

*rebuilding a stronger community...*



## Evaluation of Yarra Ranges Council Municipal Recovery Response to the **February 2009 Bushfires**

June 2012

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## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

*nlt consulting* would like to thank sincerely everyone who contributed to this review. It was clearly difficult for many people to re-visit their experiences in the aftermath of the 2009 Victorian bushfires. Many people spent considerable time discussing with us their hopes and their ideas for the future. In this report, we have attempted to reflect these experiences and have used the wide range of ideas to assist in constructing a better planning framework and preparation for the future.

In an event of such scale and devastation, not all things will go to plan and not everyone will be satisfied with the outcomes. However, there was a unanimous view from those consulted that Council staff worked incredibly hard and did the best they possibly could to support individuals and communities in their recovery. The commitment of staff to work with all people in the community to rebuild and renew local communities was clear. Staff need to be proud of their efforts. As one individual from a not-for-profit agency indicated:

*“The Shire staff are the unsung heroes of the recovery process.”*

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## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

### INTRODUCTION

The Black Saturday bushfires of 7 February 2009, and the weeks that followed, were the worst experienced in Victoria's history. They caused the deaths of 173 people across the state, with many more injured and displaced. In Yarra Ranges, 13 people lost their lives. Many people lost homes and properties and communities were deeply affected by the devastation. The fires also had a significant impact on public property and community infrastructure, as well as a substantial environmental impact.

The total cost of recovery for Yarra Ranges was almost \$15 million. Most of these costs were covered by the Federal Government Natural Disaster Resilience Grants Scheme, with additional grants from the State Government and non-government sources: the Municipal Association of Victoria (MAV), Bendigo Bank and private donations. While most of the recovery costs expended by Yarra Ranges Council have now been repaid, over \$1 million (\$1,159,077) has not been reimbursed. The acquittal process is ongoing.

Consistent with the role of local government as outlined in the *Emergency Management Act 1986*, Council activated its *Emergency Management Plan* in the hours following the event, taking a leadership role. Since then Council has supported individuals and communities in their personal recovery, restoring community infrastructure and managing the impact on the natural environment. The recovery effort has required enormous resources and effort across the whole organisation.

In the three years since the event, Council has made significant changes to its emergency recovery management strategies and developed more robust systems that can be activated if an emergency of this scale occurs in the future. To assist this process and to capitalise on learning from the 2009 experience, Council commissioned this formal evaluation. The outcomes will be used to inform the development of the *Yarra Ranges Emergency Inception Plan* and future action in relation to community recovery following major emergency.

### METHODOLOGY

This evaluation focussed primarily on the efforts in the first year of recovery. The objectives of the review were to:

1. Assess the effectiveness of actions undertaken to assist fire-affected communities in their recovery;
2. Identify opportunities for future improvement or development of emergency relief/recovery actions;
3. Identify outstanding issues requiring resolution to progress affected communities' recovery; and
4. Identify significant opportunities to improve future emergency recovery efforts.

This evaluation is primarily qualitative in nature and drew its information from:

- Consultation with key stakeholders through face-to-face interviews, telephone interviews and discussion groups. A total of 75 people were consulted, with interactions based on five specific questions:
  - What were the key achievements?
  - What was not successful and/or what were the key challenges?
  - What improvements for future planning and emergency management could be put in place?
  - What are the outstanding issues/concerns still to be addressed? and
  - What could be put in place in future to assist in future planning?

- A review of documents, including:
  - Minutes of committees, sub-committees and working groups;
  - Finance reports;
  - Newsletters and correspondence;
  - Yarra Ranges Council and Victorian Government reports, plans and strategies; and
  - Related research.

The evaluation report is based on the integrated recovery approach implemented by Yarra Ranges Council, focusing on the four pillars of community recovery: Community Recovery; Rebuilding; Natural Environment & Public Infrastructure; and Economic Recovery. It is important to note that Council has made significant changes to its approach and plans for emergency recovery and response since 2009, including developing a *Recovery Inception Plan*. This Plan details the roles and responsibilities of staff from each area, estimates the resources required if a large scale disaster occurs and includes necessary data support materials. These changes are consistent with the recommendations of this evaluation, and some were implemented as evaluation findings emerged.

## EXTENT OF THE DAMAGE IN YARRA RANGES

### Community Impacts

Across Yarra Ranges, 11 communities were burnt, with a total of 304 homes destroyed or damaged to the extent that people could not remain living in them. A further 636 buildings – 161 private buildings, 18 dwellings that were not principal residences, and 457 garages, sheds and carports – were either destroyed or significantly damaged. In addition, 844 kms of boundary fencing and 264 signs were destroyed.

#### *Property damage by township*

| Township       | Homes destroyed or damaged |
|----------------|----------------------------|
| Chum Creek     | 94                         |
| Steels Creek   | 92                         |
| Yarra Glen     | 51                         |
| Dixons Creek   | 31                         |
| Healesville    | 19                         |
| Toolangi       | 6                          |
| Coldstream     | 4                          |
| Tarrawarra     | 4                          |
| Gruyere        | 1                          |
| Belgrave South | 1                          |
| Yering         | 1                          |
| <b>Total</b>   | <b>304</b>                 |

Source: Yarra Ranges Council

### Businesses Impacts

Local businesses estimated that they incurred a total of almost \$50 million in lost assets and revenue, with approximately 630 jobs directly threatened. Tourism industries in the area were hardest hit, with monetary losses arising from loss of trading. Four accommodation facilities were destroyed with seven damaged, and one tourism activity operator destroyed with five damaged. Wineries were also affected, with one destroyed and a further 32 damaged.

## Personal Impacts

It is impossible to quantify the impact that the fires had on individuals directly and indirectly. However, many were assisted directly with case management, counselling and personal support and accommodation, and provided with access to community activities and other help. This included:

- Counselling and personal support, where over 500 individuals accessed bushfire-related counselling from a range of community health and family support agencies; and
- Emergency accommodation, where 215 instances of support were provided to individuals (35%), couples (13%) and families (52%).

As at April 2010:

- 42% had secured private rental;
- 24% were back on their land (in temporary accommodation – caravans/portables);
- 10% were living with family/friends;
- 8% had purchased a new home;
- 8% were in public housing; and
- 5% had rebuilt their homes.

Specific data about individuals from Yarra Ranges accessing case management and counselling services is not available. The Eastern Victorian Bushfire Case Management Service (VBCMS) had approximately 824 cases, peaking in March 2009 with 629 active cases across 40 case managers. While all these cases are now closed, the Bushfire Communities Support Program continued to provide support and assistance until July 2012. Counselling services are available through a voucher system for affected residents, accessed by registering with the Department of Human Services (DHS).

## UNDERSTANDING THE RECOVERY PROCESS

Recovery occurs in stages, so strategies to support communities and individuals should focus on recovery activities that are tailored to individuals' capacities to respond<sup>1</sup>. The National Principles for Disaster Recovery provide an important overview of effective recovery processes:

*"... the empowerment of individuals and communities to manage their own recovery. Consequently, individuals and agencies involved in community development in recovery from disaster have a very clear role to support and facilitate individual and community recovery. In so doing positive community outcomes are promoted."*<sup>2</sup>

These guidelines indicate that disaster recovery is most effective when:

- Management arrangements recognise that recovery from disaster is a complex, dynamic and protracted process;
- Agreed plans and management arrangements are well understood by the community and all disaster management agencies;
- Recovery agencies are properly integrated into the disaster management arrangements;

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<sup>1</sup> Cube and Turning Point Crisis Management, 2011

<sup>2</sup> Australian Attorney-General's Department (2011)

- Community service and reconstruction agencies have input into key decision making;
- Conducted with the active participation of the affected community;
- Recovery services are provided in a timely, fair, equitable and flexible manner; and
- Supported by training programs and exercises.<sup>3</sup>

The Disaster Social Process Theory<sup>4</sup> was used by Yarra Ranges to support its staff and assist the community to understand how communities function normally and in times of stress, and to develop and implement recovery strategies. This model indicates that communities experience different stages of development, associated with normal functioning and with functioning in times of trauma and stress. It also provides guidance on how best to help and support communities and individuals during and following disasters.

## ROLE OF LOCAL GOVERNMENT IN EMERGENCY MANAGEMENT

The key components of emergency management are defined under Section 4A of the Emergency Management Act as:

- *Prevention* – eliminating or reducing the incidence or severity of emergencies, and mitigating their effects;
- *Response* – dealing with emergencies and providing rescue and immediate relief services; and
- *Recovery* – assisting people and communities affected by emergencies to achieve a proper and effective level of functioning.

Council's core business is central to the recovery process. This includes wastewater management, building approvals and notices, monitoring public health, managing the natural environment on public land, delivering universal services for the whole community and, for the more vulnerable, targeted services. These functions are supported by State Government legislation and regulations. Yarra Ranges has also invested in developing its communities, building local capacity through leadership programs and working with local businesses to build local economies.

Local government has a clear, mandated role, under the Emergency Management Act, to contribute to the response, relief and recovery phases of emergencies. This includes:

- Administering and enforcing State Government legislation and policies;
- Supporting key emergency response agencies such as the Department of Sustainability and Environment (DSE), Country Fire Authority (CFA) and DHS;
- Discretionary policies through instruments such as local laws, and the adoption of state planning scheme controls such as overlays; and
- Coordinating recovery at the local level.

Following the 2009 bushfires, Victoria updated its approach to emergency management – the *Emergency Management Manual Victoria* (EMMV). This included strengthening recovery planning, placing equal emphasis on the three phases of emergency management.

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<sup>3</sup> *ibid*, 2011: 3

<sup>4</sup> Gordon (2004)

## IMMEDIATE RESPONSE

Yarra Ranges activated its Municipal Emergency Coordination Centre (MECC) at 3.30 pm on 7 February 2009. Given the scope and complexity of the fires, which continued for a protracted period, the centre remained open until Wednesday 4 March 2009.

Relief Centres were established in Coldstream and Lilydale from 6.00 pm on Saturday 7 February, during the event. The next day, additional Relief Centres were established in Yarra Glen and Healesville, with other centres opened at Kilsyth and Knox to support people who were evacuated as the event continued.

The Relief Centres at Healesville and Yarra Glen became Recovery Centres with the formal transition from relief to recovery. Healesville remained open until 27 February 2010, when recovery services were consolidated at a single centre in Yarra Glen. This centre remained open until 31 August 2010, when Council transferred its operations from the Yarra Glen Memorial Hall to the Yarra Glen Community Fire Relief Centre. This centre continued to provide recovery services for 18 months, closing in April 2011. It was the only Recovery Centre managed by a Council – centres in other municipalities were managed by DHS.

The regional office of DHS supported this management arrangement:

*“We have a lot confidence in Yarra Ranges – they were exemplary. We had no complaints from people in the community or from agencies.” (DHS Eastern Regional Office)*

The Recovery Centres were a base for immediate advice and financial assistance and, later, ongoing support. Services included:

- Insurance;
- Financial support;
- Centrelink emergency relief;
- Access to material aid (although given the volume, these were located outside the centres);
- Assistance with and access to a range of Council services – planning, water safety and health advice; and
- Counselling and individual support services.

## STRUCTURE AND PLANNING

Yarra Ranges Council has a long history of response and recovery planning and has worked consistently over many years to engage its community in preparing for natural disasters. However, the scale of this disaster meant that plans and strategies in place before 2009 needed to be continually revised due to the unprecedented impact of the fires.

The event revealed that there was a lack of detailed, documented recovery processes, including roles and functions. Council staff indicated that, before 2009, scenario planning did not take into account the enormity of a disaster such as Black Saturday. Because preparations had focussed mainly on planning and activation of Relief Centres and the MECC, staff felt they had limited understanding of what was involved in delivering sustained and long-term recovery services after a major event.

At the same time, community support agencies willing to participate in recovery activities had not participated in disaster recovery training. Consequently they had limited understanding of expectations and how they fitted into the recovery structure, and felt unprepared for the work required. Staff and agencies adjusted quickly, given their long-standing working relationships, goodwill and competence. However many actions undertaken were, by necessity, determined ‘on the run’. This highlighted the need for more detailed planning,

expectations established through Memoranda of Understanding (MOUs) with external agencies, and participation of community agencies in training.

Despite the lack of preparedness, Yarra Ranges Council established a Municipal Recovery Structure within three weeks of Black Saturday, with a Municipal Recovery Committee (MRC) to oversee and direct recovery activities. The recovery structure had a series of sub-committees responsible for different areas of community recovery – Community Recovery; Rebuilding; Natural Environment & Public Infrastructure; and Economic Recovery. These sub-committees had a number of working groups supporting them.

Membership of the MRC (and the working groups and sub-committees) comprised relevant staff, a range of agencies and coopted community members. The Terms of Reference for each reflected priorities identified by the membership, with leadership from Yarra Ranges staff. The exception was the Community Reference Group, where an open invitation was issued to the community to recruit interested residents.

Feedback from this evaluation indicated that, overall, the recovery structure was successful. Specific features considered to be effective were:

- *Comprehensive nature:* it spanned the four pillars of recovery and included the range of agencies and concerns that needed to be addressed;
- *High level of accountability in the organisation:* the sub-committees were the responsibility of the Directors in charge of the relevant work areas, or in the case of Economic Recovery, the Executive Officer directly responsible for this area. This meant streamlined decision making and minimal 'red-tape';
- *Coordination through the MRC:* this committee ensured that all activities were coordinated, reducing duplication of effort and facilitating communication and cooperation across all committees;
- *Building on existing networks and expertise:* staff who had established links and networks in the community and/or had specific expertise were seconded to work in the recovery process across departments. This meant that work could commence quickly and local knowledge could be utilised fully;
- *It was consistent with the culture of the organisation:* it did not impose a completely different way of working; and
- *Small teams were established in each of the designated areas:* this provided a supportive working environment, where staff could share information easily and control processes and outcomes.

A *Recovery Action Plan* was also developed rapidly, with the first draft completed on 5 March 2009 and the final draft in June 2009. The Plan was reviewed after six months, in July-August 2009. Both these documents provided an overview of the actions that Council had completed and a framework for future actions.

The structure was comprehensive. It allowed for an integrated approach across the organisation and encouraged external agencies and community members to participate. However, it also resulted in high expectations to attend meetings and involved considerable work. Staff indicated that, in some instances, email or teleconferencing could have been substituted. There was also some confusion and overlap between the roles and responsibilities of the Community Reference Group and the Projects and Events Working Group. These two groups could have been combined, providing improved opportunities to further use the skills of the Community Reference Group.

## SUMMARY OF ACTIONS OF THE SUB-COMMITTEES, WORKING GROUPS AND TEAMS

Recovery activities occurred across the areas of responsibilities of the four sub-committees. Organisationally, these activities included:

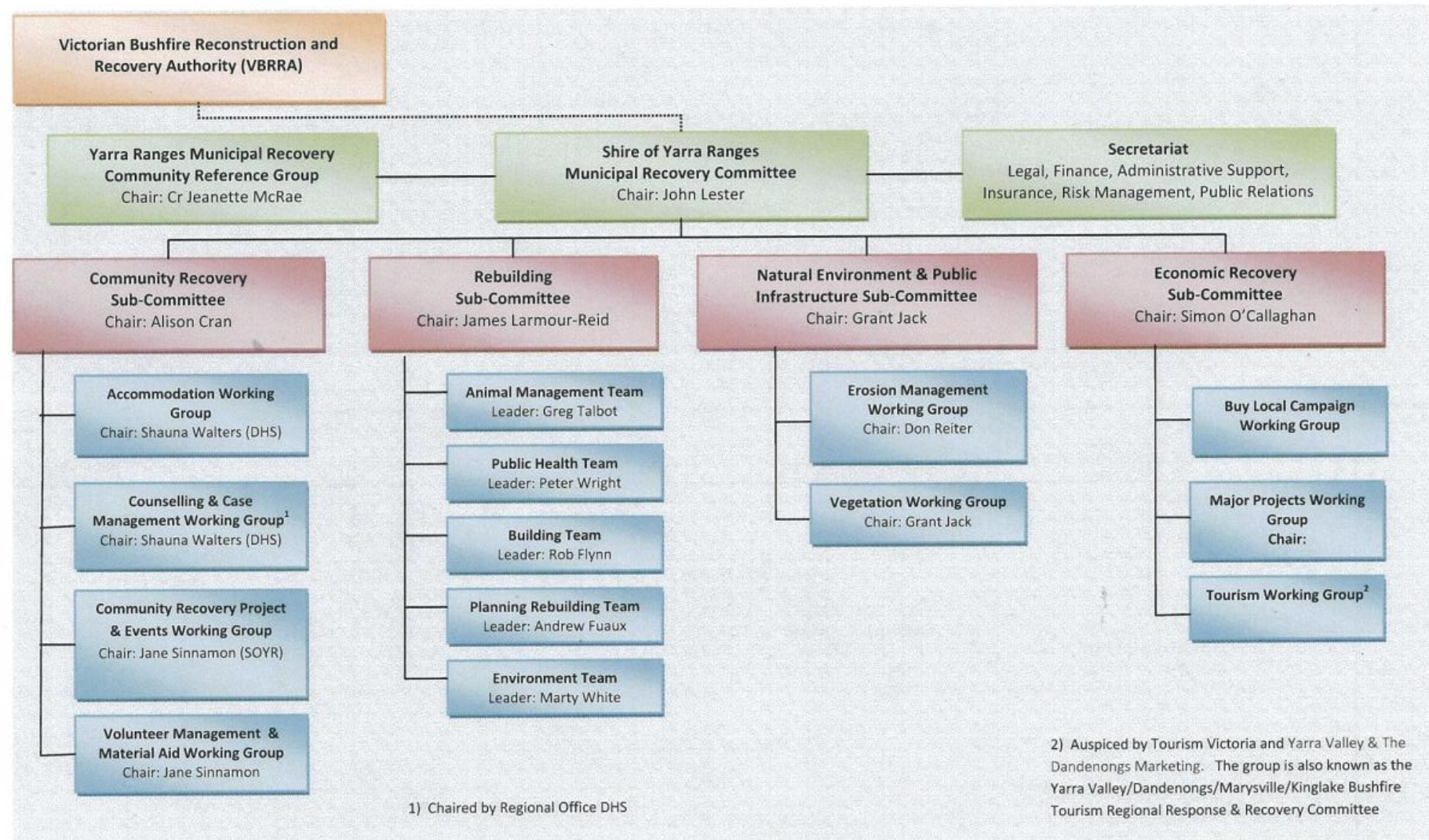
1. *Health Team*, which was responsible for the health and wellbeing of the community:
  - Inspecting 240 houses and businesses to assess damage to facilities such as water tanks, septic tanks, accommodation premises and food premises;
  - Coordinating a range of activities required to support the installation of sanitation, requiring a dedicated Environmental Health Officer (EHO);
  - Filling two extra positions to support the backlog of day-to-day health department operations.
2. *Local Laws Team*, which was responsible for animal management:
  - Coordinating, managing and distributing food and water for stock and domestic animals in the days immediately following the fires;
  - Operating on a 24-hour roster for seven weeks; and
  - Supporting fencing work, including installing over 6 km of temporary fencing to contain stock on fire-damaged properties and distributing 12 km of fencing wire and star pickets for temporary fencing.
3. *Building Department*, which was responsible for supporting the inspection of damaged buildings and structures:
  - Undertaking 451 inspections, 333 on private property, resulting in 41 combined emergency/minor works building orders and 221 minor work building orders being issued (all orders have been finalised);
  - Working overtime (equating to seven days a week) for eight weeks, with one officer, on a rotational basis from neighbouring municipalities, assisting with the day-to-day operations of the Building Department and the recovery process; and
  - Operating over two years with a dedicated team to complete the work.
4. *Planning Department*, which was responsible for the rebuilding and issuing of temporary dwelling permits:
  - Putting in place a 'fast-track' planning process that offered residents professional advice to expedite the processing of any application or consent, with fees waived;
  - Using a 'case management' approach where each landholder who contacted Council was invited to meet with Council officers and given specific advice relating to their rebuilding needs and particular site circumstances. The officers attending the first meeting continued to manage the request from pre-application advice and application lodgement through to the final decision; and
  - Processing 116 planning applications for bushfire-affected properties.
5. *Environment and Public Infrastructure Team*, which worked to restore the natural environment and repair damage to public land (fires affected 20% of the land in Yarra Ranges – 48,289.96 hectares):
  - Opening and clearing roads, hampered by the ongoing threat of the fires for three weeks after Black Saturday;
  - Managing erosion, working firstly on public land to prevent erosion and land slips, and then with private property owners to prevent further erosion. This work continued over two years and included managing erosion caused by rain and the environmental weeds that emerged through the re-growth process;
  - Clearing private property trees, where Council arborists worked with property owners to assess the safety of their trees (Council made this process as simple as possible, waiving fees); and
  - Coordinating a significant Landcare project in partnership with local communities.

6. *Economic Recovery Working Group*, which worked with local businesses to assist in their revival and established three key areas of work:
  - The Buy Local Campaign;
  - Major Projects; and
  - Regional Tourism Working Group, also known as the Yarra Valley / Dandenongs / Marysville / Kinglake Bushfire Regional Response and Recovery Committee, chaired by Yarra Ranges Regional Marketing.
7. *Volunteer coordination and management of Material Aid Working Group*: Yarra Ranges was overwhelmed with offers of support from the community. In all, 1,736 pledges of help were received, with offers such as accommodation, transport, water, entertainment and activities. Volunteer coordination tasks involved establishing a range of projects in partnership with community volunteer organisations such as Rotary and local churches. They included:
  - Supporting the Adopt a Shipping Container project, led by members of the Yarra Glen Community Fire Relief Group. Council officers assisted with identification of storage space for containers prior to the distribution of the containers, which provided safe storage for people managing their properties;
  - Renovating a disused tennis pavilion in Dixons Creek to provide temporary accommodation for up to 20 volunteers;
  - Managing the Lilydale material aid distribution facility; and
  - Supporting the Volunteer Fencing Program and Yarra Valley Rotary Tool Library.
8. *Community recovery*, which involved a range of community development activities aimed at supporting the health and wellbeing recovery of individuals and communities. Council employed a community development worker to coordinate and organise activities.

Over 100 activities and events were held in 2009, 2010 and 2011 at venues across the municipality. They involved more than 7,000 participants and included community information sessions, community events, community recovery projects and support for service providers. The most popular events were in 2009 and included the 'thank you' picnic for emergency workers (1,500 people), the family football day in July 2009 (1,000 people) and the rebuilding expo at the Lilydale Showgrounds in July 2009 (2,500 people). Sessions on personal and community recovery conducted by Dr Rob Gordon, a clinical psychologist, were attended by over 700 people between April 2009 and June 2010.
9. *Support for young people*: in 2010, a youth worker was funded for three years to conduct a range of activities to support vulnerable young people living in bushfire-affected areas. These activities are still underway.
10. *Support for older people*: specific support was also provided to isolated and frail older people to help them develop fire plans in preparation for the 2010-2011 fire season.



## Yarra Ranges Recovery Structure





## MANAGEMENT OF THE COMMUNITY RECOVERY PROCESS

The scale of the disaster meant that the resources of all levels of government were required to plan, manage and work with communities in the recovery process. This meant that structures, systems and responses were established outside existing frameworks and working relationships, including establishment of the Victorian Bushfire Reconstruction and Recovery Authority (VBRRA) and the Victorian Bushfire Case Management Service. Effective partnerships also had to be formed across the levels of government.

Local government had a key role because of its knowledge and understanding of local communities and ability to work with them effectively. This is supported through best practice in recovery management, where the role of local government leading recovery processes in the long term, and working in partnership with community and other organisations, is well documented<sup>5</sup>. It is also consistent with the culture in Victoria, including in Yarra Ranges, where local communities look to local government to provide support and leadership. This assumes that local governments have strong connections with their local communities and the resources to be able to respond, or be provided with adequate resources to undertake this work.

Consultation for this evaluation indicated that the leadership role of Council was not sufficiently acknowledged or respected across government departments and instrumentalities. This resulted in confusion for staff and the community, duplication of effort and in some instances poor decision making. There is a need for the role of local government to be recognised and built into the work of VBRRA and other coordinating authorities. When this did not occur tensions arose, particularly in Yarra Ranges where staff understood their roles and responsibilities in the recovery phase and had clear strategies outlined in the *Municipal Recovery Plan* that was prepared immediately following Black Saturday.

## COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT AND PLANNING PROCESSES

The community planning and engagement processes generated the strongest opinions during this evaluation. The review report includes a detailed analysis. There was confusion in the community and within Council about the approach of Council and the evolving role of VBRRA, with both organisations receiving community development funding and having roles in community planning and development. Residents expected Council to take responsibility for planning and engagement with the community. Yarra Ranges did do this, but so did VBRRA.

This review concluded that both VBRRA and Council were committed to achieving the best outcomes for the community and empowering the affected communities to develop and deliver their own solutions. However, there were fundamental differences in how the two organisations approached this task and these differences were not resolved effectively. There was little connection between the processes, which resulted in confusion in the community and a less than optimal use of resources.

Evidence indicates that community renewal and rebuilding after disasters is most effective when communities control the process themselves and are engaged early on in developing a vision for the future. However, research also demonstrates that communities are often unable to make decisions when they are traumatised or need to focus on personal recovery. This highlights some contradictory aspects of the research.

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<sup>5</sup> Cube and Turning Point Crisis Management, 2011, FEMA, 2010

The reviewer believes that the solution to effective community engagement and rebuilding in recovery lies in understanding the complexity of community engagement processes. Community development practice demonstrates clearly that empowering communities is a process that can be considered along a continuum.

### Key Lessons

1. In the event of large-scale tragedy, all staff must understand what to expect when working with individuals and communities that are traumatised. The broader community and community leaders, including politicians, need to understand the collective grief process and how communities will behave and respond. This can assist in decision making and ensure that the plans and processes agreed to before a disaster are adhered to under the pressure caused by the crisis.
2. Community leaders and politicians will also be traumatised and may be unable to participate actively in the recovery process due to personal circumstances. Protocols and agreed processes need to include deputising arrangements and back-up plans.
3. Communities need to be actively involved, from an early stage, in developing a vision for the future – this can bring hope and a framework for bridging differences in the community. However, there will always be different (and sometimes very strong and conflicting) views about how the vision is to be implemented. Continuous dialogue is critical and includes:
  - Regular checking with the community to gain ongoing agreement about strategies to achieve the vision;
  - Opportunities to express differences in well-managed forums;
  - A range of consultation approaches – individual interviews, discussion groups, community forums, informal conversations – that support communities to reach consensus; and
  - Transparent, open and frequent communication.
4. While it is critical to engage and empower communities in their own development, it is also important to recognise that communities comprise individuals who may be experiencing trauma and grief and need to be supported in their recovery. This is a long-term process. Trained and skilled community development workers will be required to support traumatised communities.
5. Community planning needs to balance individuals' desires and wants with the need to rebuild the fabric and infrastructure of the community.
6. Building community resilience is a long-term process that requires ongoing resources. Yarra Ranges needs to continue working with the community to develop agreed approaches to managing disasters as part of the preparation and planning phase.
7. Developing resilient communities begins before any disaster. The evidence across Yarra Ranges and neighbouring municipalities indicates communities that were well functioning before Black Saturday were able to function better sooner than those that were not functioning as well.

## MANAGEMENT OF THE INTERNAL ENVIRONMENT

Disasters and crises are complex and very challenging environments for organisations<sup>6</sup>. The 2009 bushfires caused major disruption to Council's capacity to operate its normal business, manage and support communities and the physical and natural environments, and maintain its budget integrity. Some key actions have been identified, and many have been addressed through development of the *Recovery Inception Plan*. These include:

- *Developing a business continuity strategy*: this requires planning before the event and ensuring that there are sufficient resources to continue normal business and manage the recovery effort simultaneously;
- *Having the right people for the right job*: staff have different skills – some can deal with the intensity of managing the disaster response, while others are better suited to managing business continuity. Both skill sets are important and selecting staff according to their skills is critical. Yarra Ranges now has established position descriptions for emergency management back-up positions to facilitate a smooth process;
- *Having established administrative systems*: a need to establish databases, forms and other administrative tools in the planning phase that can be immediately put into action when required;
- *Leadership*: this means using senior managers and directors to lead the recovery process, as well as ensuring that there is adequate leadership and direction for business continuity – vital for organisational stability and management of staff stress levels. This may mean acknowledging early in the process that the scale is such that managers need to be taken off-line to manage the recovery process; and
- *Supporting staff to understand and manage trauma*: all staff have personal needs and reactions to trauma, whether they are working directly in the recovery process or managing normal business. This is especially the case in Yarra Ranges, where almost 80% of staff live in the municipality.

Council was quick to enact a Crisis Response Strategy to support all staff. This included provision of up to two weeks of leave for staff who were directly affected or lost their homes, and Employee Assistance Program (EAP) sessions for all staff (up to three sessions without cost), as well as flexible working conditions for staff in the weeks and months following the fires. These sessions were also available for Councillors.

## MANAGING THE FINANCES

Grants and other funding available through State Government departments and other sources were critical to supporting the community recovery process. The evaluation identified the need for the funding arrangements to be simplified for future events. Widespread concern was raised regarding the funding model developed by the Victorian Bushfire Appeal Fund (VBAF), which was considered complex, confusing and potentially insensitive to the needs of communities and individuals who were still traumatised. In particular, there was an expectation that communities would drive their own recovery with a requirement for all funding applications to be approved by community members. This posed a number of difficulties:

- Timelines for submissions were usually very short, often with a two to three day turnaround, which restricted opportunities for community consultation. This was compounded by the fact that many

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<sup>6</sup> Tarrant, 2010



community members were managing their own grief and so found it very difficult to make decisions and focus on how resources could be spent on community needs;

- The criteria were often linked to outcomes required by VBBRA or VBAF and did not necessarily match what communities really wanted and needed. Consequently, resources could not be accessed;
- Individual community members or groups were expected to complete submissions for funding themselves. This was unrealistic for many, particularly given the complexity of the submission requirements and the short timelines;
- The criteria and available funds changed constantly, although the changes were often not widely publicised, and it was difficult to keep track;
- Funding was available on an ongoing basis, which meant that writing submissions and acquittals was an ongoing process;
- Arduous reporting requirements to acquit the funding affected both local government and community groups;
- Funding of projects occurred with little or no reference to Council and yet, in many instances, Council was expected to be the funds holder (particularly for unincorporated community groups) and project managers and/or to maintain the project for the longer term; and
- Being an Interface Council and classified as a metropolitan municipality, Yarra Ranges was not eligible for funding such as management of roadsides and public infrastructure damaged by the fires, which was only available for rural municipalities. While this issue was eventually resolved, it was a time-consuming advocacy task for Council.

## CONCLUDING COMMENTS

The impact of the 2009 bushfires was profound for the Yarra Ranges' communities – individuals, staff, the environment and communities as a whole. The evaluation concluded that, while the journey of recovery continues, positive outcomes were achieved as a result of the sustained effort and commitment of Council staff, community agencies, volunteers and residents. The evaluation provided an opportunity for reflection – what worked well, what did not, and what would help to achieve a smoother process if disasters of this intensity occur in the future.

While there is evidence that improved preparation and planning are necessary to facilitate effective recovery processes, consultation highlighted the importance of the role of local government in leading the recovery process. The experience of the 2009 bushfires demonstrates that this is best achieved through a professional approach and the ability to mobilise staff with the skills and knowledge of local communities and environments. Future planning will be strengthened and informed by the experience.

In the words of the staff of the DHS Eastern Metropolitan Regional Office:

*“The leadership role which [Yarra Ranges] Council took was impressive. It had a good model and framework. The immediacy of the response was exceptional. The processes allowed swift mobilisation of staff and volunteers in uncertain times. The fact that [it] is doing this review to inform future planning demonstrates their competence, understanding and commitment.”*

## LIST OF RECOMMENDATIONS

### PLANNING

#### Recommendation 1.

That Yarra Ranges Council continues to develop a more detailed approach to recovery, which includes involvement of local agencies in recovery management training on an ongoing basis.

#### Recommendation 2.

That Yarra Ranges Council advocates with the State and Federal Governments, in partnership with the MAV, for community recovery to be acknowledged as an equal and important component of managing disasters. It is important to acknowledge that the recovery process continues for several years after a major event and requires ongoing and long-term funding.

### STRUCTURE

#### Recommendation 3.

That Yarra Ranges Council modifies its community recovery structure to amalgamate the functions of the Projects and Events Working Group and the Community Reference Group. Other areas of the structure should be retained. Consideration should be given to:

- Streamlining the membership of the working groups and sub-committees to minimise the effort and time involved in attending meetings; and
- Streamlining communication across the organisation to ensure that actions are coordinated and opportunities to undertake joint work are maximised.

### DATA MANAGEMENT SYSTEMS

#### Recommendation 4.

That Yarra Ranges Council continues to work to develop integrated data management systems to be developed to facilitate information sharing between agencies responsible for community recovery. This would include:

- Development of appropriate privacy information release forms for residents to sign at point of registration in Relief Centres to enable sharing of personal information between agencies;
- Integration and sharing of property and accommodation data;
- Inclusion of residents' email addresses in Council's database to facilitate ongoing contact with residents who move outside the municipality temporarily; and
- Inclusion of data sharing in the MOUs with other agencies.

## WORKING WITH COMMUNITIES

### **Recommendation 5.**

That Yarra Ranges Council builds on its work with townships and other communities to continue to strengthen local leadership, local planning and community engagement and to use this work as the basis of community development in the event of a major disaster.

### **Recommendation 6.**

That Yarra Ranges Council establishes protocols and processes to include deputising arrangements and back-up plans if local leaders cannot fulfil their roles during a major disaster.

That Yarra Ranges Council develops guiding principles, based on a community development model and best practice in community recovery processes, which can provide a framework for rebuilding communities in the event of a major disaster. This would include:

- Engaging communities actively, from an early stage, in developing a vision for the future;
- Implementing a range of consultation approaches – individual interviews, discussion groups, community forums, informal conversations – that support communities to reach consensus; and
- Transparent, open and frequent communication.

### **Recommendation 7.**

That Yarra Ranges Council ensures planning for rebuilding communities following a major event takes account of existing plans and visions developed by the local community prior to the event and advocates with State Government to ensure that this approach is respected and implemented.

### **Recommendation 8.**

That Yarra Ranges Council continues to work with local communities across the municipality to develop agreed approaches to managing disasters as part of the preparation and planning phase and advocates with State and Federal Governments for adequate resources to be provided for this purpose, acknowledging that this is critical to recovery processes.

### **Recommendation 9.**

That Yarra Ranges Council continues to explore and discuss, with local communities, the most appropriate models to guide the community recovery process following a major disaster, with a view to developing a range of options that can facilitate action when required. Recognising that no single solution can be applied to all communities and all situations, these options could include consideration of:

- Advantages and disadvantages of different approaches, including when particular models may be indicated;
- Possible roles and responsibilities for elected representatives;
- Governance models, including indications for use; and
- Specifying relationships with existing local community consultative groups and with Council.



## PARTNERSHIPS WITH COMMUNITY AGENCIES

### **Recommendation 10.**

That Yarra Ranges Council develops detailed MOUs with community agencies that outline the roles, responsibilities and operations expected of partner agencies in the community recovery process.

### **Recommendation 11.**

That Yarra Ranges Council includes partner agencies, which have signed MOUs in relation to community recovery, in annual training and preparation for emergency management.

### **Recommendation 12.**

That Yarra Ranges Council explores ways to provide information to community agencies that will assist them in planning and mobilising resources to respond appropriately to community needs in the short, medium and long term.

### **Recommendation 13.**

That Yarra Ranges Council engages Neighbourhood House staff, and other local community networks and organisations, in conflict management and trauma management professional development, to ensure that they are better equipped to deal with emergencies.

## STAFFING

### **Recommendation 14.**

That, in the event of a large-scale disaster, Yarra Ranges Council appoints staff to additional positions immediately and that the Municipal Recovery Manager and Deputy Municipal Recovery Manager are employed full time to manage the disaster from the outset.

### **Recommendation 15.**

That Yarra Ranges Council develops business continuity plans that can be implemented in the event of a large-scale disaster to ensure that the normal business of Council is able to continue while the community recovery occurs. This includes ensuring that positions are backfilled when staff are taken off-line to work on recovery activities.

## COUNSELLING SERVICES

### **Recommendation 16.**

That Yarra Ranges Council revises its approach to the provision of counselling services, as outlined in the *Municipal Recovery Plan*, to develop a system for approved agencies to deliver those services in the event of a disaster.

**Recommendation 17.**

That Yarra Ranges Council develops MOUs with selected local counselling agencies and that these agencies agree to conditions targeted at providing integrated and high quality services, as identified in this review.

**Recommendation 18.**

That Yarra Ranges Council advocates with State and Federal Governments for a review of the resources provided to counselling agencies to support individual recovery following disasters, recognising that counselling is a long-term process and that agencies require direct funding to provide these services, as well as the voucher system for counselling that can be accessed through general practice. This review also needs to consider how best to resource the needs of the most vulnerable residents, including people with existing mental illnesses.

**EVENTS AND ACTIVITIES**

**Recommendation 19.**

That Yarra Ranges Council develops forms and/or other processes for monitoring the effectiveness of events and activities, as part of the planning process for disaster management, to provide information and feedback for ongoing activities and to assist with funds acquittal processes.

**Recommendation 20.**

That Yarra Ranges Council develops MOUs with Neighbourhood Houses and other 'grassroots' agencies (such as township groups) that are strongly linked to local communities and have knowledge of the most vulnerable people in those communities. These MOUs should outline roles and responsibilities in community events and activities to assist community recovery processes.

**COMMUNICATION AND PUBLICITY**

**Recommendation 21.**

That Yarra Ranges Council prepares a publicity masthead specifically for recovery.

**COMMUNITY RECOVERY FUNDING**

**Recommendation 22.**

That Yarra Ranges Council advocates with State Government for the development of guidelines and established community recovery funds, with clear funding criteria, to support the recovery process in the event of a major disaster.

**Recommendation 23.**

That Yarra Ranges Council advocates with the State Government, in partnership with the MAV, for improved systems for community recovery funding which:

- Reduce the number of agencies involved;
- Simplify the financial acquittal requirements;
- Have consistent funding accountability requirements;
- Do not require submissions for funds that are clearly required for community recovery; and

- Provide a framework that specifies the type of funding to be made available to local government as a minimum to support community recovery.

## COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT

### Recommendation 24.

That Yarra Ranges Council, when planning events and activities targeting rebuilding and strengthening communities following a major disaster, includes provision for:

- Ensuring that trained and skilled psychologists and counsellors are available at significant community events;
- Supporting and encouraging local community groups to organise their own events, including supporting applications for funding for these where appropriate; and
- Providing an ongoing forum and other opportunities for community agencies to connect for facilitation coordination and information sharing.

### Recommendation 25.

That Yarra Ranges Council employs qualified and skilled community development workers to support traumatised communities following a major disaster.

## MATERIAL AID AND VOLUNTEER COORDINATION

### Recommendation 26.

That Yarra Ranges Council continues to work with the State Government, Australian Red Cross and Salvation Army to develop more effective strategies for managing material aid and coordinating spontaneous volunteer effort.

### Recommendation 27.

That Yarra Ranges Council identifies and works with local groups and faith communities in each of the main townships that are most appropriate for inclusion in the formal volunteer management process. This includes:

- Developing protocols and strategies for joint work;
- Defining clear roles and responsibilities;
- Participating in emergency management training exercises; and
- Developing strong working relationships and partnerships.

### Recommendation 28.

That Yarra Ranges Council incorporates capacity to include data and information on screening processes for volunteers in the emergency management data management system.

### Recommendation 29.

That Yarra Ranges Council advocates with Federal and State Governments for resources to provide debriefing and formal support for volunteers who cannot access it through an affiliation with a volunteer agency.

## ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT

**Recommendation 30.**

That Yarra Ranges ensures economic recovery is part of planning for future major events, including:

- Commencing the process early;
- Instigating a subcommittee of local businesses to develop and monitor actions to support recovery;
- Linking economic recovery actions to existing economic development strategies and to broader community development actions; and
- Partnering with Federal and State Governments, where appropriate.

**Recommendation 31.**

That Yarra Ranges Council continues to advocate with Federal and State Governments for adequate grants to support economic recovery that:

- Are able to support businesses that sustain a substantial loss of business as a result of a major disaster, without sustaining physical loss to premises or assets;
- Acknowledge that Interface Councils can be rural in nature, with agricultural and rural-related businesses, and therefore be eligible for regional and rural funds to assist recovery; and
- Have flexible funding criteria that address the unique nature of difficulties faced by local communities in the recovery process.

**REBUILDING**

**Recommendation 32.**

That Yarra Ranges Council develops an integrated approach between the planning and building departments to supporting residents affected by an emergency.

**NATURAL ENVIRONMENT AND PUBLIC INFRASTRUCTURE**

**Recommendation 33.**

That Yarra Ranges Council continues to develop a bushland database, with Geographic Information System (GIS) links, that can provide information on every roadside and every reserve.

**Recommendation 34.**

That the *Recovery Inception Plan* provides clear guidelines and policy directions, and outlines the roles and responsibilities of staff in the event of a large-scale disaster.

**Recommendation 35.**

That Yarra Ranges Council resources to develop a Burnt Area Recovery Team, based on the Canadian and USA model, to manage soil erosion quickly to prevent landslide damage.

**Recommendation 36.**

That Yarra Ranges Council develops strategies that will improve the connections with environmental health, particularly in relation to soil erosion and landslides and resulting health problems in communities and on private land.

## SECTION ONE: CONTEXT



## 1. INTRODUCTION

### 1.1. OVERVIEW OF YARRA RANGES

Yarra Ranges Council is located on metropolitan Melbourne's eastern fringe, and covers an area of almost 2,500 square kilometres. It is the seventh largest local government area in Melbourne in terms of population size, and the largest in geographical area. Yarra Ranges can be described as an Interface Council, a municipality that sits at the interface of the urban and rural areas of Melbourne. It is home to over 55 suburbs, townships and small communities in a rural and urban mix. Around 70% of the population live in the urban areas, which represent approximately three per cent of the landmass. The rest of population is distributed across the remaining area.

In the east, these include suburbs such as Chirnside Park and Mooroolbark and the foothills of the Dandenong Ranges, including Mt Evelyn and Montrose. The southern part of the municipality covers the hilltop towns of Belgrave, Upwey and Olinda, with the agricultural areas of Monbulk and Silvan to the north of the ranges. The north of the municipality covers the townships of the Yarra Valley, including Healesville and Yarra Glen, while the west stretches across the rural landscapes and townships of the Upper Yarra region, including Warburton and Yarra Junction.

### 1.2. BACKGROUND TO THIS REVIEW

The 2009 bushfires caused terrible damage in Yarra Ranges, resulting in loss of life, private and public property damage and destruction of houses and businesses. There were also devastating impacts for individuals, communities and businesses. Consistent with Local Government's mandated role in relation to disaster recovery, Yarra Ranges implemented significant, ongoing and coordinated recovery efforts across the municipality. Council established a Municipal Recovery Committee and developed a Municipal Recovery Action Plan to oversee and direct recovery activities in the weeks, months and years following the bushfires. The process was managed through the establishment of a comprehensive structure, which focussed on the four pillars of recovery: Community Recovery; Rebuilding; Environment and Public Infrastructure Re-establishment; and Economic Recovery. This structure drew together Federal, State and Local Government Agencies with local Non-Government Organisations (NGOs), community groups and individuals to collaborate in developing a whole of community response to this disaster. Over the past two years, these groups have worked together, developing and responding to the changing needs of the affected Yarra Ranges' communities.

Yarra Ranges Council has commissioned this evaluation into its Municipal Recovery Action Plan and related responses to the 2009 bushfires. The outcomes of this review will inform the process of the development of the *Yarra Ranges Emergency Inception Plan* and future action in relation to community recovery following a major emergency. The evaluation has focussed primarily on the efforts in the first year of recovery.

### 1.3. OBJECTIVES

The specific objectives of the review were to:

5. Assess the effectiveness of actions undertaken to assist fire-affected communities in their recovery.
6. Identify opportunities for future improvement or development of emergency relief/recovery actions.
7. Identify outstanding issues requiring resolution in order to progress affected communities' recovery.
8. Identify significant opportunities to improve future emergency recovery efforts.

### 1.4. METHODOLOGY

This evaluation is primarily a qualitative assessment. The key methodology was consultation with key stakeholders, through interviews, and focus group discussions.

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#### 1.4.1. DOCUMENT REVIEW

A number of documents were reviewed. These included:

- Minutes of Committees, sub-committees and working groups;
- Finance reports;
- Newsletters;
- Correspondence;
- Council reports;
- Council plans and strategies;
- State Government reports; and
- Related research.

