



Submission to Council and Emergencies Directions Paper

May 2017

Local Government Victoria requested Councils to provide feedback to the 'Councils and emergencies direction paper'. Strathbogie Shire Council supports a review of the emergency management principles and practices as they relate to local government.

We also acknowledge and support the Municipal Association of Victoria's submission to the paper. This submission should be read in conjunction with that submission.

Summary

Strathbogie Shire covers an area of 3,302 square kilometres and has an approximate population of 10,000. The Shire, like many others, relies heavily on the volunteer emergency services and as such requires an emergency management process that is suitable to this circumstance.

How this Shire handles emergencies changes greatly and depends on the time of day, the day of the week and the time of year. There is no full time emergency service apart from Ambulance Victoria. There is only one small Victoria State Emergency Service team. The Shire relies strongly on the community and community volunteers in emergencies.

Council is not an emergency service though it does provide a strong service in emergencies. Council does not fall within the structure of Emergency Management Victoria. They do not have the emergency management governance that controls all of Victoria's emergency services and as such lacks, at this stage, sound operating procedures during emergencies.

This submission wishes to provide feedback to descriptors that we believe are high priority.

Descriptor No 6

Lead the maintenance and administration of the Vulnerable Persons Register (VPR).

It is Council's opinion that the Vulnerable Persons Register does not provide a realistic or accurate view of the vulnerable persons within the Shire.

Council believes that the Department of Health and Human Services should maintain the list that falls within their definition. Community definition of a vulnerable person is broader and not necessarily limited to those that fall within this definition.

There is a chance, under the present process, that the community will mistakenly believe Council has identified all or most of the vulnerable people within the Shire. This false belief reduces community resilience and strength and may fail in the one thing it was originally established to achieve.

Descriptor No 59

Clear blocked drains and local roads including by removing trees on council land and on roads.

There is currently no distinction between what is an emergency and what is Councils normal business. There must be a State wide common practice in place to deal with Level 1 incidents to correctly prioritise response and inform the community of potential dangers.

When the SES are called out at night to a tree over a road they are attending as a response to an emergency. Through standard reporting practices the call out is recorded and that information is accessible to other emergency agencies. The information is also available to the public through emergency management portals allowing them to plan and drive to the conditions.

If Council staff receive a similar after hours task no one is aware of it. There is no public portal in place for Council to record minor flooding, trees over roads, damage to roads, oil on roads etc. All of which have the potential to cause injury or death. Communication is the strongest ally in providing community resilience.

Descriptor No 67

Clarify and communicate council's emergency management role locally, to develop a shared understanding of emergency management activities with agencies and the community.

We support Council's involvement and role within an emergency management team and are willing to provide all possible staff and equipment during all phases of an emergency.

Even though Level 1 emergencies are sometimes able to be dealt with as Councils normal business, e.g. tree over road, minor flooding etc., they still account for the majority of emergency calls within the Shire. Sound guidelines would provide confidence and comfort to Council staff who normally do not deal with emergency situations.

Presently there does not seem to be guidelines for how this should take place. Previously request for staff and equipment was done through the Incident Controller to the Municipal Emergency Response Coordinator (MERC) and then to the Municipal Emergency Resource Officer (MERO). There is a satisfactory process within an Incident Control Centre (ICC) when there is an Emergency Management Liaison Officer (EMLO) present. There is no satisfactory process when there it is a single incident event or when an EMLO is not present in the ICC.

It is difficult to train on call MEROs when the process is not clearly defined. For example if the CFA are at a house fire, do they contact the MERC for the services of Council through the MERO or do they call the services they require through other means. Emergency Services appear not to have any Standard Operating Procedures relating to Local Government reporting in a Level 1 emergency.

Descriptor No 86 Dot point 7

Meeting the cost of providing, installing, marking and maintaining all fire plugs in the municipality.

Council does not believe S165 of the Water Act 1989 or S36 of the Country Fire Authority Act 1958 is relevant to local government. Council is no longer responsible for the reticulated water supply within the Shire and has not for many years. S165 (2) of the Water Act states, "A council must meet the costs of providing, installing, marking and maintaining all fire plugs that the council requires under subsection (1) to be installed in its municipal district." This has been an almost impossible task. The most important aspect of fire plugs is that they can operate correctly. Council has been asked, by the water authority, not to test plugs due to the fragile nature of the mains and the chance of contaminating the water. Even the local fire brigades have been asked not to train using street fire plugs for exactly the same reason. As such the responsibility for fire plugs should be taken away from Council and placed with the relevant water authority.

I trust that this feedback is helpful in identifying the capability of Local Government in Emergency Response.

Yours Faithfully,

