

## **Southern Municipal Emergency Coordinators Liaison Forum**

### **Submission to The Future of Local Government Review, Stage 3 Engagement**

#### **Introduction**

The Southern Municipal Emergency Coordinators Liaison Forum is a subcommittee to assist with the performance and exercise of Regional Emergency Management Committees under section 16 of the Emergency Management Act 2006.

The committee comprises the appointed Municipal Emergency Management Coordinators and their Deputies, and Municipal Recovery Coordinators, and their deputies representing the councils of:

Brighton, Central Highlands, Clarence, Derwent Valley, Glamorgan Spring Bay, Glenorchy, Hobart, Huon Valley, Kingborough, Sorell, Southern Midlands and Tasman.

There are a range of views within the group and naturally, concerns that things that work well presently may be compromised with the proposed changes. It is important if change is enacted that the good things are carried forward and elements of emergency management that are not as effective as they could be, are improved.

We thank the board for their invitation to provide submissions and as practitioners in local government, tasked with delivering the specific services required of the Emergency Management Act, we believe our voice has relevance and import in any changes considered.

The submission is provided from the context of officers working in emergency management. Not from the perspective or view of any one council. It is considered that the review provides an opportunity to ask ourselves if the present arrangements work for officers employed by councils to deliver services to community.

That may be very different to how the councils we work for consider the proposition.

This submission is intended to provide information to the Review Panel on positive and negative aspects or concerns with larger scale council areas, with a view to inviting the review to consider how any change can integrate improvement without losing what is presently good.

#### **Context**

Officers providing the services within the roles noted above experience a range of challenges. The variation in size of the staffing complement of each council combined with significant variation in budget resourcing of the emergency management functions are some of these.

The roles are not the substantive or core positions of the officers meaning there are significant other responsibilities of each member of this group. The positions for Emergency Coordinators generally need to be at a high level of authority within the entity they represent to enable sufficient delegation for the deployment of staff and other resources and provision of media advice to their GM and Mayor.

Recovery coordinator positions will vary with many coming from less autonomous positions, particularly within smaller councils. This limits their discretionary time to perform their non-core functions and participate in training.

The level of priority placed on the statutory roles by council management differs greatly but not in accord with risk. One council presently has not had a deputy Emergency Management Coordinator appointed for more than 6 months. This is not infrequent across local government where an officer leaves their position. When events occur, the demand on the role is 24 hours a day for each day of an emergency, as has occurred twice during the period for this particular council. Where an evacuation centre is established this can run into weeks.

Other councils double up the roles so one officer may be two of the four positions required.

Some councils do not provision for emergency management events within budget allocations as there is no specific requirement to do so.

Emergency management practitioners are experiencing an increase in emergency events and an increase in the knowledge of the likely impacts of such events. The Pandemic exposed many weaknesses in the existing systems supporting councils which placed a higher demand and greater burden on practitioners, often at the expense of other council services.

The increase in flood events, management of evacuation centers, arrangements for quarantine of individuals and animals, advent of heat stress definitions, Tsunami modelling, fire risk elevation, fuel reduction burns, flood mapping etc greater coordination between state and councils – greater, better planning for mitigation works, and a better understanding of the importance of resilience in communities, mean that there is more training required, more demand on time, better communication and liaison required. All organisations require the same roles to be skilled, briefed, and available. Responsibilities extend beyond the Emergency Management Act and with a new state department for resilience and recovery this aspect of EM is only increasing.

While the template for the Municipal Emergency Management Plan has provision for inter-council sharing of resources, many events are not limited to one municipality and affect multiple localities at the same time rendering neighboring council support unachievable.

Notwithstanding the preceding commentary, there are also small councils which have very good connection to community through their small size. Their size and geography make them more reliant on community within their land area. This leads to a great willingness of community to pitch in when the need arises.

### **Training & Qualifications**

With the closure of a Victorian training facility a couple of years ago, the opportunities to participate in quality training, providing relevant qualifications, is significantly reduced for Tasmanians. The Australian Institute for Disaster Resilience offers some training and exposure to knowledge through its programs however these appear ad-hoc.

There is presently no base level qualification required for the holders of the positions described in the Emergency Management Act. Accordingly, the level of knowledge associated with community in emergency management varies enormously.

