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# EMERGENCY VOLUNTEERING 2030: VIEWS FROM LOCAL GOVERNMENT MANAGERS

Environmental Scan Report No. 2

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## END USER STATEMENT

**Melissa Pexton**, *Western Australian Local Government Association*

Local Governments are prescribed formal responsibilities under emergency management legislation and as the closest level of government to our communities, are often called upon to fulfil informal roles to meet the expectations of affected communities. They are highly attuned to the spirit and social capital which exists within a community, often evidenced by the participation of volunteers before, during and after an emergency. This important research highlights the attributes of Local Governments as a critical partner alongside traditional EM partners as they are experiencing first-hand the shifts and changes occurring throughout communities in Australia.

Not only are Local Governments reliant on volunteers as an important addition, particularly in regional and remote communities, to provide critical emergency services, they offer perspectives on the sector which can inform future opportunities to meet the growing challenges of the volunteering sector. The insights contained within this report, coupled with ongoing Local Government representation and involvement in this important conversation will assist all stakeholders in this sector who subscribe to the emergency management principle of a 'shared responsibility'.

## KEY MESSAGES

- This report presents views on the future of emergency volunteering from local government and local government association managers across Australia that have recent experience with this volunteering.
- In this report, emergency volunteering means all types of volunteering that supports communities before, during and after a disaster or emergency, regardless of its particular organisational affiliation, or lack thereof. It includes formal volunteers affiliated with volunteer-based emergency management organisations (EMOs) as well as the diverse and growing types of formal and informal volunteering that supports communities before, during and after a disaster but is not affiliated with an EMO.
- The landscape of emergency volunteering is characterised by far-reaching change, converging challenges and emerging new opportunities. A key concern today is how the changing landscape is putting pressure on the long-term sustainability of Australia's formal emergency management volunteer capacity. However, the changing landscape also opens doors onto new and innovative ways for organisations to enable and enhance the value of volunteering for communities.
- Local government managers clearly see a need for change in the emergency management (EM) sector with respect to volunteering and volunteer management, and the councils represented in these interviews are trialling and developing new management approaches in response.
- These interviews flag a looming need to examine how resourcing and funding options and restrictions may impact on the ability of the EM sector to adapt to the changing landscape of volunteering.
- Many of the things that local government managers see as necessary to move the sector towards a preferred future for emergency volunteering are beyond the control of a single organisation to deliver. Certainly, many are beyond the reach of an individual council. They will require collaborative, and boundary-spanning approaches involving organisations within and beyond the EM sector.
- Future strategic planning for volunteering in the EM sector will benefit from strong representation from local government stakeholders in order to build an effective, enabling environment for local level volunteering and volunteer coordination into the future.
- This report is one of a series of Environmental Scan reports being prepared through the *Emergency volunteering 2030: Adapting the sector* project to capture diverse views of the current and emerging landscape of emergency volunteering. The reports will be used to develop alternative future scenarios for emergency volunteering to inform today's decision-making.

# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

## CONTEXT

Volunteers are critical to Australia's emergency management capability and capacity. In terms of numbers, recent estimates refer to over 250,000 fire, ambulance and emergency service volunteers across Australia. This figure swells into the vicinity of 500,000 with the addition of volunteers with non-government relief and recovery organisations that provide vital support to communities when an emergency event occurs. This formal volunteer capacity sits alongside a significant, but far less visible, capacity to help people before, during and after disasters that rests with informal, emergent, and 'unaffiliated' volunteers. The economic and social value of this combined voluntary effort to Australian communities is immense and, to date, largely immeasurable.

The modern landscape of emergency volunteering is characterised by far-reaching change, converging challenges and emerging new opportunities. A key concern within the emergency management (EM) sector today is how the changing landscape is putting pressure on the long-term sustainability of Australia's formal emergency management volunteer capacity. However, the changing landscape also opens doors onto new and innovative ways to enable and enhance the value of volunteering for communities before, during and after emergencies. Some EMOs are responding to the changing landscape with new volunteer strategies, models and management practices. Yet the pace of change across the sector overall has been slow and the need for organisations and the sector to identify and enact strategies to adapt to the changing landscape is clearly evident and becoming ever more imperative.

Local government has an important and expanding role in emergency management and can be involved with emergency volunteering in many ways. With the on-going focus in Australian disaster policy on building community resilience, the involvement of local governments with emergency volunteering is likely to increase into the future.

This report presents results of exploratory interviews with 17 local government and local government association managers from across the states of Australia who have recent experience in planning for, managing, or engaging with volunteers in the context of emergency preparedness, response, relief or recovery. The purpose of the interviews was to find out more about local government in relation to emergency volunteering and to explore managers' ideas about changes in this volunteering that have occurred in the past and are occurring now; and about their visions for a preferred future for volunteering in the EM sector.

The interviews were conducted by RMIT University researchers as part of a research project for the Bushfire and Natural Hazards Cooperative Research Centre called *Emergency volunteering 2030: Adapting the sector*. The project aims to support the EM sector to adapt to the changing landscape of emergency volunteering. This report is one of a series of Environmental Scan reports being prepared through the *Adapting the sector* project that will capture diverse views of the current and emerging landscape of emergency



volunteering. The reports will be synthesised and presented to an expert panel that will assist researchers to develop alternative future scenarios for emergency volunteering to inform today's decision-making.

## IMPLICATIONS

The findings in this report have a range of implications for considering the future of emergency volunteering and the sector's capacity to adapt to the changing landscape.

**First**, local government managers clearly see the need for change in the EM sector with respect to volunteering and volunteer management, and the councils represented in these interviews are trialling and developing new management approaches in response. As one interviewee put it, in the future "it can't look like it does now."

**Second**, local government efforts to respond to the changing landscape, and build capacity in volunteer management and engagement are curtailed by resource restrictions. Interviewees indicated that it was particularly difficult to access funds for proactive planning and preparedness activities, including planning for unaffiliated emergency volunteers at local levels, particularly spontaneous volunteers.

**Third**, following on from this, these interviews flag a looming need to examine resourcing and funding options and restrictions across the EM sector, and to consider how these may impact on the sector's ability to adapt to the changing landscape of volunteering. A key trend described by interviewees is increased responsibilities being imposed on local governments by state governments without corresponding increases in funding, which further restricts councils' ability to be proactive in this area.

**Fourth**, many of the things that local government managers see as necessary to move the sector towards a preferred future for emergency volunteering are beyond the control of a single organisation to deliver. Certainly, many are beyond the reach of an individual council. In recognition of this, interviewees stressed the importance of arrangements that 'spread the load' and share resources, experience and knowledge across council areas. They also valued existing collaborations with other EMOs and gave considerable weight to the importance of improving governance arrangements at state and national levels.

**Fifth** and finally, it is crucial that local governments' experiences, needs, and perspectives are included in strategies for adapting the EM sector to the future of volunteering. Amongst other reasons, they are the level of government that is likely to engage most closely with the growing body of 'unaffiliated' formal and informal emergency volunteers in preparedness, response and relief/recovery into the future. Future strategic planning for emergency volunteering will benefit from strong representation from local government stakeholders in order to build an effective, enabling environment for local level volunteering and volunteer coordination into the future.



