

YACVic Rural 2020 Activators Program

Young people creating community change

By Leah Munnery
Derm Ryan
& Activators (Willow, Chloe, Jen and Chris)
April 2021



RURAL



Youth Affairs Council Victoria (YACVic) is the peak body and leading advocate for young people aged 12–25 and the youth sector in Victoria.

Our vision is that the rights of young people in Victoria are respected, and they are active, visible and valued in their communities.

The recommendations in this report were developed in collaboration with young people., YACVic is thankful for the support and expertise of everyone who contributed to this work.



YACVic respectfully acknowledges the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people of this continent. We pay our respects to the ancestors and Elders past and present of all Aboriginal nations in Victoria.

Contents Page

Introduction.....	4
Background.....	6
COVID-19 Impacts on Activators.....	7
Project Implementation	10
Project design:.....	12
Orbost Secondary College	16
Case study: Chris	19
Case study: Jen	22
Case study: Chloe	24
Case Study: Willow	26
Case study: Mary.....	28
Other Project Outcomes and Reflections.....	30
Key Recommendations for Future Programs	32
Appendices.....	34
Appendix A: Youth-Focused Disaster Recovery Protocol.....	34

Introduction

“Activators is a youth program where you can meet new people with similar ideas and inspirations as you. A place you can make change.” – Jen, 15

Young people in rural and regional Victoria have unique insights and face different challenges from those in metropolitan Melbourne. YACVic Rural advocates on issues that affect rural young people and works to strengthen community participation and self-advocacy.

After the devastation of the Black Summer bushfires of 2019-20, communities and individuals needed to rebuild and recover. In the response to the bushfires, there was a gap in the engagement, involvement and inclusion of young people in contributing to community recovery. Opportunities for young people to activate meaningful change in their communities are often limited, and this was evident in the response to the Black Summer bushfires, with young people reporting feeling overlooked and unheard.

There are very little opportunities for young people in regional East Gippsland to make a difference and help the community by creating a project with their own ideas and messages behind it. – Willow

*I asked bushfire recovery and Red Cross if there was ANYTHING for young people around here
– Chris*

The Rural Young Activators Program

The Rural Young Activators program (Activators) provides an opportunity for young people to create and lead an impactful contribution to the development of their community. The Activators program provides guidance, skills training, funding, and mentorship on how to design and complete a local community project.

Community spirit and engagement is something I'm very passionate about and seeing how the community has come together through these tough times has made me very proud of where I live.

I believe the way we move forward through these tough times is to expand on our community values and building a strong community bond, I think to pair this with the rebuilding and recovering from the bushfires we can create an amazing experience for all.

The way we can build this is through community engagement learning and training as well as general community gatherings to bring our entire community together . – Jen

RSPCA Victoria has been working alongside the community, supporting people affected by the 2019/20 summer bushfires to care for their animals during the recovery period. In addition to helping individuals, RSPCA Victoria is working with other organisations on community projects and initiatives that help with the bushfire recovery and increase preparedness for future disasters.

RSPCA Victoria and YACVic formed an exciting partnership to focus the 2020/21 Activators program on supporting young people in bushfire affected areas to deliver projects designed to improve animal welfare

and help communities build resilience for the future. Through the Activators program, animal welfare has been championed as a way of bringing young people together with the wider community to build strength and resilience.

Animal wellbeing and human wellbeing are inextricably linked – the research shows us that. Bushfires can devastate communities and it will take a long time to rebuild from the most recent bushfire season. Animals are a critical part of that healing process. - Dr Liz Walker, CEO RSPCA Victoria

Background

The YACVic Rural Activators program was first conducted in 2018-2019 with 16 participants aged 18-25 from all areas of rural and regional Victoria. The focus of the project was unrestricted. The main objectives of the project were to support and upskill young people via the development of an advocacy-based project that they wanted to create, and for the project to be presented and further developed in their local communities. This further supported YACVic's commitment to placing youth voice and leadership at the core of all work.

Key features of the 2018 pilot Rural Activator program were four face-to-face intensive weekend camps/workshops over a 9-month period. The project eventually included a fifth face to face weekend and was extended to a 12-month period. Responsibility for the coordinating the program and maintaining connection with the participants was divided amongst the YACVic Rural team.

Ultimately, four of the 16 projects were taken through to completion. The 'Let's live' program, supporting access to education for rural young people in the Bass coast region, continues today.

Feedback from the 2018 Activators at the completion of the program included important gains in confidence in their own

abilities, project planning and management and networking.

Suggestions by participants for improvement to the program included more frequent contact with staff and mentors, maintaining consistency of staff, and to dedicate more time to work on individual projects during workshops. Staff involved in the program found that maintaining contact between the residential camp/workshops was difficult, especially when balanced with existing staff workload.

After reviewing the 2018 Activators program, a key consideration was the employment of a dedicated Project Officer to oversee and coordinate the program and ensure that the key points outlined in the feedback and evaluation were implemented.

Following the bushfires, the program was repurposed to focus on Bushfire communities and RSPCA Victoria came on board as the major sponsor. RSPCA Victoria's support of YACVic's Rural Activators Program is made possible by donations made to RSPCA Victoria's Bushfire Appeal. 100% of funds from this appeal are being used to provide relief and care of animals, improve animal welfare, and prepare for future emergency response in bushfire affected communities.

I am very passionate about our poor wildlife that have been affected and I want to do whatever I can to help with them and the rehabilitation that they need to get back on their feet. – Chloe

Disaster Recovery Protocols

Immediately following the devastating Victorian bushfires over the 2019-20 summer, YACVic consulted on and developed a Youth Focused Disaster Recovery Protocol.

The Protocol established a framework for Federal, State and Local Government emergency and recovery services and committees, institutions, local youth services, youth workers and others who engage with young people in disaster affected areas. It provides guidance on key matters for consideration and inclusion of young people in post-disaster recovery and rebuilding, and to ensure positive outcomes for young people aged 12-25 who have been affected directly and/or indirectly by a disaster. See Appendix A

COVID-19 Impacts on Activators

Before recovery from the fires had barely begun, COVID-19 reached Australia and the country began to deal with a global pandemic.

When COVID first happened, it was a big dip in motivation for me, because you just had all these bushfires where you are stuck inside and then COVID happens and you're stuck inside, again. - Willow

The impact of COVID across the nation was profound, with Victoria enduring the most severe and protracted lockdowns. At the height of the restrictions, COVID-19 divided the state, as a 'ring of steel' was introduced around Melbourne to prevent viral spread to regional areas, and was finally removed in November 2020. Some Victorian residents endured restricted movement within 5 kilometers of home, a night curfew and were allowed to leave home only for essential items and caregiving. Schools and most workplaces moved to remote delivery and access. Sport, a key community builder in regional areas, was suspended. Massive impacts were felt by the hospitality, retail, tourism and arts industries, with

unemployment especially felt by young people in casual positions. These changes and restrictions created a high level of stress and trauma for many people, and the cumulative impact was especially difficult for young people in regional areas and communities only just beginning to recover from the Black Summer bushfires.

2020-21 YACVic Rural Young Activators Timeline



Hire Project officer

Advertise and recruit young people to participate

COVID-19 second wave hits Victoria.

Ring of steel starts between metro Melbourne and regional Vic.

