

STORM AND PANDEMIC RECOVERY UPDATE

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Responsible Officer: Jane Sinnamon, Director Recovery

Ward(s) affected: All

The author of this report and the Responsible Officer consider that the report complies with the overarching governance principles and supporting principles set out in the Local Government Act 2020.

CONFIDENTIALITY

This item is to be considered at a Council meeting that is open to the public.

SUMMARY

This report provides Council with an overview of Yarra Ranges' approach to the storm recovery across the past year, updates on recent pandemic and storm recovery activities, and highlights arising issues.

Updates highlight the diversity of recovery initiatives that collectively aim to assist the Yarra Ranges community and local business in its recovery from the pandemic and the June storm event last year.

Four Regional Community Recovery Committees, established to cover both the pandemic and COVID 19, continue to focus on engaging with the community and learning about priorities that are important for recovery. To this end, members are actively having conversations with community groups and individuals.

A financial update has also been provided which indicates that as at the end of April 2022, \$15.6 million has been expended on the recovery effort. This compares with a total of \$13.6 million that has been received to date. It should be noted that while the advance received on claims under the Disaster Recovery Funding Arrangements (DRFA) are welcomed, Council is still no clearer on the overall level of funding support that will be made available by State and Commonwealth Governments.

It should also be noted that a fully reviewed version three of the Municipal Recovery Plan will be presented to Council for endorsement in July detailing the recommended actions for 2022/23.

Information on events, support services and resources are available on Council's 'Support Yarra Ranges' website: [Home Support Yarra Ranges](#) or can be reached by contacting our Community Recovery Team via 1300 368 333 or mail@yarraranges.vic.gov.au

RECOMMENDATION

That Council notes

- 1. The current issues relating to the recovery from the June 2021 storm event and pandemic.***

2. *The updates on recovery activities undertaken by Council over recent months.*

RELATED COUNCIL DECISIONS

Yarra Ranges Council meeting on 12 April 2022

- Item 7.1 Municipal Recovery Plan Update for noting

Yarra Ranges Council meeting on 14 December 2021

- Item 7.1 Municipal Recovery Plan for endorsement and Storm Recovery Update for noting

Yarra Ranges Council meeting on 14 September 2021

- Item 7.5 Draft Financial Plan 2021/22 – 2030/31 for adoption in principle
- Item 7.6 Community Recovery Committees

Yarra Ranges Council meeting on 27 July 2021

- Item 9.1 Special Resident Storm Branch Kerbside Collection

Yarra Ranges Council meeting on 13 July 2021

- Item 9.1 Urgent Motion – Storm Recovery Assistance

Purpose and Background

The purpose of this report is to summarise the community supports that have been offered by Council and its partners in the last year, to provide Council with updates on recent pandemic and storm recovery activities, and to give an overview of current issues pertaining to recovery.

The Yarra Ranges and its people have weathered many natural disasters over the past few decades. However, the combination of the COVID 19 pandemic and the catastrophic storms of June 2021 brought the land and many of its people to breaking point.

It was on the 9th of June 2021 that the Yarra Ranges experienced the epicentre of one of the most violent storms in Victoria's history. Extreme winds came from a direction so rare that there are almost no records of it in Victoria's history. And the winds continued for 7 hours – equally unprecedented. The result left the Yarra Ranges community, and in particularly the communities of Mt Dandenong, Olinda, Sassafras, Kalorama, Mount Evelyn and Monbulk, in complete devastation.

Although the most severe impact was centred on the Dandenongs, most of the municipality was blacked out for the first 24 hours and there was extensive tree damage and floods creating access issues across the municipality, further exacerbating the sense of isolation and mental anxiety created by the pandemic.

Overview of the past 12 months

Following the June storm event, the community has shown incredible fortitude in its ability to respond to the worst impacts of both the storm and the pandemic. However the coordinated response delivered by Council, particularly toward those that are most in need, has been critical.

Over the last 12 months, Council has delivered a range of response, relief and recovery services. On 16 July 2021, management of the incident was formally transitioned from the State Emergency Service (SES) to Yarra Ranges Council with an emphasis on the continued provision of relief services and the coordination of municipal recovery services. The time taken to transition was a week longer than following the Black Saturday Bushfires in 2009.

