

Chapter Six – People and Well Being

At its very heart, recovery is about people and ensuring those who lost their homes or suffered other significant stress, such property damage and loss of income, have the supports they need to get back on their feet. This means looking out for those who may be ‘slipping between the cracks’ and advocating for community members whose cases may not fit neatly within assistance guidelines.

We are mindful there are many who will not seek formal help but who may be struggling. This could include volunteers and those who kept our communities running during and in the aftermath of the fires. Support is available.

The beauty is we *do* look out for our own. Isolation means we are a DIY community with over fifty clubs, interest groups and volunteer organisations which places us well for recovery. Continuing to foster healthy networks and social connections is key to building resilience and entrenches our sense of belonging and optimism for the future.

Importantly, we need to capture the lessons learned during and after the bushfires/COVID-19 and build on these. We need to feel assured that in the event of another disaster we are prepared.

Noting there are many crossovers in this chapter, ideas and suggestions are grouped as follows:

- Support and Advice
- Housing
- Emergency Health Beds
- Community Connections
- Youth
- Emergency Management
- Commemorating the Bushfires
- The Arts, Music and Creative Activities
- Our History

Support and Advice

As our community deals with the aftermath of the bushfires and in the COVID-19 space, we need to understand what support and advice is needed and if there is an absence or shortfall in service provision. In the short term, this means ensuring no-one is ‘slipping between the cracks’ through lack of knowledge or confusion as to entitlement. Case workers for families and individuals have been engaged and we need to ensure there is sufficient coverage.

As part of strengthening community resilience, the MADRA Community Well Being Working Group is looking at initiatives pertaining to health and health promotion, prevention and preparedness and support groups. Other groups working in this space include:

- Recovery Management Team (RMT) which was set up in the aftermath of the fires and links agencies and interest groups.

- The Child and Youth Recovery Working Group which stemmed from concerns very soon after the fires around the particular impacts specific to children and young people following a disaster. Early on, this group identified the strong need for a youth worker. Many local and regional advocates are part of the group including representatives from Save the Children and the Uniting Church.
- The Sanctuary, a youth led community organisation which was established in response to the fires and the need for young people to have a space to support each other as peers, invite mentors to learn alongside and host inclusive workshops and events for the benefit of the whole community. The Sanctuary is also associated with the Child and Youth Recovery Working Group.

We need to understand the long-term impacts of bushfire and COVID-19 trauma including the potential for mental health and other health issues and social unrest. Post bushfire support mechanisms will likely need to be in place for longer than originally envisaged.

Our recovery has been delayed due to both the fires and COVID-19. Some people are only just now seeking help for the first time. Mental health workers are at capacity; however, future services may be at risk with no ongoing funding certainty.

We have had a number of wellbeing supports in place since the bushfires, however, some of this is finite. The need for ongoing support will continue for many years. For example, the Royal Flying Doctors Service (RFDS) is currently providing two psychologists - 1.1 Full Time Equivalent (FTE) - to July 2021. While the RFDS contract continues to 30 June 2022 there is uncertainty with maintaining the current EFT from July 2021. The Mallacoota Medical Centre currently has mental health resources equivalent to 0.375 FTE which is mostly funded by the Foundation for Rural and Regional Renewal (FRRR) but ongoing funding is needed.

Additional resources for which a need has been identified include:

- A full time Far East Recovery youth/social worker for both Mallacoota and Cann River for a minimum of two years. 1 Full Time Equivalent (FTE). The youth worker will undertake both case load and group support/events.¹
- Ongoing funding for full time school social worker – 1 FTE (currently funded until May 2021 by St Vincent de Pauls)
- Drug and alcohol counsellor (1 FTE) to cover Mallacoota and District and the Cann Valley.
- Vocational/TAFE outreach service with the capacity to have certificates/education running locally (including for youth).
- Full time child and youth psychologist (1 FTE) working locally with families and community.²
- Cultural support for Aboriginal communities inclusive of Cann Valley.

¹ Several grant applications have been submitted by the local Community Health Resilience and Infrastructure Fund (CHIRF) for this position.

- A Community Connection person (1 FTE) to support groups and coordinate social activities and promote social connections between groups across Mallacoota and District and the Cann Valley.
- A communications support officer for those without internet and/or living in remote and isolated areas who need access to services and information.
- A family violence support person and access to safe housing. Our safe house burned during the fires.
- The potential need for ongoing case management for some people after the current contract expires.
- Social connection activities to support community recovery.

Other types of advice and support – such as financial planning, case support and rebuilding (planning and permits) are available.

