

Wingecarribee Shire Council Bushfire Response and Recovery Review 2021

Dave Owens – Risk-e Business Consultants



Table of Contents

<i>Executive Summary</i>	5
<i>Recommendations</i>	9
<i>Scope of Review</i>	14
<i>Project Timeline</i>	14
<i>Out of Scope</i>	14
<i>Findings in this report</i>	15
<i>Covid Impact</i>	15
<i>Acronyms</i>	16
<i>Documents Reviewed</i>	17
<i>Council Employees interviewed</i>	17
<i>Agencies/Individuals consulted</i>	17
<i>Community meetings</i>	18
<i>Community Submissions</i>	18
<i>Council Employee Submissions</i>	19
<i>Wingecarribee Shire Council:</i>	19
<i>Bushfire 2019/20 snapshot</i>	20
<i>Legislative Responsibilities:</i>	20
State Emergency and Rescue Management Act	20
State Emergency Management Plan	21
Local Capability:	21
Local Emergency Management Committees (LEMC)	21
Local Government	22
<i>NSW Recovery Plan</i>	23
Recovery – Local Council	23
Financial Assistance	24
<i>Community Views</i>	24
Key themes community meetings:	24
Key themes community survey	25
Key themes council employee submissions	25
<i>Review Council’s Response to the immediate bushfire emergency, including coordination of Local Emergency Management Committee, provision of immediate support for bushfire impacted residents and communication.</i>	26
Prevention/Preparation	26
Plans	27
District Ignition Plan:	27
Wingecarribee Shire Council Local Emergency Management Plan (2016/2020)	27

Consequence Management Guide Evacuation/Bushfire.....	27
Emergency Management Response Plan – Koalas.....	27
WSC Policy on closure of Playing Fields and Reserves in Catastrophic Fire days.....	28
Emergency Operations Centre.....	28
Local Emergency Management Officer	29
Local Emergency Management Committee contact directory.....	30
Local Emergency Management Committee Membership Folder.....	30
Emergency Management training for council staff.....	31
Bushfire Awareness Training for WSC staff.....	31
Events/Staffing prior to fires.....	31
Staff rostering Christmas period	32
Response.....	33
Use of Council Resources.....	33
Moss Vale Resource Recovery Centre fire.....	35
Evacuation Centres	36
Community Transport to view properties	37
Initial communication	37
Councillor briefings.....	38
Disaster Welfare Assistance Point	38
Staffing allowances and leave.....	39
Resident Information sheets.....	39
<i>Review Council’s Short Term Recovery Response, including effectiveness of local Recovery Committees, establishment, and implementation of Recovery Plans.....</i>	<i>40</i>
Local Recovery Plan.....	40
Local Recovery Committee.....	41
Local Recovery Coordinator	43
Regional Recovery Committee Chair	45
Recovery Sub Committees.....	45
Sub Committee – Social	45
Sub Committee- Built.....	46
Assistance from the army	46
Assistance from other councils	46
It’s the small things that count	47
Sub Committee – Economic.....	49
Sub Committee – Natural resources.....	49
Sub Committee – Communication.....	50
Community Meetings.....	51
Community Recovery Meetings	52
Bushfire Recovery Website – www.yoursaywingercarribee.com.au/bushfire-recovery.....	52

Bushfire Recovery Updates	53
Internal Communications.....	53
Bushfire Recovery Hotline.....	54
Recovery Centre/Community Recovery Hubs.....	54
Council Internal Debrief Report – Council Response to Bushfires.....	57
Collation of an Affected Residents List	57
<i>Review of Councils Long-term Recovery Plans and Implementation of Actions.....</i>	<i>59</i>
Sub Committee Plans	59
Counselling Training – Council staff.....	60
Council Recovery Officer appointment.....	60
Bushfire Community Recovery Workshops	61
Wingecarribee Shire Council Disaster Dashboard	62
Ongoing impact of additional natural disasters	62
Council Emergency Workshop	63
Internal conflict	63
Development Applications.....	64
Rebuild Program.....	64
Royal Commission submission	64
NSW Bushfire Inquiry submission	65
Documenting all decisions.....	65
Local Emergency Management Committee After Action Review	65
Bushfires, Burns and their Management	66
Response, Recovery and Resilience EXPO 2021	66
Lessons Learned Report	66
Fire Fighters Memorial.....	67
Closure of Community Recovery Hub	67
Community Links Wellbeing	68
Acknowledgement of staff.....	68
Staff debriefing session/s.....	68
<i>Funding applications – Commonwealth and State Governments.....</i>	<i>69</i>
Disaster Declarations:	69
Commonwealth Government Disaster Recovery Grant	69
Funding Grants.....	71
Fire Affected Residents List	71
Council Bushfire Report – Commonwealth Recovery Program Funding	72
Council Bushfire Report – Resilience NSW.....	73
Grants Officer.....	73

Grant’s Breakdown	75
Grants not applied for	75
FenceCycle Bushfire Program	75
Fundraising – FireAid Concert	76
Future Funding opportunities	77
<i>Effectiveness of Council’s Mayoral Relief Fund</i>	78
<i>Annexure 1 – Documents Reviewed</i>	82
Live Steam/Recorded meetings	84
Media Releases	85
Mayoral Fund:	86
<i>Annexure 2 – Council Community Recovery Officer programs, highlights and achievements</i>	88
<i>Annexure 3 – Wingecarribee Shire Council document library</i>	93
Newsletters	93
Financial Assistance	93
Properties & Rebuilding	93
Mental Health and Wellbeing	94
Waste Management	94
Animal Welfare	94
<i>Annexure 4 – Dip sample Bushfire Funding allocations</i>	95
<i>Annexure 5 – Community Survey Feedback</i>	97

Executive Summary

Wingecarribee Shire was significantly impacted by two major bushfires in 2019 and 2020. The first fire known as the Green Wattle Creek Fire made its impact on the Shire on the afternoon of Thursday 19 December 2019. This event impacted on the localities of Buxton and Balmoral in the northern part of the Shire resulting in loss of property and significant disruptions in the way of road closures.

The second major bushfire impact on the Shire occurred on the night of Saturday 4 January 2020 when extensive ember attacks from the Currowan Fire to the south of the Shire crossed the Shoalhaven River into the Morton National Park. This fire also impacted the Village of Wingello, the eastern and southern parts of Bundanoon and Penrose, the outskirts of Exeter and the locality of Meryla.

On the 12 May 2021, the Wingecarribee Shire Council Administrator requested a review be undertaken into councils' response to the 2019/20 Black Summer Bushfires. This review would include Councils initial response, short term recovery including the establishment of Local Recovery Committees and long-term recovery including recovery plans. The Review was to also look at the application and utilisation of State and Commonwealth bushfire and recovery funding including the effectiveness of the Mayoral Relief Fund. The timeframe for the report was short, being presented to the Council meeting on the 28 July 2021. The Review looked at councils' actions in the four phases of emergency management, prevention, preparation, response and recovery.

It is important that the community understands that Local Government is not the combat agency responsible for all actions in responding to and recovering from natural disasters. However, Local Government needs to acknowledge that they are the first and most important port of call for their community and as such must develop their skills in responding to and recovering from natural disasters. Council must demonstrate clear leadership and decision making in times of crisis to instil confidence within the community. This leadership was non-existent in the response and recovery to the bush fires.

The Emergency Management Plans for Wingecarribee Shire Council lacked content or were non-existent in a number of areas. The Wingecarribee Shire Local Emergency Management Plan had been undertaken in 2016 and updated in 2020, however the Local Recovery and District Ignition Plans did not exist prior to the fires. There was no council policy or plan on how to close parks and reserves during extreme fire danger periods. It is recommended that all Emergency Management Plans are reviewed and updated where necessary (Recommendations 1,3,4,5). It is also recommended that Wingecarribee Shire Council works with the Bush Fire Management Committee in implementing changes relating to bush fire risk identification and mitigation, as recommended by the NSW Bushfire Inquiry (Recommendation 2).

The Chair of the Local Emergency Management Committee is the General Manager of Council, additionally a Local Emergency Management Officer is appointed by Council to undertake specific tasks. The Review found that members of Council's Executive and Councillors did not have a good understanding of emergency management, nor did they appear to understand council's role in a crisis. Only the

Local Emergency Management Officer had undertaken emergency management training, the General Manager and staff had not. It is important that management and staff are trained in emergency management, bush fire awareness and working in an Emergency Management Centre to ensure suitable coverage is available at times of crisis (Recommendations 7,9,10,11,12 and 14).

Council had an appointed Local Emergency Management Officer (LEMO); however, the officer was on leave for a knee reconstruction and no alternate LEMO was identified in the months leading up to the bush fires by council. This is a vital position within an emergency response and council needs to ensure that an alternate LEMO is nominated (Recommendation 8). Council had no staff, on call roster for the Christmas period which meant that there was skeleton staff available over this crisis period. A number of staff did go into work, even though they were on leave to assist the community and they should be acknowledged. It is vital that an on-call roster is developed by council for all holiday periods (Recommendation 13).

During significant natural disasters, the Local Emergency Operations Controller (Police Officer) can open an Emergency Operations Centre (EOC). The Wingecarribee Shire EOC had significant issues with connectivity, space and suitability. Post the bush fires council identified a scout hall for consideration as an EOC. A scout hall is unsuitable and where possible, the EOC should be located next to the Incident Control Centre. Council should review their current EOC to either upgrade current assets or provide an alternative suitable EOC (Recommendation 6).

Wingecarribee Shire Council staff were separated geographically, and it would have greatly assisted if those involved in response and recovery were co-located for the duration of the response/recovery (Recommendation 15). Issues arose with evacuation centres and the large number of people with animals presenting for assistance. Council should work with Resilience NSW and Department of Primary Industries to identify and support suitable premises for people with pets and develop a domestic pets evacuation protocol (Recommendation 16).

Wingecarribee Shire Council did not have a Local Recovery Plan in place prior to the bush fires. This greatly hampered the initial and ongoing recovery effort as no local recovery coordinator was appointed, the recovery committee structure was incorrectly established (as were the subcommittee's), and council went back to business as usual as quickly as possible post the fires. In the establishment of a Local Recovery Plan, recovery committees can be correctly established, including community representation on those committees, community concerns can be identified and addressed, and staff/volunteer welfare issues addressed as a priority (Recommendations 18,19,20,21 and 22).

A Community Recovery Hub was established in Balmoral; however, this should have been a council run/supported recovery hub. Council was not aware of how to establish a recovery hub and no framework/toolkit existed, nor was one developed. In the development of the Local Recovery Plan, council should work with surrounding councils in the development of a framework to establish a recovery hub along with identifying all services (government/non-government and individuals) within their Shire who are available to provide assistance during a natural disaster (Recommendations 23, 24,25 and 26).

The Review found that actions and follow up was extremely limited or non-existent within Council. There was an Internal Debrief Report (April 2020) where actions and improvement opportunities identified still remain outstanding. Local Subcommittees, except for the Social Subcommittee have ceased to function, yet there are a number of actions still outstanding which have not been collated by council and assigned to an individual/s to complete. Similarly with the Emergency Workshop Actions (held by Council), limited action has been taken to progress the actions in this document (Recommendations 27,29,32,33 and 37). There is a clear failure by council to document and finalise identified actions.

The Welfare of Council staff, volunteers and the community is extremely important and there was limited assistance provided by council in this area. In the community telling their story only once, Council should work with Resilience NSW, Service NSW and The Red Cross in the development of a tool that collects all resident information. Council needs to be involved but is not the primary driver. Council also needs to consider and have a plan to deal with their staff's welfare during natural disasters (Recommendations 28,30 and 40).

There have been a number of good ideas/concepts implemented by council that need to be promoted and celebrated. The introduction of the Disaster Dashboard, all information in the one place for residents (Recommendation 31); The Response, Recovery and Resilience Expo 2021(Recommendation 36) along with the formation and activation of wildlife management plans (Recommendation 35).

It is important for council to acknowledge and listen to their own employees. Council lacked leadership and direction during and recovering from the fires. No debrief session/s for staff has been undertaken to capture what worked and areas for improvement (Recommendation 39). It is also important to acknowledge the actions of council staff who performed well during the response and recovery phases. To date council has not acknowledged the actions of any employees or volunteers, many of whom went above and beyond community expectations (Recommendation 38).

The applications for and distribution of grants money caused significant community unrest due to the lack of information that was provided by council. Council should consider the appointment of a grants officer post natural disasters to coordinate and manage grants applications and funding. A number of grants were not applied for due to the workload involved and council staff returning to business as usual. All future grants under the Black Summer Bushfire Recovery Grants Program should be applied for by council (Recommendations 41,42).

The Mayoral Relief Fund did not exist before the fires, nor did it have Deductible Gift Recipient status with the Australian Taxation Office. The mayor announced the existence of the fund prior to obtaining this approval. This had the potential to cause significant issues for council and the community. When approved, the approval was backdated by the ATO. In moving forward, an information sheet needs to be prepared for Councillors on its operations, obligations and functioning of the fund. Additionally, consideration should be given to independent representatives being appointed to oversight the fund along with the establishment of permanent rules around the release of funding post a natural disaster (recommendations 43,44).

It is important for council and the community to learn from the 2019/20 bush fires so that the same mistakes are not repeated. It is inevitable that natural disasters will continue to occur, therefore council and the community must work together to improve community resilience. It is only through reviewing what has occurred and working together in establishing plan/s that the community/council will grow to become more resilient.

Recommendations

Recommendation 1

That the Wollondilly/Wingecarribee Bush Fire Risk Management Plan 2015 is updated immediately.

Recommendation 2

That Wingecarribee Shire Council works with the Bush Fire Management Committee to implement changes as recommended by the NSW Independent Bushfire Inquiry (Recommendation 8)

Recommendation 3

That Wingecarribee Shire Council through the LEMC ensures that the District Ignition Plan is completed as a priority

Recommendation 4

That Wingecarribee Shire Council develops a policy/procedure for the closure of reserves and playing fields on extreme or catastrophic fire rating days. This policy/procedure should be developed in consultation with sporting bodies within the Shire.

Recommendation 5

That Wingecarribee Shire Council reviews all emergency management and associated plans to ensure they are current and accurate.

Recommendation 6

That Wingecarribee Shire Council undertakes a review of the current Emergency Operations Centre sites to either upgrade current assets or provide an alternate site for the Emergency Operations Centre.

Recommendation 7

That Wingecarribee Shire Council continues to ensure that suitable and adequate staff are trained in working in an Emergency Operations Centre.

Recommendation 8

That Wingecarribee Shire Council ensures that the position of Local Emergency Management Officer and an alternative continue to be identified and trained appropriately in emergency management.

Recommendation 9

That the Local Emergency Management Officer on behalf of the LEMC develops a Wingecarribee Shire LEMC contact directory (electronic) and that the directory is circulated to all members.

Recommendation 10

That the Local Emergency Management Officer, on behalf of the Local Emergency Management Committee develop an electronic copy of the membership folder that is circulated to all members.

Recommendation 11

That Wingecarribee Shire Council ensures that staff involved in emergency management have been given appropriate emergency management training.

Recommendation 12

That Wingecarribee Shire Council continues to provide Bushfire Awareness Training for all staff as required.

Recommendation 13

That Wingecarribee Shire Council ensures that for all holiday periods, an on-call roster is developed and circulated to all staff.

Recommendation 14

That Wingecarribee Shire Council ensures that the LEMO and alternate LEMO are trained in the use of EMOS in an Emergency Operations Centre by Resilience NSW.

Recommendation 15

That Wingecarribee Shire Council in a major natural disaster response and recovery operation, co-locates a council response and recovery team to ensure a coordinated response by council.

Recommendation 16

That Wingecarribee Shire Council, through the Local Emergency Management Committee works with Resilience NSW and Department of Primary Industries to:

- a) update the existing guidelines (including a risk assessment as to suitability) around Evacuation Centres and review the current evacuation centres against these new guidelines¹
- b) develops procedures to ensure appropriate supports for people with animals and develop a domestic pets evacuation protocol².

Recommendation 17

That Wingecarribee Shire Council considers the introduction of a bushfire ready information sheet for all residents to be sent out prior to the bush fire season. Further consideration should then be given to holding a bush fire information session in concert with the NSW RFS that is open to all residents prior to the bush fire season.

Recommendation 18

That Wingecarribee Shire Council, in concert with the Local Emergency Management Committee develops a Local Recovery Plan with input and assistance from Resilience NSW.

Recommendation 19

That Wingecarribee Shire Council ensures that the Local Recovery Committee and Subcommittees are established as per the guidelines established in the Community Recovery Toolkit developed by Resilience NSW.

¹ Recommendation 70 NSW Bushfire Inquiry

² Recommendation 75 NSW Bushfire Inquiry

Recommendation 20

That Wingecarribee Shire Council in the development of their Local Recovery Plan, considers areas such as the following to be included:

- Residents not being charged for replacement of rubbish bins that are destroyed in the fires.
- Initial rate rebate for garbage collection when the property no longer exists.
- Replacement of street signage in a short timeframe.
- Replacement of village signage as a 'sense of community' belonging.
- Replacement of native vegetation through distribution of 'tube stock' by council to reduce erosion and provide a positive sign of stepping forward.

Recommendation 21

That Wingecarribee Shire Council continues to develop its capacity to use online meetings resources to support communications during natural disasters

Recommendation 22

That Wingecarribee Shire Council, in the development of their Local Recovery Plan, ensure that the early provision of welfare services/mental health support services is included in the Plan.

Recommendation 23

That Wingecarribee Shire Council works with Wollondilly Shire Council in the development of a Framework/Toolkit for a Community Recovery Hub.

Recommendation 24

That Wingecarribee Shire Council undertakes a comprehensive community review of all services available (non-government, community services and individuals) within the community who can assist with services and resources in the recovery of the community.

Recommendation 25

That Wingecarribee Shire Council ensures that in the development of the Local Recovery Plan that donations and a plan to deal with them, is a specific section within the plan. Council should work with community groups and recovery stakeholders in the development of this section of the Local Recovery Plan.

Recommendation 26

That Wingecarribee Shire Council considers the development of their existing catering trailer, into a community recovery point for areas that have no hall or community space available.

Recommendation 27

That Wingecarribee Shire Council reviews the Internal Debrief Report (April 2020) and actions/prioritises the Recommendations/Improvement Opportunities as appropriate.

Recommendation 28

That Wingecarribee Shire Council continues to develop the Customer Relationship Management tool for community registration post natural disasters. The Review would strongly recommend that WSC works with Resilience NSW, Service NSW and the Red Cross in the development of any tool to ensure that multiple tools/Apps are not developed in isolation.

Recommendation 29

That Wingecarribee Shire Council provides a documented plan for a way to capture all outstanding Local Recovery and Subcommittee actions to ensure action and finalisation is undertaken. It will also aid reporting and transparency.

Recommendation 30

That Wingecarribee Shire Council continues to support the rollout of the Accidental Counsellor Training for staff.

Recommendation 31

That Wingecarribee Shire Council promotes the existence of the Disaster Dashboard to all residents prior to the bush fire season.

Recommendation 32

That Wingecarribee Shire Council reviews the 'Emergency Workshop Actions' of the 17 August 2020 and where appropriate, actions outstanding items.

Recommendation 33

That Wingecarribee Shire Council, after reviewing all outstanding actions in plans and debrief document, allocates staff, time and appropriate resources to undertake and complete those actions.

Recommendation 34

That Wingecarribee Shire Council writes to the landowner and informs them of their final decision in respect to the wood chip piles.

Recommendation 35

The Wingecarribee Shire Council continues to support the Bushfires, Burns and their Management course.

Recommendation 36

That Wingecarribee Shire Council strongly supports the Response, Recovery and Resilience EXPO 2021 including a strong staffing presence to answer community questions.

Recommendation 37

That Wingecarribee Shire Council develops a Lessons Learned Report to capture the successes and challenges, including the information in this report, to ensure that next time the Shire experiences a natural disaster, it is better prepared to support the community.

Recommendation 38

That Wingecarribee Shire Council considers reviewing the actions of volunteers and council staff and where appropriate provide recognition for the work they did during the bush fires to assist the community.

Recommendation 39

That Wingecarribee Shire Council facilitates a debrief session/s for all staff and captures their views and insights.

Recommendation 40

That Wingecarribee Shire Council in the development of their Local Recovery Plan, ensures that a comprehensive list of all fire affected residents is collated, including contact details for where they have moved to whilst building occurs at their properties. It is important that WSC works with Resilience NSW and Service NSW to establish a best practice for obtaining and maintaining a fire affected residents list.

Recommendation 41

That Wingecarribee Shire Council appoints a grants officer following major natural disasters to ensure that grants funding is applied for and coordinated across the whole of council.

Recommendation 42

That Wingecarribee Shire Council is proactive and supports applications for the *Black Summer Bushfire Recovery Grants Program*

Recommendation 43

That the Wingecarribee Shire Council Chief Financial Officer prepares an information sheet for incoming Councillors on the operations, obligations and functioning of the Mayoral Relief Fund.

Recommendation 44

That Wingecarribee Shire Council considers the following changes to the Mayoral Relief Fund:

- a) the appointment of independent representatives to oversee the Mayoral Relief Fund (similar to Blue Mountains Council)
- b) the establishment of permanent rules around immediate financial response to impacted residents, i.e., within 48 hours emergency payments of \$250 and \$500.

Scope of Review

At the Council meeting held on the 12 May 2021, Mr May requested a review of Council's response to the 2019/20 Black Summer Bushfires. The review should examine Council's response to the immediate emergency response and the short- and long-term bushfire recovery response. The review should include feedback from community and agency stakeholders, as well as staff involved in the emergency response and recovery.

This brief is requesting the following:

- Review Council's response to the immediate bushfire emergency, including coordination of Local Emergency Management Committee, provision of immediate support for bushfire impacted residents and communication
- Review Council's short-term recovery response, including effectiveness of local recovery committees and participation of regional committees, establishment and implementation of recovery plans
- Review of Council's long-term recovery plans and implementation of actions
- Application for and utilisation of Federal and State Government Bushfire Response and Recovery Funding
- Effectiveness of Council's Mayoral Relief Fund

It is anticipated that workshops should be held with residents in bushfire impacted areas. It is essential that these workshops are carefully facilitated in a manner that will not cause further trauma to residents.

The review should also include feedback from staff involved in the emergency response, as well as key agencies such as Resilience NSW and the RFS.

Project Timeline

The initial timeline was for a draft report by the 9 July 2021, however an extension was sought and given until the 28 July to enable community consultation and emergency service/Local Emergency Management Committee feedback.

Out of Scope

The Review was to only review Wingecarribee Shire Councils Response and Recovery to the 2019/20 Bushfires. All agencies and NSW Government response and recovery arrangements were out of scope.