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#### 1.4.2. CONSULTATION PROCESS

Significant emphasis was placed on consultation with key stakeholders through face-to-face and telephone interviews and discussion groups. A list of people consulted is attached (see Appendix One).

In total, 75 people were consulted. Discussion groups were held with each of the sub-committees and working groups. The Municipal Recovery Executive Committee, Community Recovery Committee and the Municipal Recovery Community Reference Group were not brought together to participate in group discussions. However, most members of these groups were interviewed individually, either face-to-face or by telephone, and/or participated in discussions in their roles as members of the respective subcommittees and working groups. Letters were sent to members of the Municipal Recovery Community Reference Group, who were not interviewed face-to-face or involved in other working groups, requesting input. Face-to-face interviews were held with the chairs of committees, sub-committees and working groups.



Key stakeholders included:

- Yarra Ranges' staff;
- Representatives of State Government Departments;
- Community members;
- Community agencies;
- Voluntary agencies;
- Business representatives;
- VBRRA Community Engagement Officer;
- Consultants who worked with Council undertaking specific tasks in the recovery process; and
- Staff of neighbouring councils.

Specific questions guided the interviews and discussion (see Appendix Two). Essentially, these were:

- What were the key achievements;
- What was not successful and/or what were the key challenges;
- What improvements for future planning and emergency management could be put in place; and
- What are the outstanding issues/concerns still to be addressed?

Individuals were also asked to identify specific concerns and solutions to assist future planning. These have been collated in key themes and assessed, including recommended actions for the future.

The interviews were extensive and wide-ranging, with individual interviews extending beyond the specific questions and often taking up to three hours. The reviewer was impressed with the honesty of people and their willingness to participate. Their thoughtful consideration and candid assessments of the recovery process are greatly appreciated and will assist Council to prepare for future emergencies.

## 1.5. STRUCTURE OF THIS REPORT

This report contains three sections:

### *Section One: Context*

This section provides an overview of the impact of the fires and recovery processes, specifically:

- A description of the impact of the 2009 bushfires in Yarra Ranges;
- An overview of recovery processes and best practice; and
- An overview of Yarra Ranges' recovery response.

### *Section Two: Assessment of the Recovery Process*

This section focuses on the key themes that emerged across the whole of consultation, namely:

- The structure, planning and management;
- Staffing and human resources;
- Administration, data management and knowledge management;
- Financial resources;
- Communication;
- Community engagement and planning.

### *Section Three: Activities and specific issues across the four pillars of recovery*

This section focuses on the specific activities and issues for the particular sub-committees and working groups, highlighting the unique issues for these areas. The groups were:

- Community Reference Group;
- Personal Recovery – Counselling and Case Management;
- Projects and Events;
- Volunteer Management and Material Aid;
- Economic Recovery;
- Rebuilding;
- Natural Environment and Public Infrastructure.

There is also a comprehensive Executive Summary document.

## **1.6. LIMITATIONS AND FOCUS OF THIS EVALUATION**

This evaluation has a number of limitations, which have influenced the focus and the recommendations that have emerged from the analysis:

- The disaster management process in Yarra Ranges, as well as across Victoria, was a dynamic process. Many changes have occurred because of the experiences of the 2009 bushfires. In analysing the data, it was difficult at times for those who were involved to identify the actions that occurred prior to the fires and those that occurred afterwards;
- Yarra Ranges Council has made significant changes to its response and recovery planning processes over the past 3 years. This includes implementing a range of relief strategies in the lead up to the 2009/2010 and 2010/2011 bushfire seasons. Consequently, some of the changes identified in this evaluation have already been implemented by Council. This is acknowledged in the formulation of the recommendations;
- The response, relief and recovery phases of disaster management overlapped and were not discrete. This was particularly the case in Yarra Ranges, where the fire threat continued for three weeks after the initial devastation of 07 February 2009 (Black Saturday). Thus, in some places in this report, the information relates to response rather than recovery. Every effort has been made to separate these functions, but the reader needs to take account of the fact that overlaps occurred. This, in fact, reflects the reality of a complex disaster – recovery will commence as soon as the event has occurred and while the response to the emergency is still underway;
- The efforts of Council staff were enormous and continued for over two years. Consequently, there is a significant amount of information. Every effort has been made to summarise and analyse all the relevant data. In some instances, details may not be totally accurate, as the volume of the information was overwhelming and/or it was difficult to locate the most up-to-date information;
- Acknowledging the need to plan for the immediate recovery phase following an event of the scale of the 2009 bushfires, Yarra Ranges has commissioned the development of a Recovery Inception Plan. A range of systems and processes to support the recovery process in the first six weeks following a major disaster are being developed through this Plan. This evaluation has highlighted areas to be included in this Plan. However, the primary focus of this evaluation is the longer-term recovery process.

## 1.7. UNINTENDED CONSEQUENCES OF THIS REVIEW

The review has provided the opportunity for Yarra Ranges' staff and others involved in the recovery process, including community members, to reflect on their experiences and to discuss the impact of the fires for the first time since the intense recovery activities ceased approximately 18 months ago. As such, the review became almost a de-briefing process, enabling individuals to assess their individual responses and the response of the organisation.

## 2. IMPACT OF THE 2009 BUSHFIRES IN YARRA RANGES

### 2.1. SCOPE OF THE BUSHFIRES

The multiple fires that engulfed Victoria on 07 February 2009, Black Saturday, and the weeks that followed, were the worst experienced in Victoria's history. They caused the deaths of 173 people across the State, with many more injured and displaced. Many people lost homes and properties, and communities were deeply affected by the devastation. The fires also had a significant impact on public property and community infrastructure, as well as having a substantial environmental impact. The total cost is estimated at more than \$4 billion<sup>7</sup>.

Yarra Ranges had three major fires (two of which had joined) burning for a number of weeks after 07 February 2009, although the majority of the fire damage and impact occurred on Black Saturday. At different stages over the following four weeks, fires threatened townships in the Healesville and Warburton areas. Separate fires had also started in a number of other places, including the southern end of the Dandenong Ranges.

In Yarra Ranges, the fires resulted in the loss of 13 lives: ten in Steels Creek, two in Toolangi and one in Yarra Glen. Eleven communities were physically burnt. These were Chum Creek, Steels Creek, Yarra Glen, Dixon's Creek, Healesville, Toolangi, Coldstream, Tarrawarra, Gruyere, Belgrave South and Yering.

Almost 20% of the municipality was burnt (19.6%, 48,293 hectares). Of this area, 79.5% was public land and 20.5% was private land (see Table 1 and Figure 1). Figure 2 is a map of the bushfire affected areas and shows the impact on Yarra Ranges.

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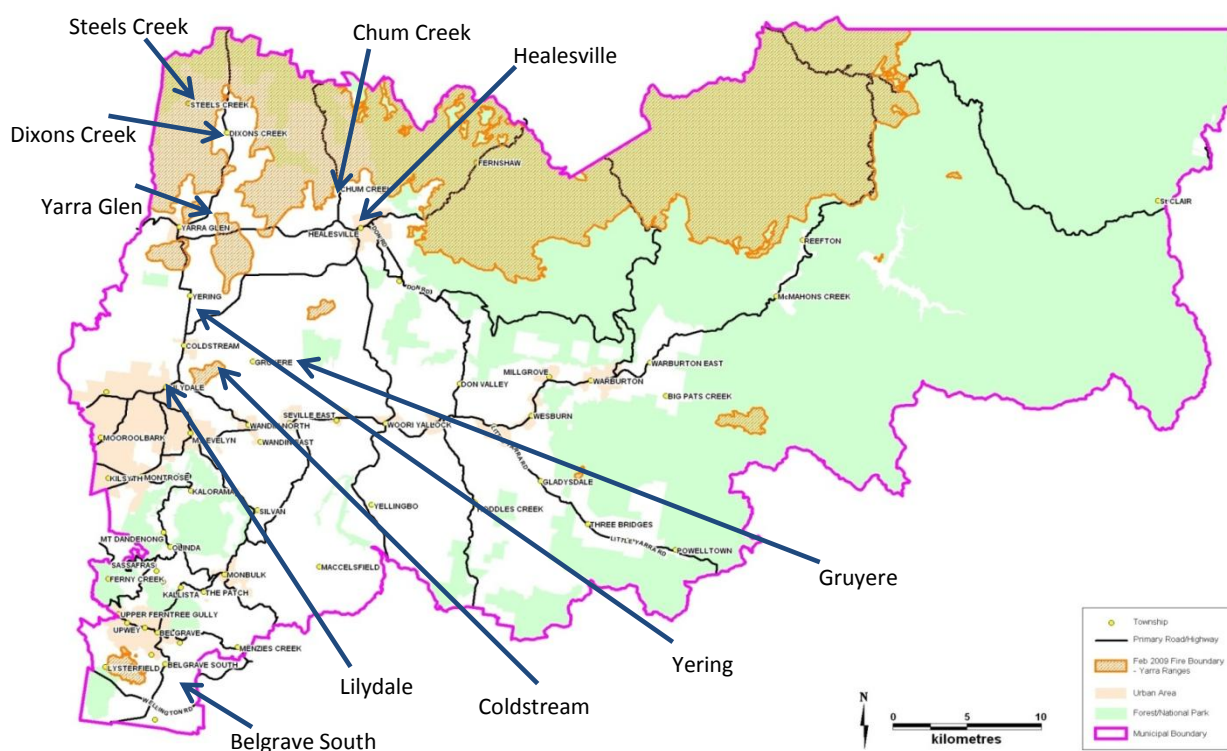
<sup>7</sup> Victorian Bushfires Royal Commission (2010)

Table 1: Areas of Yarra Ranges burnt

|                                   | Hectares | % of Fire | % of Yarra Ranges |
|-----------------------------------|----------|-----------|-------------------|
| <b>Total area of Yarra Ranges</b> | 246,846  | -         | 100.0%            |
| <b>Total area burnt</b>           | 48,293   | 100.0%    | 19.6%             |
| <b>Public land burnt</b>          | 38,372   | 79.5%     | 15.5%             |
| • <b>Public land zones</b>        | 38,316   | 79.3%     | 15.5%             |
| • <b>Road zones</b>               | 56       | 0.1%      | 0.0%              |
| <b>Private land burnt</b>         | 9,920    | 20.5%     | 4.0%              |
| • <b>Green wedge</b>              | 7,395    | 15.3%     | 3.0%              |
| • <b>Rural Conservation Zone</b>  | 2,524    | 5.2%      | 1.0%              |

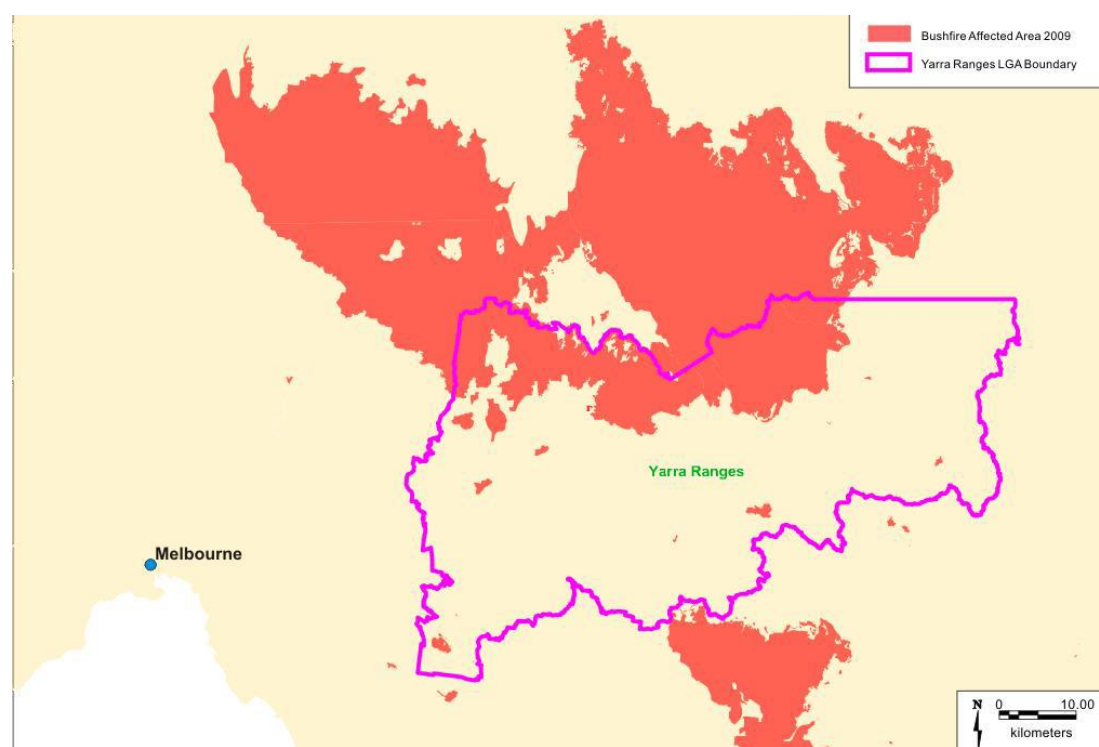
Source: Yarra Ranges Council Geographic Information System (GIS)

Figure 1: Image of bushfires in Yarra Ranges



Source: Yarra Ranges Council

Figure 2: Victoria – bushfire-affected areas, 2009



Source: Yarra Ranges Council

## 2.2. PROPERTY DAMAGE

A total of 304 homes were destroyed or damaged to the extent that people could not remain living in them, with a further 636 buildings - 161 private buildings, 18 dwellings that were not principal residences, and 457 garages, sheds and carports - either destroyed or significantly damaged.

Table 2: Property damage across Yarra Ranges

|  | Number  |
|--|---------|
| <b>Total homes destroyed or unliveable as a result of damage</b> | 304     |
| <b>Fire damaged buildings</b>                                    |         |
| • Private principal dwellings                                    | 161     |
| • Garages, sheds, carports                                       | 457     |
| <b>Approximate length of boundary fencing destroyed</b>          | 844 kms |
| <b>Roads impacted in bushfire affected areas</b>                 | 103     |
| <b>Bridges and major culverts</b>                                | 2       |
| <b>Signs, guide posts and township signs</b>                     | 264     |
| <b>Yarra Ranges Council Water tanks</b>                          | 2       |
| <b>Toilet block</b>  | 1       |
| <b>Sports fields (impacted by response to fires)</b>             | 6       |
| <b>Shire facilities with direct fire impact</b>                  | 6       |

Source: Yarra Ranges Council Building Department (as at 15 May 2009)

Table 2 indicates that considerable damage was also caused to other private and public infrastructure across the Shire. This included roads, bridges signposts, toilet blocks and sports fields and facilities.

## 2.3. BUSINESS IMPACTS

As at 31 March 2009, 144 businesses in Yarra Ranges had indicated, *via* an online survey, that they had been directly or indirectly affected by the fires. The reported estimate of the impact on jobs was that 615 to 630 jobs had been directly threatened in Yarra Ranges.

A Business Impact Assessment Summary, conducted by the Yarra Ranges Regional Marketing in April 2009, estimated a total of almost \$50 million in lost assets and revenue. Some wineries suffered damage to buildings and significant wine crop loss due to fire and smoke damage. The Yarra Glen Showgrounds and Recreation Reserve were also damaged. Tourism industries in the area were hardest hit, with monetary losses arising from absence of trading. Many local businesses reported mass cancellations of bookings and major events, with many weddings and the annual “Grape Grazing” event cancelled.

Losses reported were:

|                             |   |
|-----------------------------|---|
| Wineries:                   | One (1) winery destroyed, 32 damaged;                 |
| Accommodation facilities:   | Four (4) facilities destroyed, seven (7) damaged; and |
| Tourist activity operators: | One (1) destroyed, five (5) damaged.                  |

The longer-term impact of economic loss has been significant, particularly considering the impact on tourism-dependent businesses and those businesses that serviced other fire-affected communities outside the municipality, such as Narbethong, Marysville, Toolangi and Castella, which were cut off by road closures for many weeks and were also in the process of rebuilding infrastructure.

The full economic impact of the fires on businesses across Yarra Ranges is unknown. A further survey has not been undertaken, as it was decided that the available resources needed to focus on actions to support and enhance local businesses rather than quantifying the extent of the impact of the bushfires.

## 2.4. PERSONAL IMPACTS

It is impossible to quantify the impact, which the fires had on individuals, directly and indirectly. However, many individuals were assisted directly with case management, counselling and personal support, accommodation, and were provided with access to a range of community activities and other support.

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### 2.4.1. COUNSELLING AND PERSONAL SUPPORT

Over 500 individuals accessed bushfire-related counselling from a range of community health and family support agencies, including Connections Uniting Care, DEECD, Eastern Community Legal Centre, Eastern Ranges GP Association, Ranges Community Health, Yarra Valley Community Health, Eastern Access Community Health and Yarra Ranges Council Youth Services (see Appendix Three for more details).

For most people seeking counselling assistance, the primary presenting issues were combinations of trauma, anxiety, grief and loss. The most common number of sessions per client was between one and three, but for many individuals, the number was greater than 20. It is difficult to quantify how many residents accessed support *via* other avenues, such as local general practitioners, services outside the area, telephone help lines *etc.*

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#### 2.4.2. EMERGENCY ACCOMMODATION

Anchor Community Care (Anchor), a community organisation based in Lilydale that provides accommodation and support to individuals and families facing homelessness undertook the role of responding to the emergency accommodation needs of the community. Anchor provided 215 instances of support, through the Yarra Glen Relief Centre, to individuals (35%), couples (13%) and families (52%). Those seeking emergency accommodation were either evacuating for a short period or their homes had been destroyed in the fires. Responsibility for temporary and long term accommodation was undertaken by the DHS housing program.

Of the 215 individuals, couples and families supported, 66 were placed in funded accommodation and 149 were placed in community offers. The community offers varied from individual members of the community to not-for-profit services and community groups.

The most utilised and free of charge community offers were provided by:

- Sanctuary Park Cottages in Healesville;
- Lilydale Adventist Academy;
- The Basin (Salvation Army);
- The Timbertop Centre, Mooroolbark; and
- RACV Accommodation, Healesville.

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#### 2.4.3. TEMPORARY ACCOMMODATION

A small team in DHS was established to work with individuals in identifying their needs and developing short and long term accommodation / housing plans. In total, 136 households from the Shire of Yarra Ranges needed to find medium to long term accommodation, as their primary residence had been destroyed. As at April 2010:

- 42% had secured private rental;
- 24% were back on their land (in temporary accommodation - caravans/portables);
- 10% were living with family/friends;
- 8% had purchased a new home;
- 8% were in public housing; and
- 5% had rebuilt their homes.

These data have changed significantly over the past 18 months, as leases came up for renewal and more individuals/families commenced rebuilding or purchasing new properties. In June 2011, several people were still living in caravans and public housing properties. The exact numbers are difficult to quantify.

Immediately after the fires, 92 individuals/families relocated into temporary accommodation in the Eastern Metropolitan Region (EMR), from the Shires of Murrindindi and Nillumbik. As at March 2010, this figure had reduced to 63 non-EMR fire affected families/individuals who secured medium/long term accommodation in

the Region. The majority secured private rental (23 individuals/families) and public housing (25 individuals/families), while 15 made other arrangements.

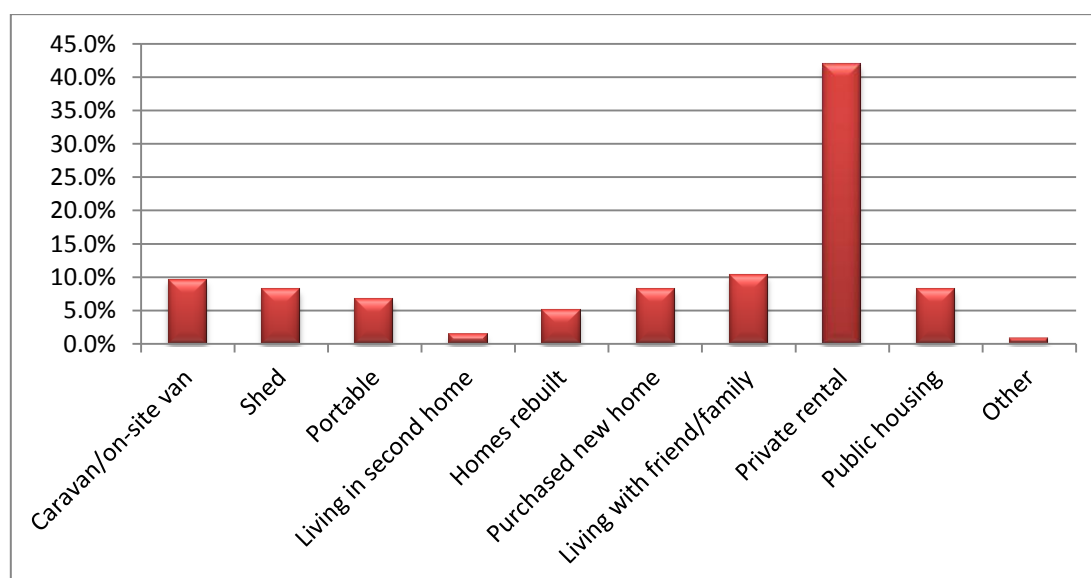
Table 3 and Figure 3 show numbers and proportions of people and the types of accommodation in which they were housed.

**Table 3: Households living in medium – long-term temporary accommodation, as at April 2010**

| Accommodation type                  | Number     | Percentage    |
|-------------------------------------|------------|---------------|
| Caravan/on-site van                 | 13         | 9.6%          |
| Shed                                | 11         | 8.1%          |
| Portable                            | 9          | 6.6%          |
| <b>Total on-site accommodation</b>  | <b>33</b>  | <b>24.3%</b>  |
| Living in second home               | 2          | 1.5%          |
| Homes rebuilt                       | 7          | 5.1%          |
| Purchased new home                  | 11         | 8.1%          |
| Living with friend/family           | 14         | 10.3%         |
| Private rental                      | 57         | 41.9%         |
| Public housing                      | 11         | 8.1%          |
| Other                               | 1          | 0.7%          |
| <b>Total off-site accommodation</b> | <b>103</b> | <b>75.7%</b>  |
| <b>TOTAL</b>                        | <b>136</b> | <b>100.0%</b> |

Source: Department of Human Services, Eastern Metropolitan Region

**Figure 3: Households living in medium – long-term temporary accommodation, as at April 2010**



Source: Department of Human Services, Eastern Metropolitan Region



#### 2.4.4. VICTORIAN BUSHFIRE CASE MANAGEMENT SERVICE

The Victorian Bushfire Case Management Service (VBCMS) provided Victorians affected by the bushfires with the support to access assistance with matters including accommodation, finance, personal assistance, employment, education, counselling, health and legal services during this difficult time.

Since the fires, the case management service has worked with individuals and families to determine their needs, prioritise the work to be conducted, follow up on the agreed actions and report back to families. They have helped individuals/families to locate and access the services they needed to get back on track, and have acted as the primary contact for the family or individual accessing services. Every family affected by the fires has had access to a case manager whose job was to help them as they sorted through what were very difficult issues.

The Eastern VBCMS team developed an effective service. The core tasks of the team were to:

- Identify information needs of case managers and develop processes to ensure their information needs, and those of fire affected residents, were met;
- Monitor service quality continuously, through auditing of case notes, agency liaison meetings and complaint investigation;
- Allocate and reallocate clients to appropriate case managers; and
- Assess clients in terms of case management need and transitioning clients to closure.

While in operation, the Eastern VBCMS had approximately 824 cases, peaking in March 2009 with 629 active cases across 40 case managers. While all these cases have now transitioned to closure, the region now had in place the Bushfire Communities Support program until July 2012, which was able to continue to provide support and assistance to individuals/families affected by the bushfires.

#### 2.5. COMMUNITY IMPACTS

Communities are inevitably affected by individuals' response and recovery processes – communities are comprised of individuals. The extent of the impact is difficult to measure, as is how well communities recover. This has been a key focus of this evaluation, using anecdotal and other qualitative information.

From a statistical perspective, eleven communities were physically burnt. Table 4 shows the extent of property damage for each of the eleven townships affected.

Table 4: Property damage by township

| Township       | Properties damaged |
|----------------|--------------------|
| Chum Creek     | 94                 |
| Steels Creek   | 92                 |
| Yarra Glen     | 51                 |
| Dixons Creek   | 31                 |
| Healesville    | 19                 |
| Toolangi       | 6                  |
| Coldstream     | 4                  |
| Tarrawarra     | 4                  |
| Gruyere        | 1                  |
| Belgrave South | 1                  |
| Yering         | 1                  |
| Total          | 304                |

Source: Yarra Ranges Council

### 3. UNDERSTANDING DISASTER RECOVERY

#### 3.1. DEFINITIONS

##### 3.1.1. DISASTER RECOVERY

“Disaster Recovery” is defined as:

*The coordinated process of supporting disaster affected communities in reconstruction of the physical infrastructure and restoration of emotional, social, economic and physical well-being.*<sup>8</sup>

Recovery is a fundamental element in the emergency management spectrum. Recovery activities assist and support people to manage and recover from the impact of emergencies and to continue with, and rebuild, their lives.

Effective recovery must be community-focussed and consequence-driven, and be considered across the four environments of recovery: social, economic, built and natural<sup>9</sup>. This is consistent with evidence of best

<sup>8</sup> Cube and Turning Point Crisis Management, 2011, from the Australian Emergency Management Terms Thesaurus

<sup>9</sup> EMMV, 2010:4-1

practice in recovery processes<sup>10</sup>. The Victorian *State Emergency Relief and Recovery Plan* (SERRP) states that recovery is:

*... a developmental process of assisting individuals, families, neighbourhoods and communities to manage the re-establishment of those elements of society necessary for their wellbeing.*<sup>11</sup>

### 3.1.2. DEFINING COMMUNITY

There is considerable debate, in the emergency management literature, about the definition of “community” and how it can be applied to the recovery process. If the goal of recovery is to rebuild communities, then this assumes that the communities existed in the first place and that there was a sense of commonality and an interest in connecting with others in the local geographic area in which people lived and/or worked and/or went to school. This is important, because it can help in understanding, and therefore managing, the inevitable differences of opinion that arise through the recovery process. Rather than become overwhelmed by the academic debate, the definition of community that underpins this evaluation and guides the recommendations for future planning is the one used to drive the framework for understanding community recovery processes that were used extensively in Yarra Ranges<sup>12</sup>.

*“A community is a large, relatively stable collection of groups and individuals, organised with coherent relationships on multiple dimensions. A community occupies a common locality with a relatively stable social structure of authority, power and prestige and with a common culture. Its members are interdependent, with networks enabling them to meet each other’s needs and provide security”*<sup>13</sup>

### 3.2. PHASES OF RECOVERY

Empirical evidence indicates that recovery occurs in phases, with transition from response phases to recovery and its sub-phases. The importance of staged recovery is often included in the definition of recovery, as in New Zealand, where recovery is defined as:

*“...the coordinated efforts and processes to effect the immediate, medium and long-term holistic rehabilitation of a community following a disaster.”*<sup>14</sup>

The description of emergency management phases provided in Section 3.2.1 is extracted from the research review undertaken by Turning Point Crisis Management and CUBE (2011), for Yarra Ranges Council, as part of the development of the Recovery Inception Plan. More details in relation to these phases, the triggers that

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<sup>10</sup> Turning Point and CUBE, 2011.

<sup>11</sup> EMMV, 2010:4-6

<sup>12</sup> Gordon, 2004

<sup>13</sup> Gordon, 2004:21

<sup>14</sup> Nicholls (2006)

indicate movement from one phase to the next and the activities of each phase are contained in the *Yarra Ranges Recovery Inception Plan*<sup>15</sup>.

### 3.2.1. EMERGENCY MANAGEMENT PHASES

The 'disaster cycle' describes the cyclical nature of disaster or emergency events. In its simplest form, there are four phases in the cycle: Prevention, Preparedness, Response and Recovery (PPRR)<sup>16</sup>. Each phase is primarily characterised by activities undertaken and functions performed. The movement from one phase to the next is not linear, and there is a strong interdependence between each phase and the next<sup>17</sup>. The priority and speed at which an activity or function is undertaken is significantly influenced by the pre- and post- event environments of each community, which are unique and complex<sup>18</sup>. Therefore, some elements of the post-event community may be in 'response phase' whilst others elements are in 'recovery'<sup>19</sup>.

Within each phase, there are also sub-phases. In the recovery phase, these sub-phases are known as:

- Immediate/Initial/Short Term Recovery (also referred to as "Recovery Inception");
- Medium/Intermediate Term Recovery; and
- Long Term Recovery<sup>20</sup>.

The transition from one phase to the next, and from one sub-phase to another, is typically indicated by a change in operational focus, activities and functions, resources, scale of focus (individual to community), structures, roles, and levels of engagement, which are known as "triggers".

Evidence or triggers that a formal transition from response to recovery has commenced, or been completed, include that:

- The emergency is contained;
- Search and rescue has concluded;
- Public safety measures are in place;
- No further threat is likely in the near future;
- Damage assessment and repair of infrastructure is underway or completed;
- Temporary housing and other services have been provided;
- Local organisations, which can provide or act as a hub for service delivery, have been identified and engaged<sup>21</sup>;
- Reduction in the number of immediate, need-based phone calls from citizens and communities<sup>22</sup>; and
- Movement from an Emergency Operations Centre (EOC) to a broader environment<sup>23</sup>.

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<sup>15</sup> This plan is currently being developed by CUBE and Turning Point Crisis Management for Yarra Ranges Council. The outcomes of this review will inform the development of this Plan. All references in Section 3.2 are those sourced and analysed by Turning Point Crisis Management.

<sup>16</sup> Petterson (1999)

<sup>17</sup> Neal (1995); Petterson (1999); Queensland State Disaster Management Group (2010)

<sup>18</sup> Emergency Management Australia (2004) p.42, COAG (2010); FEMA (2005)

<sup>19</sup> Neal (1995); Petterson (1999)

<sup>20</sup> FEMA (2005); Queensland State Disaster Management Group (2010); Brisbane City Council (2011)

<sup>21</sup> Queensland State Disaster Management Group (2010)

<sup>22</sup> FEMA (2009)

The transition from response to recovery was confused during the 2009 bushfires, due to the ongoing nature of the emergency. This meant that the recovery process commenced while several staff were occupied in undertaking response-phase tasks. This was most evident in the natural environment area. Clean up processes were underway at the same time as areas were being made safe. It could also be argued that the provision of accommodation, particularly short-medium term temporary housing, rather than emergency accommodation, was a recovery function. Regardless of the terminology, identifying and planning for the specific activities required in the aftermath and the longer-term recovery is important for preparing for the future.

### 3.3. PROCESS OF COMMUNITY RECOVERY

Recovery occurs in stages and strategies to support communities and individuals need to acknowledge this and focus on recovery activities that are tailored to individuals' capacities to respond<sup>24</sup>.

Individuals need to be able to address their own personal needs before they are ready and able to contribute to the redevelopment of the community. This is explained by models such as:

- Maslow's 'Hierarchy of Need', which describes "how people need to have their basic needs (physiological and safety) met before their higher order needs (social, esteem and self-actualisation) are met"<sup>25</sup>; and
- Alderfer's ERG model, which indicates that individuals can have concurrent needs at any one time, *e.g.* being more interested in creating art than eating<sup>26</sup>.

The Disaster Social Process Theory<sup>27</sup> was used extensively by Yarra Ranges to support its staff and assist the community to understand how communities function normally and in times of stress, and consequently, develop and implement strategies and activities that could help in the recovery process. This model has been important in helping staff and the community to understand their individual and the communities' responses. The model indicates that communities experience different stages of development, associated with normal functioning and functioning in times of trauma and stress. It also provides guidance as to how best to help and support communities and individuals during, and following, disasters. A detailed summary is contained in Appendix Three.

### 3.4. THE IMPORTANCE OF USING A COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT APPROACH

The National Principles for Disaster Recovery provide an important overview of effective recovery processes. The national approach, endorsed by States and Territories in 2009, is underpinned by a community development approach. This is defined as:

<sup>23</sup> San Francisco Governor's Office of Emergency Services (2008); Queensland State Disaster Management Group (2010); Christchurch City Council (2011)

<sup>24</sup> Cube and Turning Point Crisis Management, 2011

<sup>25</sup> Cube and Turning Point Crisis Management, 2011:12

<sup>26</sup> *ibid*

<sup>27</sup> Gordon (2004)

*... the empowerment of individuals and communities to manage their own recovery. Consequently, individuals and agencies involved in community development in recovery from disaster have a very clear role to support and facilitate individual and community recovery. In so doing positive community outcomes are promoted.* <sup>28</sup>

These guidelines indicate that disaster recovery is most effective when:

- Management arrangements recognise that recovery from disaster is a complex, dynamic and protracted process;
- Agreed plans and management arrangements are well understood by the community and all disaster management agencies;
- Recovery agencies are properly integrated into disaster management arrangements;
- Community service and reconstruction agencies have input to key decision making;
- Conducted with the active participation of the affected community;
- Recovery services are provided in a timely, fair, equitable and flexible manner; and
- Supported by training programs and exercises.<sup>29</sup>

### 3.5. EMERGENCY MANAGEMENT IN VICTORIA

The key components of emergency management are organised to facilitate planning, preparedness, operational coordination and community participation. These are defined under Section 4A of the *Emergency Management Act 1986* as:

- **Prevention** – the elimination or reduction of the incidence or severity of emergencies and mitigation of their effects;
- **Response** – the combating of emergencies and the provision of rescue and immediate relief services; and
- **Recovery** – the assisting of persons and communities, affected by emergencies, to achieve a proper and effective level of functioning.

Following the 2009 bushfires, Victoria updated its approach to emergency management. . This included strengthening the approach to recovery planning, placing equal emphasis on the three phases of emergency management.

Figure 4 illustrates the Victorian Emergency Management Model, which was developed following the 2009 bushfires. It shows the relationship between Prevention, Response and Recovery<sup>30</sup> and clearly illustrates the interface between prevention, response and recovery activities. While Recovery has always been recognised as a key component of emergency management and has been part of the legislative framework since 1986, detailed work to coordinate recovery action across municipal boundaries was limited prior to 2009.

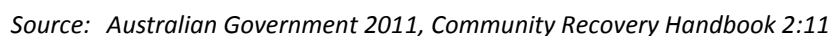
**Figure 4:** Recovery in the Emergency Management Model

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<sup>28</sup> Australian Attorney General Department (2011)

<sup>29</sup> Ibid, 2011: 3

<sup>30</sup> EMMV, 2010: 4-4,5



Relief and recovery structures and responsibilities in Victoria are outlined in the *State Emergency Relief and Recovery Plan* (SERRP), which has been developed in accordance with the *Emergency Management Act 1986* and forms Part 4 of the *Emergency Management Manual Victoria* (EMMV)<sup>31</sup>. The EMMV has been revised significantly since 2009, as a consequence of the Bushfire Royal Commission's recommendations and the learnings from Black Saturday. The context and recommendations of this evaluation are based on the revised EMMV, which could cause some confusion, as they do not necessarily relate to plans in place at the time. However, given that these changes are now in place, it is important that the current approach be noted. Importantly, significant modifications have been made in relation to coordination of recovery. These occurred during 2009, in preparation for the 2009/2010 bushfire season. The plan has also been reviewed following the 2011 floods in Victoria.

<sup>31</sup> EMMV, 2010:4-1

- Understanding the **context**;
- Focusing on the **consequences** of the emergency;
- Recognising **complexity**;
- Being **community focused**;
- Using **community-led** approaches;
- Ensuring **coordination** of all activities;
- Employing effective **communication**; and
- Acknowledging and building **capacity**<sup>32</sup>.

The SERRP specifies a number of “access principles” to guide emergency relief and recovery planning. These are:

- Allow flexibility for different situational needs;
- Be supportive whilst promoting resilience;
- Be accessible to people with disabilities, their carers and people with additional needs;
- Be accessible to culturally and linguistically diverse groups; and
- Utilise a range of access mechanisms, including enabling access without requiring physical attendance at a specific location. The use of outreach programs may be included in this context<sup>33</sup>.

The SERRP outlines the “Fundamentals of Recovery in Victoria”. It specifies that recovery operations involve cooperation between all levels of government, non-government organisations, community agencies, the private sector, affected communities and emergent organisations. The SERRP indicates that recovery is a developmental process, taking account of the comprehensive environments that constitute communities. These environments are:

- *People, social, community and health environment*: the emotional, social, spiritual, financial and physical wellbeing of individuals and communities;
- *Economic environment* – the revitalisation of the economy of the community to ensure, as far as possible, that the wellbeing of a community is increased;
- *Built environment* – the restoration of essential and community infrastructure; and
- *Natural environment* – the rehabilitation of the environment<sup>34</sup>.

### 3.7. ROLE OF LOCAL GOVERNMENT IN DISASTER RECOVERY IN VICTORIA

Local Government in Victoria has roles in various stages of bushfire *planning, prevention, response* and *recovery*. Councils have responsibility for administering and enforcing State Government legislation and policies, as well as supporting the key emergency response agencies, such as the Department of Sustainability and Environment (DSE), Country Fire Authority (CFA) and the Department of Human Services (DHS), in their response and recovery roles. Councils may also implement discretionary policies through instruments, such as local laws, and the adoption of state planning scheme controls, such as overlays<sup>35</sup>.

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<sup>32</sup> EMMV, 2010: 4-5

<sup>33</sup> EMMV, 2010:4-16, 4-17

<sup>34</sup> EMMV, 2010:4-6

<sup>35</sup> Municipal Association of Victoria, 2009



The EMMV specifies that the Department of Human Services is the coordinating agency for 'Emergency Recovery' at the state and regional level, working in collaboration with municipal councils and with other agencies, both private and not-for-profit, which are willing to provide services and support. The EMMV clearly states that local government is responsible for recovery at the local level. The SERRP provides a structure to achieve a collaborative approach that is jointly owned by all levels of government, individuals and communities affected and other participating agencies. It contains a set of principles, agreed strategies and a framework to provide coordination of emergency relief and recovery activities.

The role of local government in emergency management, including relief and recovery, is outlined in the *Emergency Management Act 1986*. This includes developing Municipal Emergency Management Plans (MEMPlans), with local activities and resources coordinated and managed through a Municipal Recovery Manager (MRM). The SERRP details the elements of the MEMPlan and the types of programs and services to be provided in communities.

### 3.8. DISASTER RECOVERY PLANNING IN YARRA RANGES PRIOR TO 2009

Yarra Ranges Council has had a long history of response and recovery planning and has worked consistently with its community over many years to engage it in preparing for natural disasters.

Prior to the 2009 bushfires, Council established a Municipal Emergency Management Planning Committee (MEMPC) in line with its responsibilities defined within the Emergency Management Act, 1986. This committee met regularly and participated annually in exercises regarding Municipal Emergency Communications Centre (MECC) activation.

The majority of the preparation, in relation to recovery, related to planning and training for the activation of Relief Centres, with a dedicated team of staff, the Relief and Recovery Team, drawn from volunteers across the organisation. On an annual basis, this team:

- Undertook training updates on their roles and responsibilities in running Relief Centres;
- Updated information and equipment on each Relief Centre, with 13 locations identified across the municipality; and
- Relief Centre team leaders undertook a familiarisation tours of all facilities.

The documented Recovery Arrangements, which Council had developed prior to 2009, outlined:

- Broad recovery management principles, including a commitment for "relief and recovery functions to be devolved as much as possible to the local level"<sup>36</sup>;
- The membership and broad functions of the Community Recovery Committee; and
- The role of the Department of Human Services and the local agencies in recovery.

Details of how the roles and functions would be carried out were not included. Community-based agencies, such as trauma counselling and housing services, did not participate in training in relation to disaster recovery. Planning in relation to recovery structures and plans post-event were limited to:

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<sup>36</sup> Shire of Yarra Ranges (2008), *Municipal Emergency Management Plan*: 57

- Identification of relevant agencies that would be involved across the municipality;
- Annual updating of the details of these agencies;
- Checking the willingness of these agencies to continue to be involved; and
- Acknowledging the need to establish a Municipal Recovery Committee structure to oversee the delivery of recovery services in the event of an emergency.

Planning for the delivery of recovery services relied on the learnings from the experiences documented from the 1997 bushfire in the Dandenongs. Scenario planning regarding possible events was primarily linked to the option of a bushfire of limited duration in the Dandenongs.

Yarra Ranges' staff indicated that, prior to 2009, scenario planning did not take into account the enormity of a disaster such as occurred on Black Saturday. As planning had focussed primarily on planning and activation of the Relief Centres and activation of the MECC, staff considered that they had limited understanding of the complexities of what would be actually involved in the delivery of sustained and long-term recovery services after a major event.

### 3.9. RESPONSE, RELIEF AND RECOVERY CENTRES

Yarra Ranges activated its MECC at 3.30 pm on 07 February 2009. Given the scope and complexity of the fires, which continued unabated for a protracted period, the centre remained open until Wednesday 4<sup>th</sup> March 2009.

Relief Centres, located in Coldstream and Lilydale, were established from 6.00 pm on Saturday 7<sup>th</sup> February, during the event. The following Monday, additional Relief Centres were established in Yarra Glen and Healesville, with other centres opened at Kilsyth and Knox, to support people who were evacuated at various times as the event continued.

The Relief Centres at Healesville and Yarra Glen became Recovery Centres with the formal transition from relief to recovery. Healesville remained open until 27 February 2009, when recovery services were consolidated at a single centre in Yarra Glen. This centre remained open until 31 August 2010 when Council transferred its operations from the Yarra Glen Memorial Hall to the Yarra Glen Community Fire Relief Centre (a former IGA supermarket). This centre continued to provide recovery services for 18 months, closing in April 2011. The centre was managed by Council during this period and was the only Recovery Centre managed by a Council – centres in other municipalities were managed by DHS.

The regional office of DHS supported this management arrangement:

*"We have a lot confidence in Yarra Ranges – they were exemplary. We had no complaints from people in the community or from agencies." (DHS Eastern Regional Office)*

Consistent with Yarra Ranges' planning and the State Recovery Plan, these Recovery Centres were a base from which a range of community support and other services provided immediate advice and financial assistance and, later, ongoing support. Services available included:

- Insurance;
- Financial support;
- Centrelink emergency relief;
- Access to material aid (although given the volume, the bulk of material aid was dispensed from centres located outside the centres);

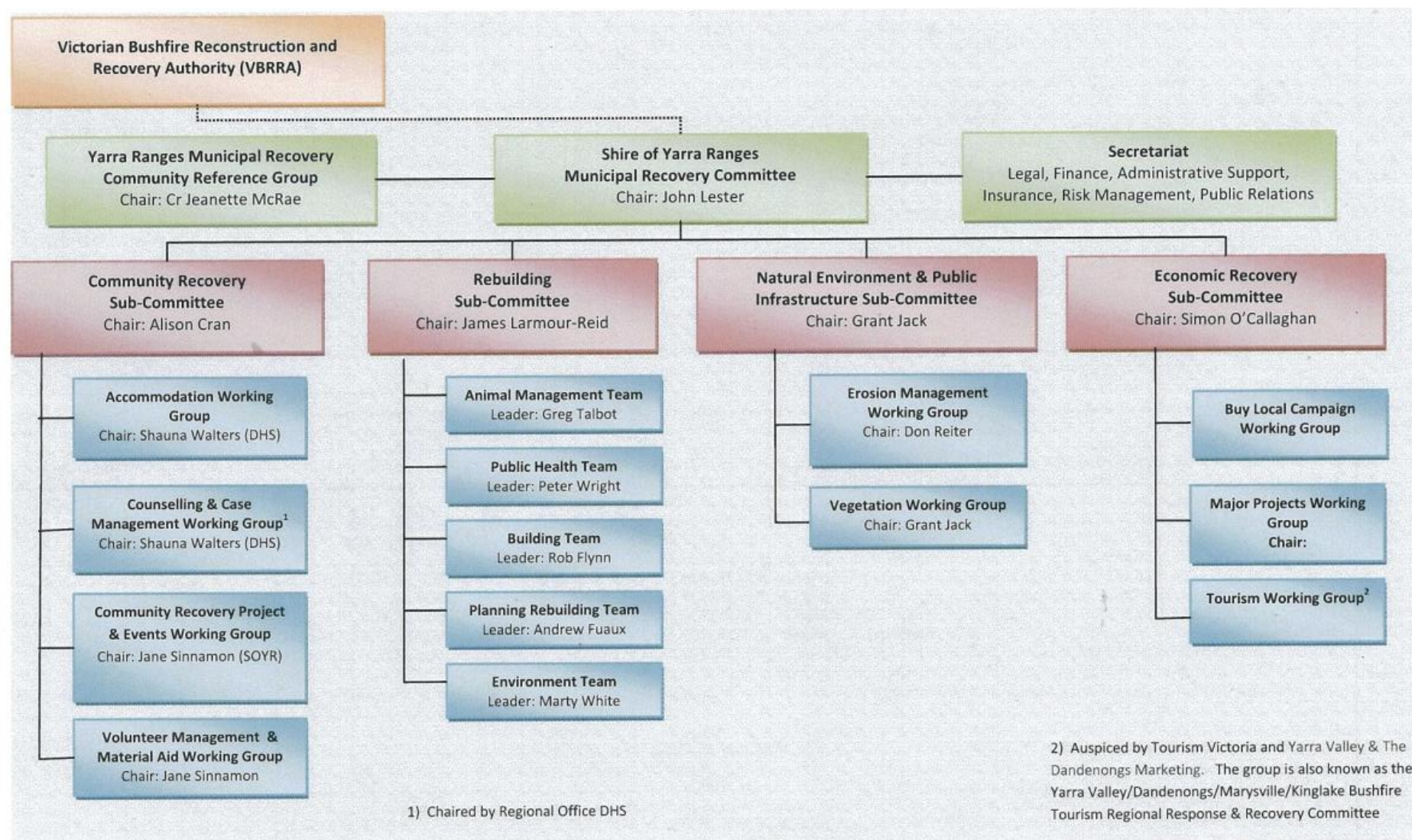
- Assistance with, and access to, a range of Council services – planning, water safety and health advice; and
- Counselling and individual support services.