Recruit mentors

Orbost Secondary College joins Activators

Begin regular online 1-on-1 catch-ups with young people

Orbost Secondary College install nest boxes

Falls Creek Activator workshop weekend

Final planning and preparation for projects

Project implementation, evaluation and reporting

Celebration and final project presentations

Black Summer Bushfires

November 2019 - February 2020	March - April 2020	May - July 2020	August 2020	September 2020	October 2020	December 2020	January 2021	February - April 2021	Next Steps
-------------------------------	--------------------	-----------------	-------------	----------------	--------------	---------------	--------------	-----------------------	------------

RSPCA Victoria puts call-out to support bushfire recovery programs

COVID-19 first wave hits Victoria. First wave of restrictions begin

Virtual Workshops 1 and 2

Stage 4 restrictions; second lockdown begin

COVID-19 restrictions ease

Virtual Workshop 3 and 4

Preparation of media releases, sponsorships and letters to local community leaders

Activators present at YACVic Conference
Activators projects continue to have positive impact with communities



Project Implementation

Recruitment:

Recruitment for 10 young Activators began in June 2020. Applicant prerequisites included:

- live, work or study in an area impacted by the Black Summer bushfires
- aged between 16-25 years
- commit to a 6-month, voluntary project
- focus/connect their project to improving animal welfare

In addition, participants needed to be open to taking on an additional commitment and be open to an online delivery method.

Recruitment for Activators was promoted through a wide range of avenues, including:

- YACVic & RSPCA Vic Facebook pages
- Contact with Bushfire Recovery Victoria and Recovery case workers
- Contact and call out with Department of Education and Training (school newsletters etc)
- Articles in media
- Contact with Local Councils across all areas impacted (6 in total)

- Reach out to previous Activators
- Online launch hosted on YACVic Facebook page
- Contact to animal wildlife carers in bushfire effected areas
- Information distributed to YACVic's Youth Participation Practice Network (YPPN)
- Information session for new applicants

When the number of applications was lower than expected, the final date for the program was extended and the age range was lowered to include a 14-year-old applicant. Potential reasons for the lack of uptake include:

- The impact of COVID-19 and requirement for online delivery, as many young people were already undertaking many hours of online study.
- Capacity for young people enduring the dual trauma of bushfire and pandemic to voluntarily take on additional commitments
- The combination of prerequisite factors geographic/age/project focus (animal) requirement
- Failure for message to be passed onto the young people within networks (gate keepers)

Activators who did participate heard about the program from a range of sources including:

- Bushfire recovery/Red Cross
- Previous involvement with YACVic
- Youth council (LGA)
- East Gippsland TAFE

- Facebook advertisements and youth development officer

Motivations for applying to Activators included a strong desire to contribute to the community but lack of knowledge of where to start, a desire for connection to other young people.

You want to make a change, but you don't know where to start - Mary

When asked 'Why did you chose to become involved in the Activators program?' responses included:

'I need to make connections with people my age'

'I wanted to be more involved in helping my community'

'I thought it was a really amazing opportunity that I couldn't pass up, I've always had a lot of ideas and finally being able to get one of the project I had dreamed about happening was something I couldn't pass up.'

'I became Involved with the Activators program because I loved the purpose of helping and making a change in the bush fire affected areas and our wildlife and domestic pets.'

'I chose to become involved in Activators because it offered an opportunity to make a change and help my community and the environment in a tangible way.'

Activators in this program also shared an affiliation for, and desire to help, animals.



Image: Activators responses

I think adopting animals makes us better people because we learn to be kind and patient. Animals can really help young people's mental health. Often dogs can tell if people are sad. I've experienced it myself. they come up and comfort you - Willow

Project design

Previously, Activators was based on residential, in person workshops, but this was not possible within the COVID-19 restrictions of 2020. The program delivery was adapted to work within the restrictions and was redesigned to a virtual/remote model. The revised program included:

- A posted welcome/starter package of workshop items and some fun extras
- 2 x introductory virtual weekend workshops over five days.
- Regular scheduled virtual group trainings and meeting
- Regular 'one on one' virtual catch ups
- Online applications such as Mentimeter allowed participants to share ideas and give feedback in a virtual setting.
- Consideration was given to the fact that most participants were students, already engaging in many hours of online learning.
- Regular communication by a combination of individual and group emails, video conference calls, text messages, phone calls and a Facebook Messenger group.
- Falls Creek 'in person' workshop in December 2020

- Final weekend workshop and presentations in April 2021

Activators joined the program at widely varying points of project development. Some commenced with a completed concept, while others had a general desire to help, but no specific focus. The two initial virtual workshops focused on building group cohesiveness and trust, along with skills training in animal welfare awareness and project management trainings. Alongside YACVic staff, guest presenters included RSPCA Victoria, Zoos Victoria, representatives from the World Wildlife Funds bushfire response, a previous Activator and a specialist in human-centered design to begin project management training.

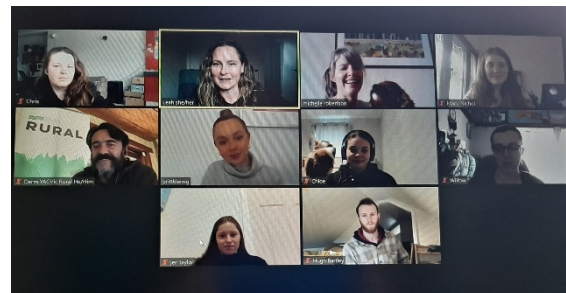


Image: Activators, YACVic and RSPCA staff participate in a Zoom call

Adaptation and flexibility were embedded in the program from the onset, with a commitment to continuous improvement and participant-directed feedback. Feedback was obtained after each delivery session. After the first virtual workshop the participants requested shorter sessions, more sharing time and more 'real-life' individual project examples. See example below.

Is there anything you would improve, change or do differently? Mentimeter

Rather than 1 hour sessions with 1 person keep shorter sessions but see those people multiple times	I would love to hear more about people like Josh and his project/program	Have shorter presentations that get to the point in a clearer and quicker way.
More sharing of ideas	the presentation being designed to fit the time we have together on zoom.	Some more examples of what we could be doing for our projects
More discussion based rather than lecture style	The guest speakers being more concise and to the point	more group chats and less lecturing

Feedback from initial virtual workshop

Although COVID-19 has required us to mainly contact each other online; the YACVic staff have been extremely supportive and have reminded me several times to contact them if I need anything. The only bad thing would be not having more whole group discussions and brainstorm, but COVID-19 has limited the in person contact. - Willow

Adjustments were made to the next workshop in response to the feedback. Participants were also encouraged to recommend training or presenters that would be of benefit.

Flexibility in program delivery and communication was essential to accommodate the varying schedules, other commitments, internet access and personal/health priorities of the young people.

Throughout the program, several Activators took a hiatus due to study, health or other issues. Understandably, capacity for additional, voluntary projects can vary due to changes in school, family or and physical or mental health factors. Activators expressed gratitude and some surprise at being able to stay involved in the program when other priorities arose requiring a break from the

schedule. One participant, Willow, thought she would have to withdraw from the program due to the pressures of school commitments but was happy to stay involved if allowance was made for her to pause her involvement and resume at the end of the school year. For Chloe, the pressure of online study combined with the time commitment of Activators resulted in lack of response to communications for several months, but she then re-engaged once her studies had been completed.

