

East Gippsland Bushfire Recovery Committee Second Progress Report

May 2021



This is a joint report from East
Gippsland Shire Council and
Bushfire Recovery Victoria



Acknowledgement of Country

On behalf of East Gippsland Shire Council and Bushfire Recovery Victoria we would like to acknowledge the Gunaikurnai, Monero and the Bidawel people as the Traditional Custodians of the land that encompasses East Gippsland Shire. We pay our respects to all Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people living in East Gippsland, their Elders past and present.

Front cover photo taken by Jenny Lawrence of Bruthen.

Version Control

Security classification	Official
Authority	East Gippsland Shire Council
Author	Bushfire Recovery Committee
Document status	Authorised
Version	1

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Accessibility:

This document is available for downloading at
<https://www.eastgippsland.vic.gov.au>

Publication details:

Authorised and published by East Gippsland Shire Council, PO Box 1618, Bairnsdale Vic 3875

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Report Purpose

This second progress report from the East Gippsland Bushfire Recovery Committee aims to provide communities, agencies, volunteers, Council and State and Commonwealth Governments an update of the work of the East Gippsland Bushfire Recovery Committee. It provides an overview of recovery efforts over the past six months since our last progress report. This report also shares the progress of work commenced previously and reported in the September 2020 progress report.

Principles of the East Gippsland Bushfire Recovery Committee



Introduction from the Chair of the East Gippsland Recovery Committee

Since the last progress report, the Committee has worked with many partners in recovery to achieve some vital outcomes for the East Gippsland Shire community. Once again, I acknowledge that, collectively, we have been faced with challenges and for some, frustrations. The COVID-19 pandemic changed how recovery and rebuilding initiatives were delivered. Critical opportunities for communities to come together and reconnect were vastly limited and we cannot underestimate the impact this can have. Experts are observing that COVID-19 has significantly delayed overall recovery in East Gippsland. We have had to change how we meet people, how we get information out to the community, how services are delivered and how rebuilding is managed with restrictions on stock and supply.

However, even with these challenges, as I move around the Shire I can see infrastructure, roads, bridges, our parks and coastal areas being rebuilt. Visitors are returning to East Gippsland and this will only increase as time progresses. Our environment is being carefully monitored and regrowth is occurring. There has been support both for the mental health and financial wellbeing of our community. Short-term housing is being established, public assets restored, and roads rebuilt. This has been the work of many agencies, including all levels of government. In addition, we have seen significant sums of grant, donation and commitments of money flow from government and agencies, continuing their commitment to assist East Gippsland. East Gippsland appreciates this significant investment in what is a long-term recovery.

In this progress report, I am particularly proud to share the work being done in the community by local recovery committees and representative groups. In a dedicated section of the report, we provide an update on East Gippsland's ten Community Recovery Committees, and the other work at the community level. We highlight the key themes from community conversations held to date and provide information on what the next steps are in working towards addressing those key themes.

I take this opportunity to thank all our partners who have worked tirelessly alongside Council and the Committee. 2021 has brought new hope for many and while some in the community have begun to rebuild, we acknowledge that each journey is different. I sincerely hope that progress can continue this year, in whatever form that might be.

Anthony Basford

Chair

East Gippsland Bushfire Recovery Committee

Recovery Coordination

Planning and Governance

The East Gippsland Bushfire Recovery Committee (EGBRC) has been in operation since January 2020. East Gippsland Shire Council (Council) and Bushfire Recovery Victoria (BRV), as Committee co-chairs, continue working with relevant agencies and organisations to support our communities through the devastating impact of the 2019/20 East Gippsland Bushfires.

Fundamental to the work of the EGBRC was the development and release of the East Gippsland Recovery Plan. Within the Plan, a five-pillar approach to recovery was outlined: Social, Environment, Economic, Built and Aboriginal Culture and Healing.

Working groups established under each recovery pillar have identified key outcomes and developed sub-plans, and associated action plans.

This second EGBRC progress report shares these identified outcomes and the progress of over 300 recovery activities required to achieve them. While progress on each action plan can be viewed as an attachment to this report, highlights are also captured under each pillar. See pages 21 to 31.

To view the East Gippsland Fires 2019-2020 Recovery Plan and associated sub-plans and reports visit this link:

Bushfire Recovery Plan, Sub-Plans and Reports

Or visit Council's website: <https://eastgippsland.vic.gov.au>

Community-Led Recovery

Community-led recovery is central to the approach of the EGBRC. Since the September 2020 progress report, the work at a community level has continued to evolve and grow. Communities are sharing their stories, and through this are identifying issues and priorities. Ten community representative groups/ recovery committees (CRCs) in various forms have been established by impacted districts across East Gippsland. The EGBRC have supported the establishment and development of these CRCs, through direct support from BRV and Council.

Reflecting the different needs and circumstances of each community, these representative groups and CRCs are in various stages of developing plans for their communities – some are just beginning, others have begun consulting with their communities, others are focusing on recovery issues, and others on resilience and preparedness. It is essential to recovery progress to understand that all communities and individuals will move through recovery in their own way, and at their own pace.

Council and BRV are supporting communities to work through a community planning process as appropriate. This model includes a readiness tool to assess the strengths and capabilities of a community's readiness to participate in planning and collective decision-making. This model is in line with the National Principles for Disaster Recovery, the Emergency Management Victoria Resilience Framework and Bushfire Recovery Victoria Principles for Community-led Recovery. The model is outlined over page.



W Tree Community Conversations in December 2020.

To support the community with their recovery, several place-based Community Conversations have begun across areas of the municipality. These conversations have and will be an opportunity for community members to come together and talk about their experiences during and since the 2019/20 bushfires, what has been learnt and priorities for the future,

including preparedness for future events. This critical information will help shape the direction for the EGBRC into the next 12 months.

Recovery activities and progress in each community with a Community Recovery Committee are outlined in the 'Story So Far – Community-Led Recovery' Section of this report.

Outcomes: Healthy and safe communities | thriving economy | resilient and connected communities | sustainable and healthy environments.

The Process Working in Place

Phase 1: Listening, research and discovery

- Collect evidence of what's happening and where the community want to be,
- Understand the issues,
- Map the assets,
- Understand opportunities,
- Look at existing plans,
- Agree on the issues/opportunities to address.

Phase 2: Imagine

- Is the context the same,
- Gather as many ideas as possible to address our issues,
- Create the ideas bank,
- Select the interesting ideas.

Phase 3: Develop

- Is the context the same,
- Establish working groups,
- Design the ideas,
- Apply the parameters,
- Achieving the desired outcome.

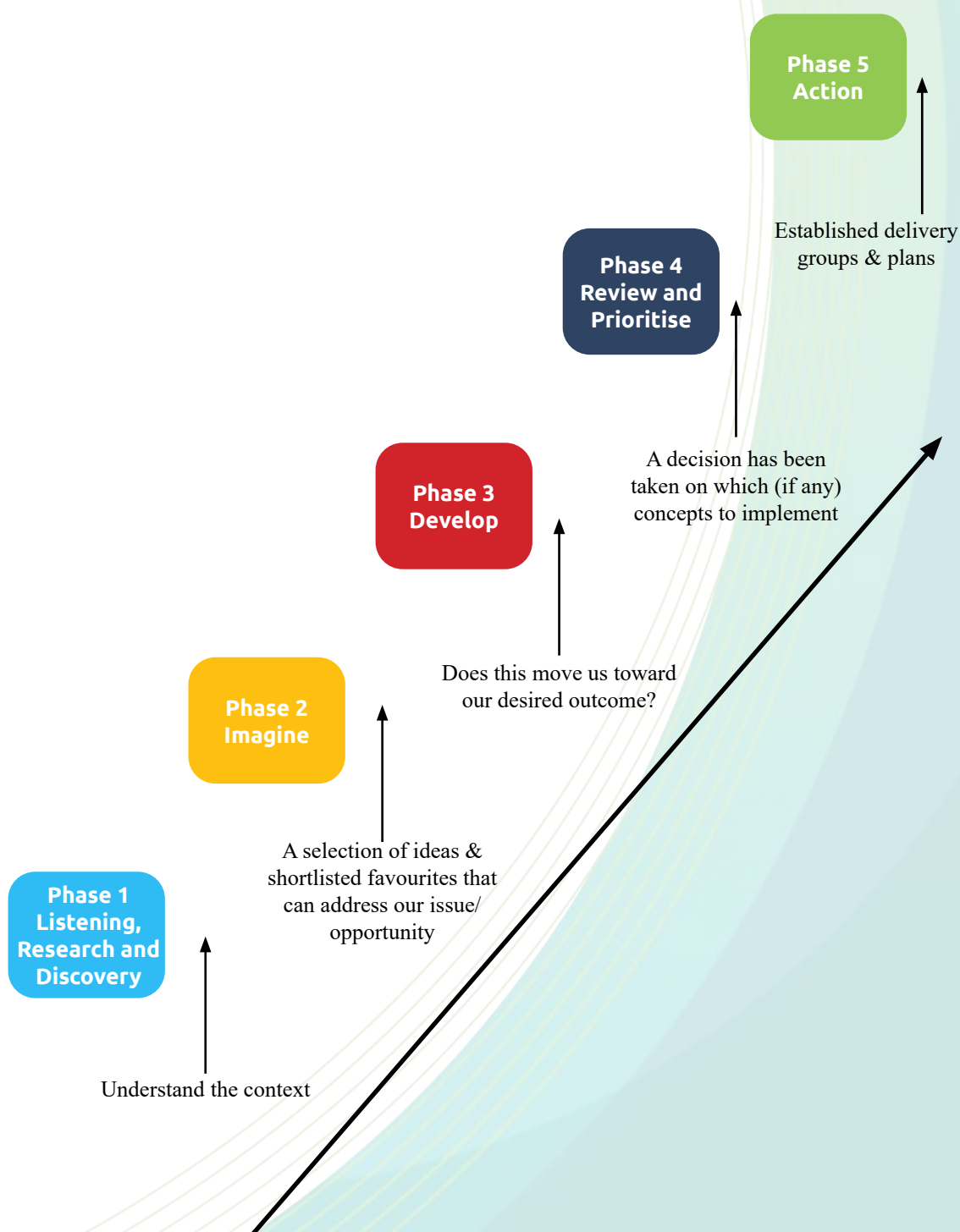
Phase 4: Evaluate

- Working groups evaluate, then bring to a larger group,
- Testing designs,
- Prioritisation/decide a course of action.