We are looking at community feedback regarding existing and potential support and advice needs³ and liaising with the relevant agencies on how to rectify any shortfalls. For example, how to obtain funding for those support workers who are currently on short term contracts where there is an identified need for longer term support and continuity.

Housing

In part due to MADRA advocacy⁴, a looming problem re the potential for people who lost their homes and faced becoming homeless when their current rental agreements and/or insurance subsidies expired has been circumvented due to policy changes precluding evictions how to house people who lost their homes and who face becoming homeless when their current rental agreements expire. This moratorium remains in place until 31 March 2021 and applies to homeowners and tenants of houses which were destroyed. The situation has been exacerbated by a shortfall in rental properties while people who lost homes rebuild and during the GROCON clean-up.⁵ The need to find housing for visiting support services has also added to the housing shortfall.

MADRA's concerns around people living in caravans at the Mallacoota Foreshore Holiday Park being evicted on expiration of leases have also been resolved.⁶

The shortfall in housing will continue during the rebuilding phase as builders and trades people from other areas need accommodation. In order to travel and/or live far away from home, incentives might be required to attract building industry workers. This must be balanced with the needs of local tradespeople and accommodation providers to ensure no local business is displaced. In addition, housing will also be needed for the foreseeable future for providers of support services.

Innovative ways to make good the current housing shortfall are being explored. This might include a temporary accommodation park or use of tiny homes.

³ Some people may think they don't need assistance now but grief and trauma manifest in different times and ways and people might need to know how to obtain assistance down the track.

⁴MADRA letter to DHHS dated 20 September 2020

⁵ DHHS/BRV letter dated 6 October 2020

⁶ EGSC letter dated 19 October 2020

There is a shortfall of emergency and transitional housing within our district. MDHSS has taken steps to rectify this shortfall by purchasing the Ballymena Holiday Units which will be renamed the Miva Cottages. We understand this will increase housing capacity by five self-contained villas. Three of the cottages will be used for independent living units and two will be available for emergency and respite care. MDHSS has also purchased an adjoining block of land where it intends to expand and build additional independent living units and respite accommodation.⁷

Rebuilding

In some cases, the turnaround time for planning and building permits has taken longer than anticipated. This is for a number of reasons including:

- The need to provide proof of the loss of a home to various organisations such as banks and insurance companies.
- The EGSC Bushfire Rebuild Support Service was only recently established.
- Some rebuilds are more complex than others ie difficult building sites, adjoining properties.
- The need for Bushfire Attack Level (BAL) ratings to be finalised.
- The extensive loss of houses during the fires across East Gippsland, resulting in a backlog. This backlog has now been reduced.

We continue working with EGSC to resolve issues and to address cases which do not fall neatly within guidelines.

The East Gippsland Water Authority provided a one-year waiver of water rates for those who had lost their homes. On 8th February 2021, we sought an extension of the waiver for those intending to rebuild on their blocks who have been unable to do so for reasons beyond their control; for example, still awaiting planning and rebuilding permits for difficult sites.

Emergency Health Beds

During the fires many of our older people had to be evacuated in order to receive appropriate care. On return, they faced dealing with smoke related disorders and bushfire related stress. The COVID-19 pandemic has made travel difficult and undesirable for our elderly population due to aged related risks and fear of being exposed.

In addition, there is a lack of care for those who have received hospital treatment but need interim care pending return to home. The availability of respite/emergency/aged care beds and treatment would have numerous social, health and economic benefits for our community.

As at 2016, nearly half of our population of 1166 was over the age of 60 and one seventh over the age of 75. This is significant as over the age of 60 there is the potential for us to lose a significant portion of our people who might involuntarily leave to be closer to medical

⁷ Mallacoota Mouth 15th October 2020

services and aged care. Not only would this result in the loss of valuable friends and knowledge, there could be significant flow on effects for support and other services.

Community Connections

One third of our population lives alone and one fifth does not have a connection to the internet. These are potentially vulnerable people who may be adversely affected by bushfire and COVID-19.

As part of the recovery process, we are looking at ways of ensuring our more vulnerable people feel supported and are not alone if this is not by choice. This involves building on existing formal networks – such as clubs – and our informal networks - such as friendship groups - as well as tapping into the many support opportunities being offered by government.

Social Opportunities

People heal in different ways. COVID-19 has meant we are unable to meet and have fun in ways which make us feel better and help us recover. As restrictions lift, social 'business as usual' is resuming. The 'Coota Gathers' event in December 2020 was organised by local volunteers and was a welcome first opportunity to meet, eat and listen to music in line with COVID-19 restrictions.