In response, Council structured itself to oversee and undertake the delivery of recovery services for both the pandemic and storm response, and to support a coordinated approach with the State Government, support organisations and the community. Much of which is funded through the State Government's Council Support Fund.

The State Government advised that a Municipal Recovery Plan (MRP) was required to secure further funding support via the State Budget for items that are outside the immediate response activities. As such, the first version of the Municipal Recovery Plan was submitted and endorsed by Council at its meeting on 14 December 2021 and the second and current version was endorsed on 12 April 2022.

Actions and initiatives delivered by Council over the past 12 months

People, Culture and Wellbeing – In response to many of the serious social impacts coming from the pandemic and June storm (mental health, access to mental and physical health services, family violence, hardship), Council has delivered a number of targeted activities including:

- Conducting community debrief sessions at relief hubs;
- Running mental health and wellbeing sessions headed by psychologist Rob Gordon;
- Holding community sessions on lessons learnt from the June storm emergency response;
- Providing a mental health first aid training program;
- Coordinating service providers to respond to pandemic and storm related community needs;
- Contracting Windemere to provide case management services to storm affected residents which included undertaking outreach calls to approximately 1600 residents recorded in Council's emergency management database;
- Undertaking an extensive storm recovery door knocking and outreach program to better understand ongoing recovery needs of community members;

- Establishing four Regional Community Recovery Committees to support recovery that is community led – a key tenant of community recovery following disaster events; and
- Implementing the ‘Art Attack’ program which has resulted in 35 arts and cultural experiences provided by local artists to enliven public places and encourage social connection.

Business, Tourism and the Economy – Local businesses have faced numerous issues over recent years due to extended lockdowns in 2020 and 2021, the decrease in expenditure that occurred following the June storm, labour market shortages along with ongoing issues with internet outages.

In response, Council has implemented a number of programs and initiatives designed to address these issues, including:

- Yarra Ranges JobLink - the online employment portal that connects jobseekers with employers in the Yarra Ranges.
- Hospitality training through a partnership with educators including CIRE and the Box Hill Institute.
- Advocacy for improvements to the local telecommunications network across a range of forums including direct advocacy to State and Commonwealth governments, NBN Co and mobile carriers.
- Buy/Enjoy/Employ Local – a marketing campaign developed to encourage the community to support local business.
- Have a Yarra Ranges Christmas 2021 – a marketing campaign delivered to encourage the community to support local business at Christmas.
- Temporary Outdoor Dining – Businesses create appealing outdoor dining areas for their patrons using the \$5,000 State grant.
- Region of Choice (RoC) initiative that promotes businesses in the Yarra Ranges that practise ‘employer of choice’ qualities.

Built and natural environment – In response to the extensive damage caused by the June storm to the built and natural environment, Council delivered a series of extensive works programs over the last twelve months that have included:

- The kerbside storm branch collection which picked up huge amounts of branch debris from across the municipality including the urban, valley and hills regions;
- The private property clean-up program for community members who are financially or physically unable to clean up the extensive volume of storm related green waste on their properties. This work is supported by Council and is undertaken by two not for profit organisations – Habitat for Humanity and Treasuring our Trees;

- Processing the larger green debris material collected by Council through the storm clean-up and returning it to the public as a resource. This includes provision of logs for community groups, more than 50 hollow bearing logs being distributed across parks and bushland to enhance amenity while other logs have been milled into products such as planting stakes and fencing materials;
- Other large tree debris has been processed into firewood and distributed at no charge to the community. More than 1,100 residents across all regions in the Yarra Ranges took advantage of the free firewood which was distributed in two locations - Healesville and Wandin. The total volume of firewood distributed to residents was more than 1,400 cubic metres; and
- Work has been undertaken with local volunteer groups in relation to biodiversity through allowing natural regeneration or replanting where erosion management is an issue.

Public Infrastructure – Council has undertaken extensive works to repair storm damaged public infrastructure over the last 12 months including:

- Works to repair the extensive damage done to the Monbulk Aquatic Centre by the June storm have been underway for many months. This includes a newly tiled pool and new scaffolding being installed inside and out;
- Tree inspections and the removal of hazardous trees on all Council owned land, roadsides, play spaces and reserves;
- Tree clearance where appropriate and manage remaining fallen trees from a biodiversity perspective; and
- Extensive works to restore major and minor Council roads, drainage systems, bridges and tunnels as well as reinstatement of pavement surfaces and removal of storm debris as required.