I was studying in Warrigal, on campus. COVID 19 was not that much of an issue at the start, so I was fine working on my TAFE work and my project but once things became remote learning, it became hard to keep up with my work and I found myself falling behind very quickly so I took a break from my project. Now I am back at it and very excited to get it going. - Chloe

I was unable to fully dedicate my time to the first part of Activators due to Year 12 and I missed out on some training and planning. However, after the Falls Creek Workshop I had a clearer idea of what my project was going to be which was really good.

I did meet the other Activators online at the end of the year which was good as it inspired me to think about my own project, but meeting them in person at the Falls Creek Workshop weekend was truly inspiring as we were able to casually talk about our aspirations.' -Willow



Activators share stories at their first 'in person' meeting at Falls Creek, Dec 2020

The strategy adapted was to continue to include the young person in all group communications, and continue regular, individual contacts. The aim was to have the participants understand they could reengage at any time and that support continued to be available to them.

Safety, inclusiveness and a positive, shared environment

YACVic has the highest commitment to the safety of young people and children. All staff and external presenters/mentors were required to adhere to YACVic's childsafe policy and provide Working with Children checks (WWCC). With the age of participants including ranging from 14-25, all Activators who were over 18 were also required to provide WWCC.

A priority in the first group workshop was the development of an Activators Agreement, with all participants providing suggestions of how to create a safe and inclusive environment. The strongest themes were of respect, inclusivity, and lack of judgement. This was collated into a document and presented to the participants for approval, then adopted as the 2020 Agreement.

Additionally, care was taken to ensure all participants had opportunities to opt in and out of activities. One Activator expressed anxiety around public speaking, but also a desire to improve and practice in this area. Options such as prerecording presentations were offered as an alternative, should they be needed.



In keeping with YACVic's commitment to inclusivity, staff ensured that all applicants were asked about access and inclusivity needs, including the availability of a safe and suitable workspace, computer and internet needs. Participants were encouraged to identify their pronouns and lead Acknowledgements of Country from their local areas.

Mentors and Coaching

Youth mentoring provides a structured and trusting relationship that brings young people together with caring individuals who offer guidance, support and encouragement. The inclusion of mentors in the Activators program provides the young person with additional insight and guidance, along with a relationship with an engaged, skillful and dependable adult.

Two of the Activators, Willow and Jen, were matched with mentors to assist with their project. RSPCA Victoria Education and Learning staff provided high levels of support, over a number of months, assisting the development of 'The Paws Project' with Willow. Support for website design and development was provided for the Jen in the 'We are Wang' project through a second mentorship. For Chloe, the Project Officer fulfilled elements of the mentoring by providing coaching, while a mentor with the experience and expertise required was not located for Chris' project. Mary chose not to undertake mentoring during her time with the project.

Orbost Secondary College

I grew up in the area and been here most of my life. I have a connection with the bush. I wanted to get a bit more connected to my community and the environment that surrounds it. It's been a bush fire affected area, and the species in this area haven't been doing great anyway, so to do something like this is really good. We want to see a better future for our place – Dylan, Orbost Secondary College

In August 2020, a teacher from Orbost Secondary College (OSC) proposed that a group of Year 8/9 students take part in the Activators project. Maintaining the commitment to a flexible approach and, given the maximum intake for the Activators program had not been reached, the decision was made to include the class. This was an opportunity to increase the reach and engagement of the Activators program.

Orbost Secondary College had a class of 11 students enrolled in the school's Broadening Horizons program, focused on increasing engagement in learning. In this program, students identify a real-world problem, make connections with both industry and

individuals in the community, while developing enterprise skills. For these students, the bushfires in the local Orbost/Cape Conran region resulted in significant loss of habitat and nesting locations for local wildlife, along with loss of property and homes for some individuals.

Creating nest boxes for local, impacted wildlife was identified as an actionable, community outcome for the students, meeting both the Broadening Horizons and the Activator program objectives. As a result of their involvement with the Activators program, these students received live video presentations from YACVic Rural, Zoos Victoria and Department of Environment, Land, Water and Planning (DELWP). These sessions provided an overview of the Activators program, along with information about impacted local animals, suitable locations for nest box installation and logistics – such as safety – that would need to be included in the students' projects. After the introductory sessions, students were required to:

- Select a local species that would benefit from nest box construction
- Research the requirements and specifications of a suitable nest box for their chosen species
- Design and construct the nest box
- Install the nest box in an appropriate local area.

The range of animals selected for the nest boxes included: micro bat, pygmy possum, spotted pardalote and antechinus.

We saw a need to help the Pardalote and we tried to fulfill that need – Dylan, Orbost Secondary College

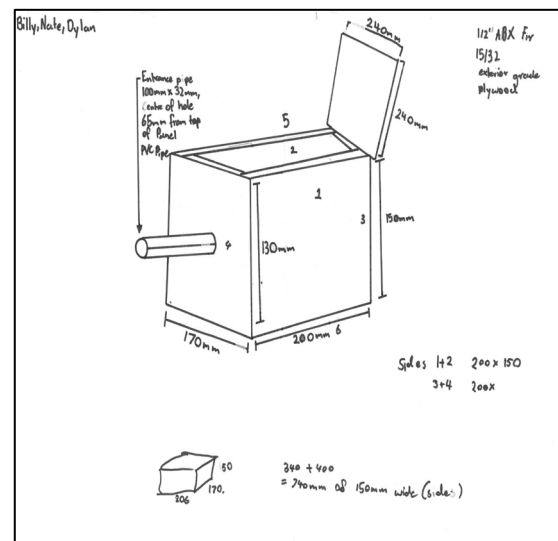
I chose pygmy possums because they were badly affected by the bushfires and I have seen them in the bush. - Abi, Orbost Secondary College

[Antechinus] live in the tree hollows which take years and years to occur naturally, so I'm helping them. We researched online about species that were impacted, then we talked to Parks Victoria about boxes, then picked an appropriate design, built and painted it. – Rueben, Orbost Secondary College

A theme that reoccurred across the participating students was a desire to help and contribute to animals, the environment and to help rebuild and connect to their communities. One student, who lost his house in the bushfires, commented:

We've been doing bird boxes which is going to help birds have a new habitat and home after the bushfires which wiped out most of that this is a good way to be connected to the environment and giving back what was taken – Billie, Orbost Secondary College

"I know a few people who have been affected by the bushfire. Me, myself have been. My parents worked on the fire... Yeah It's been hard...you see things like dead possums in the burnt bush, it saddens you but inspires you to do better for the environment and the community. It can be a trying and inspiring time. - Dylan



Example student's nest box plans



Nest boxes produced by OSC students



Orbost SC students In the Activators program

The young people engaged in the Activators program consistently identified a need to connect with, and contribute to, their communities. This intersects with a desire to help that is often frustrated by isolation and a lack of experience in getting a project off the ground. Young people often require some guidance and facilitation to bring the thought to action.

The involvement of Orbost Secondary College in Activators demonstrates an opportunity to expand the impact of the Activator program into a school setting. With many secondary schools focusing on community engagement and student directed projects, the Activator project seems suited to adaptation to a school environment.

Case Study: Chris

Project: The 20-acre Wood

Digging deep to secure water in the landscape

I've been born with a sense of urgency. I don't want to live in a future that is desolate, dry, volatile. I want to live in a lush, abundant, fair, ecologically sound future. And young people can do that. Especially through support systems like YACVic Activators.

