

# **Community-Based Bushfire Management (CBBM) As A Model For Reducing Bushfire Risk And Increasing Community Resilience**

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## **Introduction**

Community Based Bushfire Management (CBBM) is one of three community-focused projects in the Victorian Government's Safer Together program. Safer Together is a multi-agency program which was created following an investigation into the circumstances of an escaped planned burn in Central Victoria (Lancefield-Cobaw) in Spring 2015 (Carter *et al*, 2015). This burn destroyed several dwellings and sheds, as well as many kilometres of fencing. It greatly impacted the local community. The investigative report made several recommendations relating to land- and fire-management agency interoperability. To enable this interoperability, Safer Together was created in 2016. This program seeks to increase collaboration between fire- and land-management agencies (particularly the Country Fire Authority (CFA) and Department of Environment, Land, Water & Planning (DELWP)) (Safer Together, 2018), particularly in cross-tenure activities such as planned burning. The overarching program aim is the reduction of bushfire risk.

CBBM is a model of community engagement which puts the community at the centre of all work undertaken. It was the model chosen for the community-focused engagement project within Safer Together. Ideally, CBBM is community-led, however at the very least, the community has a major impact on any bushfire-related decisions made in their locality. Each community is unique and therefore the approach taken by each community is unique.

Currently, there are 21 CBBM communities throughout Victoria (Figure 1). The characteristics of each vary, as do the values, priorities and strategies identified by community members and other stakeholders. CBBM is facilitated by a team of eight facilitators, each of whom is employed either by CFA or DELWP. It is important to note that while many of the CBBM communities are single townships, many are complexes consisting of two or more townships.

In 2017, a review of CBBM was conducted. This work identified several significant achievements including; the development of trusting relationships, commencement of local bushfire risk reduction initiatives and evidence of community leadership in addressing bushfire risk. Since 2017, and indeed currently, other evaluation work has or is being undertaken.

For some, CBBM is a new style of community engagement. It moves away from informing, or even consulting with the community and instead seeks to empower the community to determine their own risk reduction strategies. This represents genuine culture change for many.



Figure 1. The 21 Victorian CBBM communities

## Materials and Methods

Fundamentally, CBBM is a community-centred process which seeks to develop trusting, two-way relationships between stakeholders. Mutual understanding of concerns is sought, with the aim of addressing issues relating to bushfire risk. With the support of a facilitator, a community-led process is developed. All stakeholders in the CBBM process should be considered equals and diverse perspectives should be respected.

In public participation terms (IAP2, for example), CBBM seeks to collaborate with, or empower, the community – not simply inform or consult with them. Community empowerment encourages greater shared decision-making, which has been shown to improve community safety and resilience (including in the face of bushfire) (Paton & Tedim, 2012).

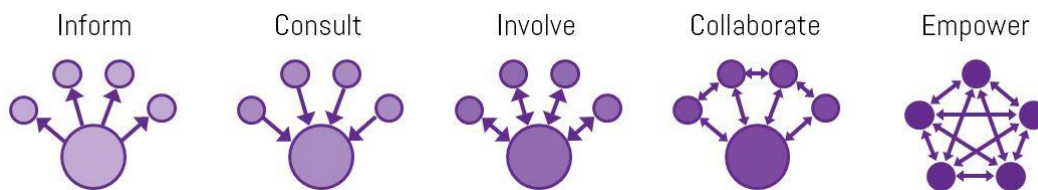


Figure 2. IAP2 spectrum of public participation

CBBM operates in accordance with a range of principles, including;

- Inclusivity - all those who are interested in joining in CBBM should be welcomed
- Openness and transparency - there are no “hidden agendas”
- Respect - participation must be based on respect for others, their experiences and perspectives
- Honesty – all stakeholders must engage in good faith on the basis that everyone is trying to do their best to strengthen relationships, build understanding, find effective solutions and work for the benefit of the community

- Flexibility – CBBM adapts to suit the needs of all those involved
- Clarity of purpose – activities should have clearly stated aims and an explanation of what is involved so people can make their own decisions
- Positivity and constructiveness – participants must have the right attitude
- Evidence-based – decisions and actions need to be based on plausible explanation and evidence, recognising that community experience and knowledge are valid forms of evidence