Findings in this report

The evidentiary standard applied in this review is ‘on the balance of probabilities’. This is said to be, “In the law of evidence, the degree of certainty with which contested facts must be established in order to be accepted as proved. In civil proceedings, the contested facts must be proved on the balance of probabilities. In criminal trials, the prosecution must prove its case beyond reasonable doubt, a greater test of proof. It is the weighing up or comparison of competing possibilities. A fact is proved to be true on the balance of probabilities if its existence is more probable than not, or if it is established by a preponderance of probability. See *Reifek v McElroy* (1965)³ 112 CLR 517; *Briginshaw v Briginshaw* (1938)⁴ HCA 34.”

The 1930 case of *Briginshaw v Briginshaw*, established two very important considerations for use in assisting decision-makers in determining what succeeds or fails in reaching this standard of proof. These are that a decision-maker must be satisfied of the matters before it on the balance of probabilities both:

1. to a comfortable degree; and
2. based on very clear and cogent evidence

The civil standard of proof of balance of probabilities can be interpreted differently by different decision-makers in different forums. In its simplest form, where the decision-maker deems that one version of events is 51% more likely than the other version, then the requisite standard of proof of balance of probabilities is met. While the balance of probabilities is a notion that is simple to understand at face value, it can be difficult to establish whether the threshold has been met in a given situation.

Covid Impact

In the development of this report, the impact of COVID-19 was considered during the period March 2020 – current. Whilst this may have prevented in some instances face to face meetings occurring, alternate means, such as online virtual meetings could have been facilitated.

In July 2021, NSW Health Orders meant the cancellation of the two community meetings. The meetings were held as virtual meetings on the same evenings as the planned face to face community consultation meetings. The extension of the Health Order meant that the Review was unable to visit council further during this period, however we believe that this did not impact further on the findings of the Review.

³ [https://staging.hcourt.gov.au/assets/publications/judgments/1965/022--REJFEK v. McELROY--\(1965\) 112 CLR 517.html](https://staging.hcourt.gov.au/assets/publications/judgments/1965/022--REJFEK v. McELROY--(1965) 112 CLR 517.html)

⁴ <http://www.austlii.edu.au/cgi-bin/viewdoc/au/cases/cth/HCA/1938/34.html>

Acronyms

APZ	Asset Protection Zone
ATO	Australian Taxation Office
BAL	Bushfire Attack Level
BCRERF	Bushfire Community Resilience & Economic Recovery Fund
BCRRF	Bushfire Community Recovery and Resilience Fund
BFMC	Bushfire Management Committee
BIRO	Bushfire Industry Recovery Package
BLER	Bushfire Local Economic Recovery
CMG	Consequence Management Guide
CRO	Community Recovery Officer
DFRA	Disaster Recovery Funding Arrangements (DFRA)
EMOS	Emergency Management Operating System
EMPlan	State Emergency Management Plan
EOC	Emergency Operations Centre
GM	General Manager
LEMC	Local Emergency Management Committee
LEMO	Local Emergency Management Officer
LEOCON	Local Emergency Operations Controller
LGA	Local Government Area
NDRRA	National Disaster Relief and Recovery Arrangements
NGO	Non-Government Organisation
NSW RFS	New South Wales Rural Fire Service
REMC	Region Emergency Management Committee
REMO	Region Emergency Management Officer
REOCON	Region Emergency Operations Controller
SEMC	State Emergency Management Committee
SEOCON	State Emergency Operations Controller
SERM Act	State Emergency and Rescue Management Act 1989
WSC	Wingecarribee Shire Council

Documents Reviewed

A comprehensive list of all documents/videos reviewed is attached Annexure 1.

Council Employees interviewed

██████████ – Group Manager Corporate and Community
██████████ – Risk Management Officer (Local Emergency Management Officer)
██████████ – Manager Open Space, Recreating & Buildings (Subcommittee Chair-Built)
██████████, Tree and Vegetation Management Officer
██████████ – Coordinator Media & Communications
██████████ – Acting Asset Manager
██████████ – Acting DGM (Chief Financial Officer)
██████████ Financial Accountant
██████████ – Community Recovery Officer (Subcommittee Chair – Social)
██████████ – Chief Information Officer (Subcommittee Chair – Communications)
██████████ – Manager Environment and Sustainability (Subcommittee Chair Environment)
██████████, Coordinator Tourism (Subcommittee Economic)

Agencies/Individuals consulted

Deputy Commissioner Worboys – State Emergency Operations Controller. NSWPF
Superintendent Templeman, Staff Officer, State Emergency Operations Controller
Assistant Commissioner Cassar, Region Emergency Operations Controller
Superintendent Klepczarek, Local Emergency Operations Controller
Ms Trish Malone, Region Emergency Management Officer, NSW Police Force
Dr. Pamela Sitko, Manager Strategic Planning, Resilience NSW
Mr Dick Adams, Regional Recovery Coordinator, NSW Government
Mr Chris Presland, Director, Natural Disaster Expenditure and Governance, Resilience NSW
Mr Mark Conlon, Regional Director Recovery Resilience NSW
Mr Peter Pigott, Resilience NSW
Ms Ally Dench, Executive Director Community & Corporate, Wollondilly Sire Council
Ms Kim Hill, Recovery Support Officer – Wollondilly & Wingecarribee – National Recovery and Resilience Agency
Ms Kerry O’Grady, Balmoral Community Recovery Hub
Ms. Leanne Barnes, General Manager Bega Valley Shire Council
Ms Tanya Smith, Coordinator, Community Links

Community meetings

It was important to meet with and listen to members of the Wingecarribee Shire community that were impacted by the 2019/20 bushfires. Two community listening events were scheduled to be held:

- Wednesday 7 July 2021 - Penrose Community Hall
- Thursday 8 July 2021 – Balmoral Village Hall

Due to COVID Health Orders, the community listening events were not able to proceed in person, virtual online meetings were undertaken on the 7th and 8th July 2021 where community members were given the opportunity to talk (additional time was allocated where possible) and all those who participated were actively encouraged to provide a response to the online survey to ensure that their views were captured.

The number of registered attendees varied between the two meetings. Overall, 48 community members registered to attend the online meetings. The themes of the community meetings are summarised below.

Community Submissions

The Review commenced accepting public submissions on Tuesday 22 June 2021. The deadline for submissions was made as 7pm on Friday 9 July 2021, this deadline was required due to the timeframe given to the Reviewer for the Report to go to the council meeting on the 28 July 2021. The deadline was further extended until 9am Monday 12 July 2021. The Reviewer stressed that submissions only relate to Council's response and recovery, not emergency service organisations or the NSW Government.

The Review wanted to ensure that as many people as possible could have their say and that submissions were as inclusive as possible. Submissions were accepted through the WSC website (<http://www.yoursaywingecarribee.com.au/bushfire-recovery>).

A total 72 community submissions were made to the Review. Each submission has been read by the Reviewer. Permission was given to include some of the comments/viewpoints made in submissions into this review. A number of submissions were also made confidentially to the Review.

The Review appreciated hearing from those affected by the fires, along with the thoughtful and constructive surveys/submissions that were received. The surveys showed a wide range of opinions on the Terms of Reference and provided a valuable insight on key issues.

Outlined below is an overview of the major themes covered in the submissions. A more detailed overview is at Annexure 4.

Council Employee Submissions

The Review wanted to hear from Wingecarribee Shire Council employees who were involved or affected by the 2019/20 bush fires. The submissions were circulated online on Wednesday 23 June 2021. The same deadline as the public submissions was set. The review appreciated hearing from the employees, and for their openness and honesty in the responses. A total of 17 submissions from council employees were received by the review, each has been read and their themes were similar.

Wingecarribee Shire Council:

The Wingecarribee Shire Local Government Area (LGA) is located 75 kilometres from the southwestern fringe of Sydney and 110 kilometres from Sydney's central business district. The Shire has a total area of approximately 2,700 square kilometres, 56 per cent of which is north of the Wingecarribee River.

It is comparable in size to that of urban Sydney, averaging 55 kilometres from east to west and 45 kilometres from north to south, with its geographic centre north-west of Berrima and its demographic centre to the south-east of Bowral. Much of the Shire is located at or above 640 metres above sea level.

There are three main towns in the Shire, Mittagong, Bowral and Moss Vale. The Shire's main administration building is located in the town of Moss Vale.



Bushfire 2019/20 snapshot

Wingecarribee Shire was significantly impacted by two major bushfires in 2019 and 2020. The first fire known as the Green Wattle Creek Fire made its first impact on the Shire on the afternoon of Thursday 19 December 2019. This event impacted on the localities of Buxton and Balmoral in the northern part of the Shire resulting in loss of property and significant disruptions in the way of road closures.

The second major bushfire impact on the Shire occurred on the night of Saturday 4 January 2020 when extensive ember attacks from the Currowan Fire to the south of the Shire crossed the Shoalhaven River into the Morton National Park. This fire also impacted the Village of Wingello, the eastern and southern parts of Bundanoon and Penrose, the outskirts of Exeter and the locality of Meryla. The fire event named the Morton Fire resulted in significant property losses and damage in Wingello including dwelling homes, outbuildings, fencing and equipment. Similarly, houses, out buildings and fencing were destroyed in the Yuille Avenue/Evelyn Avenue area of Bundanoon. Exeter and Penrose also experienced property loss and damage.

Impact ⁵	Destroyed	Damaged
Residences	68	18
Facilities	2	
Outbuildings	197	69
Livestock	15	
Burnscar (% of LGA) 24%		

Legislative Responsibilities:

The Review considered it important that the reader understood the roles and responsibilities of Council and Agencies under Emergency Management Legislation. Therefore, the below lists councils' responsibilities that will be reviewed against their response and recovery actions.

State Emergency and Rescue Management Act

The *State Emergency and Rescue Management Act (SERM) 1989⁶* is the primary statutory reference in New South Wales as to how the State and its support agencies will plan for, prepare for, respond to and recover from an emergency, crisis or major incident. Presently, and from the Government's perspective, ministerial responsibility for the Act (and its requirements) is vested in the Minister for Police and Emergency Services.

⁵ Local Government Profile Resilience NSW

⁶ SERM Act 1989 http://www8.austlii.edu.au/cgi-bin/viewdb/au/legis/nsw/consol_act/searma1989331/

State Emergency Management Plan

The State Emergency Management Plan (EMPLAN) describes the NSW approach to emergency management, the governance and coordination arrangements and roles and responsibilities of agencies. The Plan is supported by hazard specific sub plans and functional area supporting plans⁷.

There are four phases or stages of an emergency. They are:

- **PREVENTION** – to eliminate or reduce the level of the risk or severity of emergencies
- **PREPARATION** – to enhance capacity of agencies and communities to cope with consequences of emergencies
- **RESPONSE** –to ensure the immediate consequences of emergencies to communities are minimised, and
- **RECOVERY** –measures which support individuals and communities affected by emergencies in the reconstruction of physical infrastructure and restoration of physical, emotional, environmental and economic well-being⁸.

Local Capability:

Responsibility for preparation and risk management rests at the local level in the first instance. Emergency response and recovery are conducted at the lowest level of effective coordination. Resources and support are augmented by Region and State level coordination as required⁹.

Local Emergency Management Committees (LEMC)

The SERM Act recognises that the involvement of local government in all stages of an emergency is critical (i.e., in prevention, preparation, response and recovery). Therefore, the emergency management structure and arrangements at local level are based on the Local Government Authority areas (or combined Local Government Authority areas).

A LEMC consists of:

- **the General Manager of the Local Government** of the relevant local government area is the Chairperson of the Committee
- the Local Emergency Operations Controllers for the relevant local area(s)
- senior representatives of each emergency service organisation operating in the relevant local area(s)

⁷ EMPLAN <https://www.emergency.nsw.gov.au/Documents/publications/20181207-NSW-state-emergency-management-plan.pdf>

⁸ EMPLAN <https://www.emergency.nsw.gov.au/Documents/publications/20181207-NSW-state-emergency-management-plan.pdf>

⁹ EMPLAN <https://www.emergency.nsw.gov.au/Documents/publications/20181207-NSW-state-emergency-management-plan.pdf>

- representatives of Functional Areas where the respective Functional Area representative on the State Emergency Management Committee determines it appropriate and resources permit
- representatives of any other agency or organisation as determined by the LEMC.

The LEMC is responsible for the following functions:

- a) give effect to emergency management policy and coordinate emergency management practice at a local level, consistent with information on emergency management policy and practice disseminated by the SEMC
- b) **review and prepare plans** in respect of the relevant local government area that are, or are proposed to be, sub plans or supporting plans established under EMPLAN
- c) develop, conduct and evaluate local emergency management exercises for the purpose of testing sub plans or supporting plans established under EMPLAN in respect of the local government area
- d) make recommendations about and assist in the coordination of training to emergency management in the relevant local government area
- e) facilitate local level emergency management capability through inter-agency coordination, cooperation and information sharing arrangements
- f) assist the Local Emergency Operations Controller for the area in the Controller's role of establishing and controlling a local emergency operations centre
- g) **carry out the preparation of plans in relation to the prevention of, preparation for, response to and recovery from emergencies in the LGA** (noting the responsibility for planning by Combat Agencies)
- h) carry out other functions as are assigned by the SEMC.

Local Government

Given the principle that emergency management and risk management should be conducted at the lowest effective level, Local Government has a key role across the PPRR spectrum. The Office of Local Government is a member of the State Emergency Management Committee.

Local government roles include¹⁰:

- **convening Local Emergency Management Committees and Recovery Committees**
- working with State agencies to identify and prioritise risk mitigation options
- undertaking an all-hazards approach to emergency risk management
- working with insurers to minimise disaster risk exposure.

¹⁰ EMPLAN <https://www.emergency.nsw.gov.au/Documents/publications/20181207-NSW-state-emergency-management-plan.pdf>

NSW Recovery Plan

The New South Wales (NSW) Recovery Plan provides a framework for recovery operations that can be tailored to support the affected community, taking into account the specific circumstances of each disaster or emergency¹¹.

Community recovery is best achieved within a holistic and integrated framework that encompasses the community, the four recovery environments and supports the development of community resilience, as depicted in figure below.



Local Recovery Plans are to be prepared as part of the standard emergency planning process by the LEMC and or the REMC, building on the emergency risk management study for the local area. Unfortunately, only a small number of local councils prepare Local Recovery Plans in advance of natural disasters. Local Recovery Plans identify local recovery management structures, actions, roles and responsibilities and must be consistent with relevant State level plans. Local Recovery Plans and the outcomes of impact assessments form the basis for detailed Recovery Action Plans developed following an emergency.

Following an emergency, the LEMC will decide whether a Local Recovery Committee should be established to coordinate ongoing recovery issues.

Recovery – Local Council

Local Council plays a key role in managing local recovery, providing services and assistance to the community and advice to State Government. **Local Council chairs the Local Recovery Committee, when a Recovery Coordinator is not appointed.** Local Council provides Executive Support to the Local or Regional Recovery

¹¹ NSW Recovery Plan <https://www.emergency.nsw.gov.au/Documents/plans/supporting-plans/Supporting-Plan-Recovery-2016.pdf>

Committee. Local Council provides the Recovery Centre Manager and Administrative Support to the Recovery Centre, where established¹².

The Local Recovery Committee is the strategic decision-making body for local recovery. It provides visible and strong leadership and has a key role in restoring confidence to the community. This is achieved by assessing the consequences of the emergency and coordinating activities to rebuild, restore and rehabilitate the social, built, economic and natural environments of the affected community.

Financial Assistance

The Disaster Recovery Funding Arrangements (DRFA) is a Commonwealth Government instrument which provides a financial safety net to States and Territories, enabling expenditure above certain financial thresholds to be reimbursed if relevant criteria are met. The small disaster criterion is a minimum of \$240,000 public infrastructure damage, response and recovery costs.

Community Views

Key themes community meetings:

The virtual community meetings were divided between the northern and southern parts of Wingecarribee Shire. The community could register for either meeting. Each community listening event gave a different perspective and the general themes and messages that we heard are summarised below:

- The community was strong in their voice that **council lacked empathy** towards the bush fire affected community, no one from council checked up on their welfare and both groups raised the lack of any detailed submission to the NSW Bushfire Inquiry and the Royal Commission as examples of the lack of empathy shown to them by council. The General Manager refusing to speak at community meetings, residents being charged for rubbish bin replacement and water usage during the fires was also raised as small but important issues.
- The Review heard from the community that **council had no plan for recovery**, and no up to date contact lists for those affected by the fires. The lack of planning meant that council resources were not fully utilised.
- The Review heard that it was now **too late** to be having this conversation, many were appalled by the lack of response by council.
- The Review heard **constant comparisons** in the response and recovery effort between Wollondilly and Wingecarribee Shire Councils.
- The Review also heard **many positive stories** about the community recovery hub and the work of the volunteers there, **individual acts of kindness by council staff** doing their jobs very well (development applications staff, Customer Service staff, Community Recovery Officer and the Community Engagement Coordinator to name a few). The community echoed in a single voice that they just wanted to be listened to, this was important to them.

¹² NSW Recovery Plan <https://www.emergency.nsw.gov.au/Documents/plans/supporting-plans/Supporting-Plan-Recovery-2016.pdf>

The Review heard about **many stories of loss, trauma and pain** (even now). It was clear that the impact of the fires upon the Wingecarribee Shire community will be long lasting, and that ongoing welfare support will be needed to continue to aid the community recovery.

Key themes community survey

There are extracts from the surveys included throughout the report to illustrate what the review heard from the Wingecarribee Shire community. Below is a snapshot of the major themes from those affected:

- Council as a whole did not respond well to the bush fires and recovery.
- Community meetings: lacked information and structure. Overall, there was a lack of information from council and the mayor was heavily criticised for his performance and lack of empathy at the meetings
- Mayoral Relief Fund: Gratitude from residents that it was established. However, disparity between response to Balmoral to that at Wingello was clearly evident
- Recovery Committees: Lack of community representation, council should have been better organised. Lack of communication from committees to community
- Recovery plans: What recovery plans? Unprofessional and incompetent stakeholder engagement for recovery
- Recovery Funding: Most funding was spent on council. A full-time grants officer should have been appointed.
- Submissions to the Royal Commission and NSW Bushfire Inquiry: Council should have been an advocate for the community, but they showed a complete lack of empathy by not making submissions.

Key themes council employee submissions

Nearly all council employee survey responses requested that their details and responses remain confidential to the Review. Where appropriate their views have been integrated into the body of the report without acknowledgement being made to protect that confidentiality.



Review Council's Response to the immediate bushfire emergency, including coordination of Local Emergency Management Committee, provision of immediate support for bushfire impacted residents and communication.

Prevention/Preparation

At the time of the 2019/20 Bushfires, Wingecarribee Shire Local Emergency Management Committee (LEMC) had a Local Emergency Management Plan (June 2016) and subsequently updated the plan in October 2020. The 2016 Plan was signed off by the Wingecarribee Shire Council (WSC) General Manager who was the Chair of the Local Emergency Management Committee (LEMC). The Plan stipulates that it should be reviewed each three years or '*following any activation of the Plan in response to an emergency*'¹³. In 2019 the Plan was due to be reviewed and the Plan was activated in response to the 2019/20 bushfires. The Plan is in the format as stipulated by Resilience NSW.

The Plan references the Wollondilly/Wingecarribee Bush Fire Risk Management Plan 2015¹⁴. The Bush Fire Management Committee (BFMC) endorsed the Plan on 10 March 2016 and the Bush Fire Coordinating Committee signed off on the Plan on the 16 May 2017. The Plan is a five-year program and is now at the mark to be updated, considering the changing community and landscape/development within the Wingecarribee Shire. Wingecarribee Shire Council is one of the land managers, being responsible for 1% of the BFMC area.

Recommendation 1

That the Wollondilly/Wingecarribee Bush Fire Risk Management Plan 2015 is updated immediately.
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In discussions with the Environment and Sustainability Manager, Council has a full-time officer in respect to BFMC management, ensuring that fire trails are mapped out, reviewing of the Bush Fire Risk Management Plan and that actions are taken in respect to management of council reserves. The inspection of the fire trails is digitally captured and incorporated into a schedule of works. Inspections are also conducted post windstorms or similar events.

WSC in mid to late December 2019 had staff from the Infrastructure Services depot tasked with clearing fire trails on days that were rated as catastrophic fire conditions. Rightly, they considered it was too high a risk to have heavy equipment in the bush without RFS support. The fire trails should have been managed better and earlier, irrespective of whose responsibility it was (RFS, NPSW or WSC).

¹³ WSC 2016 EM Plan

¹⁴ <https://www.wsc.nsw.gov.au/Council/Strategies-and-Plans/Bushfire-Risk-Management-Plan>

As part of council business, grants from the Bushfire Mitigation Fund are applied for, to assist with maintenance of Asset Protections Zones (APZ's) around council assets. Inspections are undertaken prior to the bush fire season along with hazard reduction undertaken in concert with the NSW RFS and FRNSW. Council is then required to report back to the BFMC on the work undertaken. Greater emphasis needs to be placed on this process and achieve results.

Recommendation 2

That Wingecarribee Shire Council works with the Bush Fire Management Committee to implement changes as recommended by the NSW Independent Bushfire Inquiry (Recommendation 8)

Plans

District Ignition Plan:

The purpose of the District Ignition Plan is to provide members of the NSW Rural Fire Service, Police, Fire and Rescue NSW, National Parks and Wildlife Service and Forest Corporation with strategies to be implemented to prevent ignitions. The pro forma document was circulated by the Local Emergency Management Officer (LEMO) on the 22 April 2020 and still remains incomplete as of the end of June 2021. (LEMC/RFS primary responsibility)

Recommendation 3

That Wingecarribee Shire Council through the LEMC ensures that the District Ignition Plan is completed as a priority
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Wingecarribee Shire Council Local Emergency Management Plan (2016/2020)

The Plan was signed off by the General Manager as Chair of the LEMC in November 2016. The Plan is in the correct format and was updated in 2020 to contain all of the relevant information.

Consequence Management Guide Evacuation/Bushfire

These documents were provided to the Review as part of the WSC Local Emergency Management Plan (2020). The Consequence Management Guides (CMG) are in the correct format and clearly outline the response required from agencies. The Evacuation Consequence Management Guide also identifies the use of the Show Ground and Livestock exchange for animal evacuations.

Emergency Management Response Plan – Koalas

On the 19 December 2019 Council produced a simple 'Incident response – caring for carers'. It covered agencies spoken to during preparation, information emailed, and gaps identified. An Incident Plan was developed, that is a high-level document that provides an overview of possible procedures and considerations for each bush fire response phase, preparation, alert and standby, search and rescue, recovery and release. This is viewed as good practice by council.

