

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



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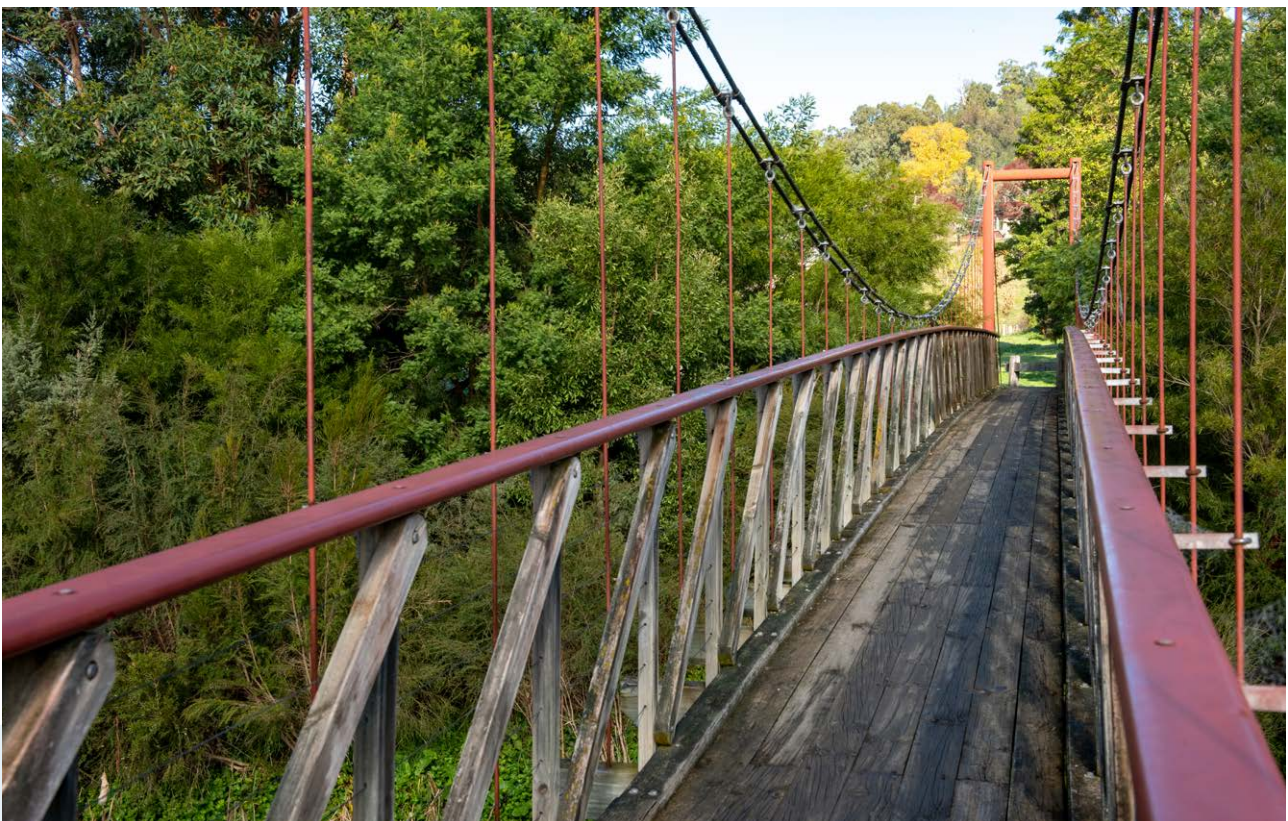
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Executive Summary

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).



0. Introduction



0.1. Purpose and Methodology

This report explores the reflections and lessons learned by the Community Recovery Committees (CRCs) of the 2019-20 East Gippsland bushfires. These bushfires had a devastating effect on Victorian communities, burning over many months and at the same time as other bushfires along the eastern seaboard and in other parts of Australia. Four people's lives were lost, thousands were displaced, and many communities were temporarily isolated (Victorian Government 2024).

This report has been prepared by Sierracon who was engaged by East Gippsland Shire Council (EGSC) to deliver this project for CRCs of the Black Summer Bushfires in East Gippsland. It is jointly funded by the Victorian Government, through Emergency Recovery Victoria's Recovery and Resilience Grant program, and the Commonwealth Government under the Commonwealth-State Disaster Recovery Funding Arrangements in response to the 2019-20 Eastern Victorian Bushfires.

An associated video has also been produced, which includes some key aspects of this report – as told by CRC members themselves and is available from the East Gippsland Shire Council website: <https://www.eastgippsland.vic.gov.au>. Primal Vision Productions completed the videography for this project, with StoryUp providing storytelling advice and editing inputs, including for this report.

This report and the video have been prepared following extensive consultation with 59 current and former committee members from all ten East Gippsland CRCs. This engagement was through a combination of 25 face-to-face interviews, six online interviews, and eight face-to-face group discussions. This engagement was facilitated by John Hamilton from Sierracon and undertaken in an open and honest manner where participants spoke freely about their experiences. Notes and recordings from these engagements have been assessed in detail and some aspect from every single engagement has been incorporated into this report. This work was also informed by a desktop review, including the 2009 Black Saturday CRC lessons learned report and each CRC's key documents.

This project was undertaken:

- As an opportunity for each CRC to stop and reflect on its hard work
- To provide a form of debriefing for each CRC
- To capture the learnings and reflections unique to each CRC, including:
 - What worked well and what opportunities are there for improvement?
 - What is the future of the community and individual CRC members?
- To provide a resource to help communities respond to future disaster events.



There were a wide range of views expressed and information provided through this engagement, influenced by the substantial differences between communities in the bushfire impacts experienced and in their specific experiences in the bushfire recovery process. CRC member feedback has been analysed and distilled to highlight the key cross-cutting issues, reflections and lessons learned, as raised by CRCs, and to focus on some elements specific to particular CRCs.

This report has been prepared to best combine and reflect a comprehensive range of feedback. However, not all information presented here has been universally agreed by all CRC members consulted. The key points on reflections and lessons learned are provided in the Executive Summary.

In this report reference is made to another report coordinated by East Gippsland Shire Council, with Commonwealth-State funding: Community Recovery Toolbox - A Guide for Community Recovery Committees (EGSC 2024b). The Toolbox provides useful information to support communities across East Gippsland to establish and build recovery processes before and after an emergency. The Toolbox is based on nine key themes: wellbeing; governance; resources; planning; relationships; communication; engagement; training and role clarity. The Toolbox provides further detail and practical guidance on some of the issues raised in this report along with a range of other useful information. The toolbox is available from the East Gippsland Shire Council website:

<https://www.eastgippsland.vic.gov.au>.

0.2. Acknowledgements

The inputs to this work from CRC members, following their already extensive and valuable efforts on their CRC, is acknowledged and appreciated, as is the valuable support provided by Council staff to communicate and organise the engagement with each CRC.