### 3.10. DEVELOPMENT OF MUNICIPAL RECOVERY STRUCTURE

Yarra Ranges Council established a Municipal Recovery Committee (MRC) structure to oversee and direct recovery activities in the weeks, months and years following the bushfires. The recovery structure had a series of sub-committees, which were responsible for the different areas of community recovery – Community Recovery; Rebuilding; Natural Environment & Public Infrastructure; and Economic Recovery (see Figure 5). The MRC was established within three to four weeks of Black Saturday.

Membership of the MRC, and the various working groups and sub-committees, was comprised of relevant staff and a range of agencies and community members, who were co-opted to participate. The Terms of Reference for each of the Committees, Sub-Committees and Working Groups reflected the priorities identified by the membership, with leadership from Yarra Ranges staff.

Figure 5: Municipal Recovery Structure



Source: Yarra Ranges Council

The objectives, in facilitating municipal recovery across the municipality, were to:

- Ensure that development and delivery of recovery services were undertaken in a planned, strategic and timely manner;
- Engage with and involve the community in the recovery process;
- Keep the community informed of recovery actions, programs and services;
- Cost the impact of response and recovery actions accurately;
- Work in partnership with State and Federal Governments in the delivery of the recovery effort; and
- Maintain the provision of centre-based recovery services in the Yarra Valley for as long as needed.

Work commenced in several of these areas prior to the first meeting dates, as part of the emergency relief phase, *e.g.* emergency accommodation, animal management (see Table 5).

**Table 4: Date of first meeting of recovery committees and working groups**

| Committee, Sub-committee or Working Group   | Date of First Meeting | Final Meeting Date | Number of meetings |
|---|-----------------------|--------------------|--------------------|
| <b>Municipal Recovery Committee</b>   | 11 Mar 2009           | 15 November 2010   | 14                 |
| <b>Community Recovery Sub-committee</b>   | 12 March 2009         | 15 March 2010      | 10                 |
| • <b>Accommodation Working Group</b>  | 11 February 2009      | 24 February 2010   | 24                 |
| • <b>Counselling &amp; Case management Working Group</b>                              | 18 February 2009      | 26 May 2011        | 27                 |
| • <b>Projects &amp; Events Working Group</b>  | 3 March 2009          | 24 November 2009   | 10                 |
| • <b>Volunteer Management Working Group</b>   | 17 April 2009         | 10 December 2009   | 9                  |
| <b>Rebuilding sub-committee</b>   | 23 February 2009      | 11 November 2009   | 16                 |
| • <b>Animal Management Team</b>   |                       |                    |                    |
| • <b>Public Health Team</b>   |                       |                    |                    |
| • <b>Building Team</b>  |                       |                    |                    |
| • <b>Planning Rebuilding Team</b>   |                       |                    |                    |
| • <b>Environment Team</b>   |                       |                    |                    |
| <b>Natural Environment &amp; Public Infrastructure Re-establishment Sub-committee</b> | 20 February 2009      | 16 May 2010        | 20                 |
| • <b>Erosion Management Working Group</b>   | 30 March 2009         | 25 May 2009        | 7                  |
| • <b>Vegetation Working Group</b>   | 30 March 2009         | 25 May 2010        | 23                 |
| <b>Economic Recovery Sub-committee</b>  | 25 February 2009      | 9 December 2009    | 15                 |
| • <b>Buy Local Campaign Working Group</b>   |                       |                    |                    |
| • <b>Major Projects &amp; investment Attraction Working Group</b>                     |                       |                    |                    |
| • <b>Yarra Valley &amp; Dandenongs Bushfire Response &amp; Recovery Committee</b>     |                       |                    |                    |
| <b>Community Reference Group</b>  | 11 May 2009           | 31 January 2011    | 16                 |

*Source: Yarra Ranges Council*



### 3.11. PLANNING

Yarra Ranges developed a Recovery Action Plan, with the first draft completed by 5<sup>th</sup> March 2009. The final draft was completed by June 2009. The Plan was reviewed after six months, in July-August 2009. Both of these documents provided an overview of the actions that Council had completed and a framework for future actions.

They focused primarily on the first six months, in recognition that further medium and long-term recovery actions needed to be identified. Each of the four recovery sub-committees was responsible for implementing the relevant suite of initiatives in the Municipal Recovery Action Plan and reporting on their progress.

### 3.12. MANAGEMENT AND IMPLEMENTATION

Importantly, two Directors in the organisation were responsible for particular areas and had responsibility for chairing sub-committees. Not only did this ensure that senior management in the organisation were aware of the day-to-day issues regarding recovery, but it facilitated speed and timeliness in decision-making. Staff indicated that this was particularly important in relation to resources. Decisions could be made to commit resources to particular activities, with responsibility being accepted by senior managers.

The Municipal Recovery Committee had responsibility for coordinating Council's response across all areas. This group was drawn from various state and local government representatives, including the Mayor and CEO of Yarra Ranges Council, the chairs of the sub-committees, and representatives of Victoria Police, the State Government Departments of Human Services, Sustainability and Environment, Planning and Community Development, and the Victorian Bushfire Reconstruction and Recovery Authority (VBRRA). This committee was chaired by an independent person, who was also Chair of Council's Audit Committee.

### 3.13. ROLES AND FUNCTIONS OF SUB-COMMITTEES AND WORKING GROUPS

A summary of the membership, terms of reference, operation and key tasks of each of the committees, sub-committees and working groups is contained in Appendix Four. An assessment of the achievements and an overview of the functions of the groups are contained in Section 5.

Importantly, the sub-committee structure reflected the four pillars of recovery:

- Personal and community wellbeing – Community Recovery Sub-Committee;
- Built environment – Rebuilding Sub-Committee;
- Natural environment – Natural Environment and Public Infrastructure Sub-Committee; and
- Economic environment – Economic Recovery Sub-Committee.

### 3.14. SUMMARY OF ACTIONS

Recovery activities occurred across the areas of responsibilities of the four committees outlined above. Details of the range of activities and assessment of the implications of these for future planning are contained in the specific sections of this report. Organisationally the range of activities included:

1. *Health Team*, which was responsible for the health and well-being of the community:
  - Inspection of 240 houses and businesses to assess damage to facilities, such as water tanks, septic tanks, accommodation premises and food premises;

- Coordinating a range of activities required to support installation of sanitation. This required a dedicated Environmental Health Officer (EHO);
  - Two extra positions were filled to support the backlog of day-to-day operations of the health department.
2. *Local Laws Team*, which was responsible for animal management:
- Coordination, management and distribution of food and water for stock and domestic animals in the days immediately following the fires;
  - Operating a 24-hour roster for seven weeks; and
  - Supporting fencing work, including installing over six kilometres of temporary fencing to contain stock on fire damaged properties and distributing twelve kilometres of fencing wire and star pickets for temporary fencing.
3. *Building Department*, which was responsible for supporting the inspection of damaged buildings and structures:
- Undertook 451 inspections, 333 on private property, which resulted in 41 combined emergency/minor works building orders and 221 minor work building orders being issued (all orders have been finalised);
  - Staff worked overtime, equating to seven days a week, for 8 weeks. One officer, on a rotational basis from neighbouring municipalities, assisted Yarra Ranges with both the day-to-day operations of the Building Department and the recovery process; and
  - Worked over two years with a dedicated team to complete the work.
4. *Planning Department*, which was responsible for the rebuilding and issuing of temporary dwelling permits, had:
- Put in place a 'fast-track' planning process, in which affected residents were offered professional advice to expedite the processing of any application or consent, with any associated fees waived;
  - Used a 'case management' approach whereby each landholder, who initiated contact with Council, was invited to meet with Council officers and be given specific advice relating to their rebuilding needs and the particular site circumstances. The officers attending the first meeting continued to manage the request from pre-application advice and application lodgement through to the final decision; and
  - Processed 116 planning applications for bushfire affected properties.
5. *Environment and public infrastructure team* worked to restore the natural environment and repair damage to public land. The fires affected 20 per cent of the land in Yarra Ranges - 48,289.96 hectares. Work included:
- *Opening and clearing roads in the first few weeks*: this work was hampered by the ongoing threat of the fires for three weeks after Black Saturday;
  - *Erosion Management*: staff worked, firstly on public land to prevent erosion and land slips and then with private property owners to prevent further erosion. This work has continued over two years, as well as managing the erosion caused by rain and managing the environmental weeds that had emerged through the re-growth process;
  - *Private property tree clearance*: Council arborists worked with private property owners to assess the safety of their trees. Importantly, Council attempted to make this process as simple as possible and waived the associated fees; and
  - *Landcare project*: coordinated a significant land care project, in partnership with local communities.

6. *Economic Recovery Working Group*: worked with local businesses to assist in their revival. Three key areas of work were established:
  - The Buy Local Campaign;
  - Major Projects; and
  - Regional Tourism Working Group, also known as the Yarra Valley/Dandenongs/Marysville/Kinglake Bushfire Regional Response and Recovery Committee, which was chaired by Yarra Ranges Regional Marketing.
7. *Volunteer Coordination and Management of Material Aid Working Group*: Yarra Ranges was overwhelmed with offers of support from the community. In all, 1,736 pledges of help were received, with offers including accommodation, transport, water, entertainment and activities. Volunteer coordination tasks included establishing a range of projects in partnership with community volunteer organisations, such as Rotary, and local churches, including:
  - *Supporting the Adopt a Shipping Container* project, which was led by members of the Yarra Glen Community Fire Relief group. Council officers assisted with identification of storage space for containers prior to distribution of the containers, which provided safe storage for people managing their properties;
  - Renovating a disused tennis pavilion in Dixons Creek which was established as temporary volunteer accommodation for up to 20 volunteers;
  - Managing the Lilydale material aid distribution facility; and
  - Supporting the Volunteer Fencing program and Yarra Valley Rotary Tool Library.
8. *Community Recovery*: a range of community development activities were conducted, aimed at supporting the health and wellbeing recovery of individuals and communities (see Table 6 for a summary). A detailed list is contained in Appendix Three.

The activities were held in 2009, 2010 and 2011 at venues across the municipality, with over 100 activities and events organised. These included community information sessions, community events, community recovery projects and support for service providers. Community information sessions and events dominated the activities in 2009. In 2010, more established community recovery projects were implemented.

A community development worker, who coordinated and organised activities, was employed by Council. More than 7,000 people attended a wide range of events and information sessions and participated in the various projects.

The most popular events were in 2009 and included the “thank you” picnic for emergency workers (1,500 people), the family football day in July 2009 (1,000 people) and the rebuilding expo at the Lilydale showgrounds in July 2009 (2,500 people). Sessions on personal and community recovery conducted by Dr Rob Gordon, a clinical psychologist, were attended by over 700 people, between April 2009 and June 2010.



Table 5: List of Community Recovery Actions

| Type of Activity   | Number of events |      | Estimated Number of attendees |      |
|--|------------------|------|-------------------------------|------|
|  | 2009             | 2010 | 2009                          | 2010 |
| <b>Community Information Sessions</b>  | 26               | 20   | 1,700                         | 450  |
| <b>Community events</b>  | 20               | 4    | 6,450                         | 400  |
| <b>Community Recovery Projects – regular sessions over several weeks or months</b> | 2                | 12   | 30 per session                | 200  |
| <b>Recovery events conducted by other organisations funded by VBRAA</b>            | 24               | -    | Not available                 |      |
| <b>Community-wide activities</b>   | 2                | -    | 80                            |      |
| <b>Support for service providers</b>   | 2                | -    | 230                           |      |

9. *Support for young people:* in 2010, a youth worker was funded for three years to conduct a range of activities to support vulnerable young people living in bushfire-affected areas. These activities are still underway.
10. *Support for older people:* specific support was also provided to isolated and frail older people to assist them to prepare fire plans in preparation for the 2010/2011 fire season.



## SECTION TWO: ANALYSIS OF ISSUES



## 4. STRUCTURE, PLANNING AND MANAGEMENT

### 4.1. ACHIEVEMENTS

#### 4.1.1. ORGANISATION AND MANAGEMENT

The majority of people interviewed indicated that they were impressed with the comprehensiveness of the recovery structure, the integration of the areas and the capacity of the structure to address the multiple factors of recovery.

*“I was impressed with the ability of the Shire to get the organisational structure in place in such a short time. The structure was excellent and covered all aspects that were required.”* (Chair of the Municipal Recovery Executive)

Council staff, in consultation with the DHS and other relevant agencies, immediately took control of the relief and recovery process. Staff indicated that the structure was clear and that they were aware of their roles and responsibilities. There was structured effort across the whole of the organisation with effective reporting processes and a high level of accountability.

Staff indicated that the process was well organised, with the delivery of a range of projects across the four pillars of recovery. The range of actions was well received by the community, as demonstrated by the high level of engagement through attendance at meetings of committees and community events. The willingness of people to participate in this evaluation also demonstrated the goodwill that Yarra Ranges had established with community members, a range of volunteer and not-for-profit organisations, and with the DHS Eastern Metropolitan Regional Office.

Feedback from the consultation indicated that members of the sub-committees and working groups were happy to be involved in these groups and that the groups enabled the key stakeholders to come together to share information and coordinate their efforts. It was important to use resources effectively and provide support to those most involved in the recovery process, both internal and external to Council.

*“The right people were at the table”* (DHS Eastern Metropolitan Region Office)

*“The leadership role which [Yarra Ranges] Council took was impressive. It had a good model and framework. The immediacy of the response was exceptional. The processes allowed swift mobilisation of staff and volunteers in uncertain times. The fact that [it] is doing this review to inform future planning demonstrates their competence, understanding and commitment.”* (DHS Regional Eastern Metropolitan Regional Office)

#### 4.1.2. STRONG REGIONAL RELATIONSHIPS

Yarra Ranges has worked with the Eastern Metropolitan Regional office of DHS for many years in planning and implementing recovery processes, although not on the scale required following Black Saturday. This resulted in strong working relationships and a strong partnership in relation to recovery. Both Yarra Ranges and DHS staff identified this relationship as critical. There was also significant confidence expressed in the ability of Council to deliver the required outcomes and to work effectively with the community and partner agencies. Those consulted indicated that the working relationship between DHS Eastern Region Office and Yarra Ranges

Council is, and was, highly professional, cooperative and effective. This was crucial in facilitating effective organisation and management.

*“The fact that Yarra Ranges is doing this review to inform future planning demonstrates their competence, understanding and commitment.” (DHS Regional Eastern Regional Office)*

#### Key Features of the Structure

People consulted indicated that the particularly effective key features of the structure were:

*Comprehensive nature:* it spanned the four pillars of recovery and included the range of agencies and concerns that needed to be addressed;

*High level of accountability in the organisation:* the sub-committees were the responsibility of the Directors responsible for the relevant area of work, or in the case of Economic Recovery, the Executive Officer directly responsible for this area. This meant that decision-making could be streamlined and there was minimal ‘red-tape’;

*Coordination through the MRC:* this committee ensured that all activities were coordinated, reducing duplication of effort and facilitating communication and cooperation across all committees;

*Building on existing networks and expertise:* staff, who had established links and networks in the community and/or had specific expertise in the areas, were seconded to work in the recovery process across departments. This meant that the work could commence quickly and that the local knowledge of staff could be utilised fully;

*It was consistent with the culture of the organisation:* it did not impose a completely different way of working; and

*Small teams were established in each of the designated areas:* this provided a supportive working environment and the opportunity for staff to share information easily and control the processes and outcomes of the work effort.

## 4.2. CHALLENGES

### 4.2.1. UNDERSTANDING THE STRUCTURE AND RECOVERY PLANNING AND PROCESS

A number of agencies, primarily not-for-profit agencies, which were required to support the recovery with specific services, such as accommodation, had little or no experience in disaster recovery. While, as agencies, some had agreed with Yarra Ranges that they would participate in any recovery process, no staff on the ground had participated in recovery training. Other organisations had not been involved with Council in any relief or recovery planning, nor did they have staff who had participated in any training in relation to emergency relief or recovery.

Consequently, several agencies indicated that they had difficulty in understanding how they fitted into the recovery structure and felt unprepared for the work required. For many, this was not an ongoing concern, as

the working relationships between these agencies, DHS and Council were positive and there was a sense of shared commitment to working through any issues. In addition, as these agencies were competent and skilled in working in crisis management and were required to work within their areas of expertise and using their existing networks, staff quickly adjusted. However, due to the overall lack of preparation in managing such a large-scale event, many of the actions undertaken were, by necessity, determined quickly and “on the run”.

The context of Black Saturday emphasised the interface between the different phases of recovery. The emergency and immediate threat of the fires continued for three weeks. This was traumatic for local communities, where residents were required to evacuate frequently. Council staff needed to commence cleaning up and supporting affected communities, as well as continuing to respond to the ongoing emergency. Staff initially felt confused when the response phase merged into recovery. The documented evidence and practice of Yarra Ranges’ staff indicate that this is inevitable. Acknowledgement of this overlap, and planning for the different stages, would have provided Yarra Ranges with a stronger strategic approach to managing its resources more effectively in the short, medium and longer terms. The current work in developing a Recovery Inception Plan will assist to address these issues.

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#### 4.2.2. MANAGING THE SCALE OF THE RECOVERY

People consulted identified the scale of the recovery effort as the greatest challenge. The scale was such that the resources required were beyond the capacity of a single municipality to respond – State and Federal Government resources were required, as were the resources of numerous not-for-profit organisations and other municipalities. However, this posed challenges. The recovery planning within Yarra Ranges was limited, with the primary focus being on relief management rather than ongoing, long-term support. The planning also did not take account of the high level of resources – staffing and financial – that were required to manage the recovery process in the long-term. Many staff continued to manage their day-to-day work, as well as manage the recovery process.

*“We felt very unprepared – the scale was such that our capacity – staff and resources – were stretched beyond the limit. The recovery effort required was far greater than could be delivered by local government alone.”*  
(Council officer)

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#### 4.2.3. DELAYS IN PLANNING

There was a sense of frustration expressed by some staff that the work plan took some time to be established and this impacted on accountability and reporting. However, it did not delay the work actually commencing. Staff indicated that it affected how confident they felt about the ongoing direction and the resources that would be available to support the activity. Although, as one individual commented:

*“I don’t know how it could have been done sooner or whether it would have changed anything – we just got on and did what had to be done.”* (Council officer)

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#### 4.2.4. BUSINESS CONTINUITY – MANAGING DAY-TO-DAY BUSINESS DURING THE CRISIS

Managing business continuity, responding to the immediate crisis and then meeting the ongoing demands of community recovery placed enormous stress on the resources of every department in the organisation. All departments acknowledged that they could have managed business continuity better. It was difficult to manage normal business and continue to meet the needs of the communities, which were not affected by the bushfires, at the same time as coping with the intensity and immediacy of managing the relief and recovery

process. Staff were willing to volunteer to work on recovery, but this then left gaps in resourcing normal work. This was particularly difficult in the early stages, where managers moved off-line to establish response, relief and recovery processes. Several departments are still working to manage the backlog of work.

*“At one stage, there were no managers in our department – they were all working on the bushfires. This was confusing – we had little or no direction.” (Council officer)*

Developing Business Continuity Plans (BCPs) was viewed as one of the most critical pieces of planning work to be undertaken by all departments. Closely linked to this was the availability of resources to back-fill positions in order to enable staff to focus on the recovery process and to ensure that there was minimal impact on normal work. Managers were initially reluctant to bring in additional staff, as they were uncertain as to whether they would be able to manage their budgets.

*“In hindsight, I’d just go ahead and backfill the positions and argue for the funds later. It was all about supporting the community – we weren’t being reckless.” (Council officer)*

Importantly, staff stressed the importance of acknowledging that, as the recovery process continued and this work became absorbed into day-to-day activity, additional resources were still required.

#### **Lessons learned: Factors that influence the effective management of business continuity**

Provision of sufficient resources to continue with normal business and manage the recovery effort simultaneously;

Availability of skilled staff to undertake the recovery work at the same time as having skilled staff to continue to manage day-to-day business;

Establishing data bases, forms and other administrative tools that can be immediately put into action when required;

Using senior managers and directors to lead the recovery process as well as ensuring that there is adequate leadership and direction for business continuity. This may mean acknowledging early in the process that the scale is such that managers need to be taken off-line to manage the recovery process; and

All staff have personal needs and reactions to trauma, regardless of whether they are working directly in the recovery process or managing normal business. This is especially the case in Yarra Ranges where almost 80% of staff live in the municipality.



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#### 4.2.5. CHANGING POLICY ENVIRONMENT

Inevitably, changes will occur in the policy environment in response to such a large-scale disaster. The normal regulations and frameworks are often tested. However, staff indicated that the fluid policy environment, with frequent changes to building and other regulations and funding grants, was confusing, time consuming and it was often difficult to understand the implications for the community. Council was often not informed of changes prior to announcements being made in the media, despite the legislative role of Council to implement the changes. People consulted recognised that these changes were inevitable and a response to the changing needs of the community as well as the scale of the event itself.

*"We worked so hard to support local residents and we'd get the blame for the changes in decisions of state government." (Council officer)*

### 4.3. UNDERSTANDING OF ROLES AND RESPONSIBILITIES OF LOCAL GOVERNMENT

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#### 4.3.1. MANDATED ROLE OF LOCAL GOVERNMENT

The core business of Council is central to the recovery process. This includes wastewater management, building approvals, building notices, monitoring of public health, management of the natural environment on public land, the delivery of a range of universal community services for the whole community and, for the more vulnerable, through targeted services. These functions are supported by State Government legislation, including responsibility for municipal health planning, planning for early childhood services, health and safety regulation and strategic planning for development and building regulation. Yarra Ranges has also invested in developing its communities, building local capacity through leadership programs and working with local businesses to build local economies. At the same time, Local Government has a clear, mandated role, under the *Emergency Management Act*, to contribute to the response, relief and recovery phases of emergencies. This has been strengthened with the revision of the EMMV since 2009.

The scale of the disaster was such that the resources of all levels of government were required to plan, manage and work with communities in the recovery process. This meant that structures, systems and responses were established outside the existing frameworks and working relationships. This included the establishment of the Victorian Bushfire Reconstruction and Recovery Authority (VBRRA) and the Victorian Bushfire Case Management Service. However, the consultation indicated that new structures did not pay sufficient attention to existing planning or the established roles and responsibilities. This was complicated further by the long-term nature of the recovery. Experiences following other disasters, documented in the literature, indicate that the time for recovery can be expected to be at least three to five years for both individuals and communities. It can be longer for many people.

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#### 4.3.2. LEADERSHIP ROLE OF LOCAL GOVERNMENT

There is a need for State and Federal Governments to engage with local governments and to acknowledge the enduring responsibility of local governments in the recovery process.

People are accustomed to relying on Council for information and support. There is a strong culture in Victoria of this occurring, including in Yarra Ranges. People in the community rely on Council for their most basic needs – collection of rubbish, provision of community care services, maintenance of a safe community in relation to the natural environment and monitoring and regulation of public health. People are used to contacting local government. For many people, if they are not accessing government funding through income

support or services, their main reasons for contact with government is as a ratepayer and related property management issues. As one person commented:

*“Local residents always look to the Shire to help them.” (Community member)*

In many circumstances, Council is not the decision-maker, but has responsibility for implementing State or Federal Government policy. Regardless, local communities know how to contact Council and feel comfortable in expressing their views to local Councillors. As such, Council is often held responsible for a range of decisions and actions, whether it is responsible for the underlying policies or not. At the same time, it is imperative that Federal and State Government support, at a time of crisis, includes local government and that they work collaboratively to assist communities to recover from the events that caused the trauma. This would minimise confusion and serve to facilitate more efficient responses and recovery processes.

As the level of government closest to the community, local government is well placed to know and understand the nuances and cultures of local communities and is able to work with them in the long term. This is supported through best practice in recovery management, where the role of local government leading recovery processes in the long term and working in partnership with community and other organisations, is well documented<sup>37</sup>. The consultation indicated that there was a need for this to be recognised and built into the work of VBRR or other similar Federal and State coordinating authorities. In their absence, tensions arose, particularly in Yarra Ranges, where staff were clear about their roles and responsibilities in the recovery phase and were committed to working with local residents in the long term to rebuild well-functioning communities.

*“Many state government agencies treated us like the rest of community and as if we had no special or different role. This is not case. Local government has a critical role in planning and disaster recovery.” (Council officer)*

*“The attitude of several state government departments was particularly frustrating because we thought local government had an understanding with state government. It was hard not to get angry and frustrated.” (Council officer)*

The clear exception was the Eastern Regional Office of DHS. This regional office acknowledged, understood and respected the role of local government and worked collaboratively to establish appropriate recovery processes and strategies.

While Council believed it was working within its legislated role and existing planning frameworks, and mobilised its resources accordingly, the tensions, and their root causes, lead to confusion, frustration, and a lack of efficiency and effectiveness. Some examples, which staff believed affected the outcomes of the recovery, included:

- Being an Interface Council and classified as a metropolitan council, Yarra Ranges was not eligible for all funding, such as management of roadsides and public infrastructure damaged by the fires, which was only available for rural municipalities. While this issue was eventually resolved, it was a time-consuming advocacy task for Council;

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<sup>37</sup> Cube and Turning Point Crisis Management, 2011, FEMA, 2010

- New funding became available in response to identified community need, together with changes in regulations, *e.g.* building regulations. Despite its clear role in implementing and monitoring these regulations and managing the community funding, Council was frequently not informed in advance of these initiatives and new regulations, hearing about them through the media or when community members sought advice in relation to them, from Council. This meant that Council officers spent considerable time working out what the new regulations meant, how to implement them and how to communicate them to the community; and
- Community recovery planning excluded local government, with VBBRA community facilitators seeking only to consult with communities directly. This approach caused particular difficulties when the views expressed in the VBBRA process contradicted those made, and agreed, by much larger, and more representative, numbers of community members in planning processes conducted prior to the disaster. Examples included the *Hike and Bike Strategy*, *Community Hubs Strategy* and Yarra Ranges' 10 year Capital Works Plan.

Yarra Ranges acknowledged that it could not manage the scale of the recovery alone and needed to work collaboratively with State and Federal Governments to rebuild communities. However, it was difficult to establish effective partnerships when the roles and responsibilities of local government were not incorporated into the overall planning and recovery processes, despite agreements and plans already in place, as well as the legislatively mandated roles. While people consulted recognised that the scale of the fires posed a range of difficulties that required developing responses quickly, there was a belief that it was imperative that State and Federal Governments needed to plan and work jointly with local government, recognising that local government had a critical role in recovery. The planning of Federal and State Governments needs to be coordinated and compatible with local government plans.

*"The State Government needs to have a VBRR in waiting, with legislation enacted and the roles and responsibilities of the respective levels of government made clear." (Committee member)*

*"We need to plan in 'peace time'." (Staff member)*

#### 4.3.3. LOCAL GOVERNMENT AS A LEADER IN THE RECOVERY PROCESS

A number of community agencies and residents consulted felt that local government was the most appropriate body to coordinate the recovery process.

*"Local government has to lead the long-term recovery – they will be around in the long term to work with communities and maintain the buildings." (Community agency)*

Local government must be a leader in the long-term community recovery (LTCR) process. This is confirmed by the experience of communities elsewhere as well as the documented evidence of what has been successful.

*“It is important that local government initiates the LTCR program and supports the overall process since key public decisions and actions will emerge from the process. Residents of the community need to know that their elected officials are actively engaged in the LTCR planning process and intend to follow through on resulting recommendations.”<sup>38</sup>*

This assumes that local governments have strong connections with their local communities and the resources to be able to respond. It includes:

- A working knowledge of local leadership;
- Strong working relationships with key community groups and organisations, such as service clubs, faith communities and business groups;
- An understanding of the nature of local communities - socio-demographic composition, familiarity with the fabric of the local infrastructure, an understanding of the nature of the relationships across communities and interest groups, and an understanding of the local needs and aspirations of communities; and
- Sufficient staff on the ground, or access to skilled staff, to enable prompt and enduring responses.

This can only be achieved through partnerships with Federal and State Governments and resources provided by these levels of government.

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#### 4.3.4. COMPARISON WITH OTHER LOCAL GOVERNMENTS

Discussions with other local governments in the adjoining municipalities, which were also affected by the fire, indicated that they had experienced similar challenges in the recovery process. The different municipalities had differing resources and capacities to develop recovery responses. This was influenced by the existing resources within the municipalities, as well as the scale of the impact on the local communities. Each local government area developed structures and processes that reflected their local communities and the existing relationships. The LGAs also worked from a framework of existing recovery strategies and plans.

As with Yarra Ranges, there was a view that more work is required to establish agreements with the State and Federal Governments regarding roles, responsibilities and common approaches to community recovery.

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#### 4.3.5. DEVELOPMENTS SINCE 2009

The MAV, supported by State Government funding, has initiated a comprehensive program, with six component projects, focussing on developing a coordinated and consistent local government approach to emergency management. The purpose of this program is to conduct a broad based review of emergency management in local government that results in a revised policy position on the role of the sector across the continuum of emergency management, *i.e.* prevention, planning, response and recovery. The program will include review and consideration of legislative and funding arrangements, the development of programs to

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<sup>38</sup> Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA), 2005:15

improve performance, including development programs, work arrangements and performance measurement<sup>39</sup>. The six interlinked projects will address:

- Policy and Role;
- Legislative Change;
- Sustainable Funding;
- Capability Building;
- Shared Services; and
- Performance Measurement.

This program, to be conducted over the next three years, is currently underway. Local governments across the State are engaged in the process.

#### 4.4. MANAGING EXTERNAL RELATIONSHIPS

##### 4.4.1. RELATIONSHIP WITH THE STATE GOVERNMENT

The core of the differences with the State Government appeared to have been related to a misunderstanding of the respective roles and responsibilities and the new structures and approaches to recovery being introduced. Compared with the effective partnership that existed at the regional level, this misunderstanding demonstrated how effective planning and partnership development in the preparation phase was critical. There is a need for local government and the Office of the State Emergency Services to develop protocols and integrated planning processes that can guide the recovery process.

Planning needs to focus on developing strong working relationships where organisations can develop trust and confidence in each other's capacity to deliver on the outcomes. Importantly, there needs to be adherence to the evidence-base that strongly supports local government taking a lead in the long-term recovery process.

##### 4.4.2. MANAGING RELATIONSHIPS WITH OTHER AGENCIES

Effective working relationships are at the core of being able to work cooperatively under pressure. This involves understanding how other organisations work, as well as being clear about the roles and responsibilities of different agencies in the recovery process. It takes time for these relationships to develop. As one individual indicated:

*"Working relationships need to be developed and built over time and tested under pressure in the planning and preparation phase." (Community agency)*

The development of protocols and Memoranda of Understanding (MOUs) can assist with this process. These written agreements outline the responsibilities of agencies and can be developed further and negotiated as circumstances change in a crisis. This was evidenced by the understanding between Yarra Ranges and the DHS Regional Office who were able to negotiate the particular tasks for which they respectively took responsibility

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<sup>39</sup> MAV (2010)

within the structure developed by Yarra Ranges. DHS took responsibility for accommodation, case management and counselling, while Yarra Ranges took responsibility for events and programs, volunteer management and material aid.

During the consultation, a number of agencies indicated that, while such devastating situations can bring out the best in people and agencies, this is not always the case. Some agencies and/or individuals appeared to try to use the difficult circumstances for personal and/or organisational gain in the form of profit, status or recognition. Awareness of this in the protocol development phase is critical. It is also important to ensure that agencies adhere to the established protocols during the recovery process.

Adhering to the agreed principles and practices established during the preparation and planning phases is critical at the time of the crisis. At the same time, it is important to be flexible and to respond to emerging community needs and circumstances.

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#### 4.4.3. DEVELOPING STANDARD SYSTEMS ACROSS MUNICIPALITIES

Several people indicated the need to have standardised training for Municipal Recovery Managers (MRMs) across the State, as well as similar systems and position descriptions for the key roles. This would enable municipalities to support each other efficiently and effectively in the event of a major emergency requiring long-term recovery processes. It would also provide the important support needed by smaller municipalities that do not have the resources to commit to intensive response and long-term recovery. It is anticipated that this will be an outcome of the MAV program.

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#### 4.4.4. BUILDING RELATIONSHIPS AND ESTABLISHING PROTOCOLS

The most effective outcomes were achieved in areas where there were established working relationships. The two best examples were:

- Yarra Ranges and the DHS Eastern Regional Office each chaired two working groups established as part of the Yarra Ranges structure. The decisions were based on a mutual understanding of each other's respective strengths, abilities and interests; and
- The Economic Recovery Subcommittee where Yarra Ranges Council and Yarra Ranges Regional Marketing used their established relationship to good effect. Further, Tourism Victoria had an established relationship with local tourism bodies and, as a result, the recovery process commenced quickly and progressed efficiently.

In an event as large as the 2009 bushfires and one requiring statewide coordination, it is important that any newly established authority familiarises itself with the local community through building partnerships with local government. Learning from the Victorian experience, Centrelink indicated that, during the Queensland floods, it took its lead from local government, building partnerships as a priority in the early days of recovery. A number of practice principles have been established by Centrelink as a result.

The State Emergency Relief and Recovery Plan (SERRP) states that strong working relationships between all levels of government are critical. The structure of the working relationships needs to be confirmed and operationalised through Memoranda of Understanding, at all levels down to regional, and clearly outline the roles and responsibilities of local government across the four pillars of recovery.

#### 4.4.5. USING THE EVIDENCE BASE AND PRACTICE WISDOM

The framework used by Yarra Ranges to understand community functioning during crises and trauma, was important in assisting staff to develop constructive approaches to working with the community across all areas. Regular training for all staff, including an understanding beforehand for not just those directly involved in the recovery activities, was important. This assisted staff to develop strategies in working with people in the community. Importantly, it provided reassurance – through understanding the impacts and reactions of community, staff could begin to understand their own reactions and to tailor their responses accordingly.

The experience of the 2009 bushfire recovery process indicated that there is a need to:

- Change planning frameworks, recognising the phases of recovery (action is already occurring in relation to this) and the resources required to achieve effective outcomes;
- Recognise that recovery is a long term process and that additional resources may be required for three to five years; and
- Ensure that staff are able to follow through on any outstanding issues with individual residents when they return to their normal jobs.

## 5. STAFFING AND HUMAN RESOURCES

### 5.1. ACHIEVEMENTS

#### 5.1.1. APPROPRIATE AND SWIFT STAFF APPOINTMENTS

At the time of 2009 bushfires, Yarra Ranges had an established Emergency Recovery Team that had worked together for many years and was trained and skilled in working in emergency recovery. This included the Municipal Recovery Manager (MRM), the Deputy Municipal Recovery Managers (DMRM), the Municipal Emergency Resources Officer (MERO) and the Municipal Emergency Manager (MEM). These responsibilities were part of the individuals' roles in the organisation. Members of the Emergency Recovery Team were also skilled and trained to work in Relief Centres and immediately took up these duties, undertaking relief and support work in the Relief Centres. This also included staff from Asset Maintenance and Services who were involved in making roads safe and creating access in the fire-affected areas.

Within several days, it became clear that the recovery process would take at least several months. Staff were 'hand-picked' to coordinate the Recovery Centres and to work in these facilities on a rostered basis, as well as to undertake additional planning, environmental health related work.

As dedicated funding for staffing positions became available through DHS and DPCD Office of Local Government, attempts were quickly made to recruit appropriate staff through secondments and the appointment of individuals known to the organisation. Three positions were funded: Community Recovery Coordinator and two Community Development Officers - one to coordinate community events and recovery projects and one to coordinate volunteers and material aid. An external consultant, well known to the organisation and familiar with the fire-affected communities, was appointed as the events focussed Community Development Officer. The Community Recovery Coordinator and the "volunteers and material aid" Community Development Officer were internal appointments.

Appointing staff, who were known to be skilled and able to undertake the work, was an important aspect. This meant that these individuals were able to commence work immediately.

### 5.1.2. DEVELOPMENT OF A CRISIS RESPONSE STRATEGY AND ORGANISATIONAL RESILIENCE

Disasters and crises are complex and very challenging environments for organisations<sup>40</sup>. The 2009 bushfires caused major disruption to Yarra Ranges' capacity to continue to operate its normal business, manage and support communities and the physical and natural environments and to maintain its budget integrity.

Council was quick to enact a Crisis Response Strategy to support all staff. This included the provision of up to two weeks leave for staff, who were directly affected or lost their homes, and Employee Assistance Program (EAP) sessions for all staff (up to three sessions free), as well as flexible working conditions for staff in the weeks and months following the fires. The EAP sessions were also available for Councillors.

Consistent with the values of the organisation, Yarra Ranges continued to give staff the message that their contribution to the recovery effort was greatly appreciated. The majority of staff indicated that they felt supported by the organisation.

This was also evident through the levels of WorkCover stress leave. The organisation reported that there was no change in the WorkCover claims in the 15 months following the 2009 bushfires and no increases in staff turnover.

*Many staff did feel burnt out from experience in Relief Centres – but for many it was an opportunity to demonstrate leadership and learn skills and identify within the organisation as a “rising star” (Council manager)*

*“Resilience is not just about ‘bouncing back from adversity’ but is more broadly concerned with adaptive capacity and how we can better understand and address uncertainty in our internal and external environments.”<sup>41</sup>*

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### 5.1.3. DEDICATED STAFFING RESOURCES

The majority of teams took staff off-line to work on recovery. This enabled them to focus on the specific issues and tasks required. Working in small teams was also identified as being important. Staff indicated that this provided them with the opportunity to de-brief informally, to share resources and to use the team to develop solutions to a range of issues. An indicator of the success of this strategy was the low levels of staff turnover. The three main staff working in community recovery remained in their positions for 15 months. One of them has continued to work on emergency management planning in a newly created, dedicated Relief and Recovery role that included coordinating the development of the Recovery Inception Plan.

Continuity of staff was also important for residents. Staff indicated that several residents had commented that they were grateful that they could continue to work with one or two key people, as it meant that they did not have to keep telling their stories to different people. It also minimised the chance of error in communicating with the community - consistent messages were given by the same people.

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<sup>40</sup> Tarrant, 2010

<sup>41</sup> Gibson and Tarrant, 2010



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#### 5.1.4. THE RIGHT PEOPLE FOR THE RIGHT JOBS

Managers actively encouraged staff to apply for positions and actively sought staff, who were known to be competent, from elsewhere. This was regarded as an important strategy for retaining staff in the longer term. Several people indicated that appointing people with the aptitude for a position, including capacity to make decisions, work in stressful environments and engage sensitively with community members, was important and contributed to the high levels of staff retention.

Comments regarding staffing included;

*“Putting the right people in the right jobs resulted in stability, continuity and an effective team.”*

*A high proportion of staff live in the municipality – this was a strong incentive to assist.”*

*“Be careful who is selected for [recovery] positions. Be mindful that people will desperately want to help but they may not be the right person for the job. However, keeping business continuity is just as important.”*

#### 5.2. CHALLENGES

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##### 5.2.1. DOING THE “NORMAL WORK”

Involvement in the day-to-day work of the organisation posed a different set of concerns for staff. There was a degree of tension between some staff, who worked on recovery, and some, who had remained to conduct the normal business of Council. One staff member described this as the ‘tall poppy syndrome’.

At the same time, some staff who continued with operating the usual business of the organisation indicated that they felt undervalued in the organisation.

*“Those who had to continue in a regular Council role felt alienated in 2009”.*

Staff felt that it was important that the organisation acknowledge the importance of business continuity. Several members indicated that they were aware that some of their colleagues felt that the greatest contribution they could make to the recovery process was to continue to do their own job and that of staff who were working on recovery at the same time – backing up and ensuring that residents were not disadvantaged.

*“[it is important to] communicate to staff that their role in business continuity is just as important, even if it is without the glamour.” (Council officer)*

*“... need praise and visibility from leadership to all staff.” (Council officer)*

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##### 5.2.2. MANAGING THE STAFF CHANGES IN OTHER AGENCIES

The scale of the event was such that all government agencies were required to second staff from a range of areas to assist with the recovery process. However, staff indicated that it was difficult to manage the constant changes in personnel. Community members also found this difficult, as they felt they were constantly telling their stories to different people. This was not only exhausting, but was viewed as unnecessary and time consuming by many people.

For Council staff, the frequent staff changes in other agencies meant rebuilding relationships as different people came into positions. This caused confusion and inefficiencies. Information was often lost, different interpretations of guidelines were made by different staff or there was a loss of continuity of business. This also contributed to poor understanding of the differing roles of individuals and organisations and reduced the capacity of staff to develop good working relationships outside of the organisation. Further, new staff in external agencies often did not understand the context of Yarra Ranges and the culture of the small townships.

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#### 5.2.3. SUPPORTING STAFF TO UNDERSTAND TRAUMA

The health surveillance staff, and staff who were required to assess property damage, were often the first Council officers to make contact with property owners who had been affected by the fires. This meant that they were often confronted with difficult situations and were required to support people who were traumatised. While they indicated that they were willing to listen and support wherever they could, they often felt “out of their depth”.

Staff indicated that participation in the professional development sessions, in relation to understanding how communities respond to trauma (the Gordon model), was particularly helpful. It would have been helpful, as a number of people indicated, to have this included in the preparation and training for emergency management. Conducting interviews in pairs was also an important strategy. Not only did this reduce the risk to individuals in potentially volatile situations, but it also provided emotional support.

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#### 5.2.4. INSUFFICIENT STAFFING RESOURCES

Council simply did not have the capacity or the resources to manage the relief, response and recovery processes, as well as continue with normal business. There were not sufficient trained and skilled people available to fill all the roles. In most areas of Council, managers decided to take staff off line to work on the recovery tasks and to backfill other positions from inside and outside the organisation. This was also difficult, as staff new to the organisation required induction to their positions and had to learn their new roles – it was not a matter of simply coming in and picking up the work. Over the longer term, the capacity of all the teams involved was stretched.

Yarra Ranges has developed a strategy, in partnership with other local governments in the Eastern Region, to support one another in the event of another large-scale disaster. A regional model has been developed to establish Relief Centres that have consistency across all municipalities. This strategy will ensure that municipalities in the region are able to manage continuity of business at the same time as managing the relief effort.

The MAV project is looking to develop a similar approach for the whole the State.

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#### 5.2.5. MANAGING THE BROADER CONTEXT

Some staff experienced a sense of frustration about external pronouncements being made with limited reference to, or consideration of, the local planning process, or the difficulties on the ground. They felt that some decisions were influenced by factors that were not necessarily supported by evidence. Staff indicated that it would have preferable to ‘keep the politics out of it’; for example media announcements being made by State and Federal Governments without any notification at the local level. However, it was acknowledged that decisions will be made at a political level and getting the timing right will often be difficult. Nevertheless, staff felt that they needed skills and strategies to manage the situation. To their credit, they believed that the most

important task was that local government continued to manage the political environment on behalf of the community and to advocate for local residents and businesses. One individual suggested that the employment of a public relations officer to present the views of local government would have eased tensions. While this appeared to be a rather pessimistic response, it reflected the frustration that staff felt.