Phase 5: Act

- Larger group approve the plan,
- Working group action and develop a plan of delivery

Based on the Minds at Work IDEA Model



Recovery During COVID-19

COVID-19 continues to impact East Gippsland and its recovery efforts. It was not until 18 October 2020 that regional Victoria moved to 'Step Three' under Victorian Government COVID-19 instructions. This step included the reopening of most businesses to the public and increased seating capacity for hospitality. However, the intrastate border between metropolitan and regional Victoria (often referred to as the "ring of steel") was strengthened with extra police checkpoints added and remained in place until 8 November 2020. Parts of East Gippsland have also been significantly impacted by interstate border closures. While provisions were in place for local communities to access services in cross-border areas, tourism traffic was significantly reduced in some areas with a commensurate impact on local economies (while other areas benefitted from the increased focus on domestic tourism when restrictions eased).

During periods of significant restrictions due to COVID-19, access to trades, services and supply were limited and holidaymakers and property owners alike were restricted from entering the area.

Many recovery activities and services were affected or modified, including events and gatherings unable to proceed, limiting opportunities for communities to connect. Where possible, services were modified to operate online and CRCs adapted to using technology to connect and continue to progress recovery planning.

Possibly the most telling impact of COVID-19 has been on communities having fewer opportunities to come together to share stories, connect and support each other. Previous events have reinforced the importance of these kinds of community events and the re-establishment of connection between community members in making sense of the events of the fires and processing the impacts together. At a time when community members would benefit most from coming together, COVID-19 required a level of isolation and separation. The impacts of this on recovery progress are becoming increasingly apparent.

While the recovery of public assets and, to some extent, rebuilding of dwellings has progressed, expert advice is indicating that COVID-19 has significantly delayed the social and wellbeing recovery process, possibly by 6 to 9 months, or more. Further, the isolation has increased the risk that some community members are not accessing the services and supports

they may need. As recently as March 2021, BRV continued to receive referrals for people seeking support for the first time, more than 12 months after the fires were declared contained.

We are just now starting to see more positive signs of communities engaging and re-connecting. Recovery agencies need to take this delay into account in planning for services, with COVID-19 likely to significantly prolong the recovery process in East Gippsland.

'The events of 2020 were a first for Victoria's communities as well as for the agencies and organisations supporting them. Whilst our psychosocial recovery systems have become adept at providing services to communities in need, they have not previously been exposed to the shock and disruption of a pandemic. The pre-existing timeframes that have been associated with the phases of recovery will need to be adapted. Whilst it is not possible to identify exact timeframe differences, it is clear that the second year is much more like the first year. Community members want to connect, support each other, and share experiences. It is important that this process is supported and not contaminated or disrupted inadvertently. Flexibility, openness and a genuine want to listen to the unique needs of community is vital.'

David Younger – Clinical & Consultant Psychologist

The Story So Far: Community Led Recovery



This section of the report shares the significant work of the Community Recovery Committees and representative groups in the ten directly impacted districts.

Disasters can be a loss of control for those impacted, and as such, it has been critical to empower communities to identify what is important to them, and to support them in building capacity to recover and move forward.

This approach achieves greater outcomes rather than the recovery 'being done to' community by government bodies and agencies. While we will not have got this approach perfect we will continue to seek feedback and learn.

Experience shows and is documented by many, that a community-led approach moves beyond a traditional community engagement method such as IAP2, where the community provides input or is engaged through a pre-determined process.

Recovery is open-ended and not pre-determined, which means ideas are considered and agreed upon collectively by each community as they apply them, and activities and priorities are adapted and refined as required.

Community Recovery Committees

The establishment of representative groups and CRCs has differed from district to district, with each at different stages in their recovery journey. In some cases, the CRCs are newly formed, and in others, they are founded within existing community groups.

These groups and CRCs keep local voices, know-how and expertise front and centre during recovery planning and delivery. This place-based, community-led approach will ensure projects, grants and support programs that are developed with the community, and funded by the government, will be the right fit for that community over the coming months and years.

It is important to note that representative group and CRC members are volunteers who have stepped up to offer leadership in recovery for the benefit of their community. The work of these volunteers is recognised and plays a critical role in the recovery journey. Over time the focus, work and membership of these groups and CRCs will need to be flexible to reflect the time and energy available for volunteers to contribute.

Working alongside community, Council has Place Managers and BRV has Engagement Officers, supporting the work of the groups, CRCs, and other local initiatives. Over time we will seek to strengthen the connection between the EGBRC and the CRCs.

Community Conversations

During 2020 a total of 11 Community Conversations were held across East Gippsland. These conversations provided a platform for community and agencies to respectfully come together and to unpack mutually shared, and often traumatic, experiences of the bushfire events. The overwhelming response from residents attending these Conversations is one of feeling heard and listened to.

In the first series of conversations, held during 2020, there were five sessions across the Cann Valley, five sessions across the Buchan Valley and one online session in Clifton Creek.

The second series of Community Conversations is currently being planned for the remainder of the communities impacted by the 2019/20 fires. These will be held on various dates from May to August 2021. These sessions will be informed by learnings from the 2020 Conversations.

Themes emerging so far include:

- Impact, trauma and community resilience.
- Land management – prevention and protection of the natural environment.
- Emergency management, planning and systems of support.
- Access to water.
- Infrastructure (roads, sewerage, telecommunications).
- Natural environment and biodiversity.
- Access to fresh food and fuel.

Bruthen

Localities include: Bruthen, Wiseleigh, Mossiface, Fairy Dell and Double Bridges



The population of the Bruthen district is 2,108. During the 2019/2020 bushfires 66% of the land area was burnt and seven dwellings were destroyed. The district was under threat from flame impact for over two months. There were many economic impacts, and communities lost power, telecommunications and water during the fire event. The Bruthen Community Recovery Committee was formed to identify and support the needs of the district.

The Committee sits within the Bruthen and District Citizens' Association as a subgroup and meets regularly to advocate for individuals navigating recovery, as well as to develop a recovery plan.

Progress So Far

In addition to establishment, the Committee have actively supported communities and individuals with their recovery needs.

- Developed, distributed, received and reviewed responses from a community feedback survey. These responses and past plans will help inform community recovery priorities.
- Explored ways to actively involve youth and Aboriginal people in the community recovery identification and planning process.
- Formed ongoing partnerships with Council and Bushfire Recovery Victoria to identify resources and other supports to implement projects.
- Held meetings with various Ministers and dignitaries to share information, advocate and inform recovery from a local context.
- Submitted a successful grant application to Bushfire Recovery Victoria for a static water tank in the Bruthen town centre and are in discussion with GunaiKurnai Land and Waters Aboriginal Corporation (GLaWAC) about engaging an Aboriginal artist to paint the tank.

- Worked closely with Bruthen Neighbourhood House to identify and deliver on recovery priorities and events to reconnect and support community wellbeing.
- Assisted Council with the development of the Bruthen streetscape plans. Council was successful in applying for a Local Economic Recovery program grant to help cover the costs of the upgrade.
- Partnered with Gippsport on the Street Games project to engage local youth.

Future Plans

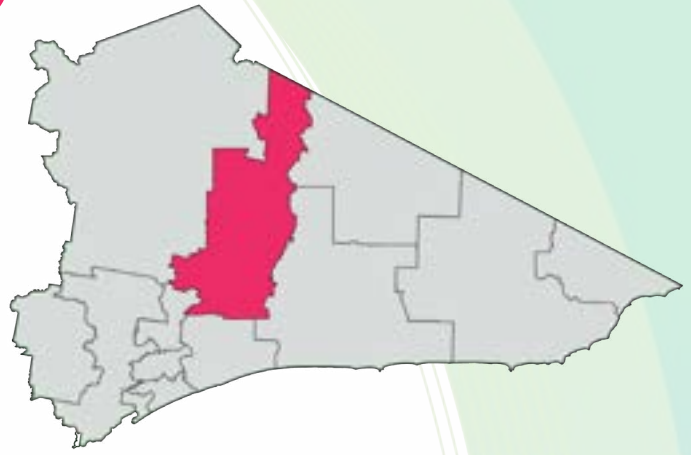
The Committee are in the discovery phase of developing their community recovery plan. Key strategic priorities identified so far include:

- Community conversations are being arranged to debrief about the event and recovery progress, with communities and relevant agencies in attendance and will inform the recovery planning process.
- Connecting with local community groups to discuss recovery priorities.
- Working on individual and community recovery projects under the scope of preparedness.
- Water access and resilience upgrades.
- Connecting with the Aboriginal community to encourage a culturally safe and welcoming district.
- Upgrading the streetscape and local facilities.
- Planning events to connect and bring social safety, happiness and fun back to the area.

