

Blue Mountains Firewatch and Recovery research project

APPENDIX C: Stakeholder engagement

A range of stakeholders were contacted as part of the Firewatch and Recovery research project, to both assess the level of community engagement in the BMFR by formal organisations, and to also provide guidance for the development of the operational plan.

The table below shows which organisations were contacted and the responses received. All responses are tabled in full at the end of the document.

Blue Mountains City Council

Although BMCC was not the lead organisation for the management of the 2013 fires, they did take over many recovery tasks in 2014, in addition to their existing roles performing Council duties. The Council did not have a strong social media presence before the 2013 fires, so began operating a Facebook page and Twitter account at this time. However, most of Council's contribution to the BMFR group occurred in the aftermath of the fires, and in the recovery period. (Here, Council refers to staff, while the Mayor and Councillors response will be covered separately.)

BMFR admins send direct messages to BMCC staff, alerting them to specific issues related to Council, which BMCC reported as being helpful, as the number of groups on Facebook increases and Council does not have the capacity to monitor them all.

Council raised concerns that BMFR members needed to follow communication protocols for dealing with Council issues (ringing the main council number, or sending an email) to make sure they are logged and responded to and suggested that BMFR admins and Council work together out of the fire season to both manage and improve these communication links. [See the operational plan for specific actions.]

Mayor and Councillors

Both the Mayor and Deputy Mayor at the time were active members of BMFR, and contributed to discussions. Other Councillors were also members, with the Ward 3 Councillors (ward covering Winmalee and Yellow Rock) often tagged in posts about their specific area. The Mayor and Deputy Mayor reported finding BMFR a useful tool in responding to community needs and for staying in touch with issues that needed to be addressed. Tagging of Councillors was also seen as a good way for BMFR admins to alert Councillors to particular discussions. Councillors who used BMFR commented that focusing discussions on solutions by admins was helpful.

Other Councillors responded that they didn't use Firewatch, or Facebook in the communications with the community, instead relying on email and phone. [See the operational plan for further recommendations for BMFR engagement with the Mayor and Councillors.]

Community and neighbourhood centres

The six key centres throughout the Blue Mountains were all send questions, and subsequently followed up with a phone call. The Mid-Mountains and Springwood Neighbourhood Centres were the only ones to respond that they had had engagement with BMFR and continued to use the page. Other centres said they did not use the group, or did not respond. For those that had used BMFR, they found it a useful way to gauge community attitudes and monitor current issues, particularly in relation to the recovery process. [See the operational plan for further recommendations for engagement with the community sector.]

Other groups

During the recovery period, the Bushfire Recovery Coordination was set up. While information from this group was posted regularly to BMFR by admins, there was no direct links between the two groups. Attempts to contact them for this project were unsuccessful.

Other recovery services, such as Jericho Road, made extensive use of the BMFR group, posting updates about available services, and using the group to assess needs in the community.

RFS – both local and statewide

BMFR has many RFS members in the group, and informal relationships with key RFS personnel. A meeting with Superintendent David Jones, at Katoomba RFS head office, was held with commitment to meeting with BMFR admins and exploring future relationships. However, as the answers to questions for the research show, there is little understanding of BMFR by senior RFS personnel nor use of the group.

[See operational plan for recommendations for RFS engagement.]

ABC Radio

Updates from ABC Radio were constantly posted in BMFR, but in October 2014, a producer from ABC702 joined the group and posted these updates directly. BMFR had been in contact with ABC702 from October 2013, with admin appearing on radio programs. However, formal responses to this research project were not available, despite repeated follow ups. [See the operational plan for further recommendations for engagement with the ABC.]

Name of organisation	Key contact	Response received	Notes
Blue Mountains City Council – Mayor and Councillors	Mark Greenhill	Yes	Some Councillors responded that they did not use Facebook, or were not elected to BMCC at the time of the fires
	Brendan Luchetti	Yes	
	Chris Van Der Kley	Yes	
	Other Councillors	No	
Blue Mountains City Council – staff	Adrienne Murphy – BMCC Communicaitons	Yes	Responded at length - see operational plan for recommendations for future meetings
	Peter Belshaw - Program Leader, Bushfire & Emergency Management	Yes	
Community and Neighbourhood centres			
BANC	Jo Ridley	Yes	Had not heard of BMFR
KNC	Kath Hutchins	No	Did not respond to questions
MMNC	Danielle Wilding Forbes	Yes	Responded positively and requested future meeting

SNC	Liz Murphy	Yes	Responded positively
LMNC		No	Did not respond to questions
WNC		No	Did not respond to questions
Other groups			
Jericho Road	Elizabeth McClean	Yes	Responded to questions
Gateway family services		No	Email sent and phone follow up, but no response
RFS – local		Yes	Meeting held at Katoomba HQ and questions answered
RFS – statewide		No	Initial contact made and questions sent, but no response received
Phil Koperberg, Bushfire Recovery Coordinator		No	Initial contact made, questions sent, but no response received. Two follow up emails sent
ABC Radio	Laurence Champness	No	Initial contact made, questions sent, but no response received. Three follow up emails sent.

