

Submission to the Legislative Council Environment and Planning Committee

Inquiry into the 2026 Summer Fires Across Victoria

Submitted by: Murrindindi Shire Council

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Residential property destroyed in the January 2026 bushfires, Yarck

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Acknowledgement

Murrindindi Shire Council is proud to acknowledge the Taungurung and Wurundjeri Woi Wurrung Peoples as the traditional owners of the land we now call Murrindindi Shire. We pay our respects to their leaders and elders, past, present and emerging, who are the keepers of history, traditions, knowledge and culture of this land. We commit to working in collaboration with traditional owners of this land in a spirit of reconciliation and partnership

1. Executive Summary

Murrindindi Shire Council welcomes the Inquiry into the 2026 Summer Fires across Victoria and appreciates the opportunity to present evidence, lived experience and practical reform proposals on the public record.

The January 2026 fires had a severe and far-reaching impact on Murrindindi Shire. Our municipality was the hardest-hit in Victoria. Nearly half of all structures lost in the State, including 216 homes and 520 outbuildings, were located within our Shire, alongside extensive agricultural devastation, environmental damage, major infrastructure disruption and a significant psychosocial toll on affected communities.

Murrindindi Shire was still recovering from major flood events in 2022, 2023 and 2024, with communities rebuilding and Council continuing to replace damaged and destroyed assets. Many of these same assets were further damaged in subsequent events, exposing the limits of Council's capacity to restore infrastructure to a more resilient standard under the current State approach to Disaster Recovery Funding Agreements.

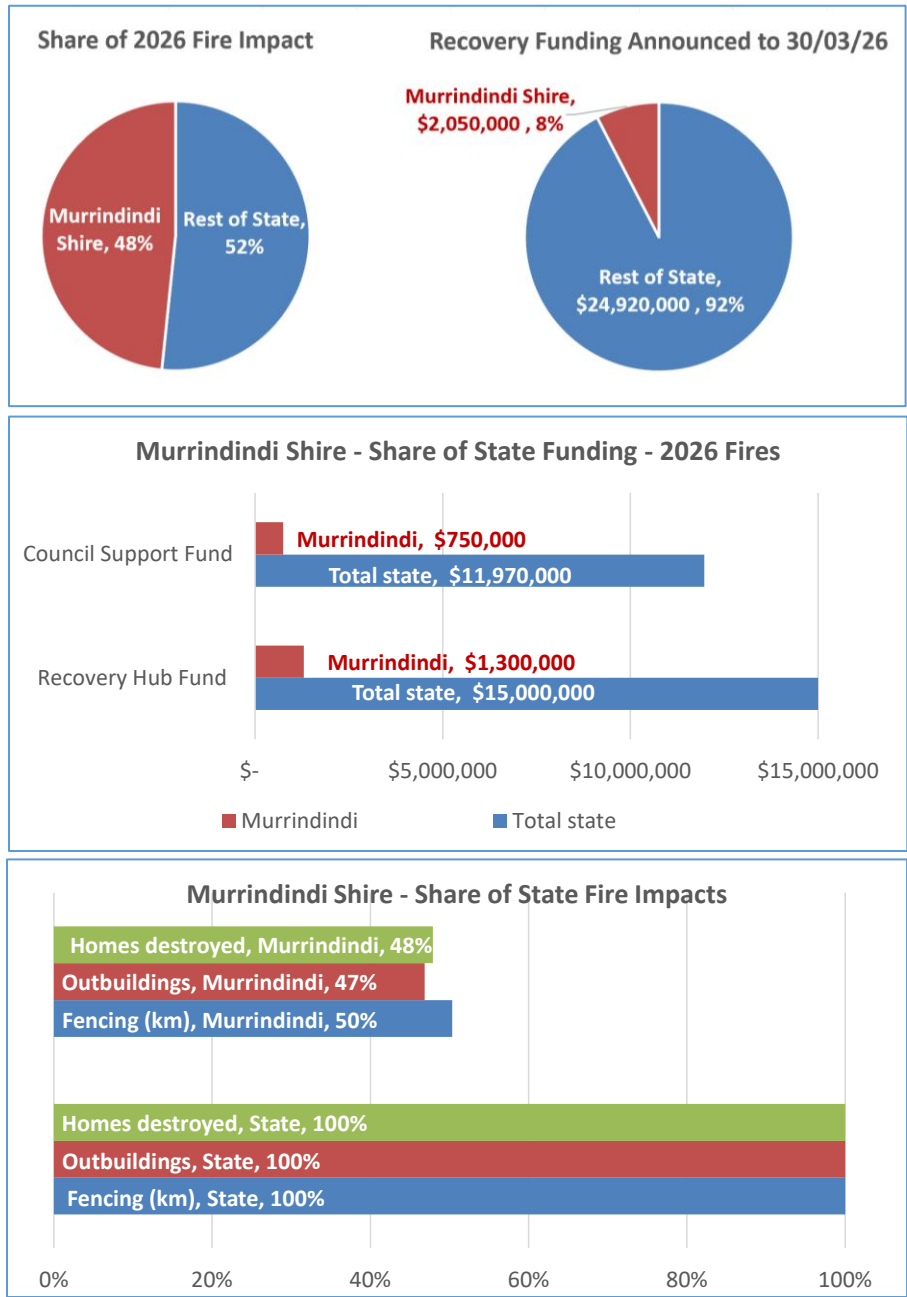
Murrindindi Shire Council, like other small rural shires, already faces structural financial pressures in providing services across large areas and dispersed communities. Multiple Federal and State inquiries into local government financial sustainability have consistently identified the fragility of the funding model for small rural councils. These pressures are now compounded by successive natural disasters, creating cumulative impacts on communities, the local workforce and Council's financial capacity. Current disaster relief and recovery funding arrangements shift a substantial proportion of coordination and delivery responsibility to local councils without commensurate, sustained funding - an approach that is neither sustainable nor equitable.

