Department of Social Work
The University of Melbourne

# Independent Review of Bushfire Recovery for Bunyip Complex Fires

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# Contents

# Table of Figures

# Table of Tables

# Executive Summary

Cardinia Shire Council sought an independent review of the Bushfire Recovery Program for the Bunyip Complex Fires (BCF; 2019) to guide future municipal recovery planning. Specifically, the purpose was to review:

- How well did the Council achieve the Recovery Plan objectives?
- What were the successes as perceived by the community?
- How did recovery actions measure against evidence based best practice?
- What system gaps and areas for improvement are identified by impacted residents and partners agencies?
- What was the lived experience of affected persons and key agency partners?
- What recommendations should Council consider for future recovery planning?

This review was an external stakeholder review, focused on perceptions of community members, volunteers and/or professional service providers who were recipients of or providers in the Recovery Program. Twenty-nine people participated in interviews or focus groups to provide their perceptions of the Recovery Program. As a rapid, qualitative review, a major strength is the diversity and depth of perspectives gathered, in terms of fire impacts, participants' residence, and personal and/or professional engagement with the Recovery Program, and perceptions of its successes and areas for future improvement. A limitation is that it is based on self-selecting participation and is not necessarily reflective of all the wider views of the impacted communities. For example, there is no Indigenous, nor children's or young families' perspectives included in this review.

Importantly, this report documents perceptions of the Council's involvement in the Recovery Program. Areas raised may not necessarily be specific to the Council's areas of responsibility in a disaster context. However, as noted throughout this review, an important area of work for future recovery planning is greater communication of these responsibilities in the complex context of disaster recovery programs, working closely with the State Government and partner organisations.

## Key findings

Before summarising the areas of success and for improvement in recovery programming, two critical issues should be noted. Firstly, as we detail later in this report, while it was not the key focus of this review, many participants described the ongoing traumatic experiences of the fire impacts and the significant mental health consequences for many in the Shire. The fires and their aftermath are very present in many participants' minds, and by report, many in the Cardinia community. Secondly, as participants often flagged, there was uncertainty as to who had responsibility for many recovery efforts, and whether it was specifically within the scope of Cardinia Shire Council. Notwithstanding this, they were all familiar with aspects of the Recovery Program and were arguably the most expert and confident community representatives to speak about community perceptions of Council's role.

### What were the perceived successes of the Recovery Program?

Seven key areas of success were identified regarding the Council's involvement in the Recovery Program:

(1) communication;
(2) engagement and outreach through diverse recovery activities;

(3) specific Council staff;

(4) the Community Recovery Committee (CRC);

(5) the longevity of the recovery program;

(6) fostering and improving a sense of community; and,

(7) enhancing the operation of volunteer organisations.

Throughout this section of the report, links are made to highlight how well the Recovery Program is aligning with the available evidence for best practice.

**What were the perceived gaps and areas for improvement in the Recovery Program?**
The three major areas of program gap or need for improvement were similar thematically to the areas of success that participants identified. Summarised in Figure 1, participants identified these areas where significant improvement was needed: preparedness for recovery; ways of working; and engagement and communication with the community.

| Preparedness for recovery | Ways of working | Engagement and communication |
|---|---|---|
| •The importance of having a plan<br>•Capacity<br>•Ability to mobilise and respond quickly | •Information gathering, recording and sharing<br>•Coordination of and with others (including hall set up and management; and volunteer services involvement)<br>•Reviewing rules and regulations | •Communication about available support<br>•Community consultation<br>•Communication reach<br>•Messaging |

*Figure 1: Three major areas for improvement in future recovery programs*

## Recommendations

Many recommendations and suggested areas for improvement were identified by the participants, along with those from us as the authors of this report.

**1 People - Organisational knowledge, emergency event experience and organisational changes**

1. Maintain a dedicated team of staff for continuity and visibility (to community members and key partner organisations) – for example, through funding dedicated staff in non-disaster periods who are knowledgeable across all Council teams

2. Find ways to build experience or ensuring regular training and handover processes.

3. Provide clear, accessible (easy to understand) flow charts to help community members as well as recovery partners navigate the recovery process across State, Council and community services
4. Support or provide coordination for partner organisations through recovery
5. Consider innovative organisational responses such as: considering a standing community consultation committee or engaging volunteers who are willing to be mentors helping people understand what to expect of recovery processes and experiences.

**2 Systems**

6. Develop systems and strategies to:

   a. identify, record and verify impact and needs,
   b. record offers of assistance,
   c. connect services and supports to affected people,
   d. manage privacy and confidentiality.

7. Address data management to facilitate ability to use information and timely access
8. Guide and assist with navigating processes – have informed people and resources (such as FAQs or links to resources) available to support the community to navigate complex recovery systems
9. Establish a program information management system related to recovery – which could include templates for program establishment, expenditure and evaluation.

**3 Procedures**

10. Resource staff adequately to be able to respond in a timely manner to emergency and recovery as required.
11. Establish CRC and subcommittees as early as possible post-disaster and facilitate opportunities for vertical engagement sooner.
12. Resource CRC and subcommittees with support as required, For example, consultants on community recovery, community development workers, and implementing learnings from guides, such as *Lessons learned by Community Recovery Committees of the 2009 Victorian Bushfires* (2011)
13. Address the issue of public liability insurance to enable insured volunteer involvement
14. Simplify planning processes to facilitate rebuilds in accordance with the Planning Scheme and advocate for improved communication and responsibility for tree and land clearing. For example, improving clarity and understanding of Bushfire Attack Level (BAL) ratings, advocacy in relation to clarifying gaps, community education and supporting impacted individuals with respect to implementation.
15. Establish relief and recovery centre(s) as close as safely possible, as early as possible.
16. Establish communication protocols for future recovery programs:
    a. Have a variety of communication methods – digital, physical presence (e.g., at the hall), door knocking or mailouts
    b. Engage in active outreach, beyond the presence at the hall
    c. Have alternatives for support or contact outside business hours
    d. Timing – communicating both about past and future events and opportunities
    e. Advocate for improvements in emergency service notifications for individuals whose properties have been damaged (so they do not find out on the news)

  f. Messaging – being clear and let people know what to expect

  g. Follow-up with individuals to close the loop on service provided

  h. Maintain contact with people who leave the area, so they have access to support, including renters

17. Strive for broad community consultation

18. Where issues raised in this review are outside of the scope of Cardinia Shire Council's response and recovery remit, we recommend that Council has an important role in liaising and advocating with other bodies (State Government and partner organisations) to raise these matters of concern.

19. To consider further opportunities for research and evaluation, related to disaster preparedness, response and recovery, that can inform Council strategy and resourcing.

We acknowledge that some of these recommendations may be out of the scope of Cardinia Shire Council's immediate mandate, and/or may not reflect the current status quo. However, in the interests of providing information to assist with advocating for appropriate resourcing and linkage for recovery planning after future disasters, we present them for consideration. In providing both community perceptions of their needs along with an alignment with best practice knowledge, we hope that they assist with future planning in the complex context of disaster recovery.

# 1 Background to the project

## 1a. The Bunyip Complex Fire (BCF) Recovery Program

The BCF Recovery Program was a regional recovery program, established with the Victorian Government, local government (in this instance, the Cardinia Shire Council) and local agencies. The BCF Recovery Program was coordinated by the BCF Regional Recovery Committee, with roles and responsibilities outlined in the BCF Recovery Plan. This Recovery Plan was transitioned after 12 months to a municipal recovery program. Regional Recovery Sub-Committees were formed for the social (led by the Victorian Department of Families, Fairness and Housing; DFFH), natural (led by the Department of Environment, Land, Water and Planning; DELWP) and economic (led by the Department of Jobs, Precincts and Regions; DJPR) Recovery Environments. Each Sub-Committee was responsible for developing recovery plans to guide recovery.

While this review has been instigated by Cardinia Shire Council for future municipal recovery planning, State and Regional authorities have a coordinating responsibility in all regional emergency events.

## 1b. Cardinia Shire Council's specific Recovery Program objectives

Following the 2019 Bunyip Complex Fires, the Cardinia Shire Council was funded to deliver a social and economic recovery program including a long-term recovery program to meet set objectives. Most actions will conclude at the end of 2022 except for several long-term projects.

The broad Recovery Plan objectives were identified as the following:

- Increase the resilience of impacted communities so that they are stronger and safer than before the Bunyip Complex Fires occurred
- Plan and deliver recovery support in a manner consistent with the National Principles for Disaster Recovery – using a coordinated approach, which is tailored to the community's context, recognises complexity, engages communities, communicates effectively, and acknowledges and builds community capacity
- Provide people, communities, businesses, local governments, and other stakeholders affected by the Bunyip Complex Fires with the information, support and services needed to pursue their recovery
- Plan and deliver a coordinated range of recovery services across the environments of: Social and community, Built (clean-up), Economic, Natural, Agricultural
- Mitigate known and potential risks resulting from the emergency.

## 1c. Purpose of the review

Cardinia Shire Council sought an independent review of the Bushfire Recovery Program for the BCF to guide future municipal recovery planning. Specifically, the purpose was to review:

- How well did the Council meet the Recovery Plan objectives?
- What were the successes as perceived by the community?
- How did recovery actions measure against evidence based best practice?
- What system gaps and areas for improvement are identified by impacted residents and partners agencies?

- What was the lived experience of affected persons and key agency partners?
- What recommendations should Council consider for future recovery planning?

## 1d. Scope of the review

The review aimed to include, but was not limited to, the following:

- Documenting the lived experience of affected residents, volunteers and key agency partners for this event and their experiences of the Recovery Program;
- Planning, delivery and effectiveness of natural, social, and economic community support and events
- Operation and delivery of services at the Bushfire Recovery Centre (Bunyip and Tonimbuk)
  - Partnerships with key support agencies including successes, gaps, and opportunities for future emergencies
- Coordination, support and involvement of volunteer and community-based organisations in recovery programs and activities
- Community Led approach including:

  - Community engagement and involvement in recovery planning and delivery
  - Effectiveness of the Community Recovery Committee.

# 2 Disaster recovery programs

## 2a. The published evidence for the effectiveness of disaster recovery programs

*The objective of disaster recovery programs is to help communities reach a point where they are sustainable and resilient (Argyrous, 2018, p.9).*

Consistent with global trends, the prevalence and intensity of disasters is increasing in Australia (Centre for Research on the Epidemiology of Disasters, 2022). A large body of international evidence now substantiates the long-term impacts of these disasters on affected communities (Jones et al., 2022), across the social, economic, built, and natural environments of people's lives. For example, the Beyond Bushfires, the 10-year mixed methods study of community resilience and mental health after the Victorian Black Saturday bushfires demonstrated long-term mental health impacts for many, including PTSD. These mental health impacts were associated not only with the fire impacts themselves, but with the ongoing major life stressors many people faced, including health, economic and rebuilding stressors. The recommendation from this report to government was to:

*Establish a staged 5 year framework for recovery from major disasters to account for extended mental health impacts and support short and long term recovery, resilience and community connectedness (Gibbs et al., 2021, p.27).*

With climate change, it is anticipated that this pattern of increased disaster prevalence and intensity will continue. This necessitates an intensification of preparedness, response and recovery planning at all levels of government to support people and their communities reach new points of sustainability and resilience, positioning these efforts not as outside of but as core to 'business as usual'.

