

Australian Disaster Resilience  
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**A recovery approach – drawing  
out the strengths within  
the community**

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### A Recovery Approach - Drawing out the strengths within the community

Connection to the community has been a priority within Corangamite Shire for many years. The shire has identified objectives and strategies to implement programs and ongoing behavioral changes focused towards building strong relationships with the community. This focus towards Council's connection to community was pivotal after the South West Complex fires.

On 17 March 2018 emergency services responded to multiple fire incidents across Corangamite, Southern Grampians and Moyne Shires. The unexpected and rapid onset of a storm provided no warning to farmers or residents of the immediate fire danger. The timing of the storm during the night contributed to the severe impact of the fires given farmers had minimal time to manage and protect property and livestock. Immediately following the fire and storm event, six relief centres were established in the South West with more than 800 people attending in the first 48 hours.

The impact assessment was significant with loss of agricultural and residential properties, especially within Corangamite Shire. The four fires burnt through more than 15,000 Ha of farm land. And the confirmed property loss included 26 houses and more than 80 farming sheds.

Additional power outages were widespread with damage to sub-station infrastructure and power lines. Confirmed livestock losses were 1,011 beef and dairy cattle, and 1,928 sheep. 2,895 kilometres of fencing was destroyed or badly damaged and required replacement.

The emergency in the Corangamite Shire continued for a further 53 days with peat fires burning at Lake Cobrico and Lake Elingamite. Council was actively involved in a number of ways throughout the response and recovery phase of the emergency, including staffing relief and recovery centres, provision of information to the community, clearing fallen vegetation and providing advice and support to residents of fire affected properties.

The events that took place left the community overcome and unsure how to move forward.

A recovery team was established by Corangamite Shire immediately following the fires to work closely with the impacted residents and the broader community throughout the recovery phase of the event. The team structure consisted of a Fire Recovery Manager, Coordinator and Officer. In addition, the Red Cross funded a position to be based at Corangamite Shire to provide support to residents through outreach.

Corangamite Shire has worked closely with its communities over a long period of time and has a sound understanding of the community composition. This community is connected, supportive, humble and resourceful, with an ageing population made up of long term residents and high volunteerism rates. As a farming community, resilience and resourcefulness is a way of life.

Council identified four broad groups that were affected by the South West Complex Fires;

1. Directly impacted
2. Those that evacuated or had storm damage
3. The community that services the impacted area – Cobden, Camperdown and Terang
4. The broader community.

A strategy was then developed to accommodate each of these groups' recovery to provide the level of support required. As the recovery progressed, Council identified that the support the community



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provided to each other and across the broadly defined groups above aided in their own personal recovery.

180 families were directly impacted and suffered some form of loss from the South West Complex Fires in the Corangamite Shire. This group were identified as the priority for support provision immediately following the emergency and Council implemented an outreach model for those members of the community. The recovery team focused on direct one on one personalised contact with each of the residents via both phone and face to face meetings. The personal contact allowed for individual needs to be met for the impacted residents and provide the support necessary to progress their recovery. As described by Dr Rob Gordon building connection to community groups and government agencies helps to reduce fusion (an unstable emotional state of a community re-bonding after an emergency) within the community. Information provided by industry leaders influenced the approach of the fire recovery team, with a focus on utilising existing channels, clubs, groups and social organisations to build new bonds and link residents back into their community.

The recovery of the remaining affected groups came through the community stepping forward in many varying ways to provide support.

It was well understood by the fire recovery team that the wider community in general would require some level of support to return to some semblance of norm. The South West Complex Fires were a significant event and caused concern to all members of the community. It was identified from early on in the recovery process that the community needed to have a sense of ownership to their own recovery. As a long term, sustainable approach was being sought, it was important that the community took a lead on delivering social connection opportunities, which occurred through the establishment of the community recovery committee, community relief fund, community creative organisations across Camperdown, Cobden, Terang and support provisions to BlazeAid, ReGreen4FireAid and Landcare, planning, identifying and delivering events and activities for the community.

### Community services support

As with all emergencies Council struggled to manage the out pouring of donated goods that came from far and wide with the best of intentions. The donated goods were limited as much as possible by consistent messaging, encouraging people to donate money to the South West Bushfire Appeal Fund, however there were still material donations made. It was at this stage that the Community Services Collaboration Group swung in to action. The community service groups, under the guidance and direction from Corangamite Shire all came together and took on individual roles.

These groups put aside their own aims and objectives to work for the benefit of the fire recovery and have significantly increased the community's capacity to support one another. The community have seen through their community leaders working together, a critical component for the impacted community to feel supported and Council has witnessed a significant increase in service provision provided by these groups. Along with new opportunities for volunteering which has been an important part of the whole community recovery and another step in building resilience. The 180 families directly affected received food hampers, clothes for working on the farm, food and furniture vouchers, hot meals and fire wood delivered to their door.