CBBM communities are chosen in accordance with these three principles;

- Community readiness to embrace and participate in CBBM
- Agency and local government readiness to embrace and participate in CBBM
- High local bushfire risk

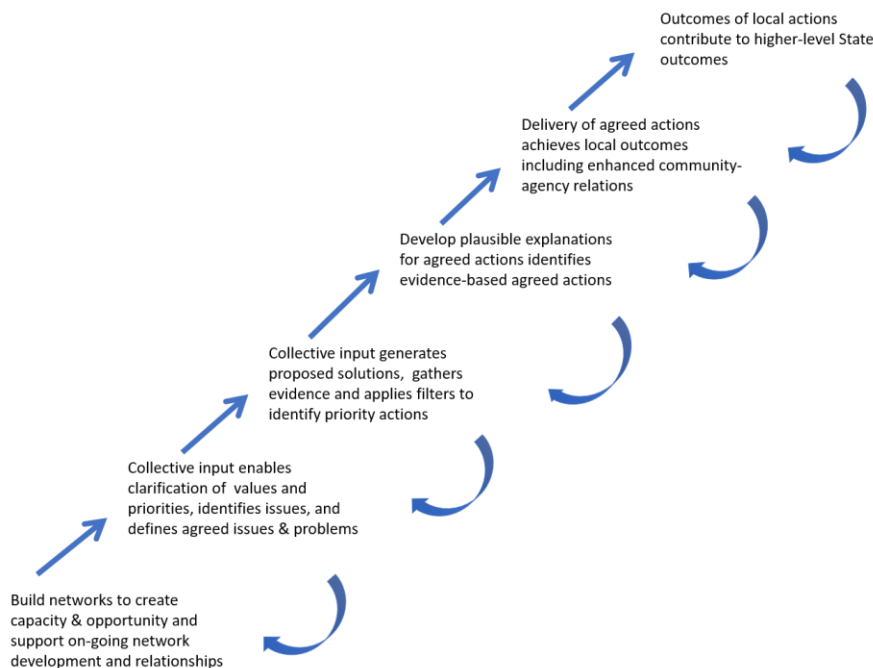
While CBBM seeks to empower the community, the first, and most important step in CBBM is the development of respectful, trusting relationships (Figure 3). This is crucial in allowing CBBM groups to progress to a stage where they can identify local values or priorities and then perhaps progress to making collaborative decisions around reduction of bushfire risk.

CBBM is facilitated in accordance with these principles;

- Community-centred – CBBM should be strongly grounded in the concerns and experiences of the local community. It may or may not be led by the community, but it strives to be as driven as much as possible by the community
- Built on partnerships – CBBM is built on partnerships between all stakeholders
- Interactive – two-way conversations are at the heart of the CBBM process
- Community-focused – CBBM must focus on and address the matters of concern to the community. These matters may or may not be priorities for other stakeholders
- Facilitated – CBBM is about bringing diverse perspectives together to explore, and hopefully resolve, complex issues
- Community decision-making – CBBM is a process to facilitate community decision-making
- Emergent – CBBM may lead to action, but it is a slow process. It will start small, gather momentum, be exploratory, wrestle with information and perspectives, evolve over time and possibly head in unpredictable directions. It may also stall, retrace its steps, create frustration and even angst. It will not stick to timelines or be easily measured.
- Recognisable and distinct – CBBM is unique, it seeks to empower communities to be involved in, and make decisions about, how to address community risk. CBBM is not a process suitable for all communities (Rhodes, 2016)

To the reader, CBBM may sound familiar. Indeed, many agency and local government personnel already recognise that by allowing community to lead decision-making processes, they are often more progressive, less contentious and more widely accepted compared with when information is simply presented to the community. However, for many, CBBM is a new way of working. It is a huge redefinition of the interactions and relationships between community, agency and local government. It is about the development of trusting relationships, with a view to collaborative decision making or community-led decision making. It is about enabling communities to make informed decisions concerning their bushfire risk. Many

communities and organisations are already working together to manage a range of issues, including emergencies, but CBBM seeks to extend the community-based approach through a consistent and practical initiative that assists communities to take a driving role to find solutions to the issues and concerns about bushfire that affect their local community.