Mark Greenhill, BMCC Mayor

1. Yes, I am a member of the current Firewatch group and i was involved from its inception.
- 2.I visit the Firewatch group page regularly and have commented on this page as Mayor.
- 3.I use information obtained from the Firewatch group in my official capacity as an elected representative. If I see an issue of concern arising I bring it immediately to the attention of Council staff.
- 4.In relation to communication with Council through this page, I do refer matters to staff. However, this is outside protocol and on a number of occasions I have posted that people should contact their Ward Councillors by phone or email on urgent issues. There is no guarantee we will be viewing Facebook at any given time.
5. Gaining information during a major emergency is really hard. Firewatch is a fantastic resource if people affected post about what is going on around them.
- 6.This should be addressed by Adrienne Murphy.
- 7.I think Firewatch has been a fantastic resource to the Blue Mountains community. I has helped me to see that those with concerns are supported. Without Firewatch, some issues would have been inadvertently missed.

Chris Van Der Kley, BMCC Councillor

Thank you for the email on Firewatch, I can tell you that I received the Firewatch reports. As the chair of BMBFMC I was at all the briefing of the RFS for the October fires.

I did not post information on Firewatch.

No

All the information we get come from RFS and council staff, if Firewatch wants information from council it has to come from the Media staff of council.

Firewatch must put out the same information as RFS and Council.

We must all put out the same information about fires.

Brendan Luchetti, BMCC Councillor

1. Yes, I am a member of the Firewatch group. I became a member during the bushfire recovery period.
2. I have responded to threads with comments and suggestions when appropriate and when I have information or advice relevant to the discussion or thread. I don't keep an eye on the page as much now as I did in the immediate aftermath of the fires, but am still occasionally tagged and then tune back in to what is being said.
3. The information on the site kept me abreast of emerging issues within the community during the recovery period. I was also given an insight into how the community was thinking, coping and responding to the crisis. Councillors were informed, at times very directly, about what the community needed and expected form us and where BMCC was falling short of expectations.
4. I agree that the tagging of Ward councillors was an is a very effective method of communication and of alerting political representatives of community needs or

disharmony. We became aware of emerging issues through this method very quickly and were able to respond in a timely manner to the issues being raised. The site admins alerting councillors to issues was also effective, as was the site admins posting comments directing participants in the threads/ discussions to contact Ward councillors directly to assist with their concerns, which often was positive direction to provide to people who were frustrated with bureaucracy and feeling angry and powerless.

5. Whilst accurate and up to date information on the bush fires is provided to councillors, Firewatch tunes us into the community impact, mood and their evolving needs. The way the page continued to identify issues and problems and alert us to them in a prompt fashion was very useful.

6. Yes. It often took the unproductive ranting or venting out of a debate and steered participants down a channel that led or gave opportunity to a positive outcome.

7. Firewatch put people in touch with other people who were having the same same or similar experiences. It has been an invaluable information sharing network and community forum for people negotiating very difficult times.

Adrienne Murphy, BMCC Corporate Communications

1. Are you a member of Blue Mountains Firewatch and Recovery group? Were you a member of either Firewatch or Recovery during the 2013 fires?

Yes. BMCC was a member of Blue Mountains Firewatch and Recovery* Facebook groups at the time of the 2013 bushfires soon after they were established. BMCC is a current member of Blue Mountains Firewatch Facebook group.

* I have little memory of the Blue Mountains Recovery Facebook page, by that name, other than it being an iteration of the original Blue Mountains Furniture & Donations Facebook page. This is distinct from the Blue Mountains Bushfire Recovery Facebook page/s established by the NSW Government and BMCC during the formal recovery phase of the bushfires.

2. Have you posted information in either of these groups? Have you posted a comment in either group? How often do you read Firewatch?

Yes BMCC has posted information and comments on the Firewatch Facebook page. I don't recall if I made any posts or comments on the 'recovery' Facebook page in its early days, I vaguely remember making a comment about the availability of council managed community halls on this page. Very little, if any, posts were made during the immediate response phase of the bushfires, with Council input made during the aftermath and recovery phases of the bushfires.