#### Building Trust with Local Communities

Four important issues were identified in the process of building trust with local communities:

- Deploying staff, who had existing relationships with local communities and understood how they worked;
- Ensuring that the staff selected for the recovery roles were themselves coping and not managing their own recovery issues;
- Ensuring that a professional approach was in place at all times and that the facilitating staff:
  - Did not become enmeshed in the local communities and consequently develop bias;
  - Understood and built on existing relationships; and
- Removing the responsibility *to do everything* from the community members but not reducing the level of empowerment.

### 5.3. LOOKING TO THE FUTURE

A number of strategies were identified for inclusion in recovery planning.

1. *Develop position descriptions now:* staff indicated that they were now aware of the types of roles and skills required to undertake the range of recovery tasks, particularly in the initial stages of recovery, but did not prior to the fires. These position descriptions could be developed now and include an assessment of the level of the positions. This would enable them to be filled swiftly, although there would always be a need for flexibility and adaptation of responsibilities.
2. *Ensure that resources to backfill positions are available immediately:* staff became exhausted because of the workload and the intensity of the tasks, particularly for those who continued to manage their normal work as well as the recovery process. This is particularly important for the MRM position. This was a full time position from the beginning. The individual only moved offline, and then for a period of only three months, in the preparation for summer of 2009/2010 bushfire season.
3. *Maintain staff continuity:* develop and implement strategies that are likely to support staff to maintain their roles in recovery.
4. *Provide targeted professional development on community recovery processes:* professional development in this area, during planning and preparation, is vital.
5. *Develop risk management strategies and policies for field visits:* there is a need to develop policies and procedures for staff undertaking home visits to traumatised individuals. This should include ensuring that visits are conducted by two people.

## 6. ADMINISTRATION, DATA MANAGEMENT AND KNOWLEDGE MANAGEMENT

### 6.1. ACHIEVEMENTS

The major achievements were:

- Yarra Ranges established a call centre to manage all requests for assistance and match them with offers of help from the community and organisations;
- In the first three weeks, a team of volunteers from WorkSafe assisted Yarra Ranges to establish the database and enter data, which related to property damage, infrastructure, personal losses *etc.* These staff were familiar with the system and their contribution was extremely valuable to the coordination of information;
- Staff indicated that the establishment of a dedicated drive, for managing and monitoring all recovery data, on the Council computer system was particularly effective;
- Where there were dedicated administration resources, such as a call centre for managing inquiries from the public and the administration, the systems worked more efficiently; and
- Staff indicated that the collaboration between DHS and Yarra Ranges Council worked extremely well. This meant that there was a willingness to share data and information and to work together to resolve the range of difficulties that arose with data management. This was particularly important in tracking residents, many of whom moved out of the area. Due to this cooperation, staff indicated that they felt confident that they did not lose track of any residents and were able to follow up, personally, with every individual who had been affected by the fires.

### 6.2. CHALLENGES

Staff indicated a range of concerns with data management. These included the lack of sophisticated systems, privacy restrictions, incompatibility of systems and some reluctance of agencies to share information.

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#### 6.2.1. REGISTRATION OF RESIDENTS WHO WERE AFFECTED BY THE FIRE

In line with the established disaster response and recovery processes in Victoria, the Red Cross undertook responsibility for the registration of residents who were affected by the fires. These volunteers and staff were located at the Relief Centres. This process proved very difficult as the information was recorded manually and meant that there was no capacity to cross-reference data easily.

In addition, both the Red Cross and Centrelink, which was responsible for initial emergency grants, were unable to share any information about residents, due to privacy legislation restrictions. Both these agencies had comprehensive information on fire-affected residents. The result was that residents needed to register individually with other agencies before they could get assistance with services, including emergency accommodation. It also meant that there was little or no capacity to track residents across agencies and to ensure that they did not need to repeat information to multiple service providers. This situation resulted in significant duplication of effort, frustration and stress for fire-affected people.

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#### 6.2.2. REGISTERING OFFERS OF VOLUNTEER ASSISTANCE AND ACCOMMODATION

There was an overwhelming response from the public with offers of assistance. This included volunteer help, support and donations. Yarra Ranges established a database system to record this information. This was a

time consuming and complicated task. Yarra Ranges employed a staff member to manage this process, given the complexity and the amount of work involved. The process would have been easier if an existing database had been available.

Yarra Ranges staff, in partnership with DHS, also managed the process of matching offers of housing, which came from across the State, with families and individuals, who required short, medium and long-term accommodation. DHS central office assisted with the management of this information.

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### 6.2.3. INCOMPATIBILITY OF DATA SYSTEMS

There was significant duplication of effort, confusion and frustration caused by the lack of compatibility between the data systems of the different agencies. It meant that staff from DHS and Yarra Ranges needed to tally their information manually in order to ensure that all residents were being supported adequately. Despite this, agencies made every effort not to lose track of anyone and followed up individually with every person who was known to have been affected.

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### 6.2.4. ADMINISTRATIVE PROCESSES FOR GRANTS

The administrative systems associated with grants were also a source of frustration. Grants forms were not on line and therefore all forms required manual completion. The DHS Regional office indicated that they found it easier to deliver forms to Yarra Glen physically rather than rely on electronic transfer of the information. This meant making two of three trips from Box Hill to Yarra Glen every day for the first month.

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### 6.2.5. RELUCTANCE TO SHARE INFORMATION

Council staff responsible for assessing properties and the extent of the damage across the municipality could not get timely access to information or access to fire affected areas. This was critical information for Council staff, as they were required to secure the safety and accessibility of the affected areas as quickly as possible, in order to ensure that residents were able to leave their properties to seek assistance. To manage this problem, Yarra Ranges paid for the charter of a plane to take aerial photographs, which could then be put onto the GIS.

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### 6.2.6. DATA MANAGEMENT

There was a tendency by both state government and local government to view complex situations entirely from their own perspectives, and in isolation from other systems. This led to some difficulties with data management systems. The issues and solutions appeared to become more complex because the roles and responsibilities of government departments and local government remained unclear.

There is a clear need to improve the data management systems as, not only is assistance to the victims of a disaster delayed, but all staff, state and local, are subjected to unnecessary additional workloads and stress. Systems need to be shared between state and local government, with some access by non-government agencies, such as the Red Cross and accommodation agencies that, at times, have responsibility for accommodation and other services. Resolution of these issues is critical for the state government, and resources need to be allocated to resolve them. Action needs to include:

- Developing a form/instrument/mechanism, which residents could sign, or agree to, at the point of registration, giving permission for their details to be shared with other agencies;

- A standard common database to enable information to be shared, and easily transferred between agencies, is required. This would prevent the unnecessary duplication of effort in tallying information and tracking residents, particularly as people move away from the area to live with relatives *etc.* Staff who are involved in recovery need to be trained in using these systems as part of the planning process;
- The inclusion of residents' email addresses in Council's database is important in keeping in contact with those who leave the municipality; and
- Inclusion of data sharing in the MOUs with other agencies.

In the absence of the development of a statewide database, Yarra Ranges could work with the DHS Regional Office to develop compatible systems locally.

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#### 6.2.7. KNOWLEDGE MANAGEMENT

The knowledge that staff have gained through the recovery process is critical for informing planning and learning for the future. This review has enabled staff to reflect on their experiences and much of the information gained through this process will be used in the development of the Recovery Inception Plan and in refining approaches to long-term community rebuilding. However, it is now over two and a half years since the fires. Despite their best efforts, it is difficult for residents and staff to remember all the details of what could have helped. The development of systems to record the reflections of staff would be useful and could assist in future review and evaluation processes. This may be simply a diary-type system that can be registered on Council's computer system or a database that allows the recording of narrative information at the time. This can then be collated and analysed after the intense work of recovery has been completed.

Staff indicated that a range of forms, policies and data systems need to be developed in the planning phase and could be included as part of the Recovery Inception Plan. Other action includes:

- Resolution of the privacy issues;
- Agreement for sharing data and information between key agencies and including this in the MOUs;
- Advocacy with the State Government to develop integrated and compatible data systems;
- Electronic versions of all forms to be placed online; and
- Training of all recovery agencies in the use of data systems.

An excellent example of good practice was the establishment and operation of the Bushfire Recovery Call Centre.

##### **BUSHFIRE RECOVERY CALL CENTRE**

In days following Black Saturday, the MECC was inundated with requests for assistance from the public. These requests were varied and included water, animal feed, fencing, generators, trades people, counseling and grants information. In an attempt to separate and manage some of the competing responsibilities, a separate team was established to manage the requests and to take advantage of the offers of support that were coming in from organisations and individuals in the community.

By 9<sup>th</sup> February, following advice from East Gippsland Shire, which has a history of managing major emergencies, Yarra Ranges introduced a Microsoft Access database, *Compass*, to manage recovery efforts and impacts. The program was integrated with Council's corporate systems.

Both Telstra and WorkSafe assisted in establishing a Recovery Call Centre through:

- Establishing a mobile-based telephone call centre with a 1300 number in the Council Offices within 24 hours (Telstra);
- Twenty WorkSafe staff - with varying skills, ranging from IT engineers, investigators, administrators, process managers and a lawyer - setting up the systems.

*After what had been a tiring and emotional first five days, with hundreds of requests from people needing assistance and having completed the brief to the new team, I felt some excitement. I remember going home late on that day reflecting that I had a good team that was going to achieve some positive outcomes. I could see some "light at the end of the tunnel." YRC Staff*

By 13<sup>th</sup> February, the call centre was operational and ran two shifts of staff operating seven days a week for approximately six weeks.

#### BUSHFIRE RECOVERY CALL CENTRE - Operations

The unit was broken into the following four functional groups:

##### *Information Technology*

- Assisted with the integration and functioning of *Compass*;
- Established a search engine and database to manage requests and offers of assistance;
- Automated the capture of information from the website and databases for dissemination to agencies.

##### *Information, Processes & Systems*

- Monitored changes in grants and state support;
- Recorded major offers of support and donations;
- Developed fact sheets for the public;
- Ensured systems and processes were running smoothly;
- Provided analysis of data and reporting to MECC and to the Municipal Recovery Committee;
- Managed volunteers and donations, including feed distribution and tradesmen.

##### *Call Staff*

- Received calls for assistance and offers of support;
- Contacted residents and agencies who had requested assistance;
- Recorded further details and needs of impacted families and properties for entering into the *Compass* database;
- Linked volunteers and material aid donations with residents and agencies that needed help.

##### *Data Entry Staff*

- Entered all data into *Compass*.

### Outcomes

The outcomes produced by the Recovery Call Centre in the initial weeks following the disaster saw lasting benefits in the recovery of the community and helped to coordinate the multiple offers of assistance. The work done at the Recovery Call Centre included:

- The collection of impact data from a range of sources: DPI Impact Assessment Sheets, DHS Grants, Recovery Assessment Forms, phone calls, Health Team Assessments, Building Assessments;
- The development of comprehensive “case files” of impacted households;
- Linkage of impact assessment data to the Council mapping system;
- An animal feed distribution site, which coordinated 3,000 bales of donated hay and truck loads of animal feed with a network of volunteers;
- The management of thousands of offers of support through a searchable database;
- Establishment and distribution of important information including Fact Sheets and information on asbestos safety, tank cleaning, available grants *etc*;
- Coordinated stock feed, stock and drinking water, and generator distribution, as well as many other requests for support;
- Coordinated requests for counseling;
- Established what was to become the volunteer accommodation in Dixons Creek;
- Supported police with missing person’s investigations; and
- Assisted DHS with clarification on applicants meeting support grant criteria.

By the end of the two months, more than 40 people had volunteered their time to assist in the Recovery Call Centre. This included Yarra Ranges’ staff, staff from neighbouring Councils and other organisations, as well as members of the community.

The core of the call centre activities were later moved to the Recovery Centre at Yarra Glen while the management of data, including *Compass*, remained at Lilydale with the Emergency Management Team.

*Council Officer*

## 7. FINANCIAL RESOURCES

### 7.1. FUNDING OF THE RECOVERY EFFORT

Council spent a total of \$10,346,605, which was claimed from the Federal Government Natural Disaster Resilience Grants Scheme, to end June 2011. While the majority of these costs have now been re-paid, over \$1 million (\$1,159,077) has not been re-funded. The acquittal process is ongoing.

In addition to the funds claimed under the above program, funding was received for the provision of recovery services across many domains and funding grants. These are outlined in Table 6. A total of \$ 3,902,708.00 was received in grants.



\$3,237,258.00 was received from the State Government, with funding coming from six departments across 19 different programs. All of these programs had different acquittal and reporting requirements. Tracking of expenditure and reporting has been a significant, ongoing task.

The remainder of the funds were from non-government sources: the Municipal Association of Victoria (MAV), the Bendigo Bank and private donations.

Table 6: Funding grants received

| Funding Source  | Program  | Amount                |
|---|--|-----------------------|
| Regional Development Victoria                           | <b>Community Initiatives Funding - Community Recovery Plan Projects</b>  |                       |
|   | • Eric Tetlow Walking Trail  | \$675,625.00          |
|   | • Walking Trail to Chum Creek  | \$218,975.00          |
|   | <b>Community Connectedness and Capacity Building, including:</b>   | \$110,000.00          |
|   | • Bloke's Night Out Series - \$38,000;   |                       |
|   | • Family Activities - \$42,000;  |                       |
|   | • Women's Cooking - \$20,000.  |                       |
|   | • Yarra Glen Community Facility - Yarra Glen Memo Hall upgrade   | \$448,000.00          |
|   | <b>Landcare Program for Bushfire Affected Communities</b>  | \$200,000.00          |
|   | <b>Sub Total</b>   | <b>\$1,652,600.00</b> |
| Department of Planning and Community Development (DPCD) | <b>Community Recovery Fund</b>   |                       |
|   | • <i>Youth Support</i> : activities such as events and projects, music programs, mental health support   | \$37,500.00           |
|   | • <i>Walk a New Path, Sing a New Song (reKINDle)</i> : Music, story- telling and performance workshops with schools from a number of fire-affected communities, led by the Little Yarra Steiner School. Will result in a CD and touring performance. | \$20,000.00           |
|   | • <i>Touched by Fire</i> : Digital Story telling project to record a variety of people's experience related to the fires   | \$17,000.00           |
|   | • <i>Target 25,000</i> - Volunteers connecting with fire affected residents -Community Project   | \$26,000.00           |
|   | • <i>Steels Creek Community Centre</i> : equipment and support to reinvigorate community meeting place   | \$19,995.00           |
|   | • <i>Yarra Glen Memorial Hall</i> : equipment to assist community groups in re-establishing and building community connectedness.  | \$50,000.00           |
|   | Community Information Funding  | \$5,000.00            |
|   | Small Volunteers Grant   | \$100,000.00          |
|   | Bushfire Community Recovery  | \$30,000.00           |
|   | National Day of Mourning   | \$3,000.00            |
|   | <b>Sub Total</b>   | <b>\$308,495.00</b>   |

|  |   |                       |
|--|---|-----------------------|
| Victorian Bushfire Reconstruction and Recovery Authority (VBRRA) | <b>Community Recovery Support Grant</b>                 |                       |
|  | • Reconnecting Community with Nature                    | \$34,000.00           |
|  | • Rebuilding Community Pride                            | \$33,272.00           |
|  | First Year Anniversary Commemoration events             | \$25,000.00           |
|  | Second Year Anniversary Commemoration events            | \$12,500.00           |
|  | Memorials and Commemorative Events                      | \$159,556.00          |
|  | Community Winter Payments                               | \$5,235.00            |
|  | Community Summer Events                                 | \$12,500.00           |
|  | <b>Sub Total</b>  | <b>\$319,563.00</b>   |
| Department of Human Services                                     | Bushfire Community Development Officer program          | <b>\$250,000.00</b>   |
| Department of Justice  | Recognition of Bushfire Emergency Services              | <b>\$ 6,600.00</b>    |
| Office of Local Government                                       | <b>Community Assistance Gift</b>                        |                       |
|  | • Counselling services                                  | \$50,000.00           |
|  | • Community development services                        | \$100,000.00          |
|  | • Don Rd Sporting Complex                               | \$30,000.00           |
|  | • Lilydale Recreation Reserve                           | \$30,000.00           |
|  | • Wesburn Recreation Reserve                            | \$10,000.00           |
|  | • Vegetation Management Officer                         | \$100,000.00          |
|  | • Environmental Health Officer                          | \$90,000.00           |
|  | • Additional Statutory Planners and Ecologist           | \$200,000.00          |
|  | • Building Surveyor                                     | \$90,000.00           |
|  | <b>Sub Total</b>  | <b>\$700,000.00</b>   |
| Municipal Association of Victoria                                | MAV Bushfire Fund                                       | <b>\$60,000.00</b>    |
| Bendigo Bank Community Enterprise Foundation                     | "Eyes of a Child" - Polyglot Theatre                    | \$40,500.00           |
|  | Meditation for the Soul                                 | \$3,600.00            |
|  | Fencing Program   | \$31,350.00           |
|  | Property Signage Project                                | \$10,000.00           |
|  | Community Playground McKenzie Reserve                   | \$300,000.00          |
|  | <b>Sub Total</b>  | <b>\$385,450.00</b>   |
| Private Donations  | Tesco (in partnership with Brown Brothers & DeBortolis) | \$140,000.00          |
|  | City of Grantt, South Australia                         | \$20,000.00           |
|  | Restaurant and Catering Victoria - volunteer vouchers   | \$70,000.00           |
|  | <b>Sub total</b>  | <b>\$230,000.00</b>   |
| <b>TOTAL</b>   |   | <b>\$3,902,708.00</b> |

## 7.2. FUNDING MODEL FOR COMMUNITY RECOVERY

Grants and other funding available through the state government departments and other independent sources were critical to supporting the community recovery process. This funding included donations from individuals in the community. However, the funding model developed by the Victorian Bushfire Appeal Fund (VBAF) posed a number of difficulties for Council staff, community groups and individuals. Staff and community members considered that the funding model was complex, confusing and potentially insensitive to the needs of communities and individuals who were still traumatised. In particular, there was an expectation that communities would drive their own recovery with a requirement for all funding applications to be approved by community members. This posed a number of difficulties:

- The timelines for submissions were usually very short, often with a two to three day turnaround. This meant that it was difficult to get people together to consult about the funding;
- Given that many community members were managing their own grief, it was very difficult for them to make decisions and focus on how the resources could be spent on community needs, particularly given the short time frames;
- The criteria were often linked to outcomes, required by VBBRA or VBAF, which did not necessarily match with what communities really wanted and needed. Consequently, resources could not be accessed; and
- Individual community members or groups were expected to complete submissions for funding themselves. This was unrealistic for many community groups, particularly given the complexity of the submission requirements and the short timelines.

Funding of projects also occurred with little or no reference to Council and yet, in many instances, Council was expected to be the funds holder and project managers and/or maintain the project into the longer term.

Funding was available on a ongoing basis, which meant that writing submissions and acquittals was an ongoing process. Community groups, which were unincorporated, relied on Council and a few not-for-profit organisations to act as the conduit for the receipt of funding. Council supported several groups in their funding submissions, sometimes to the extent of writing them, as well as applying for funding in its own right. Staff indicated that this was further complicated by there being no clear criteria for which activities could be funded, and that any criteria that were specified, changed with every submission.

Communities are comprised of a range of differing opinions. Often, the loudest voices became the dominant decision-making voices, rather than the less vocal majority and/or those advocating the most cost effective and widely beneficial decisions. The approach allowed individuals, who had particular issues or “pet projects”, to dominate, rather than decisions being made through a considered approach to planning and community engagement. Yarra Ranges and other councils presented this view to the State Government on behalf of the community. However, no changes were made to the model.

## 7.3. CHALLENGES

A number of challenges were identified with the funding processes. These included:

### 1. Keeping track of the funding available

It was inevitable that there would be continual updating of the financial resources available for communities as the scale of the event became apparent and resources were adapted to meet emerging community need. However, this proved to be difficult for Council, which was often not informed of new

resources, as they were made available, or of the criteria for accessing them. Council was often the first port of call for many residents seeking information. Without accurate and adequate information, it was often difficult for Council officers to address the concerns of residents.

## **2. Uncertainty about resources**

Staff indicated that they were uncertain as to whether the resources (such as paying for specialists and dedicated staff) that they were committing would be re-funded. This caused uncertainty about what to spend, whether to spend and how to make judgements about priorities for spending. Consequences of the uncertainty included changeover of key staff purely because funding commitments were not continuous, resulting in down time as new people came to understand the situation. This was particularly confusing when almost all the action required was necessary to ensure the safety and effective recovery of the community and the natural environment. Staff indicated that it was often difficult to know how to approach this. Council's decision to support spending, without the guarantee of reimbursement, allowed staff to feel confident about their approach to the recovery work.

## **3. Understanding the funding criteria**

Staff indicated that the process and criteria for funding applications was arduous, time consuming and often unnecessary, because the funding would be given anyway as it was clearly necessary to restore and reconstruct community infrastructure. Staff also indicated that they were never certain if they had accessed all the available funding sources. One person consulted indicated that the funding process was:

*"... a little game – if you could work out the criteria and the process and get your submission done within a few hours, then you were the winner." (Council officer)*

*"Funding criteria would not pay for airfares of survivors of the Canberra bushfires to come to talk to the community members about their experiences, later heralded a great success by the state government." (Council officer)*

Being an Interface Council, and classified as metropolitan, Yarra Ranges was not eligible for all funding, although the restoration work on public land was clearly in the rural areas of the municipality. This made it difficult to access rural funding, which had been specifically designed for disaster recovery. This issue is still unresolved.

## **4. Managing the accountability requirements**

Arduous reporting requirements were required of local government to acquit for the funding received. In fact, Council staff are still engaged in acquitting funds. This approach was incompatible with the national principles for community recovery, agreed to by all state and territory governments, which emphasised that best practice in community recovery needed to have minimal 'red tape'.

## **5. Individual funding focus not community**

Staff indicated that much of the funding was not targeted appropriately. It focussed primarily on grants for individuals and restoring their individual lives and not on community projects. This approach was inconsistent with the need to restore community infrastructure and a safe and stable natural environment.

*“There was so much money around for individuals. While it was important to meet individuals’ personal needs and provide money for this, it went on too long. It was counter-productive to a community development approach and created a ‘hand-out’ mentality in some communities.” (Council officer)*

*“Case managers became tools for getting grants – people would only want to see a case manager so they could get money.” (Community member)*

## 7.4. LOOKING TO THE FUTURE

A number of directions, which would assist to simplify the funding arrangements in future events, emerged from the consultation:

- There is a need to have standardised, accessible funding pools that have clear criteria to manage the range of factors that require resources outside normal Council expenditure. These include natural environment recovery, public infrastructure and community recovery processes, both for dedicated staff and activities. This needs to be incorporated in the *Recovery Inception Plan*;
- There is a need to allocate specific resources, including a dedicated staff position, to manage the financial assistance from the start of an event. This position would have responsibility for:
  - Establishing appropriate data bases to capture and monitor expenditure across all areas;
  - Managing the grants funding, including reporting and acquittals;
  - Supporting staff to prepare submissions; and
  - Establishing effective working relationships with relevant funding bodies to ensure that Council and community groups are aware of, and able to access, the funding that is available.
- There is a need for the State Government to simplify its funding arrangements, to reduce the arduous accounting requirements and continuous submission process.

## 8. COMMUNICATION

### 8.1. ACHIEVEMENTS

Communication is central to engaging with the community, ensuring that recovery processes are functioning well and supporting the development of productive and respectful working relationships between professionals and with the community.

Council became a primary conduit of information for the community and began writing half page advertisements/information notices in the local papers on a weekly basis, reducing their size and frequency as time passed. Daily bulletins were produced, and, as the need diminished, monthly publications were produced, with the last of the newsletters issued in January 2011. Information was also posted on Council’s website, made available through a range of community venues and delivered to affected households. Customer service staff in Council were also kept up-to-date, in order to enable them to respond to calls from the public. An example of a Community Newsletter is attached at Appendix Five.

Community information provided by the Yarra Ranges Council included:

- Media releases;
- Information sheets and posters;
- Oral advice through locating a range of staff at Recovery Centres and at community events and activities;
- Community meetings;
- Community Information Bulletins (newsletters);
- Information regarding recovery services in local newspapers;
- Website updates;
- Bulletins posted at the Recovery Centre; and
- Customer Service staff being aware of the information so that they could respond to community members' enquiries.

Information forums were also conducted by Council, including:

- An expo of building contractors and suppliers to assist residents with re-building information; and
- A community service providers' forum to enable case managers and agencies to learn about the services available locally.

People consulted for this review indicated that these forums were particularly important.

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#### 8.1.1. NEWSLETTERS AND INFORMATION

The newsletters were used as means to relay State and Federal Government information on funding and regulations, promote local events and activities, educate the community about the recovery process and promote local businesses. Information was also provided about grants, where to seek help and good news stories about individuals and communities. They were designed to be hopeful, helpful and informative.

*"We ended up employing a specific consultant to gather information and produce the bulletins. We also employed a graphic designer to develop distinctive branding to make bushfire recovery information very visible and legible." (Council Officer)*

Yarra Ranges produced daily information bulletins in the first month following Black Saturday. These became the most widely distributed newsletter and were available throughout the municipality and online. A total of 19 newsletters was produced.

The consultation process indicated that the newsletters were important for community agencies, with many using them as the primary source of information for the people they were supporting. Feedback indicated that the information was regarded as reliable, accurate, up-to-date and easy to read.

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#### 8.1.2. ROLE OF THE MEDIA TEAM

Staff indicated that Yarra Ranges' media team played a critical role in supporting the communication process. There was a plethora of information to be communicated to the community – legislative changes, grants, property management issues in relation to building regulations, tree removal, referral support information and personal information about understanding the recovery process. Staff indicated that they found it difficult to put information into everyday language, and that the media team assisted them in doing this.

## 8.2. CHALLENGES

### 8.2.1. COMMUNICATING WITH RESIDENTS

Communicating with residents was difficult from both physical and emotional perspectives. Not only had many residents moved away from the municipality with unknown addresses, but also letterboxes had been burnt, making mail delivery problematic. While attempts were made to provide general information to people through community newsletters and the Council website, communication with individuals posed dilemmas.

Individuals' capacity to absorb information also varied greatly, as it was impacted by trauma and grief. Comments from community members and community agencies, throughout this review, indicated that the barriers to community members receiving information were a feature of their personal circumstances and their capacity to understand the information available, and not necessarily the availability or quality of the information provided.

*"I went to speak to one individual who said that they had received no information from anyone, including Council. I noticed on the table next to her several Council community newsletters. She was using all her energy to cope emotionally and just couldn't absorb the information that was in front of her." (Volunteer)*

Staff indicated that it was important to keep repeating information - different people required information at different times, so there was a great deal of repetition to ensure that this need was addressed.

*"People only take on information when they need it" (Community member)*

Staff also indicated that they found it challenging to get some messages across in a simple way that could be easily understood by people, particularly those who were stressed and managing with a range of personal issues.

Feedback from this review indicated that, inevitably, some mistakes occurred with communication. One example was in relation to informing residents that their properties were unsafe to live in. When staff were unable to speak directly to residents, standard template notices were pinned to properties indicating that residents could not inhabit the properties. This caused considerable distress for residents and highlighted the importance, for all staff, of the need to be careful when communicating in such stressful circumstances. It also highlighted the need for training, in the planning and preparation for disasters, to ensure that staff understand the trauma for individuals and how best to communicate with people in these situations. It should be noted that, once senior staff were aware of this communication problem, it was immediately rectified and personal contact made with residents.

In the first few days, it was also difficult to get access to the fire affected areas. Not only were areas designated as 'crime scenes' by police investigating the deaths of residents but the area was unsafe and still under threat from fires.

### 8.2.2. MANAGING DEMAND FOR INFORMATION

Staff indicated that in the first one to two months, the volume of telephone inquiries to individual departments was enormous and there were limited resources to manage this. The provision of staffing resources to answer these calls was important. These staff needed to be familiar with the nuances of the

particular area, *e.g.* planning and building requirements. This needs to be taken into account through the Recovery Inception Planning process.

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### 8.2.3. COMMUNICATING WITH STATE GOVERNMENT

There was a consistent theme throughout the consultation process that communicating with some state government departments and VBRRA was difficult. Yarra Ranges Council staff indicated that they often found out about changes to legislation, new grants or other critical information *via* media releases or when members of the community requested information about the new initiative or change. This was frustrating and led to confusion for communities who were relying on local government for information. Staff indicated that they felt devalued and that their efforts to work in partnership were undermined at times. The notable exception was the DHS Regional Office.

The staff consulted indicated that there was a need for transparency in communication and continuous dialogue between the key agencies, through genuine partnerships. This was particularly important in the early stages of recovery, when events and policy are changing rapidly.

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### 8.2.4. COMMUNICATING WITH BUSINESSES

Information for businesses was identified in the consultation as an area that required a greater focus and a more consistent approach. Feedback indicated that this information was somewhat lost in the noise of information about property and individual assistance. At the same time, the information changed frequently and, as with other grants, it was difficult for staff to keep track of all of the information and then to relay it to the local community.

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### 8.2.5. COMMUNITY CONSULTATION PROCESSES

Although the clear majority of people consulted considered that Yarra Ranges managed communication and consultation processes with the community well, a few indicated that there were some occasions where it was not so. One resident indicated that she felt that the initial community meetings were particularly fraught because staff themselves were traumatised and it was difficult for them to contain the emotion of the community. This meant that conflicts often increased. This resident indicated that, over time, these processes were managed better and the community trusted Council staff and knew that they would do whatever possible to assist local people. This highlighted the need for Council to consider when it was appropriate to use independent facilitators to manage community meetings and to develop guidelines to assist staff in making decisions in this regard.

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## 8.3. LOOKING TO THE FUTURE

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### 8.3.1. OPPORTUNITIES FOR INFORMAL CONTACT

Several community members stressed the importance of informal contact between community members. Many people did not feel comfortable in going to the Recovery Centre and relied on friends and neighbours for information. Opportunities for informal contact, some facilitated by Yarra Ranges Council, through community BBQs, chatting over coffee *etc.* became important mechanisms for keeping in touch with one another, as well



as accessing information. Developing informal access points to Recovery Centres and/or using local meeting places, such as a popular local coffee shop, to provide information assisted this process.

### 8.3.2. COMMUNICATION AS A THERAPEUTIC PROCESS

The provision of information in itself can be a mechanism to support individual recovery. Regular communication gives an important message that the people in leadership positions in the community care and that the broader community is supportive. One resident indicated that this helped her to cope – it was somehow comforting to know what was going on in the broader community.

*“I needed to have access to information on a daily basis. It helped me to cope, even if I couldn’t absorb it all.”*  
(Community member)

### 8.3.3. EMPOWERING THE COMMUNITY THROUGH INFORMATION

People consulted indicated that they found the community sessions with Dr Rob Gordon particularly valuable (see Sections 14 and 15). It helped them to understand, for themselves, individual and community reactions and behaviours. Information sessions such as these are critical to supporting people move towards taking more control over their own decisions and developing stronger, more resilient communities.

#### Effective Communication

Staff identified that effective communication could best be achieved with residents and communities, who are stressed and traumatised, through:

- Establishing clear protocols and plans for communication as part of the preparation and planning for disasters;
- Developing clear protocols and working relationships between key agencies as part of planning and preparation. Where planning is not possible, it is necessary to meet with agencies where communication difficulties are occurring and sort them out quickly;
- Develop respectful, sensitive and easy to read information;
- Communicate regularly and frequently with the community – initially on a daily basis;
- Implement a variety of approaches – face-to-face through staff being available at Relief and Recovery Centres and participating in community meetings, informal chats, websites, texting, local papers, bulletins, newsletters;
- Frequent repetition of information is vital; and
- Using the Council Media Unit.

## 8.4. OUTSTANDING ISSUES

Some residents indicated that a number of people in the community still seemed uncertain about where to go for help. While some people in the community believed that the community appeared to have moved on from the need for a Bushfire Recovery newsletter, others indicated that it was still necessary. Some indicated it was

important that information about where and how to seek assistance continued to be widely publicised throughout the community. This could be achieved through regular notices in the local papers, notices on community notice boards and through information provided to community groups.

Several residents suggested that a quarterly newsletter would be useful. This would ensure that residents were reminded about where to seek assistance. It would also provide an opportunity for Council to explain how it is handling outstanding issues, such as vegetation management.

## 9. COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT AND PLANNING

### 9.1. ACHIEVEMENTS

#### 9.1.1. BROAD ENGAGEMENT

Council engaged the community in the recovery process in a variety of ways, including:

- Establishing a Community Reference Group as part of the Municipal Recovery Structure;
- Establishing a Community Recovery Sub-committee to coordinate and plan the range of activities required to rebuild communities;
- Establishing a dedicated call centre to manage all enquiries and offers of support;
- Facilitating regular dialogue between support agencies to ensure community needs and service gaps were met in the most effective ways and service duplication was avoided;
- Appointing Community Development Officers to work with fire affected communities through the recovery process; and
- Planning and supporting community events.

All staff working in the recovery effort engaged with residents and community groups across all areas of the recovery process. Staff who continued to provide services to residents in the areas of the municipality, which were not affected by the fires, also engaged with the community, providing information about what Council was doing to assist affected residents.

#### 9.1.2. STRONG RELATIONSHIPS WITH THE COMMUNITY

Feedback through the review indicated that Yarra Ranges Council built strong working relationships with the community. Comments included:

*“People in the community trusted that Council would do what it said it would do.” (Community agency)*

*“Council was responsive, willing to work through issues and get things done.” (DHS Eastern Regional Office)*

*“Council wasn’t bureaucratic – they would find a way to get things done.” (Community member)*

*“I could approach any department in Council and know that they would respond promptly.” (Community agency)*

Feedback from community members indicated that communities were beginning to re-bond:

*"We all feel that the greatest achievements were the bonding which has developed in the local area. Great openness and friendly contacts are continuing, with people we barely knew prior to the fires." (Community member)*

The feedback also indicates that the efforts of Council staff were appreciated and that there were positive outcomes:

*"Council has done a fabulous job. The staff in all areas were highly empathetic and sensitive to the needs of individuals and communities. They did their absolute best and were just terrific – I can't fault them." (Community member)*

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### 9.1.3. COMMUNITY CONSULTATION PROCESSES

Several people indicated that the Council initiated and facilitated consultations, which had broad representation from across the community, were positive.

Staff indicated that, through using existing community relationships and connecting with community leaders, Council was able to gain an understanding of the critical concerns in the community quickly. In the longer term, staff continued the dialogue through these processes and strengthened the relationships with local people.

Importantly, both community members and Council staff indicated that they were:

*"... not starting from scratch – we built on existing relationships and leadership already in the community." (Community member, Council officer)*

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### 9.1.4. RESPONDING PROMPTLY

Community agencies believed that the prompt responses of Council were critical in building confidence and hope across the community, and contributed to supporting the longer-term recovery process. This perception was also confirmed through the review conducted by the Red Cross, whose volunteers door-knocked all households in the affected areas, in August 2010. The responses of residents indicated that there were still high levels of stress in the community at this time but that residents felt that the majority of issues were being dealt with by Council officers.

Some people indicated that Council was very good at organising and responding quickly to community need. It knew and understood its local communities and was able to link with local leaders to begin the process of recovery. This was evident through the establishment of the Relief Centres, which were fully functional within hours of the fire. These facilities provided access to emergency relief, accommodation and immediate support. This was also highly valued by the community. One resident commented:

*"The staff at the Relief Centre were extraordinary. They did more than could be reasonably expected. They were a 'breath of fresh air' and always provided positive suggestions." (Community member)*

Conversely, a number of people in the community expressed frustration and anger about what they perceived to be the lack of responsiveness on the part of Council in the initial two weeks following the fire. In some instances, this perception was attributed to Council when, in fact, the actions were beyond Council's control.

*The Shire was hopeless in the first two weeks. No one came near us. We had problems with livestock, no access to food and we could not leave our properties – we felt abandoned.” (Community member)*

This same resident also indicated that after this initial period, things changed:

*“Shire staff came regularly. They were very supportive and did well.” (Community member)*

The difficulty of gaining immediate access to households was also a frustration for Council staff. The emergency services did not allow them to enter the fire-affected areas in the immediate aftermath, as many areas were regarded as crime scenes and not considered safe. Some local people ignored the authorities, moving around the police lines. This led to confusion in the community, fragmented management of the response and a lack of control of the processes. While on the one hand this empowered local people to support each other, it also gave license to random and disorganised responses that were potentially dangerous. Yarra Ranges has now negotiated with the Emergency Services for Council staff to be permitted to enter areas with authorised emergency personnel in future situations.

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#### 9.1.5. FACILITATING LINKS BETWEEN SERVICE PROVIDERS

Numerous organisations provided a range of support for bushfire-affected people, some coming from across Australia to assist. However, there was little opportunity to link these providers or ensure that the assistance available was across the broad area of community recovery. Two forums for service providers were coordinated in Yarra Ranges to facilitate the link to local services. Service providers were invited to come together and share information about their organisations and the services they offered. This provided important information for Bushfire Recovery Case Managers and for each other.

A “Working Summit” was also held, which provided an opportunity for service providers and others working in the area of bushfire recovery to identify gaps in areas of recovery. This information was used by Council to advocate for additional resources for these areas and to develop strategies to meet the identified needs.

### 9.2. SPECIFIC AGE-RELATED FOCUS

Yarra Ranges Council developed specific strategies to address the particular needs of different age groups in the community – young children, young people and older people.

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#### 9.2.1. EARLY YEARS BUSHFIRE RECOVERY PROJECT

The Early Years Bushfire Recovery project was created in response to an identified need for Yarra Ranges Council to assist in the recovery of families with young children, aged 0-5 years, affected by the bushfires. DEECD funded an early years development officer, employed by Council, to work with early years services, such as Maternal and Child Health, Supported Playgroups and Parent Groups Initiative (SPPI) and Pre-schools.

This project established a sub-plan, which was incorporated into the overall Municipal Recovery Plan. The project provided direct support to staff across the range of early years services in the fire-affected areas and developed specific projects, including a puppet making activity for preschool children 18 months after the event.

Council's Family and Children Services Team evaluated their response to the bushfires and made some changes, consistent with Council's overall strategies, to improve their relief and recovery response in the event of an emergency.

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### 9.2.2. SUPPORT FOR PRIMARY SCHOOL AGED CHILDREN

Primary school-aged children received assistance through their local primary schools, which also became important community links, not only providing physical space for communities to meet, but also offering a focal point for families to connect. Schools were also important in providing information as to how communities were managing. Through regular contact, schools were, and will continue to be, important organisations in linking communities and providing "community intelligence" to support the recovery processes.

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### 9.2.3. WORKING WITH YOUNG PEOPLE

Staff from Council's Youth Services Team were engaged in the recovery process from the initial stages, providing support at the Relief Centres in both Healesville and Yarra Glen.

In 2010, Yarra Ranges, in partnership with Eastern Access Community Health (EACH), received funding for a three-year position from the Victorian Bushfire Appeals Fund (VBAF) through the Office of Youth, to engage isolated or vulnerable young people, who were experiencing distress as a direct result of the 2009 bushfires. The purpose of the EACH funding was to provide counselling for young people; the purpose of the Council funding was to coordinate local outreach projects and events.

Numerous activities for young people, who were affected by the bushfires, have been delivered over the past 18 months and are planned to continue for the following 18 months. These have been conducted by Yarra Ranges Youth Services staff, in partnership with other agencies, such as the Salvation Army in Healesville, the YMCA and the Heartland Church in Yarra Glen. The activities were:

- Community tree-planting activity – planting 5,000 trees in affected areas;
- A mural, designed with a local Indigenous artist, at the Healesville outdoor swimming pool, in partnership with the Chum Creek Primary School;
- City camp in winter, for 10-14 year olds, in partnership with the Salvation Army and EACH;
- 'Seasons for Growth' counselling sessions – groups sessions focussing on grief, conducted in partnership with EACH;
- "Summer of Fun": a range of activities over summer 2010;
- Breakfasts in Healesville on Wednesday mornings, in partnership with the Salvation Army;
- Wilderness Camp with the Salvation Army;
- Surf camp for 15-17 year olds, in partnership with the Salvation Army and Healesville High School;
- Regular Friday night events, which had up to 200 families attending, in partnership with the YMCA;
- Friday night activity program in partnership with the Heartland Church in Yarra Glen;
- Range of activities, including an Indigenous Hip Hop Group, which was attended by 200 families;
- The Salvation Army Sony Music Program; and
- Student leadership program, in partnership with local secondary schools.

#### 9.2.4. SUPPORT FOR OLDER PEOPLE

Support for older people in the recovery process was incorporated into the strategies implemented for the whole of the community. However, Council recognised that significant work was required to support older people in preparing for bushfires. Initial work was conducted in 2008, with a pilot project to support Residential Aged Care providers to develop fire preparation plans. This work was expanded in September 2009, with the implementation of a community development project focussing on bushfire preparedness messaging for frail and vulnerable residents and the organisations supporting them.

Outcomes of this project included providing assistance for Council to:

- Identify its bushfire vulnerable HACC clients, of whom there was only a small proportion;
- Focus on assisting vulnerable clients to enact their bushfire plans;
- Encourage other funded services to support their clients in preparing for bushfires; and
- Develop a business continuity matrix that would assist services, clients and other service providers, which operate in the municipality.

#### 9.3. DIFFERING APPROACHES TO COMMUNITY PLANNING AND ENGAGEMENT

There was confusion between the approach of Council and the evolving role of VBRRA. Residents expected Council to take responsibility for planning and engagement with the community. Yarra Ranges did do this, but so did VBRRA.

This review has concluded that both VBRRA and Council were committed to achieving the best outcomes for the community and to empower the affected communities to develop, and deliver on, their own solutions. However, there were fundamental differences in how the two organisations approached this task and, unfortunately, the differences were not resolved effectively. There was little connection between the processes, which resulted in confusion in the community and less than optimal use of resources.

Typically, VBRRA established Community Recovery Committees (CRCs) across all affected areas, with these committees taking responsibility for the development and implementation of Community Recovery Plans. These Plans outlined the aspirations of the community and the strategies to achieve them. Funding for community infrastructure was allocated on the basis of these plans. This required the members of CRCs to make decisions on behalf of fire-affected communities in relation to the rebuilding and construction of new community infrastructure.

Broader community consultation occurred through public meetings. However, the CRCs had no links to councils and councils were discouraged from being involved in these groups. As a result, there was little or no connection with the usual community processes or acknowledgement of the usual community leadership structures.

The community consultative committee established by Yarra Ranges Council was a reference group, designed to provide advice to the effectiveness of the recovery processes. It had a different focus from the VBRRA model, contributing to the confusion. Discussion of the specific issues relating to the Community Reference Group is contained in Section 12.

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### 9.3.1. A COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT APPROACH TO RECOVERY

The evidence indicates that community renewal and rebuilding after disasters is most effective when communities have control of the process themselves and are engaged early on in developing a vision for the future. However, the research also demonstrates that communities are often unable to make decisions when they are traumatised or need to be focused on their personal recovery (see Section 4). This highlights some contradictory aspects of the research. On the one hand, there is evidence that early engagement with communities to develop a common vision is important while on the other, there is clear evidence that communities may not be ready to engage in critical decision-making for community rebuilding when they have not reached a point of sufficient satisfaction in rebuilding their own lives.

This was highlighted in the consultation process for this review, where a number of people indicated that the process of community planning was not as effective as it could have been because, while VBRRA was committed to encouraging communities to make their own decisions about recovery, the trauma being experienced by individuals was not understood well enough. The consequence was that there was significant concern about the community plan developed by VBRRA and divided opinion in the community about the outcomes, some of which continue to be debated in local communities.

The reviewer believes that the solution to effective community engagement and rebuilding in recovery lies in understanding the complexity of community engagement processes. Community development practice demonstrates clearly that empowering communities is a process that can be considered along a continuum. Communities need to be encouraged and supported to take increasing control of their own futures, with the ultimate objective being empowered communities, which take responsibility for identifying and solving their own problems<sup>42</sup>. This process needs to take account of the capacity of individual communities to make decisions. If people are exhausted and pre-occupied with making decisions about their own personal recovery, it is not only unreasonable to expect them to engage in community-decision-making but it also has the potential to undermine and delay community recovery.

