



# **Bushfire Safety Policy Framework**

Working together – before, during and after

Updated November 2018

**Working in conjunction  
with Communities,  
Government, Agencies  
and Business**

# Introduction

***Our vision of building safer and more resilient communities can be achieved by working together before, during and after emergencies.***

Bushfire management has undergone many changes since 2009, including major changes to the advice provided to communities, fire danger information and warnings, and safety and shelter options. Initiatives and expanded programs in education, shelter options and community engagement have been implemented to support improved community preparedness and safer responses. Bushfire safety is a shared responsibility and shared obligation and requires serious thought and investment to achieve.

This *Bushfire Safety Policy Framework* identifies the goal, approach and scope of these bushfire community safety activities, as a contribution to building safer and more resilient communities. It is worth noting that although this Framework primarily addresses bushfire risk, the goal and activities are also relevant for managing other emergency risks. The shift to an ‘all communities, all emergencies’ approach to emergency management has already enabled this policy framework to be applied more broadly.

The Framework has been subject to regular review since its adoption in 2010. This review has taken various forms, whilst intending to reflect learnings from experience, research and assessments of our activities so that it continues to provide appropriate guidance for the future.

In 2012/13 Victoria experienced the most significant level of fire activity since 2009. Many fires across the state threatened communities, destroyed 46 homes, and resulted in one death. The 2017 revision of the Framework further reflected the evolution of our approach following significant learnings from subsequent fire events, most notably those in 2013/14 and 2015/16, which were again attended by significant property losses.

These events remind us that there is an ongoing and serious threat from bushfires each year and that we need to be as well prepared as possible for fires of different types and scale. These fires provided an opportunity to assess some of the actions put in place since 2009.

Interviews with householders affected by three significant fires and input from various agencies, organisations and government departments with responsibilities for bushfire safety, identified valuable lessons about how to improve our approach.

One of the most significant outcomes of that review was the identification of a range of ‘archetypes’ or typical ways people respond to bushfire. These archetypes reveal the diverse ways people understand and respond to the threat of fire and also highlight the range of needs people may have in relation to bushfire. It should not surprise us that people react differently to bushfire, but we need to acknowledge these differences more fully and tailor our activities to take account of them.

Awareness, education and engagement programs have been very effective over many years. They have assisted in increasing our understanding of bushfire and how to prepare and respond safely. It is, however, clear that many people fail or choose not to participate or continue to respond in ways that entail a level of danger. We need to better understand this behaviour and tailor our approach and programs to challenge the way people think and respond to threats including bushfire.

Fire danger information and warnings have been a focus of major change over several years. The 2017 review identified that these changes have resulted in more effective warnings being issued and people being better informed and able to respond effectively. Experiences during each bushfire season highlight a number of ways we can make warnings even more effective, both in how they are constructed and disseminated to the community.

Other areas that we need to continue to investigate include safety and shelter options available to people threatened by bushfire. Options need to be adapted to the local context to provide the most effective range of ways to support safer decision making processes and actions.

One of the most striking findings of the 2012/13 bushfires review is the significant extent to which people, both individually and collectively, used their own skills and resources in responding to the fires.

Community understanding of their local area, social networks passing on information, the sharing of resources, and families and neighbours helping each other, all played an important part in enabling people to better understand and deal with the threat.

This is not to diminish the important role that various organisations and emergency services play in also supporting safe community response. It does however emphasise that we need to engage with and understand local communities, and work with them to enhance capabilities and build community resilience. *The Community Resilience Framework for Emergency Management* and the *Resilient Recovery Discussion Paper* published in 2017 point to pathways forward in this regard.

This Framework provides a sound and clear statement of contributions that assist in building safer and more resilient communities. Achieving this vision is an ongoing challenge and improvements identified in previous reviews have also been incorporated into the Framework.

These fundamentals include:

- the approach to education and engagement
- the revision of warning messages
- the development of improved ways to issue warnings
- guidance on working with local communities, to include the development of local planning processes, actions and plans to address the bushfire risk.

Whilst this Framework is dynamic, it will in time be superseded by other policy developments, including the Safer Together approach and the proposed Victorian Fire Management Strategy.

Success of the approach will depend on all those with responsibilities for dealing with bushfire and other hazard events, while engaging and working collaboratively with communities to become safer and more resilient.

**Authorised by the Victorian Emergency Management Commissioner**

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# Context of the Bushfire Safety Policy Framework

The Bushfire Safety Policy Framework is underpinned by a number of principles and perspectives that should guide the development and implementation of strategies and initiatives intended to enhance the safety of people from bushfires<sup>1</sup>. These statements reflect the findings and recommendations of the 2009 Victorian Bushfires Royal Commission (VBRC), while drawing upon research and describing key aspects of the context in which the Framework applies.