## WHAT VOLUNTEERING ISSUES IS THE SECTOR CURRENTLY FACING?

Local government managers raised a range of emergency volunteering issues currently faced by their councils:

- **Funding** – A lack of sure federal and state government funds.
- **Changing nature of volunteering** – Dealing with the impacts on volunteer-based services from changes in way people volunteer and the rise of spontaneous volunteering.
- **Sporadic nature of events at local levels** – The sporadic nature of natural hazard events, which can make it difficult to plan for and keep staff and volunteers motivated, trained and ready.
- **Loss of expertise** – High staff and volunteer turn-over, leading to a lack of experienced personnel.
- **Climate change** – Planning for the future impacts of climate change.
- **Social media** – Addressing the impacts and role of social media in the way people seek information about disasters and volunteering.
- **Rural and remote challenges** – All these issues are felt more strongly in rural and remote areas.

## WHAT NEEDS TO HAPPEN TO MOVE TOWARDS A PREFERRED FUTURE FOR EMERGENCY VOLUNTEERING?

Local government managers identified priority actions in three main areas:

- **Funding and investment in volunteering infrastructure** – On-going investment in the provision of a supportive and enabling infrastructure for volunteering, such as state-wide data-bases. / More funding to be made available before an event occurs, in order that councils and other organisations can invest time and resources in proactive preparation and planning.
- **Improved governance arrangements and ongoing collaborations** – Improve governance structures around emergency volunteering, particularly at the federal and state level, to provide local governments and communities with guidance and consistent processes, which also account for differences across regions. / Build stronger arrangements to share resources, information and experience across local government areas, and share load.
- **Adaptive volunteer models and deeper connections with communities** – Develop more adaptive and responsive volunteer models and management approaches that better meet expectations and needs of the organisation and volunteers. / Cultural and organisational change in the emergency services, and development of less rigid, hierarchical structures for volunteer management. / Greater use of technology to enhance communication and connection with community. / Deeper, ongoing engagement with communities about preparing for disasters and emergency volunteering, including through council involvement in community-based emergency management initiatives.

## CONTEXT

**Volunteers are critical to Australia's emergency management capability and capacity.** In terms of numbers, recent estimates refer to over 250,000 fire, ambulance and emergency service volunteers across Australia [1]. This figure swells into the vicinity of 500,000 with the addition of volunteers with non-government community service organisations that provide vital support to communities when an emergency event occurs [2]. This formal volunteer capacity sits alongside a significant, but far less visible, capacity to help people before, during and after disasters that rests with informal, emergent, and 'unaffiliated' volunteers [3].

**The economic and social value of this combined voluntary effort to Australian communities is immense and, to date, largely immeasurable** [e.g. 4]. Given Australia's geographic size, low population density and natural hazard risk profile; it would not be possible to provide adequate emergency preparedness, response, relief and recovery services to communities across the country without volunteers [1, 2, 5]. It is also likely that the volunteer capacity needed in emergency management into the future will be even greater given predicted increases in the frequency and severity of extreme weather events in Australia due to climate change [6].

**Local government has an important and expanding role in emergency management and can be involved with emergency volunteering in many ways.** As stated in the Australian Emergency Management Arrangements:

*Local governments play a fundamental enabling role in emergency management because of their strong relationship with their local community networks and knowledge of locally available resources [7, p.6].*

While the exact roles of councils in emergency management vary across jurisdictions, they have key responsibilities across a range of areas, including:

- building and promoting disaster resilience,
- risk assessment,
- local emergency planning and preparedness,
- local emergency response capability, including resources for local volunteers,
- local emergency warnings, and
- local resources and arrangements for emergency relief and recovery services [7, p. 6-7].

**Through these responsibilities, local governments can be involved in managing or engaging with a range of emergency volunteers.** Local governments engage with community service volunteers regularly, including directly managing volunteers in council-run services such as Meal on Wheels. They also collaborate with and support emergency service volunteers working in their area, as well as volunteers with NGOs active in relief and recovery. In Western Australia, local governments also administer and train over 19,500 bushfire

volunteers through 566 bushfire brigades [8]. While arrangements vary across jurisdictions, local governments are widely expected “to have processes in place to receive and respond to offers of assistance from spontaneous volunteers” [9, p.21] following a natural hazard event. They are also increasingly involved with volunteers in community-based emergency planning and resilience-building initiatives [e.g. 10]. With the on-going focus in Australian disaster policy on building community resilience [11], the involvement of local governments with emergency volunteering that assists their communities before, during and after disasters is likely to increase into the future.

## THIS REPORT

This report presents results of interviews with 17 local government and local government association managers from across the states of Australia who have recent experience in planning for, managing, or engaging with volunteers in the context of emergency preparedness, response, relief or recovery. The purpose of the interviews was to find out more about local government in relation to emergency volunteering and to explore managers' views about changes in emergency volunteering that have occurred in the past and are occurring now; and about their visions for a preferred future for volunteering in the emergency management (EM) sector.

The interviews were conducted by RMIT University researchers as part of a research project for the Bushfire and Natural Hazards Cooperative Research Centre called *Emergency volunteering 2030: Adapting the sector.*<sup>1</sup> ‘Adapting the sector’ is a foresight and scenario-planning project [12-14]. It will engage with a wide range of stakeholders to develop alternative future volunteering scenarios for the EM sector and consider their implications for today's decision-making. Adapting the sector is the first Australian project to consider the complete landscape of emergency volunteering with a focus on how it is changing and what this might mean for the EM sector going forward.

The project uses Volunteering Australia's 2015 definition of volunteering:

*Volunteering is time willingly given for the common good and without financial gain [15].*

The project uses the term ‘emergency management sector’ as defined in the *Emergency Management Act (Vic) s.3* to mean “all agencies, bodies, Departments and other persons who have a responsibility, function or other role in emergency management”, where ‘emergency management’ refers to the “whole spectrum of emergency needs including prevention, response and recovery” [16].

This report is one of a series of Environmental Scan reports being prepared through the *Adapting the sector* project that capture diverse views of the current and emerging landscape of emergency volunteering. The Environmental scan reports will be synthesised and presented to an expert panel that will assist researchers in developing the alternative scenarios for the future of emergency volunteering.

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<sup>1</sup> See <https://www.bnhcrc.com.au/research/resilience-hazards/3533>

## THE EMERGENCY VOLUNTEERING LANDSCAPE

The concept of 'emergency volunteering' encompasses all volunteering that supports communities before, during and after a disaster or emergency, regardless of its particular organisational affiliation, or lack thereof [3, 17]. It includes the formal volunteering affiliated with volunteer-based emergency management organisations (EMOs) that underpins Australia's formal emergency management capacity. EMOs are the government and non-government organisations that have recognised roles in relevant state and territory, district or municipal emergency management and recovery plans. Emergency volunteering also includes many types of formal and informal volunteering that is unaffiliated with these EMOs, but which also supports communities before, during and after a disaster or emergency.

There are two broad categories of recognised, volunteer-based EMOs. The first, **primary response EMOs**, are the government and non-government organisations that are the primary responders when an emergency or disaster occurs. They include state and territory government fire and emergency service agencies, ambulance services, Surf Life Saving Australia, coast guard and marine rescue, and search and rescue organisations. The second category, **support EMOs**, are organisations that have wider social welfare, community service, humanitarian or conservation missions that also have recognised emergency management responsibilities (particularly relief and recovery) for which they mobilise volunteers when a disaster strikes. This category includes local governments as well as many non-government organisations such as the Australian Red Cross, the Salvation Army, Anglicare, and state and territory volunteering peak bodies, amongst others. Many of these organisations also have important, ongoing roles in preparedness, and building individual and community resilience before, during, and after a disaster strikes.