WSC Policy on closure of Playing Fields and Reserves in Catastrophic Fire days

In November 2019, there were issues raised in respect to the closure of playing fields and reserves on catastrophic fire days by council. In an email from the Deputy General Manager Operations to the General Manager, they stated that council had a preliminary table of council affected community facilities with a draft risk assessment profile that would be linked to catastrophic and extreme fire events with an agreed position on what is closed when¹⁵. The email also stated that there would need to be some discussion with councillors and engagement with various sporting bodies. As of June 2021, no formal policy has been developed by Council.

Recommendation 4

That Wingecarribee Shire Council develops a policy/procedure for the closure of reserves and playing fields on extreme or catastrophic fire rating days. This policy/procedure should be developed in consultation with sporting bodies within the Shire.

Recommendation 5

That Wingecarribee Shire Council reviews all emergency management and associated plans to ensure they are current and accurate.

Emergency Operations Centre

The Emergency Operations Centre (EOC) is located at the RFS Headquarters Priestley St Mittagong with the alternate being located at the Wingecarribee Shire Council Theatre, Civic Centre, Elizabeth St, Moss Vale. The Mittagong site is in the training room of the RFS and there were significant issues identified prior to and post the fires with connectivity (WIFI for laptops and phones), suitability of resources available and spacing. There are similar issues with the alternate site.

On the 17 August 2020, Council held an Emergency Workshop and one of the actions listed being *'Scope what work is required (IT equipment etc) to have Scouts Hall in Donkin Avenue as EOC and associated costs.'*¹⁶ A scout hall is not a suitable location for an EOC, nor is it a cost-effective alternative. Resilience NSW provides a guide to the minimum standards required for an EOC which WSC should review.

Wingecarribee Shire Council should undertake a review of the current EOC site/s and upgrade assets or provide an alternative suitable site for the Shire. Wingecarribee Shire Council should review Recommendation 61 of the NSW Bushfire Inquiry that discusses co location of Emergency Operations Centres.

Recommendation 6

That Wingecarribee Shire Council undertakes a review of the current Emergency Operations Centre sites to either upgrade current assets or provide an alternate site for the Emergency Operations Centre.

¹⁵ Email 25/11/19 Deputy General Manager to General Manager

¹⁶ Emergency Workshop Actions 17 August 2020

Post the 2019/20 fires, Council has conducted 4 full day training sessions in conjunction with Resilience NSW for Emergency Operations Centre (EOC) liaison officers to ensure the council have enough trained and capable officers available if needed. It is recommended that Council continues to ensure that adequate staff are trained in the operations of an Emergency Operations Centre.

Recommendation 7

That Wingecarribee Shire Council continues to ensure that suitable and adequate staff are trained in working in an Emergency Operations Centre.

Local Emergency Management Officer

The Local Emergency Management Officer (LEMO) performs duties as an Executive Officer to the Local Emergency Management Committee (LEMC), Chair of the LEMC and Local Emergency Operations Controller (LEOCON). During emergency operations and events controlled by the LEOCON the LEMO provides support and advice on emergency management matters. The LEMO is appointed by Council to perform these roles.

The Wingecarribee Shire LEMO was also the Council Risk Management Officer, who performed that role along with the role of LEMO. This is common in councils as funding is not available for a stand-alone position. On the 26 November 2019 the LEMO went off to have a knee replacement, returning to work early on the 24 December 2019 and working through the fires. At the time of her return the LEMO was still on crutches and returned to assist the community.

It is important that an alternate LEMO is identified by Council to perform the role in the absence of the substantive LEMO. This issue was raised with Council in an email dated 21 August 2019 and again on the 3 September 2019. Expressions of interest for the alternate LEMO were circulated by Council on the 3 September 2019 until it was finally filled in February 2020. The issue was raised on a number of occasions with the Group Manager, Organisational Development¹⁷.

In Councils Internal Debrief Report (April 2020) it was identified that the Group Manager Infrastructure Services had performed in the role of LEMO until the LEMO returned early from sick leave. The Group Manager was not identified on any documents as the alternate LEMO which led to significant confusion within the Emergency Operations Centre.

The Internal Debrief Report also identified that *“It was organised that the Regional Emergency Management Officer (REMO) would act as LEMO if the position could not be filled due to my hospitalisation”*. The State Emergency Operations Controller was asked about the REMO performing in the role of LEMO during this time to which they responded¹⁸:

¹⁷ Email 21/8/19 LEMO to Group Manager Organisational Development

¹⁸ Letter SEOCN to Reviewer 29 June 2021.

The primary role of the REMO is to provide executive support for the Region Emergency Operations Controller and associated committees in accordance with the State Emergency & Rescue Management (SERM) Act 1989.

In any situation where a LEMO is unable to perform their duties it's the understanding of the NSWPF their employer is responsible to provide an alternate, in this scenario Wingecarribee Shire Council. Unless exigent circumstances existed, a REMO would not be a suitable alternative option.

It was not appropriate for Council to organise for the REMO to act in the position of LEMO whilst the LEMO was hospitalised. Whilst exigent circumstances ended up existing, Council had adequate opportunity to nominate and train an alternate LEMO.

Recommendation 8

That Wingecarribee Shire Council ensures that the position of Local Emergency Management Officer and an alternative continue to be identified and trained appropriately in emergency management.

Feedback was received that the relationship between the LEMO and their supervisor changed considerably about six months before the fires. There was a push for them to be spending more time in their risk management role for council rather than doing the LEMO work. The view was expressed that they were expected to complete the LEMO role/tasks in their own time¹⁹. This is discussed later in council resources below.

Local Emergency Management Committee contact directory

The current Operations Contact Directory is for the Southern Region as a whole and there was not a specific Wingecarribee Shire LEMC contact list provided to the Review. This made it difficult to identify and contact LEMC members for the purposes of the survey. Whilst the LEMO knows who is in the LEMC, an alternate LEMO might not, and it is recommended that a stand-alone contact list for the Wingecarribee Shire LEMC is developed and circulated to all members.

Recommendation 9

That the Local Emergency Management Officer on behalf of the LEMC develops a Wingecarribee Shire LEMC contact directory (electronic) and that the directory is circulated to all members.

Local Emergency Management Committee Membership Folder

The Local Emergency Management Officer maintains a LEMC membership folder that contains the Charter, list of representatives, contact list for the Region, Emergency Operations Centre Policy and Standard Operating Procedures, Handbook, Register and Terms of Reference. The membership folder also contains information on the requirement for agencies to supply their own equipment at the Emergency Operations Centre due to connectivity issues previously discussed. This is currently in hard copy format, a recommendation that this is made available electronically would enhance the current good process.

¹⁹ Meeting 29/6/21

Recommendation 10

That the Local Emergency Management Officer, on behalf of the Local Emergency Management Committee develop an electronic copy of the membership folder that is circulated to all members.

Emergency Management training for council staff

The Local Emergency Management Officer for the Wingecarribee Shire Council has undertaken a number of courses with Resilience NSW and also an external University qualification in Emergency Management. All of these education courses assist in understanding and putting into operation good emergency management practice.

A review of the training records for the General Manager for Wingecarribee Shire Council, at the time of the fires, indicate that no training was attempted or completed either through Resilience NSW or an external organisation. As the Chair of the Local Emergency Management Committee, at a minimum, completing the Resilience NSW course 'An introduction to Emergency Management', which is an online course, would have greatly assisted the General Manager in understanding emergency management prevention, preparation, response and recovery. Consideration should be given to incorporating this into their performance agreement.

Recommendation 11

That Wingecarribee Shire Council ensures that staff involved in emergency management have been given appropriate emergency management training.

Bushfire Awareness Training for WSC staff

There was no evidence provided that WSC staff had been trained in Bush Fire Awareness prior to the fires. This is a program conducted by the NSW RFS at District level for agencies, which includes local council staff that are not on the heavy plant register (they are dealt with separately).

In October 2020 the LEMO commenced discussions with the NSW RFS for WSC staff to undertake the training. On the 9th and 10th December 2020 two training sessions a day were conducted for 16 staff in each session. This was a good initiative by Council.

Recommendation 12

That Wingecarribee Shire Council continues to provide Bushfire Awareness Training for all staff as required.

Events/Staffing prior to fires

In assessing Council's response to the 2019/2020 bush fires, it is important that a complete picture is captured. In October 2019 Council's Tree and Vegetation Assessment Officer (private trees arborist) resigned and in November 2019 Council's Tree and Vegetation Maintenance Officer (public trees arborist) resigned. This had a significant impact on Council's initial response in respect to trees.

Declared natural disasters had also impacted upon the Wingecarribee Shire prior to the bush fires. This had resulted in Council allocating funding in May 2019 (\$68,661) and September 2019 (\$116,388)²⁰ towards removal and clean up. The September event was still impacting upon council when these bush fire events occurred.

On the 11 November 2019, the LEMO contacted the General Manager, Deputy General Managers, senior council staff and the Local Emergency Operations Controller by email. The email informs them that Catastrophic weather conditions and a State of Emergency had been declared for the following seven days, all LEMC members had been informed and put on standby. Outdoor staff were being kept in town along with heavy plant in case of activation. Staff were also placed on standby for possible road closures.

The Moss Vale and Mittagong evacuation centres were placed on standby, including acceptance of people with companion animals. Messaging was prepared encouraging people to leave if they didn't have a bush fire survival plan. Home care facilities and education were all placed on standby. This was a positive proactive move by the LEMO, council and Local Emergency Management Committee.

Council made the following arrangements in preparation for the fires:

- Council Liaison Officers to the EOC were organised in late October & November 2019²¹ in preparation for the fires.
- General Manager email to all staff on 11/11/19 re catastrophic fire danger rating and working arrangements.²² Outdoor staff allocated work in built up areas only²³
- As the General Manager was on annual leave, the acting General Manager organised on the 29/12/19 for Executive staff to meet to confirm what council actions were required in preparation for the potential threat²⁴.

Council was reported by individual staff members as being very flexible, obliging and supportive when the need arose to take leave to attend to employees own property.

Staff rostering Christmas period

The on-call roster for all council staff over the Christmas period appears to have been developed, however no evidence can be found that it was sent out to anyone. As no on call roster was identified, council appears to have shut down over the Christmas period as they normally would, with many staff taking annual leave between the 24 December 2019 until the 6 January 2020. A number of individuals within Council did attend work whilst they were meant to be on leave even though they were not rostered to do so.

²⁰ Interview 2/7/21

²¹ WSC email 30/10/19 and 19/11/19

²² Email WSC GM to all staff 11/11/19

²³ Email 11/11/19 WSC to staff

²⁴ Email WSC AGM to Executive 28/12/19

Council staff are entitled to take leave and cannot be directed to return to work; however, council needs to develop and circulate an on-call roster over all holiday periods to ensure sufficient staff are identified to cover council or emergency operations. The General Manager was on annual leave from the 13 December 2019 until the 7 January 2020, however returned on the 30 December 2019 due to the fires. The fires were not a surprise and had been burning for some time prior to Christmas. At the very least council could have identified those on leave but not going away to be called on if necessary.

The Review was provided an On Call Roster for the Christmas 2020 and New year 2021 period which is a comprehensive document covering all key details and contact numbers.

Recommendation 13

That Wingecarribee Shire Council ensures that for all holiday periods, an on-call roster is developed and circulated to all staff.

Response

In the initial stages, post the Green Wattle Creek Fire on the 19 December 2019, Council appointed the role of LEMO to a staff member who had previously performed in the role. The substantive LEMO, return to work on crutches on the 24 December 2019. The relieving LEMO was not trained in the use of EMOS (Emergency Management Operating System), and this caused some issues in the Emergency Operations Centre. EMOS training is provided by Resilience NSW.

Recommendation 14

That Wingecarribee Shire Council ensures that the LEMO and alternate LEMO are trained in the use of EMOS in an Emergency Operations Centre by Resilience NSW.

Use of Council Resources

In the initial response, some council resources (such as water trucks) remained at the depot as they were not specifically tasked to assist the community^{25 26}. Residents on the border between Wollondilly and Wingecarribee were receiving SMS message from Wollondilly Shire Council to undertake water deliveries to their community. All councillors were sent a screen shot; the majority did not respond²⁷. There was a clear lack of leadership and direction by council at this time in response to the fires.

WSC would have benefited from a central point of coordination with key staff seconded, along with any external consultant/s, into a council response and recovery team to provide a coordinated level of support. This team should have been co-located to ensure that information was exchanged, reduced duplication of effort and enhancement of funding/grants applications (discussed later in the report).

²⁵ Community meeting 8/7/21

²⁶ Email 24/6/21

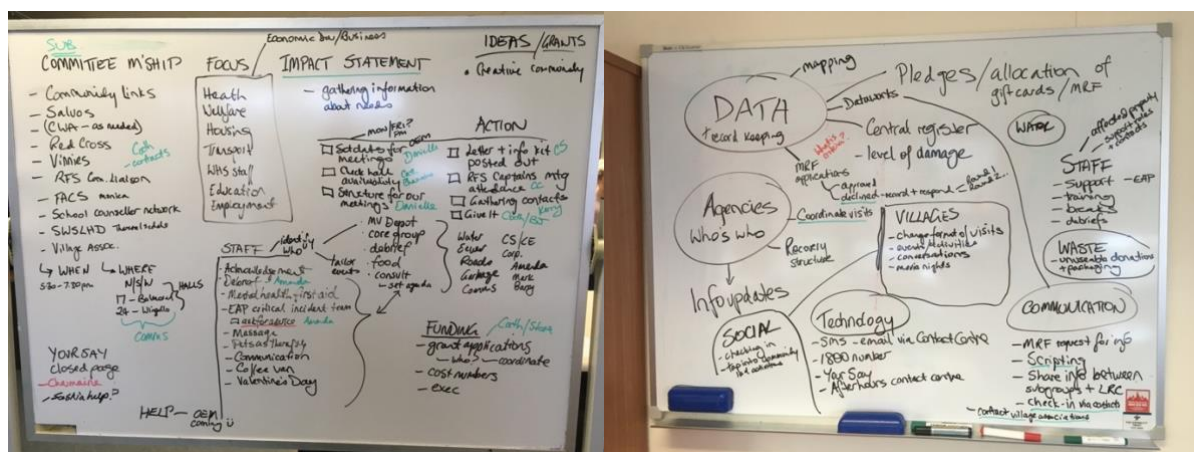
²⁷ Email 24/6/21

This team would have ensured that a central spreadsheet of activities was maintained and actioned on an ongoing basis, again reducing duplication of effort. The team would also ensure that technology, in the form of laptops and internet access was made available. This would have further enhanced councils' response and initial recovery efforts.

One example given was, a request was made for council barricades to be erected at the intersection of Balmoral Park Rd and East Parade and marked as 'Residents Only' due to looters in the area. Council did not respond, and residents received no assistance²⁸.

Council provided information that was sent internally to assist the community as follows:

- Email 20/1/20 seeking clarification on Wingello trees and heritage value²⁹
- Community facts sheet provided 20/1/20 "Bushfire Recovery Information"
- 3/1/20 Mayor on radio re community able to use saleyards. Against Local Land Services arrangements and no insurance coverage³⁰.
- 24/1/20 Free promotional deal re promotion of business
- 13/1/20 – GM to all staff: Establishment of '5 staff working advisory panels' – (Recovery Subcommittees)³¹
- 11/11/19 Information sheets on dealing with trauma to council employees
- Numerous emails internally with staff's frustration on formation of committees, slowness of actions and communication strategies/information provided.



Council's brainstorming session re resources and committees.

²⁸ Email 11/7/21

²⁹ Email WSC GM to Exe 20/1/20

³⁰ Email LEMO to GM 3/1/20

³¹ Email GM to all WSC staff 13/1/20

Recommendation 15

That Wingecarribee Shire Council in a major natural disaster response and recovery operation, co-locates a council response and recovery team to ensure a coordinated response by council.

Moss Vale Resource Recovery Centre fire

On Saturday 4 January 2020 at approximately 11.45am the green waste stockpiles on the northern side of the Moss Vale Resource Recovery Centre ignited creating a large fire that spread to the other stockpiles on the southern and eastern side of the facility, due to the close proximity, prevailing weather and drought conditions at the time of the fire. A timeline provided by WSC is below. The actions of staff from WSC are to be commended for eliminating risks to the facility, surrounding businesses and residents. They rotated and isolated smouldering mulch, alternated water trucks and worked throughout the night dousing the stripped-out mulch.

Event Sequence ³²	
1	Fire incident occurs at 11:45AM on the 04/01/2020.
2	Emergency Evacuation Procedures are implemented and completed.
3	The Pollution Incident Response Management Plan (PIRMP) for the Resource Recovery Centre (RRC) is implemented. With the Environmental Protection Authority (EPA) notified, Council is issued incident number C00102 – 2020 on the 04/01/2020.
4	Firefighting services are able to contain the fire and deem it safe enough for Council to manage as they moved offsite at 5:00AM on 05/01/2020, leaving verbal instructions on how to monitor and manage smouldering remains.
5	On 05/01/2020, the RRC is deemed safe to run limited critical services; J R Richard Waste Collections and Waste Transfers.
6	RRC staff are allocated on rotational shifts to run limited services, and to monitor and manage smouldering remains under supervision of RRC management.
7	Three (3) Environmental Protection Authority (EPA) officers inspect the site three (3) days after the incident has occurred. They were accompanied by the Manager Business Services and Coordinator Business Services.
8	EPA officers were satisfied the incident was NOT due to a breach in Council's Environment Protection Licence or any other EPA regulations. No fines or actions have been required by the EPA.
9	The RRC was reopened to the public with full services available on the 11/01/2020

³² WSC PowerPoint presentation



Fire crews entering the Moss Vale Resource Recovery Centre due to a mulch fire on 4/1/20

Evacuation Centres

The LEMC Emergency Management Plan clearly identified the Evacuation Centres activation and capacity. The evacuation centres were at the Mittagong RSL and the Moss Vale Services Club. Council conducted annual audits of the evacuation centres as required. They were activated during the fires along with animal refuges, as people had to stay with their animals.

In December 2019 as the Green Wattle fire threatened, Council commenced receiving multiple calls for an animal evacuation centre to be opened in the Wingecarribee Shire area. Moss Vale Showground would have been appropriate as a safe zone with equipment for livestock and camping. Council advised that they were not responsible for opening an evacuation centre (which is correct), council had no power to open the showground and there were insurance coverage issues. Eventually the showground was opened³³.

As at the 10 January 2020, there were over 150 registrations through the Register, Find, Reunite process at the Mittagong RSL and 8 people received accommodation. The evacuation centre was staffed by Department of Justice, Red Cross, St Johns and chaplaincy. The whole evacuation centre process appeared to run smoothly³⁴, the major feedback being that there was a large number of pets with evacuees, this required owners to stay with the animals and in some instances sleep on the floor or in chairs. This needs to be factored into any future planning around an evacuation centre by council, Resilience NSW and Department of Primary Industries.

Recommendation 16

That Wingecarribee Shire Council, through the Local Emergency Management Committee works with Resilience NSW and Department of Primary Industries to:

- c) update the existing guidelines (including a risk assessment as to suitability) around Evacuation Centres and review the current evacuation centres against these new guidelines³⁵
- d) develops procedures to ensure appropriate supports for people with animals and develop a domestic pets evacuation protocol³⁶.

³³ Email 11/7/21

³⁴ Resilience NSW interview

³⁵ Recommendation 70 NSW Bushfire Inquiry

³⁶ Recommendation 75 NSW Bushfire Inquiry

Community Transport to view properties

The Local Emergency Operations Controller, learning from the Tathra experience, requested that the mayor organise transport for the community to view their properties before they saw any damage done on the news. The mayor organised a bus for community residents who along with the mayor, councils' staff and LEOCON went to fire affected areas so that community members could see the damage to their homes. Whilst initially very confronting, all residents were very thankful for the opportunity to view their properties.

Initial communication

The overwhelming comment from the community was that there appeared that there wasn't a sense of urgency by council, it was seen as an RFS issue. Whilst this is true, the RFS were the lead agency, council does have a role in communicating to the community. There was a clear lack of communication with the community, other than sharing the information that was already on the RFS website. Council had a communication team that was available, however they only appeared to use what other agencies posted on their webpages and there was limited coordinated messaging³⁷.

There had been issues in the past as to whose responsibility it was to send out information between council and RFS. Consideration should be given to a partnership approach with council and lead agency working together for the betterment of the community.

Council was also not prepared for the volume of media attention associated with the various political agendas. This was summed up in "*the human element of pain and grief was lost for minor point scoring*".³⁸

The initial communication plan and information was altered by the Acting General Manager to be revised to simply be a document, placed on council's website that outlined councils' legislative responsibilities during a bush fire³⁹.

Council communications did establish hourly briefings on local radio, newsletters that were printed and electronic and interacting with ABC radio. However, the General Manager would not allow messaging to go out without authorisation and the slowness of the messaging/authorisation meant that it was reactionary to events. This was not the fault of the communications team.

The Mayor and General Manager were at odds with each other over the response, causing significant issues internally. The mayor's attendance at community meetings had opinions divided, except in Balmoral where there was a significant issue in respect to boundary lines between Wingecarribee and Wollondilly Shire's, where rightly or wrongly the locals are still talking about it.

³⁷ Interview 21/6/21

³⁸ Interview 21/6/21

³⁹ Email 9/7/21 and WSC Website – Bushfire Recovery- communications

The Review found that the mayor was divisive within the community, polarising opinion during the feedback sessions. A small number within the community believed that he did a good job, however, the majority believed that he lacked empathy towards bush fire victims and presented no plan on behalf of council for moving forward. There was also considerable comment in respect to the manner in which the mayor spoke with bush fire victims, as being inappropriate and lacking empathy. It was apparent that the mayor lacked support from some senior council staff. Clear leadership at all levels of council was required but was not demonstrated during this crisis period.

Effective communication was hampered by a number of councillors offering assistance and making decisions on behalf of council that they didn't have authority to do⁴⁰. The Review watched the council meetings of January, February and March 2020, these meetings would not have instilled confidence in the community.

Councillor briefings

A Councillor Information Session, prepared by the Chief Financial Officer, was conducted on the 8 January 2020 that covered the following:

- Current fire status
- Pending risks
- Council's role -v- State Agencies
- Councils' immediate response
- Staff impacted by current situation
- Next steps moving forward
- RRC Fire Incident.

There was an additional Councillor briefing in January following the two community meetings at Southern Villages 20 January and Northern Villages 21 January on the feedback from the community in respect to allocation of the Commonwealth funding of \$1m.

Disaster Welfare Assistance Point

Disaster Relief Grants are made available by the NSW Government⁴¹ if your home or essential household contents were damaged or destroyed by a natural disaster, you may be eligible for the Disaster Relief Grant for individuals.