This is a snapshot of some of the achievements of the community so far. For a comprehensive and ongoing understanding of where the communities are up to go to: <https://www.eastgippsland.vic.gov.au/community/bushfire-community-recovery>

Buchan, Gelantipy & District

Localities include: Bete Bolong North, Buchan, Buchan South, Butchers Ridge, Gelantipy, Murrindal, Suggan Buggan, W Tree, Wulgulmerang, Wulgulmerang East and Wulgulmerang West



Buchan, Gelantipy and district were significantly impacted by the 2019/2020 bushfires. With a population of 458 people, community recovery and the natural environment are of high priority to the residents of this district.

The Buchan, Gelantipy & Districts Renewal Association (BGDRA) was formed because of the bushfire events of 2019/2020. The representative group of community members was brought together to voice the community's needs in recovery. Their purpose is to get individuals and communities back on their feet after the bushfires by delivering on and advocating on behalf of the needs of the community, identifying and addressing any shortfalls that may arise, creating a Community Renewal Plan that strives for the betterment of the community, and endeavouring to increase economic activity within the community.

Progress So Far

- Establishment of the BGDRA that actively supports communities and individuals with their recovery requirements.
- Supported applications for Local Economic Recovery grants for community projects and regional economic stimulus.
- Participated in and helped facilitate five Community Conversations to debrief and discuss learnings in preparation for future fire seasons.
- Helped to create a community survey to identify priorities for community recovery.
- Met with other committee chairs across the municipality to discuss ideas and challenges, share knowledge and gain support.
- Formed ongoing partnerships with Council and Bushfire Recovery Victoria to identify resources

and other supports for future plans.

- Established an active Facebook group, email access point and website to communicate and celebrate recovery progress with community members.
- Held meetings with various Ministers and dignitaries to share information, advocate and inform recovery from a local context.
- Many local roads, bridges have been reinstated.
- Developed an interim recovery plan.

Future Plans

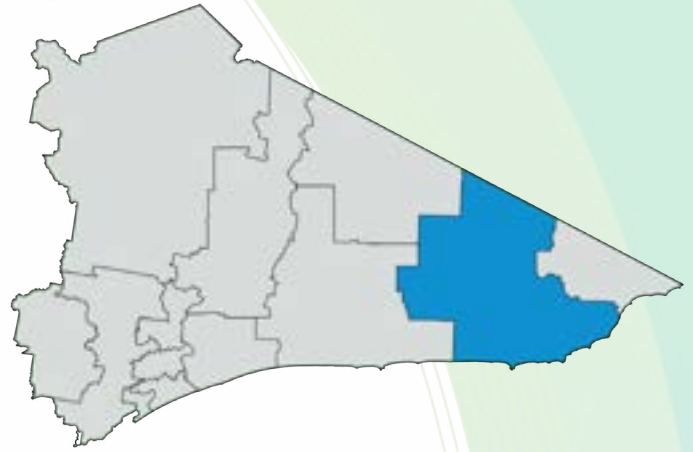
The BGDRA is developing a community recovery plan to identify project and activity priorities for communities. Key strategic priorities identified so far include:

- Develop and increase tourism to the district (Buchan Caves and beyond).
- Integrate localised fire preparation priorities into community preparedness activities.
- Upgrade the playground area in Buchan.
- Upgrade the Recreation Reserve in Buchan.
- Improve community facilities across the district.
- Upgrade footpaths and parking across the district.
- Find innovative ways to connect the community through events and activities.

This is a snapshot of some of the achievements of the community so far. For a comprehensive and ongoing understanding of where the communities are up to go to: <https://buchandistrictsrenewal.com.au>

Cann Valley District

Communities in the district include Cann River, Noorinbee, Noorinbee North, Tonghi Creek, Buldah, Chandlers Creek, Club Terrace, Combienbar, Tamboon South, Tamboon/Furnells Landing and Wingan



The Cann Valley district is made up of many smaller townships with a total population of 378 people.

There were multiple impacts across the district during the 2019/2020 bushfires. 92% of the land area was burnt and 25 dwellings were destroyed. The significant impacts include the closure of highways to all communities in January for five weeks, as well as the loss of power and telecommunications. COVID-19 restrictions from March to November 2020 impacted heavily on the district, with NSW border closures at two entry points into the district. The interim Cann Valley District Representative Group (CVDRG) was formed because of the fires and to meet the needs of the community.

Progress So Far

Since the bushfires, the interim Representative Group have met regularly to hear community needs and voice those needs to appropriate agencies for support. More recently, nominations were sought from 20 community organisations and communities to formalise the CVDRG with the intention to become an incorporated association, drive the District Community Plan and coordinate bushfire funding and recovery.

To date the Community Representative Group have achieved the following:

- Initiated the process of transitioning to an incorporated association that will actively support communities and individuals in their recovery requirements.
- Held community catch-up events through face-to-face forums, online Zoom meetings or collective written feedback. These have provided clearer insight into the district's priority list for recovery purposes.

- Developed the Cann Valley District Newsletter that is sent out to all households within the district on a fortnightly basis.
- Formed ongoing partnerships with Council and BRV to identify resources and other supports to implement projects.
- Commenced preliminary work in Club Terrace around the future development on the old school site.
- Local roads and infrastructure have been reinstated.
- Community Conversations.

Future Plans

The Representative Group is in the process of developing its Community Recovery Plan to identify project and activity priorities for communities. Key strategic priorities identified so far include:

- Improving telecommunication resilience and access across the district.
- Improving localised firefighting equipment and infrastructure.
- Engaging in appropriate land management and cultural practice.
- Increasing local employment.
- Improving community facilities.
- Increasing eco-tourism opportunities.
- Upgrading Cann River hall.
- Improving power and fuel supply.

This is a snapshot of some of the achievements of the community so far. For a comprehensive and ongoing understanding of where the communities are up to go to: <https://www.eastgippsland.vic.gov.au/community/bushfire-community-recovery>

Clifton Creek

Communities include Clifton Creek, Waterholes, Deptford and parts of Granite Rock

The population of Clifton Creek is approximately 400 people.

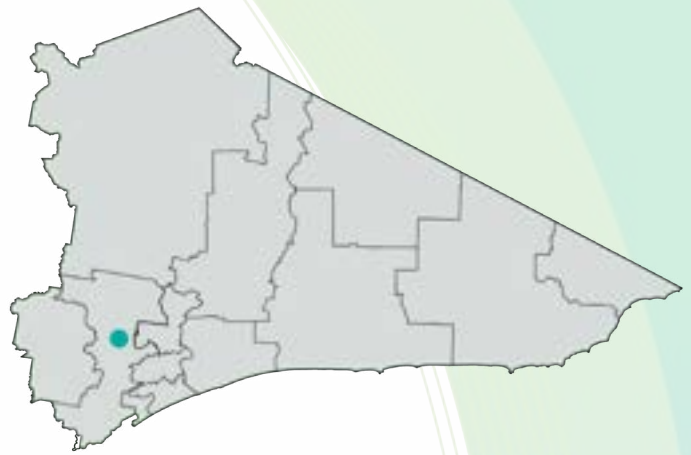
During the 2019/2020 bushfires 60% of the land area was burnt and 13 dwellings, 329km of fencing and the Clifton Creek Primary School were destroyed. Communities lost power and telecommunications during the fire event.

The Clifton Creek Community Recovery Team (CCCRT) formed in response to the fires. The Team aims to operate with the best interests of the whole community considered. The Team meet regularly to support the recovery of the district and members can 'tap in' and 'tap out' as required.

Progress So Far

To date, the Team have achieved or supported the following:

- Established the Team to support the local community and individual recovery needs.
- Developed and distributed a community survey to identify priorities for community recovery.
- Formed ongoing partnerships with Council and Bushfire Recovery Victoria to identify resources and other supports for key projects.
- Participated in and supported the facilitation of a Community Conversation event to debrief after the bushfire events and prepare for possible future disaster events.
- Installed a new playground and resurfaced two local tennis courts.
- Commenced work on priority projects including recladding the hall, updating the hall kitchen and bathroom facilities, developing a new BBQ area and establishing a regular community newsletter.
- Co-ordinated relief including hay drives and care packages for the whole community.



- Held multiple connection, mental health and wellbeing support events for the community including art therapy sessions and community catch-ups.
- Facilitated an outreach hub.
- Applied for numerous grants and secured \$380,000 in funding for community priorities.
- Commenced delivery on several large infrastructure projects.
- Organised Christmas hampers for all members of the community.

Future Plans

The Team are working closely with community members, Clifton Creek Primary School, volunteer groups, BRV and Council to plan, source funding for and deliver projects in line with identified priorities.

