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Evaluation Report

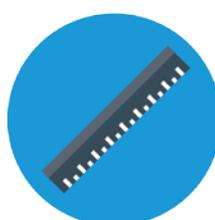
Municipal Emergency Resourcing Program

Prepared for:

Local Government Victoria (Department of Environment, Land, Water and Planning) in partnership with the Municipal Association of Victoria



RESEARCH



EVALUATION



DESIGN

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Document details:

Title:	Evaluation Report - Municipal Emergency Resourcing Program
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Version:	Final v01
Revision date:	26-10-2015
Client:	Local Government Victoria (Department of Environment, Land, Water and Planning) and the Municipal Association of Victoria

Executive Summary

Background

Local government plays a key role in Victoria's emergency management framework and is involved before, during and after emergencies. However, fulfilling the expectations around emergency management can involve considerable financial burden for councils, particularly for those with significant land coverage and a small revenue base.

Local Government Victoria helps councils plan and prepare for emergencies through the Municipal Emergency Resourcing Program (MERP), which provides targeted funds to rural, regional and peri-urban councils across the state.

This evaluation aims to review the current round of funding, which is set to conclude in mid-2016, and provide an evidence base for designing the next round of MERP funding. This includes understanding how effectively MERP has supported councils, the opportunities for improvement and how emergency management capability and capacity can be more broadly supported within the local government sector. The primary data sources for the evaluation were:

- Councils, including interviews with council staff (50 councils, 98 individuals; including project officers, emergency management coordinators and program directors) and a quantitative survey of MERP contacts within councils (41 responses)
- Agency staff, including interviews with five State-level government agency staff from EMV, SES and DHHS and a survey of regional SES staff (six responses).

Summary of findings

The MERP continues to address a clear and demonstrable need within local government. This need is characterised by challenges relating to:

- limited funds and capacity; 38/50 council interviewees noted their council is challenged in fulfilling its emergency management obligations by either limited funds or capacity—a point particularly important among smaller regional councils
- a lack of skills and expertise in emergency management
- uncertainty around councils' emergency management obligations and changes to these obligations into the future
- a lack of incidents to maintain preparedness and instil buy-in within councils
- not having their role appropriately recognised by other emergency management agencies
- the high expectations of these same agencies, as well as the communities that local governments serve.

In this context the MERP is seen to be well-structured and of great value to councils:

- All of the surveyed councils considered the MERP to be of great (35/41) or moderate (6/41) value, with a trend for smaller councils to more highly endorse the program
- State Agency stakeholders also considered the program to be of high value
- of particular note is how **the MERP enables someone to be dedicated to and focused on emergency management** in what would otherwise be an add-on, reactive role.

The MERP has helped council in a range of ways that are well aligned with its broadly scoped objectives and intended outcomes. This includes:

- Improvements to the **quality and depth of their emergency management planning** and documentation (42/50 councils), an outcome supported by agency stakeholders.
- Improvements to their **communication and collaboration with other stakeholders** (43/50 councils). These relate to councils:
 - engaging and working with emergency management agencies more closely
 - collaborating with other councils
 - improving information flow within councils.
- Improvements to **community engagement and capacity building**, including:
 - improved levels of community engagement (24 interviewees)
 - capacity and resilience building among community members (15 interviewees)
- Improvements to the **structure and organisation of emergency management within their organisations** (37/50 councils), including:
 - having a stronger focus on emergency management
 - organising, coordinating and supporting training
 - improving council systems and structures around emergency management

These are important points in that they represent more sustainable, long-term outcomes that should continue to benefit council emergency management even in the absence of external support.
- Support for **councils' work with vulnerable people**, including:
 - supporting work done by or with Home and Community Care services
 - helping maintain the vulnerable persons register
 - integrating considerations around vulnerable persons into their emergency planning

While the majority of interviewees explicitly noted that the vulnerable persons component integrates well with other aspects of MERP, six saw it as being poorly scoped and aligned.
- Support for **engaging in more strategic work and taking on more of a leadership role** (17/50 councils), including:
 - coordinating and driving collaboration across a group of partner councils
 - engaging with state and regional level management bodies on broad-level policies that have flow-on impacts at the local level.
- Five interviewees noted explicitly that **the various enhancements to emergency management planning, preparation and engagement enabled by the MERP had led to notable improvements in their response to emergencies.**

Feedback from council staff and other stakeholders point to **three key opportunities for improving the delivery and efficiency of the program:**

- **extending the funding duration to reduce issues of staff turnover and challenges in recruitment**
- **improving guidance around the funding**, including providing greater clarity around the objectives of the program, its strategic intent and what the intended outcomes are
- **encouraging or supporting collaboration among councils**, which has the potential to reduce duplication and enhance knowledge- and skill-sharing among councils.

Two further themes that emerge across the evaluation are that:

- **Councils use the MERP differently** and its value in helping them meet their legislative obligations is likely to vary among councils.
- There is a **persistent and related uncertainty around councils' obligations in this space and around the objectives and outcomes of the MERP**. In the perceived absence of clear State-level direction, the MERP objectives may be seen as (or are hoped to be) a potential de facto strategy in relation to emergency management planning.

It is also important to note that while the MERP has demonstrably helped councils in the short-term, objectives and mechanisms for maintaining capacity and capability in emergency management in the long-term remain unarticulated.

Recommendations

Based on the key findings, results and discussion contained in this evaluation, we recommend:

1. **State government continue to fund the MERP**. The program addresses a substantive need within local government, directly and efficiently addressing issues of capacity. By addressing resource and capacity shortfalls, the program contributes to a range of outcomes within councils, most notably improvements in emergency management planning and documentation, communication among stakeholders and engagement with communities. Future funding rounds should also be scoped considering the recommendations below.
2. **LGV should ensure that future iterations of the MERP have clearly defined objectives and intended outcomes**. In defining these objectives and outcomes, LGV should consider using a project logic approach, which clearly articulates how the program will work towards its longer-term goals. These longer-term goals should include some consideration about the sustainability of the funding and what the vision is with respect to the ability of councils to be self-sufficient in this area (e.g. whether council is to be perpetually dependent on this funding). In going through this process, LGV should ensure that it, or other programs, are engaging in activities that will achieve those longer-term goals.
3. **LGV should consider reviewing how funds are distributed among councils for any future iterations of MERP**. This may include some consideration of the resources available to councils, combined with an assessment of the level of risk they face. This could be used to create a matrix of funding amounts that varies based on risk/capacity. One mechanism may be to use a panel of experts (e.g. from SES, Victoria Police, EMV, MAV) to rate each councils on these scales. This would be a more transparent process than the current arrangement, though would be more complex to administer. On a related point, it may also be important to consider differentiating what different councils are expected to achieve with the funding (e.g. fulfilling their minimum requirements or going beyond and working towards clear strategic goals). LGV should also consider extending the tenure of funding to improve retention and recruitment of skilled and capable staff.
4. **LGV should continue to reflect on and improve its communication with councils**. Recent work by LGV, such as changes to reporting templates, has been viewed favourably by most councils. Similarly, while a range of councils requested feedback on what others were doing with the MERP, LGV were already in the process of compiling and communicating this

information to councils (independent of this evaluation). This proactive, two-way approach to communicating with councils is a small but important step in helping emergency management staff feel informed and connected in the shifting landscape of emergency management.

In addition to the MERP-specific points above, the evaluation also points to a range of broader issues and considerations around local government's role in emergency management, leading us to recommend:

- a) **LGV, in consultation with MAV and EMV, should consider complementing direct funding to councils with additional mechanisms of support around collaboration and knowledge sharing.** This includes:
 - a. Providing forums for knowledge sharing, networking and relationship-building among local government emergency staff, including an online forum or discussion board to complement or replace the current State-wide email list. LGV should also consider structured, regular (i.e. six-monthly) face-to-face (or teleconferencing forums) among emergency staff.
 - b. Supporting formal and informal collaboration through such forums, as well as promoting models or case studies of collaborative approaches to emergency management.
 - c. Creating a centralised repository of information, tools and resources around emergency management. This could include developing a standard template and process for reporting on emergency management activations that promotes continuous improvement and cross-council learning.
- b) **LGV should work with MAV, EMV, SES and other relevant State agencies to clarify what is expected of councils in terms of emergency management and communicate those expectations to council emergency management staff.** This may include working with relevant agencies to create sharable resources that can reduce duplication and provide clear guidance. It may also include developing a training package for emergency management staff in councils that provides similar information and guidance (see also Priority Area B of the Victorian Emergency Management Strategic Action Plan 2015-18).
- c) **LGV should ensure that it is working closely with EMV in its own work on council capacity and capability.** As legislation and policies in this space evolve and roles and responsibilities become clearer within local government, state departments and agencies should ensure their approach to supporting capacity and capability requirements in local government are coordinated and complementary. As part of this and, as suggested by councils and agencies in this evaluation, EMV and LGV should consider using a state-wide team of emergency planning experts that work closely with individual councils to support and improve their planning. This would help address identified capability issues within councils and build on SES's work in this space with MEMP audits.

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Acronyms

DELWP	Department of Environment, Land, Water and Planning
DHHS	Department of Health and Human Services
DTF	Department of Treasury and Finance
EMV	Emergency Management Victoria
EMMV	Emergency Management Manual Victoria
HACC	Home and Community Care
LGV	Local Government Victoria
MAV	Municipal Association of Victoria
MECC	Municipal Emergency Coordination Centre
MEMEG	Municipal Emergency Management Enhancement Group
MEMP	Municipal Emergency Management Plan
MERO	Municipal Emergency Response Officer
MERP	Municipal Emergency Resourcing Program
MFEMRP	Municipal Fire and Emergency Management Resourcing Program
MFPP	Municipal Fire Prevention Plan
MFMP	Municipal Fire Management Plan
MRM	Municipal Recovery Manager
SES	State Emergency Service
VBRC	Victorian Bushfire Royal Commission
VicPol	Victoria Police
VPEP	Vulnerable People in Emergencies Policy
VPR	Vulnerable Persons Register

1 Introduction

1.1 Context and overview

Local government in Victoria has a range of responsibilities in planning for, responding to and recovering from emergencies. These responsibilities are set out in various pieces of legislation and policy, including the *Emergency Management Act 1986*, the *Country Fire Authority Act 1958* and the *Emergency Management Manual Victoria*.

The role of local governments in emergency management has been the subject of much discussion and review in recent years, including as part of the 2009 Victorian Bushfire Royal Commission (VBRC), the 2011 Victorian Floods Review, the 2012 Victorian Government White Paper on Emergency Management Reform and the 2014 Hazelwood Mine Fire Inquiry. Many of the changes to Victoria's emergency management framework arising from these processes have implications for councils' obligations and performance before, during and after emergencies.

Emergency management expectations can involve considerable financial burden, particularly for councils with significant land coverage and a small revenue base. In recognition of this, Local Government Victoria (LGV, a division of the Department of Environment, Land, Water and Planning) and the Municipal Association of Victoria (MAV) provide targeted assistance and support to councils to help them meet their statutory responsibilities for emergency management.

One of these forms of targeted assistance is the Municipal Emergency Resourcing Program (MERP), which provides funding to councils in rural, regional and peri-urban areas to support their emergency management work.

The current round of MERP funding will conclude in mid-2016. Local Government Victoria, in partnership with the MAV, commissioned this evaluation of the MERP in preparation for design of the next round of MERP funding. The overarching aims of the evaluation are to understand how effectively it has supported councils, to identify opportunities for improvement and to understand more broadly how emergency management capability and capacity can be supported within the local government sector.

1.2 The Municipal Emergency Resourcing Program

The MERP was formed in 2012 to build upon the Municipal Fire and Emergency Management Resourcing Program (MFEMRP) that was in place between 2010 and 2012 and to support implementation of local government roles under the Vulnerable People in Emergencies Policy (VPEP). The program provides funds to Victorian councils to help them fulfil their legislative and policy obligations around emergency management and planning—the ultimate goal being improved protection of their communities and assets.

The objectives and expected outcomes of MERP are discussed more in Section 4.1.2.

There are two main elements of the funding allocation that reflect the areas of work for councils:

- emergency management planning
- identification and planning for support of vulnerable people.

MERP funding is allocated to all 64 Victorian councils located within Country Fire Authority (CFA) districts (Figure 1).

Approximately \$4.5 million has been disbursed to councils each year across two separate two-year funding agreements:

- 2012/13 to 2013/14
- 2014/15 to 2015/16.

Forty-seven funding agreements are in place for 2014/15 to 2015/16, comprising:

- 35 agreement with individual councils
- 12 agreements with councils that take an administrative 'lead' role on behalf of between two and four neighbouring councils that have been grouped together for the MERP.

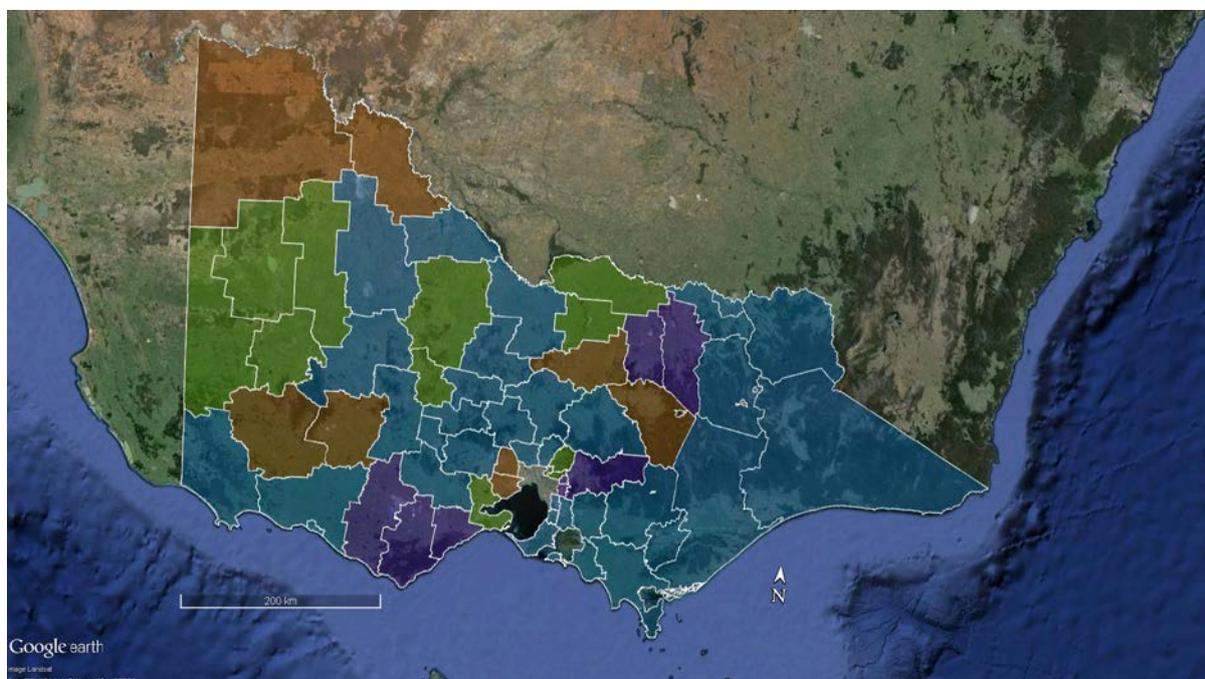


Figure 1. Map of the 64 councils receiving MERP funding. Blue shading indicates individually funded councils. Grouped councils are indicated by colour groupings, with adjacent groups coloured differently to distinguish membership. Note that the 15 inner metropolitan councils (in grey) are not in CFA districts and thus not funded by MERP.

