



Blue Mountains Firewatch and Recovery: Research report

“I think Firewatch has been a fantastic resource to the Blue Mountains community. It has helped me to see that those with concerns are supported. Without Firewatch, some issues would have been inadvertently missed.”

Blue Mountains Mayor, Mark Greenhill

“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. 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.”

Blue Mountains Deputy Mayor, Brendan Luchetti

“The sharing of information by the community and monitoring of fire movement was so valuable and far more specific and timely than provided by the media, really helped me to know just how close my family and friends in the area were. The mainstream media made it sound like every house in the mountains was on fire so this group helped put things in perspective and helped people feel a part of the community and be able to come together and communicate through a challenging time. Easily the most valuable Facebook group I am a member of.”

BMFR member survey response

Thanks and acknowledgements

This research report was jointly funded by the Commonwealth and State Governments under the Natural Disaster Relief and Recovery Arrangements.



Australian Government



The project was auspiced by Mountains Support, with particular thanks to Angelique Sasagi



This research would not have been possible without the cooperation and assistance of the Blue Mountains Firewatch and Recovery volunteer admin team, and the Facebook group members. Thanks to all.

Research conducted and written by El Gibbs in 2015.

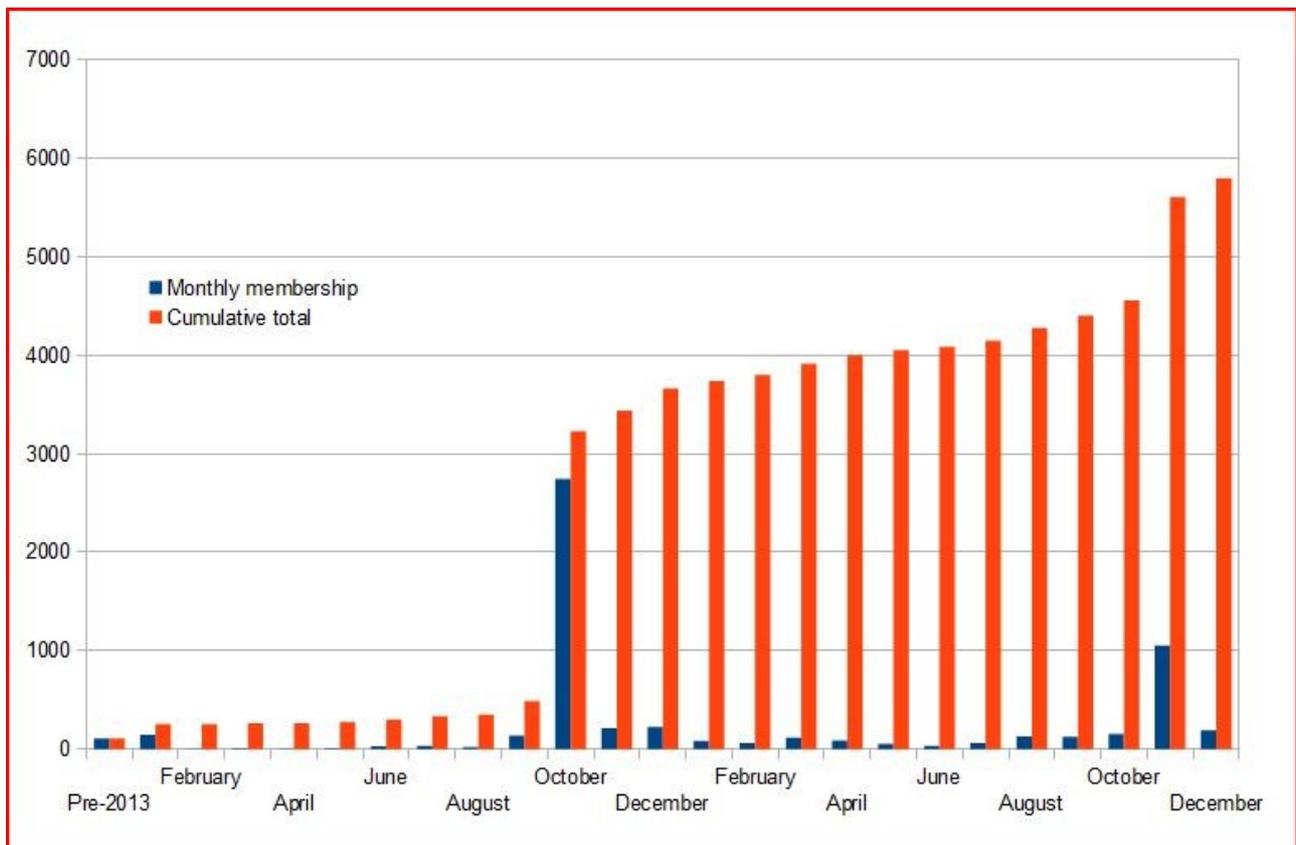
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Executive summary