All these works have been achieved with the support of State and local agencies. Of particular note are the significant support of: Bushfire Recovery Victoria's (now Emergency Recovery Victoria) Clean Up Program that supported over 700 properties that registered for help with dangerous trees or structures that needed demolition; and, their Case Support Program that has and is still supporting over a thousand of our residents since the storms.

Options considered

There are no options provided here as this report is for noting only.

Recommended option and justification

Not applicable

FINANCE UPDATE

Delivering the full outcomes outlined in the Municipal Recovery Action Plan is estimated to cost \$31.4 million. As at end April 2022, Yarra Ranges Council has expended \$15.6 million on the recovery effort.

To date, there has been several funding announcements in addition to funding, including advances, received under Category A and B of the Disaster Recovery Funding Arrangements (DRFA). \$13.7 million has been received, significantly easing the pressure on cashflow, including:

- \$3.5 million for staffing the Recovery Directorate – received;
- \$7.8 million approved DRFA claims and advances – received;
- \$300k from Department of Environment, Land, Water and Planning for the Storm Rebuilding Support Service Scheme – received;
- \$2 million Kerbside Storm Branch Collection – received; and
- \$161k announced under the Targeted Recovery Funding Initiative.

While the announcements and advance received on claims under DRFA is welcomed, it doesn't address the slow and arduous process of receiving reimbursement. Despite ongoing discussions and a recent advocacy push for financial support, Council is still no clearer on the overall level of funding support that will be made available by State and Commonwealth Governments.

Our success in applying for \$10M under the Preparing Australian Communities Program was announced in early April. This grant will allow for a broad program of activities that support community and infrastructure resilience in the face of future events.

Council is currently in negotiation with the funding agency regarding the timing of milestones and payments under the Program. The Funding Agreement is expected to be signed in June 2022.

As this funding was not certain at the time of preparing the 2022-23 Council Budget, this Program has not been included. The Municipal Recovery Plan and forecast will be updated now that the Funding Agreement has been executed.

APPLICABLE PLANS AND POLICIES

The Municipal Recovery Plan has direct links to the recently adopted Council Plan 2021-2025 and is one of the key strategic documents for how Council will achieve its Council Plan objective for a community safety strategy.

The Recovery Plan is also complementary to the Health and Wellbeing Plan which aims to deliver major initiatives to improve mental health.

RELEVANT LAW

Not applicable

OVERVIEW OF CURRENT ISSUES

Acknowledging one year on from the storm

A year after the storm we are seeing positive signs in the community across the municipality with 60% of residents reporting that they are receiving enough support with their storm recovery and 56% reporting that they have no concerns about where they live and are feeling safe to the same extent they were prior to the storm.¹

The impact survey results show improvements in levels of anxiety or trauma relating to the storm (down 8%), a reduction in dangerous trees on private property (down 8%) and a reduction in green waste (down 10%).²

However, many residents are still working through issues. Some residents report that the storm has negatively impacted their general wellbeing, including their mental health, while others report that they feel anxious when there are strong winds and heavy rain on their property.³

Results from the impact survey also show that 24% of residents are continuing to experience anxiety or trauma related to the storm.⁴ This may help to explain why residents are showing a preference for small scale activities to acknowledge the storm anniversary.

A very strong message from storm impacted communities is that only very small, very local activities were wanted to support connection at the time of the anniversary. Council has responded by offering communities small grants to enable community-led gatherings to support community wellbeing over a 4-week period. A total of \$5430 was allocated to 14 community groups for this purpose.

Of the more than 70 properties that were deemed uninhabitable after the storms, Council has still only received 2 planning applications to rebuild.

Feedback from the Community Recovery Outreach team and Psychologist Rob Gordon was that Council should also provide some Council-led support on the anniversary. Accordingly, Council scheduled 4 small gatherings supported by the Community Recovery team and partner agencies in June at Kalorama, Sassafra and Mt Evelyn.