- The protection of human life is paramount.
- Risk management is fundamental to bushfire safety.
- Bushfire safety is a shared responsibility between the government and a range of stakeholders. Individuals are ultimately responsible for making their own decisions about how to respond to the bushfire risk.
- The State has a duty in equal measure to prepare for, prevent, mitigate, respond to and support recovery from bushfire. The State cannot absolutely guarantee the safety of all its citizens from bushfire.
- All bushfires are different. Bushfires are complex and dynamic events. Safe responses will always depend on specific circumstances, so agencies and the community need to plan for a variety of situations.
- Bushfire safety depends on people having access to a range of safety options. All options other than being out of the fire area involve varying degrees of risk.
- All Victorians, no matter where they live, must understand the bushfire risk. Each person has a responsibility to learn about bushfire and to undertake measures to ensure their own safety when living in, travelling through or visiting bushfire-prone areas.
- Bushfire safety involves effective planning and preparation prior to a fire, making informed decisions during the event, and having access to a range of safety options, in particular places to shelter from the effects of the fire.
- The State will provide timely advice to the community. This includes forecasting dangerous fire conditions and, where possible, warning communities if a fire is likely to affect their location so that people are able to make informed decisions about how best to respond.
- Bushfire safety information, warnings and other safety interventions must recognise the diversity in the community, be accessible, address different needs and be relevant to local situations. The State will endeavour, where possible, to inform visitors to Victoria of the local bushfire risk and how best to ensure their safety.

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<sup>1</sup> The term 'bushfire' is used in the Framework to describe all types of uncontrolled fires in the natural environment including grassfire, scrub fire etc. It is appropriate to use others terms such as grassfire in publications and community information.

## Goal

**The vision for the Victorian emergency management sector is to ‘build safer and more resilient communities’.**

The goal of the Bushfire Safety Policy Framework is to contribute to building safer and more resilient communities, from the risks associated with bushfire.

The Framework aims to guide the development and implementation of policies and programs by government, agencies and other stakeholders to:

- Increase the level of public understanding and preparedness for bushfire, by providing information about the bushfire risk and by supporting individual and community action to manage the risk.
- Enhance the ability of those at risk from bushfires to make informed decisions about how to respond through the provision of effective fire danger information and warnings for bushfire events.
- Enable safe public responses during bushfires by establishing a range of bushfire safety options that are appropriate to local circumstances and maximise survival in a bushfire.

## Purpose

The Bushfire Safety Policy Framework provides direction to government, agencies and other stakeholders about empowering a community that is safer and more resilient to the threat of bushfire.

This is an ongoing challenge, and this Framework provides guidance on what needs to be achieved and how government, agencies, and other organisations can work with the community to enhance the safety of all Victorians.

## Scope

The Bushfire Safety Policy Framework focuses on what needs to be achieved and how various stakeholders can work towards its goal. It identifies the desired community outcomes, and priority areas for action that should guide the development and implementation of policies, programs and initiatives in order to enhance community safety and resilience.

The Framework focuses on engaging the community, influencing behaviour, and ensuring the necessary infrastructure and resources are in place to reduce risk and support safe community responses.

The Framework identifies five priority areas for action:

- Awareness and education
- Community capacity building
- Local community planning
- Fire danger information and warnings
- Bushfire safety options.

The Framework defines objectives within each priority area to specify what needs to be achieved.

It does not address the broad range of other bushfire management measures that are also vital for managing bushfire risk – such as land use planning and building regulation, infrastructure management and planning, vegetation management, and operational planning and preparedness.

# Approach

The Bushfire Safety Policy Framework recognises that bushfire is a natural part of the Australian environment and that uncontrolled fires can pose serious threats to the safety, well-being and security of people who live, work and visit bushfire prone areas.

Dealing with the bushfire risk is a complex problem that requires a range of interventions. In large part, the safety of the community depends on many organisations, government and non-government, and the community itself, working in partnership to deal with the risk. The partnership approach is based on the notion of shared responsibility, but while this is often advocated, what it looks like in practice is more difficult to describe.

The approach underpinning the Framework depends on government, agencies, not for profit organisations, business and the community finding ways to share responsibility for the bushfire risk. The sharing of responsibilities will vary in different circumstances and should involve from open and honest engagement with the community and recognition of the different roles, responsibilities and capacities of the various parties, as well as the specific local issues that need to be addressed. There is no formula by which to specify in advance how responsibilities should be shared.

The Framework recognises that there is a range of ways in which government and agencies can intervene to address the bushfire risk. Some forms of intervention will be largely driven by agencies, where others will require various levels of involvement by the community to ensure success. Some forms of intervention may largely depend on individuals, households and communities taking responsibility for action. The Framework also highlights the value of the community taking the initiative to develop options and solutions to manage the bushfire risk in particular localities. In such cases the role for agencies is to support and, where appropriate, facilitate or assist in these activities that build community resilience.

