

Parliamentary Inquiry into the 2026 summer fires across Victoria



April 2026



The voice for
local government

No one understands the challenges and opportunities facing Victoria in the 21st century better than local councils. From rapidly evolving technology to social changes, shifting economies to environmental pressures, our local communities and the governments that represent them—are at the forefront of multiple transformations happening simultaneously.

As the peak body for the Victorian local government sector, the Municipal Association of Victoria (MAV) offers councils a one-stop shop of services and support to help them serve their communities.



ACKNOWLEDGEMENT OF COUNTRY

We acknowledge the traditional custodians of the land on which we live. We recognise their continuing connection to land, waters and culture and pay our respects to their Elders past, present and emerging.

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1 Executive Summary

The MAV appreciates the opportunity to contribute to provide a submission to the Parliamentary inquiry into 2026 summer fires across Victoria.

The MAV is the peak body for Victoria's 79 councils with the purpose to mobilise action that supports Victorian councils to create cities, regions, and towns that are thriving, resilient and inclusive communities.

The MAV vision is to be a nation-leading thought leader, partner and resource hub for the Victorian local government sector in strategic foresight, policy and research, leadership and governance, service design and advocacy impact.

Victorian councils and their communities have experienced devastating and ongoing impacts from the 2026 summer bushfires.

The 2026 bushfires have again demonstrated how local government is central to emergency management preparedness, coordination and planning for recovery. Councils play a critical role in planning for, responding to and recovering from emergencies, extending well beyond their commonly known roles of establishing emergency relief and recovery centres. As the closest connection point to community, councils are often the last level of government on the ground supporting their communities through the long tail of recovery. This includes helping communities rebuild sustainably.

Climate change is increasing the frequency, severity and complexity of disasters including bushfires. Since January 2015, Victoria has had 90 declared disaster events, with compounding and cascading effects meaning councils are impacted multiple times. Nine Victorian councils have been exposed to the 2026 bushfires, 2022 floods and 2019/20 bushfires. Consecutive and concurrent disasters are placing sustained structural pressure on council capacity, critical infrastructure and community resilience. It is also resulting in new and emerging risks and issues that councils are needing to deal with.

There are ongoing concerns with recovery funding provided by State and Commonwealth Governments, alongside limited funding for councils to undertake their emergency management roles and responsibilities. Council capability gaps have again emerged through the 2026 bushfires highlighting the need for investment in local government training, capability and workforce development. It is clear that future-fit funding models are needed to support disaster response, risk reduction and resilience, including the adoption of betterment.

This summer has demonstrated the real and emerging misinformation and disinformation risks for the emergency services sector. The growing prevalence of misinformation during emergencies is undermining public trust, representing an emerging community safety risk that requires timely communication and coordination.

Recommendations

Theme	Recommendation
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<p>Review the Bushfire Safety Policy Framework and associated communications products</p>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. <i>The State Government should review the Bushfire Safety Policy Framework and the bushfire shelter options policy, in consultation with local government. This review should investigate whether NSP-BPLR are an appropriate mechanism for keeping our communities safe alongside the appropriateness of councils' role in designation and decommissioning.</i> 2. <i>The State Government should undertake a new public communications campaign on the level of safety each last resort option provides.</i>
<p>Increase and index the Municipal Emergency Resourcing Program</p>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 3. <i>The State Government should increase the Municipal Emergency Resourcing Program to cover all 79 councils with allocations indexed to inflation and commensurate with risk profile of each council and existing capacity.</i>
<p>Improve funding to support community bushfire management and vegetation management</p>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 4. <i>The MAV calls for non-competitive, risk-profile informed funding to support community bushfire management and vegetation management at the local level.</i>
<p>Provide tailored local government emergency management training</p>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 5. <i>The State Government should fund and co-design a tailored local government emergency management training program, covering statutory and non-statutory roles, to uplift council capability across Victoria.</i>
<p>Improve warnings for heatwaves</p>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 6. <i>Emergency Management Victoria should work with Bureau of Meteorology to remove inconsistencies between colour coding on BOM heatwave messaging and CFA fire danger ratings.</i>
<p>Clarify cooler places advice and expectations</p>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 7. <i>Emergency Management Victoria should work with councils and other agencies to issue advice clarifying that councils are not required to stand up cooler places in a heatwave.</i>
<p>Reform disaster recovery funding arrangements</p>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 8. <i>The State Government should work with the Commonwealth</i>

	<p><i>Government to adopt betterment as an eligible expense under the Disaster Recovery Funding Arrangements.</i></p> <p>9. <i>The State Government should fund a dedicated Build to Withstand fund to enable councils to conduct pre-disaster investigation work for infrastructure resilience upgrades.</i></p> <p>10. <i>The State and Commonwealth Governments should ensure that all recovery funding provided to councils is timely, transparent, needs based and reflects the long-term nature of recovery.</i></p>
Deliver additional support to heavily impacted councils	<p>11. <i>The State Government should work with all councils heavily affected by the 2026 summer fires on a Local Government Relief and Recovery Funding Package.</i></p>
Address specialised workforce challenges	<p>12. <i>The State Government should work with the MAV and the Environmental Health Professionals Association (and any other relevant peak bodies) to fund and co-design emergency management training for EHOs and MBS'.</i></p>
Streamline donations management	<p>13. <i>The State Government should lead work to establish clear guidelines for donations management in partnership with the local government sector.</i></p>
Resource State agencies responsible for strategic bushfire planning	<p>14. <i>The State Government should reaffirm that strategic bushfire mapping, risk assessment and application of Bushfire Management Overlays remain a State-led function, and ensure DEECA, DTP and the CFA are adequately and sustainably resourced to perform this role.</i></p> <p>15. <i>The State Government should review recent reductions in environmental and hazard planning expertise within State agencies and ensure sufficient specialist capacity to support recovery and long-term resilience planning.</i></p>

<p>Fund strategic bushfire assessments</p>	<p>16. <i>Establish a dedicated program to support councils to undertake Strategic Planning Bushfire Assessments, including funding, technical guidance and timely referral authority input.</i></p> <p>17. <i>Ensure the CFA and other relevant authorities are adequately resourced and required to respond within statutory timeframes to council-led strategic planning work.</i></p>
<p>Establish a Bushfire Recovery Planning Support Service</p>	<p>18. <i>Implement a State-funded planning support service, modelled on the Bushfire Rebuild Support Service, to provide direct assistance to residents and surge capacity to affected councils.</i></p>
<p>Provide flexible recovery planning funding</p>	<p>19. <i>Allocate dedicated, flexible funding through the existing DTP Regional Planning Hubs program to bushfire-affected councils to support secondments, shared regional planning resources and short-term specialist expertise.</i></p>
<p>Clarify and support temporary accommodation policy to improve community guidance and communication</p>	<p>20. <i>Develop a consistent framework for temporary accommodation following disasters, including clear guidance on time limits, compliance pathways and transition arrangements when approvals expire.</i></p> <p>21. <i>Establish a defined pathway for managing expired temporary dwellings to reduce enforcement burdens on councils and minimise re-traumatisation of affected residents.</i></p> <p>22. <i>Provide clear, centralised, plain-language guidance to communities regarding rebuilding requirements, temporary accommodation provisions and available recovery supports.</i></p>
<p>Maintain and expand non-planning recovery supports</p>	<p>23. <i>Continue and expand State-run infrastructure rebate programs (including septic and rainwater systems), recognising their importance to equitable recovery</i></p>

