

7th March 2016

To: Members of the Community Resilience Committee

Copy: Craig Lapsley, Sue Wilkinson, Frank Buchanan, Adam Fennessy

Re: Wye River and Separation Creek Recovery Group (WSRG)

We are writing to welcome the newly formed Community Resilience Group and to provide you with some information on the work that has been occurring in our communities since the fires. Given the work to date and the strong local engagement of the WSRG we propose that it is of continuing benefit to the community and the overall recovery effort to continue some aspects of the Group's work.

A brief outline detailing the formation, membership and Terms of Reference of the WSRG are attached for your information. The intention has always been to share the information and experience gained over the last two months with the appointed Community Resilience Committee. The minutes of the WSRG are available from the Progress Association website and these provide details of the work of the Group.

The Group was formed at the request of the Commissioner Emergency Management Victoria. Details about the formation are provided in Attachment 1. Immediately post the fire, WSRG members have been proactive in identifying community need and ensuring that those most vulnerable have been contacted. One of our members provided intensive support to ensure that people who lost their only home were able to find a place to live. This is an on-going role and maintaining contact is essential as the reality of the loss becomes a source of great stress.

WSRG informed itself quickly on what might be required. For instance, the attached summary of the experience from Black Saturday provided us with some basis for our work and reassurance that we were not acting without guidance. (Attachment 2) David Stirling from Marysville spent a day with us sharing his knowledge and experience to help shape our own approach.

WSRG has established a strong relationship with the Spirit Foundation and the Lorne Lions Club. The Spirit Foundation is a registered charitable trust and is the identified vehicle to hold and distribute the majority of donated funds for the bushfire affected area. Since the establishment of that relationship donated funds have been directed to:

- Residents who lost their primary residence
- Residents who have not been able to access their properties (the Lorne Lions Club is paying for temporary accommodation at the caravan park to enable people to stay in Wye River)
- Identification of further donors (Gran Fondo cyclists for example)
- Allocation of vehicles donated by Colac Motor Group and Nissan Australia for use by individual community members
- Distribution of vouchers for goods and services donated by businesses

WSRG has been a primary contact point for government departments and charities to provide local information and to connect all of the activity.

For example:

- DHHS
- DELWP

- Red Cross
- Volunteering Victoria
- Colac Otway Shire

Our current projects include:

- An art installation as a memorial to the experience of the fire
- Collating the many ideas for current and future projects that will assist the whole community
- A survey of the community to provide an avenue to hear the community voice on current projects and future projects. The survey closed on 29 February and the results will be available shortly. We have had an overwhelming response.
- Supporting local organisations in their submissions for funds
- Advocating on behalf of the community and those most affected by the fire
- WSRG members continue to respond to the many requests for help from the community

We want to make sure that the information that we have gathered is not lost and will share this with you.

We also propose that there is a continuing role for the WSRG to work alongside the extensive work that you have before you. In a spirit of co-operation we propose that you recognise the group to continue to provide:

- Advice to and feedback from Spirit Foundation and other charitable organisations
- Continued advice and advocacy on the community needs
- Management and monitoring local projects, as required

We look forward to working with you. For further information and discussion please contact

Sandy Forbes

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Signed

Sandy Forbes

On behalf of the WSRG

ATTACHMENT 1

Wye River and Separation Creek Recovery Group (WSRG)

The WSRG was formed following a large impromptu meeting of property owners in Wye/Sep/Kennett (30-40 people).

The meeting was called to respond to a request from the Emergency Services Commissioner to form a group, broadly representative of the communities, and could advise on recovery priorities in the immediate term.

The WSRG group formed with representation from the major service groups, people with significant charity experience and with an independent co-coordinator. Details below:

Representation

WRSC progress Association	Ian Angus/Matthew Jackman	Liaison and Public Relations	Carolyn Tatchell
Wye River CFA	Roy Moriarty/Andrew Hack	Chairperson	Peter Latham
Wye River/ CFA auxiliary	Christine Shaw/Yvonne Sheppard	Co-ordinator	Sandy Forbes
Wye River Surf Lifesaving club	Debra Hocking/Andrew Hack	Secretary	Yvonne Sheppard
Kennett River Association	Mel Kohout/Dave Kohout	On call if needed	Rex Brown/ local business owners and others
Long term holiday house owners and charity participants	Terry Bracks/David Huggins/ Richard van der Merwe		