Chris is 24 years of age and lives in a small community of only 12 people in Club Terrace on Combienbar River, 2 hours west of Mallacoota. She is the only young person in her tiny community, with the closest people to her age being two 5-year-olds and people over 50. There is no mobile reception or internet connectivity.

I need to make connections with people my age

After the Black summer bushfires, she was extremely isolated and searching for connection to other young people. Chris was frustrated that no bushfire recovery efforts seemed to focus on young people and was

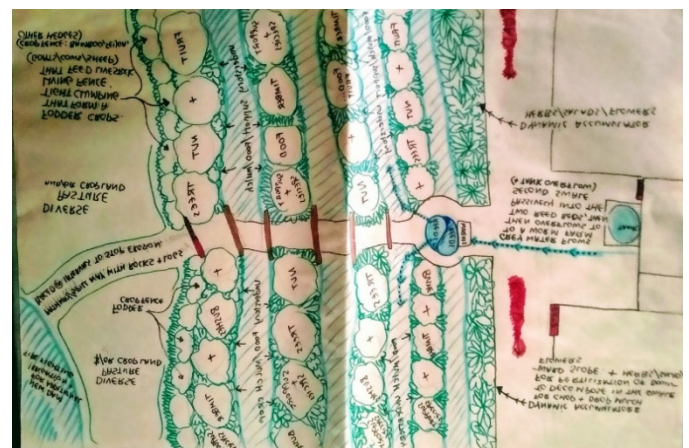
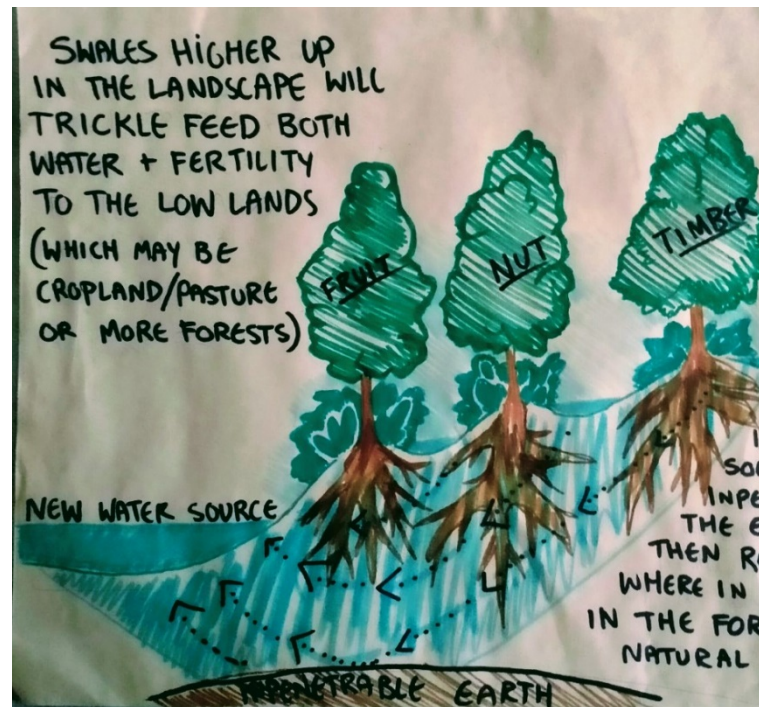
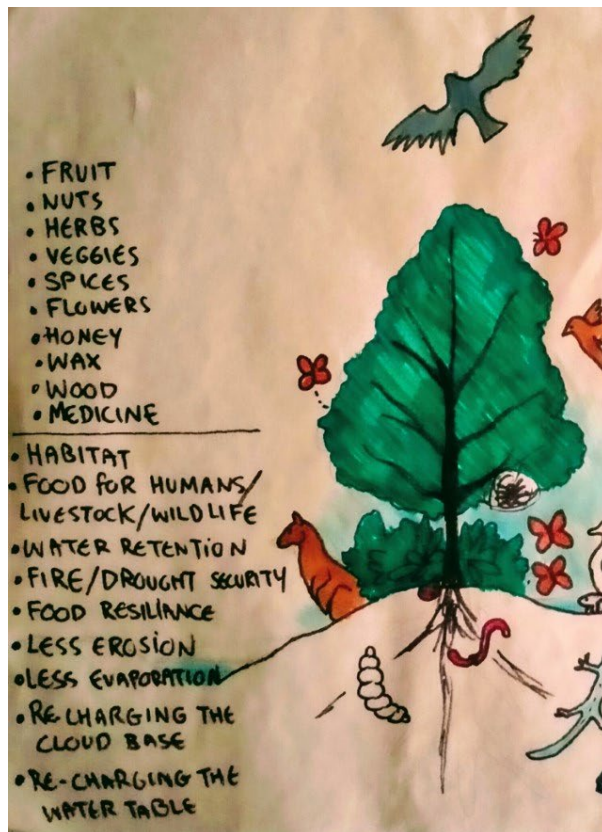
asking "Is there anything for young people around here?" She learned about the YACVic Rural Activators project through Bushfire Recovery Victoria and the Red Cross.

Bushfires are really scary, especially ones as big as what we had in the 2020 Black Summer bushfires. It was that hot, hot, summer day. We looked up into the sky and saw this huge mushroom cloud. And we were like "should we leave or should we stay?"

Chris was concerned that her isolated location, and lack of internet connectivity, would exclude her from the program, especially with the Activator program's remote delivery model necessitated by COVID-19 restrictions. The flexibility of the program, allowing contact from Chris whenever she did have mobile or internet access, along with support from The Sanctuary Mallacoota Youth Centre, enabled Chris to join the Activators program.

Chris is passionate about 'creating a sustainable, abundant environment which begins by holding water in the landscape.' Her project focuses on creating swales – level ditches on contoured land that hold water in the landscape. They are planted with trees and other vegetation to create food and habitat for humans and animals. This can attract wildlife, and meets the needs of humans, wildlife and livestock. Chris wants more people and local governments to adopt permaculture principles to help prepare our communities for the future.

Everyone's really concerned about drought and fire. If the water is held in the landscape for longer periods of time, I think that could really help with our preparedness and resilience in our changing climate.



Concept drawings of swales and plantings by Chris for her project proposal

As part of her project, Chris purchased plants using Activators seed money, but also matched this from her own funds. She is now supporting and promoting others to create swales on their land, working with a neighbour to implement these changes on a second property.

She is also facilitating an introductory permaculture course to be held in her community to inform and education more people around the benefits of these actions.



Case Study: Jen

Project: We are Wang

A youth-focused online platform,
by locals for locals.



I hope that I can live in a community that is resilient and strong together.

And that we can unite and make it through tough times, through gratitude and just being there for each other no matter what

knowing that you do have a sense of home and having that pride of where you come from.

Especially as we recover from really hard times of these bushfire months, it's about getting back to community and the roots of what community really means.

Jen is 15 and lives on a small hobby farm in Greta, 20 kilometres outside central Wangaratta. Jen has a strong sense of social justice and student leadership. She is family minded and a keen sportsperson who loves her local community. Jen wants to encourage others to appreciate and promote the Wangaratta area.

I've always been passionate about where I live and helping my area as best I can. Leadership is a huge part of who I am and I always put the needs of others first.

