



# **The Role of Local Government in Emergency Management**

**Position Paper**

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## 1 Introduction

Victorian councils play a critical role in emergency management. They are the tier of government closest to community and have an intricate understanding of local needs. Using these strong community connections, they can identify many of the opportunities available to enhance resilience, and relief and recovery outcomes, through a community-first lens.

The position paper articulates Victorian councils' position on emergency management. It explores the changing role and nature of emergency management services delivered by councils over time, including the factors that have influenced those changes. It also explores the high-level and operational opportunities and challenges for councils now and into the future.

Three strategic outcomes, and ten key principles are identified to guide future decision-making about the role of councils. Also identified are a number of core roles and responsibilities expected to continue, those which the sector believes should be limited and others which are out of scope for Victorian councils to deliver moving forward.

While this position paper aims to broadly reflect the views of councils in Victoria, it does not purport to reflect the exact views of individual councils.

## 2 Background

### 2.1 Role of councils and the MAV in Victoria

The Municipal Association of Victoria (MAV) is a membership association and the legislated peak body for Victoria's 79 councils. The MAV was formed in 1879, with the *Municipal Association Act 1907* officially recognising us as the voice of local government in Victoria.

In Victoria, local government is made up of 79 councils representing more than six million people. Councils are area-based, representative governments with a legislative and electoral mandate to manage local issues and plan for the community's needs.

Councils enable the economic, social and cultural development of the municipal area it represents, supports individuals and groups, and provides a wide range of services for the wellbeing of the local community. Each municipality is different – its community may be young or old, established or still developing, rural or urban, and its population may vary from fewer than 3,000 people to more than 340,000.

Councils implement policies, regulations and programs set by other levels of government. Councils also have to respond to local community needs. Each council has powers to set their own regulations and local laws and provide various services. They also advocate to state and federal governments on behalf of their communities.

Councils collect rates from residents and businesses in their municipality to help fund the delivery of community infrastructure worth over \$110 billion, as well as more than 100 local services. Nationally, local government collects only 3.6 cents of every tax dollar raised, so councils rely on funding from other levels of government to fund important infrastructure and services for their communities.

## **2.2 Current role of councils in emergency management**

Victorian councils have a legislative requirement to plan, with other relevant agencies, for community needs and fulfill a broad range of other emergency management responsibilities. A significant focus is on land use planning, hazard mitigation on council owned or managed land, fire prevention on private land, emergency planning, response support, and local relief and recovery coordination.

Under Victorian emergency management legislation, councils establish a Municipal Emergency Management Planning Committee (MEMPC) which has the function of planning for all emergencies. While councils convene and chair the committees, planning is a shared responsibility of the MEMPC. While no longer a legislative requirement, in municipalities with specific risks, hazard-specific subcommittees may be established to focus on planning for specific emergencies such as fire or flood.

The MEMPC is the peak planning body for emergency management within the municipal district. It is the forum for government and non-government agencies to develop policies, procedures, strategies and frameworks to support communities.

Councils also perform specific functions for identified emergency hazards. They play a role in designating and recording neighbourhood safer places-bushfire places of last resort (NSP-BPLR). Land use planning decisions are also made to mitigate against fire and flood, alongside implementation of other measures such as levees.

Councils are required to appoint Municipal Fire Prevention Officers who conduct inspections on private property and serve fire prevention notices. Councils may issue permits to burn and play a role in fire prevention on council land.

During and following emergencies, councils coordinate the relief and recovery needs of communities, including establishing Emergency Relief Centres and conducting secondary impact assessments. Legislation also requires appointments to the roles of Municipal Recovery Manager and Municipal Emergency Management Officer.

In support of councils, the MAV represents the sector as their voice on the State Crisis and Resilience Council (SCRC) and numerous other state committees and working groups. The MAV also insures the sector and support joints procurement.

## **2.3 An evolving emergency management sector**

Victoria's emergency management sector has undergone significant reform since the 2009 Black Saturday fires, following a Royal Commission. Shortly after, Victoria experienced widespread flooding in 2010-11, triggering the Victorian Floods Review. Heatwaves and the 2014 Hazelwood Mine Fire led to further reviews and reforms.