	<i>and their distinction from statutory planning functions.</i>
Evaluate recovery planning models	<i>24. Undertake a formal review of previous recovery programs, including the Bushfire Rebuild Support Service, to inform a recovery planning outcome for future events.</i>
Strengthen local government and emergency management agency capacity to address mis and disinformation	<i>25. Invest in training and capability building programs for staff and leaders to enhance their ability to identify, respond to and mitigate the impacts of misinformation and disinformation relating to climate change and energy.</i>
Invest in a localised rapid response mechanism for disaster disinformation	<i>26. Support development of a complementary rapid response mechanism for disaster disinformation that can be drawn on by emergency services and local government, to be locally embedded and contextualised.</i>
Improve information access and knowledge translation across levels of government	<i>27. Establish clear, consistent and timely channels of communication for local and national governments to share accurate, evidence-based information.</i>
Support local government as a strategic partner	<i>28. Recognise and invest in local government as a key strategic partner in addressing the underlying risk factors driving mis- and disinformation acceptance, including distrust, polarisation and low digital literacy.</i>
Address eligibility gaps with Australian Disaster Recovery Payment	<i>29. The State Government should work with the Commonwealth Government to extend eligibility for the Australian Disaster Recovery Payment to fire impacted communities in Towong and Corangamite Shires.</i>
Implement recommendations from the Colvin Review	<i>30. The Commonwealth Government should work with state and local governments to implement recommendations in the Colvin Review.</i>
Expedite finalisation of the local government emergency management training review	<i>31. The State Government should work with the Inspector-General for Emergency Management to expedite the release of IGEM's Review of local</i>

*government emergency
management training.*

2 Introduction

This inquiry provides an important opportunity to investigate preparedness, mitigation, response and recovery activities relating to the January 2026 bushfires. Most impacted communities are still in the early stages of recovery and coming to terms with the scale of devastation. Impacted councils are heavily focused on supporting families, landholders and businesses to recover and rebuild.

The MAV appreciates the extension provided by the Committee which allowed councils and community members additional time for submissions.

AFAC's autumn outlook shows increased fire risk for most of Victoria, with the exception of East Gippsland and the Mallee. While councils continue to support recovery efforts, this outlook means they are also in a constant state of preparedness.

It is unlikely the inquiry will be able to paint a full picture of the impact on the social, economic, built and natural environments. Further consideration should be given to a full inquiry at a later date which would allow councils to fully participate.

3 Response to the terms of reference

3.1 (1) the preparation and planning by government, emergency services agencies and the community ahead of the fire season, including management of public and private land and roadsides

3.1.1 Role of the MAV as peak body for local government

The MAV has a long history of being a constructive partner in Victoria's emergency management governance and operational arrangements. The MAV represents councils on numerous state-level emergency management committees and working groups, including the CEO's legislated role on the State Crisis and Resilience Council (SCRC). The MAV also insures the sector and supports joint procurement.

The MAV supports council capability development and preparedness activities each year. Some of the key activities we deliver include:

- Local Government Fire Management Forum in partnership with Country Fire Authority and Fire Rescue Victoria. In 2025 the MAV transitioned to a four-week online webinar series with session topics included vegetation management, cultural burning, community bushfire management and engagement, public information and warnings with speakers across the CFA and local government.
- Higher Risk Weather Season Local Government Preparedness Session in partnership with the Department of Justice and Community Safety. In October 2025, this included presentations on the fire season campaign.

3.1.2 Critical role of local government in emergency management

As the first tier of government, councils are the closest and most deeply embedded level of government in community. Victorian councils have a legislative requirement to plan, with other relevant agencies, for community needs and fulfill a broad range of 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 the *Emergency Management Act 2013* and *Country Fire Authority Act 1958* councils:

- Establish, chair and facilitate the multi-agency Municipal Emergency Management Planning Committee (MEMPC)
- Publish the Municipal Emergency Management Plan on their council website on behalf of the MEMPC
- In collaboration with other agencies, enable community participation in emergency preparedness, including mitigation, response and recovery activities
- Appoint Municipal Emergency Management Officers (MEMO) and Municipal Recovery Managers (MRM)
- Appoint Municipal Fire Prevention Officers (MFPOs) for councils in country area of Victoria to inspect private property, issue fire prevention notices and manage fuel hazards on council land
- Identify, designate, establish, maintain and review Bushfire Places of Last Resort – Neighbourhood Safer Places (BPLR – NSP)

- Coordinate the relief and recovery needs of communities, including establishing Emergency Relief Centres and conducting secondary impact assessments.

The State Emergency Management Plan [Council Role Statement](#) outlines councils' responsibilities as a participating agency for the following bushfire mitigation activities:

- Land use planning
- Building regulations, standards and codes
- Landscape fuel management on council owned or managed land, and legislative requirements through the Municipal Fire Prevention Officer.

The following sections outline the preparation and planning activities undertaken by local government ahead of a fire season.

3.1.3 [Municipal Emergency Management Planning Committee \(MEMPC\)](#)

Municipal Emergency Management Planning Committees (MEMPCs) serve as the primary multi-agency forum for municipal level emergency management planning, bringing together councils, government agencies and non-government organisations to identify and assess local hazards and risks, coordinate risk treatments, and support community preparedness and awareness initiatives.

Councils convene and chair the MEMPC, which is responsible for developing the Municipal Emergency Management Plan (MEMP), providing reports and recommendations to the relevant Regional Emergency Management Planning Committee (REMPC), as well as sharing information with other MEMPCs to support integrated planning across jurisdictions.

While no longer a legislative requirement, MEMPCs may also establish fire management planning sub-committees to provide technical guidance on fire management and/or prepare a fire management sub-plan to the MEMP.

3.1.4 [Management of roadsides](#)

Under the *Country Fire Authority Act 1958* and *Fire Rescue Victoria Act 1958*, it is the responsibility of every municipality and public authority (including the Department of Transport and Planning, DEECA and Parks Victoria) to take all practicable steps, including burning, to prevent the occurrence of fires and minimise the danger of the spread of fires on and from any land under its control and any road under its care and management.

Councils and road managers work with fire agencies through an integrated planning process to identify, plan and deliver a planned program of works that aims to mitigate the risks associated with fire and roadside fuels. Typical roadside fuel management treatments include mowing, slashing, spraying and burning.

However, councils have reported that the combination of reduced funding, restrictions on roadside vegetation management and associated fees with grading near tree roots are impeding their ability to reduce fire risk. Some of the key concerns reported by councils include:

- Reduced maintenance within Parks Victoria-managed land
- Inconsistencies in burn off programs
- Concerns regarding early aerial response timing
- Insufficient roadside maintenance funding

Despite these challenges, councils continue to address additional pressures placed upon them reduce the risk in their municipalities, prepare their communities and undertake their legislated roles and responsibilities for bushfire management.

3.1.5 Bushfire Places of Last Resort – Neighbourhood Safer Places

Under the *Country Fire Authority Act 1958* (CFA Act), councils wholly or partly in country Victoria are responsible for identifying, designating, establishing, maintaining and reviewing Neighbourhood Safer Places-Bushfire Places of Last Resort (NSP-BLPR). These are a last resort shelter option for communities living in, and people visiting, high-risk areas.

NSP-BPLRs can be on council land, or, with the consent of the occupier or the person in control of the land, on non-council land. Councils must ensure there is appropriate signage at designated NSP-BPLR that aligns with EMV Guidelines and are responsible for maintaining NSP-BPLR and conduct annual assessments.

