

Your role in Emergency Management



Under Victorian law, councils are required to assist with local planning and preparation for emergency events.

The Municipal Emergency Management Plan (MEMP) is a multi-agency plan for the municipal district. It is not only a council plan. As prescribed in the Emergency Management Act 2013, the multi-agency Municipal Emergency Management Planning Committee (MEMPC) is responsible for preparing the MEMP.

All agencies, MEMPC members, the Mayor and councillors, senior council officers and all staff who have emergency management responsibilities should be familiar with the contents of the MEMP.

The result of the emergency planning process under the EM Act 2013 should be a coherent and easily understood MEMP.

Building solid and strategic local connections can prove to be invaluable before, during and after an emergency event, when the pressure of an emergency event can strain relationships.

Stress can affect people's decisionmaking, so it is important that local arrangements are documented in MEMPs, and council policies and procedures.

KEY AREAS OF GOVERNANCE

As a council, key areas of governance that relate to emergency management include:

- awareness of the Municipal Emergency Management Plan (MEMP) produced by the multi-agency Municipal Emergency Management Planning Committee (MEMPC)
- ensuring council emergency management planning and business continuity planning are complementary and support good governance and operations
- ensuring health, safety and wellbeing policies within council provide appropriate support and care for senior officers and council staff, including the CEO and councillors, during and after an emergency; and
- other policies that relate to community support during emergencies.

KEY REPORTS

Councillors can expect to see reports to council on:

- proposed legislative and policy changes
- mitigation works that relate to emergency management, including capital works and maintenance
- planning and building issues, some of which may have emergency management and community safety implications
- designations of Neighbourhood Safer Places - Bushfire Places of Last Resort (NSP-BPLR)
- provision of emergency management facilities and decisions about critical infrastructure
- detailed planning for recovery following an emergency event
- media protocols relating to emergency response and recovery (including social media).

DURING AN EMERGENCY EVENT

The Mayor and councillors do not have an operational or response role during an emergency. The council's Municipal Emergency Management Officers (MEMO/s) and Municipal Recovery Managers (MRM/s) have operational responsibilities and legislative obligations they need to carry out.

Councillors should assist them by steering clear of operational areas while staying informed of the situation.

If attending emergency relief centres, recovery centres or community hubs, the Mayor or councillors should make sure they are well briefed by officers beforehand.

It's important to show empathy and compassion, but avoid making promises that may not be able to be kept.

The role of the Mayor in emergency management is quite different to that of councillors. Councillors do not usually play a prominent role in emergencies.

HANDY HINTS FOR MAYORS

Here are a few tips for mayors to remember during an emergency:

- ✓ **Do:** work in close partnership with the CEO and their key emergency management officers. Mayors and councillors can be a conduit between the community and council.
- ✓ **Do:** seek information from internal council briefings, seek daily briefings if possible.
- ✓ **Do:** provide approved comments to the media if requested. Always check in with the CEO first for the latest information.
- ✓ **Do:** ensure that your media comments relate to representing the views of the community or council services for the community (including relief and recovery services), not emergency response or operational matters.
- ✓ **Do:** help boost community morale where it may be lagging.
- ✓ **Do:** be consistent and follow-up, refer impacted residents to EM staff.
- ✓ **Do:** be patient. Information on what is happening and the impact of an emergency takes time to assess and verify.
- ✓ **Do:** explain to residents that the council isn't "running" the emergency; it plays a support and facilitation role.
- ✓ **Do:** look after yourself. Recovery from emergencies can be a taxing and traumatic period for community leaders.

- ✗ **Don't:** enter operational areas. The best place for the mayor and councillors during an emergency is among the community, not in council operational spaces.
- ✗ **Don't:** attend Incident or Regional Control Centres unless invited by the Incident Controller - this is the role of the Council EMLO.
- ✗ **Don't:** try to take command of the situation. Emergency management officers have statutory responsibilities they must carry out in an emergency event.
- ✗ **Don't:** bypass existing or approved communication and incident command structures.
- ✗ **Don't:** give answers other than current facts, especially when speaking to the media or residents.

COUNCILLORS' ROLE IN AN EMERGENCY EVENT

Councillors should:

1. Assist the Mayor as requested.
2. Remain well-briefed.
3. Boost morale and provide comfort to residents affected by an emergency event.
4. Advocate to council, and more broadly as required, on behalf of their constituents.
5. Facilitate communication between council and the community.

MEDIA AND COMMUNICATIONS

If the Mayor is the council's nominated spokesperson, they can play a helpful and prominent role before, during and after an emergency event by providing approved comments and information to the community and media. This should be done in close consultation with the CEO or their delegated communications/emergency management officer.

It is vital that the Mayor always ensures s/he is fully briefed before making media comments. Comments to the media should focus on representing the community's needs and views, not operational matters relating to the emergency.

If the Mayor is the council's nominated spokesperson, other types of information they might deliver could include:

- preparation of advice ahead of a period of high risk
- notification of community meetings and relief and recovery services
- details of any disruptions to council services
- advice regarding the availability of support, counselling or insurance services, including locations of relief and recovery centres
- general public announcements
- details of any public appeal for financial assistance for affected residents.

