



Victorian Government Response to the Inspector-General for Emergency Management

Inquiry into the 2019-20 Victorian Fire
Season: Phase 2 Report

October 2021

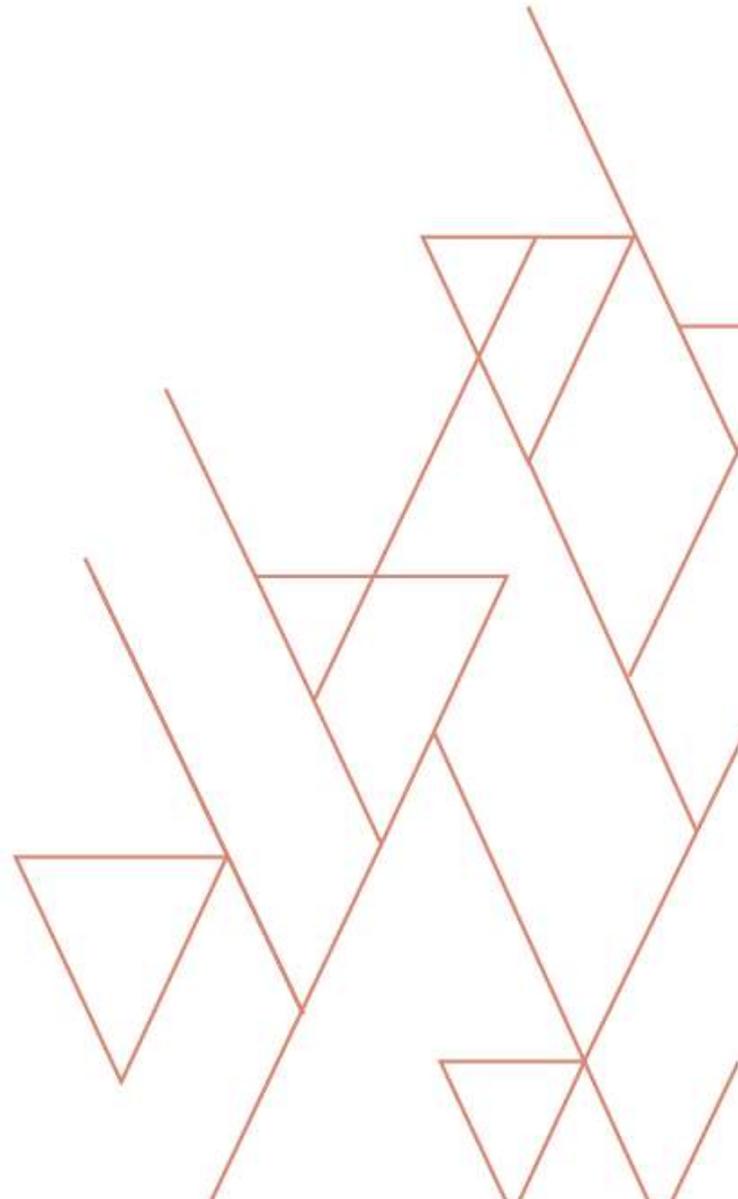


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1. Foreword

The Victorian Government welcomes the Phase 2 report (the report) of the Inspector-General for Emergency Management (IGEM) Inquiry into the 2019-20 Victorian Fire Season.

The Victorian Government supports the 15 recommendations from the report, in addition to supporting all 17 recommendations from the phase 1 report released in 2020, which focused on emergency preparedness and response.

Through IGEM's reports and related reviews and inquiries, the Victorian Government has committed to a program of reform to Victoria's emergency management sector that will strengthen resilience before, during and after emergencies.

This has been a difficult time for all Victorians, especially for the 120 communities in North-East Victoria and East Gippsland that were directly affected by these fires. While Victorian communities are unfortunately not new to disaster, the scale and complexity of the 2019-20 fires tested us all.

The fires highlighted the critical leadership of all our relief and recovery partners, and the strength of community, in meeting these complex events. The report speaks to the dedication of the thousands of volunteers, community organisations and local and state government staff who remain focused on the recovery efforts and welfare of impacted communities.

The Victorian Government acknowledges the recurring challenges faced by many communities and the sector during and after disasters, and welcomes the opportunity to improve its practices so it can better support all communities into the future.



