

Towong Shire Council

Councils and emergencies directions paper

May 2017

Thank you for the opportunity to provide feedback on the *Councils and emergencies directions paper* that has been prepared as part of Phase 1 of the Councils and Emergencies Project.

Towong Shire Council is a small rural Council located in North East Victoria. Our Shire covers an area of 6,673 sq km and is home to approximately 5,890 people. Our Council is one of the smallest in the State. Council's recurrent budget is approx. \$17m and a 1% rate increase yields additional rates and municipal charge income of \$65,000. We provide a range of services to our community with approx. 65 full time equivalent employees.

Council supports the need to clarify agency responsibilities in relation to emergency management. Our community members live in an area known to have natural emergencies, particularly floods and bushfires. Clear roles and responsibilities are an important element to mitigating the risks posed to our communities.

Over the past three years Council has expressed significant concern to the State Government about the extent of its emergency management responsibilities and its limited capacity to meet the State Government's and community's expectations.

The directions paper contains an extensive list of 154 responsibilities and actions for local government. These responsibilities are colour coded in either blue or black font. We note that the directions paper states on page 16 that actions in black font "are actions that are not a responsibility under legislation, regulations, policy or plans, but which some councils consider to be appropriate emergency management actions for them to undertake." This is inconsistent with the statement on page 13 of the directions paper that the responsibilities and actions are "current responsibilities, actions and expectations and not those that are desired, foreshadowed or anticipated in future".

In the directions paper we have been requested to "confirm or suggest amendments to how this paper describes council's current emergency management responsibilities and actions". We suggest that the paper should be consistent in its reference to 'current responsibilities and actions' contained throughout. We have reserved our feedback to the responsibilities and actions described in blue font (current) in the discussion paper and have not addressed the additional suggestions described in black font.

We understand that Phase 1 of the Councils and Emergencies Project is to identify and agree on Council's current emergency responsibilities and actions, with Phase 2 assessing the capability and capacity of the local government sector and gaps in terms of skills and expertise. With respect to the consideration of the capacity of Councils in Phase 2, we note the directions paper states that this is limited to skills and expertise, rather than financial and resourcing capacity. This response will therefore focus on our extremely limited financial and resourcing capacity whilst noting that our extremely limited skills and expertise will be considered in the next phase of the project.

Our most significant emergency management concern is the increased risk to our community members as a result of the extremely limited capacity of a small rural council such as Towong to prepare for, respond to and recover from an emergency event. **We are very concerned that we will not be able to adequately support our community in an emergency.**

Current resourcing capacity

Human capacity

Towong is a very lean organisation with incredibly limited human resources.

We have a very flat organisation structure comprising a CEO, two Directors and four Managers. Beyond the level of manager within our office based staff there are approximately 15 officers (both full-time and part-time). With planned and unplanned leave, meeting attendance or work conducted at remote or regional locations, at least 5-6 of these staff would not be available on any day to undertake 'normal' duties from a specified Shire location, let alone respond to an emergency. Many of our staff are also active volunteers with local emergency service units (for example, CFA, SES, Red Cross) and may not be available to Council in times of emergency.

In terms of Emergency Management roles, our team is comprised as follows:

- MERO position is held by Towong's Emergency Management Co-ordinator (0.5 EFT part-time position - 19 hours per week)
- Deputy MERO held by Director Technical Services (who does not always have mobile phone coverage)
- MRM held by Director Community and Corporate Services

The key role of Emergency Management Co-ordinator is a part-time role as this is the extent of funding available for emergency management planning and response purposes. We do not have other staff who are able to take on these roles.

We have an out-of-hours service that all emergency calls outside normal office hours are transferred to. The out-of-hours service will contact the above Towong 'emergency management' staff and if they cannot contact any of the three staff they contact the CEO.

Financial capacity

In addition to limited human resourcing we have limited financial capacity. Council's very low sustainability rating was confirmed in the *Whelan Report*¹ and the sustainability of small rural Councils was also highlighted in the Victorian Auditor-General's Report: *Organisational Sustainability of Small Councils June 2013*². As a result of a recommendation from this report, Towong's sustainability challenges are clearly set out in our 2015/16 Annual Report³.

¹ Local Government Financial Sustainability, Focus on Small Rural Councils, Abridged report, May 2010

² Victorian Auditor-General's Report 2012-13:33, Organisational Sustainability of Small Councils, June 2013

³ Towong Shire Council, Annual Report 2015/16, September 2016

More recently, the Victorian Auditor-General has raised concerns regarding the financial sustainability risks with the smallest nineteen (19) shire councils, including Towong Shire Council, in its most recent report on the local government sector⁴.