Information about grant recipients and Council-led storm anniversary gatherings can be found here: [Storm Anniversary Events](#) Further details are also provided in Attachment 1 – Storm Anniversary Gatherings.

Insurance

Following the June 2021 severe storm event and in the context of the pandemic, a number of critical insurance issues impacting homeowners and businesses have emerged.

¹ Outreach door knocking program – Apr 2022

² Yarra Ranges Pandemic & Storm Impact Survey – Jan 2022

³ Outreach door knocking program – Apr 2022

⁴ Yarra Ranges Pandemic & Storm Impact Survey – Jan 2022

Key issues identified consist of:

- Delays in the insurance claims process exacerbating trauma of residents;
- Insurance premiums increasing significantly and becoming cost prohibitive;
- Insurance coverage offered by insurers being significantly reduced; and
- Property and business owners being refused insurance altogether.

Some businesses are seeing increases of insurance premiums by up to 300% while seeing a reduction in policy coverage at the same time.

These issues are driven primarily by the increase in frequency and impact of natural disasters due to climate change. In response to this, insurance companies are either increasing premiums significantly and / or reducing coverage. In some instances, insurance companies are declining insurance policies altogether, particularly in locations that have been deemed as high risk.

Temporary Housing

The severe shortage of rental properties and dangers and legalities associated with temporary accommodation options that are not structurally robust such as caravans has been an ongoing issue for those whose residences were seriously impacted by the June 2021 storms. This is exasperated as insurer provision of temporary housing (rentals) comes to an end.

Many of these residents will be left in a vulnerable housing situation as repairs and / or rebuild of their damaged homes have not yet been started let alone completed and some build times are expected to take several years. Current estimates suggest that the number of households in this situation could be as high as 40.

Council is continuing to advocate for short and long term solutions to the State Government for support for our residents facing these issues and are working with agencies to identify options available now.

SUSTAINABILITY IMPLICATIONS

Economic Impact

Expenditure with businesses located within the Yarra Ranges have experienced solid growth so far this year. Figures in the table below show a comparison of expenditure for January to April 2022 compared with the same periods in 2021 and 2020.

Expenditure within the Yarra Ranges LGA					
Year to date (YTD) comparison					
	\$ Million			Change	
	Apr 2020 YTD	Apr 2021 YTD	Apr 2022 YTD	Apr 2022 YTD vs Apr 2021 YTD	
				\$M	%
Total local spend	622	770	805	35	5%
Resident local spend	401	461	478	17	4%
Visitor local spend	221	309	328	19	6%

Total local spend: Total expenditure with businesses inside LGA. Figures = resident local spend + visitor local spend

Resident local spend: Spending by residents and local business inside LGA

Visitor local spend: Spending by non residents and non resident businesses inside LGA

Figures above show expenditure from Jan to Apr for 2020, 2021 and 2022

Data source: Spendmapp by Geografia

Key concerns include:

- Extreme labour market shortages due to lack of immigration and absence of overseas students;
- Absenteeism due to employees contracting the COVID 19 virus;
- Business operating costs increasing due to inflation and upward pressure on wages;
- Supply chain delays impacting sales of goods and services;
- Insurance issues, particularly businesses located in flood or bushfire prone areas; and
- Financial situation worse now than before the pandemic reported by 28% of the YRC community.⁵

Key points:

Overall, despite the ongoing challenges, there are positive signs of economic recovery.

- Total expenditure with businesses located within the Yarra Ranges has grown by \$35 million (up 5%) as of April 2022 YTD compared with the same period last year.
- This growth was driven by Yarra Ranges resident spend (up 4%) and visitor spend (up 6%) as at April 2022 YTD.
- This illustrates that economic activity in the Yarra Ranges has continued to grow at a solid rate over the first four months of 2022.

Social Impacts

⁵ Yarra Ranges Pandemic & Storm Impact Survey – Jan 2022

As part of the social recovery effort, it is important that community recovery is monitored on a regular basis. This is achieved through the Pandemic and Storm Impact Survey which is conducted three times per year. The second round of this survey was undertaken in January 2022 with results reported in the Municipal Recovery Plan update report submitted to Council at its meeting on 12 April 2022. The third iteration of the survey is being conducted from mid-May through to mid-June with results to be reported to Council in July 2022.