Councils have [repeatedly](#) noted community confusion about the type of protection that places of last resort actually offer. There were multiple reports of people accessing NSP-BPLRs as their first line of defence in the 2026 bushfires.

Significant policy challenges persist including:

- Lack of understanding of what an NSP-BPLR is, the level of protection it offers and how they differ from Community Fire Refuges, Emergency Relief Centres or Recovery Centres
- Confusion between the use of 'safer' compared to 'last resort' and
- Communication barriers with CALD communities.

Councils also face unfunded responsibilities when NSP-BPLRs are located on non-council or state-owned land, substantial resource requirements for audits and upgrades, contributing to broader questions about whether the current model effectively serves its intended purpose.

- *Recommendation 1: The State Government should review the Bushfire Safety Policy Framework and the bushfire shelter options policy, in consultation with local government. This review should investigate whether NSP-BPLR are an appropriate mechanism for keeping our communities safe alongside the appropriateness of councils' role in designation and decommissioning.*
- *Recommendation 2: The State Government should undertake a new public communications campaign on the level of safety each last resort option provides.*

3.1.6 Local government capability and capacity constraints

Ensuring local government has the capability and capacity to fulfill its legislated responsibilities directly supports the State's shared vision of safer and more resilient communities. The Independent Review of Commonwealth Disaster Funding (also known as the Colvin Review) recommended the Commonwealth Government work with state and territory governments to adopt a leadership and oversight role in ensuring adequate capability, capacity and investment exist for local government and communities. The MAV supports this call while we wait for the Commonwealth Government's response.

While funding and grants programs are available to local government to prepare their communities, there is a mismatch between risks faced by communities and the resources available to councils to better prepare for and mitigate these risks and support them through recovery.

The Municipal Emergency Resourcing Program (MERP) only supports 64 of the 79 councils. Regional and rural councils with a smaller workforce and rate payer base are put under significant financial strain when disasters occur. Some regional councils have experienced multiple fire and flooding events over the last 5 to 10 years which have a cumulative impact on communities and the local economy. Furthermore, MERP has not seen significant increases in recent years and there is no annual increase in line with inflation meaning funding is reducing in real terms year on year. Increasing and expanding MERP commensurate with risk would support councils to better meet their essential emergency management responsibilities.

The Strengthening Local Government Partnerships Grants program supports local governments to develop stronger networks between communities, State Government land and fire agencies to reduce bushfire risk in their municipalities. In 2022, \$1.82 million funding was awarded across 10 councils. In 2024, \$1.65 million across nine councils (three of which received funding in 2022). While the quantum of funding for 2026 is unknown, it is important that there are no further reductions in this critical program. Additionally, demand for this program is often oversubscribed with only 25 out of 79 councils having received funding.

- *Recommendation 3: The State Government should increase the Municipal Emergency Resourcing Program to cover all 79 councils with allocations indexed to inflation and commensurate with risk profile of each council and existing capacity.*
- *Recommendation 4: The MAV calls for non-competitive, risk-profile informed funding to support community bushfire management and vegetation management at the local level.*

3.1.7 Local government emergency management training

In Victoria, there are limited emergency management training opportunities for councils. There is no tailored training provided for statutory positions, including Municipal Recovery Managers or Municipal Emergency Management Officers. Councils often engage consultants at a high cost or send their staff to the limited positions available through generalist emergency management training provided by the State. This can present an equity issue for rural councils.

As key agencies in emergency management, councils should be provided with an opportunity to access State-funded accredited and standardised emergency management training. It is critical that any training and exercising implemented by the State or Commonwealth covers recovery, not just response.

Despite these challenges, many councils are going above and beyond to lead robust approaches to training. In November 2025 Hume City Council and the North West Metropolitan Region (NWMR) Emergency Management Collaboration undertook [Exercise Exposure](#). The exercise brought together 14 councils, council staff, emergency service agencies and organisations such as the Salvation Army in the activation and set up of an Emergency Relief Centre, Council Emergency

Operation Centre, and deployment of an Emergency Management Liaison Officer to an Incident Control Centre. It was developed in partnership with private consultants.

The MAV appreciated the opportunity to participate in the 2024-25 Inspector-General for Emergency Management (IGEM) review of local government emergency management training.

- *Recommendation 5: The State Government should fund and co-design a tailored local government emergency management training program, covering statutory and non-statutory roles, to uplift council capability across Victoria.*

3.1.8 [Inter-council resource sharing](#)

The majority of Victorian councils are signatory to the *Inter-Council Emergency Management Resource Sharing Protocol* ('the Protocol'). The MAV is the custodian of the Protocol, which sets out an agreed position between councils regarding the provision of resources to assist other municipalities with response and recovery tasks during and after emergencies. Council adoption of the protocol is voluntary and is not intended to inhibit or diminish the effectiveness of any existing resource sharing arrangements. The Protocol is identified in 70 MEMPs as a means to build capacity during protracted response, relief and recovery activities where internal resourcing has been exhausted.

The MAV has played an active role in coordinating offers of assistance and supporting deployments in major emergencies, including the 2009 Black Saturday fires, 2019-20 Black Summer fires and 2022 floods. In response to the 2026 bushfires, the MAV supported Strathbogie and Murrindindi Shire Councils to coordinate resource sharing at the request of each council. These efforts resulted in 106 deployments from 39 councils in roles for secondary impact assessment (Arborists, Environmental Health Officers, Municipal Building Surveyors, Coordinators and Admin), Municipal Recovery Manager, Recovery Data Entry and Case Management and Customer Service. We are also aware of many other councils providing support under the Protocol across Victoria in response to the 2026 bushfires. Much of this relies on previously established relationships across councils.

The MAV is continuing to support improvements to the inter-council resource sharing protocol via funding through the Commonwealth Government's Disaster Ready Fund. The Protocol Project will develop online forms to support deployment, create a data management system for logging and managing offers of assistance, develop supporting resources such as preparedness checklists of what to have in place prior to formally requesting resources, what to have in place before deploying staff and case studies.

3.1.9 [Community Emergency Risk Assessment](#)

In Victoria, municipal emergency management planning uses the Community Emergency Risk Assessment which is developed and maintained by VICSES. It is an all-hazards risk assessment tool that aims to identify, mitigate and reduce risk within the community.

An independent review into CERA has shown:

- Poor alignment between the Community Emergency Risk Assessment process and the National Emergency Risk Assessment Guidelines.

- CERA can only assess individual hazards within a stable social, economic and natural environment.
- Data can be limited to past experiences of people who are in the room on the day of the assessment.
- Risk treatments can be vague and lack accountability.
- Probabilistic approach fails to account for the dynamic and complex nature of risk that occur due to climate change.

Climate change is a critical part of emergency management planning. The risk assessment tools available to councils should assess climate-related hazards and embed climate change projections.

The MAV is supportive of State Government, in partnership with councils, leading a review and update of the CERA framework to enable the incorporation of a broader climate context, the inclusion of scientific experts and information, and improved access to relevant climate data.

3.2 (2) the causes and circumstances of the bushfires, including climate change and the adequacy of the Government's climate policies and actions, forecasts, warnings and public education on bushfire threats

3.2.1 Adequacy of climate policies and actions

Preparation and planning by local government for this bushfire season was occurring in an environment where many communities were still recovering from previous fires or disasters like storms and floods.