1.3 Objective and scope of this evaluation

The original project specification for this evaluation and discussions with MAV and LGV staff define the objectives of this evaluation as:

- a formal evaluation of the MERP guided by the Department of Treasury and Finance’s (DTF) Evaluation Policy and Standards for Lapsing Programs
- an evaluation that will help inform effective design and delivery of future work by LGV and other entities, including appropriate grants programs, to support local governments’ role in emergency management.

Moreover, MAV and LGV's interest in the MERP is forward looking, with the broad aims of:

- understanding whether the program is delivering good support to local government
- exploring how the program can be improved into the future, including options for addressing gaps or re-assessing how funding is delivered.

For these reasons, the focus of this evaluation is on councils' perspectives on the utility, value and potential improvements to MERP as an avenue for understanding how support can be provided most effectively into the future.

Note that the focus is also on the grants allocated to local government to support them in their emergency management obligations through the MERP. The original MFEMRP had a different design and scope to MERP and is not part of the current evaluation.

Given the above points, there is also less interest in a detailed evaluation of how the program was designed and managed within LGV. This has implications for Question 3 of the DTF's lapsing program standards, which asks for program details beyond the scope required by this evaluation. As such, Question 3 in Table 1 (below) has been formulated to address the intent of both the DTF guidelines and the forward-looking aims of the evaluation.

No audits of financial documents or budgets were undertaken as part of this evaluation.

1.4 Key evaluation questions

Key evaluation questions (KEQs) help guide an evaluation, providing a boundary and guide to data collection, analysis and reporting. Key evaluation questions for this evaluation are outlined in Table 1 below. A table showing how these questions align with corresponding questions in the in the DTF's Lapsing Program guidelines is provided in Appendix 1.

Table 1. Key evaluation questions for the MERP.

Key evaluation question	Sub-questions
1. What is the evidence of a continued need for the program and role for government in delivering this program? (justification/problem)	<p>How did the program objectives align with departmental objectives and any stated government priorities?</p> <p>To what extent does the program continue to address a demonstrable need in emergency management in local government?</p> <p>How have relevant economic, environmental or social conditions changed since the program was funded?</p>
2. What is the evidence of the program's progress toward its stated objectives and expected outcomes? (Effectiveness)	<p>What were the objectives and planned outcomes of the MERP in relation to the funding provided to local government?</p> <p>What has been achieved by the MERP since 2012 in terms of intended outcomes?</p> <p>Have there been any unexpected outcomes (positive or negative)?</p>
3. What opportunities are there for improving the design and delivery of the program into the future?	<p>How satisfied are local government grant recipients with the way the program has been delivered?</p> <p>How else might the program be organised to address the need identified above?</p> <p>Are there any gaps in the program's approach and what can be done about them?</p> <p>What opportunities are there for improving program delivery, particularly in relation to: reporting and its alignment with funding agreements; the clarity of roles; the flexibility and guidance around objectives; the integration of the vulnerable persons component; the term of funding?</p> <p>Are there any clear cost-savings that can be made in administering the program?</p> <p>Are there any ways in which funds could be distributed to councils more efficiently, such as through partnerships, different funding levels or for different deliverables?</p>
4. What would be the impact of ceasing the program and what strategies have been identified to minimise negative impacts (risk)	<p>What would be the impact on local government of ceasing the program?</p> <p>What flow through impacts would this have on emergency preparedness and management?</p> <p>How can these risks be mitigated?</p>

2 Methodology

2.1 Summary

The key steps and methods used in this evaluation are outlined below, with detail provided in Appendix 2:

- **An inception meeting and project planning workshop** with LGV staff managing the MERP and representatives of the MAV.
- **A desktop review** of relevant documents, including:
 - program documentation (MERP Q & A, sample funding agreements)
 - background policy documents
 - MERP update reports from councils
- **Semi-structured interviews** with:
 - Fifty councils receiving MERP funding, including 96 individual council staff and two agency staff. 46 of the 50 were lead councils, representing 98% coverage of the 47 councils that have a funding agreement with LGV for 2014-16.
 - Five representatives from three key government agencies (Department of Health and Human Services (DHHS), Emergency Management Victoria (EMV) and the State Emergency Service (SES)).
- **An online survey** of:
 - Key MERP contacts within funded councils (one per council) to supplement interview data and provide opportunity for partner council input (41 responses, including three councils who had not been interviewed).
 - Twenty regional SES staff (6 responses) to gain an additional external perspective from individuals who had been working closely with councils over the term of the MERP.
- **Data analysis:**
 - Between the survey and interviews, we received input from 53 councils, over 100 council staff, five State-level government agency staff and six regional SES staff. (the source of information in the results is noted throughout this report)
 - Extensive coding and categorisation of interview notes (near-verbatim) to distil key issues, identify trends and clarify how concepts and components were linked.
 - Descriptive analysis of available quantitative data.
 - The source of results/comments is noted throughout this report. Where the number of interviewees is reported it refers to the number of councils mentioning that issue.
- **Reporting**, including preparation of a draft report for review by LGV and MAV and a presentation to the MERP Steering Committee (comprising senior representatives of DHHS, EMV, LGV and MAV).

It is also important to note that an important part of this evaluation has been to allow the themes, activities and outcomes to emerge from the data, rather than looking explicitly for key elements. This reflects the broadly scoped nature of the program. It also acts as a mechanism for checking how well aligned council activities are with the MERP's varied goals, without leading responses.

2.2 Limitations

As per the objectives and scope of this evaluation, the focus for data collection was councils. The majority of the data presented here thus represents the views and perspectives of council staff, many of whom have a direct interest in the program's continuance. Some input from other agencies was also collected, providing a degree of triangulation and, overall, a good indication of the value of the program to councils and the opportunities for improvement.

3 Key findings

The key findings of this evaluation are summarised below against each of the key evaluation questions. More detailed results are presented in Section 4. The key findings, results and discussion lead to a series of recommendations in Section 5.2.

Evidence of a continued need for the program (KEQ 1)

- **The objectives of the MERP align well with departmental objectives and broader government priorities in this space.** This includes LGV corporate plans and Victoria’s Emergency Management Strategic Action Plan for 2015-18, with the latter including priority actions about the capability and capacity of local governments to meet their obligations in the management of emergencies.
- As well as aligning with the above policies and recommendations, **the MERP continues to address a clear and demonstrable need within local government.** This need is characterised by challenges relating to:
 - limited funds and capacity; 38/50 council interviewees noted their council is challenged in fulfilling its emergency management obligations by either limited funds or capacity—a point particularly important among smaller regional councils
 - a lack of skills and expertise in emergency management
 - uncertainty around councils’ emergency management obligations and changes to these obligations into the future
 - a lack of incidents to maintain preparedness and instil buy-in within councils
 - not having their role appropriately recognised by other emergency management agencies
 - the high expectations of these same agencies, as well as the communities that local governments serve.
- **The MERP provides resources directly to councils to address this need. In this context it is seen to be of great value:**
 - All of the surveyed councils considered the MERP to be of great (35/41) or moderate (6/41) value in helping them address emergency management obligations, with a trend for smaller councils to more highly endorse the program
 - interviewees and survey respondents from other State Agencies also considered the program to be of high value in addressing this need
 - of particular note is how **the MERP enables someone to be dedicated to and focused on emergency management** in what would otherwise (in many cases) be an add-on, reactive role.

Progress toward its stated objectives and expected outcomes (KEQ 2)

- **The MERP has helped council in a range of ways that align well with its broadly scoped objectives and intended outcomes.**
- The majority of council interviewees (42/50 councils) indicated that **the MERP helped them to improve the quality of their emergency management planning and documentation.** This included:
 - having more detailed plans and/or a greater range of sub-plans

- o ensuring emergency management plans and other documents are up to date.

These improvements were supported by regional SES staff, with all six agreeing that the quality of emergency management planning and preparedness in councils had improved or improved greatly over the four years MERP funding has been provided.

- Most council interviewees (43/50 councils) reported that **the MERP helped them to improve their communication and collaboration with other stakeholders**. Twenty-seven interviewees also noted that these improvements were among the most significant achievements enabled by MERP. These relate to councils:
 - o communicating, engaging and working with emergency management agencies more closely (29 interviewees)
 - o collaborating with other councils, either through emergency management ‘clusters’, Municipal Emergency Management Enhancement Groups (MEMEGs) or informal collaboration and sharing (22 interviewees)
 - o improving information flow within councils (8 interviewees)

These changes were ultimately noted to lead to improved relationships, networks and levels of trust with partners, as well as councils having a greater voice in discussions with other agencies and groups

- Over half of the councils (28/50 councils) noted that **the MERP had helped them to improve their community engagement and capacity building**. This was the third most frequently cited benefit of MERP, including work relating to:
 - o improved levels of community engagement (24 interviewees)
 - o capacity and resilience building among community members (15 interviewees)
- Around three-quarters of councils (37/50 councils) noted that **the MERP had helped improve the structure and organisation of emergency management within their organisations**. This included:
 - o having a stronger focus on emergency management
 - o organising, coordinating and supporting training
 - o improving council systems and structures around emergency management

These are important points in that they represent more sustainable, long-term outcomes that should continue to benefit council emergency management even in the absence of external support.

- As per their funded requirements, **virtually all councils (47/50 councils) noted the MERP had influenced their council’s work with vulnerable people**. Ten councils noted that these impacts were among the most valuable or important changes flowing from the MERP. Work in this area included:
 - o supporting work done by or with Home and Community Care services
 - o helping maintain the vulnerable persons register
 - o integrating considerations around vulnerable persons into their emergency planning

While the majority of interviewees explicitly noted that the vulnerable persons component integrates well with other aspects of MERP, six saw it as being poorly scoped and aligned.

- Just over one-third of councils (17/50 councils) noted **the MERP helped their council engage in more strategic work and take on more of a leadership role**, including:
 - o coordinating and driving collaboration across a group of partner councils
 - o engaging with state and regional level management bodies on broad-level policies that have flow-on impacts at the local level.

- Nine councils noted that the MERP has **helped in standardising documents and bringing consistency to communications, procedures and training**
- Six council interviewees noted that the MERP had helped them to **develop innovative approaches and tools for emergency management within local government.**
- Five interviewees noted explicitly that **the various enhancements to emergency management planning, preparation and engagement enabled by the MERP had led to actual improvements in their response to emergencies.**

Opportunities for improving the design and delivery of the program into the future (KEQ 3)

- **The MERP structure appears to be well set up to address many of the needs of councils** in that it provides:
 - the resources to address the capacity needs of councils noted previously
 - autonomy and flexibility for councils to address issues that are relevant to their local circumstance
- **The key risk with its approach is the potential for creating dependence within councils** without addressing the underlying divide between resources and expectations.
- There may also be **a range of ways in which LGV and others could provide additional, supplementary support to councils to further address those needs identified previously.**

Opportunities identified by council staff relate to:

- support for collaboration, knowledge sharing and networking
 - providing standards and guidance around emergency management
 - providing local government-specific emergency management training for council staff
 - advocating for and on behalf of councils, including clarifying local government's role in this sector and lobbying for policies and legislation to establish fair and reasonable expectations for councils.
- **The majority (90%) of council survey respondents were satisfied with the actual delivery of the MERP**, pointing to particular strengths around:
 - the flexibility of the funding
 - recent improvements to reporting templates and requirements.
 - Interviewees identified two key opportunities for improving delivery of the program. This included:
 - **extending the funding duration to reduce issues of staff turnover and challenges in recruitment**
 - **improving guidance around the funding**, including providing greater clarity around the objectives of the program, its strategic intent and what the intended outcomes are.
 - This latter point raises broader issues around:
 - a persistent lack of clarity about what is expected of local government, with some seeing the MERP providing de facto strategic guidance in this environment
 - improving the efficacy of MERP through clearer objectives
 - improving the long-term impacts of MERP and avoiding issues of dependency.
 - In terms of improvements to the efficiency of the program, three potential options include:

- reviewing the funding distribution to councils (in line with clearer documentation of what MERP is trying to achieve)
- encouraging or supporting collaboration among councils that reduces duplication
- extending the duration of funding to reduce inefficiencies associated with staff turnover.

Impact of ceasing the program (KEQ 4)

- **The principal impact if the MERP were to cease would be a decrease in the capacity and capability of councils to plan and prepare for emergencies.**
- This flows on from **the immediate impact of ceasing the program, which would be the loss or reduction of MERP-funded positions within councils:**
 - 18 of 20 interviewees commenting on this indicated their councils would be unlikely to replace the position in the absence of external funding support
 - while there appears to have been some greater recognition within some councils of the importance of emergency management, this is not ubiquitous.
- **A decrease in dedicated emergency management staff within council would flow through to impact on councils' levels of emergency preparedness and management.** These impacts would reflect many of the positive gains from the program (KEQ 2 above).
- **Impacts are likely to differ between councils depending on their resources,** yielding cases where cessation of MERP would:
 - lead to a loss or reduction in innovation, quality, strategic planning, community capacity building and cross-organisational collaboration; but where core obligations would likely still be met
 - lead to a loss of core emergency management capacity and capability that would, in the absence of additional council funding, lead to councils struggling to fulfil their core emergency management obligations and being less well prepared for incidents.

