Lessons Learned by Community Recovery Committees of the 2009 Victorian Bushfires

Advice we offer to communities impacted by disaster

May 2011

About this Report

Over two years ago our communities were devastated by bushfires which swept across Victoria, Australia. This report has been developed by a group of community members who have each played a role in their community's recovery and renewal. The need for the report has been inspired by our belief that as community members we can and should share our lessons with other communities impacted by disaster. This is not a formal report prepared by government bodies or any other organisation but a report by communities, and for communities.

We have provided our names and email addresses below and welcome contact by people who would like to learn more, or have questions about this document. Maintaining contact details is always difficult, so we note that the information below is accurate at April 2011.

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Cover image: Epicormic growth in Australian Eucalypts is common following bushfire (Photographer: Tony Owczarek).

Introduction

In January and February 2009, Victoria was devastated by a number of significant bushfires, spanning over 430,000 hectares and impacting over 100 communities. The fires destroyed over 2000 homes, damaged thousands more and there was significant flora and fauna loss, business loss and public infrastructure loss and damage. Tragically, 173 people lost their lives.

Following the bushfires, many of our communities established local Community Recovery Committees (CRCs) and many others got involved in leading or participating in local recovery planning and activities. As we write this, some two years on, we can see the benefits and outcomes of this approach.

Our communities lost so much. This report has been prepared, not to document our loss, but to highlight some of the great work which followed and share some of the lessons we have learned so that other communities impacted by disaster might be supported or assisted in their recovery.

As a group of community members we have determined to produce this report specifically for other community members, keeping the lessons focussed on what communities can do for themselves, rather than on what we believe government and other organisations should do. Our lessons for government have been captured in a separate report.

We represent a diverse group of communities and CRCs in Victoria and we want to note that we are well aware that one size does not fit all when it comes to the right steps for you and your community. Our own experiences have been many and varied and your community's recovery will no doubt be unique as well.

With that in mind, we know that we have been fortunate to learn from a number of other individuals and communities who have been impacted by disaster and taken on a role in their community's recovery. We hope that this report is helpful to you in your community.

Our Advice

Our advice is structured into key themes. The following pages provide more detail on each of these themes.

Communication

- Start communicating ASAP
- Build trust and confidence through communications and constantly repeat key messages
- Try to reach out to everyone in your community and use a range of mediums
- Consider communications beyond your own community

Community Leadership

- Identify community leaders
- Ensure community leaders have legitimacy
- Run your community recovery committee meetings with a clear structure and agenda
- Enable community leaders to access support and development

Community Planning & Identifying Priorities

- Take the time to develop a recovery plan properly and engage others
- Be clear about the process to create your plan and to set priorities

Community Health and Wellbeing

- The community will recover in 'stages' and recovery will vary for every person
- Cater for the different recovery needs of different people in your community
- Look after yourself and those around you

Working with Government

- Lead your own community recovery – be bold!
- Actively build and value your relationships with government

Building effective relationships and networks

- Recognise and develop your relationships
- Think big!

Communication

Establishing and managing effective communication is one of the most important aspects of our recovery experience which we want to share. Community led communication is powerful and effective. Our lessons look at a range of 'who' and 'how' ideas which might assist you.

Who, for us means:

- Your community
- The families of impacted community members who may not live in the community
- Agencies and organisations supporting recovery
- All levels of government
- Other affected communities

How, for us means:

- Working with a wide range of mediums, methods and technologies
- Carefully considering content, delivery and consultation
- Working with others, including the media, to assist with message delivery
- Building trust and confidence within the community to support effective communication
- Recognising the impact of disaster on communication