At the same time the level of knowledge and training required to engage and educate the community is increasing.

## **Response Example**

A recent flood event which affected the north of the state resulted in two evacuation centers being opened in different municipalities. One was a large well-resourced municipality while the other was a small rural municipality. The evacuation centers were open for about 48 hours each.

The large organization had many staff resources to be able to coordinate the event and set up a “call center” to deal with public enquiries and provide information, and for staffing the evacuation center. This organization also had many resources to call on for plant and equipment and road closures etc. It was not easy for them and the time frame exhausted their resources but they were able to do it well.

The other organization had two staff available to coordinate the event. Staff on leave or not available restricted this organisation’s capacity to respond. The incident induced a considerable amount of stress for those charged with the responsibilities. The evacuation center operations were difficult. There was no “call center”, only after-hours phone arrangements. Tensions were noted between response staff and SES and elected member interactions.

Other agencies were ultimately involved in the evacuation centres however the issue relates to council resourcing.

These examples highlight the great disparity for sustainably providing services to community for the present structure of emergency management.

## **Resilience**

Resilience has become a significant aspect of the ongoing day-to-day responsibility of recovery coordinators roles. Particularly through the pandemic and on the back of drought and fire emergencies the rolling nature of emergency after emergency exposed the lack of resilience in members of the community and focused attention on the need for connection to community for vulnerable people, a classification which any of us might enter at a particular time of difficulty.

The information, training and demands of the role of recovery coordinator and deputy are increasing while the resourcing does not recognize the importance of the role in many councils with limited resources.

## **Summary**

The incidences of emergency situations are increasing with climate change. The population is growing with more people requiring direction and information. The capacity of small council’s to resource the services expected or required is sorely tested and comes at the expense of other duties.

Experience and local knowledge is the greatest tool in responding to emergencies. A very large land area council must ensure the local knowledge of areas within the catchment are serviced by local staff with local knowledge. Goodwill is gained in community through the long-term buildup of relationship and trust within communities to make things happen faster.

The present requirements for the provision of emergency management resources are vague and open to interpretation. If larger councils are to be imposed there needs to be consideration given to stipulation of the level of resourcing dedicated to the activity.

## **The Reform Proposal**

The proposal for consideration suggests catchment area councils. Subject to the way in which this is implemented and ultimately managed the reform provides opportunity to improve the provision of emergency management through greater resourcing capacity. There is also the possibility of making already difficult roles more difficult if insufficient recognition of the importance of the roles and their adequate resourcing is not included in the change.

## **Summary**

Some points to consider in the proposed reforms are:

- Does allow for greater chance of dedicated resources to EM and Recovery roles. In smaller councils people often wear many hats it could be presumed that larger councils would allow for greater dedication of resources.
- Would allow for great expertise especially in areas such as risk assessment and planning and consequently there would be greater capacity and capability. Many risks extend beyond municipal areas and allow for risk to be considered more regionally if by catchment.
- Advantages of regional level infrastructure could spill over to infrastructure that mitigates emergencies. Eg could look at whole catchment solutions for flooding.
- Amalgamation boundaries appear to be based on catchments. Don't appear to be taking into account risk and this could provide some real challenges depending on where the boundaries end up. Could have some areas holding the majority of risk.
- If boundary areas align with communities, this could provide greater opportunity especially in the preparedness and recovery space.
- Would provide greater scale and capacity to respond to emergency events.
- Potentially better career pathways for EM professionals where there are dedicated resources. If this was coupled with minimum training requirements this would be an excellent outcome.
- Concerns that larger councils could be less nimble and less responsive to community needs especially during recovery. Potentially less accountable. Maintaining local identity could be harder in a larger council area. Some small councils achieve excellent outcomes with community engagement and response in emergencies.
- Concerns that amalgamated areas will be dominated by commercial centres and rural areas would be even more marginalised. Preparedness activities could further ignore the more rural areas.

- Funding could be interesting. Emergencies classed as regional scale events when the local council can no longer respond within their own resources. Will this change? Will more cost be pushed down to local government?

Peter Porch

Presiding Chair (in circulation) for the May 2023 Committee Meeting

The following officers preferred not to support the joint submission:

- MEMC Hobart City Council
- Deputy EMC & Recovery Coordinator Tasman Council (combined position)