

**Inspector-General for Emergency Management Review:**

**Ten Years of Emergency Management Reform**

 **Submission**

**September 2019**

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While this paper aims to broadly reflect the views of local government in Victoria, it does not purport to reflect the exact views of individual councils. This Ten Years of Emergency Management Reform Review submission has been endorsed by the MAV and the MAV Board.

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# Executive summary

In the aftermath of the Victorian ‘Black Saturday’ bushfires, the MAV represented councils through the Victorian Bushfires Royal Commission (VBRC) process, and over the last decade has worked closely with the Victorian Government and councils on the development and implementation of policy and reforms that resulted from the VBRC, the Comrie Floods Review and the Emergency Management White Paper in December 2012.

Between June and August 2019, the MAV and the Inspector General for Emergency Management (IGEM) ran seven consultation sessions with councillors and council officers to hear their perspectives on the effectiveness of the reforms. The sessions were held in Melbourne, Morwell, Colac, Ballarat, Wangaratta and Bendigo and were attended by 81 participants.

The consultations demonstrated the local government sector is dedicated to improving community safety and being recognised as a valuable contributor to Victorian emergency management. Councils have experienced the on-the-ground effectiveness of the reforms and this experience and knowledge of their communities will be invaluable as we enter the next decade of reform.

The MAV has identified a number of priority actions and opportunities for improvement based on the sessions and our statewide perspective. These are listed below as recommendations and explored in more detail in the report.

*Recommendation 1:* to better realise the potential of councils’ contribution to policy development and projects, the MAV and the Victorian Government should agree to local government consultation guidelines, which could sit under the Victorian State-Local Government Agreement.

*Recommendation 2:* any legal impediments to the sharing of impact assessment data with councils should be addressed as a matter of priority by the 2019/20 fire season.

*Recommendation 3:* the Victorian Government should revisit the bushfire shelter options policy, in consultation with local government, and better communicate the level of safety of each option and the context in which they should be used.

*Recommendation 4:* as part of the fire services reform and review of the Country Fire Authority Act, the provisions relating to Neighbourhood Safer Places (Bushfire Places of Last Resort) should be fully reviewed in consultation with local government.

*Recommendation 5:* an urgent review of the guidance material, training and support provided to councils to make eligible claims is required. This should include clear communication regarding day labour and betterment options.

*Recommendation 6:* the State should work with councils to review the non-major emergency policy and ensure that councils are adequately supported to provide relief services to affected households.

*Recommendation 7:* policies and programs being designed through the Emergency Management Victoria (EMV) Resilient Recovery Strategy should be co-designed with local government.

*Recommendation 8:* investment in training for service providers so that they have the confidence and resources to provide emergency planning support will be needed. A review of the effectiveness of the vulnerable persons register will also be required.

# Introduction

The Municipal Association of Victoria (MAV) is the peak representative and advocacy body for Victoria's 79 councils. The MAV was formed in 1879 and the *Municipal Association Act* 1907 appointed the MAV the official voice of local government in Victoria.

In the aftermath of the 2009 Victorian ‘Black Saturday’ bushfires, the MAV represented councils through the Victorian Bushfires Royal Commission (VBRC). Since then, we have worked closely with the Victorian Government and councils on the development and implementation of significant legislative and policy reforms resulting from the VBRC, the Comrie Floods Review (2011) and the Emergency Management White Paper (2012).

The Inspector-General for Emergency Management (IGEM) has determined that the ten-year anniversary of the 2009 fires is an appropriate time to review the effectiveness of the reform agenda.

The broad themes of the *Review of Ten Years of Emergency Management Reform* (the Review) are:

* Governance
* Sector capability and capacity
* Community engagement and preparedness
* Rebuilding and recovery
* Safety and resilience

Between June and August 2019, the MAV and IGEM ran seven consultation sessions with councillors and council officers to hear their perspectives on the effectiveness of the reforms. The sessions were held in Melbourne, Morwell, Colac, Ballarat, Wangaratta and Bendigo and were attended by 81 participants.

The consultations demonstrated how dedicated the sector is to improving community safety and being recognised as a valuable contributor to Victorian emergency management. Councils have experienced the on-the-ground effectiveness of the reforms, and many have borne - and continue to bear - the brunt of community frustrations when the system doesn’t work as well as it could, or policies are implemented in a way that doesn’t make sense.