The Victorian Preparedness Framework identifies four key domains of recovery, specifically:

1. **Economic recovery** – returning and developing new economic and business activities for an economically viable and sustainable community

2. **Natural and cultural heritage rehabilitation** – to "preserve, conserve, rehabilitate, and restore" natural and cultural heritage resources

3. **Built recovery** – restoring infrastructure, establishing safe areas during and after emergencies, and ensuring provision of necessary facilities and services

4. **Social recovery** – providing longer term services to enable individuals, families and communities to function

These domains of recovery align with the approach taken by Cardinia Shire Council in response to the Bunyip Complex Fires 2019, addressing these four environments (referring more commonly to the natural environment as 'environmental and agricultural'). These environments align with a community capitals approach (Emery & Flora, 2006), which has been used to map all seven capitals relevant to disaster contexts in the ReCap project, a major disaster research initiative across Australia and New Zealand (recoverycapitals.org.au; Quinn et al., 2021).

Despite the importance of disaster recovery programs, there is relatively limited evidence as to their efficacy in terms of outcome studies. In large part this is due to the difficulties in conducting research in disaster contexts with traumatised people, and where recovery outcomes are not clearly defined (Argyrous, 2018). One systematic review of the available evidence by Archer et al. (2015) concluded that best practice would address: '(1) the need to plan for recovery before major events occur, identified as 'Advanced Recovery', (2) the need for community-led activities, and (3) the importance of community and individual networks. These findings are highly resonant with a key community report written after the Black Saturday bushfires by the Community Recovery Committees (2011).

More broadly, five essential elements for mass trauma intervention have been identified by expert consensus (Hobfoll et al., 2007), providing an important framework for understanding individual and community level responses to disaster, and what their immediate needs are (see Figure 2). This framework is also a helpful framework for assessing the barriers and enablers to enactment of any recovery program within a given community.

**Interventions that promote:**

**1 A sense of safety:** being and feeling physically and psychologically safe, and having a relatively predictable and stable world

**2 Calming:** restore the ability to manage and regulate intense emotions

**3 Self-efficacy and community-efficacy:** feeling effective, competent and in control, that your actions are meaningful and able to change circumstances

**4 Hope and optimism:** having a sense of meaning and purpose and expecting good things can and will happen. Not about false hope or empty reassurances that things will get better with time

**5 Connectedness:** knowing others around us share our experiences or emotions. Knowing others will support us when we need them

*Figure 2: The five essential elements of mass trauma intervention*

Thus, while disaster recovery programs are provided to restore functioning after a disaster, they are intimately linked with each community's adaptive capacities – identified as economic development, social capital, information and communication, and community competence (Norris et al., 2008).

## 2b. The local government context of recovery programs:

Recovery programs at the local government level are a vital part of emergency management (Dibley et al., 2019). Set up under the Emergency Management Act 2013, every three years a new Victorian Emergency Management Strategic Action Plan is developed. In the year prior to the Bunyip Complex Fires, Emergency Management Victoria released the *Victorian Preparedness Framework* (2018, update #1). This document identifies **core capabilities** for reducing the consequences of an emergency and details **critical tasks** that are essential to each capability. An overview of how these capabilities align across the emergency management process (EMV, 2018, p. 16) is reproduced in Figure 3. Importantly, the capabilities are recognised as interdependent across three phases of

emergency management: before, during and after. Thus, critically, while recovery takes place in the 'after' phase, the effectiveness of any recovery program is inextricably tied to capabilities.
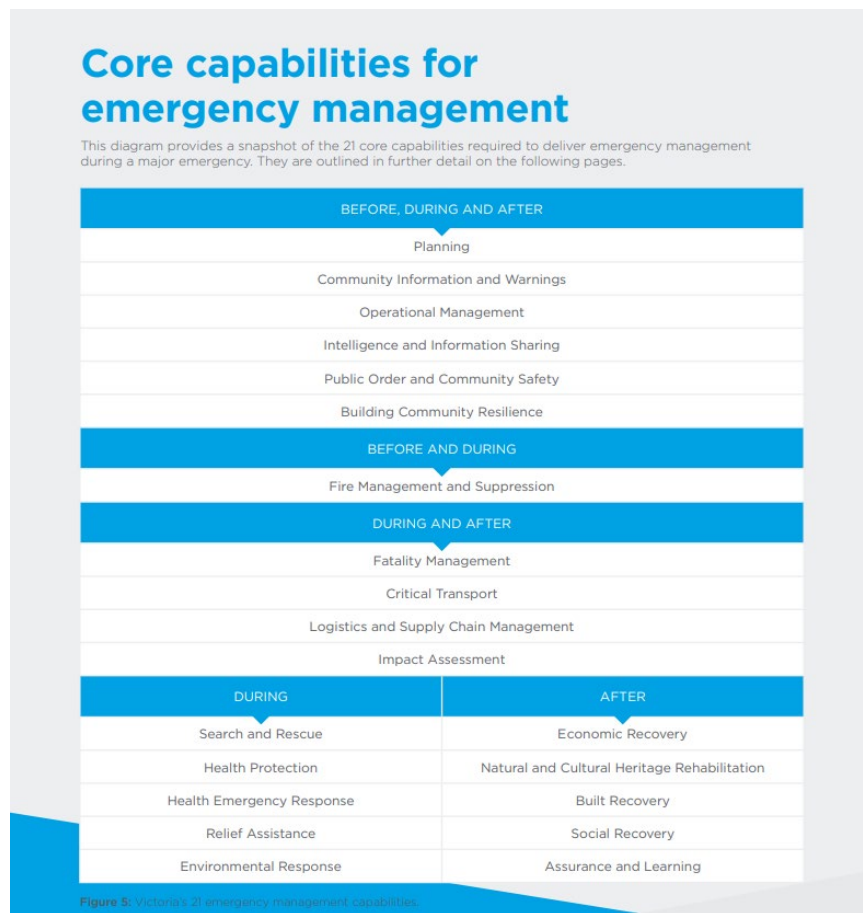


*Figure 3: Core capabilities for emergency management*

The essential areas of capability that are identified for recovery programs (Department of Environment, Land, Water and Planning [DELWP], 2019, p. 9) focus on people (organisational knowledge, emergency even experience, and organisational changes), systems (including training) and processes.

To guide best practice, seven capacities are also identified, each unique to local government areas (DELWP, 2019, p. 8): people - staffing (before); systems – budget; governance – funding; processes – procedures; people – staffing (during and after); geographic size; and population. These seven capacities become the important foundation for future recovery planning.

If recovery and resilience are the goals of disaster recovery programs, for individuals, families and communities, focusing on these programmatic capacities is important. As Canadian social worker, Michael Ungar (2013, p. 255) notes from his work on disaster and trauma recovery, 'Resilience is not as much an individual construct as it is a quality of the environment and its capacity to facilitate growth'. His resilience-focused work, embedded in disaster and trauma programs internationally therefore emphasises the capacity for disaster-impacted people to be able to navigate and negotiate these resources in the wider environments of people's lives.

## 2c. The recognised complexity of disaster recovery programs

In evaluating the Bunyip Complex Fire Recovery Program, therefore, it is important to contextualise its strengths and limitations within the broader context of Victoria's council-delivered recovery programs. With each unique disaster, council context and subsequent transition from response to recovery, the complexities of service provision are well noted. In the Victorian Emergency Management Strategic Action Plan Update #4 2019–2022 (Emergency Management Victoria, 2020), for example, the need for further detailed work to identify the relevant actions at the local government level of responsibility was noted in Action 4.1: 'Clarify and confirm the emergency management roles of local government and assess councils' capability and capacity to meet their emergency obligations.' Consistent with this need, and others identified in the strategic action plan, four priority areas have been articulated: Drive high level reform toward 2030; reduce risk and build resilience; enhance inclusion and empower and build the capacity of communities; and foster strategic capability

Based on widespread consultation, the DELWP (2019) review, *Councils and Emergencies Capability and Capacity Evaluation Report*, identified five areas for improvement (DELWP, 2019, p. 6):

1. Emergency relief and recovery: 'councils identified a lack of capacity and capability to undertake their emergency relief and recovery responsibilities and activities' (DELWP 2019, p. 23)

2. Integration of emergency management into business as usual

3. Community engagement for emergency management

4. Further clarification of council roles in emergency management

5. Emergency management budget and funding

Within the context of this limited evidence base, and emergency management ecosystem, this review sought the views of key external stakeholders as to the successes, gaps, areas for improvement and recommendations for future council-delivered recovery programs.

# 3 Methods

## 3a. Approvals

This evaluation was conducted from August to October 2022 following the establishment of a contract between CSC and the Department of Social Work at The University of Melbourne. Ethics clearance was provided by the University of Melbourne's Low to No Risk (LNR) Ethics Committee (Project ID 2022-24594-31237-2).

## 3b. Design

This evaluation used a multi-methods design, employing three different methods of data collection – document review, focus groups and interviews with key stakeholders. As an exploratory qualitative review, the aim is to provide rich description of people's lived experiences. As such, it is an in-depth review of participants' perspectives. It is distinct from a quantitative study where statistical analyses can be undertaken to identify, for example, the representativeness of the sample.

## 3c. Recruitment

Two Cardinia Shire Council staff members forwarded the focus group and interview flyers to the Community Recovery Committee and their networks via existing email and social media groups. Potential participants were advised of the project via an information flyer, which provided a link to the plain language statement and to a registration of interest survey as well as the contact details for the University of Melbourne research team.

All participants were asked to complete a brief demographic questionnaire via an online or paper format prior to the commencement of their focus group or interview (see Figure 6).

## 3d. Sample

The sample was comprised of 29 people who had been involved as a resident and community member in the Cardinia Shire, and volunteers and/or professional service providers who were a part of the recovery activities, events and programs following the Bunyip Complex Fires in 2019. As noted earlier, Cardinia Shire Council staff were excluded from the evaluation given it was an external stakeholder review. Participation was open to anyone involved in these activities, events and programs, at any stage since these fires. All participants were 18 years or older. Inviting minors would have required proceeding to a different Ethics Committee given the increased risk management needed for younger participants. The project time lines did not allow for this.

## 3e. Data collection

### Recovery program documentation review

Background documentation was provided by CSC - recovery policy and planning documents, community newsletters. This documentation was analysed against the four environments of the recovery program, with findings and recommendations reported in Figure 5. A summary of the documentation was also collated (Figure 4). This summary document was used in focus group discussions to provide an overview for participants of all the areas of CSC program delivery.

### Focus groups

Data were collected from 3 focus groups, representing (1) the Community Recovery Committee; (2) Volunteer Organisations; and (3) Agencies and government departments (excluding Council given

the external stakeholder focus of this review). Four prompt questions were used to guide the discussion. Two were conducted on-site at Bunyip Town Hall and were 96-103 minutes in length. An online focus group was with agency staff outside of the CSC community and was 69 minutes in length. The focus groups were recorded and transcribed.

**Interviews**

Nineteen interviews were conducted with 21 individuals, with two interviews involving couples who chose to meet together with the interviewer. Fifteen interviews were conducted online or via telephone, and four interviews were conducted in person at Bunyip Town Hall. Interviews ranged from 21-86 minutes, with an average of 48 minutes.

## 3f. Interview and focus group data analysis

The transcribed interview and focus group data were thematically analysed in NVivo, using a deductive method of analysis to address the key areas of focus of the evaluation. That is, the transcripts were coded for the following five areas:

1. Successes
2. Areas to improve – less than successful
3. Gaps
4. Recommendations to Council
5. Fire experience

The researchers worked to reach consensus at the coding and theming stages, resolving differences through discussion. Table 2 in Appendix 1 provides a frequency analysis of the first four areas listed above.

In the interviews and focus groups, we asked participants about their recommendations to Council for future recovery programs. Therefore, we retain throughout this reporting of findings the language of 'participant recommendations', noting that in Part 10 of this report, we integrate them into our broader recommendations arising from this report.

All participants were provided with a draft of the report and two weeks in which to provide feedback to the authors. Six participants took up this invitation.