Introduction

This report looks at the experience of a community-run social media group, operating in the Blue Mountains, that provides information and support about bushfires in the area. The Blue Mountains Firewatch and Recovery (BMFR) group began in 2011, but grew very rapidly around the time of the October 2013 fires. The group is still operating today, and now has over 6,000 members. The group can be found at <https://www.facebook.com/groups/BlueMountainsFirewatch/>.



[Graph showing growth in BMFR membership between 1/1/2013 and 31/12/2014.]

This research covers the period from October 2013 to October 2014. The Blue Mountains Firewatch and Recover group initially started as two separate groups (referred to in this report as 'Firewatch' and 'Recovery'), but have since merged into one, known here as BMFR. The evaluation was therefore split into three sections - the period of the fire emergency (October to November 2013), the period directly afterwards (December 2013 to March 2014) and finally, the post-group merger (April to October 2014.) This evaluation included surveys of the BMFR admins, both past and present, and also members.

There have been extensive screenshots taken of activity in the group to illustrate both the challenges and the successes of the BMFR group, and a clear evolution can be seen from the early days of the group, to how it functions today. The BMFR is a public group, but the screenshots have been made anonymous to protect members' privacy. Consultations with key stakeholders were undertaken, with responses being incorporated into the operational plan to ensure the long term sustainability of the group.

A public website has also been created that takes many of the experiences of BMFR and incorporates them into tips and tricks that other communities can learn from. The website contains this full report available for download.

www.bluemountainsfirewatch.com.au

The research has covered the following areas:

- **Evaluation:** three part report looking at October-November 2013, December-March 2014, and April-October 2014.
- **Survey:** a survey was done of both the volunteer admins and of group members.
- **Stakeholders:** a range of stakeholders were consulted, with their views considered in the development of the operational plan.
- **Operational plan:** this lays out a potential platform for the growth of BMFR and the steps that need to be taken to be sustainable over the long term.
- **Website:** a website has been developed containing an edited version of this report, plus guides for other groups that wish to use social media in emergencies.

The full report also contains a number of appendices:

- Appendix A: **Screenshots** - these have been modified for privacy reasons.
- Appendix B: **Group documents** - these include some internal admin documentation.
- Appendix C: **Stakeholder responses**
- Appendix D: **Survey responses** - original full responses available on request.

Literature review

The use of social media in emergencies has increased, with groups emerging during the Queensland floods, the New Zealand earthquakes and Cyclone Yasi. However, Blue Mountains Firewatch and Recovery (BMFR) is unusual for its longevity - the group has continued through several fire emergencies and continues to provide updates and gain new members.

The Facebook page, Cyclone Yasi Update, was examined by Taylor and Howell in 2012, and found to contribute to psychological first aid by not replacing official information sources but by extending "the reach of official messages and limit the damage caused by rumours and sensationalised media reporting." This kind of community-run Facebook page was also seen to empower "individuals and communities to help themselves through provision of accurate, timely and relevant information and [provide] a mechanism to connect with others."

In his 2012 paper in the Australian Journal of Emergency Management, Neil Dufty says that there are three ways that social media builds community resilience: disaster risk reduction, emergency management and community development. He cites key points where social media works in these areas, giving a useful way to evaluate how well the Blue Mountains Firewatch and Recovery Facebook group has been able to build community resilience.