0.3. Context and Background about the Establishment of CRCs

Community Recovery Committees (CRCs) are the local representative groups established after the 2019-20 Eastern Victorian bushfires to work to keep local voices, know-how and expertise front and centre during recovery planning and delivery (EGSC 2024). A place-based, community-led/centred approach seeks to ensure that projects, grants and support programs developed are the right fit for community.

What a CRC is called and how it is established differs from district to district. Each CRC had a different journey which is a characteristic of community-centred recovery. These CRCs aimed to represent their communities at both a district and locality level. Each developed differently, some from existing groups and others established as entirely new committees.

In East Gippsland the following ten CRCs were formed after the bushfires:

- **Bruthen CRC**
- **Buchan and Gelantipy Districts CRC**
- **Cann Valley District CRC**
- **Clifton Creek CRC**
- **Errinundra to Snowy District CRC**
- **Mallacoota District CRC**
- **Omeo Region CRC**
- **Orbost District CRC**
- **Sarsfield CRC**
- **Wairewa CRC.**

0.4. Feedback on Key CRC Experiences

Feedback on key experiences is provided below, followed by key reflections and lessons learned under six key themes.

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. In places such as Sarsfield and Mallacoota, this involved the formation of new incorporated associations, where a united organisation had not been in place before the bushfires. There were also feelings of personal contribution and achievement from individual CRC members from doing something for their community. This related to the implementation of a series of 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 of 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 some division on some items. This is best addressed by “parking” issues to be addressed later and possibly working with an independent facilitator to help resolve them. For the larger CRC districts/regions, there can also be geographic challenges in representing a broad area of diverse communities with different needs. Communicating the benefits and achievement of CRC activities to the community can also be difficult. 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 quotes from CRC members on their experiences.

“I got to understand my community and had the chance to be part of a group working together”

“(the CRC was an) extraordinary testament of common sense of small country towns”

“the best thing is now having a community hall that is disaster ready”

“the best thing has been the friendships created and helping each other out”

“it has given the community a voice and created connections”

“it has brought members of the community together with a concerted attempt at making a positive impact for the community”

“it has been an opportunity to review all the community planning”

“it created a representative group that could be relied upon, with well-considered opinions and a reliable source of guidance”





Example: the Sarsfield CRC Experience

Sarsfield CRC members unanimously reported that the best thing to come out of the CRC process has been the “creation of a community”. Before the bushfires, CRC members reported that the area “wasn’t really a community” with individuals/families more connected to the much larger nearby Bairnsdale than Sarsfield. The activities associated with the CRC and bushfire recovery have really changed this, and in doing so, created a major positive from an incredibly negative natural disaster event. This has included regular, very well attended all-ages community get-togethers called “Friday Night Feeds”.

Some key Sarsfield CRC member quotes are:

“One of the best things about the fires is that we all know each other now”

“Now I understand why the RSL (Returned and Services League) is so important to ex-service people’s lives.....when I go to a community event everyone has the same expression on their face and you don’t have to explain yourself”.



0.5. Comparison with the 2009 CRC Lessons Learned Report

The 2009 Victorian bushfire CRC Lessons Learned Report was reviewed as part of preparing this report. The lessons learned provided in that report are summarised in Appendix 2, partly to highlight the importance of referring back to previous experience for continuous improvement. There are many key areas of consistency between this report and the earlier report.

The key points of consistency include, but are not limited to:

- Communication is one of the most important aspects of recovery efforts. This relies on the use of a wide range of communication methods
- The early establishment of CRCs is important
- There is a need for a diverse skillset on a CRC
- Establish a clear initial purpose and goals and operate structured CRC meetings
- Use subcommittees and get other volunteers involved as much as possible to spread the load and avoid CRC member burnout
- There is great value in organising events that bring people together
- CRCs should focus on shorter-term needs first then move onto identifying longer-term recovery needs, informed by community input
- It is important to build relationships and networks with a range of partners, donors and support agencies.

These points of consistency highlight the similarity of experiences by CRCs in the two events and the ongoing importance of these lessons learned. It also highlights that in some cases the lessons from the 2009 event were not able to be fully retained and completely implemented. There are many reasons for this including the different staff in recovery agencies and the different geographic areas that were affected. The involvement of mentors for some CRCs who had experience from the 2009 Black Saturday event contributed to those CRCs drawing on some of the previous lessons learned.

Based on CRC member feedback, the key lessons from 2009 that could have been better implemented relate to tools and resources to support the establishment of CRCs and communication with government agencies. The creation of Council-employed Place Manager roles was a positive initiative to support CRC-government engagement and communication and provides a good model for future events. The creation of the Community Recovery Toolbox will also support future CRC formation and operation and assist with future implementation of lessons learned in bushfire recovery.





Theme 1:

General Approach to Bushfire Recovery



CRC members provided general support for the concept of “community-led recovery” but noted that what this actually entails is still being determined in practice. There was strong feedback that community-led recovery requires a genuine partnership between CRCs and government, with associated support for CRCs. CRCs are staffed by volunteers and thus have some limitations in their capacity and available resources. Community-led recovery requires agencies at all levels of government to recognise the important status of CRCs, that they are volunteers making a valuable contribution and doing their best with the resources available to them. Agencies should engage constructively with CRCs on this basis to get the most out of the CRC process.

Some flexibility may be needed to make the most of CRC inputs, including flexibility for engagement outside business hours and recognising that some CRC members have not had much previous exposure to government processes. In some cases, CRCs felt that there was a lack of clarity in CRC and government responsibilities, leading to some CRC members undertaking activities that would be considered agency responsibilities, with members getting more involved because they wanted to get results.

One example mentioned was extra work to coordinate communication between government agencies for a grant application, which could have been seen as an agency responsibility. There have been suggestions that “community-centred recovery” may be a more appropriate term and model, particularly when in reality some key decisions, particularly about funding, will always need to be made by all levels of government.

As noted in the MADRA (Mallacoota) Community-Led Recovery Plan (p39): “Community-led recovery is not a ‘magic bullet’. We do not control the purse strings, nor do we have the authority to approve projects or policy changes. We are not a fourth arm of government”.

Success in bushfire recovery appears to come through a combination of local initiative, State/Commonwealth government support and local government staff on the ground. There is a strong business case for future government 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. A clear theme highlighted throughout this project is that every community is different, and community-led recovery helps tailor activities to specific communities.

CRCs work best when they provide a conduit for community priorities, projects and services. A community voice, rather than being involved in individual personal circumstances and support (that is the role of case managers). CRCs can, however, provide inputs into important activities that impact individual people and families- such as common issues with planning approvals, Bushfire Attack Level (BAL) assessments or insurance - working with the Rebuild Support Service (i.e. a series of household-specific issues that a lot of individuals/families are simultaneously facing).

Theme 1: Key quotes from CRC members.