This report focuses on the reforms, programs or projects that were consistently raised through the sessions as priorities for the local government sector. While there are some localised examples highlighted in this report, it does not seek to capture every comment and example provided during the consultation. As part of the review, IGEM also interviewed several council officers individually, to get a more in-depth understanding of some of the case studies and examples provided in the sessions. These may be covered in more detail in IGEM’s final report.

# Feedback

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## Theme 1: Governance

At the state level, emergency management governance arrangements were overhauled in 2013, and enshrined in a new Emergency Management Act 2013. The Emergency Management Act 1986 is progressively being repealed as new arrangements come into effect.

Notable reforms under this theme include the establishment of:

* the Emergency Management Commissioner (EMC) role, who has overall responsibility for coordination before, during and after major emergencies, including the management of consequences of an emergency
* the Inspector-General for Emergency Management as an independent statutory role providing assurance to government and the community in respect of emergency management arrangements
* Emergency Management Victoria (EMV) to oversee planning and policy development at all levels
* the State Crisis & Resilience Council (SCRC) as a new peak body for emergency management, with membership comprising the secretaries of the Victorian Government departments; the EMC; CEO of EMV; the Chief Commissioner of Police; and the CEO of MAV.
* three SCRC Subcommittees, which replaced the plethora of emergency management working groups and committees which existed in 2013, and
* the requirement for a three-year rolling Strategic Action Plan outlining the State’s emergency management reform priorities.

Other reforms discussed under the governance theme included operational systems and arrangements, risk assessment processes, document management, and debriefing and reviews.

From a local government perspective, priorities areas for improvement under this theme include:

* increasing opportunities for councils to influence emergency management policy development
* shared responsibility for risk assessments and planning between members of Municipal Emergency Management Planning Committees (MEMPCs), and
* responsible agencies showing leadership in the development of hazard-specific sub plans, particularly fire management plans.

*Policy development*

There is currently a general feeling across the local government sector of being disconnected from policy development. Feedback from councils indicates frustration that there are fewer opportunities than there were five years ago to provide early input to policy and projects. Consultation is project-based, with some opportunities for councils to respond to written drafts, rather than participate on working groups and help shape policy. This is a missed opportunity to draw on councils’ significant emergency management experience and their understanding of community behaviour.

Where government decision-making has significant implications for councils’ operating environment and/or communities, appropriate consultation must be undertaken in order to achieve the best outcomes. Consultation needs to take account of council resourcing constraints and the requirement of at least six weeks if something needs to go to Council, or if the State would like a consolidated sector response.

There was positive feedback about the role of the MAV in keeping councils informed and providing opportunities for involvement in some projects. There was no specific feedback about the role of the MAV as a member the SCRC and subcommittees, which may have been provided to IGEM independently.

*Recommendation 1:* to better realise the potential of councils’ contribution to policy development and projects, the MAV and the Victorian Government should agree to local government consultation guidelines, which could sit under the Victorian State-Local Government Agreement.

*Emergency management planning*

There was consistent feedback from the sector that councils are doing the ‘heavy lifting’ when it comes to municipal-level emergency management planning. Councils in some regions reported inconsistent agency participation at MEMPCs, meaning risk assessments lack rigour and it has been difficult to implement integrated, proactive mitigation measures.

The White Paper stated that ‘hazard-specific sub-plans (where required) at the local government level will be led by experts from relevant agencies.’ The feedback from councils in the sessions was that the VICSES has shown leadership in the development of local flood response plans but this local-level agency leadership is lacking for other hazards, including fire.

There remains frustration across the sector that responsibility for municipal fire management plans is being shifted to councils. A recent example provided to IGEM was councils being advised that the Country Fire Authority (CFA) will no longer fund updates to the Victorian Fire Risk Register – Bushfire (VFRR-B) to inform municipal fire management planning by capturing assets at risk from bushfire.  For almost ten years the risk assessment has informed fire management plans for 67 municipalities, alpine resorts and French Island. The advice to councils states that ‘LGAs may want to consider alternative approaches to their existing review process’, illustrating many in the CFA see municipal fire management plans as council plans, rather than a shared plan for the municipality.

There is optimism that the significant reforms to emergency management planning requirements and governance at the state, regional and municipal levels arising from the Emergency Management Amendment (Planning) Bill (2018) will go some way to addressing council concerns. Councils remain supportive of the impending changes which should see a strengthening of regional planning processes, agencies taking more responsibility for decisions and risk assessments at the municipal level, and a shift from the view that municipal emergency management plans (MEMPs) are ‘council’ plans. However, these are out of scope for the IGEM review because they have not yet come into effect.