BMCC posts and comments were made by me in a professional capacity as spokesperson for the organisation.

Both myself, as Council's Program Leader Corporate Communications & Marketing, and Council's Communications Officer can view and comment on Blue Mountains Firewatch Facebook page using a single corporate profile.

Regarding the regularity of Council's use of the Blue Mountains Firewatch and Recovery Facebook groups, Council certainly interacted considerably more on Firewatch than the Recovery Facebook page

3. Did you use the information provided in either group? If so, how?

Yes. The information provided on either page was used in a number of ways:

- a) To check bushfire –related happenings and emergency services & community updates
- b) To inform council staff of immediate or emerging issues
- c) To monitor community sentiment, understanding or opinion of, emergency related issues as well as responses to Council posts/comments.
- d) To provide information, answer questions and correct mistruths relating to Recovery related matters involving Council

All interaction on these Pages was done in a professional capacity using the BMCC corporate profile. The identity of BMCC posts and comments on Facebook was clear by way of the profile name, BMCC logo and the sign off /signature. Typically, I would sign off corporate Facebook posts with, "Regards, Adrienne, BMCC Recovery Communications", or when I was no longer in the role of

recovery Communications Coordinator, "Regards, Adrienne, BMCC Communications."

4. How could Firewatch improve communications with Council staff? (tagging directly, posting on BMCC Facebook page for example.)

- Pre-approved procedure in place for a bushfire (or other) emergency
- No Council staff should be named or tagged individually even if they are the most appropriate person, as this will tie work related matters to a personal social media profile.
- It is acceptable for elected councillors to be tagged in Firewatch posts, in a manner that complies with the Firewatch Group code of conduct, which is moderated by Page administrators.
- All online communication should refer to Blue Mountains City Council corporate Facebook page or corporate profile. This means Council's corporate communications staff have visibility of all enquiries/tags/direct messages and can coordinate a response. This also means the Comms staff can register the question/request/complaint as a Customer Service Request which is logged, directed to the most appropriate staff, are tracked and are guaranteed a response.
- All off-line communication between Firewatch and BMCC should be directed to Council's Corporate Communications staff.
- On occasion the Firewatch administrators kindly Direct Message council to alert me to a 'hot' topic or controversial commentary. This was very helpful because we did not have the resources to dedicate to monitoring social media constantly. This challenge will only increase because of the ever increasing number of community-based Facebook pages in the Blue Mountains eg. BM Political Forum, Hazo Happenings etc
- encouraging group members to be patient (we cannot respond to criticisms / questions 24/7) and to be civil (acknowledging the stress/trauma etc)

5. What would be useful information for Council that Firewatch could provide in a future fire emergency?

Importantly, in emergency situations where Council is not the primary combat agency, such as bushfire, the scope of Council communications is to a) share information provided by emergency services, transport providers, emergency broadcaster, and utilities and b) advise of any Council related information regarding any impact on services, facilities, programs etc. Council does not speak on behalf of any other agency. Council does not seek to duplicate existing channels of communication.

The reliability of emergency information disseminated by residents and members of the public via Firewatch or other community-based social media platforms, is impossible to trust and therefore, despite its authenticity and potential value, will not be shared by BMCC unless verified.

The best way for Firewatch to assist the BMCC emergency communications is to:

- a) continue to moderate the site content in such a way that discourages slander or unsubstantiated comments towards BMCC (or anyone else of course)
- b) alert BMCC to a relevant post/commentary (which you have kindly done in the past)

6. Were the Firewatch communications to members about how to communicate with Council helpful or not helpful? How can Firewatch improve this communication, both in fire emergencies and in non-emergency periods?

- the Firewatch communications to members about how to communicate with Council was helpful