“You can’t rely on the community to totally 100% jump up and take over”

“Community energy is better than government (initiated action)”

“Council can come in and do it but it’s not the same if not community driven”

“(for community-led recovery) government agencies need to work around the table with CRCs and not sit across the table”

“It is important to understand that recovery takes a lot longer than people would think”

“Community-led recovery is hard when the community is still recovering





Theme 2:

CRC Formation, Governance and Operation



2.1. Timely Formation

CRCs, in some form, should be established as early as possible after a disaster, and where possible to some extent before a disaster. This is addressed in the Community Recovery Toolbox (EGSC 2024b). Depending on the situation, this may require the initial creation of an informal committee immediately post-disaster. This committee would get activities started, such as progressing impact assessments, reaching out to affected people, responding to immediate community needs, and developing initial priorities.

In some cases, a delay in CRC setup was reported to have caused some loss in community interest which was hard to regain.

A more formal committee can be established later to build on the initial committee, as soon as is practical, with broad representation and governance arrangements put in place.

2.2. CRC Representation Models, Member Selection and Induction

While it is beneficial that CRCs are representative of the whole community as much as possible, including diverse groups, it can take time to achieve representation given the varied and widespread impacts of bushfires on community members. The level of representation should be as extensive/broad as feasible, making the most of available resources. Different approaches may be suitable for different geographic areas, depending on the distribution and extent of bushfire impacts and availability of volunteers. Given this variability and the inherent challenges of a post-disaster situation, flexibility in models for representation should be acceptable to government agencies. Having an appropriate and varied skillset on the Committee is a vital factor in Committee member selection. The Community Recovery Toolbox provides guidance on required skills (EGSC 2024b).

Depending on the situation, CRC members can be elected by the community. This is possibly more suitable for larger flame-impacted communities and where there are plenty of available candidates. This approach was successfully undertaken in Mallacoota – a very heavily flame-impacted zone in a well-defined geographic area. In other situations, committees can be formed based on the availability of suitable candidates, considering a diversity of skills and backgrounds. The chair is elected by CRC members. Where the number of applicants is greater than the suitable committee size, some selection process is required using defined selection criteria, and an interview process, rather than just proceeding with a larger committee. This should be done as a concise process to reduce the burden on CRCs. Committee size can be flexible but around 6 to 12 members is typically used as a guide (Oliver et al 2018). As noted earlier, a Community Recovery Toolbox has been developed to help communities work through the creation of a CRC including examples on roles and governance structures (EGSC 2024b).

It can be daunting coming onto a new committee. Support with CRC member orientations and inductions is important. This includes maintaining an updated induction document, with a summary of the roles and responsibilities of different people and organisations, along with providing a welcoming committee environment.

There are some challenges in the availability of people to join committees. Initial committee members can become unavailable due to their own recovery requirements and health considerations. In other cases, members needed to move away from the area temporarily or permanently, while others did not feel confident being on the committee.

A key way to address these challenges is to have part-time contributions from non-committee members, with CRCs promoting community awareness about this type of volunteer role. This approach helps share the workload and provides an opportunity for informal input from those community leaders who may be unavailable for substantial contributions due to their own recovery needs and workload.



2.3. Requirement for CRC Incorporation

When forming a new organisation, the decision to incorporate it will depend on the tasks and scope agreed by the group. The key factor is whether the organisation will need to apply for and acquit funds and implement projects. There may be an existing capable auspice organisation and other local organisation(s) to implement activities (e.g. grant-funding) and the preferences of CRC members should be considered. Incorporation is required for seeking funding and protecting members from liability, but it involves increased accountability and administration.

If the extra work for achieving and maintaining incorporation is too much of a barrier, an alternative is to remain unincorporated but enter into an auspice arrangement to support, for example, funding applications and insurance - if there is another suitable organisation available. The local auspice organisation must have the appropriate capability and capacity, so that the practicalities of handling funds do not become too much of a burden. For example, the Clifton Creek Recovery Team (CRC), which did not incorporate, had five other local incorporated groups who were represented on the Recovery Team and agreed to auspice grants as appropriate or required.

The organisational structure required for a CRC will vary between situations. Where there is a well-defined smaller community with an existing organisation, the CRC can be formed based around an existing organisation. This is the case for Wairewa, whose CRC evolved from the local Hall Committee. In situations such as Mallacoota, where there were large scale impacts in a community with various existing community organisations, it was beneficial to form a new representative organisation.



2.4. CRC Processes and Systems

It is important to have a clear and concise definition of the CRC's purpose, key CRC documents and a workplan in place as early as is practical. There should be a focus on developing key content of these items, without spending excessive time on determining specific details - which can be updated later as required.

Each CRC should have a minimum level of process and rules, including minutes of decisions made, financial acquittals and accountability - even though this can divert some initial energy away from practically responding to community needs. Committee decisions should always be made during meetings and recorded in the minutes. If offline discussions are held between meetings, then other CRC members need to be kept informed, and the details appropriately recorded in the next meeting's minutes.

Other crucial administrative requirements are maintaining a file structure in a cloud application (such as OneDrive or Google Drive) and to leave handover notes from outgoing to incoming committee members, with some overlap time for handover. Having deputies for each role (e.g. Treasurer and Deputy Treasurer) is another way to spread the corporate knowledge and help with succession planning.

2.5. CRC Operation

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 into a committee role. It is desirable to attract people with a diversity of skills and perspectives and to then make the most of their involvement. Individual CRC members should not have to push to be heard at meetings.

Committees are of course made up of different types of people. As a broad (perhaps over) generalisation in one aspect, committees are made up of “planners” - those who like to plan, and “doers” - those who like to get on with practical and tangible activities, with a spectrum of people in between. At times the “doers” can become frustrated with the “planners” because they just want to get on and do things, while the “planners” can become frustrated with the “doers” because they are not comfortable with activities proceeding unless they understand the overall plan for delivery. Both categories of people are valuable, and CRCs need to be operated to cater for and include both. This can be done through coordination, processes for chairing and managing effective meetings, assigning specific roles to members, and using subcommittees for specific activities. This enables different CRC members to contribute in different ways in-line with their strengths and preferences.

CRCs should be run and supported in a trauma-informed way², 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 happens is also important in this regard. It is best to keep the tone of the meetings calm and measured, and to summarise key information and key stakeholders to help with CRC member awareness and understanding. Some CRC meetings should only involve committee members, as government agency staff attending in person or virtually can be distracting and may not be suitable for all meetings. It is more productive, and less exhausting, to have fewer more structured meetings than more frequent less structured meetings. As noted in various places in this report, subcommittees are a valuable method of enhancing CRC productivity. They can help share workload and make the most of CRC member skills and time through focused activities.

One specific practical area where CRCs require initial support from government agencies is in managing the coordination of donations of physical goods and volunteer labour. This was a key initial task that took up a lot of CRC time and occupied valuable community hall space.



2. Trauma-informed care seeks to: realize the widespread impact of trauma and understand paths for recovery; recognize the signs and symptoms of trauma in patients, families, and staff; integrate knowledge about trauma into policies, procedures, and practices; and actively avoid re-traumatization (Centre for Health Care Strategies 2024).