4 Results in detail

4.1 Need for the program

4.1.1 Overview

This section addresses the overarching question: What is the evidence of a continued need for the program and role for government in delivering it? In answering this, we examine the following sub-questions:

- How did the program objectives align with departmental objectives and any stated government priorities?
- To what extent does the program continue to address a demonstrable need in emergency management in local government?
- How have relevant economic, environmental or social conditions changed since the program was funded?

4.1.2 Alignment of objectives

The objectives of the MERP align well with departmental objectives and broader government priorities in this space.

The objectives of the MERP have evolved out of the predecessor programs, the MFEMRP and the VPEP. At the broadest level, the MERP is about supporting local government to improve its emergency management and meet its legislative obligations in this area.

While there is no single program-level document definitively defining the MERP's objectives, the 2014-2016 funding agreement notes the MERP is to:

The funding is to enable councils to undertake strategic emergency management planning, to ensure they are able to prepare for, respond to, and actively manage council activities during emergency events.

The funding will assist councils with the identification of vulnerable people within their municipality, in the context of the prevailing policy regarding vulnerable people (2014-2016 MERP funding agreement).

The funding agreement goes on to specify a range of activities and outcomes that are within the scope of the program:

- “Work in partnership with other agencies to implement local government emergency management activities. Where possible, council should utilise a strategic and collegiate approach, whereby learnings from other councils are leveraged.
- Support and facilitate joined-up fire planning at municipal level (i.e. linking Municipal Emergency Management Plans to Township Protection Plans).
- Support and facilitate the streamlining of council approval processes for emergency management activities.
- Work with community groups and members to facilitate community inclusion in emergency management preparation.
- Provide support to emergency response agencies during emergency events.

- Actively engage with relevant government agencies to help ensure consistent emergency management practices can be implemented across the state.
- Enable a continuous improvement approach to municipal emergency management.
- Work in partnership with DHS, other agencies, and across councils business areas as appropriate to support local implementation of required activities under the Vulnerable People in Emergencies policy, including:
 - Planning with, and identification of, vulnerable people within the municipality
 - Developing and maintaining a list of vulnerable clients of the council, where appropriate and in line with required protocols
 - Coordinating the compilation of lists of vulnerable people within the standard technology platform, utilising information from council, funded agencies and other third parties
 - Developing and maintaining a list of facilities within the municipality where vulnerable people may be located
 - Where appropriate, ensure the information is accessible to Victoria Police and other authorised organisations in planning for, and in response to, emergency events.
- Other duties assigned to local government stemming from the reformation of the Victorian emergency management sector over the funded period”.

As noted above, this broad scoping of the MERP has evolved over time from a more narrow focus on fire and the recommendations of the VBRC. Councils have used this flexibility to make a range of improvements to their emergency management preparedness, as outlined in Section 4.2 below.

The focus of MERP aligns well with government and departmental policies regarding emergency management. The Victorian Emergency Management Strategic Action Plan 2015-2018 very closely matches the objectives of MERP and notes the need to “enhance the capability and capacity of local governments to meet their obligations in the management of emergencies”.¹

The MERP’s intent also aligns well with the Corporate Plan of the then Department of Planning and Community Development (under which sat Local Government Victoria), which notes the Department will “build community resilience and develop a whole of community response to bushfires (and other natural disasters ... [including:]

- responding to the VBRC recommendations
- working with local government to implement new standards of fire readiness in planning and building
- supporting local communities to respond, recover and reconstruct from bushfires (and other natural disasters)”².

The VBRC’s recommendations also remain relevant, with the MERP fitting well as a State-based mechanism for “helping municipal councils to undertake local planning that tailors bushfire safety options to the needs of individual communities ... [and] compile and maintain a list of vulnerable residents who need tailored advice”.³

¹ Victorian Emergency Management Strategic Action Plan 2015-2018, p. 20

² DPCD Corporate Plan 2010-2014, p. 14

³ Victorian Bushfires Royal Commission, 2009, Final Report Recommendations, p.1

While localised in scope, recommendations from the Hazelwood Mine Fire Inquiry also provide support for LGV’s work in this space.⁴ In particular, Affirmation 31 states that “Local Government Victoria [will] coordinate emergency management officers across local councils” – a role that arises directly out of the MERP (p. 36). The MERP also has scope to contribute towards implementation of municipal fire management plans (Recommendation 3), plans for informing and engaging local communities (Recommendation 12) and supporting effective communication from state level to communities via the councils (Recommendation 11).

4.1.3 The need within local government

Articulating the need for support within local government

As well as aligning with the above policies and recommendations, **the MERP continues to address a clear and demonstrable need within local government.**

This need is broadly characterised by:

- the considerable expectations of local government’s role in emergency planning and management, particularly since the VBRC and 2011 Victorian Floods Review
- the limited resources, experience and capability of some local governments in regards to emergency planning and management
- the competing demands on councils’ limited resources, with emergency management often seen as a lower priority than other business
- a resulting disconnect between the heightened need for quality emergency management on behalf of local governments and the available capacity and capability to meet this need.

These factors, in turn, create a need for external support of local government. The challenges and issues contributing to this need are discussed in more detail below, followed by a summary of how MERP addresses that need.

Interviews with council staff and other stakeholders highlighted a range of related challenges that councils are facing in addressing their obligations around emergency management:

- **Limited funds and capacity.** Thirty-eight interviewees noted that their council is challenged in fulfilling its emergency management obligations by either limited funds or capacity. The lack of resources was noted to be driven by general resource limitations (20 comments), low rates bases (6 comments) and emergency management not being seen as “core business” (11 comments).

Because we didn’t have the resources it was only when it was a statutory requirement that we actually did it. Given our resources are at a low level, we struggle with the day-to-day preparedness (council interviewee).

Resourcing limitations, in turn, flowed through to capacity limitations. In particular, 25 interviewees highlighted that one of the key challenges pre-MERP was that emergency management roles were add-ons to other positions, creating a lack of focus and an “ad-hoc” approach to emergency management.

⁴ Hazelwood Mine Fire Inquiry Report, Hazelwood Mine Fire Inquiry, August 2014.

Prior to these roles it was more of an add on to pre-existing roles. You're struggling to do that with an already busy job – there's a lot of stuff to be done already without adding on EM stuff that's increasing every year (council interviewee).

Had nothing five years ago. One or two people on top of regular full time positions in council. No resources or facilities. No understanding of what we should be doing or capacity as a small council to go anywhere (council interviewee).

Four of the six SES survey respondents also highlighted, unprompted, these issues of limited resources and divided attention. Similarly, all Agency interviewees referred to the limited resources councils typically have in this space, particularly in smaller, regional municipalities.

- **Lack of skills and expertise in emergency management.** Ten interviewees noted that councils struggled with a lack of skills and expertise in emergency management. This related to the lack of resources noted above, but also to the challenges of recruiting appropriately qualified staff (10 comments).

Council doesn't have that knowledge and skillset or the time. It's not core business ... I could see why they were on yearly watches⁵, they couldn't get the competencies and time and resources to get their plans up to scratch (council interviewee).

In local government there's not a great deal of expertise in fire management generally. There is a whole lot of staff who fit in the 'don't know what you don't know category'. I was a little shocked when first started that it was a bit of a lowest common denominator approach (council interviewee).

- **Uncertainty and changes to obligations into the future.** Compounding the issues with capacity and capability, 30 interviewees noted that councils are challenged by the uncertain and continually changing nature of their emergency management obligations. This also links to the volume of change and the resources needed to keep up to date. As one interviewee noted:

There are expectations of councils of adopting changes and moving forward – in a small council such as this there is no spare staff for this kind of work (council interviewee).

This particular issue was also reflected by an SES survey respondent, who noted:

Most councils would not be able to provide the necessary resources to keep up to date with the ever changing emergency management environment without additional specific support (SES survey respondent)

- **The lack of incidents to maintain preparedness.** Eleven interviewees noted that one of the challenges they faced in keeping emergency management on the agenda of their council was the lack of and time between incidents. Without those incidents, emergency management was noted to drop down the funding priority list. The reverse was also noted by one interviewee whose council had experienced community backlash from a recent flooding

⁵ Refers to SES conducting yearly audits of council MEMPs, rather than audits every three years as occurs when there are higher level of compliance.

event and, in turn, had committed to funding a dedicated emergency management coordinator: “Council of the day said it would never happen again – ‘we’ll be well-prepared”

- **Appropriate recognition of local government’s role.** Nine interviewees also noted that local government is often not appropriately recognised by emergency management agencies, making collaboration and progress in planning difficult. Similarly, eight interviewees highlighted the challenges working with agencies around their Municipal Emergency Management Plans (MEMPs).

Part of the problem is that everyone sees the plans as being council plans. They’re not really. Council is responsible for developing and maintaining them, but the other agencies ... they have a bit of input, but they leave it up to council. So there’s a big challenge there (council interviewee).

- **High expectations.** Linked to the above issue, seven interviewees noted that council was faced with high expectations of performance by emergency management agencies that they struggled to meet: “some of the response agencies sometimes have unrealistic expectations” (council interviewee). Three noted similarly high expectations from the community: “one of the greatest ones is around community expectation. They expect us to be in there doing a whole lot of things” (council interviewee). One Agency interviewee also noted that the expectations of community are both a key driver and challenge for councils, explaining:

It’s not just decided at a state level. Their role is often reactive because the community expects it and rings them and asks them, so a lot of their workload is driven from the community expectations of the council as much as what’s written in the Emergency Management Manual Victoria [EMMV]. We can, at a state level, make some decisions about what they do and don’t do, but there are community expectations of local government that is not necessarily governed by what is in the EMMV (Agency interviewee).

How MERP addresses this need for support

The points above indicate a clear need for support within local government. The need appears to revolve largely around a lack of resources that, in turn, impinges on councils’ capacity and capability around emergency management (see also Box 2). **The MERP provides resources directly to councils to address this issue and, in this context, is seen to be of great value to most councils (34/41; Figure 2).**

All six SES survey respondents also noted that funding was the way to address the challenges above. In turn, four agreed with the statement that the MERP was “Of great importance. They would be unlikely to meet their obligations without it”.

Interviews confirmed that the ways in which MERP provided value and support to councils was through general improvements to capacity (37 interviewees). Most councils used funds to directly add “boots on the ground” capacity to their emergency management teams, though in some cases, this occurred at a higher level across partner councils. Typifying how MERP helped with capacity (but not necessarily what was done with that capacity), one interviewee noted:

The funded role is the core around everything we do around emergency management. Staff training, resources, exercises, policies, MERP audit requirements etcetera ... we could not have done any of this without the position (council interviewee).

The additional capacity provided through MERP was also noted to relate to:

- adding value to and improving the quality of emergency management operations within council (14 interviewees)
- adding people with specific skills and expertise in emergency management (11 interviewees): “I basically have an expert in EM in-house – whereas beforehand it was an add-on” (council interviewee).
- providing executive and administrative support to other staff (6 interviewees)
- building emergency management capacity within council more broadly (6 interviewees)
- providing additional resources during an emergency (5 interviewees).

One of the key advantages to having this additional capacity was that **it enabled someone to be dedicated to and focused on emergency management**—something noted by 31 interviewees. This focus helped:

- keep track of and understand updates to legislation and obligations (13 interviewees):
In the changing landscape it’s helped the councils to have a position just focus on emergency management. There are more changes with the Act coming so it’s really important to have that position ... someone to go back to for information – Act changes are not always that clear (council interviewee).
- have a centralised driver of activities in this space (7 interviewees):
It needs a driver. Someone to talk with people, coordinate with people and stakeholders ... I really want to stress how things did grind to a halt in those six months there was no one in this position (council interviewee).
- having another member of staff for critically thinking about and exchanging ideas around emergency management (7 interviewees):
They’re also another set of eyes—another perspective. Someone who has done some work in emergency management, rather than just someone who might not have time or expertise to look at it. It makes the plans more robust (council interviewee).

This position-based approach and its impact on the focus of emergency management staff was also supported by agency interviewees with one noting “it is fantastic there’s people whose actual job is complete emergency management responsibility”. Another elaborated:

I think spending the money on positions is essential. Having people in local government explicitly funded to do this kind of stuff is both symbolic and practical and it’s got all sorts of benefits in terms of the profile and sense of importance that it gives to that work, particularly around planning stuff ... having that dedicated resource; rather than the problem we often have in emergency management being that emergency management is only one of the 20 responsibilities that someone has, it isn’t their full role. That doesn’t give us good outcomes (Agency interviewee).

Ultimately, the additional capacity and support delivered through the MERP has led to a range of activities and outcomes, outlined in Section 4.2 below. It is also important to note, however, that the value of MERP does not appear to be uniform across councils. This differentiation and its implications are discussed more in Section 4.3.4.

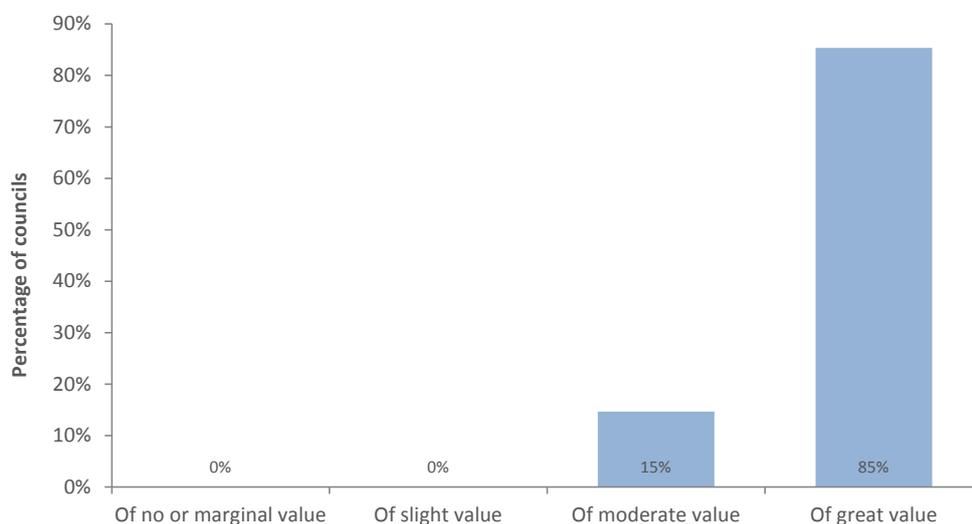


Figure 2. Value of the MERP as reported by council survey respondents. n=41.