overall

- Again, actively moderating the page helps maintain courteous communication.
- Assisting to regulate the duration of a particular Facebook commentary by advising the member when a debate or enquiry has run its course. The example we spoke of was the concern about litter/glass on site at Cliff Drive fire in October 2014. Persistent and pedantic comments/criticisms/requests relating to council matters required moderation/intervention once Council had addressed the matter adequately or reasonably. There is a point at which the ongoing debate is not in the interest of the group members and should be taken off line, or at least continued in a private message between the resident/complainant and council.
- managing the operational v political nature of council can be tricky for Administrators to know how best to refer members to council. Generally, people should speak to Council first and if they encounter a problem, or if there is a stalemate because Council staff cannot operate outside their directive/policy/law, then they should talk to an elected Councillor. Although I understand the strategy in escalating something to an elected councillor, inevitably, the elected councillor won't know the answer to the question (because it relates to operational detail) and have to ask staff anyway.
- In non-emergency periods, it might be worth Firewatch and Council working together to help Administrators better understand council/political process so they can guide members more ably. I think there is some value in reflecting on particular issues / comments raised on Firewatch to guide our thinking on this approach.
- for example, members are often asking the group for the best contact person/number for various issues eg. Tree /waste management; DAs, local parks etc. This is not efficient for the resident, the group or council. The best way to contact council is via the Call Centre on 4780 5000... the question gets answered by the call centre staff as much as possible. If not, it gets forwarded to the relevant staff or logged as a Customer Service Request (CSR).
- a CSR is logged, assigned to the right staff, can be tracked and has to meet certain standards etc.
- would also be great to encourage people to ask Council questions, and then the really hard part, wait for an answer, before starting a petition!
- also concepts like risk. Understandably, residents will often perceive risk differently to Council /authorities. It is a tricky balance between a) council relying on residents to inform us of actual & emerging risks and b) community understanding that council has to prioritise its work according to greatest risk

7. Any further comments, overall, on Firewatch and Recovery Facebook groups in relation to Council bushfire activities?

- Many of the challenges and issues I experienced from the Firewatch Facebook interactions during and after the Oct 2013 bushfires are issues inherent to the corporate/community interface on social media, but are magnified exponentially because of the trauma and sense of urgency borne from and crisis situation. Things like the expectation of an instantaneous response; community cynicism toward council; people not checking with council (or any other authority) first before starting a thread of hypotheticals, mistruths or conspiracies; and the herd mentality whereby members believe whatever was said by the last person :/
- The majority of the Facebook comments/questions required a lengthy response from Council. This was not done to be bureaucratic, rather, because of a) the complex nature of issues b) the regulatory environment Council has to operate in c) the unprecedented scale of the Oct 2013 bushfire d) the governance arrangements for the formal recovery phase were new and constantly

changing.

- As discussed, there is a desperate need, in my view, to better manage the realm of community donations in response to an emergency/natural disaster. This is a big and complex issue that requires a national approach and a radical cultural change. In the local sense, even if this had been handled better by the NSW Government Recovery team, I'm not sure how to intervene the inevitable community-based Facebook groups that are set up for this purpose.
- The theories of Benevolent Arrogance (or similar) and Intention vs Impact are fascinating but a conversation for another time (or a PhD!)
- finally to acknowledge the administrators of the Firewatch page who took on an enormous task in uncharted territory, in a voluntary capacity. The Firewatch page has certainly established itself as a credible and well managed community based social media.

Peter Belshaw - BMCC Program Leader, Bushfire & Emergency Management

1. Yes, I am a member of the current Firewatch group but was not involved during or immediately after the 2013 bushfires.
2. I visit the Firewatch group page regularly and have both commented and posted to this group as a Blue Mountains resident. I have never identified myself as being an employee of Council or an RFS volunteer, and have tried to present my thoughts on various topics as my own and not as an opinion of either of these organisations.
3. I have not used information obtained from the Firewatch group in an official capacity, however, it is useful in gaining an appreciation of issues that concern the broader community as well as identifying areas where the provision of information and engagement could be valuable.
4. With regards to communication with Council via this medium, I must admit that I'm not aware of whether Council has any protocols around responding to requests in this way (perhaps Adrienne Murphy could clarify). It goes without saying that Council employees should never be tagged directly even if they are the most appropriate person to answer, as this will tie work related matters to a personal social media profile. In my opinion, all formal requests for information should still come to Council via traditional means, such as email and telephone, as these items are logged and tracked and are guaranteed a response.
5. My comments to this question are in the context of emergency response and coordination (which is my main role during an emergency). Gathering intelligence during a major emergency can be challenging, so the Firewatch group could be a useful resource if people in the impact zone are posting about what is happening, particularly photos. That said, when gathering information for use by emergency services we need to assess who provided that information, when they provided it, and how reliable is it expected to be. As there is no quality control (as we would be used to from official sources) over posts to the group and Facebook can be fickle as to whether you see a post or not, I am not sure how we might use such information in an official capacity, or even whether use of such information would be supported from a State policy perspective. Further investigation of policy issues around the use of such resources is probably warranted.
6. These questions are probably best addressed by Council's Communications and Recovery Managers.
7. No further comments.