At the Bendigo session, the group outlined the benefits of the Northern Victoria Emergency Management Cluster model, a collaboration between five councils in the Loddon Mallee Region. The five councils meet their statutory obligations through appointing an Integrated MEMPC and preparing a joint (integrated) MEMP. This model has increased agency participation in planning, supported the lower-resourced councils to meet their obligations and freed up resources that to increase community engagement and resilience building activity across the region.

There is an appetite to replicate the Northern Victoria Cluster model in other clusters of councils that are resourced-stretched or share a common area of high risk, such as the Otways. However, there remain concerns about whether this model will be authorised to continue under the provisions of the Emergency Management Legislation Amendment (Planning) Bill 2018.

While the MAV understands that several of the concerns raised under this topic should be addressed through reforms to regional and municipal planning arrangements in late 2020, we hope that they will be noted in the IGEM report for consideration during the development of new planning guidelines.

*Operational arrangements and systems*

In 2015, EMV convened a Municipal Emergency Coordination Centre (MECC) Working Group to address the White Paper action: *The requirement for councils to maintain and operate [MECCs] during emergencies will be removed, although councils may choose to utilise existing facilities.*

The working group included significant local government representation from across the state, and resulted in the SCRC Capability & Response Subcommittee recommending amendments to the Emergency Management Manual Victoria (EMMV). The project is a good example of a collaborative approach to developing new policy.

Councils are now better integrated into the system during emergencies. There was generally positive feedback from councils about the inclusion of councils in emergency management teams and as emergency management liaison officers (EMLOs) in Incident Control Centres. This was a significant improvement from arrangements ten years ago when councils were not readily accepted in control centres and the value they could offer was not well understood.

There was also positive feedback about the Crisisworks incident management system used by most councils, which started as software to support a ‘virtual MECC’, and now also supports the administration of recovery and case management. There was, however, significant frustration expressed about the willingness to transfer State-collected impact assessment data into Crisisworks to support councils’ secondary impact assessment and recovery coordination. The technical capability to exchange data was established after the South West fires in 2018, however it was not enabled during the 2019 fires. Councils report having to revisit households to assess impact to property, because the state-collected initial impact assessment data was not allowed to be shared with ‘third parties’.

*Recommendation 2:* any legal impediments to the sharing of impact assessment data with councils should be addressed as a matter of priority by the 2019/20 fire season.

## Theme 2: Sector Capability and Capacity

This theme covered interoperability between agency systems, approaches to technology, training and exercising.

Priorities for the sector are:

* Getting certainty around the future of the Municipal Emergency Resourcing Program (MERP)
* Reducing role creep
* Understanding the outcomes of the Councils and Emergencies Project capability and capacity assessment, and having an opportunity to work with the Local Government Victoria (LGV) on strategies to address the findings
* Lack of State training to support local government emergency management practitioners, particularly those with statutory roles

The MERP provides funding to the 64 Victorian councils covered by the CFA Act, to support strategic emergency management planning and boost the capacity of councils to fulfil their statutory responsibilities for emergency management.  These include:

        implementing relevant recommendations from the 2009 Victorian Bushfires Royal Commission and the 2011 Victorian Floods Review

        planning to support the most vulnerable members of the local community in liaison with the DHHS, and

        working in partnership with other councils, emergency organisations and Victorian Government agencies to facilitate joined-up planning, staff training, exercises and systems development.

MERP funding has been provided through discrete funding agreements, with the initial program in place between 2012-13 and the current agreement due to expire in June 2020. Councils are concerned about the future of the program and are hoping early advice that the program will rollover for a year while LGV completes the Councils and Emergencies project.

The Councils and Emergencies project is a three-phased project which commenced in 2016. The first phase resulted in a position paper (Dec 2017) outlining 94 responsibilities and activities councils undertake in emergency management. The second phase involved an assessment of each councils’ capability and capacity to meet statutory obligations and undertake the non-statutory activities outlined in the position paper. The third phase, which will commence in October 2019, will look at the assessment results and recommend strategies to address them.

*Local Government Capability and Capacity*

The strongest message coming out of the sessions was that rural and regional councils now rely on the MERP funding and will be vulnerable without it. It has enabled innovation, collaboration and for councils to take the lead on training and exercising. For some smaller councils, it would be impossible to meet statutory obligations and growing community, government and agency expectations without it.