Box 1. Stories from Council: small council struggles in North Eastern Victoria.

Small council struggles in north eastern Victoria

Smaller councils tend to have fewer resources available for positions dedicated to emergency management. For one small council in north eastern Victoria this is particularly the case due to a small population, few staff and a relatively large area to cover. For this council the feeling was that their small team is generally spread quite thinly.

“The other thing is... we cover a very big area... you can have one emergency that doesn’t affect other parts. A few years ago, we had fires and the CEO was operating phones... but then the rest of the shire expects business as usual... You have fewer resources for dealing with business as usual at the same time as emergency itself and no additional staff.”

The MERP funding provides additional support to the Council, which has enabled them to put in more time to establish neighbourhood safer places, improve the MEMP and prepare for auditing. The support has also enabled them to clarify council’s responsibilities and provide some community education.

In this council emergency management plans are leaner and simpler (though still enough to meet the audit standards), however the level of funding is not enough to fully cover costs:

“The level of funding doesn’t cover the full cost of EM planning in our council. We’ve got about \$40-50,000 in costs to the Council above and beyond... and that’s just the planning.”

There are still issues which include:

- difficulty in recruitment and retention, particularly when it is a part time role and based regionally
- smaller councils being seen as a stepping stone to working at bigger and more well-resourced councils
- a steep learning curve for new staff as often they are not overly familiar with emergency management and/or local government.

4.1.4 Changes since the program was funded

This final section relating to the need of the program briefly discusses how conditions have changed since the program was funded. These changes have largely been noted already and include:

- The continued changes to structures, policies and legislation surrounding emergency management, concomitant with a perceived increase in the expectations of the performance of councils in this area. The result, from the perspective of many of the councils interviewed here, is an environment of uncertainty; one in which it is not entirely clear councils should be working on or prioritising.
- Resource constraints were discussed in Section 4.1.3, but 18 interviewees also raised the looming issue of potential rate-capping as a further limitation on councils' resources.
- Together with the changing regulatory environment noted above, there has also been a shift in how emergencies are dealt with, with agencies moving more towards an integrated, 'all hazards' approach. This has been well-reflected in the subsequent iterations of the program, which has shifted from an initial focus on bushfires to a more encompassing 'emergency management' scope.

4.2 Progress – what has it achieved?

4.2.1 Overview

This section addresses the overarching question: What is the evidence of the program's progress toward its stated objectives and expected outcomes? In answering this, we examined the following sub-questions:

- What were the objectives and planned outcomes of the MERP in relation to the funding provided to local government?
- What has been achieved by the MERP since 2012 in terms of intended outcomes?
- Have there been any unexpected outcomes (positive or negative)?

The stated objectives and planned outcomes of the MERP were outlined in Section 4.1.2 above.

The MERP has helped council in a range of ways that align well with these objectives and outcomes, including improvements to:

- emergency planning, preparation and documentation
- communication and collaboration across stakeholders
- engagement with the community and community capacity building

- internal organisation and capability building
- planning and coordination relating to vulnerable people
- strategic work and leadership
- standardisation and consistency in planning
- innovation, tools and other outcomes.

The first six of these areas emerged from asking council interviewees what areas benefited most from MERP (Figure 3). It is important to note that these issues were also discussed at various other points throughout interviews, during which other outcomes emerged, including standardisation and innovation. More detail on these activities and impacts is provided in Sections (4.2.2 to 4.2.10) below.

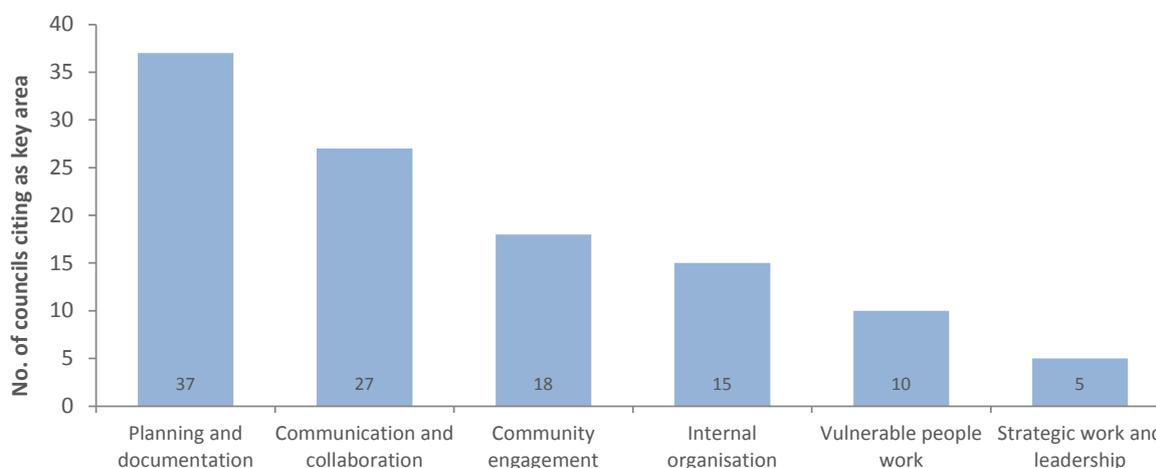


Figure 3. Key areas in which the MERP has led to improvements as reported by council interviewees. n=49.

4.2.2 Emergency management planning and documentation

The majority of councils (42/50 councils) indicated that the MERP helped them to improve the quality of their emergency management planning and documentation. This area was also rated most frequently by interviewees as one of the key benefits of the MERP (Figure 3). In 22 cases, interviewees noted that while their planning and documentation met their statutory requirements prior to MERP, the support has led to improvements in the quality and comprehensiveness of their planning and preparation (see also Box 2).

Our MEMP has always been compliant [with SES audit criteria]. But in the last two audits we've had 21 or 22 out of 25 components [rated as] best practice (council interviewee).

In 12 cases, interviewees were particularly effusive about the impacts of MERP. These interviewees generally noted that, prior to the program, their councils were struggling to meet their statutory requirements and their plans and documentation were in a poor state. One interviewee noted:

[It has been] exceptional ... when I walked in they said ‘here’s the box’—an A4 size box that was the emergency management documentation in [XX council]. They had a MEMP plan which was photocopies of photocopied bits that were out of date. That’s what we started with. The most of what the rest [of the councils in the region] had was an emergency management plan and or three supporting sub-plans. Now we have consistent emergency management plans across the councils and 26 supporting emergency management sub-plans. They are consistent and they reflect what these councils can do. [We recently] went through audit of the MEMP and 18 out of 24 came out as best practice (council interviewee).

Across councils, the MERP appears to have supported two key improvements in planning:

- **Having more detailed plans and/or a greater range of sub-plans** (20 interviewees)—“I think our planning has moved in leaps and bounds. We now have plans for flood and other hazards we didn’t have previously” (council interviewee). Another interviewee emphasised the quality and usefulness of the plans, “the plans are thought out and mean something. You can pick it up and use it as a living document, whereas before it was a bit generic”.
- **Ensuring emergency management plans and other documents are up to date** (14 interviewees). These interviewees noted that the MERP has enabled them to more routinely, regularly and proactively update their plans, contact databases, SOPs and other emergency management documentation—“if we didn’t have the MERP position it would just be me and one other, so the review of plans, etcetera, would be ad hoc at best” (council interviewee).

Box 2. Stories from Council: High quality planning in the South East

High quality planning in the south east

For some municipalities in the south east of Victoria the population of townships can fluctuate substantially, particularly during the summer months. This poses unique challenges in the context of emergency planning.

One coastal Council describes the impact of the MERP on their ability to engage in high quality planning and management of plans / sub-plans within a relatively short time frame as “surprising”.

Prior to the MERP it was felt that some plans, particularly the Municipal Fire Prevention Plan (MFPP), was not overly detailed. The MERP has enabled a significant change in the level of detail within the Municipal Fire Management Plan to a much more integrated management approach.

“It’s been such a significant change... without the MERP funding it would have been very difficult to achieve that level of detail within that plan.”

This has also had the side benefit of building inter-agency relationships:

“We’ve been able to work more closely with other agencies Victoria Police, DELWP, CFA and it’s really built those relationships”.

The other aspect that has impacted on this council is having the one consistent position over the

years who has been able to keep up with the changes in emergency management, and work with others in council to ensure that plans and standard operating procedures are up to date and implementable.

“[It’s] kind of surprising to see how far we’ve come... we have really added to the suite of plans and SOPs that we’ve got now. When you look back on the amount of work that we have been able to complete... [you] can really see that we’ve achieved a massive amount.”

Regional SES staff also observed improvements in documentation, planning, preparedness and fulfilment of obligations (Figure 4). Moreover, most noted that the MERP had a positive (or highly positive) influence on these improvements (Figure 5).



Figure 4. Changes to councils’ emergency management planning, compliance and fulfilment of obligations over the previous four years, as seen by SES regional staff (n=6).

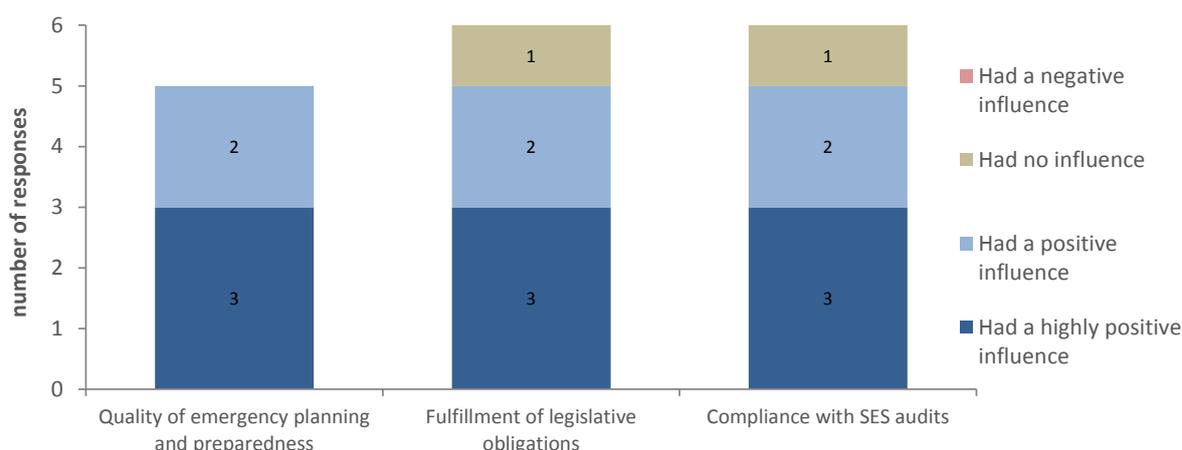


Figure 5. Influence of the MERP on councils' emergency management planning, compliance and fulfilment of obligations, as seen by SES regional staff (n=6).

4.2.3 Communicating and collaborating across stakeholders

Most councils (43/50 councils) reported that the MERP helped them to improve their communication and collaboration with other stakeholders. Twenty-seven interviewees also noted that these improvements were among the most significant achievements enabled by MERP (Figure 3).

Over half of councils interviewees (29 interviewees) noted that the MERP had given them the time to communicate, engage and work with emergency management agencies more closely. This includes:

- Attending more regional emergency management meetings – “by having a full time person it’s allowed us to be much more engaged with the EM service providers at local levels and to be able to have reasonably consistent regional representation” (council interviewee).
- Formal and informal networking with other agencies – “not just normal MEMP meetings but also get together in between [with the] heads of emergency management services at local level” (council interviewee).
- Working directly with agencies to plan and prepare for emergencies – “from my perspective it’s the robust MEMP Committee and the agency partnerships. We’ve developed really good relationships with agencies and undertaken some really good exercises” (council interviewee).

Four council interviewees noted that MERP has been particularly valuable in these interactions because, in many cases, other agencies’ resources have decreased. As one interviewee noted, this has meant those agencies “need to be able to rely more on municipalities than they have in the past ... we are undertaking work now that other agencies would have done in the past”. This perception appears to relate largely to the shifting of additional strategic and emergency planning to councils,

linking in with other comments around the increased expectations on councils for planning (see Sections 4.1.3).

Almost half of interviewed councils (22 interviewees) also noted that the MERP has helped them collaborate with other councils—either through emergency management ‘clusters’, MEMEGs or informal collaboration and sharing. As one interviewee noted,

I think one of the things I really wanted to highlight was the value of the regional MEMEG and the role of the MERP played in that (council interviewee).

The value of this collaboration between councils is linked to a range of issues, including:

- Reduced duplication of documentation – this applies to Standard Operating Procedures and other documents that can be largely similar between councils.
- Sharing knowledge among emergency management staff – one interviewee noted, in particular, “the benefit for us is that we’re able to work with other councils who are regularly involved in emergency situations”.
- Calling on support during emergencies – “the MERPs have been working on projects together and sharing resources ... that’s been a real positive. We know [the other councils] would jump on board to help in emergencies, it’s improved those relationships” (council interviewee).

A more detailed review of the various costs and benefits of collaborative approaches to emergency management is presented a recent review of collaboration in Victorian councils (Collaborative Emergency Management: Costs and benefits for local government).

For many of the councils, the MERP has supported collaboration by simply provided the time for someone to engage in meetings and other activities with neighbouring councils. As one participant in a cluster of four collaborating councils noted, “if the MERP positions go, it will make it very hard for the cluster to achieve anything because there would be no one at the local level to be working with the documents and feeding in that local perspective”.

In a range of cases the MERP funded a position that was shared between councils, leading to a de facto sharing of resources and knowledge. In one of these cases, the position was used more formally to directly coordinate collaboration between those partner councils (see Box 3).

Box 3. Stories from Council: collaboration in emergency management.

Collaboration in emergency management

Emergencies are not often restricted to local government boundaries. In Western Victoria, a group of councils have come together to work on streamlining their inter-council emergency planning, operations and communications.

These councils can now talk to each other. Over the last couple of seasons, these people, often isolated MRMs, can call each other. [That is] one of the biggest benefits, that these isolated part time individuals have a network to talk to”.

“[We have] been strong on consistency so relief centres can be inter-operable”.

There is a coordinator position that works equally across the councils who facilitates the collaboration. Councils maintain their regular EM positions, for example, Municipal Emergency Response Officers (MEROs), Municipal Recovery Managers (MRMs), etc.).