Jen wants her local community of young people to take pride and enjoyment in their local landscape, wildlife, cafes and experiences, through sharing their favourite places and activities on the 'We are Wang' website and Instagram page. A main target of interaction on the website relates to understanding and connecting with native wildlife, and finding areas to enjoy where pets are welcomed.

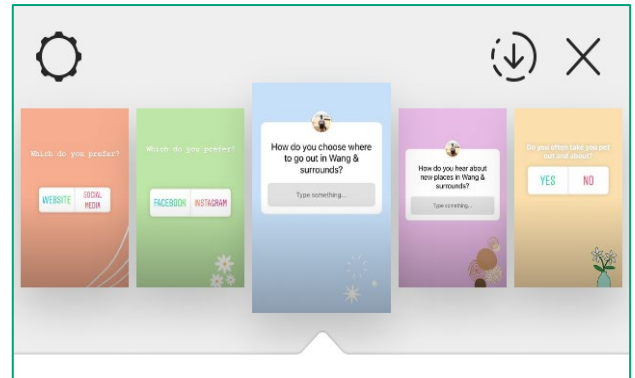
Our land is who we are and no matter where you go or where you come from, your anchor will always be your home and where you grew up.

I am creating an online space, specifically for youth, but not necessarily only for youth. The

idea is that they can find the best spots to visit in Wang and surrounds.

One of the main things I want to target is interacting with the wildlife and native species around us. It is a part of the land that almost gets forgotten sometimes. Being able to understand what's around you and what they do

I have learned so much through Activators so much about other people and how I can interact with new people. Being in a small town, you never really meet anyone totally, totally different. Being able to meet these people has been totally amazing.



Example of one of the many Instagram surveys used by Jen in the development of the We are Wang website

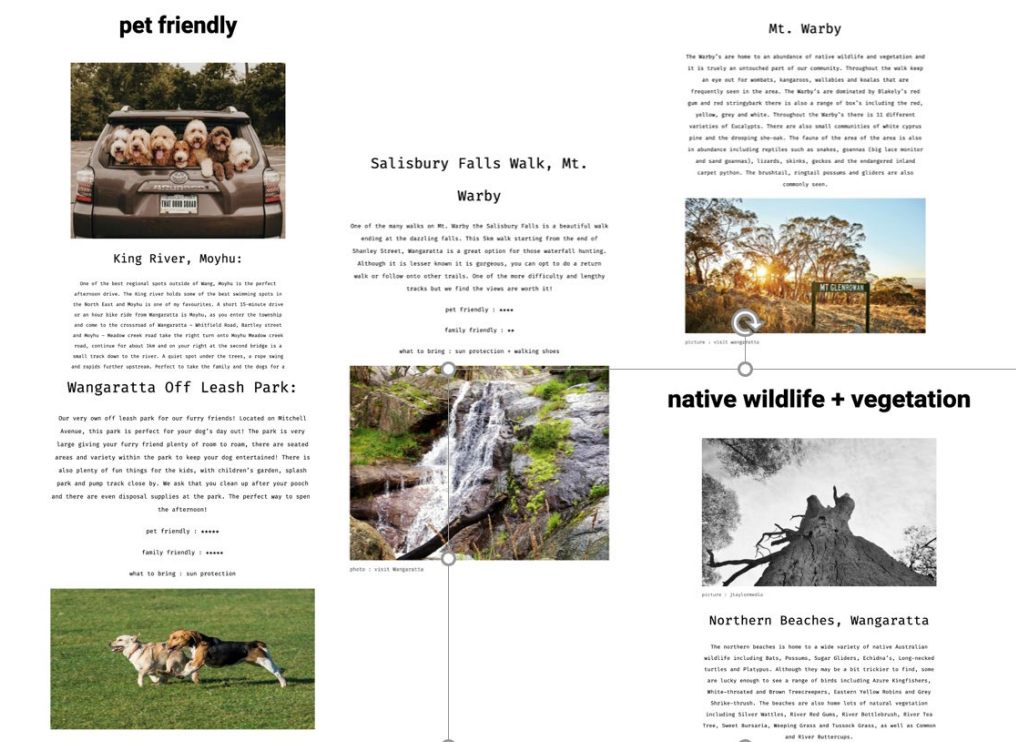


Image: Screenshot of We are Wang website pages

Case Study: Chloe

Furry Friends First Aid

Animal first aid training kits for young people in bushfire affected communities



I care about young people making change because we are the future. We are the next generation, and everything is going to start relying solely on us. We need to step up with confidence and courage.

Chloe has just completed her Certificate III in Companion Animal Studies at Gippsland TAFE in Warragul. She has experienced the impacts of bushfire several times growing up in rural Victoria and is passionate about animals and the environment. Chloe wants to empower young people to help pets and

wildlife in emergency situations. Chloe's project focuses on producing self-contained animal first aid training kits including instructions and hands-on training activities. By providing a reusable, self-contained, hands-on training resource, Chloe hopes to provide young people with knowledge and skills to assist animals. The kits will be donated to youth focused organisations in the East Gippsland area and she Chloe hopes to see them being used for many years to come.



Image: Furry friends First Aid training kit

Chloe has lived through a range of personal challenges and is an advocate for young people having access to youth workers and youth spaces.

Chloe chose to focus on youth services because she knows there are many young people who need to find that connection and purpose.

Youth centres can provide connections and a place for young people with challenges to connect, open up, feel safe and gain positive experiences. I know this as my younger self would find peace and comfort at youth centres and found it to be a safe and positive experience.

I would like to give back to these people through providing animal first aid training to these centres.

Chloe commenced the Activators program during the COVID-19 lockdown and while completing her TAFE studies. As the year progressed, she found the pressures of balancing TAFE studies, which had moved to remote delivery, with her Activators project challenging.

Chloe stopped responding to contacts about the Activators program for a substantial interval but continued to be included in all communications and invitations to Activator events. With her studies almost complete, and the COVID-19 restrictions easing, Chloe re-engaged and has since been consistently committed to her project.

Chloe does not identify as Aboriginal but does have Aboriginal heritage. Through the Activator program she noted:

"I have also learned so much about Aboriginal culture and it's been just amazing learning about everyone and why they are here and what their projects are.

My favourite part about Activators has been getting to know new people who have lots of

things in common. It has just been great getting to know all the different mind sets and the different problems around Victoria and the different things all these people are coming up with to help the community.



Image: Chloe and East Gippsland Councillor Kirsten Van Diggele a 'Furry Friends First Aid kit' for distribution

The kits have been distributed to:

- Save the Children's 'M.Y. Van' and East Gippsland Mobile youth space
- Headspace Bairnsdale's Youth Space and the headspace YAG for use at upcoming events
- East Gippsland Shire Councils 'Youth Ambassadors'
- The Sanctuary Youth Space, Mallacoota.



Image: 'Furry Friends First Aid kit' with activities

Case Study: Willow

Caring for an adopted animal has changed my life, particularly after a stressful year dealing with Year 12 during the bushfires and COVID-19. Animals are so good for our mental health, they often understand us in ways our friends and families can't. Our community could really benefit from giving these creatures a home.

The Paws Project

Supporting the ethical adoption of furry friends

Young people know a lot. Some people think we don't, but we do know a lot. We are very aware of all the issues in the world



Willow, aged 18, from Bairnsdale, learned about Activators while completing Year 12 during COVID -19 imposed online learning.