Terms of Reference

This will be an interim local group to:

- Talk to and advise organisations indicating that they have/ will raise funds to support the recovery process in Wye River/Separation Creek and Kennett River
- Maintain positive communications across all recovery groups until formal processes are in place
- Advise on the priorities for funds expenditure in the short term, ensuring those funds will promote recovery
- Liaise with a range of Foundations and Charities and gift givers to encourage their assistance and to do so in a coordinated and constructive manner

Guiding Principles for the advice on funds distribution

1. Funds will be allocated to projects that will contribute to the recovery and resilience of our communities
2. Priority will be given to those projects that will result in lasting community benefit
3. Advice will support the coordination between recovery partners and avoid duplication

4. In respecting privacy, the group will refer individuals to DHHS in the first instance to make sure that their individual needs are established and they are connected to the right services. Requests from agencies for funds will be considered but without transfer of individual information
5. The WSRG will ensure ideas for recovery are canvassed as broadly as possible in our communities and decision processes will be transparent and publicly posted on the Progress Association website
6. WSRG will consider directing donated funds to supplementing major projects if the funds are available and the need arises.
7. The WSRG will advise on priority projects for volunteer activity
8. WSRG will advise that it supports local tradespeople to undertake projects where possible

ATTACHMENT 2

Lessons from the Black Saturday recovery

Following the Black Saturday fires, a number of organisations reported on the effectiveness of recovery efforts. This document synthesises and summarises key lessons from a selection of these reports.

The quotes in this document are from members of Community Recovery Committees and government agency staff involved in the Black Saturday Recovery.

Planning

In the aftermath of the Black Saturday fires, the political pressure to show “runs on the board”, and the tight timeframes in which large amounts of money had to be allocated left many community recovery committees feeling they had inadequate time to plan. Inadequate planning could lead to a misallocation of resources, neglect of necessary tasks and feelings of uncertainty and confusion.

“Money doesn’t ipso facto equal recovery”¹

Consider the big picture

Recovery committees that took time to consider the full scope of necessary recovery tasks were better placed to allocate funds. This planning includes ensuring the committee has the information necessary to make decisions around prioritising tasks in recovery.

Establish guiding principles

The Victorian Bushfire Reconstruction and Recovery Authority (VBRRA) found establishing guiding principles to govern prioritising recovery activities useful. The speed at which the Authority had to act did not permit the lead-time normally expected for people to understand and agree what is important issue-by-issue. Moreover, the guiding principles helped to communicate the Authority’s function. These principles are similar to those drawn up in the Recovery Committee’s terms of reference. VBRRA’s principles were:

1. The safety of people in the local community, including householders, volunteers and workers, will be the top level priority and will not be compromised.
2. The needs of each community impacted by the fires will be different and the recovery solutions will be tailored to the specific needs of each community.
3. Community involvement is key and will be pursued through all activities, with management at the local level empowered to deliver results.
4. Resources for recovery will be focused on areas of greatest need in each community. Provision of services and resources will be governed by the principles of fairness and equity.

Clarify lines of authority

Confusion arising from unclear lines of authority can disrupt decision making and project management. Recovery committees needed clarity about who can speak with whom publically or covertly, and who is responsible for making what decisions.

¹ Taylor D and Goodman H 2015

Build trust

The success of Community Recovery Committees often depended on the trust they had built with the communities they represented. Appearing to be aligned to any 'faction' or 'interest group' in the community could jeopardise the community's support for the committee and undermine efforts to conduct recovery activities and advocate to government for their interests. Committees with an already trusted public figure involved found it easier to build community trust in the committee process.

Management

Manage key relationships

Committees found that having a member with public sector experience was especially useful in managing dealings with government. Committees also needed to ensure a clear and consistent message from the committee in their communications with donors and government. Clear and consistent messages could be achieved using a:

- a communication plan,
- a system such as a spreadsheet that monitors the status of communication with stakeholders
- and/or a key person on committee responsible for external relationships.