## 3g. Strengths and limitations

Within the scope of a short-term, qualitative review, a major strength of this evaluation is that 29 stakeholders were able to contribute their perspectives on the BCF Recovery Program. These in-depth perspectives were diverse in terms of fire impacts, participants' residence, and personal and/or professional engagement with the program. The limitation of this evaluation is that it was based on self-selecting participation and not necessarily reflective of all the wider views of the impacted communities. For example, there is no Indigenous, nor young families' perspectives included in this evaluation by virtue of who responded to the invitation to participate and the absence of targeted recruitment strategies to specific groups in the Cardinia Shire.

# 4 Recovery Program document analysis

As background to this review, multiple documents related to the BCF Recovery Program were provided to the evaluators – to assist with mapping the recovery program that was implemented and identifying gaps. Figure 4 shows these documents and whether they were related primarily to funding, planning, reporting and/or community engagement.



*Figure 4: Map of Recovery Program documents\**

\*Navy font refers to Council-owned documents

Recognising that this documentation set is incomplete, key observations of it are that:

1. A high and varied number of recovery efforts were undertaken across all four key recovery environments listed in the Regional Recovery Plan.
2. The evidence of activity was heavily weighted in the social environment.
3. It is difficult to track and understand all activities, events and/or programs undertaken due to changes and extensions to recovery deliverables, inconsistent language used across the documents, and missing or incomplete documentation.

A summary of this documentation, mapped against the four environments of the recovery program, was collated (Figure 5) and used as a prompt during the focus groups and interviews.
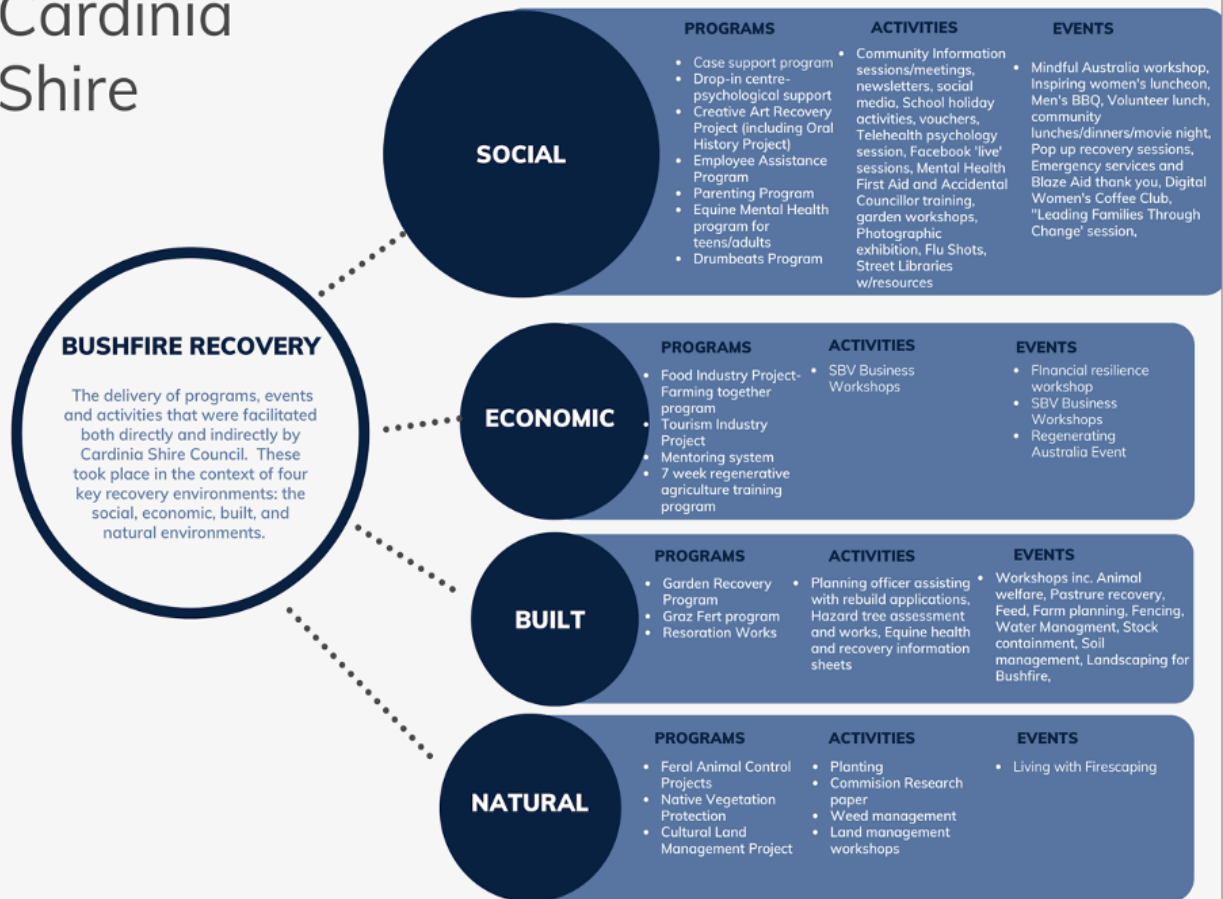
*Figure 5: Program activities and events according to the four recovery environments*

# 5 Who participated?

In total, 29 people participated in either an interview or focus group and 27 completed the background demographic questionnaire (Figure 6). Those who completed the questionnaire identified as follows:



*Figure 6: Participant demographics*

# 6 What were the participants' fire experiences?
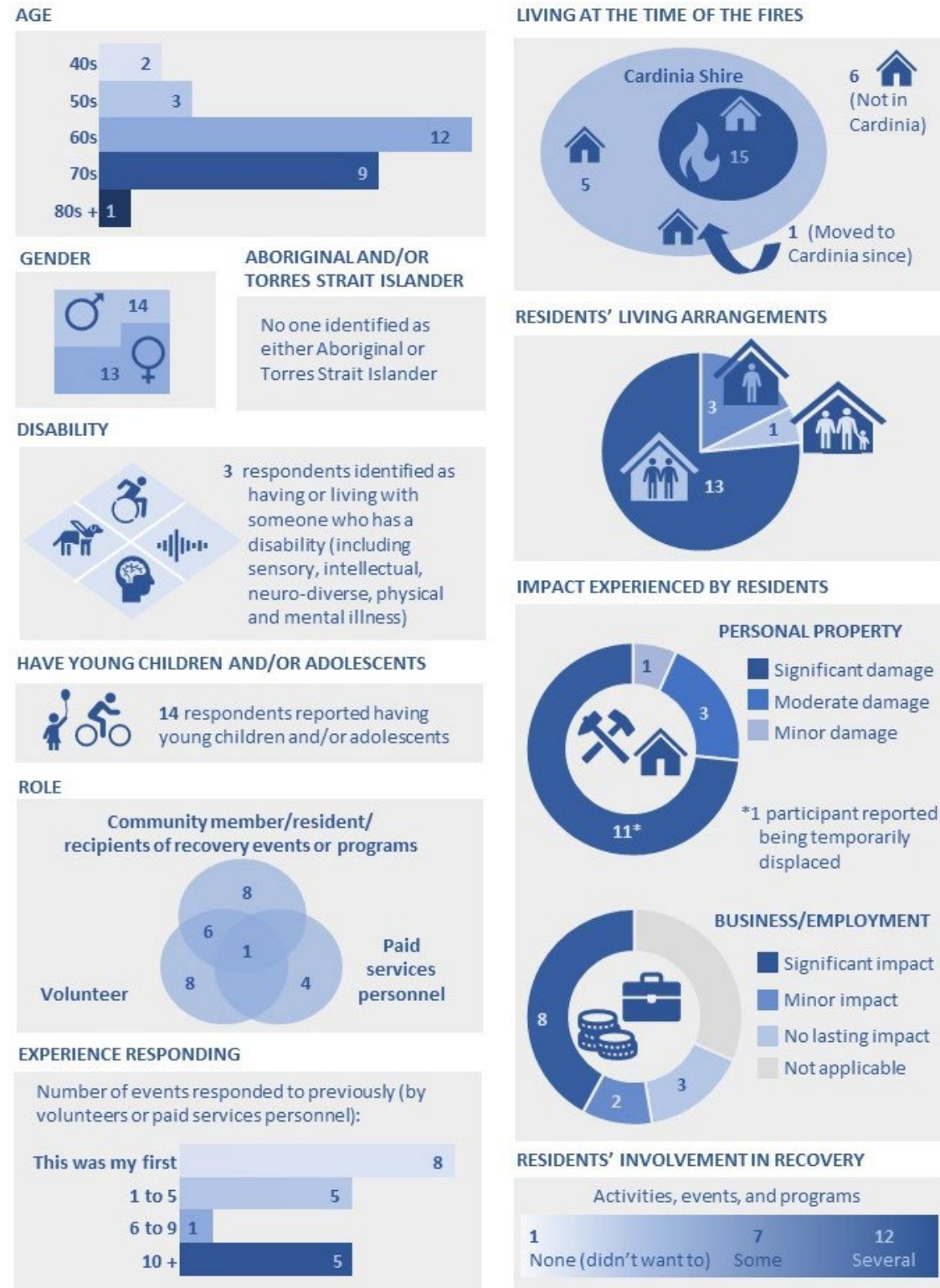
While the interviews and focus groups did not directly focus on the participants' specific fire experiences, fourteen of the participants spoke in some detail about them, with ten participants describing the direct impacts of the fires on their property and selves on the days of the fires.

Our observation is that many participants were continuing to experience traumatic and distressing recollections and ongoing impacts of these fires and their aftermath, consistent with other longitudinal studies of the mental health impacts of bushfires (Gibbs et al., 2021).

The key concerns relating to the fire experiences that were described were:

- The management of the fires – the perception that the fire could have been put out swiftly and therefore much of the damage could have been prevented.
- The perceived necessity of accessing property to support livestock - the frustration and distress re the roadblocks and inability to return home. It is worth noting that numerous participants did return to their properties by avoiding these roadblocks.
- Property loss – the traumatic experiences of losing homes, businesses, sheds, and fencing.
- A sense of injustice – the perceived inequitable access to resources (financial and human) by members of the community.

The traumatic experiences people were continuing to live with were vividly described and some excerpts are provided here to illustrate these profound impacts:

*The worst thing about the whole experience was waiting the four or five days not knowing whether you had a house or not. […] and it's dealing with - I mean, people - it's not only you're dealing with the fire stuff. You're dealing with the other stressors that are in your life at the time.  (Interview 8)*

*Emotionally I lost a fair bit of my past life. (Interview 11)*

*I got stuck on the other side of the roadblock. I went down to get food because we had no food. [...] So, I got food for [my family], and then I got stuck on the roadblock and they wouldn't let me back in. I said, I'm a local. I've got my rates notice. They said, no, you're not going back in [...] where's the number? You know how they have like the police? It says if you don't need the sirens; ring this number. Okay, so in an emergency, what's the number to explain this is my situation right now. Can you help me? I don't know what to do. (Interview 10)*

It was also evident throughout the interviews and focus groups that there were different experiences of the aftermath of the fires within the Shire. Some participants clearly felt highly connected to the broader community and the Council, while others thought there were different groups or 'cliques' with respect to involvement and inclusion in recovery. Participants also highlighted that there were very different communities (and therefore needs) within the Shire, which influenced recovery experiences.

*The other thing, in that community, each of those – like there's Tonimbuk, Garfield North and Tynong North – they're all completely different communities, with different attitudes, so they're even isolated from each other. (Interview 4)*

BEST PRACTICE LINK

Recognise and provide support for the long-term mental health impacts of disasters on the community and service providers

# 7 What were the successes as perceived by the community?

Seven main themes were identified from participants' descriptions of the successes of the Council's work towards recovery: communication; engagement and outreach through diverse recovery activities; specific Council staff; the Community Recovery Committee (CRC); the longevity of the recovery program; fostering and improving a sense of community; and enhancing the operation of volunteer organisations.