She joined the Activators program through a desire to be more involved in her community and to promote responsible adoption of shelter pets. Willow's project is to educate local upper primary school students about selecting pets ethically and not supporting puppy farms.

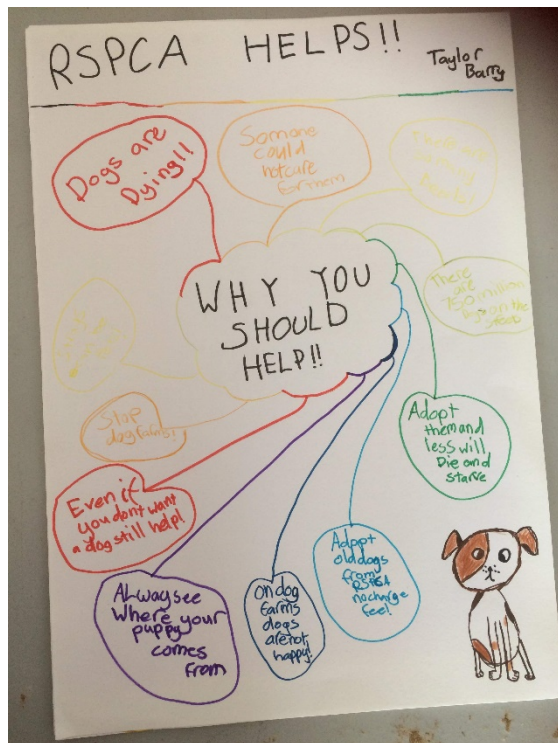
As her year 12 commitments increased, Willow found it necessary to take a hiatus from the Activators program, rejoining after her school year ended.

I appreciate that Leah and Derm were flexible and allowed me to take a break from Activators to study in year 12

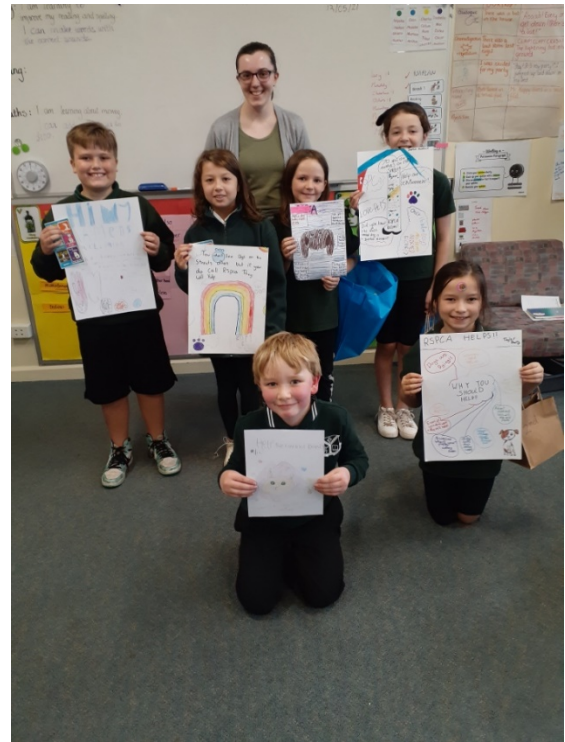
Since resuming her project work, Willow has been working the RSCPA Vic Education team to develop tailored lesson plans, competitions and activities. She has delivered her ethical adoption sessions to all students in Years 3-6 at Bairnsdale 754 Primary School in March 2021.



Image: Willow delivering her education session at Bairnsdale 754 Primary school.



Project competition submissions for 'The Paws Project' from Bairnsdale Primary School 754



Willow is now recruiting schools for future 'Paws Project' sessions.

I think Activators is a very empowering program and allows young people to feel more confident in themselves and their ability to create change in the world.

Willow has since returned to 754 Primary School to ask some follow up questions and deliver prizes to the students who entered the Paws Project poster competition. Willow was pleased to report that the students:

- Talked to friends and family about the Paws project
- Remembered that puppy farms treat animals poorly
- Understood the need to care for pets and animals.

Case Study: Mary

Care with Confidence

Animal first aid kits – supporting people to help injured wildlife

Mary, 16, lives in Wangaratta and wants to help empower people to aid injured wildlife.

I am passionate on the education of communities on the impact bushfires have on native bushland and wildlife as well as what people can do to combat this.

When Mary joined the Activators program, she was a young student whose life had been changed by the impact of COVID-19.

My name is Mary and I am a year 11 student currently living with my family in Wangaratta. I usually work casually at Bunnings, however due to covid-19 and my own health concerns I have been unable to do so of late. I am part of the 2020 Wangaratta youth, more specifically the environmental group and have been thoroughly enjoying the opportunity to expand my skills and broaden the impact I have on my community.

Mary overcame an initial reservation to join Activators due to her fear of public speaking. Once Mary was reassured that she would

have choice and control in all elements of the program, she was able to participate with enthusiasm. Care was taken to ensure Mary felt supported and to build a safe group environment where she could contribute comfortably. Mary was keen to challenge and extend herself throughout the Activators project and ultimately reported:

I am proud of all the times I simply spoke up/in front of others, as it is something that I avoid a lot in my everyday life so I think I did a good job of pushing myself out of my comfort zone.

Mary's project was based on creating animal first aid kits to go in cars, to help people assist when they encounter injured animals, particularly wildlife. Mary researched appropriate contents, instructions, and suppliers for the kits. At the beginning of 2021, Mary stepped back from her Activators project after commencing her Year 12 studies and resuming her part time job. Although she had hoped to get more of her project done over the summer, she found that after the difficulties of the last year, she needed more time to recover and focus on her school commitments.

With Year 12 starting I am really beginning to feel the pressure of everything and I'm not sure I will be able to cope with the added stress

However, Mary reflects positively on her time with Activators. When asked if the Activators program helps people and communities recover from adversity, she said:

.it gives people the chance and resources to make an impact in their community.:

I think it is helpful as people get a chance to properly face what has happened and overcome it.

For herself, she also reflected:

I have definitely learnt about the fact that even if you do a project individually, it doesn't mean you have to do it alone as there is always infinite support their to help you. I also learnt interesting things about wildlife, project management and media.

Mary is hoping to resume her project after completing her Year 12 studies.

Other Project

Outcomes and Reflections

Life gets in the way

Young people engaging with programs such as Activators, are taking on an additional, voluntary commitment. Understandably, situations occur when life circumstances result in an inability to continue the commitment to its conclusion. During the Activators program, two highly engaged young people left the program.

The first, who was undertaking full-time employment, completed initial workshops and trainings with enthusiasm and contributed enthusiastically to other project offerings. During research into his own project, using connections facilitated through Activators with Zoos Victoria, he discovered that an expert in his project area was already a co-worker at his place of employment. This young person was experiencing personal challenges and working fulltime. He realized he was able to continue his project at his own pace within his local community. He chose to resign from participation in the Activators program and

pursue his project independently, at his own pace.