Around seven years ago we developed our Long Term Financial Plan (LTFP) using a robust and detailed model capable of considering innumerable financial scenarios for Council. The LTFP plan gave a clear picture of Council's financial future.

Following this work, our Council has been consistently working to reduce its underlying deficit. We have been implementing innovative approaches to reduce costs or increase revenues and where possible, reducing the impact of any service reductions on the community. During this time we have also been significantly challenged with:

- The freezing of indexation on Federal Government Financial Assistance Grants
- The introduction of the *Fair Go Rates System* (rate capping)

The indexation freeze alone has resulted in a loss of revenue of approx. \$658,000 over a three year period. In the context of a 1% rate increase only yielding \$65,000, this is significant. This has meant that Council has had to review and cut services to the community to offset the revenue reduction. Services that have been cut include a reduction in the swimming pool season of two weeks, cessation of the contribution to the three local SES units, reduction in the number of youth events and discontinuation of our local government scholarship for a tertiary student.

Council has recently submitted an application for a Higher Rate Cap to enable Council to continue to provide day-to-day services and infrastructure maintenance and renewal at the modest level required by its residents and ratepayers.

What our long term financial modelling effectively told us is that small Councils like Towong, with the many environmental factors that bear upon them, cannot be sustainable purely relying on rates and charges and own source revenue alone. Sustainability is only possible with an adequate level of financial support from the State and Federal governments. Accordingly current Council financial resources are not adequate to manage pressure from increasing emergency management expectations.

The extremely limited capacity of Towong Shire Council poses an increased risk to our community members as we may not be in a position to appropriately respond in an emergency. We are therefore of the view that the current emergency management framework is not appropriate for small rural Councils.

We have previously expressed our view to the State Government that we are extremely concerned at our ability to deliver on our legislated Emergency Management role, most recently in June 2016. Reviewing the *Councils and emergencies directions paper* has reinforced our view.

⁴ Victorian Auditor-General's Report 2016–17:11, Local Government: 2015–16 Audit Snapshot, November 2016

Suggested regional emergency management model

Emergencies are not confined to local government boundaries and different councils have different capacities to respond in the event of an emergency. The safety of our community is paramount. Given the high risk of adverse outcomes, it is our view that emergency management responsibilities should be held, planned and delivered at a regional level. This could involve the establishment of a regional team of experienced emergency management practitioners that can be supported by council officers where appropriate. This team could:

- lead an all-agencies approach to community-based risk assessment and planning including compliance with relevant legislation and policy at a local level
- prepare and maintain local emergency management plans
- manage local emergency management planning committees
- establish relief centres
- prepare local recovery plans
- establish local recovery centres and conduct local recovery activities
- support agencies to coordinate volunteer efforts after emergencies
- coordinate animal welfare
- assess impacts on essential infrastructure and services
- collect secondary impact-assessment data about the scale and characteristics of the impact on the social, economic, built and natural environments
- survey and determine the occupancy of damaged buildings

This type of model would ensure that there is an adequate number of experienced emergency management personnel that are available and able to respond when an emergency event occurs, reducing the risk to Towong Shire and other communities in small rural Shires.

Comment on specific responsibilities and actions contained in directions paper

We also provide comment on a number of the responsibilities / actions contained within the directions paper in blue font, as detailed in the following table.

No	Responsibility and action	Council comment
2	Prepare and maintain municipal emergency management plans and subplans	This should be the role of the municipal emergency management planning committee which includes representatives from all involved agencies, not local government in isolation.
5	Lead implementation and coordination of specific risk treatments on private and council land in partnership with emergency management agencies, including flood/fire management, maintaining a register of at-risk groups	Towong does not have the capacity to fund or resource this action on private land. Councils should not have responsibility to lead the implementation of risk treatments on private land. There may be a role that Council can support through the Victorian Planning Provisions however this would also be dependent on the availability of staff.