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### 9.3.2. CHALLENGES OF WORKING WITH THE VBRRA MODEL

People consulted in this review process highlighted a number of issues in relation to the approach taken by VBRRA:

1. *Imposition of a standard model:* individuals indicated that VBRRA neither understood nor took account of, existing plans and structures developed by Council over the years before the fires. Council developed its model taking account of its knowledge of the local communities and its understanding of the capacity and resources in these areas. Council officers in Yarra Ranges and other neighbouring municipalities indicated that VBRRA had a “one size fits all” model that did not take account of the differences between communities.
2. *Exclusion of local government:* contrary to evidence and documented practice wisdom in relation to recovery from emergency events, local government was not engaged as leaders in the process

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<sup>42</sup> IAP2 model, [www.iap2.org](http://www.iap2.org)

implemented by VBRRA. This was particularly difficult in Yarra Ranges, where there was a long-term community development model in use and an established culture in the community of looking to Council to lead and provide assistance and support. This increased the confusion for communities, as they did not know which agency had responsibility for implementation.

3. *Limited recognition of community processes:* several people expressed concern that the VBRRA decision-making processes did not take account of the fact that individuals and communities were at different stages in the recovery process. Many people were unable to contribute to the process because they needed to be focused on addressing their own needs and could not make decisions in relation to the broader community:

*“There was too much grief and trauma in communities – relationships were breaking up, people were grieving for family members and friends. It was too much to expect that people could make decisions for rebuilding community infrastructure when they were struggling to cope with making decisions about rebuilding their own homes.” (Community member)*

4. *Limited consultation strategies:* the VBRRA community consultation process was conducted almost solely through public meetings. This meant that only people who felt comfortable about attending community meetings, and speaking in such public forums, contributed. Such a process could easily be compromised, allowing the most vocal, and not necessarily the most representative, to dominate.

Several people also expressed concern about the level of conflict at these public meetings, highlighting that these forums were not necessarily the most effective ways in which to gain a good understanding of the wishes of the community as a whole. Several people noted that it was difficult to contain the emotion in such a large setting. One community member noted:

*“People were shouting at each other and arguing about simple things. It was too distressing to attend. I went to one and didn’t go again.”*

5. *Unrealistic timelines:* the consultation process was overlaid with an urgency to complete the planning and decision-making quickly. This meant that there was insufficient time for consultation and visioning processes. Little notice was given for community forums. One school principal indicated that notification of a major community planning meeting was received on a Friday evening, for a meeting to be held on the following Sunday evening.

*“How was I going to consult with the community that I was representing in the process? It was the weekend and my students and parents had gone home!” (A school principal)*

6. *Lack of transparency:* VBRRA interpreted the outcomes of these community meetings as the wishes of the whole community. Together with the short timelines, there was little or no opportunity for the community to reflect on its initial vision and decisions – the process proceeded to funding without checking back or informing communities.
7. *Unrealistic outcomes:* several people, including community members, indicated that the VBRRA community plans were a “wish list” and often reflected “pet projects” of some individuals.

*“There was no reality check, projects were under-funded or were based on the wish of a few individuals.” (Council officer)*



*“The community consultation process was a sham. It was assumed that people were responding normally because they could hold a conversation. But, this wasn’t the case – they were traumatised. They couldn’t make decisions. Now, they are stuck with decisions which were made by community at the wrong time.”*  
(Council officer from a neighbouring municipality)

Importantly, considerable concern was raised that the decisions of the community may never be realised because they were:

- Not properly costed;
- There was no provision to meet the costs for ongoing maintenance and delivery of services established; and
- No responsibility for the delivery and implementation was established.

This had the potential to fuel resentment in the community and disillusionment with political and community leadership as well as militate against the development of healthy well-functioning communities.

#### Yarra Glen and Steels Creek Pedestrian Path

A decision to construct a pedestrian path between Yarra Glen and Steels Creek was included in the VBRRA community plan. This came out of community meeting organised by VRRRA. This idea had been discussed in the community over several years. Council had been reluctant to construct this path, due to community safety and environmental concerns. Further, there had been division in the community stretching over a number of years as to whether people wanted the path or not. VBRRA, unaware of the history associated with this concept, endorsed the construction of the path and publicised its funding without notifying Council of the project or the decision to fund it.

There was considerable difference of opinion in the community, which Council eventually resolved through conducting a plebiscite in the local community.

There were also great variations in the cost estimates. The estimate prepared by a community member for this in the VBRRA Community Plan was \$150,000 and funding approved for this amount. The actual cost for the construction of this pathway is \$800,000, excluding ongoing maintenance. After considerable debate, VBRRA agreed to fund Council to conduct a feasibility study and to consider increasing its contribution to the cost of construction, although if construction is to go ahead, Council will be required to meet the balance and to meet the ongoing maintenance costs of the path into the future.

Some community members contested this issue in the Victorian Civil and Administrative Tribunal (VCAT). This appeal to VCAT was finally resolved in favour of Council in early 2012.

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### 9.3.3. COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT

It was difficult to define who needed to be included in community consultations. There is also a range of approaches to engagement. Some people considered that only those who had been directly impacted were 'entitled' to be engaged in the community planning process, while others considered that a broader definition of community was required, as surrounding communities were also affected, if only indirectly.

*"Yarra Glen was traumatised even though it was not burnt. People in Steels Creek shop in Yarra Glen and know people there." (Community member)*

Some people indicated that Yarra Ranges needed to work more collaboratively with the community and encourage communities to take greater control over decisions for their own recovery at an earlier stage. The approach taken by Council was perceived by some people to be disempowering and somewhat paternalistic. There was view that Council could have been more proactive in up-skilling communities and empowering them to make their own decisions.

*"Communities can make decisions for themselves. Council needed to support the process, not take control." (Community member)*

At the same time, feedback through this review indicated that the VBRR processes did not empower communities and in fact, served to exacerbate underlying tensions.

## 9.4. USING KNOWLEDGE OF COMMUNITIES TO SUPPORT RECOVERY

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### 9.4.1. ACKNOWLEDGING THE DIFFERENT CAPACITIES OF COMMUNITIES

Different communities have different skills. Some communities have natural leaders who are able to lead the decision-making process. In other communities, this is not the case and significant effort may be required to support the development of community leaders over time. The ultimate goal of this process would be to build resilience in the community and empower it to participate actively in decision-making.

Over the past ten years, Yarra Ranges has worked with its communities to strengthen the capacity of townships and build community leadership, utilising a framework based on the four pillars of sustainability. This work is continuing. The experiences of working with the communities in the aftermath of the disaster can provide insight as to how Council and communities can continue to build capacity over time.

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### 9.4.2. ADVOCATING FOR YARRA RANGES COMMUNITIES

There was significant variation in the impact of the fires across municipalities. Staff and community members indicated that it was difficult at times to get politicians and funding bodies to understand and focus on the needs of the affected communities in Yarra Ranges. The scale of loss was great for the communities affected but was less than that experienced in other areas, for example Marysville. This did not mean that the recovery process for Yarra Ranges was less important or less difficult. However, staff considered that it took considerable effort to maintain Federal and State Government focus on the Yarra Ranges' communities. An example was the ongoing advocacy required to obtain adequate financial support to assist businesses in Yarra Ranges to recover. Considerable resources were targeted to tourism businesses. However, this excluded the

other businesses in Yarra Glen and other affected areas of the municipality that were used by the community on a day-to-day basis and not directly related to tourism.

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#### 9.4.3. CONSISTENCY – STICKING TO THE SCRIPT

In the aftermath of such a devastating event, there will always be an overwhelming desire by all people in the community, including politicians, to help in whatever way possible. After the 2009 bushfires, this resulted in decisions, which were both hard to understand and to interpret at a local level. Many of these were also regarded by people consulted as not in the best long-term interests of building well-functioning communities into the future. A clear example, commented on frequently in the consultation, was the provision of funding.

*“The community was awash with money but it was targeted to individual needs. This served to create dependency in the community rather than support resilience and self-driven recovery. We needed the money to build long-term strategies and develop infrastructure that was targeted to community needs for the long term not short-term solutions.”* (Community member)

It is often difficult, in the intensity of community grief and shock at the effects of a disaster, for politicians to resist the urge to respond to strong media attention and to make decisions “on the run”. The research urges governments to adhere to the plans and agreements, which were put in place during the planning phases. This doesn’t mean being inflexible or ignoring the need to respond to changing circumstances. However, it is imperative the relationships built and developed through the planning phases, and the agreed roles and responsibilities identified as being the most appropriate, are respected. Without this, confusion and disillusionment result.

There is also a need for the broader community and community leaders, including politicians, to understand the collective grief process and how communities can be expected to behave and respond. This can assist in decision-making and ensure that the plans and processes, agreed to prior to a disaster, are adhered to under the pressure caused by the crisis.

The National Principles for Disaster Recovery provide an important framework for guiding recovery processes<sup>43</sup> (see Table 8) and reflect the experience in Yarra Ranges.

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<sup>43</sup> Community and Disability Services Ministers’ Advisory Council, 2010

Table 7: National Principles for Disaster Recovery

| Successful recovery relies on:                 |   |
|--|---|
| <b>Understanding the context</b>               | Successful recovery is based on an understanding the community context  |
| <b>Recognising complexity</b>                  | Successful recovery acknowledges the complex and dynamic nature of emergencies and communities                                |
| <b>Using community-led approaches</b>          | Successful recovery is responsive and flexible, engaging communities and empowering them to move forward                      |
| <b>Ensuring coordination of all activities</b> | Successful recovery requires a planned, coordinated and adaptive approach based on continuing assessment of impacts and needs |
| <b>Employing effective communication</b>       | Successful recovery is built on effective communication with affected communities and other stakeholders                      |
| <b>Acknowledging and building capacity</b>     | Successful recovery recognises, supports and builds on community, individual and organisational capacity.                     |

Source: Community and Disability Services Ministers' Advisory Council, 2010

## 9.5. REVIEW PROCESSES

While the timing of encouraging more control by the community will vary depending on the nature of any disaster, and from community to community, it is important to review the responses at strategic points. One individual suggested that a review at 12 months could be appropriate. Such a review process requires the involvement of the community.

The experience of the Yarra Ranges communities affected by the fires also indicates that the vision needs to be re-visited frequently. "Checking-in" with the community is an important empowering process. Not only does it allow the community to reflect and take its time, but it also provides the opportunity for greater numbers of people to be involved in the process and for the decisions about the future to be made at a time when the community is ready to do so. This also enables the fire-affected communities to contribute more effectively to the planning process, once they have commenced their own personal recovery and have begun to heal.

## 9.6. INVOLVING PEOPLE WHO MOVE

A number of people highlighted the importance of keeping in touch with people who had moved from the area after their homes had been damaged. There was concern expressed that many of these people risked losing connections with their local communities and the support available to assist them in their recovery and that they were now in a community that didn't understand the impact. Some Council staff believed that VBRRA could have assisted more with this function. This could have meant conducting events outside of the municipality and/or providing transport for people to come back to Yarra Ranges.

## 9.7. MANAGING THE LONG-TERM RECOVERY PROCESS

It is critical that the planning take account of the fact that, in the event of large-scale disasters, recovery for individuals and communities will be enduring. Long-term strategies need to be in place. At the same time, while the evidence indicates that it is important to set up consultation processes quickly and engage with communities as soon as possible, it is important not to rush people into decision-making and impose outside agendas onto the recovery process.

It is too much to expect communities to make unsupported community decisions at a time of crisis – they need to be supported in this role and be encouraged and empowered to take on responsibility for decision making over time as they feel ready and able to do so. Local government has a critical leadership role to play in this process.

The process of developing resilient communities begins before any disaster. The evidence across Yarra Ranges and neighbouring municipalities indicates that communities that were well functioning prior to Black Saturday were able to function better sooner than those that were not functioning as well previously.

While there was a view expressed by some people that the community was healing, several people indicated that there was still considerable work to be done before communities were functioning well again.

*“There are a range of individual responses – people are still feeling the impact. Some people think we should be over it by now but the community is still traumatised.” (Community member)*

*“Too many are still not back in a home, for various reasons, and need more help and encouragement.” (Community member)*

*“People are weary, trying to get back to normal – they’re not there yet.” (Community member)*

Several people indicated that there was a lack of understanding or acceptance, on the part of State Government, that the recovery process would be enduring. This was reflected in the approach to funding and the sense of urgency in all activity.

#### Community Recovery in Steels Creek

This community traditionally held fortnightly markets at the community centre. One was due the weekend after the fire despite the centre itself being damaged. The organisers decided to go ahead with it. Over 100 people turned up. This was a strong indication that people needed to get together – to touch base with one another and find out what was happening. These markets have continued and residents indicated that they have continued to be important in strengthening the bonds in the community.

### 9.8. OUTSTANDING ISSUES

There are several outstanding issues in relation to community functioning. Council needs to continue to engage, and work collaboratively, with the local communities in the fire-affected areas to build resilience and resolve outstanding concerns. These include:

1. *Steels Creek Community Centre:* there was a strong sense of frustration in the community about the lack of progress in relation to the reconstruction of this facility.

*“I don’t think it will ever be built. Whenever we make progress, there is more bureaucracy that gets in the way – something else has to be done.” (Community member)*

2. *Walking track connecting Steels Creek to Yarra Glen:* see 10.3.2.

3. *Management of the natural vegetation:* as Council is aware, local people have strong and divided views about how the re-growth and environmental weeds could be managed. Engagement of the community on this issue is critical.
4. *Development of local leadership:* the aftermath of the fires indicated that more work is required to strengthen local leadership capacity.
5. *Ongoing support:* several community members indicated that a number people in the community were having trouble in communicating with Council in relation to planning permits and in other negotiations with State Government departments. There was a feeling that communities still required support.

#### 9.9. LOOKING TO THE FUTURE

8. In the event of large-scale tragedy, it is important that staff involved in the recovery process understand what to expect when working with individuals and communities that are traumatised. This is not just the staff who are involved directly in the recovery process, but also includes the whole of the organisation, as well as the community at large. This is important in developing a more informed approach to community relationships.
9. Community leaders will also be traumatised and may be unable to participate actively in the recovery process due to their personal circumstances. It is important that any protocols and agreed processes include deputising arrangements and back-up plans.
10. Communities need to be actively involved, from an early stage, in developing a vision for the future – this can bring hope and a framework for bridging differences in the community. However, there will always be different and, sometimes, very strong and conflicting views, in the community about how the vision is to be implemented. This may mean developing structures and frameworks for recovery early but leaving longer-term decisions on rebuilding infrastructure until later. Continuous dialogue is critical and includes:
  - Regular checking with the community as to whether there is ongoing agreement about the strategies to achieve the vision;
  - Opportunities to express differences in well-managed forums;
  - A range of consultation approaches – individual interviews, discussion groups, community forums, informal conversations – which support communities to reach consensus; and
  - Transparent, open and frequent communication.
11. While it is critical to engage and empower communities in their own development, it is also important to recognise that communities are comprised of individuals and that these individuals may be experiencing trauma and grief and need to be supported in their recovery. This is a long-term process. Trained and skilled community development workers will be required to support traumatised communities.
12. Community planning needs to balance individuals' desires and wants with the need to rebuild the fabric and infrastructure of the community.
13. Building community resilience is a long-term process that requires ongoing resources. Yarra Ranges needs to continue to work with the community to develop agreed approaches to managing disasters as part of the preparation and planning phase.

## SECTION THREE: ACTIVITIES ACROSS THE FOUR ENVIRONMENTS OF COMMUNITY RECOVERY





## 10. OVERVIEW OF THE COMMUNITY RECOVERY PROCESSES

### 10.1. STRUCTURE OF THE ASSESSMENT

This section provides an assessment of Council actions in relation to the four environments of recovery. These are:

- Community and psycho-social recovery;
- Economic recovery;
- Recovery of the natural environment; and
- Recovery of the built environment – public infrastructure.

In particular, the assessment focuses on the subcommittees and working groups that comprised the Municipal Recovery Structure (see Figure 5). Details of the membership of each of these groups and their key activities and decisions are contained in Appendix 4.

These groups are:

- Community Reference Group;
- Community Recovery Subcommittee Working Groups:
  - Accommodation;
  - Counselling and Case Management;
  - Projects and Events;
  - Volunteer and Material Aid;
- Rebuilding Sub-Committee;
- Natural Environment and Public Infrastructure Subcommittee; and
- Economic Subcommittee

### 10.2. COMMITTEE RECOVERY COMMITTEE

The membership of the Municipal Recovery Executive Committee was comprised of the chairs of each working group, senior managers from State Government and VBRRA, as well as the Mayor and Chief Executive Officer of Yarra Ranges Council, with chairing provided by an independent person, the chair of Council's Audit committee.

A detailed assessment of the functions and operations of the Municipal Recovery Executive Committee is not included here. This group coordinated the activities of its working groups and the details of its functions are covered in the details relating to the subcommittees and working groups.

#### 10.2.1. ACHIEVEMENTS

The chairs of the working groups and sub-committees indicated that the role of this committee was critical in providing leadership and coordination across the range of activities. With an independent Chairperson and membership outside the day-to-day management of the recovery process, the committee was able to provide a strategic perspective to guide decision-making. Importantly, the structure of this committee reinforced its capacity to ensure transparency and accountability in the decision-making processes. This committee was

linked to Council through the mayor, who provided regular feedback to the whole Council. This also ensured that accountability to the community was maintained through the links to elected representatives and through the Audit Committee.

## 11. COMMUNITY REFERENCE GROUP

### 11.1. ROLE AND RESPONSIBILITY

The Municipal Recovery Community Reference Group's role was to assist Council to target recovery actions in areas of greatest concern and to identify and address any issues that could assist the community further. The group initially consisted of 25 local representatives from the most directly affected areas of the municipality. This group of individuals, from various areas, various levels of impact and different connections to the community, was effectively the Shire's 'ears on the ground'. The group held its first meeting on 11 May 2009, with a final meeting in December 2010.

The group, and the process for expressing an interest in joining, were advertised widely in the local newspapers, Community Recovery newsletters and through word-of-mouth. Membership of this group was determined through a selection process, with the Ward Councillor providing input. Most applications from the fire-affected areas to join the group were accepted. The Ward Councillor of the area most affected by the fires chaired this committee.

### 11.2. CHALLENGES

Although members indicated that the communication within the committee, and with Council, worked well, that their views were listened to and their opinions were respected, there was a strong view that the Community Reference Group did not work as well as expected. This is evidenced by the high dropout rate – attendance decreased significantly, with just five people attending the last meeting.

A number of challenges were identified by the members of this committee. These were the:

- Confusion regarding the purpose of the group;
- Formality of the processes;
- Membership of the group; and
- Community focus of the group.

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#### 11.2.1. PURPOSE OF THE GROUP

Feedback from Community Reference Group members indicated that a number of people had difficulty understanding the purpose of the group and how it fitted into the overall structure of the recovery process in the municipality. Several members indicated that they felt that the group didn't really fulfil its intended purpose, *viz* to advise Council about community concerns. There was a feeling that Council was well aware of the issues in the community and had a range of mechanisms for seeking this intelligence and working with community members and groups to address concerns.

Some people in the community expressed strong views about the Community Reference Group. This reflected the frustration about its operations and the confusion about its purpose in the broader community. One resident's comment reflected the general view of the committee:

*"I couldn't see the purpose – there were better ways to engage the community." (Community member)*

The purpose of the group became further confused as VBRRR began to seek the advice of this group, treating it in the same way that it interacted with CRCs in other municipalities. It sought to use this committee as an authorised endorsement body for the VBRRR Community Plan and for funding decisions. Members of this committee were well aware that this was not one of their functions and this further confused the processes. Several members indicated that they stopped attending this committee because they couldn't see the purpose and felt that there were better ways to communicate community concerns to Council.

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### 11.2.2.FUNCTIONING OF THE COMMITTEE

A number of members indicated that they were not comfortable with the processes of the committee, which were formal meeting procedures. This made the discussions much more inflexible and structured than anticipated. One member indicated that he felt constrained in contributing and this was a key reason for ceasing to attend:

*"The committee was too bureaucratic and many people around the table didn't understand the processes."*

Feedback indicated that more informal processes, such as workshops, would have been more effective. However, others indicated that when this had occurred, the process had not been controlled well and the outcomes were not clear.

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### 11.2.3.COMMUNITY FOCUS OF THE GROUP

The Community Reference Group involved people from all the communities that had been affected by the fires. This posed some difficulties:

- There was significant variation in the socio-demographic composition of the different communities;
- The impact of the fires varied across the communities – Healesville had experienced little physical impact when compared with Steels Creek, where nine people died and a large number of people lost their homes; and
- There were differences in the cohesion in the different communities, with some having strong bonds, while others had loose connections, with the only commonality being that people lived in the same geographical area.

A number of members expressed concern that the Community Reference Group was comprised of a number of people who had been directly affected by the fire. Some had lost friends while others had lost their homes. Their grief was intense and several people indicated that it was not reasonable to expect that these individuals should, or could, be expected to contribute to such a formal process. A number of people indicated that the input of these individuals could possibly have been more effective if the process had been less formal.

An alternative would have been to develop more than one community reference group, with a focus on the individual communities that were affected. However, to resource more than one such committee would have been exhausting and time consuming for Council officers.

### 11.3. DISCUSSION

A number of factors appear to have influenced the functioning of this committee. Using this experience, and that of other communities following disasters as recorded in the research literature, the following are important considerations:

- *Defining community*

The concept of what constitutes a community is important to understanding what would work better in the future and how communities may best be engaged in decision-making. There is significant discussion in the literature about how to define communities to assist recovery. This could occur in a number of ways. It may include geographic area, association with work or education, *e.g.* the primary school community, or the Chamber of Commerce, community interests associated with a faith-based group or neighbourhood house, or cultural or ethnic backgrounds. It is important that community engagement processes, that are designed to support communities to rebuild, have a structure with which people can identify.

- *Choosing the most appropriate consultation processes*

Committee structures are one mechanism with which to engage communities in decision-making and/or consultation. However, as indicated in the consultation for this review, some people may not feel comfortable participating in these structured environments, while others may feel uncomfortable participating in public meetings. A variety of approaches, which are compatible with the nature of the community, need to be considered. They need to take account of location, accessibility and the capacity of individuals to contribute. Committee structures assume that people are articulate and able to contribute verbally in such situations – this inevitably constrains an inclusive consultation process.

It may be that a committee structure is not appropriate, at least in the first instance. Engagement with the community needs to occur early in the recovery process but this may not include establishing a committee. The community needs to be involved in deciding the formal structures that are best suited to meet its objectives.

- *Developing appropriate governance processes*

A number of governance models exist and choosing the most appropriate one depends on the capacity of individual communities, the robustness of existing community decision-making structures, such as township groups, and the willingness of individuals to contribute to more formal structures and processes. After Black Saturday, the Community Recovery Committees, in some areas, became incorporated bodies, able to accept funding directly and operated with an independent management structure; others were constituted under Section 86 of the Local Government Act, giving them significant decision-making powers on behalf of council. The VBRRA model assumed that Community Recovery Committees were independent of councils, even though most received significant resourcing and support from local government employed Community Development Officers.

More discussion and exploration of models, which may be appropriate for Yarra Ranges, is required. A range of options needs to be considered. A single model cannot be recommended, as the most suitable model needs to be developed in line with the capacity of the affected communities.

- *Involving elected representatives*

Councillors, as elected representatives, have an important role to play in the recovery process. The exact nature of the role would depend on:

- The nature and circumstances of the disaster; and
- The capacity of the individual(s) at the time.

- *Making the links with community development events and activities*

The functions of the Community Reference Group and the Projects and Events Working Group were strongly aligned. Combining the functions may provide a more streamlined and consultative approach to engaging the community.

## 12. ACCOMMODATION WORKING GROUP

### 12.1. ROLE OF THE WORKING GROUP

The Emergency Management Manual Victoria (EMMV) specifies that DHS has responsibility for coordinating accommodation – emergency, short, medium and long term – in the relief and recovery phases. Council has a role in working with DHS to coordinate and ensure that all residents, who require assistance, have access to appropriate support in a timely manner.

Council officers commenced matching emergency accommodation requests with offers of accommodation on Sunday 8<sup>th</sup> February. At the same time, emergency housing agencies were also seeking emergency accommodation. Council initiated the development of the Accommodation Working Group, in partnership with the DHS Eastern Regional Office. The Regional Office took on the direct management of this group and its functions, chairing it and taking responsibility for the overall management of the accommodation process, partnering with Council and Anchor Community Care (Anchor), the local not-for-profit agency housing service based in Lilydale, which had specified responsibility for accommodation in the Municipal Recovery Plan. The first meeting of this group was on 13 February 2009, with the final meeting in May 2010. A total of 18 meetings were held.

This working group coordinated the provision of emergency and long-term housing. At the time of writing this report, several people were still not living in their own homes. Working group tasks included:

- Collection of offers of emergency and long term housing from the community;
- Identification of individuals' needs;
- Management of an accommodation database;
- Placement of individuals and families through housing agencies; and
- Ongoing support and follow up.

## 12.2. SCALE OF THE EFFORT

### 12.2.1. EMERGENCY ACCOMMODATION

Emergency accommodation was coordinated through Anchor, a community organisation that provides accommodation and support to individuals and families facing homelessness. Anchor provided support, through the Yarra Glen Relief Centre, to 215 individuals (35% of the total serviced), couples (13%) and families (52%). Those seeking emergency accommodation were either evacuating for a short period or their homes had been destroyed in the fires.

Of the 215 individuals, couples and families supported, 66 were placed in funded accommodation and 149 were placed in community offers. The community offers varied from individual members of the community to not-for-profit services and community groups. The most utilised and free of charge community offers were provided by:

- Sanctuary Park Cottages in Healesville;
- Lilydale Adventist Academy;
- The Basin (Salvation Army);
- The Timbertop Centre, Mooroolbark; and
- RACV Accommodation, Healesville.

### 12.2.2. TEMPORARY ACCOMMODATION

In total, 136 households from the Yarra Ranges needed to find medium to long term accommodation, as their primary residence had been destroyed. As at April 2010:

- 42% had secured private rental;
- 24% were back on their land (in temporary accommodation - caravans/portables);
- 10% were living with family/friends;
- 8% had purchased a new home;
- 8% were in public housing; and
- 5% had rebuilt their homes.

This data has changed significantly over time, as leases came up for renewal and more individuals/families commenced rebuilding or purchasing new properties and proved difficult to track. In June 2011, several people were still living in caravans and public housing properties. The number is difficult to validate with certainty.

Initially, 92 individuals/families relocated from the Shires of Murrindindi and Nillumbik into temporary accommodation in the Eastern Metropolitan Region (EMR). As at March 2010, this figure had reduced to 63 non-EMR fire affected families/individuals. The majority secured private rental (23 individuals/families) and public housing (25 individuals/families).

## 12.3. EFFECTIVE COORDINATION

The DHS Regional Office indicated that the process implemented in Yarra Ranges was very effective in managing the accommodation process. The partner agencies decided to continue with the planned processes

of working with one local housing agency. While this was considerable work for the agency (Anchor), all partners indicated that it was effective because it reduced confusion and streamlined processes. This was particularly important because the databases for monitoring individuals and matching need with available accommodation resources were inadequate.

Council shared information in relation to building and site inspections, which assisted to identify damaged properties, and consequently, which residents were in the greatest need.

*“The Shire did a fantastic job. They did all they could to assist with identifying residents who needed assistance. They worked tirelessly with DHS and Anchor to find solutions for local residents.” (Community agency)*

Members of the working group indicated that the coordination and communication between case management and accommodation was also important. There was crossover between the memberships of these two working groups, which facilitated communication in relation to meeting individuals' needs.

#### 12.4. STRONG PARTNERSHIPS

The strong working relationships, which existed prior to the emergency, developed more strongly over time. All agencies working in accommodation commented on the positive partnerships that developed.

*“Everyone was willing to help. The communication with the Shire was terrific – very easy, it enabled any difficulties to be sorted out quickly.” (Community agency)*

Accommodation services indicated that the development of the working group was critical. This provided a process for agencies to communicate regularly, coordinate resources and support one another's efforts.

#### 12.5. CHALLENGES

##### 12.5.1. DATA MANAGEMENT

Issues relating to data management have been discussed in Section 7. The lack of effective and integrated data management systems and a single database for managing information caused considerable difficulties in meeting the accommodation needs of residents.

The agencies involved - DHS, Anchor and Council - spent an enormous amount of time making attempting to contact all residents who they believed required support with accommodation. Lists had to be tallied manually and, due to privacy requirements, no direct information could be shared. These workloads would have been reduced significantly with the support of effective technology and integrated data systems, together with processes seeking individuals' permission for agencies to share personal information. The effective communication between the partner agencies, including the willingness of Yarra Ranges staff to provide information, made the process easier.

Feedback indicated that there was a critical need to develop integrated databases across all agencies involved in the relief and recovery phases. One system for managing all information and individual needs is required. It needs to be established at the point of registration of affected residents, usually at Relief Centres, and be updated by each agency that has contact with, and assists, those individuals.

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### 12.5.2. PREPARATION OF COMMUNITY AGENCY STAFF

As with Council staff, community agency staff indicated that they felt quite unprepared for the scale of the effort required to manage the accommodation needs of residents who were displaced. This highlighted the need to include staff in training and preparation for emergency management.

The agencies that work in Yarra Ranges, particularly in accommodation, are small, both in number and in size of organisation. This works well for day-to-day management, as staff are familiar with the area and have strong networks with local agencies and communities. This is an important strength for the management of community recovery processes. However, it can also be difficult for small agencies to expand their capacity rapidly to respond large-scale disasters. It was suggested that a system for categorising the scale of the disaster would be helpful. This would indicate the scope and the resources required to respond. It would enable small agencies to plan for the use of their limited resources over time and make any necessary increases.

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### 12.5.3. COORDINATION OF EFFORT

Coordination with the MECC through Yarra Ranges staff was considered important. It assisted accommodation agencies understand the extent of the disaster and provided broad parameters of the extent of the need for emergency accommodation in the immediate aftermath of Saturday 7<sup>th</sup> February.

Anchor and DHS Eastern Region services also highlighted the importance of ensuring that there was coordination and communication between the case management and the accommodation functions. There are strong links between the two functions and communication and coordination is essential to ensure that resources are used efficiently and that fire-affected individuals receive appropriate support. Crossover membership of the Accommodation Working Group and the Counselling and Case Management Working Group assisted to facilitate this coordination.

The EMMV gives responsibility for accommodation services to DHS, which, in this instance, made Anchor the designated agency. It is important to note that both these organisations emphasised the importance of Council as an active partner in the accommodation process. This is because each had its own set of critical attributes, *i.e.*:

- DHS has skills and resources to work across housing providers and regions to access caravans, leased properties and public housing as options for people;
- Anchor has the accommodation networks and support skills; and
- Council had the information regarding the homes that were damaged and destroyed as well as the contact details of the occupants. This facilitated greater efficiency in the whole process.

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## 13. PERSONAL RECOVERY - COUNSELLING AND CASE MANAGEMENT

### 13.1. COUNCIL'S ROLE

While it is clearly the role of DHS to coordinate psychosocial support in the recovery phase, including counselling and case management, Council has a role as a key partner in the process, given the strong linkage between individual recovery and support, and community recovery. As part of the Municipal Recovery Structure, Yarra Ranges coordinated the development of a Working Group to focus on counselling and case



management. DHS managed this process and Council staff worked in partnership with the DHS Regional office. The Working Group brought together the agencies, which were providing counselling and case management, and the agencies, such as Council, which were working with communities in the recovery process.

The group held 27 meetings, with the first on 18 February 2009 and the last in September 2010.

### 13.1.1. COUNCIL AS THE CONDUIT

Consistent with the widespread view in the community that it was Council's responsibility to provide all assistance to the community, one resident suggested that the Shire needed to employ social workers to assist with the trauma still evident in the community. While this may seem to be an unrealistic suggestion, access, *via* Council, to staff, who are trained and skilled in working with people in trauma in the longer term, is important. Residents frequently use Council as the first point of contact for information and assistance. This highlights the importance of a strong and respectful working relationship between local and state governments and local counselling agencies.

Inclusion of a case management and counselling focus in the Municipal Recovery structure, through the working group, acknowledged that Council understood the importance of individual recovery as a key pillar in restoring community functioning. The DHS Regional Office indicated that this model was different from those developed in other municipalities, where the connections between Council and DHS, in relation to case management and counselling, were not as strong. The feedback from this review indicates that the model developed in Yarra Ranges was very effective. It brought together all relevant agencies, enabling resource sharing and facilitating effective communication. Importantly, this process helped to prevent individuals' "falling through the cracks". Through sharing information, it was possible for agencies to coordinate their efforts and reduce duplication. At the same time, the working group provided an important accountability and quality control mechanism.

### 13.2. COMMENTS FROM COMMUNITY MEMBERS ABOUT THE SERVICE

This review focussed on Council's role and was not designed to review the effectiveness of the case management and counselling services. However, several community members made some important comments, which can assist in recovery planning, about the case management service.

The majority of members of the community interviewed through this review indicated that they believed the case management system supported them and they were pleased that this service had been developed.

*"I lost sense of being able to organise anything and even the thought of organising anything was just daunting. I needed a case manager to help me." (Community member)*

*"Case managers were a brilliant idea. This worked extremely well." (Community member)*

However, not all case managers were adequately skilled and trained to undertake the work. One community member reflected:

*"A number [of case managers] were almost disasters – they were not well trained, not well informed and often withdrew before people were ready. They needed to go back home [to their own States] and so would say to people – 'you're alright now - you can cope'. This was not always the case." (Community member)*

A number of people also indicated that while the case management service was effective in assisting them to organise themselves and access adequate resources, it did not provide adequate support in dealing with the trauma.

*"People needed trauma specialists working with them, not just case managers. The psychological service with vouchers was not effective. People won't use services that they don't know." (Community member)*

One individual indicated that people were more likely to go to their general practitioner to seek assistance with their stress and trauma. In this context, the vouchers for accessing psychological services would appear to be a good idea. However, this individual also indicated that the local GPs did not seem to have a good understanding of trauma issues and did not necessarily refer individuals to other services.

A number of people indicated that the case management process became confused because people could access funding through the case managers and that this distorted the process. Analysis of this issue is outside of the scope of this review. However, it is important that models of case management and counselling be based on best practice.

### 13.3. OUTCOMES OF THE WORKING GROUP

Working group members indicated that having a process, which brought agencies together, was important in providing a consistent and coordinated approach to delivering services. Key outcomes of the group included:

- Agencies were able to share resources, reduce duplication of effort, identify gaps in services and work collaboratively to develop solutions. This facilitated a timely and responsive services across the municipality;
- Identification of differences in the approaches of agencies and use of this information to target and develop training for counselling staff;
- Agencies being able to share information and referrals;
- Facilitating co-location of counselling services, particularly in the initial stages;
- Developing consistent information to be distributed to the community;
- Coordinating the case management, counselling and accommodation functions; and
- Enabling agencies to clarify roles and responsibilities;
- Supporting communities in informal situations, such as events; and
- Collectively address professional development and support needs for practitioners.

### 13.4. CHALLENGES AND SOLUTIONS

#### 13.4.1. COUNSELLING RESOURCES

Surprisingly, limited resources were available to meet the ongoing costs of counselling and support, despite the evidence that personal recovery can take up to five years. A system of vouchers, which people could take to organisations and psychologists registered with Medicare, was introduced. Very few people used the vouchers, but did go to other agencies for support. This may have been for other reasons and, during the course of these visits, it became evident that they required counselling and support in relation to the trauma associated with the impact of the fires.

Agencies indicated that people were reluctant to seek help and that using the vouchers was not the most effective way of supporting people. Many people had never had contact with counselling and support

agencies, and were embarrassed or considered that other people needed assistance more than they did and so were reluctant to take advantage of the voucher system.

The result, for several agencies, was that their efforts in providing counselling were not acknowledged, nor were the agencies compensated for the cost of counselling provided by their staff.

Agencies indicated that this additional stress on their limited resources needed to be recognised, and additional Federal and State Government resources made available to them in the longer term to cope with the increased demand for counselling services.

At the same time, agencies need to ensure that their data management records are robust and able to record accurately when individuals seek assistance in relation to recovery from the trauma of the disaster. Some agencies were not able to provide this information and did not have adequate systems in place to monitor the number of people seeking assistance.

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#### 13.4.2. THE DIFFERENT FUNCTIONS OF COUNSELLING AND CASE MANAGEMENT

Agencies indicated that it was critical to identify the differences in the functions and purpose of case management and counselling, and plan and resource these accordingly. They also indicated that the case management functions were important in coordinating and supporting residents to organise the multiple factors required to begin their personal recovery, including advocating with individual organisations on their behalf, as necessary. However, counselling and individual support is a long-term process and requires different resourcing, management and support. This needs to be incorporated into the planning processes.

The 2009 experience highlighted that providing counselling in Relief Centres was not appropriate – it was too early in the recovery journey. The provision of case management services and practical support by qualified and experienced counselling staff, however, was important in the early stages.

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#### 13.4.3. MANAGING THE SPONTANEOUS VOLUNTEERS

One of Council's critical concerns was managing the 'well-intended' helpers who emerged. This included a range of faith communities, as well as a range of people who identified as "counsellors", whether qualified or not. Council was able to manage some of this volunteer effort through the specific volunteer projects (see Section 16). However, it identified the need to develop more robust processes to ensure that residents can rely on the quality of the services offered.

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#### 13.4.4. MANAGING REFERRALS

Agencies indicated that there was a need for improved referral and intake processes. Some agencies had effective data management systems, while others did not. This was related to the capacity of the agencies and data management systems generally.

Agencies also stressed the importance of common information for residents about the availability and access to services. The same information needs to be used by all agencies providing counselling.

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### 13.5. PLANNING FOR PERSONAL PSYCHOLOGICAL SUPPORT

Counselling agencies indicated that the delivery of the counselling and case management services highlighted the need for the municipality to have a component of the Municipal Recovery Plan that focussed on coordination of personal recovery and case management. This would recognise the role of DHS in coordinating and managing these services and also recognise the critical role of Council in the whole recovery process.

Council indicated that the scope of the disaster highlighted the inadequacy of the Municipal Emergency Management Plan at the time, which identified only one agency to undertake counselling. This has since been addressed.

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#### 13.5.1.BEST PRACTICE MODEL

The approaches taken by the various agencies were vastly different. Some undertook an assertive outreach approach with residents, while others linked to Council's community development strategy to provide individual support. There is a need to consider best practice in this area and develop a model of care to be used by all agencies to ensure that quality services are delivered. This model needs to be consistent with a community development and strengths-based approach to practice as well as acknowledging how individuals and communities respond to, and recover from, trauma.

At the same time, the reviewer observed that the differences in approaches contributed, at times, to tensions between agencies. There is a need for not-for-profit agencies to understand, and commit to, the overall plan and approach. This includes recognising that Council has a leadership role in relation to recovery and the importance of working together in a coordinated, strategic manner to ensure maximum benefit from the recovery effort. It is the role of government to lead.

Governments, whether federal, state or local, need to develop effective and positive partnerships on the ground and with community agencies, faith communities and not-for-profit agencies that have expertise and skills in community and personal recovery. Council needs to work with agencies that are motivated by their desire to empower community recovery and not increase their own agency power and influence.

Agencies also indicated that there was a need to ensure that staff undertaking counselling were skilled and trained in trauma counselling and understood the processes of grief and trauma that individuals often experienced. Staff also needed to be supported, including having access to specialist de-briefing services. These aspects need to be incorporated into the planning and preparation of counselling services. Importantly, agencies that are part of the counselling services, as specified in the Municipal Recovery Plan, need to agree that the staff who provide counselling services are suitably qualified and have participated in the appropriate training.

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#### 13.5.2.ASSERTIVE OUTREACH

Some community agencies indicated that assertive outreach, *i.e.* going to residents' homes and asking if they needed help, was appropriate. This approach to practice was viewed with some scepticism by some community members and warmly welcomed by others. The model is a newly emerging one in relation to recovery and could be interpreted as "touting for business", regardless of any well-intended motivations. It could also lead to situations where vulnerable residents were preyed upon by a range of organisations, which may not be community minded in their intentions and, even worse, it could lead to vulnerable residents becoming victims of unscrupulous people impersonating members of those agencies.

Importantly, protocols and standards of practice, based on best practice models, need to be implemented. All agencies working in the recovery process need to understand and be trained in these approaches. Committing to a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) and protocols should also lead agencies to working within evidence-based practice standards and ensuring that their staff participate in professional development.

### 13.5.3. ENGAGING WITH THE MOST VULNERABLE

Agencies indicated that it was difficult to support fire-affected residents who also had long-term mental illnesses. Many of these residents required intensive support and were profoundly impacted by the trauma of the event, whether they had been directly involved or simply lived in the area. There were insufficient resources to manage the intense needs of these individuals. At the same time, the events and activities targeted at engaging community members did not necessarily meet the needs of the most vulnerable in the community. This was, in part, due to a lack of connection with these populations, as well as funding not being specific to the needs of these individuals. It also highlighted the lack of mental health services available for residents in the affected areas of the municipality.

Several people with existing long-term mental illness frequently attended the Yarra Glen Recovery Centre for help as well as company. This created several difficulties, as the purpose of the centre was not to provide intense, ongoing support for this particular group in the community. This experience indicated that it was important to develop strong relationships with agencies that were working with these most vulnerable people and ensure that they (the agencies) were engaged in the planning for the recovery process.

### 13.6. OUTSTANDING ISSUES

The majority of people interviewed indicated that many people in the community were still struggling with their own trauma and managing personal issues. To assist this, several people suggested that it was critical that broad advertising of the support available for individuals occurs on a regular basis.

The State Government had sub-contracted counselling to a not-for-profit agency with expertise in dealing with trauma. It was evident in the consultation that this was not widely known in the community and therefore needed to be advertised better.

Comments from people interviewed indicated:

*“Some people still don’t realise what services are available, despite all the efforts to provide information.”*  
(Community member)

*“We are seeing more people now than a year ago who are traumatised by the fires. They are now ready to deal with their personal issues. They’ve dealt with the business of getting their lives together – they put on hold their personal issues until now.”* (Community agency)

*“The psychological effects for individuals and the community are really horrific. Some people have not recovered at all and really need help.”* (Community member)

### 13.7. LOOKING TO THE FUTURE

Agencies identified a number of issues that need to be addressed and incorporated into future planning. While the responsibility for the delivery and funding of case management and counselling services is not part of the role of Council, the planning for these services needs to be incorporated into the Municipal Recovery Plan. This includes identifying several local agencies that are able to provide case management and counselling services. These agencies need to be willing to sign an MOU with Council as part of the planning process. These agencies would be regarded as “approved” counselling services to support community and personal recovery in the municipality. The agreement needs to include, that, as far as possible, agencies commit to:

- Ensuring that only suitably qualified and skilled staff provide counselling;
- Ensuring that staff involved have participated in appropriate professional development and are skilled and experienced in trauma counselling;
- Ensuring that staff are supported in the delivery of services, including having easy access to de-briefing services;
- Participating in a common referral and data management system, thus providing consistency in the overall access to the services by residents and the administration of the services;
- Delivering services that are based on models of best-practice and have been verified through research and evidence; and
- Participating in a coordinating structure, such as a working group, that enables community development efforts, case management, accommodation support and counselling services to be coordinated across the municipality.

Agencies identified a number of other issues, which need to be addressed in planning. Several of these suggestions fall outside of the responsibility of local government. Yarra Ranges’ role in relation to these is to advocate with the State and Federal Governments for changes. This approach is reflected in the recommendations. The issues were:

- The case management and counselling services need to be viewed separately, with adequate resources being available for both functions;
- Criteria, that will identify when case management may be required, are needed;
- Ongoing, long term funding for counselling needs to be provided by Federal and State Governments, with direct funding provided to agencies, and not relying solely on a voucher system;
- Local GPs need to be trained in recognising trauma and need have adequate resources available for referrals (Federal Government responsibility); and
- The reliance on Dr Rob Gordon to assist and educate after the emergency highlighted a large vulnerability in this field. There is a need to train other professionals to offer this support and advice.

## **14. PROJECTS AND EVENTS**

### **14.1. ROLE AND RESPONSIBILITY OF THE WORKING GROUP**

Council organised a range of projects and events, which were coordinated and monitored by the Projects and Events Working Group. This group was comprised of agencies, such as neighbourhood houses and church groups, state government departments and Council, from the fire-affected areas.

The first meeting of the group was held on 3 March 2009 and the last on 22 September 2009, with a total of nine meetings. The group also communicated *via* email to save time in meeting face-to-face. The working

group provided a forum for sharing information and analysing the effectiveness of the events and activities. It also provided a forum for assessing community applications for grants awarded through the Department of Planning and Community Development and VBRRRA prior to the applications being submitted. This fulfilled the expectation of these funding bodies to seek the views of community organisations and members prior to funding consideration. In this context, this group fulfilled a responsibility that was undertaken by Community Recovery Committees (as per the VBRRRA model) in other municipalities.

