

Case Study: Resource Sharing During the 19/20 East Gippsland Fires

Introduction

On 21 November 2019, lightning strikes ignited a series of fires in the East Gippsland Shire Council (EGSC) footprint, burning over 50% of the shire and in excess of 1.2million hectares over a three-month period. EGSC undertook a wide range of roles prior to, during and after the fires, establishing 7 relief centres, (one in NSW), a range of assembly areas and a mobile recovery van to provide information and support to 39 communities over eight weeks. A full list of EGSC activities is contained in its report to IGEM.

How Councils Supported One Another

Capacity Constraints

- The 2019/20 bushfires placed substantial demands on the emergency management system in the EGSC footprint, exacerbated by the size of the shire, the timing of the fires over the Christmas and New Year holiday period and capacity constraints given some council officers becoming directly involved in fighting the fires, defending homes or evacuating.
- Capacity issues were addressed initially by redirecting internal staff and calling on neighbouring councils for support. When it became obvious the response required was significantly greater than first thought, EGSC leveraged additional resources from across the state through [MAV's Inter-Council Emergency Resource Sharing Protocol](#) (the Protocol).
- Councils in Sale, Morwell and Melbourne also supported by the establishment of relief centres and other similar community facilities in their footprints.

The Protocol and Database

- The Protocol clarifies operational, insurance and reimbursement issues that may arise through municipal resource-sharing arrangements. It is consistent with the concepts and policy guidelines articulated in the *Emergency Management Act 1986 and 2013* and the State Emergency Management Plan. The [Human Resource Sharing Database](#) (the Database) supports the Protocol and assists councils to connect and share human resources.
- Significant resources were provided to support relief centres and Incident Control Centre (ICC) operations, which typically included Emergency Management Liaison Officer (EMLO) roles. This was initially arranged through direct contact with Gippsland Councils, and subsequently coordinated by MAV.
- EGSC assigned one of its Organisational Development officers to work directly with MAV and manage the Database for council. Their role was initially focussed on relief centre and recovery centre staff, before transitioning to resourcing secondary impact assessment teams among other needs.

Roles Sought

- EGSC sought a broad range of personnel with expertise in:
 - emergency management
 - technical areas (environmental health, building surveying and information technology)
 - communications
 - coordinators
 - relief and recovery.
- Specialised roles were hardest to fill – particularly those in incident control centres and roles which required expertise in Crisis Works.
- Nonetheless, EGSC found the Protocol and Database to be extremely valuable in sourcing external expertise and meant council did not have to rely on existing relationships to source assistance.

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Secondary Impact Assessment Teams

- A mix of private sector and local government resources were used due to capacity constraints in specialist areas such as building surveyors, asset managers and arborists.
- EGSC directly approached private providers for resources that could not be provided by other councils, or where available council expertise had been exhausted. The private operators were often already providers of services to local government, such as Kernow, who are contracted by other councils to provide environmental health officers.

Council Induction, Deployments, Debriefs and Reimbursements

- Inductions, rostering and debriefs are critically important when sharing resources. Ideally, a dedicated coordinator would manage these tasks, however, due to the unprecedented scale of the emergency and the resourcing constraints triggered by the scale of the response this was not possible.

Induction

- On day 1 of the deployment for secondary impact assessment, council took officers through a face-to-face induction and Crisis Works training before being deployed into the field. This process was developed at the time but was improved on a regular basis. Having a pre-prepared induction would have aided delivery and enhanced efficiencies.
- EGSC was fortunate to have a significant number of returning personnel over the three-month event. This helped with efficient delivery of the induction and saw the establishment of a staff buddy system, whereby an experienced officer was paired with a newly arrived officer in-field.

Deployments

- EGSC developed a deployment pack with information sent to officers prior to their arrival, including:
 - information forms required by council for authorisation/delegation purposes
 - secondary impacts assessment information sheets
 - key reading material.
- The deployment process evolved over time and was tailored to the location each staff member was being sent, with remote deployments requiring a different approach to those in urban areas.
- It was also important to consider that personnel were in some cases community members experiencing trauma and loss associated with the fires. In recognition of this, team members were paired up with personnel from the Victorian Council of Churches who provided vital support.

Debriefs

- EGSC conducted daily debriefs at the end of shifts. Initially these were face-to-face, however, they quickly transitioned to phone/virtual debriefs to better support personnel in remote locations. The exception to this was the final day of deployment, where all personnel were required to attend in-person.

