

Kangaroo Island bushfire recovery - DHS



Community engagement session

What did we do?

The 2019-20 Fire Danger Season was one of the most challenging in history for Kangaroo Island communities. While it wasn't the only fire that summer, almost half of the Island's 440,500 hectares was burned, two people lost their lives, 87 houses were destroyed and almost 60,000 livestock perished.

During our journey through recovery, communities were central to the identification, planning and delivery of suitable programs in each fire-affected area. We listened to their needs and identified what mattered to them.

Our purpose was to generate opportunities for each region to develop locally owned and managed initiatives for disaster risk reduction and ongoing resilience.

The following principles guided our recovery program for the affected communities:

- understanding the context
- recognising complexities
- supporting and nurturing a community-led approach
- recognising and building community capacity
- establishing clear communications
- coordinating efforts effectively

We engaged early and with a broad number of cohorts. We needed the community to accept and engage with the recovery support team, so we identified a local champion to vouch for the process and ensure the community was on board.

We are still working with local councils, the Commonwealth government, not-for-profit organisations and industry to ensure affected people, businesses and communities can access what they need as quickly and as easily as possible.

How did we do it?

As with every engagement, community involvement in the recovery process was variable. We identified people who wanted to be involved early, in particular business owners and associations. Other residents and some businesses were only ready to participate a little later. Hence, each engagement followed a different journey but was also made 'standalone' so that newcomers could easily join the conversation without having to catch up on information or activities.

For our initial engagement, we held a community workshop to identify key themes and actions within those themes, identified by sub-groups. This workshop was a key part of the 'we start together' principle. At the conclusion of the workshop we distributed a story book to ensure those who couldn't attend could see what was discussed without analysis or bias. The story book was a useful engagement tool.

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We start together

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We are genuine

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What went well?

Engaging early was a key element in our approach. While some community members weren't ready to discuss about longer term recovery, it helped identifying what recovery could look like. It also provided an estimated timeline for the community to start the recovery process together, ensuring they have a voice throughout.

Finding a champion to build and foster relationships quickly was critical to our success at the first workshop. The community helped us recognise that plans and committee members could change, as well as the potential solutions. So having one person to journey with us throughout the process, was very useful in the creation and delivery of the program.

We engaged often and kept the community up to date using different tools including printed newsletters, face-to-face events, listening posts, or visiting people's homes to assess their needs.

While recovery from events such as bushfires of this scale can take years, establishing long term goal is unhelpful.

Establishing shared goals at a reasonable timeframe (for us it was 12 months and two years) assisted the community to look positively into the short and medium term future, without feeling too overwhelmed.

We had a number of timelines that constrained our activity, but our **focus was on the community** so we re-worked our timelines based on what he heard at the workshop.

By integrating the experiences and aspirations of communities into the preparation of plans and recovery operations, the longer-term recovery process is most likely to foster a sustainable community and economic development.



Engaging with a focus on community

What would we do differently next time?

Our first engagement was in Kingscote as we considered that to be the commercial centre of the Island. However, we learned after the event that people from the western end of the Island will rarely travel to Kingscote, hence the day lacked some key community voices. An engagement with cohorts that weren't part of the first workshop such as youth and disability groups would have been beneficial.

The aim of the story book was to take the information from the first workshop and share it raw, without analysis. However, people who were not at the event, believed that everything mentioned in the story book was going to be executed. Better shaping of our communications strategy would have ensured the message was clear for the audience throughout the process.

During the workshop, we realised that people were in different mindsets. Fires were already declared safe by then so people's priorities were diverse. Identifying a shared goal on what 'good looks like' would have helped to address these differences and find a common ground regardless of where people were at the time.

The scope of our discussions was clearly explained to the community at the beginning of the process. However, as it progressed, priorities at the state and federal government levels changed, impacting the scope of our program. This could have challenged the community's perception as to how genuine the recovery team and the program were.

Were there any unexpected outcomes?

The level of ownership and carriage of some key issues at the initial workshop was fantastic. Community members took on several short term challenges, impeding recovery, to resolve beyond the workshop.

People reverted back to the group leaders established during the workshop, reinforcing the purpose of community ownership of the program.