## 7a. Communication

Four areas of successful communication strategies were identified. Participants spoke about the:

- positive access they had to information regarding recovery efforts

- direct contact and communication with council staff

- information sharing between organisations to facilitate recovery efforts

- listening to the communities perceived needs.

> BEST PRACTICE LINK
>
> This Recovery Program did offer:
>
> - High frequency, relevant and extensive reach of communication that enabled families and communities to function well

These selected participant comments highlight some of these strategies:

> *Look, I think they were very good. They kept us in the loop of everything. As I said, I attended all the recovery meetings, as I said, weekly for months and months and months. We just all came together, and it was all discussed. I think keeping it weekly, because it was really important because we were needed out there in the community, and if we all knew exactly what was going on, and that was - yeah, it worked well. (Interview 14)*

> *So I think from then it was a matter of making sure that community had, I guess, a pathway into council and into those recovery services. Council did that by*

*ensuring that they had a dedicated line that people could ring; so there was a*

*recovery support line that was established for people to be able to access those*

*supports and to speak to someone in council. … the relief centre then morphed*

*into a recovery centre and council officers were there so people could come in and*

*actually speak to people, so they didn't have to do it over the phone if they didn't*

*want to or they didn't have to travel into the shire offices - in Officer, they could*

*actually speak to someone there. (Focus group participant)*

## 7b. Engaging and outreaching through a variety of recovery activities

Participants referred to a significant range of activities (e.g., dinners, arts, singing, workshops) which catered to individual preferences.  The nature of the program delivery was diverse; from informal events or 'drop-ins' to more structured and facilitated workshops, as well as the opportunity to engage in a group versus one-on-one setting.

*I think the council did a good job. Considering communication can be really*

*difficult. Even the postcard drop that we did, a lot of people didn't have a post – a*

*letterbox – they'd got burned, so they were picking up mail from Bunyip, which is*

*a town, quite a distance from where they were living. So, in that particular*

*community it was quite difficult for council to even get that information out, and*

*you know what it's like, if you get a flyer, most people would probably just go, oh,*

*what's that? Throw it in the bin. So, I think they did a really good job of engaging.*

*I think they had some key people in the community. Yeah, some of the dinners*

*were really well attended, so, I think they were doing a good job of actually*

*reaching out to the community. (Interview 4)*

> BEST PRACTICE LINK
>
> This Recovery Program did:
>
> - Try to be deeply community-engaged and ensure a diversity of approaches to engage with people and their needs

## 7c. Council staff

Specific council staff were perceived to be hardworking and passionate, whose presence in the community and skills improved over time and made a significant difference for many. The skills of particular staff were highlighted repeatedly. These skills and strengths of individuals should not be under-estimated in terms of the success of a recovery program.

*What was really good - well there were two women who virtually manned the council side of things through that period of time. I've lost track of how much time. You do when you're on the ground too. But certainly now - were exceptional. They went in there without anything, any knowledge, any prior knowledge. They were local. That was that. I think that's why they got the job - the Bunyip people. I think that's why. They were taken from their jobs at council, whatever they were doing - they were probably still doing it think - and lobbed in and just had to - yeah all they knew was what you would know in the relief centre. (Interview 16)*

*Well, they had people dedicated to the recovery and they've got a team, they still do. I suppose part of it is that they happened to be pretty nice, capable people, so they were therefore able to achieve. (Interview 19)*

> BEST PRACTICE LINK
>
> This Recovery Program did:
>
> - Provide strong networks of support.
>
> These are often driven by particular individuals within the affected community who can assist with navigating and negotiating recovery resources (Ungar, 2013), both informational and practical in nature, as well as emotionally supportive ones

## 7d. The Community Recovery Committee (CRC)

The CRC was generally recognised for its positive contributions to recovery. Participants in this evaluation who were members of it spoke about how they were able to advocate and connect other community members to Council and other recovery partners. There were also observations from agencies:

*We had representatives from the CRC come along to that [Regional Recovery] Committee to really be the voice of the community to give us a sense of what was happening on the ground and whether we were hitting the mark in terms of the recovery supports that were being put in place. (Focus group participant)*

Some perceived strengths about the operation and support for the CRC related to rotation of venues to support working across the different communities, and the initial guidance from Anne Leadbetter, an experienced consultant on disaster recovery, was valued. Guidance was seen as important for future, as accomplishments of the present committee were attributed in large part to the skills and determination of the current members and establishing committees in future may not be able to rely on that.

> BEST PRACTICE LINK
>
> This Recovery Program did:
>
> - Develop community-led activities, and build local community and individual networks

## 7e. The longevity of the recovery program in general was praised

Participants noted ongoing projects that have been established as well as appreciating the duration of programs and supports that were still on offer. This reflected a consideration of timing, whereby supports may be accessed at different points along the recovery trajectory according to the individual needs and circumstances of community members.

*There's that whole emotion part of trying to rebuild, not just the building, but it's the bits and pieces that go with it. It goes on for ages. It's not a short-term thing.*

*(Focus group participant)*

> BEST PRACTICE LINK
>
> This Recovery Program did
>
> - Plan for longevity
>
> This program's three-year approach, which converged with the COVID-19 pandemic, reflects good practice at the very least. As noted earlier, the Beyond Bushfires study, which focused on longitudinal community and mental health recovery after the Black Saturday bushfires, recommended a minimum five-year focus for government recovery programs after large scale disasters.

## 7f. Fostering and improving the sense of community

The recovery program and process **fostered and improved the sense of community** in the region, between both individuals and community organisations. The establishment of Tonimbuk Hall as a hub for recovery activity and its consequent refurbishment for ongoing use was considered a key factor in this.

*I think one of the biggest successes was bringing the community together,*

*because I think that the recovery program really did focus a lot on making sure*

*that the community as a whole was recognised and supported. (Interview 15)*

*They (community members) would come to the hall every day. We provided*

*lunch so they'd come every day. Then the council workers would go and sit with*

*them. They were the positives ... a lovely open fire and couches and chairs so*

*people could sit and talk and share their story ... that worked so well. They all ate*

*together, and they ate with the volunteers. (Interview 16)*

*When you experience something like that [the fires], isolation is not the way to*

*recovery – connection is the way to recovery. (Interview 9)*

BEST PRACTICE LINKS

This Recovery Program did:

- Bring the community together in as many constructive and creative ways as possible
- Enable sharing of practical resources and strategies, along with the mental health support that community linkage can provide

## 7g. Enhancing the operation of volunteer organisations

Participants referred to a number of volunteer organisations that provided critical assistance with clean-up efforts and material aid in the immediate aftermath of the fires. Council was noted to have enhanced the operation of these organisations by providing both practical support and advocacy. Some noted that while at times volunteering or participating in community engagement strategies was a demanding personal investment, there were also benefits:

*[Despite the intensity of personal recovery] I still felt that being on the Recovery*

*Committee was helpful for me in that helping other people in their recovery was*

*cathartic – it was therapeutic. I felt like I was making a difference and I think we did make a difference, a big difference. So of course it was more intense at the start, and it became less intense as time went on. But I suppose, yeah, by being on the Recovery Committee, I felt that – we all felt that we could help direct people to – if we couldn't help them, to someone who could, and so that's what we tried to do, yeah. (Interview 9)*

When mapped against the four recovery environments, the overwhelming majority of discussion of successes was in relation to the social environment.

*Even now with all the recovery stuff that we – I've been pretty pleased to see, it's been ongoing although it's probably not directly related to the physical aspects because we've moved past that but the psychological and the artistic stuff that we've been doing which I've never been exposed to before, in that sense. […] It's quite emotional, that stuff. It actually brings things out that you didn't realise were in there. […] Some people would say it's a waste of money until you get involved. (Interview 6)*

The provision of diverse programs through the broader social networks that these organisations fostered is well-aligned with best practice recommendations, promoting community-efficacy and connection.

Table 1 (p. 51) provides further detail about what was discussed in relation to each environment. While many specific events and activities were discussed, it was evident that they related not only to individuals' enjoyment of particular activities, but for important indirect benefits as well.

*There were so many conversations that came out through the workshops. I think they were more valuable for that, than they were for the actual activities [laughs] that we were doing. By having people there, being busy doing something, that's where the conversations come out. (Interview 4)*

It is vital to note that participants referred to a range of volunteer organisations that they thought were particularly responsive in the immediate aftermath of the fires, providing support with **clean-up and material aid**. This included access to food, toys, clothing, plants and tools, as well as support with the removal and re-instatement of boundary fencing and dead trees.

**BEST PRACTICE LINKS**

This Recovery Program did:

- Provide diverse, coordinated psychosocial support for people

- Provide for immediate material and instrumental needs

# 8 Gaps, areas for improvement, and recommendations identified by participants

Having outlined the successes in the previous section, we now review the areas identified by participants as the Recovery Program gaps and areas for improvement, along with their recommendations for future recovery programs. In many ways, these findings are reflective of the absence of or difficulties with the elements of success described in the previous section – they are in many ways the flip-side of the same coin of best practice in disaster recovery.

Discussions of gaps, areas for improvement and recommendations converged around three key themes: (i) preparedness for recovery, (ii) ways of working, and (iii) engagement and communication. Consistent with the evidence for recovery discussed earlier, it was evident that proficiency in relation to each of these themes would be interdependent. Figure 7 (overleaf) provides an overview of the themes, which are described in greater detail in the following pages.

In addition to these broad themes, participants discussed issues that are directly mapped against the recovery environments and can be found in Table 1 (p. 51).

One other area noted as a gap was in relation to recognition and **support for people who are renting** (not only property owners).

Finally, some people felt they had not received any direct help from Council, yet there were also others who felt there were no or few significant gaps.

