

Overview of Mallacoota and District Baseline Assessment RediCommunities Disaster Resilience Workshop

Disasters have varied, complex and long-term impacts on people's lives, including on their wellbeing, quality of life and social connections, but individuals and communities have capacity to cope with and recover from these impacts. Disaster resilience focuses on strengthening social capital and collective efficacy, as well as taking practical actions to prepare.

The risks that people in Victoria face are becoming more frequent and complex, with communities often impacted by overlapping events, such as drought, storms, bushfires and pandemic. We have repeatedly seen that Mallacoota and district communities are strong and resilient but there is more that can be done to prepare for, respond to, and recover well from disasters. Experience from international and interstate disasters shows that communities which are well connected, and have done work to prepare themselves, are able to cope better and recover faster from the impacts.

Last week participants gained a better understanding of the consequences of disaster, assessed the community's strengths, needs & priorities.

Exploring Resilience, Disasters and their Impacts

We started off by having a conversation about what resilience means for us and what that looks like in our heavily impacted community. We shared some definitions so that we had the same understanding of what we were talking about. We talked about how resilience is not about 'bouncing back' or the immediate ability to respond to negative events, but a process of positive adaptation before, during and after adversity. Here is how the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies has defined it:

"The ability of communities (and their members) exposed to disasters, crises and underlying vulnerabilities to anticipate, prepare for, reduce the impact of, cope with and recover from the effects of shocks and stresses without compromising their long-term prospects."

A disaster is an unforeseen and often sudden event of natural or human origin that can overwhelm people's ability to cope. In Australia, we have historically tended to focus on one or two natural hazards in any local area in planning. As we have seen recently with the combined impacts of bushfire, storms, power outages and the COVID-19 pandemic, the unexpected can happen, and can subsequently have far-reaching impacts on people and communities, overwhelming their ability to cope. Below are the notes on potential local disasters and their impacts.

Red Cross takes an all-hazards approach to preparedness and resilience, recognising that the consequences on communities and individuals impacted are very similar regardless of the cause. We discussed how disasters impact our:

- Health and wellbeing, both physical and mental
- Relationships
- Ability to earn an income
- Educational outcomes
- Community dynamics and social routines
- Ontological security (sense of control over our life and future and order in the world)
- Connections to things that hold meaning to us (Country, place, community, homes, animals and sentimental possessions)
- Goals and aspirations.

We acknowledged that there can also be positive impacts such as increased social cohesion and trust and an opportunity to build back better. In preparing ourselves and our communities for these impacts, we are strengthening our resilience to withstand future disasters.

Resilience Assessment

We used a Resilience Assessment tool to gauge the current state of Resilience in Mallacoota and District. While resilience is a process rather than a static state, the assessment provides a point-in-time snapshot of some key measures important to resilience, providing guidance on aspects of community life that the community could focus on: Connection, Knowledge, Security and Wellbeing.

Decision-making was an interactive process that involved representatives from community groups. The Assessment Tool highlights 4 key measures of Resilience, called the Resilience Capacities – Connection, Knowledge, Security and Wellbeing. Each has a range of values:

- 0 – don't know
- 1 – No, not at all
- 2 – Yes, a little
- 3 – Yes, with limitations
- 4 – Yes, definitely.

(Please note that these are a collection of thoughts from the groups – they are not necessarily accurate, nor the beliefs beyond those present in the group at the time).

We also examined the geographical maps of the area and considered the assets, strengths and vulnerabilities that exist in our physical location.

How participants responded

Connection - drawing on the support they need through their connections with positive community networks, trust in local institutions, connection to place and strong social capital.

- Undoubtedly participants felt they had a strong sense of belonging in the community and that we have a range of active and diverse community groups, this section scored the highest on the survey. There were some notes reflecting technology challenges for the elderly that could hinder connectedness. Concerns noted that although we have become stronger and more connected together, the pandemic has created some disconnection and social isolation. We discussed how many groups are delivering activities designed to reconnect us and help us to become more active participants in all kinds of sports, arts, music and other gatherings. We discussed how the distance we travel to other places both makes us more connected and also can lead to poorer connections with other Gippsland communities and the Shire. Many felt that we have improved our advocacy since the bushfire through groups such as the fuel management group and MADRA.

Knowledge - knowing and understanding hazards and local history, as well as having access to and using information, to make informed decisions.

- Because of our location, our lived experience and trainings provided by community groups we feel we have solid knowledge of the hazards we potentially face. Notes also reflected the community has various communication systems in place such as 3MGB, social media, The Mouth as well as noticeboards, the Vic Emergency App and so on. There could be improvements to the timing with which notifications are received as there is a perceived delay in notifications being available to the public through these systems. It was acknowledged that we need to be proactive about closing knowledge and information provision gaps wherever possible.

Security - having adequate shelter, personal safety, and financial protection against loss of assets and livelihoods.

- The participants scored security as the lowest of the categories. Some believed that that it was lucky (a fluke) that we had so many tankers in place prior to the bushfire but over the two days we learned a great deal about the amount of planning, preparation and coordination that was involved. There is concern about the readiness of our hall and about safer places generally. It was noted that only some houses meet desirable requirements as there are still many older style homes. Although we have well trained emergency and security teams, it was noted that memberships are ageing, and numbers of volunteers are falling. It was noted that lower volunteer numbers also mean that we have a small number of volunteer members to look after potentially a large number of people, especially if it is holiday season.

Wellbeing - having a good quality of life, judging life positively and generally feeling good, physically and mentally.

- Overall, the participants rated psychosocial wellbeing relatively well. Although there were a great many difficulties with food, water and other supplies following the bushfire the provision of mental health support has been good and community members feel that there are lots of opportunities available to improve our wellbeing.

EMERGENCY SERVICES PANEL

On Day 2, many members of our Emergency Services staff and volunteer members made themselves available to meet with participants and talk about how they prepare in the months and years before emergencies happen and how they respond when they do. They explained about how they work together to support each other's roles and how they combine resources to provide support in times of a large emergency. They also discussed how community members can best help themselves to be well prepared, knowledgeable, and organised so that they are well placed to be their own best asset if an event happens.

OUTCOMES

After many discussions the following outcomes were chosen to address the strengthening of our resilience as individuals, families and community:

1. An update of the Local Area Management Plan and its distribution to everyone including being available to visitors
2. A one-page document of things to know and do in order to best prepare yourself your family and your property for possible future emergencies to be distributed to everyone and made available to visitors.
3. Training for volunteers in how to operate the 'STAND' emergency communications system
4. Training for volunteers in how to support the establishment of a relief centre should it be needed
5. A Get Ready Day for community to learn more about preparing to future possible emergencies.

These outcomes are currently being implemented.