Climate change is increasing the frequency, severity and complexity of extreme weather events and natural hazards, including bushfires. Since January 2015, [Victoria has had 90 declared disaster events](#), with compounding and cascading effects with many councils impacted multiple times.

Local government, and their communities, are on the frontline of responding to climate change. Many Victorian councils, individually and in partnerships, have a strong track record of delivering nation-leading work to reduce emissions and increase organisational and community resilience to climate impacts. However, it is clear we need more urgent and rapid action from all levels of government to achieve a safe climate. Both mitigation and adaptation are essential to reduce emissions and minimise the increasing risks from current and future climate impacts.

The MAV is strongly supportive of the Victorian Government setting ambitious, science-derived emissions reduction targets backed by investment that enables rapid and deep greenhouse gas emissions reductions across all sectors.

We recognise that reducing Australia's greenhouse gas emissions will require enhanced cooperation between national, state and local governments. To this end, the MAV is calling for the Victorian Government to implement a multilevel governance approach to climate change. This approach would empower all spheres of government to fulfill their climate ambitions by promoting effective coordination between and across governments.

There are ample opportunities for the Victorian Government to support councils to drive place-based adaptation and mitigation efforts including:

- Establishing a dedicated fund to support the implementation of Victoria's seven Adaptation Action Plans which includes direct financial support for councils
- Fast-tracking electrification and emissions reduction initiatives for essential community infrastructure, such as neighbourhood centres, public housing and community centres.
- Expanding opportunities for councils to upgrade local infrastructure and improve resilience to extreme weather events, with attention to the differing needs of urban, regional and rural municipalities.
- Improving household and business access to electric retrofitting programs.
- Supporting a partnership with local government to establish and undertake home upgrade program/s for energy efficiency and electrification.

3.2.2 Adequacy of forecasts and warnings

The January 2026 bushfires were coupled with extreme heat events which tested the adequacy and effectiveness of emergency warnings and public information. Heatwaves are complex and cause more deaths in Australia than all other natural hazards combined. Yet many people underestimate the danger of heatwaves and do not prepare accordingly.

Councils have reported inconsistencies between Bureau of Meteorology (BOM) heatwave warnings and Country Fire Authority (CFA) fire danger ratings. For example, the BOM presents extreme heatwave warnings in red while CFA also presents catastrophic fire danger ratings in red. Councils play a key role in re-distributing approved public messaging and warnings to communities. As the level of government closest to communities, this also means councils support their communities to understand public information. Ensuring there are consistent colour hierarchies and terminology across hazard warnings is essential to reducing community confusion and strengthening preparedness.

Under the State Emergency Management Plan [Council Role Statement](#), councils are responsible for municipal relief and recovery coordination. Councils also support Department of Health to provide public health advice consistent with heat health messaging developed by the department. While councils may choose to extend the opening hours of community facilities during heatwaves (such as libraries), this decision is made on a council-by-council basis and is by no means required under existing emergency management arrangements.

During the January 2026 heatwave, the MAV is aware of state agencies seeking advice from councils around the arrangements they had in place to support 'cooler places', with the intention of uploading that information onto the Relief and Recovery tab on VicEmergency. This type of request is confusing for councils as the opening of 'cooler places' is not covered under existing emergency management planning or recovery funding arrangements.

In rural areas, messaging by the Department of Health encouraging people to seek respite 'cooler places' can be in contradiction with CFA fire danger messaging which advises people to avoid unnecessary travel on high-risk days. For communities experiencing both heatwave conditions and elevated fire danger, this creates confusion about which advice should take priority.

- *Recommendation 6: Emergency Management Victoria should work with Bureau of Meteorology to remove inconsistencies between colour coding on BOM heatwave messaging and CFA fire danger ratings*

- *Recommendation 7: Emergency Management Victoria should work with councils and other agencies to issue advice clarifying that councils are not required to stand up cooler places in a heatwave.*

3.3 (5) resilience of critical services and infrastructure such as electricity, water and telecommunications during and after the fires

Case study: Communications outages in Mt Alexander

Harcourt lies about 110km north-west of Melbourne and is best known for apple growing. The town, combined with nearby Ravenswood, lost fifty-four homes and several businesses on Friday, with the area among the worst hit by bushfires which started on 7 January amid a heatwave that saw temperatures soar past 40C. The Harcourt fires caused considerable damage to the region's infrastructure, particularly the transmission towers that provide radio and TV services. The fire also impacted a water processing facility and sewage facility in Harcourt as well as powerlines, leaving the town without water, sewage and electricity.

The damage to infrastructure meant ABC Victoria was unable to broadcast on its standard frequency. Communities also lost access to SBS, commercial radio and TV. This significantly impacted the ability of emergency services to deliver advice and warnings. It is understood the fire damaged both antennas and power systems, and that redundancy plans, including backup generators, were unable to continue powering the stations. Telecommunications outages can be life-threatening in an emergency demonstrating the importance of community preparedness and the agility of emergency services to broadcast advice and warnings through different channels.

Case study: Outages in Simpon and surrounding districts

As documented in Corangamite Shire's submission to this inquiry, extended power and telecommunications failures in multiple regional townships demonstrated that infrastructure resilience is now a life safety issue. The 2026 heatwaves and fires produced widespread power interruptions impacting fuel supply, EFTPOS, communications and medically vulnerable residents across regional Victoria. The Otways districts saw >100,000 properties lose power at one point during the late January heatwave.

Documented outages in Simpson and surrounding districts illustrate the compounding consequences of power and Telstra network failures described above. These case studies support calls for priority line-hardening, micro-grid options and greater redundancy in regional telecommunications infrastructure, particularly to support priority community facilities like relief hubs, potable water and communications towers.

Case study: Known telecommunications network gaps

Both Murrindindi and Strathbogie Shire Councils

experience unreliable internet, persistent mobile black spots and insufficient telecommunications infrastructure to support emergency response. Some of the known issues include no mobile coverage in key areas like Mitchellstown, inadequate broadband access in towns such as Avenel and Violet Town and patchy service impacting emergency management.

One consistent impact in emergency events in Murrindindi Shire is the failure of critical telecommunications which impedes our community's ability to access Vic Emergency App and other information to make good emergency decisions; prevents emergency help-seeking through 000 calls; and slows emergency responses.

Of particular concern is internet and telecommunications back-up at Incident Control Centres. For example, the Alexandra Incident Control Centre lost communications in the February 2024 and January 2026 emergency incidents. This should not be allowed to happen again, as it places emergency services and our communities at increased risk.

Councils are seeking support to work in partnership with other levels of government and telecommunications providers to invest in targeted telecommunications upgrades and hardening of existing infrastructure at risk of failure in natural disasters.

There are also calls to build layers of resilience so that when telecommunications services fail, there are adequate back up plans to support emergency response. This could include the installation of battery back up on all mobile phone towers, the use of pre-deployed generator programs and alternative satellite-based internet service such as STAND, Starlink or SkyMuster.

3.4 (6) the impact on the community, business and agriculture and efforts to aid in recovery

3.4.1 Impact on the community

The 2026 bushfires have had a devastating impact across the state destroying more than 1500 structures, including primary places of residence. The impacts to communities, farmers, landholders, businesses are significant and ongoing.