2.6. CRC Transition Post-Recovery

There was CRC member feedback that CRCs should focus entirely on bushfire recovery during the recovery period and not to be combined part way through recovery to take on other emerging issues such as broader local economic development or transition (e.g. forestry or agricultural industry transition). CRCs' advice was for CRCs to first finish the job of bushfire recovery before taking on other tasks.

At the time of writing, CRCs are at different stages of transition. Some are already in the process of substantially winding down. In some cases, they are transitioning back to their original community entity(s). In some districts, the incorporated organisations formed for recovery still have substantial recovery work to do and may continue on.

This is to complete their identified priorities and help build resilience in their community to withstand future disaster events. In coming years this could transition to less intensive activities, focused more on coordination and undertaking community preparedness and planning between fires and disasters. In the case of the large East Gippsland area, these organisations may continue to provide local representation by maintaining the relationships built with government during recovery and act as a conduit to government for community planning and service delivery.



Theme 2:

Key quotes from CRC members.

"(At the start) everything is terrible, what you need is already there - in your local people. It would have been great to have been aware of that earlier".

"(early on it was about creating) bright light out of the doom"

"Don't try and reinvent the wheel. In 3 easy steps: incorporate (or form) quickly, get the community involved, and align with stakeholders"

"Get an idea on what you want to achieve and stay focused. Get as much information up front and get someone in to talk to"

"Everyone has got skills. Have a leader, you need a leader"

"Suspend your ego (when you are on a CRC), it is not a competition"

"It is so crucial to have the right people in the right roles, with a transparent process"

"I stepped away when it got too formal and political"

"The delay in (CRC) setup meant that we lost some community interest"

"Get the architecture right above CRCs"

"Defining a focused direction (i.e. overworking of detail) bled energy out of the group"

"CRCs need to stick to their terms of reference. The term 'this isn't CRC business' was used when issues came up that were out of scope"

"(CRCs needs to be) a nurturing recovery space with an understanding of the whole picture"

"if the letter to government came from the CRC we actually got action - because it is (essentially) coming from the whole town"

"You don't just jump on the committee and make decisions. And, you know, step one, step two, step three, they're all done. Let's, finish. Now we can move on. We are still working on many of the issues we came up with (initially)...."

"People get really frustrated that the bureaucracy of it is the blocker".





Theme 3: Relationships and Communication



3.1. Community Engagement

Community engagement is a very important area of work for CRCs and is an area where some CRCs require support. The CRCs' general experience is that it is very worthwhile to make contact with as many community members as possible immediately after the bushfire, along with ongoing contact. This was a point raised particularly by CRCs from the significantly "flame-impacted" communities.

This requires proactive effort, ensuring reasonable attempts to reach people, including those who do not initially want to talk to anyone. For example, at Sarsfield, a few (eventual) CRC members went from property to property handing out bottles of water and talking to each household. Many people were looking for some connections in the early phase of recovery. In heavily impacted areas, it is particularly beneficial to create a space where local people can gather. This space just needs to be basic and functional - the main consideration is that it be available as early as possible.

Successful community engagement for bushfire recovery generally relies on drawing on a wide range of communication channels, avenues and activities (everything from community meals, newsletters, social media, sporting clubs, community groups, handing out flyers, posting notices in a variety of places, SMS/text messages and SMS trees, and in some cases knocking on doors for hard-to-reach people). Consistent messaging, clear and straightforward communication and repeating information is also important as it reinforces communication.

Facilitating and enabling community get-togethers proved to be invaluable across East Gippsland. As one CRC member mentioned, this can be a challenge but “good food helps!”. The community meals and get-together concept were also described by another CRC member as an “open arms type of strategy for engagement” which appeals to all age groups. This is because it supported people to share their experiences and how they were coping with recovery. CRC feedback reflected that this was particularly the case for the more heavily impacted areas, but it also applies generally.

In communications, it is vital to acknowledge that CRC and community members have all been affected in some way and that everyone is in the recovery together, regardless of actual or perceived differences in impacts. Differences in impacts and experiences can include whether people lost their house, livestock or assets, psychological impacts, personal circumstances, and whether they evacuated the district, or their homes, or stayed to defend their properties.

Importantly, some community members will not be interested in larger community gatherings. Various reasons can be barriers, including the stage of their own recovery, being more introverted by nature, cultural differences, or previous connection to the community. It is vital to cater for different segments and to not reduce people’s status by their non-attendance at larger events. Small gatherings such as workshops on relevant topics, and one-on-one engagement are better suited to this segment. One CRC suggested that another possible option could be a rotating working bee (rotating between different properties so property owners help each other) to practically engage with hard-to-reach community members.





Community engagement for the development of recovery priorities and recovery plans is another key task discussed under Theme 4.

Targeted community engagement is vital, but CRC members often mentioned that people will be more inclined to come along to a Landcare, sporting or other community event than an event which is labelled as a specific “bushfire recovery event”.

Importantly, communities become fatigued with engagement over time. This needs to be considered when planning engagement activities, making the most of each engagement opportunity and providing feedback to communities on how their input was used.

Community surveys on recovery priorities proved to be very valuable in several districts, with very high response rates. These surveys were undertaken as coordinated and focused activities, offering both hard copy and online options. The surveys provided valuable information for preparing recovery plans.

Many CRCs found it difficult to achieve strong awareness in their own community, even for smaller communities. Making external and independent assistance (e.g. consultants) available to support CRCs to undertake community consultation and analysing community feedback is valuable.

Another group of stakeholders is the group of people who have left the area, due to the loss of their homes or personal trauma and have chosen not to engage. This can make them hard to reach. A lesson learned from the East Gippsland experience is to find ways to better communicate with them, which could include online and offsite events, some tailored information and possibly some informal support groups.

Engaging with young people is essential and requires special consideration with non-standard and flexible approaches. The experience of East Gippsland CRCs has been that young people are typically less likely to be involved in traditional committees alongside adults. Rather other tailored initiatives and activities are needed to engage with young people. Examples include the “Sarsfield Snaps” photography project and involving children and youth in the design of a play space, the Mallacoota Sanctuary youth program and activities such as school holiday fun days and other initiatives to consult young people more informally. The Sarsfield Snaps Project involved a non-standard children-led approach in the area of photography. This included the publication of a photo book, winning an award and connecting with overseas bushfire-affected school students. It achieved high participation in a non-competitive manner and provided an excellent way to document and report on bushfires through the perspective of junior members of the Sarsfield community.

3.2. Engagement with Indigenous Communities

Engagement with Indigenous stakeholders is essential for a range of recovery initiatives and is an area where Council and State Government agencies can provide some support and coordination for CRCs, given the lack of existing relationships in some cases. Several CRCs expressed that this area was important to them but felt they could have accomplished more. There may be potential to have a more formal structure to engage with CRCs, such as a specific Indigenous CRC or reference group. This could also be developed for other community groups with specific needs, on a case-by-case basis.