This submission outlines:

- What worked well in the local emergency response, including community-led initiatives
- Critical gaps in preparedness, infrastructure resilience, resourcing and coordination
- Systemic issues exposed by the fires that disproportionately affect rural councils
- Practical, evidence-based recommendations for reform
- Why small rural councils lack the financial and workforce capacity to absorb major emergencies and prolonged recovery without structural funding reform

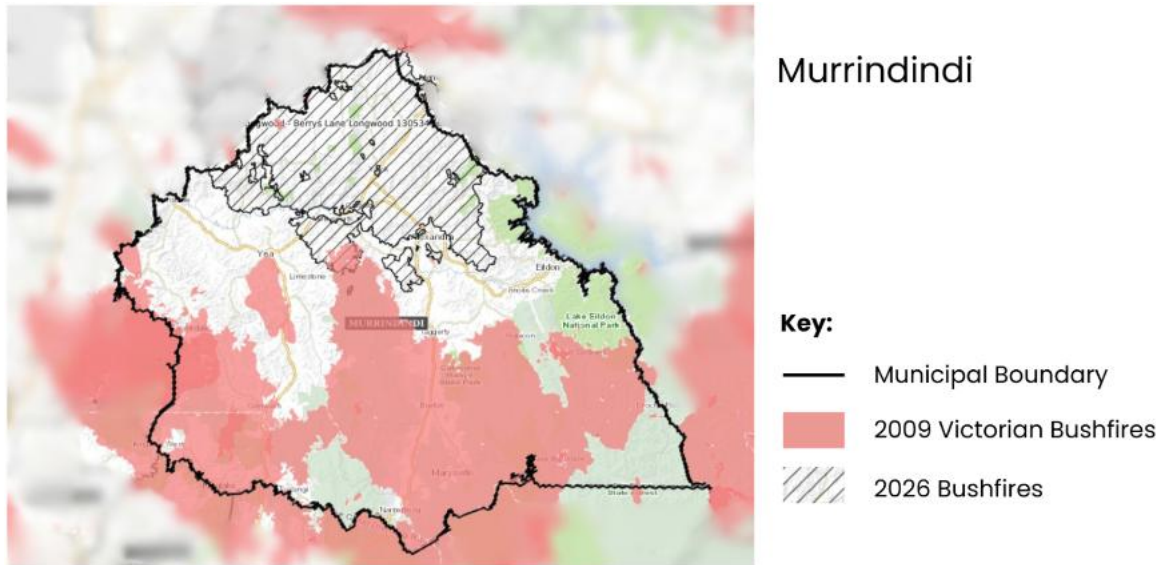
One-size-fits-all funding produced unequal recovery capacity for councils

The charts below demonstrate a clear disconnect between impact assessment data (compiled by Emergency Management Victoria) and recovery funding allocations. The Longwood fire-impacted Councils - Murrindindi, Mansfield, Mitchell and Strathbogie- each received the same Council Support Fund allocation, despite materially different impact profiles, population dispersion and infrastructure damage. This approach produced observable service gaps on the ground, undermined equity between communities, and contributed to declining confidence in authorities. Proportional, impact-based funding is essential if recovery systems are to be fair, effective and credible.



Equal funding did not result in equal outcomes.

Extent of the January 2026 Bushfire Footprint Across Murrindindi Shire-



Almost one-third of Murrindindi Shire was directly affected by the January 2026 bushfires, including the Longwood and Tallarook fires.

When viewed alongside the 2009 Black Saturday fire footprint, the mapping shows that almost the entire municipality has now been impacted by major bushfire events over time, compounding risk, recovery burden and community fatigue.

Resilience is not a funding model. Local government and communities cannot continue to absorb escalating climate driven disasters without structural reform.

2. Summary of Recommendations:

Recommendation 1

Establish a State-funded, locally delivered, risk-based fuel management and risk-reduction framework for a future of more frequent and extreme fires. Prioritise coordinated fuel-reduction across public land, roadsides and high-risk interface areas, with multi-year funding certainty and clear accountability across all land managers (State, Council and private). Resource Councils as delivery partners rather than unfunded coordinators, supported by an auditable program focused on high-risk interfaces rather than sporadic or complaint-driven works, and integrating cultural burning and other locally appropriate land-management practices within a consistent statewide framework.

Recommendation 2

Address ongoing and critical telecommunications failures by investing in resilient infrastructure, including permanent backup power at towers and exchanges, alternate routing for the single NBN fibre connection into Murrindindi Shire, and satellite or other backup links, to ensure communities are not cut off from emergency warnings and information during disasters.

Recommendation 3

Reinforce the electricity network through increased redundancy and local backup, including additional feed routes, community batteries, on-call generators at strategic locations, and localised power solutions to maintain essential services running during prolonged outages.

Recommendation 4

Develop a rural-specific CFA funding and volunteer strategy, including modernisation of fleet and equipment; targeted wellbeing support recovery time for volunteers; back-filling during long campaigns; school-based and youth programs to build resilience and future emergency service volunteers; and a rapid-deployment support team model to assist small rural councils during major emergencies.