What worked for us	What didn't work for us
- Early communication and community engagement, as soon as possible after the disaster. - Focus on remaining calm, talking openly and honestly. - Listen and don't just talk 'at' people. - Using or considering a range of communication methods including: community meetings, setting up community websites or blogs, community newsletters, phone trees or sms trees, community events, noticeboards, general store windows, word of mouth, formal agendas and minutes of meetings made freely available, email lists and newsletters, local media and radio and school newsletters. - Noticeboards in the community (if you don't have them, use a tree, get new noticeboards...). - SMS and text messaging and setting up an 'SMS tree' to help distribute messages. - Collecting phone and address information early on (and obtaining permission for its use). *Continued on next page...*	- After the disaster, many people had lost phone / power / computer access. Restoration of these services was a priority but it took quite a long time for many people to be 'back on'. - Posted mail or letter drops were difficult because so many people were not at their home and access to everyone's address was hard to obtain. - There were many challenges to compiling contact lists and networks. Restrictions in place about sharing (or being asked to share) contact lists and information were difficult to manage. Privacy legislation has its place, however, it will make some communication methods more difficult. - Only offering one- way communication or 'we talk, you listen' communication opportunities. - Relying on one person or one process for communication. - Unfortunately, rumours are inevitable.

What worked for us	What didn't work for us
• Using maps as a good base for tracking or communicating activity in the community (ask govt agencies for help getting some good maps to work with if you need to). • Helping people re-establish their letter boxes. • Regular newsletters. • Equipping people with donated or loaned mobile phones, particularly key networks or leaders in the community. • Meeting with other affected communities.	• Negative or 'attacking' behaviour on individuals or organisations – it didn't produce constructive outcomes. • Communication which went to 'selected' groups of people – beware of government communication methods which attempt to address only some people in the community.

Advice we offer

Start communicating ASAP

We recommend beginning communication processes as early as possible after the disaster.

Use a wide range of communication methods as different people had access to different mediums and responded to different methods.

If you begin a contact list of any type, hang on to it, value it and build on it.

You don't have to wait for an outside service to arrange meetings either – communities can call and run their own meetings at a local level to share information.

Remember that in the early days, many people may have lost their reading glasses. Don't under-estimate this as a real challenge for people receiving news and communication.

In many of our communities we established community owned websites and blogs. These provided a great mechanism to get information out quickly and broadly and also helped people who were displaced to stay in touch with news and information.

Build trust and confidence through communications and constantly repeat key messages

The importance and value of building trust and confidence in the community via strong, open and ongoing communication cannot be under-estimated.

To achieve this:
- Be honest if you don't know the answer to something and see if there is a way to find someone who does
- Dispel rumours as quickly as possible, no matter how small or strange they seem - they affect confidence and trust in the community – use a source of 'authority' if you need to
- Offer 'opt-in' and 'opt-out' services if possible (such as phone trees or newsletters) so that people can take a break at times.

Try to also offer hope and optimism. Model good behaviour.

Importantly, we found that people had difficulty taking in and remembering information after a disaster – this is a 'normal' result of the trauma experienced and lasts for many months (we called it 'bushfire brain').

Always repeat key messages frequently using a range of different formats and methods.

Try to reach out to everyone in your community and use a range of mediums

Tailor your communication to reach as many different groups as possible, using whatever mediums work best for each group.

It may be harder to reach the people in your community who have been most affected by the disaster – persist with your offers and communication channels for these people as there will be a time when they are 'ready' and they need to feel welcome.

Remember that many people have lost their traditional points of access to communication or their usual habits such as reading newspapers. Encourage friends and family to take up support roles for others in keeping up to date with communication and news and to provide reminders for community meetings and events.

"Encourage people to recognise their personal responsibility for accessing information and contributing to discussions in the community."

Bill Gale, Kinglake Ranges

Consider all your options for creating safe places for good communication to happen – this might be a bbq or a community event, rather than a formal meeting in a public hall.

Establish working relationships with the media – consider a community spokesperson(s) and consider getting some mentoring early on, on how to work 'with' them and how to tell your community's story well by keeping messages concise and relevant.

Consider communications beyond your own community

Establish links or communication with other affected communities early on – ask for assistance to support this process if you need it.

Don't feel discouraged - no matter how hard you try, there will always be communication problems or gaps, just keep going.

The need for good communication is a long term activity – messages and needs will change, but the process should continue for months and years, not weeks.

Community Leadership

We believe that communities should play a leadership role in recovery from disaster.

Locally led recovery is crucial for communities and the people within them.