Disaster risk reduction	Blue Mountains Firewatch and Recovery Facebook group
Informing others of disaster risks	Post information from official sources Group members post information from local areas Validating rumours, or sightings Admin check on information veracity Group members encouraged to validate information
Discussing and planning ways to minimise risk	Fire planning and preparedness discussed, both in emergency period and in the recovery phase Local expertise and experience shared
Coordinating and managing tasks	Recovery able to share coordinating of donation and recovery efforts Firewatch able to coordinate supplies for local brigades, lists of information sources and emotional support resources
Conducting post-event learning to improve	Firewatch admins had informal discussions immediately after the October 2013 fires, and ongoing discussions happen in admin group Group has not had a formal reflection process, however this research may be part of that process
Emergency management	
Providing emergency intelligence through crowdsourcing	Hyper-local posts about specific areas to provide detailed information about fires Relaying information from RFS meetings to group Posting continual updates from official sources
Helping people prepare for disasters	Promoting fire planning and preparedness information Members sharing experience from previous fires Providing information about tools and services available to assist in fire preparedness
Communicating warnings to others	Admins posting latest official fire information Members assisting in understanding that fire information Members posting eye-witness information
Coordinating community response and recovery	Recovery posted donation and collection information Firewatch coordinated some fire station supply posts Combined group continued to post information about the variety of bushfire recovery processes
Conducting post-event learning to improve	Specific event not held, although informal meet ups happened. Reflections and discussions were held in the admins' group, but it could be valuable to have a more formal strategic planning and reflection session.
Community development	
Increasing and improving social networks, leadership and support systems	BMFR improved networks in the community, with residents of distinct areas connecting. It also reached broader groups, such as organisations providing bushfire recovery. See operational plan

	for more information about this aspect
Providing support to people during and after a disaster	Both Firewatch and Recovery provided forums for direct support during and after the 2013 fires, through peer to peer support, posts with information about getting support and creating lists of emotional support resources.
Conducting post-event learning to improve	Specific event not held, although informal meet ups happened. Reflections and discussions were held in the admins' group, but it could be valuable to have a more formal strategic planning and reflection session.

The Australian Government's National Strategy for Disaster Resilience (COAG, 2011) identifies building communities' resilience as a key part of both disaster planning, and recovery. This strategy notes that it is important that all parts of those communities take responsibility for in a disaster, not just those tasked with officially dealing with it, such as fire fighters. This strategy calls for a [range of activities](#) that will build resilient communities and defines what that looks like.

"A disaster resilient community is one where:

- People understand the risks that may affect them and others in their community. They understand the risks assessed around Australia, particularly those in their local area. They have comprehensive local information about hazards and risks, including who is exposed and who is most vulnerable. They take action to prepare for disasters and are adaptive and flexible to respond appropriately during emergencies.
- People have taken steps to anticipate disasters and to protect themselves their assets and their livelihoods, including their homes and possessions, cultural heritage and economic capital, therefore minimising physical, economic and social losses. They have committed the necessary resources and are capable of organising themselves before, during and after disasters which helps to restore social, institutional and economic activity.
- People work together with local leaders using their knowledge and resources to prepare for and deal with disasters. They use personal and community strengths, and existing community networks and structures; a resilient community is enabled by strong social networks that offer support to individuals and families in a time of crisis.
- People work in partnership with emergency services, their local authorities and other relevant organisations before, during and after emergencies. These relationships ensure community resilience activities are informed by local knowledge, can be undertaken safely, and complement the work of emergency service agencies.
- Emergency management plans are resilience-based, to build disaster resilience within communities over time.
- Communities, governments and other organisations take resilience outcomes into account when considering and developing core services, products and policies. They are adaptive and flexible to respond appropriately in disasters.
- The emergency management volunteer sector is strong.
- Businesses and other service providers undertake wide-reaching business continuity planning that links with their security and emergency management arrangements.
- Land use planning systems and building control arrangements reduce, as far as is practicable, community exposure to unreasonable risks from known hazards, and suitable arrangements are implemented to protect life and property.
- Following a disaster, a satisfactory range of functioning is restored quickly. People

understand the mechanisms and processes through which recovery assistance may be made available and they appreciate that support is designed to be offered, in the first instance, to the most vulnerable community members." (COAG, 2011)

BMFR is an excellent example of how the Blue Mountains community was able to work together to strengthen key features of a resilient, connected community. The group functioned as a forum to communicate and explore risks, such as when and how to evacuate, what to do to defend homes, and shared accounts of past bushfire behaviour in the region. This function as a useful tool for people new to the Mountains, and also served as a peer reminder of risk.

Working with the Blue Mountains City Council after the October 2013 fires, showed the value of this forum in being able to resolve issues quickly, but also to bring together communities with similar needs. The group also worked with community organisations, both to spread information more widely, but also to make the community aware of the resources available after the fire emergency had passed.

The Recovery group was vital in linking the different groups of people who wanted to provide assistance with those that needed help. One of their key roles was also to manage the expectations of donors and the quantity and quality of donations. Donations are likely to be an ongoing challenge. The National Guidelines for Managing Donations, prepared in 2011, contain some highly useful material for future communications around donations.

Conclusion

Overall, the research found very positive responses to BMFR, both during the 2013 fires and in the recovery period since. Wide ranging consultations show areas that BMFR can build on and what are the key challenges for the group in the future.