A secondary component was then implemented to fill the need of supporting BlazeAid volunteers. Two BlazeAid camps were set up after the fires to assist in the essential job of rebuilding fences across the fire footprint. The large number of volunteers that came from far and wide required nourishment to undertake the rebuilding work. A subsidiary group was formed and a roster



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developed, to feed the volunteers each day. This provided an opportunity to reach out to all types of community groups within the area, fitness groups, scout troops, quilting groups, the local primary school and many more all rotated to participate and cook meals. In all 21,753 meals were provided from 28 clubs and groups over 9 months. Overall both camps were able to rebuild 660km of fencing and with the unprecedented support of the community, the Cobden BlazeAid camp was the longest camp ever conducted.

### Who's missing?

A number of initiatives were implemented to ensure that there was support provided to those who needed it. The fire recovery team undertook a 'who's missing' project and contacted all football/netball clubs in the south of the shire to see if there was anyone that was missing from the club following the fires. This proved successful as it empowered the football/netball clubs (who were already engaged in the community led recovery process) to feel a greater sense to their role in the community. In addition, it provided them with a contact person at Council in the fire recovery area to contact if they did notice that members were missing. This action was underpinned by the community recovery committee action plan and the overall goal of a community led recovery.

### Community Fundraising

The community relief fund was supported heavily by the community contributing and holding events to fundraise and build moral in the community. The Cobden and Districts Community Bank® of the Bendigo Bank partnered with Emergency Management Victoria (EMV), Bendigo Bank (including the Community Enterprise Foundation (CEF) and Cobden District Health Services (CDHS) to establish a Community Relief Fund in support of community members affected by the South West Complex fires.

The fund aimed to support communities across Corangamite, Moyne and Southern Grampians shires where the fires destroyed homes and impacted primary producers. The community relief fund allowed emergency donations to support relief, recovery and reconstruction of the emergency event within the south west of Victoria.

There was a significant localised groundswell of public wanting to donate funds towards recovery of those affected immediately after the fires. The Bendigo Bank is a community bank where the board of the local branch is made up of local community members. It was a great fit for the community led recovery approach.

Other initiatives by the community included the Stitches for Recovery project where the hard work of the CFA members was recognised by the Clocktower quilters who hand stitched a quilt entitled 'Resurgence' for the CFA Brigade. The quilt was presented to the Camperdown CFA brigade with the intention of it being a raffle item contributing to the Brigades fundraising goal to purchase a new Tanker. These kinds of collaborations occurred throughout the recovery with community organising itself to support one another, building on their connections and capacity.

### Regreen4FireAid

ReGreen4FireAid is a volunteer organisation that established themselves following the South West Complex Fires. The community organisation identified the importance of re-establishing shelter belts, native vegetation plantings and the important role that this played in resident recovery. The process included working closely with Council to ensure that the trees were distributed to those who were directly impacted. The local Landcare network provided significant knowledge and experience to ensure that the trees planted had the best chance of survival. The project to date has seen over 16,000 trees planted, utilising volunteers to assist landowners in planting.



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### Creatives

As time passed, Council wanted to expand on the range of events and activities to assist with social connection and to build resilience within the community. Council knew that there was already a strong sporting culture in the communities and throughout the case management Council Officers identified residents undertaking art projects as a way to express their experience and assist in their recovery. It was with this in mind that the recovery team engaged with community leaders and the community recovery committee to find opportunities and organisations/individuals capable of delivering events.

Council found a number of organisations with a high interest in this area and partnered them together. Three township based 'creative organisations' were formed to promote arts and creative outlets within the community. The creative organisations are offering live performances, art workshops, markets, open mic nights, poetry readings and much more. They will be offering events over the next 18 months and it is hoped they will continue into the future. It is a long term, sustainable outcome, building community capacity, having the community deliver events for the community.

### Conclusion

The recovery from the South West Complex Fires will be a continual journey.

Knowing the community, respecting their systems, supporting and encouraging them to help each other, building strong networks to the support services and simplifying bureaucratic processes across the government agencies, were critical factors for the fire recovery. Corangamite Shire was clear from the start and had a continual focus on a community led recovery.

The recovery consisted of Council identifying opportunities in the community and ways in which to build resilience to have the community continue to deliver the recovery outcomes even when Council returned to business as usual.

Council's investment into relationships with the community prior to emergencies has allowed Council to work closely with the community, help build their capacity and support one another. The affected community have felt supported and Council has played a central role in supporting the community to support themselves.