Many councils and communities recovering from the 2026 bushfires have been affected by successive disasters in recent years. The following 9 councils have been impacted by the 2026 bushfires, 2022 floods and 2019/20 bushfires: Alpine Shire Council, Benalla Rural City Council, East Gippsland Shire Council, Mansfield Shire Council, Mitchell Shire Council, Murrindindi Shire Council, Towong Shire Council, Wellington Shire Council and Yarra Ranges Council. Being exposed to multiple disasters can lead to re-traumatisation of communities and contribute to more complex recovery needs.

The local government workforce has also been personally impacted by the bushfires. In Murrindindi Shire Council alone, up to 50 per cent of council staff were impacted directly or supporting family and friends who had been impacted. Rural and regional councils have smaller workforces that are already under pressure outside of an emergency. Needing to navigating complex process of response, relief and recovery on top of this adds additional strain and stress.

Councillors as local leaders navigating their communities through disaster are also under significant stress. Many councillors in rural areas hold dual roles of local government representatives and emergency services volunteers. The MAV has observed there is a clear role for more dynamic and tailored mental health supports for councillors.

3.4.2 Impact on agriculture

[Agriculture Victoria](#) reported 45,593 statewide livestock losses, 150,517 hectares of total farm area affected and 11,136 ha of plantation softwood lost.

Early on in the bushfire response phase, councils identified concerns around the capacity and capability of landholders to meet their obligations to dispose of deceased animals.

Under the State Emergency Management Plan, farmers are responsible for disposing of dead livestock on their properties. Councils are acutely aware that the emotional and psychological toll of emergencies can leave farmers unable to manage this task. Small scale or hobby farmers may also not have the knowledge or equipment ready to dispose of animal carcasses in line with environmental guidelines.

To support landholders with guidance and technical advice, Agriculture Victoria set up a Livestock Disposal Advisory Service. However, advice from some impacted councils was that this service was stood up after most of the community had already disposed of their stock. We understand guidance relating to safe animal carcass disposal options could have also been circulated more quickly. In future events it is critical that Agriculture Victoria has the ability to activate on-the-ground supports and advice for landholders to meet their disposal responsibilities in a timely manner.

Over 9,625 kms of fencing has been damaged in the 2026 bushfires. Fencing restoration is critical for livestock management, environmental protection and economic recovery. During the recovery phase, councils have been under pressure to support repairs to fences damaged during the fire response. However, DEECA's [Repair of Rural Fences Damaged by Bushfire and Fire Control Line Stabilisation Policy](#) notes the Victorian Government is responsible for carrying out and paying 100 per cent of the reasonable costs to restore fences on private land damaged as a result of machinery used by fire agencies to control bushfires. There is a clear need for more education around this policy to reduce confusion around councils' role and support recovery efforts on the ground.

It should also be noted that agricultural land is the main land use in Victoria in geographic extent, where nearly two thirds of Victoria is in a rural, agricultural or green wedge zone. For most rural councils, farming and agriculture is the base of the local economy, not to mention being part of the state's food and fibre bowl. Although farms have infrastructure and dwellings, they are primarily a space of economic production that supports individual livelihoods and community financial sustainability.

In farming zones, the dwelling or other buildings (like the farm machinery shed) is often used by emergency management agencies as the sole indicator of risk to life and property, other indicators around agricultural and productive land use should also be more readily recognised in emergency responses. The Victorian Farmers Federation (VFF) notes that there is a lack of understanding around what is farmed, and how it is farmed. Knowing how the land is actually used is critical to minimising the risk of a fire event, managing incidents to reduce fire consequence and undertaking actions to speed up recovery.

3.4.3 [Efforts to aid in recovery: Recovery funding arrangements](#)

Effective and efficient recovery funding arrangements are essential to support community recovery following a disaster. The 2026 bushfires have again demonstrated the gaps in State and Commonwealth funding arrangements that are impacting the ability of councils to meet the expectations of communities on the ground.

Disaster Recovery Funding Arrangements

The MAV has long called for improvements to State and Commonwealth recovery funding arrangements to support councils to undertake their emergency management responsibilities. The Commonwealth Government's Disaster Recovery Funding Arrangements (DRFA) are complex, administratively burdensome and do not provide the level of certainty required to support community recovery.

To support effective and efficient claims processes, the State Government should investigate whether the number of DRFA Assessors needs to be increased. The [Colvin Review](#) found that “the DRFA faces challenges related to accessibility and transparency, with inconsistent application across jurisdictions. Its flexibility, while a notable strength, also introduces complexities due to the inherently discretionary nature of its decision making...The current categorisation framework (A, B, C, and D) is inadequately understood and is used to differing degrees by different state and territory governments, leading to a need for simplification and more transparent application.”

One of the most significant gaps in the DRFA (as it is applied in Victoria) is that it offers limited opportunities to build infrastructure back to a more resilient standard post-disaster. In most cases, damaged or compromised infrastructure can only be returned to its existing condition. In practice, this limits or discourages any attempt to better the infrastructure to make it more resilient.

As found by the [Parliamentary inquiry into climate resilience](#) “The like-for-like approach to asset restoration creates a resiliency gap by reinstating infrastructure to its pre-disaster condition without allowing for necessary upgrades, leaving assets vulnerable to repeated damage and increasing long-term costs for councils.”

The MAV continues to call on the Victorian Government to work with the Commonwealth to consistently and transparently enable betterment under the DRFA so that local government assets are rebuilt to a higher, more resilient standard. The provision of a dedicated 'Build to Withstand' Fund would allow councils to conduct pre-disaster investigation works to identify and address the highest priority infrastructure for resilience upgrades.

There is ample evidence that shows the return on investment in resilience-building and mitigation activities is far greater than continued investment in response. Extreme weather-related damage costs Victoria \$2.7 billion annually while resilience investments save roughly three dollars for every dollar spent. The DRFA should be maximised to reduce future risk and build future resilience at every opportunity.

- *Recommendation 8: The State Government should work with the Commonwealth Government to adopt betterment as an eligible expense under the Disaster Recovery Funding Arrangements.*
- *Recommendation 9: The State Government should fund a dedicated Build to Withstand fund to enable councils to conduct pre-disaster investigation work for infrastructure resilience upgrades.*

Case Study: DRFA Funding Washed Away in Mitchell Shire

The Hume region is highly susceptible to natural disasters. Since 2019 there have been numerous declared disasters including significant bushfires, and two major floods in October 2022 and January 2024. In the wake of the 2022 floods, DRFA funding allowed damage to be repaired and infrastructure restored to its previous condition. However, a lack of betterment funding meant that this work did not include improved resilience measures, which meant 60-70% was damaged by floods again only fifteen months later.

The Whitegate Road repair bill in October 2022 was \$292,000 before the road was re-impacted in January 2024 resulting in further remediation works at an estimated cost of \$200,000. Building to withstand similar events on this road is estimated to cost only \$900,000 and would substantially reduce future remediation requirements.

Broader recovery funding constraints

Councils continue to report issues accessing recovery funding that is timely, transparent and needs based.

As experienced in previous disasters, there is a delay between the Community Recovery Officers and Hubs program being announced and councils receiving the funding. This is a critical program that allows councils to deliver tailored recovery programs on the ground through the employment of dedicated officers. To ensure councils can coordinate timely and tailored recovery activities, it is critical that this funding flows to councils quickly following an emergency.

Councils have also flagged concerns regarding the contribution criteria for some grant funding. We know that grant programs often require a financial co-contribution from councils – it is challenging for rural councils to meet the level of contributions required meaning they may miss out on critical grant opportunities.