More recently, the Inspector-General for Emergency Management (IGEM) reviewed the sector in the context of ten years of reform, and conducted an Inquiry into the 2019–20 Fire Season. A Commonwealth Royal Commission into National Natural Disaster Arrangements in response to the 2019-20 fires also occurred.

These reviews, inquiries and Royal Commissions have dramatically altered the entire emergency management sector, including through the creation of new organisations, entities and roles. The recent pandemic and other ongoing reforms have further shifted expectations and impacted resourcing across the sector.

## **2.4 An evolving role for councils**

Roles and responsibilities of councils have continued to evolve throughout the reform journey. Victorian Government expectations, changing legislation and revised emergency planning arrangements have created significant complexity and resourcing constraints. This has increased the risk of councils being unable to comply with the broad range of requirements, ultimately risking community outcomes.

There is a lack of clarity about the role of councils across the emergency management sector. Despite some work by the Victorian Government to deal with this issue through the Councils and Emergencies Project, little has improved. Capacity and capability gaps identified over the six-year project are still present, including significant gaps in resourcing, training and clarity on expectations.

Twelve years on from Black Saturday and the ensuing Royal Commission, ongoing and significant reform of the broader emergency management sector continues, with no signs of any easing. While the Victorian Government invests in improvements to state arrangements, councils have been left behind. They remain continually stretched as they seek to respond to the growing number of major emergencies.

The MAV's assessment is that there is a need for a fundamental, strategic review of councils' role. This position paper articulates the sector's position and rationale for a revised approach. This must reflect the importance of local, council-led recovery coordination as a crucial strength and one which must be the central feature of any revised approach. The Victorian Government must then commit to the defined role.

## **3 Strategic Outcomes**

Victorian councils have identified the following strategic outcomes as critical to informing ongoing discussions about the role of councils in emergency management.

- 1) Legislation, policy, frameworks, other doctrine and funding effectively support communities before, during and after emergencies
- 2) Council connections with community are leveraged and supported as part of emergency management activities.
- 3) Councils are sufficiently resourced and trained to deliver and coordinate agreed emergency management responsibilities.

## **4 Role Principles**

The following principles have been agreed to by the sector to guide decision-making on the roles and responsibilities of councils in emergency management.

- 1) Council emergency management roles should draw on the sector's strengths and close connections to their communities.
- 2) Councils support a focus on community-based approaches, local decision making and resilience building as part of their role.
- 3) Council emergency management roles should focus on resilience-building, and relief and recovery coordination. It should not involve activities or responsibilities that are response-focused and better delivered through state-based agencies, departments or emergency services.

- 4) Council emergency management roles must not be expanded without close consultation with the sector. New or changed roles must be in alignment with funding, resourcing and existing responsibilities.
- 5) The Victorian Government must properly resource the capability and capacity of councils to which they have delegated responsibilities.
- 6) Emergency management arrangements should allow for councils to collaborate and share resources in a way that suits local needs.
- 7) Council emergency management roles need to be supported by system-wide and organisational structures that reflect responsibilities, and must have redundancy and escalation capabilities built in.
- 8) Council emergency management roles must not interfere with the delivery and continuity of essential council-led community services, such as waste, recycling, and maternal and child health services. Councils are not structured as emergency response agencies and the role should reflect this.
- 9) Council emergency management roles must be appropriate, achievable and risk-based, with absolute clarity about responsibilities.
- 10) The Victorian Government must ensure funding to councils flows immediately when increased service demand is triggered by an emergency. The important role of councils in local recovery needs to be recognised in funding models.

## 5 Opportunities and Challenges for Councils

Victorian councils have identified a range of strategic and operational opportunities and challenges that are, or have the potential to be, influencing the roles and responsibilities of councils in emergency management moving forward.

### 5.1 High-Level Opportunities

#### New and emerging technology

The quality and scale of data, information and next-generation systems available to emergency management agencies and councils continue to grow.

We must be at the forefront of implementing innovative new approaches that enable the transformation of data and information into actionable intelligence. There are significant opportunities for councils, and indeed the broader sector to leverage smarter technologies that minimise administrative burdens, and maximise process efficiencies, allowing for faster decision-making and better community outcomes.