Emergency volunteering that is unaffiliated with EMOs occurs in a range of organisational contexts that also fall into two main categories. The first category are '**community and extending organisations**' (see [3, p.359-60, 17]). They are large and small community service organisations that do not have formal emergency management responsibilities but which build individual and community resilience before, during and after a disaster strikes [18], and which may also 'extend' their activities into emergency risk reduction, relief and recovery. Examples include resident and community associations, Neighbourhood Houses, churches, advocacy and support groups, sporting clubs and other interest groups. This category also includes the growing number of community-based and community-led emergency management groups. Businesses and industry groups may also 'extend' activities into relief and recovery through corporate and other employer-supported volunteering, and pro bono services.

The second main category of organisation for unaffiliated emergency volunteering is '**emergent groups**' [3, p.359-60, 17]). These are self-organised groups or networks that form in response to an arising need when a disaster strikes, or a risk develops or is newly recognized. These include, for example, many self-organised, informal responses to disaster by communities ("arguably the most underestimated component of human resources available to disaster

managers" see [19, p.397-8]), as well as emergent and self-organised informal volunteering activity by the wider public that is increasingly digitally-enabled in nature.

## THE ISSUE


**The landscape of emergency volunteering is characterised by far-reaching change, converging challenges and emerging new opportunities** [20]. On one hand, formal emergency management volunteering roles are becoming more demanding and expectations on these volunteers are rising due to mounting government regulation, professionalisation, and an associated increase in administrative and training demands [5, 21, 22]. This has created increasing barriers and disincentives to this volunteering. Meanwhile, the availability of people for this kind of traditional, long-term, high commitment volunteering is declining due to factors such as structural economic change that has increased competition between paid and voluntary work time; and demographic change, particularly an ageing population, urbanisation and declining populations in some rural areas [5, 23-25].

**At the same time, the way people choose to volunteer is also changing.** People increasingly eschew the traditional, formal style of volunteering that is most common within EMOs, choosing instead to engage in alternative forms that are more flexible, more self-directed and cause-driven [26, 27]. These alternatives include virtual, skills-based, spontaneous, informal, and episodic volunteering. There are also a growing number of new emergency volunteer groups, networks and platforms that provide easier, more accessible and more flexible ways for people to help before, during and after disasters compared to the options available with more traditional, established EMOs.

**A key concern within the EM sector today is how the changing landscape is putting pressure on the long-term sustainability of Australia's formal emergency management volunteer capacity.** Concerns about volunteer recruitment and retention have been mounting across the sector since the late 1990s due to factors such as declines in volunteer numbers and turn outs in some areas, rising volunteer turnover, and an ageing volunteer base [2, 21, 23, 25, 28-33]. A 2012 *National Emergency Management Volunteer Action Plan* called it "an issue of national importance that impacts on all levels of government and all Australian communities" [2, p.6].

The changing landscape **also opens doors onto new and innovative ways to enable and enhance the value of volunteering for communities before, during and after emergencies** [20]. VIOs, including volunteer-based EMOs, who can respond effectively and rapidly to the changing landscape, have much to gain. Yet, developing "the capacity to adapt to changing volunteer demographics, motivations and expectations" is a significant on-going challenge [34, p.48], particularly for more traditionally-structured organisations, like many in the EM sector.

**Alongside this changing landscape, the emergency management sector's understanding of what emergency volunteering looks like and where it takes place is expanding to incorporate a wider range of volunteers, groups and organisations.** A wider view of the modern day practice of volunteering within



the voluntary sector [35, 36], combined with the influence of resilience and shared responsibility in Australian and international disaster policy [11, 37] have spurred growing recognition of the contribution of volunteers and Volunteer-Involving Organisations (VIOs) that have not been considered a part of the EM sector in the past. The need for emergency management planning and collaboration to be extended to include these wider groups and actors is an idea that is therefore gaining some traction [e.g. 18, 38, 39].

**Some EMOs are responding to the changing landscape with new volunteer strategies, models and management practices** [e.g. 33, 40, 41, p.19]. Amongst local government, a key response has been the development of plans, relationships, and arrangements for spontaneous emergency volunteering [e.g. 42, 43]. Yet the pace of change across the sector overall has been slow, despite a pressing need for change being voiced almost two decades ago [e.g. 25, see also 41]. Thus, the need for organisations and the sector to identify and enact strategies to adapt to the changing landscape is clearly evident and becoming ever more imperative.



## IMPLICATIONS

The findings presented in this report have a range of implications for considering the future of emergency volunteering and the sector's capacity to adapt to the changing landscape.

**First, local government managers clearly see the need for change in the emergency management sector with respect to volunteering and volunteer management, and councils represented in these interviews are responding.** As one interviewee put it, in the future: *"it can't look like it does now."* Local government managers recognise the shifts occurring in the way people are choosing to volunteer and they are concerned about the impacts of the demographic changes occurring in their communities on volunteer-based services. Overall, interviewees recognised a need for EMOs, including councils, to develop more adaptive, responsive and 'smarter' volunteer models and management approaches that can better meet the needs and expectations of both organisations and volunteers at the same time.

Within those councils represented in the interviews, new and more adaptive approaches to volunteer management and engagement are being trialled both in the context of emergencies and across council's full volunteer portfolio. New approaches are building on councils' existing structures for community service volunteering; forging new linkages across council services, particularly between emergency management and community development; developing new capacities in spontaneous volunteer coordination; working with communities to build resilience in preparation for 'when the time comes'; and seeking ways to harness social media and new technology to build deeper connections with communities and engage the existing skills and capacities that already lie within them.

**Second, local government efforts to respond to the changing landscape, and build capacity in volunteer management and engagement are curtailed by resource restrictions.** Interviewees indicated that it was particularly difficult to access funds for proactive planning and preparedness activities, such as in area coordination and engagement of unaffiliated emergency volunteers at local levels, including spontaneous volunteers. This reflects the wider findings of the Productivity Commission's Inquiry into Natural Disaster Funding Arrangements in 2014, which highlighted persistent underinvestment by governments in mitigation and over-investment in post-disaster reconstruction [44]. As one interviewee noted, greater upfront investment to build capacity for volunteer coordination, communication and planning at local levels can enable community resilience and may reduce the extent of post-disaster relief that councils and communities need from governments in future.

**Third, following on from this, these interviews flag a looming need to examine resourcing and funding options and restrictions across the emergency management sector, and to consider how these may impact on the sector's ability to adapt to the changing landscape of volunteering.** A key trend described by interviewees is the increased responsibilities being imposed on local governments by state governments without corresponding increases in funding, which restricts councils' activities in this area. As additional roles and



responsibilities have been tasked to local governments, this has increased the strain on already limited resources, particularly in smaller, rural councils, some of which also have declining rate bases. Further, several interviewees also described the need for greater investment by higher levels of government in volunteering and volunteer management infrastructure more widely. One key example given was the need for secure funding for state-wide resources such as volunteer databases that councils can draw on as needed, like those already developed by some volunteering peak bodies [e.g. 45].