The financial assistance is provided to help people to recover from the effects of a disaster and re-establish a basic standard of living. It is not provided to replace insurance or compensate for losses. You may be eligible for financial support if the following apply:

⁴⁰ Email 11/7/21

⁴¹ <https://www.nsw.gov.au/resilience-nsw/disaster-relief-grant-for-individuals>

- your home (primary place of residence) was damaged by a natural disaster
- you do not have insurance for the damage
- you are a low-income earner with limited financial resources
- it has been less than 4 months since the disaster.

Wingecarribee Shire Council made available the front office of the Moss Vale Chambers (Civic Centre) for Resilience NSW to be able to deal directly with community members along with the Red Cross. A strategy was also implemented of an Outreach program mainly to Balmoral, Wingello and Bundanoon. For a number of weeks, Resilience NSW and council staff attended the Outreach locations and community meetings. In total there were only 24 requests and 5 applications received by Resilience NSW through the WSC outreach locations.

Staffing allowances and leave

On the 9 January 2020 an email sent to all staff by the General Manager outlining staff's ability to access special leave and allowances. The email is specific as to what Awards allow and what Council was providing over and above the Award. This was a good proactive move by Council to ensure that all staff were clearly aware of not only councils' position, but what they are entitled to in an emergency situation⁴².

Resident Information sheets

It is recommended that Wingecarribee Shire Council, considers making available a bushfire information sheet to all residents as the bushfire season approaches. The information could contain how to prepare your property, how to complete your bush fire ready plan and services available to assist residents. The information sheet could be distributed by council and would provide valuable information to all residents. This was raised by a number of new residents to the area that had not previously resided in a bush fire zone. This could be further developed through the introduction of a bushfire ready information session conducted in concert with the NSW RFS prior to the bush fire season for the community. This should be done in concert with Resilience NSW to ensure that there is coordination of messaging.

Recommendation 17
That Wingecarribee Shire Council considers the introduction of a bushfire ready information sheet for all residents to be sent out prior to the bush fire season. Further consideration should then be given to holding a bush fire information session in concert with the NSW RFS that is open to all residents prior to the bush fire season.

⁴² Email General Manager to all staff 9/1/20

Review Council's Short Term Recovery Response, including effectiveness of local Recovery Committees, establishment, and implementation of Recovery Plans

The initial council response to recovery was very slow and weak to begin with, in comparison to surrounding councils⁴³. Disaster events are highly political in nature at all levels of government and Wingecarribee Shire Council was no exception. Several of the Councillors were highly critical of council in the press, instead of presenting a unified front for the betterment of the community. Senior council staff had minimal understanding of emergency management, coupled with a council that was somewhat dysfunctional. One council employee who was spoken to summed it up very simply in that *"We lost the focus on what we are here for...to serve the community"*⁴⁴

In the immediate aftermath of the Green Wattle Creek fire, it became obvious that the Executive of Wingecarribee Shire Council had never had to play a role in disaster management and recovery. WSC were seen as 'a bit slow to pick up pace for recovery'. There was clearly inexperience in disaster management and there seemed to be a lack of urgency within council⁴⁵ ⁴⁶. The Regional Recovery Coordinator engaged heavily with Council in an effort to progress recovery.

The mayor initially took a lead role and had to push some of the Executive into the role of community recovery support. This demonstrated the clear divide and lack of cohesion between the mayor and council executive. Initially a small group of WSC staff was working with the mayor and executive to send out information, distribute financial assistance (discussed in Mayoral Relief Fund below) and supporting those evacuated to go back into the fireground to view the damage.

The second fire hit the southern flanks of the Wingecarribee Shire and council appeared to have 'shut up shop' to avoid dealing with donations and recovery hubs⁴⁷.

Local Recovery Plan

Wingecarribee Shire Council did not have a Local Recovery Plan prior to the 2019/20 bushfires as part of the standard emergency management planning process of the Local Emergency Management Committee. No evidence of an existing Local Recovery Plan was found. The community sentiment was *"There was no plan in place by council"*⁴⁸

⁴³ Interview 22/6/21

⁴⁴ Interview 21/6/21

⁴⁵ Interview 24/6/21

⁴⁶ Interview 29/6/21

⁴⁷ Email 11/7/21

⁴⁸ Virtual community meeting 7/7/21

The existence of a Local Recovery Plan would have assisted the Recovery Committee in the establishment of a local recovery structure, actions, roles and responsibilities at the local level⁴⁹. In the Bushfire Recovery Newsletter (April 2020) WSC noted that they were *'in the process of developing a Local Recovery Plan'*.⁵⁰

The Local Recovery Plan that was presented to the Review was adapted from the Wollondilly Shire Council Recovery Plan. Whilst there is nothing wrong in the adoption of another Councils Recovery Plan (format), the last pages of the plan supplied to the Review still had Wollondilly Shire Councils actions and responses from 2016 and 2017. This demonstrates a lack of attention to detail and oversight in the Recovery phase by council.

Recommendation 18

That Wingecarribee Shire Council, in concert with the Local Emergency Management Committee develops a Local Recovery Plan with input and assistance from Resilience NSW.

Local Recovery Committee

The Local Recovery Committee is established as the strategic decision-making body for local recovery⁵¹. The establishment of the Wingecarribee Shire Council Local Recovery Committee had no clear governance or structure in the initial stages and was not representative of the community.

Minutes of the **'Executive Emergency Recovery Team'** meeting 10 January 2020 were provided. This is an entirely Council Executive meeting with no community representatives and no establishment of sub committees. This meeting was followed by the below email from the General Manager to all council managers that the establishment of a recovery committee had to go through the LEMC. This is a Council Executive Managers meeting, not a recovery meeting.

On 20 January 2020, WSC General Manager sent an email to all council managers stating:

"I omitted to mention at our Managers Meeting last week that I need to obtain formal approval for the establishment of WSC Local Recovery Committee through the Local Emergency Management Committee (LEMC). An extraordinary meeting of that committee has been set up for Thursday 23 January and I am hoping to get our Recovery Committee Structure and outline plan endorsed at that meeting.

Whilst you can commence preliminary actions that would aid recovery in your respective area and who you might wish to have on your subcommittee as representatives from relevant agencies or community reps, please hold off establishing a first meeting date until I have the formal approval from the LEMC. I will advise when that has occurred⁵².

⁴⁹ NSW Recovery Plan

⁵⁰ Bushfire Recovery Newsletter April 2020

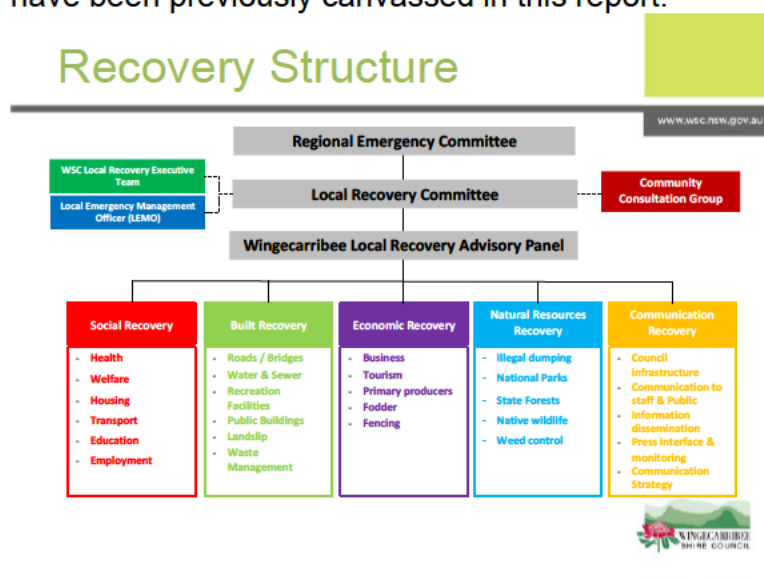
⁵¹ NSW Recovery Plan

⁵² Email 20/1/20 General Manager to council managers

On the 13 January 2020 an **Emergency Recovery Meeting** was held with the only difference to the meeting on the 10 January 2020 being that the Chief Financial Officer did not attend this meeting. This is a Council Executive Managers meeting, not a recovery committee meeting.

On the 15 January 2020, the Region Emergency Management Officer forwarded an email to the WSC General Manager outlining the requirements in establishing a Local Recovery Committee. This included the attachments of the Local Recovery Toolkit and a Recovery Committee suggested membership document. These documents also referenced the guidelines and templates available, the link to Australian Disaster Resilience Community Recovery Handbook and National Principles of Disaster recovery.

On the 15 January 2020 the WSC Local Recovery Plan was presented to Council Managers. The Recovery structure presented on that day was incorrect in that a “Wingecarribee Local Recovery Advisory Panel⁵³” had been placed between the Local Recovery Committee and the Sub Committees. The Sub Committees were also named as “Recovery Working Advisory Panels⁵⁴”. There was clearly initial confusion as to the correct structure under the NSW Recovery Plan. The issues with the Local Recovery Plan have been previously canvassed in this report.



The Review could not correlate the 15 January 2020 with the WSC Local Recovery Plan being presented to council, yet in the Bushfire Recovery Newsletter (April 2020) WSC noted that they were *‘in the process of developing a Local Recovery Plan’*.⁵⁵

The Local Emergency Management Committee met on the 23 January 2020 at 10am and discussed the establishment of the Wingecarribee Local Recovery Committee. The General Manager noted that the plan/structure needed to be adopted before the Committees commenced work. In developing the structure, the General Manager had looked at Wollondilly and Bega Valleys Recovery Committee structures, which has been previously discussed above.

⁵³ WSC PowerPoint presentation 15/1/20
⁵⁴ WSC PowerPoint presentation 15/1/20
⁵⁵ Bushfire Recovery Newsletter April 2020

The General Manager in the LEMC meeting made the recommendation that the Local Recovery Advisory Panel be removed from the Recovery Plan along with the renaming of the sub committees to advisory sub committees. This shows confusion as to councils understanding of established recovery arrangements.

The Minutes were provided for the Wingecarribee Shire Local Recovery Committee 4 February 2020. The Chairs of the Subcommittees were not invited to this recovery meeting. An explanation was provided as to the Organisational Chart and subcommittees by the Chair of the Southern NSW Regional Recovery Committee. It was noted that Chairs of Subcommittees should be invited to the next Recovery Committee meeting.

The minutes were provided for a meeting on the 6 February 2020 for the “*Wingecarribee Shire Local Recovery Subcommittees*”. The structure was wrong in that the subcommittee chairs should be participants in the Local Recovery Committee meetings so that everyone can be updated on what is occurring across each sector. This was rectified as the last agenda item where subcommittee chairs would now be part of the Local Recovery Committee meetings.

Council appeared to be playing catch up in the establishment of a Local Recovery Committee and Local Recovery Plan. The establishment of the Recovery Committee was about senior staff members of Council, not a true Recovery Committee in the initial stages⁵⁶. The existence of a Local Recovery Plan, as previously discussed would have greatly assisted Council in this time of crisis.

Recommendation 19

That Wingecarribee Shire Council ensures that the Local Recovery Committee and Subcommittees are established as per the guidelines established in the Community Recovery Toolkit developed by Resilience NSW.

Local Recovery Coordinator

The NSW Recovery Plan states that ‘**Local Council chairs the Local Recovery Committee, when a Recovery Coordinator is not appointed**’⁵⁷. The WSC General Manager was approached numerous times by Resilience NSW and within Councils own staff for the appointment of a Local Recovery Coordinator. This was evidenced by the following:

At the Local Emergency Management Committee meeting, 23 January 2020, The Chair (Council General Manager) noted “*that the State can appoint a Recovery Coordinator within the Region if they determine it will be beneficial*”⁵⁸. This is somewhat confusing as a Region Recovery Coordinator (Mr Adams) for that area had already been appointed along with a State Coordinator for Recovery (Mr Willing). These positions are also noted in the minutes to the LEMC meeting. The WSC General Manager we believe was talking about a local recovery coordinator; however, this is unclear.

⁵⁶ Interview 29/6/21

⁵⁷ NSW Recovery Plan

⁵⁸ LEMC Minutes 23/1/20

In the LEMC meeting, the LEOCON rightly pointed out that recovery was about community engagement and that a Local Recovery Coordinator, '*in their unique environment with multiple affected villages would help cohesion in the recovery efforts*'⁵⁹ and strongly recommends the appointment of Local Recovery Coordinator.

On the 24 January 2020 the Senior Manager, Strategic Planning, Resilience NSW responded to an email to the General Manager WSC that they did not fund the cost of a Local Recovery Coordinator position. There was evidence that there was correspondence between the General Manager and the Southern Region Recovery Coordinator where the possibility of the appointment of a Local Recovery Coordinator was raised to take over the function and relieve Council staff to allow them to get on with their Business as Usual. There was also discussion of a short-term appointment and a possible source of funding from the second-round grants made to council from the Commonwealth⁶⁰.

On the 25 February 2020 the Wingecarribee Shire Council Executive Meeting Minutes state (General Manager) "*Met with Dick Adams – Recovery Coordinator not required*". There is no explanation as to the General Managers reasoning for this decision and it was against the recommendation/s of the Southern Region Recovery Coordinator (Mr Adams).

The General Manager, WSC was a member of the Regional Recovery Committee General Managers Working Group and a member of the 10 Councils working group in the Canberra Southern Region prior to the fires. The Southern Region Recovery Coordinator and Co-Chair of the Regional Recovery Committee spent considerable time with the WSC General Manager, assisting and guiding them in the recovery process.

The General Manager attended the Regional Recovery Committee meetings however, the information didn't flow back to the Subcommittees or council employees⁶¹.

The general feedback was that the General Manager was significantly impacted by the internal politics at the time and the uncertainty surrounding their own position within council. The relationship between the General Manger and Councillors was described by several people as strained and not a good relationship.

The surrounding Councils of Shoalhaven, Bega Valley and Snowy Valleys did appoint Local Recovery Coordinators; however, it should be noted that a number of other fire affected councils did not appoint a Local Recovery Coordinator.

⁵⁹ LEMC Minutes 23/1/20

⁶⁰ Email Region Recovery Coordinator to GM WSC 24/2/20

⁶¹ Email 11/7/21

Regional Recovery Committee Chair

On the 14 February 2020 a meeting was held with the Chair, Region Recovery Committee and the WSC General Manager in a Local Recovery Workshop. The Chair, Region Recovery Committee put together a 'WSC Challenges' list under each of the Subcommittee headings and emailed the document to the WSC General Manager. On Monday 17 February 2020 the document was circulated by the General Manager to Council Executives with the comment "*Can you please give consideration to the opportunities and actions that may be developed in relation to each of the identified challenges, particularly as they relate to your Subcommittee area. Please send back to XXXX and she will populate the table*⁶²".

The Review requested any feedback from the Subcommittees or actions taken against any of the listed challenges in the document. The Review was informed that there is no record of any emails back from the Subcommittees, no documents in any folders and no response being provided to the Chair, Region Recovery Committee⁶³.

Recovery Sub Committees

An Email was sent from the LEMO to the Group Manager Organisational Development (14/1/20) re '*Community Recovery Needs following a Disaster Event*' covering community and council representation on recovery sub committees.

The WSC Sub Committees of Social, Built, Economic, Natural Resources and Communication were established.

Sub Committee – Social

The Social Sub Committee was established through Terms of Reference in February 2020. The makeup of the Committee, including community representatives was recorded and minutes of all meeting was provided to the Review. The meetings are still held monthly and consist of approximately 23 members including council officers, State and Federal Recovery Agencies, local non-government agencies and community association representatives.

The Minutes of the Sub Committee developed over a short period of time into a very good reference document for community activities and engagements undertaken. Social impacts were largely captured through meetings, where a standing agenda item was for agencies to discuss any issues arising in the community or identified gaps in recovery.

⁶² Email WSC GM to Executive 17/2/20

⁶³ Email 9/7/21 WSC to Review

Sub Committee- Built

The Subcommittee of 'Built' should cover waste management, roads and bridges, infrastructure, recreational facilities etc. There was a strong view that initially council looked after council infrastructure instead of the community⁶⁴, with the Executive taking a very conservative approach and being slow to respond. It was felt that there was a missed opportunity to deploy council staff in high visibility vests into towns assisting people. Once the opportunity was lost it was very hard to get back in front of the community⁶⁵. This was a sentiment echoed in community meetings.

The fires saw a Section 44 declared on the 28/11/19 and revoked on the 7/2/2020 for the Wingecarribee Shire Council. In total the tree costs (removal etc) under the Section 44 were for \$7,090 with the inspections on the firegrounds commencing in Balmoral on Sunday the 22 December 2019 when a request went into council for another level 5 arborist to assist. A contract tree and vegetation maintenance officer commenced on the 24 December 2019 and is still working four days a week. The firegrounds at Wingello were inspected commencing on 5 January 2020 assisting contractors and the RFS.

A lot of the business around the subcommittee lacked clarity as to what was funded and what wasn't. This lack of clarity slowed the response in many areas. The first few months saw one council member working on their own coordinating the removal of trees from the roadside. It was a lot of business as usual as well as fire recovery duties. One proactive initiative was the splitting of timber into firewood and the delivery of over 164 tonnes of firewood to the fire affected community free of charge. An email went out on the 14 April 2020 to the Balmoral and Buxton WSC residents offering two cubic metres of free firewood. The offer was not made to southern residents as the wood there was mostly pine and unsuitable for firewood⁶⁶.

Assistance from the army

On the 10 January 2020 the army reserves were brought into the Balmoral area, with the regular Australian Defence Force (ADF) assisting an additional two times after this. Council did not receive any pre warning that the ADF was attending the area until after they arrived and therefore were not properly prepared with taskings for them.

Assistance from other councils

The assistance provided by other councils to the Wingecarribee Shire Council was extremely useful and of great assistance to the community. Liverpool City Council attended in late January and assisted, followed by Sydney City Council that arrived in February 2020 for two weeks. Blacktown City Council supplied their level 5 arborist for the whole of February 2020 where he was initially working directly with council and then moved to perform the role of Councils Tree and Vegetation Assessment Office assessing the removal of trees from private land.

⁶⁴ Interview 21/6/21

⁶⁵ Interview 26/6/21

⁶⁶ Email WSC 14/4/20



Staff of City of Sydney Council join Wingecarribee Shire Council crews in Balmoral

Wollondilly Shire offered practical insights and documents post their experience with the Picton Floods to assist Wingecarribee Shire Council, however in many instances Council did not take advantage of these learnings. Wollondilly Shire had produced a booklet about what to do post disaster that was distributed to all households. This could have been easily replicated by Wingecarribee Shire for quick distribution to their residents but wasn't.

It's the small things that count

In Council moving forward with the development of a Local Recovery Plan, consideration needs to be given to 'those little things' that matter to the community. The Review heard that some of the areas that should be considered by Council into the future are:

- Residents not being charged for replacement of rubbish bins that are destroyed in the fires.
- Initial rate rebate for garbage collection when the property no longer exists
- Replacement of street signage in a short timeframe.
- Replacement of village signage as a 'sense of community' belonging.
- Replacement of native vegetation through distribution of 'tube stock' by council to reduce erosion and provide a positive sign of stepping forward.



Balmoral Village signs – Northern burnt and southern still standing. ‘The burnt sign caused mental health issues with residents seeing the destruction to their area every day’.⁶⁷

Post the bush fires, WSC saw many roles as returning to business as usual rather than continuing concentrating efforts on recovery. This meant that during normal business hours, crews were not tasked to replace street signs etc, but rather this was undertaken as overtime out of hours and took significantly longer to replace. This also had to do with the roads funding not covering ‘day labour’ so having to be undertaken as overtime. The short-term assistance provided by other councils, if WSC was prepared with a Local Recovery Plan, could have been utilised to remove damaged road signs, identify and prioritise work needed to repair and replace, along with clearing roadsides.

Recommendation 20

That Wingecarribee Shire Council in the development of their Local Recovery Plan, considers areas such as the following to be included:

- Residents not being charged for replacement of rubbish bins that are destroyed in the fires.
- Initial rate rebate for garbage collection when the property no longer exists.
- Replacement of street signage in a short timeframe.
- Replacement of village signage as a ‘sense of community’ belonging.
- Replacement of native vegetation through distribution of ‘tube stock’ by council to reduce erosion and provide a positive sign of stepping forward.

⁶⁷ Email 12/7/21

Sub Committee – Economic

There was very little information to be found on the Economic Subcommittee as the Chair is on long term extended leave from Council and there was no written or verbal handover to the Coordinator, Tourism. This again demonstrates the poor record keeping by Council of any minutes or actions from the Recovery and Subcommittees.

The Recovery process from an economic viewpoint, lacked direction and leadership on how council could have provided assistance. The Subcommittee only met on approximately three occasions and the minutes of the meetings, if taken, cannot be located.

Tourism, seizing the initiative and separate from the Economic Subcommittee has applied for and been successful in their applications for stimulation monies as follows:

Round 1 and 2: WSC Destination Southern Highlands⁶⁸

This was a grant for \$75,000 which initially started as 'Share the Love' and then developed into the Buy Local online and Plan Your Visit which is designed to encourage locals and future visitors to pre purchase and plan their future visits and support local businesses. This has been impacted by COVID Health restrictions, but the monies have been fully allocated.

Oz Trade 2020

There are four project grants applied for and successful as follows:

1. Heritage time – Wonder the Wingecarribee (\$30,000) expended
2. Marketing Pie Time 2021 (\$40,000) expended
3. Southern Highlands Business Events (Regional Conferencing) (\$20,000) Covid impacted due to travel restrictions
4. Save for the Unexpected (\$50,000) unspent.

Regional NSW

Through Regional NSW a grant has been applied for in the vicinity of \$75,000 in respect to the Tulip Time Event. This is to promote visitors to the Region.

Sub Committee – Natural resources

The sub-Committee already had strong working relationships with agencies, so it was seen as a continuation of operational arrangements. One difficulty was that all communications had to go via the General Manager, this again slowed down the process.

⁶⁸ www.visitsouthernhighlands.com.au

The first newsletter (email) went out from the subcommittee on the 8 January 2020 and then subsequent newsletters on the 15 January, 20 January, 27 January, 7 February and 9 March 202 (copies provided). This was a very positive proactive action by council in ensuring that the community was kept informed with the information also being placed on council webpage. This simple format could have been adopted by other subcommittees.

Caring for Carers – There was an Incident Response meeting on the 19/12/19 where information was shared, gaps identified, and a summary of meeting actions summarised. Bushfires and Koalas was produced in early January 2020 that was an overview of how council will support local wildlife carers during the bushfire season.

The Sub Committee Chair went to the Extraordinary Environment and Sustainability Advisory Committee on 18 March 2020. Agenda item 3.1 was the Program of Works for \$100,000 Flora and Fauna Recovery under the Commonwealth Disaster Recovery Grant. This Advisory Committee is an established committee with four community representatives. The Advisory Committee put forward a recommended works schedule covering a variety of programs for the benefit of the community as outlined in the meeting documents⁶⁹.