With compounding and cascading disaster events placing strain on existing recovery funding arrangements, governments can underestimate the length of time it takes to

recover. While councils report recovery can commonly extend beyond five years, funding usually ends after two to three years. Committing to longer-term funding timeframes will enable meaningful recovery and strengthened community resilience.

Councils also hold concerns about the eligibility of relief and recovery supports for non-residential ratepayers. Under existing frameworks, these property owners may not be eligible for financial assistance or state-funded clean-up support because they are not permanent residents in the municipality. This gap is creating additional strain for affected landholders and the MAV supports council calls for a more flexible and equitable approach.

The 2026 bushfires have also exposed significant gaps in the ability of smaller councils to undertake business as usual functions while simultaneously responding to emergencies. The dual demands of maintaining essential services – such as waste collection, infrastructure maintenance and community programs – alongside emergency management responsibilities places immense strain on local government capacity. Rural councils face particular challenges of working within constrained budgets and staffing levels, while being more likely to be exposed to disasters.

- *Recommendation 10: The State and Commonwealth Governments should ensure that all recovery funding provided to councils is timely, transparent, needs based and reflects the long-term nature of recovery.*

Compounding disasters impacting council revenue

To date funding support for councils following disasters has largely focused on costs incurred directly as part of relief and recovery. Repairing infrastructure, undertaking impact assessments, operating relief centres.

Councils also incur significant expense more broadly to support community and economic recovery. In addition to rate relief for residents and businesses, there are ways councils can support recovery if they have capacity. These include discounting planning permits for those rebuilding, waiving waste fees to aid cleanup, promoting tourism to assist economic recovery, and increasing capacity to support mental health in the community. Staffing even to normal capacity can become challenging as council staff have often been personally impacted by the disaster.

Demand on council services increases following a disaster, while the capacity to pay rates is reduced.

The Ministerial Guidelines Relating to Payment of Rates and Charges issued in December 2025 explicitly considers natural disaster as one of the components which must be considered by councils when assessing hardship and financial hardship of ratepayers.

Rural shires are disproportionately affected by natural disasters. They are also the councils least able to absorb financial impacts of reduced revenue. Across all financial sustainability measures rural shires track below the state's average. Their communities are generally paying a higher proportion of their income in rates, so recovering the costs incurred through future rate increases is not viable.

The existing recovery funding arrangements do not provide mechanisms for heavily and re-impacted rural shires to seek additional support to address this funding gap.

Strathbogie, Mitchell and Murrindindi Shire Councils were each impacted by the 2022 floods and again impacted by the 2026 bushfires. These councils have estimated the loss to council revenue in rates following the 2026 fires. This is based on loss of primary residence and/or loss of primary source of income.

Financial Year	Strathbogie	Mitchell	Murrindindi
2025/26	\$1,000,000	\$170,557	\$750,000
2026/27	\$1,030,000	\$178,196	\$1,500,000
2027/28	\$1,060,000	\$183,092	\$1,500,000
Total (Est.)	\$3,090,000 (subject to Secondary Impact Assessments)	\$531,845 (subject to Secondary Impact Assessments)	\$3,750,000 (subject to Secondary Impact Assessments)

The State Government should look at immediate options for addressing the gap in revenue for rural shires that have been heavily impacted by multiple disasters. For example, the MAV supports calls for a Longwood Bushfire Local Government Relief and Recovery Funding Package which could be broadened out to all heavily impacted councils.

- *Recommendation 11: The State Government should work with all councils heavily affected by the 2026 summer fires on a Local Government Relief and Recovery Funding Package.*

Emergency management workforce challenges

Environmental Health Officers (EHOs) and Municipal Building Surveyors (MBS') each play a critical role in undertaking highly specialised roles before, during and after emergencies. EHOs support initial and secondary impact assessments, safe and adequate water supply, emergency shelter and accommodation, food safety, wastewater management including septic tanks, infectious disease control and more. MBS' also support initial and secondary impact assessments, issue building notices and orders requiring building work to be made safe, issue building permits for replacement structures and inspect private emergency accommodation buildings.

The specialised nature of the work done by EHOs and MBS' cannot be undertaken by other personnel. Their assessments enable councils to apply for funding under the DRFA.

In response to the 2026 fires, several councils have experienced difficulty sourcing sufficient EHOs and MBS' to undertake Secondary Impact Assessments. This challenge reflects broader workforce pressures across the local government emergency management workforce, including an ageing workforce, training constraints and a shift towards privatisation.

At the same time, demand for emergency services continues to grow, with [Report on Government Services 2026](#) data indicating that service callouts are increasing at a much faster rate than funding.

[Environmental Health Professionals Australia](#), the peak representative body for most Victorian EHOs, has advised that workforce deficiencies are more pronounced in regional councils. It is recommended that State funding and grants be made available for potential local EHOs' (and MBS') to undertake internships in regional and rural councils, as locally based staff are more likely to remain in their communities.

- *Recommendation 12: The State Government should work with the MAV and the Environmental Health Professionals Association (and any other relevant peak bodies) to fund and co-design emergency management training for EHOs and MBS’.*

Donations management

The effective management of donations can support strengthened community recovery efforts. Under the State Emergency Management Plan, Emergency Recovery Victoria is the lead agency for the management of donation goods. Councils reported gaps in coordination efforts at the state and regional tiers which led to inappropriate donations, operational strain and waste disposal challenges. A higher level of leadership and direction from Emergency Recovery Victoria is required to better coordinate donations and ensure transparency and visibility. The State Government should look to establishing clear guidelines, in partnership with impacted councils and communities, to ensure that donations for the 2026 bushfires reach those who most need assistance.

- *Recommendation 13: the State Government should lead work to establish clear guidelines for donations management in partnership with the local government sector.*

3.4.4 Efforts to aid in recovery: Planning for bushfire recovery

The 2026 summer fires have again demonstrated the critical role that sustainable development through planning and building systems plays in supporting community resilience, safety and recovery. This includes guiding rebuilding and reducing long-term bushfire risk.

Council planning, building and environment teams are central to this work.

The weight of responsibility placed on local government, particularly in the early and immediate phases of recovery, has exposed systemic pressures on their planning and enforcement teams. The compounding impacts of capacity constraints and gaps in recovery pathways and strategic bushfire planning processes are having a real impact on councils, their resources and communities.

Recovery outcomes will be strengthened by clearer policy settings and dedicated resourcing to councils and the authorities they partner with to plan on behalf of their communities.

Planning system context – a shared responsibility

Victoria’s planning and building frameworks require natural hazard and bushfire risks to be assessed and addressed through both strategic planning and decision-making. Our planning system seeks to prioritise the protection of human life. It also shares key roles between local and state government for the land use planning and recovery for communities.

Key elements include:

- Clause 13.01-1S, which requires risk-based planning for all natural hazards and climate-related risks
- Clause 13.02-1S, which prioritises the protection of human life and directs how bushfire considerations must influence planning decisions

- Applying Bushfire Management Overlays and designated bushfire-prone areas, which trigger the need for a planning permit for new buildings and works, necessitating certain design standards, including dwellings
- State-led strategic bushfire planning and mapping, which has been a core outcome of the 2009 Victorian Bushfires Royal Commission

State Government-led planning for bushfire provides the foundation for where and how rebuilding can occur, including following a major fire event. The MAV supports these current arrangements and does not propose they change.