Locally led recovery supports and enables decisions *about* the local community by people *within* the community and empowers community members in their own personal recovery process.

As a result of the 2009 Victorian Bushfires, over 30 communities established their own Community Recovery Committee (CRC). Each of us has different examples of what worked, what didn't and what advice we would offer.

Some Committees were formed quickly, some emerged over time, some were formed following a local election process and others were established as a formal incorporated organisation. A summary of our experience is collated below.

What worked for us	What didn't work for us
• Encouraging input from community members right from the start so that they knew their voice was important early on – it set the path ahead. • Election of our CRC leadership (e.g. Chair, Secretary and Treasurer) as soon as practicable improved authority and legitimacy. • Some groups and CRCs decided to Incorporate – this worked well for them. It provided legitimacy within the community and with other organisations. It also enabled them to directly receive and manage support funds for community projects. • We needed clear authority and a defined 'scope' for the work of CRCs – once we had this, it was better. • Having community leaders with strong mediation and negotiation skills. • Having community leaders with an ability to manage high levels of emotion in the community and above average 'anger management' skills. • Delegating the many tasks that came up – many Committees established sub-groups or working groups across a range of areas and projects to spread the workload.	• There was a lack of clarity around the official operating environment we were in (who was in charge?). • There was a lack of definition around what a CRC was and how one should be formed. • Lack of support for local and community based leadership was disappointing and frustrating. • There was sometimes competition within the communities for who would be 'in charge' which was difficult to resolve. • Community election processes may have provided a broader representation on committees, but didn't always necessarily provide the right skill sets that were needed. • A lack of structure or agenda for our committee meetings – once we had this in place, things moved along in a much better format.

Advice we offer

Identify community leaders

Actively work to identify your local community leaders and look for leaders with good local knowledge and networks to draw on. If you know who these people are prior to a disaster occurring, it obviously helps a lot.

There are various methods of selecting leaders and committee members. These include community elections, emergent groups, use of existing community groups, local government nomination or simply being 'tapped on the shoulder.'

Even though it may be challenging in the circumstances, try to seek out and establish a wide range of skill sets and interests in your leadership group/committee.

We respected the initial community leaders that emerged but also welcomed new leaders along the way. Early and emergent leaders may not stay on throughout the recovery process. New leaders at different phases will emerge over time – have some faith in this process as being natural and 'okay.'

There were also leaders in our communities prior to the disaster and it was important not to forget or ignore them. Local 'economic' and business leaders are also an important aspect to the recovery process.

Be aware that there may be resistance to the emergence of a 'new group' in the community. Try to be inclusive and genuinely welcome broad input and participation.

Be aware that the leadership styles you model and set in place *will* have an impact on your community's recovery – work hard to make your contribution a positive and valued one.

Ensure community leaders have legitimacy

Regardless of how the process begins, the committee (or 'leadership group') needs to be 'ratified' by the community in some way at some point.

The authority and legitimacy of the leadership group/committee needs to be clarified with both government and the local community. This will help determine the operating environment and role of community leadership.

Local 'elections' for your committee may provide stronger legitimacy and authority within the community.

You may want to consider incorporation of your group – it can provide clear structure, governance, independence, focus and legitimacy.

Incorporation will also help you obtain and manage funds from various grants and sources independently (if this is something you want to do).

> *"In Strathewen we took the decision to form the 'Strathewen Community Renewal Association' as an incorporated body. While this took some time, we feel the decision was right for us. It has served us well in working with our small community, and in undertaking a range of recovery and community projects."*
>
> *Malcolm Hackett, Strathewen*

Try not to be seen as aligned to any 'faction', including particular community groups or political parties – this will be difficult, however your 'neutrality' will be a key to your success as a group.

Also note that with 'authority' and 'legitimacy' comes additional work, including a need for greater transparency, documentation, reporting and financial management.

Run your Community Recovery Committee meetings with a clear structure and agenda

Set committee meeting agendas – have a structure at meetings and ask people to adhere to it – no lengthy reports.

Consider establishing working groups or sub-committees which can meet separately to conduct agreed work. These working groups can then report back to the main recovery meetings in an efficient manner to keep meetings short and focussed.