**Fourth, many of the things that local government managers see as necessary to move the sector towards a preferred future for emergency volunteering are beyond the control of a single organisation to deliver. Certainly, many are beyond the reach of an individual council.** The sporadic nature of natural hazard events, and their infrequency for a given local area, makes it difficult for councils to maintain expertise, experience and capacity for coordinating and engaging emergency volunteers over time. Furthermore, when a disaster does strike, local government is in situ and experiences the impacts along with their community. A natural hazard event can therefore disrupt and directly impact staff and/or council's own equipment and resources. In recognition of this, interviewees stressed the importance of further developing arrangements that 'spread the load' across council areas and mobilise human and physical resources and experience from outside the impacted area. They also placed significant value on existing collaboration with other EMOs that enables councils to draw on specialised services and professional expertise for response, relief and recovery.

Building on this, interviewees also gave considerable weight to the importance of improving governance arrangements at state and national levels. Policies and frameworks around volunteering at these levels would provide local governments and local community service organisations much needed guidance, and would establish consistent, documented processes on which they can draw when needed.

**Fifth and finally, it is crucial that local governments' experiences, needs, and perspectives are included in strategies for adapting the emergency management sector to the future of volunteering.** As the *Australian Emergency Management Arrangements* make clear, local governments "play a fundamental enabling role in emergency management because of their strong relationship with their local community networks and knowledge of locally available resources" [7, p.6]. Thus, local governments are not only important partners of (and in Western Australia's also managers of) volunteer-based emergency services. They are also the level of government that is likely to engage most closely with the growing body of 'unaffiliated' formal and informal emergency volunteers in preparedness, response and relief/recovery into the future. Future strategic planning in this area will benefit from strong representation from local government stakeholders in order to build an effective, enabling environment for local level volunteering and volunteer coordination into the future.

## THE INTERVIEWS

This report presents the findings from 11 exploratory interviews with 17 local government representatives:

- Six participants from Victoria;
- Three from Queensland;
- Two each from New South Wales, South Australia, and Western Australia; and
- One participant from Tasmania.

Interviewees in the Northern Territory were invited, but no interviews were secured during the fieldwork period, and the ACT does not have local governments. We sought interviewees from local government areas that had experienced a major disaster within the last five years, or who were actively planning for future emergency volunteering. The roles that interviewees held within their councils covered emergency management, volunteer coordination and community development.

The interview guide followed a set of questions or discussion points and this was sent to participants prior to the interview (see Appendix – generic interview guide). The semi-structured interview approach allows for the emergence of new ideas and clarification of key concepts related to the research. The interviews were conducted via the telephone and were audio-recorded, transcribed, and returned to each participant for review. The findings presented in this report are the broad themes and ideas that emerged from across the interviews. We used QSR NVivo 11 software to assist in the analysis of the data. The qualitative analysis is a continuous iterative process [46, p.13]. NVivo does not interpret any data; the important feature of the software is the ability to manage a great volume of data, the transcripts. Passages of the transcripts are placed into topics [47, p.96] and by grouping the data in a semblance of order allows for interpretations. The categories arise from the data and this means unanticipated issues can emerge [48, p.88].

Interviewees' comments/quotes used in this report are indicated by a unique ID number to de-identify participants. The quotes, unless otherwise stated, reflect most interviewees' experiences. As this research is exploratory in nature, findings should not be interpreted as representative of local government more widely, but as insights from local government managers that have recent experience with emergency volunteering.

## FINDINGS

An important backdrop to understanding local government manager views on, and experiences with, emergency volunteering is the activities and functions of their councils and what can happen to councils when their local area is impacted by a disaster, such as a bushfire, flood, storm or cyclone. When a disaster hits their region, local government is in situ and experiences the impacts along with their community. They are the closest level of government to community and have much insight into how community with council can prepare, respond and recover from a disastrous event.

### WHAT HAS CHANGED IN THE EMERGENCY VOLUNTEERING LANDSCAPE OVER THE LAST 5-10 YEARS?

#### Summary

- State governments have placed greater responsibility on councils but have not necessarily provided greater funds to support additional tasks.
- Long-term volunteering has declined and volunteer-based emergency management organisations as well as councils have increasingly struggled to maintain volunteer-based services, particularly in rural and remote areas.
- Demographic changes have occurred in communities, such as rural decline and depopulation, urbanisation, growing diversity, and increased mobility. This has changed the social settings within which volunteering takes place.
- There has been a rise in spontaneous volunteering, and some councils have introduced proactive plans and arrangements for spontaneous volunteer coordination in response.
- Some councils have introduced improvements and changes in volunteer management, particularly an increase in on-line provision of training for volunteers. However, challenges and limitations of online training were also noted.

Many interviewees talked about increased demands from state governments on councils in the emergency management space, without greater funds necessarily being made available to councils to support additional tasks. For example, one interviewee described how their council now needs to manage the pets of people who are forced to evacuate during an event, which wasn't a role it had in the past:

*Council seem to be getting responsibility for managing a few more issues, for instance, pets in Evac Centres, which is a large responsibility and quite an issue ... a lot of research shows that people won't leave their home if they can't bring their pets with them [LG14].*

As additional roles and responsibilities are tasked to local government, this can increase the strain on their limited resources:

*That is my worry state government pushing things down on us without providing funding [LG2].*

*We always seem to be chasing our tails, because we all have a number of different roles [LG3].*

*Council is just under so much pressure to deliver their day jobs, so it is not their focus during non-disaster time [LG16].*

Interviewees also noted the changes that have occurred in the way people volunteer, with fewer people signing up for long-term roles and ongoing training. For example, in some areas people are more transient because they commute for work, and they are not prepared or able to dedicate as much time to volunteer training as in the past. However, it was suggested that despite this shift, when a community is impacted by disaster, many people come to the fore to help:

*...the on-going time commitment that scares people. I think when there is an identified serious need; then they will come out of the woodwork [LG3].*

Local government managers recognised that because of this, it has become increasingly difficult for volunteer-based EMOs and councils to maintain volunteer numbers in more regional and remote areas. Interviewees identified issues of ageing volunteers and increasing difficulties attracting younger people compared to the past, as well as people being less able or inclined to volunteer for roles which can demand on-going time commitments, particularly in the emergency services:

*Here the local brigades are struggling to get numbers and the SES has just done a big drive because they are having trouble getting volunteers [LG3].*

*The other thing is volunteers are getting older and I think that is across all volunteering areas, whether it is SES or [fire] brigades or St John ambulance. Look at all volunteers and they are ageing [LG10].*

*The [fire service] basically formed from farmers and I guess in the last 20 or 30 years, farm size is increasing and there are less farmers in the area, and the other thing is the farmers are getting old [LG15].*

*I think because of our volunteer numbers diminishing, they are getting older; we need to be able to get younger volunteers in [LG16].*

Across Australia, areas and regions experience different types of hazardous events that can impact urban, rural and remote communities and the various demographic settings adds to the complexities. Interviewees described how communities are changing, some are experiencing rural decline, others urbanisation, and in other areas the population is becoming more diverse. So, the setting in which volunteering takes place is changing:

*I think we need to acknowledge every community is different, so one size doesn't fit all [LG16].*

The rise of spontaneous volunteering was described by interviewees as both a challenge and an opportunity. Following large scale events, hundreds if not thousands of people can respond, such as occurred with the Brisbane floods in 2010/11. According to some interviewees, the 'Brisbane Mud Army' that

emerged in response to these floods is often held up by media and politicians as a positive example of the value of spontaneous volunteering. However, some interviewees noted that behind the scenes the experience was quite different and more fraught than the public image portrays. They described difficulties for the impacted community and agencies in dealing with a mass wave of good intentions, which at times was misdirected and – according to some of the interviewees – may have added to some householders' anguish:

*...from a Brisbane City Council point of view, it was quite nightmarish. People turning up in their best quality thongs rather than safety boots to do work in flooded areas. Going into homes that had no real right of entry. Throwing out things that were precious to people but looked damaged [LG12, NB: interviewee not affiliated with Brisbane City Council].*

Volunteers' enthusiasm to help and the scale of the event meant there were safety and logistical difficulties with the 'Mud Army', which prompted a review of disaster management.