Sub Committee – Communication

The Communications Subcommittee was established but initially lacked coordination and an understanding of what the role was⁷⁰. There was also initial push back internally within Council as to who was to be the Chair of the Subcommittee. In the communication sphere, everything appeared to be politicised. The example supplied was the front-page article on the Daily Telegraph (27/1/20) “*Council’s fees for fire victims to rebuild*” This went viral on the Paul Murray Program⁷¹, 7News⁷², 2GB⁷³, ABC News⁷⁴ and continued into February. The view was that the General Manager was shy of the media and there was very little proactive media.

Council view was that they were not the lead agency in the bush fires, so they reproduced what other agencies had provided. The subcommittee reported that they were not able to get newsletters out as other subcommittees did not provide content⁷⁵ and there was no funding for the coordination.

There was no formal training provided in emergency management, mental health and/or empathy training when dealing with the community in times of crisis, prior to the event for communications staff. This would have greatly assisted as customer service staff were continually abused by some sections of the community for simply doing their job and they were the frontline communication source. There was also a clear political divide with councillors and the information provided⁷⁶.

⁶⁹ Extraordinary Environment and Sustainability Advisory Committee documents 18/3/2020

⁷⁰ Interview 21/6/21

⁷¹ Paul Murray Program 30/1/20

⁷² 7NEWS 27/1/20

⁷³ 2GB 31/1/20

⁷⁴ ABC News 31/1/20

⁷⁵ Interview 21/6/21

⁷⁶ Interview 21/6/21

There were 25 media releases and alerts issued in a three-and-a-half-month period between mid-December 2019 and 31 March 2020 (examples were provided) and for each of the above media releases, a corresponding 'tweet' were posted on Twitter. All media releases and alerts were distributed through the regular local and regional distribution list as well as being posted on the WSC electronic media centre at <http://media.wsc.nsw.gov.au>. In the same period, there were approximately 140 Facebook posts that were shared from agencies such as *NSW RFS, NSW RFS Southern Highlands Team, Office of Emergency Management, Local Land Services NSW Department of Primary Industries, NSW Health and Services NSW*.

The Communication Subcommittee developed the Communication Strategy 'Bushfire Recovery Wingecarribee⁷⁷' that is based on the Resilience NSW – Communicating in Recovery template. It is a comprehensive document; however, it does not appear to have been used by Council Executive.

In support of the above document, the Subcommittee undertook a communication needs analysis that is a comprehensive analysis of the audience and needs for communication. The document was prepared but there is no evidence that it was implemented by Council Executive.

Community Meetings

There were a number of meetings undertaken with the community that were small and sometimes unannounced. There was difficulty in providing this information to the Review as the information is not centrally recorded.

- 23/12/19 Bus load of residents taken into Balmoral (mayor)
- 27/12/19 RFS meetings in Southern Villages and Avoca
- 28/12/19 Bundanoon and Wingello Hall meetings with mayor
- 30/12/19 Mittagong RSL Community meeting
- 9/1/20 Planners at Balmoral Hall by appointment
- 13/1/20 Buxton Recovery meeting held by Wollondilly. WSC in attendance

Community meetings were held at the Southern Villages 20 January and Northern Villages 21 January 2020 to listen to the expectations of the community in respect to the spending of the \$1m in Commonwealth grant money. These meetings are discussed throughout this report.

Two Community Recovery meetings were held for residents of fire affected villages:

- Thursday 20 February 2020 6pm – 7.30pm in Wingello Community Hall
- Monday 24 February 2020, 6pm - 7.30pm in Balmoral Village Hall

⁷⁷ Communication Strategy February 2020

The meetings were live streamed on Facebook and videos of the meetings were able to be viewed post the meetings. A Bushfire Recovery Team visited the ‘Southern Villages’ on 14 March 2020. The team was made up of Government agencies, legal aid and Wingecarribee Shire Council representatives⁷⁸.

Council was very reluctant and had to be pushed to be involved in community meetings, many were arranged at short notice, the General Manager refused to speak or be introduced as the WSC General Manager at these meetings⁷⁹. This was an opportunity for the community to hear what arrangements council had in place and the roadmap forward. It was also the opportunity for the community to be listened to. Unfortunately, council didn’t deliver on either area.

Community Recovery Meetings

A series of online Community Recovery Meetings were held during the Covid restrictions phase in 2020. These meetings each had a theme and were held on:

- 18 June 2020 – Lets Grow Together
- 2 July 2020 – Health and Wellbeing
- 16 July 2020 – Building Back Better
- 30 July 2020
- 13 August 2020.

Video recordings of the Community Recovery meetings were also made available online.

Bushfire Recovery Website – www.yoursaywingecarribee.com.au/bushfire-recovery

A Bushfire Recovery page on the Your Say Wingecarribee Website⁸⁰ was established on the 11 February 2020, on the 12 February 2020 Council posted who was responsible for management of the land within Wingecarribee Shire. There was a lot of information provided in February 2020 on the website and then the postings greatly reduced as follows:

Year	Month	Number of posts	Month	Number of posts
2020	March	3	August	1
	April	4	September	0
	May	1	October	0
	June	1	November	0
	July	2	December	0
2021	January	3	April	4
	February	1	May	1
	March	2	June	1

⁷⁸ Bushfire Recovery Assistance Team visit flier

⁷⁹ Email 11/7/21

⁸⁰ <https://www.yoursaywingecarribee.com.au/bushfire-recovery?page=5#>

Bushfire Recovery Updates

Council proactively collected the email addresses of fire affected residents in order to keep them updated about recovery support. The YoursayWingecarribee Website offered residents and the community an opportunity to register for emailed updates, newsletters and timely announcements to keep them informed of what was occurring. A historical check of the email documents available resulted in the following:

- 02/07/2021 - [Feedback sought for Council's bushfire response review](#)
- 20/04/2021 - [Bushfire recovery update](#)
- 07/04/2021 - [Bushfire recovery update](#)
- 02/03/2021 - [Bushfire generated waste - deadline extended](#)
- 17/02/2021 - [Bushfire generated waste](#)
- 21/12/2020 - [Bushfire recovery update](#)
- 04/12/2020 - [Bushfire recovery update](#)
- 28/10/2020 - [Bushfire recovery update](#)
- 02/10/2020 - [Funds for your community recovery and resilience project](#)
- 18/09/2020 - [You're invited to a community workshop](#)
- 07/08/2020 - [BUSHFIRE RECOVERY UPDATE from Wingecarribee Shire Council](#)
- 27/07/2020 - [Bushfire recovery update](#)
- 22/07/2020 - [BUSHFIRE RECOVERY UPDATE from Wingecarribee Shire Council](#)
- 10/07/2020 - [BUSHFIRE RECOVERY UPDATE from Wingecarribee Shire Council](#)
- 26/06/2020 - [BUSHFIRE RECOVERY UPDATE from Wingecarribee Shire Council](#)
- 18/06/2020 - [BUSHFIRE RECOVERY UPDATE from Wingecarribee Shire Council](#)
- 17/06/2020 - [Bushfire recovery update](#)
- 15/06/2020 - [BUSHFIRE RECOVERY UPDATE from Wingecarribee Shire Council](#)
- 25/05/2020 - [BUSHFIRE RECOVERY UPDATE from Wingecarribee Shire Council](#)
- 15/05/2020 - [Bushfire Recovery update](#)

The document library provided a comprehensive list of all information provided to residents and has been reproduced in Annexure 3.

Internal Communications

Internal communications during a crisis is as important as external communication. Wingecarribee Shire Council attempted to establish a central point of communication through the use of Microsoft Teams. This would host the relevant Frequently Asked Questions, files and links, however as with many businesses before Covid impacted, staff were not familiar with the use of Teams and the General Manager refused to use the App⁸¹. It is important that WSC develops this technology as it is easy to use and accessible for any location and is App based.

Recommendation 21
That Wingecarribee Shire Council continues to develop its capacity to use online meetings resources to support communications during natural disasters

⁸¹ Email 11/7/21

Bushfire Recovery Hotline

Wingecarribee Shire Council established a Bushfire Recovery Hotline (1800316500) to assist residents with bush fire advice and assistance. Staff received focussed information to ensure that they could assist the majority of callers. This was a good initiative by council.

Recovery Centre/Community Recovery Hubs

The Community led Recovery Hub at the Balmoral Community Hall was jointly supported (limited) by both Wingecarribee and Wollondilly Shire Councils for the recovery response to the Green Wattle Creek Fire. Two centres were originally established at Buxton (groceries) and Balmoral (everything else) however over a short period of time, everything was managed out of Balmoral⁸². The Recovery Hub was managed by two volunteers (Hill/O'Grady) who by all accounts provided an extremely valuable service to their community.

Community members reported that the Resource Hub was essential in providing information that made sense to them and allowed many to stay connected to others within the community.



Balmoral Community Recovery Hub

There were a number of areas for improvement identified with the Recovery Hub and Councils support as follows:

The volunteers struggled with the workload (burnout and fatigue) and there was no welfare support in place for the first eight (8) weeks. As volunteers, they would have benefited greatly from welfare assistance. There was a misconception that as a Section 44 Order was still in place, supporting services/agencies could not be in the area. This was incorrect as a Section 44 does not exclude services from entering the area, it was more that agencies were stretched, and council had no plan in place to provide welfare services to staff or volunteers.

Recommendation 22

That Wingecarribee Shire Council, in the development of their Local Recovery Plan, ensure that the early provision of welfare services/mental health support services is included in the Plan.

⁸² Interview 25/6/21

The volunteers at the Recovery Hub had no established framework or toolkit that they could follow in establishing and running the centre. The Review understands that Wollondilly Shire Council is in the initial stages of developing a Community Recovery Hub Framework/toolkit. Wingecarribee Shire Council should work with them in the development of the framework/toolkit.

Recommendation 23

That Wingecarribee Shire Council works with Wollondilly Shire Council in the development of a Framework/Toolkit for a Community Recovery Hub.

The Community Recovery Hub did not have access to (nor did one exist), to the community profiles, Non-Government Organisations (NGO's), community services and individuals within the community who would have been able to assist with resources. Council needed to understand their capabilities and capacity.

An example is the assistance provided by the Men's Sheds, in particular the Bargo Men's Shed in putting the Community Recovery Hub in contact with resources across the State. They also provided a safe space for many men and their activities were of great assistance to the community.

Recommendation 24

That Wingecarribee Shire Council undertakes a comprehensive community review of all services available (non-government, community services and individuals) within the community who can assist with services and resources in the recovery of the community.



Balmoral Community recovery Hub

Council was requested to set up a governance structure or a plan to deal with donations⁸³, both in general and at the Community Recovery Hub. Donations kept coming into the Community Recovery Hub and there was no plan on how to deal with them. There were issues with receiving, storing and distributing the donated items. Additionally, five (5) skip bins full of rubbish accumulated at the Hub and had to be removed.

⁸³ Interview 25/6/21

Recommendation 25

That Wingecarribee Shire Council ensures that in the development of the Local Recovery Plan that donations and a plan to deal with them, is a specific section within the plan. Council should work with community groups and recovery stakeholders in the development of this section of the Local Recovery Plan.

The volunteers, Resilience NSW and Non-Government Organisations that assisted post fires as always were amazing and require special mention. The Red Cross, Country Women's Association, St Vincent de Paul, Rotary, church groups and Resilience NSW (Peter Pigott) all spent countless hours assisting the community during a very stressful period.

Councils' role in the Community Recovery Hub was described by a number of people as a 'grey area'. Initially they were not involved in the Hub but later acknowledged that they needed to be. The Review found that WSC should have been involved in the establishment and running of the Recovery Hub. Through council's involvement, an accurate and confidential database could have been maintained, skip bins organised, support services coordinated, and welfare services provided for the volunteers/staff. There could have been a clear guideline for roles and responsibilities of council to assist the hub. These same services could have been provided for southern villages as well, even though council resources would have been stretched.

There was a request for administration support at the Hub, as the volunteers saw themselves as working on behalf of Council, and they were left to do all of the administrations work. They often found it difficult to obtain resources and printing of material for the community. The volunteers could go to council for assistance; however, Council was seen as not being proactive and present at the Hub. The gift cards that were provided by council initially, were greatly appreciated by that community.

Wingello Recovery Hub:

A recovery hub was established at Wingello and operated for approximately two weeks. Initially there were issues with them using a non-council owned hall, due to the issues at Balmoral, however approval was eventually provided, and Council Assets staff spoke with the volunteers about what to expect. Council only dropped into the hub a few times to distribute information but did not support or participate in their donation distribution activities⁸⁴.

Wingello was different to Balmoral in that there was a shorter power outage and access was provided quickly to allow people to get in/out to obtain their groceries and power was restored quickly. The donations were managed through the general store and half a dozen locals after the closure of the hub.

⁸⁴ Email 11/7/21

Remote sites

The western region of Wingecarribee Shire is remote and there are no immediately obvious meeting places apart from the RFS facilities. The people who reside there presented a significant challenge to WSC to communicate with and support. In supporting recovery for this community, WSC needs to think outside the square and consider the use of the catering trailer (or similar), where no hall or community space is available.

Recommendation 26

That Wingecarribee Shire Council considers the development of their existing catering trailer, into a community recovery point for areas that have no hall or community space available.

Council Internal Debrief Report – Council Response to Bushfires

On the 9 March 2020 in response to the Green Wattle Creek and Morton Fires, a debrief was conducted involving some key Council staff, the debrief report was provided to the Review dated April 2020. The debrief participants had their business-as-usual positions listed on the debrief document, below which they had their role in the bush fire response and recovery. Whilst they performed roles on the Recovery Committee and Chairs of the Subcommittees, these roles were not listed. The Report is very blunt in its assessment of Councils performance, resulting in a total of 34 recommendations or improvement opportunities. The Debrief Report has not been circulated to all council staff. The Review requested an update over the past 12 months on the 34 recommendations and was informed that no recommendations/improvement opportunities had been actioned.

Recommendation 27

That Wingecarribee Shire Council reviews the Internal Debrief Report (April 2020) and actions/prioritises the Recommendations/Improvement Opportunities as appropriate.

Collation of an Affected Residents List

The issue of an exact and updated list of residents affected by the bush fires was raised by council employees and in all community meetings. The list needed to contain the information of fire affected properties, but then go further and contain the details of where they had moved to and contact details so they can be kept informed of recovery updates and grants information.

Due to the size of the impacted areas, impact assessments took some time to come into council. Contact details were then matched with affected properties and council staff attempted to match properties with recent correspondence to find phone numbers and email details. Facebook groups were also trawled, and affected people messaged.

WSC is currently working on the implementation of a Customer Relationship Management tool (CRM) which is designed to ensure that in the future council will be able to collect the phone number and email contacts for the Wingecarribee Shire community whether they are a renter, business operator or property owner. This information can then be used in disasters. The Review would strongly recommend that WSC works with Resilience NSW and Service NSW in the development of any tool to ensure that multiple tools/Apps are not developed in isolation.

Recommendation 28

That Wingecarribee Shire Council continues to develop the Customer Relationship Management tool for community registration post natural disasters. The Review would strongly recommend that WSC works with Resilience NSW and Service NSW in the development of any tool to ensure that multiple tools/Apps are not developed in isolation.

Review of Councils Long-term Recovery Plans and Implementation of Actions

The Local Recovery Committee should have been a conduit between Council, Regional Recovery Committee, recovery services and the community. There were only three local recovery meetings held, these meetings then gave way to '*local chairs recovery meetings*' that included all subcommittee chairs, the General Manager, 2 Deputy General Managers, the Chief Financial Officer, Community Recovery Officer and a representative from Resilience NSW. This saw a very council centric recovery process instead of considering the needs of the community through a properly established Local Recovery Committee. The General Manager, as the Local Recovery Coordinator should have been providing leadership and overseeing the Subcommittees to ensure that identified actions were undertaken, implemented and completed.

The subcommittees operated until their final meetings:

- Social Still operating
- Economic 5 March 2020 (2 meetings)
- Communications November 2020
- Environment January 2021
- Built June 2020

Sub Committee Plans

Wingecarribee Shire Local Recovery Action Plan was developed encompassing all of the subcommittee actions and initiatives into the one document. The Plan is in the agreed upon format by Resilience NSW and clearly allocates the Recovery Objective, Actions, Responsibility for the action/s, the recovery phase that the action will occur, resources and support available, funding source if applicable, the status and expected completion of the action along with potential barriers and risks to the actions undertaken. The final column is an alignment with the Australian Institute of Disaster Resilience outcomes. The final pages contain a list of all grants and allocated funding.

The Local Recovery Committee no longer exists, and four of the five Subcommittees have been wound down. The Review is concerned as to who has responsibility for ensuring that actions developed in each of the Subcommittees, and the reporting on progress and finalisation to Council. Currently there is no plan or system in place to monitor and report on these outstanding actions.

Recommendation 29

That Wingecarribee Shire Council provides a documented plan for a way to capture all outstanding Local Recovery and Subcommittee actions to ensure action and finalisation is undertaken. This will aid reporting and transparency.

Counselling Training – Council staff

The provision of welfare to staff, volunteers and the community continued to be raised as an issue. The issue of proactively listening to the community as to what they wanted required council staff to demonstrate empathy towards the community. This was sometimes difficult when some of the community demonstrated poor behaviour towards customer service staff. Counselling support was not available on Sundays, when the community identified that Sunday counselling was required, the program did not support it.

WSC needs to acknowledge that staff heard stories and witnessed first-hand the devastation done by the bush fires. The impact of this upon employees cannot be understated and simply referring them to the Employee Assistance Program isn't good enough. Staff were exposed daily to the damage of the bush fires and a number still are in the performance of their council duties. WSC should review the system that the Red Cross has in place to support the welfare of their staff during a disaster and learn from that review.

Council has recognised the need for staff and community to be supported and organised for 'Accidental Counsellor Training' for council staff to be delivered in July 2021. This is a positive move towards welfare support of staff and the community.

Recommendation 30

That Wingecarribee Shire Council continues to support the rollout of the Accidental Counsellor Training for staff.
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Council Recovery Officer appointment

A Community Recovery Officer (CRO) was appointed in July 2020 with funding provided through Resilience NSW and the Commonwealth. In December 2020 this position became a shared role until April 2021 when a single Community Recovery Officer took over. The continuity was maintained over this period. In total 22 Community Recovery Officers were appointed across NSW for a period of 12 months (now extended to two years) under Disaster Recovery Funding Arrangements⁸⁵.

The CRO had six clear deliverables of:

- Establish a Community Resilience Network
- Facilitate Community recovery Events
- Develop a Local recovery Action Plan incorporating community needs and activities
- Provide access to relevant and timely recovery information
- Develop a Local recovery Plan
- Develop a Transition Plan

All of the deliverables have activities associated with them, an outcome and a timeframe for delivery. The CRO is actively working towards completing these deliverables.

⁸⁵ Community Recovery Officer Program – Information Pack

The appointment of the CRO saw the strategic recovery intent back online. There appeared to be some confusion around the CRO, with a number of staff and Executive viewing their role as a Local Recovery Coordinator. In a number of instances this has seen the role go beyond its scope. The appointment of the CRO was a positive appointment by Council.

The CRO commenced in June 2020 and still remains in position with Council. A snapshot of programs, highlights and achievements was provided by Council and is Annexure 2 attached.

WSC had the Community Recovery Officer and the Community Development Officer attend the NSW Engage and Collaborate training offered by Resilience NSW in February 2021. This training will further develop their skills in engaging and collaborating with the community post a natural disaster.

Bushfire Community Recovery Workshops

In October 2020, Wingecarribee Shire Council in concert with Resilience NSW delivered Bushfire Recovery Community Workshops. The workshops were seen as an opportunity for the community to express their views on what was needed to support recovery and help build resilience. The workshops captured key themes along with how Council was responding. The key themes can be summaries below as:

Key Themes	Actions
Community Connection	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Small grants program • Events to encourage community connection • Program of works • Improvements to bushland reserves
Community Resilience	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Establish Community Reference Group • Develop Resilience and recovery Plans • Disaster Mentors harnessing the learnings
Mental health and Wellbeing	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Local Mental Health Services • Identification of service partners for council
Coordination, Communication & Engagement (Govt)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • One stop shop personal information • Cross agency communication, information flow • LGA Disaster Dashboard
Preparedness & Hazard reduction	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • First Aid mental health programs • Red Cross deliver psychological preparedness • Council supporting Recs 15, 17 and 20 of the NSW Independent Bushfire Inquiry
Firefighting infrastructure	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • the construction of new water storage tanks and bores at Balmoral, Wingello and Penrose for firefighting purposes.
Telecommunications (Infrastructure)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Mobile Black spot program • Commonwealth allocated \$27m to strengthen comms during natural disasters
Support for rebuilding (residential)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Engaging of bushfire rebuild specialist by council

Clearance & Clean up (private property)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Support of the Bushfire generated green waste program
Housing support	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Link of Council to NSW Government
Natural Environment (Flora & Fauna)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Expanding the land for wildlife and Habitat for wildlife programs • Animal evacuation shelters identified • Glow Worm Glen restoration • Public areas clearance of weeds
Insurance & Financial Aid	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Liaison with Insurance Council of Australia and Resilience NSW
Economic Recovery	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Participation in Destination Southern Highlands • Integrated multimedia campaign

Wingecarribee Shire Council Disaster Dashboard

The Disaster Dashboard⁸⁶ is a recently launched program that provides community members with an emergency management platform that is designed to provide emergency data and updates from a single point of reference. The dashboard is divided into clearly marked areas of Get Ready, Dashboard and Recovery.

Get Ready covers general preparedness and also preparedness from specific hazards. The Dashboard section provides information on fires, floods and even road repairs along with access to Fires Near Me, weather radar and the ABC and Council websites. Recovery is divided into community and Government supported. This site will be beneficial to connecting with the community and should be viewed as a good initiative by Council.

Recommendation 31

That Wingecarribee Shire Council promotes the existence of the Disaster Dashboard to all residents prior to the bush fire season.

Ongoing impact of additional natural disasters

The devastating bushfires of 2019/20 were further compounded with additional Natural Disasters that council had to contend with in 2020. These Natural Disaster (Declared Events) and the costs to council were as follows:

Event date	Funding	Event
7 February 2020	\$231,701.00	Flood
25 July 2020	\$51,734.00	Flood
5 August 2020	\$233,374.00	Flood
28 November 2020	\$303,453.00	Storm
18 March 2021	\$273,805.00	Flood
5 May 2021	still being determined	Storm

These natural disasters impacted, along with COVID, on Council's ability to undertake some tasks.