This research was funded by the Department of Premier and Cabinet, and auspiced by Mountains Support. Sincere appreciation to both organisations for their support.

My thanks also to all the admins and members of BMFR for generously giving their time to the production of this report.

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Recommendations:

Recruit and sustain pool of volunteer admins

As BMFR continues to grow, the need for a wider pool of admins also grows. BMFR could develop rolling recruitment goals to ensure the continuation of admin skills and experience.

Relationships with stakeholders

Through this research, formal stakeholder meetings between BMFR admins and a variety of groups has been suggested. These include Blue Mountains City Council, the Katoomba RFS local headquarters and the broader local community sector. This will assist in future fire emergencies, and also build trust between these disparate parts of the community.

Publicity materials

Developing general material about BMFR, for both print and online audiences, will be a key part in growing the group membership and also reaching parts of the Blue Mountains community who are not currently members of BMFR.

Develop and provide out of fire season information on best practice in regard to donations, with key stakeholders

The management of donations is a significant drain on resources after a disaster. BMFR may be able to effectively communicate some of the key messages from the National Guidelines for Managing Donations, in conjunction with Blue Mountains City Council, and community organisations. This process may help to educate our community, who then will be able to implement a different way of dealing with donations. Developing materials that are best suited to the Blue Mountains region may improve the effectiveness of the communication materials.

Conduct a reflection and future planning session

This was the only section missing from the Dufty analysis on how to use social media to build resilience, so it would be valuable for BMFR admins to be able to conduct such a session.

Blue Mountains Firewatch and Recovery Project

Evaluation

The Blue Mountains Firewatch Facebook group was established in 2011 as a source of emotional support during fire-related emergencies. Before the 2013 fires, the group had approximately 300 members and 3 admins. After the October 2013 fires, the group had grown to over 3000, and had 10 admins.

The Blue Mountains Fire Recovery group was formed in October 2013 to coordinate the large volume of donations that were being delivered. Recovery provided emotional support to people and disseminated a huge volume of information about events that were happening and where people could get help and support. The recovery group was started the morning after the fires and had over 500 members by the end of that day.

The two groups worked collaboratively from the beginning, but had clearly specified differences. This was both to assist the groups' members, but also to make sure admins were able to efficiently resource the groups. Recovery had two admins.

Other Facebook groups were also created at this time to target specific needs, such as with pets and other animals, formal dresses and furniture.

In this section, the two groups will be analysed separately, although the similarities between them will also be discussed. Key conversations within both groups are referenced, and can be found in Appendix A in a series of screenshots from the group. The names of members have been blurred for privacy. The volunteer administrators of both groups are referred to as 'admins'. Both the admins and the group members were surveyed as part of this analysis. The full survey data can be found in Appendix D.

What did Firewatch and Recovery have in common?

- Both groups were (and still are) run by Blue Mountains residents on a voluntary basis. The groups compiled lists of available resources that were updated many times a day to ensure their accuracy. Admins liaised closely with official groups, such as the RFS, Council and community organisations, helping to spread information.
- Emotional support and awareness of members' fragility were also present in both groups, and encouraged by both admin teams. The fires led to a great deal of community anxiety and members were able to share that with others.
- Both groups saw large increases in membership and posting activity during the fires.
- Both groups used the Files system in Facebook groups to gather and disseminate information. For example, Recovery had an up to date list of what donations were needed, and Firewatch provided lists of where to find information and support.
- Both groups worked hard to counter the many rumours and mis-information that was present in the Blue Mountains and the wider media.

What did Firewatch and Recovery do differently?

- Firewatch had been an open (public) group where any member could post before the fires, and remained one during the emergency. Recovery was an open group in the beginning, later becoming a closed group but still allowing member posts.
- Firewatch had some existing admins, and grew this group of admins, while Recovery was set up by the two admins who stayed until the merger of the two groups.
- Firewatch used a secret group to discuss administrative tasks while with two admins, Recovery didn't need to.
- While Recovery remained focused on donations alone, Firewatch provided information and support on all recovery issues.

Part 1: During the fire emergency – October – November 2013

Firewatch

Blue Mountains Firewatch grew from roughly 300 members, to over 3000 in the period of the major fires in the Blue Mountains in October 2013. Members came from all over the Blue Mountains Local Government Area, but also from outside the region, with friends and family eager to find out details of the fires.