These insights reflect participants' own experiences. Their awareness of Council's roles and responsibilities within the BCF Recovery Program and what was available or delivered may be limited (which was acknowledge by some participants themselves). Nonetheless, if there are areas where the Council's role or work was unnoticed or misunderstood, any discrepancy in how these participants had experienced it may itself speak to considerations for improvements around how it is communicated.
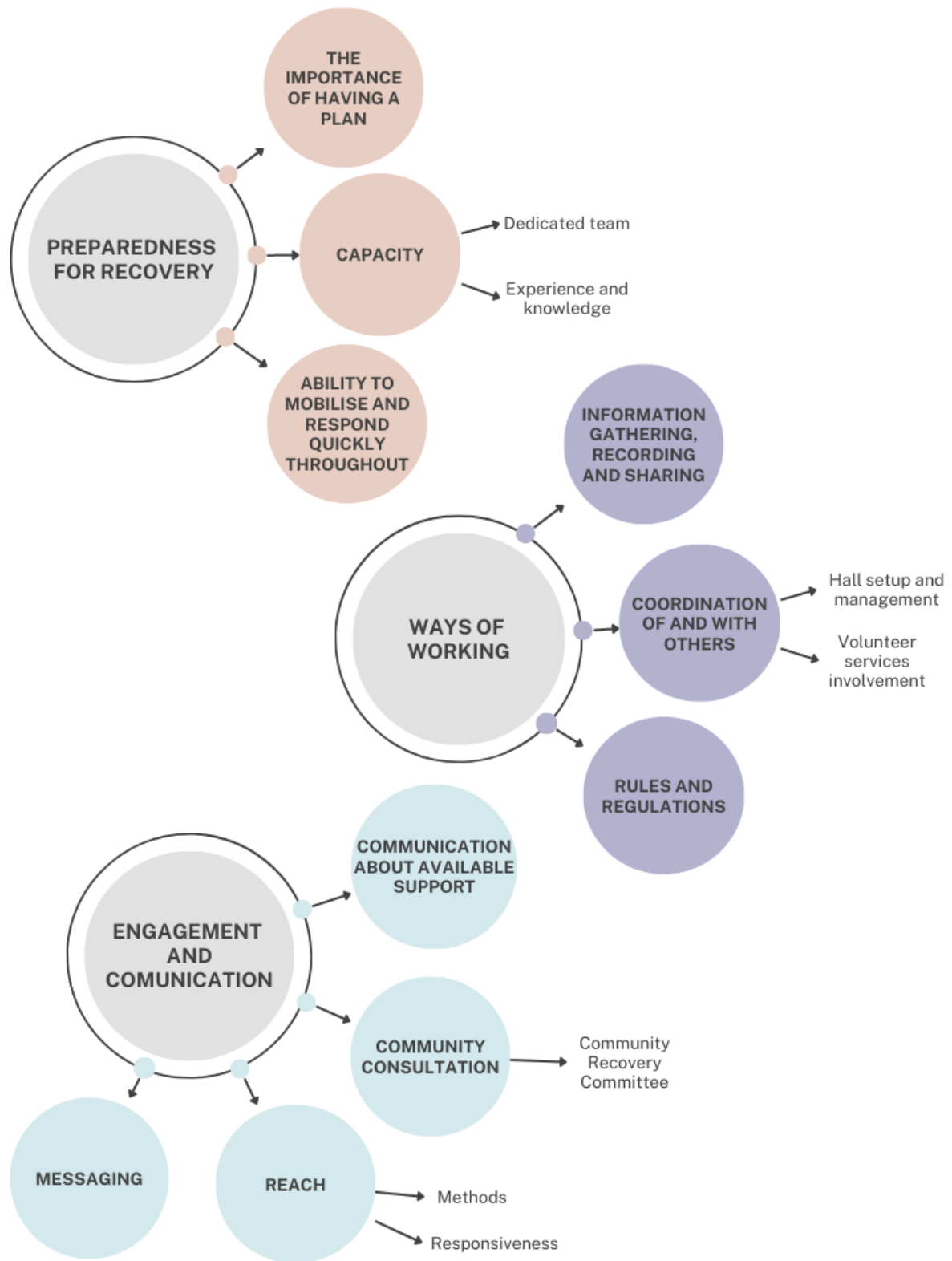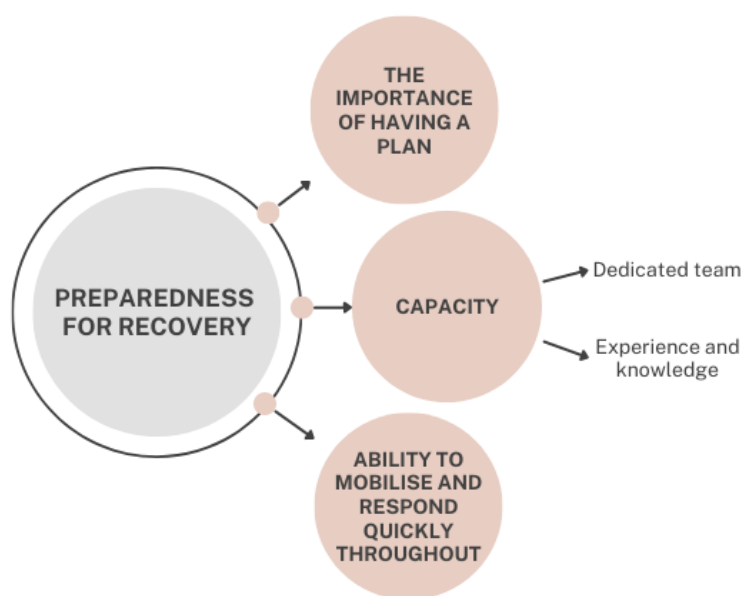
*Figure 7: Key themes for areas of improvement in future recovery programs*

## 8a. Preparedness for recovery



### 8a.i The importance of having a plan

While there was recognition of the urgency and uniqueness of disasters, participants considered that there are key steps, tasks, and roles that in principle would be consistent. Having a clearly documented plan was viewed as important for being able to mobilise quickly and communicate it clearly and consistently to others involved. Other areas of Council and recovery partners need to know how they fit into the response in advance.

> *In the future [disasters will] be far more frequent. So, it should be this response that's not automated, and not generic, because nothing can be – every community's difference. But that's your starting point. That's where you start from, and you work through Step 1, you need to assist people with cleaning up. Well what does that look like? How do we achieve that? What agencies need to be employed? Who is going to support that process? What financial assistance is required? How is Government going to commit to that? (Interview 9)*

While policy level plans may be in place, something that is able to be picked up and **communicated clearly and easily to community members** and partners in recovery was also seen as important to help them understand the processes that are involved in recovery.

> *So, my belief very strongly is the council and the volunteers that were around - and I know it was a new experience for everybody. They need some flowchart*

*that says in the event of a fire or another emergency, this is what happens so that*

*it can be handed out to people. (Focus group participant)*

This could include identifying different pathways for people affected to varying degrees, to avoid the perception they have not been considered. For example, when someone hasn't lost their home but they were impacted by being in the midst of a major clean up, one participant said:

*So, there's a real push back to those people – I wasn't looking for help, I was*

*looking for the process, and the process was a flat no.  So, anybody that didn't*

*lose their house and went through that process, just got pushed back straight off.*

*There's the door. (Focus group participant)*

Understanding the process has potential to help community members and organisations with decision making as well:

*I think, by say that planner, within a reasonable timeframe after the event,*

*having at a community meeting, an information session about this is what it's*

*going to look like if you rebuild. If you want to rebuild, these are the steps that*

*you have to take. This is the likely outcome. Then that influences the decisions*

*that people make, so that they're not mentally hooked on this process of re-*

*building if it's not going to be viable for them.  That caused a lot of angst – a lot*

*of anger, yeah, contributed to a lot of mental health issues. (Interview 9)*

The perception that **lessons have not been learned** (or maintained) from previous disasters was a notable frustration and was associated with the sense of limitations with any existing recovery plans.

There was appreciation of the willingness to commission this evaluation as well as interest in knowing what the Council has learned since these fires, including what action might be taken in response to this report.

*But the report will come out, and I feel the report will be tabled and are they*

*going to action it? We won't know until something happens again and then we'll*

*go through this process again. (Interview 5)*

**8a.ii Capacity**

The Council's **capacity** was seen by participants as critical to its ability to facilitate recovery, and this was a key area where limitations were perceived by some community members and agency partners. The areas of capacity noted were in relation to having a dedicated team, experience and knowledge, and resourcing. As one participant noted,

> *But can I say that the council really did not have the capacity. The Council didn't have the staff. The Council didn't have the funding. The Council didn't have - I could go on all day here. But Council just couldn't do it. (Interview 16)*

A **dedicated team** was identified as critical for harnessing experience and familiarity with the recovery plan. This so a team is ready to enact it, provide continuity of service during recovery, and be a visible known presence (i.e., the community knows who to contact in relation to emergency rebuilding and recovery).

> *They need to have a group who - or team who - understands and are trained to understand what happens in an emergency, who you call on. I know they've got their system. But it's not enough. It's in case of emergency. It needs to almost be run like there is an emergency always. (Interview 16)*

As with the need for recovery planning to address other areas of Council than emergency management, there was the need to ensure staff with this portfolio have an understanding or some level of integration with other areas of service, particularly in light of the decentralised and dispersed model of Home and Community Care, and Disability Services that were previously under Council management and coordination. These issues of integration were noted as follows:

> *I think the thing with - for me for Cardinia too is that they've got a team […] that sit in the emergency management space and I think that's great. It's a really good commitment that council have dedicated emergency management staff. I think the risk in that though is that they are- they can be disconnected from other parts of their organisation. [...]*

> *So, they can be a little siloed in Cardinia and I think that's a risk for them that they probably need to have that engagement with different aspects of their organisation. I think with Cardinia as well, they don't run HACC; so Home and Community Care services are outsourced. So, their community services team is*

*actually quite small in council. So, I think that's a little bit of a risk for them too in*

*not understanding the services that the community need, particularly in a*

*recovery space as well… (Focus group participant)*

A core component of the Council's capacity to provide optimal future recovery programs was seen as relying on **experience and knowledge**. Participants repeatedly emphasised the importance of knowing what needs to be done, the value of first-hand experience where possible, the need for training and handover, and for staff to be familiar with the plan at all times.

*Unless something happens, you don't read them [plans, policies, and procedures],*

*and they aren't trained in them or whatever. Then they're scrambling and, I'm*

*afraid - well, it's going to happen again. (Focus group participant)*

One of the issues noted was continuity of service and continuity of knowledge when there is staff turnover, which was framed as a common issue in this area of emergency management.

*[After everything learned from Black Saturday] When we got to the 2019 fires and*

*the Bunyip fires, it's as though we, people had forgotten all of those experiences*

*and all of the people that you would have been drawing on weren't available or*

*didn't reside in the organisation anymore.  Their positions no longer were there.*

*So, I think that made it very hard to come in quickly and it was very much based*

*on people going, don't you remember that we've got a whole process around fire*

*recovery which means that these are the steps we need to take, and trying to get*

*the momentum around that was very difficult. (Interview 18)*

Knowledge can also relate to how changes or updates to business as usual would feedback into the recovery process after a disaster – for example, there was a suggestion that the Council (planner) should have knowledge of existing properties and thus be able to be planning in advance any changes that might be needed if structures are lost and need to be rebuilt.  While this may be well out of scope of a planner's role, it highlights the importance of Council having awareness of the potential impacts of future disasters and working with relevant bodies in advance. Strong leadership and management were also seen as critical.

**Adequate resourcing** was seen to be vital; that is, making sure there are adequate staff to be familiar and ready to respond, bring in back-up during emergencies (could be for usual roles),

resourcing to support data management and responding to individuals (e.g., returning enquiries and follow-up).

> *But given all that, look the people working for Council did a brilliant job. But they weren't trained. There weren't enough of them. Their hours were ridiculous. They stayed on. They had to - you were either doing nothing or you were just scrambling. They were working to Council hours. So they had to try and get everything fitted in. Just not enough people to call on. (Interview 16)*

It was also recognised that with disasters occurring simultaneously across the state, less local resources get spread even more thinly when required to respond to multiple locations.

> *… if something can go wrong, it will go on wrong, and you need to have some degree of capacity to ramp-up to receive the sudden increase in calls (Interview 1)*

### 8a.iii Ability to mobilise and respond quickly throughout

There was a prevailing perception that the Council's ability to mobilise and respond needs to be faster. The ability to mobilise was viewed as associated with **capacity**, the **perceived limitations of existing of recovery planning**, and at times the risk management approach of **rules and regulations**.

> *… you're putting your life on hold. Yeah, I don't think anyone who hasn't been through it understands just how, yeah, demoralising, debilitating it can be. Just waiting for the next part of the process to fall into place. Because all you want after a disaster is for normality to return.*
>
> *[…] It's really upsetting, yeah, and the bureaucracy just holds everything up and it's painstaking and agonisingly slow – the wheels of Government, how they respond. I don't know what you do about that, though; I don't know how you could possibly – I don't know. But I guess you know my comment before about it being a cookie-cutter approach, we've been through so many disasters, we've had so many Royal Commissions about bushfires – why – why should – why are we doing that, when we're obviously not learning from it. (Interview 9)*

*They need to know that people are there for them immediately. Not in the future*

*when everything is nearly done, they need to know that people are there for them*

*now. That's what is most important about helping out anybody. Can you do it*

*now or do we have to wait? (Interview 3)*

Reflections of areas where it would be useful to mobilise more quickly were also made in relation to **hall setup and management** as well as **establishing the Community Recovery Committee and sub-committees** and the need to advocate with the state government earlier**.**

### 8a.iv Participant recommendations to Council: Preparedness for recovery
1. Have a dedicated team of staff for continuity and visibility (to community members).
2. Find ways to build experience (one suggestion was secondment of CSC staff to other councils to support them *and* gain experience during disasters that do not affect the local region, such as the recent flooding) or ensuring regular training and handover processes.
3. Provide clear, accessible (easy to understand) flow charts to help ground community members as well as recovery partners in the process.
4. Council could coordinate volunteers who might be willing to be mentors helping people understand what to expect of recovery processes and experiences (there might be interest from older community members in particular).

