

# Macedon Ranges youth experiences in emergency management planning

Angus Hocking (Gisborne Secondary School), Bethany Taylor (Kyneton Secondary School), and Kylie Tupek (Save the Children) explain why perspectives of younger people are valuable in emergency management planning.

## Background

Prior to the 2009 Victorian bushfires, the Macedon Ranges Shire, like many municipalities across Victoria, did not actively engage young people and children in its emergency management planning or frameworks. Emergency management and recovery plans for the municipality did not separately identify unique needs and requirements of young people, but rather, identified them as part of the broader needs of all those affected in an emergency. As a result, young people have had little engagement with emergency management planning within the Shire, as well as little education or input into the issues that may affect them during an emergency.

In 2012, the Macedon Ranges Shire Youth Service Development Unit and the Macedon Ranges Shire Emergency Management Unit hosted a Youth Emergency Management Workshop. Young people, many from schools within the municipality, came together to identify and discuss emergency management issues focusing on areas that concern young people.

The purpose of the workshop was to establish a link between young people living in the shire and the emergency management planning process. The Municipal Emergency Management Planning Committee endorsed the workshop as a way to consult with young residents regarding the local emergency management plan. The Youth Services Development Unit at the Shire attracted young people via a Facebook page and also made contact with local schools where students could nominate themselves to take part. Fourteen young people aged between 16 and 23 years participated in the workshop.

## The workshop experience

The workshop presentations provided good information and attendees began to understand the areas of emergency management. For most young people in attendance, this was the first time their opinions had been sought by older people and it was a great opportunity and experience to have thoughts and ideas tabled and valued.

Some time was needed to bring the young people to a common understanding of current emergency management practice. Mutual respect and trust were important values underpinning the day.

Throughout the workshop, young people identified key issues that were of concern and provided the Youth Services Development Unit and Emergency Management Unit with suggestions, direction and actions that could be addressed to improve community preparedness, resilience, and recovery in emergency situations.

There were some key areas that attendees identified, which included the following three areas.

### Emergency management knowledge

Attendees were able to identify that young people generally may not have experienced an emergency situation or have a full understanding of consequences or the possible roles they could play. Aspects of life experience and understanding what a disaster means were discussed and it was felt that it would be good to have ways to learn from other young people who have lived through disasters.

Some of the ideas to share knowledge developed during the workshop included joining with several schools in the area to help raise knowledge and awareness about emergency situations. This could be organised by young people with support from local SES, police, fire agencies, ambulance and the Red Cross.

### How do young people have their voices heard?

Attendees indicated that young people don't think they have a voice in emergency management and the group suggested the formation of a formal youth emergency management committee that includes students from a range of schools in the Shire. It was suggested that students from secondary schools across the shire could participate in the youth committee with the meetings being facilitated by the Youth Services Development Unit and the Emergency Management Unit. The Shire's emergency management committee had expressed an interest in gaining the views of young people by conducting the workshop and setting up a more formal

committee would ensure that young people could engage with the process in an ongoing way.

### Peer-to-peer training

Attendees identified that early planning and being prepared are key success factors for resilience in emergency situations and disasters. Joining with peers to explore scenarios, recognise and understand what might play out in a community during an emergency response, and what effective roles they could play in relation to emergency preparedness and what to expect in emergency recovery, was a strong consideration.



Group discussions allowed opportunity to have thoughts and ideas tabled.

### Activities for young people

The workshop participants identified a number of activities that would help increase their understanding and effective participation. These are listed in Table 1.

After the workshop, the Youth Services Development Unit and the Emergency Management Unit used ideas identified in the workshop to formulate a plan for future action, as well as developing key learnings on how to discuss emergency management issues with young people.

Recognising the important contribution young people can make to the ongoing development of the community, the Youth Services Development Unit worked to increase the Shire’s engagement and support of young people in the area of emergency management. The Municipal Emergency Management Planning Committee (MEMPC) received a recommendation that a youth sub-committee be formed to bring ideas forward to discuss the needs and concerns youth and children have in relation to emergencies. The purpose of the youth sub-committee was to examine how younger people are considered in emergency preparedness and training and then to be a representative voice for how the Shire supports children and youth during and after an emergency. The sub committee’s formation was enthusiastically adopted by the MEMPC, which suggested that the Youth Sub-Committee report to the Committee at each meeting. This will keep the MEMPC informed of the concerns, recommendations and findings of the youth sub-committee.

