



Strengthening Collaboration in Emergency Management – A Case Study of the Northern Victorian Emergency Management Cluster

Research Report
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Cover photo shows the Campaspe River at Axedale, by Francis Ford.

1 SUMMARY – KEY MESSAGES AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Emergency management is vital for protecting lives, and social and environmental functioning. Local governments have in-depth knowledge of their communities and places and are strongly positioned for effective emergency management. However, emergency management by local government is challenged by the increasing severity and frequency of extreme weather and climate events, and overarching constrained resourcing, expanding roles and responsibilities, and complex community needs. This is particularly acute for rural and regional local governments with low resourcing, and responsibilities for large geographical areas, as well as difficulty recruiting staff, and high staff turnover.

In this context, collaborative emergency management is needed to overcome resource constraints and to respond to extreme events that cross jurisdictional boundaries. Collaboration is a key principle in emergency management and the 2009 Victorian Bushfires Royal Commission (2010) is often identified as a key moment of support for collaboration in the state. At its core, collaborative governance is about engaging different actors, across levels of government, sectors, and scales, in all aspects of policy making and implementation towards a common goal (Daniell & Kay, 2017). However, collaborative governance is challenging whereby actors have distinct interests, overlapping roles and responsibilities and differential power in formal and informal institutions. In emergency management, collaboration is needed within and across different levels (strategic, tactical, operational) and phases (preparedness, response, recovery) (Tangney et al., 2023).

The purpose of this project was to explore an example of collaborative emergency management through the Northern Victorian Emergency Management Cluster (the Cluster), situated in the 2022 flood event, which was one of the most extreme flood events in the state. The Cluster is a formal regional emergency management collaboration including Campaspe Shire Council (CSC), Central Goldfields Shire Council (CGSC), City of Greater Bendigo (CoGB), Loddon Shire Council (LSC), and Mount Alexander Shire Council (MASC). The key research question was: How does a formal collaboration shape emergency management in the context of climate change in regional Victoria?

Commencing in 2023, the research was a collaboration between La Trobe University and the Cluster. Central to the collaboration was the involvement of two primary researchers, Dr. Lisa de Kleyn, Research Fellow at La Trobe University, and Ashley Fletcher, Graduate Researcher, and employee of CoGB. The researchers were committed to praxis: bringing together research and practice as an intentional, ethical, and applied approach (Kemmis, 2010). Together, they interviewed local governments, agencies, and organisations that are part of the Cluster, Integrated Municipal Emergency Management Planning Committee (IMEMPC), and the sector; and they developed findings through continued engagement with participants and the Cluster through document reviews, presentations, and discussions. In-depth interviews were held in 2023 and 2024 with 18 people with different emergency management roles, job levels, career paths, and experiences for a comprehensive understanding. Ethics approval was granted by La Trobe University Human Research Ethics Committee.

The participants' stories were profound and demonstrated boundless complexity in the event, and commitment and care in their response. We are grateful for everyone's genuine, and open contribution to the research. This report is the first output of the research focussing on key findings relating to collaborative emergency management. The findings are presented in four sections: 1) the 2022 flood event, 2) benefits, challenges, and opportunities for the Cluster, 3) benefits, challenges, and opportunities for the IMEMPC, and 4) key recommendations for the emergency management sector.

1.1 COLLABORATION SIGNIFICANTLY INCREASED THE CLUSTER'S ABILITY TO RESPOND TO THE 2022 FLOOD EVENT BENEFITTING COMMUNITY HEALTH

The research found that the Cluster significantly increased the capacity (available resources) and capability (skills, competencies, and knowledge) of the local governments in the response to the 2022 flood event, with all local governments contributing, and significant resources committed by CoGB. The Cluster's response provided leading examples in emergency management. Two examples that increased capacity, follow.

Local government has a role to *'provide support to the incident and/or regional control centres'* (Emergency Management Victoria, 2025). In the 2022 flood event, the Emergency Management Liaison Officer (EMLO) role in the Incident Control Centre (ICC) became a regional role and represented the Cluster and other regional local governments. This role required

extensive local knowledge and relationships, and advocacy and communication skills. The role increased capacity across the Cluster such that staff who would normally fulfil this role could continue response and recovery in their local area.

During response, local governments are responsible for establishing Emergency Relief Centres (Emergency Management Victoria, 2025). The Cluster reported that *'across Loddon Mallee region, 34 Emergency Relief Centres were set up and run for varying lengths of time, 1 day to 35 days'* (Northern Victorian Emergency Management Cluster, 2023, p. 15). The Emergency Relief Centre (ERC) stood up by CoGB was open for 16 days and accommodated 284 people at its peak. The ERC played a significant role such that it accommodated people from outside its municipality, with the majority from CSC, the most impacted local government in the Cluster. An ambitious goal was set for the ERC such that people left healthier than when they arrived, which was enabled through the establishment of its own field hospital, as well as three cooked meals a day and laundry done. Such outcomes were a result of the Cluster. They could not have been achieved by individual local governments alone, particularly given constrained resources and high demands of response and recovery.

Capability was increased through Cluster members sharing local knowledge and emergency management expertise, supporting each other's problem solving, and providing informal training to a range of local government staff during the event. Prior integrated planning through the IMEMPC facilitated response such that the participants already knew each other's plans and knew who to call. Through the Cluster and IMEMPC, the participants had underlying relationships of trust, which were vital to providing emotional support and helping staff to manage heightened stress and trauma. While we haven't included individual stories in this report, we want to acknowledge the immense commitment, care, and capabilities of participants that shone through the interviews.

1.2 THE CLUSTER BUILDS EMERGENCY MANAGEMENT CAPACITY AND CAPABILITY

As stated, the Cluster refers to the five local governments. The Cluster, like other regional emergency management collaborations in Victoria, involves a financial contribution from each member, and the members share resources. However, the Cluster is unique in its formal Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) and integrated planning. The research found that resource sharing increased the capacity and capability of all local governments in the Cluster through pooling funds for training; sharing information; expanding representation in initiatives run by state government, researchers and organisations; and sharing expertise. Collaboration also facilitated advocacy for each local government, and for rural and regional local governments in emergency management governance, through a consolidated and greater voice. Many participants emphasised that collaboration helped them to meet legislative requirements they would otherwise struggle to fulfil.

As discussed in Section 1.1, trusted relationships are vital in emergency management. The Cluster facilitated relationships built on expertise, local knowledge, and shared experiences, developing deep understanding. These relationships help people through burnout and isolation that often comes with the role, particularly in local governments with low resources and few dedicated staff. From the participants' statements, the importance of these relationships cannot be overstated.

The Cluster, like all collaborations, experiences challenges and has opportunities for improvement. Key issues raised were the need for more efficient administrative processes; to ensure that processes engender fairness and voice for all members; to develop role clarity; to retain a focus on the local scale within the regional group; and to set objectives with climate change at the centre. Overcoming these challenges will facilitate the Cluster in amplifying its benefits.

1.3 INTEGRATED PLANNING BENEFITS THE CLUSTER, AGENCIES, AND ORGANISATIONS

The Cluster established the IMEMPC in 2016 for integrated planning between the Cluster local governments, and agencies and organisations with emergency management roles and responsibilities in the region. The IMEMPC supports the development of a multi-agency Municipal Emergency Management Plan (MEMP) for each local government area through a collaborative and integrated process. Cluster participants described the benefits of the IMEMPC as facilitating communication, familiarity, and trust across organisations, and saving time for agencies because they can attend five meetings in one. For the agencies and organisations, while time saving was stated as a benefit, participants emphasised relationship building, learning about the Cluster, feeling a part of and having a voice in the IMEMPC, collective problem solving, and shared oversight of the MEMPs.

A barrier to the IMEMPC, which was mentioned by many Cluster participants, was a legislative change requiring the MEMPCs to be chaired by the local government's Chief Executive Officer (CEO) or delegate. While this may appear to be a minor change, it was a barrier because the integrated and collaborative process had originally involved one Chair, and an integrated plan, with appendices for each local government. While the IMEMPC developed a process to meet legislative requirements, it is administratively burdensome and detracts from the primary aim of facilitating integrated planning. This is an example of how a legislative change can affect existing collaborative arrangements, and at a higher level, represents a 'disconnected and fragmented policy landscape' (Bosomworth et al., 2017, p. 317). The participants identified additional challenges of the IMEMPC including that it is administratively heavy and given its regional focus, there is less emphasis on the local scale, and fewer operational staff from agencies in attendance thereby detracting from the development of local relationships.

