from young people was to engage and empower them across the entire bushfire lifecycle. Young people want their capabilities to be recognised and the strengths they bring to community seen as valuable. The constraints of vulnerability perpetuate the notion of protection however, there is a flip slip to this discourse, one that acknowledges young people as capable, constructive, creative and agentic thinkers. The benefits are considerable:

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

Paradigm shift While young people have been critical of the lack of support through 2020, they

were adamant that returning to the pre-bushfire, pre-COVID 'normal' was not an option. Young people want lessons to be learnt from the past 12 months, to address the absence of support for young people in regional and rural areas, to improve environmental and farming practices, to upgrade water storage, and embrace online communication, amongst other things. As a result, we identified a sixth theme, a paradigm shift.

A paradigm shift acknowledges two key messages from young people. Firstly, it acknowledges that pre-bushfires, pre-COVID was not ideal. Young people in regional and rural areas want lessons to be learnt from 2020 and to be better supported in their local communities. Secondly, a paradigm shift flips the vulnerability narrative as the defining characteristic of young people affected by bushfires. It enables young people's capabilities to be acknowledged and their desire to take an agentic role across the entire bushfire lifecycle. When given the opportunity, young people can play an important and valuable role in rebuilding, and building resilience, in local communities.

Young people in regional and rural communities are keen to convey the message to decision makers that while things haven't been perfect, the support they have received as a result of the bushfires has made a difference.

Throughout the report young people have openly shared their ideas for improvement and a desire for change, we submit the following recommendations to ensure that young people are actively involved in building community resilience in preparedness for future disasters and events, and taking action if/when a disaster occurs.

Recommendations

Recommendation 1: That youth focused, disaster management and community focused organisations actively engage with young people across the entire disaster lifecycle, recognising their capabilities and desire to take an agentic role in reducing their vulnerability and supporting their community. The aim is to ensure the collective empowerment of young people in the building of community resilience for future events, and ensure psychosocial support is already in place in the event of any future disaster or event.

Recommendation 2: That the State and Federal Governments fund youth workers in regional and rural areas, particularly those areas prone to natural disasters, to ensure a holistic, effective, efficient and sustainable solution that supports young people to build resilience and connection before disasters, and to cope through the longer-term recovery period. Youth workers are skilled at building trusted relationships, supporting and engaging young people, building their skills, and connecting them with community and employment, in a non-stigmatised way.

Recommendation 3: That youth-safe spaces are established in communities as part of building resilience for disaster management. The aim is to provide young people with a safe, positive space to meet, talk and debrief with friends and their peers, without feeling pressured to do so. The space can be used by professional people (see Recommendation 2) and trusted adults to support young people.

Recommendation 4: That education and knowledge around natural disasters is focused on the risk factors, environmental context and preparedness planning of local communities. Education and training for natural disasters should be locally focused and continuous across the curriculum, delivered annually to all year levels and building on previous knowledge. Education and training should be embedded within all education and youth-relevant organisations, not limited to the DET system. The aim is to ensure that all young people, not just those who attend school, are informed about their local community's disaster planning and response.

Recommendation 5: That TAFE and other local education providers deliver appropriate courses and training in disaster prone areas, or at an appropriate stage in the aftermath of a disaster. The type of training will be context specific but in the aftermath of the 2019–20 bushfires could have included fence-building, traffic management and clean up. The aim is to develop skills and build capability to enable young people to be actively involved in recovery and access employment opportunities in their local community.

Recommendation 6: That young people are meaningfully included in state-based (Bushfire Recovery Victoria) and local preparedness and recovery committees (Community Recovery Committees), and the establishment and structure of the new National Resilience, Relief and Recovery Agency. That specific funds and positions

around natural disasters across the entire disaster lifecycle.



7

Introduction

Our instinct in the face of bushfires or natural disasters is to ensure the safety of vulnerable people, especially children and young people.^b

Advice, strategies and practices have been developed from a large body of knowledge and research that has investigated children and young people's¹ reactions, responses and recovery from bushfires and other disasters. Much of this research has focused on young people's vulnerability and the desire to mitigate their emotional trauma¹ and longer term impact, for justifiable reasons. However, in the past decade there has been a significant shift to better understand how practical interventions, programs and approaches can work to reduce the vulnerability of young people² and investigate how they can be actively involved in the reduction of their own vulnerability, build community resilience and rebuild their communities.^{2, 3, 4}

We know that bushfires and other disasters impact on young people's mental health, education, housing, employment, family and peers,

community ties, their community and natural environment.^{5,6} What is less known is how support processes and challenges before, during and following bushfires or other disasters are impacted by 'personal, familial, geographic, economic, and social factors' for young people.⁷ Even less is understood about what resources, people, spaces and places, programs and activities have been supportive from the perspectives of young people themselves.

It is vital that the vulnerability of young people is acknowledged in disaster planning, as it ensures the visibility of this age group in planning pre-disaster, response and recovery.^{1, 2, 8} It is important though to ensure that vulnerability is not the defining characteristic of young people, as this does not acknowledge their considerable skills, attributes and capabilities.^{2, 8, 9, 10} When enabled, young people have shown a genuine desire to be more involved in their communities across the entire disaster lifecycle.^{2, 9, 11}

^b Disaster and reduction literature often uses the phrase children, or children and young people. While this is an accurate representation of those under the age of 18, as defined by the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, it

does not recognize young people up to the age of 25. As the participants in this project are aged 12-25 years, we have adopted the phrase young people throughout the remainder of this report.

Researchers and practitioners are calling for young people to be recognised as active agents in the face of disasters and to ensure that they are not dismissed as disinterested or passive observers.^{3, 8,}

⁹ There have been considerable advances in the past 10 years to better understand the role of young people in disasters, and investigate the capabilities and agency of young people from a youth-centric perspective.^{1, 2, 8, 12}

There is a general consensus between researchers and practitioners that the key to breaking down the barriers to young people's active participation in bushfire and disaster preparedness, response, relief and recovery is to 'flip the script on trust'.⁸ This means that those making decisions must be open to 'recognize and encourage children [young people] as agentic thinkers and actors who are capable of constructive participation'.⁸

Background

The 2019-2020 Victorian bushfires will have a lasting impact on the local communities and people who were directly affected. Young people are an integral part of these communities and have unique insights into their experiences and perceptions of the bushfires and the recovery period.

The Inspector-General for Emergency Management is undertaking a two-phase inquiry into the Victorian 2019–2020 bushfires. Phase 1 has been completed and considers preparedness for and response to the fires.¹³ Phase 2 is considering the progress and effectiveness of Victoria’s immediate relief and recovery arrangements.

It is vital in this phase to capture experiences from members across the breadth and diversity of affected communities. The aim of this report is to ensure young people’s experiences and perceptions of relief and recovery provide data-informed evidence that will inform IGEM’s work related to the effectiveness of several areas of community-facing relief and recovery.

The research has focused on the following lines of inquiry:

1. What relief and recovery activities that were relevant to young Victorians occurred during and after the 2019-2020 bushfires at the state, regional and local levels?
2. To what extent were relief and recovery arrangements and activities, including at a state, regional and incident level, effective from the perspective of young Victorians?
3. What opportunities are there to improve current relief and recovery arrangements and practice in Victoria for young Victorians?

Young people noted the impact of drought on the bushfires. They also clearly stated that COVID-19 has had a significant impact on their recovery from the bushfires. Where relevant, references to both have been incorporated into this report to highlight the combined impact of drought, bushfires and the pandemic.

Top Six Themes

1. Information and Knowledge

Category: Preparation, During,
Relief and Recovery

2. Communication

Category: During, Relief and
Recovery

3. Psychosocial Support

Category: During, Relief and
Recovery

4. Agency and Capability

Category: Preparation, During,
Relief and Recovery

5. Community Engagement

Category: Preparation, During,
Relief and Recovery

6. Paradigm Shift

Category: Recovery and
Preparation

Methodology

As part of the Inquiry into Victoria's bushfires in the 2019-20 fire season the Inspector-General for Emergency Management (IGEM) reached out to Youth Affairs Council Victoria (YACVic) to prepare a report on behalf of young Victorians, describing their perceptions of relief and recovery. The report will inform IGEM's work related to the effectiveness of several areas of community-facing relief and recovery.

YACVic has engaged with young people through a number of workshops, interviews and an online survey to capture a unique and comprehensive insight into their experiences and perceptions of Relief and Recovery following the 2019–20 fire season in Victoria.

YACVic was already exploring some of the issues identified by IGEM across a series of consultations, programs and workshops for organisations including, but not limited to: Bushfire Recovery Victoria (BRV), the Department of Education and Training (DET), the Department of Health and Human Services (DHHS) and RSPCA Victoria. To avoid over-consulting, and where an overlap was identified in the information already collected and proposed, the consultation activities, online survey, and data were combined.

Access to the broader findings has enriched the information available for the IGEM project. Analysis of the information for IGEM has been undertaken by a dedicated Project Manager to ensure the integrity of the project aims and outcomes. The IGEM project was managed separately from other YACVic bushfire related projects to further ensure project integrity.

The aim of the Report is to build on the commentaries and insights from young people across a mixture of online and in-person workshops, interviews and surveys, outlined below, and to analyse the findings that align with IGEM's specific areas of interest:

Relief

- Relief centre experiences (including safety, security, appropriateness)
- Public communications (including information issued through the Vic Emergency App)
- Opportunity to volunteer and offer donations
- Psychosocial support (including during and immediately after the fires)
- Returning to the community after evacuation

Recovery

- Psychosocial support
- Opportunity to participate in community recovery initiatives
- Employment and employability after the fires
- Education and training opportunities after the fires
- Perceptions of recovery in the natural environment (flora and fauna).

We want to note here that the project has enabled us to capture valuable insights into young people's experiences and perspectives of the 2019–2020 bushfires. These are not presented here as a representative sample of all young people's experiences. However, the data collected from young people, experiences of key members of the project team, and evidence from recent international research, has enabled us to provide a rich youth-centred perspective of the effectiveness of the support, relief and recovery arrangements following Victoria's 2019–2020 bushfires. In doing so, we have identified important themes that will enable IGEM to better understand the experiences of young people and inform future programs and arrangements around bushfire and disaster preparedness, response, relief and recovery.

Workshops

Information was gathered from 11 workshops, see Table 1. The workshops were 1.5–3 hours in duration and engaged young people aged 12–25 from across East Gippsland, Towong and Alpine regions. With extensive experience in ethical and best practice consultations with young people,

YACVic's workshops were developed within a framework that focused on the key issues but enabled flexibility in delivery.

Interviews

Key areas of focus for the 2nd stage of data collection were identified in IGEM's feedback on Report 1, see Appendix E. Firstly, to draw out more information about where young people are at now, 12 months on from the fire, and to unpack what is or isn't working when it comes to their involvement in recovery.

Invitations were sent out via YACVic's social media networks to invite young people to participate in a 20-30 minutes interview to discuss these aspects of bushfire recovery. Direct invitations were also sent to young people in YACVic's bushfire working group, as well as those involved in the original workshops. Interest was limited and we were advised by several organisations that young people were 'exhausted from consultation and feeling the effects of burnout' (Youth Coordinator/Community Development Officer, Mallacoota). Six interviews were conducted with young people, two were with young people with a disability, see Table 1 for demographic details.

Online survey

At the same time, YACVic was conducting an online survey as part of their overall bushfire projects, see Appendix D for survey instrument. At the time of writing this report the survey had received seven responses, see Table 1 for demographic details.

Table 1: YACVic workshops delivered in bushfire affected communities

ORGANISATIONS	DELIVERY METHOD/LOCATION	WORKSHOP/INTERVIEW/SURVEY	NUMBER OF YOUNG PEOPLE	LENGTH
BRV/DET	4 x Online 1 x face-to-face, Corryong Neighbourhood Centre, Youth Space	Workshop: Looking Back — residents of East Gippsland x 14, Towong x 2, Latrobe Shire x 4, others unknown	40 (10 x 12–15 yrs, 6 x 16–19yrs, 4 x 20+ yrs, 20 x age unknown ^c)	2-3 hours
SAVE THE CHILDREN IGEM/BRV/DET	1 x face-to-face, Community Centre, Cann River ^d	Workshop: The Silver Lining & Rising from the Ashes — residents of Orbost	4 (4 x 12–15yrs)	1 hour
IGEM/BRV/DET	1 x face-to-face, The Sanctuary, Mallacoota	Workshop: The Silver Lining & Rising from the Ashes — residents of Mallacoota area	10 (3 x 12–15yrs, 6 x 16–19yrs, 1 x 20+yrs)	1.5 hours
IGEM/BRV/DET	1 x face-to-face, Orbost Education Centre	Workshop: The Silver Lining & Rising from the Ashes — residents of Orbost area	6 (3 aged 12–15yrs, 3 aged 16–19yrs)	1.5 hours
IGEM/BRV/DET	1 x face-to-face workshop, Gippsland East LLEN, Bairnsdale	Workshop: The Silver Lining & Rising from the Ashes — residents of Bairnsdale x 1 and Sarsfield x 2	3 (3 x 12–15yrs)	1.5 hours
IGEM/BRV/DET	1 x face-to-face, Corryong Neighbourhood Centre, Youth Space	Workshop: The Silver Lining & Rising from the Ashes — residents of Corryong area	11 (6 x 12–15yrs, 4 x 16–19yrs, 1 x 20+yrs)	1.5 hours
IGEM/BRV/DET	1 x face-to-face workshop, Bright Skate Park	The Silver Lining & Rising from the Ashes	0	0
IGEM	Online and phone interviews	Interviews— residents of Bright, Bairnsdale, Combienbar, Myrtleford, Newmerella x 2	6 (1 x 12-15 yrs, 4 x 16 (19 yrs, 1 x 24 yrs)	
IGEM/BRV/DET	Online YACVic Young people and bushfire recovery survey	Survey — residents of Alpine Shire, Corryong, Drouin, Goongerah, Mossiface, Orbost, Welaregang,	7 (1 x 14 yrs, 3 x 16-19 yrs, 3 x 20+ yrs)	
TOTAL	11 workshops, 6 interviews and 7 survey responses		87	

^c Not all participants in BRV/DET 1&2 registered, and some attended both workshops

^d The Cann River workshop was at the invitation of Save the Children who had 2 adult representatives, a BRV representative, East Gippsland Council representative, a Youth Facilitator from Cann River, who was also a parent of one of the young people, and a mother of one of the participants in the workshop

Data Capture

The workshops were conducted by three YACVic staff and members of YACVic's bushfire youth working group. In 2020, YACVic established this group to co-design, co-deliver and inform collective activities in response to the 2019–2020 fires across eastern Victoria. The working group is made up of young people impacted by the fires who assist with overall project and policy-based responses.

The working group members operate under a Terms of Reference and are provided with opportunities, training and capacity development to co-lead work in this area. Working group members are remunerated for their time to attend meetings, co-facilitate consultations, input and edit resources and present to a range of forums. The working group is consistent with YACVic's principle of youth participation by including and involving young people in the design and delivery of work.

Participants in the workshops were invited to participate in the way they felt comfortable and all were given the opportunity to speak to the range of issues raised by the facilitators. There was no expected level of engagement and participants contributed when and how they wanted to. As a result, some participants made more significant contributions, and others less so, but all were

given the same opportunity to engage with issues. A dedicated scribe captured the young people's comments as accurately as possible in the midst of what were often lively and enthusiastic conversations.

Information captured by the scribe in the Cann River, Mallacoota, Orbost and Bairnsdale workshops was complemented by the young people's creative responses that were captured on large butcher's paper worksheets. These have been copied from the worksheets and a power-point slide show of images has been created by one of the young people's working group.

Interviews were conducted by the dedicated IGEM Project Manager/Research Officer, video and audio recorded and transcribed. Written consent was obtained. All workshops, interviews and online survey were conducted in accordance with the Code of Ethical Practice for the Victorian Youth Sector.

YACVic takes child safety very seriously and all staff, volunteers and participants are informed of the Victorian Child Safe Standards and how and where to report child abuse. All staff and volunteers are required to have a current Working with Children Check and the reporting responsibilities related to their roles are clearly outlined.

Additional information was also captured from school newsletters and information to school communities about the bushfires, as publicly available on school websites. A transcript from the Principal of Mallacoota P–12 College, collected by IGEM for Phase 1 of the Inquiry¹³ into Victoria’s bushfires, was analysed. Media reporting of young people’s experiences of bushfire relief and recovery was also investigated, specifically reporting around The Sanctuary in Mallacoota (see page 32) <https://sanctuarymyg.org/beyond-the-fires/>¹⁴ the Sarsfield Snaps in Sarsfield (see page 35),¹⁵ and The Activators program (see page 42) <https://www.yacvic.org.au/rural/activators/>.¹⁶

Data Analysis and Themes

The YACVic Rural Team played a pivotal role in analysing young people’s experiences and perceptions, as the Rural Manager of YACVic, Derm Ryan and Rural Youth Project Co-ordinator, Carla Hall, were both a physical presence in the bushfire areas immediately following the fires and an online presence through 2020, supporting young people in fire affected communities. The

data collected was analysed by Dr Fiona MacDonald, a Senior Research Fellow recruited as the Project Manager/Research Officer for the IGEM research, in consultation with the YACVic Core and Rural Team and Senior Executive.

All comments and data were analysed and coded thematically into the specific areas of interest, listed above, requested by IGEM and reported on here. Once coded, the data was analysed through IGEMs three lines of enquiry to identify the key themes.