Understanding the circumstances and experiences of diverse communities is central in guiding how services are delivered and how organisations can work with communities. Finding ways to address risk requires a good understanding of people's strengths, needs, priorities and their capacity to develop and take action. Programs and initiatives must acknowledge and account for this inherent diversity. Experience working with communities and observing public response to major bushfires highlights the challenges of engaging the public in dealing with risk. People may choose not to engage and others may not have the capability or capacity to become actively involved.

The approach underpinning the Framework requires both a long-term perspective and a recognition of the limitations of attempting to positively influence public behaviour. Nevertheless, these challenges can be tackled by using a broad range of innovative approaches and ensuring that good practice is replicated. Where communities indicate a willingness to take initiative, government, agencies and other organisations should encourage and appropriately support such efforts.

Communities are more likely to become involved and to take initiative if government and agencies value their experience and knowledge with a genuine offer to engage. The Framework encourages an approach to deal with the risk at the local level, providing opportunities for the community to identify key issues and become involved in finding solutions, together with the appropriate support from organisations.

The Framework reflects an approach that recognises the complexity of dealing with bushfires, the diversity of needs and potential capabilities of those at risk, and the need for a broad range of stakeholders to work collaboratively to address the bushfire risk.

## **Linkages to other policies and strategies**

The Bushfire Safety Policy Framework is a priority in the *Strategic Statement, Fire and Emergency Services in Victoria (2012)*.

The Framework's goals and approach are consistent with the *National Strategy for Disaster Resilience (2011)*.

It is also aligned with the Australasian Fire and Emergency Services Authorities Council (AFAC) position *Bushfire and Community Safety (2012)*, the *Community Resilience Framework for Emergency Management (2017)*, the *National Framework for Advice and Warnings to the Community (2009)* and the *Victorian Warning Protocol, v.3 (2017)*.

Other policies, such as the *Community Fire Refuges Policy (2015)*, *Use of Sirens for Brigade and Community Alerting (2016)*, the *Emergency Management Manual Victoria*, and a range of procedures and guidelines provide detailed direction and guidance on particular matters that are within the scope of the Framework.

## Governance

The Emergency Management Commissioner is responsible for the development, oversight of implementation and review of the Bushfire Safety Policy Framework. The Framework recognises the diverse range of stakeholders, including the community, that have an interest in its outcomes, and the devolved arrangements under which various parties manage bushfire risk.

This Framework provides direction and guidance, but requires government, agencies and other organisations with responsibilities for dealing with bushfire risk to work with each other and the community to identify and develop the most effective ways to deal with the risk.

The Emergency Management Commissioner will periodically review the Framework to consider available evidence on the implementation and effectiveness of its key elements. Such evidence may include the experiences and views of various stakeholders, the lessons from previous summer seasons, relevant research, and examination of key strategies and initiatives.

