

***Young People and Bushfire Recovery***

***Emerging Themes and Key Findings  – Workshop 1 – ‘Looking Back’***

***Background and Context***

YACVic is working with the Victorian Government to hear directly from young people and communitymembers in rural and regional areas, about the response and recovery from the devastating 2019-2020 bushfires across Eastern Victoria, and their experiences and ideas for a better future.

These workshops are complemented with training workshops on youth participation for community leaders, and youth advocacy and leadership for young people, to develop their skills in advocacy, leadership and decision-making.

Young people are experts in their own lives and have important contributions to make in bushfire recovery and rebuilding efforts. It is also important for community leaders to understand and embrace good practice in youth participation, and creating ethical and safe experiences for young people.

***Purpose***

The purpose of these consultations is to engage with young people, to genuinely seek their perspectives on the fires and what is needed for the recovery, develop new resources on good practice in engaging and supporting young people and local communities, and deliver workshops and training opportunities with young facilitators in partnership with local communities.

This includes a focus on big picture and aspirational ideas as well as identifying local vision statements, collecting stories and providing a space to discuss solutions.

The data from these consultations will be analysed and reported by YACVic in a consultation report on a regular basis and ongoing information will be deidentified.

***Workshop 1 – ‘Looking Back’***

In this first workshop ‘**Looking Back’** our objective was to explore and unpack how the bushfires have impacted young people’s lives, study, jobs and relationships.

***Workshop Design***

‘Looking Back’ was codesigned with members of the Bushfire Recovery Working Group, who also assisted in the delivery of this series.

YACVic facilitated a series of online workshops via zoom for 2-3 hours in duration and a face-to face consultation (once COVID-19-19 restrictions allowed).

Mental health services and debriefing opportunities were incorporated into the workshop design.

***Target Population group***

Young people aged 12 to 25 in Eastern Victoria (Towong, Alpine and East Gippsland Shire)

***Results and Analysis***

**Impact**

Most young people we have spoken to were not directly flame affected. Many were evacuated or had friends or family who were evacuated.

*This was different to other disasters. The fires were so big to anything else, people were not prepared. Everyone was impacted, we were all in shock, you couldn’t ignore this, we could see it. It was everywhere.*

*We were not allowed to live at home because of smoke on the roof, the water and power were off. Mum was scared so we left.*

*People don’t get the impact of what was lost and what was done to stop the fire.*

*People say to me “But you were not really impacted and didn’t lose that much”.*

*People panic. I have not had an opportunity to discuss what actually happened. We sat on the roof watching the fire come and defended the house against ember attack. It was really stressful and for people to deny that it is distressing.*

*No one had resources to respond to the fires like we do for flood and droughts. We’re aware about it but with drought and flood you can still about our lives. Not with a fire like this*

*It was so big. The front was into another state. It was bigger and hotter and faster, because we didn’t have a fire where it was for a long time, if ever.*

*The fire was in your face, you felt it far more than the drought, people had to pay attention to it. You couldn’t ignore it.*

*Everyone lost something in our area. Corryong property was really impacted. Lots of buildings had chemicals in it and we lost a lot of silage, feed, and land impacted.*

*There was a circle of fire around Corryong so one could leave, we lost communications during the fire.*

*I think of the heat and smoke, I think of recovery.*

*Disbelief.*

*This was the first fire to really rattle our town.*

*This fire has left a long-lasting visible impact.*

*Surprise.*

*We had no water, no power, no phones, no radio, no supplies.*

*This was the first direct threat to our town.*

**Health**

Almost half of the young people we have spoken to have had some physical health related impacts

*I had breathing issues during and after the fires.*

*Friends were in distress. Many people had family working as fire fighters.*

*Didn’t sleep as we were putting out spot fires*

*I was supposed to go into the army this year, but my shoe melted into my foot when putting out spot fires and I had to cancel as it is still not right.*

**Mental Health**

*We were not directly impacted but the community did get people to support people, and community offered mental health support which was really good. That would not have happened 15 years ago.*

*Need more funding for mental health youth support, and that gap for 20-30-year-olds also place based supports.*

*Everyone in the community was complaining about how they were impacted. Young people felt responsible for the destruction if they were in the fire response but couldn’t get to a particular property in time to save it. We had no time to reflect, no recovery time, no follow up counselling, because of fire. We didn’t even know how to process or talk, it was shock and raw, then no follow up counselling because of COVID-19. It’s word of mouth and everyone thinks someone else is worse off and then they don’t seek help. Kids are raised here to be tough; you don’t just go to a counsellor. School counsellor is not confidential. Everyone knows if you go to that room.*