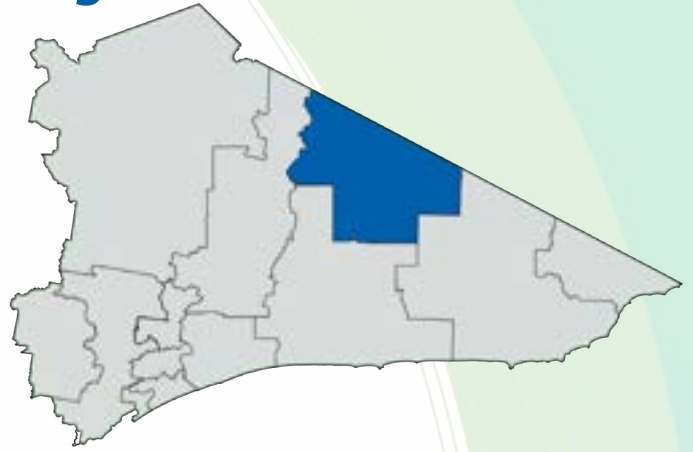
Key strategic priorities identified so far include:

- Facilitate community engagement to support mental and emotional recovery.
- Restore, improve and build new resilient community infrastructure.
- Support improvements in individual and community firefighting capacity.
- Protect, nurture and facilitate the rehabilitation and recovery of local biodiversity.
- Advocate for community consultation for future fire management on public land.
- Assuring telecommunications resilience and access.
- Building a community events stage, constructing a family bike track and developing a pathway between the school and hall.

This is a snapshot of some of the achievements of the community so far. For a comprehensive and ongoing understanding of where the community is up to go to: <https://cliftoncreekcommunity.com>

Errinundra to Snowy District

Localities include Bendoc, Bonang, Cabanandra, Deddick Valley, Delegate River, Dellicknora, Haydens Bog, Tubbut, Goongerah



The population of the district is 341 people. During the 2019/2020 bushfires, the district lost substantial old-growth forest and wildlife habitats and many thousands of native birds and animals. In total, 32% of the land area was burnt and 19 dwellings were destroyed. The Community Recovery Sub-Committee was formed as a result of the fires to support the needs of the community.

This is a snapshot of some of the achievements of the community so far. For a comprehensive and ongoing understanding of where the communities are up to go to: <https://www.eastgippsland.vic.gov.au/community/bushfire-community-recovery>

Progress So Far

The sub-committee was established in December of 2020 and meets monthly. This is a sub-committee of the existing District Representative Group that was formed in November 2019 to take carriage of the Errinundra to Snowy District Community Plan. The sub-committee hopes to establish and refine the agenda for the district for the coming years with a long-term and sustainable vision.

- With a focus on community connectedness, community recovery and community preparedness, the committee provides a broad representation of communities.
- Other sub-committees relating to recovery have also been established: the Nature-based Tourism Committee, the Road Safety Committee, and the Services Committee.

Future Plans

The sub-committee are in the discovery phase of developing their community recovery plan to identify project and activity priorities for our communities. The existing Community Plan will be reviewed in the recovery context. Key strategic priorities identified so far include:

- Strength and resilience of telecommunications and power.
- Tourism.
- Local employment resources.
- Community facilities.

Mallacoota and District

Communities in the district include Mallacoota, Genoa, Wangarabell, Maramingo Creek, Wallagaraugh, Gipsy Point and Wroxham River

The population of the district is 1,161 people. 83% of the land area was burnt and 123 homes were destroyed. One life was sadly lost in the Genoa district during the fires. The only road in and out of town was closed for 39 days resulting in over 1,500 visitors and residents being evacuated by air and sea by the Australian Defence Force. The economic impact from lost work and income during this period and throughout 2020, with the additional impacts of COVID, was profound. The devastating impact on flora and fauna is having an ongoing emotional and psychological impact on residents.

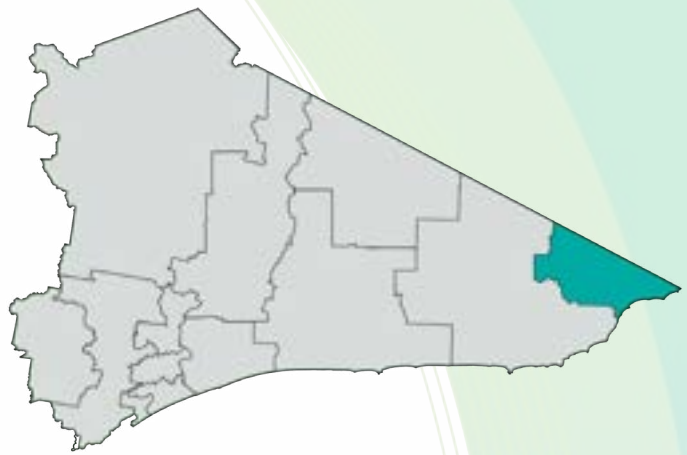
In the immediate aftermath of the fires, a 'Thinking Group' was formed which was led by a range of community-minded people that had the foresight to start the collection of ideas and skills to support community-led recovery. This group was supported by recovery mentor Steve Pascoe. After extensive community consultation, the Mallacoota and District Recovery Association (MADRA) was formed and has grown to over 780 members. The Thinking Group also conducted a Snapshot Survey to gather initial feedback from the community to inform the locally led recovery process.

The 12 members of the MADRA Committee were elected through an independent election overseen by the Victorian Electoral Commission on 21 May 2020.

Progress So Far

In addition to establishment, the Committee have actively supported communities and individuals with their recovery needs. Key achievements and supports include:

- Formed ongoing partnerships with Council and BRV to identify resources and other supports to deliver priority projects.
- Established several working groups focusing on community wellbeing, housing, first anniversary recognition, buildings and infrastructure, parks infrastructure, ADF memorial, sustainability of business and economy, fuel management, administration and communications and media.
- Facilitated a brainstorming process to source ideas for recovery, identify any gaps in recovery services and infrastructure and to inform the Recovery Plan.
- Met with other committee chairs to share ideas, challenges, knowledge and support.



- Held meetings with various Ministers, CEOs and dignitaries to share information, advocate on behalf of community and inform recovery from a local context.
- Advocating for those who are struggling with the complexities of recovery in dealing with the multitude of issues between agencies of all levels.
- Development of a very detailed recovery plan that will assist in this and future disasters.
- Support for multiple successful and ongoing grant applications including the rebuilding of the Abalone Co-Op, refurbishment of the community hall to enhance its functioning in critical circumstances, the Pony club, the Gun Club, the Genoa bridge rebuild, enhancement emergency facilities in Genoa, a nursing facility in Mallacoota, increased psychological and youth support for the district, the Mallacoota Skate Park and the Genoa Sporting Club rooms.

Future Plans

The Committee consulted with various community groups the best they could throughout COVID-19 restrictions and developed a draft Recovery Plan that articulates projects and activity priorities for communities. The Committee is currently conducting face-to-face consultations in order to seek final community feedback and gain endorsement for the first iteration of the Mallacoota District Recovery Plan.

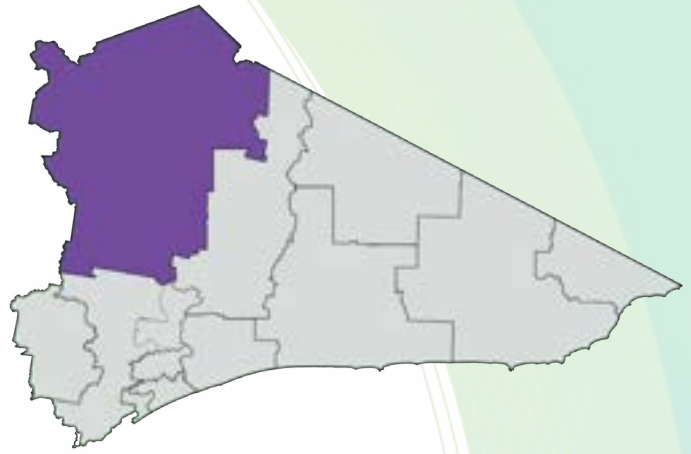
Key priorities identified so far include:

- Making sure community members receive the supports they need – no one falls through the recovery cracks.
- Preparedness and resilience.
- Enhancement of social connection and psychological/emotional support networks.
- Key infrastructure upgrades, repairs and replacement.
- Sourcing funding for key projects.

This is a snapshot of some of the achievements of the community so far. For a comprehensive and ongoing understanding of where the communities are up to go to: <https://madrecovery.com/>

Omeo, Cobungra, Swifts Creek and Ensay

Localities that make up the Omeo District include Omeo, Swifts Creek, Benambra, Ensay, Ensay North, Brookville, Cassilis, Doctors Flat, Hinnomunjie, Livingstone Valley, Omeo Valley, Reedy Flat, Glen Valley, Cobungra, Shannonvale, Bingo Munjie, Tambo Crossing, Tongio, Anglers Rest, Bindi, Uplands, and Bundara



The Omeo District has a population of around 1,400 and is almost 600,000 hectares in size. There were multiple impacts across the district from November to February during the 2019/2020 bushfires. 30% of the land area was burnt and 15 houses and 36 sheds were lost. The economic impacts were significant and communities lost road access, power and telecommunications during the fire events.

The interim Omeo Region Community Recovery Association (ORCRA) was formed in June 2020 to support and guide community-led recovery. The group became incorporated and sought expressions of interest from community members across the Omeo District to join the group. At the AGM in October 2020, seven community members accepted a position on the Recovery Association Committee

Progress So Far

To date, the Committee has achieved or supported the following:

- Established themselves as an incorporated recovery committee.
- Actively collaborated and formed ongoing relationships with recovery organisations and agencies to support communities in their recovery.
- Investigated ways to enhance the district's long-term resilience.
- Formed partnerships with Council and Bushfire Recovery Victoria to identify resources and other support needed to plan and implement projects.

Future Plans

The Committee are in the discovery phase of developing their Community Recovery Plan to identify project and activity priorities for our communities. Key strategic priorities identified so far include:

- Development of a new community building in Tambo Crossing.
- Improve the resilience of essential services during fire events.
- Review the Local Incident Management Plans.
- Expand coverage and reliability of district telecommunications.
- Review timing and duration of road closures during emergency events.
- Improve resilience and preparedness for future bushfire events.