The data is reported on here as a qualitative analysis of the key findings and themes of young people’s experiences and perceptions as shared with the YACVic team across the 2020 year. The report is not designed as a statistical representation of all young people in the bushfire affected regions. Key Findings from the *Children and Young People’s Experience of Disaster Report*⁵ were also evident in this project.

The workshop, interview and survey format enabled young people to speak to the issues that were important to them throughout the relief and recovery period. They were encouraged to share their experiences but also to offer their recommendations and suggestions for improvement. As a result, the focus of the report is predominantly on things young people identified as not working well. This should not be seen as ignorant criticism, but rather as informed critique to ensure the Inquiry captures young people's perspective of how things could work better for them.

Analysis of the overall data and information available for this project identified six key themes and areas of concern for young people in both relief and recovery. The six key themes overlap across relief and recovery, and in many instances preparation, as a result they are reported on concurrently under the themes:

- Information and knowledge
- Communication
- Psychosocial support
- Agency and capability
- Community engagement
- Paradigm shift



Theme 1: Information and Knowledge

The majority of young people reported that family was their primary support and source of information in the immediate relief and recovery period.¹⁷ This was the case regardless of whether they were evacuated to relief centres or to family and friends in other parts of Victoria, or remained in their family home, often with no power, water or internet access.

While it was evident that young people stuck with their family's fire plan, they also reported a *'lack of information about everything'*, gaining most of their information as *'second-hand info from parents'* and living with a *'lot of uncertainty'*.

Young people also shared their experience as active participants in the family's personal preparedness and response strategies, *'as a young person you rely on your parents, and you need the ability to feel useful'*. Some young people reported staying up on bushfire watch while family members slept, keeping watch on the VicEmergency App and other communication where available. In some instances young people reported that they *'took on the brunt of looking after the family emotionally'*.

While young people acknowledge the importance of family they also reported that these relationships were not always supportive, they were not sufficiently informed about bushfire threat and response strategies, and operated under extreme stress. It was clear that young people wanted to be better and directly informed about bushfire readiness, response and recovery to help them in these complex circumstances.

Young people reported that being better informed about the community response as well as their family's plan would assist them in the face of a bushfire threat, and to know what to do while under threat. They reported that information kept changing and they were not sure about what to do next, even for basic survival information, *'be aware of your surroundings, I had no idea where the evacuation area was, no-one did'*.

Young people were frustrated at the lack of information available to them following evacuation. Many reported having no accurate knowledge of the impact of the fires in their community. Many were away from home for weeks and were resentful of the outsiders who were allowed into their community:

Earlier return, or more information/consultation about what activities are being undertaken in local communities while residents are not allowed to return (young person, online workshops).

To date, bushfire preparedness for young people has focused on a 'model of personal preparedness [as opposed to collective empowerment]'.² However, it is clear that young people can be better prepared and more resilient in the face of disruption, loss or evacuation if communities, organisations, local government and families have facilitated collective action, active participation and empowerment.^{2, 17, 18}

Young people told us they wanted to be better and directly informed about a range of issues, including bushfire threat, how adults respond in stressful situations, knowing how to talk about mental and emotional situations, and to be assured that they are not alone as others outside their family will be trying to assist. While they acknowledged that it is not possible to be prepared for everything, being better informed would enable them to feel a sense of control in the face of disaster:

Although you can't always be prepared for a fire like the one experienced it's good to have a plan of some sort to ensure a feeling of control (young person, Welaregang [in NSW however the young person had farms in the state of Victoria]).

They wanted practical knowledge of evacuation strategies, immediate response and having a broader overview of the community plans around preparation, response, evacuation, communication and support. One young person suggested that knowledge of the CFA plans would be helpful, declaring '*public information is better communication*'.

While bushfire education is covered in Year 5–6 Humanities and Social Sciences^{3, 19} in the Australian Curriculum and then throughout geography and science units in subsequent years, these usually have a broader focus on natural disasters and resilience, and do not address the natural hazards in young people's immediate environment.^{4, 8, 20, 21}

Recent research shows that young people have many misconceptions about bushfires, as much of the content is not focused on bushfire risks in their own community or is taught as an isolated topic within a broader unit that does not specifically address the communities students live in.^{3,8,19,22,23}

There are some good examples of education programs addressing local needs^{24, 25, 26,}²⁷ however, the content is not consistent across the education sector nor has it been developed for specific communities.¹² Furthermore, the programs are often delivered in specific year levels or subjects, and do not update young people's knowledge on a regular basis.

Strathewen-Arthurs Creek Bushfire Education Partnership

Investigating fire behaviour, students look closely at where they live and the subsequent bushfire risk. In weekly sessions they [Year 5 & 6] learn about the bush, in very hands-on sessions. They study map reading, topography and learn to measure fuel loading. They work on understanding the Fire Danger Rating system and learn to use tools to determine how the rating is calculated. They explore the responsibility of local bushfire preparedness and planning.²⁴

The project identified a need to address how and where young people obtain their information about bushfire preparedness in local communities. While schools play a significant role^{19, 22, 23} the limitations of this approach are highlighted by young people throughout this report, further

restricted by the reality that not all young people are engaged in traditional school structures, or have graduated from school.

We know that rural and regional young people engage in a multitude of places—sporting clubs, community centres, recreational clubs, surf lifesaving, churches, junior CFA and other emergency services—and there is an opportunity for these organisations to play a role in ensuring young people have better information and knowledge across the bushfire lifecycle. There is also an opportunity for all youth-focused organisations to play a role in providing psychosocial support for young people (see page 24 and 60). The timing of the 2019–2020 bushfires, impact of COVID-19 and the findings from this project support the call for additional avenues for bushfire education and learning for young people. This should be expanded to investigate the potential of other community organisations^{28, 29} beyond schools^{19, 22, 23}

The IGEM project has provided valuable evidence that young people believe being better and directly informed will ensure their safety, and the safety of others, in future disasters. The findings support emerging research that calls for education programs, school curriculum and future interventions to reduce the vulnerability of young people in the face of bushfires and other nature disasters, and 'focus on the entire disaster lifecycle — from preparedness, to emergency response, to recovery, to mitigation — and on empowering' young people through information.²

Theme 2: Communication

Young people identified the significance of communication before, during and following the fires. Many reported using multiple communication mediums to stay up to date on bushfire advice and information. In addition to the VicEmergency App (The App), young people reported using the CFA App, Vic Roads website, Google Maps, ABC radio, local community Facebook pages, social media, word of mouth, and community meetings. Several young people attended community meetings but this did not appear to be widespread.

In some cases, the physical presence of the fire was the first 'communication' young people and their families received that the fire was approaching. Some took on the responsibility of monitoring The App and other mediums as part of their role in the family preparedness plan, *'we had The App working, plus the radio and Facebook, plus the Lake's noticeboard on Facebook'*. Others reported that The App did not work for them, *'the App didn't work for us, so it was word of mouth which is unreliable'*.

Issues with communication access and infrastructure have already been noted in the Phase 1, IGEM Summary Report.¹³ Some of the same issues were identified by young people, including:

- Loss of communication during fires
- Fire encircled small communities, cutting off communication
- Poor mobile phone coverage for some providers
- Inconsistent or misinformation
- Living for days/weeks after the fire without power or access to the internet and online communication.

A number of young people indicated that they did not own a phone, had limited coverage, or no credit left on their mobile devices. They also expressed concern for younger children, under the age of 12, who do not have mobile phones or access to social networks.

Not everyone even uses a mobile phone here. So, you can't assume about the data, you can't assume about the communication aspect of it (IGEM Interview transcript, Principal Mallacoota P-12 College)

Young people felt they were not well supported, or informed, with access to communication during the fires. They felt that transition communication, which was unpredictable and kept changing, was particularly lacking for their age group, '*young people know what's going on but get shut down. It's even harder when you don't have access to social networks, e.g. under 12*'.

Preparation for future events should include an updated review of the most effective means of communicating with young people, popular communication channels and being aware of appropriate protocols for engaging with young people in disaster affected areas, see Appendix A.

Word of mouth, local information from friends and neighbours, photos and stories of fire damage or successful defending were often reported directly to young people. While this was helpful for many, there were incidents where the information was unreliable or incorrect.

Many young people experienced a considerable level of misinformation during the fires. This included information that their homes had been lost or damaged (when they were not), the school was gone along with other community buildings and infrastructure. This information was provided

both face-to-face and online. Several young people reported that they did not share this information with their parents as they did not want to overburden them when they were already under extreme stress. This meant some young people kept traumatic information to themselves, with no outlet to share their response. For example, a Mallacoota family discovered their daughters had been incorrectly told their house had burnt down on the night they were evacuated:

*We made a pact not to tell you and Dad.
[daughters]*

*We had vowed not to tell them and they had
vowed not to tell us.*

*There's a part of me that really struggles with that
— we've never been a family to keep things from
one another.*

*But the oldest girl said: We figured you and Dad
did not have that kind of grief that night.*

*They said: "you were really holding it together for
all of us. [mother]³⁰*

Young people provided conflicting reports about the use and value of social media. Some reported that they used social media to check in with friends and stay in contact with their friendship networks. Facebook and Snapchat were the most popular platforms. Young people reported they gained lots of information and updates were available to them during and following the fires. Others though, reported that social media was not helpful as they had no reception, their friends weren't online, and people were posting inaccurate information.

It is vital that communication with young people before, during and following disasters is acknowledged as a two-way relationship. They have their own 'perceptions and ideas and should be interlocutors, not the object of top-down instruction'.¹⁷ Young people had a number of

recommendations of how to improve communication through official channels:

- Emergency Apps need to incorporate Vic and NSW information
- Google Maps should be updated with emergency data in real time
- Ensure road closures are updated on The App, to remove the need to check other Apps
- Change the sound of The App after the disaster as the sound is triggering for many people
- Understand why The App is not the go-to communication medium for many community members, and then improve to ensure it is user friendly for young people and the primary source of information.

Theme 3: Psychosocial Support

The provision of psychosocial^{e,f} support for young people during and following bushfires and through the recovery period is essential. The protective and promotive factors that impact on how young people respond and adapt, are extensive and come from a range of personal, social and cultural structural supports that include:

A range of interacting vulnerabilities (risks, stressors, and exposure), and protective or promotive factors for recovery and resilience at the personal (e.g., neurobiological, personality, past experience, self-regulation, agency), relational (e.g. parents, family, attachment systems), environmental (e.g., places and community), and cultural (e.g., norms, mores, and practices) levels.⁷

While much has been learnt from previous bushfires and disasters, the evidence shows that effective psychosocial support requires responses to be developed for the existing community, the support services and systems and the context of the disaster.^{5, 18}

Much of our knowledge of the impact and effectiveness of these support structures has been

developed through adult-centric research and has tended to focus on the role of schools and family, and how adults — parents, teachers, counsellors — work with young people after bushfires or disasters. Less is known about the role of individual agency, peer support, the impact of ‘place attachment and place disruption’, and the importance of community spaces and places from the perspectives of young people.⁷

One of the challenges for young people during and following a disaster is the tendency to focus on their vulnerability, trauma response and psychological first aid.^{2, 3, 4, 6, 8, 51} While these are vital it is important not to categorise young people following bushfires or disasters as ‘functioning well’ or ‘functioning poorly’. This categorises young people into two narrowly defined measurements of response. The reality is that adjustments following bushfires or disasters are complex, and more nuanced understandings of how young people respond and draw from personal, social and cultural support structures is essential.³¹

^e The psychosocial definition encompasses cultural, psychological, social, economic, and physical dimensions that are part of the regeneration of a community which has experienced adversity.²⁸

^f Guidelines for psychosocial disaster responses emphasise the need for multilevel support strategies that align with the needs and circumstances of affected communities.¹⁵

Previous research has shown that providing a range of activities and opportunities 'for distraction or respite, a sense of meaning, and opportunities for emotional [and creative] expression' have been helpful for young people.⁷

There is evidence too of discrepancies between parents'/carers'/guardians' and other adults' reporting of young people's emotional systems and behaviours, during and following a bushfire or disaster. This may be a misreading of emotional reactions or the adult's own stress and uncertainty. When this occurs, it has been suggested that young people are more 'accurate reporters' of their experience and response.³¹

Young people acknowledge the role of people who were supportive through disaster and recovery periods. These are often, but not exclusively, parents, teachers and counsellors. Young people

identify 'instrumental, emotional, and companionship forms of social support'⁷ in the aftermath of bushfires and disasters. These include the provision of tangible resources such as a space, food or specific donations and resources. They identify trust as a key component of support and refer to those who are 'just there', so they can express emotions or talk about their experience.

The importance of sharing a sense of belonging in their community following a disaster and reconnecting with friends is important, as are accessible youth-centred spaces.⁷ There is considerable detail in the data around what young people identified as psychosocial support and how these could be improved. In this section we have focused on the overarching issues rather than the specific details of each point.

Mental health support

It was very clear from young people that they wanted more mental health support. While the Australian Government committed \$76 million in January 2020 to provide mental health support, with specific funding for headspace to expand its services for young Australians, the young people reported that they did not receive the support they required. While some reported that they had been offered mental health support, most felt that there was an initial response or a one-off opportunity that fell short of what was required.

We had the counsellors that came out to begin with but there wasn't any follow up. A lot of young people didn't know how they were feeling initially and it wasn't until later on that they started realising that they may or may not be feeling as well as they may have expected and the follow up counselling would have been great in that aspect, acknowledged their emotions and found a way to deal with that later on, we didn't have that (young person, Corryong, VCOSS Conversation series, (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=aH5BTMhj-6s>)).³²

Young people also wanted more support for themselves within families who remained stressed and traumatised following the bushfires. The absence of mental health support in bushfire communities in 2020 was identified by young people and adults as a major cause for concern.

Young people referenced the ten free counselling sessions offered by the Federal Government; however they reported that the uptake from young people in their communities was minimal. Uncertainty around what was actually being offered, not knowing what they might get out of the sessions, limited capacity to access the support, and the limited scope of services restricted their engagement:

There's all these things out there but you need to have a system in place for those things to work. That mental health plan did not work in my town or my Shire because we just don't have the pre-existing support networks or infrastructure even (young person, Bright).

Addition challenges, reported by young people, included the absence of mental health support in their own community:

We needed more mental health support. We had very limited access to mental health—one off—they saw us once and never came back. They were only here for a month (young person, Corryong).

Transport is also a significant challenge for young people in regional and rural areas. The distances are great and young people without licences are reliant on others to drive them to support services. Those with jobs or in training are often unable to take the time off required to travel to larger centres and access support.

Trust is another concern for young people. They are often less familiar with support programs or workers and find it difficult to build the trust through on-line sessions or infrequent visits to mental health support in larger regional centres. Other issues included a lack of confidentiality, dismissal by others of experiences that were considered less severe or traumatic, and COVID-19 shifting the focus of support and counselling away from bushfires.

Most young people reported positive experiences of community support, particularly during and immediately following the fires. They talked about neighbours who had helped out their families, provided information, and helped each other.

Schools

Young people were critical of the support provided to them in schools, although some reported positive experiences where school staff phoned families in the immediate period following the fires and ran bushfire programs and support through 2020, see Appendix B. Many reported that schools acknowledged the bushfires in the first assembly in 2020 but little after that. It should be noted that school assemblies were directly impacted by COVID-19 and assemblies were not conducted throughout 2020.

Young people suggested a whole school approach to normalise counselling. Others shared experiences of young people being bullied for attending counselling at school, and of the lack of confidentiality around school counsellors. Some reported being targeted by schools for counselling and being overtly pulled out of class to attend sessions. The stigma of being singled out in the school environment is a real concern for young people, as negative labelling complicates relationships with their peers, who can play a supportive role in addressing mental health issues.³³ Many reported that the focus on bushfires ceased with the arrival of COVID-19 and felt that they just had to get on with things.

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 (young person, Orbest).

In 2020, the Victorian and Federal Governments announced \$15.95 million in funding to assist families and schools affected by the bushfires, declaring that 'schools have a responsibility to support parents who are facing hardship'.³⁴ Funding was available for kindergartens, camps, sport and excursions, mental health support, establishing a trauma support recovery team, State Schools' Relief Getting Kids Back to School Fund and to provide grants to affected schools. Beyond Blue was funded in January 2020 to establish the *Be You Bushfire Response Program* in schools and early learning services affected by the 2019-2020 bushfires.

It was obvious that schools were providing support to students and families see Appendix B and C, though this was inconsistent between schools and across the DET, Catholic and Independent education sector. Significantly, despite the additional funding young people felt that support from schools was inadequate, inappropriate, not youth-centred, or they were simply unaware of what was available. As a result, some young people received considerable support from school, while many did not, *'some schools were good at talking about it, but some schools did not talk about it at all'*.

Twelve months on from the fires young people reported that schools had now employed qualified staff to undertake counselling with students.

