



Australian Business Volunteers' submission to the Senate Finance and Public Administration Committees inquiry: Lessons to be learned in relation to the Australian bushfire season 2019-20

1. SUMMARY OF SUBMISSION (max. ½ page)

During August 2020 – February 2021 ABV piloted a model of support to bushfire affected communities in Cobargo, southern NSW. Cobargo was one of the worst affected areas in the 2019-20 bushfires, located in the second-most affected LGA in NSW with an estimated economic damage bill of \$218 million.¹

Drawing on ABV's 40 years' experience in international development across the Asia Pacific region, ABV's unique integrated planning approach to bushfire-affected communities realizes existing community priorities through skilled volunteers (drawn from ABV and corporate partner networks, delivering valued support through online channels) whilst facilitating a capacity building process of community-led visioning and project alignment to plan for the future. Moreover, ABV played an impartial mediation and interface role supporting community organisations to engage productively with government agencies, for example facilitating a community visioning workshop which provided a forum to engage government representatives on community-led recovery/place-based planning.

Developing a coordinated, whole-of-community approach to resilience building is central to communities being able to achieve their wide-ranging and interconnected development aims, and an impartial third party is invaluable to supporting this process. Establishing a funding process that is rigorous and transparent while at the same time aligned with place-based approaches and supportive of community-led recovery and resilience building is a crucial factor to achieve sustainable outcomes for communities.

Our key recommendations include:

- To develop effective community feedback mechanisms which demonstrably influence government processes for recovery.
- To develop a more supportive and timely funding allocation process which ensures rigor and risk mitigation whilst also allowing communities to collectively develop rebuild plans and coordinated projects without having to compete against each other.
- To support genuine community-led recovery by enabling communities to set their own priorities and bring government, corporates and nonprofits alongside to work towards these in a coordinated and collaborative way.
- To adopt and further refine best practice disaster recovery approaches such as ABV's integrated, trauma-informed framework and facilitation methods to ensure communities are being heard and allowed to drive their own recovery efforts whilst reducing some of the burden in achieving these efforts through tailored skilled volunteering.

¹<https://webcache.googleusercontent.com/search?q=cache:i-QsmbM1tFEJ:https://www.bushfirerecovery.gov.au/sites/default/files/local-government-economic-exposure-data.docx+&cd=1&hl=en&ct=clnk&gl=au&client=firefox-b-d>

2. OVERVIEW OF ABV AND OUR WORK IN COBARGO

Australian Business Volunteers is an international development not-for-profit with 40 years of experience across Australia and the Asia Pacific region in community transformation through volunteering, leveraging its skilled staff and 300+ volunteer network of experienced business professionals to generate lasting social impact.

Our integrated approach to supporting community-led recovery combines ABV's experience and a comprehensive framework for engaging with trauma-affected communities with our corporate partners' social responsibility teams who leverage their expansive range of technical expertise to help deliver impact. Our approach is unique as it draws on national and international disaster recovery theory and practice, business continuity planning and resilience, trauma-informed engagement, business volunteer management and place-based approaches to inform program design, implementation, and evaluation.

Critical to this evidence-based process is a willingness to be guided by and respond to the expressed priorities of the community themselves. ABV is intentional about not bringing an agenda and remaining politically neutral in order to be able to bring together sometimes disparate groups and views for the benefit of the whole community's recovery journey.



The Black Summer Bushfires of 2019/2020 were an unprecedented event in Australian history. While important learnings can be drawn from past bushfire events, there is an opportunity to develop a truly participatory response model in partnership with bushfire-affected communities to address their recovery, renewal and resilience building objectives for a sustainable future. The Bushfire Resilience Project pilot that ABV ran from August 2020 to February 2021 provides important insights towards developing this model.

