



Australian Business Volunteers' submission to the Joint Committee of Public Accounts and Audit inquiry: Commonwealth grants administration

Publishing ABV's submission:

1. SUMMARY OF SUBMISSION

During August 2020 – October 2022 ABV demonstrated a model of support to disaster affected communities in southeaster NSW and northeast Victoria. These included some of the worst affected areas in the 2019-20 bushfires, with an estimated economic damage bill in the billions.

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:

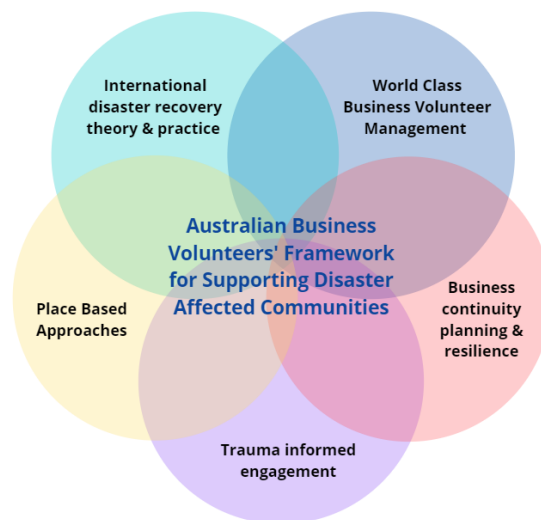
- Reform funding at all government levels and increase investment in facilitators like ABV, and community-led solutions.
- Embed greater transparency around funding allocation decisions according to assessed regional/ community need and stated criteria, including who is on selection panels, why certain projects were chosen over others, and the strategy behind monies granted.
- Develop effective community feedback mechanisms which demonstrably influence government processes for funding key community-led projects.
- 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.
- Support genuine community-led place-based community building 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.

2. OVERVIEW OF ABV AND OUR WORK

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.

ABV has a long history in community development over the past 40 years and has deployed volunteers across the Pacific region as well as in Australia. We are a skilled and trusted advocate for communities as they recover from the last disaster and prepare for the next. Our recent work in Southeast NSW and Northeast Victoria has highlighted the need for independent expert assistance for these traumatised communities to realise their ambitions to build back better.

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, followed by a global pandemic (2020-2022) and widespread flooding along the eastern seaboard (2022). ABV has been walking alongside communities in NSW and Victoria for the past two years, very often supporting disaster recovery by assisting groups to apply for competitive Commonwealth and State grant funding. There are less traumatic and more effective ways to disburse funding to communities and with this submission, ABV provides some key recommendations to address the inequity and competitive nature of these processes.

3. ABV'S PERSPECTIVE ON HOW TO STRENGTHEN THE INTEGRITY AND ADMINISTRATION OF COMMONWEALTH GRANTS

Through this submission, based on our experience across disaster-affected areas in NSW and Victoria, ABV aims to provide our perspective on how to strengthen the integrity and administration of Commonwealth grants and our recommendations for improvement. Our comments can be generally applied whilst also relating directly to points raised in the reports referenced in the Inquiry Terms of Reference.

- *Possible changes to the Commonwealth Grants Rules and Guidelines*
- *Equity, decision-making and matters relating to the allocation of funding (generally) and specifically BLERF, BCRRF and BSBRG*
- *The status of recommendations included in the JCPAA's Report 484 The Administration of Government Grants, in particular Recommendation 4 2.70 and Recommendation 5 2.71 relating to transparency of decisions and timeliness of announcements and communications*
- *No. 47 (2020-21) Administration of Commuter Car Park Projects within the Urban Congestion Fund - Recommendation no.5 paragraph 4.57 relating to transparency of decision making for projects identified through a non-competitive process*
- *No. 16 (2021-22) Awarding of Funding under the Safer Communities Program – Recommendation no. 5 paragraph 4.49 relating to awareness of the funding availability and barriers to entry.*

- *No. 1 (2022-23) Award of Funding under the Building Better Regions Fund – Recommendation no. 3 paragraph 4.17 and Recommendation no. 4 paragraph 4.49 relating to parliamentarians applying the principles for grants administration and transparency of decisions made.*

Challenges

1. Competitive grant processes have undermined community-led projects and social capital building efforts by pitting groups against each other for limited funding within short timeframes, with minimal support. ABV focusses on bringing communities together in place based integrated planning efforts, working in a trauma informed way to ensure groups across a community understand each other's initiatives and projects and see how they can complement and enhance the community to build back better. Competitive grants processes undermine this community building, making it difficult for community groups to trust each other to work for the good of the whole community. Mechanisms such as getting letters of support from other community stakeholders or the Council become an administrative exercise rather than actual evidence of broad community engagement on any particular grant application.
2. Structuring grants, such as 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 creates added pressure as well as further undermines local government's relationship with communities and hinders integrated place-based planning and economic recovery efforts.
3. The complexity of the grant applications combined with the short timeframes further burden already stretched communities leading to lowered resilience to other stressors and diverting community resources away from critical development efforts. The time pressure of this can exclude communities that don't have the support that an organization like ABV can bring, can exclude marginalized members and groups of the community who don't have the skills and resources to apply for sophisticated grants and ultimately doesn't work to support vulnerable communities to improve their resilience or to build back better.
4. Competitive grant rounds which are awarded 'at the discretion of the Minister' are widely held to be monies that are already committed in principle, and will likely to go to electorates of the Ministers' party or their pet projects/groups. The despair felt by communities that see or perceive "pork barreling" compounds trauma already being experienced with comments made to ABV by multiple community members of "how can we hope to build back after this disaster if the grant process is rigged?"