Community organisations

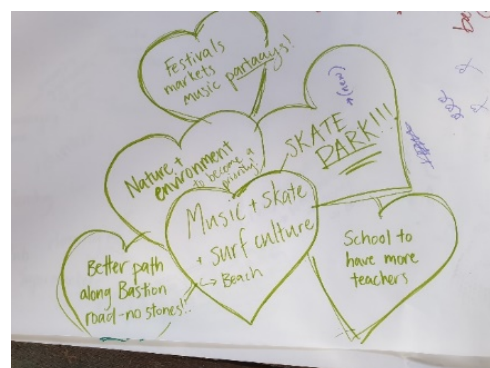
Interestingly, young people referred to traditional structures, family and school, when reporting on their experiences of psychosocial support, or the absence of, through 2020. This is not surprising as much of the education and support provided to young people has been located within schools and education systems.^{12, 20} Funding for recovery activities for young people also appears to have been directed through schools or educational environments.³⁴

Schools have traditionally played a significant role in providing support and wellbeing to students and families through bushfires, disasters, health interventions and programs, e.g. Sun Smart, eSmart schools. The timing of the bushfires and the significant impact of COVID-19 for schools through 2020, has demonstrated the limitations of relying on schools.

When asked directly, young people indicated that other community groups, like sporting clubs, scouts and other organisations, did not provide any support, with many ceasing operation due to COVID-19 through 2020.

There are further challenges to relying on schools as primary providers of psychosocial support for young people in communities, as schools do not engage with young people who have completed school, enrolled in TAFE or other providers, have disengaged from education or are home schooled.

The reliance on and expectations of schools raises significant questions of how we engage with and provide psychosocial support to young people, who is best placed to do so and who gets to decide.



Youth spaces

A key message from young people is the need for youth-centred, youth-created and youth-focused spaces and groups in their local communities.

Young people were very clear that they needed their own space during the fire, in the immediate aftermath and throughout 2020, *'open, positive space to be, a safe space, provide group discussion spaces'*. Importantly, the need for youth spaces with skills workers who can facilitate and support young people in regional and rural areas is not unique to bushfire affected communities.

Corryong Youth Space

The Corryong Youth Space was established prior to the bushfires, with a youth-focused space in the community as early as 2012. The youth space operates as a hangout space for young people and is a base for organised activities throughout the year. The youth space has been fully funded by the Corryong Neighbourhood Centre from 2018.³⁵

The centre has a resident Youth Worker, Errol, who is funded through the Engage! 2018–20 program.³⁶ The Corryong Youth Space received some donations following the bushfires, largely for equipment such as televisions, but the space was constrained by COVID-19 and did not run face-to-face program for much of 2020. In 2021, Errol reports, the space is now more actively used as a hub and bushfire recovery space for young people.

Youth-centred, youth focused, co-design

Young people across the three Shires identified an entrenched need for youth-focused support in their communities, *we are in desperate need of one [safe, youth-focused space] though, not just for bushfire recovery but for all the issues that we have (young person, Bright)*.

Young people recognised the value that group support offers, *I feel like community based recovery, you know support groups and things, would have been so much better than one-on-one with a counsellor (young person, Alpine Region)*.

Another clear message from young people was the limitation of their knowledge of what may be possible in their communities. When told to imagine what is possible, or to 'think outside the box' they reported that they cannot do that without being better informed. Young people told us that they want adults to provide more information and outline possibilities and opportunities so they can make informed decisions on what might be possible in their community.

Consultation overload

At the same time, through others, and the absence of engagement with the survey, interviews and other bushfire recovery projects through YACVic, young people told us they felt exhausted with consultations. While initially optimistic:

³⁵ A Victorian Government, Youth Central program, Engage! 2018–20 offers funding to local governments and community organisations over three years to work with young people to

develop and deliver activities that engage young people in their community, <https://www.youthcentral.vic.gov.au/get-involved/youth-programs-and-events/engage>

At the start of our journey, many of us thought that each interaction would add to help build a picture of our story — but it often feels that It becomes fragmented instead, because each time we tell our story it is framed in a different way to suit the intentions of the person collecting our data and we don't often get to find out what has been done with the information in a way we understand or relate to. ... This is taking away from the spontaneous, fun and supportive atmosphere ... it is beginning to feel like a bureaucratic job, with stresses from being asked to perform in interviews or write essays or answer questions or make

arguments (Youth Coordinator/Community Development Worker, The Sanctuary, Mallacoota).

Being able to meet with friends, share a positive and safe space and talk, or just be, has played a significant role in recovery. The Sanctuary in Mallacoota and the pre-existing youth space in Corryong have given young people a physical space that they have been able to make their own. The Sarsfield Snaps demonstrate the potential of online environments. The spaces also provide a non-stigmatised environment for identifying young people who need more intense psychosocial support.



The Sanctuary

The Sanctuary Mallacoota Youth Group Inc (The Sanctuary) is a safe haven for Mallacoota's young people to be together, support each other and develop our skills as leaders as we recover from the fire events of the summer of 2020.

The Sanctuary provides teenagers and young adults with a platform to share their voice in this community. It is a place where participants can feel safe to express themselves and explore ideas. Mallacoota's youth use the space to study, play music, make art, play games, organise programs and events and run workshops.³⁶

The Sanctuary emerged out of the 2019-2020 bushfires when it became apparent young people needed a place to come together and support each other. Local community members, SES crews, volunteers, and young people worked together to convert a vacant space, the local newsagency, into a youth-focused, youth-friendly space. Early funding and support came from local residents. Donations enhanced the space and The Sanctuary opened on the 4/5th January, less than a week after the fires reached Mallacoota. The Sanctuary's story has been highlighted across a range of media outlets, and the documentary *Beyond the Fires Series*¹⁴ on Channel 10 introduces The Sanctuary and highlights its achievements.

The idea for The Sanctuary arose because young people needed their own place to gather and support each other while they were cut off from the rest of the world, with no internet, no power, no 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 organic nature of The Sanctuary 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 web page and social media sites. Following the impact of widespread, and often unwanted, national and international media interest in their community, The Sanctuary has taken a pro-active stance, working with young people to build their skills and capabilities in media engagement.

Media interest has brought with it a public profile and support. The Sanctuary has benefited from significant donations throughout 2020 and into 2021. The September 2020, Sanctuary Bulletin #7 declares they have 'amazing donors, from all over the shop, who have teamed up to give us the funding needed for at least a year after this one finally finishes'.³⁶ Donations have been varied, including Dutch Cargo Bikes and support from CERES Bike Shed³⁷, Sony Foundation Australia³⁸ (a half share in \$200,000), computer equipment, pool tables, food and clothing.

Funding for Brodie, the Youth Coordinator/Community Development Worker who has worked with young people to create The Sanctuary, was initially provided by DET through the principal at Mallacoota's P-12 College who recognised the importance of The Sanctuary for his school community. Funding for 20 hours a week was made possible through bushfire relief funding redirected from the school for two months at the

beginning of 2020. Uniting Vic. Tas has employed Brodie, three days a week from July 2020 for two years, to build on The Sanctuary's initial success. Uniting Vic. Tas also provided her with support and mentoring, necessary in the face of issues she is asked to deal with:

Symptoms that Sanctuary members have discussed include not caring about things they usually care about, not feeling able to be creative, disharmony in personal relationships and feelings that overwhelm (Youth Coordinator/Community Development Worker, The Sanctuary, Mallacoota).

A search of The Sanctuary's Facebook page demonstrates the reach of this youth-led, community-based association. Some of the events run through The Sanctuary include:

- weekly radio show
- bike maintenance and hire program
- pizza nights
- film making
- jam session

The site advertises a multitude of events and activities, including educational training and skills development, volunteering and funding opportunities, community events and programs, as well as promoting visits from external organisations and visitors. Amongst others The

Sanctuary has been visited by The Governor General David Hurley and Mrs Hurley, African Drumming groups, YACVic, Salvation Army, and Save the Children.

Relationships with other community groups are clearly evident and the webpage celebrates The Sanctuary's engagement with the community. This list is long, but includes Mallacoota Surf Life Saving Club, SES, Mallacoota Prep-12 College, Wilderness Coast and Friends of Mallacoota. See page 73 for organisations who are able to use The Sanctuary space and for organisations who are using the space for mental health support.

The Sanctuary actively supports young people to gain skills, confidence and have a voice in their community. They received notification in January 2021 that their campaign to redevelop the local skate park, a key focus of The Sanctuary through 2020, was successful.

As we know though, relationships, advocating for change and building an organisation takes time. The value of this respected, inspiring and effective mechanism of support for grassroots leadership, mutual aid and representation for young people in local communities is reflected in the young people's voices:

confidentiality
community decision youthspaces
talkwitheachother a placetotalk
youthdesign positivespace
letyourguarddown nojudgement
spaceforgroupdiscussion
jamming

Having worked alongside adult volunteers and the dedicated Brodie^h, young people in Mallacoota recognise that they need assistance and a more permanent commitment to young people in regional and rural communities. Having seen what is possible these young people have identified a role for a locally based youth worker, declaring that the *'town needs a youth worker, need to be discreet, need an outsider, someone we can trust'*.

At the same time Mallacoota's young people, Brodie and those who work with them, recognise the challenges in making The Sanctuary an ongoing and sustainable organisation in their community. There are already concerns about funding drying up or that offers of support *'which are hinted at in return for our voices will be withdrawn'*.

Bushfire relief and recovery funding

Considerable donations were made to relief funds during and following the bushfires. One of the largest was the Red Cross, who report they have received \$240 million in donations up till 21st December 2020. Funds are not available immediately though, and in some cases take considerable time to be released. As a result, it is difficult to get things up and running locally and quickly, when they are most needed.

Many of the young people we spoke to were unaware of any bushfire recovery funding available for them through 2020. Most were aware of larger funding opportunities for schools, organisations and community groups but had not identified opportunities for themselves. If they

were aware, they indicated that perhaps their ideas were not good enough or they didn't know what they could use the money for. At the beginning of 2021 though, several young people reported that they are now applying for grants as part of community groups for example, through The Sanctuary or a young person in the Combienbar community who had joined the local community group applying for fire equipment.

Young people told us that accessing funds, developing applications for grants and the paperwork required to run an incorporated organisation requires considerable expertise, work and time. Young people at The Sanctuary described bureaucracy and funding as their biggest hurdle:

We want others to know that the biggest hurdles we face are bureaucratic. We can get a lot more done with less bureaucracy. Why is there a need for so much paperwork? (young person, Mallacoota).

The Sanctuary has demonstrated the significance of an immediate response to the needs of young people following bushfires or other disasters. However, 12 months on, it also demonstrates the challenges ahead to ensure its sustainability and the danger of bureaucracy overrunning the very essence of this community-led, youth-focused, safe space.

^h Brodie is a local community member who instigated the idea for The Sanctuary and has worked with young people and the local community to establish the youth space in Mallacoota.

Brodie continues to work with young people to run The Sanctuary and advocate for ongoing support for youth in the Mallacoota area.

Sarsfield Snaps

Another bushfire affected community, Sarsfield, demonstrates how youth spaces need not be constrained by a physical space.

The Sarsfield community is *'spaced out, everyone has land, a backyard and paddocks and is 'disbursed or harder to reach than other kids in the town'*. Following the bushfires the community started sharing a meal together every Friday night. Recognising that young people needed a way to come together and express themselves following the bushfires, and with a timely donation of cameras and an openness to thinking outside the box, the Sarsfield Snaps project was born.¹⁵

The Snaps have given young people in this rural community an opportunity to capture photos of their everyday lives and express themselves through the creativity of photography. Young people in Sarsfield have created a website and a calendar that runs over multiple years due to the level of interest from young people in their community.¹⁵

With COVID restricting their plans to share their bushfire experience, they are now looking forward to a road trip to Melbourne to present a photographic exhibition of their work.

Bringing young people from rural properties together, the young photographers identified that they are *'more of a community'* having made the *'effort to get to know each other'*.

While disbursed properties and distance create physical barriers, the Sarsfield Snaps demonstrate how youth spaces need not be constrained by a physical space. Through their engagement in the Snaps young people in the Sarsfield community have a much greater awareness that while their neighbours and friend might *'be harder to reach, [but] you know they are always there'* (young person, Sarsfield).



Theme 4: Agency and Capability

For the most part, young people reported limited agency or opportunities to be acknowledged as active participants in their bushfire experience, yet we know that they have much to contribute to bushfire preparation, response and recovery. There is an emerging body of knowledge that ‘demonstrates that children [young people] are highly capable and creative in the face of disaster’.^{4, 8, 51} We also know that enabling them to take an active role can offer them both physical and mental protection into the future.^{6, 9, 39} Research with communities affected by the Black Saturday bushfires suggests that ‘a healthy community is characterised by having many groups with high levels of participation spread across the community’.^{9, 40, 46}

The Amigos

We heard lots of creative ideas from young people about how they could be actively engaged in community recovery. We heard recently about a couple of projects that were starting to come to fruition, including the following example from the Corryong local youth space.

Our little working group, we've got a few members, but one of the main things is we've found an aspect for this funding with youth involvement, to put it towards a positive criteria

and aspect of what could be happening in Corryong.

One of the main things we have done here is, there's a group of boys, we call them The Amigos, they're all younger than 16 and are involved in creating a down-hill mountain bike track in town.

We noticed some of the jumps around town, we scouted them out. They've [The Amigos] since gone and ridden in Bright to get their ideas for their own track. Which has not only reinforced their desire to be involved in bushfire recovery but it also allows them to understand where their participation can be of value and that their openness and their input actually does have an outcome and its effective (young person, Corryong)^{32, 35}.

One of the barriers to acknowledging young people's agency and capability is childhood vulnerability and risk discourse, which perpetuate the notion of protection and innocence. This is not simply an issue within bushfire and natural disasters, as scholars across childhood disciplines grapple with the notion of how to enable young people to be active participants in the reduction of their own vulnerability.^{2, 3, 4, 8}

Young people in this project reported that their attempts to engage with community relief and

response were dismissed and met with a negative response. Little explanation or consideration of their skills and capabilities was evident, *we tried to help out unpacking boxes but weren't allowed to, no reason given*. The frustration of being overlooked and not allowed to engage and contribute was clearly evident.

Some of the activities they were engaged with included looking after their neighbours' dog and checking in on elderly people. Yet, young people had many additional ideas and suggestions of where they could have been actively engaged. These included:

- helping out with younger children and relief centres
- stocking shelves
- babysitting
- traffic controlling for the multitude of relief trucks and truck movement around tree felling.

Those who were able to provide assistance reported that they felt valued in *'being able to be involved in the recovery effort'*.

Several young people talked about how valuable it would have been to set up a volunteer roster for young people to help out. Suggestions included setting these up within relief centres so young people could register their skills and availability and someone could monitor and allocate tasks as needed. There was genuine concern from the young people about other members of their community, particularly elderly or disabled neighbours, firstly to make sure they were safe and secondly to assist with the delivery of food,

water or other day to day items in the immediate relief period.

Young people talked about the frustration of being evacuated from their homes and unable to return, yet knowing that 'outsiders' were allowed access to their communities. Some of the concern was related to the need to replace and repair work undertaken by those who were not skilled in the tasks and repairs needing to be done. This was particularly evident with fence building in several communities, *'Blaze Aid were not trained in fencing and didn't know how to do fences. A lot of the fences needed to be redone'*.

One of the most striking aspects from the young people who wanted to be involved, was their awareness of their own skills and capabilities. These were not young people saying just give us tasks, they were very aware of where their skills could be utilised. They acknowledged that some tasks may be determined by age, but believed that others could acknowledge and value the life experiences of young people in these communities.

A standout memory from the workshops was a conversation that highlighted the importance of assessing capability. A young person, aged around 13–14 [one of The Amigos] told us that he had the skills to build fences, drive a bob-cat and be a general helping hand in many of the physical relief efforts. Discourses of childhood innocence and vulnerability would suggest that a young person of this age would not have the skills, nor be allowed to undertake these tasks. But for him, these are everyday activities that he engages in on his family farm. Without recognising the balance of

vulnerability and capability² it is impossible for his skills to be acknowledged.

Young people also highlighted a range of tasks that they could have been involved in had training courses and activities been made available in their local community. The skills and capability to build fences, direct traffic, assist in relief centres amongst other tasks could have quickly been acquired with short day courses, TAFE certificate courses and training that could have been delivered in their local community. The benefits are longer term as recovery efforts in many affected areas are still being undertaken more than 12 months after the event. It would also place skills in the community in preparedness for future disasters.

We saw evidence in the workshops that young people, like adults, like to help after a disaster, and are frustrated when they are denied the opportunity. This project supports a growing body of evidence that argues:

It is thus crucially important that emergency managers and others who respond to crisis anticipate that children [young people] may want to help, and work to make space for the range of helping behaviours that children may wish to engage in or contribute to after disaster.⁸

Finally, young people told us that the YACVic/IGEM/BRV/DET workshops were the first time in 2020 they had been invited to speak about their experience and to hear what programs and activities might be possible in their local community. They were very appreciative of the opportunity, one young person emailed to say:

Thank you so much for that workshop, it was awesome and done in all the right ways. I just thought of a couple more things. Not sure if it will help but I'll tell u that ... Things like this need to be brought in as a whole school approach rather than being mentioned and forgotten about, or only focussed on individuals. Thank you so much, can't wait for you to come back and for everyone else to take part in the workshop (young person, Orbost).

Theme 5: Community Engagement

It is well documented that young people are strong advocates for the environment, water management, improved land use and their future, promoting awareness and calling for immediate action from governments, organisations, and individuals.^{8, 41, 42} Young people expressed concern about the impact of the bushfires on the environment and have identified opportunities to be actively involved in environmentally focused community recovery.