1.4 OPPORTUNITIES TO FACILITATE COLLABORATION ACROSS THE SECTOR

The majority of Cluster participants described 'falling into' their role, and that the role was both demanding and under-resourced. Training was often informal and reliant on experienced colleagues; and staff turnover was high, often leaving local governments without adequate resourcing of experienced staff. Stress and trauma were discussed in relation to the flood event – and is well-understood to occur in emergency management (Kyron et al., 2022). Added to this, some participants expressed that they were also impacted by the flood. While managers did what they could to meet their duty of care to staff, the situation led to burnout for staff members, and staff turnover. At the time of writing this report, nine out of eighteen participants (50%) had a significant role change since the 2022 flood event. As a result, there is an urgent need to formalise emergency management as a career, and to establish institutional support for the roles.

For local governments, the challenge is compounded by constrained resourcing, which often limits emergency management to a planning role to meet legislative requirements, when long-term, place-based, person-centred community resilience work is needed. The research reinforced the message that state government must resource councils to meet their delegated responsibilities (Municipal Association of Victoria, 2023) and funding models need to be more efficient and responsive. Participants explained that recovery funding is often delayed or disjointed relative to local government and community needs. Municipal Emergency Resourcing Program funding, which is sometimes used to support emergency management staffing, is not indexed and so is effectively declining. Resource constraints are exacerbated by the ongoing expansion in local governments' roles and responsibilities (Municipal Association of Victoria, 2022), and for rural and regional local governments in particular.

Climate change is greatly amplifying the challenges. Exposure to the increasing frequency, severity, and unpredictability of extreme climate events is powerfully affecting emergency management in multiple ways, and recognised as a primary influence on emergency management, now and into the future (Howes et al., 2015; McLennan, 2022; Owen et al., 2014). To manage the escalating challenges, collaboration of the sort this research documents needs to be strengthened.

Throughout the research, opportunities to enhance collaboration within existing emergency management governance were discussed. Six key recommendations follow.

1. Legislation and policy that set the agenda and promote collaboration including existing regional collaborative arrangements.
2. Effective policy instruments including stable, flexible, adequate, and administratively streamlined funding that is aligned with roles and responsibilities, distinct capacity and capability of organisations, and local needs.
3. Processes across and within organisations that ensure integration of emergency management collaboration and deepen relationships of trust.
4. Training to build capabilities and contribute to the development of emergency management as a career.
5. Fit-for-purpose tools including for climate risk assessment.
6. To put climate change and recognition of unique local needs at the forefront of policy, and practice.

These recommendations cross a number of 'mechanisms' (McLennan & Handmer, 2012) to facilitate collaborative governance. The mechanisms interact and require reform built on inclusive and participatory processes that are grounded in unique local needs. These reforms will not only strengthen Victoria's emergency response but also build a foundation for greater state-wide collaboration and resilience in light of escalating climate change. As Victoria faces increasing climate change risks and the demands on local governments grow, strengthening governance arrangements through locally driven, collaborative mechanisms presents an opportunity for improving local preparedness, response, and recovery.

2 INTRODUCTION – RESEARCH CONTEXT

2.1 CLIMATE CHANGE

The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change states that ‘every increment of global warming will intensify multiple concurrent hazards (high confidence)’ (Calvin et al., 2023, p. 12). Communities across Australia are already experiencing the impacts of climate change, and these impacts are compounding – that is, they are interacting and accumulating, deepening existing vulnerabilities, and making communities more vulnerable in the future. Northern Victoria has experienced concurrent extreme events in recent years including the 2022 flood event, which is the focus of this study. These events are expected to increase in severity, frequency and unpredictability with climate change. Climate projections at the Loddon Campaspe scale are outlined below.

- Average temperatures will likely increase by 1.0°C to 1.5°C degrees by 2050.
- Hot days and nights are expected to become hotter and more frequent, with longer, more intense heatwaves.
- Rainfall is projected to continue to decline in the cool season, and long-term changes for summer rainfall are uncertain.
- Extreme rainfall events are projected to be more intense on average, including shorter-duration rainfall events intensifying more than longer-duration events (CSIRO & Department of Energy, Environment and Climate Action (DEECA), 2024).

2.2 EMERGENCY MANAGEMENT

All levels of government, multiple agencies and organisations, and communities have roles and responsibilities in emergency management in Australia. State and territory governments have primary responsibility for emergency management legislation, policies and frameworks within their jurisdictions (Australian Institute for Disaster Resilience, 2023). Emergency management in Victoria is governed by legislation, Ministerial Guidelines, and the State Emergency Management Plan (SEMP), which is a statutory requirement, prepared by the Emergency Management Commissioner and issued by Emergency Management Victoria (Emergency Management Victoria, 2024). A recent legislative change, passed in 2018, was the amendment of the *Emergency Management Act (2023)* with the *Emergency Management Legislation Amendment Act (2018)* to provide for new integrated planning arrangements at state, regional, and municipal levels. The new arrangements require the establishment of a Municipal Emergency Management Planning Committee (MEMPC) in each municipal district in Victoria, and the MEMPC is charged with developing and maintaining their Municipal Emergency Management Plan (MEMP). At the regional-level, emergency management planning is undertaken through the Regional Emergency Management Planning Committee (REMPC), which is responsible for producing a Regional Emergency Management Plan (REMP). Regarding First Nations peoples, the SEMP (Emergency Management Victoria, 2024, p. 6) states that: ‘Traditional Owners who are party to Indigenous Land Use Agreements with the Victorian Government should be involved and consulted in accordance with the requirements of the agreement, when implementing the SEMP and otherwise managing emergencies’. While collaborative emergency management is a key principle across all levels of government, research indicates that there is often some blurring between roles and responsibilities, and this is being exacerbated by climate change and the rising need for emergency response (McNaught et al., 2024; Ollerenshaw et al., 2016).

2.3 LOCAL GOVERNMENT

Local government has a central role in Victoria’s emergency management arrangements including for mitigation, response (including relief), and recovery (Emergency Management Victoria, 2025). Examples include planning for emergencies, implementing land use planning controls, maintaining local infrastructure, coordinating relief and recovery efforts, and providing support to response agencies (Emergency Management Victoria, 2024). The emergency management sector has undergone significant reform since the 2009 Black Saturday Fires in response to reviews, inquiries and Royal Commissions into disasters in the state (Municipal Association of Victoria, 2022). Local government’s roles and responsibilities have evolved creating ‘significant complexity and resourcing constraints’, and lack of role clarity, while experiencing capacity and capability gaps (Municipal Association of Victoria, 2022, p. 5). In 2020, the Royal Commission into National Natural Disaster Arrangements on the back of the Black Summer fires Recommendation 11.1 stated ‘State and territory governments should

take responsibility for the capability and capacity of local governments to which they have delegated their responsibilities in preparing for, responding to, and recovering from natural disasters, to ensure local governments are able to effectively discharge the responsibilities devolved to them' (Commonwealth of Australia, 2020, p. 39). This recommendation is reinforced in the Victorian context (Municipal Association of Victoria, 2022). Capacity and capability gaps for local government in Victoria have been reported through the state government's 'Councils and Emergencies Project', therefore, the gaps are known (DELWP, 2019). The challenges are exacerbated for rural and regional councils, which operate with limited resources across large geographic areas, and can face challenges in accessing services during disasters and extreme events (McNaught et al., 2024). Therefore, the need to collaborate and leverage existing resources is critical for effective emergency management (Ollerenshaw et al., 2016). Specifically, collaborative governance models that integrate local knowledge, enable inter-agency coordination, and recognise the value of community networks are essential (Daniell & Kay, 2017; McNaught et al., 2024).

2.4 THE NORTHERN VICTORIAN EMERGENCY MANAGEMENT CLUSTER

The Cluster evolved from a pilot project initiated by Municipal Association of Victoria in 2013, funded by the Australian Government's Natural Disaster Resilience Grants Scheme. The pilot project recognised the challenges and needs of councils with limited resources in responding to flood impacts and the need for a sustainable resource sharing model for emergency management. Craig Niemann, who was the Chief Executive Officer of CoGB at the time, was central to the pilot project and reported by participants to have had a strong interest in local government collaboration, and particularly CoGB's role in supporting local governments with less resources in the region. This approach to equity between local governments in regional contexts continues to be a foundational principle for the Cluster.