*A catalyst for change in Queensland occurred in 2011 with the major floods [LG12].*

Some councils have responded to the rise of spontaneous volunteering by developing proactive plans and arrangements to coordinate them. This has often happened as a result of experiences with spontaneous volunteers during an event, where processes proved to be inadequate and therefore a need to make changes was recognised:

*A couple of things have happened [after a major event] and that is the engagement of the Relief and Recovery Officer and the Volunteer Co-ordinator, both will be available to support our team of volunteers in the event of an emergency [LG1].*

*We have got our Volunteers in Emergency Plan that looks at how we would deal with volunteers in a larger event [LG3].*

*We have put into our emergency management plan the process, which is to use [the volunteer peak body registration] platform ... so there is an overlap for using our internal staff from a capacity point of view and linking with others [LG5].*

*We went from formal volunteering only or people helping each other, to this mass influx of untrained, unco-ordinated volunteers and now we're backtracking, going "that doesn't work". How do we control this space to make sure it does [LG9]?*

Some councils have also made wider improvements and changes to their volunteer management approaches to respond to the changing ways that people are choosing to engage in volunteering today compared to the past. In particular, they have sought to overcome the requirements of training and the obstacles of distance and remoteness by introducing on-line training courses. However, as one interviewee noted, online training can also isolate individuals and lessen the camaraderie that can be essential for team work, particularly for emergency response teams. Furthermore, on-line learning may

not suit everyone and in some remote areas Internet access issues remain problematic:

*Not everyone has access to internet and some of these old cockeys aren't going to register on-line. ...So, the delivery of training, the understanding the needs of training and thinking about the broader capability hasn't been explained very well or implemented well [LG11].*

*Internet training can achieve things, but I think you end up doing questions from an open book and you don't know how much sinks in. And the other thing is that it takes away the social aspect, instead of having a classroom of people [LG15].*

## WHAT VOLUNTEERING ISSUES IS THE EMERGENCY MANAGEMENT SECTOR CURRENTLY FACING?

### Summary

- Natural hazard events can disrupt and directly impact staff and/or council's own equipment and resources.
- A lack of sure federal and state government funds, particularly in rural areas, means councils can struggle to address human and financial resourcing difficulties for preparation, response and recovery projects.
- Dealing with the impacts on volunteer-based services from changes in way people volunteer and the rise of spontaneous volunteering.
- The sporadic nature of natural hazard events, which can make it difficult to plan for and keep staff and volunteers motivated, trained and ready.
- Planning for the future impacts of climate change, and the potential for emergency management volunteers to get burnt out as a result of more frequent, severe, and lengthy events in future.
- High staff and volunteer turn-over, particularly in rural and remote areas, leading to a lack of experienced personnel.
- Addressing the impacts and role of social media in the way people respond to natural hazard events and seek information about disasters and volunteering.

What happens to councils when a natural hazard event such as a bushfire, flood, storm or cyclone occurs in their local area shape how council is involved with volunteers in a post-disaster context. Local government is the closest level of government to community and has much insight into how its community can prepare, respond and recover from a disastrous event. However, when a disaster hits their region, local government is in situ and experiences the impacts along with their community. A natural hazard event can disrupt and directly impact staff and/or council's own equipment and resources:

*Sometimes I wonder whether local government is the right, I know that we are the closest to the community and we are responsible for relief and recovery, but we have had enough trouble during an event to look after our own stuff [LG3].*



*The burden as a council, we also have our own impact, as a disaster, and therefore you are struggling to bring your own infrastructure back on line quickly. You are hampered by the paperwork involved in seeking that assistance from the State. It is complex and then you also have to deal with recovery [LG17].*

Thus, on one hand local government is there to assist community and lead recovery efforts, but at the same time it can struggle to organise itself.

Most interviewees highlighted inadequate resources to support volunteer programs, particularly for recovery and they described the never-ending battle to secure sufficient funds. Interviewees described a lack of sure federal and state government funds:

*I don't think that the funding covers the cost and I think that is a concern for any in local government [LG16].*

In rural areas with lower populations with a smaller rate-base, councils can struggle to address human and financial resourcing difficulties for preparation, response and recovery projects.

Many interviewees also talked about chaotic situations when spontaneous volunteers respond who are not formally trained by or affiliated with an EMO, and a need for more councils and EMOs in general to put plans in place to address this:

*We had a lot of service clubs and clubs from neighbouring municipalities helping out, people turning up, we say 'they just washed up in the floods ...It was managed in an ad hoc fashion [LG3].*

*It is such an oxymoron – managing spontaneous – because they are spontaneous by nature there is no way you can manage and co-ordinate. ...there is no way to have an integrated approach, but some way [to] have a connection with all of them, is going to be difficult [LG6].*

Harnessing the spontaneous response was seen as an opportunity for more people to assist in recovery. However, some interviewees noted that spontaneous volunteers can have misguided expectations of their involvement, or to lack the skills needed recovery, and this can create risks when the disaster site is hazardous:

*...the skillset of the volunteers might not necessarily be the skillset that we actually need in an emergency situation or in a recovery situation [LG4].*

Volunteers' misguided expectations can also be about a lack of experience or understanding of what is required for recovery after a major disaster, where the clean-up can take weeks, months and sometime years:

*How do we capture people willing to help out, weeks or months after an event not just a couple of days after [LG9]?*

In a somewhat paradoxical way, one of the biggest challenges for councils is dealing with the sporadic nature of natural hazard events. Because of this, it can be difficult to plan for and keep staff and volunteers motivated, trained and ready:



*364 days of the year we don't need to worry about volunteers in an emergency management context, but once every three or four years an event will occur and then we need to think about volunteering in a completely different way [LG13].*

Turnover in staff and volunteers can mean that when the next event occurs, there can be many new people who have not experienced the previous event. A couple of interviewees highlighted the difficulty, particularly in rural and remote areas of dealing with staff turn-over and a lack of experienced personnel:

*You lose a lot of knowledge at the drop of a hat, like the turnover of staff since the floods, so there is not a whole lot of people here who went through it ... because we are a small council and we have got so much to do, and our staff aren't experienced in a lot of areas [LG3].*