"I like knowing there is a source of info in case of fires. Feels more local and more relevant than the mainstream info I relied on during Oct 2013. I feel better knowing other people are thinking about the risk of fire, like I am. A sense of "we'll all help each other through if it goes wrong again". But also gives the message that we are each responsible to prepare ourselves."

[Member survey response - see Appendix D.]

The group previously had been set up to provide emotional support after an earlier fire emergency. This remained a focus for the group, but in addition the group became a source of fire information, with the latest updates from the RFS posted regularly. The group always deferred to the RFS as the source of official information and relayed content from RFS briefings on ABC radio and television as well as the RFS website and Facebook pages.

During the fire emergency, the Firewatch admin team rapidly expanded, with people recruited from across the Blue Mountains region to assist. Some admins worked 10-12 hours a day, keeping the group updated and vetting new members. Admins were motivated by a variety of reasons.

"I partly wanted to know what was happening myself - concerned, have young children etc. Realised at times I had better information than many others due to scanner monitoring, so started helping with updates." [1]

"As I am living with a disability, I would find it difficult to be a member of the RFS. However, I desperately wanted to do something productive to help my community, and to keep busy so that I didn't think too much about the traumatic situation" [3]

"Our little family had our bushfire plan in place but we're a bit freaked out by our first major fire season since moving to the mountain. I found the page very helpful and just kind of fell into helping out more and more as the situation escalated. It seemed the best way to contribute while working and looking after my fam." [6]

"Staying informed for the sake of my own family" [8]

[Admin survey responses - see Appendix D.]

Admins were recruited either through the existing personal networks, or from active group members. The key attributes that admins needed was a commitment to accuracy of information, a good manner with people, an understanding of the emotional impact the fires were having, and strong community links. Each person recruited had their background checked through personal references and no one was made an admin unless at least one of the admins had a personal

connection to someone who knew them.

The Firewatch admin team set up a secret group in Facebook to discuss issues that were arising and used Facebook messages to both communicate with each other, and with group members. This group was where key documents were developed, such as group guidelines.

An ongoing challenge was to ensure that the information provided in the group was accurate, and that people were paying attention to official sources of information, such as the RFS. Another key function of the group was to provide peer emotional support for members. The fires caused a great deal of anxiety and stress for people, particular for those who were in Sydney. Many people in the Blue Mountains commute to work and study. They used the information in Firewatch, both official and that provided by their neighbours, to make decisions about when to leave work and to stay up to date on what was happening at home.

Firewatch members found the information provided in Firewatch overwhelmingly useful, with strong survey findings about the quality of information provided. [See Appendix D.]

Each update from the RFS was posted in full, and pinned to the top of the group. Duplicate posts about each fire were deleted, so that there were only one post per incident. Admins were very active in the group – moderating comments and posts and directing conversations. Often, posts and comments would be wildly speculative, or were passing on rumours, so these were deleted.

The work that the admins did included:

- “Helped organise threads, Help dispel rumours, and point people in right direction for latest info. Calmed people. Helped improve resource guides.” [1]
- “Admitting members, moderating posts, asking members to clarify information and provide sources, expressing gratitude to well-informed members (such as Hugh Paterson) for their contributions, and finding information on Facebook, the RFS website, ABC 702 and ABC News 24 to add to the group.” [8]
- “Posting fire updates from RFS main site as well as the individual RFS and brigades. Sharing info from other relief organisations, council etc providing shelter, pet relocation options, school closure info, mediating comments from community members, removing inappropriate/abusive/rude posts (and members....after admin discussions!), referring page members to appropriate info or orgs based on their posted questions or comments, updating files and every now and again updating the pinned post.”[6]

[Admin survey responses - see Appendix D.]

Admins also reported that they spent time keeping people calm, and providing reassurance.

“We provided a lot of emotional support to the whole community through encouraging and sympathetic dialogue and strong moderation to remove unkind or unsupportive posts. Admins provided each other with a lot of emotional support in the admin group and helped each other to make well-informed and considered decisions.” *[Admin survey response - see Appendix D.]*

"Thank you SOOOO much. Social media is THE way to go and you did so well. Couldn't believe your bravery at the time, and calm in the face of panic (well I was panicked) I would have been so lost in this without the page."

[Member survey response - see Appendix D.]

The admin team worked in shifts, to ensure no one person was carrying the load, or getting burnt out. This was a stressful process, as many admins were preparing to evacuate themselves. A roster was developed to ensure that admins were able to plan their commitment to Firewatch around the rest of their lives, but also to make sure people were able to take a break. When fires were active, most admins were available, with at least six admins working at the same time. In these situations, the jobs of the admin team were divided up (new member checking, monitor individual posts, check with RFS, listen to scanner, listen to ABC Radio, monitor other Facebook and Twitter sites) to ensure there was no doubling up. But during busy times, admins reporting working up to 12 hours per day.