**Table 1.** Suggestions of activities younger people can do to prepare for emergencies.

Phase	Activities
Prepare	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Working bees in classes or groups to help the community prepare for emergencies. This could help elderly people in the community.</li> <li>Teen mental health support training. This could include peer-to-peer support training.</li> <li>Set up a Facebook page that is ready to roll out in the event of an emergency. Since the workshop the Shire has set up a Facebook page called Macedon Ranges Emergency Alerts. Being connected to the emergency management team means that young people can use this established page to access information that is relevant.</li> <li>Tap into the interests of young people as they may be able to contribute by volunteering in a variety of ways. While some members of the group already volunteer with agencies like the Country Fire Authority, there may be others who would want to help out if the community was affected by an emergency. The need to undertake training was discussed and this is something that the group will explore in the future.</li> </ul>
Recover	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>School curriculum and education programs, especially hospitality, could be included in recovery plans.</li> <li>Investigate ways where young people can contribute (eg. in relief centres and recovery activities). This could include assisting in clean-up activities.</li> <li>Organise or participate in activities to raise funds for recovery.</li> </ul>

The MEMPC recommended that two youth members be appointed to the committee to bring a youth voice to emergency management planning activities. This will bring insights into discussions where youth engagement would not have previously been sought. This has been adopted by the MEMPC and the authors, two secondary school students, are the first regular young members of the MEMPC.

Anne Louise Linder, Shire Municipal Emergency Response Officer, said ‘Having young members on the committee means that the needs of children and young people are front and centre, and you can’t help but to give consideration to their requirements. One of the direct outcomes of engaging with the students has been the review and update of our relief centre planning to include a dedicated space for youth. This was done with direct consultation with the young people so that they had a say in how relief centre plans would reflect their needs.’

### Changing perspectives

As a result of increased engagement with young people in the community, many stakeholders, including the Shire Council, schools, and local emergency services

organisations have come to regard the ideas of young people as having a valid contribution to emergency management planning and response. Key to this were the efforts of people within Council and local community organisations who championed the need for greater youth engagement in emergency management activities and who were supportive of young people driving change and establishing a voice.

It is understandable that some members of the emergency management committee may have been uncertain about what young people could offer and how young people could contribute to important discussions about emergency management planning and response. However, community and council members have been positive regarding the contributions made during initial discussions with young people. Pauline Neil, Manager Youth Development said, 'We are actively engaging with young people in many aspects of council and community life. We are thrilled that young people are eager to participate in forums such as emergency management. We value and respect the input and time young people have given to this process so far and look forward to watching this unfold.'

Young people are already mobilising to support recovery efforts and address problems during an emergency. One example of this is the Student Volunteer Army that was formed via a Facebook page and responded to community needs following the earthquakes in Christchurch, New Zealand in 2010 and 2011. The SVA used everyday technology to co-ordinate thousands of volunteers to clear tens of thousands of tonnes of mud and soil, deliver clean water, and direct community members to recovery services. They worked closely with many organisations to deliver pamphlets, lay sandbags and man call centres. Closer to home, the Facebook page, 'Tassie Fires We Can Help', which was set up during the January 2013 fires in Tasmania is another example. Its creator, Melanie Irons, was not from a fire-affected area but she wanted to help and realised she could use technology to connect those who needed assistance with those who could help. Melanie co-ordinated a huge recovery effort and has made a significant contribution to the communities that were affected by fires along with contributing to emergency management planning for Tasmania.

## Outcomes

Including young people early in emergency management planning means young people are aware of the official channels and resources available during an emergency and throughout the recovery phase. This helps with co-ordination of activities if emergencies or disasters strike local communities and ensures that the energy and enthusiasm of young people is harnessed in emergency management activities.

While still in its initial stages, the youth sub-committee is working to engage young people to ensure sustainability of the youth sub-committee and continuous adaptation of emergency management planning to meet the evolving needs of children and young people in the Macedon Ranges communities.

## Points to consider

- Young people may want to get involved and make a difference to their communities, but generally don't know how to get involved in emergency management activities and don't believe their views will be taken seriously.
- It is important to engage with young people from a diverse cross-section of the community—from different areas, and who are involved in different activities.
- Engagement needs to be ongoing and regular to build trust and provide support so young people feel confident to express ideas. This can be supported by working with both the youth unit and emergency management staff within local councils.
- Young people can make good contributions to emergency management broadly and it is important that there are fora where they can express their views and contribute to emergency management planning.

## Conclusion

Being asked for opinions and providing a youth perspective regarding emergency management planning was a new and exciting experience. It has helped build confidence and provided an appreciation that a youth perspective is respected and considered. To be included on the MEMPC also shows young people that their voices are included and that they can make a positive contribution to their community. Local government emergency management planning committees are encouraged to consider giving young members of their community a voice in their emergency management planning.

### About the authors

**Angus Hocking** is a year 11 student at Gisborne Secondary College. He is an active volunteer involved in 'Music in the Sticks', a local FReeZA initiative, for the last five years. Gus has attended a Disaster Resilient Australian Schools Education Network meeting where he contributed to small group discussions about disaster education.

**Bethany Taylor** is a year 11 student at Kyneton Secondary College and has been a CFA volunteer for more than three years. Beth wants to make a contribution to her community by making positive changes for young people.

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