Any media comments should be drafted in consultation with the council's communications/emergency management staff with the necessary approvals.

Importantly, in a multi-agency event, specific crisis management information should only be issued by the spokesperson nominated by the control agency (designated lead response agency under the SEMP) as it is likely to relate to the technicalities of the emergency and may have legal ramifications.

Communication is a two-way street. The Mayor may also receive vital information from local residents that should be passed on to the emergency management team via the CEO. This ensures that information coming from the community is collated to enable the best possible decision making.

Accurate information about the emergency and the impact on the community will also be necessary if the Mayor is advocating to other levels of government or other agencies for assistance for the community. Advocacy should be done in consultation with the CEO, who will be gathering information and receiving advice from a range of internal and external sources.

Establishing good working relationships with local media during non-emergency times can prove very helpful during an emergency event.

Relationships with State and Federal Ministers

The Mayor can also play a linking role to other levels of executive government, working with the CEO on this action. However, it is important not to take pre-emptive action (and thereby undermine existing procedures).

FOLLOWING THE EMERGENCY

At the local level, councils have a long-established role in coordinating the provision of relief and recovery services to their communities, and the expectation of this important function is increasing. The recovery period that follows an event can last from months to years.

In the aftermath of an emergency event, the Mayor and councillors should monitor recovery activities and maintain their strong engagement with and advocacy for the community.

Community support

There may be an opportunity for the Mayor and councillors to boost morale or provide comfort to residents affected by an emergency event. This should be done in consultation with the CEO, who will liaise with the emergency management team to determine what would be most helpful.

Public appeal for financial assistance

In consultation with the CEO or their delegate, the Mayor can be the public face of an appeal for financial assistance from the wider public.

The Mayor can act as the focal point for queries from service clubs and community groups that may wish to support an appeal or start their own. This focal point for queries is important because during past emergency events, these organisations have sometimes expended significant amounts of well-intentioned energy gathering goods that are not actually required by the community in crisis.

It is usually far more useful that willing residents/organisations donate financial assistance or time rather than goods.

ABBREVIATIONS

CFA	Country Fire Authority
DRFA	Disaster Recovery Funding Arrangements (Federal program)
EHO	Environmental Health Officer
EMLO	Emergency Management Liaison Officer
EMV	Emergency Management Victoria
ERC	Emergency Relief Centre
ERV	Emergency Recovery Victoria
FRV	Fire Rescue Victoria
IMT	Incident Management Team
MEMP	Municipal Emergency Management Plan
MEMPC	Municipal Emergency Management Planning Committee
MEMO	Municipal Emergency Management Officer
MFPO	Municipal Fire Prevention Officer
MRM	Municipal Recovery Manager
NDFA	Natural Disaster Finance Assistance (State program administered by EMV)
NEMA	National Emergency Management Agency
SEMP	State Emergency Management Plan

© Copyright Municipal Association of Victoria, 2023. The Municipal Association of Victoria is the owner of the copyright in the publication *Guide for Mayors and Councillors – Your role in Emergency Management*. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored or transmitted in any form or by any means without the prior permission in writing from the Municipal Association of Victoria. All requests to reproduce, store or transmit material contained in the publication should be addressed to inquiries@mav.asn.au.

BACKGROUND INFORMATION

What is an emergency? What is emergency management?

An emergency is an event or situation that poses an immediate risk to health, life, property and/or the environment. Emergency management means the organisation and management of resources for dealing with all aspects of emergencies.

All emergencies are different but the same management principles apply, whether the emergency event is relatively minor or very complex.

The Emergency Management Act 2013 establishes Victoria's governance arrangements for managing emergencies. This Act is being amended in stages as the Emergency Management Act 1986 is repealed.

What is local government's role in emergency management?

Local government plays an important role in emergency management, both in partnership with other levels of government and emergency services, and through its own responsibilities. The State Emergency Management Plan (SEMP) gives guidance to councils, emergency services and other emergency management agencies about how to implement their obligations under Victorian legislation.

From 1 December 2020, key emergency management responsibilities of councils stem primarily from section 59 of the Emergency Management Act 2013, which requires:

- Establishment of the MEMPC through a resolution of Council

- The CEO or a senior officer of council to chair the MEMPC
- The council to participate in the preparation and maintenance of a Municipal Emergency Management Plan (MEMPC) through the MEMPC
- Appoint at least one Municipal Emergency Management Officer (MEMO) as outlined in the SEMP (page 64) s59G of the EM Act 2013
- Appoint at least Municipal Recovery Manager (MRM) role as outlined in the SEMP (page 67) and s59H into the EM Act 2013.

The broad role of local government in emergency management is described in [SEMP's role statement for municipal councils](#), however, councils vary in their approach to emergency management planning depending on their risk profile and available resources.

Councils play an important support role in the response to an emergency, but they are not emergency response agencies.

Councils have the authority and governance structures, networks and strategic partnerships necessary to support community recovery. The MRM and a range of support staff will activate relief and recovery measures as quickly as possible.

Planning is crucial to effective recovery in a community affected by an emergency or disaster.