*We need peer mental health, and Youth Mental Health First Aid. We need a counsellor we can trust but also that we don’t all know. Everyone knows everyone around here.*

*Friends were in distress, many people had family working as fire fighters*

*I stayed at my friends’ houses. This helped me get away and just spend time with my friends.*

**Community**

*Community was good. I felt respected and supported. Everyone helped each other.*

*Respect from Community. Community stepped up. Community helped each other.*

*We ran nights for younger scouts on preparation and then farm clean up, but we got shut down because of COVID-19.*

*I liked seeing all the names on the trucks because you could see how the response came from everywhere to help us.*

*There were community meetings at the sports centre, that was very helpful, we had people giving out donated equipment.*

*What if I’m not as affected as other people. People saying “You were not really impacted or affected”.*

**What is working well?**

*Being able to be involved in the recovery effort, like baby sitting and or stocking shelves. Suddenly we were old enough to help and be useful rather than being told you’re too young for that.*

**What is not working so well now**?

*More reach out for young people, there is a gap with checking in. Facebook was a useful support.*

*We have a lot of old people. There was no coordinated response to look after the old people and make sure they were ok. My neighbour was eating weetbix with water. It was 2 days before we could check on them.*

**Communication and Emergency Response**

*We had the app working. Plus, the radio and Facebook, plus the Lake’s noticeboard on Facebook.*

*VIC Emergency app was really helpful. You need to remember to turn it off after the event.*

*There was a circle of fire around Corryong so one could leave, we lost communications during the fire.*

*We need more aircraft, more firefighting resources, this would result in less damage.*

*More security to stop the houses being looted. This was scary. Why do people do that it’s just sad.*

*We used the Vic emergency app and the ABC. We had a friend in the CFA. A friend had a bunker. They now say they will never do it again. People say if they knew they would not have stayed.*

*Local info was people sending photos, like neighbours, that’s how we knew our house was spared.*

*We used social media, no-one knew about Mallacoota until social media and ABC news, and once those images came out everyone wanted to help, like farmers who don’t have enough hay were sending it to Mallacoota.*

*We had the army in, but they were limited because of the contracts AND WHAT THEY ARE ALOUD TO DO. Blaze aide were not trained in fencing and didn’t know how to do fences. A lot of the fences needed to be redone. The cops were here, the Melbourne cops didn’t know how to deal with us and had no idea of local community. This community is different, and they didn’t know what they were doing.*

*The app didn’t work for us, so it was word of mouth which is unreliable*

*We used the app, but also social media and photos of damage which friends would send. We had a contact in DWELP that helped to keep us informed.*

*Young people aren’t well supported or informed.*

*Communication was lost, and we felt blind.*

*Limited.*

*There were convoys of trucks come into our town, it was great to see the names of the small-town CFA trucks.*

*This was the first time our town was evacuated.*

*We had to rely on door knocking to let our neighbours know what was happening.*

*We only knew what was happening from our family and neighbours.*

*Word of mouth.*

*Community meetings at the school.*

*We only knew the fire was coming when we saw the glow.*

**What could YP do for the future to be better prepared?**

*I’m not sure, even with previous fires people were still not prepared. I’m not sure why.*

*Maybe talk with schools. Scouts or other spaces where you tell young people what to expect, what to pack if they do need to evacuate that sort of thing.*

*More awareness. Actual education in Primary schools. Every time you go up a grade you get a little lesson on what to do.*

*Better knowledge of what to take like a packing list.*

*Better knowledge of fire with case studies from previous experiences.*

*Bring community together, to talk about what we need to do. Like a town meeting for everyone to have input into a community plan, like knowing if the fire gets here X, we will put in a fire break. Key community can take on key roles, like helping neighbours who are less mobile, old or disabled.*

*This needs to be planned before the fire comes you know like at a community level.*

*They should talk to schools about fires and what to do as a response. Basic fire knowledge and training.*

*Is there somewhere safe to go and have youth workers or teachers there at the safe place to keep young people engaged.*

*We didn’t know what to take when evacuated. Just knowing people are ok. Like a way to check in people to know they are OK.*

*Simple things like clean your gutters, or if your neighbours can’t because they are old or disabled, help and do it for them.*

*Make community level fire plans as an event, where young people can also have a say*