Following the 2009 Bushfires and Royal Commission, the role of strategic planning for bushfires (i.e. establishing the planning controls and mapping where building can and cannot occur) has been a function of the State Government. The Government, through DEECA and DTP, holds the expertise, mapping and other technology required to review and update bushfire maps and apply these to planning schemes quickly. While councils do not hold this expertise and do not lead bushfire planning reviews at the state-wide scale, they have an important role in scrutinising proposals to update planning controls and explain proposals to local communities. However, councils, in partnership with the government and other agencies and stakeholders, can invest in their own landscape hazard assessments to determine the strategic pattern of settlement in their municipalities to avoid hazard risks.

Strategic land-use planning in the context of bushfire

Strategic land-use planning in the context of bushfire (and other natural hazards) is essential to building safe and resilient communities.

Councils have ongoing or identified programs of strategic work that prioritise settlement planning, economic development and environmental and landscape protection. Essential to this work is managing natural hazards and prioritising the protection of human life through:

- avoiding development in locations where risk cannot be effectively mitigated
- addressing bushfire risk at a settlement and regional scale rather than site-by-site
- identifying alternative growth or rebuilding locations
- ensuring proposed bushfire protection measures do not conflict with environmental or landscape values
- designing settlements to strengthen community resilience

These assessments, known as Strategic Planning Bushfire Assessments, include local contextual information on bushfire and identifies locations that are higher or lower risk to support land use planning and the preparation of planning scheme amendments. This strategic work enables early identification of higher-risk areas, ensures future development occurs in safer locations, and prevents the escalation of long-term exposure to bushfire risk.

These assessments need to be undertaken in partnership with and referred to the CFA, FRV and DEECA for their expertise and support. Unfortunately, MAV is aware that the CFA has often not had the planning resources to respond to referral requests or work with councils to resolve issues with their hazard assessments. This has stymied local government efforts to undertake long-term strategic planning for settlements in areas within bushfire risk.

Meanwhile, expertise in strategic bushfire assessments across the local government sector is also lacking. While support for councils is welcome and able to be accessed

through the Department of Transport and Planning's Regional Planning Hubs program and training through the Planning Institute of Australia, rural and regional councils especially struggle to recruit and maintain planning expertise, and provide training, across a range of often competing demands and issues, including (to name a few):

- housing demand, including meeting Plan for Victoria's Housing Capacity Targets
- agriculture and economic development
- cultural heritage and post-contact heritage
- landscape and environmental conservation
- climate change, bushfires and flood

The MAV also understands that leading public servants working in the bushfire, flooding and environmental hazards space in the DTP have recently been made redundant. The MAV is disappointed and confused about this decision by DTP to remove key personnel working in environmental planning from the department at the current time. The timing is entirely misaligned with recovery and the need to coordinate across departments and plan for community recovery.

In the face of the climate crisis and escalating instances and risk of fire, government at all levels should review strategic planning capacity in local and state government to manage increased landscape hazard risks. A good start would be to ensure DTP, DEECA the CFA, and other agencies like Agriculture Victoria, are well-resourced to deal with these increasing risks.

While councils contribute essential local knowledge and undertake risk-based strategic planning in areas of high bushfire risk, MAV emphasises that the State retains responsibility for strategic bushfire mapping and risk assessment.

Temporary Accommodation: Community need and system limits

The Victoria Planning Provisions (VPP) allow residents who have lost their homes to bushfire or another natural disaster to build a temporary dwelling without a planning permit, so long as certain conditions are met. These conditions allow the temporary accommodation to remain on site for up to 3 years while reconstruction of a permanent dwelling is approved and construction is underway.

Temporary accommodation is critical to community recovery. It keeps residents in place and connected to their community, local services and social and health support networks. Temporary accommodation provides shelter while recovering from the trauma of experiencing and surviving a natural disaster.

Local government has a significant regulatory, administrative, legal and resource-intensive role in assessing, deciding upon and enforcing these temporary approvals. The delegated responsibility for determining whether temporary accommodation requires a permit sits with a council planner, yet many affected councils lack the staff to carry out these functions efficiently on top of their normal council duties.

Temporary accommodation presents challenges that extend the capacity of the many rural and regional councils that have significant numbers of residents living in temporary dwellings, often many years after the disaster event.

Permit requirements and community confusion

Although temporary accommodation does not require a planning permit when specific conditions are met (timing, services, emergency vehicle access, wastewater

controls, vegetation removal consents, etc.), affected residents find these provisions complex and difficult to navigate. These complexities are exacerbated in time of personal and likely financial strain on individuals and communities trying to rebuild their lives. Councils experience significant demand for guidance, written consents from agencies and providing their own consent, and clarification of the rules.

This work occurs in addition to their 'business as usual' planning work such as consents, existing permits in the system before the disaster event. But also planning and building permits that are not streamlined or require a simpler consent, which includes planning permits for permanent dwellings, businesses reopening and rebuilding, vegetation clearance and replanting, and required planning scheme reviews and updates.

Inconsistent legacy arrangements

Past emergencies have left councils with:

- incomplete records
- varied or unclear permit conditions
- enforcement complexities where 'temporary' accommodation has become de facto permanent housing for recovering residents

The planning scheme provides clear distinctions between temporary and permanent residential structures. For traumatised communities, however, these distinctions are blurred and confusing. These issues are compounded by the ongoing cost of construction, supply chain and labour shortages impacting the construction and development industry. Increased costs to build to bushfire-safe BAL standards are also a barrier to communities and individuals who have already lost everything to a natural disaster. These are leading to longer and more costly rebuild times.

To many, a home is a home. However, councils must enforce the planning scheme of the day and retain enforcement responsibility for years after the disaster event. Fire-affected councils face acute capacity challenges. Councils report recurring issues where more substantial structures erected under temporary allowances create long-term compliance problems once consents under the planning scheme have expired. Navigating complex social, economic and regulatory issues fall to councils who must help communities rebuild, but within the parameters of the planning, building and bushfire regulations.

While the Government's proposed standard 'reliance statements' for councils are welcome as a step forward and should create clearer and more consistent record keeping, they do not address how councils should manage:

- expired temporary accommodation which have, for the occupants at least, become their permanent home
- unwillingness or inability of residents to vacate
- the social impacts of enforcement

A consistent, statewide approach and clear policy direction from the State to communities is required now to avoid repeating previous cycles and re-traumatising communities who are still rebuilding.

The MAV strongly supports:

- a repeat of surge funding and support through the established and well-recognised Regional Planning Hubs program. This was used effectively after the 2022 floods, and can again be used for the current bushfire recovery and rebuild
- dedicated funding to supplement planning capacity in affected councils

- flexible funding that supports secondments and short-term external expertise

Effective planning support is directly linked to more responsive, equitable community recovery.

Lessons from Previous Recovery Programs

The Black Summer (2019–20) experience offers valuable insights. This includes the Bushfire Rebuild Support Service (BRSS). This State-supported and funded planning service in East Gippsland and Towong Shires provided:

- direct assistance to residents navigating planning and building controls
- proactive outreach, reducing confusion and delays
- access to skilled planners, including secondees from metropolitan councils

The East Gippsland BRSS remains active six years later, demonstrating ongoing value. MAV recommends a rapid review of outcomes and lessons to inform any 2026 recovery funding program.

Rebate Programs

State-run rebates for essential rebuilding infrastructure (e.g., septic and rainwater systems) have been effective, predictable, and equitable. These programs sit outside statutory planning and should not be conflated with planning responsibilities.

