

Community-led disaster recovery – Mallacoota, Victoria

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Like many other communities in 2019–20, the Mallacoota district in East Gippsland, Victoria was ravaged by fire. In our community's living memory, there is no comparable event.

Mallacoota is a small area with a population of around 1,200 that can swell to 8,000 at holiday times. In the summer of 2019–20, bushfires caused significant devastation of wildlife and bushlands with 83% of land area burnt and 123 homes destroyed. Since then, flooding and the COVID-19 pandemic have been cascading events that have disrupted and damaged the community.

This is our story of community-led recovery – what a small community can achieve and the lessons we've learnt along the way.

Establishing a recovery association

The Mallacoota and District Recovery Association Inc (MADRA) was established shortly after the fires. A group of locals – the Thinking Group – proposed a model for community-led recovery based on experiences of the Victorian town, Strathewen, in the aftermath of the 2009 Black Saturday bushfires. This model was endorsed at a community meeting attended by over 500 locals in February 2020.

Mission and Vision

Establishing a mission (why we exist) and a vision (what recovery looks like for the community) were important anchors to ensure recovery efforts were focused and targeted. As we worked through our mission statement, a 16-year-old hit the nail on the head: we are a 'voice' for our community.

Our vision is to be 'an inclusive, vibrant, strong and safe community', which will be achieved when:

- Everyone who needs bushfire assistance has received it.
- We have restored what we loved and fixed what was broken.
- We are prepared for future disasters.
- We have laid the foundations for a more resilient community.

Setting up MADRA

In partnership with Bushfire Recovery Victoria and the East Gippsland Shire Council, the Thinking Group put enormous thought into how MADRA might function and how the community ought to be represented. The Victorian Electoral Commission managed the formal election process, which was a first in the state, and 44 local people stood for 12 committee positions.

The committee comprised 6 men and 6 women ranging in age from 20 to 60-plus with diverse skills and life experience. Our first committee meeting was in June 2020, and we hit the ground running.

The first piece of team building was our nickname – the MADRats¹ – followed by the formation of an organisation structure and protocols, including a Code of Conduct. In the early stages, we decided that MADRA would not take sides on issues that divided the community. We developed 2 mantras: 'Do no harm' and 'Can we live with this decision?'. MADRA is now an incorporated association with charity with deductible gift recipient status.

Recovery framework

Our recovery framework drew from the concept of power: the power of networks, reducing inequalities and empowering people to make a better life for themselves.

Through our formal and informal networks, we identified people in danger of slipping between recovery cracks. We tapped the diverse talents of locals who willingly contributed their expertise, and we built strong relationships with local members of parliament, emergency services agencies, not-for-profit organisations and philanthropists.

A community is as strong as its weakest link. Houses and infrastructure can be rebuilt but shattered lives are harder to put back together. Initiatives addressing mental health support, case management, housing

and social connections were critical to individual and community wellbeing. Understanding the effects of broader political, economic, environmental, social and technological trends is important to empowerment. Our resilience projects included improving volunteer emergency service facilities, enhancing critical economic infrastructure and broadening and diversifying our economy.

What is community-led recovery?

There is no single framework or formula for community-led recovery, but at its heart, it's about communities proposing solutions based on local knowledge, preferences, priorities and (importantly) values. This includes sticking up for people whose circumstances don't fit neatly within established guidelines through advocacy.

Our values

Finding common ground is a challenge! An initial survey identified recovery themes, which informed our values-based approach, including:

- acknowledging the trauma resulting from the loss of homes, amenities, natural environment and infrastructure
- recognising the importance of social connections and community get-togethers to restore a sense of community
- ensuring a balance between maximising biodiversity and enhancing fire safety
- taking a strategic approach to rebuilding and extending community infrastructure
- broadening the diversity of our economy
- prioritising the love of our wilderness environment.

Community consultation

Pandemic restrictions and lockdowns initially slowed the momentum as face-to-face meetings that are crucial to the recovery program were not possible. When restrictions eased, we held sessions on a range of topics and invited relevant emergency services agencies to attend. This provided opportunities for sharing expertise and insights, and for members of the community to convey concerns.

We progressively released chapters of our draft recovery plan for feedback and asked the local community to vote on all suggestions received. Our community-led and endorsed Recovery Plan encapsulates the shared vision and provides context for agencies, philanthropists and grant applications.

An ongoing recovery story

Our first annual general meeting was held in August 2021 and the inaugural MADRA committee stood down and new committee members brought welcome energy and expertise. There is no 'cut off' point for recovery, and MADRats 2.0 faced a different set of challenges including residual 'wicked' problems like housing, adequate support services and fuel management.

Housing

Lobbying for social and affordable housing is our highest priority. Inflexible regulations have meant that available, relocatable housing could not be used. Practical and temporary solutions were also

stymied by red tape. Currently, we have a shortage of workers who can help run businesses and the lack of accommodation for builders and tradespeople means the rebuilding of our district is hindered. The Victoria Government has committed to building 10 affordable and social houses. This is a welcome start, but more homes are needed.

Support services

Disaster recovery takes many years. At the 2-and-a-half-year mark, recovery services began to vanish. The abrupt way these services were withdrawn is lamentable. We had hoped for a transition period in which badly affected members of our community could get used to less support, build their own support networks and become familiar with new methods of support. When service contracts expired, staff moved on. Services ceased with little notice and there were no transitional arrangements in place. This caused distress to some people.

Fuel management

Our fuel management group achieved a Herculean task in bringing together all the relevant interest groups to develop a comprehensive plan to this complex issue. Will it be implemented? We need to know that our town will be safe before another such summer comes along.

What we have learnt

We've learned that communication is crucial but not everyone is in 'receive' mode. Hearing the heart of our community's wants and needs, being visible and available outside the Post Office was our best method of communication.

We are not a 'fourth arm of government'. Community-led recovery means we can no longer simply present problems; we've got to come up with solutions and priorities. As volunteers, we have limited capacity, so we learnt that not everything related to recovery is our responsibility.

Politicians and bureaucrats are not our enemies. Building relationships and trust with people in government and emergency services agencies has been crucial to our recovery effort.

Some members of the community are still traumatised and acceptance of what has happened is hard. But our inclusive and transparent approach to establishing our endorsed Recovery Plan has helped in the healing process.

Visit the MADRA website² for information and resources including the Recovery Plan, community consultation material and voting report webinars. Contact us directly via madra.3892@gmail.com.

Watch the ABC TV series *People's Republic of Mallacoota* currently on ABC iview.³

Endnotes

1. Mallacoota and District Recovery Association Team = MADRats
2. MADRA website, at <https://madrecovery.com/>.

3. *People's Republic of Mallacoota*, ABC iview (in Australia only), at <https://iview.abc.net.au/show/people-s-republic-of-mallacoota>.