The data captured through this survey is used to monitor and evaluate the recovery of the Yarra Ranges community from the pandemic and June storm. It also informs the effectiveness of recovery activities undertaken by Council over the past 12 months as well as over the years ahead.

Additional feedback from the community on impacts and ongoing recovery needs is collected in person through the Outreach Door Knocking Program which commenced in April 2022. And further monitoring feedback is collected through other means including pop-up community hubs, regional CRCs and through regular meetings with partnering agencies including BRV, DELWP and DET.

Through these sources Council is aware that:

- Ongoing mental health impacts from the pandemic (29% reported significant impact on mental health) and the June storm (24% reported trauma/anxiety);⁶
- Some residents contacted by the outreach door knocking team are reporting that they haven't yet engaged with any recovery support services even though it's apparent that they would benefit from these services;
- 20% of residents report that they feel like assistance is still needed to help them clean-up and dispose of green waste on their property;⁷
- 60% of residents report that they are receiving enough support with their storm recovery;⁸
- 56% of residents report that they have no concerns about where they live and are feeling safe and settled to the same extent they were before the storm;⁹
- 36% of residents answered that they have at least a 'little concern' over where they live and their safety in future severe storms. Of this group, 15% said that they are 'anxious' about the impacts of strong winds and rain on their property;¹⁰
- Many residents have continued to report that the storm has negatively impacted their general wellbeing (including mental health) and relationships at home;
- Hardship arising from the pandemic is reported by 29% of respondents;¹¹

⁶ Yarra Ranges Pandemic & Storm Impact Survey – Jan 2022

⁷ Outreach door knocking program – Apr 2022

⁸ Outreach door knocking program – Apr 2022

⁹ Outreach door knocking program – Apr 2022

¹⁰ Outreach door knocking program – Apr 2022

¹¹ Yarra Ranges Pandemic & Storm Impact Survey – Jan 2022

- Some residents are experiencing delays in getting access to mental health and physical health services;¹²
- Power outages are more frequent, and the power network appears less stable since the June storm event;¹³
- Housing and rental affordability is getting worse; and
- Cost of living pressures are getting worse (CPI rate 5.1% at Mar 2022, official interest rate increase of 0.25 percentage points in May 2022).

Environmental Impacts

The environmental impacts to the Yarra Ranges, particularly Kalorama, Mount Dandenong, Olinda, Mount Evelyn and Yarra Junction were extensive.

Key concerns include:

- Threats to regeneration in storm damaged sites include emergent weed species including nightshade, asparagus fern and blackberry weedy grass species;
- Vehicle access at tree clean-up sites has caused soil damage in areas that were regenerating; and
- The loss of outer buffer trees is resulting in additional tree loss as previously protected trees are now exposed to high winds.

The action table in the Municipal Recovery Plan identifies how Council will recover, maintain and restore the local environment and biodiversity.

These actions include, but are not limited to:

- Continuing tree inspections and the removal of hazardous trees on all Council owned land, roadsides, play spaces and reserves;
- Continuing tree clearance where appropriate and manage remaining fallen trees from a biodiversity perspective;
- Communication with the community around the biodiversity benefits of fallen timber;
- Continuing to provide material from the fallen trees to the community either as mulch or to community groups/artists, in the case of larger timber; and
- Work will be undertaken with local volunteer groups in relation to biodiversity through allowing natural regeneration or replanting where erosion management is an issue.

¹² Yarra Ranges Pandemic & Storm Impact Survey – Jan 2022

¹³ Yarra Ranges Pandemic & Storm Impact Survey – Jan 2022

Recent recovery activities

Outreach Door Knocking Program – Council's Outreach Team commenced its storm recovery door knocking program in April 2022. The purpose of this program is to better understand the recovery needs of community members across storm impacted areas within the Yarra Ranges by visiting a sample area. The team are focusing their efforts in the Hills region which has the most storm impacted townships including Kalorama, Mount Dandenong, Olinda, Sassafras, Ferny Creek, Montrose, Mount Evelyn and Monbulk.

The outreach team's presence has been well received by the community. Residents often note that they have appreciated the efforts of Yarra Ranges Council, and particularly the outreach team's efforts during storm recovery. The team is typically spending one week in each storm impacted suburb before moving on to the next.