Recommendations

14. Resource State agencies responsible for strategic bushfire planning. *The State Government should reaffirm that strategic bushfire mapping, risk assessment and application of Bushfire Management Overlays remain a State-led function, and ensure DEECA, DTP and the CFA are adequately and sustainably resourced to perform this role.*
15. *The State Government should review recent reductions in environmental and hazard planning expertise within State agencies and ensure sufficient specialist capacity to support recovery and long-term resilience planning.*
16. Fund strategic bushfire assessments: *Establish a dedicated program to support councils to undertake Strategic Planning Bushfire Assessments, including funding, technical guidance and timely referral authority input.*
17. *Ensure the CFA and other relevant authorities are adequately resourced and required to respond within statutory timeframes to council-led strategic planning work.*
18. Establish a Bushfire Recovery Planning Support Service: *Implement a State-funded planning support service, modelled on the Bushfire Rebuild Support Service, to provide direct assistance to residents and surge capacity to affected councils.*
19. Provide flexible recovery planning funding: *Allocate dedicated, flexible funding through the existing DTP Regional Planning Hubs program to bushfire-affected councils to support secondments, shared regional planning resources and short-term specialist expertise.*

20. Clarify and support temporary accommodation policy to improve community guidance and communication: *Develop a consistent framework for temporary accommodation following disasters, including clear guidance on time limits, compliance pathways and transition arrangements when approvals expire.*
21. *Establish a defined pathway for managing expired temporary dwellings to reduce enforcement burdens on councils and minimise re-traumatisation of affected residents.*
22. *Provide clear, centralised, plain-language guidance to communities regarding rebuilding requirements, temporary accommodation provisions and available recovery supports.*
23. Maintain and expand non-planning recovery supports: *Continue and expand State-run infrastructure rebate programs (including septic and rainwater systems), recognising their importance to equitable recovery and their distinction from statutory planning functions.*
24. Evaluate recovery planning models: *Undertake a formal review of previous recovery programs, including the Bushfire Rebuild Support Service, to inform a recovery planning outcome for future events.*

3.5 (9) the prevalence and impact of misinformation leading into and during the fire season

3.5.1 Prevalence and impact of mis/disinformation

Mis and disinformation was reported in relation to the 2026 bushfires and response efforts. Due to the timeframe of this submission, it has not been possible to exhaustively collate the instances of disinformation across affected areas, but media reports and anecdotal accounts suggested several strong themes, outlined below.

The incidental or deliberate sharing of falsehoods is increasing in risk and prevalence in times of disaster globally, as demonstrated in this year's International Federation of the Red Cross and Red Crescent flagship report: *World Disasters Report 2026: Truth, Trust and Humanitarian Action in the Age of Harmful Information*¹. This report 'shows why understanding harms of harmful information is critical — revealing its wide-ranging impacts and how it disrupts preparedness, response and recovery'². Such disinformation has been widely reported related to Australian bushfires in recent years, including prominently in relation to the devastating 2019-20 fires³.

Disinformation commonly takes three main forms in disaster situations⁴:

1. Disinformation about the existence, severity or cause of a disaster - questioning whether the situation is accurately represented by authorities. In Victoria's recent bushfires this has included claims that the fires were deliberately lit in order to remove structures in the path of contentious planned transmission lines⁵.
2. Disinformation about response efforts - manipulating heightened fears and uncertainty during disasters to promote distrust and chaos. This has not been as widely reported in the media in relation to this season's Victorian fires, though conspiracist narratives accusing the government of covertly causing an internet blackout circulated widely⁶.

3. Disinformation that uses disasters opportunistically to exacerbate unrelated prejudices and pre-existing societal divisions. Given the timing of the Victorian fires immediately after the terrorist attack in Bondi on 14 December, there was some likelihood that disinformation conflating the two might ensue but anecdotal evidence suggests this was not in significant circulation, though this was reported interstate.

The following areas of investment are recommended to address mis and disinformation during bushfires and other disasters:

Recommendations:

25. *Strengthen local government and emergency management agency capacity to address mis and disinformation: Invest in training and capability building programs for staff and leaders to enhance their ability to identify, respond to and mitigate the impacts of misinformation and disinformation relating to climate change and energy.*
26. *Invest in a localised rapid response mechanism for disaster disinformation: Support development of a complementary rapid response mechanism for disaster disinformation that can be drawn on by emergency services and local government, to be locally embedded and contextualised.*
27. *Improve information access and knowledge translation across levels of government: Establish clear, consistent and timely channels of communication for local and national governments to share accurate, evidence-based information.*
28. *Support local government as a strategic partner: Recognise and invest in local government as a key strategic partner in addressing the underlying risk factors driving mis- and disinformation acceptance, including distrust, polarisation and low digital literacy.*

3.6 (10) the interjurisdictional support into and out of Victoria leading into and during the fire season, including interstate and international deployments, Commonwealth support and relief efforts; and

3.6.1 Commonwealth support: Australian Disaster Recovery Payment

In the immediate aftermath of the bushfires, the Australian Government Disaster Recovery Payment (AGDRP) was activated. The AGDRP is a lump sum provided to people who were adversely affected in a declared area and meet residency requirements.

When the AGDRP was initially activated, a number of towns that were affected by the January 2026 bushfires were not listed as declared areas. This was rectified for some areas including Skipton and Natimuk. However, the MAV understands there are still several fire-impacted areas that have missed out on access to the AGDRP including Burrowye and Tallangatta Valley in Towong Shire and Larralea in Corangamite Shire. These omissions continue to cause unnecessary stress for councils supporting their communities through the relief phase and into recovery.

- *Recommendation 29: The State Government should work with the Commonwealth Government to extend eligibility for the Australian Disaster Recovery Payment to fire impacted communities in Towong and Corangamite Shires.*

3.7 (11) lessons from and progress on the implementation of recommendations from previous inquiries, reports and Royal Commissions

The MAV acknowledges Victoria's emergency management sector has undergone significant reform since the 2009 Black Saturday fires, following a Royal Commission. The Inspector-General for Emergency Management also reviewed the sector in the context of ten years of reform and conducted an Inquiry into the 2019-20 Fire Season. These reviews, inquiries and Royal Commissions altered the entire emergency management sector in Victoria. However, there is more work to be done.

The final report of Independent Review of Commonwealth Disaster Funding (Colvin Review) was released by the Australian Government in October 2024. This review contains important recommendations regarding our disaster recovery funding arrangements and disaster risk reduction more broadly.

- *Recommendation 30: The Commonwealth Government should work with state and local governments to implement recommendations in the Colvin Review.*

In 2025, the local government sector was pleased to participate in IGEM's Review of local government emergency management training. This review was aimed to assessing the strengths and challenges in emergency management training for council staff and identify opportunities for improvement. The 2026 bushfires have again highlighted gaps in council capability and the need for tailored, formalised training that enables councils to effectively perform their statutory and non-statutory emergency management roles.

- *Recommendation 31: The State Government should work with the Inspector-General for Emergency Management to expedite the release of IGEM's Review of local government emergency management training.*

MAV would be pleased to provide clarification on any information in this submission. For further information, please contact Inquiries@mav.asn.au

Municipal Association of Victoria
Level 5, 1 Nicholson Street, East Melbourne VIC 3002
PO Box 24131, 6 Southern Cross Lane, Melbourne VIC 3000
Telephone: 03 9667 5555 Email: inquiries@mav.asn.au
www.mav.asn.au