Recommendation 5

Secure funding to develop a fit-for-purpose emergency relief centre in Alexandra, designed to be all-abilities accessible and equipped with dedicated backup power, water and communications to operate safely as a community refuge and coordination point during future disasters.

Recommendation 6

Formally recognise and strengthen community-led relief and recovery hubs as integral components of emergency management by equipping local halls with backup power, water and communications, integrating them into emergency plans and ICC protocols, and providing clear funding, governance and information-sharing arrangements, rather than treating them as ad hoc or peripheral efforts.

Recommendation 7

Ensure robust local emergency coordination and communication by:

- Formally recognising the Alexandra Incident Control Centre (ICC) as the preferred regional coordination point for emergencies affecting Murrindindi Shire (and neighbouring areas as appropriate), where safe and operationally appropriate, prioritising local leadership and knowledge
- Upgrading the Alexandra ICC facility and associated local infrastructure, with resilient backup power and hardened communications systems
- Implementing consistent statewide authorised access and roadblock protocols for essential services (including feed, water, fuel, medical and utility crews) to safely access affected areas, while non-essential and unauthorised traffic is restricted
- Improving resilience of communications, water and electricity at critical community facilities

- Establishing clear ICC guidelines to recognise, coordinate with, and support community-led information and relief centres.

Recommendation 8

Mandate climate-resilient rebuilding of critical infrastructure after disasters rather than like-for-like replacement. State and Commonwealth funding arrangements (including DRFA) must explicitly allow and fund betterment so assets are rebuilt to contemporary, fit-for-purpose standards that reduce future failure and long-term costs.

Recommendation 9

Shift from short-term relief to multi-year, place-based recovery funding that reflects verified impact severity. Provide “day one” operational guidance alongside announcements; resource Council-led coordination and surge staffing; fund community-led hubs as core recovery infrastructure; allocate recovery funding proportionate to impact rather than on a one-size-fits-all basis; and prioritise local hospitals, mental health providers, and fast-track case management for vulnerable residents.

Recommendation 10

Address the structural financial sustainability of small rural councils as a core element of Victoria’s disaster preparedness, response and recovery framework. State and Commonwealth funding, grant programs and rate-capping settings must recognise councils as delivery partners and reflect the cumulative costs of repeated disaster exposure, consistent with findings of State and Commonwealth inquiries.

Recommendation 11

Establish a centralised state-wide emergency impact data system (“single source of truth”) to securely share authorised, property and individual -level impact and recovery data across agencies and councils, reducing duplication, retraumatisation, service gaps and inequitable funding outcomes while maintaining appropriate privacy safeguards.

Recommendation 12

Fund locally led, long-term and place-based environmental recovery programs, working with Traditional Owners, Landcare, Catchment Management Authorities, wildlife carers and environmental volunteers to restore habitat connectivity, manage post-fire erosion and weeds, protect waterways and support ecological recovery beyond initial stabilisation phases through secure multi-year funding.

Recommendation 13

Strengthen authoritative local information channels to counter misinformation during emergencies by formally recognising councils as trusted communicators, resourcing localised updates, ensuring redundancy for local emergency broadcasts (including local radio) and establishing pre-agreed “myth-busting” protocols to swiftly correct misinformation and retain public confidence.

Recommendation 14

Improve interjurisdictional support through stronger pre-planning and faster activation of interstate, Commonwealth and international assistance, with clear triggers, integrated incident and recovery planning, and seamless handover arrangements that avoid cost-shifting to councils.

Recommendation 15

Strengthen accountability for the implementation of past inquiry and Royal Commission recommendations by requiring transparent public reporting on progress, applying a rural lens to outcomes and prioritising overdue reforms such as integrated impact data systems and proportionate recovery funding.

3. Context: Murrindindi Shire and the 2026 Fires

Murrindindi entered the 2026 fire season still recovering from major flood events in 2022, 2023, and 2024, resulting in cumulative infrastructure degradation and workforce fatigue across Council, CFA and community organisations. Economic conditions were worsened by the recent drought and the disproportionate effect of the Emergency Services and Volunteer Fund on rural communities.

The Longwood Fire burnt more than 140,000 hectares across four municipalities, with Murrindindi Shire experiencing the most concentrated impacts. Over the course of the incident, the entire Murrindindi Shire was subject to evacuation warnings, reflecting the scale, unpredictability and geographic spread of the fire, and triggering traumatic responses across communities lived experience of the 2009 fires.

In Murrindindi Shire alone, the Longwood fire resulted in:

- Loss of 216 homes and over 520 outbuildings.
- Destruction of almost 8,000 livestock and approximately 4,860 km of fencing
- Widespread power, telecommunications and road disruption, including hazardous debris along more than 450 km of local roads
- Ongoing environmental damage to waterways and habitat corridors
- Community-led emergency relief and recovery hubs established spontaneously in severely affected localities

Local government played a central role in enabling relief and recovery efforts on the ground, stretching resourcing and requiring increased financial allocations. However, Council's capacity to surge in an emergency is constrained by structural funding limitations, rate-capping, inequitable government grants allocations and settings, the scale of our municipal road network and dispersed settlement patterns. Rural councils cannot sustainably absorb expanding emergency management responsibilities without appropriate, ongoing funding.