Community suggestions for social opportunities which have already been initiated include:

- Pop-up drive-in cinema on the old soccer ground near the Golf Club
- Supporting the desire for an off-lead dog beach
- Exploring grant opportunities for community social connections and providing letters of support for community grant applications, for example the Yarn by the Sea initiative.
- Kinder kids sunflower trail.

Other suggestions include:

- Regular dances.
- Creating recreational opportunities on our fire trails.
- Encourage membership of sports and social clubs.
- Concerts, shows, festivals and events, such as a busking showcase.

Reclink

Reclink Australia has partnered with Vic Health to deliver sports and recreation programs for Mallacoota, Genoa, and Cann Valley districts. The aim of the program is to regain a sense of fun, increase social inclusion and improve physical and mental health for residents. Activities will cater for a variety of ages, abilities and interests.

Reclink commenced in our district in January 2021 with the employment of two locals – Callista Cooper and Cassandra McNamara. Callista and Cassandra have hit the ground running, seeking/bringing ideas for fun activities from/to our community.

Volunteering Opportunities

Volunteering generates new networks and skills. Ideas for partnerships for learning and volunteering could include:

- Mentoring opportunities
- Committee positions for community clubs.
- Support for courses in internet skills and telecentre activities
- Emergency services.

Volunteering creates social networks and builds community resilience. Encouraging our younger people to undertake volunteering will also allow for succession planning as our older volunteer workforce stands down. This is particularly important for our volunteer emergency services.

An example of a powerful volunteer initiative - literally and figuratively – is the Tool Library.

CASE STUDY: THE TOOL LIBRARY

A volunteer initiative which has been well supported is the Tool Library next to the Home Hardware.

The Tool Library was established after the fires through a significant donation by the Independent Hardware Group. Bunnings Bairnsdale also made a generous donation of battery powered and other gardening tools. Due to COVID-19 restrictions, the Library was not able to start operating until June 2020.

Current volunteers include David Whittle, Stewart Laxton, Marion Lau and Lorraine Yap. New volunteers include Marty Goodison and Colin Dixon.

The Tool Library is under the auspice of the Mallacoota District Health and Support Service (MDHSS).

Not only does the Tool Library provide practical assistance to community members, it's a place where people and have a chat, swap tips and learn.



Community Gymnasium

A suggestion has been made for a community owned gymnasium which might be set up as a social enterprise. This would provide a permanently set up facility to those who currently run exercise programs as well as for the general population of locals and visitors. There is a possibility also that a swimming pool and a hydrotherapy pool may be part of this development. There is also potential for this project to be explored in conjunction with the swimming pool project for which Surf Lifesaving Victoria is campaigning. See [Swimming and Hydrotherapy Pool](#) in Chapter Seven Buildings and Infrastructure.

Youth

Our young people range from school students to young adults. They are valued members of our community and should have the opportunity to live, work and raise families here if they desire.

Many young people were adversely impacted by both the bushfires and COVID-19, missing out on rites of passage and important social connections. At the same time, our Year 12 students achieved outstanding results despite a chaotic year.

The Sanctuary provides activities and mentoring for young people. This includes projects, such as the Wilderness Coast Project which combines environmental rejuvenation activities with social events. As COVID-19 restrictions allow, the Sanctuary Working with the Youth Affairs Council Victoria (YACvic) to make sure the voices, aspirations, strengths and needs of children and young people are heard and responded to as part of recovery.

The Mallacoota P-12 College has a school social worker funded by St Vinnies. Tegan has taken the lead in on support for the P-12 College, working with the school community, Save the Children and the Head Space 'Be You' project. Funding to maintain the school social worker position past the initial appointment has been identified as a priority.

The Child and Youth Recovery Working Group is pursuing vocational Education and Training (VET) skills and opportunities for young people to close the gap in local opportunities and meet aspirations and needs. This is being informed by advice from TAFE and the Jobs and Skills Network.

Other ideas for supporting our young people include:

- A Sanctuary Youth Forum to revitalise youth engagement across a whole range of activities including sports clubs, bush care and emergency services.
- A full-time youth worker for MAD and the Cann Valley.
- Improving employment opportunities for young people ie local Green Army corps.
- Encouraging EGSC and Victorian Government agencies to prioritise apprenticeship, training and work opportunities for our young people.
- Opportunities to work and train in the digital economy.
- Encouraging EGSC, Victorian Government agencies and local businesses to employ local youth for major infrastructure projects within MAD.
- Promoting volunteer activities as opportunities for young people to add skills sets and training to their resumes.