“There’s a body of work in maintaining consistency and networks and connectivity and that they’re not going to be able to do without some sort of coordination”.

“One of the key things is my counterparts and I; we do not do the doing. When there is an exercise or an incident or an emergency the phone call goes to the councils, not the collaboration facilitator.”

The feeling is that without the MERP support for the collaboration there would not have been the time for upskilling among the councils, and the time available to work on the arrangement.

Continued support is still necessary:

“Without funding this would not be happening, and without support it will go back. Now we are articulating the role more as it is not yet embedded alongside other businesses within council.”

And collaborations are still not necessarily seen as commonplace in all forums:

“For a long time, if I attended a meeting on behalf of other councils, I would not be recognised as representing all of them [or the collaboration].”

Interviewees noted that this increased communication and collaboration with emergency management agencies and other councils has, in turn, led to two important outcomes:

- **Improved relationships and trust** (24 interviewees). Interviewees reported that the additional interaction, communication and work with others has improved their relationships and levels of trust. As one interviewee noted, “we now great relationship with DHHS ... we’re learning how to build processes in advance of other emergencies”. This has set up councils for improved response, “it really improved our ability to respond quickly and efficiently, because we had established those relationships and that trust and understanding was already there” (council interviewee).
- **Gives a voice to councils** (5 interviewees). Through the improved representation of councils at various meetings and communication with other organisations, five interviewees indicated that their council now has a greater voice in working with those organisations. One interviewee noted, “Council now has a voice on all of these [emergency management committees] so that our part of the world isn’t forgotten and this flows back down”.

The final dimension of the communication and collaboration supported by the MERP is linked to improvements in information flow within council itself (8 interviewees). As noted elsewhere, this appears to relate to having additional capacity for doing emergency related work as well as having a key point of contact for others within the organisation to go to.

Other parts of the Shire—for example the Events Manager—now consult with the MERP position. Before it was all isolated and no one necessarily knew [who to go to]. It provides a point of contact (council interviewee).

4.2.4 Community engagement and capacity building

The third most frequently cited benefit of MERP related to improvements to community engagement and capacity building (Figure 3). Over half of the councils (28/50 councils) noted the MERP had helped to some extent in this area, including work relating to:

- improved levels of community engagement (24 interviewees)
- capacity and resilience building among community members (15 interviewees).

In terms of community engagement, council interviewees indicated that the MERP resources (translated into staff time) have allowed them to simply do more work with communities. This includes running more events, targeting new groups or engaging more closely with sections of the community (see also Box 4).

The funding has allowed us to provide a resource to do community-facing activities. We have a high number of vulnerable people represented in Black Saturday fatalities. We've run a number of programs to address that, with a strong community facing outlook, which we wouldn't have been able to do without that funding (council interviewee).

As above, in many of the cases of enhanced community engagement, interviewees noted that the work would not have been done had it not been for the support of the MERP. This appears to be because of the relatively high level of resourcing required to do community engagement. As noted by one interviewee, “we have 40 odd communities – maintaining those links takes a lot of work”.

Closely linked to this engagement is the more specific work councils have been doing around capacity and resilience building within their local communities. This ranges from awareness raising and education through to more in-depth planning and preparation. Examples include:

- a campaign providing residents with information about flood risk
- community education around fire safety in and around the home
- information and awareness raising to support members of the community who are deaf
- engagement sessions targeted at elderly residents for managing heatwaves and the risks of bushfire
- collaboration with amateur radio groups to develop a plan for assisting during emergencies
- work with specific cultural groups to get them to “manage their own resilience in an emergency by making them aware of the risk they face and planning for this coming summer”.

Most important is work supporting community, through Local Emergency Action Planning ... MERP role allows us to further provide that on-ground support to our communities to do the planning they may need. Without the MERP position, we wouldn't be able to achieve that, because we don't have the staff (council interviewee).

Box 4. Stories from Council: Improving emergency management-related community engagement.

Improving emergency management-related community engagement

For one council in south eastern Victoria, with a relatively spread out population, MERP has

enabled them to significantly increase their emergency management-related community engagement and capacity building activities.

[MERP] allowed us flexibility to focus on areas we identified that we needed to do more work, resilience building and response and recovery. [This] will be our focus area in future, and without the funding we would not have achieved it.

Part of this involved working with a particular community group on emergency management planning over the course of nearly 12 months. This has facilitated a community owned management plan which would not have necessarily occurred without the initial inputs from Council. This is seen as positive by the Council:

We're getting to that point where in next 6 months, we'll take a step back from that group, won't require as much support as they have in getting it up and going, and we'll be able to redirect that support to other groups to get started.

The other advantages of building capacity of groups in this way are that it increases the changes of sustaining these benefits over time and into the future. As also noted by the Council, it also means that they are able to direct their support to other groups and continue the process.

4.2.5 Internal organisation and capability building

Beyond the more immediately obvious improvements to emergency management plans and documents, around **three-quarters of councils (37/50 councils) noted that the MERP had helped improve the structure and organisation of emergency management within their organisations.** These are important points in that they represent more sustainable, long-term outcomes that should continue to benefit council emergency management even in the absence of external support.

The most frequently cited organisational change was having a **stronger focus on emergency management within councils** (19 interviewees). This was apparent in comments:

- around improved awareness and appreciation of emergency management within councils: "MERP has raised the profile of emergency management. It's placed an emphasis on what we need to do and need to achieve. It's really highlighted that it's core business" (council interviewee)
- through to examples where emergency management has become embedded in a range of roles and processes: "it's now part of our induction process for new staff members and it really represents that emergency management is a part of development for staff" (council interviewee).

These changes appear to have been driven simply by the amount of additional activity, coordination and representation being done by MERP-funded staff. As one interviewee suggested:

Embedding emergency management thinking ... it's similar to how organisations do OHS; there's one person that champions it across the organisation. It gets into the psyche of everyone across their day to day functioning (council interviewee).

Nearly one- third of interviewed councils recognised the MERP was a key element in supporting a staff member to **organise, coordinate and support training** (15 interviewees). This may have also helped focus council attention on emergency management:

Certainly we've had a large buy-in from council staff. Before this funded program it was a couple of people in the office, usually engineers, and no one else took any interest or had any buy-in. Now, through this program, everyone knows about it. We've had training and [the MERP-funded staff member] is lining up extra training - everyone is doing SES intro to emergency management, fire-ground access training. Previously, they would have left it to the engineers and truck drivers (council interviewee).

Finally, support from the MERP was also noted to be valuable in improving council systems and structures around emergency management (16 interviewees). This included:

- Having more structured emergency management coordination that better aligns with the rest of council operations (8 interviewees)—“it’s also allowed us to align our emergency management planning with our business continuity planning. During the floods there was a bit of an issue here; we had a lot of staff in our EM responsibilities but we also had a business to run ... without the funding we would have just gone back to the way things were rather than actually trying to improve things”.
- Changing procedures and organisational structure so that emergency management knowledge does not remain with just one person (5 interviewees). As one interviewee described:
Working through the recovery period as MRM took a great mental and emotional toll. People leave—there’s a high turnover—and there is not enough support for that; not the systems for backfill and support. MERP has enabled me to ensure those systems and processes are in place and that I’m not the only person in the role (council interviewee).
- Fostering processes of continuous improvement (7 interviewees). Linked to the above points, some interviewees also noted that the additional capacity offered by the MERP allowed for a more “reflexive” approach to emergency management planning and implementation—“we’ve had a lot of events, the MERP has allowed us to review and evaluate and practice continuous improvement”.

4.2.6 Planning and coordination relating to vulnerable people

Virtually all councils (47/50 councils) noted there had been some influence of MERP on their council’s work with vulnerable people, which is to be expected given the direct reference to councils’ roles in the MERP funding agreement. Ten councils noted that these impacts were among the most valuable or important changes flowing from the MERP (see also Box 5).

In terms of how councils used MERP resources to work on planning and coordination relating to vulnerable people:

- The most common approach was **supporting work done by or with Home and Community Care (HACC) services in identifying and working with vulnerable people (28 interviewees)**. Interviews rarely detailed who engaged in this work, but in around half of these cases the work appeared to be ‘outsourced’ to HACC or other community welfare staff within council,

rather than MERP or emergency management staff. Describing a typical arrangement, one interviewee noted:

We've got the register but the MERP [position] doesn't look in on that because other staff already do. They assist the aged and community services manager with the screening process for the vulnerable people register and managing that for HACC clients.

Another interviewee pointed to how the position has actually improved the way assessments are done:

It's lifted the profile and there's now a good, shared understanding of what the list is and what it is used for. For example, when client assessments are done by agencies, they now consider their eligibility for the register – this wouldn't have occurred without someone to promote the function.

- Another common use of MERP resources was **helping to maintain the vulnerable persons database/register (21 interviewees)**. As described by one MERP-funded interviewee, “I check the list and make sure there's no people unassigned and fallen off with agencies etcetera. I also contact agencies to make sure contact details and the people are up to date as well”. Four interviewees also noted that they have been working to improve the systems around the vulnerable people database.
- **Thirteen interviewees noted that the MERP has helped them integrate the vulnerable people register and considerations into their emergency management planning.** One interviewee described an example of this, noting “our aged care and disability staff are working closely with the MERP [funded position] around sub-plans around vulnerable people ... [and] relief centre work on vulnerable people as well”.

Overall, 29 of the interviewees noted that the vulnerable persons component integrates well with the other aspects of MERP and the obligations surrounding DHHS' vulnerable people in emergencies policy:

I think it works very well. Its aligned what we've got in our Municipal Emergency Management Plan, and drawn vulnerable people into that, and made us more aware of them and how we deal with that in planning and in response to an emergency (council interviewee).

Interviewees from state agencies supported these observations, one noting “when they ring and talk to us, it's quite clear that they are the MERP funded person ... and they understand the program, they are using it a lot and they are doing it well”.

Such positive comments aside, there were six interviewees who saw the vulnerable persons component as being poorly aligned with the broader work of MERP. For some, this was an issue of resource overlap (i.e. there was already a resource within council for doing the work), for others it was a question of who is best placed for the work:

There's such a lack of clarity around why that's embedded into the MERP funding. It should be in DHHS and other agencies' area of work ... I don't understand why I'm caught in the community chasing up clients etcetera. The role is articulated, but it doesn't fit in

emergency management. We don't have many on the register. It's just an extra layer that's not necessary. DHHS should take a more responsible approach. It's us in the middle.

Two interviewees also raised issues with the Crisisworks web application that serves as the platform for the state-wide vulnerable persons register. They noted that did not see the value in having to pay the \$5,000 subscription fee when they have very few people registered in their municipality and have alternative solutions that are more closely aligned to their council systems.

Box 5. Stories from Council: MERP and vulnerable people planning.

MERP and vulnerable people planning

One key aspect of the MERP is the relationship to vulnerable people. For a council in eastern Victoria the MERP-funded position specifically manages the Vulnerable Persons Register (VPR) and works across the vulnerable people space.

"[The VPR work is] specifically managed by the MERP person at the moment. So a lot of discussion with our HACC services people, and with our community members."

For this council one notable program involves the HACC team identifying potentially vulnerable people in high-risk areas who are unable to maintain their property to an adequate level prior to bushfire season.

"The MERP position and the council inspect the property, make an assessment, and if required contractors are brought in to bring the property up to an adequate level. This is done at cost to the council [separate to MERP funding] and has received positive feedback from the community. [The program] wouldn't have got off the ground without the MERP support for vulnerable persons."

The council also noted the flexibility of MERP in the support of vulnerable people as a positive as it enables them to ensure they are meeting the needs of the community.

"Flexibility is key to the program."

4.2.7 Strategic work and leadership

Just over one-third of councils (17/50 councils) noted the MERP helped their council engage in more strategic work and take on more of a leadership role in the emergency management space. While only five councils rated these impacts among the most significant areas supported by MERP (Figure 3), this reflects the lower level of MERP-supported work being done in this space as compared to core planning-related activities.

For many of these 17 councils, this strategic work revolved around high-level involvement in regional collaborations and with emergency management agencies (Section 4.2.3). Work included:

- council arranging meetings between agencies to align planning approaches and agree on principles of prioritisation and risk management at a local level
- experienced staff from one council coordinating and driving collaboration across a group of partner councils that may be less well-resourced
- engaging with state-level emergency management bodies on emergency management issues and policy changes.

Although only four councils cited this last point, the impacts of this activity on councils have the potential to be far-reaching:

It's allowed us to be actively involved in the committees formed in Melbourne. That's hugely significant. If things are done around emergency management they'll hold the meetings in Melbourne. The impost is state-wide though, so you need to be involved. This has allowed us to be involved and do it face-to-face (council interviewee).

This was often facilitated by having a MERP-funded officer-level staff member who would then 'free-up' the time of more senior staff for strategic work. One interviewee noted:

My [MERP-funded] offsider covers the on-ground stuff so I can do the strategic stuff for the MERP... freedom to do some strategic work with our regional partnerships, which has been great (council interviewee).

On the same point, another interviewee noted:

It also allows input into the development of documents from [a department or agency] head office ... so that they've got a local perspective and will hopefully work better in the regions. For example, with the NSP [Neighbourhood Safer Places] meeting last week, what they were proposing isn't going to work—without the MERP position, it wouldn't allow us to have input on that process and make it more relevant and useful for local governments (council interviewee).

One interviewee suggested that this strategic-level use of the MERP has potential to leave more of a legacy than using MERP resources for operational matters, arguing that operational-level work should be 'core business' (see Box 6). This is in contrast to the large number of interviewees who noted that emergency management is simply not seen as 'core business' in many councils and that operational-level work is constrained by very limited resources (see Section 4.1.3).

Box 6. Stories from Council: Taking the high level view in the North East.

Taking the high level view in north-east Melbourne

For this outer north eastern council, who possesses a high-risk profile, the focus they have taken is strategy, rather than operations.

"From my perspective... the tasks and outcomes we have focused on are above and beyond what we could do with the day-to-day stuff."

"It's short sighted when you're talking about things that are really core business. Using MERP to

meet day-to-day requirements is short sighted; all it's going to do is increase dependency."