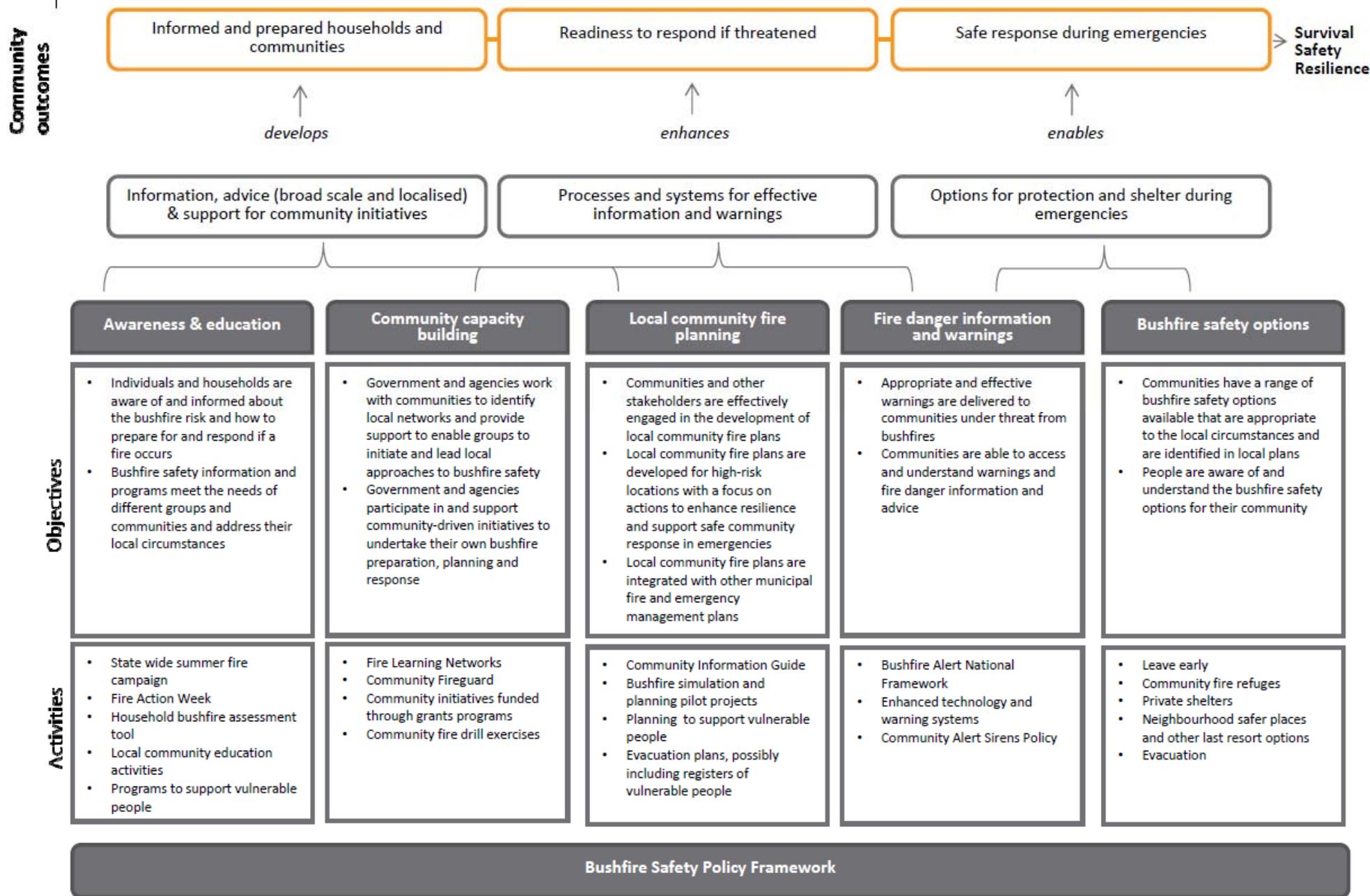
Feedback from the community and those delivering services is vital to ensure that the Framework is responsive to the changing context and the challenges of improving community safety and building resilience. The Framework will in future be revised as necessary until such time as it is superseded by other policy development.

## Priority areas

Figure 1 (below) shows the key elements of the Bushfire Safety Policy Framework. It lists the community outcomes that the Framework is intended to achieve in contributing to building safer and more resilient communities. It also identifies the objectives and activities that organisations need to deliver under five priority areas to achieve the community outcomes. The priority areas are discussed in the following sections, providing a description and objectives relevant to each area.

The priority areas are interconnected and activities may relate to more than one priority area. Similarly, actions to address a particular issue may involve activities from several priority areas.

Figure 1: Bushfire Safety Policy Framework



## Priority area 1

### *Awareness and education*

Many organisations have an important role in engaging and working with the community. This includes increasing awareness and understanding of bushfire, to enable people to better prepare and safely respond. Awareness and education programs ultimately aim to drive changes in people's behaviours to enhance the safety and resilience of individuals and communities.

Information and advice need to provide people with a clear understanding of the bushfire risk and the different types of fire situations they may experience. The consequences of decisions people may make must also be made clear. In particular, people need to be informed that remaining in an area under threat of bushfire may result in death, serious injury and psychological trauma.

Safety advice needs to provide a clear explanation of what is involved in adequately preparing themselves and a property, particularly if people intend to stay to defend their property. Advice should emphasise the importance of understanding fire danger information, warnings and shelter options.

While awareness and education programs form a critical component of the approach to bushfire safety, it is important to recognise the limitations of what can be achieved through such an approach. Achieving behavioural change is difficult and takes time. Many factors constrain the public's understanding and actions, including the complexity and variability of the risk due to local conditions, people's perceptions and attitudes, and that some people may lack the capacity to address the bushfire risk or choose not to engage. The design of effective awareness and education activities needs to recognise these factors while seeking to minimise their impact.

An integrated approach, using broad-based media campaigns, government and fire agency websites and publications, locally delivered community education programs, as well as local community events and activities throughout the state, is essential to reach and engage as much of the community as possible. Activities should be delivered year round.

Evidence shows that in order to drive behavioural change, programs need to be varied in format and content and designed to meet the specific needs of the audience. Information should be tailored to include reference to the local context, situation and risks. Some of the groups that warrant particular attention include tourism operators, tourism workers and tourists themselves; schools and schoolchildren; culturally and linguistically diverse communities; people with special needs, including the elderly, people with a disability, and the people who care for them.