Community-led relief and information hubs were rapidly established across multiple localities, in the absence of any State-sanctioned Emergency Relief Centre in the Shire. These hubs became the primary points of access to information, water, food and welfare support during extended outages. Council staff worked alongside community volunteers to support these hubs with information and logistics while advocating for State agencies to deliver services locally. The State-led ICC had limited operational capacity to support multiple decentralised, community-led relief centres. Locally-run hubs operated in Terip Terip, Highlands, Fawcett, Yarck and Yea within hours of the fires, providing shelter, supplies and reliable updates to those cut off by the crisis.

Murrindindi Shire was initially supported by neighbouring councils, which offered staff and equipment in a timely and effective manner. The Municipal Association of Victoria (MAV) resource-sharing protocols allowed us to scale up these external resources over time. However, community patience and social license for volunteering and self-help will wane if relief and recovery extend over a protracted period without adequate government support. The MAV advised that they had escalated our requests to the State Crisis Team for specialist skills (including health officers and building surveyors). No additional personnel were released by State agencies, meaning continued reliance on the private sector and already-stretched local government was required.

4. Preparation and Planning Ahead of the Fire Season

(TOR 1)

What Worked

- Strong local CFA brigade knowledge and commitment, with volunteers adeptly leveraging local terrain and fire behaviour knowledge to protect their communities
- High community awareness of fire risk and Vic Emergency warnings and messaging
- Council's Municipal Fire Management Plan, which provided a solid strategic framework
- Council's Leaping into Resilience program, developed with the community and funded by the State and Commonwealth, helped many residents create their own household emergency plans
- Recent flood recovery events and community resilience programs that built stronger local connections and support networks across towns and demographic cohorts
- Council maintained operational readiness through established regional arrangements, including an Incident Management Team pre-positioned in Alexandra as fire conditions escalated.
- Local Government's strong alignment in values and a willingness to collaborate regionally, enabled further through a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) formalizing collaboration for community benefit from the lack of boundaries and consistency.

What Did Not Work

- Inconsistent roadside and interface fuel management, with limited capacity for councils to undertake preventative burning, slashing and fuel reduction at the scale required
- Fragmented accountability across land managers (Council, State, private landholders) leading to gaps in fuel treatment
- Telecommunications failures due to lack of redundancy or backup power, so once batteries ran out, entire areas went dark.
- Additional black spots in mobile coverage, with the cessation of the 3G network have been reported by the community.
- Prolonged power outages across the Shire (despite the region hosting major power generation and transmission infrastructure).
- Limited community understanding of agency accountabilities during and post natural disasters, leaving council to manage misinformation, expectations beyond the control of local government and supporting the community to navigate multiple agencies and channels.

These issues are examined further in Sections 7 and 8.

The Inquiry must recognise that rural councils, particularly Small Rural Shires, do not have the resource base to deliver "best practice" bushfire preparedness at the required scale, while also maintaining core services across vast, sparsely populated and challenging landscapes. This is a system design issue. Every town and hamlet in Murrindindi fits the definition of a tiny town, yet we are expected to manage extensive high-risk land with minimal funding.

Council supports risk-reduction efforts and acknowledges our responsibilities on council-managed land; however, the expectation that we can deliver large-scale roadside and interface fuel reduction without sustained funding is unrealistic under current funding settings (including rate capping) given the sheer expanse of road reserve and public-private interface in rural shires. Council's approach to private land fire hazard reduction balances enforcement with practicality: our officers administer the Municipal Fire Hazard Clearance program, across all freehold land in the Shire, working with property owners to ensure compliance while taking into account farmers' needs to harvest crops after a prolonged drought, even as fire seasons begin.

Communications across large parts of the Shire failed during and after the January 2026 fires. The reliance on a single NBN fibre line (with no alternative path or standby power at exchanges) proved catastrophic when that line was damaged - cutting off internet and phone service to the entire Shire. The short battery life at mobile phone towers meant that most cellular service failed within hours, and the local emergency radio broadcaster fell silent when power was lost at transmission sites. At a critical point in the fire campaign, the Incident Control Centre was even forced to relocate from Alexandra to Seymour due to these communications failures.

It is ironic that although Murrindindi Shire is a key producer of renewable electricity via the Eildon hydroelectric scheme, and hosts major power transmission lines, our communities continue to suffer frequent and prolonged blackouts. These outages occur regularly, but during natural disasters, they further compound the feeling of loss and isolation. Many households, community groups and businesses who can afford to, are now buying their own generators, which further highlights inequalities between those who can secure backup power and those who cannot.

The State and Commonwealth Disaster Recovery Funding Agreement (DRFA), provides funding to rebuild like for like, requires extensive evidence to support a claim and includes significant uncertainty for Councils on recovery of funds. This is a significant hurdle for a small Rural Shire to navigate. The prolonged rebuilding and claim process, resulted in local brigades having to travel extended distances over steeper terrain to attempt to save houses, where a bridge remains destroyed from the 2022 floods dividing a local community. Support and a streamlined approach to build back resilient fit for purpose infrastructure in a timely manner improves connectivity in communities.

Recommendation 1

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Recommendation 3

Reinforce the electricity network through increased redundancy and local backup, including additional feed routes, community batteries, on-call generators at strategic locations, and localised power solutions to maintain essential services running during prolonged outages.

5. Causes, Climate Change and Risk Forecasting

(TOR 2 & 8)

The 2026 fires occurred in the context of increasingly frequent, intense and fast-moving disasters driven by climate change, including searing heat, high winds, prolonged drought and extreme storm events that exceed historical experience. These conditions are no longer exceptional; they are becoming the “new normal” operating environment for rural Victoria. Murrindindi Shire has now suffered catastrophic bushfires (most notably the 2009 Black Saturday fires and the 2026 Longwood fire), record floods in 2022, 2023 and 2024, and destructive storm events (in 2024 and again in early 2026 immediately after the fires).