The particular focus being taken is to maximise the benefits of MERP to ensure that there is a legacy left behind. This includes working to:

- break down barriers between councils and within council departments to improve relationships and increase trust
- think creatively and strategically on how to maximise MERP (include streamlining processes and ensuring consistency across systems and documentation)

"To use an analogy, you can give people a fish or teach them to fish; this is more like giving them the fish. There is no focus on sustained legacy and benefits. We have a massive list of things to do already in terms of risk, but achieving them is not dependent on the funding."

"If you ask other councils – they're going to say yes we need more – we're thinking strategically about the amount we've got and how we can maximise that."

Another key consideration for this Council is how strategic changes will work in practice (e.g. further downstream) as well as how the Council works with agencies such as Victoria Police.

"I think we underappreciated that – you're trying to deal with VicPol or the CFA that [have a certain] way of doing things that make it harder to implement changes, so you need the agency buy-in".

4.2.8 Standardisation and consistency in planning and communications

Stemming from the enhanced collaboration (Section 4.2.3) and planning (Section 4.2.2) noted above, **nine councils noted that the MERP has helped in standardising documents and bringing consistency to communications, procedures and training.**

This process appears to be driven by:

- The overlap in many of the documents that each council is expected to prepare, leading to opportunities for sharing templates and generic materials: "most practices are starting to standardise—[in this region] and even across the state. A lot of stuff I've worked on has come from other people in the state" (council interviewee).
- The benefits of standardisation when emergency management staff are working across councils—that standard procedures and ways of doing things allow more efficient and effective cross-council support during emergencies: "we have standard operating guidelines and procedures and training across 14 councils, which means we now have a reserve of 14 councils who can support each other in need" (council interviewee).

This process of standardisation also has potential benefits for regional emergency management agencies, who gain from having clearer and more consistent interactions across the range of councils that they deal with. Agency interviewees supported this, one noting:

It is not just about the quality of what councils do, but sometimes it's about consistency. For example, for the Police to access the VPR [vulnerable persons register], if it's

consistent across all councils it makes it much easier for agencies to interact ... it's not just about the council and how they do it, it is also about how they interact with other entities and particularly how they present services or products, like the lists and registers.

4.2.9 Innovation, tools and other outcomes

Six council interviewees noted that the MERP had helped them to develop innovative approaches and tools for emergency management within local government. This includes:

- a violence against women in emergencies plan
- fire prevention inspection tools that support more efficient on-ground work
- fire modelling and planning work done to enhance the risk assessment and planning process (see Box 7).

Five interviewees noted explicitly that the various enhancements to emergency management planning, preparation and engagement enabled by the MERP had led to actual improvements in how they had responded during emergencies. In all five cases the incidents were fires, with staff indicating that the response and transition into recovery phase was faster:

The experience of the grass fires has helped us see what a difference it has made. The training and refreshing people around emergency response is an ongoing thing, requires ongoing resourcing. Relationship building as well, it really improved our ability to respond quickly and efficiently, because we had established those relationships and that trust and understanding was already there (council interviewee).

We were able to respond much faster because people whose role it was knew what to do (council interviewee).

Of all the interviewees, only one referred to the MERP helping with operational-level equipment, noting it had helped them to properly prepare equipment and have “trailers maintained and ready to go”.

Box 7. Stories from Council: Innovation in emergency management

Innovation in emergency management

For some council's particular emergencies or risks are more prevalent than others. The provision of MERP has enabled them to focus on these emergencies and undertake potentially more innovative approaches.

For example, in the south west of Victoria a council is focusing on fire planning and are using fire modelling to enhance their risk assessment and planning process:

“[We're using] state of the art fire behaviour modelling through a provider... [which] we use it to help determine the potential fire spread, what are the risks associated with fire, which are the riskiest towns, what are the riskiest places within those towns.”

“We’re lucky that we have got that access and the ability to analyse it – we can bring that knowledge to people in the council... who wouldn’t have even know it was there.”

“[We] have mapped the vegetation in some towns and done the modelling to work out the risks within those towns... this is ground breaking stuff that could be adopted across the state.”

However, the council notes that at this stage it is about “bringing together research to support fire plans”. The council currently meets their emergency management obligations, so the MERP provides the opportunity to improve the quality of these plans:

“It is just the fire plan needs to be more robust than ever. What I’m trying to do is help... get them to have a look at our systems so that if/when funding goes, and then we have improved systems but can do it efficiently.”

The benefit of the approach taken by the council is the ability to target their prevention work:

“One [benefit of] the risk analysis/strategic work [is that it] has really helped them with their on ground works processes; the fire, parks officers – have focused their fuel reduction work more strategically.”

The use of modelling is also applicable in other areas such as evacuation planning:

“We approached a research body with DELWP to get a model built and are working with a whole bunch of other agencies trying to build this model to understand evacuation sequencing and timing – could be something that would be applicable to state or national level.”

4.2.10 Unintended outcomes

Because of the relatively broad base of work that could be done through the MERP, there were few ‘unintended outcomes’ outside of the scope of the funding agreement. That said, many of the outcomes in Sections 4.2.2 to 4.2.9 were highlighted as being ‘unexpected benefits’ of the MERP funding. This was particularly the case for the relationships and improved lines of communication that formed among councils and between councils and other agencies—the strength and value of which were noted to be unexpected to many of the interviewees.

Similarly, five interviewees noted the sheer volume of work that their council had achieved was unexpected.

Beyond these results, which were more ‘surprising’ to staff than unintended outcomes of the program, **ten interviewees noted that a negative outcome of the MERP was that it had led to increased expectations around the capacity of council in this area.**

Now that there are people in the role there are expectations from other agencies that there’s someone there ... that’s a risk. A lot is left to councils and there will be a massive void [in its absence], especially in the rural areas ... remove that position and it’s a big hole. The relationships, the knowledgebase ... it falls apart very quickly (council interviewee).

4.3 Opportunities for improvement

4.3.1 Overview

This section addresses the question: **What opportunities are there for improving the design and delivery of the program into the future?**

We address this question in a three sub-sections, each of which has two guiding sub-questions:

- Program structure:
 - How else might the program be organised to address the need identified in Section 4.1?
 - Are there any gaps in the program's approach and what can be done about them?
- Program delivery:
 - How satisfied are local government grant recipients with the way the program has been delivered?
 - What opportunities are there for improving program delivery, particularly in relation to: reporting and its alignment with funding agreements; the clarity of roles; the flexibility and guidance around objectives; the integration of the vulnerable persons component; the term of funding?
- Efficiency:
 - Are there any clear cost-savings that can be made in administering the program?
 - Are there any ways in which funds could be distributed to councils more efficiently, such as through partnerships, different funding levels or for different deliverables?

4.3.2 Program structure

Other ways of organising MERP to address council needs

The structure of LGV's approach with the MERP can be summarised as:

1. provide funds to councils, who
2. follow the funding guidelines, and
3. expend those funds in ways that best address their local emergency management needs.

Overall, the structure and approach taken with the MERP is sound, with no clear alternatives that would provide improved value. The structure of the MERP:

- provides autonomy to councils to address needs that are relevant to their local circumstance (this flexibility is discussed more in Section 4.3.3)
- entails relatively low levels of administrative burden within council (making it efficient)
- should be relatively efficient to coordinate and administer from LGV's perspective.⁶

It is worth noting, however, that three interviewees did highlight this approach risks creating dependency among councils. They raised concerns that, in the program's absence, some councils may be in no better a position than they were previously:

⁶ Note that LGV's internal management of the program and the costs associated with running it were not examined as part of this evaluation.

I've seen the funding used to varied purposes – like administrative roles, other than getting through at least the day-to-day. To use an analogy if you can give people a fish or teach them to fish, this is more like giving them the fish. There's no focus on sustained legacy and benefits (council interviewee).

These comments should also be seen in the context of the MERP and the need articulated in Section 4.1.3—building skills and capability within council is an important objective, however there are a range of councils who, even with improved skills or capability, would still not have the time needed to dedicate to emergency management activities.

Two suggested solutions were to have the MERP re-organised to allocate its funds wholly or partially on a project-by-project basis, requiring councils to demonstrate the outcomes and sustainability of their proposed work. Note that this would require a substantially more elaborate structure for managing the grants. It would also effectively reduce the autonomy given to councils, as decisions about what gets approved for funding would shift from councils to the funder (LGV).

Gaps in the program's approach

Considering all the points above, the MERP structure, as it is, appears to be well set up to address many of the needs of councils. Rather than restructuring the MERP there may, instead, be a **range of ways in which LGV could provide additional, supplementary support to councils to further address those needs identified in Section 4.1.3.**

These are not 'gaps' in the MERP per se, but opportunities to further address the overarching objective of the MERP—supporting local government in emergency management and helping them meet their legislative obligations.

Opportunities identified by council interviewees include:

- **Support for collaboration, knowledge sharing and networking** (31 interviewees). Interviewees talked about the critical value of knowledge sharing in the emergency management space. This included how interacting and sharing information with other councils helps:
 - inform “projects or ideas we haven't considered” (council interviewee)
 - looking for opportunities to “reduce duplication, pool resources and knowledge” (council interviewee)
 - learn from others who have had emergencies, given many go long periods without – “everything that I've based my learning on is from other people. We haven't had an activation and need a really easy way for councils to learn from other councils” (council interviewee)

While interviewees noted that there was some degree of this already happening (such as through a State-wide email network and regionally based collaborations), there was opportunity for better coordination and support, including:

- having an online forum for discussion and sharing resources, noting that the email list is valuable, but unwieldy and repetitive
- similarly, having a centralised repository of information, including learnings from emergencies in a set template, “what worked, what didn't ... every council should be learning what happened every time” (council interviewee)
- sharing what other councils are doing with their MERP resources

- funding administrative support for MEMEGs and other cluster-type arrangements
- regular forums, conferences or face-to-face meetings to meet and discuss emergency management issues relevant to councils. Some interviewees noted that MAV previously organised such forms, but that one has not been held in around 18 months.
- **Providing standards and guidance around emergency management** (22 interviewees). This includes:

- Developing standardised templates for planning and documentation. Interviewees noted that while there are a range of planning and reporting requirements, it is not clear what the minimum standards are. Others noted that having standardised planning templates that could be tailored for each region would help reduce duplication and uncertainty. As one interviewee noted, “each planning committee tends to work on their own emergency management plans, recovery plans, flood plans. There doesn’t seem to be a centralised place where you can get those tools readily available”. Another emphasised the importance of guidelines, noting:

Heat wave planning is a good example. The Department mandates everyone has a heat wave plan, but there is little guidance provided about what should go in that plan.

- Help interpreting councils’ legislative obligations. As noted in Section 4.1.3, one of the key challenges facing local government is the uncertainty and dynamism surrounding their legislative obligations. Seven interviewees noted they would benefit from having help in this space, one noting “whether it’s MAV, EMV or LGV, there needs to be more clarity on legislative responsibilities at the local government level. There’s a lot of argy bargy around what councils could and should do”. Two other councils and one agency interviewee suggested that having a State-wide team of experts that visit councils to help with emergency management planning would be one option to help with this.
- **Training for council staff** (12). This relates both to the MERP-funded roles specifically (5 comments), as well as emergency management training for other staff within council (e.g. MRMs, MEROs). Interviewees noted that while there is some training available, it is often ill-fitting and that there would be significant benefits from a training package specifically targeted at council staff:

The intro course CFA runs is pretty ill-fitting, local government also needs their own module ... DHHS used to run three or four different modules but due to funding cuts it’s not available externally. There’s no training for MRM or MERO responsibilities – it goes off the experience of previous people [creating problems when they leave]. [XX council] came to us for help when all of their people left (council interviewee).

We’re filling the gaps in training ourselves by groups of councils ... but we don’t necessarily have the skills for that, so someone picking that up and running with it would be very valuable (council interviewee).

- **Advocacy by LGV and MAV on behalf of local government** (11 interviewees). Interviewees raised a range of issues here that mainly involved having an organisation at the state level working to represent and support them and their issues. One interviewee noted, “With

reduction in support from MAV we don't really have someone to advocate across the state. [For example,] the role of Municipal Emergency Control Centres (MECCs), we're looking at trying to get some standards for them, but there's no one to help with that. It's down to us and MEMEGs. There's a need for an authority to help with that". Other issues included:

- working with emergency management agencies to clarify local government's role—an issue seen to be underlying agencies' unreasonable demands of councils (3 comments)
- managing community expectations and, again, educating the public about local government's role (3 comments)
- lobbying for appropriate policies and legislation to reduce the burden on councils (4 comments)
- acting as an "umpire" in disputes and debriefs between councils and emergency management organisations (1 comment)

4.3.3 Program delivery

Satisfaction with program delivery

The majority (90%) of council survey respondents were satisfied with the overall delivery of MERP (Figure 6). A minority (10%), however, noted some level of dissatisfaction, citing issues with:

- LGV needing to take on more of a lobbying role to reduce the overall burden of emergency management on councils (1 response)
- partnering councils being inappropriate (1 response)
- funding levels across councils being inappropriate (1 response)
- its temporary nature and a lack of monitoring of its actual impacts (1 response)

Interviewees also noted a range of strengths in terms of MERPs delivery, including

- the flexibility of the funding (34 interviewees)
- the recent improvements to the reporting template (27 interviewees), including the relatively low level of burden they impose (8 interviewees)
- the recent improvements in LGV's communication with councils around the MERP program (1 response), including its updating of councils around changes to obligations (1 response).

Reflecting these strengths, a range of opportunities for improving program delivery are presented in the next section.