What's worked?

- ABV has successfully built the trust of local community organisations across the 7 LGAs in which we work 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 have been built between community organisations and volunteers from around the country.
- Moreover, our strategic approach to developing support programs identified the broader opportunity around supporting communities to achieve their shared development vision through providing an impartial facilitation role. This facilitation process ensures safe spaces are created where community members, local businesses and groups are able to share their ideas and feel heard, while guiding consensus-building to deliver an inclusive vision and shared priorities and values for their area.
- ABV and its corporate partners, alongside community project leads, actively engage with a wide range of stakeholders across national, state and local government levels. Part of the reason ABV has been welcomed and supported by NEMA, Regional NSW and BRV is due to our ability to combine the strategic skillsets of ABV, corporates and other agencies such as Disaster Relief Australia and 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, whilst 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.
- 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).

What's needed?

- Complex social challenges like disaster recovery and resilience building, regional development and community safety cannot be solved through traditional models of service-based program delivery. Holistic, place-based planning must be developed for each community context, utilising community-led, collaborative approaches.
- Research publications^{29,40,47} affirm the belief that **community participation and empowerment have important benefits through increasing democracy, mobilizing resources and energy, developing holistic approaches, achieving better decisions and more effective services, and ensuring ownership and sustainability of programs.**^{24,35} As Wallerstein argues, “empowerment... [is] an important outcome in its own right, and also an intermediate outcome in the pathway to reducing health disparities and social exclusion,”^{29(p18)}—a point reiterated by Hothi, who suggests that “empowerment ‘done well’... helps individuals and communities to exert control over the circumstances that affect their lives, thereby improving local well-being.”^{47(p55)} Guareschi and Jovchelovitch⁴⁸ have commented that **participation for empowerment not only serves a conscientization role, but also “re-shapes the relationship between individuals, community and the political arena, empowering, developing citizenship and forging spaces for the presence of grassroots in the institutional structures of the state.”**¹
- Feedback from affected communities has been clear that abbreviated timeframes and a lack of surge capacity within the community to manage the burden of applying for grants ranges from troubling to traumatising. ABV, with NEMA have identified a mitigating solution of providing a partner, independent organisation that has direct and relevant experience in this area, along with a proven track record of successful community development, to support communities with grant applications like the Black Summer Bushfire Complementary funds grant.
- Rather than continuing to fund traditional emergency services actors for a top-down approach, all levels of government need to significantly increase investment in facilitators like ABV, and community-led solutions. The fixed and top-down approach to government grant processes themselves also inhibits the uptake of community-led solutions.
- 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 is needed.
- Developing a coordinated, whole-of-community approach to community 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:

1. Separate out grant funding rounds for Councils and professional groups from community-based initiatives.
2. Introduce expressions of interest as the first phase to grant rounds, with longer time frames allowed and greater rigour expected for full submissions.
3. Engage neutral third parties like ABV to strategically support diverse communities to create inclusive and locally owned community development plans using a nuanced, impartial, consensus-building approach.
4. Reform funding at all government levels. Require closer coordination between different levels of government and the systems created to support development that are driven by the community's expressed needs.
5. Recognise the impacts of trauma on communities by ensuring processes, particularly funding processes, are as streamlined and simple as possible.
6. Develop effective community feedback mechanisms which demonstrably influence government processes for regional development.

¹ Ibid.

7. Embed greater transparency around funding allocation decisions according to assessed regional/ community need and stated criteria, including who is on selection panels, why certain projects were chosen over others, and the strategy behind monies granted.

4. SUMMARY OF RECOMMENDATIONS:

Recommended actions

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2. Introduce expressions of interest as the first phase to grant rounds, with longer time frames allowed and greater rigour expected for full submissions.
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4. Reform funding at all government levels. Require closer coordination between different levels of government and the systems created to support development that are driven by the community's expressed needs.
5. Recognise the impacts of trauma on communities by ensuring processes, particularly funding processes, are as streamlined and simple as possible.
6. Develop effective community feedback mechanisms which demonstrably influence government processes for regional development.
7. Embed greater transparency around funding allocation decisions according to assessed regional/ community need and stated criteria, including who is on selection panels, why certain projects were chosen over others, and the strategy behind monies granted.