Try not to regularly use Committee meetings to do the 'work' that is required or you will be there for hours on end week in, week out. We tried to focus on using the meetings to review and approve actions and next steps, and then relied on working groups or nominated people to undertake any work required away from the meetings.

If guests are invited to your Committee or community meetings (including government representatives or staff), ensure that they understand the time available and insist on an overview of what they intend to present.

Depending on the experience of your Committee members you may need to consider assistance in facilitation or operating as a Committee at the beginning – it will be worth it.

"As the Chair of our CRC meetings, I brought along a small child's toy siren, for use if people spoke for too long. Over time, even a twitch of my finger towards the toy would bring a touch of laughter to the room, and this approach made it a little easier for all of us I think."

Margaret O'Connell, Toolangi and Castella

Do feel empowered to set a tone for your Committee meetings which suits your community. For example, humour played a role for some of us when managing challenging people or long-winded 'speeches'.

People may often move 'off topic' to talk about the disaster or emergency itself – this is generally an aspect of personal recovery. Ensure that there are alternative supportive forums and opportunities for these discussions to take place.

Consider how the Community will be kept informed and involved in the work of the Committee. Many of our CRCs held regular community meetings to provide updates, and call for input, or to facilitate presentations by other organisations. Most of the above advice also applies to general community meetings – that is, set an agenda, be clear about the purpose of the meeting and ensure that you have a strong facilitator available.

Enable community leaders to access support and development

Be prepared for lots of challenges and complexity. Do what you can to ensure that Committees and leadership groups have resources available to support them right from the start.

There will also come a time when developing leadership, leadership training and succession planning becomes important – for us it occurred at different times, but it is an aspect we recommend you plan for.

"Don't forget about your young people. Consider local leadership opportunities for them, and ensure they have a voice in decision-making."

Colin McAllan, Gormandale

Community Planning & Identifying Priorities

Following the disaster in our communities we each developed a Community Recovery Plan which sought to identify recovery priorities and projects. Developing these plans and setting these priorities was an important process which we want to share with others. We believe that building a community recovery plan is an important element of recovery and should be driven by the community with priorities set by the community. This takes time.

What worked for us	What didn't work for us
• Immediately after the disaster we focused on basic needs and immediate priorities for individuals and families (food, water, accommodation, toilets and showers, security, fences, restoration of services). This was essential and took priority over community planning. • In rural communities, support and coordination of fencing work was important from the outset – focusing on fencing established a confidence and trust which engaged the community in discussion about other needs and priorities. • We explained to the community who we were as a Community Recovery Committee and that we needed their advice and input to form a plan and set priorities. • Ensuring that community meetings were well run and facilitated (providing structure) was essential. • Gathering people within the community with a range of broad skills to support the process was important. • We developed models for setting priorities (e.g.: giving projects and ideas a rating from 1 to 5 on a set of criteria, such as the number of people who would benefit from its delivery). • Once we understood the process involved/required, we embraced it rather than fighting against it. • Revisiting our plan from time to time to assess changing or new priorities in the community. • Identifying any large community projects which warranted separate community consultation – holding specific meetings about the bigger ideas or projects. • Effective coordination of the many offers of support and volunteers who wanted to help us deliver projects.	• We were often dependent on others to assist or deliver our priorities (e.g.: restoration of essential services or availability of private or 'local business' services which had been lost). • The process of identifying, documenting and prioritising recovery plans was a haphazard and confusing process at times. • Timelines were set which weren't achievable – we were constantly responding to deadlines and timelines set by government and statutory authorities. • There were a number of restrictions and 'fine print' on what we could plan for and ask for (e.g.: what donated funds could be used for, or what government 'rules' applied to projects). • Some individuals or community groups went outside of the community planning process and directly engaged with organisations and government for their projects. • We couldn't assume that government agencies and departments were talking to one another. • Having only one person in the community as a 'sign off' point on decisions which affected the wider community was a risk, and an unsuitable arrangement.