Services traditionally provided in an Emergency Relief Centre (ERC) could be further shifted online. This would enable tailored, virtual services enabling more community members to access emergency funding, personal support and other assistance without needing to travel through potentially dangerous impacted areas. The use of crowd sourced intelligence, impact models and self-serve reporting could drastically improve Secondary Impact Assessments and ensure recovery planning commences more rapidly after a major event.

In some rural and regional communities, a physical ERC service delivery model may be more appropriate. Areas of limited digital connectivity also need to be factored into any new approach, as does the potential for telecommunications network failures during and following emergencies.

There are also significant opportunities for communities, councils, and the broader emergency management sector to better collaborate through data sharing. This would help to inform a more holistic view across the sector in resilience-building, response and relief and recovery phases, with machine learning enabling enhanced decision-making through more timely risk analysis and assessment. Councils must be supported to test, trial and leverage new and emerging technology.

### Structural funding changes

A structural review of funding arrangements presents as a significant opportunity for the Victorian Government to properly support councils to deliver on the roles and responsibilities they have been delegated.

The current Municipal Emergency Resourcing Program (MERP) funding is grossly inadequate. Existing arrangements under the Natural Disaster Financial Assistance program (a Victorian component of the Federal Disaster Recovery Funding Arrangements) are inefficient and place significant administrative burdens on councils and communities impacted by emergencies.

Higher levels of ongoing funding, reflective of risk-assessments and community expectations, would dramatically enhance the service-delivery offering and ensure local community needs are met before, during and after emergencies. A new model should include sufficient base level funding for all metropolitan, regional and rural councils. Funding allocations should not be unnecessarily skewed by population density, political interests or other factors.

### Revised emergency management planning arrangements

The recently enhanced emergency management planning arrangements in Victoria present an opportunity to leverage the specialist skills and hazard expertise of control agencies. With responsibility for municipal-level emergency planning now sitting with multi-agency Municipal Emergency Management Planning Committees (MEMPCs) – rather than councils – local circumstances, needs and risks can be better addressed.

Control agencies and their subject matter experts should lead development of hazard-specific preparedness and plans. Open sharing of Victorian Government hazard and risk intelligence and knowledge with MEMPCs would also assist. While councils have a critical role to play in informing agencies about local needs, it is no longer appropriate for councils to be leading hazard-specific planning.

The risks and consequences of emergencies vary significantly across each municipality. It is vital to maintain a locally led risk assessment and mitigation approach. A tool commonly used by MEMPCs to identify risks is the Community Emergency Risk Assessment (CERA) platform. The approach supports multi-agency risk discussions and is the foundation on which many MEMPCs are built. The Victorian Government should continue to invest in and improve this approach alongside other tools such as the Victorian Fire Risk Register (VFRR). It may also be appropriate to consider consolidating the various risk tools to ensure a streamlined approach.

### Changing community expectations

Increasingly, the importance of 'person-centric' policy making and partnering with communities as part of government decision-making and service delivery are being

acknowledged as critical. Individuals and communities expect their interaction with governments at all tiers to reflect their specific needs. While technology has enabled much more personalised approaches and the tailoring of information and services in emergencies, there is still significant room for improvement.

Councils are well positioned with strong community networks and local expertise to inform and strengthen resilience, relief and recovery outcomes. The Victorian and Australian Governments should support and utilise these connections and the expertise of councils by resourcing and empowering them to deliver local initiatives that meet community needs and expectations.

Under the *Gender Equality Act 2020*, councils now have an obligation to conduct a gender impact assessment of policies, programs and services that are new or under review and have a direct and significant impact on the public. This presents an opportunity for local government and the broader emergency management sector to ensure an inclusive and effective emergency management approach that caters to the needs of all community members.

Comprehensive engagement and co-design will continue to be critical in planning for and delivering a range of innovative resilience building approaches. A one size fits all approach will no longer suffice, with new initiatives needing to capture the nuances of all communities, and indeed all emergencies. Shifting community expectations present a real opportunity for councils to lead improved disaster outcomes.

#### Increased private sector and not for profit support

Globally, more effective resilience-building, and improved relief and recovery outcomes are tied to greater support from the private sector. Councils, with strong local connections to business and industry are well placed to drive further engagement and integration in this space. In the United States, for example, companies like Walmart partner with local government and key agencies to support relief and provide access to essential goods like food and medicine. East Gippsland Shire worked closely with GIVIT after the Black Summer bushfires to better match donations with community needs.