In this context, the central challenge is no longer whether bushfire risk is increasing (it is), but whether land management, fuel reduction, flood mitigation strategies and community preparedness systems are adapting quickly enough to reduce the exposure and harm from these climate-driven events.

The priority must shift toward systematically reducing fuel loads, managing risk across all land tenures, and strengthening preparedness so that communities can live more safely with fire in the landscape.

What Worked

Despite extreme conditions, the loss of life was limited to one regrettable fatality. This outcome reflects the effectiveness of existing training, warning and safety systems.

- CFA and FFMVic training and safety-first operational culture were critical
- High levels of community awareness of fire risk
- The VicEmergency app and official warnings were effective while communications systems remained operational
- Clear safety messaging encouraged early decision-making and risk-aware behaviour
- Community planning and strengthening fostered communities to establish local community led relief and recovery hubs
- The activation of Council’s Employees and Council Services During High Emergency Risk Periods Policy on the Catastrophic Fire Danger Rating day enabled timely restrictions on non-essential services and staff movement, and allowing non-critical staff to prioritise personal safety and evacuation planning

These elements saved lives and must be protected, strengthened and expanded.

What Did Not Work

- Fuel loads, particularly along roadsides, interfaces and unmanaged reserves, remain too high and inconsistently treated
- Preparedness and mitigation effort have not kept pace with the escalating severity, frequency and speed of events
- When telecommunications failed, combined with extensive blackspot areas, communities were abruptly cut off from alerts and information
- Local Community led relief hubs initially established without power and communications, until generators & alternative communications could be established.
- No ICC- auspiced relief centre was established within the Shire due to safety concerns. A number of visitors and locals who had not evacuated were observed moving through townships seeking assistance from emergency agencies.

Community feedback reflects the cumulative and transgenerational trauma associated with repeated disaster exposure. For children and young people in particular, catastrophic events are formative experiences. Building knowledge, preparedness and understanding from an early age is critical, not only for safety, but for long-term resilience and healthy coping.

There is growing support for expanding risk-reduction approaches, including better-managed fuel loads through low-intensity burning, cultural burning, mechanical treatment and other evidence-based practices suited to local landscapes. Communities want to be partners in prevention, not passive recipients of warnings once fires are already established.

The fuel-reduction and risk-mitigation issues identified in this section are addressed through **Recommendation 1**, which establishes a State-funded, locally delivered, risk-based fuel management and risk-reduction framework.

6. Funding, Equipment and Volunteers

(TOR 3)

Observed Issues

- Local CFA crews were on the ground during critical escalation periods when additional resources were not available, placing sustained pressure on local capability
- Ongoing challenges with:
 - Volunteer fatigue and retention
 - Ageing equipment and limitations in fitness-for-purpose under extreme conditions
 - Reliance on goodwill to fill systemic gaps
 - Increasing reliance on private equipment
- Larger and better-resourced neighboring Councils were quick to offer immediate support, demonstrating strong sector collaboration and mutual aid arrangements.
- The Municipal Association of Victoria resources sharing protocols were effective in securing many of the resources required, however response times were slower than required and the arrangements were unable to fully meet urgent needs for a small rural shire managing a catastrophic emergency.
- Community-led relief centres were established in the absence of a state-led or ICC-aided Relief Centre, demonstrating strong local capacity and initiative, however this resulted in a fragmented and localised approach to relief provision. The ICs limited visibility of, and capacity to actively support, community-led hubs compounded a sense of abandonment while incident control remained externally located.
- No fit-for-purpose relief centre was available within the Shire to adequately support vulnerable and at-risk community members
- Failure of communications systems left communities isolated and without timely information with the Incident Control Centre required to relocate from Alexandra to Seymour, reducing local situational awareness and accessibility.
- During the incident, equipment was provided to the community-led hubs under the understanding that it was being donated to support immediate relief efforts; invoices were subsequently issued, creating confusion and unplanned financial exposure for community groups.
- The increasing frequency and intensity of disasters highlights a growing risk to the sustainability of the volunteer base. School-based emergency preparedness and fire-education programs can play a dual role: supporting young people to process and cope with disaster-related trauma, while laying foundations for future volunteering and community leadership in emergency services.

Recommendation 4

Develop a rural-specific CFA funding and volunteer strategy, including modernisation of fleet and equipment; targeted wellbeing support recovery time for volunteers; back-filling during long campaigns; school-based and youth programs to build resilience and future emergency service volunteers; and a rapid-deployment support team model to assist small rural councils during major emergencies.

Recommendation 5

Secure funding to develop a fit-for-purpose emergency relief centre in Alexandra, designed to be all-abilities accessible and equipped with dedicated backup power, water and communications to operate safely as a community refuge and coordination point during future disasters.

Recommendation 6

Formally recognise and strengthen community-led relief and recovery hubs as integral components of emergency management by equipping local halls with backup power, water and communications, integrating them into emergency plans and ICC protocols, and providing clear funding, governance and information-sharing arrangements, rather than treating them as ad hoc or peripheral efforts.