⁸⁶ <https://wingecarribee.disasterdashboards.com/dashboard/overview>

Council Emergency Workshop

WSC undertook an Emergency Workshop on the 17 August 2020 that included the Executive and LEMO. There were specific actions to be undertaken in respect to communication, internal council positions, training, emergency operations centre, and other areas. A request was made by the Review for any follow up information/documents as to what actions had been completed and those that were still outstanding. The Review was informed that no follow up of the actions was undertaken. Individual actions were able to be verified as being completed, however the majority of the actions remain unresolved as there is no drive or leadership within council to complete the actions. The actions that are outstanding need to be finalised by WSC.

Recommendation 32

That Wingecarribee Shire Council reviews the 'Emergency Workshop Actions' of the 17 August 2020 and where appropriate, actions outstanding items.

Internal conflict

There was some internal conflict within WSC post the bush fires. This was clearly demonstrated in an email sent on the 30 November 2020 to the Group Manager Organisational Development requesting permission for the LEMO to undertake their role, listing actions that required the sign off of the Group Manager. This placed an unnecessary additional management layer across a position that has clearly defined roles and responsibilities. The LEMO is a vital link in the recovery process and should not have had inhibitors to performing their job, rather the processes should have been streamlined.

The General Manager and Mayor were at odds with each other, and it was reported to the Review that these hostilities boiled over a number of times in meetings.

The majority of council staff have also been returned to their 'normal' positions within council and no time is separately allocated to complete the bushfire work that is still outstanding. It appears that the expectation is that they should complete the bush fire actions in their own time. As previously stated, WSC needs to obtain a comprehensive plan of all outstanding actions and allocate who is responsible for completing the actions. Time and resources also need to be allocated to complete these tasks.

Recommendation 33

That Wingecarribee Shire Council, after reviewing all outstanding actions in plans and debrief document, allocates staff, time and appropriate resources to undertake and complete those actions.

Development Applications

Post bushfires Wingecarribee Shire Council has received a total of 44 development applications, there were for 22 dwellings and 31 outbuildings (noting that some of the applications have included multiple structures i.e., dwelling and shed) the total number of building approvals is 53.

Council figures provided showed that the median total determination time was 19.5 days (including the time from start to finish, including the stop the clock days where Council has requested and was waiting on information from the applicant). The median assessing days determination time was 13 days, including days that council used to assess and determine the application and does not include the period (if any) where additional information was requested from the applicant.

On the 27 January 2020 Council received adverse media for alleged council fees that were going to be charged to bushfire residents who had lost their home. The first development application for a bushfire impacted property was received by council on the 14 February 2020 (carport replacement) and the first development application for a dwelling was lodged with council on the 6 March 2020. At the two community meetings, residents complemented the WSC staff involved in development applications for their understanding and promptness in processing their applications.

Rebuild Program

Resilience NSW reported only two rebuilds through their program from the Local Government Area up until June 2021. Neither application had a BAL (Bushfire Attack Level) Report provided by council with both being undertaken by a private company. A small number of councils did their own BAL reports for residents, the majority did not. It was dependent if council had staff that held the required qualifications⁸⁷.

Royal Commission submission

The Bushfire Royal Commission was established by the Commonwealth to review all aspects of the 2019/20 Bushfires. On information provided, the night before submissions closed, the General Manager and Deputy General Manager requested information from the Local Emergency Management Officer by 10am the next morning to enable the submission to meet the deadline.⁸⁸ Wingecarribee Shire Council missed the opportunity to be a voice for their community at the Royal Commission. The Review believes that Council greatly underestimated the sentiment and need within the community to be heard and the community saw this as continued lack of empathy by council towards the community⁸⁹. WSC should have undertaken the role of advocate on behalf of the community.

⁸⁷ Email 5/7/21 Resilience NSW

⁸⁸ Interview 21/6/21

⁸⁹ Virtual Community meeting 7/7/21

NSW Bushfire Inquiry submission

On the 24 April 2020 WSC Community Engagement Coordinator circulated an email⁹⁰ to residents providing them with details of how to make a submission to the NSW Bushfire Inquiry. A link to the submissions page was also provided. Notice was also given of the virtual meeting that was to occur with the Inquiry and details of how to register. Whilst the Council provided details of how to make a submission, Wingecarribee Shire Council did not make a submission to the NSW Bushfire Inquiry. As stated above, Council greatly underestimated the sentiment and need within the community to be heard and the community saw this as continued lack of empathy by council towards the community.⁹¹

Documenting all decisions

Many stories were told to the Review of interactions with council, some positive but mostly negative. The one story that does stand out is that of a resident in the Balmoral area who undertook to remove dangerous trees on their property and turned them into wood chip. These wood chip piles were apparently enormous. Council, acting on a complaint (as we understand it) attended the property and subsequent correspondence threatened to issue a fine, in excess of \$1 million if the wood chip was not immediately cleared.

This has caused considerable stress to the occupant and as the Review understands, the fine is not to be imposed. However, WSC has not followed up with the landowner to inform them of this fact. Under normal circumstances, WSC may have been well within their rights to impose such a substantive fine as the risk posed may have been enormous. However, post the fires and given the alleged significant risk of falling trees, perhaps council could have handled this situation differently. This story has caused significant unrest within the community as to lack of empathy by council.

Recommendation 34
That Wingecarribee Shire Council writes to the landowner and informs them of their final decision in respect to the wood chip piles.

Local Emergency Management Committee After Action Review

A formal After-Action Review was not undertaken by the LEMC post fires due to competing priorities, however all representatives and liaison officers that attended the Wingecarribee Emergency Operations Centre during the fires was sent an online survey to complete (July 2020), this included council.

⁹⁰ Email Community Engagement Coordinator to residents 24/4/20

⁹¹ Virtual Community meetings 7/7/21 and 8/7/21

Bushfires, Burns and their Management

One program that was put together by the Environment Subcommittee in concert with the Southern Cross Wildlife Care and Tree of Compassion is the ‘Bushfire, Burns and their Management’ course⁹² (September 2020). The course covered Emergency Management arrangements, Incident Management, Bushfire Awareness, On the Fireground, Wildlife Carers role, assessment of injuries and management of same. It is a great program for Wildlife Carers and agencies in the management of injured wildlife.

Recommendation 35

The Wingecarribee Shire Council continues to support the Bushfires, Burns and their Management course.

Response, Recovery and Resilience EXPO 2021

Wingecarribee and Wollondilly Shire Councils, through their Community Recovery Officers are working collaboratively with Resilience NSW and National Recovery and Resilience Agencies to hold a Response, Recovery and Resilience EXPO in November 2021 at the Mittagong RSL. This is the first time the two councils have worked in collaboration on an event of this scale with the EXPO designed to assist the communities on preparing ‘Get ready’ Plans, improved understanding Response, Emergency Management arrangements and functions along with how to build a more resilient community. This is a very positive step by both Councils to build a more resilient community.

Recommendation 36

That Wingecarribee Shire Council strongly supports the Response, Recovery and Resilience EXPO 2021 including a strong staffing presence to answer community questions.

Lessons Learned Report

The Wingecarribee Shire Council would benefit greatly from ‘Lessons Learned’ documents/reviews produced by other natural disaster affected communities and documenting their own lessons learnt in a report for future use. The report should cover all aspects of the PPRR in Emergency Management, and the information contained in this document in capturing the successes and challenges from the Wingecarribee Shire experience to ensure that next time the Shire experiences an emergency event, it is better prepared to support the community through all phases.

Recommendation 37

That Wingecarribee Shire Council develops a Lessons Learned Report to capture the successes and challenges, including the information in this report, to ensure that next time the Shire experiences a natural disaster, it is better prepared to support the community.

⁹² Course manual September 2020

Fire Fighters Memorial

The unfortunate deaths of Mr Keaton and Mr O'Dwyer (NSW RFS) saw a memorial laid in the playground at Telopea Park Buxton. There were very strict guidelines around the unveiling of the memorial (5 December 2020) under NSW Health Guidelines and the wishes of the families. Whilst the Review understands that some community members were unhappy that this unveiling was not open to everyone, it was appropriate for the circumstances at the time.

There was a roadside memorial organised by Mr Pepping of Wingecarribee Shire Council as it was on the council's boundaries and permission had to be gained from the resident. It was a small ceremony as per the wishes of the families.



Roadside memorial honouring the memories of fallen Rural Fire Service volunteers Geoffrey Keaton and Andrew O'Dwyer who died during the 2019/20 Black Summer bushfires.

The residents of Balmoral have expressed a wish to have something commemorative placed into the Balmoral Village Green for the two-fire fighters. This should be negotiated through the NSW RFS and consider the wishes of the families.

Closure of Community Recovery Hub

The volunteers at the Community Recovery Hub, spent a lot of their own money on phone calls, internet access, printing, cleaning products, toilet paper and the provision of food to those in need. There was no council allocation of funds to assist/reimburse these volunteers. At the closure of the Community Recovery Hub, the Wollondilly Mayor took flowers and chocolates up for the volunteers. Wollondilly Shire Council also acknowledged all of the work of the volunteers in their Australia Day Awards.

Simple gestures that were greatly appreciated. The Review is not aware of anything that the Wingecarribee Shire Council did in recognition of the volunteers.

Community Links Wellbeing

Community Links Wellbeing is a free and confidential service for information, guidance and support for the bush fires in the Wingecarribee and Wollondilly Shires in 2019/20. This includes rebuilding, land clearing, tree felling, fencing, financial assistance, community connection and emotional wellbeing. The Community Links Wellbeing program commenced as the Community Recovery Hub closed down in the start of May 2020. They are a vital link between the community and council and should be supported in their activities.

Acknowledgement of staff

A number of Wingecarribee Shire Council employees went beyond what is expected of them in the performance of their duties, during and post bush fires. The actions of volunteers and council staff should be reviewed, and appropriate recognition provided by Wingecarribee Shire Council.

Recommendation 38

That Wingecarribee Shire Council considers reviewing the actions of volunteers and council staff and where appropriate provide recognition for the work they did during the bush fires to assist the community.

Staff debriefing session/s

Frontline staff worked tirelessly over the bush fire period to respond to the community and their needs. WSC has not provided them the opportunity to be de-briefed as to what worked and areas for improvement. It is also an opportunity for their voices to be heard and listened to, which is equally as important.

Recommendation 39

That Wingecarribee Shire Council facilitates a debrief session/s for all staff and captures their views and insights.

Funding applications – Commonwealth and State Governments

Disaster Declarations:

A disaster declaration is a frequently updated list of Local Government Areas (LGA) that have been declared a natural disaster. Disaster declarations are issued by the NSW Government and include an Australian Government Reference Number (AGRN). If an area has been declared a disaster, affected communities and individuals may have access to Disaster relief assistance.

Disaster Relief local councils

- Public infrastructure and assets
- Waste Levy
- Disaster Risk Reduction.

The two evacuation centres at Moss Vale and Mittagong were able to claim costs back for the use of the premises as an evacuation centre. It is unknown if the Moss Vale Services Club claimed, the Mittagong RSL did not claim any expenses. The RSL provided thousands of meals for the RFS and other emergency services/agencies during the fires. The base cost of meals, that were packed by volunteers, was reimbursed by the RFS. The RSL would not claim any costs associated with feeding evacuees etc as they view the expenditure as their contribution to the welfare of the community⁹³. Both facilities are extremely community minded and should be commended for the services they provided during the bush fires.

Commonwealth Government Disaster Recovery Grant

On the 9 January 2020, the Commonwealth announced funding to affected councils of \$1 million. At the time of release of the funds, the Commonwealth stated that it was an initial beginning helping the repair and rebuild process. Funding was for projects and activities that Council deemed essential for recovery and renewal of their communities, including

- Rebuilding damaged or destroyed council assets such as key local roads, bridges, and community facilities.
- Employing additional local staff to take on specialist recovery or planning roles to help coordinate and plan the rebuilding effort.
- Hosting new public activities and events to bring communities together and attract visitors back to affected regions; and
- Immediate maintenance and repairs to relief and evacuation centres.

This funding was confirmed in an email to Council on behalf of the Department of Infrastructure and Regional Development on the 9 January 2020.

⁹³ Interview 21/6/21

In January 2020 following the two community meetings at Southern Villages 20 January and Northern Villages 21 January 2020 a presentation was given to Wingecarribee Shire Councillors on the feedback from the community on the \$1m Disaster Recovery Funding arrangement⁹⁴. This covered the areas of:

- Tourism/Economic development
- Trees/Vegetation
- Infrastructure
- Waste
- Wildlife
- Private Property
- Council Policies
- Council Plans and
- Council staff.

The intent of involving the community and asking what approach should be taken with the allocation of the \$1m Commonwealth Grant was a good gesture, but it appears to have backfired on council. The community however was looking for a plan forward and none was provided.

At a Wingecarribee Shire Council, extraordinary meeting on the 29 January 2020 the Commonwealth funding was allocated into the following areas⁹⁵:

Project	Budget
Waste Disposal at Bargo Waste Management Centre	\$50,000
Tourism Recovery Program	\$75,000
Balmoral Park, Balmoral	\$100,000
Casburn Park, Wingello	\$50,000
Tree Removal at Balmoral, Wingello, Exeter, Wombeyan Caves Road, Manchester Square	\$225,000
Glow Worm Glen	\$25,000
Mountain Bike Tracks at Wingello and Bundanoon	\$25,000
Roadside Entrance into Bundanoon	\$25,000
Contribution to Honour Fallen RFS Firefighters	\$15,000
Rate Relief for Properties with Homes Completely Destroyed	\$300,000
Flora and Fauna	\$100,000
Contingency	\$10,000

There was differing community views and expectations on council. In Wingello there was discussion and acceptance by the community as to what the funding could be used on. In Balmoral, the money was allocated to Balmoral Park and the issue of a bushland reserve/park where reviews/investigations had been proceeding for some six years already. This gave hope to the community that they may get a park, but they may not. This fact has now caused resentment within the community and the \$100,000 remains unspent.

⁹⁴ PowerPoint presentation Councillors January 2020.

⁹⁵ WSC Annual report 2019/20

The Extraordinary Environment and Sustainability Advisory Committee on the 18 March 2020 discussed the issue of funding allocated to “*Establishment of an informal passive recreation area*”⁹⁶. The Advisory Committee found “*There is no plan of management under the NSW Local Government Act for Balmoral Reserve, although Council has previously adopted the WSC Parks Strategy which identified this park as a bushland reserve. Without an adopted plan of management, Council cannot change the nature and use of the site.... Given the significant threatened species on the site, it is not a certainty that a park will legally be able to be established*”⁹⁷.

On the 6 February 2020 the General Manager wrote to the Trustees, Veolia Mulwaree Trust in respect to Councils grant funding to the RFS Memorial at Telopa Park Buxton. The General Manager confirmed the amount of \$15,000 was allocated along with Councils full support for the project⁹⁸.

Funding Grants

The funding provided by the Commonwealth and State Governments fell into the following categories:

- BCRRF - Bushfire Community Recovery and Resilience Fund
- BIRO – Bushfire Industry Recovery Package
- BLER – Bushfire Local Economic Recovery

A comprehensive breakdown of grants and funding was provided by council to the Review. This was cross referenced with the data provided by Resilience NSW to that of WSC. In collaborative Projects funded where Wingecarribee Shire Council received a benefit the amount totalling \$8,618,683.00⁹⁹

Fire Affected Residents List

One issued raised internally was that Council did not have a succinct list of fire affected residents moving forward. Council had a list of the fire affected residents; however, it had not been updated as to where they had relocated to whilst their property was rebuilt or repaired.

The example provided was that for the Environmental Protection Agency – Bushfire Recovery Program – Green waste clean-up and processing in January 2021. The purpose of the grant is to clean up bush fire generated green waste which fell outside the Laing O’Rourke clean up contract on public and private lands. A total of 824 residents were considered as ‘fire affected’ so letters were sent to them, 232 responded and were assessed through Stream A funding by two arborists. In total 174 sites were considered eligible under the program with 134 located on private property. Council applied for Stream B funding on the 30/6/21 for \$4.6 million.

⁹⁶ Extraordinary Environment and Sustainability Advisory Committee 18/3/20

⁹⁷ Extraordinary Environment and Sustainability Advisory Committee 18/3/20

⁹⁸ Letter WSC GM to Trustees Veolia Mulwaree Trust 6/2/20

⁹⁹ Resilience NSW LGA Collaborative Projects Summary.

The completion of an up-to-date resident's fire affected list was an issue across the whole state. WSC undertook its best endeavour to maintain the fire affected list, but the task was beyond them, as it was for many other councils. It is important that WSC works with Resilience NSW, Service NSW and the Red Cross to establish a best practice for obtaining and maintaining a fire affected residents list.

Recommendation 40

That Wingecarribee Shire Council in the development of their Local Recovery Plan, ensures that a comprehensive list of all fire affected residents is collated, including contact details for where they have moved to whilst building occurs at their properties. It is important that WSC works with Resilience NSW, Service NSW and the Red Cross to establish a best practice for obtaining and maintaining a fire affected residents list.

Council Bushfire Report – Commonwealth Recovery Program Funding

Wingecarribee Shire Council provided a spreadsheet for Commonwealth Funding (\$1,225,000) with a list of fifteen (15) projects that had been allocated this funding. As of July 2021, the amount of \$644,374 remained unspent by council. This included the \$100,000 funding allocated to Balmoral Park¹⁰⁰.

Commonwealth Grants Disaster Recovery Program¹⁰¹

Cost Centre	Project	Original Budget	Proposed Budget	2019/20	2020/21	Total	Remaining Budget
20883	GREEN WATTLE CREEK FIRE - NON-CLAIMABLE COSTS	8,000	8,000	8,000	-	8,000	-
20898	MORTON FIRE JAN 2020 - NON-CLAIMABLE COSTS	42,000	42,000	42,000	-	42,000	-
20030	WASTE DISPOSAL BARGO WASTE MANAGEMENT CENTRE	50,000	60,000	60,000	-	60,000	0
20031	TOURISM RECOVERY PROGRAM	75,000	75,000	75,000	-	75,000	0
20032	TREE REMOVAL VARIOUS BUSHFIRE AFFECTED AREAS	400,000	118,000	-	21,632	21,632	96,369**
20033	GLOW WORM GLEN	25,000	25,000	-	-	-	25,000
20034	MOUNTAIN BIKE TRACKS WINGELLO & BUNDANOON	25,000	25,000	-	-	-	25,000
20035	ROADSIDE ENTRANCE INTO BUNDANOON	25,000	25,000	-	-	-	25,000*
20036	CONTRIBUTION TO HONOUR FALLEN RFS FIREFIGHTERS	15,000	15,000	-	15,445	15,445	445
20037	RATE RELIEF FOR DESTROYED HOMES	300,000	300,000	254,301	22,931	277,232	22,768
20038	FLORA AND FAUNA	100,000	100,000	10,513	41,513	52,026	47,974
20039	CONTINGENCY	10,000	-	-	-	-	-
40020	BALMORAL PARK BALMORAL	100,000	100,000	-	-	-	100,000
40021	CASBURN PARK WINGELLO	50,000	50,000	-	28,540	28,540	21,460

¹⁰⁰ Bushfire Resilience and Economic recovery WSC Council July 2021 spreadsheet

¹⁰¹ WSC Spreadsheet

41386	3 RFS STATION WATER STORAGE TANKS	-	282,000	-	751	751	281,249
	TOTAL	1,225,000	1,225,000	449,813	130,813	580,626	644,374

*This expense has been funded from DRRFA and can be reallocated

**\$220,000 was spent on tree removal and allocated to 20032. This \$220K was subsequently claimed through bushfire recovery grants and has been removed from the Disaster Recovery Program

Council Bushfire Report – Resilience NSW

Wingecarribee Shire Council provided a spreadsheet for Resilience and Economic Recovery funding from Resilience NSW (NSW Government). This showed an amount of \$250,00 allocated across five (5) projects with unspent funding of \$19,062. In the spreadsheet is a line item of Equine & Agri Business Sustainability Project (\$100,000) which the Review understands is being removed from the bushfire grants program, effectively leaving \$119,062 in unspent funding by council¹⁰². The allocation of these monies to the Equine Business Sustainability Project has already been reviewed by the Interim Administrator for WSC.

Cost Centre	Project	Budget	2019/20	2020/21	Total	Remaining Budget
20474	BF RECOVERY COMM ENGAGEMENT & COMM DEVELOP	55,000	-	46,372	46,372	8,628
22202	EQUINE & AGRI BUSINESS SUSTAINABILITY PROJECT	100,000	-	100,000	100,000	-
22211	SH BUSHFIRE RECOVERY SHARE THE LOVE PROGRAM	61,656	51,360	6,800	58,160	3,496
22212	BUSINESS EVENTS FAMILIARISATION	20,000	-	13,062	13,062	6,938
20031	TOURISM RECOVERY PROGRAM	13,344	13,344	-	13,344	-
	Total	250,000	64,704	166,234	230,938	19,062

Grants Officer

The Review found that there is no comprehensive list of Commonwealth and State Government grants offered or provided during this period that can be used as a reference point. Council was not proactive in applying for funding, nor was there any coordination for funding applications across the whole of council. There were some pockets of very good work by employees applying for funding, however council also missed a number of opportunities for additional funding grants. Council was also waiting for funding extensions rather than being proactive and assisting the community¹⁰³.

¹⁰² Bushfire Resilience and Economic Recovery WSC Council July 2021 spreadsheet

¹⁰³ Interview 1/7/21

The funding for the engagement of a Community Recovery Officer was obtained under the Disaster Recovery Funding Arrangements (DFRA). This was a very positive step as the community had a reference point within council to assist them moving forward. In the timeframe given, it was not possible for the Review to analyse all grants and funding allocations. A dip sample was done in respect to the Commonwealth funding \$1.225m and State funding of \$250,000 (as per above). Annexure 4 contains a dip sample of the Bushfire Community Resilience and Economic Recovery Fund (Phase 1) for \$30,000 (completed) and \$85,000 obtained under the Bushfire Community Recovery and Resilience Fund (to be delivered to the community by December 2021).

The role of the Community Recovery Officer also changed from its original intent, with the CRO being caught up in the application for grants process which took them away from their community recovery role. This happened across many councils.

An example of how grants can be applied for, best practice, is Richmond Valley Council who produced a grants application booklet entitled “Rebuilding the Richmond Valley - Community Revitalisation Plan from the 2019 Bushfires”.¹⁰⁴

The intent of the document was ‘to analyse the impact of the bushfire disaster, understand which recovery actions have been initiated and identify the ways in which a well-planned and coordinated approach can be used to help impacted communities recover, rebuild, grow and thrive’.

Immediately after the bushfires a significant number of offers were made from various sources to assist with clean-up to donation of goods, gift cards and cash. Without a central coordination point, keeping track of the offers and donations was difficult. Individual benefactors were extremely generous and did not wish to be identified or caught up in council politics. They just wanted to give back to the community. At the time WSC was not able to work with these benefactors as they had no framework in place.