The second young person to leave the program was balancing full-time study with the impacts of the bushfires and other personal challenges. As the anniversary of the bushfire approached, the young person began to respond only intermittently to contacts, but would occasionally respond:

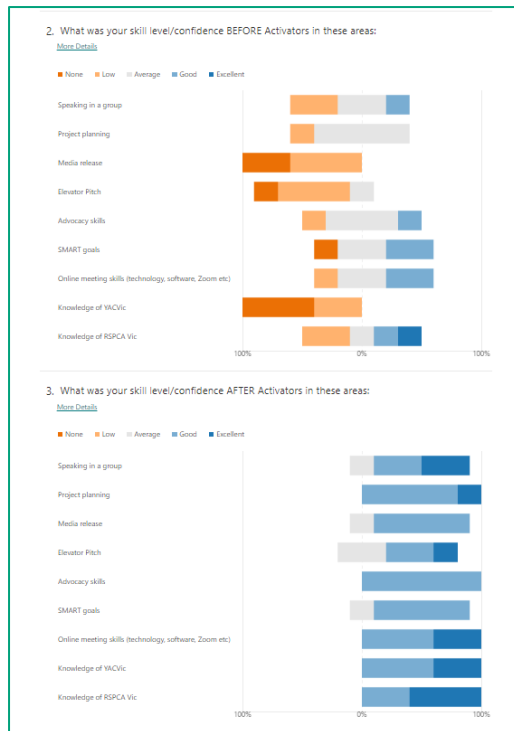
I've really appreciated your messages .it's really unlike me not to reply, I am just trying to work out what's best. Thanks for keeping my options open

Ultimately, the young person decided they needed to focus on their own recovery and studies and therefore stepped away from the Activators project. They were happy to reflect on their involvement and provided the following feedback:

I felt completely supported though the whole experience I learned sooo much from it. It made me think critically on the different issues we have going on in the world. The biggest thing I took was that ..the best action you can take is just engaging your community.

Outputs and Actions

In addition to their community projects, participants undertook a range of training and activities throughout the Activators program . All Activators reported improvements in skills and confidence in a range of area, from public speaking and project planning, to knowledge of the work of YACVic and RSPCA Vic.



A short video was also released highlighting the work of the Orbost Secondary School students during the Activators program.

The Activators Project Officer prepared an abstract for a national conference.

To promote and celebrate the work of the young Activators, YACVic produced group and individual short videos featuring the young people describing their motivations, experiences of bushfire, Activators projects, and hopes for the future.

Additionally, each Activator prepared a tailored media release and a letter to their local Member of Parliament. The Activators were asked to edit and approve documents, reports and videos before their publication.

Two Activators were interviewed for the Inspector-General for Emergency Management's (I-GEM) report into bushfire recovery for young people. One was interviewed and appeared on her local TV network in response to the release of the group Activator video.

Key Recommendations for Future Programs

Recommendation 1

Keep an open and flexible approach to inclusion and enrolment into the program. This creates opportunities, such as the involvement of Orbost Secondary College, and should be maximised.

Recommendation 2

Continue the model of appointing a dedicated Project Officer to support, maintain communication and build trust with participants.

Recommendation 3

Focus on face-to-face delivery supported by regular virtual connections.

Recommendation 4

Take a solution-focussed approach to recruiting, including and supporting marginalised or disadvantaged young people to participate in the program.

Recommendation 5

Have a strong commitment to accommodating the changing life circumstances of young people. This includes adjustments to schedules and the option to re-engage with the program without judgement or guilt. Continue communication to participants throughout the project, even after a period of no response.

Recommendation 6

Offer a range of project interest/focus areas to widen the participant pool. Multiple constraints of age, geographic location and interest areas may have reduced applicants this time.

Recommendation 7

Recruit and train mentors prior to program commencement, and ensure they are trained prior to the young people's participation in the program commencing.

My experience has been exceptional. I have gained so many new skills. I have gained so much more confidence in myself and my social anxiety is almost non-existent anymore.

The Activators program has really helped me grow as a person and I couldn't be more thankful to all the lovely people I have meet. I have really enjoyed getting to know new people with so much in common and working with them. - Chloe



Appendices

Appendix A: YACVic Youth-Focused Disaster Recovery Protocol

February 2020 - (Katherine Ellis and Derm Ryan, Youth Affairs Council Victoria)

Who is this protocol for?

This protocol is for use by Federal, State and Local Government emergency and recovery services and institutions, and local youth services, youth workers and others who engage with young people in disaster affected areas.

It aims to provide guidance on key matters for consideration / inclusion in post-disaster recovery and rebuilding, to ensure positive outcomes for young people aged 12-25 who have been affected directly and/or indirectly by a disaster.

Why is it important to have a special protocol for young people?

In times of disaster, when families and communities are stressed and disconnected, and resources are channelled to dealing with disaster relief and recovery, it can often be the young people of the community whose needs are sidelined, and often at a crucial stage in adolescent development that can never be revisited.

Many young people will be required to step up their responsibility to their families and will also feel that they cannot voice their normal adolescent / early adult concerns in the context of a disaster environment when everyone's needs are so dire.

Their connections to peers and support networks are often significantly compromised by transport and communication outages which can

compound feelings of disconnection, loss of control and mental health issues.

There is also a risk that more young people will leave their communities and not return because they have been displaced or to search for jobs.

Young people from farming and small business backgrounds have identities that are linked to their family's business, and expectations that they will continue that legacy. If the property or business is destroyed, their livelihood, expectations and plans for their future may also be destroyed. In addition, young people may be expected to leave school to help on the farm or in the business, or there may be no money to send young people to boarding school which may also destroy chances of getting into university.

What are some of the key principles for young people in disaster recovery?

It is vital to provide resources specifically to support and empower young people in a disaster situation, both in the immediate aftermath of the disaster, and then as part of the ongoing recovery and rebuilding process over several years. Young people should play a central role in determining how the resources should be utilised to ensure the strongest outcomes.

Young people should have a dedicated and specific role on local, state and National recovery committees, and advisory bodies.

It is vital that young people are considered and included in any economic and infrastructure planning / rebuilding that a local community, state or national body may be working on (ie. BCA) and their views are included in both immediate and long-term modelling and or impact statements.

What support do young people need after a disaster?

Mental health services can be key to ensuring that young people are able to process their experiences. It is important to note that mental health services must be trusted by the young person, trauma informed, able to be provided without stigma, and easily accessible (taking into account cost, referral pathways, transportation needs etc). Often, mental health services will be better provided by local youth or health services with which young people have an established relationship.

Recreational programs to provide some semblance of a normal life, and to promote connection to their communities and with people who understand what they have experienced. Such programs can also provide a platform for youth workers to subtly assess young people's wellbeing and needs for referral to mental health and other services, in situations where young people may not even realise they need help, or be able to articulate their needs, or may be reluctant to 'bother' others for help as their family and community face significant troubles.

Empowerment, coordination and support to be 'part of the solution' and play an important role in contributing to recovery and rebuilding efforts, including renewing community cohesion. In past conflicts and disaster zones, it has often been young people who have led community projects to rebuild their communities.

What are the mechanisms to get support to young people?

Youth services in local communities

Local youth services will already be known and trusted in the community, as well as being easier to access, so are generally a better investment than fly-in-fly-out models of support, or bigger services in regional centres. They will also often be based in Local Government Associations, which take the lead on recovery and rebuilding efforts, which positions youth support and action as a key part of recovery and renewal.

The work of youth services can be remedial, such as on-the-ground

generalist support and mental health services, or recreational programs to ensure young people have some semblance of a normal life, and stay connected to their communities and with people who understand what they have experienced. Importantly, youth services can also coordinate, support and fund young people to play an important role in contributing to recovery and rebuilding efforts, and rebuilding community cohesion.