With the increasing shift in the business community towards initiatives that enhance corporate social responsibility, councils can take the opportunity to decentralise aspects of relief coordination to the private sector and not for profits.

## **5.2 High-Level Challenges**

### Financial constraints

The ability of councils to support their communities before, during and after emergencies is under considerable financial strain. Despite ongoing calls for substantial and sustainable funding from the Victorian Government to deliver on council emergency management responsibilities, funding remains stagnant.

Collecting only 3 per cent of every tax dollar raised, councils deliver critical services with an incredibly limited budget. The increasing complexity, frequency and intensity of emergency events is leading to even greater financial impacts on councils and communities. This is particularly pertinent in the context of rate-capping.

Baseline emergency management funding for rural and regional councils is stagnant, or effectively reduces over time considering inflation, further impacting the ability of councils to deliver core services and ultimately posing a risk to community safety. There is no recurrent emergency management funding for metropolitan councils.

Without addressing these major flaws, councils will be forced to prioritise services, and discontinue those which are unsustainable to deliver. This presents an unacceptable risk – but it is avoidable – subject to proper support from the Victorian Government.

### Climate change

The MAV recognises that we are in a state of climate emergency that requires urgent action by all levels of government. Our changing climate will further challenge an already stretched sector, with a likely increase in resources needed to prepare for, respond to and recover from emergencies.

An increased focus on local, community-led resilience building and mitigation is required. Some communities are facing increased threats from natural hazards, such as coastal erosion, bushfire and flooding. Lower resilience in some population groups will overlay with the rising natural hazard threat and lead to larger scale impacts.

Councils are well placed to lead and engage communities in all-hazard emergency preparedness, including through land use planning – assuming the Victorian Government commits to investing in and empowering councils to do so.

More robust preparedness activities will be far more effective in dealing with the changing climate and associated increase in emergency events. Continued growth in response investment at the expense of resilience building is no longer sustainable.

### Diminishing Victorian Government support

The current operating environment of the Victorian emergency management sector is complex. There is ongoing significant change. The sector remains continually stretched as it seeks to respond to a growing number of major emergencies. Capacity and capability gaps were further highlighted during the COVID pandemic. At the same time, broader Victorian Government support to councils is waning despite ongoing calls for sustainable funding to deliver on council responsibilities.

Additionally, the Victorian Government has continued to roll out disparate emergency management reforms across separate departments and agencies. In this environment, there is a significant risk that council roles and responsibilities will be reshaped in a piecemeal approach without strategic consideration. The role of councils into the future must reflect the importance of local, council-led recovery coordination as a crucial strength and must be central to any revised approach.

The recent Councils and Emergencies project intended to confirm and clarify the role of councils in emergency management. It promised to improve capacity and capability gaps identified across key areas including training, relief, recovery and resourcing. Disappointingly, the gaps identified are still present today.

### Changing demographics

The COVID pandemic has brought unprecedented population growth to some regional areas. In the coming years, Melbourne's population is also predicted to increase with a return to pre-pandemic migration levels and a strong economic rebound. These pressures will continue to build on the emergency management sector, especially councils. They will challenge how we deliver services.

The interface between the traditional built and natural environments in towns and cities may continue to expand and could lead to higher numbers of residents placed at-risk if inappropriate development occurs in high bushfire or flood risk areas – particularly on the urban fringe. The Victorian Government must empower councils with powers to make smarter, locally led planning decisions to deal with these risks. Additionally, some smaller rural communities will face further population decline, limiting the capacity of local communities to face the challenges of climate change, withering economic growth and an ageing population.

## **5.3 Operational Opportunities**

### Leveraging community connections

Councils are closely connected to their communities. With strong networks into local business and industry, health, education, sporting and community groups, councils have an intricate understanding of day to day need and challenges. Councils can drive an approach that supports and strengthens local institutions after emergencies, rather than replacing them with temporary services.

Councils see a significant opportunity to enhance emergency outcomes through community-based approaches, local decision making and resilience building. This approach should take precedence ahead of increasing investment in response. Investment in local capacity and capability is critical.