## 8b. Ways of working – navigating complex systems of management
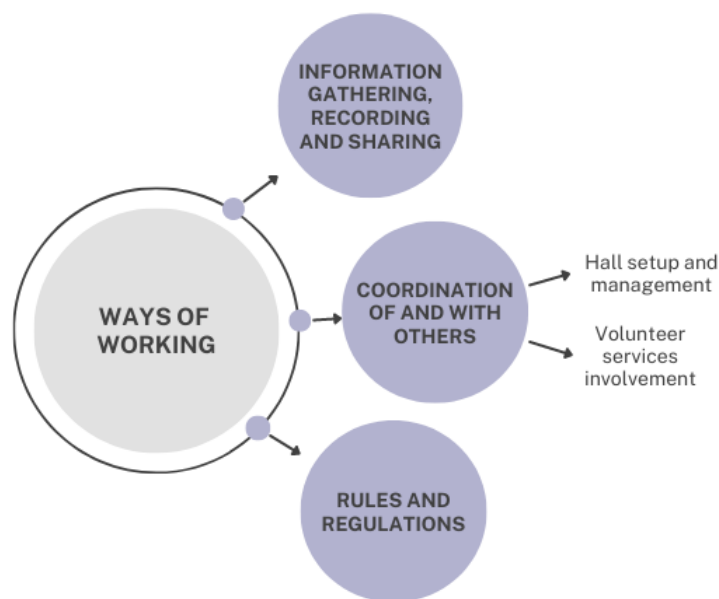
**8b.i Information gathering, recording, and sharing**

The importance of meaningful data gathering, recording and sharing was a recurrent theme. Community members spoke of expectations of Council being aware of who is directly impacted by way of property loss or needing to take a more active role in **identifying impact and individual needs**, as well as **providing verification of impact** (both in relation to ensuring equity, and existing need for accessing other funding or support). Those participating with affiliations to volunteer organisations and the CRC commonly spoke of needing to access to information regarding who was impacted and what their needs might be. For agencies and government departments that were able to share information, they spoke of the limitations in relation to how data is recorded:

> *I think from a Council perspective, they used their Crisisworks system, which you may have heard of, the database. […] they've actually been quite open about is probably having more people early on to be able to capture that data and to be able to make sense of it and to be able to kind of massage it into something that is meaningful and is helpful. (Focus group participant)*

Other challenges in this area were noted around privacy and confidentiality. Some people thought the threshold should be lower following a disaster, but there were also examples of people valuing confidentiality. One suggestion was a system where individuals opt in to have certain information shared only in an emergency.

> *So we've actually had quite a few learnings since then in terms of – [a recovery partner agency], if they were here, would say - would probably say things like, we were setting that up on the run, we were building the ship as we were flying it.*
>
> *So in hindsight, if we'd had more time to set that program up, we would have considered some of the processes and forms that we - that needed to be filled in by members of the public to be able to share their information and to be able to allow that to occur, but that didn't happen early on, right, because people were out and about and capturing a whole lot of information and then it was like, well, we don't have their authority to share that, so we can't, so that made it challenging. (Focus group participant)*

Other information seen as useful to record was in relation to offers of help, whereby Council could potentially support the recording of offers of help with recovery partners.

### 8b.ii Coordination of and with others

Another aspect of 'ways of working' was the perception that the Council could have had a **stronger role in coordinating** recovery or supporting coordination.

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*Don't depend on the community groups to know to make it [bringing people together] happen. It needs to be managed. […] They're doing their stuff. We're doing our stuff. Council are doing their stuff. You get there's a theme there, you know? It needed to be organised by somebody. [A peer] and I spoke a lot about it during and after - it's not about a government department running it. That would not - it would have to be somebody employed to do it with a paid support team and then use your volunteers. (Interview 16)*

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Relatedly, a mechanism **for linking services and supports to individuals** was seen as a gap that Council could have a role in filling or supporting; that is, finding out who could do (or was doing) what and being able to guide some of the activity in line with needs.

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*There wasn't a toolbox meeting for all the organisations in the morning, or of an evening, or even just a text to say, we'll be doing this place this place and be in that area, and then basically, anything the Shire or the government departments were doing, no one knew what they were doing. So there was no-one. The chiefs might have known around their table, oh yeah, we'll be doing this. All we hear is our roads are being cleared. Which ones? Where? Is there road closures? Are the roads open? (Focus group participant)*

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Additionally, there was some reports of times when people described **unwanted engagement** with volunteer services doorknocking, or dissatisfaction with agencies or recovery partners.

Also, the role of Council in **interacting with State Government** and advocating for community needs was observed and appreciated, though limited in how soon this achieved results and the degree of funding received. The experience was that these were the 'Forgotten fires' relative to the 2019-2020 Black Summer fires, despite the property loss and disruption. Though not a reflection on Council, the absence of State Government support was keenly felt.

There was also discussion of their being benefits available to zones that are effectively rural, which are needed but not accessible to those on the metro-rural interface.

*I know we're in a metropolitan Council. And this is the problem. It's not Council's fault, it's the way it is, right? But we have rural issues, not metro issues. […] And in terms of programs and funding and that, and government entities, we miss out. I still feel like I'm a Gippslander. But I not, I'm now a Melbournian. (Focus group participant)*

*It is a dilemma for Council because Council can't tap into those regional and rural grants because they're classified as metropolitan, which is an improvement on being – we used to be an interface Council which made it – you couldn't get metropolitan grants and you couldn't get rural grants either. But in theory you should have been able to get both, but you could get neither, so now that we're metropolitan, we do have trouble, all our volunteer organisations. (Focus group participant)*

**Volunteer services involvement**

Working with volunteer services relates strongly to **coordination** as well as **rules and regulations** which are described further below. There were other experiences noted around whether and how offers by volunteer groups were considered and engaged with (or not) by Council, perceptions of recognition (appreciated where experienced, but for some not experienced), and not feeling included in the coordination of recovery work (e.g., not being invited to meetings).

Importantly another key issue relates to **information sharing** and the need for access to knowledge of who has been impacted and what needs are known, described earlier in 8b.i. The implication of not sharing this (restricted by current approach to ensuring privacy and confidentially), was that volunteer organisations and CRC had to expend their own resources duplicating this effort to gather this information first-hand, because it could not be obtained from Council or other recovery partners (or a central database).

A number of comments conveyed perceptions that volunteers and volunteer organisations were the ones doing all the hard work and getting in there immediately, while 'the Council' was gathering information, sorting out processes, or waylaid by rules and regulations. While it may seem to reflect expectations that Council would be doing this work, more constructively, it could reflect the perception that there is more Council could do to partner-in and facilitate their work (such as contributing to coordination, sharing information, minimising the burden of compliance with regulations). Importantly the later would align with the benefits of facilitating community efficacy.

**Hall set-up and management**

The Council's involvement in what was generally the primary hall (Tonimbuk) as centre of relief and recovery was perceived to have been limited. It **took time for Council to recognise** the community preferred that location (to the original approach of Council offices, followed by Bunyip Recreation Reserve).

It could have benefitted from **greater coordination by Council**, but some were **wary of restrictions** that came with increasing involvement.

> *It was a little bit difficult at the beginning. They struggled a little bit I think in the relief centres. Then after, there was a bit of crossover of people doing maybe the same thing, or one not sure who was meant to be, say, heading it up or managing it. […] I think just the amount of brain power and thought processes that need to go in to making sure it works, which makes me think maybe there wasn't some good enough processes, whereas if there was a process, you could just follow it.*
>
> *(Interview 14)*

At times the experience was that everything operated out of the Hall, and people who did not attend (e.g., due to not being available during business hours, concerns about confidentiality, not feeling connected to the people who typically attended) missed out on knowing what was available.

### 8b.iii Rules and regulations

Many of participants' experiences of frustration related to rules and regulations. The degree of compliance requirement **delayed the ability to get necessary work under way** and thus contributed to stress and distress, was seen to **outweigh the risk management** at times acknowledged as the intended benefit. Some spoke of how difficult such processes can be to navigate, often for the first time, when they are under the stress and trauma of being impacted by an emergency or disaster. The lived experience of the impact of these frustrations was that it amplified trauma:

> *We were so happy we didn't lose our house, because the nightmare that people have had to get permits to get rebuilding has been, I think, compounding trauma for a lot of people.  (Interview 8)*

The rules and regulations most frequently mentioned were roadblocks, planning and rebuilding permits (including Bushfire Attack Level (BAL) rating difficulties), public liability insurance, as well as 'red tape' generally. Feeling a lack of assistance with bureaucratic processes also left people feeling under-supported:

> *[Feeling set back in their progress establishing a home in Cardinia] Then the fires*
> *came through and you said, no. You're just back that many steps and you've got*
> *to come forward again. So, they [Council] could've been under my arm helping me*
> *back on those steps. (Interview 12)*

The arrival of the dedicated planner was highly valued with the areas for improvement being to make that available much sooner and with greater capacity to respond to the volume of work. For example, many participants spoke about the lack of clarity about and difficulty understanding the Bushfire Attack Level (BAL) ratings and the implications for rebuilding, causing delays and distress. It was acknowledged that while the policy itself is not the Council's, advocacy and assistance with its implementation were needed. There was also the consideration of people for whom new regulations have changed the value of their property:

> *Making things a bit easier for people to get their permits or, if there's already*
> *been a house on a property, there's got to be a way to have a house put back –*
> *[…] You bankrupt people. Particularly in different stages of life, it's really - you*
> *can't just start again. […] people say, oh, sell, but if you haven't got anything to*
> *sell... You can't get a building permit - nobody wants 10 acres without a building*
> *permit. It's just impractical, and it's cruel. It's just straight out cruel, I think.*
> *(Interview 8)*

The issue of **public liability insurance** was seen as a particular **barrier to facilitating offers** from people who wanted volunteer to help others.

There were some other important implications of the frustrations with rules and regulations. There were reports of people **avoiding engaging with Council,** which limits Council's ability facilitate recovery, and sometimes individuals were **prepared to incur risk** (as was the case with roadblocks) in addition then to not receiving support.

> *A lot of people were living in caravans that Council didn't know about. That was*
> *an issue too because they weren't supposed to be. They were trying to find them,*
> *and nobody would tell them of course because they had nowhere else to live.*
> *(Interview 16)*

Another example is that the Tonimbuk Hall was initially preferred and chosen by volunteers for the establishment of a relief/recovery centre, in part because community members did not want to

drive as far as the Council offices or to Bunyip, for example, out of fear they would not be able to get through roadblocks to get home again.

By contrast, assistance with processes enabled outcomes:

> *The caseworker and the business recovery officer were very good because there's a lot of paperwork that we wouldn't have done. There were two grants we actually did get this time that I wouldn't have even applied for because I thought I wasn't eligible. (Interview 2)*

### 8b.iv Participant recommendations to Council: Ways of working

1. Develop systems and strategies to:
   a. identify, record and verify impacted individuals and needs,
   b. record offers of assistance,
   c. connect services and supports to affected people,
   d. manage privacy and confidentiality.
2. Address data management to facilitate ability to use information and timely access.
3. Support or provide more coordination for partner organisations throughout recovery.
4. Guide and assist with navigating processes – given how difficult it can be for lay people to understand bureaucratic requirements and processes; from those directly related to Council's service delivery (emphasised by the appreciation of the dedicated recovery planner), through to assisting people with insurance claims.
5. Address issue of public liability insurance.
6. Establish relief and recovery centre(s) as close as safely possible, as early as possible, having a presence at those, having option for information and support outside business hours.