Advice we offer

Take the time to develop a plan properly and engage others

Ensure that before you begin community planning you have helped to support and prioritise 'basic needs' for people first – food and water, somewhere safe to stay, essential services etc – *only then* can you begin community planning.

Don't underestimate the complexity of community recovery planning – take your time and encourage community input into the hard decisions. Also take the time to talk and to consult widely across your community.

Consulting with as many people as you are able to will help to ensure that the community recovery plan supports and includes a broad range of people in the community. Try to make sure that your plan offers something for everyone in the community.

Engaging people in this task might be challenging and people won't always turn up at community meetings. Ask people for their help, actively engage them and be prepared to go to them in a calmer, quiet way if it will help.

> *For many of us, the development of our Community Recovery Plans necessitated large community workshops filled with butchers paper and diverse ideas. In most cases we had facilitators come along to assist us.*

Community Recovery Committees (or those people coordinating community recovery plans) have a role in communicating the many different views that will exist within the community – share these views across the community so that people can 'hear' other views they might not have heard before.

Work hard to instil energy and positive thinking across your community through this process.

Be clear about the process to create your plan and to set priorities

From the beginning, insist that the community drives the recovery planning and that there is community participation throughout.

If there is a fixed process or limited resources, don't waste time and energy fighting this, use whatever you've got and focus on recovery progress. However, ensure that timelines are realistic – where unreasonable deadlines are imposed on you, communicate and negotiate viable timelines. 'Push back' if you need to.

When explaining the planning process to others, be as transparent as possible about how community priorities will be identified and set.

We recommend capturing all of the ideas that are presented – not all of the ideas will be seen as community priorities, however you can clearly explain the process taken and report back to everyone on how priorities and projects were agreed.

This can be a stressful process – share the responsibility and in doing so, share the pressure of 'decision-making' on behalf of the community. Where a process or a decision requires 'sign-off' by the community or CRC, ensure that at least two signatures are provided so that decisions don't (or aren't seen to) rest with any one individual.

> *"In the Marysville & Triangle communities, we identified over 100 projects in our community recovery plan ranging from the very large to the small. Setting priorities was difficult, and we needed to work closely with a number of different community groups to help us make those decisions."*
>
> *Tony Thompson, Marysville*

Try not to get caught up in local politics within the community.

If you know what it is that you need help with, actively engage local services and local government – don't wait for them to come to you.

Community Health and Wellbeing

The health and wellbeing of our community became one of the most important areas of focus for us.

Often, as community members we had the strongest insight into the general health and wellbeing of our local people and could anticipate or request services and supports needed.

Our experience is that different needs will emerge over time and much can be put in place to help people in their personal recovery. We also have some advice and 'lessons learned' for looking after yourself, if you are in a community leadership role.

What worked for us	What didn't work for us
• Holding a range of community events which supported people coming together and feeling safe and well (e.g. Christmas in July, regular community dinners, stitch and chat groups, women's getaways and men's events). • Having regular visits from qualified and professional experts on disaster recovery, trauma and grief talk with the community on what to expect in their recovery. (e.g. Dr Rob Gordon, Beyond Blue and others suited to particular communities) • Coordinating and providing pro-active health services locally (e.g.: breast screening services, mental health first aid training, professional guest speakers who specialise in trauma and grief). • Encouraging people (including ourselves!) to take a proper break and physically get away on a short holiday. Hard to do, but almost unanimously, people found it an important step and a helpful action. • Recognising pivotal and/or difficult periods in the recovery process, particularly the six, twelve and eighteen month mark.	• Not being able to see or prevent exhaustion and 'burn out' of volunteers and community members. • Lots of people got sick during winter – it was a challenging time for us. • An increase in family stress and domestic violence was difficult to confront and resolve. • Serious health impacts arose, including higher rates of long term illness or serious disease diagnoses. • Rushing things and/or not having time to rest properly. • A lack of recognition on the broader impact of the disaster on those communities and regions around us, particularly on those nearby communities where our children attended schools. • Health services which were inflexible and wouldn't change their usual models for service and come out to see us or be with us in our communities.