Jaclyn Symes MP
Attorney-General
Minister for Emergency Services

2. Government's commitment to continuous improvement

The Victorian Government will work closely with sector partners, local governments and communities to drive improvements and support the resilience of all Victorians and our environment.

2.1. Dedicated leadership in relief and recovery

The Victorian Government welcomes IGEM's recommendation to establish a permanent and comprehensive recovery entity to drive system and state-wide improvements for recovery from all emergencies.

The Victorian Government will work with the sector over the coming months to design **a dedicated recovery entity** with a state-wide, all-emergencies focus. The entity will need to lead the sector to address enduring challenges in our recovery arrangements and support better outcomes for our communities. In conjunction with the sector and community, the entity will also drive ongoing improvements that will build resilience during recovery towards future emergencies across the state, and tackle challenging recovery issues such as rebuilding, insurance and workforce capacity.

In the interim, Bushfire Recovery Victoria will continue its vital work and play a similar role to support the recovery of communities, as it has for the 2019-20 Victorian fires and the 2021 flood and storm events, during any future emergencies.

The Victorian Government also recognises the increasing demands on relief services during emergencies. As recognised by IGEM, immediate actions were taken following the 2019-20 fires to improve operational arrangements, such as the dedicated appointment of the State Emergency Relief Coordinator. Emergency Management Victoria (EMV) will continue to work in partnership with the sector and communities to make relief a greater priority and address the critical relief issues identified in the report, with a strong focus on capacity building, collaboration and service improvement.

The Victorian Government recognises the importance of leadership in relief and recovery in many different forms and by various community, local and regional partners. The Victorian Government will support leadership at all levels by clarifying the roles these partners play during and after an emergency. This means that people have a clear path

forward on what actions they can take to deliver more timely and meaningful support to communities.

2.2. **Easier access to financial assistance, services and support**

The Victorian Government acknowledges that individual, community and local governments' access to critical support following the 2019-20 fires were sometimes hindered by system-wide challenges within government. The Victorian Government will therefore streamline services and deliver more proactive and tailored outreach to impacted communities.

The Victorian Government aims to support the resilience of its communities by ensuring all people affected by emergencies can easily access the resources, services and assistance they require.

Acknowledging that in times of hardship not all people affected by disaster will be able to navigate complex services on their own, the Victorian Government will improve how we collaborate with sector and non-sector partners to offer streamlined support.

The Victorian Government will adopt a trauma-informed and people-centred approach to its relief and recovery support. Services will be clear and practical, focusing on the needs of individuals during and after emergencies, as well as the chronic stressors people face in their every-day lives – such as work, family and health. Support will also be inclusive and culturally sensitive, recognising the diversity of affected people and communities.

Since the 2019-20 fires, the Victorian Government has been investing in technologies to improve how people find and access support online. This includes the **MyRecovery** platform pilot being developed to improve recovery service delivery for people impacted by the 2019-20 fires.

The Victorian Government will also continue to work closely with other jurisdictions and the Commonwealth Government to **strengthen disaster recovery funding arrangements** and ensure early intervention of financial support to avoid compounding costs to people, environment, the economy, and state and local governments.

2.3. **Better use of information about disaster impacts**

The Victorian Government acknowledges that individuals impacted by the 2019-20 fires were often required to share their personal information

and disaster 'story' multiple times to access the support they required, a process that can cause further trauma.

The report offers improvements to information management during and after an emergency. This relates to collecting information about the impact of the emergency on communities and the environment, and how government and service providers request and use information provided directly by affected individuals. Working closely with local governments, the Victorian Government will ensure that our decisions and services are informed by quality data to deliver the right support for people and the environment.

In the coming months, the Victorian Government will deliver **contemporary impact assessment guidelines**, alongside **an online platform that shares reliable impact assessment data** with relief and recovery practitioners across government and the sector. In addition, government is exploring how best to incorporate people's information about impacts in a respectful and secure manner that maintains privacy and trust, and facilitates timely decision making. For community, this will mean less frequent requests for information and more streamlined engagement with service providers.

The first **data strategy for Victoria's emergency management sector** will build on these improvements through a multi-year partnership with the Victorian Centre for Data Insights to develop a better understanding of what data is available to the sector, how it is used, and key strengths and challenges. This partnership will streamline how government uses and accesses data which will result in an improved understanding of community needs.