> *I just think there should be either a group of people that are put together to deal with the disaster, and they're there to get through applications quickly and sensitively with some empathy for what people are going through. That, for me, has not happened. People have hit this wall of, well you've got to have this i dot and this t crossed, and, oh, and you haven't done than, go back again, and again, and again, and again, and again.*

*People just don't get that. When they're traumatised, they can't. It's so hard to fill*

*out a form, if you're not used to doing it. I mean, you know, we tick off - go to*

*Centrelink and have a conversation or fill in the form. It's... I've got a university*

*degree, and I can't - I find it difficult enough. How people who are semi-illiterate*

*or have come from a diverse background, how they manager it, I've got no idea.*

*No idea. (Interview 8)*

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## 8c. Engagement and communication

The third overarching theme in relation to gaps, areas for improvement, and participant recommendations was that of **engagement and communication.**
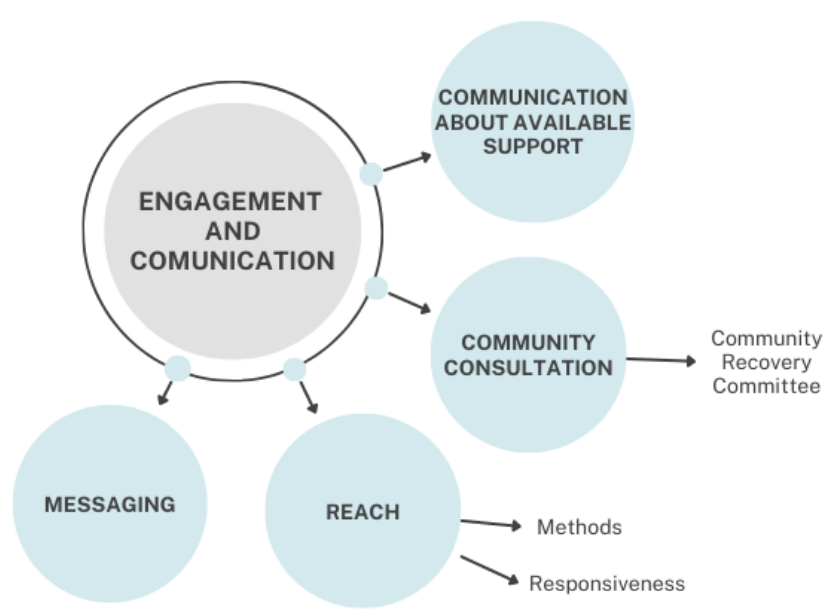


### 8c.i Communication about available support

Communication was viewed as being very important in relation to people knowing what was going on, **what was available**. Some people spoke about not having known what was available or finding out too late, as well as experiences where they felt Council could not give them answers about what was happening or what was available.

### 8.cii Messaging

At times it was evident that **messaging** (content, tone, connotations) shapes perceptions of Council's recovery efforts. These are reflected and further expanded in the recommendations.

*So, I think it's not to make grand announcements, yeah, make sure that you are*

*going to do what you say. Yeah. So, again, it's back to kept them coming out*

*saying we're going to help. What are you going to help with? What's the help*

*you're talking about? Specify it. You don't think these things when you're so*

*involved in what's happening. You think about them afterwards. You'd never ask*

*that question as they come on. (Interview 10)*

*If you are going to come up and promise something to someone, let them know*

*that it's going to happen. Not that oh we are thinking about this or we have*

*proposed, or we are in the process of. […] Provide the residents with a time table*

*so they know what to expect and when to expect it. (Interview 3)*

The newsletter was perceived by some as reporting what had occurred rather than **communicating upcoming opportunities.**

### 8c.iii Reach

Engagement with the broader community was reflected in discussion of **reach** (who was reached by Council communication and information) and the methods used to achieve this (described further under recommendations).

While there were limitations of methods used, there was also recognition that some people are not inclined to engage and there was concern around how to access such people. Regardless, the need for more assertive outreach was emphasised:

*So, I think you have the liaison officers and that sort of thing, but just having*

*people involved and on committees and listening, it's a big thing, yeah. So that*

*would have worked early days with – up at the hall having the people not sitting*

*in an office even in the hall I noticed that. So you've got your people working in*

*little teams going out doing things. It's the practical side of things is – was*

*probably overlooked a little bit and the expectation that people will come to you.*

*That's not what service is about. Service is about giving it out, not waiting for*

*people to come. (Interview 6)*

In contrast to reaching out, the topic of **responsiveness** related to discussion of difficulties contacting Council to access assistance, and not receiving a timely (or any) response. This was markedly contrasted with participants who felt able to directly engage with specific individual staff members (noted earlier under successes).

### 8c.iv Community consultation

As noted earlier, a core aspect of working with the community was through the CRC. However, there was recognition that who has capacity and interest in nominating for the CRC may only reflect a portion of the community and that much wider consultation is needed after a disaster.

> *So the other learning is that, how do we do that broader engagement to really*
>
> *understand who - what are the needs of the broader community as well, not just*
>
> *a group that forms the CRC. (Focus group participant)*

The need for broader engagement was also reflected in examples of community members who felt there had not been any community consultation about big decisions (e.g., in relation to construction of a new hall), and were disappointed when informed consultation had been via the CRC.

Other areas for improvement in relation to the operation of the CRC included supporting the CRC and other sub-committees to be mobilised earlier, and to increase opportunities for vertical engagement (e.g., contributing to Regional Recovery Committee meetings) earlier. As noted earlier, it would have been useful for the CRC to have access to information about who had been affected to engage with those individuals.

### 8c.v Participant recommendations to Council: Engagement and communication

1. Have a variety of methods – not only digital (and upskilling and supporting community members in relation digital access), not only via physical presence (e.g., at the hall), door knocking or mailouts have been suggested particularly early on.

2. Presence at the hall (compared to the office) was appreciated, however also provide more active outreach

3. Have alternatives for support or contact outside business hours

4. Timing – communicate both about past and future events and opportunities

5. Support early notification to individuals whose properties have been damaged and liaise with them directly about needs

6. Messaging – being clear and let people know what to expect.

7. Resource adequately for the ability to respond and in a timely manner

8. Follow-up with individuals to close the loop on service provided (e.g., was it received and how are they doing), and generally to see how people are going.

9. Maintain contact with people who leave the area, so they have access to support.

10. Strive for broad community consultation in addition to CRC

11. Establish CRC and subcommittees as early as possible and facilitate opportunities for vertical engagement sooner.

# 9 The four recovery environments

In addition to the broad themes discussed thus far, there were other aspects of the recovery program that participants spoke about, areas that can be mapped to the four recovery environments – the built, natural, economic, and social (see Table 1 overleaf).

By far the most consistently described recovery environment in relation to the recovery program's success was the social environment, though all of the successes were described passionately. No gaps were noted in relation to the social environment, only areas for improvement. By contrast there was a perception that other aspects of recovery needed more attention:

*But there was a little bit – there was more awareness of the need for more money*

*for that sort of thing, for the actual recovery rather than the mental recovery. So*

*that would help. (Interview 16)*

The area that consistently received greatest attention in relation to gaps and areas for improvement was the built environment, followed relatively equally by discussion of the natural and social environments. The **management of trees** since the fires was the major source of concern throughout the interviews and focus groups. It was the most commonly reported area of frustration and distress for participants, and clearly an area where greater communication and clarity regarding responsibilities is needed if out of the scope of Council service provision and regulation.

*. I mean they've got an arborist. They've got the machinery and you've got all the*

*infrastructure to do this, but they left it all for the residents to do and to pay*

*themselves. I mean they are already suffering so badly they are trying to organise*

*their insurance and get their homes rebuilt. There was just no compassion there*

*for them. They just didn't go that extra step to help them out. I would have*

*thought they would have done what we were doing they would have sent the*

*local council - I see the guys on the road then guys on the road, nine guys on*

*shovels and one just doing the work.*

*Those guys could have gone onto the properties and done a clean-up for six*

*months and made it so much easier for the residents to start rebuilding their*

*homes. To clear their properties. (Interview 3)*

Table 1. Mapping experiences related to recovery environments

| Environments of recovery | Successes[1] | Gaps, areas for improvement, recommendations[1] |
|---|---|---|
| **Economic** | • Business recovery worker (1)<br>• Funding for regenerative agriculture (1)<br>• Funding for tourism consultants and work (1) | • Early support for business needed (1)<br>• More regenerative farming (1)<br>• Umbrella cover insurance-personal (1)<br>• Insurance-public liability for volunteers needed (1)<br>• Provision of (2) & easing administration requirements with vouchers (1) |
| **Natural** | • Plants and planting with aims including biodiversity and shelter belts (3)<br>• Clearing trees (2)<br>• Dedicated subcommittee (1)<br>• Receptiveness to and uptake of programs (1) support for specific projects (1)<br>• Longevity of attention (1)<br>• Wild deer management (1)<br>• Social media and interviews to share stories of recovery including natural environment (1)<br>• Provision of water/water tanks (1) | • Cleaning up damaged trees (9)<br>• Improper clearing of land unnoticed (1)<br>• Ongoing monitoring of shelterbelts and vegetation (1)<br>• Management of wild animals on private land (1)<br>• Launch of work with consultants around managing properties for shade and shelter (1)<br>• More funding (1)<br>• Water tanks (1), fencing and animal feed (2)<br>• Sub-committee could have benefited from clearer aims (1)<br>• EV charging stations (1)<br>• Replacing town sign early (1) |
| **Built** | • Dedicated planner (1)<br>• Financial support for fencing (1)<br>• Providing rubbish collection point early (1)<br>• Support for volunteer organisations doing clean-up (1)<br>• Work of volunteer organisations in this space in particular was well noted. | • Mobile/internet reception (7)<br>• Planners, process and permits (6)<br>• Property or building clean-up (5)<br>• More individual financial support when gap with insurance, costs of clean-up needed (6)<br>• Equipment (e.g., tractors, log splitter) (5)<br>• Helping people find accommodation early (1)<br>• Liaising with emergency services about unused roads & tracks (1) |
| **Social** | • Meals/social gatherings (12)<br>• Mental health services and support (9)<br>• Activities and workshops including arts, music, meditation (7)<br>• Provision of food at Hall (1) | • Improve reach and awareness, particularly in relation to mental health and wellbeing (11)<br>• Integration across committees for others to see how their work could contribute to or be strengthened by social efforts (1)<br>• Dissatisfaction with agency service delivery (1)<br>• Framing as recovery from a particular event in the long term may not be needed (1)<br>• Capacity in relation to provision of food at early events (1)<br>• Help share stories from CFA perspectives (1)<br>• Suggestion- facilitate mentoring (1)<br>• Restart dinners since Covid hiatus (1)<br>• No gaps noted with respect to the social pillar |

[1] Numbers provided represent how many different interviews or focus groups the issue was raised in; this is only one indication of the nature of the issue it is not intended to denote the representativeness or 'strength' of a theme. Aspects that cannot be reflected numerically include the significance and consequences of the issue as described by participants, as well as their position in being able to consider the extent of the experience across the community.

The interconnected nature of the recovery environments was also evident. For example, the planning aspects that relate to built and natural environments for some also affected their business and economic recovery.