### Cross-border collaboration and resource sharing

Assuming baseline capacity is enhanced, Victorian councils see an opportunity to further encourage sharing of resourcing, and collaboration in project delivery across council and even state borders. While localised nuances will be important to recognise and respond to, cross-border collaborations will drive increased efficiencies and ensure lessons can be more easily shared. Practitioner-driven collaboration groups, such as Municipal Emergency Management Enhancement Groups (MEMEGs) can help to achieve this.

### Multi-agency collaboration

Victorian councils are keen to continue to work more closely with state-based agencies in delivery of resilience-building, relief and recovery activities. There are opportunities to better integrate impact assessment activities to minimise the burden on local communities when responding to government requests for information.

Multi-agency collaborations allow for a smarter, all-hazards approach to community engagement activities. Councils can play a key role in driving an engagement approach that is integrated and avoids the mistakes of the past where siloed agencies each delivered their own campaigns, overburdening communities.

### Shift to resilience-focused activities

Increasingly, the sector is understanding the return on investment in resilience-building and mitigation activities is far greater than continued investment in response.

The challenges associated with emergency events experienced over last two years further highlight the importance of resilience building activities, particularly those which are hazard agnostic. We cannot always predict the nature, type and intensity of emergencies. Well prepared and resilient communities are critical.

Victorian councils already play an important role in planning for and supporting the needs of local communities. With adequate support from the Victorian Government, councils are ready to respond to local risks, deliver more significant resilience-building initiatives and ensure all communities are well positioned to face the challenges of an increase in the intensity and frequency of emergencies. Community-centered engagement and education will be critical as part of this approach.

### Consistency in systems and processes

With a plethora of disparate systems and processes across emergency management agencies and departments, there is an opportunity for much greater consistency. For councils, this means leveraging and refining existing templates, forms, ICT systems and processes for widespread use across all municipalities and avoiding the risks of 'reinventing the wheel'. Already, the councils are investing in a single emergency management platform for the future, but the Victorian Government needs to commit to properly fund councils, helping them to maintain a consistent and robust approach and ultimately allow for more cross-border collaboration and sharing.

## **5.4 Operational Challenges**

### Capacity constraints

With limited full time equivalent emergency management staff, many councils are severely limited in their capacity to plan and prepare for, respond to and recover from emergencies. The inadequate funding provided by the Victorian Government is a direct threat to community safety and risks forcing councils to prioritise delivery of some services over others.

In larger emergencies, councils are challenged with resources and have resorted to moving some staff members offline from core business to respond to the emergency. This approach is unsustainable.

Resource sharing through the MAV resource sharing protocol helps address short-term gaps, however it is not a long-term solution. The protocol works best when an emergency is concentrated to a few municipalities, but sector resources are quickly stretched in broadscale events.

### Increasing complexity and confusion

Victorian councils have noted increasing complexity and confusion in emergency management sector arrangements. For example, Bushfire Recovery Victoria (BRV) has recently been playing a more direct community recovery coordination and service delivery role. In some cases, this has led to parallel recovery arrangements

with councils and BRV delivering simultaneous services to the same communities, leading to unnecessary inefficiencies, complexity, and confusion. This includes a lack of clarity in triggers for BRV involvement.

Additionally, recent revisions to the State Emergency Management Plan (SEMP) and other sector doctrine have led to the creation of new roles, altered terminology and greater confusion in responsibilities. While the MAV and council representatives raised these issues with departments and agencies, little improvement is noted.

It is critical that further reforms leverage existing arrangements, mechanisms, roles and responsibilities where they are working effectively. This includes better utilisation of the Regional and Municipal Emergency Management Planning Committee structures. The creation of additional layers of complexity that are at odds with existing arrangements is a significant risk. Local approaches must be prioritised.

### Lack of training

For many years, councils have been calling on the Victorian Government to better support them with dedicated training for statutory emergency management roles. If councils are expected to fill Municipal Recovery Manager, Emergency Management Officer and Fire Prevention Officer roles, training must be developed and delivered.

## **6 Roles and Responsibilities**

While the Victorian Government's 'Councils and Emergencies Project' aimed to identify a list of roles and responsibilities of councils in emergency management, arguably the list articulated the position of the state, not councils.