This is a snapshot of some of the achievements of the community so far. For a comprehensive and ongoing understanding of where the communities are up to go to: <https://www.facebook.com/ORCRAInc>

Orbost District

Localities include Orbost, Newmerella, Marlo, Bemm River, Cabbage Tree Creek, Jarrahmond, Brodribb River, Corringle, Lochend, Simpsons Creek, Waygara, Bellbird Creek, Cape Conran, Manorina, Sardine Creek, Murrungower, Tabbara, Sydenham Inlet

The Orbost District has a population of 3,889. The Orbost District was highly impacted by the 2019/2020 bushfires. 76% of the land area burnt and surrounding National Parks lost many flora and fauna. The local economy, struggling already due to timber industry changes, was hit harder by limited summer trading. Many communities lost telecommunications and power during the fire event.

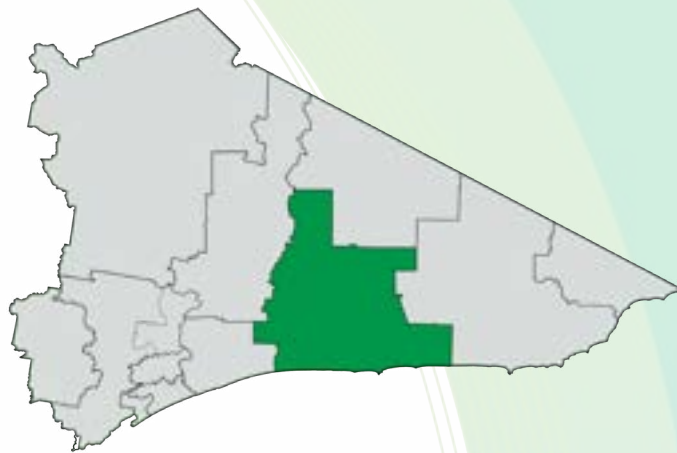
The Orbost District Community Recovery and Transition Committee (ODCRTC) was formed as a result of the fires and in response to the needs of the community.

Given both processes are focussed on the future of Orbost District, the ODCRTC will also consider the impacts of transition in the timber industry resulting from The Victorian Forestry Plan. The Department of Jobs, Precincts and Regions are supporting this work.

Progress So Far

The ODCRTC was formed through a community expression of interest process and members represent many parts of the district. The Committee has met regularly since November 2020. To date the ODCRTC have worked on:

- Formulated and agreed on Terms of Reference to help guide the Committee.
- A recovery and transition plan is in the discovery phase. This plan will highlight priorities and projects within the communities for recovery.
- Formed ongoing partnerships with East Gippsland Shire Council, BRV and Department of Jobs, Precincts and Regions.
- Successful in receiving funding for last year's Christmas Eve street activities that were held in Orbost. This community event also helped to recognise the local emergency services' efforts during the 2019/2020 bushfires.



- Received funding to support the Orbost Show and Sustainability Expo. These provide the community with the chance to come together and connect.

Future Plans

This year the ODCRTC will work to form a Community Recovery Plan and a Communications Plan to support consultation with the wider community going forward. Key strategic priorities identified so far include:

- Understand and respond to the recovery and transition needs of the community.
- Maximise opportunities that directly benefit the five pillars of recovery.
- Identify and source funding opportunities

This is a snapshot of some of the achievements of the community so far. For a comprehensive and ongoing understanding of where the communities are up to go to: <https://www.eastgippsland.vic.gov.au/community/bushfire-community-recovery>

Sarsfield

There were multiple impacts across the Sarsfield district during the 2019/2020 bushfires. 49% of the land area was burnt and 73 dwellings were destroyed. Communities lost power and telecommunications during the fire event. 72% of the 276 homes in the area were impacted and more than 130 residents were displaced.

The Sarsfield Recreation Reserve and Hall Committee supported the community with relief efforts during and immediately after the fires. The Hall Committee established a dedicated recovery committee, the Sarsfield Community Association, in August 2020, to support and plan Sarsfield's recovery.

The committee meets regularly and has established sub-groups to plan, support and deliver various recovery priorities and projects. The committee advocate for individuals navigating their recovery journey, and are working hard on social recovery activities as well as developing a Community Recovery Plan.

Progress So Far

The recovery committee have achieved or supported the following:

- Established a formal committee of diverse community members to drive community-led recovery.
- Actively supported individuals during the relief phase with food, water and donations and by providing a safe place for the community to come together.
- Focussed on community resilience projects such as Friday Night Feeds, a community tool library and Sarsfield Snaps: a community photography project for children in Sarsfield whose photos have been on display at the Sarsfield Recovery Hub and made into a calendar.
- Advocated for a BRV Recovery Hub to be based in Sarsfield.
- Gathered ideas from the community through surveys that give our community a voice and opportunity to help identify recovery priorities, and plan to continue seeking community input.
- Supported a wide range of community connection and wellbeing events and activities.



- Worked closely with other recovery committees such as Clifton Creek and Bruthen to collaborate on events that support a connection between the communities.
- Held meetings with various Ministers and dignitaries to share information, advocate and inform recovery from a local context.
- Involved in the engagement stage for the Inspector General for Emergency Management's inquiry into the 2019/2020 fire season.
- Maintained regular communication throughout the district with a Facebook presence, multiple mail outs and regular website updates via www.sarsfield.com.au.
- Working on how to best move forward with a community debriefing process.
- Formed ongoing partnerships with a wide range of agencies and groups to best support and deliver the best outcomes for the recovery priorities for the district.
- Sarsfield CRC Members attended the Cultural History of Gippsland tour Krowathunkooloong Keeping Place GEGAC.

Future Plans

The committee has engaged a facilitator to support the development of the Sarsfield Community Recovery Plan and to identify project and activity priorities within the community. Key strategic priorities identified so far include:

- Social recovery.
- Regeneration of the natural environment.
- Community facility upgrades.
- Development and delivery of a communications plan.

This is a snapshot of some of the achievements of the community so far. For a comprehensive and ongoing understanding of where the communities are up to go to: <https://www.sarsfield.com.au>

Wairewa District

The locality of Wairewa was significantly impacted by the 2019/2020 bushfires. With a small population of 87 people, 86% of the land area was burnt and 18 dwellings were destroyed. The small community suffered severe stress and anxiety due to direct flame impact and many lost their livelihoods based on the expansive fruit, vegetable, olive, beef and dairy production. Stock losses were extensive. Roads, power and telecommunications were cut off for many days and the iconic, heritage-listed O'Grady's wooden trestle bridge was significantly damaged. The Wairewa Community Recovery Committee (WCRC) was formed as a result of the fires and to meet the needs of the community.

Progress So Far

The WCRC was one of the first recovery committees formed in East Gippsland after the fire event. Established by locals to plan and implement recovery projects, support the highly traumatised community and to ensure residents, businesses and tradespeople had access to a reliable source of income.

The WCRC meet fortnightly to develop ideas to re-establish the community and its connectedness, develop projects, and source funding for community projects and resources.

To date the WCRC has worked hard on the following:

- Successful grant and funding applications to rebuild farm fences and communication infrastructure, enabling residents to restock farms and resume horticulture and agriculture industries.
- Work on the Wairewa Hall to make it more resilient is progressing well, and renovations are being made to the Hall to improve accessibility for all residents and visitors.
- Advocating for the successful reopening of the Wairewa Transfer station, an important facility for the community.
- With the support of Council, several roads and



infrastructure have been reinstated.

Future Plans

There are many projects planned for the coming 12 months and beyond. Key strategic priorities identified so far include:

- The Hall upgrade and development of the Hall precinct to add playgrounds and play equipment for all ages, barbecues and picnic tables under shade sails, and development of the old tennis courts are immediate projects.
- Nature-based tourism for the Rail Trail and the countryside around the Wairewa Valley.
- The O'Grady's Bridge precinct will be developed as a tourism stop with long vehicle parking, picnic and toilet facilities, educational and historical information tours catering to walking tours including multi-day walks, bicycle tours and horse-riding trails.

This is a snapshot of some of the achievements of the community so far. For a comprehensive and ongoing understanding of where the communities are up to go to: <https://www.eastgippsland.vic.gov.au/community/bushfire-community-recovery>

Key Highlights by Recovery Pillars

- Social Environment
- Built Environment
- Economic Environment
- Natural Environment
- Culture and Healing



Social Recovery Working Group

Agency Led - Department of Families, Fairness and Housing

The East Gippsland Social Recovery Working Group agencies have delivered activities to support the emotional, social, spiritual and physical wellbeing and financial recovery of individuals, families, and communities. The intent of the Working Group is to support community needs identified through the community-led planning process and add value to existing service systems.

Communities have initiated many of their own wellbeing activities, particularly post-COVID-19 as they have seized opportunities to come together. Many of these events have been supported by Working Group members. In January 2021, several anniversary events took place across the municipality in ways significant and meaningful to each community. The representative groups and CRCs took a well-earned break over this period, with many coming back together in February 2021.

Financial Support

Supporting residents with bond and rental assistance and emergency relief and re-establishment payments has been a priority. Through a dedicated Housing Assistance Coordinator, the (then) Department of Health and Human Services (DHHS) was able to assist residents who required financial support for bonds to secure rental accommodation.

Financial assistance has also been provided through the Personal Hardship Assistance Program (PHAP), to address the immediate needs of individuals and families and to help facilitate recovery.