Much has been written about how communities pull together in the face of adversity or disaster. Building strong and supportive communities is important to young people, who are looking for them to be inclusive and respectful of them as individuals and as a collective.² Young people are key members of every community, almost 13 per cent of Australians are aged between 15–24 years of age, with a further 18.7 per cent 0–14 years.⁴⁷

Building resilient communities prepared for future disasters and events is also a key component of the emergency services risk reduction strategy.^{48, 49}

Children should not be considered to be liabilities in disasters, and can play an active and positive role in making their communities more resilient to

climate change, hurricanes and bushfires, and in improving disaster recovery.⁹

Increasingly, research is investigating how meaningful engagement in communities is assisting young people to build ‘resilience and adaptive capacities’ and demonstrating ‘that participation from all members of a community is invaluable to disaster risk reduction and individual and collective resilience’.⁸ The young people in our workshops expressed a strong desire to be more involved in their community across the bushfire lifecycle, from decision making to action.

Community-led recovery sits at the heart of Bushfire Recovery Victoria (BRV), ‘recovery can’t be about us telling communities how it’s going to be. It has to be about listening, working together, and ensuring that rebuilding and recovery are both locally driven and delivered’.⁴³ Alongside their commitment to youth participation, places should be reserved on Community Recovery Committees for young people.

The establishment of a National Resilience, Relief and Recovery Agency¹ must ensure that young people are meaningfully included in the structure of the organisation and that specific funds are allocated to ensure their inclusion.

¹ [Australia to set up new agency to respond to natural disasters like bushfires \(msn.com\) \(November 13, 2020\)](#)

Active engagement

Young people are already actively involved in a number of bushfire activities, including volunteering with the local CFA and other emergency services. Young people in these organisations demonstrate the capability of young people given the right skills, training and support. The Mallacoota P-12 College principal, reflected on the capabilities of one of his students:

[He] Is one of the bravest boys I know, he's one of my Year 12 students, he was one of the head fire fighters (Principal, Mallacoota P-12 College).

Many of the suggestions and ideas young people shared with us are already evident within their communities. Ideas like community level planning and fire plans, how to evacuate and support vulnerable members of the community, bring community together, *'to have a town meeting for everyone to have input into a community plan'*.

Young people are telling us that they are not being included and they want to be.

Over and over they expressed a desire to have a say, to be heard, with confirmation that what they have said has been valued and listened to. Young

people shared stories of education and information sessions where they were asked for their input but did not believe that they were listened to. They expressed their frustrations that adults often say *'what young people need'* but do not follow up with opportunities.

There is already evidence of young people wanting to be part of economic recovery in their local communities. Ecotourism was a popular option while others were keen to expand the roles for summer crew and park rangers with DEWLP. Some young people expressed a desire to revive long forgotten Arts Festivals, improve community parks or be entrepreneurial with start-up businesses like the young person who sold eggs to local businesses.

Young people want to set up youth advisory and advocacy groups in their local communities. They are committed to the future of their communities and they want to be involved in decision making that impacts over time. Their ideas are just as important as any other member of the community and they believe that given the right opportunities their perspectives will be heard and valued.

Environmental concerns

The young people expressed concern for the environment, for flora and fauna. Many were concerned for the koalas and other wildlife, for fish and local waterways. They were unaware of much of the support for animals during the fires and expressed a desire to be more aware of what was available and for donations to be directed to wildlife.

There was an awareness of traditional recovery, allowing nature to take its course, to allow regrowth before intervention. They also expressed significant concerns around the ongoing impact of the bushfires on soil, and the run-off into local waterways.

The RSPCA Victoria has played a significant role in supporting bushfire recovery. Amongst other programs, they partnered with YACVic to run a program to build young people's skills and capabilities by delivering animal welfare programs that will help animals living in bushfire affected areas.⁴⁴

Young people expressed concerns at the limited opportunities to volunteer or be involved, and

highlighted areas where opportunities could be created. Many of these focused on the natural environment and young people wanted opportunities to be involved with summer crews and park rangers, with Department of Environment, Land, Water and Planning (DEWLP) and Mallacoota and District Recovery Association (MADRA). They also saw the potential to be involved in ecotourism.

Many talked about a desire to help out other members of their community, of helping neighbours or being aware that others (e.g. the elderly, children, pets) may need their assistance.

They recognised that young people may leave their local communities but also identified many who had returned, bringing their education, learning and experiences back to the community.

Overwhelmingly the young people believe that they have a vital role to play in their community and have asked us to share with others that they are more than ready to be involved.

The Activators

The Activators program collaborates with young people in rural and regional Victoria to develop and deliver an idea or project on an issue that is important to them.

The program runs over 6 months and is designed for young people aged 14-25 who live, study, or work in rural or regional Victoria, enabling them to lead projects in their local community.

Activators receive support, training, resources, professional development and networking opportunities along with up to \$1,000 in seed funding for their project and out of pocket expenses to support their participation (YACVic, 2021). The 2020 program was sponsored by RSPCA Victoria who are part of the Victorian Emergency Animal Welfare Plan.

As part of their commitment to bushfire recovery, RSPCA Victoria teamed up with YACVic to support the young Activators to deliver animal welfare projects that help animals living in bushfire affected areas recover and to help communities build resilience for the future (RSPCA Victoria, 2021).

Because I believe that if you make humans part of the solution everything will be ok. Because I reckon when we segregated ourselves from nature that's when the trouble started (Activator 2021).

The innovative projects included:

- Planting trees that provide food, habitat for humans, animals, livestock, wildlife, for everything.

They had a big mulberry tree and the fires swept through the whole gully and everything was black and singed except for this one beautiful green mulberry tree which protected the house. Provides shade and the possums love those berries, love them, oh my gosh, you are lucky if you can get some (Activator 2021).

- Creating connections and confidence in young people who care for animals and the community through first-aid training and giving bushfire-affected communities wildlife first-aid kits.
- Developing a 'We are Wang' website to create an interactive, online community in Wangaratta building connection within the community by sharing some of the best kept secrets of swimming holes, parks, flora and fauna.
- Promoting the ethical adoption of pet animals in Bairnsdale by ensuring people understand how to adopt animals from ethical sources.

My project is beneficial to have because you care for the animals but the animals help you because they can comfort you and everything (Activator 2021).

- Building possum and bird boxes as shelters for native wildlife in Orbost.



I thought Activators was an amazing thing, I'd never seen anything like that but that's why I wanted to try it (Activator 2021).

Theme 6: Paradigm shift

Engaging young people in the 2nd stage of this project proved difficult. Feedback from community organisations was that young people were feeling over consulted, and exhausted from the number of times they have told their story, feeling that their voices are not being heard or used for the benefits of others rather than for tangible outcomes for them and their community. This was a concern for YACVic in the initial project design and should be acknowledged as a key issue for young people in bushfire relief and recovery.

However, the interviews and surveys that have been conducted with young people since the 12-month anniversary of the bushfires in January 2021 have provided valuable insights into where young people are at now. The interviews and surveys also enabled young people from some of the small rural communities affected by the 2019–20 bushfires to share for the first time their experience and the impact on their community.

Mental health

It is not surprising that one of the key issues for young people 12 months on remains access to mental health services. While there is evidence of mental health services being more readily available in 2021, with schools recruiting qualified staff and headspace expanding its face-to-face

outreach, most young people still report challenges with access, knowledge of what is available, and perhaps more troubling, comparing their mental health needs to others and feeling that they were less impacted by the bushfires and they are less deserving of assistance, influencing their decision to seek help, or not.

The first year anniversary brought with it many memories for young people. While they felt local communities were being sensitive to young people's needs at this time, they were critical that the notification sounds for the VicEmergency App had not been changed as the sound was triggering for many young people and their families. They were also critical of bushfire ads on television and radio being played without property warnings about the triggering effects.

The desire for connection with their peers and to have youth-focused, safe spaces to talk about their experience is also strongly evident. While clinical mental health supports are important, such spaces provide social connection and peer support, a sense of belonging and purpose, and opportunities for activities and skills building, which are also all vital for young people's wellbeing.

This project highlights the absence of group support for young people following the bushfires and through the restrictions of COVID-19 in 2020, although there are exemplars of community practice, through The Sanctuary (see page 32), Sarsfield Snaps (see page 35), Corryong Youth Space (see page 30) and The Activators (see page 42, 48).

The absence of youth-focused spaces and skilled, qualified people to work with young people in regional and rural areas is not a direct result of bushfire or COVID-19, although these events have amplified and highlighted the absence of qualified, youth-focused support across the State.

Alongside the need for youth-focused spaces, is the desire for adults to *talk with us, not to us*. Young people felt that much of the messaging and support through 2020 was directed to, and by, adults and parents. So while on the one hand young people felt over consulted there was a sense that a valuable opportunity had been missed to engage them in community recovery.

Community recovery

While The Sanctuary has become an exemplar for youth-focused spaces in the aftermath of the bushfires there was limited evidence in other areas of community events and engagement with young people. The Katy Perry concert in Bright in March 2020 was a highlight for young people in Alpine regions but they reported little or no community events since.

Communication about events or activities remains a problem, with young people reporting that they

were not always informed and many were unsure of what might actually be available in their community. There was also a significant difference in community support and recovery in areas that had been flame affected and those which were smoke or fire affected.

Buildings and infrastructure

Young people in smoke or fire affected areas reported little evidence of bushfire recovery activity in their community. In flame affected communities young people reported that rebuilding was slow but in progress. Young people identified communities that were getting on with their lives but still significantly impacted by their experiences in the 2019–20 bushfires. There was an urgency too about making sure communities were ready for 'next time'.

The downturn in tourism and their communities' economic recovery remains a concern for many young people. The lifting of restrictions from COVID-19 was welcome though and there is a sense of hope that businesses will recover.

Young people appear to have been actively employed over the 2020–21 summer as towns like Bright and Mallacoota saw an influx of tourists after the easing of lockdown. One young participant felt that,

The community has really rallied around young people in making sure that they are in the workforce and still getting their qualifications because they know how important that is to foster (young person, Bright).

Biodiversity and environment

Environmental impact and biodiversity was a major concern for young people 12 months on from the bushfires. Concerns about the immediate devastation of the bushfires and the impact on wildlife were palpable alongside concerns about the impact of the rain that followed and the silt and debris run-off into creeks and rivers. Young people are also very concerned about inappropriate and excessive logging, and the lack of attention to bare hills that have resulted in erosion and water runoff.

Young people are keen to be part of environmental recovery and as evidenced through The Activators (see page 42) have creative and well-informed ideas of how to take action in their own communities.

None of the young people had witnessed specific Aboriginal culture and healing in their local community but all expressed a frustration that this was not evident.

Enablers of successful engagement with young people

While there is much to be done to ensure young people are part of the bushfire or disaster lifecycle, there is much to be learnt from the experiences of young people who have had the combined experience of devastating bushfires and COVID-19, and for many, the preceding drought.

There are valuable case studies of how communities engaged with and supported young people through bushfire recovery, the Amigos (see page 36), Activators (see page 42), Corryong Youth

Space (see page 30), Sarsfield Snaps (see page 35) and The Sanctuary (see page 32).

Enablers for the programs include financial and in-kind support, community engagement, adult volunteers and/or paid support, safe spaces - both physical and online, adopting youth work principles, and purposeful objectives. All are youth-focused and youth-friendly.

While the Activators program will conclude in 2021, the Corryong Youth Space, Sarsfield Snaps and The Sanctuary have the potential to extend into the future. The Sarsfield Snaps was established with the donation of cameras and appears to require minimal financial input to become a sustainable activity for young people in the Sarsfield community. The youth worker in Corryong is funded for a specific term and will require future funding to continue.

The Sanctuary has generated considerable media and public interest and has established itself as a key youth-focused organisation in the community. Its vision is to be a safe haven for Mallacoota's young people. The Sanctuary has taken on a vital role within the community, and is already advocating for a youth worker to provide support to young people around drug and alcohol abuse, family violence, loneliness and isolation that was apparent well before the bushfires. While it has received significant support from bushfire recovery funding and the generous support of DET and Uniting Vic. Tas, its longer-term sustainability is already a concern.

What could be done better

As evident throughout this report there are many areas of recovery that young people could participate in. The overall message from young people is to engage them in the process, to affirm, acknowledge and empower them to act on their ideas. When given the opportunity young people make valuable contributions:

Involving young people in recovery because it doesn't just make the program better, it makes the community stronger. Because young people really feel like they have had a voice in their recovery and that is the most important thing. I think that I have found, having a voice in recovery has helped my own personal recovery from what happened (young person, Bright).



A long-term project — "Trees are pretty important"

The Activators projects (see page 42) all demonstrate the potential of young people being given opportunities and a voice in bushfire recovery. A young person from Combienbar (population of 19) shared their project and a desire to lead environmental recovery in the community.

My main concern is planting trees that provide food, habitat for humans, animals, livestock, wildlife, for everything. Because I believe that if you make humans part of the solution everything will be ok because I reckon when we segregated ourselves from nature that's when the trouble started. So if you can provide for human needs as well as livestock needs then the cycle will be smooth.

So I've planted native and non-native species. Native would be Weeping Lilly Pilly, Australian Frangipani and things like that which provide berries for native wildlife because they will be more palliative to those native wildlife; too bitter for deer. I have also planted big shade trees that will defend against fire because of the water filled leaves that don't burn as easily as oil filled leaves.

That will provide nuts and things which will also create food and secondary harvests such as walnuts, like walnut seeds provide ink for pens and whatnot, which is amazing. So mainly tree planting and some swales which is like a level pitch and contour that captures water when it rains. Usually it would rain and run off the landscape but this

ditch captures it and keeps it in the soil for longer, and then you plan trees on the backside.

Definitely a long-term project. I've got 20 acres so I want to try and plant that out and make it into, list it, as a sanctuary or a botanic gardens or something so it's protected. And then possibly move onto further afield, especially trying to get farmers to plant more trees on their land. Cause you always see the cows under this one tree. Provide shade and habitat and then it pumps water up from deep underground to the surface for the grass and everything. Trees are pretty important...

I had a meeting with a neighbour, he lost his shed, and I told him about my friend in Brogo. They had a big mulberry tree, as the fire swept through the whole gully and everything was black and singed, except for this one beautiful, green mulberry tree which protected the house...



'Mulberry tree stands in front of the family home, which survived the horrific 2019/2020 summer fires' (Daily Mail, November 1, 2020).⁴⁵

Return to normal or a paradigm shift?

The final word in this section shares the strong, emotive responses the young interview participants had to the phrase, 'return to normal'. Overwhelmingly they saw major shortcomings in returning to pre-bushfire, pre-COVID-19 community status quo.

While young people have been critical of many of the support services, or lack of, through 2020, these young people were adamant they did not want to return to a pre-bushfire, pre-covid-19 normal.

You know the fires and COVID have seen so many support systems and networks and infrastructure that came out of it that going back to normal would mean they would all fall away and I feel like that would just make things a million times worse (young person, Bright).

Others were concerned that returning to normal would be less ecologically sound and community driven, and lessons learnt from the bushfires would be lost. Positive elements from community response and recovery would also be overlooked.

As soon as you said the word return to normal, I went, my mind went, I don't want to return to normal, I want something different. Because obviously normal didn't work. I'd like to see more environmental things changing, farming practices

that create life and create water storage in the soil and things like that. ... So return to normal no don't want that, something more ecologically sound and community driven, self-sufficient and something that isn't the conventional normal (young person, Myrtleford).

One of the key messages from young people was to decision makers and bureaucrats in cities.

Young people in regional and rural areas want to be acknowledged, to be valued and supported, to know that while things haven't been perfect, support as a result of the bushfires has made a difference. They are adamant though that it should not take a disaster to generate this support.

Detailed Commentaries

Relief

Family

We know that children and young people are reliant on caretaking relationships both during and in the immediate aftermath of a disaster. While caretaking relationships can work to safeguard young people from the effects of disaster, before, during, and after, they can also exacerbate the impact.^{4, 25}

When asked about what support was helpful during and immediately following the fires the young people acknowledged the role of family and the key role they played in keeping them safe, making decisions in the face of extremely stressful situations. They also shared with us though the challenges they faced within families at this time, the roles they were asked to step into, the things that worked well for them as well as things that did not.

Importantly, they offered suggestions of what can be done differently to help children and young people be better prepared for future events.

Experience of support

- *Some family stayed to protect the house this was a bit freaky to know they were doing that. We were evacuated and it was scary. I saw what was happening on the news and by talking to family.*
- *People stuck with the fire plan, families stayed together.*
- *We went for a sleep over before we went back and mum went and looked after and tidied up the house.*

An active role

- *I was awake all night, I walked up the hill, it was getting redder and hotter, I ran down the hill and woke my family, and we left.*
- *As a young person you rely on your parents, and you need the ability to feel useful.*
- *Dad would make me check the app whenever I was on the phone.*

- *I didn't know what to do. I keep thinking to myself, what do I do? I wasn't able to think, what should I take, or pack from our house. I am not sure.*

A supportive role

- *Young people took on the brunt of looking after the family emotionally.*
- *My dad went home even though you weren't allowed to, the roads were fine, he blocked the road, he was stressed with anxiety and the helicopter and police came down on him. But they wouldn't let us help him.*
- *We sort of turned into a hermit.*
- *There was looting going around so a family member had to stay behind and sleep in the car and protect the house.*
- *Young people on farms saw a lot of trauma especially.*
- *Many people had family working as fire fighters.*

Information

- *My dad stayed and we left with mum – he kept us updated.*
- *Lack of information about everything, especially second-hand info from parents, you lived off a lot of uncertainty.*
- *Used the app but mum turned it off because she was anxious.*
- *We didn't know whether to stay or go, the first we were on one side [of us] then another, for weeks we didn't know what to do.*
- *The smoke affected the generator and so we lost power, but dad had his radio so we could keep in contact with him, but we lost contact for a while and that was scary.*
- *We experienced about a week of no signal and no power. This made things even more extremely hard to access water through pumps and hoses etc to wet down properties to prepare for the fires.*
- *Especially contacting loved ones was extremely stressful.*
- *Most people we knew were ok so that was good.*

What could be improved

- *Upskill young people about how to talk about mental and emotional situations within families, particularly in the face of stressful situations like the bushfires.*
- *Better knowledge of what to take, like a packing list, we didn't know what to take.*
- *To know that it is okay to not be okay [for parents as well as children] and that you are not alone.*
- *Peer to peer mental health, better communication channels and support for each other.*
- *What are the plans for the CFA? Public information is better communication.*

Relief Centres

Many of the young people in our workshops were not directly flame affected. A number were evacuated or had friends or family who were evacuated, however they did not spend time in relief centres, making it difficult for them to comment on how effective these were for young people. Some young people reported that they had been evacuated to other parts of Gippsland or Melbourne, even through to Canberra and NSW. It was evident that some had spent weeks staying with family or friends until they were allowed home. Several also reported being evacuated on numerous occasions, returning when safe only to evacuate again.