There was mixed feedback about the Councils and Emergencies project. Some councils viewed it as an opportunity and others with scepticism. The assessment phase, which had concluded by July 2019, was a significant investment in time – in excess of six hours for most councils and several days’ work for some. There remains real concern that the 2017 position paper has resulted in new responsibilities for councils and amplified the expectations of agencies and government departments. These concerns will need to be addressed in the next phase of the project.

In most regions there are positive examples of collaboration between councils at the regional and sub-regional level and how councils have self-organised to deliver training, run exercises and standardise procedures. These collaborations have increased capability, capacity and consistency and have made it easier for councils to share resources and personnel during an emergency.

There were also concerns expressed about the lack of state-provided training opportunities for local government emergency management practitioners. Although the Victorian Government purchased the Australian Emergency Management Institute at Mount Macedon, there have been few opportunities for council officers. There is no training for the statutory roles of Municipal Recovery Manager (MRM) and Municipal Emergency Resource Officer (MERO). Feedback on the Municipal Fire Prevention Officer (MFPO) training was that it is focused on vegetation risk, but not enough on decision-making and the evidence required to support defendable decisions.

Maintaining a trained and willing workforce is also a challenge. Even council officers holding the key emergency management positions of Municipal Emergency Manager, MERO and MRM usually hold these on top of their substantive roles. Without support from the State and from the council executive for professional development, these officers are often thrust into situations for which they aren’t prepared.

There was largely positive feedback relating to the Emergency Management Common Operating Picture (EM-COP) which is EMV’s web-based communication, planning and collaboration tool. Many council officers use it frequently and find it valuable, while others acknowledged they find it daunting and underutilised. There is clearly an appetite for training to increase the use of EM-COP across the sector.

In November 2015, Victoria’s lessons management framework was released. The feedback from councils is that there is room for improvement in the sharing of timely information coming out of real time monitoring, debriefs and reviews, and that the framework could be simplified and made more accessible at the local level.

The decline in volunteerism, particularly CFA volunteers, was also raised as a serious community safety concern, but also because of the resulting additional burden on councils to manage vegetation on private land and roadsides.

## Theme 3: Community Engagement and Preparedness

Over the last decade there have been significant reforms to warnings and public information relating to emergencies. These reforms cover the doctrine, terminology and technology used to disseminate information and warnings.

There have also been hard-hitting whole-of-Victorian Government summer communications campaigns, which, for the last nine years, local government has been encouraged to support through a pre-summer briefing for council communication staff. The State shares key communications messages with councils ahead of each summer. These reflect State policy on a range of issues from power outages to bushfire shelter options.

Another part of the community engagement reform agenda has been the ongoing development of the Community Based Emergency Management approach, which assists communities to identify and build upon their own strengths, together with the appropriate support from organisations. EMV has sponsored pilots in several communities and supported councils to do the same.

The key opportunities under this theme are:

* Supporting community-led planning and community resilience building is resource-intensive. A lot of progress has been made, however continued investment through the MERP and other grants programs is critical
* The State and councils should be conscious of engagement fatigue in a number of communities
* There is ongoing confusion about Neighbourhood Safer Places that requires urgent attention

*Community preparedness*

IGEM and the MAV were provided with excellent examples of community-led planning and council-supported resilience building initiatives, particularly in townships with high bushfire or flood risk or communities recovering from a major emergency. It was noted that in many cases council support for these projects was reliant on MERP, grant or recovery funding and few councils would have the resources to support this level of community planning without external funding.

Councils’ observations of agency-led community preparedness and engagement activity was quite consistent across the sessions: the more integrated/ multi-agency and localised the activity, the more successful. People are less likely to travel to hear about a single hazard from a single agency than they are to participate in a multi-agency event.

There were some examples provided of ‘engagement fatigue’ in communities that have experienced major disasters and have participated in several evaluations, reviews and research projects and are feeling progress has been slow or under-resourced.

Many councils are grappling with the best way to involve community members in formal planning. The new planning legislation will require community participation in MEMPCs from December 2020, so there would be value in investigating the question further and developing a guideline with options and advice for municipal committees to consider.

*Warnings, campaigns and public information*

The general view in the sessions was that the most significant improvements to public safety have been through improvements to warnings and public information. This includes making information more accessible through the VicEmergency app and website, and the agreements with emergency broadcasters.

There was also feedback that the summer fire campaign needs a refresh and some more thought needs to be given to reaching CALD communities and other groups that require easy English.