### **Objectives**

- **Individuals and households are aware of and informed about the bushfire risk and how to prepare for and respond to a bushfire.**
- **Bushfire safety information and programs meet the needs of different groups and communities and address their local circumstances.**

## Priority area 2

### *Community capacity building*

Community involvement and leadership of localised bushfire safety activities can deliver great benefit. The success of the Bushfire Safety Policy Framework is predicated on the ability of those working to address the bushfire risk to apply and adapt the Framework to local circumstances, issues and local community needs.

While state and local government, emergency services agencies, non-government organisations, communities and individuals all share responsibility for bushfire safety, communities can most effectively provide the necessary local knowledge to increase the likelihood of initiatives being successful. Communities that have strong local networks and in which a large proportion are engaged in thinking about and planning for bushfire will be safer and stronger, and will be best placed to support more vulnerable people.

A community capacity building approach to bushfire safety focuses on approaches aimed at skill and network building to enhance communities' abilities to develop, plan for and execute their own bushfire safety options. It emphasises and builds upon existing skills and knowledge, such as leadership, which are not exclusive to bushfire safety.

Bushfire safety will always be a partnership between communities, government and non-government organisations and effective community capacity building will enable communities to take greater control and exercise a degree of autonomy in planning, preparation and recovery.

Capacity building activity may be distinct from, but will complement, agency and government-driven activities to inform and engage the community in thinking about and working towards bushfire safety. Community engagement, where agencies seek to inform, educate and involve communities in a particular policy area or activity is an important part of a community capacity building approach.

Capacity building is a process that takes time and progress will vary greatly across different communities. It requires a different approach from government and agencies, allowing and enabling communities to take the lead in planning and decision making around bushfire safety. Government and agencies need to adopt a different role, becoming a facilitator and supporter of community-initiated activities. These approaches will inevitably involve local debate and negotiation and will require communities and agencies to find new ways of working together.

### **Objectives**

- **Government and agencies work with communities to identify local networks and provide support to enable groups to initiate and lead local approaches to bushfire safety.**
- **Government and agencies participate in and support a range of community-driven initiatives to undertake their own bushfire preparation, planning and response.**

## Priority area 3

### *Local community planning*

Community planning is a process that brings agencies, local governments and communities together. These processes can be locally developed and used to explore the various bushfire scenarios, while working together to better develop goals and solutions that build on strengths and also reduce risks. Local collaborative planning processes are an important part of preparation as the community and supporting organisations can consider the context from a range of different perspectives, while identifying strategies to appropriately address particular situations and the needs of the community.

Local planning processes provide greatest value when the community is involved in the development, implementation and ongoing improvement. Tailored and genuine engagement assists the community (including the contribution of local volunteers and staff from organisations) to develop ownership of the risk and contribute to the process. Locally generated information including local knowledge and expertise should be captured in a 'plan', but development of the plan should not be the reason for coming together.

Active involvement of the various stakeholders in the planning process provides opportunities to strengthen partnerships, with the potential for stakeholders to develop an understanding of respective roles and responsibilities. It is important to acknowledge that achieving widespread involvement in community planning requires effort and may be difficult to achieve. Equally important is to recognise the competing demands on people's time and resources, and that where possible organisations need to coordinate activities and seek opportunities to work together as part of the community.

Local planning processes and the development of plans are likely to vary in focus and form. These will be dependent on the issues and priorities of the community, but should have a common goal of finding solutions appropriate for the particular community. A collaborative approach between agencies and communities is essential to identify strengths, define issues and develop solutions.

Community connection needs to involve a range of approaches to ensure that the information and actions reflect community priorities and engender ownership by the community. If the community is willing and able to take the lead in the process, the greater the chance of success in building community capacity and developing appropriate solutions.

Activities in local plans should be integrated with municipal emergency management and fire management plans. Local plans can provide the basis for the implementation of various initiatives by local government and emergency services on bushfire safety options including evacuation routes, local warnings, and shelter options. The effectiveness of local plans will be enhanced by conducting practical exercises to familiarise both agencies and the communities with the plan.

### **Objectives**

- **Communities and other stakeholders are effectively engaged in the development and implementation of local community planning processes.**
- **Inclusive decision making processes support the development of locally generated information based on a combination of local knowledge and expertise. This information is captured in local community plans, developed**

**for high-bushfire risk locations with a focus on actions to support community preparedness, response and overall resilience to bushfire.**

- **The information and actions identified in community based processes and plans are integrated with other municipal and emergency management plans.**

## Priority area 4

### *Fire Danger warnings and information*

Information about forecast weather conditions and warnings about bushfires that have started are essential to enable people to make informed decisions about their safety.

#### *Fire danger information*

It is critical that the public understands the level of bushfire danger that may affect them where they live, work and visit. Victoria utilises the national fire danger rating system, which aligns advice to the community with different levels of forecast fire danger. Fire danger ratings provide the public with a forecast of how a fire is likely to behave once it has started and how difficult the fire will be to put out.