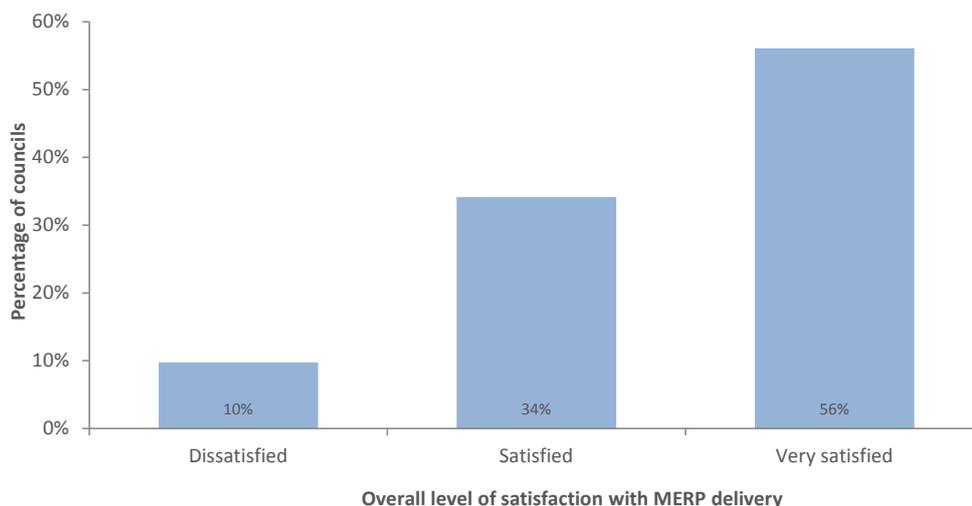


Figure 6. Survey respondents' overall level of satisfaction with the delivery of the MERP. n=41

Opportunities for improving program delivery

Figure 7 outlines the extent to which survey respondents reported opportunities for improving aspects of MERP's delivery. Combined with the open-ended comments and insights from the interviews, the two key areas for improving the delivery of MERP relate to:

- funding duration
- guidance on MERP's objective and intended outcomes.

Seventy-eight per cent of survey responses indicated that either some (28%) or substantial (48%) improvements could be made to the term of funding (Figure 7). Four also suggested that higher levels of funding would be useful, particularly to accommodate CPI-related increases to pay scales. All related interview comments (31 interviewees) noted that a longer funding cycle and/or greater certainty around funding would be beneficial. Interviewees explained that the two-year funding cycle:

- Create significant uncertainty for contracted staff, leading to high levels of turnover (14 interviewees): "We've lost some good people from this kind of uncertainty from across the sector" (council interviewee). This was noted to have flow on impacts in terms of:
 - additional training and recruitment costs
 - lost relationships
 - lost corporate knowledge
- The uncertainty of the role was also noted to be a factor impairing recruitment (10 interviewees), with interviewees indicating that it was difficult to attract appropriately skilled candidates to a (often) part-time, limited tenure contract. As one interviewee noted, "If you went to a five-year program you'd be able to attract better quality staff".
- These issues also combined to inhibit longer term planning in emergency management: "if the funding gets cut then it's a risk. I find myself almost holding back on things because I don't want to overcommit because I won't be able to deliver if the funding is cut" (council interviewee).

Suggested improvements included:

- making the program permanent
- extending the funding term (e.g. to 3-5 years)
- informing councils well ahead (six months) of the lapsing of funding about whether it will be continuing.

The other key area of opportunity for improving the MERP is in the guidance given around the MERP's objective and intended outcomes. **More than half of survey respondents (54%) noted there is some or substantial opportunity for improving guidance around funding.** Nineteen interviewees who talked about this noted it relates to a desire to see some additional guidance around:

- the objectives of the program
- its strategic intent
- what the intended outcomes are.

The lack of this guidance was seen by one interviewee as indicative of a lack of leadership at the State level:

It's tremendously unclear what LGV is hoping for ... the guidelines have been kept frustratingly broad on what the funds should be used for and remarkably little guidance about what outcomes LGV are trying to achieve. It reflects a wider absence of leadership, in the state government ... even though EMV has been established there's still a vacuum of expectations around what councils should be providing. Although we'd miss some of the freedom, we'd also support more tightly targeted funding and more closely specified outcomes.

Others articulated the problem as an issue of alignment between councils and having a clear and common purpose to guide and prioritise activities:

I don't think there's clarity about intended outcomes of program. It's not clear in the guidelines, which is good in one way, but it also means there is no common direction from broader perspective. So every council uses money in different ways ... when the guidelines came out last time people were a bit disappointed it didn't give more direction because we are still working in silos.

There is thus a tension between these comments and the purported value of the flexibility of the funding. These comments should also be seen in the context of those in section 4.3.2, which call for a higher level of guidance around emergency management obligations (matching with the 50% of respondents who noted there is opportunity to improve the clarity of roles and responsibilities; Figure 7). These elements suggest the issue of guidance around funding can be distilled into three key points:

- **There is a persistent lack of clarity about what is expected of local government in the emergency management space**, with some looking to LGV to provide clarity, priorities and strategic direction in a de facto sense through the MERP.
- **That greater clarity over outcomes and objectives would help improve the effectiveness of council activities**—i.e. councils are expressing an interest in making sure they, and other councils across the state, are making the best use of funds.

- **The lack of strategic objectives and outcomes raises concerns among some councils (as discussed in section 4.3.2) that, being broadly scoped, the MERP potentially creates dependency.**

In contrast to higher-level program guidelines, **most respondents considered that there was no immediate need for improvements or changes to the reporting template or the timing of reporting** (72% and 82%, respectively; Figure 7). The only suggested improvements to these aspects were that while the new reporting template was an improvement, it possibly was too prescriptive in its structure (1 response).

Other suggested improvements to the delivery of the MERP that emerged during interviews were:

- One council staff member and one state government agency interviewee suggested that LGV should specify that MERP funds be used to pay for each council’s Crisisworks fee. They noted that this would ensure interoperability between agencies. However, this point was disputed, unprompted, by two councils. They noted that they had so few vulnerable people and had effective alternative systems in place such that the fee for Crisisworks would have been wasted.
- Eleven interviewees expressed a desire for the MERP to cover operational support during emergencies. It appears that this is happening by default in some cases, with MERP-funded positions noted to help backfill positions or aid in response/recovery operations (5 interviewees).

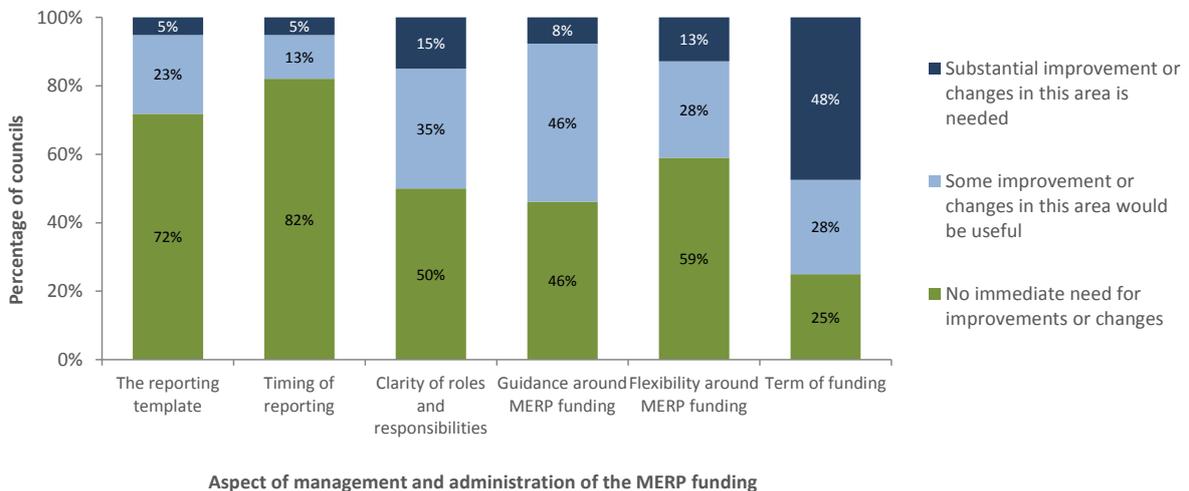


Figure 7. Reported potential for improvements to the MERP. n=41.

4.3.4 Efficiency

Overall, **there are few clear ways that the efficiency of the MERP could be improved, either administratively or in how the funds are distributed to councils.** There is no application process and the reporting burden on councils was seen to be relatively favourable (Figure 7). The costs of administering the program within LGV were not examined. However, given the funding allocation mechanism and the relatively straightforward reporting/application requirements, project administration should have been reasonably efficient.

In terms of potential improvements in the distribution to and use of funds by councils, there are three key areas of opportunity:

- funding levels allocated to different councils
- partner councils
- funding tenure.

As it stands, funding is allocated across the 64 councils in the CFA districts according to the breakdown in Figure 8. No documents were provided that describe the rationale for the different funding levels, other than a statement relating to “their specific requirements and additional complexities in delivering the program”.⁷ LGV staff advised that allocations built on the previous program’s funding structure and were guided by a steering committee comprising MAV, LGV and the Fire Services Commissioner that considered criteria around risk, capacity and need to spread the available funding as equitably as possible.

There may be opportunities for more cost-effective distribution of funds among councils.

Comments from interviews (and the coarse breakdown in Figure 2) suggest that some councils get more direct value from the program than others: i.e. those with scarce resources as compared to those who, by their own reckoning, are relatively well-resourced. Thus, the MERP appears to be critical to the efficacy of emergency management preparedness in some councils:

We’re rapt to get the funding. I struggle to think how we’d run this without the funding. It’s allowing us to deal with the emergencies which we experience regularly. It’s a godsend (council interviewee).

For others, it is a “nice to have” (council interviewee), or as another interviewee noted:

Council would be fulfilling their obligations with or without the program. But the program makes the difference between compliance and quality (council interviewee).

If the objective of the program is to support councils in fulfilling their legislative obligations, this suggests there may be potential for **improving the program’s cost effectiveness by adjusting how the funds are allocated to councils**—i.e. by targeting those most in need of support. It is not clear the extent to which this has occurred already (based on the distribution of funds in Figure 8), but there may be value in reviewing and clarifying this funding distribution.

The challenge, however, is that such a process would likely introduce an additional level of complexity in transparently balancing issues such as:

- the resources available to councils based on their rate base and other revenue sources
- the level of risk councils face.

⁷ Municipal Emergency Resourcing Program Q & A (2012), p. 3.

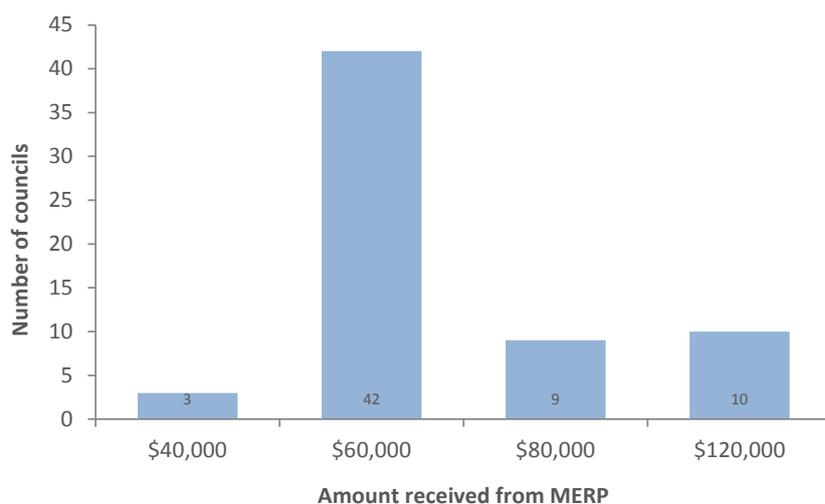


Figure 8. Distribution of MERP funds among the 64 councils.

Another potential avenue for improving the cost-effectiveness of the MERP is through encouraging greater participation in formal collaborations, such as the partner council groups funded through the present program or broader collaborative groups operating across the state.

It is not clear whether the partner- or single-council examples were any more or less efficient; however, there is certainly potential for costs savings through this approach through reduced administration and opportunities for reducing duplication of documents, training and other expense, as well as knowledge sharing between the groups. The flip side is that sharing resources among councils can involve higher transport costs, a split in the focus of staff and costs associated with meetings and reaching agreement.

Given the savings would rely on individual councils and their commitment, the current format of MERP, whereby councils can negotiate to work in partnership or not, appears ideal. The opportunity rests in communicating the potential advantages of and lessons around collaboration among councils.

The final potential improvement to cost-effectiveness relates to the duration of funding. As discussed in section 4.3.3, many councils consider the two-year term of funding leads to high turnover of staff and difficulties recruiting appropriately skilled individuals. By extending the term of funding of the program, there would likely be flow on benefits in terms of reduced training and recruitment costs and greater efficacy in the role.

4.4 Cessation and risk

4.4.1 Potential impacts on local government

This section addresses the question: **What would be the impact of ceasing the program and what strategies have been identified to minimise negative impacts?**

In answering this, we consider in turn:

- the impact on local government of ceasing the program
- the flow through impacts on emergency preparedness and management
- strategies for mitigating these risks.

Mirroring the evidence around the value and positive impacts of the program, **the principal impact if the MERP were to cease would be a decrease in the capacity and capability of councils to plan and prepare for emergencies.** This flows on from **the immediate impact of ceasing the program, which would be the loss or reduction of MERP-funded positions within councils.**

Of 20 interviewees who discussed the consequences of ceasing funding for the position, 18 indicated that their council would be unlikely to replace that funding or position, at least to the same level. Two suggested that their council would potentially replace the position with funds, one noting “Since we’ve had it, council thinks it’s wonderful, but if they had to put their hand in their pocket to fund it would have a lot of provisos”.

These suggestions that the MERP funding would largely not be replaced by councils contrast with the earlier observations that there is now a stronger focus on emergency management within councils (Section 4.2.5). It may be that while some councils now see emergency management as “core business” others are yet to have it sufficiently embedded:

We’ve now managed to articulate the role [of emergency management in councils], but have not embedded how important it is alongside all of their other business (council interviewee).

4.4.2 Potential impacts on emergency preparedness and management

A decrease in dedicated emergency management staff within council would flow through to impact on councils’ levels of emergency preparedness and management. These impacts would reflect many of the positive gains from the program (Section 4.2). Table 2 outlines some of these flow-on effects.

It is important to note that these impacts would likely happen to different degrees in different councils, depending on their reliance on the MERP and what they had been using it for. As noted in Section 4.3.4, different councils appeared to get different value from the MERP depending on whether it:

- Provided an essential addition to council staff, allowing them to address obligations around emergency management that they would have struggled to fulfil otherwise.
- Provided a complementary addition to their emergency management team, allowing them to go beyond complying with their obligations and to work towards broader improvements in quality and effectiveness:

If we didn’t have MERP funding we wouldn’t have the presence that we have. We wouldn’t be doing a lot of the activities that we are doing now. We’d doing the tick the box stuff but we wouldn’t do the nice to have stuff (council interviewee).

Some councils will also have improved their systems to be more efficient (see Section 4.2.5), though this is unlikely to substantially mitigate impacts from withdrawal of funding because of the previously mentioned importance of simply providing capacity to do work.