2.4. Improved engagement with communities before, during and after disasters

Significant strides have been made in how Victorians collaboratively plan and prepare for disasters as part of a shared responsibility, but it is clear there is more work to be done to ensure we are all better prepared for future risks. The Victorian Government will genuinely and regularly engage with communities to contribute to their disaster knowledge and education, and better enable community and local planning processes before, during and after emergencies.

The Victorian Government recognises the value of local knowledge during and after a disaster, and the potential for people from all parts of the community to help drive this. The Victorian Government is

continuing to work closely with local Traditional Owners, other partners and scientists to inform the environmental recovery process in response to the fires' devastating impacts. These efforts will ensure we maximise the long-term, state-wide resilience of species and their habitats and inform future recovery activities by ensuring successes and lessons are built upon.

The Victorian Government also acknowledges the importance of engagement practices respecting all communities, particularly those that have specific needs for relief or can often experience greater disadvantage in recovery – such as First Nations peoples, Culturally and Linguistically Diverse (CALD) communities, LGBTQIA+, youth, people living with disability, the elderly and other at-risk or potentially marginalised communities.

In response to IGEM's recommendations in the phase 1 report, the Victorian Government is progressing major improvements to community information and warnings on the **VicEmergency** website, mobile app and social media platforms, including a dedicated focus to better support CALD communities. The Victorian Government will consider how these improvements can be used for relief and recovery messaging.

The Victorian Government also recognises that a disaster event can impact the availability and usefulness of mobile technology and the internet. The report pointed to the ongoing importance of traditional, low-tech methods of communicating. Local radio, community meetings and face-to-face outreach for communities impacted by the 2019-20 Victorian bushfires proved invaluable, especially in remote communities where access to telecommunications and technology was limited or compromised by the fires.

The Victorian Government will draw on significant lessons offered through the 2019-20 fires and other events to improve planning, education and engagement practices within all areas of emergency management.

2.5. Strengthening capability, capacity and wellbeing

The Victorian Government recognises the pressures an emergency can place on the mental health and wellbeing of affected communities, their loved ones and the large groups of individuals that support people during and after a disaster. Under a changing climate, the frequency

and severity of emergencies will likely increase, as will the demands on existing relief and recovery capability and capacity.

IGEM notes that the capability of first responder agencies has been a focus of the emergency management sector for some time, as this has been critical to keeping Victorians safe. The Victorian Government acknowledges that local governments and regional partners have incredible strengths in relief and recovery, but existing resources and skills cannot keep up with the increasing frequency, duration and complexity of emergencies. The Victorian Government welcomes the opportunity to better support the resilience of communities by strengthening the capability, capacity and wellbeing of all those that partner towards relief and long-term recovery efforts.

The Victorian Government will continue to address gaps in its emergency relief and recovery workforces at all levels, building on key projects such as the **Councils and Emergencies Project** and the **Victorian Preparedness Framework**. The finalisation of the Councils and Emergencies Project later this year will be instructive in the development of strategies and actions to address gaps in councils' emergency management capability and capacity.

A new **state-wide recovery website** will also improve the knowledge and wellbeing of all those working in recovery by centralising recovery related information, resources and guidance. Embracing a model that values local contribution and shared knowledge will help to build the skills of the sector and communities.

3. A forward plan

The Victorian Government will work closely with communities, local government and sector to prioritise the rollout of urgent programs required to ensure we are better prepared for the consequences of future emergencies, including continuing to progress key initiatives that are already demonstrating benefit to disaster affected communities.

The Victorian Government is developing an extensive emergency management reform program including a **sector-wide outcomes framework**, a **roadmap** outlining strategic improvements and investment, and an **action plan** for priority initiatives. This reform program will support Victoria to be better positioned to prepare, respond and recover from sustained and overlapping emergencies. It

will also ensure better collaboration within government and more effective use of government resources.

This work will build on lessons from previous reviews and inquiries, sector knowledge, and the lived experiences graciously offered by disaster affected communities. Implementing IGEM's findings in the phase 2 report will be a key part of this program.

The Victorian Government appreciates the work undertaken by the IGEM in producing this report and significant contributions from the disaster affected communities. IGEM is requested to monitor implementation of the phase 2 recommendations, consistent with phase 1. We look forward to addressing these issues with the emergency management sector, non-government agencies and importantly, those we serve to support – Victorian communities.