Approximately one in every two households visited by the outreach team has a resident who is willing to engage in conversation. When connecting with residents, the outreach team focuses their efforts on understanding where people are at on their recovery journey, what their current recovery needs are and to promote recovery resources available to the community.

Concerningly there are still a worrying number of households that were spoken to who have yet to connect in with the supports available.

As part of this program, each resident contacted is provided with contact details for organisations including Windemere who can assist residents with their ongoing storm recovery needs.

Region of Choice (RoC) initiative - This initiative promotes businesses in the Yarra Ranges that already practise 'employer of choice' qualities. The intention is that businesses will look to those that attain 'Region of Choice' status and improve what they offer to potential employees, thus creating a region of high calibre employers offering a gold standard work environment.

Initially RoC will focus on five key industries consisting of manufacturing, retail, tourism and hospitality, construction and agriculture. These five industries represent 55% of the region's economic output or \$7.9 billion.

Lessons learnt sessions – Following an extensive review of Council's emergency preparation and response to the June 2021 storm, 'Lessons learnt' sessions have been held in late May in Monbulk, Mount Dandenong and Mount Evelyn.

In addition to Council representatives, personnel from Emergency Management Victoria, Victoria Police and Victoria State Emergency Service were also in attendance to take questions from the community.

These sessions were an opportunity to share the lessons learned by Council and other response agencies and proposals about what can be done to improve for future emergencies. These events also provide the opportunity for the community to find out more about specific topics and offer feedback and suggestions.

COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT

Regional Community Recovery Committees (CRCs)

The work being done by the four regional CRCs is a critical component of community led recovery. As such, Council acknowledges and greatly appreciates the important work that these volunteer groups are undertaking.

To date, the four regional CRCs are pursuing their role in engaging with the community and learning about priorities that are important for recovery. Surveys have been distributed and members have been actively having conversations with community groups and individuals.

Using survey data, regional CRCs are beginning to determine what their community led recovery plans will look like. With the help of the Community Enterprise Foundation, regional CRCs have commenced drafting guidelines for the first round of grants. In addition, Co-chairs have established a community of practice who meet monthly for peer support and to monitor the progress of each regional CRC.

Further planning is underway for an in person gathering of all regional CRC members to network and to share learnings. Updates on the progress of regional CRCs will be provided to Council on a regular basis.

COLLABORATION, INNOVATION AND CONTINUOUS IMPROVEMENT

Council established a municipal recovery governance structure to oversee the delivery of recovery services for both the pandemic and storm response and to support a coordinated approach including representation from the State Government, support organisations and the community.

Representatives are built into the recovery governance structure through being members of key recovery committees. As such, all recovery activities are driven by collaboration, consultation and input from the community, Community Recovery Committees, township groups, Council's standard advisory committees and government agencies.

Representatives come from a diverse range of organisations and government agencies including Bushfire Recovery Victoria, Department of Jobs, Precincts and Regions, Department of Environment, Land, Water and Planning, Department of Education and Training, Melbourne Water, Parks Victoria, Country Fire Authority, Anglicare, EACH, Eastern Legal Centre, Inspiro, Oonah and Windemere.

RISK ASSESSMENT

The Yarra Ranges Council Municipal Recovery Plan outlines the preferred model for recovery for the region, however, Yarra Ranges Council cannot manage this burden without the support of the State and Federal Governments through the standard arrangements clearly articulated under the Disaster Recovery Funding Arrangements.

The Recovery Action Plan that supports this document identifies those activities that are currently funded through either: Yarra Ranges Council, the Victorian and/or the Federal Governments, and those that are proposed but not yet funded. Without clarity on the level of funding support available, undertaking the unfunded activities would generally be outside of Yarra Ranges Council's financial capacity, or be achieved through significant impacts on standard service delivery for the municipality.

CONFLICTS OF INTEREST

No officers and/or delegates acting on behalf of the Council through the Instrument of Delegation and involved in the preparation and/or authorisation of this report have any general or material conflict of interest as defined within the *Local Government Act 2020*.

ATTACHMENTS TO THE REPORT

1. Storm Anniversary Gatherings