Evaluation of the Bega Valley Shire Council’s Recovery Support Service for Tathra and District and Yankees Gap District

Report prepared by Risk Frontiers
For Bega Valley Shire Council
September 2019
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<th>Version</th>
<th>Release history</th>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Author</th>
<th>Reviewer</th>
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<td>V 1.0</td>
<td>Final report</td>
<td>9/9/2019</td>
<td>S. George</td>
<td>A. Gissing</td>
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Executive Summary

The Tathra and District bushfire occurred in March 2018, impacting the township of Tathra and surrounding areas within the Bega Valley Shire Council Local Government Area (BVSC LGA). In a short period of time, the fire burnt more than 1,250 hectares of bush and urban area, destroying 69 homes, 35 caravans and cabins and damaging a further 50 residences. The fire-impacted area is predominantly residential with a range of retail, hospitality and tourism businesses. Fortunately, there were no deaths however, the scale of the disaster and the magnitude of damage caused had a significant impact on the Tathra and local communities in terms of trauma and financial loss.

In response to the impact on local residents, property owners and the wider community, the Tathra and District Recovery Support Service (TDRSS) was implemented. The TDRSS was designed to be a temporary service that would ensure individuals and communities significantly impacted could access the recovery support they required. The service ensured that TDRSS ‘clients’ (fire-impacted people) had access to a (predominantly) single person of contact or Recovery Support Worker (Case Worker). Case Workers would assess the individual needs of the client and connect them to the appropriate services to best aid their recovery. This practical and personal approach to recovery was designed to enable fire-impacted clients of the TDRSS to manage their own recovery needs and access the services they required. Furthermore, the service was intended to foster individual and community resilience to better prepare clients for future disasters.

The TDRSS was further challenged when, in August 2018, another bushfire occurred within the Bega Valley Shire LGA, northwest of Bega. The fire, known now as the Yankees Gap fire, burnt for 44 days and accounted for the loss of an additional four houses, damage to fencing and infrastructure on numerous rural holdings and significant additional trauma to communities. Immediately after the Yankees Gap fire, it was determined that, in addition to assisting clients from the Tathra and District fire, the
TDRSS program would be extended, without additional resources, to address the needs of communities impacted by the Yankees Gap fire: Bemboka, Numbugga and Brogo.

Funding for the Tathra and District Recovery Support Service was provided by the Department of Justice, Office of Emergency Management (OEM) upon application from the BVSC for financial support to implement the service.

To evaluate the effectiveness of the TDRSS, the Bega Valley Shire Council (BVSC) engaged Risk Frontiers to undertake an independent evaluation with a focus on the following outcomes:

- People impacted by the Tathra and District and Yankees Gap and District fires have had contact with a Case Worker
- People value the Recovery Support Service and BVSC’s commitment to recovery
- People impacted by the Tathra and District and Yankees Gap and District fires were referred to other support services and have accessed those services
- The service model met the needs of impacted people
- Fire-impacted people have an improved capacity and confidence to access relevant services following TDRSS intervention
- People are moving forward with their recovery activities
- People in the communities are connecting, communicating effectively and supporting each other
- People are starting to think about preparing for future natural disasters and other adverse events.

The evaluation methodology consisted of a desktop review of data collected by the TDRSS and BVSC and 42 interviews with clients, stakeholders (supporting service organisations) and program managers.
**Evaluation Results**

**The program was a success**

The TDRSS has been a success and is acknowledged by the vast majority of clients and stakeholders as being instrumental in progressing the recovery of those impacted by the Tathra and District fires. Although challenges in assisting Yankees Gap clients existed, clients reported a high degree of satisfaction at the commitment and effort the TDRSS demonstrated.

Clients of both fires provided extensive positive feedback, presenting a picture of a service that was highly valued and necessary for communities experiencing significant trauma and financial impacts. The service quickly established itself and won the trust of the communities through the wide range of tasks they undertook for clients and in the personal relationships they developed. Clients and stakeholders interviewed, strongly recommended a similar service model for similar disasters in the future.

Generally, the service operated in line with better practice disaster recovery principles.

**People value the Bega Valley Shire Council’s response to the fires**

The implementation of the TDRSS has greatly enhanced local community confidence in the ability of local government to respond to a major disaster. Clients, stakeholders and case workers all agreed the commitment to recovery shown by the BVSC was exceptional and an appropriate response to the fires.