Both groups provided emotional support, as well as information. Many people in the Blue Mountains found the experience of the fires very difficult to manage. The group was able to provide informal peer support around the clock. People would post late at night and be able to get reassurance about the fires and that their feelings were appropriate for the situation from members and admins.

In the immediate aftermath of the October 2013 fires, there was a great deal of anxiety among Firewatch members about a repeat fire event. Many posts were made about smelling smoke, or about hot weather or high winds. Again, group members found reassurance, but also were able to learn about the fire conditions in the different regions of the Mountains. Some Firewatch members, who were also volunteer fire-fighters, were able to discuss in detail what different brigades did in different areas. The roles also of Fire and Rescue NSW and the National Parks and Wildfire Service were highlighted and discussed.

Several threads evolved that just focused on particular areas – Mt Victoria, Buena Vista Rd in Winmalee for example. Key group members used these threads to update their neighbours and to provide hyper-local information. The group also provided coverage of the RFS meetings for those who could not attend. Members who were at the meetings posted in different threads about what the RFS had said. This was particularly useful in countering the constant rumours that were being spread around, both in the community and on other disaster related Facebook sites. (See screenshots in Appendix A.)

Dealing with rumours was a constant issue. Admins would delete comments and posts of events that couldn't be verified, relying instead on both the RFS information and the information from group members about what they were actually seeing on the ground. Members were encouraged to post the suburb they were talking about and the source of the information. However, group members also monitored this, often countering rumours themselves and asking for admins to delete comments. This culture was encouraged and supported by the admin group and remains a feature of the Firewatch Recovery group today.

The mainstream media reporting was often less than helpful in regard to the specifics of where fires were and whether they were under control. The group received many contributions from people outside the region concerned about parts of the Mountains that were not under threat.

The group was able to rebut many concerns about other towns in the Mountains, while still being active around the areas that were under threat.

There were many members who were new to the Mountains and had not been through a fire emergency before. They were able to talk through their anxiety and be supported in how to make a fire plan. The key question of whether to stay, or whether to go was discussed many times.

The admin group developed guidelines, that included what was acceptable behaviour, and what to expect from the group. These guidelines (latest version available in Appendix B) formalised the information rules from the admin team that had developed over the fire emergency period, including input from group members. They provided a useful tool to refer to when mediating disputes between group members, and for clarifying admin decisions. They also worked on creating, then keeping up to date, lists of where people could go for information and for help. These lists were constantly revised to ensure they were accurate – admins did this by making phone calls and reaching out via email and Facebook.

Throughout November, the intensity of the posts to Firewatch decreased, with more information both requested and provided about immediate recovery needs. The Blue Mountains City Council hosted a rebuilding forum, with members posting video and feedback about the content provided at the meeting. There were formal recovery processes set up, coordinated by the Blue Mountains Bushfire Coordinator, Mr Phil Koperberg. This body issued regular newsletters, that were shared with Firewatch.

The information about the various bushfire appeals were also a feature. The Firewatch admin team also began posting regular information about total fire bans and forecasts – again using the official information sources.

Insurance featured heavily in group members' questions, especially for those who had lost their homes, but also for people concerned about their current insurance levels. Information about support available at the local community legal centre was posted, as were the BMCC forums on insurance.

Questions also arose about climate change, with members posting information about the link between climate change and bushfire intensity. These discussions became highly contested, and each time would occupy a great deal of admin resources to manage them. A decision was made to disallow posts about climate change (and political matters in general). Priority was given to directly fire-related discussion. What was, and was not, a fire-related discussion was a conversation had many times by both group members and the admin team. Part three of the Evaluation has further discussion about this.

The Recovery group through November continued to promote information on what kinds of donations were needed. These lists were highly specific and updated by the admins on a regular basis.

Key technical points

- Both groups used the Facebook group function, rather than a page, to allow more free-flowing conversations and posts from non-admin members.
- Firewatch used a secret group to communicate among admins, while Recovery used personal messages (PMs).
- Both groups utilised the group function 'files' to upload and edit documents that were then available to all group members.
- PMs were also used to communicate with group members, including about posts/comments being deleted.
- Both groups used pinned posts to highlight current information. Firewatch used the pinned post for the latest fire information, and Recovery used it to for the latest donation update.