BANC – Jo Ridley, Manager

I have discussed this with the people here who are involved in bushfire recovery activities and they inform me that we were not involved with Firewatch.

MMNC – Danielle Wilding Forbes Community Development Worker

1. Are you a member of Blue Mountains Firewatch group? Were you a member of either Firewatch or *Recovery* during the 2013 fires?

Yes and Yes

2. *Have you posted information about your organisation in either of these groups? Have you posted a comment in either group? How often do you read Firewatch?*

Yes and yes

I check on it when there is extreme weather, when I hear sirens or when it hits my FB feed.

3. *Did you use the information provided in either group? If so, how? Yes but I cant remember specific examples.*

4. *How could Firewatch improve communications with community and neighbourhood centres? By sending email updates and requests for information. (possibly)*

5. *Do users of your organisation ever talk about using Firewatch, either during the fires or afterwards? Yes, through our Meet your Street Project events a number of people have offered it as an example of an information source they use.*

6. *What could Firewatch do to improve awareness of the group and of the information available there? Would love to talk further as the list is quite long and opportunities to partner with MMNC may exist.*

7. *Any further comments, overall, on Firewatch and Recovery? Doing a great job and am keen to see it grow.*

SNC – Liz Murphy, Community Development Worker

1. Are you a member of Blue Mountains Firewatch group? YES Were you a member of either Firewatch or *Recovery* during the 2013 fires? Both

2. *Have you posted information about your organisation in either of these groups? Yes Have you posted a comment in either group? Yes How often do you read Firewatch? Once a fortnight now but regularly twelve months ago.*

3. *Did you use the information provided in either group? Yes If so, how? It was a useful indicator of how people were travelling and to gauge issues arising for people in the recovery.*

4. *How could Firewatch improve communications with community and neighbourhood centres? I would suggest email contacts as some of the services do not have as much of a presence on social media and it would be helpful to just email the admins to share information rather than having to have a facebook presence.*

5. *Do users of your organisation ever talk about using Firewatch, either during the fires or afterwards? Discussion was that it was useful and we know some people found out about assistance and programs only through the facebook sites. Anecdotally, I think some people removed themselves because they found it exhausting and tending to escalate their distress.*

6. *What could Firewatch do to improve awareness of the group and of the information available there?* I actually think it was well publicised across Facebook and met the need well.

7. *Any further comments, overall, on Firewatch and Recovery?* I do think that Ann Crestani and the Step By Step found social media very helpful and in their final report have some data around that. She may be helpful for you to talk to and is based back at Gateway Family Services now.

Jericho Road, Elizabeth McClean

- 1. Are you a member of Blue Mountains Firewatch group? Were you a member of either Firewatch or Recovery during the 2013 fires? Yes, both personally and in my role as CEO of Jericho Road*
- 2. Have you posted information in either of these groups? Yes, in my role as CEO of Jericho Road. Have you posted a comment in either group? Yes, as above. How often do you read Firewatch? During the year following the fires between 4 times per day and once per week.*
- 3. Did you use the information provided in either group? If so, how? Yes. To ascertain what needs people had at any point in time and assess whether Jericho Road could assist.*
- 4. How could Firewatch improve communications with organisations working in the region? We had an informal relationship which worked well for us.*
- 5. Any further comments, overall, on Firewatch and Recovery. Blue Mountain Fire Recovery was particularly good*

We did not run a social media group as such, but our facebook page was a great way to connect with people. In the first weeks we were receiving over 30,000 hits per post on some posts.

Superintendent David Jones, Blue Mountains RFS District Manager

Please see responses to your questions. As we discussed the other day I am keen to ensure any messaging is consistent with the information provided on the NSW RFS website to ensure we do the best for our communities.

1. I have heard of the Blue Mountains Firewatch group from verbal sources
2. As I have not participated in the Group I am unable to advise what information has been provided so am unable to comment
3. As we discussed I believe it would be advantageous to have meeting with the Group Facilitators to ascertain their charter and objectives. From there we would be able to consider information streams.
4. One of the most important facets of information is correctness and relevance. It would be helpful if the Group were to refer discussions to the NSW RFS website. This would ensure the correct information is being promulgated to the community
5. I am unable to comment on this question as per 2 above
6. My comments in 4 above apply. I am under the impression that the Group has not always encouraged participants to refer to the appropriate website for information
7. As discussed I believe it would advantageous for the Group to consider a discussion with the District to allow us to develop an operating framework that would be of benefit to the community of ensuring clear and consistent messages are conveyed to users.