The engagement of a grants officer within WSC would have greatly assisted the entire process of grants identification and applications on behalf of council/community. They could have coordinated WSC’s response to State and Commonwealth funding/grants ensuring that all resources were used to obtain the maximum benefit to the community.

Recommendation 41

That Wingecarribee Shire Council appoints a grants officer following major natural disasters to ensure that grants funding is applied for and coordinated across the whole of council.
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¹⁰⁴<https://richmondvalley.nsw.gov.au/wp-content/uploads/2020/02/Rebuilding-Richmond-Valley-Revitalisation-Plan-s.pdf>

Grant's Breakdown

The Review identified that funding had been applied for under the following schemes. The individual projects were provided to the Review, however as some are still going through the approval phase, individual projects were not identified in the report.

- BCRRF Phase 1
- BCRRF Phase 2 stream 1 (4 projects)
- BCRRF Phase 2 stream 2
- BLER – Fast tracked priority projects
- BLER Sector Development grants (4)
- BLER Fund, stage 2 (3)
- Commonwealth \$1m (as previously listed)
- Commonwealth Austrade (4)

Regional/State projects

- BCCRF Stream 2 phase 2 (7)
- BLER Fund stage 2 (3)
- BLER Sector Development Grants (2)

A summary of the programs and activities Council has undertaken since the devastating bushfires can be found in their most recent Annual Report: <https://www.wsc.nsw.gov.au/Council/Council-Reports>.

The natural disaster declaration on 1 January 2020 meant that council was able to access DRFA (Commonwealth) disaster funding for repairing/reconstructing transport assets. This declaration meant that council was reasonably assured that emergency works, and immediate reconstruction works could be commenced, and the costs could be later claimed under DRFA. There are still @\$1million Essential Public Asset Restoration Works (EPARW) that have only recently been approved and can now be undertaken with a completion date of June 2022¹⁰⁵. The Review had to source this information separately because there is no central register of grants held by council.

Grants not applied for

The Review found it extremely difficult to locate a comprehensive list of grants provided by State and Commonwealth. The following is a sample of what we were able to find in grants that were not applied for by Wingecarribee Shire Council

FenceCycle Bushfire Program

The program offered up to \$10 million in grants to assist councils with the collection and recycling of the metal components of burnt fencing from bushfire affected rural landholder. Grants ranged between \$20,000 to \$500,000¹⁰⁶. This included costs for collecting and storing. Applications closed on the 15 March 2021. On the 2/3/21 an

¹⁰⁵ Email WSC to Review 12/7/21

¹⁰⁶ EPA Facts Sheet

email was forwarded by a community member raising this issue with Council and requesting that on behalf of residents, council apply for the grant¹⁰⁷. Another resident forwarded a draft amendment to the Green Waste letter for all residents that could have been used for the FenceCycle Program.

Council responded¹⁰⁸ to the community request to apply for the grant with the following:

Unlike the burnt green waste program, the Fence Cycle bushfire program does not have an initial assessment phase, which would permit Council to collect data on which it could reliably use to submit a grant application.

The basis of the application would require some understanding of the amount of material on the ground, unfortunately this is not information we have.

After speaking to other Council staff who attended Community Recovery Sessions, the removal of burnt fencing was also not an issue that was raised consistently at these meetings.

Those issues aside, you may not be aware that Council's Community Recycle Centre (Located at the RRC) accepts scrap metal and steel free of charge. We have received a number of positive comments from residents who have been impacted by the bushfires who have used this free service to dispose of burnt fencing material.

Based on the above factors, and the existing free of charge service already available through the RRC, Council has not lodged an application for funding under the Fence cycle program.

Therefore, council did not apply for this grant and is seen by the community as an opportunity lost and a cost to them. Council had not factored in the fact that many community members could not transport their own waste as they had lost their vehicles and trailers in the bush fires. The task of loading and unloading the material was also overlooked by council in that the task may have been physically demanding and beyond the capabilities of some of the elderly residents. The grant included the cost of a contractor to collect, store and dispose of fencing.

Fundraising – FireAid Concert

FireAid 2020 was held on 24 January 2020 at the Bong Bong Picnic Racecourse, Bowral. The concert was hosted by Julia Zemiro and appearing alongside John Waters was Darryl Braithwaite, John Paul Young, Megan Washington, Jack Jones, Margaret Ulrich, Leo Sayer, Stewart D'Arrietta with the songs of Leonard Cohen and more. Justine Clarke also joined in to entertain the kids.

The Southern Highlands Foundation was chosen by John Waters and Leo Sayer to manage the distribution of funds raised at FireAid. Council had a representative work with the Foundation to ensure that funds were distributed to legitimate bush fire affected residents.

¹⁰⁷ Email community member to council 2/3/21 re FenceCycle Program

¹⁰⁸ Email 10/3/21 WSC council to community member

Future Funding opportunities

NSW Government (EPA) Bushfire Generated Greenwaste Grant. This involved an initial data collection initiative (\$10,000) and a clean-up and processing project of \$3 million (Stream B) applied for by WSC.

The Stream B program directly supports local communities and seeks to:

- Reduce stockpiled green waste that has been left on private or public land as a result of bushfire-related firefighting authorities or emergency services activity
- Remove fire-damaged trees on public or private land that pose a significant risk to public safety.
- Manage the clean-up of outstanding green waste generated by the 2019/20 bushfires
- Provide opportunities to beneficially reuse processed green waste products in bushfire-affected regions
- Provide regional employment opportunities in bushfire-affected communities.

The '*Black Summer Bushfire Recovery Grants Program*'¹⁰⁹ worth \$280 million and comes from the National Bushfire Recovery Fund. Projects must support communities:

- Social recovery and resilience needs
- Economic recovery and resilience needs
- Recovery and resilience needs of the built environment

The next round of applications opens on the 22 July and closes on the 2 September 2021. Wingecarribee Shire Council should view this as an opportunity to obtain funding for an education piece to be developed for the Shire in understanding Prevention, Preparedness, Response and Recovery (through resilience) in the community. This is an opportunity to provide disaster mentoring and ensuring that learnings from community members are captured.

Recommendation 42
That Wingecarribee Shire Council is proactive and supports applications for the <i>Black Summer Bushfire Recovery Grants Program</i>

¹⁰⁹ <https://recovery.gov.au/recovery-support/2019-20-bushfires>

Effectiveness of Council's Mayoral Relief Fund

On Monday 21 June 2021 the Chief Financial Officer and Financial Accountant for the WSC were interviewed in respect to the establishment of the Mayoral Relief Fund and allocation of funding.

Prior to the 2019/20 bushfires, a Mayoral Fund existed, however it was in the form of a Trust Fund and did not have the status of Deductible Gift Recipient (DGR) with the Australian Taxation Office. This was essentially an emergency relief fund that had operated for a number of years¹¹⁰.

On the afternoon of the 19 December 2019, the Green Wattle Creek fires impacted upon the WSC. On the 23 December 2019, the Mayor, Councillor GAIR announced 'the establishment' of a Mayoral Relief Fund, even though approval as a Deductible Gift Recipient through the Australian Taxation Office had not been approved. The mayor, through his announcement, prior to the establishment of the fund, placed council in a position that had the potential to cause significant issues for both council and the community.

WSC Finance established a separate bank account into which donations could be made. Inquiries commenced to ensure that donations made to the Mayoral Relief Fund were tax deductible, this required endorsement by the ATO as a Deductible Gift Recipient (DGR). WSC reviewed all available information, including Mayoral Funds already established by neighbouring councils and established that the most appropriate endorsement under the establishment of the fund was '*a public fund for persons in necessitous circumstances*'.

WSC finance staff worked to ensure that donations made were in line with ATO guidelines and were *potentially* tax deductible. On the 9 January 2020 a letter was forwarded to the ATO requesting the status of DGR, along with Governing Principles for the Fund, with a number of clarifications sought from the ATO until final approval was granted on the 7 February 2020. This was backdated to the 23 December 2019, alleviating any potential embarrassment for council and the mayor. The ATO ensured that the application was fast tracked. The fund was established on the basis that it will exist in perpetuity, ensuring that the fund is available for immediate use in future natural disaster events.

The mayor established the Mayoral Relief Fund with a donation from Council of \$50,000. The WSC established Mayoral Relief Fund Rules¹¹¹, that covered all of the requirements of the establishment and operations of the fund, including an oversight committee to ensure compliance.

¹¹⁰ Mayoral Relief Fund Annual Report June 2020

¹¹¹ WSC Mayoral Relief Fund Rules

The Mayoral Relief Fund provided assistance with two distinct rounds being offered¹¹².

The first round of assistance:

- Financial assistance to individuals (\$250) and families (\$500) in bushfire affected areas
- Balmoral and Buxton residents were eligible upon proof of residence
- All other residents in bushfire affected areas (e.g., Wingello, Exeter, Bundanoon, Wombeyan Caves) needed to demonstrate loss or damage to property or outbuildings (Primary place of residence).

The second round of assistance:

- Financial assistance \$1,000 to property owners where primary place of residence was destroyed.

The initial release of funding was in the form of gift cards (\$250/\$500) in bushfire affected areas to ensure monies remained within the community. Once established WSC moved into Electronic Fund Transfers (EFT) to reduce any stigma associated with applications for assistance. The Fund was advertised through media (Press releases), the WSC website, information at Recovery Centres and on local radio. In their annual report 2019/20 WSC states “*the distribution of cash cards to bushfire affected residents in Balmoral on 24 and 27 December 2019*”. There is no evidence that cash cards were distributed to fire affected residents in Wingello.



Balmoral Village Hall with WSC staff providing immediate financial support from Mayoral Relief Fund

A Financial Assistance Application Form was developed online for the Mayoral Relief Fund along with the availability of a separate financial hardship application. The applications were also cross checked with Service NSW Rate Notice Relief to ensure those applying were entitled to assistance. This is viewed as good practice by WSC.

¹¹² Mayoral Relief Fund Annual Report June 2020

WSC Financial attempted to ensure that all funds donated into the Mayoral Relief Fund had no charges associated with them and that every dollar went into the fund. On the 18 February 2020 a donation was made in the amount of \$500 over the front counter and it was brought to their notice that this attracted a \$5 merchant fee in the transaction. This was immediately brought to the notice of the Chief Financial Officer who advised all Customer Service staff that no Merchant Fee was to be attached to donations into the Mayoral Relief Fund, a cheque refund was to be made to the customer along with a letter offering an apology that the fee had been charged¹¹³. The Review formed the view that this was a simple oversight on behalf of Council as they had not dealt with a DGR Mayoral Relief Fund previously.

Mayoral Relief Fund¹¹⁴	Funds	Funds update 30 June 2020
Council contribution	\$50,000	
Community Donations	\$103,767	
Interest Earned	\$16	
Total Funds available		\$153,783
Financial Assistance – Round 1		
Pre-loaded Cards		
Families	\$10,000	
Individuals	\$250	
Bank Transfers		
Families	\$80,500	
Individuals	\$4,750	
Financial Assistance – Round 2		
Households	\$28,000	
Total Financial Assistance Provided		\$123,500
Funds Remaining		\$30,283

Whilst it is acknowledged that COVID 19 did impact the distribution of funds, in total over 200 hundred families and individuals within the WSC were provided with financial assistance from the Mayoral Relief Fund. There is no requirement for the Mayoral Relief Fund to be independently audited, however all documents associated with the establishment and operations of the Mayoral Relief Fund will be available to the Audit Office of NSW.

There were issues associated with mayoral messaging and councillors understanding of the Fund, donations under DGR, along with priorities and allocations of funding. To improve Councillors understanding of the Mayoral Relief Fund, it is recommended that a one-page document is prepared by the WSC Chief Financial Officer for incoming Councillors to ensure that they have a full understanding of the operations and obligations surrounding the Mayoral Relief Fund. This information sheet can also be made available during natural disasters.

Recommendation 43

That the Wingecarribee Shire Council Chief Financial Officer prepares an information sheet for incoming Councillors on the operations, obligations and functioning of the Mayoral Relief Fund.

¹¹³ Email correspondence Financial Accountant to CFO 18 February 2020.

¹¹⁴ Mayoral Relief Fund Annual Report June 2020

Council staff themselves identified two improvements to the current process;

- a) council considering the appointment of independent representatives to oversee the Mayoral Relief Fund (similar to Blue Mountains Council) and
- b) the establishment of permanent rules around immediate financial response to impacted residents, i.e., within 48 hours emergency payments of \$250 and \$500. The review supports these proposed improvements to the Mayoral Relief Fund.

Recommendation 44

That Wingecarribee Shire Council considers the following changes to the Mayoral Relief Fund:

- c) the appointment of independent representatives to oversee the Mayoral Relief Fund (similar to Blue Mountains Council)
- d) the establishment of permanent rules around immediate financial response to impacted residents, i.e., within 48 hours emergency payments of \$250 and \$500.

Annexure 1 – Documents Reviewed

The *State Emergency and Rescue Management Act (SERM) 1989*

The State Emergency Management Plan (EMPLAN)

NSW Recovery Plan 2016

National Principles of Disaster Recovery

<https://knowledge.aidr.org.au/resources/national-principles-disaster-recovery/>

Australian Disaster Resilienc Community Recovery Handbook

<https://knowledge.aidr.org.au/resources/handbook-2-community-recovery/>

Resilience NSW Recovery Tool Kit

Communities responding to Disasters Planning for spontaneous volunteer's handbook

National Guidelines for managing Donated Goods.

https://dcsi.sa.gov.au/_data/assets/pdf_file/0004/1894/national-guidelines-for-managing-donated-goods.pdf

Wingecarribee Shire Council – Internal Debrief Report ‘Council Response to Bushfires’ (April 2020)

State Emergency Operations Controller letter to Review 29/6/21 re appointment of LEMO/REMO

Wingecarribee Shire Council LEMC Local Emergency Management Plan - June 2016

Wingecarribee Shire Council LEMC Local Emergency Management Plan – Oct 2020

Operations Coordination Plan – Wollondilly/Wingecarribee Bush Fire Management Committee

District Ignition Prevention Plan – Draft template only – not completed

Wollondilly/Wingecarribee Bush Fire Management Committee – Bush Fire Risk Management Plan (2015)

Wingecarribee Shire Council LEMC – Consequence Management Guide ‘Evacuations’.

Wingecarribee Shire Council LEMC – Consequence Management Guide ‘Bushfire’.

South Eastern Emergency Management Region Operations Contact Directory.

Wingecarribee Shire Council website

<https://www.yoursaywingecarribee.com.au/bushfire-recovery>

Wingecarribee Shire Council – Local Recovery Action Plan (Social, Natural Resources, Built, Economic) January 2020

Wingecarribee Shire Council – Social Recovery Subcommittee Meeting Minutes

Wingecarribee Shire Council – Social Recovery Subcommittee Review of 2020 Terms of Reference (March 2021)

Wingecarribee Shire Council – Communications Recovery Sub Committee – Communications Strategy February 2020

Wingecarribee Shire Council – Communications Recovery Sub Committee – Communication needs analysis

Wingecarribee Shire Council – Grants and allocated funding list

Wingecarribee Shire Council – Emergency Workshop Action 17 August 2020

Wingecarribee Shire Council – Executive Emergency Recovery meeting minutes 10 January 2020

Wingecarribee Shire Council – Emergency Recovery Committee meeting minutes 13 January 2020

Wingecarribee Shire Council – Expenditure of \$1m Disaster Recovery Funding – Community meetings Southern Villages 20 January 2020 and Northern Villages 21 January 2020.

Email General Manager to Council requesting formal approval to establish a Recovery Committee 20 January 2020.

Wingecarribee Shire Council Local Recovery Plan PowerPoint presentation by John Burgess 15 January 2020.

Wingecarribee Shire Council Local Recovery Committee Meeting Minutes 4 February 2020

Wingecarribee Shire Council Local Recovery Subcommittee Meeting Minutes 6 February 2020

Email and Actions attachment, Director South East Region, Regional NSW to General Manager WSC 16 February 2020

Email Recovery Coordinator Resilience NSW to General Manager re-establishment of independent Recovery Coordinator 24 February 2020.

Wingecarribee Shire Council Executive Meeting minutes 25 February 2020 (Recovery Coordinator not required)

Report for Wollondilly Shire Council – Review of Community Recovery Hub Model
June 2020

Wingecarribee Shire Council Internal Debrief Report – Council Response to Bushfires
– April 2020

LEMC Minutes from meeting 23/1/20

Green Wattle Creek & Morton Fires After Action Review (LEMC)

Email 21/8/19 requesting alternate LEMO within Council

Written submission Mr George Nowra.

Community Recovery Needs Following a Disaster Event

PowerPoint for Councillor Information Session 8 January 2020.

Email General Manager to all WSC staff re leave entitlements and allowances 9/1/20

Email WSC Council re \$1m from Commonwealth Government

Local Government in Emergency Management

Email LEMO to Group Manager for permission to undertake actions in their role as
LEMO 30 November 2020.

Email 25/11/19 Deputy General Manager to General Manager re closure of playing
fields and reserves

Agenda for Extraordinary meeting of Council 29 January 2020

Bushfire Recovery Funding Register (Commonwealth/State)

Community Recovery Officer Program – Information Pack (July 2020)

Wildlife Care Education – Bushfires, Burns and their Management September 2020

Wingecarribee Shire Council Annual Report 2019/20

[Live Steam/Recorded meetings](#)

Wingecarribee Shire Council Extraordinary Council meeting 29 January 2020

Wingecarribee Shire Council Extraordinary Council meeting 6 February 2020

Wingecarribee Shire Council Extraordinary Council meeting 12 February 2020

Wingecarribee Shire Council - Council meeting 26 February 2020

Southern Villages Community Recovery Meeting 1 – 20 February 2020 – Wingello Community Hall

Villages Community Recovery Meeting 1 – 24 February 2020 – Balmoral Village Hall.

Media Releases

Wingecarribee Shire Council Tweets 19 December 2019

Mayoral Relief Fund set up to support locals – 23 December 2019

Financial Assistance for Bush Fire affected residents – 24 December 2019

Bushfire recovery update – 8 January 2020

Bush Fire Recovery Phone line – 13 January 2020

Councillors vote to allocate federal funding at extraordinary meeting – 31 January 2020

Extraordinary meeting called for Thursday 6 February – 3 February 2020.

Councillors vote to waive all bush fire rebuilding costs – 11 February 2020.

Council to host Bush Fire Community Recovery meeting – 13 February 2020.

Mayoral Relief Fund update – 26 February 2020

The Daily Telegraph – 27 January 2020 “Council’s fees for fire victims to rebuild”

Sky News, Paul Murray – 3- January 2020 “Council slugs bushfire victims fees”

7 News 30 January 2020 “NSW Bushfires: Residents are being charged thousands to rebuild their homes”

2GB – 31 January 2020 Ben Fordham – Devastated firefighter tears up at suggestion they failed to save town

ABC News – 31 January 2020 – Councils call for more autonomy to spend bushfire recovery funds”

ABC News – 5 February 2020 – Bushfire victims in NSW to get local council rates relief this quarter”

Daily Mail – 31 January 2020 – Bushfire victims are charged tens of thousands of dollars to rebuild their homes by a heartless council which is accused of cashing in on the disaster”

2GB – 31 January 2020 - Ray Hadley – “Sack us all: Councillor wants heads to roll over insensitive bushfire response”

Mayoral Fund:

Letter WSC to Australian Taxation Office – DGR endorsement for Mayoral Relief Fund 9 January 2020.

Letter ATO (Deputy Commissioner Taxation) to WSC requesting additional information re deductible gift recipient 23 January 2020

Email Correspondence ATO/WSC requesting additional information 24 January 2020

Email correspondence WSC/ATO in response to request for additional information 31 January 2020.

Email correspondence Chief Financial Officer to Committee Members clarification Balmoral/Buxton residents eligible, update on availability 5 February 2020

Email Chief Financial Officer to Executive re ATO fast tracking for DGR endorsement 7 February 2020.

Email Chief Financial Officer to Committee Members clarifying donation of gift cards to local schools 24 March 2020.

Email Deputy General Manager to Counsellors and Committee members to attend Finance Committee Meeting 19 February 2020.

Minutes of Finance Committee meeting 19 February 2020 Reference 102/8 Motion passed re-establishment of Mayoral Relief Finding (Public Appeals)

Mayoral Relief Fund Financial Assistance Application Form (Round 1)

Financial Hardship Application

WSC Mayoral Relief Fund – Fund Rules.

Email to WSC Executive re-establishing Mayoral Relief Funding Rules 8 January 2020

Mayoral Relief Fund Annual Report – Period ending 30 June 2020.

Mayoral Relief Fund media release 26 February 2020.

Email correspondence Chief Financial Officer to Mayor re transfer of monies into Mayoral Relief Fund 27 December 2019.

Email correspondence (sample-declined) in respect to applications for funding assistance

Email to all staff re financial assistance available (Bushfire Emergency Relief and Mayoral relief) 24 December 2019.

Letter in respect to Merchant fee applied to Mayoral Relief Fund Donation (refund \$5.00) 20 February 2020

Email from Chief Financial Officer to Committee Members regarding financial allocations under Mayoral Relief Fund 9 April 2020

Various email correspondence from Chief Financial Officer to committee members 17 February 2020, 19 February 2020, 27 February 2020, 24 March 2020, 9 April 2020.

Annexure 2 – Council Community Recovery Officer programs, highlights and achievements

July 2020

Recovery Morning tea (Balmoral) Outreach activity aimed at connecting with those residents that hadn't yet come forward for support. The event was led by the Red Cross in collaboration with the Recovery Support Service, DPI Regional Support Officer, Anglicare and Council. This was an opportunity to have a talk about the grants and services available to support recovery.

Online Community Recovery Meeting – (2 July) Online Community Meeting focused on dealing with rebuilding after bushfire and the DA process. This was in response to feedback from the Social Recovery Subcommittee that rebuild information was of particular interest for affected residents.

Online Community Recovery Meeting – (16 July) Online Community Meeting focused on Building Back Better. Guest speakers included the Rural Branch of the Architects Institute of NSW, Building Angels and Renew (sustainable living).

Online Community Recovery Meeting – (30 July) Online Community Meeting focused on Health and Wellbeing. This session is intended to explain the impact of trauma and provide details of support service available (including the RSS)

August 2020

Environmental - On 13 August Council delivered an online community meeting for bushfire affected residents called "lets grow together". This was the 5th in the series of online community meetings over June-August. The focus of this session was on land regeneration and addressed some of the issues being raised in community.

The Environment and Sustainability Team also provided information about programs they are launching as part of Environment Recovery called Habitat for Wildlife and Land for Wildlife. The programs provide native plant vouchers and planting guides for residents impacted by bushfire. The Land for Wildlife program (for Rural residents whose bushland was burned) also includes a free property visit and report from an expert ecologist.