Council developed strategies, which targeted the community generally, as well as specific events and projects for men, women, children and young people. All activities and events were aimed at supporting the rebuilding and renewal processes in the fire-affected communities and building community and individual resilience.

The working group provided an important accountability function for the organisation of community events, as well as a forum keeping abreast of the range of needs in the community. Members of the group indicated that the working group had an important role in the planning and staging of events and activities to meet the gaps and needs.

However, some members of the working group felt that the process did not work as well as they could have. The purpose of the group changed, as the funding environment and decision-making processes imposed by State Government developed.

*"We thought we would be running events. This didn't happen. We ended up coordinating and commenting on funding for other agencies." (Community agency)*

This was complicated by the requirements of the funding process. With short timelines, many decisions were required between meetings. Members considered that the process *via* email was an effective way to maintain accountability and continue to seek the input of community agencies.

#### 14.2. COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT OFFICER – PROJECTS AND EVENTS

Council employed an experienced community development worker who had worked with the fire-affected communities on other projects prior to the fires and had established relationships with local community groups and leaders. This individual commenced work in February 2009 and remained with the Community Recovery Team for two years. The role of this individual was to work closely with the fire-affected communities to support their recovery. This included arranging and facilitating community activities and events. DHS funded this position for the first year, with funding provided as part of project management costs of funded projects for the second year.

#### 14.3. FOCUS OF EVENTS AND PROJECTS

The events conducted and projects implemented were diverse and covered four main areas:

- Information and wellbeing sessions;
- Support for service providers;
- Community one-off events; and
- Longer-term activities targeted at specific sectors of the community.

The activities were held in 2009 and 2011 at venues across the municipality – Yarra Glen, Healesville, Yarra Junction, Belgrave, Steels Creek, Chum Creek, Wandin East, Yering, Lilydale, Coldstream, Dixons Creek and Hoddles Creek.

Over 100 different events and activities were conducted from 2009 to 2011. A total of activities 74 different activities were conducted in 2009, 36 in 2010 and two in February 2011. Table 8 provides a summary of the activities and events that were organised in the community. A detailed list of these is contained in Appendix Three.

Community information sessions and events dominated the activities in 2009. In 2010, community recovery projects were staged.

In excess of 7,000 people attended the events, information sessions and participated in the various projects. Numbers are not exact because it was difficult to count people at community events and some people did not register their attendance. Information about the numbers attending events conducted by other organisations is not available.

The most popular events were in 2009: the “Thanks Mate” picnic for emergency workers (1,500 people), the family football day in July 2009 (1,000 people) and the rebuilding expo at the Lilydale showgrounds in July 2009 (2,500 people). The sessions conducted by Dr Rob Gordon on community recovery were also well attended. Six months after the event, 700 people attended a session with Dr Gordon.

**Table 8:** List of Community Recovery Actions

| Type of Activity   | Number of events |      | Estimated Number of attendees |      |
|--|------------------|------|-------------------------------|------|
|  | 2009             | 2010 | 2009                          | 2010 |
| <b>Community Information Sessions</b>  | 26               | 20   | 1,700                         | 450  |
| <b>Community events</b>  | 20               | 4    | 6,450                         | 400  |
| <b>Community Recovery Projects – regular sessions over several weeks or months</b> | 2                | 12   | 30 per session                | 200  |
| <b>Recovery events conducted by other organisations funded by VBRAA</b>            | 24               | -    | Not available                 | -    |
| <b>Community-wide activities</b>   | 2                | -    | 80                            |      |
| <b>Support for service providers</b>   | 2                | -    | 230                           |      |

Source: Yarra Ranges Council

#### 14.3.1. INFORMATION AND WELLBEING SESSIONS

These sessions were organised as the need was identified by the community development officer, community members or agencies, or through direct requests from individuals, community groups and service providers. The sessions were initiated through the various community recovery working groups (Projects and Events, Counselling and Case Management *etc*) or through specific areas of Council, such as the Environment Department. The themes of the sessions were:

- Rebuilding and Regeneration;
- Personal Wellbeing; and
- Business Recovery.



### 14.3.2. EVENTS

The main objective of the community bushfire recovery events was to bring people together in a relaxed and non-threatening environment. The events assisted, in the short term, to relieve anxiety and pressure, and brought together people, who had shared similar experiences. These events provided important informal opportunities for people to make contact with their neighbours and friends, particularly for those people who had moved out of the area.

The majority of events were organised in conjunction with, or with the support of, a local community group or organisation, with Council providing organisational support and publicity resources. Event themes and locations were varied to ensure accessibility and the inclusion of people from all bushfire affected areas in the municipality. A variety of venues was hired to ensure that no one business benefited more than any other.

### 14.3.3. LONGER-TERM ACTIVITIES

A number of longer-term activities and projects were organised in 2010. These targeted specific groups in the community and included specific activities for men and women, pre-school children and young people. They were conducted by neighbourhood houses, church groups, community agencies, community groups and Council.

A number of residents consulted in this review commented on the events and activities, which were organised through Yarra Ranges. Comments included:

*"Coffee mornings were great."*

*"I loved the massage. The staff were wonderfully helpful."*

Yarra Ranges staff reviewed the responses to these events on an ongoing basis. Recorded comments indicated that participants regarded the events and activities very positively.

Participant feedback from the event evaluations included:

*"Some of us are too proud to feel we need counselling but in a group environment it is acceptable. Thank you so much." (Community member)*

*"Rob's knowledge and experience has really helped us in dealing with our first major trauma." (Community member)*

*"Activities and events allowed people to be supported – the informal nature meant that people felt comfortable and could chat and express their feelings." (Community member)*

Specific events and activities for men were organised in response to feedback from the Economic Recovery Committee. This committee recognised that many males in the community were not engaging and specific strategies were necessary to fill this service gap.

The events held were diverse and targeted a variety of people in the community. Many of the groups, which received the funding, were able to stage the events without any assistance, while others required assistance from the Council CDO, as their experience was limited.

### Importance of informal contact – Yarra Glen Coffee and Chat

Yarra Ranges staff initiated a “coffee and chat” group in a coffee shop in Yarra Glen on Monday mornings. This became well known in the community, with up to 30 people attending each week. Funding was available initially. The group allowed residents to meet their neighbours and to get to know other people in the community. Strong bonds across the community have now formed and this group continues two and a half years after the fires.

Table 9: Typical types of activities

| Type of Activity   | Typical event  |
|--|--|
| <b>Community Information Sessions</b>  | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Rebuilding forums</li> <li>• Business recovery</li> <li>• Gardening recovery and design</li> <li>• Debriefing sessions</li> <li>• Personal recovery information: for men, for women, for families, for couples and for communities</li> </ul> |
| <b>Community events</b>  | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Thank you BBQ for emergency workers</li> <li>• Family nights, picnic, BBQs</li> <li>• Men’s events</li> <li>• Community BBQs</li> <li>• Concerts and Open Air Cinema at Rochford Winery</li> </ul>  |
| <b>Community Recovery Projects – regular sessions over several weeks or months</b> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Meditation</li> <li>• Cooking for men, families</li> <li>• Puppet sessions for children</li> <li>• Autumn &amp; winter festivals</li> <li>• Weekends away – men, women</li> <li>• Coffee ‘n’ chat sessions</li> </ul>                         |
| <b>Recovery events conducted by other organisations funded by VBRAA</b>            | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Organisations included: churches, primary schools, sporting clubs, community houses</li> <li>• Events: trips, tree planting, dinners, dances, lunches</li> </ul>  |
| <b>Community-wide activities</b>   | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Conducted by other organisations: Tool Library and wire fence scrap metal recycle drive</li> </ul>  |
| <b>Support for service providers</b>   | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Showcase of providers’ services</li> <li>• Working summit for case managers</li> </ul>  |

## 14.4. CHALLENGES

### 14.4.1. FUNDING PROCESS

The difficulties with the changing policies and guidelines relating to funding were played out more critically with the coordination of events and activities than elsewhere. Individuals interviewed indicated that the timelines for funding were very short and the criteria were frequently incompatible with community need. This meant that submissions for funding had to be re-written frequently, in order to enable resources to be available for community groups. Several individuals indicated that this was further complicated by VBRAA staff who were unaware of the guidelines and were therefore unable to support the process adequately.

Council staff and community agencies were required to apply for grants on an almost continual basis. This was not only resource intensive but was also an intense intellectual exercise in matching community needs with the funding criteria.

*"We were applying for funding to meet guidelines, not to address community need. We'd get the funding and then work with communities to try to make it fit so that their needs would be met." (Community agency)*

*"The division of funding into 'winter' and 'summer' imposed a framework on the community that did not fit with their thinking." (Community agency)*

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#### 14.4.2.COMMUNICATION

Communication was identified as a particular problem. Community agencies, Council and VBRRA were all running events. While community agencies and Council were communicating regularly, it took a long time to have a system operating where information was provided by VBRRA and communicated to Council staff. This led to several of the VBRRA events and activities not being well publicised in the community.

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#### 14.4.3.PARTNERSHIPS

There was mixed feedback about the partnerships and working relationships, which developed between agencies. Youth Services indicated that the partnerships they had with other providers had been particularly important and had worked well. This included Centrelink, local church groups and larger agencies. Importantly, staff emphasised that building on existing relationships was critical.

*"Everyone has been on the same page and willing to help with whatever." (Council Youth Services team member)*

For others, the partnership relationships had been tense. Feedback through the consultation indicated that some organisations, which were not located in the community, saw the process as a way to get funding, power and influence with the State Government and in the municipality. This caused tension with local agencies. It was particularly difficult as many of the local agencies were small and had limited resources. This also affected their capacity to apply for grants to support the work they were doing in their local communities – a factor that placed them at some disadvantage when "competing" for funds with large organisations. Further, several of these local agencies were managing their own loss and grief - the loss of staff members and clients - and managing their own property damage. This highlights the importance of developing working relationships, protocols and MOUs with agencies in the preparation and planning phases.

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#### 14.4.4.COMMUNITY CONTROL

Several people indicated that community control of events and activities was critical. One individual indicated that events organised directly by communities were much more popular and better attended than those organised "externally". Community members indicated that the barbecues organised by local people were particularly important at bringing residents together. People indicated that these activities needed to be encouraged and supported, as they built resilience and encouraged communities to begin to take control of their own recovery.

There was mixed feedback regarding the perceived support that communities received from Council for those events and activities initiated by the community. Some people indicated that Council appeared to be hostile to

their attempts to organise their own activities, with one individual indicating that Council health officers attempted to close down their BBQs. Other groups indicated that Council was able to secure funding for them to conduct their own events and that the support they received enabled them to make important connections in their local communities.

#### 14.5. LOOKING TO THE FUTURE

Staff identified a number of resources that could be developed through the Recovery Inception Plan and in the planning and preparation phase. These included:

- Developing evaluation forms for each activity and event: these do not need to be long – one or two questions - but a process needs to be in place to provide information and feedback to target ongoing activities and to assist with funds acquittal processes;
- Ensuring that MOUs include neighbourhood houses and other ‘grassroots’ agencies (such as township groups), which are strongly linked to local communities and have knowledge of the most vulnerable people in those communities;
- Preparing a publicity masthead, that is ready for use, specifically for recovery;
- Engaging neighbourhood house staff, and other local community networks and organisations, in training in relation to conflict management and managing trauma, so that they are better equipped to deal with emergencies; and
- Developing clear principles and guidelines for working with local communities to strengthen community engagement.

Other actions for future events included:

- Ensuring that trained and skilled psychologists and counsellors are available at significant community events as early as possible. Such activities are often the only public contact that some people make;
- Setting aside funding for community groups to organise and support events;
- Changing the focus of event organisation to include a stronger emphasis on community-generated activities. Initially, this may require Council staff to support and organise them but communities need to be empowered to take control of such activities themselves;
- Advocating for flexible funding guidelines that take account of needs of individual communities;
- Providing an ongoing forum and other opportunities for community agencies to connect for facilitation coordination and information sharing.

The role of the working group also requires consideration. The functions of this group evolved over time. Its functions aligned more closely with that of an advisory and/or coordinating group for community development activities, of which the events and activities were an integral component. Consideration needs to be given to amalgamating the functions of this group with a revised Community Reference Group.

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##### 14.5.1. FUNDING ISSUES

The Federal Government has developed clear guidelines and funding grants, which will be available in the event of a major disaster, using the experiences of the 2009 Victorian bushfires and the 2010 Queensland floods. While these guidelines provide opportunity for flexibility, they also provide certainty in relation to funding. They include grants to individuals and organisations. The processes for seeking funding are also established, *e.g.* obtaining funding from Centrelink. Similar guidelines at a State Government level for community re-building would assist local government to have greater certainty in the recovery processes.

## Outstanding Issues

Youth Services staff indicated that the bushfires highlighted the difficulties of Interface Council areas. Lack of public transport and few services contributed to the challenge of supporting young people in the longer term. The cumulative effect of personal and family issues became evident for many young people. There was concern that, when the resources for engaging isolated young people ceased at the end of 2010, the underlying issues would not be resolved. Many young people were only then beginning to engage with services and come to terms with their grief and fear. Staff believed that there was a need to continue to proactive engagement of young people for at least a further two years.

## 15. VOLUNTEER MANAGEMENT AND MATERIAL AID

### 15.1. CONTEXT

The work of volunteers in the recovery process was critical. The volume of tasks required, not just in the response and relief phases, but in the longer-term recovery effort, could not have been undertaken solely by paid staff. The EMMV outlines clear roles and responsibilities for volunteers, including:

- The CFA volunteer fire fighters and SES volunteers;
- St John's Ambulance workers in emergency first aid;
- Red Cross's in its role in the registration of affected people in the immediate response to the emergency; and
- Ongoing support from others to assist communities to rebuild.

Without the work of local volunteers in assisting communities to rebuild, the recovery from the 2009 bushfires would have been impossible to coordinate and achieve.

The extent of the offers of assistance from people in the community, and the amount of goods and services offered, demonstrated the overwhelming generosity and response of the broader community to the bushfires. Following Black Saturday, more than 22,000 potential volunteers offered their help online, *via* the *Go Volunteer* website, and to a telephone hotline managed by the Victorian Government<sup>44</sup>. Many also registered their desire to help directly in Yarra Ranges. This spontaneous desire to assist was also reflected in efforts at a local level, where community members organised events and relief activities. The extent of the offers of help from the community was consistent with the experiences in other jurisdictions in recent emergencies – such as the New Orleans and Queensland floods<sup>45</sup>.

Coordination of the volunteer effort was critical to ensure that the energies of committed people were targeted to where they were most needed. It was also important to manage the effort so that local communities were not overwhelmed or intruded upon unnecessarily. At the same time, the offers of support were extraordinary, as was the amount of material aid received.

<sup>44</sup> *Spontaneous Volunteer Management Resource Kit*, developed by Red Cross Australia, [www.facsia.gov.au](http://www.facsia.gov.au)

<sup>45</sup> *ibid*

DPCD provided a grant to Council to support the community volunteering efforts. A Community Development Officer was employed by Council to focus on volunteer coordination and support. Small grants were also provided to local community groups that were volunteering in the fire-affected areas.

Council established the Volunteer Management and Material Aid Working Group, as part of the Municipal Recovery Structure, to coordinate volunteer management and material aid, facilitate communication with the volunteer agencies, and receive advice from those agencies. The first meeting of this group was held on 12 March 2009 with the final meeting a year later on 15 March 2010. The group met fortnightly initially and then reduced the frequency of meetings, with a total of ten meetings held.

This group was comprised of the key volunteer organisations that were coordinating a range of volunteers in the community and provided support services, ranging from fencing to community barbeques. Membership included agencies such as the Salvation Army, Lions Club, local community fire relief recovery groups, Rotary and local church groups.

## 15.2. ACHIEVEMENTS

The key achievements of the volunteer coordination process were:

- Audit of 'Offers of Help' database;
- Development of 'Needs' database;
- Dixons Creek Volunteer Temporary Accommodation;
- Eastern Region Volunteer Coordinators Network;
- Lilydale material aid distribution facility;
- Material Aid and Volunteer Support Working Group;
- Personal development and skill building opportunities for volunteers;
- Planned Volunteer Activities;
- Risk management for all volunteer activity supported or managed by Council;
- Support for volunteer groups that provided material aid in the Yarra Ranges;
- Volunteer appreciation;
- Volunteer Fencing Program;
- Target 25,000 Revegetation and community building program;
- Supporting the Adopt a Shipping Container project (lead organisation – Yarra Glen Community Fire Relief Group); and
- Yarra Valley Rotary Tool Library.

### 15.2.1. MANAGING THE VOLUME OF VOLUNTEER OFFERS

When Yarra Ranges Council was overwhelmed with offers of support in the two to three months following the bushfires, a team of WorkSafe staff volunteered to construct a database to gather the offers into a format that could be utilised quickly and easily during the emergency and recovery phases. In all, 1,736 pledges of help were made, with offers including accommodation, transport, water and entertainment or activities.

Once the emergency phase was over, a recovery call centre, comprised of temporary staff and volunteers from the database, was established. Efforts were made to contact all 1,736 people, following through on the offers and/or registering the offers for future reference. This served the dual purpose of thanking the community for their willingness to assist in the aftermath of the fires, as well as updating information that could be made accessible for future emergency events.

### 15.2.2. OPERATIONS OF THE WORKING GROUP

Working group members indicated that this group was particularly effective in providing a forum to share information and to coordinate volunteer resources. It also undertook an advocacy role in areas where additional resources and support were required. Members indicated that it provided an effective forum where they could work together to develop solutions for problems which they jointly identified or experienced in their day-to-day work with communities.

It provided an important medium for members, who were working constantly in their own communities, to support one another. Members indicated that the discussions in the group assisted members to gain a perspective on the broader scale of the recovery efforts and to gain some support in relation to the day-to-day demands of working with people in local communities who were traumatised.

A positive, if unintended, consequence of the working group was the support that it provided to its members. It is important to recognise that many of the volunteers did not have access to professional de-briefing and support processes available to paid staff in large agencies. While not a substitute for formal de-briefing, the working group process provided important support for its members.

Some of the projects were:

### DIXONS CREEK VOLUNTEER ACCOMMODATION

Temporary volunteer accommodation was established in the fire-affected community of Dixons Creek in May 2009. A disused tennis pavilion, along with donated ablution and mobile office blocks, were converted into living quarters for up to 20 people. It catered for volunteers travelling from overseas and across Australia to assist with recovery efforts. The site featured five separate sleeping quarters, one common room, two bathroom facilities and external power supply for up to ten tents and two caravans. All renovations utilised donated goods, equipment and labour, including the:

- Installation of kitchen facilities and wood heater;
- Interior painting and floor refurbishment;
- Donated beds, tables, chairs, fridge, kitchen appliances and equipment, televisions, toilet/shower blocks and sleeping quarters;
- The provision of bottled drinking water for volunteer activity;
- Regular water carting to service amenities; and
- Heating and cooling for sleeping units.

The Yarra Glen Relief Centre managed bookings for the accommodation. Keys were available 24 hours a day, 7 days a week from a nearby winery and local resort. The facility operated from 23<sup>rd</sup> May 2009 to 31<sup>st</sup> August 2010. It has since been converted into the community centre for local use.



Dixons Creek tennis pavilion before renovations



Recreation and living space following renovations



Building from outside



Sleeping quarters



### Fencing Program

The Victorian Farmers Federation (VFF) coordinated the fencing activity, on behalf of the Department of Primary Industries, in the Yarra Ranges from mid-March to the end of September 2009. Yarra Ranges took over the management of the program from early October to December 2009. The program utilised fencing contractors to complete the skilled tasks of post driving and the construction of end assemblies, while volunteers completed the wiring and straining. This program was supported by a number of volunteer organisations, including Rotary, The Lions Club, Conservation Volunteers Australia, Belgravia Leisure, the Sugarloaf Pipeline Alliance, Red Cross, Restaurant Catering Victoria, the Swartz Foundation and Accor Hotel Group, as well as numerous other corporate groups, using the labour of individuals, community groups and corporations. This program is still operating and hopes to replace over 1,000 kms of fencing destroyed in the fires.

### Tool Library

The Yarra Valley Rotary Tool Library was developed by the Wandin Rotary Club, with support from Council staff. A range of tools was purchased and loaned to people, who had lost their equipment in the fires, as well as being used in working bees. They maintained the tools, adhering to strict biosecurity protocols, ensuring that Yarra Ranges continued to be protected from the spread of unwanted soil and airborne pests and diseases.

### Adopt a Shipping Container

This project was initiated by the Yarra Glen Community Fire Relief Committee. In the months following the bushfires, many property owners reported lost or stolen equipment, as well as poor options for storage of electrical or weather sensitive equipment. Local volunteers initiated the "Adopt-a-Container" program, which Council supported through facilitating funding and supporting coordination, with the Yarra Glen Community Fire Relief Centre managing the program.

The program provided over 250 subsidised shipping containers to property owners and people who had lost their primary place of residence and/or sheds. The containers provided secure and dry storage over winter months as part of a 12-month lease with Royal Wolf. The lease arrangements were independent, with property owners being provided with the option to extend at the conclusion of the initial 12 months.

Volunteers were utilised to clear and mark out suitable areas for the shipping containers, in preparation for their arrival. Aerial imagery was used to ensure shipping containers were placed away from original houses and driveways, ensuring that the rebuilding process was uninterrupted.

## 15.3. CHALLENGES AND DISCUSSION

### 15.3.1. SUPPORT FOR VOLUNTEERS

The Community Development Officer responsible for coordinating the volunteer effort provided as much support as possible to volunteers. The formal public recognition of the volunteers was important. However, it was important to recognise that many volunteers could have benefitted from formal debriefing. Where these volunteers were part of a larger organisation, such as the Red Cross, such services were available. However, for the many people volunteering spontaneously, this was not necessarily the case. Many of them worked long hours and became exhausted. For some, this resulted in impeded capacity to make clear judgements, including an inability to recognise that they needed to rest and that others could take their place. It also resulted in some conflict with Council and other agencies. Other municipalities had similar experiences.

In future events, State and Federal Governments need to provide resources for debriefing support for volunteers who are unable to access it through affiliation with a volunteer agency. This could be developed in partnership with volunteer agencies, such as the Red Cross.

### 15.3.2. SPONTANEOUS VOLUNTEER EFFORT

Across the fire-affected areas, local residents, particularly those who did not sustain direct losses, did a range of things in their local communities to assist one another.

Significant work has been undertaken by FACSIA and the Red Cross on how best to manage spontaneous volunteer effort. A tool kit and guidelines have been developed to assist municipalities and agencies manage and redirect the anticipated influx of spontaneous volunteers. The framework is intended to facilitate the effective management of potential, spontaneous volunteers and their use in emergencies<sup>46</sup>. DPCD has also undertaken a project on spontaneous volunteers. This project has developed a framework and process for the recruitment and training of potential volunteers prior to a major event. This will target people in the community who may be interested in helping in such circumstances and who will then be able to support local government and local communities immediately. These approaches will assist Council manage similar situations in the future.

### 15.3.3. MANAGING MATERIAL AID

The volume of material aid received was enormous. While some of this was valuable and used extensively by residents, there were significant amounts that were not useable and required extensive effort and cost to manage and/or dispose of. Neighbouring municipalities had similar experiences. Yarra Ranges Council was forced to hire a factory in Lilydale to house these goods, as it took VBRR a considerable period to take action. After four months, VBRR stored the material aid in a warehouse in Clayton and issued identification cards to fire-affected people to access the goods. This was a crucial management strategy and feedback from the consultation indicated that the approach assisted greatly. However, staff also indicated that it was required from earlier on in the process.

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<sup>46</sup> *Spontaneous Volunteer Management Resource Kit*, developed by Red Cross Australia, [www.facsia.gov.au](http://www.facsia.gov.au)

Considerable discussion occurred within Council as to how best to manage the material aid received. The suggestions ranged from refusing to accept any goods and simply giving money, to hiring a warehouse from day one and managing the process with vouchers and identification cards. The most realistic solution probably lies in between. There is a need for immediate material aid. Many people only had the clothes they wore on Black Saturday. It was important that immediate goods were available to these people. However, it is important that people who undertake this work on a day-to-day basis, e.g. organisations such as the Salvation Army and Red Cross, take responsibility for this task rather than Council staff.

Effective management of material aid requires volunteer effort and can be a critical way of using the offers of assistance from the community. Work, currently being undertaken by the Department for Families and Communities in South Australia, is exploring the effective management of donated goods following a disaster<sup>47</sup>. It is anticipated that the outcomes of this work will provide important input to assist Yarra Ranges in the future.

*“Offers of assistance from the public were astounding, both in volume and in generosity.” (Council officer)*

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#### 15.3.4. YARRA GLEN FIRE RELIEF COMMITTEE

The Yarra Glen Fire Relief Centre is an example of spontaneous community volunteer effort. A group of concerned and committed residents established a Relief Centre to manage material aid for fire-affected residents and provide support and a meeting place for local people. They believed that these services were not being delivered adequately from the official relief and Recovery Centre in Yarra Glen. This group provided immediate assistance, through delivering food and supplies to residents who could not leave their properties in the days immediately following the fires. They also initiated the development of the “adopt-a-container” project.

This Relief Centre was located in a former IGA supermarket, across the road from the official Relief and Recovery Centre in Yarra Glen, operated by Council. Significant tensions developed between Council and this group during the first six to eight weeks of its operation. These related to differences of opinion as to how relief and Recovery Centres should be operated, how to manage the inevitable confusion for people in the community with two centres operating in close proximity to one another, and how emergency relief should be distributed. The situation was difficult for Council to manage. Council wished to encourage and support the dedication of the local residents. However, the group of individuals who established the centre, which developed into a committee, were initially reluctant to work with Council.

Over time, the management of this facility became difficult for the group. It was hard for them to monitor who accessed the material aid and how to control who used the facility. The committee also had no awareness of the incorporation requirements to receive funding, how to provide a safe environment for all people in the community, including children, and how these issues could be managed on a day-to-day basis. The centre also became a drop-in centre for people who were very traumatised, many of whom had existing mental illnesses and were struggling to cope. A local community health centre attempted to assist, through providing activities, but this was not particularly successful. The volunteers became exhausted, with few taking breaks. Further, the IGA also wanted to rent the premises to the group, after 6-8 weeks, rather than provide it rent-free.

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After considerable negotiation, the committee agreed to the:

- Development of a direction for the future, using the services of a facilitator, paid for by Council;
- Payment of rent by Council;
- Support in managing the material aid, incorporating it into the management of material aid for the whole of the municipality; and
- Funding for the “adopt-a-container” initiative, with Council facilitating the submission for funding for this project and providing the necessary incorporation status for the management of the funds.

After three months, Council moved the Recovery Centre from the community hall where it was located, to the old IGA. This provided important staff support in managing and operating the centre. Council staff worked alongside the Yarra Glen Fire Relief Committee members, to provide an integrated service for the community.

#### 15.4. LOOKING TO THE FUTURE

After any disaster, there will always be well meaning people in the community who will not only want to assist but will organise to do so. In such situations, there can be a number of unintended consequences, including:

- *Confusion*: residents may not be sure of who can assist them, who is authorised to do so and what assistance can be provided;
- *Safety*: for unauthorised people attempting to provide assistance as well as those they are attempting to help, e.g. attempting to enter areas that are still under threat from fire. The volunteers may also find themselves in situations for which they are completely unprepared, such as dealing with traumatised people;
- *Standard of assistance*: there can be no quality control on the assistance provided; and
- *Fraud*: in unregulated situations, the risk of unscrupulous people attempting to take advantage of the victims of a disaster is increased.

The experience of the Yarra Glen Relief Centre, and the challenges of managing the overwhelming and generous offers of support from the public, highlighted a number of strategies, which are required for planning, although they do not provide easy solutions for similar circumstances that may arise in the future. Some of these are:

- The Emergency Services and Council have now developed a strategy to provide for the immediate needs of residents who may be unable to leave their properties, with Council staff visiting residents, accompanied by emergency services personnel. This will alleviate the need for local people to go into restricted areas to provide assistance;
- The Red Cross, the agency designated by the State Government in the EMMV, to take primary responsibility for volunteer management, is currently developing, in partnership with local councils, improved strategies to coordinate volunteer effort. The outcomes of this work will be incorporated into Yarra Ranges’ Emergency Management Plan, including the Recovery Inception Plan; and
- The National Council of Churches is working with local and state governments to develop improved processes for managing the offers of assistance from faith communities. This work will also guide the approach taken in Yarra Ranges.

Suggestions that emerged in the consultation for this review included:

- Council needs to be clear about which local groups are best to be included in the formal volunteer management processes. It is important to work with these groups to develop clear roles and

responsibilities. The choice of these agencies is important. Organisations that are able to work in partnership with others is critical;

- Local faith communities need to be engaged, as they will be able to mobilise volunteer resources and, inevitably, people engaged in these congregations will want to contribute to the volunteer effort; and
- Management and screening processes, databases and support processes need to be developed prior to an emergency, with capacity for local and statewide databases to interface with each other.

While these strategies will not prevent conflicts or misunderstandings that may arise in managing spontaneous volunteer effort, they may assist in providing a framework and guidance for action.

## 16. ECONOMIC RECOVERY

### 16.1. OVERVIEW

The Economic Recovery Sub-committee played an important role in facilitating a range of strategies to support businesses recover from the bushfires. Local businesses, the Chambers of Commerce for the affected regions, key regional agencies for agriculture, tourism, business and government agencies, comprised the group. They worked collaboratively to develop strategies and actions to speed up local economic recovery through rebuilding business confidence, job creation, business support, financial counselling, as well as major projects in the area. The members of the committee had well established relationships with Council and had contributed to the development of strategic planning for economic development in the municipality. The key tasks of the group included:

- Providing important information about the recovery issues for local businesses;
- Advocating for local businesses with Federal and State Governments in relation to funding support;
- Advocating with insurance companies on behalf of local businesses;
- Developing strategies that were consistent with the overall vision and strategic directions of Yarra Ranges; and
- Working in partnership with Tourism Victoria and Yarra Ranges Regional Marketing.

Three working groups supported the sub-committee, each focussing on particular activities. These were:

- The Buy Local Campaign;
- Major Projects; and
- Regional Tourism Working Group, also known as the Yarra Valley / Dandenongs / Marysville / Kinglake Bushfire Regional Response and Recovery Committee, which was chaired by Yarra Ranges Regional Marketing.

The first meeting of the sub-committee was 25 February 2009. The final meeting was February 17 2010, with a total of 12 meetings held.

## 16.2. ACHIEVEMENTS

### 16.2.1.SUB-COMMITTEE

Individuals consulted indicated that the Economic Sub-committee worked well. Local business leaders, including representatives from the local Chambers of Commerce, were selected to drive, lead and support the economic development process. These people were co-opted for their capacity for strategic thinking and to consider the broad range of issues and concerns affecting the area. Representatives from State and Federal Governments, including VBRRA, were also invited to participate.

Many on the group had worked together previously through their roles on their respective representative groups and/or individual businesses. However, this was the first time they had worked together across all industry types in the local economy.

### 16.2.2.THE ECONOMIC RECOVERY SUB-COMMITTEE ACTION PLAN

The Economic Recovery Sub-committee developed an Action Plan with 46 distinct actions across six key result areas. These were based on best practice economic development principles for supporting local economies. Forty-two (42) of these actions were achieved. The strategic area, that was the most difficult, was related to the introduction of new, major projects and business to stimulate the local economy. This was not surprising given that it required long-term investment and could take years to gain commitment from both public and private investment.

#### Reflections of the Chair of the Economic Recovery Sub-Committee

In developing a group of like-minded individuals from the region to work collaboratively on rebuilding the economy, the task felt monumental. By developing a Strategic Action Plan that considered the known economic profile (industries and statistics), strengths and weaknesses of the local economy, over-layed with the specific industries impacted by the fires, the committee could be confident that their actions would remain focused in supporting the community. The plan was primarily delivered and driven by Council's Economic Development Unit, who engaged partners and temporary staff as required.

Unlike most strategic plans, that are developed to maintain a high-level focus, this plan focussed on the experiences of individuals and what impact the committee could have in assisting their recovery. The Plan took account of the unique, multiple issues, acknowledging that a creative approach was required - a 'one size fits all' approach was never going to be suitable. It was important to understand the different emotional stages of recovery that the community was going through, which were consistent with the social connectedness models of Dr Rob Gordon.

### 16.2.3.A COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT APPROACH

Yarra Ranges has taken an integrated approach to community and economic development for the past ten years. This has resulted in significant township development, which has engaged local businesses and community groups to build sustainable communities, recognising that economic development through local enterprise and employment, is a key platform to achieving this end. This was reflected in the approach taken

by the Economic Recovery Sub-committee. Committee members considered that the most effective activities facilitated by the group were those that were linked to the broader community recovery activities. Examples included the Men's Nights and golf days.

The consultation indicated that community, business and individual recovery processes were directly related to functioning prior to the event. For those individuals, communities and businesses that were strong and functioning well with a high degree of business networks and leadership, the recovery was stronger, quicker and more robust. This highlighted the importance of ongoing community development and governments working in partnership with communities to build resilience on an ongoing basis.

The morale of businesses and the community were intrinsically linked. As business confidence and activity recovered, communities became more active and residents began to feel more confident and connected with their local areas. Linking business recovery activities with overall community recovery strategies was important. In recognition of the fundamental relationship between economic and community development, resources, which focus on economic recovery and support local small businesses to recover, were critical. As one community member indicated:

*"When the shops in the main street are doing business again, it really lifts the spirit of the community as well providing a place to meet." (Community member)*

#### **MAKING THE MOST OF ECONOMIC RECOVERY OPPORTUNITIES**

A range of great initiatives was developed to promote the return of business to the region. There were many excellent marketing-based actions, from "Buy Local" campaigns to the re-launching of the tourist commercials, the "Run Rabbit Run" series, across Australia. While these activities were paramount to rebuilding business confidence, it was the support from fellow businesses that was the most overwhelming.

Those working in the sphere of business and economic development can have a powerful impact on the ability to respond rapidly to all aspects of recovery. The business networks and connections associated with Council staff and the Economic Recovery Sub-Committee saw the following unique benefits:

*Restaurant Catering Sponsorship for volunteers, a \$70,000 initiative:* every volunteer received \$50 gift voucher to spend in local food and beverage businesses;

*Consortia funding for a new regional playground in Yarra Glen:* donations from a number of local businesses (Tesco's, Brown Brother's, De Bortoli), the Bendigo Bank Community Enterprise Fund and the City of Grant in South Australia were used to construct a playground that will benefit the local community and tourists;

*Personal recovery for business owners:* Bendigo Bank contributed approximately \$140,000 to community recovery activities, focusing on personal recovery;

*Material aid donations and funding for recovery activities:* Westpac donated \$12,500 to the cost of these; and

*Corporate volunteer hours:* many different corporations from across Australia donated hundreds of hours of staff time, with these volunteers assisting in activities from ranging from cleaning up and fencing to data entry and administration.

#### 16.2.4.LINKING WITH EXISTING ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT PLANNING

The Economic Recovery sub-committee decided to link the economic recovery in the fire-affected areas with the existing vision, planning and strategies for economic development in the municipality. The Yarra Ranges Community and Economic Development Strategy formed the key platform that guided the economic recovery process. This strategy was developed in partnership with local businesses and communities prior to the fires.

The Economic Recovery Sub-committee assessed the priorities outlined in this strategy, and in the context of the efforts required to renew business activity in the fire-affected areas. Different strategies and approaches were developed to meet the specific needs of local communities in the aftermath, but the overall approach was consistent with the existing vision for the local communities and the local economy. Importantly, this renewed interest and attention in the business community for several of the strategies that had been developed previously. It also contributed to the development a sense of hope in the community.

##### Re-invigorating Local Businesses

In order to encourage local shoppers to return to the affected towns promptly, Council directly funded a number of “Buy Local” campaigns, through working with local Chambers of Commerce to provide incentives for people to buy locally. This was effective in building the confidence of local businesses, many of which were small family affairs. It was also important in contributing to improving the psychological wellbeing of local business people, encouraging them to look at a range of ways to attract customers back to them.

Committee members identified the key success factors of this strategy as:

The funding was made available quickly by Council;

The actions took account of the unique features of the local area – a model or framework for action was not imposed, as distinct from the restrictiveness of the many State funded programs. This enabled support to be provided for businesses that had sustained substantial losses of custom as a result of the fires, without sustaining physical loss to premises or assets; and

Local businesses were able to design the best approach, in partnership with local government.

This resulted in increased patronage of local businesses by both locals and tourists.

#### 16.2.5.INVIGORATING REGIONAL TOURISM - A PARTNERSHIP APPROACH

The model for regional tourism recovery provides an example of effective practice. The Federal and State Governments contributed \$2.2 million to support the recovery of the regional tourism industry. Not only was this commitment swift but it was very effective in helping ensure certainty for the industry. Yarra Ranges Regional Marketing led the process and worked collaboratively with Tourism Victoria, councils and local businesses to develop an Action Plan of marketing initiatives for the funding. This Plan outlined the business community’s vision for the future and developed a range of actions to achieve it. The plan covered the whole of the Yarra Valley Region, which included Marysville, Yarra Ranges and Kinglake.



### 16.2.6.ADVOCACY

Council had a clear role in facilitating a range of actions and advocating on behalf of businesses. While businesses wanted to take control themselves, many were unable to do so initially and needed Council support. Committee members indicated that their most effective role had been in identifying issues facing local businesses and developing a range of solutions for them. Importantly, this guided the advocacy work of Council, and included:

- Advocating with VBRRA and the State Government for relevant support programs to directly and indirectly affected businesses.
- Assisting local business to develop a position about the equitable collection of the fire services levy and its impact on business overheads – this is now being considered by the State Government;
- Advocating on behalf of individual businesses with insurance companies; and
- Advocating on behalf of businesses with banks and other financial institutions, as several businesses could not raise the finances required to assist them to re-build their businesses.

## 16.3. CHALLENGES

### 16.3.1.TIMING

The committee members felt that they had commenced meeting a little too soon. This was despite the fact that the trader groups in both Yarra Glen and Healesville sought opportunities to commence community recovery very early on. They considered that, as individuals, they were not ready to begin thinking about how they could contribute to supporting their local communities in the recovery process in February 2009 as they were still managing their own personal recovery.

*“Like most of the local businesses, we were trying to grapple with our immediate needs – loss of friends and family, loss of business as a result of the fire. We didn’t really know what to do to benefit the whole of the community in the first few meetings.” (Committee member)*

However, it was also difficult for the committee members to identify when the right time would be. Despite this, Council staff indicated that it was important to commence as soon as possible. A complicating factor, in this instance, was that the fires in some parts of the region were over within the first 48 to 72 hours of the event, while for other parts, they continued for up to 23 days. In fact, Council staff indicated that the decision to commence planning for business recovery early on was an important factor in the rebuilding for many businesses.

*“Beginning the rebuilding work quickly was really important. We were still in the response phase two weeks after Black Saturday and we had already commenced working with business to develop solutions.” (Council officer)*

### 16.3.2.THE CHALLENGES OF BEING AN INTERFACE COUNCIL

As an Interface Council, Yarra Ranges Council is classified as a metropolitan Melbourne municipality. This meant that Council and local businesses were not eligible for a range of funding initiatives that were available to rural councils, including accessing regional and rural funds. This is despite the fact that the businesses that were affected were located in the rural areas of the municipality.

### 16.3.3. UNDERSTANDING THE NUANCES OF THE COMMUNITY

Council officers indicated that the “off the shelf” responses of State and Federal Governments, which did not recognise the unique nature of the local communities, delayed the recovery process. Funding was often only available for businesses that had incurred a direct loss of property or assets because of the fires – this did not take account of the loss of business as an indirect consequence. For example, many businesses in Healesville provided support services to Marysville tourist establishments, such as hotel cleaning services and food and beverage supplies. With the destruction of Marysville, the Healesville businesses could not operate, as their clients were no longer in existence. However, no financial support was available to assist these businesses to recover. Council spent a considerable amount of time advocating for these local businesses with relevant funding bodies. It also required a considerable amount of time and effort to write submissions to present the unique circumstances of the local communities, when these did not fit the standard models assumed by funding bodies.

### 16.3.4. COMPOUNDING FACTORS FOR BUSINESSES

Since the fires in 2009, Yarra Glen has been flooded on two separate occasions. This has had a particularly negative impact on the racecourse, which is currently operating a reduced race calendar and conducting only harness races. In addition, the township has been impacted by several major civil projects in the area, viz the North South Pipeline and the Truck Bypass of the town. Traders have indicated that these activities and events have had a significant economic impact on the town and have reduced the flow of tourists to the area.

The Global Financial Crisis 2009 also affected many businesses already hit hard by the bushfires. Since the February 2009 bushfires, there have been a small number of business closures in the retail areas of the Yarra Valley. It is difficult to determine whether these were due solely to the bushfires or to a combination of consumer, trade and market factors.

The members of the sub-committee indicated that they believed that economic recovery is a two to five year process. This needs to be recognised in the planning, funding and other support.

## 16.4. OUTSTANDING ISSUES

The impact of Black Saturday has highlighted the importance of “future proofing” the economy in the small towns that characterise Yarra Ranges. Tourism is an important industry and impacts on a range of supporting industries in the more rural areas of the municipality. When an event such as a fire or flood devastates the area, the economic stability of the region is undermined. The community and local businesses have identified a number of strategies to broaden the economic activity of the area, providing important infrastructure to encourage the growth of more diverse industries. To date, Yarra Ranges has not been successful in advocating for funding to support these initiatives. However, the experience of the impact of the 2009 fires highlights the importance and critical nature of such developments.

Members of the Sub-committee considered the following to be ongoing issues as requiring specific strategic intervention:

- The need to create diversity in the economic base remains an ongoing issue for businesses across the small rural towns in the municipality. This requires infrastructure and programmatic funding; and
- Businesses in Yarra Glen believe that revitalisation work in Yarra Glen is critical to developing business confidence and making the town more attractive for tourists again.

## 16.5. LOOKING TO THE FUTURE

Suggestions for improvement of future planning included:

- Strengthening the partnership with Federal and State Governments to clarify the guidelines for economic development: This is particularly important for Interface Councils, where the guidelines that apply to regional and rural economic redevelopment funding do not apply to councils classified as metropolitan;
- Supporting the role of local government as a facilitator and advocate for local businesses;
- Undertaking more regular reviews of the progress of the Action Plan – the committee was often absorbed with “doing” rather than setting aside time for reflection; and
- *Engagement of a paid facilitator to chair the meetings:* the Chair was responsible for nearly all the actions identified through Council’s Economic Development Unit, which often made the role of being an effective chair more difficult.

Consideration of the approach taken with tourism recovery provides some indications in relation to effective practice. While there were some difficulties with the funding arrangements, the approach taken in relation to tourism:

- Ensured that action could be taken quickly;
- The opinions and role of local government were respected and a partnership approach to the planning and implementation process was evident; and
- The planning and vision for recovery was strongly linked to existing planning and respected the vision that the community had worked to develop prior to the fires.

## 17. REBUILDING

### 17.1. ROLES AND RESPONSIBILITIES OF THE SUB-COMMITTEE

The Rebuilding Sub-committee had responsibility for the reconstruction, restoration and inspection of privately owned buildings and public health issues such as waste treatment, site hazards (asbestos, copper/chrome and arsenate timber) and water supply.

The sub-committee worked to ensure planning and health approval processes were fast-tracked, and information and assistance on issues such as understanding the new building regulations, clearing of sites, or situating temporary dwellings, like mobile homes or caravans on fire-affected properties, were available. Teams dedicated to dealing with bushfire-affected residents offered responsive on-site, ‘face to face’ and counter services. In the longer-term, this sub-committee continued to facilitate rebuilding and oversee the implementation of the changes in building regulations in fire-affected areas.

Four working groups comprised this sub-committee – Animal Management, Public Health, Planning & Rebuilding and the Environment.

Specific tasks of the sub-committee included:

- Developing processes to assist people in a prompt and sensitive manner, including fast-tracking planning applications, building advice, and septic tank approvals;
- Sharing information and coordinating the functions across the working groups;

- Managing the implementation of the State Government's legislative changes;
- Collecting data on the progress of activities and monitoring the outcomes for individual residents;
- Providing input and links with the Natural Environment and Public Infrastructure responsibilities;
- Coordinating the process for rebuilding, including liaising with Grocon in the clean-up process;
- Coordinating the building permit reimbursement scheme to minimise costs to bushfire affected residents engaging private building surveyors;
- Ensuring consistent approaches to communicating with the community; and
- Ensuring that all relevant staff had up-to-date information.