**The service had many strengths**

The key strengths of the TDRSS were:

1. That case workers possessed the right range of skills and personal attributes to support fire impacted people
2. That the TDRSS utilised an effective and efficient information sharing mechanism which provided clients with relevant and valued recovery information. Of
specific note were community meetings facilitated by the TDRSS. Case workers had a sound understanding of services available

3. The strong and effective advocacy of case workers in assisting clients to access needed local and state government services

4. That case workers regularly displayed high levels of commitment including analysing complex matters, time consuming preparations for tribunal hearings and intercity travel

5. That case workers were available and accessible

6. That cases workers supported local community connections and cohesion

7. That clients of the service developed greater resilience and self-sufficiency as a result of the nature and type of assistance provided by the TDRSS.

Client contacts were established and managed effectively and with commitment

Aspects of this include:

1. The identification and contacting of Tatham and District fire-impacted people was enhanced considerably by the registration system operated at the Bega Recovery Centre prior to the TDRSS commencing

2. The highly valued ‘drop in’ without appointment nature of TDRSS support. Clients appreciated the flexibility this offered. This was enhanced by the long hours and six-day-a-week operation of the TDRSS office

3. The ‘single person’ of contact aspect of the service, where a client’s needs were predominantly managed by one case worker. This was identified as creating and fostering an individualised service which was highly valued

4. The centralised location of the TDRSS office. Its location was the most regularly highlighted positive aspect of the service, in terms of providing clients the flexibility and control to manage their own interactions and seek assistance in a discrete location when they felt compelled or able

5. A flexible approach to the frequency and nature of client contacts, driven by the clients, which included home visits, face to face at the TDRSS office, informal
café meetings, phone calls, community meetings and emails. This was highlighted as enhancing the control clients had over their own recovery.

6. A commitment to maintain contact with Tathra residents forced to move away in recognition of the importance of inclusion for the client’s recovery.

**Resourcing was flexible and mostly adequate**

Case workers agreed that the resourcing allocated was adequate for the initial Tathra fire recovery. However, when the additional workload of assisting the Yankees Gap communities was given, the service was forced to adopt a more flexible approach in operational hours and priorities to assist additional clients, resulting in additional pressure on the TDRSS staff. The distance between the TDRSS office and impacted communities limited the ability of the service to, initially, determine the number of fire-impacted people at Yankees Gap.

Although the TDRSS’s flexible approach to managing the dual responses of the Tathra and Yankees Gap fires was a success, greater flexibility in staffing numbers, working hours and the ability to operate remotely would enhance future responses.

**Recovery has progressed at significantly different rates for fire impacted people**

The recoveries of communities impacted by the Tathra and District and Yankees Gap fires has proceeded at vastly different rates. Factors which have influenced these disparities include access to and eligibility for funding assistance, Council response times and communications which were influenced by community locations and the distances and connectedness of communities.

**There are some barriers to recovery in Tathra**

Whilst many fire-impacted clients of the TDRSS are no longer making use of the service, some clients are still struggling to recover due to several factors. These include:

1. Ongoing mental health issues brought on by the trauma of the fire and the lack
of appropriate counselling services

2. The impacts that Bushfire Attack Level (BAL) ratings had on the costs of re-building including redesign of properties and the delay in processing Development Applications (DA) due to the volume.

3. Not seeking assistance from the TDRSS or other services earlier in the recovery when they either needed it or when services were more available to them.

There are some barriers to recovery in Yankees Gap

A number of barriers challenged the work of the TDRSS to take on the additional role of supporting clients of the Yankees Gap fire. These were:

1. Limitations on eligibility for financial assistance, relative to the Tathra fire clients. Categorisation of the Tathra fire as a disaster (a matter of days following the fire) had ensured disaster funding support from the State Government which was not available to the Yankees Gap clients. Furthermore, for the Tathra and District fire, BVSC had established the Mayoral Fund, which was not legally available to those impacted by the Yankees Gap fire

2. The perception of Yankees Gap clients that there was a difference in response to that of the Tathra clients and the belief that they were forgotten, in the shadow of the perceived ‘Tathra-centric’ Tathra and District fire recovery

3. Many impacted by the Yankees Gap fire were from more remote rural landholdings and not situated in urban communities, differing from clients in the Tathra fire recovery, which impacted their connectedness to a more organised and connected community