These ratings describe the various bushfire conditions that can occur and provide guidance for people to enable them to respond in ways appropriate to the forecast conditions. During the high fire danger season information about the fire danger rating should be widely available. A 'Code Red' fire danger rating predicts the worst conditions for a bushfire, and all residents of high-risk areas are advised to leave the night before or early in the day.

However, advice to the public should also emphasise that very dangerous bushfires can occur on days of lower fire danger, and it is important to plan accordingly.

The National Fire Danger Ratings System is undergoing review and significant reform is expected. It will eventually lead to a redesign of the fire indices and the ratings themselves. A pilot project conducted over the 2017-18 summer season will inform the first stage of this redevelopment.

Fire danger ratings are distinct from Total Fire Bans and the two exist for different reasons. Total Fire Bans provide a set of legal restrictions on what activities can or cannot occur in a particular district on a declared day. Both the fire danger ratings and Total Fire Bans are used as triggers for people to take protective action.

#### *Warnings*

In contrast to fire danger ratings and Total Fire Bans, warnings provide information about bushfires that have already started. Victoria uses the national framework for warnings. There are three types of bushfire warnings, each increasing in urgency and the need for action:

- **Advice:** general information that a fire has started to keep people up to date with developments.
- **Watch and Act:** a fire is approaching, conditions are changing; people in the area need to start taking action immediately to ensure safety.
- **Emergency Warning:** people are in imminent danger and need to take immediate action.

In some circumstances, an incident controller may recommend evacuation as part of a warning.

Fire services and other agencies must make warnings a priority whenever a fire poses a threat to lives or property. Timely and tailored warnings assist people to respond more safely to a fire. However, advice to the public prior to and during the fire season should emphasise that receiving a bushfire warning cannot be guaranteed. There are many reasons why a warning may not be received including how fast fires can start and technology limitations.

Effective warnings need to be well constructed and easy to understand, clearly stating:

- where the threat is
- when the threat may impact
- level of the threat ('how bad it will be')
- what actions people should take.

Warnings need to be issued via as broad a range of methods as possible, and community should not be reliant on a single medium. The options available for issuing warnings include radio and television, websites, apps, telephone alerts, social media, and community alert sirens. Many broadcasters have entered a memorandum of understanding with the emergency services to broadcast warnings and information during emergencies.

Effective warnings also depend on people understanding where they can access the information and seeking it out, receiving warnings in a timely and appropriate manner, understanding the information they contain and having an appropriate plan to guide a safe response.

As far as practicable, warnings need to take account of people's different circumstances and levels of readiness. Advice to the public prior to the fire season should advise people about how warnings will be provided, what they can expect in a warning and how to respond.

Agencies should advise the public when a fire threat has passed and, if appropriate, provide information on why an expected bushfire threat did not eventuate to maintain confidence in the validity of future warnings.

The ultimate aim is to provide information to enable people to make good decisions about their own safety.

### **Objectives**

- **Appropriate and effective warnings are delivered to communities under threat from bushfire.**
- **Communities are able to access and understand warnings and fire danger information and advice and respond safely.**

## Priority area 5

### ***Bushfire safety options***

The *Bushfire Safety Policy Framework* recognises that there are different ways people may respond to the threat of bushfire. This includes a range of personal and communal options where people may seek shelter from a bushfire. Refer to 'Shelter options for people in areas threatened by bushfire' below.

It is important that advice to the public about bushfire safety options communicates that:

- not all options will afford the same degree of protection from a bushfire
- personal circumstances and local conditions in a fire area will affect the extent to which any of these options provide relative safety
- some options should only be considered as a backup or last resort, rather than a primary safety option
- movement through a fire affected landscape on foot or in a vehicle is dangerous.

However, there will be situations in which it is appropriate for emergency services to recommend and manage evacuations of those under threat.

Not all bushfire safety options will be available in all circumstances. Some options will be more viable for specific groups than for others.

Advice about bushfire safety options should consider the needs of diverse groups, including culturally and linguistically diverse communities, tourists, and people working in or travelling through high risk areas.

### *Backup plans*

A critical aspect of bushfire safety options is the importance of backup plans. All plans have the potential to fail, and it is impossible to predict all potential scenarios. It is vital that people are aware of and understand the full range of options available to them, including last resort options.

