As I write this article, the utter devastation of the Victorian bushfires is very clear. With 25 (nearly one third of all Victorian municipalities) directly affected, Local Government is playing a crucial role in recovery efforts, working alongside the emergency services, heading up local case management and outreach programs, and working with volunteer and health organisations. Many of the elected members and staff doing this work will have faced their own personal losses.

The President of the Australian Local Government Association, Geoff Lake, has stated that the work is just beginning and I’m sure that there are a number of Tasmanian councils that can relate to that. The East Coast bushfires in 2006 and the Beaconsfield Mine rock fall are two examples where councils have had to put their community recovery theory into practice.

Local Government has a wide range of emergency management responsibilities. Many are designated through legislation and policy but all are firmly based on the reality that local communities expect their local councils to be active participants in ensuring their safety through appropriate planning for emergency risks, maintaining local response capacities and ensuring the community recovers from any emergencies that might occur.

In particular, as the local arm of government, councils play a vital role that supports the community to manage their own recovery from an emergency. It is the council which will provide local leadership, credible and respected voices and the commitment to the long haul that effective community recovery requires.

Although the current situation in Victoria is exceptional, it highlights the importance of the local council in pulling together the affected community. It is also through understanding of the issues of the local community, harnessing its enthusiasm and energy, mobilising its resources and recognising its strengths and needs, that councils most effectively support the community.

In 2008, LGAT produced and distributed to all councils The Community Recovery Kit. The kit followed a series of residential workshops and brings together material from the workshops as well as case studies, proformas and templates for use by community recovery coordinators. The format was such that coordinators could add to, adapt and personalise their kits to suit their community context.

Under the Emergency Management Act 2006, each council is required to have prepared a Municipal Emergency Management Plan and Community Recovery Plan. The finalised content for the revised Tasmanian Emergency Management Plan was endorsed by the State Emergency Management Committee on 27 November 2008. Since then, several rounds of editing and typesetting have occurred to transition the plan into its final form. Approval by the Minister for Police and Emergency Management is expected in the near future. Once approved, the plan will be issued on the SES website as a publicly available document.

It is important to remember that the plan itself won’t prepare a council for an emergency. As the Vice President of LGAT, Mayor Barry Easther has stated, “An emergency, in fact a disaster on our front doorstep, is the last thing we in Local Government really expect to happen to us. And yet it does happen, and indeed is happening, far more frequently than we would like.”
Rather than wait for a crisis to hit, councils must actively continue to review plans, put processes and structures in place and keep networks up-to-date in order to ensure an effective, coordinated response should the worst occur. Community consultation in developing the plan is crucial. West Tamar Council had adopted their Community Recovery Plan just six months prior to the Beaconsfield rock fall.

It is also important to remember that the recovery process can be a very protracted process. It is almost always complex in nature and it is as dynamic as the affected community. This means local councils need to be committed, flexible and responsive as the recovery process unfolds in their community.

With the East Coast fires in 2006, not only were homes and property lost, farmland and fences were burnt, stock was killed or injured, tourist assets and community infrastructure and ecological and cultural assets were damaged or destroyed, power and communications were extensively disrupted, and the economy of the district suffered because the fires occurred in the peak tourist season. The report on the fires produced by the Australian Red Cross states, “Many people had not experienced a bushfire previously and had limited understanding about the longer-term impacts a fire of this magnitude would have upon them and their community.”

1 Funded through Emergency Management Australia’s Working Together To Manage Emergencies Funding via a joint submission with the Department of Health and Human Services.

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