Housing

The Department of Families, Fairness and Housing (previously DHHS) have led the establishment of Bushfire Accommodation Panels across East Gippsland. These panels will support and add value to existing case management and social recovery programs and enhance the capacity to support innovative and creative solutions that may not otherwise be captured within existing support frameworks.

Agencies continue to reach out to those engaged in the State Government case support program to offer housing assistance, checking back in as circumstances change. This extends to community events and other opportunities to promote the Short-Term Modular Housing initiative (described in the Built Environment update below).

Mental Health Assistance

A \$23.4 million investment in immediate and long-term support that has seen a host of practical programs delivered to affected communities has been announced.

The package includes:

- \$8.75 million to expand the capacity of mental health services, provide specialist early intervention mental health advice to GPs and community health clinicians, and provide post-disaster treatment and advisory services through leading research centres.

Financial assistance has been provided through the Personal Hardship Assistance Program (PHAP) including:



Emergency relief assistance:
7,839 payments totalling
\$9.47M.



Emergency re-establishment assistance: to assist individuals and families to re-establish a principal place of residence.
92 payments totalling \$1.82M.

14

Rental payments: 12-week rental assistance payments created for the first time in this event and made available to assist eligible persons that were uninsured (or where insurance did not cover rental properties). Although administered through the PHAP system, these are not part of the regular PHAP payments: 14 payments totalling \$65k.



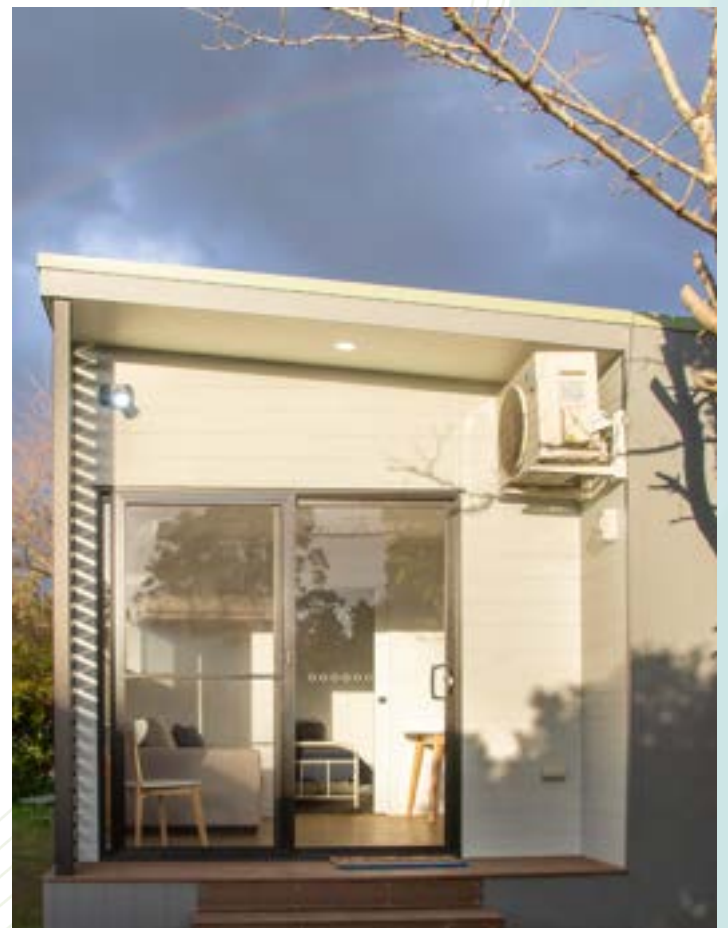
Sarsfield Snaps youth photography social and community recovery project.

- \$6.6 million for practical mental health support programs.
- \$3 million for Aboriginal-community-controlled health organisations to establish social and emotional wellbeing programs, aligned with the recommendation from the Royal Commission into Victoria's Mental Health System.

Services and initiatives currently on the ground for those affected include access to 20 psychologists for online and telephone counselling and the expansion of mental health services provided through Latrobe Regional Health. Austin Health are also engaged to provide treatment for clients with complex post-traumatic stress disorder, workforce trauma training, community connection activities in Aboriginal communities and community engagement and development.

Future Plans

As outlined on page six, 10 representative groups and CRCs are now established and provide vital input and viewpoints for recovery planning and delivery. The Community Conversations also contribute to this and give the community the opportunity to come together and share their experience of the fire events and discuss how to prepare for the future. This approach will continue to guide and inform future planning and actions of the Social Recovery Working Group.



Short-term modular housing. Credit: Bushfire Recovery Victoria.

Built Environment and Infrastructure Recovery

Built Recovery Working Group - Lead Agency: East Gippsland Shire Council

The East Gippsland Built Environment Recovery Working Group has focussed on the delivery of many projects and activities in priority areas. A total of 90 activities have been identified with 73% of these completed and the remaining 27% in progress (as of 30 March 2021).

Roads

The public road network throughout East Gippsland suffered extensive fire damage, in addition to road closures caused by hazardous and fallen trees. Regional Roads Victoria (RRV) have completed the primary restoration of the regional road network, including repairs to the road surface, bridges, signage, and guideposts. RRV have completed 3,428 jobs, at a value of \$16.6M. DELWP continue to address bushfire-damaged roads and bridges on Crown land. It is anticipated that the completion of all the works required may take up to three years.

Similarly, Council has completed restoration works across the local road network in East Gippsland, working in partnership with RRV. This resulted in an additional \$10.4M of road works. Council has

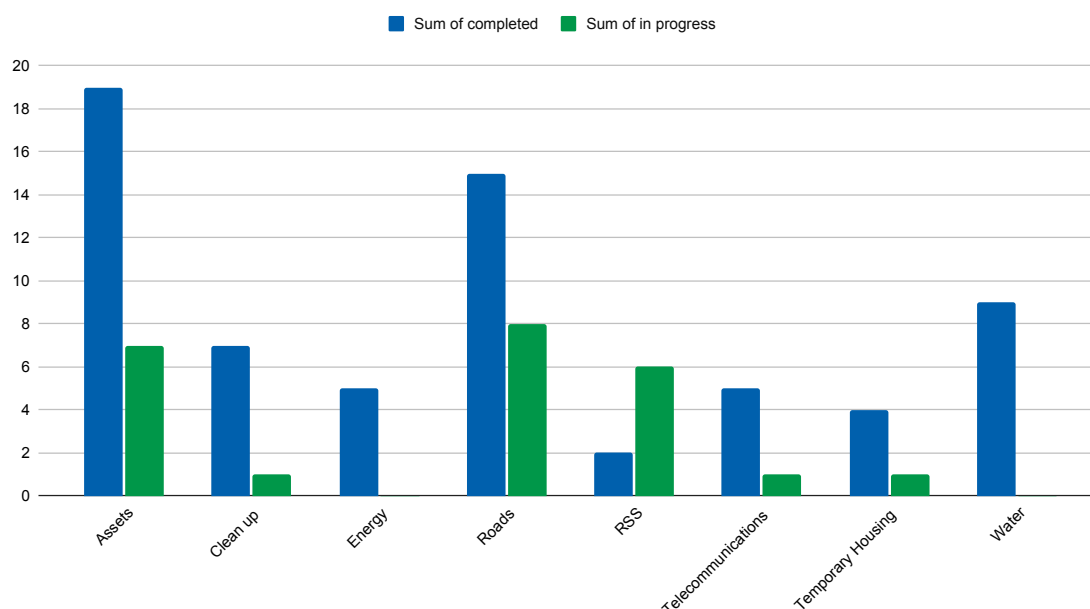
replaced or undertaken significant repairs on 12 bridges with a value of \$3,563,703. All road bridges impacted have now been repaired or replaced as of April 2021, and replacement has been with more resilient materials. Replacement of the Genoa Footbridge is the last bridge replacement to be completed.

Visitor Facilities

The rebuild and repair of many impacted visitor facilities and their associated natural and built infrastructure continues. This includes \$2 million towards stage 1 of the Buchan Caves Reserve upgrades and Cape Conran. Both sites were reopened and ready to receive tourists by Christmas 2020. Other facilities include the restoration of the foreshore infrastructure and walking tracks in Mallacoota with works currently nearing completion. The ability to reopen sites has a significant positive impact on tourism in key holiday areas.

For more information about Parks Victoria visitor facilities' restoration go to: <https://www.parks.vic.gov.au/get-into-nature/conservation-and-science/biodiversity-protection/bushfire-recovery>

Public assets and infrastructure





Fairhaven Road Little River Tributary Bridge: before.

Telecommunications

Council has been advocating for improved connectivity for our communities and more resilient telecommunications through programs such as the Commonwealth Government's Mobile Blackspot and Strengthening Telecommunications Against Natural Disasters (STAND) programs.

Working with Telstra and the Alpine Shire Council, Council has supported a successful application for funding to complete the fibre optic connection from Swifts Creek and Tambo Crossing and upgrade or install several new mobile phone towers. Many other projects to improve the security of electricity supplies including the Murrumbidgee battery, will also have some benefit in improving the resilience of telecommunications.

As part of works at community facilities, Council will provide an option for resilient satellite telecommunications at several community facilities across East Gippsland. This builds on the pilot installation of satellite internet connections for use during emergencies at eight relief centre sites under the Commonwealth Government STAND program.



Fairhaven Road Little River Tributary Bridge: after.