*Neighbourhood Safer Places - Bushfire Places of Last Resort*

Some of the most concerning feedback in the sessions related to neighbourhood safer places/ bushfire places of last resort (NSPs) and the confusion in many communities about the protection they can offer. There were several examples of communities putting pressure on councils to designate NSPs and people considering NSPs to be their ‘plan A’ in a bushfire.

Part of the confusion about NSPs appears to be in the terminology. EMV’s signage manual (2016) tried to address this, and states: ‘the term Neighbourhood Safer Place - Place of Last Resort will now be referred to as a Bushfire Place of Last Resort for the purpose of this manual and signage.’ Rather than better educating the community, the manual has resulted in a patchwork of signs and communication materials across the state.

The requirement for councils to designate NSPs came out of the VBRC recommendations and may have been an appropriate policy response at the time. The Emergency Management Act and CFA Act require councils to designate NSPs, and the CFA Act provides a policy defence for local government if death or injury occurs. It is time for a full review of the legislation and policy relating to NSPs and other shelter options in the context of the Bushfire Safety Policy Framework.

*Recommendation 3:* The Victorian Government should revisit the Bushfire Safety Policy Framework and the bushfire shelter options policy, in consultation with local government. As part of the summer campaign, it should better communicate the level of safety of each option and the context in which they should be used.

*Recommendation 4:* as part of the fire services reform and review of the CFA Act, the provisions relating to NSPs should be fully reviewed in consultation with local government.

## Theme 4: Rebuilding and Recovery

While this theme covers both rebuilding and recovery, the sessions did not delve far into planning and building reforms. IGEM will be running a separate process to seek feedback from councils on these matters.

The VBRC made no formal recommendations relating to recovery and the White Paper was largely silent on actions relating to on-the-ground management of relief and recovery. However, as the coordinators of local recovery, councils have experienced incremental changes to relief and recovery arrangements since Black Saturday.

Key topics discussed under this theme included insurance, social recovery, disaster recovery funding, impact assessment, potable water policy and non-major emergency relief and recovery. Some of these topics will be addressed with EMV and DHHS separately and have not been covered in detail below.

The priorities under this theme are:

* Further support and clarity around the Disaster Recovery Funding Arrangements/ and consequential changes to Natural Disaster Financial Arrangements for Councils
* Reviewing the non-major emergencies (single incidents) policy
* Working towards a recovery model that recognises the long-term nature of recovery

*Disaster recovery funding arrangements*

In November 2018 the Federal Government’s Natural Disaster Relief and Recovery Arrangements (NDRRA) program was replaced by new Disaster Recovery Funding Arrangements. Jurisdictions were responsible for putting state policies in place to support the transition to the new arrangements. In Victoria, an Interdepartmental Committee developed the policies and guidance material relating to local government claims. IGEM has been provided with copies of three letters the MAV wrote to the Treasurer and Local Government Minister relating to the new arrangements. This correspondence outlines our concerns including:

* councils’ capacity to meet pre and post-disaster asset condition evidence requirements
* the absence of a day labour policy when other jurisdictions have policies in place, and
* councils’ ability to restore assets to more disaster-resilient standards (betterment) under the new arrangements.

Through the IGEM sessions, councils confirmed they were having difficulty understanding the new requirements and making eligible claims. One council had lost count of the number of claims that had been sent back for further information, and another had found the new process too difficult, so they did not put in a claim.

We need to get to a point were councils have the confidence to undertake emergency works and provide support to response agencies during an emergency and know they will be reimbursed. In recovery, most regular council services have to be maintained, and councils can only rely on resource sharing for a short period of time, so it is critical that the money starts to flow when and where it’s needed.

*Recommendation 5:* an urgent review of the guidance material, training and support provided to councils to make eligible claims is required. This should include clear communication regarding day labour and betterment options.

*Non-major emergency relief*

In 2017, the Red Cross advised the State Government that it would cease funding accommodation and material aid for people affected by a ‘single incident’ such as a house fire. EMV and DHHS established a working group, which included the MAV and LGV, to consider policy relating to single incidents, including definitions, roles and responsibilities, notification processes and options for managing the costs associated with accommodation and material aid. Through this process, the State determined that councils are responsible for providing relief and early recovery services for people whose house is considered uninhabitable due to a non-major emergency. The DHHS-administered Personal Hardship Assistance Program (PHAP) grant could be used to assist with the cost of accommodation and material aid.