### Leaving bushfire risk areas

#### *Leaving early – before a fire has started*

Leaving bushfire prone areas on days of heightened risk is the safest response option. In its simplest form, 'leaving early' means leaving a bushfire-prone area before a fire has started. Advice to the community needs to emphasise that information about high-risk conditions, including weather forecasts, Total Fire Ban declarations and fire danger ratings, should provide a trigger for departure for some people. Leaving early should be encouraged and emphasised in communications with the public. Advice should state that:

- On Code Red days:
  - All residents of high-risk areas are advised to leave early, either the night before or early on the day
  - People intending to visit or drive through high risk areas are to avoid doing so
- For some Victorians, leaving well before the onset of heightened fire danger conditions is the *only* safe option, especially for those people who will require more time and assistance to leave safely

- On other days of heightened fire risk, residents should leave the night before or early in the day:
  - They do not have the physical capacity and psychological readiness to defend their house (e.g. children, the elderly and people with disabilities)
  - The house is likely to be subject to high levels of radiant heat or direct flame contact due to high fuel loads close to the house
  - The house is not adequately prepared for ember attack, or is not considered defensible for the potential fire danger predicted for that day
  - They do not have a bushfire survival plan.

#### *Leaving once a fire has started*

Leaving once a fire has started may be an option in some circumstances. This is an inherently risky option and safety will be affected by many factors, including the proximity of the fire, access to safe evacuation routes and timely access to incident information.

Communication with the public should strongly emphasise the dangers of travelling through an area affected by fire, and the importance of being alert for signs of fire.

#### *Leaving – where to go*

An important aspect of community response is where to go if leaving an area under threat from bushfire. A range of destinations should be discussed in awareness and education programs and included in fire danger rating information.

People leaving an area prior to a fire starting will have a range of options available to them that are outside the fire threatened area. These may include privately arranged places (e.g. friends and family), or public locations such as suburban areas, regional urban areas or larger towns that are safe from bushfire and provide access to amenities.

People leaving an area once a fire has started may have fewer options available to them. Options in these circumstances may include locations outside the fire affected area (see above), or shelter options inside the affected or threatened area (see below).

#### **Shelter options for people in areas threatened by bushfire**

While current messaging advises encourages people to leave areas at risk from bushfire, some people are likely to remain or find themselves in an area threatened by fire. The *Bushfire Safety Policy Framework* recognises the importance of providing information about different shelter options and the degree of safety they afford.

Options include being personally prepared and staying at a well-prepared property, actively defending it, and sheltering in the home if required. Alternative options may include taking shelter in a designated Community Fire Refuge or Neighbourhood Safer Place, a private place of shelter (bunker) or another well-prepared property in the immediate vicinity. In some circumstances, people may also need to seek a degree of protection in various locations as a last resort.

Advice to the public should emphasise that remaining in an area threatened by bushfire is inherently risky. None of the options listed below provide a guarantee of safety in a bushfire and there are dangers involved with travelling to and remaining in these places of shelter.

#### *A well-prepared home*

Remaining at a well-prepared house surrounded by adequate defensible space and actively defending it against the fire threat may be a valid strategy in some circumstances. Advice to the public should make it clear that:

- Staying to defend a house is dangerous and demanding. It involves risk of psychological trauma, injury and death.
- People should not plan to defend a property on Code Red days. Homes in Victoria are not designed or constructed to withstand fire in Code Red conditions. Catastrophic conditions experienced on Code Red days may make even well-prepared and resourced properties indefensible.
- Not all houses can be safely defended from bushfire. A range of factors including house design, construction and maintenance, topography, siting, vegetation management, weather conditions and fire intensity will influence whether a house can be successfully defended. Preparation of a property and availability of resources to defend must be adequate for the likely fire severity under particular fire danger conditions.
- The likelihood that a house will survive will also depend on the capacity and capability of those present to defend it. Defending a property requires extensive physical exertion, in most cases from at least two fit adults, and the psychological capacity to deal with prolonged stress and emotionally demanding situations. Those who do not have the physical or psychological capacity (e.g. children) should not be present in this situation. Successful defence of a property also requires people to have skills and adequate resources to protect the house and themselves.
- During a major bushfire, it is highly unlikely that residents will receive direct assistance from fire services to defend their property.
- A well-prepared house can provide shelter from the effects of a bushfire at least for a period of time. However, occupants cannot rely on passively sheltering within the house. People must remain alert and monitor the fire impact and have an escape plan to avoid being trapped in a burning building.

Advice to the community must make it clear that preparation of a property in order to stay and defend it requires extensive planning and effort. Although it is difficult for even technical experts to make a definitive assessment whether a particular house will survive the range of potential bushfire situations, agencies should endeavour to provide households with advice and guidance about the likelihood of successfully protecting a property. Residents then need to make their own assessment of their abilities, the extent of preparation required and the most appropriate plan for their situation.

### *Community Fire Refuges*

A Community Fire Refuge is a designated building that can provide short-term shelter from the immediate life-threatening effects of a bushfire. A Community Fire Refuge must meet the performance requirements of the *Victorian Building Regulations (2006)* and the *Building Code of Australia*. A refuge must also be designated in accordance with the *Country Fire Authority Act (1958)*.