7. Emergency Response and Communications

(TOR 4)

What worked

- Community-led relief hubs (including informal “makeshift” hubs) were established rapidly, in many cases before formal relief arrangements were in place. These hubs functioned as trusted, place-based points for information, supplies, welfare checks and connection, including during periods of power and communications outage, and became a model of community resilience.
- Informal coordination between Council staff, CFA personnel and local community leaders enabled urgent needs to be identified and addressed early, despite the rapidly evolving and chaotic conditions of the incident (for example, facilitating water and fodder deliveries via alternative access routes).
- While operating locally, the Alexandra Incident Control Centre (ICC) provided timely and accurate information that supported local decision-making and public communications. Following the relocation of the ICC to Seymour, coinciding with the introduction of interstate control arrangements, access to local knowledge and context was reduced, affecting engagement with local agencies and access to locally specific intelligence
- The operation of community-led relief hubs demonstrated an existing, but informal, capability within affected communities. These hubs operated without formal integration into the emergency management system, highlighting the opportunity to recognise community-led relief as a standing capability rather than an ad-hoc response. Investment in local halls with resilient power, communications and water infrastructure would support this role during disasters and prolonged outages.

What did not work

- Telecommunications outages, including loss of power to mobile towers, exchanges and radio transmitters, compromised situational awareness and contributed to the closure and relocation of the Alexandra ICC. Loss of Local Emergency Radio coverage (UGFM’s broadcast) due to power failure reduced the reach of trusted local information during critical periods.

- The loss of NBN fibre connection to the Shire cut off communications contributing to reported distress among evacuees and people outside the municipality who were unable to contact family and friends. This exacerbated anxiety and, in some cases, led to unnecessary assumptions about safety and outcome
- Road closures and access constraints left some communities isolated for extended periods while requiring food, water and animal welfare support. This was compounded by inconsistent application of road closures across locations.
- When incident control arrangements shifted away from Alexandra, including overnight and surge configurations, a reduction in local relevance of decisions and effectiveness of communications was observed, particularly in relation to community-specific needs.
- Road closure checkpoints were applied inconsistently and at times appeared ad-hoc. Reports were received of looters and onlookers being permitted through checkpoints, while essential service deliveries (including water, food and fodder/hay) were turned away. This caused avoidable distress, disrupted farm logistics and contributed to animal welfare risks. Clear, consistently applied and publicly understood access protocols are essential, including simple credentialing arrangements for essential services.
- Lack of clarity regarding materials and equipment supplied to community-led relief hubs, which were initially described as donations and later invoiced, created confusion and financial risk for community groups. Earlier ICC oversight and clear arrangements at inception would have reduced this risk.
- In the absence of an ICC-aided relief centre, some community members who were unable to leave the Shire were observed moving through towns seeking assistance.
- Uncertainty and delays were reported in relation to support for farmers managing injured, distressed or displaced livestock.

Recommendation 7

Ensure robust local emergency coordination and communication by:

- Formally recognising the Alexandra Incident Control Centre (ICC) as the preferred regional coordination point for emergencies affecting Murrindindi Shire (and neighbouring areas as appropriate), where safe and operationally appropriate, prioritising local leadership and knowledge
- Upgrading the Alexandra ICC facility and associated local infrastructure, with resilient backup power and hardened communications systems
- Implementing consistent statewide authorised access and roadblock protocols for essential services (including feed, water, fuel, medical and utility crews) to safely access affected areas, while non-essential and unauthorised traffic is restricted
- Improving resilience of communications, water and electricity at critical community facilities
- Establishing clear ICC guidelines to recognise, coordinate with, and support community-led information and relief centres.

8. Critical Infrastructure Resilience

(TOR 5)

The fires exposed vulnerabilities in:

- Electricity distribution (power pole losses and prolonged outages)
- Telecommunications coverage failures
- Road networks that are critical to evacuation, response and recovery
- Building back resilient infrastructure to minimise isolating communities during and post events.

The Alexandra ICC and its supporting civic infrastructure constitute a critical “response asset” located in the municipality’s primary population centre. Council considers this asset must be prioritised for protection and upgraded to ensure it can operate through high-impact events (including prolonged outages). The construction and equipping of fit for purpose Relief Centres catering for people of all abilities in their time of need is critical.

Recommendation 8

Mandate climate-resilient rebuilding of critical infrastructure after disasters rather than like-for-like replacement. State and Commonwealth funding arrangements (including DRFA) must explicitly allow and fund betterment so assets are rebuilt to contemporary, fit-for-purpose standards that reduce future failure and long-term costs.

9. Community, Business and Agricultural Impacts

(TOR 6)

Observed service and community confidence gaps

Council observed a sustained difference in recovery service availability between municipalities that received the same flat recovery funding. Mitchell Shire, with a larger rate base, higher internal staffing capacity and a geographically contained impact footprint (with 11 destroyed homes reported at the time funding was announced), was able to deliver more visible and continuous recovery services. By contrast, Murrindindi and Strathbogie Shires (with 193 and 115 destroyed homes reported at the time funding was announced), managing extensive damage across highly dispersed rural communities, experienced constrained service coverage despite equivalent funding.

These differences were visible to residents and frequently raised in community feedback, contributing to frustration, perceptions of inequity, and declining confidence in authorities. Councils were placed in the position of explaining service variations driven not by effort or intent, but by structural capacity and one-size-fits-all funding design.