ABV's model of support to bushfire affected communities was first developed and piloted in Cobargo, southern NSW in August 2020 – February 2021. Cobargo was one of the worst affected areas in the 2019-20 bushfires, experiencing a catastrophic firestorm which wiped out critical infrastructure (power, water, town sewerage, telecommunications), destroyed over 300 homes and almost one third of the main street (comprising 50% of the tourist-oriented businesses)², incinerated entire dairy and beef herds as well as countless native species, and tragically claimed the lives of 4 locals. Of the 94 Local Government Areas (LGAs) affected by the 2019-20 fires, the Bega Valley Shire was officially reported as the second-most affected LGA in NSW. Official figures for the Bega Valley LGA report a burn scar over 60% - this represents the loss of over 75% of forests and parks and over 30% of agricultural land in the Bega Valley LGA.³ Ernst and Young have costed the economic damage to the shire at \$218M.⁴

ABV's unique integrated planning approach to bushfire-affected communities realizes existing community priorities through skilled volunteers whilst facilitating a process of community-led visioning and project alignment to plan for the future. The model is based on key community recovery principles including building capability and empowering communities to recognise their own capabilities and strengths to lead and make their own choices about their recovery. The pilot consisted of two main elements: 1) rapidly responding to community organisations' existing priorities and support needs through skilled volunteering (both through ABV and our corporate partner networks), and 2) walking alongside the community to support their development of a cohesive 'build back better' vision and coordinated set of projects (again bringing skilled volunteers alongside to support with grant submissions).

² 2016 ABS figures compared to official damage report for region.

https://quickstats.censusdata.abs.gov.au/census_services/getproduct/census/2016/quickstat/SSC10951

³ <https://www.bushfirerecovery.gov.au/your-community/local-area-profiles#/map>

⁴ <https://webcache.googleusercontent.com/search?q=cache:i-QsmbM1tEJ:https://www.bushfirerecovery.gov.au/sites/default/files/local-government-economic-exposure-data.docx+&cd=1&hl=en&ct=clnk&gl=au&client=firefox-b-d>

Following on from the pilot, there is an expressed need across other bushfire affected regions in NSW, and potentially the eastern seaboard for trauma-informed community facilitation, including community mediation, support and guidance on how to engage with each other and with the recovery process. Additionally, a more integrated approach to place-based planning—and sharing these learnings—is required as part of a standardised approach to supporting community recovery and resilience. At the invitation of the NBRA and with appropriate funding, ABV plans to scale up across New South Wales building on the success of this initial pilot and ABV's foundational facilitated processes whilst incorporating innovative economic development activities in response to the population and market changes wrought by the bushfires and now COVID-19.

3. ABV'S PERSPECTIVE ON THE LESSONS TO BE LEARNED FROM THE 2019-20 BUSHFIRE SEASON

Through this submission, based on our experience with Cobargo, ABV aims to provide our perspective on the challenges and lessons learned regarding community recovery efforts and our recommendations for improvement. Our comments relate directly to points *(b) respective roles of levels of government; (e) best practice funding models; and (f) existing structures, measures and policies* of the Terms of Reference, with indirect application to *(d) the adequacy of existing measures; and (i) any related matters*.

b) the respective roles and responsibilities of different levels of government, and agencies within government, in relation to bushfire planning, mitigation, response, and recovery;

Challenges

- From the perspective of the community, there seems to be a lack of coordination from levels of government in understanding, agreeing and then supporting their expressed recovery priorities. While ABV found many individual workers across all levels of government to be excellent—engaged, compassionate and committed to supporting communities in their recovery process—there seemed to be an unavoidable limitation in their support given the funding programs they represented through their respective government roles. ABV, as an example of an impartial nonprofit with no ties to delivering funding, was able to provide much needed support to the Cobargo community by delivering a visioning workshop and facilitating integrated recovery efforts, as well as rapidly mobilising our networks of altruistic volunteers. While ABV received advice from one government worker that we should redirect our efforts elsewhere, ABV declined this advice, recognising that this kind of support was crucial to supporting genuine community-led recovery and was not available elsewhere.
- Traditional power structures have been counterproductive to advancing resilience building and have not responded to the community's expressed needs. Moreover, Australia's tendency to prioritise "expert" opinion can at times detract from engaging with communities in an authentic way (who themselves possess a breadth and depth of technical and social knowledge) to support genuine community-led recovery.
- Additionally, government at all levels have neglected to develop coordinated systems which prioritise bushfire survivors and increase the efficiency of recovery services. For example:
 - The 'onus of proof' to being on bushfire survivors has required individuals to re-traumatise themselves with the constant re-telling of their story of survival in order to access grants, subsidies etc.
 - The complexity of Bushfire Attack Level (BAL) ratings compliance, approvals process and cost of rebuild has made the rebuild process slower and overly difficult.