Planning today for the future impacts of climate change was also raised as a current issue for councils. Interviewees acknowledged the likelihood of more frequent large-scale events in the future due to climate change and the potential for emergency management volunteers to get burnt out as a result of more frequent, severe, and lengthy events:

*Obviously, we're going to have more and more disasters and the agencies and people like the council; we just don't necessarily have the resources to be able to support the communities [LG4].*

*One of the concerns I have is if we do experience more often and greater emergencies, then there might be a number of communities that will be affected more often. And we will get burn out of volunteers who are called on to respond year after year, so how do we keep people engaged and not burnt out [LG1]?*

One of the current tasks for local government is to keep up-to-date with technology, particularly social media, and cater for a range of ways of communicating with their community. Some interviewees highlighted the need for a proactive approach to broadcast accurate information and minimise erroneous reporting, particularly during and after a disaster:

*As part of the recovery we funded a consultancy to set up a social media platform and through Twitter and through Facebook to connect people with that storm clean up opportunity [LG6].*

*It's also a real concern that the management of social media means that you're not properly moderated and mediated; misinformation can quite easily be put out. But it is a fact of life and it's something that the disaster space has to start to embrace and demonstrate how they're going to deliver on it [LG12].*

## WHAT IS HAPPENING TO ADDRESS THESE ISSUES?

### Summary

The councils represented in these interviews are planning and trialling new volunteer management options to better deal with future disaster events, these include:

- Engaging council's 'regular', community service volunteers to help during and after an emergency event.
- Training non-emergency management council staff as 'volunteers' to assist during and after an event to increase the workforce capability.
- Working with communities to build resilience in preparation for 'when the time comes'.
- Reviewing community development processes and applying them to emergency management.

The incidents of major disasters and the forecast of more frequent and larger-scale events because of climate change are heralding change. Local governments are exploring new approaches and seeking more funding to build their volunteer coordination and capacity because they recognise the better prepared they are to coordinate and engage volunteer contributions, the better they can support their communities to recover. In line with this, several interviewees talked about current initiatives being undertaken to plan and trial new volunteer management options to better deal with future events.

One of these options is engaging council's 'regular', community service volunteers to help during and after an emergency event. Many local governments host a range of community services supported by volunteers and interviewees described the structures in place to manage these programs. Some of the larger councils can have hundreds of volunteers, which provide valuable support for services such as libraries and Meals on Wheels, and these volunteers are predominantly involved in community service programs. This pool of volunteers who are already supporting community services could be called upon to assist during and after an emergency:

*We have quite a lot of established processes to deal with volunteers, such as doing Police Checks, doing interviews, referee checks, but not in an emergency setting, that's with our on-going volunteers. There's a cross council working group. We had an audit, so we have been looking and continually improving our internal processes for dealing with other volunteers [in an emergency] [LG5].*

Some councils are therefore beginning to explore options for engaging volunteers from across services, as it is not an automatic process or presumption that 'regular volunteers' will or can step into emergency volunteering. 'Regular volunteers' are already inducted, checked and can be ready to go more quickly when there is an emergency compared to new volunteers. There are many roles that can be adapted, such as, administration, support in relief centres, food handling and transport tasks. Although, volunteer managers within council are mindful not to over-burden their volunteers and recognise some volunteers may not be able, physically or emotionally, to undertake roles during and after a disaster:

*Local government is the closest level of government to the community... they do also have responsibility for a raft of volunteers and it may not be their core function to support EM volunteers, [but] they certainly have a lot of experience in utilising volunteers to provide services to their community [LG11].*

*We drew upon our existing pool of volunteers to help us with things such as helping out at community meetings, helping out with excursions, through to manning our community centre, which was used as a recovery centre at the time. Keep in mind, we did not push that out to areas that were not our areas of expertise, so for things like providing psychological first aid, we were relying on the Red Cross and their volunteers [LG13].*

A few interviewees described how traditionally there has been a reliance on one branch of council for disaster response and recovery, but now they have developed a framework to train and involve a broader cross-section of staff. This is to balance demands across the organisation and ensure continued business and service delivery. This also provides opportunity for non-emergency management staff to develop skills and increase the council's workforce capability:

*We utilise a hybrid volunteer approach, the model is specific to disaster management...staff self-nominate, and they do a whole series of training. ... We rely heavily on these people [LG 8].*

These 'volunteers' from their wider workforce can be trained to operate at the recovery centre after a disaster. This means the council is primed to respond with the confidence they have a well-trained team of 'volunteers'. In this example, interviewees described how, when a major cyclone hit their area, the response and recovery for the council and community was vastly improved using this approach.

At the same time some councils are working with communities to build resilience in preparation for 'when the time comes':

*If you've got strong community ties and community are engaged in emergency management and becoming resilient, then they are more likely to volunteer when the time comes or where they think there is a need [LG10].*

## WHAT DOES A PREFERRED FUTURE FOR EMERGENCY VOLUNTEERING LOOK LIKE?

### Summary

- An enabling environment for volunteering exists, including governance arrangements, and policies and guidance for organisations. There is investment in developing and maintaining technological enablers like state-wide databases of potential volunteers and their skillsets.
- Local governments and other local organisations are sufficiently funded for volunteer management and engagement across preparation, response and recovery.
- Registration and deployment of spontaneous volunteers is simple and straightforward. It is easy for people to register their interest in volunteering, and they can be quickly tasked to support emergency activities.
- There is consistent messaging across the state about volunteer involvement.
- Information-sharing occurs at a local level through engagement, education, and awareness programs about hazards and how local people can prepare and be involved.
- Councils and other volunteer-based EMOs are flexible and adaptive in working with volunteers and engaging the existing skills and capacities that already lie within communities.

Most interviewees found this question difficult to answer. They more often described what needs to happen, rather than envisioned a new horizon.

Interviewees described enablers, like state-wide databases and technology that have sophisticated operating systems as important features in a preferred future for emergency volunteering. Databases would have up-to-date information about volunteers; team leaders; and managers of volunteers; who can be quickly tasked to support impacted communities to speed up recovery. The registration and deployment of volunteers would be a simple and straightforward process and it would be easy for people to participate in volunteering and for organisations to capture their interest:

*...digital platform, so the sharing and making an offer of help on-line and having it matched with the need, that is a great opportunity. I am excited about that, because that aligns people helping out themselves [LG6].*

*If we could utilise that data and that pre-registration better in peacetime, then we would be more prepared to respond when the time came to utilise them [LG9].*

Information-sharing at a local level would be widespread and an important avenue to build self-reliance within a community, just as telephone-trees once did (and continue to do in some areas). It would also enable volunteers from outside the area to be aligned to tasks and locally directed to help:

*I think the on-line resource sharing forums will be the way of the future ...that allows groups to share information about the work they are doing, which allows them to support each other, things like plans and processes and procedures they would use to activate in a recovery space after an event [LG7].*

A key feature in the preferred future painted by local government managers was that local governments would be sufficiently funded to develop and support volunteer programs around preparation, response and recovery. They would have the mechanisms to support and enable volunteering and provide community education and engagement programs to raise awareness about hazards and how local people can prepare and be involved:

*Consistent messaging across the state about what volunteering in an emergency looks like, some of the functions or the roles might be [LG3].*

*Following on that engagement we have ended up with a great data base of people who are really actively interested and now a bit trained up and engaged in this space [emergency management] [LG7].*