Issues relating to this policy were raised in nearly every session. IGEM and the MAV heard of several instances where council officers are feeling the burden of the policy. There are concerns about the inconsistent approach between councils, the pressure it is putting on individual council officers, the difficulties with identifying appropriate short and longer-term accommodation, and difficulties accessing the PHAP, particularly overnight or on the weekend.

*Recommendation 6:* the State should work with councils to review the non-major emergency policy and ensure that councils are adequately supported to provide relief services to affected households.

*Recovery coordination*

Through the sessions, councils provided a variety of insights and reflections about what works in recovery and where we make mistakes. The general feedback from councils was that the current arrangements (outlined in Part 4 of the EMMV) are appropriate and recovery works best when they are followed. There are numerous examples of new arrangements being developed on the run, with little consultation with local government.

There was consistent feedback around the length of recovery versus the short timeframe for recovery funding. Councils advised that a relatively small amount of social recovery funding can make a significant difference, but it is often too difficult to access, or the guidelines are inflexible.

The introduction of consequence management at the state level was generally viewed positively, although councils advise they do not always receive the reports.

The implementation of the State’s Resilient Recovery Strategy offers an opportunity to use councils’ experiences to design a stronger, more integrated recovery system.

*Recommendation 7:* policies and programs being designed through the Resilient Recovery Strategy should be co-designed with local government.

## Theme 5: Safety and Resilience

This theme covered the principle of shared responsibility, the various approaches to building community resilience, the Vulnerable People in Emergencies Policy and bushfire shelter options, including NSPs (which have been addressed in section 3.3). Opportunities for improvement include:

* Ensuring the Safer Together Program recognises local government as a land management partner and focuses on integrated, sustainable bushfire risk reduction
* Working collaboratively to review and improve the Vulnerable People and Emergencies Project

The discussion relating to shared responsibility and community resilience focused on the need to accept ‘one size doesn’t fit all’ when it comes to communities. This is well recognised, but in a program delivery sense, resource-intensive. The Safer Together Bushfire Program was discussed in this context, with councils expressing frustration that they have not been accepted or funded as equal partners in the program and arguing that it is more of a short-term grants program than a sustainable bushfire mitigation program. There was also frustration expressed about the ‘double standards’ in vegetation management because private landholders are held to account, but there aren’t the same penalties applied to public land managers.

*Vulnerable People in Emergencies Policy*

The policy was first developed in 2011 to address VBRC recommendations relating to emergency planning and evacuation support for people who may be vulnerable in emergencies. The policy covers:

* emergency planning with and for vulnerable people
* developing local lists of facilities where vulnerable people may be located
* developing local lists of vulnerable people (Vulnerable Persons Registers) who may need tailored advice of a recommendation to evacuate in an emergency, and
* making these lists available to those with responsibility for helping vulnerable residents evacuate.

This policy is currently being reviewed by DHHS, largely because aged care reforms and the transition to the NDIS have meant the department can no longer compel service providers to comply with it.

There is a consistent view across the sector that the current policy is not working, but there is less of a consensus about the best approach to take in the context of the broader service delivery reforms.

As we approach summer, there is little confidence about the emergency planning support being offered to the most vulnerable members of the community, or that the vulnerable persons registers are capturing the right people.

*Recommendation 8:* Investment in training for service providers so that they have the confidence and resources to provide emergency planning support is needed. A review of the effectiveness of the vulnerable persons register will also be required.

# Conclusion

The consultation sessions were broad ranging but at the same time the messages were consistent. Councils recognise their key role in emergency management and are eager to contribute to improving the system and work with their communities to improve their resilience. Despite the issues raised through the discussions, most participants feel that Victorians are safer and more aware of the risks than they were ten years ago.

At the same time, councils’ capacity to meet expectations and continue to expand their services is limited. Many are reliant on the MERP funding, and all are feeling the effects of rate capping.

The upcoming planning, recovery and fire services reforms all provide opportunities to work more closely with local government to support community safety and resilience building initiatives. The Councils and Emergencies assessment should highlight the areas in which investment is needed if councils are expected to continue to deliver the current range of services and contribute effectively to reforms.

There is also an obvious need to urgently review some of the earlier reforms, such as the NSP and Vulnerable People in Emergencies policies, to ensure the intended outcomes are being met.

As we move into the second decade of the reform program, it is clear that there is still a long way to go to embed the principle of shared responsibility in emergency management. We are grateful to IGEM for taking the time to listen to councils and for providing the opportunity to reflect on what is working, what can be improved and what we should urgently address together – with and in support of communities.