- A Family Fun Day to bring families, children and young people together, to celebrate resilience, and an opportunity for consultation and fun!

Emergency Management

Debriefing and learning from the bushfires and COVID-19 is critical to future preparedness.

As part of this part of this process, the following actions have been taken:

- Collating community concerns and suggestions and present these to the relevant authorities seeking action and answers.
- Liaising with our elected representatives on ongoing issues of concern. For example, as with the COVID-19 plan for the busy Summer tourist season.
- Promoting educational and safety related information, such as the webinar series put together by the [Fuel Management working group](#).
- Liaising with our emergency services (CFA, SES, Ambulance Victoria and Victoria Police) re a joint approach to disaster debriefing and emergency preparedness in addition to discrete agency specific information campaigns.
- Attending the emergency preparedness meetings being run by EGSC to provide community input.

Information and Protocols

The following ideas have been put forward by community members for consideration by as part of the emergency management process:

- Establish collaborative protocols and partnerships between regional and local emergency services Operations and Recovery phases of emergencies.
- Develop a mechanism for ensuring emergency response crews from outside Mallacoota and District (MAD) are informed about the local community and its features by designated local emergency services personnel ie alternative evacuation routes for flood prone and fire risk areas and existing local services that can be activated.
- Encourage EGSC to undertake community engagement through the combat agencies to improve the planning and understanding of what is in place for emergency.
- Develop a MAD handbook (hard and electronic copies) containing information about individual and agencies' responsibilities before, during and after emergencies as well as existing education programs on bushfire and flood safety for dissemination to residents, second homeowners and visitors.
- A readily available evacuation plan developed by government and community members which factors in key issues such as seasonal populations, evacuation routes, sheltering facilities, jurisdictional boundaries, messaging to communities and risks to safe evacuation.
- Improve continuous communication, support and early warning to MAD:
 - Social gatherings/meetings/events continue to be promoted by community groups to enable people to meet each other and develop networks that can be used during emergencies (eg alternative accommodation during emergencies, check who needs help with evacuation etc)
 - Identify front line combatants whose families and homes might be vulnerable.

- Explore diverse communications techniques and methods to address different age groups.
- Actively encourage community members to participate in community education programs provided by EGSC and emergency agencies.
- Encourage community members to make use of the VicEmergency app.

Emergency Infrastructure

Learning from the fires, we are working with the relevant Minister, agencies and local associations to improve our broader emergency infrastructure. These projects are outlined in Chapter Seven Buildings and Infrastructure and include:

- Working with the Mallacoota Halls and Recreation Reserves Committee and the Genoa Hall Committee re improvements to our local halls to ensure they are 'fit for purpose' as relief centres.
- Expanded Emergency Services Shed
- Prepositioned emergency equipment and stores at Genoa.

Commemorating the Bushfires

COVID-19 restrictions precluded an on-ground commemoration of the bushfires one year on.

A survey launched on 21st October 2020 seeking community ideas for commemoration revealed many of our community wanted to reflect quietly in their own way.

Understanding this might be a traumatic time for many, additional supports – such as psychologists and the Red Cross - were available during the holiday season for both residents and visitors. This was co-ordinated by our local Bushfire Recovery Victoria (BRV) Wellbeing Support Officer Mike Amos.

Our volunteer Media Group provided a series of informative articles for community members on how to manage media interest. A full-time media adviser to manage media requests for interviews and stories and for advice on messaging within and to our community was loaned to us by BRV and her support was much appreciated.

The Community Well Being Working Group also developed a well-received guide for community members with tips for dealing with potentially intrusive queries. This guide also listed established supports. A brochure was also made available for new and returning visitors with supports and services.

In lieu of an on-ground service, a gentle commemoration film was made by Kristin Rule and other talented locals. This was accompanied by a radio broadcast. The film records the gradual path to recovery of our community and our environment. A link to the film is available at madrecovery.com.

Australian Defence Force (ADF) memorial

Shortly after the fires, the ADF unveiled a memorial, a plaque mounted on a large piece of local wood salvaged from the fires. The plaque symbolised the close relationship forged between the ADF, volunteer services and community members during the fires and read:

“In acknowledgement of all Services contributions to the bushfire response of 2019-2020. Courage, empathy, honour and bravery to leave their families and lives to help us. We cannot thank you enough.”

The unveiling of the plaque provided an opportunity for ADF personnel from Joint Task Force 646 and HMAS CHOULES and community members to reunite under less stressful circumstances.