September 2020

Community Recovery Small Grants Program Council rana Community Recovery Small Grants Program announced in August, Seven projects that support communities with the process of healing and recovery were approved for funding. Projects were required to demonstrate alignment with the Five Ways to Wellbeing Framework.

Target groups – Aboriginal families, members of RFS, primary school students, young people, children and families. The Social Recovery Small Grants program was proudly funded by the NSW Government (BCRERF grant that council was successful in obtaining)

October 2020

Council in partnership with Resilience NSW delivered two **Bushfire Recovery Community Workshops** in October. These workshops were focused on providing an opportunity for community members to engage in conversation about recovery and resilience and to provide input into action plans/ project proposals. (Response document already provided)

Children and Youth The Walk a Mile Project, designed by Youth Liaison Officer at Council, and supported by Reframe was delivered in two schools in bushfire impacted localities in October (Wingello & Exeter).

This was an art therapy style project where participants paint white canvas shoes to represent their experience of the past year and hopes for the year ahead.

November 2020

Wingecarribee completed the **Service NSW Outreach Survey** in early November. 109 surveys responses were received, approximately 65% resulted in referrals to the Recovery Support Service.

Photo Voice: Wingecarribee Shire Council's Bush Fire Social Recovery Committee and the Southern Highlands Foundation (FireAid) launched a Photo competition, Entitled '**Photo Voice: Renewal and Resilience**', the exhibition was open to both professional and amateur photographers who were directly involved or affected by the 2019/20 bush fires.

Selected images and text were exhibited at the Community Halls in Wingello (8 November) and Balmoral (15 November), and published in a book which will be available for purchase in 2021. Over 80 photos were submitted for the exhibits, which were attended by over 200 people in total. Feedback from those who submitted artwork reflected positively on the experience as an opportunity to look back over the images they captured at that time and to reflect. Many had not looked at their photographs since they were taken.

December 2020

Bushfire Community Recovery and Resilience Small Grants Program - Councils BCRRF Stream 1 Recovery and Resilience Small Grants program launched in mid-December. It is hoped that this will give community the opportunity to bid for funding to support events over the anniversary period and early in the new year. This small grants program has \$85,000 allocated from the BCRRF for community led projects and programs.

January 2021

Social - The first of Council's Recovery Program of Events (BCRRF Stream 1) was delivered in January. In partnership with TOTEM and supported by Highlands Youth Services, learn to skate lessons and BBQ were delivered at Bundanoon Skate Park. This free event was targeted to children ages 5 and up.

Environmental - Council continues to work with affected landholders through the Land For Wildlife and Habitat For Wildlife programs. Special resources have been put in place to reach potential landholders and fast track actions to assist their bushlands in the recovery process. To date 678Ha of bushland is being managed through 30 Land For Wildlife applications.

February 2021

Drive-In movie event - Council's Community Recovery Team delivered a free COVID-safe pop-up drive-in event for the Shire on 4-6 February (funded by Bushfire Community Resilience and Economic Recovery Fund 1). The event was intended to provide an opportunity for families to come together, to connect and enjoy some much-needed fun.

Directly impacted residents were given early bird access to tickets before the event was opened to all residents of the Shire, all of whom were impacted by Black Summer in some way with many residents feeling they lost the summer of 2019/20, a time normally spent celebrating with family and friends.

The event was planned and delivered with significant contribution from a group of local volunteers with the Moss Vale RFS also supporting the event on the night with traffic management. Shane Fitzsimmons, Commissioner of Resilience NSW, provided a video acknowledging the recovery journey of the community and thanking all those who have been working to support the recovery process.

The Social Recovery Team also produced 'show-bags' for attendees which included Australian native seed packets as a symbol of growth, regeneration and resilience, RFS Prepare a Fire Plan Kits, flyers and fact sheets for relevant services and events along with donated movie paraphernalia.

Feedback from the event was extremely positive with people reflecting on the experience as much needed after a tough year.

Writing for Wellbeing Workshop Council's Community Recovery team in conjunction with 'The Moon Lab' held a 'Writing for Wellbeing' Workshop on 9 February via Zoom. This workshop was an opportunity to explore the highs and lows of 2020 on the back of the 2019/20 bushfires through writing in a Covid Safe environment.

Six residents of the shire's impacted communities attended. These participants looked at poems of reflection, change, courage and bravery and created a positive approach to goal setting. Collectively the group wrote a poem titled 'A chance to be new', a deeply moving piece that says goodbye to past experiences and welcoming new future opportunities.

Feedback was positive with the workshop harbouring new friendships and a positive approach to 2021.

March 2021

The second round of Council's BCRRF Stream 1 Small Grant closed on 17 March. Grants of between \$2,000-\$10,000 have now been awarded to seven successful applicants from local not for profit community organisations and associations to deliver community-led recovery and resilience projects and events that focus on health and wellbeing.

Forest Bathing and Canoes and Canapes - Council delivered two therapeutic recovery activities, Forest Bathing and Canoes and Canapes, with small grant funding received from South West Sydney PHN. The two activities both focused on supporting directly impacted residents to reconnect with nature and importantly with each other. Council's Community Development Coordinator partnered with the Community Links Wellbeing Recovery Support Service to identify, invite and encourage those residents most in need to participate.

April 2021

Community Recovery Concert - Council hosted a free 'Community Recovery Concert' at Moss Vale Showgrounds on 10 April to bring community joy and reconnection for residents of the Wingecarribee. The concert featured a range of well-known and local artists including Michelle Cashman, X Factor finalists Jess & Matt, Mahalia Barnes and Justice Crew. Free transport was provided for bushfire impacted residents to attend the event. 3663 tickets were obtained by residents with over 1100 attending on the night.

There were local food vendors on site and free activities for Children including jumping castles, face painting and balloon twisting. The RFS were in attendance with fire trucks, holding conversations with interested residents about volunteering opportunities. A support tent was available with the RSS and Red Cross in attendance.

Feedback from both agencies was extremely positive. The Red Cross held conversations throughout the event with ticketholders about how they are feeling generally whether any common issues or challenges stood out in recovery and also conversations around preparedness. The feedback from families from the RSS were positive, Balmoral residents in particular, were able to use the night to connect with other community members for the first time and share their experience in the bushfires.

May 2021

'REGROW – Wingecarribee' The School Children Planting project - Council partnered with Convoy of Hope to bring 'REGROW – Wingecarribee' The School Children Planting project to the Wingecarribee Shire on 6-7 May. REGROW Wingecarribee is an initiative that provides the opportunity for school children to nurture native tube stock with the purpose of helping impacted residents to regenerate their gardens.

The students were provided an opportunity to contribute to their own community's recovery and were taught about local native species, habitats and ecosystems. Six primary schools in bushfire impacted areas participated in the program. Council partnered with Convoy of Hope, Bunning Mittagong and Bundanoon Garden Club to run these workshops in each school. Over 1000 native tube stock were potted, with each school keeping the pots onsite over winter to look after where we will then donate to our bushfire impacted communities as part of a future event.

Recovery & Regenerate Fun Day & BBQ - Council was involved with Community Link's Recovery Support Service for their 'Recovery & Regenerate Fun Day & BBQ' event held in Wingello on Sunday 30 May at Wingello Public School. This event was co-hosted by the Southern Highlands Foundation for residents of Wingello to attend and reconnect as a community and for the distribution of local nursery vouchers. There were 4 local native nurseries in attendance to assist community with advice to replanting and rejuvenation.

The purpose of Councils stall at this event was to donate the native plants from the 'REGROW – Wingecarribee' to any impacted residents who were ready to plant. The event promoted community connection and played a key role for the CRO to connect with bushfire impacted residents in an informal and fun setting. Free lunch, Jumping Castles, face painting and local music was available and the engagement invaluable.

Round 3 of Council's BCRRF Stream 1 Small Grants - Applications from 4 local not for profit community organisations and associations to deliver community-led recovery and resilience projects and events that focus on health and wellbeing were approved.

Council continues to work alongside successful applicants from previous rounds distributing funds and assisting with community engagement strategies.

Annexure 3 – Wingecarribee Shire Council document library





Newsletters

-  [Bushfire Recovery Newsletter - Issue 4 - 27 July 2020 \(535 KB\) \(pdf\)](#)
-  [Emailed updates](#)
-  [Bushfire Recovery Northern Villages - Issue 2.pdf \(591 KB\) \(pdf\)](#)
-  [Bushfire Recovery Southern Villages - Issue 2.pdf \(583 KB\) \(pdf\)](#)
-  [9th April 2020 - Bushfire Recovery Newsletter - Southern Villages \(416 KB\) \(pdf\)](#)
-  [25 March 2020 - Bushfire Recovery Newsletter - northern villages \(573 KB\) \(pdf\)](#)
-  [OEM Regional Recovery Newsletters - click to see latest edition](#)

Financial Assistance






-  [Australian Government Services in Response to the Bushfires - Part A: Support for Residents \(1.61 MB\) \(pdf\)](#)
-  [Australian Government Services in Response to the Bushfires - Part B: Support for Small Businesses \(1.31 MB\) \(pdf\)](#)
-  [Australian Government Services in Response to the Bushfires - Part C: Support for Indigenous Australians \(992 KB\) \(pdf\)](#)
-  [Community Recovery Hub - Balmoral \(210 KB\) \(pdf\)](#)
-  [Application for Temporary Accommodation & Storage \(312 KB\) \(pdf\)](#)
-  [Disaster Relief Factsheet \(156 KB\) \(pdf\)](#)
-  [National Disaster Grants Primary Producer Guidelines \(198 KB\) \(pdf\)](#)
-  [Bushfire Recovery Assistance Factsheet - Office of Emergency Management \(108 KB\) \(PDF\)](#)
-  [Summary of Financial Assistance in NSW and ACT \(606 KB\) \(PDF\)](#)
-  [Red Cross - Financial Assistance Factsheet \(577 KB\) \(PDF\)](#)
-  [Bushfire Community Recovery and Resilience Small Grants program Guidelines V2.pdf \(197 KB\) \(pdf\)](#)
-  [BCRR Small Grants Program Guidelines - Feb 2021 \(203 KB\) \(pdf\)](#)
-  [Red Cross - How We Are Using Funds Factsheet \(742 KB\) \(PDF\)](#)

Properties & Rebuilding





-  [Building after bushfire - Wingecarribee Shire Council \(563 KB\) \(pdf\)](#)
-  [Support for Site Clean-Up and Rebuild](#)
-  [Bushfire Property Clean-Up - Fact Sheet \(152 KB\) \(pdf\)](#)
-  [Bushfire Building Impact Assessments](#)

-  [Bushfire Recovery Clean-Up \(392 KB\) \(pdf\)](#)
-  [Returning Home Safely After a Bushfire Factsheet \(82 KB\) \(PDF\)](#)
-  [Building Hazard Indication Signs Factsheet \(1.23 MB\) \(PDF\)](#)
-  [Property Hazards Following a Bushfire Factsheet \(735 KB\) \(PDF\)](#)
-  [Fire Retardants Factsheet \(52 KB\) \(PDF\)](#)
-  [Fire Suppressant Retardants and Property Protection Factsheet \(310 KB\) \(PDF\)](#)
-  [Bushfire Impacts On Water Quality](#)
-  [Copper-Chrome-Arsenate \(CCA\) Burnt Timber and Ash](#)




Mental Health and Wellbeing

-  [Bushfire Mental Health Support and Resources - SWSPHN \(2.16 MB\) \(pdf\)](#)
-  [Let's Talk - Taking Care of Yourself Following a Natural Disaster Factsheet \(768 KB\) \(PDF\)](#)
-  [Bushfire Recovery Contact Information \(683 KB\) \(PDF\)](#)
-  [Community Recovery Information No 2 - NSW Office of Emergency Management \(145 KB\) \(PDF\)](#)
-  [Protect Yourself From Bushfire Smoke - Factsheet \(45.4 KB\) \(PDF\)](#)

Waste Management

-  [Waste Management Factsheet \(200 KB\) \(PDF\)](#)
-  [Gas Cylinders Factsheet \(172 KB\) \(PDF\)](#)
-  [Bushfire Recovery Solar Panels Factsheet \(113 KB\) \(PDF\)](#)
-  [EPA Greenwaste Cleanup - Letter to residents and consent to enter form - PDF fillable or print and return \(407 KB\) \(pdf\)](#)

Animal Welfare

-  [Helping Wildlife in Emergencies \(43.9 KB\) \(PDF\)](#)
-  [Assistance With Animal Welfare Issues Factsheet \(1020 KB\) \(PDF\)](#)
-  [Managing Livestock After a Bushfire Factsheet \(72.9 KB\) \(PDF\)](#)

Annexure 4 – Dip sample Bushfire Funding allocations

Bushfire Community Resilience & Economic Recovery Fund – Phase 1 (BCRERF) - \$30,000

Organisation	Project	Summary
Woodlands Volunteer Rural Fire Brigade	Social Recovery	Workshop to manage mental or health issues due to stress
ImaginArta – Australian Puppet Theatre	6 Feet and Up	8x 2hr workshops in puppet making, sculpture and writing exhibition
Wingello Public School	School Community Kitchen	Contribution towards a functional kitchen for cooking lessons
Community Links Wellbeing	Art from the Ashes	Visual arts project led by a young person for young people
FIAS Resilience	Resonate Regional Resilience	Digital project with creatives, producers and community builders on resilience

Bushfire Community Recovery and Resilience Fund (BCRRF) - \$85,000

Organisation	Project	Summary
The Men's Table Ltd	Wingecarribee Resilient Communities of Men	An opportunity to connect with other men in the community through open conversation and social connection
Bundanoon Garden Club	Garden of Memories Maintenance and event	Removal and replacement of significant trees in 'Garden Of Memories'. Event to bring community together and share their space.
Community Links Wellbeing	Gather and Connect	Facilitate community gatherings in bushfire impacted communities
Bundanoon Community Preschool	Bundanoon Preschool Community Space	Revitalise outdoor space and enhance options for the community room at the preschool
Southern Tablelands Arts	Reflection and Healing Through Song	Song writing workshop aimed at secondary school students, to be performed and professionally recorded on completion
Balmoral Village Association	Balmoral Basketball Buddies	Resurface damaged tennis court and add line markings, basketball and netball hoops – Basketball workshops
Marjorie Kay	I Know a Safe Place Sumer 2019/2020	Production of an illustrated book telling the story of bushfire from the perspective of animals, to be launched at Balmoral Village Hall

Gumnut Community Celebration	Gumnut Bowral Memorial Preschool	Brings together community members to celebrate the resilience of the people in the area who have recovered and growth through previous disasters
Bundanoon Public School P&C	Bundanoon Public School fostering a strong resilient community	An open event for Bundanoon and the wider community, create a place for community to learn, connect and recover.
Bundanoon Community Association Inc.	Improved Community Response to emergency	Publicly assessable AED – Training AED and manikin for exposure sessions on a regular basis for community at no cost.
River Road Interactive Learning Pty Ltd	Stories toward recovery	A series of wellbeing and creative sessions to process and unpack community experience post disaster

Annexure 5 – Community Survey Feedback

The following themes are taken from surveys submitted by community members who authorised the Review to reproduce those comments. There are many specific themes that were reproduced across each area. These are the views of the community, and it is important that they are heard by Council so that systems and processes can be reviewed/improved.

Key Theme	What the Review Heard
Council's immediate response	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Huge failure – where was the General Manager • Working Group by Council post fires, 2 short meetings and then disbanded • Council did not provide many updates • Invisible, inconsistent and ineffective • Amazing how council was completely blindsided by a bush fire • I did not know what council was offering or doing • It should be recognised that Council was not the lead agency. • There was no obvious coordination from WSC • Councils' immediate response was poor. Community meeting not held for weeks, and council turned up with no plan and extreme lack of empathy, on the reverse, Wollondilly sprang into action • Extremely poor including personal attacks on me and others who had lost their homes. There was nothing but public self-protection and lies. • The initial stages were effective, but as the crisis worsened, council did not have the resources to provide support. • Council had a poor understanding on the impact on the business community • Excellent work by rangers, especially those dealing with animals. • There was no public leadership or guidance by council, their immediate response was underwhelming • A better experience and result would have occurred with pre-emptive planning and allocation of resources • Early in the emergency the whole council seemed to be on holidays, and no one answered the phone • Poor support or communication to the community no leadership community left to fend for themselves • We received neither information nor help at the time before or after from the council or LEMC. • In the beginning between Jan-April 2020 we had never been contacted by anyone from council • As householders we received no contact from council whatsoever, the council had no plans for disaster relief. • Prior to the fires, contact was made with WSC for them to clear roadside of leaning/overhanging branches, the response was no. They could not spare the resources. • Saw no evidence of council action or response
Council's immediate support and information	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Didn't see any and wasn't aware of any • Not much of a response. Group plan put to council from local business operators, and it was ignored. • We had to pay for water used to fight the fires • Community meetings WSC was unprepared for the number of attendees. More community meetings were required. • Total lack of public notification to the ratepayers • We are ratepayers and were ignored. Nobody from council came down our street.

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The community meetings that I attended were embarrassing and shocking • The community meeting was a lesson in how not to hold a meeting • The mayor and GM were totally out of their depth, or simply exhausted beyond capacity. • Balmoral have had zero consultation until the council was suspended • Council made no attempt to brief staff or provide any support to its rate payers. I was disgusted • Charmaine reached out on social media having seen a post about our house. Mark P and Charmaine were both very good. • No communication from council during emergency
<p>Mayoral Relief Fund</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • It was not clear to residents what the mayoral fund did. • Relief fund was a joke, the mayor rushed into Balmoral and handed out funds, he never visited Wingello • Mayoral fund was immediately activated however was sabotaged by members of the community who had a vendetta against the mayor • Wingello suffered more loss than Penrose but as a village we received no assistance during/post fires • Months later I rang up to find out what the MRF was, we were not on their email lists • We received nothing from council in regard to the fire • The mayoral fund should have been used to relieve residents of costs associated with DA applications • I was and am tremendously grateful for the assistance granted to me via the MRF. Distribution of other assistance was not fair or equitable • We had significant damage from the bushfire but were told we did not qualify for MRF • We received \$500 from the MRF, thank you • When we found out about the MRF it said there was a cap of \$500 (which we applied for and received promptly)
<p>Short Term Recovery needs and set up of local recovery committees</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Pretty late & disorganised • Lacked direction, WSC had no visible presence • Council should have been far better organised • They seemed oblivious • There was no discernible management of short-term needs • There were initiatives that will serve well for future situations • The set-up of the committees was a long time coming and very poor. Was not aware committees were formed • I was not aware that there were any committees set up for this purpose • I was invited to be a committee member and sadly this committee only met twice and then did not meet again • The set up and management by senior management was not effective • To date this has been almost non-existent as a structured approach apart from Red Cross • The clean up by Laing and Rourke was excellent and helped a lot • Did not get any notice from council re recovery committee • The opening statement at the first recovery meeting I attended at Wollondilly from WSC rep was "I am here to learn" • The Recovery Hub located at Balmoral was set up by volunteers no council. • The community link people met with us and tried to link us to council but no one from council came back to help us

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Feel like we don't matter because our home didn't burn down. Everything else was torched and the whole summer was just awful, but we don't feel supported by council in the recovery. • I think council/staff worked hard to support our community • I approached WSC for help. I was told that recovery for large farms was the responsibility of LLS, WSCX was only concerned with village/residential damage • Having attended a number of WSC meetings with agenda items specific to this, my overwhelming response was one of frustration and despair
Recovery Plans and implementation of actions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Caught up in its own infighting • I don't think these plans were adequately reported • The inclusion of members of the community both residents and business on committees would be valuable • We still haven't seen any recovery plans only tactical plans • Council argued about waiving rebuild fees, other councils had waived the fees already • 18 months later and council still have not replaced the Balmoral Village sign. • WSC did not have an up-to-date crisis/emergency management plan • Unprofessional and incompetent stakeholder engagement by the WSC, it was a top-down approach that we know better from the WSC. • No debrief provided post fires and lessons learnt opportunities. • Did not see any recovery plans • Balmoral Village have been largely abandoned in terms of working with council • DA application, council staff have been tremendous, kind and generous, helping me through this time for which I am incredibly grateful • Mark P ensured our DA was prioritised and we are grateful • No communication on recovery plans and implementation • Our application form to rebuild a shed on top of existing concrete slab was rejected twice due to the confusing advice from council • I have not noted any WSC recovery plans that apply to farms
Recovery Funding Commonwealth and State	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The dysfunctional nature of council made it difficult to propose and implements plans of any kind • Most funds were spent on council – reimbursing them for development fees waived, studies for improvements they had planned already. They stopped part way through the clean-up claiming no funds • I did not know anything about this, but we now know it was mishandled • Grants were obtained that were relevant to the circumstances. • Absolutely disgraceful. I contacted council to advise funding was available, they had no idea. • Not aware of councils approach as no community dialogue • We have not seen any recovery funding via council • Shocking, appalling, what else can I say? • Lack of shovel ready projects, lack of framework for effective stakeholder engagement and input. • Council got funding and it was spent on the wrong things • Where is the money? • This money didn't get to where it was critically needed. • Appeared council spent most of the funds obtained on council projects, not helping the community

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Council needs a full-time officer looking after and applying for grants • Wasn't clear what happened to this money very concerned it wasn't used transparently • From my discussions with council, you definitely do NOT seek out funding rather wait for it to fall in your lap • ADF support, prompt and professional to clear burnt trees
Submission to Commissions of Inquiry	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Submission to Royal Commission was woefully underprepared • Council failed us by not submitting anything, then submitting a pathetic report. • It was staggering when the community discovered that WSC had not put a submission into Federal and State Govts. • The submission was not done properly, it was late and only 3 pages • Staggering that council did not put in a submission • It is a significant dereliction on the part of WSC that no submission was made to the NSW Bushfire Inquiry. No words of inspiration, no we will bounce back, no thank you to all those who gave so much and our heartbreak for those who have lost so much. Silence. • No one from WSC attended the NSW Bushfire Inquiry which was incredibly disappointing for us
No Plan in place	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • There was no plan for coordination of resources • Plans need to be reviewed and updated • Communication plans, evacuation and critical pathways should have been reviewed and implemented
Lack of empathy	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • There was not much empathy for the homeowners from what I observed from council • Communication from WSC was sadly lacking throughout the emergency and recovery period • A total lack of empathy for its residents who had lost their homes. • The elected mayor and many councillors lack of understanding and empathy towards those affected by the fires was a sad reflection of this Shire. • There was no attempt at emotional connection with the residents, no compassion, there was nothing from the heart. • I cried when told by staff at MV tip I could not get discount on waste as Covid was a bigger priority. • We found WSC slow and no empathy from the mayor or GM