

Reflections and Lessons Learned by the Community Recovery Committees (CRCs) of the 2019-20 East Gippsland Bushfires

A report informed by engagement with members of all ten East Gippsland CRCs



Prepared for:



Prepared by:



Funded by:



SIERRACON

ABN 53 090 614 310

142 Main Street, Rutherglen 3685
4/75 High Street, Woodend 3442
Victoria, Australia

www.hscon.com.au

November 2024
Project No. SC352303

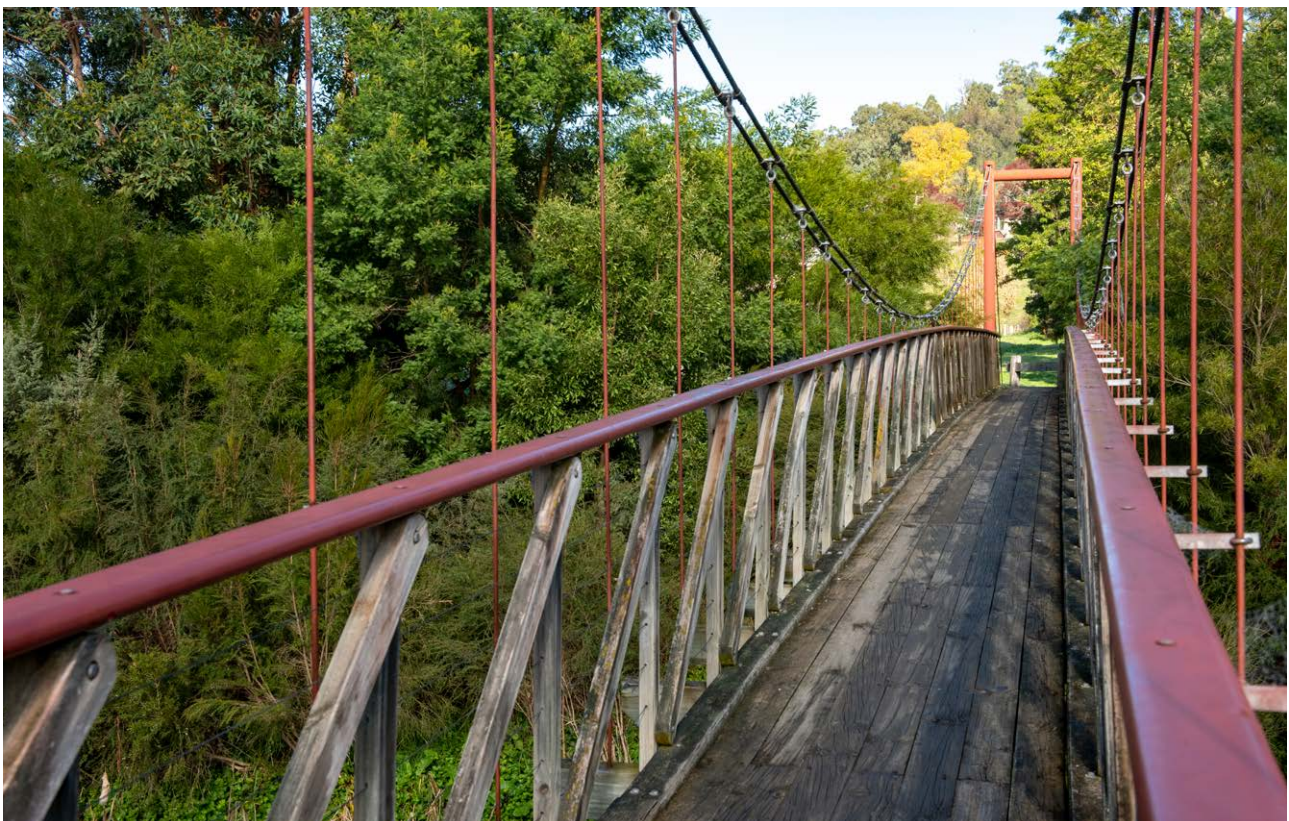


Executive Summary

This report explores the reflections and lessons learned by the Community Recovery Committees (CRCs) of the 2019-20 East Gippsland bushfires. It has been prepared following extensive consultation with 59 current and former committee members from all ten East Gippsland CRCs through individual interviews and groups discussions. A desktop review, including the 2009 Black Saturday CRC lessons learned report and each CRC's key documents, was also undertaken.

The overwhelming feedback about the best things to have come out of the CRC process is the shared experiences which led to community connectedness and development. The CRC process, despite responding to devastating events, was seen to provide an opportunity for communities to come together, to develop and to do something positive. There were also feelings of personal contribution and achievement from individual CRC members. This included experiences associated with the benefits from implementing practical community recovery projects.

A key challenge identified by CRC members was the time and energy required from individuals to be on the CRC, given other personal and family commitments and their own recovery needs. There can also be a challenge in getting a diverse group of individuals to work together, as is the case in many other contexts. CRCs can get bogged down on specific issues and there can be division on some items. For the larger CRC districts/regions, there can also be geographic challenges in representing a broad area of diverse communities with different needs. CRC members reported practical challenges in delivering projects within each recovery plan including cost rises and the availability of tradespeople. COVID-19 also acted as a huge disrupter to holding face-to-face CRC meetings, undertaking community engagement, progressing projects and undertaking a range of practical activities. CRC members consistently referred to the frustration, exhaustion and difficulty in working with various government agencies along with the burden of grant writing.



Key Reflections and Lessons Learned

The key reflections and lessons learned from this report are listed below under each of the six report themes, with further detail provided in the main report.