4. A slow response by the BVSC to register victims to enable follow-up

5. The distance from TDRSS office in Tathra to Yankees Gap communities. Outside of community meetings and organised gatherings, Yankees Gap clients would be required to either call the TDRSS or travel to Tathra to meet with Case Workers.
There is evidence to support the need for the TDRSS to continue

A number of factors support the need for the TDRSS to continue operation in some reduced form. These are:

1. A number of clients are still accessing the TDRSS to some extent or are making use of referral services. Moreover, as the TDRSS prepares to cease operations, the service has seen an increase in new inquiries for assistance

2. A number of clients appear to have become overly reliant on the TDRSS as a support service, feeling ill-equipped or lacking the confidence to access relevant services without TDRSS assistance. This is despite the perception of an adequate range of services available in the community to assist them in their ongoing recovery

3. The overall community re-building progress has been slow, with only five houses re-built out of 69 destroyed. The perceived lack of progress is impacting individual and community recovery. Furthermore, there is a considerable amount of advocacy anticipated as more clients continue their re-building plans

4. Case workers reported they were spending more time with individual clients

5. The fact that, whilst the TDRSS has been in operation for approximately 14 months assisting Tathra impacted people, Yankees Gap clients have had less time to receive recovery support

6. Limited options for transitioning clients for ongoing support.
## Recommendations

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<th>Number</th>
<th>Recommendation</th>
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<td>1</td>
<td>That the Recovery Support Service model be utilised for future similar disaster events to improve access to recovery services and resilience and, where appropriate, be imbedded within local government to facilitate information sharing.</td>
<td>The TDRSS as implemented by BVSC has been a success.</td>
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<td>2</td>
<td>That a review be undertaken to identify methods to streamline BAL rating and rebuilding processes for future fires. This should include lessons from recent Australian fire events.</td>
<td>There is a lack of progress in rebuilding which is negatively impacting community recovery.</td>
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<td>3</td>
<td>That, in addition to available counselling services, additional specialist mental health support be procured for future events.</td>
<td>The lack of adequate available counselling services was identified as a gap.</td>
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<td>4</td>
<td>That Recovery Support Service providers in future events locate a recovery support office in the impacted community from the recovery outset.</td>
<td>The location of the TDRSS office in Tathra was highlighted as a major factor in local recovery.</td>
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<td>5</td>
<td>That Recovery Support Service providers in the future recruitment of Case Workers</td>
<td>The skills, experience and personalities of the TDRSS workers was identified as a major strength of the program. There is a significant risk that the success of the program relies largely on those undertaking the support worker role.</td>
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<td>consider people:</td>
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<td>• with diverse knowledge of community and support services</td>
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<td>• possessing a diverse range of community-based skills</td>
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<td>• possessing personal attributes including empathy, understanding and listening and the ability to build trust</td>
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<td>• with experience in fire / disaster recovery</td>
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<td>6</td>
<td>That future Recovery Support Service arrangements should be highly flexible in</td>
<td>Long working hours pressured Case Workers and limited TDRSS presence in Yankees Gap communities, limiting the effectiveness of TDRSS in contacting fire impacted people.</td>
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<td>• mobility to work remotely</td>
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<td>7</td>
<td>That BVSC continue to work with the RFS to promote bushfire preparedness, in</td>
<td>BVSC and RFS ‘Hot Spot’ program was identified as valuable in future fire preparedness.</td>
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<td>particular regarding messages to residents to check their insurance coverage on a</td>
<td>Gaps in community bushfire preparedness were identified, in particular regarding insurances.</td>
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<td>8</td>
<td>That future Recovery Support Service arrangements allow for further extensions to the service beyond 12 months should it be required.</td>
<td>The TDRSS is receiving new inquiries, client recovery progress is variable, there is slow progress in re-building and there are significant numbers of clients still accessing TDRSS and other services. Ultimately, it should be acknowledged that every community’s recovery journey will be unique, which will require flexibility in the provision of support models.</td>
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<td>9</td>
<td>That future implementation of the Recovery Support Service includes collaborative transition planning with clients to ensure they are connected with ongoing assistance as needed.</td>
<td>Some TDRSS clients are still heavily reliant on the TDRSS. The TDRSS has attempted to implement transition plans. However, there are limited one-stop services available in the Bega Valley.</td>
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<td>10</td>
<td>That OEM, through the continued implementation of resilience grant programs, continue to build the capacity of community groups in disaster recovery.</td>
<td>Local community group projects and activities were key to assisting disaster recovery efforts.</td>
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