What did not work

- *My parents didn't think the evacuation space was appropriate so we stayed somewhere else [they were concerned about the centre being exposed to potential fire attack].*
- *The evacuation point was on the hockey oval. But, in the process of people going there it reached capacity very quickly, leaving many families, young and old, unsure where to go.*
- *We evacuated New Year's Eve, we all stayed together up at the school. It felt like a safe space, except there was no water in the fire truck parked at the school evacuation point.*

What could be improved

- *Have someone available to look after the kids at evacuation centres. A young adult to keep them busy, distracted and calm.*
- *Young people need a place to get together to meet, talk and debrief.*
- *More accommodation for people with disabilities.*
- *You need something in the relief centre to help keep your mind off things.*

Challenges for those who evacuated or were absent during the fires

For those who evacuated

- *Devastated, evacuated three times.*
- *We had smoke damage so it took a while to be able to get back home. We also had no electricity.*
- *We were not allowed to live at home because of smoke on the roof, the water and power were off. Mum was scared so we left.*
- *There was no assistance with school text books. We spent so much money on text books, I had to make sure they were safe x three times.*

For those who were absent during the fires

- *I was not so sure about joining in as I was in Melbourne at the beginning of the year.*
- *Before I was in Perth, just before the fires was lots of fun, looking after family, the drought was over, was away before the fires and excited for summer, After I was playing catch-up.*

Communities

The social vulnerability of children and young people in the face of disasters is a key determinant in preparedness, relief and recovery plans, activities and strategies. It is important, however, to remember that young people are also active members of their local community, influenced by the same social, cultural, political, and economic forces as adult members. Adopting a social-ecological model to the roles of young people in communities preparing for, and recovering from, disasters acknowledges the contribution from younger generations. Emerging research demonstrates how ‘participation from all members of a community [including young people] is invaluable to disaster risk reduction and individual and collective resilience’.⁴

Respect from community. Community stepped up. Community helped each other (young person, online workshop).

Experience of support

- *Our neighbourhood heavily relied on those we have grown up with that know the bush like the back of their hand and know exactly how to recognise and prepare for the weather. We trusted them with our lives as the knowledge he holds is extremely valuable (btw he wasn't in CFA or Parks etc). His logic and problem solving and planning was made ahead and before all other organisations.*
- *After the fire people offered to go and see our house, and sent us photos. This was reassuring.*
- *We knew someone at DELWP and that helped. Sometimes people gave us information that was a day behind or incorrect.*
- *Local info was people sending photos, like neighbours, that's how we knew our house was spared.*
- *We were lucky as our scout leader is on the SES and well connected to advise people where to go for help or to access services.*
- *Teacher, he was driving up and down the roads letting us know where the fires were.*

An active role

- *Community was good. I felt respected and supported. Everyone helped each other.*
- *Support through finding ways to help – SES [State Emergency Services], SLS [Surf Life Saving], Sanctuary [The Sanctuary Youth Space, Mallacoota], and Paramedics.*
- *We had to rely on door-knocking to let our neighbours know what was happening.*
- *Calling neighbours on the phone.*
- *Plan for evacuation for people with disabilities. My relation could have been caught. Even though the neighbours said they would take her they panicked and took off so I had to contact the police to see if they could go get her. We were lucky because the fire shifted and she was spared. This needs to be planned before the fire comes, you know, like at a community level.*

A supportive role

- *Maybe coming back because of the fires, a lot of people left because it wasn't a very nice environment, but many came back afterwards, some to help the families.*
- *We have a lot of old people. There was no coordinated response to look after old people and make sure they were ok. My neighbour was eating weetbix with water, it was 2 days before we could check on them.*
- *Most people knew we were ok, so that was good.*

What could be improved

- *Needs to be planned before the fire comes you know, at a community level.*
- *There was no detail in any of it (young people reflecting on information provided during the fires)*
- *Make community level fire plans as an event, where young people can also have a say.*
- *Plans for members of the community who need support to evacuate and require accommodation.*
- *Just knowing people are ok, like a way to check in with people to know they are ok.*
- *Formal gatherings to listen to young people.*
- *Bring community together to talk about what we need to do. Like a town meeting for everyone to have input into a community plan. Like knowing when the fire gets here [to this point], we will put in a fire break. Key community can take on key roles, like helping neighbours who are less mobile, old or disabled.*

External Relief

Experience of support

- *Played sport with the army, the Army/Air Force people who played cricket with us.*
- *There were convoys of trucks come into our town. It was great to see the names of the small-town CFA trucks. ... you could see the response came from everywhere to help us.*
- *The army played cricket. I rocked up to the police station and asked for a lift home, they said fine.*
- *We had the army in, but they were limited because of the contracts AND WHAT THEY ARE ALOUD [sic] TO DO.*
- *Blaze Aide were not trained in fencing and didn't know how to do fences. A lot of the fences needed to be redone.*
- *More awareness for animals could be done. Didn't know RSPCA van was in town (more comms and awareness for this sort of service).*
- *ADF, the help they provided with cleaning up was amazing.*
- *CFA, was at the Victorian farm that burnt, we were able to save the house and all the cattle nearby on the farm.*

A supportive role

- *No-one knew about Mallacoota until social media and ABC News. Once those images came out everyone wanted to help, like farmers who don't have enough hay were sending it to Mallacoota.*

What could be improved

- *Resources kept going to the tourists to try and keep them out. It was annoying, COVID has shown us we can keep the tourist out.*
- *Proper facilities to house/support emergency services.*
- *The Melbourne cops didn't know how to deal with us and had no idea of local community.*
- *External organisations were allowed to remain in local communities while locals were not allowed to return.*
- *Beer came before fuel, better priorities of what was brought into the community.*
- *Streamlining donations, people donated useless stuff, stuff we didn't need.*
- *Earlier return, or more information/consultation about what activities are being undertaken in local communities while residents were not allowed to return.*
- *Victoria police response, they tried to stop people helping us and gave speeding fines to people escaping the fires, like my dad.*

Public Communications

Communication Mediums and Challenges

Communication was lost and we felt blind (young person, online workshop).

We were told several times our house had burnt down, there were so many stories that were untrue (young person, Cann River).

Communication strategies

- *We had the App [Vic Emergency] working. Plus the radio and Facebook, plus the Lake's noticeboard on Facebook.*
- *We only knew what was happening from our family and neighbours.*
- *We only knew the fire was coming when we saw the glow.*

Communication mediums

- *Local info was people sending photos, like neighbours, that's how we knew our house was spared.*
- *The App [Vic Emergency App] didn't work for us, so it was word of mouth which is unreliable.*
- *Community meetings at school.*
- *Telstra was the only tower working.*

Challenges

- *There was a circle of fire around Corryong, no one could leave, we lost communications during the fire.*
- *Young people aren't well supported or informed.*
- *I didn't own a phone.*
- *There was a lack of telephone communication.*
- *Transition communication was not good, always lacking.*
- *Be aware of your surroundings, I had no idea where the evacuation area was, no-one did.*

What could be improved

- *What are the plans for the CFA? Public information is better communication.*
- *The information kept changing, fire was close then changed.*
- *Friendship networks: how to check in with friends.*
- *Myself and all the community have said this, but communication, that's our main concern, imagine if we had communications at our community hall, which is our emergency evacuation site, you could definitely get in contact with the outside world and organise things and even perhaps organise a benefit at the hall, for the hall, for the community as well, and that will serve as socialising and mental health (young person, Combienbar).*

Social Media

Social media channels

- *Facebook, lots of updates*
- *Friends from school on Snapchat.*

Shortcomings of social media

- *Snapchat was not helpful, groups with inaccurate information about what was happening.*
- *We were not in communication with any friends – no reception.*

Accessibility

- *Young people know what's going on but get shut down. It's even harder when you don't have access to social networks, e.g. under 12.*

Apps: VicEmergency and Others

We used x3 Apps to stay up to date, just one should have been enough (young person, Cann River).

Challenges

- *Why is the community app more popular (Vic Fires App)?*
- *Compare the VicEmergency App to the East Gippsland Emergency fire and disaster season 2019-20 Facebook Group [Private Group, 14.3K members].*
- *[VicEmergency] App doesn't have closed roads, you had to go to Vic roads, this needs to change.*
- *Google Maps needs to list emergencies, because we only had the Vic Emergency App, we didn't know it shows roadblocks and traffics but not emergencies.*
- *Traumatizing for the whole town, you'd be getting everything on your notifications.*
- *The Apps were not linked in NSW so if you went to Eden you could not see what was happening in Victoria.*
- *They need to fix the Google Maps – we were somewhere in NSW evacuating to get to Melbourne on a 10 hr drive and Google maps lead us straight into another fire.*
- *Change the sound. We all used the App [Vic Emergency], the notification sound is now triggering.*

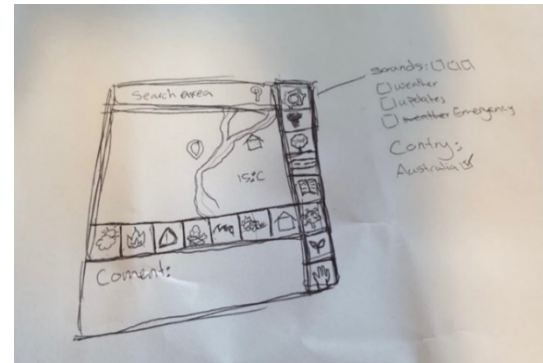
Improving the VicEmergency App

Young people made suggestions of how the VicEmergency App could be improved.

It is not that easy to use, there is too much on there, it is not easy to navigate.

Maybe a section for young people, with a setting for ages, focus tested with young people.

Limit notifications to: Weather, Emergency, Update



Can you get emergency data like you get emergency calls for people in disasters, like the App and ABC Radio?

Open on the map when the App opens.

App doesn't have closed roads, you have to go to Vic Roads, this needs to change.

Maybe the App could be used where people can update it. They put their information in and then are able to update info. Like make notifications about stuff.

You could comment and then people could confirm the comment like a moderator and register to be a local community commentator, include a verify feature.

Community based Apps, comment on topics in your area, community disaster tracker and track community meetings. Link to local DELWP updates.

Setting for different languages.

Why are there two different things, like warnings and incidents?

Make the map bigger by clicking on the map. Click on either maps or warnings to enlarge that section.

Multiple watch zones to pinpoint everything around 50kms from your home and then all the specific events.

Have icons at the bottom that you could click on to tell you what it means rather than scrolling down.

Could you have a section for each state? So it is automatically on your areas but you can see other states.

Opportunity to Volunteer and Offer Donations

I wanted to help & volunteer, I had zero qualifications (young person, Mallacoota).

While children and young people are acknowledged in disaster planning, management and recovery, much of the focus has been on their vulnerabilities rather than their capacities.^{1, 11} While the aim here is not to dismiss their unique needs and vulnerabilities in the face of disasters, it has been acknowledged that many young people are capable of undertaking a significant role across the lifecycle of a disaster. Like adult members of communities, young people are keen to be actively involved in their own communities rather than being passive observers.

Volunteering following the bushfires

Feeling valued

- *Being able to be involved in the recovery effort, like baby sitting or stocking shelves. Suddenly we were old enough to help out and be useful rather than being told that you're too young for that.*

Barriers

- *Not so much young people, more elderly people, say 50 or more [helping at relief centre].*
- *We weren't allowed to help, tried to help out unpacking boxes but weren't allowed to, no reasons given.*

Roles for young people

- *Fed and took water to the neighbour's dog.*
- *Have someone available for little kids when they are gathered. A young adult to help keep them busy, distracted and calm.*
- *Traffic controlling, that was amazing, because there were 12 hour days with lots of opportunities around tree felling, truck movement.*

Psychosocial Support

I feel they were all in a rush to move on. Bushfires are scary and it takes a while to move on, they just rushed us (young person, Orbost).

Social support plays a key role in individuals' overall well-being and quality of life and is even more significant in times of extreme stress. Ensuring that psychosocial support is provided to communities affected by bushfires has been shown to mitigate against the effects on mental health.¹⁷

Significant social and cultural structures and influences provide valuable psychosocial support for young people following bushfires. It is important though to create youth-friendly spaces where young people can find comfort and relief and feel that support is provided in a 'youth-relevant' and non-stigmatised way.

Young people may find support from their peers is more comforting. Talking to adults can be challenging for young people through adolescence. This can be even more challenging in stressful circumstances when adults are already overburdened with the stress of bushfires.⁸

Immediately following fires

What was available

- *We needed more mental health support. We had very limited access to mental health – one off – they saw us once and never came back. They were only here for a month.*
- *The community did get people to support people, and community offered mental health support which was really good. That would not have happened 15 years ago.*
- *There were lots of options but they didn't really help. One to one sessions should be for one young person.*
- *We have some services but they operate out of Bairnsdale and there is no service for young people here [Orbost].*

Young people's experience

- *People say to me 'but you weren't really impacted and didn't lose that much'.*
- *People panic. I have not had an opportunity to discuss what actually happened. ... it was really stressful and for people to deny that is distressing.*
- *Young people felt responsible for the destruction if they were in the fire response but couldn't get to a particular property in time to save it.*
- *Friends were in distress, many people had family working as fire fighters.*

What could be improved

- *Need more funding for mental health youth support, and that gap for 20-30 year olds also need place-based supports.*
- *We had no time to reflect, no recovery time, no follow up counselling because of fire. We didn't even know how to process or talk, it was shock and raw, then no follow up counselling because of COVID-19.*

Mental health services

Headspace and opening up the conversation

- *There was the ten subsidised mental health appointments, I took that opportunity because I had, my Grandmother is a nurse and she was like, there's this thing, so I took them but I don't think a lot of people did.*
- *There was a push for youth mental health.*
- *I feel like headspace is trying really hard with online but I know people that are finding it extremely hard to find the right type of person to help them.*
- *The one thing I can think of is the psychology sessions that were increased for people in fire affected areas. That was helpful to those who could access it.*
- *It did generally bring a lot of young people together and more so, sort of normalise having issues with your mental health. Even if a lot of people did struggle to access help it did normalised to either, just talk to your mates and say hey I'm struggling with this, how are you going? So while not directly linked to the bushfires I do think that's like an element of what happened we should bring forward with us (young person, Myrtleford).*
- *We need mental health/addiction services that won't leave after 12 months.*

Shouldering the burden

- *At several points last year students said they felt they were not only carrying their own significant problems, but shouldering much of the burden of the adults in their lives as well. This includes acting really happy and downplaying their own emotions to cheer up adults, taking on additional responsibilities and forgiving adults for losing their temper or letting them down 'because they are stressed' at the expense of the young person's own wellbeing and mental health (Youth Coordinator/Community Development Worker, The Sanctuary, Mallacoota).*

Barriers to access

- *But no one really used them [mental health services] because they did not know what they were doing, they didn't know what they were going to get out of it.*
- *In rural areas, even before the bushfires, nothing really changed, just bulk billed 10 sessions and no new pathways for young people to access mental health support.*
- *There's all these things out there but also you need to have a system in place for those things to work. So that mental health plan did not work in my town or my [Alpine] Shire because we just don't have the pre-existing support networks or infrastructure even.*
- *My other friends they have been to headspace but headspace, they only have certain, I guess levels of professionals, so they don't deal with people that have suicidal thoughts really, guess it is sort of out of their range. So it is mainly early prevention so it is hard for people who have had depression for years and years to find a good professional outside of headspace.*
- *I guess it's hard because if you are like from lower socio-economic it is hard to find someone as well as the good ones always seem to be booked or not really practicing anymore.*
- *There's nothing really else I have found that is aimed for young people for bushfire recovery.*
- *It is hard to have conversations about ur trauma when sleeping next to the water was the only place u were 'safe'.*

What could have worked better

- *I think making people aware of the services that were out there, like obviously there was headspace and a lot of those organisations did put out specifically bushfire hotlines and things and there were grants available.*
- *I feel like community based recovery, you know support groups and things would have been so much better than one-on-one with a counsellor. I do a little bit of work with the DET in their trauma recovery in schools and you know through that I work with a lot of people who lived through Black Saturday and they really emphasised the fact that those in person support groups within the community were one of the things that helped them recover the most (young person, Bright).*
- *Like I understand why they did the ten subsidised, but I feel like it didn't, ten is not enough, in a calendar year because you just really catch the surface there.*
- *Making it less expensive to see professionals or something.*
- *Limited resources for mental health, addiction, general health. Any and all services stretched so think that it takes 18 months to see someone.*
- *Lack of transportation to get to said services.*
- *Being checked up on but not pressured to talk about it.*

Schools

My school is acting like it's over, it's done, move on. Thanks for coming (young person, Orbost).