Reimbursements

- The reimbursement process was somewhat difficult to navigate. While the Protocol outlined the process and requirements for reimbursements, refinements to help streamline processes have since been made in the 2021 version following the 19/20 bushfire event.
- Furthermore, it is critical that all councils are aware of the requirements of the Disaster Recovery Funding Arrangements (DRFA). EGSC needed to claim costs associated with other councils through DRFA and in some cases the supporting information was not available or unable to be provided in a timely manner, which delayed claims. Some councils chose not to seek reimbursement, or to simply claim directly.
- EGSC believes all councils should have the ability to claim directly to mitigate the risk of a claim being rejected by DRFA and the primary council having to bear the cost of preparing submissions and any rejected claims.

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Role of the MAV

- The MAV's role in the Protocol and Database is to ensure signatories are kept up-to-date and the Database is maintained. It also provides lists of resources to councils according to their requests.
- EGSC appreciated the role MAV played in coordinating resources. One primary MAV contact was useful and reduced time delays, while secondary MAV contacts provided reassurance. Responses from the MAV were swift, but it may be useful to explore whether council officers could have direct access to the Database in the future given the MAV's capacity constraints.

Lessons for the Future

Protocol and Database

- The Protocol provides a framework and improves understanding across the sector about resource sharing. It sets out the terms under which council officers can be engaged, as part of a broader emergency management suite of resources provided by MAV. The more we can enhance partnership-based approaches, the better placed the sector will be to manage emergencies into the future. Improved consistency of approaches will make it easier when calling on sector wide support in the future.
- As well as offering access to a pool of resources, the protocol allows the sharing of expertise, experience, feedback and continuous learning for personnel across the state. In future, assistance could be provided outside the traditional response, relief and recovery tasks, with councils able to assist with thinking, planning, coordination, administration, communication and more than just the hands-on requirements.
- It is important to have personnel who are familiar with emergency management processes and tasks to coordinate resourcing and management of the database at council's end. This helps to ensure they can provide guidance to other council officers who are deployed to assist. Where that isn't possible it is still beneficial to allocate one single resource as the main point of contact for managing the database.
- Closing off reports proved difficult as database administrators were time poor. It is important to schedule in time for this task to help where resources are required by other councils assist in compounding events. For example, Towong Shire had to call on the Database to resource their emergency management response at the same time as the East Gippsland fires.
- COVID-19 has shown us we can work together remotely. It would be great to continue working in this way in future events where appropriate and allow personnel to provide advice remotely where it isn't possible to have them deployed in-person.

Resource Sharing and Capacity and Capability Building

- Assistance is often required beyond the response and well into the recovery phase. Nonetheless, it can be difficult to engage staff from other councils once the initial crisis is over. The COVID-19 pandemic has complicated recovery work even more so.
- To overcome the difficulty in sourcing specific technical roles and to ensure internal capacity constraints can be managed, the development of a 'flying squad' should be considered, which would include personnel with experience in core roles routinely required in emergencies. Flying squad members could be pre-trained and quickly deployed to work alongside a smaller pool of less-experienced local personnel to capture build capability and capacity across the sector.
- Emergencies of this scale provide unique challenges that individual councils may only respond to once in a generation, which highlights the importance of resource sharing and collective capacity and capability building.

Pre-Planning

- Emergency responses require councils to act swiftly. It is extremely beneficial to allocate time to plan and develop processes ahead of time to reduce response delays.

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- Developing templates, spreadsheets, inductions and briefing guides ready for use. For example, EGSC developed a resource register in excel which included officer details, their council, their accommodation, contact number, dates of deployment and other key information, which proved useful during deployments and supported reimbursement claims.
- Consider developing a catalogue of all the potential services that might be drawn upon (local government and private).
- Sharing expertise and experience ahead of time is beneficial, particularly in work areas with limited capacity currently, such as secondary impact assessment. Many councils are not exposed to such significant emergencies very often so there are a limited number of people in the sector to be able to call on with these skills. Capturing and sharing their expertise with the sector would be beneficial for planning and response into the future.

High-level Summary Recommendations

- **Plan for emergencies of all sizes.** EGSC is generally involved in small/medium scale disasters, and rarely involved in a fire that lasts for three months. Planning for the worst-case scenario is important.
- **Consider the scalability of your resources and systems** to determine how a standard emergency response respond be escalated beyond what is generally planned for and experienced.
- **Develop and leverage collaborative sector-wide approaches** rather than simply how your council will operate on its own.
- **Prioritise your staff**, their fatigue, stress and well-being.
- **Recovery needs to commence well before the event** with investment in community resilience and then during the response phase, not after the event.

Acknowledgment

Thank you to EGSC personnel for sharing their time and experiences.