It also assessed the sector was unable to fully deliver on many of those roles but has so far failed to improve capacity and capability despite promising to do so.

The roles and responsibilities listed below are reflective of the local government sector's existing capacity and capability and are informed by the high level and operational opportunities and challenges identified above. The lists aim to provide a broad summary rather than articulating every specific role and responsibility.

### **6.1 Core roles and responsibilities**

Victorian councils have identified the following roles and responsibilities as important and appropriate for councils to deliver moving forward – assuming appropriate funding and support from the Victorian Government is provided.

- 1) Chair the Municipal Emergency Management Planning Committee (MEMPC) and facilitate strategic planning at the municipal tier in partnership with other agencies.
- 2) Delivery of local hazard agnostic resilience-building programs, including community engagement.
- 3) Implement risk mitigation measures across council owned or managed land, infrastructure, assets and services.
- 4) Foster local partnerships and networks.
- 5) Lead local land-use planning and building activities.

- 6) Provide information and advice to Incident Controllers and Incident Management Teams on community needs.
- 7) Coordinate provision of local relief (not provision of specific relief services) and coordinate local recovery.
- 8) Manage and restore community infrastructure for which council is already responsible for managing.

## 6.2 Limited supporting roles and responsibilities

Victorian councils have identified the following roles and responsibilities that are appropriate for councils to have only a limited role in moving forward – assuming appropriate funding and support from the Victorian Government is provided.

- 1) Coordination of spontaneous volunteers for recovery only (coordination of offers only – does not extend to oversight or management of volunteers, or response / initial relief volunteers).
- 2) Support local risk identification processes.
- 3) Support hazard specific planning (control agencies must lead hazard-specific planning in line with their subject matter expertise).
- 4) Support distribution of emergency information and warnings.
- 5) Support and inform regional emergency management planning.
- 6) Support emergency responses by providing council-owned equipment where available on a cost recovery basis (assuming core council services will not be unnecessarily impacted).
- 7) Support and participation on Regional Emergency Management Planning Committees (does not automatically include provision of secretariat support or chairing of committees).
- 8) Support other councils via the MAV's peer to peer resource sharing protocol.

## 6.3 Unaligned roles and responsibilities

Victorian councils have identified the following roles and responsibilities that are out of alignment with the principles identified and are no longer appropriate to deliver.

- 1) Non-council owned infrastructure maintenance and/ or funding (e.g.: fire plugs, hydrants etc.).
- 2) Essential water replacement
- 3) Default secretariat support for MEMPCs.
- 4) Direct provision of relief services (coordination is acceptable).
- 5) Hazard specific responsibilities or tasks that requires expertise (e.g.: issuing of Permits to Burn and Fire Prevention Notices). These activities should be the responsibility of state-based control agencies such as the Country Fire Authority and Fire Rescue Victoria. Some individual councils may choose to continue to support these tasks if relevant council capacity and capability improvements are implemented by the Victorian Government.
- 6) Non-major emergency response and relief provision.
- 7) Vulnerable persons register administration.
- 8) Severe weather response or clean-up for non-council owned assets and land.
- 9) Neighbourhood Safer Place administration, approval and management. This should be the responsibility of the fire agencies, in conjunction with councils.

- 10) Sourcing or provision of services, resources or equipment for which council is not ordinarily responsible (e.g.: water tanks for relief purposes, plant and equipment for emergency response).
- 11) Other roles and responsibilities that are more appropriate for a state-based department, agency or emergency services organisation to deliver, or where appropriate funding and resourcing has not been provided.

## **7 Summary and Next Steps**

Despite the ongoing challenges identified in this position paper, councils remain a committed partner in the emergency management sector. Councils understand their communities and work tirelessly to improve resilience, prepare for emergencies, and coordinate relief and recovery post-impact.

The potential for significant community consequences associated with a stymied local government sector is unacceptable. Emergencies will continue to impact Victorians and councils must be properly empowered to perform their critical role.

Enhanced and more sustainable support to councils in emergency management is essential to ensure a community first approach that prioritises local voices, needs and approaches.

The MAV will continue to advocate on behalf of the sector, and work with the Victorian Government to improve outcomes for local communities.