*From the Council? There was an offer of cleaning up. We had - I can't remember the figures - I don't know whether it was the council or the government - but you had to spend X amount of thousands of dollars to get a rebate or a funding of some kind. [described in greater detail expenses that would have been incurred] Well financially we couldn't afford that. We had a group of amazing friends that came out with their tip trucks and their machines and just cleaned everything up for us. (Interview 11)*

The costs related to the built environment were also keenly felt at an individual financial level and the complexities of the bureaucratic processes of insurance, planning and rebuilding:

*Because I'm afraid the Shire, in their good will or whatever is bogged down with red tape. Farmers and that, or anyone affected, do not want to hear the red tape; they just want to get up and going, like getting a water tank, getting fences cleared. (Interview 5)*

*The answer came back is that we can't let you do anything […] we were left devastated because we thought they would understand that as businesspeople […] So, that hurt still exists and still continues to this day. (Interview 10)*

*We were so happy we didn't lose our house, because the nightmare that people have had to get permits to get rebuilding has been, I think, compounding trauma for a lot of people. It made our neighbours leave. They sold their land. They just couldn't pay the cost that was imposed on them to rebuild the extra things that they had to do. They couldn't cover it with their insurance, even though they were*

*insured. So - and the trauma of people going, oh, yes, we can rebuild, and then*

*there's all these ongoing layers of red tape. I think Council could look at*

*something there, because they really compounded the trauma for a lot of people.*

*(Interview 8)*

The economic environment was the least explicitly discussed, though this might relate to the degree to which it may not have been directly relevant to all participants. For those who did raise initiatives in this area, it was clear it had a significant impact as highlighted in the quotations above.

The interconnected nature of all four of the recovery environments was reflected in the reported successes as well. For example:

*I know the Council had developed up some great programs and had social media*

*pages and also were conducting a series of interviews with people about impact*

*of the fires and what's being done or where we're at with regards to recovery*

*within the community, but also within the natural environment as well.*

*I participated in one of those, which I thought was a terrific idea, terrific*

*opportunity as well, to share with community about what was happening on the*

*public land as well as what was happening or for us to learn more about what*

*was happening on the private land. (Interview 18)*

# 10 Discussion and Recommendations

### 10a. How well did Council achieve the Recovery Plan objectives?

The Recovery Plan objectives were identified as the following:

1. Increase the resilience of impacted communities so that they are stronger and safer than before the Bunyip Complex Fires occurred.
2. Plan and deliver recovery support in a manner consistent with the National Principles for Disaster Recovery – using a coordinated approach, which is tailored to the community's context, recognises complexity, engages communities, communicates effectively, and acknowledges and builds community capacity.
3. Provide people, communities, businesses, local governments, and other stakeholders affected by the Bunyip Complex Fires with the information, support and services needed to pursue their recovery
4. Plan and deliver a coordinated range of recovery services across the environments of: Social and community, Built (clean-up), Economic, Natural, Agricultural.
5. Mitigate known and potential risks resulting from the emergency.

As this report has highlighted, many aspects of the Recovery Plan objectives were achieved, according to the participants in this evaluation and the evidence provided in the documents for analysis.

In the context of both the bushfires, the extreme weather events of 2021, and the subsequent COVID-19 pandemic, a recovery program has been delivered within the Cardinia Shire that in many ways has supported the built, social, natural and economic environments of many people's lives. Documents and verbal reports demonstrate that a coordinated range of recovery services were offered in the years after the fires, that have assisted people in their recovery efforts.

Participants who identified as members of the CRC as well as agencies and government Departments generally spoke positively about the support for this mechanism of community engagement. There were nonetheless some suggestions that community consultation could have been broader, and recommendations to strengthen this aspect including mobilising and facilitating vertical engagement as early as possible.

This evaluation has highlighted considerable dissatisfaction with the management of the natural and built environment in particular, however, and key recommendations are made in relation to improving this aspect of future recovery programs.

### 10b. How did recovery actions measure against evidence based best practice?

Many of the Recovery Program actions and events align with the (limited) evidence for best practice in disaster recovery programs, in that:

- They address the four environments impacted by disasters
- Were offered in consultation with community members
- Were adapted as community needs shifted over time

They align strongly with the essential elements of mass trauma interventions (Hobfoll et al., 2007), built on promoting safety, calming, self and community efficacy, optimism and hope, and connectedness.

A key focus in emerging disaster recovery program literature is the importance of community-led recovery. The degree to which this was evident in this Recovery Program is limited and is reflected primarily in the work of the CRC. This is an area for further development in the future.

In highlighting the gaps and areas for improvement that the participants identified, there is high resonance with the areas identified by the DELWP (2019) report. In summary, we would concur that the key areas of best practice to continue to address are those proposed by DELWP:

1. Emergency relief and recovery capacity and capability

2. Integration of emergency management into business as usual

3. Community engagement for emergency management

4. Further clarification of council roles in emergency management

5. Emergency management budget and funding

We do not have insight into all community members' experiences with a review of this nature. Perhaps unsurprisingly given the age demographic of the sample, there was no discussion of young children in the interviews (notwithstanding mention of financial strain on families). The document analysis showed some evidence of consideration of children and families through: 3 parents building solutions-based programs delivered by Anglicare, a community engagement process – survey (which included a children's drawing sheet), and the fire recovery plan noted a range of activities (engagement with MCHNs, schools, Windermere case support and Youth Services programs). This could be a stronger focus in future recovery programs.

A lack of a strong cultural focus was evident, based on the participants in this review. Noted earlier, this review has not identified Aboriginal experiences of recovery in Cardinia; and this is an identified gap in the primarily Western knowledge base of disaster management employed in Australia to date.

## 10c. What recommendations should Council consider for future recovery planning?

Firstly, it is important to note the many successes outlined by participants of the recovery program delivered in the aftermath of the 2019 Bunyip Complex fires. The successes of this program that were experienced by many participants speak to existing strengths that can be expanded as the basis of future recovery programs:

1. A sound communication strategy

2. The ability to engage and reach out to different community members through a variety of recovery activities

3. Skilled Council staff

4. A strong Community Recovery Committee (CRC)

5. Longevity of recovery program delivery

6. Fostering and improving the sense of community

7. Enhancing the operation of volunteer organisations

To build capability in future recovery planning, we recommend that Cardinia Shire Council develops a three-pronged capability plan, consistent with the essential areas of capability identified recovery programs

(DELWP, 2019, p. 9). Expanding on the twenty-one recommendations drawn from the participants' insights, we have consolidated these and added several higher-level ones, recommending the following:

## 1 People – Organisational knowledge, emergency event experience and organisational changes

1. Maintain a dedicated team of staff for continuity and visibility (to community members and key partner organisations) – for example, through funding dedicated staff in non-disaster periods who are knowledgeable across all Council teams.
2. Find ways to build experience or ensuring regular training and handover processes.
3. Provide clear, accessible (easy to understand) flow charts to help community members as well as recovery partners navigate the recovery process across State, Council and community services.
4. Support or more provide coordination for partner organisations throughout recovery.
5. Consider innovative organisational responses such as: considering a standing community consultation committee or engaging volunteers who are willing to be mentors helping people understand what to expect of recovery processes and experiences.

## 2 Systems

6. Develop systems and strategies to:

   e. identify, record and verify impact and needs,
   f. record offers of assistance,
   g. connect services and supports to affected people,
   h. manage privacy and confidentiality.

7. Address data management to facilitate ability to use information and timely access.
8. Guide and assist with navigating processes – have informed people and resources (such as FAQs or links to resources) available to support the community to navigate complex recovery systems.
9. Establish a program information management system related to recovery – which could include templates for program establishment, expenditure and evaluation.

## 3 Procedures

10. Resource staff adequately to be able to respond in a timely manner to emergency and recovery as required.
11. Establish CRC and subcommittees as early as possible post-disaster and facilitate opportunities for vertical engagement sooner.
12. Resource CRC and subcommittees with support as required, for example, consultants on community recovery, community development workers, and implementing learnings from guides, such as *Lessons learned by Community Recovery Committees of the 2009 Victorian Bushfires* (2011)
13. Address the issue of public liability insurance to enable insured volunteer involvement.
14. Simplify planning processes to facilitate rebuilds in accordance with the Planning Scheme and advocate for improved communication and responsibility for tree and land clearing. For example, improving clarity and understanding of Bushfire Attack Level (BAL) ratings, advocacy in relation to clarifying gaps, community education and supporting impacted individuals with respect to implementation.
15. Establish relief and recovery centre(s) as close as safely possible, as early as possible.
16. Establish communication protocols for future recovery programs:
    i. Have a variety of communication methods – digital, physical presence (e.g., at the hall), door knocking or mailouts

j.  Engage in active outreach, beyond the presence at the hall
        k.  Have alternatives for support or contact outside business hours
        l.  Timing – communicating both about past and future events and opportunities
        m.  Advocate for improvements in emergency service notifications for individuals whose properties have been damaged (so they do not find out on the news)
        n.  Messaging – being clear and let people know what to expect
        o.  Follow-up with individuals to close the loop on service provided
        p.  Maintain contact with people who leave the area, so they have access to support, including renters
17. Strive for broad community consultation – engaging in ways to gain diverse views from networks – for example, consider a system of ad hoc community consultation on key issues from people who do not have the capacity to nominate for, or who may not feel represented by a CRC. This could include those with differing language and literacy experiences, and cultural identity differences.

In addition to the recommendations above that have been drawn from the participants' recommendations and the available evidence for best practice, the review concludes with two higher-level recommendations:
18. Where issues raised in this review are outside of the scope of Cardinia Shire Council's response and recovery remit, we recommend that Council has an important role in liaising and advocating with other bodies (State Government and partner organisations) to raise these matters of concern.
19. To consider further opportunities for research and evaluation, related to disaster preparedness, response and recovery, that can inform Council strategy and resourcing.


## Conclusion

This review has provided a unique opportunity to undertake a rapid review of community member and partner organisations' perceptions of the Recovery Program. The successes of this program are highly reflective of best practice, evidenced in the current published literature, and in government policy. The suggested areas for improvement and the identification of gaps in the program provide important insights into what is needed in the community going forward – enhancing preparedness for recovery, finding improved ways of working, and engaging and communicating to a more diverse group of people within Cardinia Shire. These areas are consistently identified in the literature as the most challenging areas of disaster management and recovery – including the imperative for more community-led approaches to programmatic responses. Disaster recovery is a complex and long-term process, experienced differently by people in the years after lives have been disrupted. Undertaking this review is an important step in making the commitment to and opening up the conversations and planning for the future.

# Appendix 1

*Table 2 Summary of key themes by frequency*

| Themes | Successes | Gaps, areas for improvement | Community suggestions |
|---|---|---|---|
| **Preparedness for recovery** | **9*** | **18**** | **16^** |
| **The importance of having a plan** | 0 | 5 | 6 |
| **Capacity** | 9 | 5 | 9 |
| **Ability to mobilise and respond quickly throughout** | 2 | 15 | 8 |
| **Ways of working** | **16^** | **22^** | **20^** |
| **Information gathering, recording, and sharing** | 1 | 14 | 9 |
| **Coordination of and with others** | 9 | 19 | 11 |
| **Hall setup and management** | 4 | 15 | 3 |
| **Volunteer services involvement** | 7 | 12 | 7 |
| **Rules and regulations** | 5 | 16 | 12 |
| **Engagement and communication** | **19**** | **19^** | **14^** |
| **Communication about available support** | 10 | 10 | 5 |
| **Community consultation** | 5 | 10 | 5 |
| **Community Recovery Committee** | 3 | 6 | 4 |
| **Reach** | 9 | 11 | 5 |
| **Methods** | 7 | 8 | 5 |
| **Responsiveness** | 7 | 7 | 3 |
| **Messaging** | 3 | 10 | 5 |

*Note.* Numbers provided represent how many different interviews or focus groups the issue was raised in (the number of focus groups specifically is only reported for the overarching themes in blue); this is only one indication of the nature of the issue it is not intended to denote the representativeness or 'strength' of a theme. *Includes one focus group    **Includes two focus groups ^Includes three focus groups

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