Some young people reported that schools had been very supportive, including some who rang families immediately following the bushfires. On the other hand, many expressed a frustration with the lack of school support and acknowledgment of their experience of the bushfires.

A review of several schools' 2020 newsletters revealed evidence of information about resources and financial aid that was available for families as well as offering wellbeing support. In a number of schools experienced staff were recruited to support students experiencing stress or trauma. There was evidence of some opportunities for students to share creative pieces and reflections from the bushfires.

It was obvious from this review that schools' concern shifted quickly from bushfires to COVID-19 as young people reported, but as mentioned earlier, this was not consistent across the sector. Newsletter items from a sample of schools from bushfire regions are presented in Appendix B and C. Some schools seemed to do a better job in keeping the bushfires on the agenda through 2020 than others. This reflects the advice from the Department of Education and Training, that bushfire response has been a school by school proposition.

What was available

- *We only had one counsellor at school. They always get on with the little children or the teachers, but not teenagers.*
- *Headspace info in schools – helpful in terms of identifying issues for friends.*
- *They said there was a counsellor but we have never been introduced to them.*
- *School was great, we did not have internet for a while and school was really good, very helpful.*
- *Schools had some services come in.*
- *Do these sessions in schools. It should be compulsory. Please follow up and come to our school.*
- *Notifications through the schools' Compass, a web-based school management program*
- *Schools contacted families before we went back and made contact. There was a bushfire program for primary schools which gave kids free books and equipment.*

What happened

- *One girl did go to see the counsellor and she got bullied [primary school age].*
- *School counsellor is not confidential. Everyone knows if you go to that room.*
- *Some kids were asked to go to the staff room.*
- *Some schools were good at talking about it, but some schools did not talk about it at all. There are lots of schools here. Everyone knew someone who was impacted in some way.*
- *No check ins with young people, we have had nothing, unless someone else has, but I haven't. Definitely the same for all students, especially here. There is wellbeing but there's the stigma that goes along with it.*
- *Don't know about emergency plans, even within the school. This year's Year 7s will have missed out on the emergency practice, but also lots of other stuff.*

What could be improved

- *They talked at the first school assembly but it needs to be reinforced and regular, it would be good if someone could come to the school and update us.*
- *They need to be more secretive about when you access this [counselling] (discreet and confidential) but clearer in where to get that help. Assisting people in knowing how to do this privately.*
- *There should be a whole school approach when accessing counselling.*
- *Schools need to do more.*
- *They needed to normalise this for all the students, like it's not a problem to access these services and here is how. They didn't do this.*
- *Capturing and engaging with young people as a reaction event (in the moment) and then further down the track to check in.*
- *Programs exactly like yours [YACVic's] need to be implemented in schools without doubt. As I definitely found it beneficial to reflect on a really, really hard time without feeling that I was being pushed to talk about it/judged.*
- *Things like this [the YACVic workshops] need to be brought in as a whole school approach rather than being mentioned and forgot about or only focussed at individuals.*
- *Compulsory counselling (at least one compulsory counselling session) for the whole school so students are more likely to feel included and not discriminated.*

Local Place-Based Support

Local support

- *Why now [and not before]? Why haven't we heard about this? What's the purpose, where's the funding, what is to be achieved?*
- *No other groups, sport, scouts etc helped out or reached out.*
- *We need peer mental health, and Youth Mental Health First Aid. We need a counsellor we can trust but also that we don't all know. Everyone knows everyone around here.*
- *We ran nights for younger scouts on preparation and then farm clean up, but we got shut down because of COVID.*
- *There needs to be like a healing process and gatherings. School aged kids need to get that at school.*
- *Develop a guide for how communities can hold these conversations.*
- *People living out of home might need extra support. I've just moved out and having some check in would be good for 18+. Just how are you going? Do you need anything?*

Barriers for young people asking for help

- *It's word of mouth and everyone thinks someone else is worse off and then they don't seek help.*
- *Kids are raised here to be tough; you don't just go to a counsellor.*
- *What if I'm not as affected as other people? People saying you are not really impacted or affected.*
- *Knowing what to do next, the volunteers were impacted too and there was a lack of mental health support.*
- *Classes for people to be self-aware about their emotional response. Mental health, it's like just complain for about a minute and then just get on with it. There was no way to express it.*
- *My mates don't know what's involved in counselling or how to even talk about what happened. We need classes on how to do this.*

Youth Spaces

The fire was an excuse to set up The Sanctuary. Other towns don't have excuses like the first to set things up like this, but other towns don't have this because they didn't have a fire. That sux because they need a focus point like we have here (young person, Mallacoota).

What they look like

- *Open, positive space to be, a safe space, provide group discussion spaces, sausage sizzles and food, chill space and a place for YP to meet and chill and hang out but also to talk.*
- *You would want experienced people there like in therapy, working with young people.*
- *Town needs a youth worker. Need to be discreet, need an outsider, maybe an outreach worker but regular days and times.*
- *It could be done online with the right set up but a mix of group and 1-1 with an experienced Youth worker.*
- *Young people could carpool, because transport is an issue.*
- *I stayed at my friends' house. This helped me get away and just spend time with my friends.*
- *Get people to share their stories with each other, and a space where you can openly communicate with everyone.*
- *Don't go over the top, ask young people how to input into this.*
- *A place to be educated and not reminded of what has been lost. A place where authorities will listen and act on their words.*
- *A pump track, skatepark and mount bike track. Also a program for learner drivers.*

Challenges

- *We had to learn as we go.*
- *We need more staff and Brodie can't do it all—clone Brodie.*
- *The capable people are already doing everything they can.*
- *We want it known that the biggest hurdles we face are bureaucratic. We can get a lot more done with less bureaucracy. Why is there a need for so much paperwork?*
- *It's like an assumption that you are going to put everything into The Sanctuary, but it's a lot of pressure and people, like friends, told us to shut it down.*
- *There is an expectation that we will all do big things in the future.*
- *Orbost has stayed the same and it feels like its dying out. There is nothing here for young people.*

A genuine need

- *No, they don't [exist in Bright], we are in desperate need of one though, not just for bushfire recovery but all the other issues that we have, which has come out of the fires. Yeah, everyone is like don't you have a youth centre? No we don't, we don't really have anywhere outside of school where we can go and seek support.*
- *I think we have Youth Ambassadors which is a local youth group and the council's here [Bairnsdale] but I haven't really heard of [young] adult group counselling before. I feel like other than headspace not really a space to come together. I think it would be helpful because sometimes people think you have to have mental illness to go into headspace but maybe there would be less pressure if it was just another organisation or another place and if it didn't matter what age you were so adults could also go (young person, Bairnsdale).*

Recovery

Opportunity to participate in community recovery initiatives

Previous engagement

- *Junior Vic Bush fire came and gave a talk. Not really participated. Junior Rotary got us to attend. We took notes—what could we do to improve, how did the fires impact you specifically—they were asking but not listening.*
- *Very few volunteering opportunities.*

Barriers to participation

- *I hear a lot of adults saying ‘what young people need is’, but there is not a lot of opportunities for them to be involved or say what they want.*
- *A lot of people left after the fires because it was not nice, but now lots are coming back, a lot of their parents are here.*
- *Not here when they are 25, 45 – maybe. They leave and leave, sometime come back when they are going to retire or have kids, travel overseas, either leave or work at IGA/work or don’t work, or leave and get an education, then travel, not in this year, then they are no longer young people anymore, unless it is teaching then they come back.*

Roles for young people

- *Simple things like clear your gutters, or if your neighbours can’t because they are old or disabled, help and do it for them.*
- *Make sure the fence builders are qualified, farmers had to repair the volunteers’ job.*

It is our community too

- *Young people need to be involved as they are going to be here for the long-term, they have lots of ideas and it’s just important.*
- *We will be inheriting everything after this so we should be involved. I am confident that the community would listen to us.*

Employment and employability after the fires

Young people identified lot of opportunities for work during relief and recovery from the bushfires. They proposed the idea of short courses being delivered in local communities:

All-round skills, not so much longer term courses but sort and sharp, like doing a 2 day course for truck driving ... a day on farms trying to tap into local areas where young people can spend a day learning gardening skills (young person, Corryong).

Opportunities

- *Very few opportunities for apprenticeships, hospitality, waiting staff, kitchen hands.*
- *Lots of summer work or part time work.*
- *Most employment – IGA – golf club, volunteer as a life saver (only over summer), surf coaching can lead to teaching.*
- *Doing some trade work as a plumber, don't really want an apprenticeship at the moment.*
- *I have been finding it hard to get a job, I have a job lined up but it is taking a while to get that set up and getting Centrelink stuff has been hard.*

What it takes to get a job locally

- *If you want a job you can get one. Yes, but because it is a small town if you have a good reputation you will get a job.*
- *It is also about who you know.*
- *Skills are not needed as most people will train you.*
- *Do the same job for a while, you get good at it.*
- *As a young person you can get a job, some yes others not so sure. If you have a bad reputation you won't get a job but if you have a good reputation you will get all the jobs.*
- *If you don't have key connections in the town you won't. Knowing people helped many get their jobs.*
- *Need to be physically fit to do fencing.*

Possibilities

- *Kitchen work, dishes to waitress, kitchen, larder (set up and making salads), apprenticeships, chef.*
- *Become a secretary very easily, that's a new industry.*
- *Apprenticeships, traineeship, internship, volunteering.*
- *Summer crew and park rangers, confusion around requirements and qualifications.*
- *There need to be more local opportunities for these positions, could be focused on young people.*
- *Could summer crew be an opportunity for young people to participate in and get skill development as part of that, e.g. use a chain saw, drive a manual car.*

Education and Training Opportunities After the Fires

Barriers

- *Mostly people need to travel out of here to get a career started. People tend to come back for teaching.*
- *Qualifications and experience, but how do you get the experience without being given a go.*
- *We were unable to do work experience [through school].*
- *Most people are not planning to stay in Orbost, there is not a lot to do here. Most want to live in another regional town, one in the city. Some want to spend time in another country, but not to live.*
- *I think I was uuming and aahing about it half way through Year 12 and then when COVID was happening it was definite, make my decision to take a gap year. Cause it was mentally too much strain to think about moving to Uni while the pandemic was happening (young person, Bairnsdale).*

What could be improved

- *Provide young people with skills. Get young people to do social media for businesses.*
- *Roll out training like white card, so young people could do fencing.*
- *Focus on what your existing skills are, but be focused on what you can use them for.*
- *Internet access is really inconsistent.*

Perceptions of Recovery in the Natural Environment

Flora

- *They needed to do more back burns and better fire planning*
- *Next fire season the shire has to implement the preparation processes BEFORE the fires not afterwards (this happened last year e.g. The shire was meant to chop down trees and slash dry grass around back roads but that didn't happen until AFTER the fires hit) (young person, Orbost).*
- *Waterways on the Murray River, lots of dirt run off and floods after the fires, lots of dead fish, lots of feed donated, lots of financial aid*
- *I know they want to see the re-growth happens naturally and seed only open after fires, so people have waited to see how the nature environment comes back first before doing too much.*
- *Is anyone doing research on the impact on the waterways? The runoff from the rain has been really bad, impact on fish, Tambo is really bad up in Swifts. There is nothing to hold the topsoil and this can cause landslides. Which is really bad for all the wildlife and people that depend on that, it is really bad (young person, online workshop).*

Fauna

- *Melbourne zoo – releasing koalas - not allowed to tell anyone where they are going to release, don't want tourists to find out where they are, even when you tell them not to they run up and do it anyway.*
- *Koalas were heavily impacted, like at Rawson they had so many koalas arrive needing care, mostly from East Gippsland. .*
- *Not a lot done except cutting down dead and dangerous trees. Lots of toxins in the soils. Now big work projects.*
- *Things have grown back. People in my area are taking photos of the re-growth and the dams filling and sharing them.*
- *There were thousands of dead fish in our river.*

The Impact of COVID-19

Recovery is on pause ... lockdown has prevented us from helping with clean-up (young person, online workshop).

- *COVID forced further isolation. There was no time to debrief, this happens with storytelling and that did not happen.*
- *COVID is now the issue and the fires have been forgotten like it's not an issue anymore.*
- *Everything is focused on COVID-19 and permits to rebuild have slowed or stopped. We have been waiting for our permit to be processed and it's all being put on pause because of COVID. We are not revisiting what's happened and you're just looking at the damage and it reminds you of the loss.*
- *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.*
- *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. Then all of a sudden the anniversary came along and the media decided that it was once again the time to show extremely triggering images of the fires, days leading up to the anniversary and on the anniversary (young person, Alpine Shire).*

Being Heard

In general

- *We need to be listened to and confirmed before the event as to what the event is actually about, what the conversation is meant to achieve so we can be listened to.*
- *I represented youth views at a meeting of politicians from Melbourne. I spoke from school perspective. Asked how they were going to manage students who were really tired from the fires. I do not remember though who or what it was for.*
- *Develop opportunities for young people in Orbost to meet with council to tell them what's going on here. Transport is an issue.*
- *Even with previous fires people were still not prepared, I'm not sure why, need better knowledge from previous experience.*

In schools

- *Maybe talk with school. Scouts or other spaces where they tell young people what to expect, what to pack if they need to evacuate, that sort of thing.*
- *More awareness, actual education in primary schools. Every time you go up a grade you [should] get a little lesson on what to do.*
- *They should talk to schools about fires and what to do as a response. Basic fire knowledge and training.*
- *Use school newsletters.*

In our community

- *Family and friends support at, and following, the event. This support had a real impact. Friends took us shopping at Kmart and wouldn't let us leave till we bought something. It was weird but helpful.*
- *Place-based community level discussions.*

12 months on

Twelve months on and we are still struggling (young person, Alpine Shire).

People and wellbeing

- *There was a shame in feeling like it was a traumatic event, even probably within the last couple of months or so, leading into summer and leading into the anniversary, there was that more oh, its ok to be, to have feelings about what happened last summer. So there was that real delayed response.*
- *I do know a lot of my peers play for the local cricket team or mountain biking club is another. A lot of them do look towards netball or football or mountain bike club for support and that kind of did not happen.*
- *We had Katy Perry come up just before the first lockdown and that was really the last time that you know the whole, everyone in the community was there, it was just down at the local footy oval, that was amazing, but since then there hasn't been anything. It was just the first and last time that people could let their hair down and just forget about what happened.*
- *Footy and netball season is going ahead and I think coming out of restrictions should bring us closer.*
- *Headspace is now finding ways to bring outreach to Mallacoota and Cann River once a fortnight and can use The Sanctuary as a confidential and familiar space to meet clients. Similarly a dog therapy group called Canine Comprehension Is using The Sanctuary for their sessions with children, and we have the capacity to shape the set-up of the space to suit their clients.*
- *I know the school has tapped into the bushfire recovery funding for mental health practitioners, so we got some funding after the fires to have someone come in and they are now full time which is really exciting. They are a young person themselves and qualified, but it took so long for the school to get it that she was only supposed to be there two days a week and now she is there full time because of all the things that came out of the fires and then COVID, she's stretched totally but she is trusted by the students.*
- *I feel like mentally it is still not that great, I know, feel like some people might have like PTSD, so if they see another red sky they immediately think there is another fire.*
- *It's something you don't talk about it because it can be really touchy sometimes for some people, like maybe if their family had their house burnt down or something. But it would be good, kind of like group counselling or something, somewhere so people could talk about it.*
- *Yeah, I just signed up to be on the committee, after 25 I'm out of the youth bracket, so I really want to focus on community to give myself purpose outside my own little farmlet.*
- *I definitely think that connection with people is very important, especially in a valley of 12 or people with no reception.*
- *You don't know what's happening, you don't know if there's a bushfire benefit, barbecue or something on because by the time you get there it is already over, and you are like oh, I didn't know that.*

- *I suppose like the community is trying to get over it again, but I think coming, after it was all sort over we were focused on COVID but coming into the summer people were much more vigilant.*
- *My school/town never received any physical support services, it was just money that we couldn't use. My town saw a massive rise in recreational drugs and alcohol out of stress from home dealing with the stress of the fires. 12 months on we are still struggling. The only good thing was that Katy Perry playing a concert in March for the community (young person, Alpine Shire).*

Aboriginal culture and healing

- *There hasn't been overtly any Aboriginal cultural or recovery for communities, which is upsetting in a way.*
- *None but I feel like it definitely should be.*
- *I would like more cultural things to be done but no, at the moment there isn't.*
- *My mum is Aboriginal and my dad is mixed and we had no help.*
- *I wish the community was more community oriented, especially considering First Nations.*

Buildings and infrastructure

- *I know everyone banded together when the fires were about but recently people are still getting their fences fixed and trying to carry on with their lives but I would like to see a bit more community gatherings.*
- *It's [rebuilding] slow, but we are doing it internal which is something I understand but we were told if anything happens here you are on your own.*
- *We are all particularly self-sufficient, and we were saying that before, if each of us are very self-sufficient and strong as alone then when we come together we are pretty powerful. I think, especially with bushfire preparedness, we all got the firefighting equipment ourselves, which is what the grant is for, then when we come together to battle fires we will have it down pat.*
- *Yeah, I reckon. I do see them when we have community hall meetings and I can see the urgency, especially in the new treasurer, I'm trying to get this grant, I'm trying to get that grant but, it just seems like it is also waiting. I reckon if everyone had a slip-on [firefighting equipment that 'slips' onto a flat tray ute] and a trailer equipment there's something big off your shoulders.*

Biodiversity and environment

We will be inheriting everything after this so we should be involved. I am confident that the community would listen to us (young person, online workshop).