Advice we offer

The community will recover in 'stages' and recovery will vary for every person

Acknowledge that the initial immediate response after a disaster to basic needs such as food, water and access to amenities will have a longer term impact on people's wellbeing and recovery (Do what can be done to avoid adding to the trauma).

Emotional well-being will vary within your community at different times. We recommend taking some time to learn about the physiological and psychological effects of trauma and disaster (such as the many impacts of adrenalin).

Take advantage of a range of available professionals and organisations to help you. For some of us, Dr Rob Gordon's advice was a tremendous support, for others, organisations such as Beyond Blue provided support and advice, and you will no doubt find a range of other people who meet the needs of your community.

Remember that everyone's experience is different, and be cautious of advice which makes a number of people feel that they are not recovering at the right speed or in the right way.

Prepare for the six month mark and/or winter – there will likely be lots of illness which you can better prepare for. While physical illness is one aspect, mental health (e.g. depression) is something to watch out for here too.

We saw a marked increase in serious or chronic health issues emerging after the one year mark. Do what you can to see that health services are available and promoted widely in your communities, well after the disaster has occurred. Actively seek out additional health services to visit your community, or ask agencies or government to coordinate this for your community. Advocate for health services to provide local service within your community, as many people won't 'go into town' to access the services otherwise.

> *"More complex health needs became apparent in the months following the fires. In the Traralgon South district, we arranged visits to specialist health services for our small rural communities, such as breast screening appointments."*
>
> *Ange Gordon, Traralgon Sth*

Cater for the different needs of different people in your community

Offer psychological counselling and support in a wide range of forums to help different people access these services in different ways.

We used a range of services and programs including formal counselling services, 'cups of tea' with people and trained outreach workers, relief centres, men's events, professional guest speakers and programs specifically for young people.

Finding and providing a space and place for community meals on a regular basis was also particularly good.

Consider holding community events targeting different groups of people and focused on their interests (children, families, men, young people, women, bereaved families). We found these events a great way to keep people connected and to occasionally take time out.

Be aware that kids and young people don't express themselves in the same way as adults – consider targeted and professional advice and services for these groups of people.

> *"In the Kinglake Ranges, community dining facilities were desperately needed as so many people were without homes and cooking areas. We established a number of different community dining options which were so important to our community's recovery. They provided a really great opportunity for people to come together."*
>
> *Daryl Taylor, Kinglake*

People who lost pets, livestock or wildlife are also affected - don't underestimate the trauma and grief experienced by these people.

Don't forget the communities around yours which have also been impacted and may need services and support. For many of us, the schools in our neighbouring communities needed specific and long term support services as they included students (and staff) from a wide range of impacted and affected areas.

Different people will 'emerge' at different times in your community. This will present a number of different challenges, however ensuring that they are well supported is an important step to their recovery, and will also prevent the emergence of any new divides or schisms in the community.

Look after yourself and those around you

Prioritise looking after yourself and your immediate friends and family. This will be a challenge as you get caught up in various other 'priorities'.

Don't be afraid to ask for help – use your energy wisely and acknowledge your own limitations.

Many of us were not very good at taking a break when we needed time out to recover and restore our own energy levels – listen to your friends and family when they ask you to look after yourself. Take a short break and make sure you get right away from the area – we can't stress enough the value in doing this.

Eat properly, visit your GP, and look after your health.

Working with Government

As a group, we have many lessons to share with government bodies about our recovery experiences.

We also have advice to share with other communities about working with government. The many 'policies' and layers of bureaucracy that we had to tackle and manage will no doubt also be a part of your recovery process.