Council’s impact assessments indicate:

- Limited co-ordination of data and knowledge across agencies and with councils, which constrained collective response efforts and required affected people to repeatedly recount their experiences, contributing to confusion and distress.
- Inconsistent property and people-level data, which compounded inconsistencies and inaccuracies in understanding the scale of impact and increased the risk of individuals and households falling through service gaps
- Severe and ongoing impacts on primary producers, small businesses and tourism sector
- Insurance coverage gaps and challenges in navigating insurance and recovery systems
- Growing mental health and wellbeing concerns across affected communities, particularly among young people and individuals experiencing cumulative trauma from consecutive disaster events
- Significant capacity gaps in reinstating lost infrastructure eg fencing, sheds, and on-farm assets.

- Succession planning pressures and uncertainty regarding the capacity or willingness of intergenerational farming enterprises to rebuild
- Loss of agricultural activity and reduced economic performance across impacted areas Delays in state-led clean-up processes, which increased contamination risks as some residents undertook self-directed disposal or delayed clean-up activities.
- Delays in state-supported clean-up activities, which in turn affected the timing of temporary housing deployment and prolonged uncertainty for impacted households.
- Material donations, while well-intended, at times disrupted local supply chains and impeded recovery of local businesses and economies..

For example, in one heavily impacted locality (Fawcett), around 90% of remaining properties experienced loss of critical farm infrastructure – fences, gates, floodgates, water piping and tanks – indicating that the January 2026 fires will have prolonged impacts on both community recovery and the local economy.

A major and recurring source of frustration and distress for impacted residents was the delay, incompleteness and inconsistency of impact data, and the absence of a harmonised, property-level “single source of truth” across agencies. Without a shared and consistent view of who was affected, what losses had occurred and what support had been provided, residents were repeatedly required to retell their stories to multiple organisations, increasing distress and the likelihood of gaps in assistance.

Data quality issues were further compounded by inconsistent address capture and duplication across systems and datasets (including EM-Impact/CrisisWorks, AgVic data, DEECA and DFFH records, etc). Reconciling impacts and targeting outreach required substantial manual effort by Council during a period of already constrained capacity. Council also encountered reluctance to share critical impact data due to privacy concerns, even where secure and authorised information-sharing arrangements were feasible and necessary to deliver humane, coordinated services.

These systemic data limitations undermined recovery coordination, delayed assistance, and contributed to inequitable outcomes. A centralised, state-harmonised impact data system should therefore be considered essential recovery infrastructure, rather than an administrative or IT enhancement.

Local mental health providers and hospitals require prioritisation for surge funding, given their established trust and place-based knowledge within affected communities. Reliance on external providers without local presence risks fragmentation and disengagement. Local clinics have reported spikes in anxiety, depression and trauma cases - particularly among farmers and young families - since the fires, underscoring the need for accessible, ongoing counselling and mental health support. Case management arrangements took too long to establish at scale, leaving vulnerable individuals without timely support and compounding distress.

State-announced mental health supports were directed to organisations without established capacity or presence within the fire-affected communities.

Community-led relief hubs played a critical role in early relief and information provision; however, funding uncertainty and unclear eligibility settings limited certainty around what could be responsibly offered and for how long, contributing to volunteer fatigue. Early recognition of these hubs, with clear resourcing and governance arrangements, would provide greater certainty for communities and support volunteer sustainability.

The Council Support Fund allocation of \$750,000 per impacted council was welcome, however it was not proportionate to the scale or complexity of impact experienced in highly affected municipalities. In a

large, dispersed shire with disproportionate loss, this funding level was not commensurate with the expectation that councils establish local coordination, relief hubs, outreach and recovery systems while maintaining core business continuity. Non-proportionate funding allocations were visible at the community level and placed councils in the position of explaining variations in service availability and timeliness.

Announcements of recovery measures without accompanying operational guidance (including eligibility and clean-up protocols) created avoidable delays and distress. Guidance should be released concurrently with announcements, rather than weeks later. In the absence of early direction, some residents commenced clean-up of potentially contaminated sites, while delays in program implementation also affected private clean-ups and the rollout of state-supported temporary housing as winter approached.

Water relief arrangements further illustrate system coordination challenges. Council observed delays in confirming agency (DEECA) responsibility and processes for domestic and stock water delivery (including up to 20,000 litres), creating uncertainty during periods of acute need. Subsequent closure and reopening of the program added further confusion for affected households and communities.

Recommendation 9

Shift from short-term relief to multi-year, place-based recovery funding that reflects verified impact severity. Provide “day one” operational guidance alongside announcements; resource Council-led coordination and surge staffing; fund community-led hubs as core recovery infrastructure; allocate recovery funding proportionate to impact rather than on a one-size-fits-all basis; and prioritise local hospitals, mental health providers, and fast-track case management for vulnerable residents.

Recommendation 10

Address the structural financial sustainability of small rural councils as a core element of Victoria’s disaster preparedness, response and recovery framework. State and Commonwealth funding, grant programs and rate-capping settings must recognise councils as delivery partners and reflect the cumulative costs of repeated disaster exposure, consistent with findings of State and Commonwealth inquiries.

Recommendation 11

Establish a centralised state-wide emergency impact data system (“single source of truth”) to securely share authorised, property and individual -level impact and recovery data across agencies and councils, reducing duplication, retraumatisation, service gaps and inequitable funding outcomes while maintaining appropriate privacy safeguards.

10. Environmental Impacts and Biodiversity

(TOR 7)

The fires caused:

- Extensive loss of habitat
- Damage to waterways and ecological corridors
- Ongoing risks to wildlife survival and regeneration processes
- Significant risk of erosion and sedimentation and water quality decline in catchments following intense rainfall events.
- Increased likelihood of significant weed infestation in post-fires landscapes
- Long-term changes to highly valued and environmentally significant landscapes.