The Cluster model was piloted with four local governments including Campaspe Shire Council, City of Greater Bendigo, Loddon Shire Council, and Mount Alexander Shire Council. Central Goldfields Shire Council joined later, as Central Goldfields and Loddon Shire Councils shared an Emergency Management Coordinator. The five local governments entered into a Memorandum of Understanding to formalise resource sharing. Coordination of the Cluster is undertaken by one local government at a time, and each local government provides a pro-rata financial contribution to the Cluster. The IMEMPC was established in 2016 (Northern Victorian Emergency Management Cluster, 2023) to support the local governments and partner agencies and organisations with their emergency management planning requirements. While there are other regional emergency management collaborations, and some of which include financial contributions, the Cluster is distinct in its formal governance and integrated planning.

A recent IMEMP (City of Greater Bendigo, 2023) acknowledges the traditional custodians of the region including the Dja Dja Wurrung, Taungurung, Yorta Yorta, and Barapa Barapa (Figure 1. shows the boundaries of the Registered Aboriginal Parties). While there isn't a Registered Aboriginal Party for part of Loddon Shire, it is recognised that the Barapa Barapa Traditional Owners should be engaged in relation to the area.



Figure 1. Map of traditional custodian areas within the Cluster (City of Greater Bendigo, 2023, p. 12).

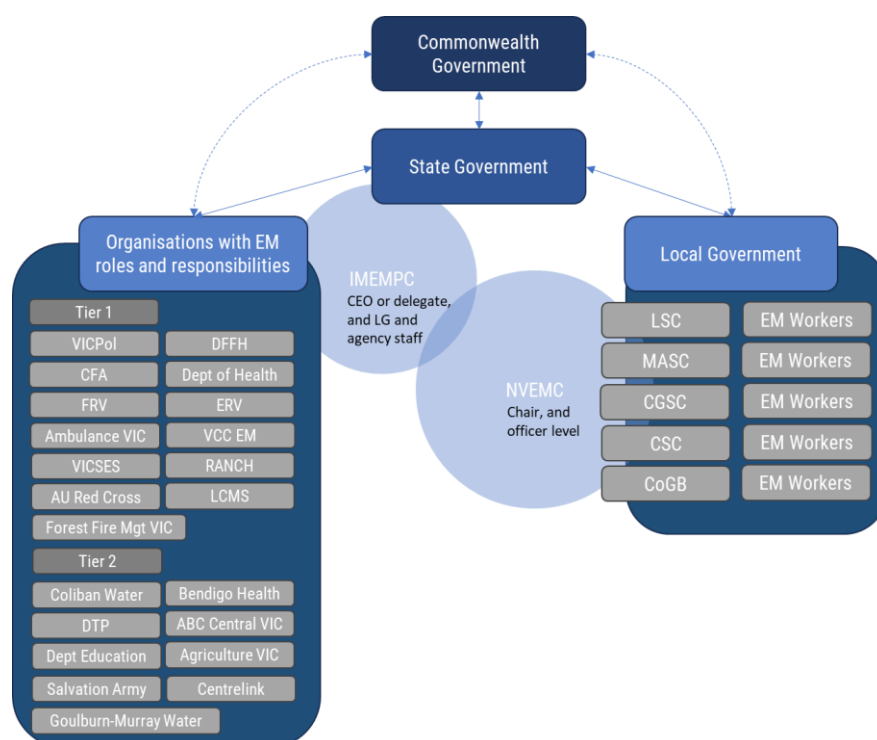


Figure 2. Key relationships for the Cluster in regional emergency management

2.5 THE 2022 FLOOD EVENT

The 2022 flood event in Victoria was among the most severe in the state's history, causing widespread damage across urban, rural and regional areas, and the deaths of two people, one person in Rochester, and another person in Nathalia. The event started on 6 October 2022 and is defined as lasting for 89 days, to 3 January 2023 (Australian Institute for Disaster Resilience, 2023). Victoria experienced its wettest month on record in October 2022, with rainfall more than doubling the monthly average. Heavy rainfall on October 12 and 13 overwhelmed catchments and river systems, which were already at capacity and led to widespread flooding across the state (Legislative Council Environment and Planning Committee, 2024). In Victoria, 81% of the local government areas (LGAs) (63 LGAs and one alpine resort) were impacted by the flood event (Legislative Council Environment and Planning Committee, 2024) with rural and regional councils facing distinct challenges in both response and recovery.

Local governments within the Cluster experienced some of the most severe and costly impacts, including *'extensive damage to property, infrastructure, farming and agriculture industries, cultural heritage sites and resulted in community displacement. The local economy and environment were also adversely affected by these events'* (Northern Victorian Emergency Management Cluster, 2023, 3). While the flood moved through all Cluster local government areas to differing degrees, the event impacted all, placing enormous pressure on local governments, agencies, organisations, and communities.

- Campaspe Shire Council was among the hardest-hit areas, with 2,800 properties affected and more than 800 homes in Rochester damaged or uninhabitable, leading to the displacement of residents (Campaspe Shire Council, 2023). There was *'extensive damage'* to infrastructure and rural settings, and *'significant crop and fodder loss'* and *'minimal stock loss'* (Northern Victorian Emergency Management Cluster, 2023, p. 4).
- Central Goldfields Shire had *'several homes with water inundation, losses to sheds, crops and fencing damage'* (Northern Victorian Emergency Management Cluster, 2023, p. 4).
- City of Greater Bendigo received more than 150 mm of rainfall in 48 hours, triggering flash flooding which resulted in \$3.3 million in damages spanning infrastructure repairs, relief operations, and insurance costs (City of Greater Bendigo, 2024). The Cluster's (2023, p. 5) submission to the Inquiry into the 2022 Flood Event in Victoria reported *'damage to over 91 residences with 14 uninhabitable. 70% of council roads were damaged, five bridges damaged or destroyed causing*

some areas to be isolated. Significant damage to community facilities and recreation reserves. Serious damage to over 4000ha farmland and two businesses destroyed.'

- Loddon Shire Council experienced losses of \$36 million in essential asset damage, \$8 million in non-essential losses, and widespread agricultural devastation, including over \$100 million in lost crops and 3,500 livestock deaths (Loddon Shire Council, 2023) as well as *'damage to infrastructure; disruption to essential services; isolation of towns and properties'* (Northern Victorian Emergency Management Cluster, 2023).
- Mount Alexander Shire Council had *'damage to over 60 homes, two caravan parks housing 76 permanent residents across 54 individual sites displaced, 93 primary producers, 10 businesses, one Power Substation, 10 Community Facility Buildings, 15 bridges and 730 km road'* (Northern Victorian Emergency Management Cluster, 2023, p. 5).

Each local government's experience of the flood event was shaped by geography, hydrology, vulnerabilities, local services, their capacity and capability, and individual experiences of staff. The Cluster was activated in the response, with immeasurable benefits.

2.6 THE PROJECT

This project was a collaboration between La Trobe University and the Cluster. The purpose was to research the role of collaborative emergency management in adapting to climate change. The case study centred on the 2022 flood event, and Cluster governance including the IMEMPC. The project was funded, in kind, by both La Trobe University and the Cluster, primarily through research staff. Dr. Lisa de Kleyn was the research lead at La Trobe University, working with Ashley Fletcher, Graduate Researcher, and employee at CoGB. Lisa and Ashley were supported by Todd Denham, and Farema Yazdi. The researchers took a collaborative approach to deepen engagement with the participants and the Cluster and encourage continued reflection alongside changing practices and events over time. Such an approach brings together research and practice as an ethical and reflexive approach to contribute to on ground outcomes – known as research praxis (Kemmis, 2010).