Water

A focus on repairing water infrastructure has seen key repair and upgrade projects completed. In Murrumbidgee, the shade cloth covering of water storage was replaced. Solar panels were also installed at the bore pump in Murrumbidgee. A major water quality infrastructure upgrade at the Orbost raw water storage and water treatment plant will address source water turbidity issues and provide for future extreme events. A raw water tank was installed at the Buchan Water Treatment Plant along with other improvements to raw water cross-contamination and water treatment chemical dosing systems. Twenty remote sites have received VHF network upgrades to be used as either a back-up/failover or primary communications link. Southern Rural Water is installing drought relief bores at several recreation reserves across East Gippsland. Council have arranged to also include with these a static water tank, increasing the availability of water for firefighting if required. BRV has supported an additional static water tank in Bruthen, and funding is being sought for static water tanks to be installed in other locations across the region.



Joan's Seat Replacement on the Mallacoota foreshore.

Private Assets and Rebuilding

Clean-up

Established by the Victorian State Government and delivered by Grocon, the program completed the clean-up of 736 properties across East Gippsland and Towong Shire Councils. The registration process for the clean-up of fire-affected properties closed on 30 June 2020 and on 26 August 2020 clean-up of the final property registered with the program was completed. Almost 75,000 tonnes of bushfire waste was removed from properties registered for the clean-up.

At short notice Council re-established the Orbost Landfill as a site to receive bushfire waste, with much of the remainder received at Council's Bairnsdale Landfill.

Fencing

Best estimates indicate that approximately 2,873km of fencing was lost in East Gippsland during the fires and, to date, assistance has been provided for 1,296km of fencing replacement. This includes support through DELWP, East Gippsland Catchment Management Authority (EGCMA) and Gippsland Emergency Relief Fund-VFF, in addition to fencing completed with the assistance of Blaze Aid volunteers.

Additional fencing replacement has also been completed by landholders, either through insurance, own source funds or Commonwealth Government grants of up to \$75,000 that were available for fencing and clean-up works on agricultural properties.

There is a need to undertake a reassessment of the remaining fencing to be replaced and any support required.

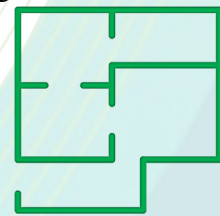
Council, in partnership with DELWP, has established eight official fire-impacted fencing waste collection sites across East Gippsland; fencing waste is regularly collected by Council contractors from these designated sites.

Short-Term Modular Housing

Short-Term Modular Housing (STMH) is an option available for several residents who lost their primary place of residence in the 2019/20 fires. STMH is a 'bridge' between accommodation provided in the weeks and months after the fires and the long-term rebuild of a dwelling. This housing initiative is administered through BRV. STMH aims to help residents get back on their land and into their communities as they begin their rebuilding process.



Sites Inspected: 69



Houses ordered: 50



Houses built: 47



Houses occupied: 40

Rebuild Support Service

STMH data as at 7 April 2021:

Council, in partnership with BRV, established the Rebuild Support Service (RSS) to provide specialised advice to help streamline both planning permit application requirements and advice, and the overall rebuild process.

RSS support includes, but is not limited to:

- Support with planning and rebuilding – including the preparation and submission of a planning permit application.
- Access to Land Use Planners, Environmental Health Officers and Building Surveyors to assist with technical advice to support the permit application process.
- Support to connect residents to organisations and services that offer specialised services such as health and wellbeing case support agencies and financial counselling services.
- Information about financial rebates available to residents who are rebuilding.
- Copy of Title, Property Report, Preliminary Property Assessment, BAL Assessment for their property.

Rebuild Support Service

171	Referrals
60	In Preparation
22	No Permit Required

Assessment and Determination of Planning Permits

120	Planning Applications Lodged
7	Under Assessment
110	Planning Permits Approved

Complex Site Taskforce

BRV established the Complex Site Taskforce (Taskforce). The Taskforce is made up of an independent group of experts to assist property owners of complex sites (for rebuilding on), and will help to identify options for rebuilding on these sites to comply with contemporary building and bushfire safety standards.

For property owners with a complex site, and where an alternative house site is not possible, a voluntary resettlement program is available to owners of high-risk, complex sites, providing the option to sell their property at the 2019 site value (approved by the Government Land Monitor) to the Victorian Government.



Short-term modular housing. Credit: Bushfire Recovery Victoria.

Economic Recovery Working Group

Economic Working Group - Lead Agency: Regional Development Victoria

Economic recovery work continues, on top of the multiple effects of drought and COVID-19. The Working Group continues to meet quarterly to update on progress made and to problem solve these and other emerging challenges.

A range of priority interventions, projects and activities to assist in the recovery efforts have been identified by the Working Group. It is acknowledged that investing in priority programs and projects designed to sustain and create jobs will support investment attraction and stimulate the economy while also giving local businesses and industries the support they need to recover and thrive into the future.

While the impacts of COVID-19 on East Gippsland's recovery has created an additional level of complexity in stabilising the economy and supporting business recovery, several positive indicators of progress are emerging including increased business confidence.

Below is an overview of several of the 21 priority activities and projects in East Gippsland across key response areas. To date \$39.5 million in funding, leveraging \$160 million in investment (10 projects with the private sector - \$10.1 million in funding leveraging \$64 million in investment) projects include:

- \$2.35 million Sailors Grave Brewing
- \$3.3 million Mallacoota Abalone Co-op
- \$2.8 million and \$1.01 million Buchan and Bruthen Streetscapes respectively
- \$0.85 million Envite Invest – Training and Skills for Indigenous Youth

Economic Recovery Program - \$8 million of projects include:

- \$0.5 million Growing Regional Opportunities for Work (GROW)
- \$0.64 million Victorian Apprenticeship Bushfire Recovery Program
- \$2.1 million On-Farm Recovery Support Services to Industry
- Over 1,000 businesses and primary producers have received \$10k to cover lost income

Tourism Recovery

- Tourism Recovery - East Gippsland Tourism Package \$18.5 million
- \$3 million total State investment for the Metung Hot Springs (including \$1.5 million from Bushfire Recovery)
- \$3.5 million Snowy River Rail Bridge

Small Business Recovery

For the past 12 months, Small Business Victoria has had several business advisory mentors working one-on-one to support business operators. East Gippsland accounts for over half of the indirectly bushfire-impacted business in Victoria and currently, the Small Business Mentoring program has seen 3,334 business engagements with 769 local businesses receiving further tailored assistance. Recovery is progressing with 604 local businesses no longer requiring support, two in the transition phase and 70 still requiring business assistance.

[Click here to watch a video about Helping Small Business – Small Business Recovery Grants in Mallacoota.](#)



Caravan set up at Mallacoota Foreshore Caravan Park, Mallacoota. Credit: Destination Gippsland 'Little Wonders' campaign (Bushfire recovery funded campaign).

Visitor Economy

Tourism campaigns led by both Destination Gippsland and Visit Victoria encouraging people to visit the region are showing positive results. The Gippsland “All Kinds of Wonder” campaign started in October 2020 and will run through to June 2021. Summer visitation into East Gippsland off the back of this, (also spurred by travel restrictions due to COVID-19) has seen the majority of accommodation, tour and hospitality providers fully booked, a pattern that has largely been sustained through to Easter. Regional expenditure has rebound with January 2021 spend exceeding pre-bushfire levels (up by \$5.7M)*

**Spendmap: data reporting on credit card spending in East Gippsland by visitors from outside the region.*

Employment

Job vacancy rates are at an all-time high, largely due to COVID-19, and are impacting employers’ ability to recruit and train staff, resulting in some businesses limiting their opening hours and service offerings.

The continued engagement and work of the Economic Recovery Working Group will enable an understanding of the impact that various government-supported programs and initiatives is achieving regarding improving economic conditions in East Gippsland.



Mallacoota Boardwalk.



Horse Riders on the Beach in Mallacoota. Credit: Destination Gippsland ‘Little Wonders’ campaign (Bushfire recovery funded campaign).



Aerial of the Entrance to the Gippsland Lakes, Lakes Entrance. Credit: Destination Gippsland ‘Little Wonders’ campaign (Bushfire recovery funded campaign).



Banksia Bluff, Cape Conran, Parks VIC.



Natural Environment Recovery Working Group

Lead Agency: Department of Environment, Land, Water and Planning

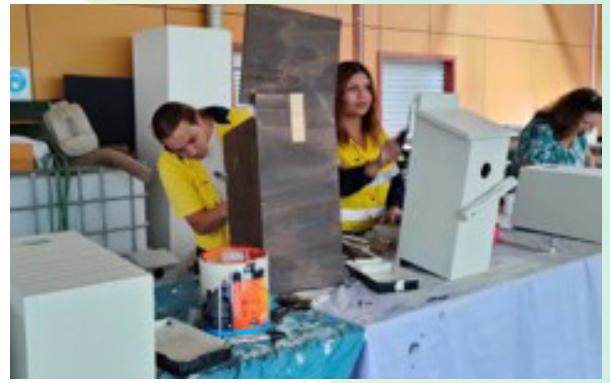
With the coordination and collaboration between partner agencies and communities continuing to strengthen, the Natural Environment Recovery Working Group has delivered many important outcomes since the last report.