3.3. Communication between CRCs

In situations where there are multiple CRCs, such as the 2019-20 Black Summer and 2009 Black Saturday bushfires, it is important to have a CRC forum with an independent chair. This forum allows CRCs to communicate with each other, providing a sounding board for ideas, an opportunity to learn from each other, a chance to share consistent information, to support each other and to share their successes and solutions. This should be run as a non-competitive space. For East Gippsland (the CRC Link Up forum), face-to-face events were found to be most beneficial. The focus should be on CRCs freely talking to each other. The involvement of agencies should be limited to sharing key information and responding to CRC questions. In addition to facilitating the CRC forum, there may also be a further role for engaging a professional advocate to work for and across all CRCs, enhancing the CRCs' communication with government.



3.4. Engagement with Government Agencies

As noted earlier, engagement with Government agencies was a key challenge consistently noted by CRCs, perhaps the greatest challenge. It is important to recognise that this CRC feedback was in the context of there having been many great agency staff working hard to support CRCs throughout recovery and that communities are grateful for the significant government investment. Nevertheless, it is productive to review opportunities for improvement.

Having a consistent point of contact in government agencies is a key consideration, particularly when some CRC members may have limited previous experience in government processes. East Gippsland Shire Council's Place Managers provided a consistent point of contact at Council. There was consistent positive feedback about this approach. CRCs advised that key skills/ characteristics required for staff in Place Manager roles are: ability to provide guidance; to facilitate discussion; keep activities within scope; communication skills – to achieve two-way communication between Council and CRCs; knowledge of community and government process and the ability to navigate government processes.

CRCs suggested that a concierge/point of contact would also be beneficial at State government level. CRCs members often complained of being told by agency staff that “we will get back to you”. Having a concierge/ point of contact to engage with the CRC to follow up on actions/commitments could help with this. However, CRCs should still be able to engage directly with government decision makers.

Staff turnover in government agencies is a key limitation and a very consistent complaint from all ten CRCs, the extent of which varies between agencies. Staff turnover impacts on continuity in activities and drains the energy of CRCs in explaining everything again to a new staff member. Staff consistency and continuity is particularly important in the first few years of recovery.

CRC members frequently noted that the first year of recovery is when people were still in shock and really needed that consistent point of contact.

Some CRCs indicated that someone is needed in a role such as a Place Manager for an absolute minimum of 6-12 months to be productive, but ideally much longer.

There will be practical challenges to address government staff turnover, but options include having detailed handover between staff members and incoming and outgoing staff meeting with CRCs before handover occurs. It may also be possible for Government agencies to offer longer term contracts and incentives for longer placements. CRC members also mentioned scope for much better coordination between government agencies and for staff with decision-making responsibilities to directly engage with CRCs to a greater extent.

Key advice is for CRCs to keep accurate records of interactions with government agency staff, including agreed actions and due dates to assist with follow up discussions and progress. It is also crucial for CRCs to support government agencies in community engagement and to manage potential negative community comments, with CRCs acknowledging agency support to help progress this work. Based on CRC feedback for this report, it is also productive for CRCs wherever possible to present solutions and alternatives (based on community input) to government agencies rather than problems.

Some CRCs worked closely with government agencies and others worked very independently. Some CRCs became frustrated with the challenges of working with government, ultimately leading them to keep government at arm's length. This may have enabled them to develop their own priority projects and activities independently of government programs but likely resulted in CRCs missing out on achieving influence and accessing information, funding and support.



This includes awareness around the full suite of funding programs available and having sufficient time to plan projects to be successfully funded. This experience highlights the importance of strong working relationships between CRCs and government agencies.

From the government agencies side, there is an opportunity for continuous improvement regarding the efficiency of government bureaucracy and avoiding overlap/competing demands from different agencies. There is also an opportunity for government agencies to better consider and respect local knowledge, and to continuously improve their processes for genuine engagement.

Overall, improvements in government processes for interacting with CRCs have the potential to substantially reduce the demands and stress on CRC members. This was a consistent point of feedback across all CRCs.

3.5. Technology to Support Better Coordination

Continuous improvement of databases and related applications has great potential to support the CRC-based bushfire recovery process. This includes applications in areas such as better coordination between government agencies and CRCs, consolidating information to avoid affected people having to repeat their story and details, mapping and communicating impacts, planning and monitoring engagement activities and providing consistent information to communities.

Theme 3: Key quotes from CRC members.

"There is a benefit of people having their say - it has a healing role"

"People have to tell their stories many times and have to provide documentation - this creates unnecessary grief; it would be better to be able to tell your story once"

"Younger people are less interested in formal committees, so less formal activities can help with that"

"People need to have the opportunity to be part of it if they want to be"

"There is a hierarchy of trauma - CRCs need to communicate to the community that everyone is impacted in different ways, but all impacts are important"

"People have stopped complaining because they are worn out"

"(Government agencies should) listen to what locals have to say"

"CRCs need to work out who are the stakeholders and what are their roles"

"Treat CRCs as a partner - avoid the impenetrable wall of government"

"Lots of time is required for managing relationships- government, philanthropic and other communities"

"(being on a) CRC involves fighting your battle at every gate, building relationships - it's all about relationships and communication"

"All the good stuff has been grassroots, let's sit on the grass and have a talk"

"It's like you hit brick walls all the time (with Government)"

"Their (other CRC members) opinions matter just as much as my opinions"

"CRCs need to 'manage' community expectations, the community didn't understand how long the recovery process would take"

"We wrote a lot of thank you letters back to the authorities that helped us"

"If government is not taking ownership, then take it up the food chain"

"Local knowledge is a huge resource (for government agencies to draw on)"

"Each CRC should get the same information"

"Even though it's not community's job to lead on some of this stuff. I think it falls to the community to actually create the accountability because if you don't create the accountability, that won't actually happen".





Theme 4: Recovery Planning

4.1. Mapping and Defining Bushfire Impacts

A consistent and accessible framework for mapping and defining bushfire impacts that can fully capture both flame-impacted and flame-affected aspects is important. Some CRCs reported finding it challenging to “get on the radar” post bushfire due to the difficulty in fully communicating how their district had been impacted compared to other districts. This included factors such as the stress, uncertainty and lost economic activity from being under threat from bushfire for a long period. This was in the context of the available resources of support agencies being stretched given the scale of the disaster event.

CRCs, or their early informal incarnations, can use local knowledge, people and networks to support the task of defining bushfire impacts. This includes identification of areas that may be economically impacted even though they were not flame impacted. An approach that worked very well for one CRC early in bushfire recovery was preparing a concise report, informed by community engagement and local knowledge of CRC members, which outlined the types and extent of bushfire impacts which could then be shared with support agencies.



4.2. Identifying Recovery Priorities and Developing Recovery Plans

Identifying recovery priorities through community engagement is crucial. Different communities will be at different starting points – some may have recently developed a community plan before the disaster while others may be starting from scratch.

Community engagement for the development of recovery priorities and recovery plans requires a logical and suitably rigorous process. However, it also must reflect that communities need some time to consider the options, provide input and make decisions. Some CRC members commented that it is difficult to manufacture a clear state of mind post disaster but that a clear state of mind is required for important long-term decisions. Some CRCs found that community feedback on local priorities changed substantially between immediately after the bushfires and a year or two afterwards.