The research was approved by the Human Research Ethics Committee at La Trobe University and semi-structured interviews were held in 2023 and 2024 with 18 participants, including 13 participants representing the Cluster local governments, and five participants representing agencies and organisations. This number of participants reflected the number of emergency management staff across the organisations at the time of the flood and facilitated the anonymity of participants. The participants had different emergency management roles, job levels, career paths, and experiences contributing to a comprehensive view of the issues faced. The interviews were held online for approximately one hour and focussed on participants' experiences of the 2022 flood event, the functioning of the Cluster and IMEMPC, and emergency management needs in the context of climate change. Participants received summaries of their interviews and a draft of this report so that they could confirm their contributions and continue to shape the research. In addition, key findings were presented to the Cluster Board and Executive Working Group in August and November 2024 for discussion. This report is the first output from the project and focusses on collaborative governance in the Cluster, IMEMPC, and emergency management sector, including formal and informal expressions.

During the research, the Cluster was undertaking a review process of both the Cluster and IMEMPC before the MoU between the Cluster councils was due to expire on 30 June 2025. The researchers were advised that the early findings helped to inform the review, which is an indication of the potential of collaborative research.

3 THE 2022 FLOOD EVENT – CLUSTER COLLABORATION IMPROVED RESPONSE

We had the initial response that was really fast and furious, then probably the first three months was around that, winding up, what it was going to look like, understanding what the impact was, and then the long, long, long-term recovery. (Interviewee_04_Local Government)

This section discusses the results in relation to the benefits of collaboration during the 2022 flood event. Local governments have a range of roles in response and relief including being responsible for supporting the control agency, coordinating relief services information to communities and municipal level support, and establishing Emergency Relief Centres. Roles also include providing support to the incident and/or regional control centres through partial or full road closures and establishing alternative routes and clearing blocked infrastructure. The full role statement is published by Emergency Management Victoria (2025). While the role statement is comprehensive, emergency events are unpredictable, and participants shared stories of profound complexity, and commitment to response.

3.1 THE CLUSTER INCREASED THE COUNCILS' RESPONSE CAPACITY AND CAPABILITY

As discussed, rural and regional governments are often understaffed due to difficulty recruiting staff and staff turnover. In line with this context, several participants reported that their local government lacked emergency management capacity and capability at the time of the event. This problem was exacerbated by participants being cut off from their local government due to flood water; stretched in taking on response roles and continuing their substantive roles; managing the complexity of the flood including some local governments being in response and recovery at the same time; being affected by flooding themselves; and experiencing the compounding emotional toll of being in continual response. While there is a resource sharing protocol through Municipal Association of Victoria, several participants reported that the function was less effective when staff were external to the Cluster and lacked local knowledge, reinforcing that vital importance of local knowledge and local relationships in response, and that the issue is not capacity alone.

We had not very many experienced staff because of the staff turnover in local government, we lose a lot of our experience, specifically the Recovery Manager role. (Interviewee_01_Local Government)

A lot of our emergency management team were impacted themselves and unable to attend because of those impacts and their duties to their families. (Interviewee_03_Local Government)

Several participants explained that they started to prepare early, and this extended to the Cluster. One participant described that they had a conversation about resourcing, which prompted discussion of the potential for a regional Emergency Management Liaison Officer (EMLO) representing local governments in the Incident Control Centre (ICC), and a regional Emergency Relief Centre (ERC), both of which eventuated.

3.2 THE CLUSTER ENABLED REGIONAL REPRESENTATION IN THE ICC

Several participants reported that they didn't have the capacity or skilled staff to fulfil the EMLO role in the ICC. This challenge was overcome by a Cluster staff member who advocated for a single person to fulfil the role and represent the Cluster local governments. The advocacy was supported by Cluster members. As a result, the EMLO became a regional role, filled by two experienced staff members on rotation. The EMLOs were strongly praised throughout the interviews.

It was up to Bendigo to also lead EMLO out of the control centre ... there was no way known I could do that. I had too much to deal with here locally so we all really relied on our Cluster arrangements to do that. (Interviewee_06_Local Government)

The EMLOs were particularly effective due to their local knowledge and local relationships, knowledge of emergency management, and communication and advocacy skills. For example, one EMLO helped to identify a problem, such that the Control Centre was delivering messages to communities to decide whether to leave early, however the EMLO knew via local staff that some community members wanted to leave early but couldn't, for example, because their alternate routes were

already cut off. Therefore, the EMLO worked with the Incident Controller to make sure messaging supported people to act, including helping communities to develop a plan. As such, the EMLO role involved advocating for communities and regional partners through the Incident Controllers, to Regional Controllers, and state government. Further, the EMLO role supported other local governments who were being impacted by the flood.

3.3 THE ERC WAS A MAJOR ACHIEVEMENT MEETING CLUSTER AND COMMUNITY NEEDS

The Cluster (2023, p. 32) reported that *'Throughout the 2022 Floods across Loddon Mallee region, 34 Emergency Relief Centres were set up and run for varying lengths of time, 1 day to 35 days'* whereas ERCs are usually open for a maximum of seven days. The magnitude of the flood event led to CoGB standing up a regional ERC at the direction of the Municipal Emergency Resource Co-ordinator (Victoria Police). The ERC at the Bendigo Showgrounds was open for 16 days, accommodating 284 people at its peak, with the majority of residents from Campaspe Shire Council.

*The enormity of the event meant that relief centres in multiple municipalities were not possible.
(Interviewee_12_Local Government)*

The scale and complexity of the situation was profound and escalated quickly due to the numbers of people arriving; the poor underlying health of many people; people arriving wet, with or without belongings, and some experiencing trauma; the need to care for and manage people's pets; the lack of local accommodation; the arrival of volunteers and agencies without prior communication; the need for safe provision of food; setting up facilities such as showers and a kitchen; providing necessary supplies such as sheets, clothes, toiletries, sanitary and shaving products; and managing the media. A field hospital was established where residents could seek medical assistance on-site, and over time, its ambition grew to helping people to leave healthier than when they arrived.

The ERC was facilitated by a senior staff member who was able to assume responsibility and authority in a complex, and high risk situation. The cost of the response to CoGB was high in the immediate term. One participant reported that over a seven-week period, CoGB committed more than 2,200 staff hours to the response, including staffing the ERC and fulfilling roles in the ICC. Commitment to paying for the immediate cost derived from being part of the Cluster, confidence that the state government would fund at least part of the cost through the Disaster Recovery Funding Arrangements (DRFA), and confidence to take on that advocacy for funding as needed. This example reinforces the need for experienced, local staff, with authority to be able to act as needed to facilitate safe and effective response.

3.4 EMOTIONAL SUPPORT FROM CLUSTER COLLEAGUES WAS INVALUABLE IN RESPONSE

The ability to call on colleagues to ask for information, discuss ideas and problem solve was identified by several participants as crucial to making decisions and feeling emotionally supported in a highly complex and demanding situation. Emotional support was also provided by checking in with each other. The interactions meant that people felt less alone, helping them through extreme stress and trauma. These interactions were built on a foundation of pre-existing trust facilitated by the Cluster, a key theme that cannot be overstated in terms of its importance to participants.

I suppose the other thing - moral support. Knowing that you can ring them at any time, and they're ringing you to make sure - or it's even sending you a text message, "How's it going? Are you okay? Do you need anything?" (Interviewee_01_Local Government)

3.5 TRAINING WAS REQUIRED DURING THE RESPONSE

Significant capability building was required during the event. Participants described that people were called to do roles they didn't have the training or experience for, particularly given the magnitude of the event. The quote below shows that training was required across different roles and extended from the officer level to executive and councillor levels of local government.

*Our Cluster councils, we all know one another pretty well, but there's a lot of staff that had no experience in this. So, it was quickly about - how can we get a bit of training and education into people? How can we support a Council remotely to get them skilled in Crisisworks or understanding how to open a relief centre if they're isolated? That was a bit of that task, to get people and keep them calm. Because there's a lot of craziness happening, particularly as the impact has come in.
(Interviewee_07_Local Government)*

4 CLUSTER – MULTIPLE BENEFITS FOR COUNCILS

Collaboration between the different local governments, particularly when you've got some that are really resource poor, I think it's just critical. It wouldn't work if you didn't have it. (Interviewee_10_Other Organisation)

This section discusses the benefits of the Cluster from the perspectives of the local government participants. The benefits were strongly and consistently emphasised throughout the interviews.