It is critical that young people are consulted and empowered to take a lead in determining the support that they need, the projects that they can lead and contribute to, and how they would like to see their community (including infrastructure and economic prospects) be rebuilt. Youth services can play a role in supporting and coordinating young people's safe and effective participation in such decision making.

It will also be vital for young people to be involved at the centre of decision making for recovery and rebuilding for their communities, to ensure their perspectives and lived experience inform decisions such as rebuilding of community facilities, and the creation of jobs. It is also as a matter of respect, as they are essential citizens for the health and future of the communities.

Youth Development Officers in the LGAs are ideally placed to coordinate young people's involvement, supported by YACVic and other state peaks. For immediate / quick action, grants to each affected local council should include an amount specified for youth services, to ensure that the unique needs of young people and the role they can/do play in the community are addressed.

Structures exist in most communities that would allow quick and expert deployment / utilisation of funds. Based on consultation undertaken by YACVic with colleagues and members, we would advise that immediate funding is best placed via allocations to each affected Local/Shire Council, and to Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisations (ACCO).

In addition to having existing mechanisms to distribute equitably and quickly, they are best placed to know what is happening on the ground.

We would also recommend that the funding is specifically identified and allocated for youth services, and overseen by a Youth Development Officer at the council (rather than health services, which tend to be more narrowly focused and can be stigmatising).

In the mid- to long term, other community youth services can also play a key role as lead agencies for recovery and rebuilding work with young people. Youth services can operate in/via a multitude of environments (local council, community, school, health, sport and recreation, etc), and ideally the services would be funded to be located within, or be able to easily and regularly travel to, each affected town, so that the young people are being supported by trusted community members who are there for the long term. It is also often difficult (emotionally, financially, or due to transport availability) for young people to travel to other towns.

Such investment will have enormous economic and social benefits, and could save millions in tertiary end services. Professional youth workers have specific skills that are often not fully recognised, and are also usually very good at stretching dollars to deliver great outcomes.

What should funding be spent on?

Meaningful funding would allow additional youth services – to be determined by each community based on their needs – such as:

- Creating a team of generalist youth workers who can run activities and events where young people can gather for some normality and social connection, but also be subtly assessed and referred for other needs. This should be a medium-term investment (i.e. 5 years), recognising the need for continuity, and that issues will continue to emerge over time for traumatised communities.
- Providing additional community-based services for young people who are traumatised. This may include mental health services, as not all young people will want to / be able to travel to where services such as headspace operate. If these are

offered as outreach services they are best done in person as young people in rural locations may not have free access to technology.

- Coordinating and paying young people to take on projects to help their communities to rebuild and recover. Rural communities are made up of incredible, resilient people – many of whom are driven young individuals who are passionate about where they live.
- Consulting with young people for their unique perspectives on solutions for rebuilding, both for community infrastructure and for economic recovery, especially the tourism, construction and agriculture industries.
- Providing opportunities for young people, such as apprenticeships while they assist with rebuilding, or community services training for those running youth programs, which could allow local skills development to be one of the silver linings on the disaster.
- Training staff from local institutions (schools, health services etc) and community members to understand the support that young people will need immediately and in the longer term. This should include training in the Code of Ethical Practice in Youth Work.
- Investing in local service providers and community members to become accredited instructors in Youth Mental Health First Aid training, to support young people in the immediate aftermath of the disaster, and to build the resilience of the community for the recovery and rebuilding stage, and future disasters.
- Provide access to safe sex information, sexual and reproductive health resources and services.
- In the case of bushfires, fund the Country fire Authority (CFA) Junior Volunteer Development Program (JVDP) (Junior Brigades) across all branches, to encourage and train local young people to join the CFA.

Past Inquiries – What has been recommended after previous disasters? High level Recommendations involving Young People

2009 Victorian Bushfires Royal Commission

Recommendations

- Six: 'Victoria lead an initiative of the Ministerial Council for Education, Early Childhood Development and Youth Affairs to ensure that the national curriculum incorporates the history of bushfire in Australia and that existing curriculum areas

such as geography, science and environmental studies include elements of bushfire education.’

Victorian Bushfire Reconstruction and Recovery Authority

Recommendations

- ‘VBRRRA adopted a ... framework that has the concept of community at its centre.’
- ‘VBRRRA would be involved in all four domains in varying degrees but the local community would be central to decision-making processes. Once people had a chance to convene and reach some kind of consensus about their needs, they would be invited to submit a proposal for community recovery which the Authority would help them enact. The combined proposals from all the affected communities would then form the basis for VBRRRA’s long-term master plan.’
- The VBRRRA operated until the 30th June 2011. From 2011–2020 the Victorian Government established the Fire Recovery Unit within Regional Development Victoria, and in 2020 established Bushfire Recovery Victoria (BRV) to focus on the rehabilitation of bushfire-affected communities.
- ‘VBRRRA began by encouraging affected townships to set up Community Recovery Committees (CRCs) for the express purpose of developing recovery plans.’
- ‘VBRRRA suggested that groups consult widely, hold open meetings and make consensus-based decisions wherever possible.’

Engaging Youth in Post-Disaster Research. Lori Peek, Jennifer Tobin-Gurley, Robin S Cox, Leila Scannell, Sarah Fletcher and Cheryl Heykoop (2016)

- ‘Children and youth have a vital role to play in disaster risk reduction, research activities, policy creation and decision-making.’

Kids the hidden victims of Black Saturdays

<https://www.theaustralian.com.au/nation/politics/kids-the-hidden-victims-of-black-saturday-disaster/news-story/12a50cc1382c4dbedecb11c7e01fecd>

Psychological effects on young people ten years on

<https://www1.racgp.org.au/newsgp/clinical/%E2%80%98renewal-from-the-ashes%E2%80%99-ten-years-on-from-black-s>

Specific Cohorts – What specific needs might some youth cohorts have?

Young disabled people can be particularly vulnerable during bushfires due to a lack of accessible information, emergency housing, vital equipment, mobility and many other factors. The Victorian Youth Disability Advocacy Service (YDAS) has collated some useful resources for disabled Victorians who are impacted by the bushfires.

<https://www.yacvic.org.au/blog/bushfire-resources-victorians-disability/>

There is a possibility that young people from certain groups (eg Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander, LGBTIQ+, multicultural communities) may experience racism and discrimination as they seek assistance and support in the aftermath of a disaster. It is important to assess arrangements at relief centres, recovery activities, and decision making processes to ensure inclusive and accessible practices are being utilised.

Communications – What are young people’s communication needs in/after a disaster? Media coverage of/by young people

There is so much that comes to mind, of course the practical needs, assistance opportunities, and the targeted mental health care is what most people are thinking about at the moment. But my experience with these types of things says that what young people want in particular is space and time that helps them forget a bit about what is happening. A chance to reduce responsibility, even for a few hours, and be young. I'd really love to be able to take some fun, engaging, 'distracting' youth programs into the worst affected areas in the recovery stages, and be an outside support to put young people in a space where they are allowed to have fun and enjoy themselves, despite their situations and their families' devastation. There's so much responsibility on young people to be grown up, to be responsible, to be present throughout the unknown grey period of recovery. It's a tough space for them to be in, and often they don't know how to balance the responsibility and the pre-existing needs of a developing young person.

Bonnie Clark, Youth Services & Partnerships Coordinator, Mansfield Shire Council