On this basis, a practical tip is to get an interim recovery plan that is owned by the community, then allow time for the development of longer-term plans. The interim plan can identify key short-term priorities for quick implementation and then progress to identifying longer term priorities over time, such as including the top three priorities for the first six months.

Recovery plans should be clear and concise, outlining key steps for CRCs to follow. They should be practical and realistic while also being somewhat aspirational.

Throughout community engagement it is important to communicate with each community about how long recovery activities will take, while being careful not to limit community ideas on projects and activities. The complexity of some recovery projects may not be immediately apparent to many people, particularly those who haven't been previously involved in government programs. This includes tasks such as the time, effort and information required for grant/funding applications, procurement considerations, the availability of contractors, planning and other government approvals and other unforeseen issues and complexities.

It is also important that CRCs stay focused on their community priorities. It is crucial that they are not distracted by available programs which may have funding guidelines or focus areas that don't quite align with their key priorities.

CRC members often shared their experience that progress/success on achieving recovery priorities is a key driver of CRC motivation.

4.3. Rebuilding Housing and Assets

One key area of CRC concern has been the rebuilding of housing. While the rebuilding of individual houses is not a CRCs' core role, it is a very important issue that impacts the whole community. The community empathises with those who have yet been able to or have chosen not to rebuild their homes. There are a diverse range of personal, psychological, social, community, policy and building-related factors that pose barriers to rebuilding. This includes homeowner's fatigue, mental health, financial situation and recovery journey. Further, the remoteness of East Gippsland, the effect of COVID-19 on the construction industry, the availability of tradespeople, and the Bushfire Attack Level (BAL) assessment system create additional difficulties.

CRCs can have an important role to play in advocating and facilitating a review of common issues that affect rebuilding. This could be a role for a professional advocate, proposed earlier, to work for and across all CRCs. This includes identifying and gathering information on collective issues such as insurance and planning and seeking community input on these matters. For example, The Mallacoota CRC (MADRA) were able to collaborate with government to progress the construction of new local public housing.

Theme 4: Key quotes from CRC members.

"achievements are the key, keep a list and stick to it"

"focus on key actual community priorities - stick to what is important - push back if the guidelines don't fit"

"go back to your community, don't be railroaded by the bureaucrats stand firm on what your community wants"

"people were in a stressed state after the fires - initial feedback was different to later feedback"

"it takes time to identify needs, people can be too busy at home to do community"

"do the groundwork on priorities early"

"asking community what they want when they haven't thought about it yet is like asking a primary school student what they want to learn"

"(it was) always about what is best for everyone in town"

"it's a bit hard to think of what you need when you need everything"

"It's a blurry line between achieving recovery and building resilience".





Theme 5:

Wellbeing of CRC Members



Selfless volunteerism from local people is a key success driver of the CRCs, but recovery is a marathon. As a result, CRC member burnout is a key practical challenge consistently experienced across all CRCs. CRC members generally agreed that being on a CRC is exhausting. CRC members frequently shared the term “recovering from recovery”.

CRCs typically lost members over time and reported that the energy of members usually declined over their time on the CRC. CRC members are typically driven by a great sense of desire and obligation to be on the CRC to serve their community – there was a common sentiment from CRC members that community service is “just something that you do”. However, this can compete with managing their own and their family’s recovery

and wellbeing. It was common that many CRC members who volunteered early in the recovery process became unable to maintain their commitment, due to their own recovery. This, in some cases, resulted in a few core leaders becoming overloaded, burnt out or unwell. There were also instances where the usual leaders were not available due to trauma and their own recovery, reducing the pool of recruitment for CRCs.

There was a consistent view that meeting government requirements, along with the workload of engagement with and lobbying of government agencies was a key source of burnout for many CRC members. This is within the context of the general pressure and expectations of delivering results for their community.

Activities to help address CRC member burnout are:

- Reducing bureaucratic requirements wherever possible and implementing initiatives as indicated earlier at section 3.4 regarding engagement with government agencies.
- Focus on core CRC business around bushfire recovery and not let the CRC's scope become too large or take on too much. Only do extra work if it suits. Be clear on what the CRC is going to do and what it is not going to do. Avoid becoming a "mini shire council".
- Have clearly defined roles for all CRC members. Utilise subcommittees to distribute workload and enable focused activities. Assign smaller tasks to non-committee volunteers and leverage external support where available. Some CRCs found that subcommittees worked best when a single CRC member took on the bulk of the initial work, potentially collaborating with another resource, with the subcommittee making decisions for CRC endorsement.
- The impacts of bushfires on individuals and their family can preclude them from CRC involvement. Creating ways which enable them to have some involvement are worth pursuing.
- Have the CRC perform a coordination role for communications and commitments. This helps minimise the number of requests each CRC member receives and coordinates activities such as hosting dignitaries and managing donations (i.e. requests for visits from dignitaries, requests for information and offers of donations all come through the CRC). This is crucial for reducing the burden on community members from having to repeat their stories, a point consistently stressed by CRC members as a major source of stress, exhaustion, and potential re-traumatisation. In this regard there is also scope for CRCs to directly refer households to assistance programs, considering privacy legislation, to avoid households providing additional information.
- Promoting the ability for CRC members to "tap in" and "tap out" to manage their commitments and workload. However, "tapping out" can be very hard to do in practice as committee members can feel like they are letting their community down by doing so.
- Peer checks are very valuable. Having counselling services available for CRC members to call upon is vital, as are opportunities for CRC members to debrief. Importantly, CRCs advise that members of small communities are often reluctant to engage with strangers in this context and would prefer to talk to someone with some level of familiarity.
- Providing adequate funding and support, as noted under Theme 6.





Theme 5: Key quotes from CRC members.

Being on a CRC is “stimulating, exhilarating, rewarding and exhausting”

“I am blown away by the energy (from CRC members), they have given their life”

“it is just as hard to tap out as tap in”

“you feel that you can’t give any more, then you have to give more (e.g. a new grant application is due)”

“I stepped down from the CRC because it became all too much”

“at the start it was like standing above the bungee cord, with residual memories of the 2003 fires...”

“if I don’t stand up nobody else will”

“if you want something done, ask a busy person”

“being on the CRC kept me busy and keeping busy after a disaster (like the bushfires) is important”

“in the community it’s SOS – same old six” (i.e. the same people typically volunteer for community committees)

“there’s a lot of pressure, a lot of pressure put on you as an individual”

“as a CRC member you were in as a (whole) family, not (just) as an individual”





Theme 6: Funding and Support

6.1. Administration Support

The provision of administration support to CRCs was overwhelmingly seen as a key success factor and something that has very strong merit. CRCs that had some paid administration and project staff inputs were very appreciative of it and those that had limited support would have preferred to have had more. There was consistent positive feedback on the model of an administration staff member or project officer being employed and paid by Council but answerable to CRCs.