4.1 RESOURCE SHARING OCCURED IN A RANGE OF WAYS WITH MULTIPLE BENEFITS

The research found that resource sharing increased the capacity and capability of all local governments in the Cluster. All of the local government participants mentioned the benefit of pooling funds for training. The need was greater for local governments with fewer resources and dedicated emergency management roles, which made paying for training unviable. Training was delivered by consultants, and Cluster members. Topics included Crisisworks, opening an ERC, and specific roles including the MEMO and MRM roles. Peer-to-peer exchange was reported by many participants and included sharing operational insights, lessons from recent events, updates on legislation, and understanding of different risks e.g. fire. One participant said, 'it's really useful having that experience of others from across that wider area' (Interviewee_04_Local Government). Knowledge sharing was also involved in co-design of training and materials such as brochures or guidebooks. 'We were able to take these resources [...] and all of a sudden there's this guidebook that we've got, that we can give to people to help them prepare' (Interviewee_09_Local Government). The increased capacity also meant that individual members were able to represent the Cluster in external meetings, and projects and report back, thereby increasing the reach of the Cluster. As one participant summarised, 'that ability to be bigger than the resources and that experience [...] I think it is worth it' (Interviewee_08_Local Government).

4.2 SHARED PLANNING IN REGULAR MEETINGS HELPED MEET REQUIREMENTS

Many participants emphasised that collaboration helped them to meet legislative requirements they would otherwise struggle to fulfil. Several participants emphasised that joint planning ensured they were aware of changes, avoided duplication of effort, and ensured consistency across the region. Shared planning also enabled interoperability in emergency response.

I think it's definitely the preparedness space of knowing that you've got your plans up to date, that you've got everything in line with your legislation because we've done it jointly together. Or someone's taken the lead on one and then we've worked collaboratively together to make sure that is correct and make sure it is right within the current legislation. Making sure your Ts are crossed, your Is are dotted. You can achieve so much more when you're doing it together. (Interviewee_01_Local Government)

4.3 TRUSTED RELATIONSHIPS HELPED PARTICIPANTS TO PERFORM THEIR ROLES

Relationships across the Cluster were consistently described as being highly valuable in being able to perform their roles on a daily basis. Participants reinforced that trusted, collegial relationships made emergency management more effective, especially for those in local governments with few designated emergency management roles. Relationships were described as genuine friendships, underpinned by respect and shared experience. This sense of community enabled honest conversations, informal mentoring, and fast, reliable communication. Participants explained that they felt comfortable making calls, and they knew who to contact, or knew who was on the other end of the line for generic numbers.

A big thing for us was we all knew each other so when we were responding, we knew who was who in the zoo, we knew when we'd called each other, we didn't feel bad about having to find someone's number and call them. (Interviewee_02_Local Government)

4.4 PSYCHO-SOCIAL SUPPORT IS NEEDED THROUGH STRESS AND BURNOUT

Many participants discussed the pressure on emergency management staff. Emergency management roles often cover planning, preparedness, response, and recovery, but in practice are overwhelmed by the immediate demands of response and recovery: *'it's very tiring particularly over the last – we've just been response, response, response.'* (Interviewee_06_Local Government). Staff were frequently working beyond their job descriptions, covering multiple critical roles such as Emergency Management Coordinator, Municipal Emergency Management Officer (MEMO), and Lead Municipal Recovery Manager without backfill or additional support. As a result, burnout was common. In this context the Cluster provided space for participants to lean on each other and receive support, which is essential in the context of staff turnover and the need to foster sustainable careers.

I think the strength of the officer network and being able to lean on each other has been really important. Particularly the ones that have been there for a long time. I know they're really reliant on each other both in an EM [emergency management] sense, but also, they're sharing the psychological burden of managing emergencies, which can be pretty heavy. Others might feel like they're doing it on their own, but as a Cluster, that's probably really helped keep them in their roles for quite a while.
(Interviewee_16_Other Organisation)

4.5 COLLECTIVE ADVOCACY STRENGTHENS INDIVIDUAL LOCAL GOVERNMENT INFLUENCE

Many participants highlighted the Cluster enabled stronger, more effective advocacy to state government and other key stakeholders. Acting collectively allowed councils to amplify their concerns and needs. Participants described this as allowing them to *'have a voice greater than one'* (Interviewee_12_Local Government), *'influence up'* (Interviewee_15_Other Agencies) and *'give some input on behalf of the Cluster'* (Interviewee_18_Local Government). The Cluster was able to advocate for changes needed to support local governments in emergency management through a joint submission to the Victorian Parliamentary Inquiry into the 2022 Flood event (see Northern Victorian Emergency Management Cluster, 2023). Advocacy also aligned with increasing capacity. One participant described their involvement in Local Government Victoria's Councils and Emergencies project, explaining the importance of having rural and regional councils' realities recognised, such that, often 'smaller' local governments aren't heard.

4.6 THE GEOGRAPHICAL AND OPERATIONAL SCALE ARE EFFECTIVE FOR COLLABORATION

The size and scale of the Cluster were supported as administratively feasible and meaningful due to shared risk profiles. The Cluster members were approximately an hour from Bendigo, which made face-to-face meetings more feasible. Further, the size and scale was suitable for current emergency management arrangements, whereby the Cluster was smaller than the Loddon Mallee Region. Finally, involving a larger local government was acknowledged as important in resource sharing arrangements and participants at CoGB appreciated their role in contributing to emergency management through the Cluster, and across the state.

4.7 THE PEOPLE DRIVE THE CLUSTER

Participants expressed that the strength of the Cluster lies in the commitment, collaboration, and solidarity between participating local governments, and the staff involved.

What's driving it would be, I think, the main staff members from each of the councils. [...] I think without people who actually want to be involved and come to the party and value add, I think without that you wouldn't really have a group, and because they are all happy to come along, listen, learn, talk, give their views, I think because they are all active members then it works. (Interviewee_02_Local Government)

5 CLUSTER – ADDRESSING CHALLENGES TO AMPLIFY BENEFITS

It's just one of those realities. You can't always give it the attention that maybe a bigger council can, it's just active resources. So, just being mindful and making sure things are set up in that way that makes it easy. (Interviewee_08_Local Government)

While the challenges were significantly less discussed and emphasised, with several participants finding it difficult to even think of a challenge, some challenges were identified and are presented in this section.

5.1 CHALLENGES

5.1.1 MANAGING POWER DYNAMICS TO FACILITATE TRUST AND COMMITMENT

Engagement and involvement of each local government was influenced by a number of factors including available resources. This contributed to a power dynamic and considerations of equity e.g. each local government's contribution of funding and time; and equality, e.g. rotating positions equally between the local governments, and ensuring they have equal voice in processes. Many participants reinforced that it was important to understand the different capacities, capabilities, and needs of each local government and to address any concerns promptly, transparently, and fairly, to maintain strong relationships.

Many participants stated that the financial contribution of each local government is based partly on population and rates base and that this arrangement is equitable. However, the disparity in resourcing is also reflected in the amount of time each local government can contribute to the Cluster and those with less resources being particularly constrained. Several local governments in this position mentioned they need their constraints to be understood, and for processes to be easy for them, so that they can engage as much as possible.

Existing research into collaborative emergency management discusses the importance of involving local governments of different sizes in a collaboration, and particularly a larger local government for the collaboration to work from a resource sharing perspective (Palm & Ramsell, 2007). Further to this, all collaborative arrangements have challenges, which were reflected in a few interviews. Specifically, a few participants said that when the coordination was run from CoGB, the larger local government in the Cluster, the role could become Bendigo-centric, for example, priorities and processes aligned with CoGB's. Ensuring that all local governments experience equality in voice and administrative processes is important to maintaining openness and trust in the process. Through the research, key points about collaborative arrangements were reinforced such that equality of voice goes beyond being at the table, and involves:

- being heard,
- shaping the conversation,
- incorporating different situations, contexts, and experiences into understanding,
- transparency in processes, decision-making, and resourcing, and
- processes for agreement making, and issue resolution.

5.1.2 IMPROVING ADMINISTRATIVE EFFICIENCY AND OBJECTIVE SETTING

It is important for administration to be efficient and effective to enable participation, particularly for local governments with low resources, and to create more space for the value that arises from collaboration and relationship building. Examples of challenges were as follows.