- *We have definitely noticed a lot more wildlife around and regrowth in areas that were burnt.*
- *I know there is regrowth but other than that, not really, I guess it has really stayed the same.*
- *It has been pretty devastating, we have a plantation behind us and it was cut down, harvested, and we can see the hills and you can see the bare earth on the hills from a distance away. But yes, some of the trees are coming back and especially on the Combienbar Road it used to be like a prehistoric jungle but now it's like, just sticks, but there's some glimpse of green.*
- *It is pretty devastating, especially this year after the fires there was a lot of rain and walking past, upon the pastures, and seeing all this water, it was just running off the landscape and I'm like, it could be collected and used when we don't have a lot of water and used in firefighting. So, there was the bushfires and its bare earth and rain and it's all washing away into the streams and muddying and eroding the banks and everything (young person, Combienbar).*
- *Just after the fires I saw a lot of kangaroos and wallabies coming in, they would eat my veggies which I was totally fine with but then as the rain started more things grew and I think they have gone a bit more into bush. But yes, I do see some roos and wallabies and I've seen, oh tons of, goannas. So many. So yeah a lot of bird action and maybe I'm noticing them because they could fly away from the fires. Just a lot more birds I guess (young person, Combienbar).*
- *The Shire [Alpine] is very open to keen to support, especially children and young people, they are very supportive of the local community.*
- *Koalas and all the animals make me very sad.*
- *After the fires every time there has been a heavy rainfall there has been lots of trouble with silt and debris washing into creeks, off hills and erosion which can't necessarily be avoided but places like Paddy's River and Bluff are being cleaned up well.*
- *There have been little to no bushfire recovery efforts even 'planting trees'.*
- *This disaster destroyed so much of my home and the landscape ... and that will take many years to regrow ... some parts not at all ... that hurts.*
- *Why are we logging in badly fire affected regions ...STOP! Cannot believe how stupid people are. Stop destroying the land!!!*
- *Ensure we have a brighter future where we will learn from this disaster, become more sustainable, tackle climate change, stop excessive logging especially of old growth, and have the mindset of a healthy future and not just money.*

Business and economy

I think that the community (Bright) has really rallied around young people in making sure that they are still in the workforce and still getting their qualifications because they know how important that is to foster (young person, Bright).

- *Our town was hit pretty hard because we are a tourist town ... we missed out on summer, Easter, the ski season, and then you know, it was like school breaks, so there was that financial strain on a lot of families. COVID rolled into trying to recover from the fires and it all just rolled into one and I think a lot of people, at the end of last year because they were emotionally burnt (young person, Bright).*
- *I think financially a lot of people are still dealing with what happened, but I think slowly a lot of things will start to get better and I really hope it does because we just can't have another year like we did last year.*
- *I don't know many young people that were laid off, a lot of them either went onto JobKeeper or were just not working.*
- *The tourist season [2020–21] relied on young people to work in often dysfunctional, unsupportive and exploitative work situations (because of the combined effects of fewer adults being available to the workforce and a larger than normal influx of tourists due to increased media exposure after the fire, no International travel and border closures) (Youth Coordinator/Community Development Worker).*
- *This mean that many students did not get much of a break over summer holidays.*
- *There was a lot of help afterward, hay for farmers and things as well, I think some of it was short-term and it hasn't really carried on I feel.*
- *I think the CFA is taking on more volunteers, sort of thing. It's not really a job but there's that opportunity.*
- *There's not much tourism in Combienbar but I really reckon we could do some artisan goods cause there's like some really talented people there.*
- *This is a tourist area that was one of the biggest impacts, it was very, very quiet.*
- *I think now it's definitely gotten a lot better, obviously now restrictions have been eased I think communities are feeling more positive, we seem to be off to a much better start.*

Bushfire and recovery funding

- *I have known about it through various things that I do. Like youth wise, I think people are aware of it but they just don't know what to use it for.*
- *It's very much what can I do with this money, it's a big sum of money and I don't think my idea's good enough, or I don't know what to do with it, those kind of things.*
- *It was [available] during the bushfires but then we haven't seen any more of that, I guess from the middle of last year there wasn't really ongoing funding.*

- *I think there might have been a bushfire bursary but not too sure. It was like a scholarship so you are not necessarily guaranteed to get it.*
- *We are trying to get a grant for community slip-ons [firefighting equipment that slips onto a flat tray ute] and trailer so we are definitely trying to get prepared but it is definitely hard to get grants we are finding.*
- *He [community member] is trying some bushfire recovery but he is also trying to get other grants from other places as well. But we are finding it is very obviously very slow because there is a lot of people applying at the moment. Everyone keeps saying that Combienbar has never asked for anything, we just really need some help with getting fire prepared.*
- *Right now I am practicing at getting an arts grant to get the piano repaired that's in the hall, just as a practicing to get grant money.*
- *There was no opportunity for young people. I know my school accessed funds but I believe what happened was that the money either didn't get used, got absorbed by the school or was used on our graduation. So none went on wellbeing or mental health.*

What could be done better

Talk with us not to us, as young people a lot of messaging was very much to parents or adults. Work with young people in the recovery process, we are old enough to have complex feelings about what happened and after all we know what's best for us. Not all the time, but if you are doing programs for young people then having young person input is the most important thing you can possibly do, so not just leaving it till the last minute (young person, Bright).

- *Involving young people in recovery because it doesn't just make the program better, it makes the community stronger, because young people really feel like they have had a voice in their recovery and that is the most important thing. I think that I have found, having a voice in recovery has helped my own personal recovery from what happened. Through the working group, just bringing more light to it (young person, Bright).*
- *Maybe something to do with actual plans for bushfires, cause I know a lot of people never actually have a proper plan for what they would do if they had to evacuate or something actually happened. Maybe that could be focused like a, like an event or something that could be focused at young people but also maybe one for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people (young person, Bairnsdale).*
- *Maybe you could have a checklist of what you need to do, and step by step and different situations because I feel like often there are lots of different situations that can pop during bushfires and if it one you haven't experienced before you don't really know what to do (young person, Bairnsdale).*
- *Please don't treat us like children, we aren't children (young person, Alpine Shire).*
- *Please stop putting extremely triggering 'fire safe' ads on TV without proper warnings (young person, Alpine Shire).*

- *Have a plan, although you can't always be prepared for a fire like the one experienced it's good to have a plan of some sort to ensure a feeling of control (young person, Welaregang).*
- *Provide essential skills in education on how to provide support to the community in a variation of ways. Provide more information and awareness (young person, Orbost).*

Return to normal

I think instead of walking backways and going back to what was familiar it would be a lot better if we move forward and bring the positive elements with us (young person, Myrtleford).

- *The only normal I can think of is like pre-fires, pre-COVID when we were not just really having to worry, for a lot of people, if we would be able to pay the bills. Honestly I don't want to return to that normality, that was pre-bushfires, pre-COVID because it wasn't a great one. You know the fires and COVID have seen so many support systems and networks and infrastructure come out of it that going back to normal would mean they would all fall away and I feel like that would just make things a million times worse (young person, Bright).*
- *But returning to normal I just want to see people who are making decisions think of the little guys, think of people out in the country who, we are affected by what you do in cities, budget wise. You know it's not just as easy as going to your local headspace or going to your local youth centre. We don't have that, so just understand that normality isn't necessarily a positive (young person, Alpine Shire).*
- *I guess return to normal, but also be prepared and aware that like, I feel like you have that idea of summer and bushfires, more dangerous, you understand how dangerous bushfires are now, whereas before it wasn't too much of a worry (young person, Bairnsdale).*
- *As soon as you said the word return to normal I went, my mind went, I don't want to return to normal, I want something different. Because obviously normal didn't work. I'd like to see more environmental things changing, farming practices that create life and create water storage in the soil and things like that, so when another bushfire does come around. Yeah and just being a bit more self-sufficient in our food production and making. So return to normal, nah don't want that, something more ecologically sound and community driven, self-sufficient and something that isn't the conventional normal (young person, Combienbar).*
- *I don't really like that phrase. The implication is that whatever normal was before is this perfect scenario where everything works really well so we should go back to it and we should go backwards towards it. I think, a lot of terrible things have happened in the past 12 or so months, we can all attest to that, however there also have been positive elements and people have been able to adjust to things that may happen again or just generally aren't going away. It think the move to more online communication obviously as a student, a bit of it was difficult to adjust to but it did generally make things a lot more accessible for a lot of people. So I think instead of walking backways and going back*

to what was familiar it would be a lot better if we move forward and bring the positive elements with us (young person, Myrtleford).

- *Ensure we have a brighter future where we will learn from this disaster, become more sustainable, tackle climate change, stop excessive logging especially of old growth, and have their kind set on a healthy future and not just money (young person, Goongerah).*

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Appendices

Appendix A: YACVic Youth-Focused Disaster Recovery Protocol

Youth-Focused Disaster Recovery Protocol

February 2020

(Katherine Ellis and Derm Ryan, Youth Affairs Council Victoria)

Who is this protocol for?

This protocol is for use by Federal, State and Local Government emergency and recovery services and institutions, and local youth services, youth workers and others who engage with young people in disaster affected areas.

It aims to provide guidance on key matters for consideration / inclusion in post-disaster recovery and rebuilding, to ensure positive outcomes for young people aged 12-25 who have been affected directly and/or indirectly by a disaster.

Why is it important to have a special protocol for young people?

In times of disaster, when families and communities are stressed and disconnected, and resources are channelled to dealing with disaster relief and recovery, it can often be the young people of the community whose needs are sidelined, and often at a crucial stage in adolescent development that can never be revisited.

Many young people will be required to step up their responsibility to their families and will also feel that they cannot voice their normal adolescent / early adult concerns in the context of a disaster environment when everyone's needs are so dire.

Their connections to peers and support networks are often significantly compromised by transport and communication outages which can compound feelings of disconnection, loss of control and mental health issues.

There is also a risk that more young people will leave their communities and not return because they have been displaced or to search for jobs.

Young people from farming and small business backgrounds have identities that are linked to their family's business, and expectations that they will continue that legacy. If the property or business is destroyed, their livelihood, expectations and plans for their future may also be destroyed. In addition, young people may be expected to leave school to help on the farm or in the business, or there may be no money to send young people to boarding school which may also destroy chances of getting into university.

What are some of the key principles for young people in disaster recovery?

It is vital to provide resources specifically to support and empower young people in a disaster situation, both in the immediate aftermath of the disaster, and then as part of the ongoing recovery and rebuilding process over several years. Young people should play a central role in determining how the resources should be utilised to ensure the strongest outcomes.

Young people should have a dedicated and specific role on local, state and National recovery committees, and advisory bodies.

It is vital that young people are considered and included in any economic and infrastructure planning / rebuilding that a local community, state or national body may be working on (ie. BCA) and their views are included in both immediate and long-term modelling and or impact statements.

What support do young people need after a disaster?

Mental health services can be key to ensuring that young people are able to process their experiences. It is important to note that mental health services must be trusted by the young person, trauma informed, able to be provided without stigma, and easily accessible (taking into account cost, referral pathways, transportation needs etc). Often, mental health services will be better provided by local youth or health services with which young people have an established relationship.

Recreational programs to provide some semblance of a normal life, and to promote connection to their communities and with people who understand what they have experienced. Such programs can also provide a platform for youth workers to subtly assess young people's wellbeing and needs for referral to mental health and other services, in situations where young people may not even realise they need help, or be able to articulate their needs, or may be reluctant to 'bother' others for help as their family and community face significant troubles.

Empowerment, coordination and support to be 'part of the solution' and play an important role in contributing to recovery and rebuilding efforts, including renewing community cohesion. In past conflicts and disaster zones, it has often been young people who have led community projects to rebuild their communities.

What are the mechanisms to get support to young people?

Youth services in local communities

Local youth services will already be known and trusted in the community, as well as being easier to access, so are generally a better investment than fly-in-fly-out models of support, or bigger services in regional centres. They will also often be based in Local Government Associations, which take the lead on recovery and rebuilding efforts, which positions youth support and action as a key part of recovery and renewal.

The work of youth services can be remedial, such as on-the-ground generalist support and mental health services, or recreational programs to ensure young people have some semblance of a normal life, and stay connected to their communities and with people who understand what they have experienced. Importantly, youth services can also coordinate, support and fund young people to play an important role in contributing to recovery and rebuilding efforts, and rebuilding community cohesion.

It is critical that young people are consulted and empowered to take a lead in determining the support that they need, the projects that they can lead and contribute to, and how they would like to see their community (including infrastructure and economic prospects) be rebuilt. Youth services can play a role in supporting and coordinating young people's safe and effective participation in such decision making.

It will also be vital for young people to be involved at the centre of decision making for recovery and rebuilding for their communities, to ensure their perspectives and lived experience inform decisions such as rebuilding of community facilities, and the creation of jobs. It is also as a matter of respect, as they are essential citizens for the health and future of the communities.

Youth Development Officers in the LGAs are ideally placed to coordinate young people's involvement, supported by YACVic and other state peaks. For immediate / quick action, grants to each affected local council should

include an amount specified for youth services, to ensure that the unique needs of young people and the role they can/do play in the community are addressed.

Structures exist in most communities that would allow quick and expert deployment / utilisation of funds. Based on consultation undertaken by YACVic with colleagues and members, we would advise that immediate funding is best placed via allocations to each affected Local/Shire Council, and to Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisations (ACCO). In addition to having existing mechanisms to distribute equitably and quickly, they are best placed to know what is happening on the ground.

We would also recommend that the funding is specifically identified and allocated for youth services, and overseen by a Youth Development Officer at the council (rather than health services, which tend to be more narrowly focused and can be stigmatising).

In the mid- to long term, other community youth services can also play a key role as lead agencies for recovery and rebuilding work with young people. Youth services can operate in/via a multitude of environments (local council, community, school, health, sport and recreation, etc), and ideally the services would be funded to be located within, or be able to easily and regularly travel to, each affected town, so that the young people are being supported by trusted community members who are there for the long term. It is also often difficult (emotionally, financially, or due to transport availability) for young people to travel to other towns.

Such investment will have enormous economic and social benefits, and could save millions in tertiary end services. Professional youth workers have specific skills that are often not fully recognised, and are also usually very good at stretching dollars to deliver great outcomes.

What should funding be spent on?

Meaningful funding would allow additional youth services – to be determined by each community based on their needs – such as:

- Creating a team of generalist youth workers who can run activities and events where young people can gather for some normality and social connection, but also be subtly assessed and referred for other needs. This should be a medium-term investment (i.e. 5 years), recognising the need for continuity, and that issues will continue to emerge over time for traumatised communities.
- Providing additional community-based services for young people who are traumatised. This may include mental health services, as not all young people will want to / be able to travel to where services such as headspace operate. If these are offered as outreach services they are best done in person as young people in rural locations may not have free access to technology.

- Coordinating and paying young people to take on projects to help their communities to rebuild and recover. Rural communities are made up of incredible, resilient people – many of whom are driven young individuals who are passionate about where they live.
- Consulting with young people for their unique perspectives on solutions for rebuilding, both for community infrastructure and for economic recovery, especially the tourism, construction and agriculture industries.
- Providing opportunities for young people, such as apprenticeships while they assist with rebuilding, or community services training for those running youth programs, which could allow local skills development to be one of the silver linings on the disaster.
- Training staff from local institutions (schools, health services etc) and community members to understand the support that young people will need immediately and in the longer term. This should include training in the Code of Ethical Practice in Youth Work.
- Investing in local service providers and community members to become accredited instructors in Youth Mental Health First Aid training, to support young people in the immediate aftermath of the disaster, and to build the resilience of the community for the recovery and rebuilding stage, and future disasters.
- Provide access to safe sex information, sexual and reproductive health resources and services.
- In the case of bushfires, fund the Country fire Authority (CFA) Junior Volunteer Development Program (JVDP) (Junior Brigades) across all branches, to encourage and train local young people to join the CFA.

Past Inquiries – What has been recommended after previous disasters?

High level Recommendations involving Young People

2009 Victorian Bushfires Royal Commission

- Recommendations
 - Six: ‘Victoria lead an initiative of the Ministerial Council for Education, Early Childhood Development and Youth Affairs to ensure that the national curriculum incorporates the history of bushfire in Australia and that existing curriculum areas such as geography, science and environmental studies include elements of bushfire education.’

Victorian Bushfire Reconstruction and Recovery Authority^j

- Recommendations
 - ‘VBRRA adopted a ... framework that has the concept of community at its centre.’
 - ‘VBRRA would be involved in all four domains in varying degrees but the local community would be central to decision-making processes. Once people had a chance to convene and reach some kind of consensus about their needs, they would be invited to submit a proposal for community recovery which the Authority would help them enact. The combined proposals

^j The VBRRA operated until the 30th June 2011. From 2011—2020 the Victorian Government established the Fire Recovery Unit within Regional Development Victoria, and in 2020 established Bushfire Recovery Victoria (BRV) to focus on the rehabilitation of bushfire-affected communities.

from all the affected communities would then form the basis for VBRRA's long-term master plan.'