*Use school newsletters.*

*Make a list of what to pack.*

*Know when to evacuate.*

*I wish I knew more about how fire worked and the [interactions with] weather*

*Be aware of your surroundings, I had no idea where the evacuation area was, no one did.*

**What about during?**

*Harder for children under 12 as they rely on family more than news or social networks. Families need to be prepared.*

*Have someone available to look after the kids at evacuation centres. A young adult to help keep them busy distracted and calm.*

*Not much available for little kids when they are gathered. Have something to keep children and young people occupied.*

*More accommodation and support for disabled people.*

*Plan for evacuation for people with disabilities.*

*We were lucky as our scout leader is on the SES and well connected to advise people where to go for help or to access services.*

*I didn’t know what to do. I keep thinking to myself, what do I do. I wasn’t able to think, what should I take, or pack our house. I am not sure.*

*We had to grab things that you couldn’t replace. Like your school computer.*

*Plan for evacuation for people with disabilities. My aunty could have been caught. Even though the neighbours said they would take her they panicked and took off so I had to contact the police to see if they could go get her. We were lucky because the fire shifted, and she was spared but if that didn’t happen, she would have been caught because the police couldn’t get to her and it was scary. This needs to be planned before the fire comes you know like at a community level.*

*More accommodation and support for disabled people.*

*We didn’t know what to take when evacuated. Just knowing people are ok. Like a way to check in people to know they are OK.*

*I wish I could have been useful and having something to do.*

*Knowing what your role is, having a job.*

*I needed to know everyone was okay, I wish there was a way to do that.*

**What do young people need after?**

*Friendship networks: How to check in with your friends.*

*More support to replace equipment or schoolbooks, supplies and essentials, and financial support.*

*There is a gap for mental health support for people 20’s plus. There needs to be like a healing process and gatherings. School aged kids need to get that at school.*

*There has been no opportunity for me to address my stuff from last fire and now we are coming into a new fire season.*

*It needs to be reinforced and regular that it’s not just once. It stays with you forever. We need for this help to be available for a long period of time.*

*Get people to share their stories with each other, and a space where you can openly communicate with everyone.*

*Family and friends support at and following the event. This support had a real impact. Friends took us shopping at KMART and wouldn’t let us leave till we bought something. It was weird but helpful.*

*People checking in for support.*

*They talked at the first school assembly, but it needs to be reinforced and regular, it would be good if someone could come to the school and update us.*

*Get people to share their stories with each other, and a space where you can openly communicate with everyone.*

*Community BBQs*

*Resource hub and social connections. Do it as a BBQ? It would have a positive outcome.*

*Community level discussions. Place based.*

*Develop a guide for how communities can hold these conversations?*

*To get away from the smoke.*

*Young people need a place to get together to meet, talk and debrief.*

*Knowing what to do next, the volunteers were impacted too and there was a lack of mental health support.*

**What more can be done regarding animals and environment?**

*Lots of donations were made for people. More awareness for animals could be done. Didn’t know RSPCA van was in town. (More comms and awareness for this sort of services)*

*Koalas were heavily impacted, like at Rawson they had so many kolas arrive needing care, mostly from East Gippsland.*

*Waterways on the Murry river, lots of dirt run off and floods after the fires, lots of dead fish, lots of feed donated, lots of financial aid. I know they want to see how well the re-growth happens naturally and seeds only open after fires, so people have waited to see how the natural environment comes back first before doing too much.*

*Not a lot done except cutting down dead and dangerous trees. Lots of toxins in the soils. No big work projects.*

*Is anyone doing research on the impact on the waterways? The runoff from the rain has been really bad, Impact on fish, Tambo is really bad, up in Swifts. There is nothing to hold the topsoil and this can cause landslides. Which is really bad for all the wildlife and people that depend on that is really bad.*

*Things have grown back. People in my area are taking photos of the regrowth and the dams filling and sharing them.*

*There were thousands of dead fish in our river.*

*The farms irrigation was contaminated.*

*Making sure that the fence builders are qualified, farmers had to repair the volunteer’s job.*

**How can young people be involved now? What are the opportunities?**

*I hear a lot of adults saying “what young people need is” but there is not a lot of opportunities for them to be involved or say what they want?*

*Young people need to be involved as they are going to be here for the long term, they have lots of ideas, and it’s just important.*

*We will be inheriting everything after this so we should be involved. I am confident that the community would listen to us.*

These comments give rise to the need for capacity development opportunities in local areas for young people to develop peer mentoring, public speaking and public consultation skills.