- The processes were discussed as administratively heavy, and lacking flexibility.
- The Cluster was described as focussing too strongly on processes and procedures, which didn't allow for other benefits that could be achieved with everyone in the room.
- Approval processes were described as taking a long time, which was also linked to local government processes.
- Travel time was resource intensive for local governments distant from a meeting location.

A few participants discussed objective setting and that it needs to focus on: what the Cluster wants to achieve, how the Cluster will be viable into the future, outcomes for the community, and how the Cluster will function in more extreme circumstances, or if the impacts are distributed differently.

5.1.3 FOCUSING ON THE LOCAL LEVEL

Several interviewees raised the importance of taking deliberate action to focus on the local level outside the Cluster, given the Cluster's focus at a larger scale. A few participants expressed concern that, if the role of the Cluster is not well understood, local governments can rely on the Cluster's work as having met their emergency management requirements, rather than develop and integrate their own emergency management capabilities throughout their organisation and deepen local engagement and knowledge.

When we're looking at things like risk assessments, doing it as a whole Cluster, it has made us realise that we do need to do individual risk assessments for each shire as well. [...] Sometimes, you do need to bring it back down that little bit more locally to make sure that the needs of each community or each shire are being met, as opposed to the whole Cluster. (Interviewee_01_Local Government)

5.2 OPPORTUNITIES TO AMPLIFY THE CLUSTER'S BENEFITS

"I look how far forward we are from these other – but I also think that we can do a lot more."
(Interviewee_06_Local Government)

There was strong support for the Cluster, and this section includes recommendations that arose during the interviews. The recommendations centred on how to develop the Cluster to promote the value that it provides.

5.2.1 IMPROVING COMMUNICATION AND ADMINISTRATION

Participants highlighted that clear, accessible, and secure communication channels are essential to the Cluster's effectiveness. A shared, central platform was proposed to support real-time collaboration, information sharing, and document management. While a Microsoft Teams page was suggested, participants explained that local government Information Technology systems make external collaboration difficult. Without an integrated system, communication risks becoming fragmented and relying heavily on emails, which was perceived as a less efficient.

Participants emphasised the need to streamline administrative processes. Suggestions included using automated forms for reporting, auto-populating agendas, centralising the storage of minutes and action items, live document editing, and building a shared library of emergency management resources. Streamlining administration is not just about improving efficiency; it also addresses equity between the local governments making it easier for all to contribute. Participants expressed concern that when administrative demands are excessive, some local governments risk falling behind or feeling excluded from decision-making.

5.2.2 EXPANDED PARTICIPATION IN EXTERNAL FORUMS AND SPECIALISATION

The Cluster has facilitated access to new opportunities and allowed local governments to participate in region-wide initiatives. Several participants identified this function could be expanded to increase the value for members and leverage the existing collaboration. A benefit of collaborative models is the allowance for specialisation and staff could have the opportunity to follow their specialisation whilst supporting collective group knowledge.

6 IMEMPC – ADMINISTRATIVE CHALLENGES AND GREATER BENEFITS OF TRUST

The Cluster undertakes collaborative planning through a regional Integrated Municipal Emergency Management Planning Committee (IMEMPC) that was established in 2016 and involves each Cluster local government and agency and organisational representatives. The IMEMPC Chair rotates between the Cluster board members (not including the co-ordinating council), and the IMEMPC supports the development of a multi-agency Municipal Emergency Management Plan (MEMP) for each local government area. The motivations for establishing the IMEMPC were to undertake shared planning, and to make it easier for agencies to participate in the development of Municipal Emergency Management Plans (MEMPs) because some of the MEMP committees were having difficulty reaching a quorum.

6.1 LOCAL GOVERNMENT - CHALLENGES OF THE IMEMPC

Many local government participants raised that a change in legislation was a barrier to the IMEMPC. The *Emergency Management Legislation Amendment Act 2018* provided for new integrated planning arrangements at state, regional, and municipal levels and required each MEMP to be a multi-agency plan including specific agencies (and other agencies could be invited), that was ratified by the local government. It also required each local government's CEO or delegate to chair the MEMPC. This change was a barrier to the IMEMPC due to the single Chair. The Cluster lobbied for an amendment to the legislation; however, a change was not made. The Cluster then developed an IMEMPC process so that they could continue to collaborate and still be compliant with requirements, such that *'The IMEMPC continues to function as five MEMPCs meeting as one integrated multi-agency committee, including core members from each LGA, agency and community representatives as outlined in the legislation, plus several additional organisational representatives'* (Northern Victorian Emergency Management Cluster, 2023, p.2). In practice the IMEMPC includes five Chairs, and in each meeting, each Chair is asked if they have anything to raise specific to their local government area. This approach is on the agenda, and minuted. Participants said that this *'workaround'* was *'clunky'* (Interviewee_05_Local Government) and made the process more complicated, detracting from the value of everyone working together.

We have to have a combined meeting and then we have to have all our own individual MEMPC meetings after that because the Cluster model is no longer recognised in the legislation, which to me seemed really strange that we were funded to actually develop the Cluster and fully supported and then the legislation came out and it meant that it could no longer operate. It was great that they actually found a solution to allow us to continue because it's definitely the way forward for us.
(Interviewee_04_Local Government)

Several participants suggested that the IMEMPC process contributes to a loss of local connections, including with operational staff in agencies who previously attended their MEMPC but don't attend the IMEMPC.

The benefit of saving time by attending one meeting, is reduced for Campaspe Shire Council given it has different representatives for certain agencies such as VICSES. Therefore, the IMEMPC can be experienced as a duplication of effort. Travel is time consuming for local governments far from where IMEMPC meetings are being held. These concerns are important for local governments with constrained resourcing.

6.2 AGENCIES AND ORGANISATIONS - CHALLENGES OF THE IMEMPC

Distinct challenges were raised by agencies and organisations.

- Two organisations said that meetings needed to be more focussed, including reinforcing the need to identify actions, mitigation strategies, approaches for upcoming events, and accountabilities and responsibilities.
- One organisation said the large scale of the IMEMPC meant a loss of some local level knowledge and relationships.
- A restructure at VICSES means that one staff member is responsible for four of the local governments and another staff member is responsible for Campaspe Shire Council.

- One organisation was unsure about the structure of the IMEMPC and when their organisation should engage.
- One organisation finds that there is duplication in what is being discussed at different meetings they attend across the region, straining resources.

6.3 LOCAL GOVERNMENT - BENEFITS OF THE IMEMPC

Several local government participants said that relationship building was an important part of the IMEMPC and facilitated emergency response. Specific benefits included: knowing who to call in an organisation; knowing who was on the other end of the line when calling generic numbers; that agencies knew who they were; and that IMEMPC facilitated the agencies' trust in the local governments. Several local government participants said that the IMEMPC was a benefit to agencies so that they could attend one meeting instead of five.

If you sit them at a table or a Teams meeting, they can listen to all of the conversations and have trust that the Councils are doing the right thing by the community. (Interviewee_08_Local Government)

The other part for us, for the Cluster is knowing that having connections with CFA, Vic Pol, SES, at that wider regional level, because they often do backup up for each other. [...] When you're involved in the regional one, you're involved with a much larger network of members of those agencies, which was really useful. They knew who we were because they'd seen us and met with us on a regular basis, which was great. (Interviewee_04_Local Government)

6.4 AGENCIES AND ORGANISATIONS - BENEFITS OF THE IMEMPC

Time saving was mentioned by a couple of organisations, but it was more important that the IMEMPC was useful. The majority of the organisations discussed the benefits as: learning about the Cluster; finding ways to work together to solve problems e.g. delivering communications; having oversight of each other's plans; and the opportunity to cover strategic and tactical issues.

Several organisations discussed the importance of relationship building. Benefits included: confidence that if you asked someone for something, it would be done; knowing where resources are; knowing who to call; facilitating the development of relationships across many groups; knowing what people would need from them, and how they could help each other; feeling included as part of the IMEMPC; and having a voice through the IMEMPC.

You could never ever probably put a price on how valuable that is. That contact-ability, those relationships are exactly what make it happen. It just wouldn't happen without that. (Interviewee_10_Agency)

7 EMERGENCY MANAGEMENT SECTOR – THE NEED FOR COLLABORATION

Just as things get more extreme, more intense, more frequent, we're going to need each other more than we ever have. We've needed to collaborate to make best use of limited resources in the past, and that will just be even more important, and beyond the Cluster as well. (Interviewee_05_Local Government)

This section includes discussion from all participants about issues that affect the entire sector. Three key areas were identified: 1) Retaining emergency management staff, 2) Increasing local government capacity and capability, and 3) Supportive institutional settings for collaborative emergency management.