This is not to say the MERP has not created any lasting impacts—it has certainly led to a wide array of improvements in planning across councils. The challenge, however, is that in this continually evolving space (see Section 4.1.4) there is an ongoing need for work to ensure that plans are up to date, people are trained and prepared and the relationships exist to allow for effective responses to emergencies.

There are thus two key likely cases, depending on the resources available within councils:

- **Cases where cessation of MERP would lead to a loss or reduction in innovation, quality, strategic planning, community capacity building and cross-organisational collaboration; but where core obligations would likely still be met.**

Most of the work will stop and default back to basic requirements. It will fall back to roles like myself, adding to existing roles. The maturity of emergency management would cease without the funding and we will fall back into a reactive way of doing business. How do you get around to creating effective emergency management in a changing world without an effective role (council interviewee).

- **Cases where cessation of MERP would lead to a loss of core emergency management capacity and capability that would, in the absence of additional council funding, lead to councils struggling to fulfil their core emergency management obligations and being less well-prepared for incidents.**

This program has shown us we can meet that obligation if we have the resources to do it. ... We've come a long way, but if the funding isn't ongoing, we won't meet our obligations as far as EM (council interviewee).

Importantly, poorer performance in these areas risks poorer performance in actual emergencies and, potentially, significant negative consequences for the broader community.

There was also the sense among interviewees that ending funding now would be premature; changes and improvements have yet to be cemented and, as noted above, emergency management has not been fully embedded in council. This view was also expressed by one agency interviewee, who noted

I also see that there have been some significant gains in the last two or three years, and it wouldn't be constructive to see some of that lost if the funding changed and reduced councils' ability to maintain the things that they're currently doing well (Agency interviewee).

Table 2. Examples of the flow on impacts of a loss of capacity within councils following the withdrawal of MERP, together with an indication of whether it is likely to impact more on less- or more-well-resourced councils.

Example issues	Discussed in Section
Loss of corporate and emergency management knowledge	4.1.3
Loss of drive and focus in emergency management	4.1.3
Documents (plans) becoming out of date, council failing to keep up with changes to obligations: “it would happen at an extremely reduced, ancillary function”	4.2.2
Fewer and less well detailed plans; “if this stops that planning will stop because there is no one else that has the skills or the time”	4.2.2
Collaboration among councils is hampered: “if MERP does not continue – that pretty much leaves us without a cluster; especially smaller partners—without a position that has a primary responsibility for emergency management it won’t work”	4.2.3
Communication, engagement and capacity building with community members decreases	4.2.4
Reduction in capacity-building in council “All the extra exercising would just be lost, the MERP is about providing increased capacity”	4.2.5
Poorer representation of councils at regional and State-level forums	4.2.7
Progression and innovation in emergency management in local government slowed	4.2.9

4.4.3 Options for mitigating risks

Continuation of funding is the most obvious strategy for mitigating the risks noted above. However, such continuation should also consider how the underlying capacity issues might be resolved in the longer-term—i.e. the disconnect between resource-limited councils and their emergency management obligations. This might include:

1. Providing alternative/supplementary mechanisms of support, such as those noted in Section 4.3.2.
2. Reducing the ultimate burden on councils by adjusting their emergency management obligations.

These options are discussed further in Section 5.1 and in the Recommendations in Section 5.2.

5 Discussion and recommendations

5.1 The strengths of and opportunities for the MERP

The MERP is a highly valued program that helps councils across Victoria meet their emergency management obligations. The logic and rationale underpinning the program is strong: councils struggle for resources to fund emergency management activities; the MERP provides those resources; the additional capacity afforded by those resources gets used to improve emergency management.

The additional capacity supported by MERP not only provides straight “boots on the ground”, but also acts as a dedicated and focused driver of emergency management within councils. The flexibility of the program means that councils apply that additional capacity in ways that best meet their needs and priorities as they see them. Furthermore, the MERP’s value in this space is supported by state-based agency observers, one noting:

The MERP funding in the municipalities that I deal with directly is very positive. They are good people and committed people with a strong work ethic and it is value for money, no question (Agency interviewee).

There are, nevertheless, a range of further opportunities for enhancing the support offered to councils, either through the MERP or more broadly by LGV and MAV. Options for this support stemming directly from the data are outlined in Section 4.3. However, two further themes that emerge across the evaluation and are worth discussing in this context include:

1. Councils use the MERP differently and its value in helping them meet their legislative obligations is likely to vary among councils.
2. There is a persistent and related uncertainty around councils’ obligations in this space and around the objectives and outcomes of the MERP.

The first of these points has been raised at several points throughout this report. Ultimately, the MERP seems to be critical in bringing some councils up to a ‘pass mark’ with respect to their compliance with and fulfilment of their legislative obligations. For others, it is explicitly a ‘nice-to-have’ that adds quality, fosters innovation and raises the bar, but would effectively not be needed for those councils to meet their minimum obligations.

The different ways in which MERP is used—either enabling compliance or helping to go beyond—thus provide potential scope for refining how the program is scoped and targeted.

The second point relates to the first in that the flexibility of MERP funding has created confusion among some councils around what the program is trying to achieve. While some have high praise for the way it helps them to meet their obligations, others advocate that it should be an ‘add on’ that looks to add further value above and beyond core requirements; as one interviewee noted, “MERP should be for enhancing the capacity of council, not substituting it”.

Particularly in this latter group, there is an interest in MERP having much more **clearly articulated objectives and expected outcomes**. This may be something that is more apparent in councils that have enough resources to think beyond compliance and, as such, are looking for guidance as to what to prioritise. In the perceived absence of clear State-level direction, **the MERP objectives may be**

seen as (or are hoped to be) a potential de facto strategy in relation to emergency management planning. This gap was articulated by one interviewee who noted:

There's no real ownership with the standards, no consistent direction. Across the state there's heaps being done but, in looking for true value, if there's repeats of work it might be interpreted that it's not the best use of money. To me it needs some kind of ownership and governance.

On a related, but slightly different point, it is also important to note that the lack of clarity in MERP's objectives also applies to its longer-term vision with respect to council capacity. **While the program has demonstrably helped councils improve their capacity and their emergency management preparedness in the short-term, it may be worth considering the longer-term sustainability of this approach.** This includes considering whether alternative or supplementary mechanisms of support are required (such as those noted in Section 4.3.2).

5.2 Recommendations

Based on the key findings, results and discussion above, we recommend in relation to the Municipal Emergency Resourcing Program:

1. **State government continue to fund the MERP.** The program addresses a substantive need within local government, directly and efficiently addressing issues of capacity. By addressing resource and capacity shortfalls, the program contributes to a range of outcomes within councils, most notably improvements in emergency management planning and documentation, communication among stakeholders and engagement with communities. Future funding rounds should also be scoped considering the recommendations below.
2. **LGV should ensure that future iterations of the MERP have clearly defined objectives and intended outcomes.** In defining these objectives and outcomes, LGV should consider using a project logic approach, which clearly articulates how the program will work towards its longer-term goals. These longer-term goals should include some consideration about the sustainability of the funding and what the vision is with respect to the ability of councils to be self-sufficient in this area (e.g. whether council is to be perpetually dependent on this funding). In going through this process, LGV should ensure that it, or other programs, are engaging in activities that will achieve those longer-term goals.
3. **LGV should consider reviewing how funds are distributed among councils for any future iterations of MERP.** This may include some consideration of the resources available to councils, combined with an assessment of the level of risk they face. This could be used to create a matrix of funding amounts that varies based on risk/capacity. One mechanism may be to use a panel of experts (e.g. from SES, Victoria Police, EMV, MAV) to rate each councils on these scales. This would be a more transparent process than the current arrangement, though would be more complex to administer. On a related point, it may also be important to consider differentiating what different councils are expected to achieve with the funding (e.g. fulfilling their minimum requirements or going beyond and working towards clear strategic goals). LGV should also consider extending the tenure of funding to improve retention and recruitment of skilled and capable staff.

4. **LGV should continue to reflect on and improve its communication with councils.** Recent work by LGV, such as changes to reporting templates, has been viewed favourably by most councils. Similarly, while a range of councils requested feedback on what others were doing with the MERP, LGV were already in the process of compiling and communicating this information to councils (independent of this evaluation). This proactive, two-way approach to communicating with councils is a small but important step in helping emergency management staff feel informed and connected in the shifting landscape of emergency management.

In addition to the MERP-specific points above, the evaluation also points to a range of broader issues and considerations around local government's role in emergency management, leading us to recommend:

- d) **LGV, in consultation with MAV and EMV, should consider complementing direct funding to councils with additional mechanisms of support around collaboration and knowledge sharing.** This includes:
- a. Providing forums for knowledge sharing, networking and relationship-building among local government emergency staff, including an online forum or discussion board to complement or replace the current State-wide email list. LGV should also consider structured, regular (i.e. six-monthly) face-to-face (or teleconferencing forums) among emergency staff.
 - b. Supporting formal and informal collaboration through such forums, as well as promoting models or case studies of collaborative approaches to emergency management.
 - c. Creating a centralised repository of information, tools and resources around emergency management. This could include developing a standard template and process for reporting on emergency management activations that promotes continuous improvement and cross-council learning.
- e) **LGV should work with MAV, EMV, SES and other relevant State agencies to clarify what is expected of councils in terms of emergency management and communicate those expectations to council emergency management staff.** This may include working with relevant agencies to create sharable resources that can reduce duplication and provide clear guidance. It may also include developing a training package for emergency management staff in councils that provides similar information and guidance (see also Priority Area B of the Victorian Emergency Management Strategic Action Plan 2015-18).
- f) **LGV should ensure that it is working closely with EMV in its own work on council capacity and capability.** As legislation and policies in this space evolve and roles and responsibilities become clearer within local government, state departments and agencies should ensure their approach to supporting capacity and capability requirements in local government are coordinated and complementary. As part of this and, as suggested by councils and agencies in this evaluation, EMV and LGV should consider using a state-wide team of emergency planning experts that work closely with individual councils to support and improve their planning. This would help address identified capability issues within councils and build on SES's work in this space with MEMP audits.

Appendix 1 KEQ alignment with DTF Lapsing Program guidelines

Table 3. Alignment between key evaluation questions used in this evaluation and the corresponding question in the DTF Lapsing Program guidelines (p. 8).

Question	Sub-question	DTF reference
1. What is the evidence of a continued need for the program and role for government in delivering this program? (justification/problem)	How did the program objectives align with departmental objectives and any stated government priorities?	2
	To what extent does the program continue to address a demonstrable need in emergency management in local government?	1
	How have relevant economic, environmental or social conditions changed since the program was funded?	1
2. What is the evidence of the program's progress toward its stated objectives and expected outcomes? (Effectiveness)	What were the objectives and planned outcomes of the MERP in relation to the funding provided to local government?	2
	What has been achieved by the MERP since 2012 in terms of intended outcomes?	2
	Have there been any unexpected outcomes (positive or negative)?	2
3. What opportunities are there for improving the design and delivery of the program into the future?	How satisfied are local government grant recipients with the way the program has been delivered?	3
	How else might the program be organised to address the need identified above?	1
	Are there any gaps in the program's approach and what can be done about them?	1
	What opportunities are there for improving program delivery, particularly in relation to: reporting and its alignment with funding agreements; the clarity of roles; the flexibility and guidance around objectives; the integration of the vulnerable persons component; the term of funding?	3
	Are there any clear cost-savings that can be made in administering the program?	3
	Are there any ways in which funds could be distributed to councils more efficiently, such as through partnerships, different funding levels or for different deliverables?	3
4. What would be the impact of ceasing the program and what strategies have been identified to minimise negative impacts (risk)	What would be the impact on local government of ceasing the program?	4
	What flow through impacts would this have on emergency preparedness and management?	4
	How can these risks be mitigated?	4

Appendix 2 Methodology in detail

Inception meeting and planning workshop

Our joint team met in person with LGV and MAV staff managing this project to:

- discuss and agree on the evaluation objectives and scope
- discuss the key evaluation questions and methods
- explore the underlying program logic
- identify relevant documents and contacts.

The project plan was updated following this meeting and submitted to LGV for sign-off.

Program documentation desktop review

A desktop review was conducted on relevant program documentation, which included:

- program documentation (MERP Q & A, sample funding agreements)
- background policy documents
- MERP update reports from councils

The documentation provided background information for each funded council, which in turn informed the data collection process through targeted questioning. The documentation also assisted the data analysis process by providing a point-of-reference for triangulation.

Data collection

Data collection was undertaken through two methods (semi-structured interview and online survey) with councils (lead and partner) and key state government agencies. Quantitative data was collected primarily through online survey, with qualitative data collected through the semi-structured interview.

Councils were sent the semi-structured interview questions in advance of the interview along with the URL to the online survey. If councils had not completed the online survey by the time of the interview they were reminded to complete it as soon as they were able.

The semi-structured interviews covered:

- Fifty council interviews were conducted (46 of which were lead councils), which represents 98% coverage. This covered 96 individual council staff and two agency staff who sat in on interviews. For 69 interviewees for whom we had data, 21 (30%) were directly MERP-funded and interviewees' roles within councils included:
 - 8 project officers
 - 28 project coordinators
 - 23 managers
 - 10 directors
 - 1 CEO.
- We also interviewed five representatives across three key government agencies (Department of Health and Human Services, Emergency Management Victoria and the State Emergency Service)

The online survey covered:

- Forty one council-level responses (lead and partner)

- Six SES staff responses (which provided an external perspective on the impact of MERP on councils)

Between the survey and interviews, we received input from 53 councils, over 100 council staff, 5 State-level government agency staff and 6 regional SES staff.

Analysis and draft report

Data analysis was undertaken using two separate platforms:

- qualitative data analysis through Nvivo
- quantitative analysis using Microsoft Excel.

The qualitative data was conducted through the extensive coding and categorisation of interview notes (which were near-verbatim) to identify the key themes, issues and trends. This enabled concepts and themes to be linked back to the key evaluation questions that guided the project

Quantitative data was analysed against the key evaluation questions using descriptive statistics.

The results of the data analysis were refined into a draft report. The structure of which included:

- an executive summary
- introduction
- methodology
- key findings
- results in detail
- discussion and recommendations
- conclusions
- appendices.

Presentation and final report

Once finalised the report was presented to the MERP Steering Committee. A summary of the report was distributed to attendees prior to the presentation so that time could be spent discussing the findings and implications.