What worked for us	What didn't work for us
- We took the opinion that community recovery was the responsibility of the community. We didn't wait for government to come to us – we went to them and this established a productive relationship where they knew they should and could consult with us more often. - We held our own meetings to represent our needs to government, which were well received. - Building effective relationships with people across government at Local, State and Federal spheres. - Finding and seeking out the people in senior levels of government to represent our views - 'go to the highest level'. - Once we had found the 'good' people across governments, we used a philosophy of 'help us to help you' to achieve our goals. - Understanding the 'drivers' behind government decisions and how to best work with these. - Proposing solutions and alternatives rather than just highlighting problems – often, government doesn't know how else to solve a known problem.	- In the days immediately after the disaster, on the ground government support was limited. - There was something of a 'parent-child' dynamic between government and communities which we didn't like. - Confusion about the various roles of local government and state government was frustrating. - The level of support for Community Recovery Committees was mixed within local governments and often limited to particular staff or Councillors. The obstructive or unhelpful actions of some local government people caused us frustration and distress. - Using local government to hold recovery funds for projects on behalf of communities created tension and confusion about decision-making rights and project ownership. - Constant government surveys that asked lots of questions but didn't seem to help us at all. - Dealing with various egos and head-butting between government personnel. - Contending with unrealistic expectations of government. - Our local governments were often under-resourced both with staff and financial capacity, particularly in rural areas

Advice we offer

Lead your own community recovery – be bold!

Community recovery is the responsibility of the community – take up this challenge, don't wait for the government.

Government will expect that you can provide 'evidence' of broad community support for your projects or submissions – be prepared for this, engage others and consult broadly.

Be brave and bold when dealing with people and bureaucracy - don't be afraid to challenge the status quo.

> "In our experience, many local governments will struggle to cope with a major disaster and simply won't have the resources and the expertise to do what seems necessary."
>
> Liam Sheahan,
> Strath Creek

Take the time to define your role and the purpose of your community recovery plan

Don't assume that governments will understand what might seem obvious to you. Meet and discuss the role of your CRC and be as clear as possible on any decision-making processes, right from the beginning.

If you are developing a community recovery plan, be sure that all spheres of government, particularly your local government, recognises this plan and will continue to do so into the long term.

Doing the above will help you down the track when new people (or entire governments) arrive and want to make changes to previous commitments.

If you are developing ideas or projects for your community, consider how the project will be supported and delivered. Some of us have experienced great periods of frustration where local governments require additional funds to project manage or deliver on the project, and the work comes to a standstill.

Actively build and value your relationships with government

Take the time to build relationships with all levels of government, particularly senior 'decision-makers'.

Find those people who *will* work with you in government (be it local, state or federal) and do all that you can to help them deliver outcomes for you.

You can play a role in assisting various organisations (government and non-government) to collaborate effectively, as this may not be easy for them without you.

Do keep yourself nice. Your style and approach is important – attacking individuals and organisations will not be helpful.

Being clear about your community's position and offering solutions will be helpful.

> "In Strathewen, we needed a medium term temporary housing solution for people in our community. Acting as the broker, we sourced donated funds via government and other sources, used the Strathewen Trust Fund, with a special ruling from the Australian Taxation Office (with support from a not-for-profit organisation (FRRR) and a Melbourne law firm), and this enabled us to approach the local Council to establish the accommodation on private land. Never give up!"
>
> David Brown, Strathewen

Building effective relationships and networks

Underpinning almost everything we have outlined here is our advice about understanding the value of your networks and relationships with others.

We could not have achieved what we have so far without a great range of partners, organisations, donors, and support from others. This doesn't just 'happen'. There is effort required to seek out the right partners for different goals and projects, develop healthy working relationships, and build trust with these organisations and people over weeks, months and years.

What worked for us	What didn't work for us
• Recognising the level of interest in our community and its recovery early on, and capitalising on this. • Actively following up on offers and opportunities, and holding people to their commitments. • Drawing on fabulous local community organisations (e.g. Lions Clubs, Rotary clubs, Salvation Army etc) • Using the most diplomatic and resourceful people in our communities to build and develop the partnerships and relationships we needed. • Picking up the phone and asking for help. 'If you don't ask, then the answer is definitely 'No''. • Learning which organisations, areas of government or people to approach for different things. • Working most closely with the organisations and people who showed an understanding of our goals and objectives as a community. • Trying to 'meet half way' where there were roadblocks to getting something done. • Using mainstream media to tell our story and attract interest in particular projects.	• Waiting for help. • Organisations or donors with good intentions, but a lack of willingness to work *with* us as a community. • Promises not being delivered, or being delivered poorly. • Excluding key people (e.g. local government staff) from our community planning and discussions, as later on in the process, we struck difficulty in gaining their support for key decisions. • A lack of mutual respect. • Organisations, donors, or government officials receiving mixed messages from the community and getting 'cold feet' on projects. • Under-estimating the time and effort required to maintain communication with all of the different people in our networks.