7.1 RETAINING EMERGENCY MANAGEMENT STAFF

7.1.1 FOSTERING EMERGENCY MANAGEMENT AS A CAREER

The interviews started with people describing their career trajectory, and many participants described that they 'fell into' the role, or it was 'accidental'. For example, participants found that emergency management was in their position description for another role. Alternatively, another common experience was that participants felt compelled to help the community after having experienced an extreme event and then volunteered for a role.

Participants' descriptions of the work involved significant instability and demands. Many participants described that their roles changed to cover staff who moved to work in different locations, to take over from staff who left the organisation or left the role, to fill a gap where there was a lack of emergency management capacity in an organisation, and to take on different emergency management roles either intentionally or as needed.

Many participants, and particularly those in resource-constrained local governments, described that training and development were often informal and reliant on learning from experienced colleagues, and gaining experience during an event. One participant noted that, while they had some training for the role, they had more on-the-job training by asking questions of the experienced emergency management staff who would then develop frameworks in response to their questions. This learning culture, and reliance on peer-to-peer knowledge, while adaptive and essential, also reflects systemic gaps in preparedness in that Councils were reliant on institutional memory and staff relationships.

I do think more promotion and acceptance of emergency management as a career, as a standalone career. [...] I think more training, more people, a career so that people don't come and go because that continuity of knowledge and relationships is vital. The easiest way to maintain that is to keep people in the sector in those jobs rather than having to start again and introduce yourself every time there's another emergency. (Interviewee_11_Local Government)

7.1.2 ADDRESSING BURNOUT, STRESS AND TRAUMA

Many participants discussed and gave examples of an excessive workload during emergency response. Emergency response was demanding and involved long hours. The majority of participants were also still doing their substantive role. One participant described how even after formal shifts ended, they would go home and continue working late into the night. This situation of excessive and extreme work, with limited relief, contributes to exhaustion and burnout.

Many participants described the psychological and physical demands and cumulative pressure of being in near-constant response mode over several years. For example, the 2022 flood event was after the Covid-19 pandemic, which was immediately after Black Summer. There was a high level of fatigue prior to the flood. In some cases, participants had made deliberate decisions to exit frontline emergency roles altogether, citing the toll on their wellbeing. The implications of this turnover were not only operational but also structural.

It is well known that people in emergency management roles experience trauma and burnout (Kyron et al., 2022), and this is also true for the Cluster members. The impact of the 2022 flood event on mental health was discussed by many participants. Drawing out specific issues, we heard: people grappled with their want to help people, however the support they could provide was limited; of the significant emotional impact when engaging with communities who are in the midst of an emergency event and experiencing trauma; the workers themselves were also affected by the flood; and the responsibility managers experienced towards supporting their staff.

It becomes a toll on your mental health when you see people out there struggling, and you have nothing you can do to help them. It's really hard, and it does mean that I think people will 100 per cent burn out. If it's not from over work, it's from the confronting nature of this work, in that, it's just, people are out there suffering. Your whole job is to help alleviate that as best as you can, and to not be able to do that is really hard. (Interviewee_09_Local Government).

Despite these challenges, many participants expressed commitment to their communities. At the same time, without systemic change, such as secure funding, career pathways, greater resourcing, and adequate support, the model is unsustainable.

7.2 LOCAL GOVERNMENT CAPACITY AND CAPABILITIES

7.2.1 CAPACITY IS CONSTRAINED, AND NARROWS WORK TO MEETING PLANNING REQUIREMENTS

Participants described that each local government is working with constrained resources and making the most of what they have available. This has an impact at all stages of emergency management. Under-resourcing narrows existing capacity to meeting planning requirements and doesn't leave capacity for proactive preparedness work including community engagement, and resilience-building.

... they need a full-time person at each council. It's not conducive going forward. You can't prepare your staff enough. You can't prepare your communities enough. A huge part of my role should be community education, but you just don't have the capacity to do that. There's no opportunities for resilience building in your communities. (Interviewee_01_Local Government)

7.2.2 LOCAL GOVERNMENT ROLES NEED STABLE, EQUITABLE, INDEXED FUNDING

The state government's Municipal Emergency Management Resourcing program provides some financial contribution to emergency management staffing, with funding based partly on a local government's fire risk (either \$60,000 or \$120,000 per year, unindexed since its inception more than 12 years ago after Black Saturday). Within the Cluster, Mount Alexander Shire Council received full funding; Central Goldfields Shire Council, and Loddon Shire Council each received part funding and decided to employ a single person to work across both shires; and Campaspe Shire Council, and City of Greater Bendigo each received part funding and decided to keep their funding separate.

The funding and role are essential to the local governments; however, the management of the funding was challenging for participants. This is exemplified in the four-day per week Emergency Management Coordinator role covering two shires – Central Goldfields Shire Council, and Loddon Shire Council. As discussed above, the split role then necessarily becomes a planning role. Further, the funding has not been indexed, so over time, given wage increases, the position's FTE has reduced. One participant stated, 'the fact that there's been no indexation is pretty scandalous' (Interviewee_05_Local Government). In addition, administration of the funding rounds was said to contribute to staff turnover due to short-term rounds (initially two years, later increasing to four years) and late notice that funding rounds would go ahead.

... can we manage into the future without that role? I'm going to say no ... because I know the amount of work that the role does. [...] It will be a real challenge for us. (Interviewee_04_Local Government)

7.2.3 RESOURCE CONSTRAINTS FURTHER CHALLENGED BY INCREASING ROLES AND RESPONSIBILITIES

Participants noted that although local government continues to ‘*punch above their weight*’, there is a significant gap between growing responsibilities and resourcing provided by state and federal governments (Interviewee_07_Local Government). This mismatch leaves local governments with constrained resources particularly vulnerable. Several participants noted that while collaboration through the Cluster offers important support, even this collaboration is strained under the weight of concurrent events. Without additional investment in local government capacity, participants warned that their ability to manage the increasing frequency and severity of events will be compromised.

We're so poorly resourced to do the work, and yet our role is growing and the expectations on local government in emergencies is unprecedented in terms of the expectations, but our funding hasn't changed for 15 years. It's the same amount of money to do more work. (Interviewee_12_Local Government)

The importance of local knowledge was a consistent theme. Participants emphasised that decisions during an emergency are not only about logistics but must reflect the specific community needs. Such knowledge shapes decisions such as where to locate relief centres, what kind of support is needed, and how to engage people who may not otherwise seek help. Therefore, any increase in capacity needs to account for the need to foster local knowledge, and while collaboration between local governments is critical to make-up for a lack of capacity, systemic support for the sector is required.

7.3 EMERGENCY MANAGEMENT SECTOR

7.3.1 FUNDING NEEDS TO BE STABLE, FLEXIBLE, ADEQUATE, AND ADMINISTRATIVELY STREAMLINED

Multiple funding sources are relied upon, and overall, through the interviews, funding appeared to be unstable, inflexible, inadequate, and administratively challenging. One participant explained the sources used including the Municipal Emergency Resourcing Program (MERP) funding, state funding that is made available for specific purposes such as planning and preparedness for the community, or may be applied for, the Cluster co-contributions, and the Commonwealth government's annual Disaster Ready Fund (previously the Emergency Response Fund), and the Disaster Recovery Funding Arrangements. When asked, ‘*Is the funding—is it stable? Is it flexible? Is it what you need?*’ one participant replied, ‘*No. None of the above*’ (Interviewee_04_Local Government).

Recovery funding has been found to be slow, lagging the immediate reality of community recovery needs (Northern Victorian Emergency Management Cluster, 2023), as well as administratively burdensome (Legislative Council Environment and Planning Committee, 2024). This research shows the implications of this situation such that experienced emergency managers describe making necessary resourcing decisions, including hiring a recovery officer, before state government funding was announced with the expectation that support would be provided. Other local governments did not take this approach and waited for funding. Neither option is satisfactory. The first is a risk for the local government, the second leaves the local government under-staffed.