Screenshots - see Appendix A, part one

Firewatch 1

This post about the Mt Victoria fires show several elements that made Firewatch so valuable during the fires. Firstly, the admin team posts the latest update from the RFS, including where the fire is located and its status. In this case, the update was about the Mt Victoria fire which was listed as at a Watch and Act status. The first comment is from the President of the Mt Victoria Community Association, asking for more current information, as she was hearing unofficial news that houses had been lost in a specific street.

As the comments continue, the admin team is shown trying to find more current official information, and other members of the Mt Victoria community also post updates with what they have either personally witnessed, or have heard from local RFS brigades on the ground. Mention is made of the pub being a local evacuation point.

Group members also commented on the early lack of coverage of the Mt Victoria fire on the ABC, but later noted it had featured on the 7pm news. The post is updated twice with the RFS bulletins, and extra news about particular houses and people is conveyed.

Firewatch 2

This post featured live discussion about the Buena Vista Road fire, part of the Winmalee fires. The post is an update from a resident about the specific conditions when she had evacuated from her home in that street. She described how quickly the fire was moving and expressed concern that the RFS were not on the scene.

The group members were about to provide emotional support, and then other residents of that street also contributed about their experiences and asked questions about specific houses in that street.

Firewatch 3

This post highlights the discrepancy between the media reports coming from Sydney and the local experience (comment about visiting the Blackheath RFS brigade.) But it also serves as a way to explore how anxious people were, both on hearing the news framed in this way, but also more generally. The group reinforces that this is normal and expected, and provides reassurance and practical help.

Firewatch 4

A woman asks about the fire risk in her specific area, particularly as she has a small baby. The group members are able to firstly, stress the importance of being prepared and having a plan, but also share their own experience with fires in the area and ideas for places to evacuate to, if needed. (This is an excellent example of the confusion between place of last resort and evacuation points.)

Firewatch 5

A Katoomba resident and her dog post in Firewatch about needing some advice about where to evacuate too. She is an older woman, with a dog that can't be separated from her. Many group members respond with ideas, and with official evacuation points, such as Lithgow Worker's Club

and the Springwood Sports Club. Members also post information about evacuation centres that welcome animals. Finally, a member offers her direct accommodation at their home in Warragamba, and the Katoomba resident goes there.

This is a good example of the many direct needs and offers during the fire period. People were able to help with a myriad of solutions when members articulated specific needs.

Firewatch 6

This post is a long and lively discussion about managing fear and panic. This initial poster notes that panic can be both contagious and counter-productive in terms of being prepared and safe. The first part of the conversation is about the media reporting of the fires being less than helpful, particularly for people outside the area, such as friends and family.

The discussion goes in details about the RFS warnings about evacuation, and people's individual decisions about whether to evacuate and the preparations they were doing. There is also discussion about whether people are being complacent.

Firewatch 7

This post, from a new Blue Mountains resident who has not experienced a fire emergency, shows the value of peer support. The resident is unclear about both the risk and what they need to do to prepare their home.

Firewatch 8

The admins of Firewatch responded to members' requests and organised to report live on the three community meetings that were held on 22 October 2013. Two admins attended the Katoomba meeting, while the Warrimoo and Blaxland members were attended by group members. It was coordinated by admins in both the Blue Mountains, and evacuated to Sydney. The meetings were extremely well attended, but many people were unable to attend, or had already evacuated.

This was a highly useful process, as it helped that night and the following day to counter rumours that appeared on other social media sites, and were posted on Firewatch, such as the RFS had ordered mandatory evacuations of the entire Blue Mountains.

Firewatch 9

This is a good record of both the kind of information the RFS was conveying, but also of the questions that were being asked by Firewatch members, that the admins were able to ask at the meeting. The appreciation of Firewatch members is clear, showing this was a successful social media tool that could be used in the future.

Firewatch 10

This post contains first hand accounts of the Yellow Rock and Winmalee fires, requested by one of the residents who had been trapped at Yellow Rock. There are powerful stories here, with much reassurance shown from group members. Again, the hyper-local nature of this communication is shown with one group member unable to remember fully what had happened, and uses the group discussion to piece together events and connect with the people she had shared the experience with.

Firewatch 11

This post is an opportunity for group members to both describe their emotional state in the immediate aftermath of the fires, and to seek reassurance from other members. This was particularly valuable for new Mountains residents.

Firewatch 12: Emotional support resources

This was the first list compiled that pointed out what resources were available for people experiencing any kind of emotional distress. The list grew as time went on to a far more detailed list, as seen in the Group Documents in Appendix B.