This staff member can perform duties such as following up on information requirements for grant applications and undertaking communication and coordination between CRC members. This reduces the workload and mental load on CRC members.

It is important to note that while external support is really useful to CRCs, the nature and urgency of tasks means that committee members often feel that they need to do some tasks themselves and to be directly involved in activities to manage CRC relationships.



6.2. Mentoring, Facilitation and Other Support

It is important that independent facilitators and mentors are made available from the outset and that CRCs are encouraged to use them. Only a few CRCs used a mentor – this was someone with a lived experience from strong CRC involvement from the previous Black Saturday bushfires. These CRCs found this input very valuable particularly for the early period of formation. This included: having someone to bounce ideas off; providing an opportunity for peer review; learning from previous experience, but not copying it; providing reassurance, giving the committee confidence and helping promote committee consensus. For those CRCs that did not have a mentor there was general support for the concept of a mentor. It has also been suggested that a similar mentor could have been provided specifically to support Council Place Managers and other government staff.

Several CRCs reported positively on the involvement of an independent facilitator. An independent facilitator was used in some cases to help CRCs address decisions which were hard to reach agreement on, e.g. due to

differences of opinion between Committee members, particularly for some decisions which were complicated or controversial. In some cases, there was initially some reluctance for this external support, but it ultimately proved successful.

A catalogue of support services, or panel of consultants, was established during the recovery process. This was favourably received by CRCs, who – with the benefit of hindsight – would have preferred to have that in place earlier. Key areas of support identified are regarding community engagement, collating results from surveys, grant writing and support with developing recovery plans. Quick and effective support is typically required in these areas and should be available from early in the recovery process. It is important for government agencies to provide some screening of this panel and support CRCs in the selection process, especially those who do not have previous experience in engaging a consultant.

Each community will have a different starting point so will require different levels of support.

6.3. Templates, Tools and Resources

CRCs identified the following requirements for templates, tools and resources to support their work:

- Information technology: a laptop ready for use with some IT support available, and email addresses setup
- Clear guidelines to address community committee member recruitment (expression of interest, selection criteria)
- A CRC manual covering: committee setup; generic CRC structure; standard committee operating procedures / rules of operation; standard purpose; itemised guidelines; generalised actions; governance forms; format for minutes; tips for community engagement; and guidance on how to do incorporation and ABN setup, or establish auspice arrangements. The contents of the manual could then be tailored by each CRC. This should be supported by training, with external guidance to help explain and tailor the manual's contents, and linked to the Community Recovery Toolbox.
- General guidance on options to consider for CRC setup for different communities – e.g. flame-impacted versus flame-affected, larger populations versus smaller populations, geographically spread versus more concentrated populations.
- Guidance on meeting immediate post emergency needs, such as how to equitably distribute donations to community members according to need. There was feedback that improvements in the management of donations are needed, regarding communication to potential donors, logistics of managing donations and the process for distributing them. Unwanted/inappropriate or difficult-to-manage donations can be a burden on communities, even though the donations are well intended.
- Document templates for a recovery plan, communication and community engagement plan, communication materials, project plans and website content.

6.4. Training

CRCs have identified the following as valuable topics for training: media training; group leadership (early in the process); IT training and ongoing support; working together with different perspectives; governance; how to manage community feedback; how to be representative; succession planning; how to run meetings and fatigue management.

6.5. Funding

Initial funding

There was general support from CRCs for there to be an initial tranche of funding, even a substantial petty cash fund, with these funds to be self-managed but with appropriate acquittal rules and basic governance in place, to support CRC administration and operation. This is an investment which can help set CRCs up for success and reduce the stress on CRC members. As one CRC member put it, “It is hard to be agile as a committee if cap in hand”.

Competitive Grants

Competitive grants were broadly criticised by CRC members. The identified limitations of competitive grants include:

- they potentially pitted communities, or organisations within a community, against each other – when in fact all districts have some need for funding given they have all been impacted.
- the grant rounds often had tight timelines – with insufficient time for CRCs to be able to fully develop project proposals. The combination of navigating grant portals and tight timelines can be particularly stressful for CRC members. Some funding rounds started too early, before CRCs had time to ascertain community needs and priorities.



- the timing of grant programs means that in some cases, applications were made for projects that were “shovel ready” or met the guidelines rather than being of highest community priority. It is very important to provide suitable timeframes for grant programs, including allowing communities to plan and undertake community engagement enabling projects to become “shovel ready” and suitable for funding and implementation.
- equity: competitive grants favour those CRCs with more experience in grant writing and have better access to resources, skills and relationships for communicating with government agencies.
- the stress and exhaustion of CRC members from the competitive grants model does not align with a trauma-informed approach.
- efficiency: the time, efforts and resources used on grant applications could be used on project implementation.

As one CRC member commented: “either people don’t how to do them (grant applications) or those that do get burnt out”. Some CRCs also complained of a dearth of grant programs that included funding for wages or staff inputs, which in some cases is what they really need most and would provide the greatest return on investment. The panel of consultants is one way to partly address this but having ongoing part-time staff inputs, for skills such as administrative support is more cost effective.

Needs/Impact-Based Community Funding

An alternative to competitive grants could be a disaster recovery needs mapping model (district-by-district needs or impact assessment) coordinated by government agencies. This model could serve as an indicator of funding needs, enabling allocation of funds from the outset. This would give communities time to work through their immediate needs first and plan for longer-term projects, ensuring an appropriate distribution of funds across each district. The process of allocating funds to specific projects and activities would then follow, potentially leading to more effective fund distribution compared to multiple competitive grant rounds. Importantly, this approach would give assurance to CRCs and communities that they will not miss out on funding – fear of missing out was a key source of CRC stress.

The Gippsland Community Foundation (GCF, previously East Gippsland Community Foundation) funding model has been well received by CRCs. There were positive comments about the GCF proactively connecting with local groups and understanding their progress. CRCs also note the GCFs success in targeting funding to correlate with long-term recovery needs. A key factor is that the GCF is a non-government organisation and hence does not have to conform to government systems. Also, government, particularly Council, provided input into the development of GCF based on recent challenges and experiences with grant funding, and Council Place Managers supported the GCF to target funding.

Other important points to consider for the design of funding programs relate to the need for certainty and consistency. This includes clarity and equal knowledge across CRCs about available funding, eligibility criteria, guidelines and adequate timeframes. Situations should be avoided where funds are initially indicated as being available but later withdrawn, especially after CRCs have invested significant effort in developing a proposal.

6.6. Project Management

Under the model of community-led recovery, some CRCs secured substantial funds for large projects. The default situation has been for these projects to be taken on by Council who are experienced in managing larger community infrastructure projects. In practice it has proved challenging for Council-managed projects to maintain community involvement and build trust in the community. This is because it can become hard for the relevant department in Council to distinguish between those projects managed on behalf of communities from other projects, and the additional community engagement required. This is a similar CRC experience from the 2009 bushfires (CRCs 2011).