Advice we offer

Recognise and develop your relationships

Effective relationship and partnerships will be a key feature to your success – take the time to identify those people or organisations with whom your community has an existing relationship , or would like to work with. Work hard to attract the right people to your community and garner their support for critical recovery activities and projects.

Your networks and relationships should include people within the three spheres of government. They will be instrumental to your success over the long term.

Organisations or people may approach you and say 'how can we help?' Being ready with a short list of answers or some key people within your community who they can be directed to for advice, is a great way to get things moving.

Each organisation you approach (or who approaches you) will have different drivers and constraints for how they might be able to help. Find out what these are.

Empower your best networkers and negotiators in the community so that they can work on your behalf.

Your relationships won't always be smooth sailing. Be patient and stick with it.

In our experience, there is a 'window of opportunity' which you can capitalise on. For us, we feel that we had a good level of interest from the wider community for two years after the bushfires.

Think Big!

Your network is bigger and stronger than you can imagine – think big!

Don't underestimate the level of support and interest that is out there and available to you. In our experience, picking up the phone produced some surprisingly positive outcomes.

Don't be afraid to go straight to the top of large companies or organisations for help. Many companies would love to help, but don't know who to contact, or are unsure of how to approach your community following a disaster.

Use the media and your own communication channels constructively to tell your story and attract interest in different programs or projects.

"We lost our hall in the fires at Narbethong. We're only a small township and rebuilding it was going to be a challenge. We sought help from Emergency Architects Australia who invited a prominent Australian architecture firm to design our new hall. As the project gained momentum we were able to attract other donors. The support we have received from the corporate sector has been amazing. They have stuck with us throughout the process, and building is now underway."

Jennifer Wood, Narbethong

Conclusion

We have prepared this report to capture a small set of important lessons which we have learned over the last two years. We hope that if you or your community are facing some of the many challenges of recovery that the thoughts and advice outlined above are helpful.

This report is not a list of 'rules'. We know that every experience and every disaster is unique, and that your community will have its own path to travel over the years ahead. Perhaps your community will one day be inspired to revise or update this document, so that others can learn from your experience too.

As a final message, we want to encourage you to play a role in your community's recovery. Communities empowered to lead in their own recovery *will* make a difference, and it will be a great foundation for your community's renewal.

We wish you well in the weeks, months and years ahead, and offer our greatest support in spirit.

Further Information

There is a wealth of information available on community development, disaster recovery and everything in between. We know that bombarding communities with too much information following a disaster is not particularly useful. We do, however want to highlight just a small number of references that are connected to our own recovery and experience.

There is a great deal of information about the Victorian bushfire recovery program on the Victorian Government website www.wewillrebuild.vic.gov.au (link current at May 2011). This includes a number of reports about community recovery including:

> The Government's *Community Engagement Strategy*
> http://www.wewillrebuild.vic.gov.au/local-community/community-engagement.html
>
> *'In their own Words'* – a report produced following a CRC workshop with over 100 community members, held 18 months after the bushfires.
> http://www.wewillrebuild.vic.gov.au/publications.html
>
> If you are looking for ideas or inspiration, the *24 month report* captures our progress and achievements across a great range of over 700 different community projects.
> http://www.wewillrebuild.vic.gov.au/publications.html

Following the 2009 Victorian Bushfires was the emergence of a bereaved community, geographically dispersed but brought together by their shared loss. This community has developed a book about their experience of trauma and grief which may be helpful to you.

Surviving Traumatic Grief – When loved ones die in a disaster. A book by people who have survived traumatic grief. Available at: http://www.sueevansfund.com.au/

Many communities established websites and blogs following the fires. Many of these can still be found online. The Strathewen community website is one such example, and it remains a rich and active information source, which may be of assistance to others. http://strathewen.vic.au/