**Figure 3. CBBM program logic**

## Results

Several pieces of CBBM evaluation work are currently underway. However, previous evaluation has been undertaken in St Andrews, one of the longest-running CBBM communities in this project. St Andrews Conversations, as their project is known, collectively chose to focus their evaluation on the social implications of CBBM, as their work is based on the understanding that strategically facilitated dialogue with a small, dynamic group of locals helps to increase understanding of emergency management related issues – and, in the process, strengthens connections and trust. It was suggested that these changes lead to learning, greater mutual understanding of the issues associated with emergency management locally and a greater collective capacity to problem solve (Safer Together, 2018).

The St Andrews Conversations project undertook Social Network Analysis (SNA) as a means by which to enable stakeholders to;

- Understand the domino effect of the project (quality conversations with a few can have a substantial, broad impact on a community)
- Obtain some insight into the “social impact” of the project
- Gauge if local networks have been strengthened, created and/or grown (and why)
- Identify and appreciate hubs of knowledge and connection in the community

To help achieve an understanding of the impact of St Andrews Conversations, a survey was completed with participants in which they were asked to indicate their level of agreement with several statements related to the project. The key results were;

- Survey respondents most strongly agreed with the statement “The St Andrews Conversations are contributing to the community becoming more connected, safe and resilient”
- The second most strongly agreed with statement was “The St Andrews Conversations have had a reach and impact beyond those who are directly part of the conversations”

Survey respondents were also asked to share what they found to be the most valuable aspects of participation in the project. The emerging themes were; increases in understanding; building of trust; increased confidence in fellow stakeholders; strengthening of relationships; and, the creation of a forum for sharing (Rixon, 2017). The participatory nature of St Andrews Conversations has produced effective behaviour change because;

- A partnership approach facilitates more knowledgeable decision-making processes, breaking down barriers to behaviour change
- Community-based partnerships help align agency objectives with community goals, increasing the likelihood that behaviour change will occur
- Participatory approaches foster greater social trust, by strengthening connections between people. The level of trust within a social network affects the success of behaviour change programs, and the CBBM methods helps to foster social trust
- Perceived social norms around safer community behaviours can be encouraged through participatory approaches
- Social network-based interventions help to reduce social barriers to behaviour change, by diffusing new ideas (Burton *et al*, 2004)

Anecdotally, numerous stakeholders involved in CBBM around Victoria have commented positively on this engagement model. Some illustrative quotes include;

*“What’s key is helping residents understand the part they can, and must play, to build a safer community”.*

*“[CBBM] is exciting. This is the way I have been hoping and encouraging [the fire service] to engage for years”*

*“Did you notice that everyone was listening to each other?!”*

*“We’ll work together because we don’t want to miss an opportunity to change things”*

*“What I liked about the group dynamics was the respect people showed each other”*

*“With the right knowledge the community will accomplish far more than fire services ever could alone”*

*“This is actually about life and death – we need to work together to prevent deaths”*

## **Discussion**

CBBM is a unique model of community engagement. Those involved with CBBM recognise that, for the most part, this model of engagement represents a fundamental shift in the way agencies and local government interact with the community. CBBM is a model which moves away from the tradition of agencies “informing” the community, but rather seeks to collaborate with and empower the community, to ultimately reduce local bushfire risk.

CBBM requires a willingness of the community to embrace and participate in the process. Likewise, agencies and local government must be ready and willing to participate. Communities must also have a suitable level of bushfire risk. To be successful, CBBM requires a skilled facilitator who understands the nuances required to make this a successful process. Facilitators often do well when they remove their uniform and become a neutral entity who is not seen by stakeholders as having allegiances.

Evaluation has shown the widespread benefit of CBBM on community. The positive impacts of CBBM are far-reaching and are testament to the effectiveness of a community-based approach. Community members respond positively to being empowered. Furthermore, the development of trusting and respectful relationships has widespread benefits.

## **Conclusions**

CBBM is a model of community engagement which empowers community members. It seeks to give community members the leading voice in the decisions which impact them. The focus on trusting, respectful relationships and shared decision-making, while time-consuming, has been shown to help align community and agency goals. The increased strength of local social networks also has a positive impact on behaviour change due to the diffusion of ideas through a community.

## **Acknowledgements**

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