An alternative model is for the CRC to directly engage a project manager (paid for by including an amount for project management in the grant application/funding agreement). This approach offers greater involvement and empowerment of CRCs, potentially resulting in better value for money, and takes the burden off Council at a time they have a very heavy workload. Contractors may be less inclined to submit quotes at “grant prices” when the client is a community organisation from a bushfire-affected area, compared to dealing with a Council with a substantial rate base. However, this alternative model will not necessarily be better in every instance and should be considered on a case-by-case basis, considering issues such as the capability of community organisations, project budget and land manager.

Theme 6: Key quotes from CRC members.

“Find out what you can spend money on. Don’t come up with a long list and get disappointed”

“If you get consultants involved they should report to the CRC”

“a funding allocation early on (is required), with clear direction on what it can be used for”

“It is hard to be agile as a committee if cap in hand”

“Need an initial ‘care package’ tranche of funding”

“Grant writing is tough”

“(we were told by the government agency) look, there’s no hurry, we’re not going to rush you through this. But you have got to have it (the grant application) in by June 30th”

“Our administration support was vital; we would have drowned otherwise”

“It’s very clear that recovery does not finish up in two funding cycles, or even three.... that’s not how recovery works, but that’s how government and funding cycles work. So maybe there’s a bit more courage required from government to say, this is the support”

(a better funding model is) “This district has been impacted this much. So probably, let’s allocate funding of this much. Not have funds in separate programs for different communities to apply for competitively.”



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Limitations

This report has been prepared by Sierracon to best combine and reflect a comprehensive range of feedback from CRC members. However, not all information presented here has been universally agreed by all CRC members consulted. Sierracon has not been able to verify all information provided by CRC members.

Sierracon has made no independent verification of this information beyond the agreed scope of works and SierraCon assumes no responsibility for any inaccuracies or omissions. No indications were found during our investigations that information contained in this report as provided to Sierracon was incorrect.

This report was prepared between October 2023 and November 2024 and is based on the information reviewed at the time of preparation. Sierracon disclaims responsibility for any changes that may have occurred after this time.

This report should be read in full. No responsibility is accepted for use of any part of this report in any other context or for any other purpose or by third parties.

Appendix 1: Guiding Questions

Group Discussion Guiding Questions

1. What do you think have been the best things to come out of your CRC process?
– both from a) a personal and b) a broader committee perspective?
2. What has been the most challenging thing during recovery through your CRC process? both from a) a personal and b) a broader committee perspective?
3. What arrangements or support do you think would have helped your CRC to do its work better? (opportunities for things to have been easier / better / more supportive)
4. What do you think is the future/next steps/ transition of your CRC and its members?

Interview Guiding Questions

1. What has been your involvement with the CRC?
2. How have you found your involvement in the CRC process?
3. What do you think have been the best things about the CRC process? – both from a) a personal and b) a broader committee perspective?
4. What has been the most challenging things during the CRCs process? – both from a) a personal and b) a broader committee perspective?
5. What arrangements or support do you think would have helped your CRC to do its work better?
6. What would have supported you personally in your role on the CRC better?
7. What do you think you will do when you leave being on the CRC or the CRC / recovery finishes?
8. Imagine there is another community that has been through a bushfire event and are just commencing their recovery process. What would be your advice be to them?

Appendix 2: Summary of 2009 CRC Lessons Learned

This summary of lessons learned is drawn from a report developed by a group of community members who were involved with CRCs in the 2009 Victorian Bushfires. This has been included to emphasise the importance of referring back to previous reviews on the basis of seeking to achieve ongoing continuous improvement in the operation of CRCs.

A summary is presented below under key topics.

Communication

Communication is one of the most important aspects of recovery efforts. It is vital to ensure that transparent and consistent communication between communities, impacted families and individuals, agencies and organisations supporting recovery, and all levels of government is well established.

Lessons learned by CRCs regarding communication include:

- Establishing early communication and community engagement is vital post-disaster
- Communication should be calm, open and honest, and involve active listening
- Use of a wide range of communication methods is important such as informal/formal community meetings, websites, noticeboards, flyers in commonly used spaces, emails, etc. It is useful to remember that in bushfires, often people lose their phones or mailboxes, and hence being creative with communication methods is vital
- An immediate focus on re-establishing lost mailboxes or phone lines is vital for successful communication and should be a priority immediately following a bushfire disaster
- Build trust and confidence through communications and constantly repeat key messages.

Community Leadership

Establishing leadership from within affected communities is vital to ensure that recovery programs are reflective of community needs. Following the 2009 bushfires, over 30 Victorian communities established their own CRC, which adopted different recovery initiatives that reflected the needs of their community. The key lessons learned by the CRCs in relation to community leadership include:

- Electing CRC leadership early, to establish order and leadership contributes to the success of CRCs. Clearly identify the roles of the CRC leaders and ensure their legitimacy within the community is vital
- Encouraging community involvement, engagement and volunteerism allows for tasks to be delegated and avoids burnout of individual leaders
- Establishing clear agendas and goals of the CRC will allow communities to understand the CRCs functions and encourage community involvement
- Allow community leaders access to support and development, to allow them to better themselves within the committee, will benefit the function of CRCs.

Community Planning and Identifying Priorities

Lessons learned regarding planning and identifying priorities include:

- Focusing on immediate needs first is vital, such as establishing food, water and shelter resources where required. Establishing more long-term recovery goals should then follow, such as rebuilding community centres
- Establishing methods of community input into the planning and identification of priority processes is vital. This can be created through open community meetings, focus groups, surveys etc. Ensure a wide array of community members are involved in these processes.

Community Health and Wellbeing

Community health and well-being needs become apparent over time, and there is much that can be done by CRCs to assist community members in need. Some lessons learned in this area include:

- Organise community events that bring people together
- Have regular and qualified trauma and grief counselling made available to the community
- Coordinate and provide pro-active health services locally
- Appreciate that recovery is a long process and that each individual's experience is different. Long-term support is required to ensure communities have access to the health and well-being services they require.

Working with Government

Working closely with all levels of government (local council, state and commonwealth) is vital to ensuring a successful recovery process. Lessons learned from working with government include:

- Organise regular meetings with government and establish clear lines of communication across all levels of government is extremely important
- Do not hesitate to contact government agencies that the community believes can be involved in recovery efforts
- Focus on presenting solutions and alternatives to government, rather than presenting them with problems
- Involving government agencies in recovery fund projects proved useful, however allowing government to run fund projects completely results in community confusion.

Building Effective Relationships and Networks

Establishing relationships and networks with a range of partners, donors, organisations and support from individuals is vital to ensure successful bushfire recovery efforts. Lessons learned regarding establishing relationships and networks include:

- Recognise the level of interest in our community and its recovery early on, and capitalise on this
- Draw on local community organisations such as Lions clubs, Rotary clubs and Salvation Army
- Do not be afraid to reach out for help from different organisations – just because they have not reached out, does not mean they are not willing and eager to assist.



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