Theme 1: General Approach to Bushfire Recovery

1. Community-led recovery requires a genuine partnership between CRCs and government agencies, with associated support for CRCs. This includes government recognition of the important status of CRCs and that they are volunteers making a valuable contribution, doing their best with the resources available to them. “Community-centred recovery” may be a more appropriate term and model given that some key decisions will always need to be made by all levels of government.
2. The CRC model has strong merit, and there is a strong business case and role for government agencies to continue providing funding and staff support for CRCs to assist with their operation. If CRCs become overloaded, stressed, and burnt out, this threatens the viability of a community-led approach and leads to initiatives falling back on government to deliver. Government activities, without CRC involvement, are less likely to succeed in keeping local voices, know-how and expertise front and centre during recovery planning and delivery.



Theme 2: CRC Formation, Governance and Operation

3. CRCs work best when they provide a conduit for community projects and services, focusing on shared issues that affect a group of individuals, rather than becoming directly involved in individual personal circumstances and support.
4. CRCs, in some form, should be established as early as possible after a disaster, and where possible to some extent before a disaster. This includes having a clear, concise and defined CRC purpose, key CRC documents and a workplan in place as early as is practical. Depending on the situation, this may require the initial creation of an informal committee to get activities started, with a more formal committee established later with broad representation, member selection and inductions.
5. The level of representation should be appropriate across each community and make the most of available resources. Different approaches may be suitable for different geographic areas and this flexibility should be acceptable to government agencies.
6. Having an appropriate and varied skillset on the Committee is a vital factor in Committee member selection.
7. It is important that independent facilitators and mentors are made available to CRCs from the outset, and that CRCs are encouraged to use them. They should also be supported by other specialist consultant inputs from a range of disciplines.
8. CRCs should be operated as an open, welcoming, non-daunting and non-competitive space. This helps encourage those people who want to, and are able to, to step up to a committee role. CRCs should be run in a trauma-informed way, recognising that people’s memory and decision making may not be at full capacity post-disaster. Considerations include constantly summarising and repeating information, and allowing time for CRC members to consider information as much as is feasible. This is challenging because there can be an urge for fast-paced progress given the impact on the individuals and community involved. Preparation in advance, before a disaster event actually happens, is also important in this regard.



Theme 3: Relationships and Communication

9. Successful community engagement for bushfire recovery relies on drawing on a wide range of communication channels, avenues and activities.
10. Facilitating and enabling community gatherings is invaluable for community recovery. Some community members will not be interested in attending larger community gatherings and it is important to cater for this segment through other activities.
11. Supporting regular communication between CRCs affected by the same disaster is valuable and should be run as a non-competitive forum, with a face-to-face format focused on CRCs freely talking to each other.
12. Engagement with government agencies was a key challenge consistently noted by CRCs. Having a consistent point of contact at each level of government, including a local council Place Manager, is a key consideration. There is also an opportunity for continuous improvement regarding the efficiency of government bureaucracy and in preventing overlapping or competing demands from different agencies. Key advice is for CRCs to keep accurate records of interactions with government agency staff, documenting agreed actions and due dates to facilitate follow up discussions and track progress.





Theme 4: Recovery Planning

13. A consistent and accessible framework for mapping and defining impacts that can fully capture both flame-impacted¹ and flame-affected aspects is important.
14. Community engagement to identify recovery priorities and develop recovery plans is a key task. This requires a logical and suitably rigorous process but also needs to reflect that communities need some time to consider the information and options. This is an area that CRCs will often benefit from external support.
15. Different districts and communities will be at different starting points and levels for the process of identifying community priorities post-disaster.

It is important to identify key short-term priorities for quick implementation and then progress to identifying longer term priorities over time, such as the top three priorities for the first six months.



Theme 5: Wellbeing of CRC Members

16. CRC member burnout is a key practical challenge consistently experienced across all CRCs. Activities to help address burnout are: for CRCs to stay focused on their core business, having defined CRC roles, using CRC subcommittees, promoting the ability of CRCs members to “tap in” and “tap out”, using part-time community volunteer inputs, peer checks, adequate administrative support and reducing bureaucratic requirements.



Theme 6: Funding and Support

17. The provision of funded administration support to CRCs was overwhelmingly seen as a key success factor and something that has very strong merit.
18. It is important that independent facilitators and mentors are made available, and that CRCs are encouraged to use them.
19. Templates, tools, resources and training should be in place for CRCs to draw upon from early in their formation.
20. An initial tranche of funding, even a substantial petty cash fund, should be provided to each CRC, with these funds to be self-managed but with appropriate acquittal rules and basic governance in place, to support CRC administration and operation.
21. Competitive grants are not a successful model because they create a burden for CRCs and the broader community. A better alternative to competitive grants needs to be developed for bushfire recovery. This should be based on a disaster recovery needs mapping tool, such as district-by-district needs or impact assessment, to indicate funding needs and provide certainty in funding allocation. Specific funds should then be allocated over time, based on identified community recovery priorities.

1. Flame-impacted areas are where the bushfires caused direct impacts including loss of houses and assets (e.g. Mallacoota and Sarsfield). Flame-affected areas are where the bushfire fronts threatened, but did not actually reach, the location but still caused a range of other impacts including isolation, trauma and economic disruption and losses (e.g. towns such as Swifts Creek, Omeo and Orbost).





ABN 53 090 614 310

142 Main Street, Rutherglen 3685

4/75 High Street, Woodend 3442

Victoria, Australia

www.hscon.com.au