What's worked?

ABV and its corporate partners, alongside Cobargo community project leads, actively engaged with a wide range of stakeholders across national, state and local government levels throughout the pilot. Part of the reason ABV has been welcomed and supported by both the NBRA and Regional NSW early on in this process was due to our ability to combine the strategic skillsets of ABV, corporates and other agencies such as CSIRO to support place-based planning/road mapping activities, alongside leveraging the professional skillsets of business volunteers to deliver individual support to local community organisations and local businesses, creating a comprehensive support package to communities. Additionally, ABV is able to play an impartial interface role supporting community organisations to engage productively with government agencies, for example facilitating community visioning workshops and providing a forum to engage government representatives on community-led recovery/place-based planning.

What's needed?

A coordinated approach to providing support services/activities is crucial, particularly around developing a support model for scaling up support to bushfire-affected communities across Australia as well as strengthening disaster resilience across all communities into the future.

Recommended actions

- Closer coordination between different levels of government and the systems created to support recovery that are driven by the community's expressed needs.
- Closer collaboration between government and corporate support – where are each best placed to support?
- Greater recognition of the impacts of trauma on communities by ensuring processes, particularly funding processes, are as streamlined and simple as possible.
- Develop effective community feedback mechanisms which demonstrably influence government processes for recovery.

e) best practice funding models and policy measures to reduce future bushfire risk, both within Australia and internationally;

Challenges

- Competitive grant processes have undermined community-led recovery and social capital building efforts by pitting groups against each other for limited funding within short timeframes.
- Structuring the Bushfire Local Economic Recovery Fund so that local councils and other professional organisations were also competing against community groups (made up largely of volunteers) for the same funding has created added pressure as well as further undermining local government's relationship with some communities and hindering integrated place-based planning and economic recovery efforts.
- The complexity of the grant applications combined with the short timeframes have further burdened already exhausted communities leading to lowered resilience to other stressors and diverting community resources away from recovery efforts.

What's worked?

ABV successfully built the trust of local community organisations through our ability to actively listen to their support priorities, design responsive volunteer assignments, and source and mobilise volunteers rapidly. Despite travel restrictions posed by COVID-19, productive online collaborations were built between community organisations and volunteers from around the country. Moreover, our strategic approach to developing support programs identified the broader opportunity around supporting the Cobargo community to achieve their shared 'building back better' vision through providing an impartial facilitation role. This facilitation process ensured safe spaces were created where community members and local groups were able to share their ideas and feel heard, while guiding consensus-building to deliver an inclusive vision and shared priorities and values for 'building back better'.

What's needed?

Developing a coordinated, whole-of-community approach to resilience building is central to communities being able to achieve their wide-ranging and interconnected development aims, and an impartial third party is invaluable to supporting this process. Establishing a funding process that is rigorous and transparent while at the same time aligned with place-based approaches and supportive of community-led recovery and resilience building is a crucial factor to achieve sustainable outcomes for communities.

Recommended actions

- Greater transparency around funding allocation decisions according to level of fire damage/impact.
- A more supportive and timely funding allocation process which ensures rigor and risk mitigation whilst also allowing communities to collectively develop rebuild plans and coordinated projects without having to compete with each other.
- Engaging an impartial third party organisation to strategically support diverse communities to create inclusive and locally-owned community development plans using a nuanced, impartial, consensus-building approach.

f) existing structures, measures and policies implemented by the Federal Government, charities and others to assist communities to recover from the 2019-20 bushfires, including the performance of the National Bushfire Recovery Agency;

Challenges

- The support needs vastly outweighed supply via standard and newly-established channels given the unprecedented scale of the disaster, overwhelming the agencies at a national, state and local level currently offering valuable recovery and resilience building support services across a range of sectors.
- Overwhelming need and time pressures limited engagement opportunities between support agencies including charities to collaborate. Following the immediate relief effort, some expressed a feeling of ‘band aid’ approach to recovery and resilience building support without adequate resourcing to develop a comprehensive support program.