## 17.2. PLANNING & REBUILDING WORKING GROUP

The rebuilding team had critical tasks in the response, relief and recovery phases with the Local Laws, Building, Environmental Health and Planning teams all contributing to the effort. The first few weeks of the response effort were coordinated through the MECC and relied upon the working relationships of building, health and local laws sub-plan coordinators. After this, the monitoring of activities was undertaken by the sub-plan coordinators and the support of these teams was overseen by the Rebuilding Recovery Sub-Committee (RRSC).

A significant increase in workload continued from the time of the fires until well into August 2009. Many activities are still ongoing. A dedicated multi-disciplinary team was established as part of the Municipal Recovery Structure and was overseen by the Director of Planning, Building and Health. This proved an effective way of managing the surge in operational requirements in early recovery. Table 10 shows the number of staff taken offline:

Table 10: Staff Taken Off-line

|                               |  |
|-------------------------------|--|
| <b>Planning Services</b>      | 1 x Team Supervisor<br>3 x Planners<br>1 x Customer Service Officer      |
| <b>Building Services</b>      | 2 x Building Surveyors<br>1 x Administration officer                     |
| <b>Public Health Services</b> | 1 x Environmental Health Officer<br>1 x Part-time Administration Officer |

Support and assistance was provided on an occasional basis by the Manager, Building, Health and Local Laws and three Executive Officers of Planning and Environmental Compliance, Health and Local Laws, as required.

### 17.2.1. ACHIEVEMENTS

The rebuilding process was complex with the team being required to undertake a variety of tasks. The rebuilding related services included:

- Building services
  - Refunds of building permits and fees for reconstruction of buildings;
  - Technical advice on issues such as how to determine BAL (Bushfire Attack Level); and
  - Relevant bushfire construction requirements, including those for fire bunkers;

- Health Services
  - Fast tracking of septic tank approvals, waiving application fees and on-site inspections and advice;
- Planning Services
  - Fast tracking of planning approvals, waiving application fees and planning advice;
  - Rebuilding News;
  - Worked with first fire bunker manufacturer to be accredited by Building Commission Victoria - Wildfire Safety Bunkers, Mornington; and
  - Instigating an amendment to building regulations - Minister will now designate bushfire prone areas (previously designated by Council in consultation with the CFA).

Table 11 provides an indication of the type and volume of work undertaken by the Working Group. The data are from a summary report to the Community Recovery Executive Committee in August 2010. It must be noted that, at this time, the rebuilding process had slowed, as many property owners were undecided about whether they would rebuild.

**Table 11: Approvals for bushfire affected properties – February 2009 to June 2010**

|                            |     |
|----------------------------|-----|
| <b>Planning Approvals</b>  | 141 |
| <b>Building Permits</b>    | 100 |
| <b>Occupancy Permits</b>   | 28  |
| <b>Septic tank Permits</b> | 81  |

### 17.3. ANIMAL MANAGEMENT WORKING GROUP

Council's Local Laws team was responsible for animal management and undertook a range of actions in the immediate aftermath of the fires, as well as recovery actions over a nine to ten month period. Response and relief actions included:

- Animal feed and supplies;
- Temporary fencing;
- Emergency Relief Centre Animal Welfare;
- Link to veterinary services;
- Rehousing Animals; and
- Coordination of donations.

The role of the Animal Welfare Sub-plan Coordinator was to plan, coordinate and implement recovery actions utilising information from the MECC, as well as from Local Laws Officers in the field.

The Animal Welfare Sub-plan was developed between August and December 2008, and was untested. As a draft, the plan detailed roles, responsibilities and local partnerships with Animal Aid. It proved to be an excellent starting point for the coordination of animal related requests received at the MECC.

Within the MECC, the Animal Welfare Sub-plan Coordinator was supported by one, sometimes two administrative or technical officers. Officers maintained a presence in the MECC for 24 hours a day, seven days a week for the first two weeks after the fires to coordinate and implement recovery actions.

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### 17.3.1.ACHIEVEMENTS

Local laws field staff played a vital role in Emergency Relief Centres, providing a full-time presence at the Yarra Glen and Healesville Emergency Relief Centres to manage animal issues and requests. This was provided for 24 hours a day for a number of weeks following the event.

Business Continuity for Local Laws operations during this time was maintained by a small contingent of Yarra Ranges local laws staff, as well as staff from councils across Melbourne. Yarra Ranges Local Laws utilised the support of 29 local laws staff from ten different councils, including the cities of Melbourne, Knox, Boroondara, Whitehorse, Casey and Greater Dandenong. The demand for resources meant that a decision was made by management to limit requests for 'core-business' over this period to high risk issues, including dog attacks and lost pets only.

Key actions undertaken by the Animal Welfare Sub-plan included:

- Coordination and transfer of stock from fire affected properties to agistment properties;
- Coordination of the humane destruction and disposal of wounded and burned animals, in partnership with the Department of Primary Industries;
- Installation of over six kilometers of temporary fencing to contain stock on fire damaged properties;
- Distribution of twelve kilometers of fencing wire and star pickets for temporary fencing;
- Coordination of the receipt, recording, management and distribution of food and water for stock and domestic animals, including 3000 bales of hay, 1,300 pallets of hard feed, water delivery and the distribution of water troughs;
- Investigation into reports of abandoned and suffering animals;
- Provision of advice, guidance and support to residents about accessing a variety of resources for animals;
- Transportation of emergency veterinary supplies for animal welfare agencies in fire affected areas;
- Installation of a 20,000 litre stock water tank at Steels Creek and a stock water point at Chum Creek for communal use; and
- Provision of vital animal and traffic management assistance at each of the Relief Centres.

Over the nine months following the fires, the Local Laws Team continued working to follow up on community requests. These included requests and processing of permits for caravans, emergency fencing repairs, call outs for stock or missing pets. A dedicated Local Laws Officer was employed for six months to assist with the backlog of routine medium to low risk requests.

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### 17.3.2.CHALLENGES

The Local Laws Department identified a number of challenges in the initial stages of the response to the emergency, including:

- The Executive Officer Local Laws managed both the response to the emergency, through their role of Sub-plan Coordinator, as well as normal business operations. These roles often had conflicting priorities and business continuity during this time was heavily impacted;
- There were difficulties in tracking the whereabouts of officers at any one time, particularly staff from other councils, who were not familiar with Yarra Ranges Council processes, systems and geography ;
- Operating an untested plan created a lack of situational awareness resulting in reactive decision-making. Decisions were being based on the needs as they arose, resulting in double up, lack of clarity of roles and frustration between the organisation's representatives and other agencies;

- Independent plans at the state and municipal levels were not integrated; and
- The resources required to manage the logistics surrounding the overwhelming response from the public of the donations of feed, material goods and services.

#### Case study

Property owners in Steels Creek, who had destroyed or damaged homes, still needed to care for stock. As a result, a decision was made, in consultation with the Health Sub-plan Coordinator and a private landholder, to install a large 20,000-litre water tank with a pump and stand pipe on private property in Steels Creek. This allowed property owners in the area to access water for their stock.

### 17.3.3. LOOKING TO THE FUTURE

Staff skilled in animal management need to be given the opportunity to participate in the development and implementation of their own plans. The timing, in the case of the Local Laws Team, was most appropriate.

The recognition of Animal Welfare activities, and the critical role of caring for animals in emergency recovery, became apparent. Local and State Governments and animal welfare groups have the necessary momentum to ensure animal welfare is clearly embedded in the emergency management space.

The learnings and experiences gained from the events of 2009 have been critical in informing the arrangements and actions for future revisions of the Animal Welfare Sub-plan. The flow-on effect has motivated governments and other councils and agencies to develop their own plans and templates.

## 17.4. PUBLIC HEALTH TEAM

The Public Health Team was responsible for the environmental health and wellbeing of the community during and after the emergency and undertook the following response and relief tasks:

- Coordination of the safe disposal of deceased animals;
- Coordination of adequate medical treatment, personnel and supplies at ERCs;
- Establishing temporary safe drinking water collection points;
- Supervision of food handling at ERCs and Agency Staging Areas;
- Supervision of the donation of food;
- Identification of site hazards, including asbestos, treated pine timber, contamination of water tanks and damaged waste water systems; and
- Investigation of infectious disease outbreaks, *e.g.* gastric illnesses.

### 17.4.1. ACHIEVEMENTS

The Health Team had established roles and responsibilities in the event of a fire emergency as described in the MEMP and detailed further in the Public Health Emergency Sub-plan. This plan is reviewed, tested and updated annually.

When activated on February 7<sup>th</sup> 2009, the Health Team set up a structure and approach similar to that of the Local Laws Team. The Health Team's responses included:

- The Public Health Sub-plan Coordinator and one, sometimes two additional support staff, were present in the MECC for 24 hours a day for the first two weeks following activation. Their role was to plan, coordinate, implement, monitor and report response and recovery actions;
- Following the first two weeks that the MECC was open, the Public Health Sub-plan Coordinator and one support staff member were in attendance full time during business hours;
- Environmental Health Officers provided a full-time presence at the Healesville and Yarra Glen ERCs for 24 hours a day for the first two weeks following activation of the MECC. Their role was to manage health and medical issues and requests. Following these first two weeks, they were in attendance for a number of weeks during daytime hours, as directed by the Public Health Sub-plan Coordinator;
- One Environmental Health Officer, funded through the Office of Local Government Community Assistance Gift program, was dedicated to responding to queries from bushfire-affected residents in relation to drinking water, septic tanks and managing hazards. The officer also conducted inspections and assisted property owners through the septic tank application process. At the time of writing, 93 septic tank permits had been issued and applications were still being processed in 2011;
- Environmental Health Officers at the ERCs:
  - Supervised the food handling by caterers;
  - Inspected the delivery of donated food;
  - Ensured the adequacy of first aid provision and expertise was available; and
  - Monitored the general cleanliness and hygiene at the Relief Centres.
- During the event, Environmental Health Officers responded to an outbreak of gastric illness of New South Wales fire fighters and ambulance workers at the Healesville staging area;
- Environmental Health Officers arranged for the distribution of bottled water to the Reefton and Steels Creek communities, in response to concerns about contamination of water in water tanks by ash and smoke;
- In response to confusion over where residents could take asbestos materials, Environmental Health Officers coordinated the placement of a rubbish skip for residents to dispose of asbestos and other hazardous materials at the Yarra Glen Recovery Centre;
- The Team liaised with the Environment Protection Authority and Council's waste management Team to provide guidance to residents about the disposal of asbestos and other hazardous materials at Council's waste transfer stations;
- Between the 17th and 24th of March 2009, Environmental Health Officers from Boroondara, Knox, Whitehorse, Cardinia, Monash, Maroondah and, Manningham conducted 240 inspections 'face to face' with fire-affected residents on their properties. The Information Kits they provided to residents contained information on how to deal with asbestos, drinking water, wastewater and other hazards. They also included current information on access to grant funds for repairs and other personal assistance services;
- Environmental Health Officers:
  - Coordinated the distribution of 1,000 kits, provided by the Department of Health, to aid in the clean-up of asbestos on properties;
  - Coordinated the installation of temporary toilet and showering facilities, water tanks and bottled drinking water for residents in Steels Creek.



- Coordinated the installation of a drinking water tank at the Chum Creek Primary School;
- Provided mains water from a standpipe at the Yarra Valley Water pumping station in Chum Creek; and
- Initially coordinated the distribution of tanker water for drinking, water tank cleaners and then liaised with Water Retailers to coordinate tank cleaning and water replacement.

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#### 17.4.2. BUSINESS CONTINUITY PLANNING

- A small contingent of Yarra Ranges Environmental Health Officers and administrative staff maintained 'core' business during this time. Core business activities continued during the event, supported by Environmental Health Officers from Maroondah City Council;
- Core business delivered by Environmental Health Team over this period was limited to high-risk issues such as infectious disease outbreaks, food complaints *etc.*; and
- Office based administration staff continued with 'day to day' operations but also answered queries from bushfire-affected persons and distributed information sheets on a range of health topics. Administration staff assisted with uploading and updating of information on the Council web site.

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#### 17.4.3. EMERGENCY RELIEF CENTRES

In the first hours and days, many people entering the Healesville and Yarra Glen ERCs required medical treatment beyond the capabilities of the first aid providers and nurses who had volunteered to help although their conditions were not serious enough for ambulances to be called. The first aid arrangements were inadequate to deal with the supply of medication, delivery of oxygen and management of more complex medical conditions. This led to the rostering of doctors at the ERCs and the purchase of medical supplies. This was coordinated through the Eastern Ranges General Practitioners Association. This activity continued for three weeks until the demand for medical treatment eased.

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#### 17.4.4. CHALLENGES

- Understanding the scale and the issues arising from the emergency as it evolved proved a challenge when making decisions on what actions to take, when to take them and what resources to allocate;
- The Executive Officer Health Services had both the role of coordinating emergency and the substantive role of managing 'core' business;
- A lack of understanding, and sometimes confusion of the role and responsibilities of State Government agencies involved in providing advice or services, sometimes delayed decisions or actions that could have caused further stress and anxiety for bushfire affected residents; and
- Having 'face to face' conversations with bushfire affected residents on their properties and hearing the traumatic accounts of their experiences soon after the event, proved to be confronting for Environmental Health Officers.

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#### 17.4.5. INTO THE FUTURE

This unprecedented event has drawn out health and medical related issues that may not have been experienced in a lesser event. Understanding the most vulnerable people in our communities and deciding on the appropriate response to reduce harm requires further discussion with relevant agencies and all levels of Government.

It has been clearly identified that medical and health functions in an emergency event require the ongoing commitment and participation of Yarra Ranges Council and agencies, such as Ambulance Victoria, Red Cross, St John Ambulance, Hospitals and Eastern Ranges General Practitioners Association, to develop municipal level plans.

The identification of issues and the response and recovery plans at a municipal level require development through a Health and Medical Sub-committee reporting to the Yarra Ranges Municipal Emergency Planning Committee (MEMPC).

#### **Acknowledging the work of the Environmental Health team**

The innovation, planning and commitment of the Environmental Health and Local Laws team in rebuilding have been acknowledged in the broader emergency management community. This is reflected by the fact that members have been invited to present at several national and international conferences. These included:

- Environmental Health presentations:
- Environmental Health Australia State Conference South Australia – May 2010
- Environmental Health Australia National Conference – Melbourne – June 2010
- International Federation of Environmental Health - Vancouver Canada September 2010
- Local Laws presentations:
- Department of Primary Industries State Conference, Melbourne – May 2011
- Australian Institute of Animal Management Conference , Townsville QLD – May 2011
- SAAOA Conference , South Australia - May 2010

### **17.5. THE BUILDING DEPARTMENT**

The Building Department was responsible for the inspection of damaged buildings and structures. Two additional building surveyors/inspectors and a volunteer WorkSafe inspector were employed to assist with the inspections/assessments of damage to buildings within the bushfire affected areas. These areas were divided into three, each of which was allocated to a team to inspect on a property by property, street by street basis, as accurate information as to which properties had fire damaged buildings was not available. Recovery activities for the Building Team took approximately two years.

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#### **17.5.1.ACHIEVEMENTS**

- In the initial few weeks following the activation of the MECC, the Building Sub-plan Coordinator and one, sometimes two additional support staff, were present in the MECC for seven days a week from early morning to late evening, to plan, to coordinate and implement recovery actions;
- For the following two weeks that the MECC was open, the Sub-plan Coordinator and one support staff member were present full-time during business hours and on weekends;
- All field staff were supplied with kits containing essential safety equipment and were briefed on the procedure and potential hazards on site;

- Four hundred and fifty-one (451) properties were inspected, over a two to three week period, to assess risk and determine the make-safe actions required. This resulted in 41 combined emergency/minor works building orders and 221 minor works building orders being issued, all of which have been finalised;
- Laminated Hazard warning notices, with tick boxes for the field staff to highlight the standard make-safe actions required, were placed on sites to notify owners, and any persons attending the site, of works required and potential hazards;
- Existing building order and letter templates were redrafted to reduce or soften the impact on bushfire-affected owners receiving these orders, e.g. deletion of any reference to fines or prosecution for non-compliance, in lay terms and simple non-threatening language;
- Progress of properties and streets inspected was recorded on a hard copy map of the bushfire-affected areas and was updated when the inspectors returned to the MECC;
- Impact assessment forms were completed for each building inspection, with attached photographs, and uploaded onto the Pathway system for recording;
- Advice and actions in response to enquiries were recorded on an excel spreadsheet;
- Staff worked overtime, seven days a week, for approximately eight weeks;
- Officers from neighbouring municipalities (Knox and Maroondah) were employed, on a rotational basis, to assist with the normal day-to-day operations of the Building Department for approximately six weeks;
- The Manager, Building Services, attended regular meetings, convened by the Building Commission, with the Managers, Building Services, from other bushfire affected municipalities and representatives from Grocon;
- The Team worked closely with Grocon to prioritise properties for demolition and clean up, according to risk;
- The Office of Local Government Community Assistance Grant funded a Building Inspector for 12 months to conduct inspections of fire damaged buildings and follow-up any notices and orders issued;
- In the months and years following the initial inspections, the Building Department responded to enquiries about new codes and standards that were introduced for building homes in bushfire prone areas and in relation to construction of fire bunkers;
- Coordination of the building permit reimbursement scheme that allowed bushfire affected property owners and building surveyors to have their costs reimbursed by the Government for building permit applications and permit processing charges; and
- Collation and cataloguing of all documentation and material in preparation for the Coroner's Inquest.

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#### 17.5.2. CHALLENGES

- Resources were not used as effectively as possible with respect to Health and Building inspections. This was because of the procedural differences and the different times that they took to complete and meant that, after initially conducting joint inspections, the process was discontinued and separate inspections were conducted;
- The Building Department was required to issue Emergency Orders on any properties where there were immediate life safety issues due to dangerous buildings and the like. This involved placing notices in highly visible positions at the front of properties. In many instances, the property owners were elsewhere when the Orders were issued and were distressed when they returned and saw the signs. There was also significant negative feedback to Council and officers indicated that they would have preferred a process that took account of the trauma affected residents;

- There were difficulties in identifying properties due to the absence of landmarks, street signs, fencing, letterboxes and other reference points, all of which were destroyed in the fires;
- There were difficulties in arranging suitable AWD/4WD vehicles for transport to the inspection sites;
- Departmental officers were not always able to answer enquiries in relation building standards for bushfire prone areas or fire bunkers as the State Government, in a number of instances, had not published the proposals that had been announced in the media;
- Business continuity was a major issue as there were insufficient technical and administrative resources to respond to the emergency and to continue with day-to-day operations. Although there was great support from other municipalities in providing building surveyors/inspectors, it was difficult to utilise those staff effectively for day-to-day business, as they required induction and familiarisation with Yarra Ranges' processes and systems. Initially, the public understood the reasons for the delays in providing normal business. However, the community's patience was strained after a few months and tensions became evident;
- Building staff did their utmost to work with people who had been deeply affected by the bushfires but were not always equipped to handle these situations. They believed that they required specialist training or professional development to enable them to deal with such situations;
- There was confusion regarding the issue and lifting of the Coroner's orders and the impact that these had on owners complying with the requirements of the building orders;
- There were eight amendments to the Building Regulations and BCA enacted and/or revoked over a period of about two years following the bushfires. This process lead to considerable public confusion and was done without adequate consultation; and
- Council had no record of the location of those bushfire-affected properties that were constructed without building permits and/or where people may have been living in non-compliant, temporary dwellings. These were built under planning scheme exemptions that expire in early 2013. Council, in order to fulfil its obligation to inspect these properties, will have to inspect all properties where a dwelling was destroyed but not rebuilt with a permit.

#### 17.6. PLANNING FOR THE FUTURE

- In the event of a future large-scale emergency, any necessary advice, technical resources (building surveyors/inspectors) and support should be obtained from the Building Commission and unaffected Municipalities, via the MAV, as early as possible;
- An alternative strategy for the issue of emergency orders is required in order to minimise any negative impact on property owners;
- The communication between the Coroner's office and the MECC/Council needs to be improved, especially with regard to the issue of any building orders issued by the Coroner;
- As a minimum requirement, there needs to be approval for the temporary occupation of any buildings on bushfire-affected properties; and
- It is possible that orders were issued where a building or structure was entirely destroyed leaving a pile of rubble. Clarification is required about the validity of an order if there is no building or structure.

## 17.7. THE PLANNING DEPARTMENT

The Planning Department is responsible for the issuing of permits for the rebuilding of properties and the construction of temporary dwellings. Recovery activities included:

- Fast-tracking the planning process, in which fire-affected residents were offered professional advice to expedite the processing of any application or consent, with any associated fees waived;
- Implementing a '*planning case management system*'; and
- Ongoing assessment of planning applications and consents for bushfire affected properties.

### 17.7.1. THE PLANNING CASE MANAGEMENT SYSTEM

Yarra Ranges implemented an innovative, one-on-one case management approach to supporting fire-affected residents through the planning and rebuilding process. This provided a consistent point of contact for residents with Council, streamlined decision-making processes for individuals and ensured that issues were addressed in a timely manner and handled sensitively by Council staff. The process involved:

1. Each landholder, who initiated contact with Council, was invited to meet with Council officers and was given specific advice relating to their rebuilding needs and their particular site circumstances. The officers attending the first meeting continued to manage the request from pre-application advice and application lodgement through to the final decision.
2. An individual 'team' comprising of at least two planners (and officers chosen from the remaining areas dependent on site specific needs) was then put together for each site. The overall process was overseen by the Executive Officer.
3. Within three working days of the first meeting, a letter of advice was sent to landholders outlining:
  - Assistance offered by Council (fast tracking, advice etc);
  - Assistance available through other bodies (*i.e.* State Government);
  - An offer to provide all plans and site history available for the property;
  - A step-by-step process to the lodgement of the application/consent;
  - Timelines in the planning process; and
  - General advice on rebuilding issues, *e.g.* need for building permits, services from other authorities.
4. The planning officers prioritised each rebuilding application/consent on receipt. The following actions were above and beyond the normal planning processes:
  - Expedited referral of each application;
  - Early and continuous contact occurred with the landholders to discuss their needs, explain and update the planning permit process and check availability of the site for inspection;
  - If advertising of the permit was required, fees were waived;
  - A multi-disciplinary team conducted a inspection;
  - Priority was given to following up referral responses, application assessment/report writing and consideration; and
  - An internal Planning Panel prioritised applications requiring complex advice and consideration.

Feedback from residents for this approach was very positive:

*"I didn't have to keep telling my story to Council – they knew me and knew what had happened."* (Community member)

Residents indicated that the initial approach of Council was positive and assisted in creating confidence in the community. Planning and septic tank permits were also fast tracked and the fees waived. Fees paid to private building surveyors were reimbursed through a statewide building permit reimbursement scheme and administered by the rebuilding sub-committee.

*"We were working behind the scenes to make sure that things could be streamlined, responded to with urgency. We worked hard to put things together quickly and to treat residents with respect and sensitivity."*  
(Council officer)

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#### 17.7.2.ADMINISTRATION AND STAFFING

The sub-committee and managers responsible for this area considered that the organisation of dedicated resources from very early on in the recovery process (within the first week) was a significant achievement. Staff were taken off-line to enable them to concentrate on supporting fire-affected residents and establish processes that could facilitate swift decision-making.

A database was established to identify bushfire-affected properties to assist with the co-ordinated management of individual property owners and for reporting purposes. Secretariat support was provided for this process.

Staff were required immediately to support residents to re-establish water supply, repair septic tanks and as one staff member indicated:

*"... support residents to restore their dignity." (Council officer)*

### 17.8. CHALLENGES

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#### 17.8.1.INTERFACE BETWEEN RESPONSE AND RECOVERY PHASES

The nature of the fires was such that the emergency continued for up to three weeks after Black Saturday. This created some dilemmas with the planning and allocation of resources, as the staff were required to focus on both response and recovery phases at the same time. This affected the physical rebuilding process. The manager responsible for this area was still involved in the MECC for three weeks as the crisis continued. Staff indicated that this was confusing, as they often lacked direction, which meant that the planning and management for rebuilding was not as responsive and immediate as required.

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#### 17.8.2.MANAGING LEGISLATION CHANGES

A critical role for this area was to implement State Government legislation in relation to the 10/30 rule applying to removal of vegetation close to buildings, building regulations and public issues, such as ground water quality, water tanks and septic tanks. Staff indicated that there were frequent changes in relation to the legislation. These changes were often announced publicly before staff had information on how to implement the changes or how to interpret them.

Staff also indicated that many of these changes were contradictory. Residents were initially informed that they could rebuild wherever they wanted. However, this was often inconsistent with health legislation and/or

building restrictions governing safety issues. This was difficult for staff to manage, particularly when working with residents who were traumatised.

### 17.8.3.SUPPORTING RESIDENTS

As indicated in Section 6, health and building staff were often the first Council officers to visit residents after the fire. This was difficult at times. While staff were conscious of the need to be sensitive in their approach, their understanding of individual's responses to trauma was limited. This caused some distress and confusion for staff. The provision of professional development and support for staff assisted with this issue.

### 17.8.4.MAINTAINING THE MOMENTUM

Several residents indicated that there were ongoing concerns about the bureaucracy associated with planning and building permits and managing the regulations. These comments indicated that the initial prompt response of Council had not been maintained. There was frustration at the difficulty in getting permits and the bureaucratic processes preventing rebuilding.

One example was the reconstruction of the community centre in Steels Creek. Residents involved with this project indicated that, while the initial response of Council was positive, the process had slowed considerably and residents were keen to engage with Council to complete this project. They believed that it is important for the wellbeing of the community for this to occur.

#### Discussion and Planning for the Future

The staff involved in rebuilding faced a number of difficulties, which could have been avoided if legislation, policy directions and funding criteria were clear and established prior to the event. This is clearly an area for negotiation with the State Government. Staff indicated:

- There was a need for staff training in dealing with traumatised people, given their roles as the first point of contact with many people.
- The development of an integrated approach, where planning and building staff can visit residents with all of the information that they may need would improve efficiencies and reduce stress for residents;
- Improved business continuity planning would assist with managing the on-going and long-term impact of emergencies on workload; and
- There is a need for improved communication with State Government and a stronger partnership approach.

### 17.9. OUTSTANDING ISSUES

Staff identified the following outstanding issues:

- Strategies to manage the recommendations of the Royal Commission to develop bunkers is still to be resolved fully;
- Staff are still dealing with backlog of work in the building area; and
- The process of reimbursing contractors is still occurring. Funding has been made available through the bushfire funding;

## 18. NATURAL ENVIRONMENT & PUBLIC INFRASTRUCTURE

### 18.1. ROLE AND RESPONSIBILITY OF THE SUB-COMMITTEE

The recovery activity relating to natural environment and public infrastructure was managed through the Natural Environment and Public Infrastructure Re-Establishment Sub-committee. This group had responsibility for overseeing:

- The restoration of public facilities, public buildings, local roads and overall safety in bushfire exposed public areas; and
- The inspection of potentially unstable trees, possible landslips sites and other environmental hazards on publicly owned land.

The work was coordinated by two working groups: the Vegetation Working Group and the Erosion Management Working Group.

### 18.2. ACHIEVEMENTS

The key achievements in this area were identified as:

1. *Opening roads:* in the early stages of recovery, staff worked as quickly as possible to make roads safe, functioning and accessible. This included assessing and repairing bridges and roads, removing trees and managing the traffic throughout the process. Despite working quickly, the work still took several weeks. The ongoing threat of the fires for three weeks further affected this work.
2. *Erosion Management:* staff worked firstly on public land to prevent erosion and land slips and then with private property owners to prevent further erosion. This work was hampered by rain, which commenced in mid-March. While the rain put the fires out, it contributed to the risks associated with erosion and this became a significant issue by early April 2009.
3. *Private property tree clearance:* Council arborists worked with private property owners to assess the safety of their trees. Importantly, Council attempted to make this process as simple as possible, waiving the associated fees.

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#### 18.2.1. DATA MANAGEMENT

Staff indicated that the data management systems in place in relation to vegetation worked well and assisted the working groups in the management of the weeds and erosion. The GIS based mapping system assisted in identifying the most sensitive conservation areas. Whilst there were gaps in knowledge, the data were being regularly updated to develop a comprehensive system that would assist the ongoing management and future planning.

To improve response and recovery works, and to assist with communication of information to other agencies and the community, it became apparent that there needed be better integration of Council information and asset management systems. Communication with the public could have been managed better if there had been an information link to Council's website, particularly in relation to road closures and road works.



### 18.2.2. MANAGING TREES - USING A RISK BASED APPROACH

Council quickly acknowledged that trees required a different recovery approach to built infrastructure. Unlike bridges, roads and buildings, trees continued to change through the recovery process, creating an ongoing risk to the community's safety. This resulted in council undertaking continuous tree assessments over many months.

The initial impact on vegetation was obvious with the trees blackened and shrubs reduced to stumps. Over coming months, the trees started to recover and reshoot. The environment continued to change as the landscape began the stabilisation and regeneration process. The effect on the local community from this was twofold and in some ways conflicting:

- It assisted in motivating the community through nature commencing its own recovery; but
- It was somewhat disheartening with the continuous dropping of limbs, particularly on newly reinstated fencing.

The temperature of the fire was greatly influenced by the topography and aspect of the landscape, which in turn may have delayed the regeneration process for the vegetation in some areas. Council completed four rounds of tree works in the fire affected areas.

#### Stage 1

This was based on critical service reinstatement and focused on clearing roads immediately after the fires. Two Council officers were tasked with driving along every fire-affected road in the municipality marking trees for removal and making a priority list of required works.

#### Stage 2

The second stage followed a more detailed inspection of all burnt roads by a qualified arborist who made recommendations for pruning and tree removal. The work was completed by two contractors and took approximately four months.

#### Stage 3

Tree contractors were given a specification, which included removing all dead trees that had a less than 400 mm trunk diameter and/or were overhanging or threatening the road. Dead trees that were less than 300mm in trunk diameter and threatening fences were also removed as part of the works. Larger trees were assessed on a case-by-case basis by Council officers before removal action was taken.

#### Stage 4

A repeat in part or whole of the same process as outlined in Stage 3. The same areas were inspected up to seven times on a selective basis throughout the recovery process.

Council intentionally retained large tree hollows or potential hollow bearing trees on all burnt roads unless they had deteriorated to the extent that they had become dangerous. This was to increase the shelter and safety for indigenous fauna. Even small dead trees provided habitat for local wildlife, which increased the environmental value of a roadside. Therefore, even three years on, Council had not remove all dead trees.

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### 18.2.3.MANAGING TREES ON PRIVATE PROPERTY

Trees on private property were as much an issue for property owners as they were for government. Council opted to provide specialist support and advice to property owners in the months following the fires.

Two Council officers undertook 115 prospective hazardous tree inspections on private property between February 2009 and May 2010. Many of these inspections involved repeat visits as the trees' conditions changed throughout 2010.

Council arborists provided advice about replanting and management of vegetation on properties in high fire risk zones, in order to prevent the unnecessary removal of trees on private property. Staff assisted property owners with the integration of identified hazardous trees and the implications on the planning and building permit process. The support provided by Council minimised a significant amount of unnecessary removal of vegetation and enabled residents to carry out works on their properties with confidence.

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### 18.2.4.RESOURCES

Unlike other areas of recovery, the roads and park-related areas were well resourced with staff and contractors, and did not draw on resources from other councils. This was due in part to the mix of operational resources and contracted works, as well as the in-built surge capacity within existing systems. Yarra Ranges relies heavily on well-tested systems to manage common windstorms and floods, from which Council was able to 'scale up' effectively and draw on the support from over 30 contracting companies.

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### 18.2.5.BRIDGE RENEWAL NORMAL PRACTICE

The impact of fire on critical infrastructure, including bridges, can have a significant effect on all aspects of the recovery spectrum and is one of the key priorities for recovery planners.

In the period prior to the fires, Council undertook significant works to bridges across the municipality, in many cases upgrading from timber to steel and concrete. Changes to the materials used for bridges aimed to increase the life of Council managed infrastructure, although an unintended consequence of the upgrade was infrastructure that was more resistant to fire.

#### Case Study

In the 12 months prior to the 2009 Bushfires, Yarra Ranges Council upgraded bridges in the Steels Creek and Healesville areas.

A bridge in Pinnacle Lane, Steels Creek, was a timber-decked structure that, before the works upgrade, would most certainly have suffered in the fires. At the height of the bushfire, the upgraded bridge provided vital emergency access to the local community as Steels Creek Road was blocked by an overturned tanker and, had the original bridge been in place, residents would have been trapped and in danger.

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### 18.2.6.WEED MANAGEMENT

Council manages the vegetation on 130km of fire affected roadside reserves along 90 roads. Weeds rapidly dominated pastures and fire affected bushland, which lead the Bushland Team to focus on addressing weed management issues, and promoting regeneration of indigenous vegetation in fire affected areas with property owners.

Vegetation management initiatives included:

- Weed control - brush-cutting, spraying and hand weeding;
- Thinning indigenous regrowth, such as Kunzea Ericoides and Eucalyptus species, at the request of residents;
- Side arm slashing of roadside batter;
- Planting for erosion control and reinstating vegetation where there was little regeneration potential, or at request of residents;
- Clearance of vegetation along fence lines at the request of residents;
- Threatened species management; and
- Clean up of farm fences where trees fell on to the nature strip (undertaken to assist with future management of the roadside vegetation and slashing programs).

Approximately 1.5 EFT was dedicated to recovery works from the Bushland Team in 2009/10. Once programs were in place, this reduced to 1.0 EFT in 2010/11. Staff resource requirements decreased again to 0.5EFT in 2011/12. The expenditure and employee time was not funded from State and Federal Government programs, and associated costs had to be absorbed by Council.

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### 18.2.7.CONSERVATION MONITORING

The impact on high and very high conservation value reserves and roadsides was assessed and managed through the appointment of an ecological consultant, Dr Graeme Lorimer. Numerous study sites were established throughout the road reserves affected by fire across the northern parts of the municipality.

Work was also done at Birdsland Reserve in Belgrave South, which was partially burnt by fires that started on 23 February 2009, as a future record of the impact and recovery of the environment. All of these sites provided a record of the impact of the fires and how the vegetation recovered over time.

In addition, staff and contractors regularly monitored regeneration along the roadsides, and within the bushland reserves, to determine future methods of protection of native vegetation. This was also seen as an opportunity to schedule specific weed control measures.

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### 18.2.8.RE-ESTABLISHMENT OF SLASHING AND ROAD CLEARANCE

Roadsides and Reserves programmed for annual fire management works were isolated in order to focus on the removal and relocation of fallen debris. This was aimed at maximising the ability of road maintenance crews to carry out future fire slashing works.

Contractors spent considerable time relocating or removing debris to meet both conservation and fuel reduction objectives. The debris was chipped and recycled as mulch to be used throughout the Shire's parks and gardens.

During 2009/10, the regeneration on 79 roadsides was slashed once to recreate the vegetation clearance from the road. This slashing was carried out by the Yarra Ranges side arm operator. The program took eight weeks (300 staff hours) to complete and, at current contractor rates (\$80/hr), had an estimated cost of \$24,000.

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#### 18.2.9. VEGETATION PROTECTION WORKS

A range of vegetation protection works was executed during the 12 months after the fires and included:

- Protecting threatened shrub species, *Pomaderris vaccinifolia*, with rabbit proof fencing in Chum Creek and surrounds;
- Protecting threatened species, *Dianella amoena*, with fencing along Steels Creek Road, Steels Creek;
- Implementing a rabbit control program at Birdsland Reserve.;
- Reinstating fencing at Yarra Flats Billabongs in Yarra Glen, School Lane Reserve in Tarrawarra and Birdsland Reserve in Upwey so as to exclude 4WDs and motorbikes;
- Reinstating internal fencing to manage the horses agisted at Birdsland Reserve;
- Implementing a pasture renovation program at Birdsland Reserve; and
- Installing damaged or destroyed high conservation signage to identify valuable roadside vegetation.

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#### 18.2.10. REVEGETATION

Recovery activities at Yarra Flats Billabongs included two activities where 90 people participated in a cleanup day and a planting day. Approximately 5,000 indigenous species were planted in the Yarra Flats Billabongs Reserve between February and July 2009. Revegetation of 1000 plants along Steels Creek Road was completed in the winter of 2010/11 at the request of local residents.

### 18.3. CHALLENGES

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#### 18.3.1. EXTENT OF THE DAMAGE

As highlighted in Section 2 of this evaluation, Yarra Ranges was significantly affected by the 2009 bushfires. Table 12 provides detailed information about the land use type pertaining to affected areas and this is illustrated further in Figures 6. The majority of land affected by the bushfires was in conservation areas, national park, strict nature reserves, habitat/species management areas and other conservation areas.

Table 12: Percentage Municipality Land Use Affected by 2009 Bushfires

| Land Use Description             | Area Bushfire Affected (Hectares) | Total Municipality Land Use (Hectares) | Percentage Municipality Land Use Affected by 2009 Bushfires |
|----------------------------------|-----------------------------------|--|---|
| Strict nature reserves           | 1,218.44                          | 4,861.76                               | 0.25  |
| National park                    | 25,087.52                         | 71,777.53                              | 0.35  |
| Habitat/species management area  | 13.05                             | 546.39                                 | 0.02  |
| Other conserved area             | 230.39                            | 3,176.36                               | 0.07  |
| Managed resource protection      | 4.33                              | 666.37                                 | 0.01  |
| Other minimal use                | 102.81                            | 1,206.57                               | 0.09  |
| Remnant native cover             | 250.90                            | 6,310.37                               | 0.04  |
| Grazing natural vegetation       | 102.44                            | 721.32                                 | 0.14  |
| Production forestry              | 14,301.60                         | 82,079.19                              | 0.17  |
| Grazing modified pastures        | 4,759.58                          | 32,058.18                              | 0.15  |
| Irrigated modified pastures      | 18.61                             | 18.61                                  | 1.00  |
| Irrigated perennial horticulture | 2.27                              | 53.53                                  | 0.04  |
| Irrigated tree fruits            | 15.92                             | 2,066.05                               | 0.01  |
| Irrigated vine fruits            | 325.15                            | 3,652.43                               | 0.09  |
| Irrigated vegetables & herbs     | 2.37                              | 266.36                                 | 0.01  |
| Intensive horticulture           | 12.34                             | 1,266.67                               | 0.01  |
| Intensive animal production      | 63.20                             | 1,337.16                               | 0.05  |
| Urban residential                | 31.42                             | 7,645.90                               | 0.00  |
| Rural residential                | 1,025.78                          | 13,493.43                              | 0.08  |
| Services                         | 37.38                             | 128.93                                 | 0.29  |
| Public services                  | 2.11                              | 630.67                                 | 0.00  |
| Recreation and culture           | 7.42                              | 1,424.72                               | 0.01  |
| Research facilities              | 90.01                             | 110.92                                 | 0.81  |
| Roads                            | 537.75                            | 6,121.43                               | 0.09  |
| Railways                         | 23.07                             | 180.94                                 | 0.13  |
| Landfill                         | 4.17                              | 19.01                                  | 0.22  |
| Channel/aqueduct                 | 17.75                             | 295.49                                 | 0.06  |
| Supply channel/aqueduct          | 2.19                              | 11.94                                  | 0.18  |
| <b>Total</b>                     | <b>48,289.96</b>                  | <b>242,128.24</b>                      | <b>19.9%</b>  |

Source: Yarra Ranges Council GIS using DPI Land use data (2004)

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### 18.3.2. MANAGEMENT AND PLANNING ISSUES

The fires affected significant areas of rural or bush land within the Yarra Ranges municipality, creating a set of complex issues for the Natural Environment and Public Infrastructure Subcommittee to manage. A number of Council officers assisted with the MECC operations, at the same time as there was urgency to open roads and make areas safe for public access. This created an untidy crossover between core Council business and emergency response. Staff indicated that their managers were engaged in the ongoing response and unable to provide the necessary guidance for recovery work to commence, which, in turn, heightened stress levels across the departments.

Delays were caused by roadblocks and areas cordoned off at the request of a Coronial Inquiry. This hindered the commencement of recovery work, particularly in areas where communities remained out of reach.

The development of the Natural Environment and Public Infrastructure Subcommittee provided a discussion forum for staff and agencies to share information and to consult about appropriate actions. This had an impact on the planning for the recovery process and further identified the need for inception recovery planning before the next event in the Yarra Ranges.

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### 18.3.3. MANAGEMENT OF RECOVERY ACTIONS

The continued risk of fires following Black Saturday during the transition from response to early recovery meant that operational staff were seconded from departments and, in some cases, there was no management structure in place. Council realised that there was a significant need for the organisation to plan for business continuity to ensure an organised and structured response to the emergency and ensure that normal business could be conducted.

A debriefing session was held with staff, from which emerged that there had been:

- High levels of frustration with the lack of management staff available to maintain business continuity; and that
- Staff were keen to become involved and assist but there was a feeling that the operations within the MECC were deemed more important and therefore impenetrable for business continuity matters.

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### 18.3.4. WORKLOAD MANAGEMENT ISSUES

Staff indicated that they were “rushed off their feet” managing the continuous increase in community requests in the first few months following the bushfires. Reports indicate a 120% increase in requests for assistance between February and July 2009.

The workload continued to be high, with continual management of erosion, weed and tree issues for the months following July, a situation exacerbated by a general lack of awareness of the available resources and funding. This resulted in delays of additional staff and contractors being employed. The surge in bushfire recovery activity removed many staff from daily business into the fire-affected regions, creating a backlog of work in other parts of the municipality. This backlog took over twelve months to bring under control (see Section 5.2.4).

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### 18.3.5. PARTNERSHIPS WITH OTHER AGENCIES

Communication between Council staff and the State Government staff continued to create tension, particularly in departments responsible for managing the natural environment. This resulted in inefficiencies, double-up and wasted resources.

Information was not shared between government departments in the early stages of recovery because of perceived confidentiality and privacy restrictions. When information was eventually shared, analysis and cross comparison revealed large variances in impact data, requiring additional resources to undertake further assessments.

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### 18.3.6. SUB COMMITTEE STRUCTURE

Feedback from the consultations revealed that the structure and name of the subcommittee caused some confusion and concern with the public and Council. The name was originally *Public Infrastructure* and was aimed at covering parks, roads, waste and associated Council operational departments. As the environment was not listed in the rebuilding or the public infrastructure subcommittees, the title was changed, along with the committee's objectives, in order to clarify the matter.

The Recovery Structure was built to complement existing Council business functions, reflecting the four directorate operations, rather than broad elements or themes. This limited the opportunities to bring together planners and operational staff to unify the approach, especially for land management issues such as erosion, weeds, trees and fauna. The lack of integration between the *Rebuilding and Natural Environment* and the *Public Infrastructure* subcommittees was also evident with the Environment Department's functions cutting across two recovery committees.

In hindsight, it would have been far more advantageous to retain to the four traditional environments of recovery committees, *i.e.* Social, Economic, Built and Natural.

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### 18.3.7. QUANTIFYING WORKS

During this evaluation process, it proved very difficult to quantify the efforts required to deliver recovery services for erosion and road maintenance works. These works evolved organically as part of a reactive response, initially to clear and make safe access along roads affected by the fires. The Road Maintenance Crew identified priorities based on:

- Clearance of debris - aiming to make roads safe as trees and native vegetation transitioned into recovery, causing large volumes of limb loss and requiring ongoing monitoring;
- Road surface repairs for areas affected by the fire, and associated response activity. Priority was given to the reinstatement of roads as quickly as possible;
- Significant rain, in the months following the bushfires, complicated planned recovery activity, washing silt and debris from fire affected areas over public and private infrastructure, including roads, bridges and driveways. This required careful management to balance the needs of the community with the needs of the local, natural environment; and
- Post rain clean up and removal of debris deposited into the drains and on to road surfaces. Drains were affected significantly during rain after the fires. The combination of drought, fires and silt/debris build up contributed to the community's anxiety during recovery and required careful prompt management.

Most of this work was done by the road maintenance crew, creating a significant drain on the organisation, particularly from a business continuity perspective, with service delivery limited in areas outside the fire-affected area.

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#### 18.3.8.PROPERTY ACCESS

In the more rural areas, access to properties was often *via* privately owned carriageway easements. These were the responsibility of the property owners to build and maintain, but many required assistance from Council in 2009. To manage the workload, many of the inspections, and meetings with property owners, had to be conducted outside normal working hours.

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#### 18.3.9.ROAD MANAGEMENT

Traditionally quiet roads, normally used only by local cars and farm machinery, were strained by high volumes of heavy vehicles and meant that additional maintenance was required. Trucks and equipment accessed local roads, in high numbers, to undertake:

- Road clearance (Council)
- Restoration of services (SP Ausnet / Telstra)
- Clean up of house sites (Grocon)
- Follow up tree clearing (Council)
- House building (private)

Traffic management controls were in place for a considerable period while tree, road and drainage works were undertaken, increasing the resources required during this time.