No	Responsibility and action	Council comment
23	Deliver timely, coordinated, accessible and tailored information to the community so it understands relief and recovery assistance mechanisms and processes including through community briefings and meetings.	Towong does not have adequate capacity to fund or resource this responsibility, with one communications officer who works 8 hours per week. The Regional Emergency Management Team should have responsibility for communications. Council can feed any REMT communications through its channels to assist in the broadcast.
27	Provide and staff a recovery centre.	Towong does not have adequate capacity to fund or resource this responsibility.
41	<p>Support response agencies to effectively deliver emergency response services locally</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • after consultation, making council resources, facilities and services available to agencies during response, relief and recovery phases • providing council resources as requested by agencies to secure affected areas • providing a council liaison officer (emergency management liaison officer) to an emergency management team to: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - share knowledge, data and information about community needs and consequences - ensure council is consulted and involved in emergency decisions that will affect the council and community. 	Towong may not always have an appropriately experienced officer available to fulfil the responsibilities of an emergency management liaison officer.
59	Clear blocked drains and local roads including by removing trees on council land and on roads	Towong does not have adequate capacity to fund or resource this responsibility.
62	Coordinate animal welfare within council resources.	Towong does not have adequate capacity to fund or resource this responsibility.
75	Proactively enforce relevant regulations and laws that relate to emergency management	The relevant regulations would need to be more clearly defined to provide feedback.
85	Engage the community in developing and delivering recovery activities including by appointing community development and/or community recovery officers	<p>Towong does not have adequate capacity to fund or resource this responsibility.</p> <p>Towong would require additional funding to appoint a community recovery officer.</p>
86	<p>Support agencies in line with relevant fire legislation and regulations by:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • appointing a municipal fire prevention officer • developing and maintaining a municipal fire prevention plan • identifying, designating, signing, maintaining and annually reviewing bushfire safer places and their plans, and reporting back annually to the CFA • issuing permits to burn • taking all practicable steps (including with planned burning) to prevent the occurrence 	Some of these actions may be better placed with other authorities. For example the regional water authority should have responsibility for providing firer hydrants and installing and maintaining fire plugs connected to its infrastructure.

No	Responsibility and action	Council comment
	<p>and spread of fires and minimise their danger on land that council manages or is responsible for</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • providing pillar fire hydrants in reticulated areas when the CFA issues written notice to do so • meeting the costs of providing, installing, marking and maintaining all fire plugs in the municipality. 	
94	Initially assess impacts on essential infrastructure and services.	It is appropriate for Councils to have responsibility for assessing impacts on Council owned and managed essential infrastructure, but not for other infrastructure owned by other government authorities or entities.
104	Coordinate relief agencies and the community to develop local relief plans	Towong does not have adequate capacity to fund or resource this responsibility.
115	Coordinate relief services locally	Towong does not have adequate capacity to fund or resource this responsibility for more than 24 hours.
116	<p>Establish and manage relief centres where appropriate, including:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • register relief centre attendees • coordinate the provision of food, water and materials to affected communities • provide temporary shelter options for displaced local people • coordinate and manage services to meet the physical and psychosocial needs of affected local people. 	<p>Towong does not have adequate capacity to fund or resource the provision of materials to affected communities, provide temporary shelter options for displaced local people or manage services to meet the physical and psychosocial needs of affected local people.</p> <p>The Australian Red Cross has responsibility for the registration of relief centre attendees.</p>
136	Survey and determine the occupancy of damaged buildings.	It is appropriate for Councils to have responsibility for determining the occupancy of Council owned damaged buildings, but Council does not have adequate capacity to fund or resource the determination for other buildings.
140	Coordinate the rebuilding and redevelopment of council and private assets	It is appropriate for Councils to have responsibility for coordinating the rebuilding and redevelopment of Council owned assets, but not for private assets.
141	Restore council-owned assets, prioritising business operations and commercial or community facilities essential for community wellbeing or recovery activities	Towong has access to limited resources and may not have adequate capacity to fund or resource this responsibility. In addition, the required expertise may not be available when emergency damage occurs across a region and there is high demand for experienced contractors (for example flood damage)

No	Responsibility and action	Council comment
142	Coordinate clean-up activities including the disposal of dead animals.	Towong does not have adequate capacity to resource this responsibility.

Conclusion

In conclusion, our Council has extremely limited resources (both financial and human) and as a result **we do not have the capacity** to meet the current expectations of the State Government and the community. At the present time we are very concerned that we will not be able to adequately support our community in an emergency and the proposed additional responsibilities make our situation even more perilous.

We believe that a one size fits all approach to emergency management will not effectively manage the risk exposure to small rural communities. We support a regional model that is better placed to manage this risk.

We reiterate our request of June 2016 to meet with you to discuss our concerns and to provide you with a greater understanding of the risk exposure to our community.