Council would then have to use council cash if there's no relevant grant, but that's another burden placed on local government. Recovery is great, relief response is great, but the funding's aligned at one or two years in a three to seven-year recovery. There's not that buffer for a council to keep meeting these emerging issues because at the end of the day, it does cost, everything costs, and in a deficit budget, we have to really be clear if this is a support that's offered and it's a crucial support. (Interviewee_03_Local Government)

7.3.2 OVERCOMING FRAGMENTED SYSTEMS AND SILOS

Despite a stated commitment to collaboration in emergency management, participants described that state government commitment has fluctuated, adequate direction for collaboration has not been provided, silos across organisations persist, and jurisdictional boundaries impede effective response. One example was a participant being asked to meet state reporting deadlines during active emergencies. Several participants stated that collaborative local government models, such as the Cluster, have not been fostered. For example, direction has not been provided on how to enact a multi-agency MEMP for

shared responsibility and accountability, and challenges to the IMEMPC were described above. Jurisdictional boundaries, including between New South Wales and Victoria, also challenged the response, by not knowing what was happening over the border.

7.3.3 CLIMATE CHANGE ADAPTATION TO CURRENT AND FUTURE COMPOUNDING HAZARDS

Participants emphasised that the Community Emergency Risk Assessment (CERA) process is no longer fit for purpose. Designed around a single-hazard model and historical data, CERA does not account for the complexity of climate risks, such as concurrent, compounding, and cascading impacts. Participants explained that emergency management must shift away from isolated risk assessments and toward a more systemic approach that integrates climate change as a core driver.

Basically, the CERA process, Community Emergency Risk Assessment process is not really fit for purpose and hasn't been for a long time, especially in relation to climate. [...] That's part of our responsibility, climate risk. The tool that we are mandated to use isn't good enough to help us do that properly, and it doesn't consider cascading, compounding, concurrent risk, so just looking at risks in isolation, basically doesn't cut it. (Interviewee_05_Local Government)

Participants discussed that emergency management will be more resource intensive in the future. There was widespread agreement that the frequency, severity, unpredictability, and overlap of disasters is increasing. As one participant reflected, major events that once occurred every 20 to 40 years are now happening every five years, or even more frequently (Interviewee_09_Local Government). Participants explained that the sector understands the need to move beyond reactive models toward prevention and preparedness, but that this ambition is constrained by limited funding and capacity. Participants consistently emphasised that climate change is no longer a future risk but a present and escalating challenge for the sector, and that the demand for emergency management will be closer to BAU for agencies and local government. The experience of concurrent, compounding, and cascading impacts, challenges the linear conceptualisation of emergency management. Climate change is a key driver of the need for collaboration, and this will only increase, and policy making needs to be led by state government in collaboration with local government and agencies.

I don't think there's great alignment in policy thinking, really forward-thinking about climate change and emergency management and what it's going to mean for our sector. We've started to see concurrent or compounding emergencies. Our arrangements, our staffing, our volunteer base, none of it is geared up to deal with that. We're not rebuilding to a more resilient standard. We're just reinstating infrastructure in the same way it was built whenever. We're not doing it well at the moment. Emergency management as a sector is very structured around roles and responsibility and command control coordination. It's not necessarily the sector's role to be doing that. (Interviewee_16_Other Agency)

7.3.4 COMPLEX COMMUNITY NEEDS AND INTERESTS

This section demonstrates that there is less capacity for community preparedness work. The participants see the challenges and dangers of this. There are challenges in changes in demographics and people moving into regional areas who have not experienced extreme events. First Nations peoples' self-determination must be a primary consideration in emergency management, and one participant discussed impacts to cultural heritage. Several participants understand vulnerability as complex and a result of multiple socio-economic, cultural, and environmental factors that influence people's positionality, which requires unique responses. Further, some communities can be difficult to reach for a number of reasons. Also, participants acknowledge the compounding nature of impacts including the community's exhaustion from responding to the most recent flood event, and question how the community will be able to 'bounce back' and find the capacity to respond again. Reflecting on the community having to learn through the experience, was described by one participant as 'terrifying' (Interviewee_04_Local Government).

They're the really challenged ones because they're what you'd call the 'hardest to reach'. The furthest on the tree of access. So, they'll miss out more so. They're probably the most vulnerable. If they're from a different language group, they've got no cultural connections, no family connections, they're in a remote community. (Interviewee_14_Other Agency)

8 CONCLUSION – FOSTERING COLLABORATIVE EMERGENCY MANAGEMENT

What are we doing all of this emergency management for? It's for that resilience, and that response and that recovery of actual people. (Interviewee_08_Local Government)

This research documents the benefits of the Cluster and IMEMPC in increasing the capacity and capabilities of the local governments during the 2022 flood event and in all aspects of emergency management. Such support is vital in the context of constrained resourcing, difficulty recruiting staff and staff turnover, particularly in emergency management due to rates of burnout, and complex, diverse, and changing community needs. These changes are more acute for rural and regional local governments that have low resourcing, large areas, diverse communities, and are at a distance from state government thereby impeding engagement in emergency management governance. In addition, the increase in the severity and frequency of extreme climatic events already strains resources and contributes to concerns about how local governments will be able to meet their roles and responsibilities for emergency management in the future. Collaboration is fundamental to this complex situation, and this research identified specific benefits and challenges for emergency management staff, local governments, and the emergency management sector.

The research found that the Cluster model and IMEMPC provided significant benefits. Sharing limited staffing, funding, and responsibilities enabled greater capacity, reduced duplication, and created new opportunities that would otherwise have been out of reach, particularly for less resourced local governments. Strong relationships built through the Cluster improved preparedness and supported more effective response and recovery during emergencies. Participants consistently emphasised the importance of trust, familiarity, and mutual support. Knowledge-sharing across local governments improved emergency management practices, while joint planning and engagement strengthened regional preparedness and compliance. In times of emergency response and recovery, the Cluster's collective approach enabled local governments to rapidly mobilise, draw on experienced staff, and advocate more effectively to state government and agencies. Overall, the Cluster model not only built operational resilience but also fostered a sense of shared purpose and community for participating local governments and staff.

The research reinforces that effective emergency management relies on local knowledge, local relationships, relationships of trust between all actors, the ability to problem solve in unique situations, the ability to make decisions under pressure, extensive experience in emergency management, and the vital need to care for staff. This unique combination of skills, knowledge, and experience is arguably under-represented, and in some cases, challenged through institutional settings. Current funding is reported to be inadequate, unreliable, and administratively intensive, with implications for all aspects of emergency management. Legislative changes to encourage collaboration inadvertently added complexity to integrated planning for the IMEMPC, and lacked direction on how to share accountability. This is a significant concern for local governments, such that they won't have the capacity to do preparedness work in particular, and meet complex needs in response. The result will be more reliance on communities; which is an incredible risk, and challenged by their unequal capacities and capabilities, and exhaustion from recovery efforts. While collaboration has been a strength of the Cluster, wider reforms and disconnected state processes have weakened inter-agency ties, imposed competing demands, and left local governments to bear disproportionate responsibilities without the necessary resources or systemic coordination.

In the context of climate change, the pressure on emergency management at the local government level will continue to increase as existing challenges such as shrinking resources, staff turnover (particularly for rural and regional local governments) and changing community expectations are exacerbated. Improved structures and processes are needed for effective, sustainable, emergency management. Six key recommendations follow.

1. Legislation and policy that set the agenda and promote collaboration including existing regional collaborative arrangements.
2. Effective policy instruments including stable, flexible, adequate, and administratively streamlined funding that is aligned with roles and responsibilities, distinct capacity and capability of organisations, and local needs.
3. Processes across and within organisations that ensure integration of emergency management collaboration and deepen relationships of trust.

4. Training to build capabilities and contribute to the development of emergency management as a career.
5. Fit-for-purpose tools including for climate risk assessment.
6. To put climate change and recognition of unique local needs at the forefront of policy, and practice.

These findings reinforce that local governments are critical frontline actors in emergency management, but require greater investment, stability, and whole-of-organisation support to respond to the scale and frequency of future events. Overall, participants stressed that without increased and ongoing support, local government capacity, and by extension the Cluster model itself, will be vulnerable under the escalating demands of a changing climate. Therefore, action is required to enable a more collaborative governance system developed with local governments, responsible organisations and agencies.

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