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#### 18.3.10.DUST MANAGEMENT

Remaining houses, in fire-affected areas serviced by Council managed gravel roads, reportedly experienced an increase in dust, largely because of the removal of the vegetation that had acted as a dust screen. Council managed a high number of complaints from residents and deployed a large number of dust suppressant services to these areas in the months after the fires. Council also managed requests from residents who were concerned about water supply from their tanks.

Costs incurred from managing dust in the fire affected areas of Skyline Road in Steels Creek, Long Gully Road and Wheelans Roads in Healesville could not be claimed as part of the Disaster Recovery Funding model. These costs, of around \$20,000, were absorbed by Council.

### 18.4. OUTSTANDING ISSUES

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#### 18.4.1.ENVIRONMENTAL WEED CONTROL

In the aftermath of the fires, and with the rains that followed over the subsequent two years, there was substantial growth of environmental weeds on both private and public land. This included non-indigenous trees and other weeds growing on roadsides from seed blown in from elsewhere. Noxious weeds also



propagated in the burnt-out roadsides. This not only impacted on what were previously pristine native vegetation areas but it also had the potential to destroy the structure of the roadside and the table drains that run alongside the roads. The growth of noxious weeds is threatening the biodiversity of the fire-affected areas of the municipality. Agribusiness was also affected, with additional costs of managing the noxious weeds, which emerged since the fires.

This issue was exacerbated by the lack of funding available to meet the costs of managing the problem. Despite the significant amounts of funding available for individual recovery, there have been low levels of funding for environmental restoration and management of the issues that have arisen. While the state arrangements clearly acknowledge the importance of the restoration of the natural environment, this was not reflected in the funding grants. In particular, there have been few or no resources available for property owners to manage their weeds. Without control on private land, it is difficult, if not impossible, to contain the problem on public land.

There is a need for funding to be allocated for up to five years after an event when dealing with weed and vegetation based issues.

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#### 18.4.2. EROSION

With no vegetation remaining in the wake of the fires, soil erosion was a critical concern. Attempts to advocate on behalf of landowners and businesses have not been successful. The Department of Sustainability and Environment managed soil erosion issues on Crown Land. However, no resources have been made available to manage the problem on adjoining land, whether private or public, despite the fact that water has been flowing from Crown Land, across the roads and through private land.

In the absence of external funding, Yarra Ranges Council paid for erosion and weed management and control from within its own budget, an unsustainable situation.

Four properties still require erosion management works to be undertaken. These have been held up due to inappropriate site conditions and specialist contractor availability. There are a number of erosion issues, attributable to the land system and the rainfall recently experienced, that continue to be reported.

There would be some benefit in the continuation, and/or increase in staff, able to provide landholder advice and assistance to small and large agricultural properties. At present, the main source of this support is DPI and, as with Council, their numbers are being reduced. There is a similar situation with bush properties requiring advice about weed management, pest animals and erosion issues.

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#### 18.4.3. MANAGING REGROWTH

Residents in the municipality had, and still have, strong, and sometimes divergent, views about how the natural environment ought to be managed. In the aftermath of the fires, these differences of opinion created serious tensions in the community. Council was continually meeting with residents to assist to resolve these issues and to discuss the options. With the high level of regrowth occurring, there were opposing views in the community about whether the regrowth should be cleared or encouraged to continue. Clear policy directions are required to assist staff in the management of these issues.

Related to this is the management of community concern. Staff believe that professional facilitators need to be used for managing community meetings, particularly as Council develops and communicates policies in relation to the management of vegetation. Residents' comments included:

*"Roads are still in dire need of attention. There are huge gullies and trenches on the sides of roads. It is outside the normal budget for Council and this needs to be paid for from the bushfire funds. There are still lots of dead trees which, in due course, will have to come down."*

*"Council has a sensible approach to the ongoing management of the regrowth but it needs to communicate this more clearly within the community."*

## 18.5. PLANNING FOR THE FUTURE

Staff identified the following issues to assist improved planning in the future:

- Continued development of a bushland database, with GIS links, that can provide information on every roadside and every reserve;
- Development of a Recovery Inception Plan for the department, with clear guidelines, policy directions and roles and responsibilities;
- Development of a *Burnt Area Recovery Team (BEAR)*, based on the Canadian and USA model. This 'strike team' manages soil erosion quickly in order to prevent landslide damage. It requires additional resources;
- Consideration of the source of payment for dust suppressant initiatives, particularly in areas where buildings have survived but the natural vegetation screen has been removed;
- Additional administrative resources are required, particularly to manage the high volume of queries from the public; and
- *Improve the connections with environmental health*: soil erosion and landslides caused considerable health problems in communities and on private land. Future planning needs to ensure that these connections are in place to improve the management of these issues and to support residents.

## REFERENCES

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**APPENDIX ONE: LIST OF PEOPLE CONSULTED**

| Name               | Organisation/agency                                       | Role   |
|--------------------|---|--|
| Leanne Anderson    | former Yarra Ranges Council                               | Community Recovery Coordinator   |
| Mike Bambridge     | Heartland Church and COGA                                 | Member, Volunteer and Material Aid Working Group   |
| Dorothy Barber     | Community Member  | Member, Community Reference Group  |
| Susan Benedyka     | Regional Development Company                              | Consultant   |
| Mandy Black        | former Yarra Ranges Council                               | Community Development Officer, Projects and Events   |
| Jodie Bowker       | EACH  | EACH Bushfire Recovery Coordinator, Manager, Yarra Glen Community Fire Relief  |
| Jenny Branton      | Murrundindi Council                                       | Municipal Recovery Manager   |
| Jan Brown          | Department of Human Services, Eastern Metropolitan Region | Manager Staff Support & Emergency Management Coordinator   |
| Melinda Brown      | Department of Human Services, Eastern Metropolitan Region | Member, Accommodation Working Group  |
| Bernadette Brown   | Department of Human Services, Eastern Metropolitan Region | Housing Services Manager<br>Member, Accommodation Working Group  |
| Jane Calder        | Community Members   |  |
| Malcolm Calder     |   |  |
| Melissa Carmody    | Yarra Ranges Council                                      | Parks and Bushlands<br>Bushland Management Officer, worked on roadsides and bushland in burnt out areas                |
| Barb Cawte         | Community member  | Member, Community Reference Group  |
| Norm Casey         | Rotary  | Member, Volunteer and Material Aid Working Group   |
| Michael Corr       | Chum Creek PS   | Principal<br>Member, Community Reference Group   |
| Alison Cran        | Yarra Ranges Council                                      | Municipal Recovery Manager<br>Director, Social and Economic Development  |
| Colin Crotty       | Department of Business and Innovation                     | Member, Economic Recovery Committee  |
| Adrian Cully       | Nillumbik Council   | Manager Community Participation, Learning and Culture<br>Manager Emergency Recovery                                    |
| Garfield D'Costa   | Yarra Ranges Council                                      | Maintenance and repair of roads and roadside infrastructure<br>Executive Officer, Infrastructure Strategy and Projects |
| Michael Dafuomilis | Yarra Ranges Council                                      | Rebuilding process – planning consents   |
| Jenny Davies       | Yarra Ranges Council                                      | Member, Community Projects and Events Working Group<br>Regional Arts Coordinator                                       |
| Mike Debinsky      | Department of Human Services                              | Regional Manager, Eastern Metropolitan Region  |
| Leanne deBortoli   | Community Member  | Provided resources for activities  |
| John Devine        | Anchor  | Accommodation facilitation   |

|                         |   | Member, Accommodation Working Group  |
|-------------------------|---|--|
| Barb Dobson             | Yarra Ranges Council                                      | Manager, Yarra Glen Recovery Centre, Feb-Mar 2009<br>Member, Community Projects and Events Working Group<br>Executive Officer, Community Development                           |
| Bernie Durkin           | Eastern Access Community Health (EACH)                    | General Manager, Regional Counselling Services   |
| Brett Ellis             | Yarra Ranges Council                                      | Manager, Risk Emergency & Community Safety<br>Municipal Emergency Manager  |
| Rob Fallon              | Community Member  | Member, Community Reference Group  |
| Emma Fitzclarence       | Municipal Association of Victoria                         | Manager, Emergency Management Policy   |
| Rob Flynn               | Yarra Ranges Council                                      | Building Sub Plan Coordinator  |
| Kerri Goding            | Healesville Interfaith Community Care Inc                 | Member, Volunteer and Material Aid Working Group   |
| Barry Gunning           | Department of Human Services, Eastern Metropolitan Region | Manager Corporate Services, Eastern Metropolitan Region  |
| Rowan Hore              | Yarra Ranges Council                                      | Parks and Facilities Department<br>Implementing vegetation recovery works  |
| Richard Howden          | Yarra Valley Wine Growers Association                     | Member, Economic Recovery Committee  |
| Rachel Hughes           | Yarra Ranges Council                                      | Rebuilding planning  |
| Grant Jack              | Yarra Ranges Council                                      | Chair, Natural Environment and Public Infrastructure Sub committee<br>Chair, Vegetation Working Group<br>Manager, Parks and Facilities<br>Municipal Emergency Resource Officer |
| Stuart Jackson          | Department of Human Services, Eastern Metropolitan Region | Housing Manager,<br>Member, Accommodation Working Group  |
| Karen Kisala            | Healesville Living and Learning Centre                    | Member, Community Projects and Events Working Group<br>Member, Community Reference Group   |
| Neville Kurth           | Whittlesea Council  | Municipal Recovery Manager   |
| John Lester             | Independent Chair   | Chair, Municipal Recovery Committee  |
| Anna Lottkowitz         | Department of Planning and Community Development          | Member, Community Projects and Events Working Group  |
| Richard Lough           | EACH  | Youth and Family Team – managed Bushfire Counselling Service   |
| Leanne Manfre           | Yarra Ranges Council                                      | Coordinator, Yarra Glen Relief Centre  |
| Natasha Marquez-Brudler | Department of Education and Early Childhood Development   | Member, Case Management and Counselling Sub-committee<br>Coordinator Student Support Services, Eastern Metropolitan Region   |
| Pam McQuade             | Department of Human Services, Eastern Metropolitan Region | Regional Project Officer<br>Member, Accommodation Working Group  |
| Jeannette McRae         | Yarra Ranges Council                                      | Councillor<br>Chair, Municipal Recovery Community Reference Group  |
| Paul Mechelen           | Yarra Ranges Council                                      | Arborist – managed tree-related matters  |

|                      |   |   |
|----------------------|---|---|
| Anne Monichon        | Yarra Ranges Council                                      | Early Years   |
| Keith Montell        | Community Member  |   |
| Peter Montgomery     | Community Member  | Past President, Yarra Glen Community Fire Relief  |
| Emily Noble          | Yarra Ranges Council                                      | Bushland Management Officer, Parks and Facilities – implementing recovery works in reserves and on roadside vegetation                                |
| Simon O'Callaghan    | Yarra Ranges Council                                      | Chair, Economic Recovery Sub Committee<br>Executive Officer, Economic Development<br>Deputy Municipal Recovery Manager                                |
| Joe Pacquola         | Yarra Glen PS   | Principal<br>Member, Community Reference Group  |
| Bev Page             | Yarra Ranges Council                                      | Planning consent process  |
| Christine Pattas     | Department of Human Services, Eastern Metropolitan Region | Coordinator, Case Management Services   |
| Sharon Patton        | Yarra Ranges Council                                      | Member, Case Management and Counselling Sub-committee<br>Youth Services Coordinator Mental Health & Counselling Team                                  |
| Kate Siebert (Powne) | Yarra Ranges Council                                      | Executive Officer, Emergency Management<br>Community Development Officer, Bushfire Recovery<br>Deputy Municipal Emergency Manager                     |
| Rob Reid             | Yarra Ranges Council                                      | Bushfire Community Support Program Officer  |
| Don Reiter           | Yarra Ranges Council                                      | Infrastructure Services,<br>Maintenance and repair of roads and roadside infrastructure<br>Deputy Municipal Emergency Resource Officer                |
| Maria Romanin        | VBRAA   | Client Relationship Manager TDC   |
| Mark Ryan            | Federal Department of Human Services, Centrelink          | Manager, Social Work Services   |
| Jane Sinnamon        | Yarra Ranges Council                                      | Community Recovery Coordinator<br>Chair, Projects & Events<br>Chair, Volunteer Management & Material aid<br>Manager, Capital Works and Urban Planning |
| Gary Slater          | Healesville Chamber of Commerce                           | Member, Economic Recovery Committee   |
| Terry Smith          | Yarra Ranges Council                                      | Roads Infrastructure<br>Erosion, road and drainage works  |
| Joanne Speirs        | Community Member  | Member, Community Reference Group   |
| Greg Talbot          | Yarra Ranges Council                                      | Provision of local law permits and managed the recruitment process for additional resources<br>Executive Officer Local Laws                           |
| Gaby Thomson         | Anglicare Victoria  | Member, Case Management and Counselling Sub-committee<br>Area Manager, Eastern Region   |
| Sharon Walker        | Dixons Creek PS   | Principal<br>Member, Community Reference Group  |

|                |  |   |
|----------------|--|---|
| Shauna Walter  | Department of Human Services,<br>Eastern Metropolitan Region | Chair, Accommodation Working Group<br>Chair, Counselling & Case Management Working Group          |
| Marty White    | Yarra Ranges Council   | Native vegetation issues<br>Biodiversity planning and policy<br>Rebuilding and environment issues |
| Fred Whitlock  | Yarra Glen Chamber of<br>Commerce, Yarra Glen Hotel          | Member, Economic Recovery Committee   |
| Simon Williams | Yarra Ranges Council   | Youth Services, Community Recovery  |
| Peter Wright   | Yarra Ranges Council   | Health operations MECC<br>Chair, Rebuilding Sub committee   |
| Brad Yartman   | Yarra Ranges Council   | Coordinator, Bushland Team in recovery and clean-up process                                       |

## APPENDIX TWO: CONSULTATION QUESTIONS

### FOR SUB-COMMITTEES, WORKING GROUPS AND INDIVIDUAL INTERVIEWS

1. Identifying information, including role in the recovery process
2. Structure and Planning
  - Did you know about the community recovery structure developed by YR Council?
  - Did you understand it? If not, what made it difficult to understand?
  - What worked well about the structure?
  - What aspects did not work well?
  - Did you feel part of the municipal recovery planning process? If yes, why? If not, why not?
  - What improvements could be made in the future?
3. Roles and responsibilities:
  - Did you feel that you were able to undertake your roles and responsibilities in the recovery process?
  - If yes, what were the factors, which contributed most?
  - If no, what were the factors, which hindered your capacity to work?
  - What improvements could be made in the future?
4. Communication:
  - What worked well about communication:
    - Within Council?
    - Within the community?
    - With State Government?
    - With external agencies?
  - What were the major communication challenges?
  - Do you have any suggestions as to how communication could be improved in similar circumstances?
5. Data and information management
  - What worked well about data and information management:
    - Within Council?
    - Within the community?
    - With external agencies?



- What were the major data management challenges?
  - What were the major information management challenges?
  - What improvements could be made in the future?
6. Community engagement
- What worked well about the strategies to engage with community?
  - What were the key challenges in engaging with the community?
  - What improvements could be made in the future?
7. Administration
- What worked well about the administration of the recovery process?
  - What were the key challenges?
  - Do you have any suggestions as to how to improve administration in similar circumstances?
8. Financial and material resources
- What worked well about the process to obtain financial resources?
  - What were the challenges in obtaining financial resources?
  - What were the challenges in distributing material resources?
  - What improvements could be made in the future?
9. Human resources:
- What worked well in managing volunteer resources?
  - What were the key challenges in managing volunteers?
  - Were staff adequately supported? If not, what were the key difficulties?
  - How could support and resources for staff be improved in similar circumstances?
10. What do believe are the outstanding issues which need to be addressed to facilitate the affected communities' recovery?
- What is required to achieve these?

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## ADDITIONAL QUESTIONS FOR STATE GOVERNMENT INTERVIEWS

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1. Role of Council:
- YR Council operated differently from other councils in many areas in the recovery process. What do you think the impact of this was for:
    - the community?
    - achievement of outcomes?

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## QUESTIONS FOR THE MAV

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1. What was the role of the MAV in the 2009 Bushfire recovery process?
2. What were some of the key achievements for local government in the recovery process from the MAV perspective?
3. What were some of the key challenges for local government in the recovery process from the MAV perspective?
4. In similar situations in the future, would the MAV consider bringing the MRMs from the affected councils together to enable them to share information and to coordinate advocacy?

5. How / are you going to pull together the learnings from across the different fire affected LGAs in relation to ongoing planning and delivery of recovery into the future?

**APPENDIX THREE: LIST OF COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT EVENTS AND ACTIVITIES**

| Title  | Objective  | Numbers | Venue   | Date          |
|--|--|---------|---|---------------|
| <b>COMMUNITY INFORMATION SESSIONS</b>  |  |         |   |               |
| Community Recovery & Dealing with Stress after Emergencies   | An open evening to hear about the Shire of Yarra Ranges bushfire recovery actions and a presentation by Rob Gordon, (Dealing with Stress after emergencies)      | 120     | Yarra Glen Memorial Hall                          | 26 March 2009 |
| Men's Bushfire Debrief   | An opportunity for men to network and share experiences. Guest speaker for the evening was Bruce Esplin (Emergency Management Commissioner) First drink free     | 80      | Yarra Glen Grand Hotel                            | 31 March 2009 |
| Women's Wellness Evening   | An opportunity for women to get together and share experiences. Guest speaker for the evening was Karen Dickson (Cameron House). Gift baskets for every attendee | 50      | Yarra Valley Conference Centre                    | 2 April 2009  |
| Information Evening with Christine Nixon on the Victorian Bushfire Reconstruction & Recovery Authority | Community meeting to provide information about VBRRRA's role in bushfire recovery.   | 700     | Healesville Memorial Hall & Yarra Glen Racecourse | 8 April 2009  |
| Business Recovery After the Fires - Yarra Glen   | Workshop with the small business mentoring service focussing on short, medium and long term strategies to assist business owners to getting back on their feet.  | 15      | Yarra Glen Recovery Centre                        | 22 April 2009 |
| Families Meeting the Challenges of Recovery  | A workshop with Rob Gordon   | 15      | Yarra Glen Recovery Centre                        | 23 April 2009 |
| Garden Recovery After Fire   | A workshop with Greg Moore on the various phases and signs of garden recovery  | 30      | Yarra Glen Recovery Centre                        | 27 April 2009 |
| Bushfire Business Recovery   | Workshop with the small business mentoring service focussing on short, medium and long term strategies to assist business owners to getting back on their feet.  | 15      | Yarra Junction Community Link                     | 28 April 2009 |
| What to Consider When You Are Rebuilding   | Experts discussing options to consider when rebuilding including sustainable house design and house design in bushfire prone areas.                              | 10      | Yarra Glen Recovery Centre                        | 30 April 2009 |

|   |   |     |  |                |
|---|---|-----|--|----------------|
| Business Recovery After the Fires   | Workshop with the small business mentoring service focussing on short, medium and long term strategies to assist business owners to getting back on their feet.   | 17  | Yarra Glen Recovery Centre                 |                |
| Bushfire Business Recovery  | Workshop with the small business mentoring service focussing on short, medium and long term strategies to assist business owners to getting back on their feet.   | 19  | Belgrave Library                           | 5 May 2009     |
| Local Vegetation After the Bushfires  | Jane and Malcolm Calder (local residents) hosted a discussion session on local vegetation after the bushfires   | 20  | Steels Creek Community Centre              | 6 May 2009     |
| Bushfire Legal Help, Insurance & Financial Road show                                  | Experts from Victoria Legal Aid, the Financial Ombudsman and Insurance Council of Australia discussed issues occurring in bushfire communities and how to get assistance to address them                        | 12  | Yarra Glen Recovery Centre                 | 7 May 2009     |
| Garden Recovery After Fire  | A workshop with Greg Moore on the various phases and signs of garden recovery   | 20  | Healesville - Supper Room                  | 10 May 2009    |
| Bushfire Legal Help, Insurance & Financial Road show                                  | Experts from Victoria Legal Aid, the Financial Ombudsman and Insurance Council of Australia discussed issues occurring in bushfire communities and how to get assistance to address them                        | 8   | Healesville Memorial Hall                  | 13 May 2009    |
| Sustainable Garden Design Techniques  | A presentation to assist with designing and developing sustainable gardens for a more sustainable lifestyle with Graeme George, Stuart Ryder and Heather and Andrew Djurovich (Yarra Valley Permaculture Group) | 35  | Yarra Glen Recovery Centre                 | 20 May 2009    |
| Property Recovery after Bushfire  | An information session that looked at whole farm planning, fencing, pasture recovery, weeds and animal health   | 40  | Yarra Glen Hall                            | 11 June 2009   |
| Local Service Provider Showcase   | An opportunity for Victorian case managers to meet with local service providers to find out about local programs to assist bushfire affected residents  | 150 | Yarra Valley Vineyard Christian Fellowship | 24 June 2009   |
| Men's Bushfire Debrief with Rob Gordon  | Men coming together to chat. Rob Gordon led a short discussion about surviving natural disasters  | 50  | The White Rabbit Brewery, Healesville      | 08 July 2009   |
| Working Summit (for case managers & others working with people affected by the fires) | An opportunity to bring together those directly involved in assisting people to recover from the affects of the fires to find out what they have heard about community needs and issues                         | 80  | Yarra Valley Vineyard Christian Fellowship | 27 August 2009 |

|  |   |      |                                     |                            |
|--|---|------|-------------------------------------|----------------------------|
| Meditation Seminars with Bill Patterson              | Residents were invited to attend 3 meditation sessions lead by Bill Patterson, (Psychotherapist) to assist people to de-stress.   | 35   | Yarra Glen Recovery Centre          | 11,25 and 8 September 2009 |
| 6 Months on - Coping with the Challenges of Recovery | Informative discussion lead by Rob Gordon - what to expect at the six month recovery stage, what families can do to help stay together and how to cope with emotions and stress | 90   | RACV Healesville                    | 29 Sept 2009               |
| Pasture Recovery                                     | An information session that looked at whole farm planning, fencing, pasture recovery, weeds and animal health   |      | Steels Creek Community Centre       | 28 October 2009            |
| Fire Smart Garden Design                             | A community information session with Dr Greg Moore  | 45   | Yarra Glen Memorial Hall            | 25 Nov 2009                |
| Fire Smart Garden Design                             | A community information session with Dr Greg Moore  | 23   | Yarra Glen Memorial Hall            | 29 Nov 2009                |
| Tackling Tough Times                                 | A workshop hosted by Beyond Blue to assist community members who are supporting friends and neighbours that have been traumatised by the fires                                  | 13   | Montrose Town Centre                | 30 Nov 2009                |
| <b>COMMUNITY EVENTS</b>                              |   |      |                                     |                            |
| Anzac Day / Chum Creek BBQ                           | A local community event for families. B.B.Q and free pot plant supplied by Rotary, entertainment for children.  | 120  | Chum Creek School                   | 25 April 2009              |
| Thanks Mate Family Picnic Races                      | Day initiated by Victoria Police and organised along with Shire to say thank you to all emergency service workers   | 1500 | Yarra Glen Racecourse               | 26 April 2009              |
| Coffee 'n' Chat                                      | An opportunity for local residents to come together in an informal setting to rekindle old friendships and build new ones   | 20   | Hargreaves Hill Brewery, Yarra Glen | 18 June 2009               |
| Coffee 'n' Chat                                      | An opportunity for local residents to come together in an informal setting to rekindle old friendships and build new ones   | 7    | Eastern Food Garage, Healesville    | 23 June 2009               |
| Sponsor farming community to attend C.A.B. dinner    | To provide an opportunity for members of the farming community to come together at an agricultural forum  | 25   | Wandin East                         | 25 June 2009               |
| Men's Golf Day                                       | A day for men to come together at Yering Meadows Golf course. The aim was for them to make friends, share stories and have some fun. The golf fees were waived by management    | 70   | Yering Meadows                      | 2 July 2009                |
| NAB Football Family Day                              | A day of fun for children where they could participate in football activities and meet AFL players  | 1000 | Yarra Glen Football Club            | 8 July 2009                |

|   |   |      |                                      |                |
|---|---|------|--------------------------------------|----------------|
| Rebuilding Expo                                   | To provide residents with the opportunity to speak to building experts, local contractors and suppliers to assist them through the rebuilding process                                     | 2500 | Lilydale Showgrounds                 | 18 July 2009   |
| Helping Wildlife after Bushfires                  |   | 40   | Steels Creek                         | 22 July 2009   |
| Steels Creek Family Day                           | A family day with music and other entertainment. Supported by the Shire and Chaplaincy Australia  | 100  | Steels Creek                         | 19 July 2009   |
| Hanna Montana                                     | Free showing of the movie for families. Rotary provided lolly bags  | 200  | Healesville Memorial Hall            | 30 August 2009 |
| The Singed Sisterhood                             | An opportunity to hear from two members of a woman's group that was established out of the Canberra Bushfires. Drinks and nibbles provided  | 120  | De Bortoli Winery                    | 4 Sept 2009    |
| The Singed Sisterhood                             | An opportunity to hear from two members of a woman's group that was established out of the Canberra Bushfires. A light lunch provided   | 50   | Healesville RSL                      | 5 Sept 2009    |
| Chum Creek Community BBQ                          | An opportunity for local residents to come together and connect with other members of their community. Including activities for children and a barbeque. Initiated by the Salvation Army. | 70   | Chum Creek School                    | 12 Sept 2009   |
| Adventure Island                                  | A live stage show targeted at pre school children   | 200  | Healesville Memorial Hall            | 22 Sept 2009   |
| Campfire Get Together                             | A sing along and picnic for the whole family including children's activities This event also celebrated the funding of a playground at Dixons Creek                                       | 140  | Dixons Creek Recreation Reserve      | 24 Oct 2009    |
| Campfire Get Together                             | A sing along and picnic for the whole family including entertainment for children   | 30   | Chum Creek Primary School            | 30 Oct 2009    |
| Sponsor farming community to attend C.A.B. dinner | To provide an opportunity for members of the farming community to come together at an agricultural forum  | 18   | Wandin                               | 12 Nov 2009    |
| Blokes Night Out                                  | An inspirational and motivating talk by Kevin Sheedy. Supported by the Healesville football club  | 90   | Don Rd Sporting Complex, Healesville | 2 Dec 2009     |
| Family Night at Rochfords                         | Live music by two musicians that have volunteered their time to bring some relief to bushfire survivors. Followed by a movie screening  | 150  | Coldstream                           | 11 Dec 2009    |

| <b>COMMUNITY RECOVERY PROJECTS</b>             |   |                |                                       |                                  |
|--|---|----------------|---------------------------------------|----------------------------------|
| Men Can Cook (4 weekly sessions)               | A program targeted at men               | 15             | Coldstream Brewery                    | Commencing 10 Nov 2009           |
| Men Can Cook and Brew Beer (3 weekly sessions) | A program targeted at men               | 17             | Coldstream Brewery                    | 23 Jan 2010                      |
| Meditation for the Soul                        | Fortnightly ongoing meditation sessions | 15 per session | Yarra Glen Living and Learning Centre | fortnightly starting 14 Oct 2009 |

| Title   | Objective  | Numbers | Venue                                     | Date              |
|---|--|---------|---|-------------------|
| <b>2010 EVENTS</b>  |  |         |   |                   |
| <b>COMMUNITY INFORMATION SESSIONS</b>                         |  |         |   |                   |
| Dr Rob Gordon – Community Information night                   |  |         | Yarra Glen Memorial Hall                  | 03 February 2010  |
| Bridging the Generation Gap                                   | Your personal resilience and inner strength  | 67      | Train Track Winery, Yarra Glen            | 09 March 2010     |
| Recovery and Relationships                                    |  |         | Healesville Memorial Hall                 | 13 March 2010     |
| Rex Hunt  | Blokes Night Out   | 80-100  | Don Rd Sporting Complex, Healesville      | 02 June 2010      |
| Walter Mikac  | An Inspiring Story   |         | Fergusson Winery, Dixons Creek            | 21 July 2010      |
| Dr Rob Gordon   | Disconnected Reconnecting  |         | Immerse in the Yarra Valley, Dixons Creek | 09 September 2010 |
| Max Walker  | Blokes Night Out   | 80-100  | Don Rd Sporting Complex, Healesville      | 15 September 2010 |
| Todd Russell  | Blokes Night Out   | 80-100  | Don Rd Sporting Complex, Healesville      | 24 November 2010  |
| Mark McKeon   | Bushfires  | 80-100  |   | 09 February 2011  |
| Info Night: Stresses in Families 6 months on: with Rob Gordon |  |         | Yarra Glen                                | 29 Sept 2009      |
| <b>COMMUNITY EVENTS</b>                                       |  |         |   |                   |
| Commemorative Picnic  |  |         | Chum Creek Primary School                 | 07 February 2010  |
| Dixons Creek Commemorative Function                           | A social event to celebrate the end of summer in style   |         | Yarra Valley Conference Centre            | 07 April 2010     |
| Family Fun Day  | Event aimed at connecting families, friends and wildlife affected by the 2009 bushfires  | 300     | Healesville Sanctuary                     | 13 Nov 2010       |
| Hedgend Maze  | Event aimed at connecting families, friends and neighbours affected by the 2009 Bushfires in Buxton, Marysville, Narbethong & Yarra Ranges | 54      | 163 Albert Rd, Healesville                | 19 Feb 2011       |
|   |  |         |   |                   |



| <b>COMMUNITY RECOVERY PROGRAMS</b> |   |    |                                     |                                     |
|------------------------------------|---|----|-------------------------------------|-------------------------------------|
| Meditation for the Soul            | An opportunity to investigate an alternative option to help build your personal resilience and inner strength   |    | Yarra Glen Living & Learning Centre | 10,17,24 Feb 2010                   |
| Meditation for the Soul            | An opportunity to investigate an alternative option to help build your personal resilience and inner strength   |    | Yarra Glen Living & Learning Centre | 07,14,21,28 March 2010              |
| Winter Warmers - Autumn Harvest    | This program has been designed to provide an opportunity for women in bushfire affected areas to come together in a relaxed and friendly environment        |    | Fergusson Winery, Dixons Creek      | 9,16,23,30 March 2010               |
| Winter Warmers - Winter Harvest    | This program has been designed to provide an opportunity for women in bushfire affected areas to come together in a relaxed and friendly environment        | 25 | Fergusson Winery, Dixons Creek      | 8,15,22,29 June 2010                |
| Coffee 'n Chat                     | Cake and coffee - every Monday June-December  |    | Hargreaves Hill Brewery, Yarra Glen | 10 June 2010-December               |
| Through the Eyes of a Child        | Polyglot Theatre -An eight week program working with children from Healesville and Badger Creek Primary Schools exploring perceptions of self and community |    |                                     | 17,24,31 July 2010                  |
| Through the Eyes of a Child        | Polyglot Theatre -An eight week program working with children from Healesville and Badger Creek Primary Schools exploring perceptions of self and community |    |                                     | 07,14,21,28 August 2010             |
| Winter Warmers - Winter Harvest    | This program has been designed to provide an opportunity for women in bushfire affected areas to come together in a relaxed and friendly environment        | 25 |                                     | 10,17,24,31 August 2010             |
| Blokes Get Away - Golfing          | This activity provided an opportunity for men to build relationships in a safe and friendly environment.  | 50 | Cape Schanck Resort                 | 28-29 Aug 2010<br>04,11,18 Sep 2010 |

|  |   |                 |                                  |
|--|---|-----------------|----------------------------------|
| Al Dente - Healthy Family Cooking  |   | The Oaks Winery | 06,13,20,27<br>October 2010      |
| Women's Weekend Away   |   |                 | 08,09,10 Oct 2010                |
| <b>RECOVERY EVENTS CONDUCTED BY OTHER AGENCIES/ORGANISATIONS FUNDED BY VBRRA</b> |   |                 |                                  |
| Healesville Football & Netball Club  | Healesville v Alexandra football and netball competition                        | Healesville     | 18 July 2009                     |
| Yarra Glen Cricket Club  | Pre-season dinner for Yarra Glen Cricket Club families                          | Yarra Glen      | 19 August 2009                   |
| Yarra Glen Community Fire Relief   | Thank you event for volunteers  | Yarra Glen      | 22 August 2009                   |
| Salvation Army   | Women's breakfast with a guest speaker  | Healesville     | 22 August 2009                   |
| St Brigids Church  | An end of winter dinner to encourage people to share experiences                | Healesville     | 29 August 2009                   |
| Yarra Glen Primary School  | Community tree planting fun day   | Yarra Glen      | 31 August 2009                   |
| Steels Creek Stitchers   | Lunch with meeting to plan and make a fire quilt                                | Steels Creek    | 1 Sept 2009                      |
| Healesville Living and Learning Centre   | Celebration/Promotion Men's Shed  | Healesville     | 2 Sept 2009                      |
| Singing for your souls sake  | An excursion for members of local singing group to attend a concert in the city | Healesville     | 13 Sept 2009                     |
| Yarra Glen RSL   | Weekday lunch for members of RSL  | Yarra Glen      | 15 Sept 2009                     |
| Yarra Valley Practitioners Project   | Yoga workshop   | Healesville     | 19 Sept 2009                     |
| Healesville Pony Club  | Family pony camp  | Hoddles Creek   | 19 & 20 Sept 2009                |
| Steels Creek Community Centre Inc  | Spit roast dinner for bushfire affected males                                   | Steels Creek    | 22 Sept 2009                     |
| Salvation Army   | School holiday program for primary school children                              | Healesville     | 29 September - 1<br>October 2009 |
| St Johns Anglican Church   | Special service and BBQ lunch for local emergency services                      | Healesville     | 30 Sept 2009                     |
| Golden Wattle (EACH)   | Old time tea dance for older people   | Healesville     | 9 October 2009                   |
| HICCI  | Celebration of Dinner at Darrons (a community meal for disadvantaged people)    | Healesville     | 13 October 2009                  |
| Melba Community Support  | Light lunch wsith guest speaker to be held in                                   | Healesville     | 15 October 2009                  |


|                                     |  |              |                 |
|-------------------------------------|--|--------------|-----------------|
| Seniors Week                        |  |              |                 |
| Local residents who lost their home | A lunch for 30 residents who lived in the area of Brennan Ave and Old Kinglake Rd who lost their homes in the fires                        | Yarra Glen   | 18 October 2009 |
| Steels Creek Croquet Club           | Hosting of a celebration for croquet players. All equipment was lost in the fires  | Steels Creek | 18 October 2009 |
| Winhort Yarra Ranges                | To pamper women affected through the fires   |              | 24 October 2009 |
| Yarra Valley Practitioners Project  | Dru meditation and Yoga Day  | Healesville  | 25 October 2009 |
| Dixons Creek Primary School         | A trip to the zoo for all children and their families  | Dixons Creek | 25 October 2009 |
| Bridge Builders                     | Four day camping retreat for young women.<br>Funding allowed an increase in number of participants to include people affected by the fires |              |                 |
| Salvation Army                      | Theatre sports   | Various      |                 |

| Title   | Objective   | Numbers | Venue                                      | Date                       |
|---|---|---------|--|----------------------------|
| <b>PLANNED PROJECTS/ACTIVITIES/EVENTS TO ASSIST COMMUNITY RECOVERY</b>                  |   |         |  |                            |
| Tool Library  |   | est 40  | Yarra Glen                                 | est start 1 September 2009 |
| Wire Fence Scrap Metal Recycle Drive  |   | est 40  | Shire Wide                                 | 1 Sept 2009                |
| <b>SUPPORT FOR SERVICE PROVIDERS</b>  |   |         |  |                            |
| Local Service Provider Showcase   | An opportunity for Victorian case managers to meet with local service providers to find out about local programs to assist bushfire affected residents                                  | 150     | Yarra Valley Vineyard Christian Fellowship | 24 June 2009               |
| Working Summit (for case managers and others working with people affected by the fires) | An opportunity to bring together those directly involved in assisting people to recover from the affects of the fires to find out what they have heard about community needs and issues | 80      | Yarra Valley Vineyard Christian Fellowship | 27 August 2009             |

#### APPENDIX FOUR: MEMBERSHIP OF THE MUNICIPAL RECOVERY COMMITTEE

| MUNICIPAL RECOVERY COMMITTEE |         |             |   |
|------------------------------|---------|-------------|---|
|                              | John    | Lester      | Chair   |
| Cr                           | Len     | Cox         | Mayor, Yarra Ranges Council                             |
|                              | Glen    | Patterson   | CEO, Yarra Ranges Council                               |
| Snr. Sgt.                    | Vin     | Butera      | Victoria Police (MERC)                                  |
|                              | John    | Leatherland | Director DHS Eastern Region (until April 2009)          |
|                              | Mike    | Debinski    | Director DHS Eastern Region (from June 2009)            |
|                              | Laurie  | Jeremiah    | DSE   |
|                              | Ty      | Newton      | DPCD (until May 2009)                                   |
|                              | Melissa | Agostino    | DPCD (from June 2009)                                   |
|                              | Grant   | Jack        | MERO , Yarra Ranges Council                             |
|                              | Alison  | Cran        | MRM , Yarra Ranges Council                              |
|                              | Greg    | Ireton      | Community Engagement Coordinator, VRRRA (from May 2009) |

## APPENDIX FIVE: EXAMPLES OF A COMMUNITY NEWSLETTER



**Severe injury payment**  
Anyone who has stayed overnight in hospital or has had, or will require surgery or further hospital treatment as a result of the bushfires will be eligible for a payment of \$7,500. To apply contact the Victorian Bushfire Appeal Fund on **1800 180 213** or speak to your case manager.

**Re-establishing identity documents**  
A priority service has been established for bushfire victims for Victorian registration and licensing. Phone **13 11 71** or visit [www.vicroads.vic.gov.au](http://www.vicroads.vic.gov.au).

Residents who have lost property or belongings can obtain a temporary Medicare card number from any Medicare office. Phone **13 20 11** or visit [www.medicareaustralia.gov.au](http://www.medicareaustralia.gov.au).

**Replacement drivers licences for bushfire victims**  
VicRoads is giving priority treatment to bushfire victims who may have lost their drivers licence or need to cancel their car registration.

Relying on photos stored on its licensing system, VicRoads staff will ask key questions, such as date of birth and address, to confirm identity and issue replacement licences.

Other services include processing requests to cancel registrations and issue on-the-spot cash refunds and allowing periodic payments of registration fees of three or six months on application.

The service is being offered free of charge to fire victims.

For more information, phone **13 11 71** or visit [www.vicroads.vic.gov.au](http://www.vicroads.vic.gov.au).



**A Day at the Races**  
In the aftermath of the tragic bushfires, Yarra Valley Racing, supported by the Shire of Yarra Ranges and the State Government, will dedicate the proceeds of its Sunday February 22 race meet to the local community.

The race meet will provide the Yarra Ranges community some respite from the hardships being experienced, bringing people together in a relaxed and enjoyable environment.

The tremendous work undertaken by CFA volunteers since the fires began will also be acknowledged, with all gate proceeds being donated directly to the local CFA.

With Sunday also declared a National Day of Mourning a live simulcast will be held of the memorial service at Rod Laver Arena, from 11am to noon. Anyone wishing to attend the simulcast may do so free of charge, as no entry fees will be charged until after midday.

As well as the eight thoroughbred races held throughout the afternoon, there will be free children's activities (including a jumping castle and chair-o-plane) and a live band.

Entry after 12pm will be \$15 for adults, \$10 for concession and free for children under 17.

**Following the disastrous impact of last week's bushfires the shire is beginning to move into the recovery process to assist residents in fire-affected areas to start rebuilding.**

**The Shire of Yarra Ranges, along with other government and non-government agencies is offering a range of measures to assist communities in the rebuilding and recovery process.**

**Register your details**  
All residents affected by the bushfires are urged to register their details with the Red Cross. This can be done at either of the shire's Relief Centres.

By registering, family, friends and police will be aware of your location and that you are safe.

**Recovery Centres**  
The Healesville and Yarra Glen Recovery Centres continue to operate with the shire and other community organisations on hand to assist people.

They are located at:  
**Healesville Memorial Hall, Maroondah Hwy, Healesville** (Mel Ref 270 C12)  
**Yarra Glen Memorial Hall, cnr Anzac Ave & Bell St, Yarra Glen** (Mel Ref 274 K1).

The Recovery Centres are open:  
Monday-Friday 10am to 5pm  
Saturday-Sunday 10am to 2pm


*\*These hours will change as the shire moves into the recovery phase.*

For opening hours check the shire's website or call **1300 368 333**.

**Rates**  
Rates (including garbage rates) on any Shire of Yarra Ranges houses that have been destroyed by the bushfires will be waived for the 2008-09 period. Any instalments already paid for this rate period will be directly refunded to affected residents.

Property owners who have been affected by the bushfire in other ways, for instance have suffered the loss of improvements or partial improvements on the property, wages or income, crops or stock can contact the Shire's Rates department to negotiate an extension of the payment date without interest penalty on a case by case basis.


For more information contact the Shire on **1300 368 333**.








**Animals and livestock**  
Temporary accommodation for pets is available at the Victorian Animal Aid Trust, Killara Rd, Coldstream, phone **9739 0300**.


The shire can also assist residents with supplies for livestock such as hay, stock feed, fencing, stock water troughs and temporary agistment. Phone **9294 6344**.


Donations of stockfeed can be dropped off at the Lillydale Lake overflow car park, entry off Akarana Rd (Mel Ref 38 H6). For more information phone **9294 6344**.





Shire of Yarra Ranges  1300 368 333 [www.yarraranges.vic.gov.au](http://www.yarraranges.vic.gov.au)

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**W**elcome to the January edition of the Bushfire Recovery Community Newsletter. Happy New Year to you and your family. In this edition, you will find the latest news relating to bushfire recovery, including details of events commemorating the February 2009 fires. There is also information about rebuilding, grants, personal support and events in your community.

All the latest information about bushfire recovery continues to be posted on council's website, or you can contact council for assistance or advice.

## COMMEMORATIONS FOR THE SECOND ANNIVERSARY OF THE 2009 BUSHFIRES

### MELBOURNE

A central service to remember the people and communities impacted by the February 2009 fires will be held at 3pm on Sunday, February 6 at the Zinc Space at Federation Square, Russell Street Extension, Melbourne. The inter-faith service was arranged after consultation with affected community members, and former police chaplain, the Rev. Jim Pilmer, will oversee the service which recognises the significance of the anniversary to Victoria.

The service has been arranged to provide an opportunity for bushfire-affected people who lost loved ones, or who live in other parts of Victoria, to gather in a central location to mark the anniversary. The timing of the service respects the wishes of those who will mark the occasion at memorial events held in the fire-affected communities on the same day.

### YARRA RANGES

Various commemorative events will be held throughout Yarra Ranges to provide an opportunity for people to connect, reflect and share. Locals and the wider community are most welcome. Updates will be posted on [www.yarraranges.vic.gov.au/Residents/Bushfire\\_Recovery](http://www.yarraranges.vic.gov.au/Residents/Bushfire_Recovery)

#### Chum Creek

A community BBQ will be held on Saturday, January 22 from noon at the Chum Creek Primary School.

All members of the Chum Creek community and visitors are welcome.

Food and soft drinks provided. Jumping castle for the kids, musical entertainment for all. Bring your own chairs/rugs.

For more information contact: Eileen O'Sullivan, Centacare Bushfire Community Recovery Service on 0407 427 090 or email: [Eileen.O'Sullivan@centacaremelbourne.org.au](mailto:Eileen.O'Sullivan@centacaremelbourne.org.au)

#### Steels Creek

A community BBQ and get together for all members of the Steels Creek community and visitors will be held on Sunday, January 23 from 11.30am at the Steels Creek Community Centre.

Food and soft drinks provided. Jumping castle for the kids, musical entertainment for all. Bring your own chairs/rugs.

For details phone Eileen O'Sullivan on 0407 427 090.

#### Dixons Creek

A community BBQ and get together for all members of the Dixons Creek community and visitors will be held on Sunday, January 23 starting at 5.30pm at the Dixons Creek Reserve.

Food & soft drinks provided. Jumping castle and face painting for the kids, musical entertainment for all. Bring your own chairs/rugs.

For more information contact Jean Shortis on 0408 993 998 or Eileen O'Sullivan on 0407 427 090.









[www.yarraranges.vic.gov.au](http://www.yarraranges.vic.gov.au)