The *Community Fire Refuges Policy (2015)* outlines the purpose, attributes and other arrangements related to establishment of refuges, designation, management, and other matters related to the operation of refuges. Refuges do not guarantee safety from a bushfire due to a number of limitations identified in the *Community Fire Refuges Policy*. Consequently, advice to

the public should emphasise that seeking shelter in a refuge should not be considered as a primary plan of action.

#### *Private shelters (bunkers)*

A private bushfire shelter (bunker) is a structure that may provide shelter for occupants from the immediate life-threatening effects of a bushfire. The Australian Building Codes Board (ABCB) developed a national performance standard for private bushfire shelters: *Performance Standard for Private Bushfire Shelters (2010) (Part 1)*. Construction of a bunker requires a building permit under the *Victorian Building Regulations (2006)*. Bunkers may assist people when there is imminent threat of a bushfire and they are unable to relocate to a safer place. Advice in relation to bunkers needs to make clear the requirements for constructing a bunker, their use and limitations.

#### *Private places of shelter*

Some people may plan or decide to move to privately arranged places of shelter close to their homes when threatened by bushfire or in anticipation of dangerous fire conditions. The decision about where and when to move to this type of shelter should be planned. A privately arranged place of shelter may include a private dwelling on private land, for example, a well-prepared neighbour's house or other building that is in a lower risk area.

Private places of shelter are arranged by individuals as part of their household planning and not by State or local governments. Advice should highlight that such places may not be safe in all circumstances and that individuals who decide to use private places of shelter are responsible for assessing their suitability, including whether the property can and will be defended if required.

#### *Evacuation*

Evacuation is the planned movement of people from dangerous or potentially dangerous areas to safer areas. In some circumstances, evacuation may be recommended. The necessity for, and scale of any evacuation will vary according to the fire behaviour, its projected spread and local circumstances. An evacuation may apply to a specific locality, an institution (school, prison or hospital), a town or a large area of the State.

In Victoria, evacuation is largely voluntary. The Incident Controller is responsible for deciding whether to recommend to members of the public that they evacuate from a specified area. This decision should be made in consultation with Victoria Police, and others where appropriate. Detailed guidance on evacuation is provided in the Emergency Management Manual Victoria and standard operating procedures.

Some legislative provisions give authority for people to be removed from areas threatened by fire, which exempt people with a pecuniary interest in a property (or goods or valuables within a property). This exemption does not apply if the person claiming a pecuniary interest is not at the property (access can be prevented).

Evacuation can also be compelled under 'State of disaster' provisions in Part 5 of the *Emergency Management Act 1986* and restrictions to access places or areas under the *Coroners Act 2008* and the *Terrorism (Community Protection) Act 2013*.

### **Last resort shelter options**

The *Bushfire Safety Policy Framework* recognises that situations will occur when individuals may need to access shelter options of last resort. Reasons for using last resort options include the above shelter options being unavailable, or the failure of primary or backup plans. In these

circumstances, shelter may be sought in an area such as a Neighbourhood Safer Place (place of last resort), a nearby structure, an area of low vegetation or a water body or vehicle.

Advice to the public should emphasise the relatively low levels of safety afforded by the last resort options listed below. It should also note that accessing any of these options should not be part of a primary plan. However, it is important that people understand these options and have considered where they might seek shelter as a last resort.

#### *Neighbourhood Safer Place (Place of Last Resort)*

A Neighbourhood Safer Place (NSP) is a place that, as a last resort, may provide protection from the immediate life-threatening effects of a bushfire. NSPs have been designated in many high-risk areas at various locations such as recreational reserves, sports ovals, streets, car parks or shopping strips. NSPs may assist people when there is imminent threat of a bushfire and they have no plan, or their planned options are not possible.

Advice to the public should clearly state that NSPs are not Community Fire Refuges or emergency relief centres and do not necessarily provide shelter from the elements or provide other amenities or services. NSPs are not an appropriate destination when leaving early.

#### *Other last resort options*

Where all other shelter options have been exhausted, people who find themselves directly in the path of a bushfire may seek shelter in any available place, such as a parked vehicle, an area of low vegetation, ploughed paddock, or a body of water.

Advice to the community should emphasise that, while these may provide a greater degree of safety, such places do not offer good protection from radiant heat or other dangers. They are likely to involve a high-risk of trauma, injury or death. Given the high likelihood of death or serious injury in such situations, it is critical that people understand the need to do everything possible to avoid having to use these last resort options.

## **Objectives**

- **Communities have a range of bushfire safety options available that are appropriate to the local circumstances and are identified in local plans.**
- **People are aware of and understand the bushfire safety options for their community.**