What’s worked?

- Community social capital building through mechanisms such as Cobargo Catch-Ups (regular in-person and livestreamed meetings to share ideas, discuss ways of moving forward, etc.); walking alongside community organisations; Visioning Workshop and community events.
- Community volunteers driving community re-build (range of community organisations formed post-bushfires to address community needs, many of which were supported by ABV and corporate volunteers in business planning, organisational strengthening and proposal development). Importantly, ABV managed the volunteer engagement process from identifying the work, recruiting and briefing the volunteers and ensuring the volunteers were performing well. This is critical to reducing the burden on the community members who are themselves volunteers, who are trauma-impacted and have their own recovery needs.
- External volunteers operating remotely through online channels to reduce the burden on local resourcing of on-site volunteers from over-stretched communities, allowing a much greater range of skilled volunteers to participate (volunteers were located across VIC, NSW and QLD).
- Providing strategic support to work with communities on the design and building of inclusive and actionable ‘road maps’ for ‘building back better’, being guided by them at each step and coordinating valuable corporate skilled volunteering inputs into strategic planning activities with local communities.

What’s needed?

Rapidly responding, in a trauma-informed way, to the immediate support needs of bushfire-affected communities as this builds trust and enables better outcomes via non-traditional avenues such as mobilising skilled volunteers and leveraging corporate resources. From this strong foundation of trust and demonstrated delivery on promises, broader strategic conversations are opened up to support wider community-led recovery in a more coordinated and cohesive way.

Recommended actions

- Community-led recovery: Communities must be supported and enabled to set their own priorities and bring government, corporates and non-profits alongside to work towards these.
- Adopt and further refine best practice disaster recovery approaches such as ABV’s integrated, trauma-informed framework and facilitation methods to ensure communities are being heard and allowed to drive their own recovery efforts whilst reducing some of the burden in achieving these efforts through tailored skilled volunteering.
- Work productively with trauma-affected communities by remaining flexible (working with them where they’re at), receptive (volunteers are used as ‘sounding boards’ and responsive to emerging support needs), and positive (strengths-based approach used to frame engagement around possibilities not gaps).

4. SUMMARY OF RECOMMENDATIONS:

Terms of Reference points	Recommended actions
b) the respective roles and responsibilities of different levels of government, and agencies within government, in relation to bushfire planning, mitigation, response, and recovery;	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Closer coordination between different levels of government and the systems created to support recovery that are driven by community expressed needs. • Closer collaboration between government and corporate support – where are each best placed to support? • Greater recognition of the impacts of trauma on communities by ensuring processes are as streamlined and simple as possible. • Develop effective community feedback mechanisms which demonstrably influence government processes for recovery.
e) best practice funding models and policy measures to reduce	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Greater transparency around funding allocation decisions according to level of fire damage/impact.

<p>future bushfire risk, both within Australia and internationally;</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A more supportive and timely funding allocation process which ensures rigor and risk mitigation whilst also allowing communities to collectively develop re-build plans and coordinated projects without having to compete with each other. • Engaging an impartial third party organisation to strategically support diverse communities to create inclusive and locally-owned community development plans using a nuanced, impartial, consensus-building approach.
<p>f) existing structures, measures and policies implemented by the Federal Government, charities and others to assist communities to recover from the 2019-20 bushfires, including the performance of the National Bushfire Recovery Agency;</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Support genuine community-led recovery by enabling communities to set their own priorities and bring government, corporates and nonprofits alongside to work towards these in a coordinated and collaborative way. Adopt and further refine best practice disaster recovery approaches such as ABV's integrated, trauma-informed framework and facilitation methods to ensure communities are being heard and allowed to drive their own recovery efforts whilst reducing some of the burden in achieving these efforts through tailored skilled volunteering. • Work productively with trauma-affected communities by remaining flexible (working with them where they're at), receptive (volunteers are used as 'sounding boards' and responsive to emerging support needs), and positive (strengths-based approach used to frame engagement around possibilities not gaps).