**The impact of COVID-19-19**

*People are worn out from fires, then COVID-19-19, Real impact on farmers not being able to support each other, Real impact on business and economy It has been better for support as a result of the fires, people are more supportive as a community during COVID-19 because of the Fires. Especially the first lock down.*

*After the fire in Sarsfield we usually do Friday night dinners at the hall and there was lots of donations there, you were not able to get to on Friday night. You had to book a time to go and see the donations.*

*Community are more concerned about the 3rd wave of COVID-19 than another bushfire.*

*The fires got forgotten with COVID-19 and home schooling/ working. As a result, none of us have even talked about the fires. Nothing has been recognised after COVID-19 there has been very little opportunities to talk as a group.*

*COVID-19 is now the issue and the fires have been forgotten like it’s not an issue anymore.*

*Some of the bushfire funding has not been fully utilised as a result of COVID-19. Will that money still be available because it needs to be.*

*Are people still going to volunteer their time to support fire recovery events also people have lost work so are they still going to be motivated to work on this sort of thing?*

*Forced further isolation. There no time to debrief, this happens with storytelling and that did not happen.*

*Recovery is on pause, no face to face talking.*

*No, lockdown has prevented us from helping with clean-up.*

*CLASSES FOR PEOPLE TO BE SELF AWARE ABOUT THEIR EMOTIONAL RESPONSE. Mental health it’s like just complain about for a minute and then just get on with it. There no way to express it. My mates don’t know what’s involved in counselling or how to even talk about what happened. We need classes on how to do this. Wearing a mask makes its harder, and therefore further isolates people from working together.*

*Everything is now focused on COVID-19 and permits to rebuild have slowed or stopped, we have been waiting for our permit to be processed and it’s all being put on pause because of COVID-19. We are not revisiting what’s happened and you’re just looking at all the damage and it reminds you of the loss.*

**Other**

*Traditionalist attitudes and parents are barriers for young people to get involved. Lack of transport, you’re too young, you don’t know what going on or what to do as a response is a big issue from older people.*

*Young people know what’s going on but get shut down. It’s even harder when you don’t have access to social networks i.e. under 12.*

*Peer youth mentors will help to change some of this and elevate the voices for young people (U12) and they can advocate for them.*

*People living out of home might need extra support. I’ve just moved out and having some check in would be good for 18+. Just how are you going? Do you need anything?*

*Confidence. We don’t know what can be done, so we need to be included to know what is possible. It’s hard to engage people, young people are not motivated. It’s one thing to ask what needs to be done but it’s another to know what needs to be done or even what’s possible. It’s no good just asking us what needs to be done because we don’t know what’s possible, we are drained from just being at school and there is no energy to meet after school, also transport is an issues kids don’t have a licence, so they can’t get anywhere.*

*Growcon? Not enough local were included. Why were they not local? The locals had to fight to be a part of it. This is not good enough. More local people could have been involved, I know this might be problematic but also be cathartic and be involved. These are important employment opportunities for local employment.*

***Unique ideas and feedback***

*Neighbours were challenging as some didn’t like us but if they needed help, we would provide that. (maybe LGA factsheet or info on how to be a good neighbour in a disaster even with neighbours you don’t know or like)*

*Maybe talk with schools. Scouts or other spaces where you tell young people what to expect, what to pack if they do need to evacuate that sort of thing.*

*More need to be done to advertise services for young people. I haven’t heard much from Headspace in the past 6 months. There not much around for young people.*

*It’s important that young people can have a space to suggest how they can be involved in the clean up.*

***Conclusion***

Young people who participated in our ‘Looking Back’ workshops were appreciative of the opportunity to share their story and to feel heard, and excited to communicate to the wider community to influence the actions of the recovery efforts.

* **Workshop 2 - Good Practice Guide consultation (Completed, report pending)**

Create and design resources to support youth participation in bushfire recovery and rebuilding efforts.

* **Workshop 3 – ‘The Silver Lining’**

Identify ideas and aspirations for jobs that could flow from the recovery and rebuilding efforts, or that should be considered as part of the long-term strategy for your community.

* **Workshop 4 – ‘Rising from the Ashes’**

Explore your unique needs and ideas for the recovery and rebuilding of your community.

* **Youth Network Co-design**

Establish a student-led (school, apprentices, TAFE and Universities included) ongoing disaster recovery network that will focus on empowering young people. Produce ideas on how to best engage students in all levels of education, build connections with diverse young people, and improve disaster responses.