- 'VBRRA began by encouraging affected townships to set up Community Recovery Committees (CRCs) for the express purpose of developing recovery plans.'
- 'VBRRA suggested that groups consult widely, hold open meetings and make consensus-based decisions wherever possible.'

Engaging Youth in Post-Disaster Research. Lori Peek, Jennifer Tobin-Gurley, Robin S Cox, Leila Scannell, Sarah Fletcher and Cheryl Heykoop (2016)

- 'Children and youth have a vital role to play in disaster risk reduction, research activities, policy creation and decision-making.'

Kids the hidden victims of Black Saturdays

<https://www.theaustralian.com.au/nation/politics/kids-the-hidden-victims-ofblack-saturday-disaster/news-story/12a50cc1382c4dbedecb111c7e01fecd>

Psychological effects on young people ten years on

<https://www1.racgp.org.au/newsgp/clinical/%E2%80%98renewal-from-the-ashes%E2%80%99-ten-years-on-from-black-s>

Specific Cohorts – What specific needs might some youth cohorts have?

Young disabled people can be particularly vulnerable during bushfires due to a lack of accessible information, emergency housing, vital equipment, mobility and many other factors. The Victorian Youth Disability Advocacy Service (YDAS) has collated some useful resources for disabled Victorians who are impacted by the bushfires.

<https://www.yacvic.org.au/blog/bushfire-resources-victorians-disability/>

There is a possibility that young people from certain groups (eg Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander, LGBTIQ+, multicultural communities) may experience racism and discrimination as they seek assistance and support in the aftermath of a disaster. It is important to assess arrangements at relief centres, recovery activities, and decision making processes to ensure inclusive and accessible practices are being utilised.

Communications – What are young people's communication needs in/after a disaster?

Media coverage of/by young people

There is so much that comes to mind, of course the practical needs, assistance opportunities, and the targeted mental health care is what most people are thinking about at the moment. But my experience with these types

of things says that what young people want in particular is space and time that helps them forget a bit about what is happening. A chance to reduce responsibility, even for a few hours, and be young. I'd really love to be able to take some fun, engaging, 'distracting' youth programs into the worst affected areas in the recovery stages, and be an outside support to put young people in a space where they are allowed to have fun and enjoy themselves, despite their situations and their families' devastation. There's so much responsibility on young people to be grown up, to be responsible, to be present throughout the unknown grey period of recovery. It's a tough space for them to be in, and often they don't know how to balance the responsibility and the pre-existing needs of a developing young person.

Bonnie Clark, Youth Services & Partnerships Coordinator, Mansfield Shire Council

APPENDIX B: Sample of School Newsletter Items from 2020

School	Date	Context
Secondary College	7/02/2020	Financial Bushfire Assistance briefly mentioned in 'WHOLE SCHOOL' section.
Secondary College	7/02/2020	Acknowledgement and offered support to help manage stress: mentioned in wellbeing section.
Secondary College	7/02/2020	Support resources (links) offered for families and information about bushfire smoke.
Secondary College	7/02/2020	Acknowledgement of loss of homes in 'Principal's Message'
Secondary College	21/02/2020	More information provided about State Schools Relief Bushfire Recovery financial support, in 'Administration Office' Section
Secondary College	21/02/2020	Community Bushfire Support for Students and Families mentioned in the 'Community' section. Funding is mentioned again here.
Secondary College	6/03/2020	Information about State Schools Relief is repeated in the 'Administration Office' section, including new information about funding for sports and excursions in Bushfire affected areas.
Secondary College	20/03/2020	Information about State Schools Relief is repeated in the 'Administration Office' section.
Secondary College	9/10/2020	VCAL student completed a piece of writing about the impact, personal experience and understandings of the bushfires.
Secondary College	22/10/2020	Bushfire Exhibition Callout' mentioned asking for any images that 'deserve to be seen', to share a photo and the story behind it.
Secondary College	6/11/2020	Included a video of the Hon James Merlino to the Year 12s of 2020 acknowledging their 'perseverance' during many difficulties throughout the year. Mentions COVID19 but not the bushfires.
Secondary College	20/12/2020	Year 7's reflect on their experiences through 2020, using one word to describe their year. E.g. Friendship, Resilience and Support.
Secondary College	4/12/2020	Principal's highlight of the year is, 'thinking about how much we have achieved as a school community given the difficulties that were thrown at us.'
Secondary College	4/12/2020	Year 7s newsletter acknowledges that the 'start of the year saw the Defence Force based in our area, supporting (our) community through the devastating bushfires that impacted East Gippsland.
Primary School	31/01/2020	Acknowledgement of impact of bushfires on the community, personal message to families. Mention that support will be in place for students but no details.
Primary School	7/02/2020	Information provided about East Gippsland Rotary Fire Aid that administers \$25-100 vouchers. Also mentions St Vincent de Paul Society can assist with educational expenses.
Primary School	14/02/2020	Free Mini-golf vouchers to lift spirits after the fires plus reminder about St Vincent de Paul Society.
Primary School	21/02/2020	Notified that last year's drought relief funding application has been approved. A counsellor has been organised to attend school.
Primary School	28/02/2020	Reminder about free mini-golf and lolly shop vouchers
Primary School	6/03/2020	Acknowledges the lingering effects of bushfires. Many members of our school community are still feeling the effects of the bushfires. To allow staff, students and families a little extra time to regain their balance we have decided to delay Conferences until early in Term 2."
Primary School	20/03/2020	Fire reflection wall' mentioned, paintings and letters sent to the school plus a toy for their new sandpit was donated.
Primary School	12/06/2020	Contracted Catholic Care to work in their parish to help with bushfire recovery. Thanks also to the St Vincent de Paul Society who are financially supporting some of our bushfire response efforts.
Primary School	31/07/2020	Staff participated in a workshop into 'supporting (ourselves) and (our) children after trauma'.
Primary School	7/08/2020	Reminder that Catholic Care 'is still available on Tuesdays and Wednesdays for counselling.
Primary School	28/08/2020	A free online workshop is now available for parents, caregivers and teachers of children affected by the dual impacts of the bushfires and COVID-19.
Primary School	11/09/2020	Reminder that Catholic Care is still available. Tuesdays and Wednesdays for counselling either by phone or in Zoom conferences. '
Primary School	18/09/2020	Student wins a poetry competition about the recent bushfires.
Primary School	6/11/2020	Student wellbeing, it is really important for everyone to know that there is someone to talk to or ask for help if no one in their network is available.
Primary School	16/12/2020	Acknowledges a 'very difficult year'
Prep - 12 College	31/01/2020	Acknowledgement of impact of bushfires on the community, encourages students to 'share their stories and debrief through the telling of their experiences.
Prep - 12 College	14/02/2020	Experienced teacher moves into the Student Support Services role and was involved in supporting schools 'for an extended period after the 2009 bushfires.' If you are concerned about your child, ensure you reach out to the year level leaders who will then direct the need for support
Prep - 12 College	28/02/2020	Identifies many resources and steps around community support
Prep - 12 College	13/03/2020	Mentions a Parenting After Bushfires Presentation and Q & A. Parent information about the ways you might expect your children and young people to react in the months after the fire and suggestions about how best to support them.
Prep - 12 College	16/4/20	More wellbeing support
Prep - 12 College	12/06/2020	Refers back to the bushfires and the privilege to have experienced staff to support the students. Introduction to new Counsellor's who were hired under the school's Bushfire Recovery Plan. Teacher and a group of students have identified 'alarming lack of water quality' due to the bushfires (dirty water due to ash).
Prep - 12 College	26/06/2020	Notes that Headspace is seeking input from young people in your area as to how we can best support them following the 2019-2020 bushfires.
Prep - 12 College	17/07/2020	Mentions that the Parent's Club has been unable to acquire the executive positions of the club, particularly due to 'the bushfires and the Covid Pandemic'
Prep - 12 College	14/08/2020	Has asked students and parents to 'go a step further' to advocate for mental health awareness. Provided community information about the hospital's brilliant counsellors and psychologists.

Prep - 12 College	28/08/2020	Acknowledging the difficulties faced throughout the year, reminding readers to 'Remember our children, well in matter of fact—all of us, will find it difficult to move beyond the heightened feelings of fear, angst and fatigue with the images of bushfires, flooding for some, loss of our young men, isolation and separation. Provides an action that parents can take with children.
Prep - 12 College	11/09/2020	Support Program'. There is information about a 'Parenting After Bushfires' Community event. Some Headspace fact sheets were also included in this newsletter called 'tips to keep good mental health'
Prep - 12 College	23/10/2020	Included images of the year 5/6 students exploring 'along the bike path where they looked at the way the bush is regenerating after the bushfires'.
Prep - 12 College	20/11/2020	Acknowledgement of the bushfires in a paragraph about new Resilience Coaches coming to the school.
Prep - 12 College	8/12/2020	There was a 'Bushfire Season Emotional Preparedness Session for Primary Parents' sessions, addressing the upcoming bushfire season. Sessions are under 'The Be You Bushfire Recovery Program' as part of Headspace Schools.

Appendix C: School Bushfire Procedures



Mallacoota P-12 College



School Procedures for the Bushfire Season

This plan informs families and the local community of what will happen under different conditions during the bushfire season in order to keep our students and staff safe.

Forecast Fire Danger Rating (FDR) & local bushfire conditions	Action	Communication
CODE RED	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Families enact their bushfire survival plan SCHOOL CLOSED No staff onsite Monitor 3MGB as emergency broadcaster 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Parents contacted directly, up to 3 days prior, confirmed the day before Decision will not change Local CFA notified
EXTREME / SEVERE , with fire in local area (Genoa, Croajingolong National Park, Mallacoota State Forest, Gypsy Point)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Families enact their bushfire survival plan Request approval for closure from Regional Director SCHOOL CLOSED (Upon Confirmation) No staff onsite Monitor 3MGB as emergency broadcaster 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Parents contacted directly as soon as possible. Decision will not change Local CFA notified
EXTREME / SEVERE , with no fires in local area	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Families enact their bushfire survival plan School Remains Open Monitor Vic Emergency website/ ABC radio/ keep in contact with Regional Emergency Management Follow advice of Emergency services Monitor 3MGB as emergency broadcaster 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Parents notified of any changes to situation Parents need to make sure we can contact them easily or let us know who the best contact is for that day.
<i>Note: If considered necessary, approval will be sought for school closure as above</i>		
EXTREME / SEVERE / VERY HIGH / HIGH / Low-Med If fire starts spontaneously during the day and may possibly impact the school.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Monitor Vic Emergency website/ ABC radio/ keep in contact with Regional Emergency Management Contact emergency services Follow advice of Emergency Services Monitor 3MGB as emergency broadcaster If time allows and if safe to do so, evacuate with Emergency services escort Shelter in place in classroom building. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Parents notified of any changes to situation if possible Parents need to make sure we can contact them easily or let us know who the best contact is for that day.
<i>Please note: If parents arrive during this time they will be strongly advised to stay with us.</i>		

Appendix D: Online survey instrument



YACVic Young People and Bushfire Recovery

Let's get started

Young people aged 12 to 25 in Eastern Victoria (Towong, Alpine and East Gippsland Shire), this is your chance to have your say on bushfire recovery in your community! We believe young people are experts in your own lives and that you have important contributions to make in bushfire recovery and rebuilding efforts.

YACVic is working with the Victorian Government to hear directly from young people and community members in rural and regional areas, about the response and recovery from the devastating bushfires across Eastern Victoria, and your experiences and ideas for a better future. We are also running training workshops on youth advocacy and leadership to develop your skills in advocacy, leadership and decision-making.

The aim of this work is to support and build the capacity of local young people to be actively engaged and included in the bushfire recovery and rebuilding work, to ensure your voices are heard as part of this process.

We want all community members and young people to contribute to this work. Our voices, our desires and our opportunities needs to be at the centre of this work.

Please Note. We understand that not all issues related to bushfire recovery and rebuilding are the same, and you may feel that some of the questions in this survey do not relate to you.

Sometimes, talking about these issues can be difficult and it may bring up difficult memories and experiences. You can access telephone support by contacting:

Services Australia Disaster Hotline – 180 22 66

Lifeline's dedicated Bushfire Recovery Crisis Support line 13 HELP (13 43 57)

Beyond Blue – 1300 224 636

Kids Helpline – 1800 55 1800 (telephone counselling for young people aged 5 to 25)

1. How old are you?

2. Where do you live

- ☐ Towong Shire
- ☐ East Gippsland Shire
- ☐ Alpine Shire
- ☐ Other (What's your Local Government Area)

3. What town/city did you live in at the time of the 2019-2020 bushfires?

4. What are your preferred Pronouns?

Pronouns - a pronoun is basically a word used to refer to a person other than their name like they, she and he. See more here: www.minus18.org.au/articles/what-are-pronouns-and-why-are-they-important

- ☐ They/them
- ☐ She/her
- ☐ He/him
- ☐ Something Else?

5. Please tick all that apply to you

- | | | |
|--|--|--|
| <input type="checkbox"/> Aboriginal | <input type="checkbox"/> LGBTIQ+ | <input type="checkbox"/> International Student |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Torres Strait Islander | <input type="checkbox"/> Experienced Homelessness | <input type="checkbox"/> Pasifika |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Culturally or Linguistically Diverse (CALD) | <input type="checkbox"/> Experienced Mental Ill Health | <input type="checkbox"/> Experienced family violence |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Refugee or Migrant Background | <input type="checkbox"/> Experienced and/or living in out-of-home care | <input type="checkbox"/> Low Socio-economic status |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Deaf/Hard of hearing | <input type="checkbox"/> Contact with the justice system | <input type="checkbox"/> Prefer not to say |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Disabled/Have a Disability | <input type="checkbox"/> Experienced Unemployment | |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Other | | |

6. If you are from an organisation what is your organisations name and your role?



Youth Affairs
Council Victoria

Looking Back

7. How were you impacted by the 2019-20 Bushfires?

- ☐ I needed to seek shelter from the fires because I live, work or were visiting the fire-affected areas
- ☐ I experienced damage or destruction of my/our home or property
- ☐ My education, employment or business disrupted because of the fires
- ☐ I experienced damage or destruction in the community where I live or work
- ☐ I was affected by the disruptions caused by the fire to services such as power, water, telecommunications and roads
- ☐ I was threatened by fires in the area where I live, work or were visiting
- ☐ I have experienced/experiencing mental health or emotional impacts because of the fires.
- ☐ I have experienced/experiencing physical health impacts because of the fires
- ☐ I had to evacuate and leave my home or family because of the fires
- ☐ I was not impacted
- ☐ I was directly involved in firefighting efforts
- ☐ My family members and/or close friends were directly involved in firefighting efforts
- ☐ I provided support to friends who were impacted
- ☐ Our Family Business was impacted
- ☐ Our family farm was damaged /impacted
- ☐ Please list any other impacts you have experienced

8. How did this disaster differ from previous disasters in your region? i.e. drought, floods, earlier bushfires etc.

9. Has your household accessed the Bushfire Case Support Program?

- ☐ Yes
- ☐ No
- ☐ What's that?

10. If yes to Q9, What supports and services has your household family had access to?

- | | |
|---|---|
| <input type="checkbox"/> Discussing your needs and the next steps you could take | <input type="checkbox"/> Completing paperwork |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Information and support to access recovery and mental health service | <input type="checkbox"/> Advice for business owners |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Financial counselling and assistance with insurance | <input type="checkbox"/> A small amount of financial support to help with immediate needs |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Temporary accommodation | |

Please comment if you have had any issues accessing the services you need?

11. During the bushfires did you feel as though your identity was respected?
i.e. Culture, Gender, Dis/ability and Access, Religion, Race, Aboriginality, LGBTIQ+ etc

12. Did you experience any physical/mental health impacts from the fires?

- | | |
|---|--|
| <input type="checkbox"/> Breathing difficulties | <input type="checkbox"/> Anxiety |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Sore eyes | <input type="checkbox"/> Depression |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Asthma | <input type="checkbox"/> Eating disorders |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Cuts/bruises | <input type="checkbox"/> Self-harming |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Burns | <input type="checkbox"/> Suicidal thoughts |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Sleeplessness | |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Other (please specify) | |

13. When the recent bushfire first happened what was MOST helpful for you, your family, friends, and other people in your community? e.g. Financial support, community gatherings, counselling

14. What are the things that you wish would have been around at the time of the disaster that would have been helpful to you, your family, friends, and other people in the community? e.g. more information, better internet, a safe place to go.

Appendix E: Interview focus

Lines of recovery and examples from IGEM feedback on Report 1

#	Line of Recovery	Explanation/ Examples
1	People and wellbeing	Psychosocial support, community gatherings, family support initiatives, temporary accommodation
2	Aboriginal culture and healing	Recovery initiatives and approaches that aim to ensure Aboriginal people are included and considered in recovery plans and activities
3	Buildings and infrastructure	Rebuilding of homes and community infrastructure, resilience of road and tracks, fencing
4	Biodiversity and environment	Wildlife welfare, environmental resilience, rehoming of species, using the natural environment to support recovery, returning the nature-based social activities
5	Business and economy	Schools and vocational training, employment opportunities for themselves and their families, financial stress within families, 'return to normal' for businesses in townships and regional centres.