*When it comes to volunteers by 2030, I would like to see a much more organised structure around volunteers and plans locally and regionally, and to make better use of the potential of the so-called spontaneous volunteers [LG17].*

Further, councils and other volunteer-based EMOs would be flexible and adaptive in working with volunteers and engaging the existing skills and capacities that already lie within communities:

*I have a very strong belief that because these things impact the community, we probably need to start from that point, not the other way around. When we look forward as hard as it is to know, there has got to be that flexibility and adaptability [LG11].*

*Volunteering in general can provide really good surge capacity to support recovery in communities. If we are talking a large-scale disaster, that is where it will come into the fore and that is where the state's emergency management sector hopefully understands it, and the challenge is being able to tap into and activate the volunteers when needed [LG6].*

## WHAT NEEDS TO HAPPEN TO MOVE TOWARDS THIS FUTURE?

### Summary

#### *Funding and investment in volunteering infrastructure*

- On-going investment in the provision of a supportive and enabling infrastructure for volunteering, such as state-wide data-bases.
- More funding to be made available before an event occurs, in order that councils and other organisations can invest time and resources in proactive preparation and planning.
- Volunteer-based EMOs recognise the value of good volunteer management and employ highly competent professional staff to oversee volunteer programs

#### *Improved governance arrangements and on-going collaboration*

- Improve governance structures around emergency volunteering, particularly at the federal and state level, to provide local governments and communities with guidance and consistent processes, which also account for differences across regions.
- Develop structures to learn from past events, with information documented, training passed on and more experienced people sharing their knowledge and skills with others.
- Build stronger arrangements to share resources, information and experience across local government areas, and share load.
- Deeper collaboration between council's community development and emergency management teams to broaden approaches to working with volunteers and communities.
- Continue and strengthen existing collaborations between councils and other EMOs.

#### *Adaptive volunteer models and connections with communities*

- Develop more adaptive and responsive volunteer models and management approaches that better meet expectations and needs of the organisation and volunteers.
- Cultural and organisational change in the emergency services, and development of less rigid, hierarchical structures for volunteer management.
- Greater use of technology to enhance communication and connection with community.
- Deeper, on-going engagement with communities about preparing for disasters and emergency volunteering, including through council involvement in community-based emergency management initiatives.

It was evident from interviewees' comments and ideas about volunteer management that local governments are considering a range of ways to best adapt to the challenges of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. As one interviewee succinctly put it:

*It can't look [in the future] like it looks at the moment [LG10].*

Overall, interviewees' suggestions for what needs to be done across the sector to move towards a preferred future fell into three main areas: funding and investment in volunteering infrastructure; improved governance arrangements and on-going collaboration; adaptive volunteer models and connections with communities.

## Funding and investment in volunteering infrastructure

Overall, interviewees communicated a need for on-going investment in the provision of a supportive and enabling infrastructure for volunteering such as state-wide data-bases. These can enable engagement, recruitment, and preparation of volunteers from across regions to support local government and communities. Most interviewees emphasised the importance of on-going funding for programs developed by their state's volunteer peak body that assist councils to manage and coordinate spontaneous volunteers:

*The other challenge we have is to see the surety of the funding for the state-wide programmes such as [the volunteering peak body's spontaneous volunteer registration platform] and [support services for managing spontaneous volunteers], because it is fundamental to our processes [LG1].*

*One thing is the political, the lack of funding for volunteer support organisations like [our volunteering peak body], uncertain funding [LG5].*

Interviewees also highlighted the need for more funding to be made available before an event occurs, in order that councils and other organisations can invest time and resources in proactive preparation and planning. However, many interviewees described the reluctance of higher levels of government to invest in preparation for an unknown event. In addition, they explained that investment in preparation does not provide the same public attention or accolades as it does in a highly publicised post-disaster setting:

*We tend not to place a lot of importance on it until the disaster hits, and then it's completely different [LG4].*

*It's like selling insurance; no one wants to buy insurance until the day before it is going to happen. Meanwhile emergency services it's the same, it is very hard to get funding [LG15].*

*I think the biggest barrier is expense, is finance. It's the understanding politicians and organisations do not like spending money on things that they cannot be assured are going to happen. The big problem you've always got in preparing for a disaster event, preparing for, in some cases, the unlikely, is it doesn't provide a ribbon-cutting ceremony [LG12].*

A few interviewees emphasised that more attention is needed on prevention and preparedness across the emergency management and volunteer sectors in general:

*It needs to be acknowledged the community engagement team did a lot of work prior to the event and people knew who they were, rather than seeing and hearing from us for the first time after a devastating event [LG8].*

*I think the emergency management sector, the volunteer sector, needs to be much more aware of its capacity to assist in the prevention, preparedness and the building of resilience of community rather than waiting for an event to happen. Much more work in the space of the preparedness of local areas than simply waiting for local areas to fall over [LG12].*



One interviewee emphasised that through government support and recognition of the value of volunteer management and preparation and planning for volunteer involvement at the local level, this in-turn can foster community self-reliance and resilience:

*There is a lot more understanding about community resilience, so if the State and the Feds are keen to see that strengthened, then they also need to acknowledge local government and provide assistance and resources to do that. I think if we can do it better at our level [preparation and planning], then the State and Feds coffers would not be needed so deeply, but they have got to be able to fund it [LG17].*

Related to this, several interviewees acknowledged the critical role volunteer managers play and the need for volunteer-based EMOs to recognise this and employ highly competent professional staff to oversee volunteer programs:

*I think looking forward it is absolutely crucial that any volunteer reliant organisation has really high quality paid professional staff overseeing it, because at the end of the day they are the ones going to be doing the liaison between the different agencies and they have a level of responsibility to do that and the professionalism that comes with what you would expect them to be able to translate the agreed activities of that agency down to their volunteer base [LG13].*

### **Improved governance arrangements and ongoing collaborations**

Improved governance structures, particularly at the state level, were also considered by many as essential for moving towards the preferred future. Policies and frameworks around volunteering at all levels would provide local governments much needed guidance and consistent, documented processes to draw on:

*Everything we do in the disaster management space is about having a co-ordinated approach for the benefit of the community and we can make recovery as quick as possible for people to get them back to the new normal[LG8].*

This also points to scale issues. As most local governments experience natural hazard events infrequently, they are not necessarily able to maintain high levels of expertise and capacity in this area within council:

*It is important to ensure volunteer processes are embedded into our emergency management plan and state-wide processes as well, so we have a co-ordinated approach [LG1].*

*From a council perspective we are dealing with it so infrequently, that we are never going to be on top of it all of the time, so the more frameworks and guidance that can be there that we can call upon in the event, the better [LG13].*

At the same time, differences across regions and states need to be considered:

*...try to provide a system that is better than just a one size... and that's really difficult when you've got [so many] different local governments around the state [LG12].*

High turn-over of council staff, particularly in rural and remote areas can exacerbate scale issues and mean that knowledge and skills are not retained within councils over time. Some interviewees indicated that it is imperative to learn from past events, with information documented, training passed on and more experienced people sharing their knowledge and skills with others:

*And what has been introduced in the last few years is a CMG, consequent management guide; I call them 'cheat sheets'. They are there at the time of the disaster; it is a very practical overview document that says this is what is going to happen during this particular event. So, we have one for floods and one for bushfires, which will give you a snapshot. Because we said before we don't have disasters that often and people change and so for new officers, "here is what happens in this part of the world and these are the plans we have place" [LG16].*

The impact of a disaster on the community and on the council's ability to respond was outlined by many of the interviewees. The idea to do more to 'spread the load' across councils was mentioned by several interviewees, to draw upon human and physical resources from outside the impacted area. For example, other councils could provide additional staff. This was seen as an option, but one that interviewees felt will need further consideration with regard to financial arrangements:

*You have neighbouring shires, who are still at risk, they are the closest but don't want to give up resources. So, we were working through change management process. As always, the money issues come up. That is something we are grappling with. Everyone has the good will and good nature to want to assist and help, but it often translates back to how we make it happen [LG11].*

In addition, interviewees talked about the importance of continuing and strengthening existing collaborations with other EMOs, which draw on the benefits of specialised services and the professionalism required to manage response, relief and recovery:

*We had a terrific relationship with the Red Cross and what was particularly helpful is they had a terrific band of well-trained volunteers, and they had paid professional staff who were overseeing the programmes and were providing excellent leadership and support to those volunteers [LG13].*

*I think we work really well with the other agencies, certainly the SES we have a great relationship with them and all of the agencies really. We work with them pre-disaster and during response [LG14].*

Many interviewees also talked about the need for the EM sector to draw upon different perspectives and involve different people. At the council level, this can involve deeper collaboration between council's community development and emergency management teams to broaden approaches to working with volunteers and communities in preparation, response and recovery:

*It's funny, out of a crisis you find a connection and a great collaboration ...a great opportunity to connect up and she [Community Development] has brought that volunteering mind-set that we from an emergency management sector just don't have, so that insight is really enabling for us [LG6].*

*Local government it is about doing right by your community and the way that they do that is through a community development lens. That is a bit of a game changer for the emergency management sector if we were to harness that a lot more and tap into that, because those community development people get it. They understand the people connections as opposed to the command-and-control environment and the traditional environment of the emergency management organisations [LG11].*

### **Adaptive volunteer models and deeper connections with communities**

The different ways people volunteer was also seen by some as an opportunity for councils to connect with communities in new ways and open opportunities for skilled people within the community to engage in volunteering through short, fixed term engagements. This changing landscape of volunteering means organisations such as councils must, as one interviewee described, 'get a little smarter' in becoming more adaptive and responsive in serving both the needs of the organisation and the volunteers:

*It is just getting volunteers for the programs we are already running and the functions that require volunteers. We are just trying to get a little smarter about how we attract them and how we acknowledge them [LG3].*

*We need to come up with more flexible ways to embrace volunteers, keep them engaged [LG9].*

*I have noticed over time volunteers have changed. Now most volunteers have expectations on what they want to do ...And that is not necessarily a negative thing. It poses a challenge and it just means we have to be a bit clearer around the opportunities that we have available and therefore our expectations change [LG13].*

Many interviewees pointed to the need for cultural and organisational change in the emergency services to adapt to the changing ways that people engage in volunteering compared to the past. A need for less rigid and hierarchical structures for volunteer management was recognised:

*I think the model of emergency management volunteers has been sign up and sign up for life. The requirements in a traditional sense are quite onerous really... So how does the emergency management sector grapple with that given that it is a very structured type regime and realising we have to bend and we have to bend an awful lot if we want to attract volunteers [LG11].*

*So, in becoming more professional you can turn it into a little army and, of course, some people don't relate to that type of discipline and they would rather a social network rather than be a as a soldier if you like [LG15].*

Greater use of technology to enhance communication and connection with community was considered essential by many, and one interviewee described the use of devices for staff to better respond and work within the community:

*Mobility is probably one of the big focuses for our organisation at the moment. We are focusing on access to our core systems and information to be available on devices so that our workforce can manage report and respond to the community needs out in the field [LG4].*

A few interviewees described the example of social media use in the Dunalley bushfires in Tasmania in 2013 and how social media can provide a mechanism to assist, without the risk of entering the site:

*Yes, Mel Irons was seeing what was happening and she started doing something. She never actually left her house to do it, but she was on social media, I think is the face of volunteering. And because it is using technology and social media is a lot smarter than what we do at the moment [LG10].*

Some interviewees described the digital world of Apps and social media as a way that might attract young people to volunteer. Fast-changing and ever-improving technology was recognised as something that will continue to assist the EM sector. At the same time, it is a challenge to keep abreast of developments in technology and particularly social media.

Engaging in an on-going way with community about preparing for disasters and emergency volunteering, including through council involvement in community-based emergency management initiatives, was also considered key. At the same time, some recognised that this on-going engagement can also provide training and skills that are applicable for every-day situations beyond emergencies, for example skills in psychological first aid:

*...and [we] engaged with the community-based emergency management groups and volunteers who are leaders in the community as well. So, we have continued on that work in meaningful ways [LG7].*

*Some dialogue with them throughout the year so that when an event occurs, everyone's expectations about what that group will do is clear and what they won't do and where the relationships are formed [LG13].*

## CONCLUSION

Local government is in situ and the closest level of government to community, it is the site of the disaster. On one hand it is there to assist community, but at the same time can struggle to function when the scale of the disaster can disrupt and directly impact staff and/or council's equipment and resources and dramatically curtail recovery.

In a preferred future, local governments would be sufficiently funded to develop programs around preparation, response and recovery and keep pace with social and technological changes. There would be mechanisms like state-wide databases to support and enable volunteering and provide community engagement programs to raise awareness about hazards and how people can prepare and be involved. Importantly, governance structures, policies and frameworks at the national and state level were considered essential to provide local governments guidance and establish consistent processes. Moreover, funding for the recovery process would be reviewed and local governments and communities would have confidence in the surety of funding in the emergency management space.

All interviewees have experienced a significant disaster in their community within the last five years. The interviews provided an opportunity for them to reflect and talk about volunteer management and changes that have occurred, are occurring and need to happen for disaster preparation, response and recovery to progress toward the future. And in the words of Deepak Chopra "*All great change is preceded by chaos*"<sup>2</sup>: a sentiment with which many of the interviewees would concur.

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<sup>2</sup> Source: [https://www.huffingtonpost.com/irene-tanner/life-changes\\_b\\_1614221.html](https://www.huffingtonpost.com/irene-tanner/life-changes_b_1614221.html)  
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## APPENDIX – GENERIC INTERVIEW GUIDE

1. Describe your organisation and how it works in an emergency or large-scale event. Briefly outline the strategies and programs for volunteer support and development and how they are structured in your organisation
2. What are the key volunteering issues that your organisation is currently tackling? How is it doing this? (e.g. strategies, programs, projects, training, partnerships?)
3. Thinking back over the last 5 years or so, what - if anything - has changed in the volunteering issue your organisation is tackling? Can you tell me why this change has happened?
4. What do you think the emergency management sector needs to look like by 2030 with regard to volunteering?
5. What are the key issues that the sector will need to deal with over the next ten years to make this happen? (E.g. challenges, trends, opportunities, uncertainties)
6. Are there any other challenges, trends, changes, uncertainties that the emergency management sector needs to be mindful of in relation to volunteering in the future? (Consider social, technical, economic, environmental, political).