Unfortunately, insect damage while the ADF memorial was in storage meant the plaque and associated service badges had to be removed to enable fumigation and they have gone missing.

After community consultation by the ADF Memorial working group, a permanent home for the memorial has been found. The memorial is mounted on a slab of granite near the Mallacoota main wharf where so many people sought refuge during the fires.

A simple plaque acknowledges the contribution of both the Australian Defence Forces (ADF) and Emergency Services as well as the many volunteers who kept our community running during the bushfires. The ADF memorial will be supplemented by story boards which provide amplifying information on these contributions. The story boards will depict pictures of the missing badges and reflect the wording on the original plaque.

A Reflections Park

A Reflections Park where we can remember and reflect on our bushfires experience and journey to recovery has been suggested by a number of people. In addition, a Reflections Park allows us to acknowledge those who assisted us during the fires and in our recovery. Locations mentioned include the Cenotaph Park and Bastion Point.

The Arts, Music and Creative Activities

The arts and other creative activities play an important role in the recovery and rebuilding community spirit.

“Arts-led projects can be a powerful tool as part of the recovery process, when the basic essentials of food and shelter have been secured and communities are scrambling to try to reconnect, reflect on what has happened, and express what they have been through in ways that sometimes words cannot do alone. The arts can be effective in disaster recovery by:

- Providing an opportunity for reflection and commemoration;
- Building new communities;
- Reconnecting old communities;
- Reducing feelings of isolation;
- Helping people develop new and creative skills;
- Strengthening people’s connection to place; and

- Creating a shared sense of hope and optimism.”⁸

The arts and music have already played a significant role in in our recovery:

- Beach ukulele sessions - sponsored by the Community Health, Infrastructure and Resilience Fund (CHIRF) and led by Padma Newsome - were held to teach people how to play.
- The Mallacoota Arts Council recently received grant funding to build a roof over the Croajingolong Centre courtyard which will enable more classes and get together to be conducted in a more appropriate space for those activities.
- The very moving Epicormic exhibition reflected on our experiences of the bushfires. Some of the artists had lost their homes.
- The healing singing group lead by Eva Grunden which was established shortly after the fires and continues..
- The many beautiful face masks made and distributed by the Friendship sewing circle.
- The Coota Gathers event in December 2020 combined food and music so locals could get together and chill out.
- Yarn by the Sea, an opportunity for yarn crafters to meet, yarn and create in a relaxed atmosphere.
- The bushfire commemoration film which was produced by locals.
- The Music Recovery program initiated by Padma Newsome and Susannah Keebler in addition to their research and thinking on creative recovery.
- Jade Oakley conducted a bird making workshop. The birds were created from anodised wire and hand-dyed silk and contained coloured lights. Over one hundred birds were made by community.
- The 2021 Sounds Better Together event in January saw big name artists perform in Mallacoota. Not only was it a great night, locals did not have to most of the leg work in putting the show together.

An observation about arts in the role of recovery is:

“Creative projects are most successful when they are designed by the communities involved and when they respond to an issue, such as the need for young people to reconnect, or for the creation of a central memorial in which people can gather and share their stories. They should be part of the recovery process, rather than simply aiming to produce an artistic outcome or product.”⁹

Suggestions received for arts projects in the recovery context include:

- A film festival showcasing the work of local filmmakers and those who come here to learn about film making and editing.
- Writing workshops and storytelling.
- The return of the popular Café Culture series and other theatrical productions.
- Multimedia projects and teaching multimedia skills including text, images, audio, video and animation skills.

⁸ <http://nsfconsulting.com.au/arts-disaster-recovery/>

⁹ <http://nsfconsulting.com.au/arts-disaster-recovery/>

- Dance workshops.
- A local sculpture exhibition.
- Photography classes and exhibitions of student and local photographers' works.

Our History

The bushfires are now part of our history. In the aftermath of the fires, parts of our history were revealed including a third bunker and a cricket pitch near the airport.

There is a strong desire to value and learn from our history and to have a place to reflect on the devastating bushfires. To this effect, ideas include:

- Progressing the story boards to accompany the ADF memorial.
- An audit of cultural and historical icons to ensure these are preserved and protected.
- Contributing to the Bunker museum bushfire collection.
- Re-establishing the fledging Bush Tucker walk around the Bunker Museum.
- Revitalising the old Genoa School museum site.
- Capturing our stories on film and in writing and songs.

See also [Heritage and Cultural Sites](#) in Chapter Seven Buildings and Infrastructure in which the old Genoa School site, the Genoa Bridge and the WW11 Bunker Museum are listed.