Acknowledge the complexity of recovery activities

*"the neatness required in contracts and reports is a long way from the messiness on the ground"*²

Some members of Recovery Committees felt there was an effort from bureaucracy to "dumb down" the complexity of conditions on the ground. Recovery Committees made an important contribution to the efforts of government agencies and NGOs in providing an understanding of the complexity of local conditions.

Understand the implications of relevant laws

*"to know what the legal situation is in terms of privacy laws would be good for the future. There was widespread misunderstanding of privacy law after Black Saturday"*³

*"Privacy laws and occupational health and safety legislation were among the biggest barriers to communities generating and sharing information and taking direct action"*⁴

The government now provides [information sheets](#) to assist the understanding of these laws in the context of emergency or disaster.

Communication

Use multiple media

After a fire, some people may be without phone reception, without access to a computer or without access to a letterbox. Therefore it is important to provide multiple ways in which community members can access critical information. These include:

- Email newsletters

² Taylor D and Goodman H 2015

³ Ibid.

⁴ Ibid.

- SMS communication
- A website
- Physical noticeboards
- Community meetings
- Physical newsletters
- Helping people to re-establish their letter boxes
- Equipping people with donated or loaned mobile phones

Receive feedback

Recovery Committees reported that communication was most effective when it was calm, open and honest. Some reported that communication between the committee and the community had a tendency to be 'one-way' or 'talking at people' and that an active effort had to be made to ensure they received feedback from the community.

Be heard by government

*"We didn't wait for government to come to us – we went to them and this established a productive relationship where they knew they should and could consult with us more often."*⁵

Recovery Committees suggested holding meetings to represent the views of the community to government, and seeking out people in senior levels of government to 'represent' community views. Moreover, they found that proposing solutions and alternatives to government was more effective than simply identifying problems. Government may not know how else to solve a known problem.

Wellbeing

The Black Saturday fires also wreaked devastation on the mental wellbeing of survivors. For members of Community Recovery Committees, the trauma of the fire was compounded by the pressures of their new role. In the *Kinglake-350*, Adrian Hyland argued that

*"those with the richest emotional lives—people who are by nature caring and empathetic, the very people most likely to find themselves at the forefront of a disaster— are the most likely to suffer from negative feelings such as guilt and sadness in its wake"*⁶

This description is reflected in the polarised experience reported by members of Recovery Committees. Experiences ranged from membership of the committee being the *"most rewarding work I've ever done"* to *"the most thankless and intense job I've ever done"*⁷. Committees should expect that their members will experience a range of emotions during recovery: trauma, vulnerability, uncertainty, frustration, anger, resilience.

The need to be constantly available to government and various agencies as a committee member was an additional stressor. Borrowing from TS Elliot, one committee member described it as the constant pressure to *"be the still point in a turning world"*.

⁵ McAllan C et al 2011

⁶ Hyland A 2011

⁷ Taylor D and Goodman H 2015

Pre-empt the risk of burn out

Many committees found it useful to encourage breaks and support and fund short holidays away from the fire-affected area. One report suggested that *“almost unanimously, people found it an important step and a helpful action”*⁸.

An agency staff member assisting the recovery suggested it was necessary for breaks to be formally recognised as part of the process as

“workers needed to trust that if they said they were having trouble coping, they didn’t feel they needed to watch their back”

Burn out can also be pre-empted by ensuring tasks are properly delegated. Establishing working groups to work on specific recovery activities is an effective process to ensure the workload is distributed.

Recognise pivotal and difficult periods

During the recovery, many committees found that gatherings to recognise events such as the 6-month and 12-month anniversary of the fire were important moments for the community to come together and support one another.

Ensure counselling is targeted and responsive to need

Counselling is an important part of the recovery process for many. However some felt “counselling fatigue”⁹ at the amount of counselling services they had been directed to following the Black Saturday fire. Counselling, as with all elements of the recovery, must be responsive to feedback about where and how it is needed.

Sources

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Taylor D and Goodman H 2015, *Place-Based and Community-Led Specific Disaster Preparedness and Generalisable Community Resilience*, Available at: http://www.ccam.org.au/site/DefaultSite/filesystem/documents/Place-Based%20and%20Community-Led_FINAL.pdf [Accessed 29/01/2016]

⁸ McAllan C et al 2011

⁹ Hedger E