These impacts will continue to unfold over years rather than months, requiring sustained and locally informed recovery approaches.

Recommendation 12

Fund locally led, long-term and place-based environmental recovery programs, working with Traditional Owners, Landcare, Catchment Management Authorities, wildlife carers and environmental volunteers to restore habitat connectivity, manage post-fire erosion and weeds, protect waterways and support ecological recovery beyond initial stabilisation phases through secure multi-year funding.

11. Misinformation and Community Trust

(TOR 9)

Misinformation during and after the fires:

- Increased anxiety and uncertainty in the absence of clear and published guidelines, early speculation about eligibility for relief, clean-up and recovery assistance
- Increased confusion due to multiple, uncoordinated information sources, combined with communications outages
- Undermined confidence in official advice where information was delayed or inconsistent
- Placed additional pressure on Council and local leaders to correct narratives
- Communication blackspots and power outages removed access to authoritative and timely information

Recommendation 13

Strengthen authoritative local information channels to counter misinformation during emergencies by formally recognising councils as trusted communicators, resourcing localised updates, ensuring redundancy for local emergency broadcasts (including local radio) and establishing pre-agreed “myth-busting” protocols to swiftly correct misinformation and retain public confidence

12. Interjurisdictional Support

(TOR 10)

While interstate and Commonwealth assistance was valued, limitations in timing and coordination reduced effectiveness in early response phases.

The transition of responsibility from the Incident Control Centre to Council occurred while Council was still undertaking impact assessments, clearing roads and establishing the scale of damage, and before funding certainty was in place. This created financial risk for Council in continuing essential emergency works.

Assurance is sought that emergency response and assessment activities undertaken during this transition will not result in Council being left out of pocket.

The current application of Disaster Recovery Funding Arrangements (DRFA) risks significant shortfalls in rebuilding lost assets and limits opportunities to rebuild to climate-resilient standards. Experience following the 2022 floods demonstrated instances where assets were rebuilt to pre-disaster condition, only to be damaged again in subsequent events. There is an opportunity to embed resilience at the point of reconstruction, reducing future disruption and long-term costs.

Recommendation 14

Improve interjurisdictional support through stronger pre-planning and faster activation of interstate, Commonwealth and international assistance, with clear triggers, integrated incident and recovery planning, and seamless handover arrangements that avoid cost-shifting to councils.

13. Lessons from Previous Inquiries

(TOR 11)

Many issues raised in this submission echo findings from previous inquiries and Royal Commissions. The persistence of these issues indicates:

- Incomplete implementation of recommendations from prior inquiries and Royal Commissions
- Insufficient accountability and follow-through mechanisms
- Limited adaptation of systems and settings to climate-driven escalation in disaster frequency and severity

The recurring failure to implement integrated, property-level impact data systems across response and recovery phases has become a national issue. The absence of a harmonised “single source of truth” continues to undermine coordination, delay assistance and increase distress for affected communities. Murrindindi Shire Council has advocated for reform in this area through Australian Local Government Association (ALGA) National General Assembly motions calling for a framework that enables authorised access to granular (property-level) impact data while maintaining appropriate privacy safeguards.

Recommendation 15

Strengthen accountability for the implementation of past inquiry and Royal Commission recommendations by requiring transparent public reporting on progress, applying a rural lens to outcomes and prioritising overdue reforms such as integrated impact data systems and proportionate recovery funding.

14. Conclusion

Murrindindi Shire Council submits that the January 2026 fires were not an anomaly, but a warning.

Without structural reform, rural communities will continue to experience disproportionate exposure to climate-driven disasters without commensurate support.

Rural municipalities are critical to Victoria’s food security, water catchments and regional economies. The long-term impacts of repeated disasters extend well beyond the emergency period.

This Inquiry must therefore move beyond restating lessons learned and deliver systemic, durable change.

Council emphasises that community capability is a core asset in emergency management. Recognising and investing in community-led response and recovery, alongside agency and government capability, will improve outcomes, reduce long-term harm and strengthen Victoria’s resilience in an era of escalating climate-driven emergencies.

Appendices

- **Appendix A:** Murrindindi Shire 2026 Fire Impact Summary Data
<https://www.murrindindi.vic.gov.au/Community/Safety-and-Emergencies/January-2026-Fire-Longwood/Murrindindi-Shire-Impact/Impact-by-the-numbers>
- **Appendix B:** Business and Agriculture Impact Report
<https://www.murrindindi.vic.gov.au/files/assets/public/v/1/documents/1-council/news-and-media/fire-jan-2026-updated-business-and-agriculture-impact-report-17-february-2026.pdf>
- **Appendix C:** Murrindindi Shire Council Submission to the Victorian Parliamentary Inquiry into Local Government Funding and Services
<https://www.parliament.vic.gov.au/4ae6f1/contentassets/a2e08d6f10114400bd706b817d1bc2f4/submission-documents/103.-murrindindi-shire-council- redacted.pdf>
- **Appendix D:** 2024 Regional Telecommunications Review Murrindindi Shire Council Submission
<https://www.infrastructure.gov.au/sites/default/files/documents/rtirc-2024-murrindindi-shire-council.pdf> (2026 Update available upon request at customer@murrindindi.vic.gov.au)
- **Appendix E:** Community Photos <https://www.murrindindi.vic.gov.au/Community/Safety-and-Emergencies/January-2026-Fire-Longwood/Murrindindi-Shire-Impact/Community-Photos-Gallery/Community-Photos>