With favourable weather conditions helping recovery efforts, some of the highlights from the program include:

- The Bushfire Biodiversity Relief and Early Recovery program now includes \$54.5M of State and Commonwealth funding providing recovery actions for wildlife and biodiversity impacted by the fires across the state.
- The largest ground shooting program undertaken in Victoria has occurred as part of recovery efforts with the reinstatement of Southern Ark operations.
- Studies and assessments completed on eight threatened frog species in East Gippsland riparian areas.
- The Community Bushfire Connection webpage established and live for community contribution <https://www.communitybushfireconnection.com.au/>
- East Gippsland post-bushfire revegetation guide published.
- Over 90% (7,100km) of roadside hazardous tree assessments completed, including roads and walking tracks.
- Over 80% (20 sites) of recreation sites assessed and many re-established.
- 50 nest boxes constructed and installed for Glossy Black Cockatoos.
- 42,000 flathead released in the Gippsland Lakes, as part of improving recreational fishing opportunities and bushfire recovery.
- The Drought Employment Program employed 57 farmers or community members impacted by the bushfires from across Gippsland.
- Over 90% of fencing along waterways has been reconstructed or repaired.



Low burning cultural fire in Kalimna West. Credit: GLaWAC.



Recovery crew preparing nest boxes for installation on Country. Credit: GLaWAC.

Culture and Healing

Joints Leads: Gunaikurnai Land and Waters Aboriginal Corporation (GLaWAC) and BRV

On a local level, impacted Traditional Owners and Registered Aboriginal Party groups have been working together to lead culture and healing recovery in East and Far East Gippsland. These groups are also reporting into and working with the State governance structure.

Despite COVID-19 restrictions, face-to-face consultation was able to occur to support and identify priorities for Aboriginal communities. Through recovery, Aboriginal Victorians are to be supported to flourish through the practice of cultural knowledge that informs their physical and mental wellbeing and spiritual health in fire-affected areas.

Identified priorities that will guide local actions over the next 12 to 18 months for Aboriginal Culture and Healing recovery include:

- Cultural engagement with education
- Respect for land practices
- Connection to Country
- Strengthen participation in employment opportunities

Community support is also a high priority with Aboriginal communities in affected areas to receive funding to deliver health, mental health and wellbeing activities as determined by the community themselves. Communities will be supported to prosper through economic initiatives, business ownership, resilience, and economic development.

Bushfire Recovery Officers at Gippsland and East Gippsland Aboriginal Co-operative (GEGAC) are providing case management support to the Aboriginal community and are working on community healing projects including a fishing day, an equine therapy day for women and an arts and crafts day at the Keeping Place.

Council and BRV staff are working alongside the community, local agencies, and Aboriginal elders to apply for funding for projects including:

- The restoration of Windarra in Buchan - this large old homestead will be used to deliver health and social services to the surrounding Aboriginal communities (taking service to the people), with a longer-term vision of eco-tourism, raising livestock and becoming sustainable.
- An upcoming project titled 'Custodians of Fires' provides Aboriginal women's perspective and examines their role in caring for Country and the environment through *Custodians of Fire, Connection to Country, Storytelling & Art*, which will be exhibited throughout Gippsland.
- Natural resources environmental service Envite attained funding through the Local Economic Recovery (LER) Program – Regional Economic Stimulus and Resilience Grants, and has advertised positions for young and Indigenous trainees in Orbest and Far East Gippsland (Mallacoota and Cann Valley) with projects and traineeships commencing in April 2021.



East Buchan dig site collecting pollen samples to better understand fire regimes of the old people. Credit: GLaWAC.



Mick Farnham, Cultural Fire Leader, at a recent cultural burn in Kalimna West. Credit: GLaWAC.



RAP Manager Russell Mullett, and Prof Bruno David from Monash University at the East Buchan dig site. Credit: GLaWAC.

Information and Communication

Community Recovery Hubs

Community Recovery Hubs have been established in fire-affected areas across East Gippsland to provide a local access point for vital recovery services. The network of five Hubs that have been established provide a long-term presence to support and drive recovery efforts in bushfire-affected areas.

Five Hubs are operated by BRV in the areas of:

- Buchan district
- Cann Valley district
- Orbost district
- Mallacoota district
- Sarsfield and district

Hub Support Services

Hubs provide a locally based, central access point for anyone in the community who needs support in their recovery journey. Services at each Hub are specially tailored to reflect how those services are currently delivered and accessed at a local level – which is what community-led recovery is all about.

The Hubs offer access to a wide range of recovery support and advice and practical support for individuals, not for profit organisations and businesses, including:

- Access to experienced, professional, locally based Hub staff who support people in the community to navigate the service system (taking the burden off the individuals).
- Information about available grant opportunities, financial relief, and support.
- A meeting space for referrals to:
 - Case support and case management
 - Financial counselling
 - Trauma and personal support counselling
 - Legal advice
 - Mental health and wellbeing support

- Aboriginal health and community services (culturally safe)
- Planning and rebuilding support services.
- Information and guidance about a wide range of topics and programs to support recovery, including clean-up programs, short term modular homes and agricultural services.
- Community building and recovery events and activities.
- A welcoming, dedicated local space for the community to meet (especially in areas where local infrastructure and facilities were lost).
- Rooms to host community meetings and local recovery events.
- Mobile / outreach services to rural and remote communities and residents unable to access the Hub itself.

Hub Activities

The Hub network commenced operation in May 2020. In that time there have been:

- 7,752 people have made contact with or accessed a Hub;
- 4,383 people have engaged with services through a Hub; and
- 589 people have been referred to support services to ensure that they have a coordinated response to the supports that they require.

The service approach offered through the Hubs continues to evolve as the recovery process continues. Taking services out of the Hubs and into the community has become an important part of the operation with approximately 120 outreach activities undertaken to date. Hub engagement and activity-based opportunities designed to engage community members that may not have identified that they require support or ongoing connection with services are a current area of focus for the Hub network.



Case Support

Bushfire Case Support was established to connect impacted individuals, both directly and indirectly impacted, with a range of support services. Key issues for case support include access to grants, clean-up, mental health, financial counselling and temporary housing requests. Approximately 1,560 individuals and families have been assisted by case support in East Gippsland. This accounts for almost 75% of all individuals and families that have accessed the Case Support Program. As of 13 April 2021, 1,126 people continue to access support with the frequency and complexity of support varying due to individual needs.

Communications

In a time that was already challenging for our region, COVID-19 restrictions limited the ability to deliver recovery services and information. Many of what would have been face-to-face community meetings and recovery services shifted online. Council moved from a dedicated bushfire recovery newsletter to including recovery information in the *My Council, My Community Newsletter*. The *My Council, My Community Newsletter* could, and can, be subscribed to online, with information sent directly to community inboxes, contact-free.

Identifying the need for more tailored communications that access local communication channels relied on by our communities, District Recovery Updates commenced in late 2020 for impacted districts. These Updates contain local-specific information and updates on recovery projects, infrastructure, events and more from Council, and relevant Shire-wide information such as available grants and financial support, rebuilding information and support and more.

Council-specific communications are complemented by state information from BRV who have provided a range of program communications and the CRC Recovery Network Update. This Update is in the form of a fortnightly newsletter and is provided directly to CRCs and other relevant agencies.

Stories of Recovery, a compilation of stories of impacted residents, was also developed by BRV in January 2021.

Council's Place Managers, the BRV Bushfire Recovery Hubs, CRCs and the community itself play a critically important role in sharing information. In several parts of East Gippsland 'word of mouth' continues to be a critical part of how information is shared.



A wealth of information was available for residents, visitors and agencies at the Bushfire Recovery Centre in Bairnsdale.

Next Steps – East Gippsland Bushfire Recovery Committee

As outlined in the previous sections, the communities of East Gippsland have come a long way since the Black Summer Fires of 2019/20, and much has been achieved. In all of this, the impacts of COVID-19 cannot be underestimated both on business and communities. Expert advice is indicating that the wellbeing recovery of communities, on the whole, is delayed and that requires us to rethink the expected stages and timing of the recovery journey.

Many of the actions that were set out in the East Gippsland Fires 2019-2020 Recovery Plan have been completed, although many are continuing, for example:

- Community Conversations and local incident management planning.
- Support for landholders to rebuild houses and other structures.
- Mental health and other wellbeing supports
- Business support and delivery of economic development projects.
- Information and support through the Bushfire Recovery Hubs and the case support program.
- Supporting community development.
- Work with CRCs to develop and implement community recovery plans, including seeking funding to support implementation.

There are other areas of work that have become more prominent in discussions with communities about their priorities for recovery. For example, a stronger focus on resilience and preparedness for future events has been identified by a number of communities as central to their recovery journey.

The East Gippsland Bushfire Recovery Committee will continue to meet to coordinate recovery support, monitor progress and assist in resolution of any issues that arise while continuing to provide recovery services. We will update the East Gippsland Fires 2019-2020 Recovery Plan to focus on what is required to support recovery over the coming years. This will include:

- Recognition and removal of the actions completed to date.
- A review to identify current and future recovery needs.
- Inclusion of priorities identified by CRCs (to the extent these are relevant to a regional recovery plan).
- Development of an evaluation plan to better track how recovery is progressing and identify where additional support is needed or where communities or individuals are ready to transition to the next stage.
- Identification of opportunities for improvement in the delivery of recovery support as part of this event and future events.

Action Plans and Grants Listing

Each of the Recovery Pillars have a dedicated Action Plan that identifies the recovery action priorities.

These include the:

- Economic Environment Recovery Action Plan
- Natural Environment Recovery Action Plan
- Built Environment Recovery Action Plan
- Social Recovery Action Plan
- Culture and Healing Recovery Action Plan

For each of the actions plans, a report on the status of actions has been prepared. These reports and a listing of Building and Infrastructure Grants can be accessed by going to:

Bushfire Recovery Plans and Reports
(eastgippsland.vic.gov.au)

Or by contacting Council on (03) 5153 9500 and requesting a copy.