Recovery

The Recovery group was started a few days after the 2013 fires to manage the enormous volume of donations that were beginning to flood in. Recovery and Firewatch were separate groups, but worked together by referring people to the appropriate group. This was an efficient way to manage the different streams of information, with each group having a specific focus in the fire emergency.

People immediately began to offer resources to the people who had lost their homes, but also to those affected more broadly by the bushfires. There were offers of places to stay, cleaning help, cars, goods, clothes and concert tickets among many others. The Recovery admins collected all these offers, then sorted the data and reposted them as single documents, making them easier to access. For some categories of help offered, such as housing, there was an official register available, so people were diverted there.

Recovery also posted information from NSW Health about how to manage returning to burnt and smoke damaged buildings and the assistance available from both the NSW and Federal Governments.

Once donations arrived, there were often logistical challenges with sorting and storing them, so requests for assistance with transport, volunteers and storage were often made. Donations to individual RFS brigades were also offered, with people directed to contact the brigades to find out the exact details of what was needed.

Janet was prompted to set up the group after seeing how Facebook was helpful after the Christchurch earthquake, and recruited Lucy to help.

“Initially we set up to connect people who needed help with people who could offer it, by providing goods and services. We weren't quite sure at first whether we would help organise assistance or let other services do it. In the end, it was a combination of local agencies, individuals, businesses, other Facebook groups and to a minor extent the council did most of the organisation and we just provided the conduit between them.” *[Recovery admin interview]*

The Recovery group used the Files section (a Facebook group tool) to keep up to date list of what was needed, and what was not. Initially anyone could post in the group, but after Christmas 2013, that was restricted to admins only. The group was open from October 2013 until April 2014, and had approximately 2500 members by the time it was closed. The admins used their existing relationships with agencies such as Jericho Road and the local Anglican Church to start with, but that quickly expanded to include a wide range of local groups who were not part of the 'official' recovery operation, such as the Red Cross.

“Over time we developed relationships with Scouts, Salvos and their associate charities, Catholic Social Services, local RFS, a number of business like Chapman Real Estate and Storage King in Penrith etc. Pretty much any charity or organisation not involved in the official relief effort. Many of them felt locked out and we help them gain access to the fire affected either directly or through family and friends, also helped them gain access through the schools.” *[Recovery admin interview]*

Admins used their local networks to ensure that the information was accurate, but also praised the members for helping to post up to date information. This was a difficult and challenging task, as there were many separate groups that were bringing in donations.

A key task for the Recovery group was to stop donations going to places that could not accommodate them, and also to ensure that they were the right kind of donations. Inappropriate donations caused storage and handling problems for many organisations.

The posts on Recovery during the immediate period of the fire emergency included:

- offers of people to help clean/clear burnt properties,
- raffles to raise money
- individual housing offers for people who had lost their homes, which were then directed to a central housing register,
- donations needed from individual RFS brigades
- NSW Health advice on returning to burnt building,
- NSW and Federal Government assistance,
- free cleaning, concert tickets and many more offers to people who had lost houses,
- requests for drivers, transport and people to help in the management of donated goods.

In November, the group was more focused on the recovery processes that were in place throughout the Blue Mountains. Information that was shared included various Council meetings, updates from the Bushfire Recovery team, and encouragement to support local businesses. Groups, such as Jericho Road, used Recovery to publicise their frozen meals program, that continued to be available.

Recovery 1

This is the first of many attempts by Recovery to manage donations and communicate official messages about when and what kind of donations were needed.

Recovery 2

This post from the Mt Riverview RFS brigade was shared to Recovery to show an example of being prepared and how to evaluate a fire plan after the emergency had passed.

Recovery 3

Here is an example of the calls for donations directly to RFS brigades in the region. The Recovery group supported many brigades directly, through the fires, and in the period afterwards.

Recovery 4

This notice, from Winmalee Neighbourhood Centre is a good example of the kinds of very specific examples of local donations that were needed, and information on where to drop them off.

Recovery 5

Here a resident was concerned about the availability of toilets and queried whether Blue Mountains City Council knew about this. The BMCC Communications team were able to respond quickly with the correct information.

Recovery 6

Here is an offer of showers that is made in the Recovery group, then one of the group admins updates the group information.

Part 2:

Immediately after the fires:

December 2013 – March/April 2014

Firewatch

The period immediately after the October 2013 fires was focused on beginning the process of recovery. An official recovery centre had been set up, led by former RFS Commissioner, and MP for the Blue Mountains, Phil Koperberg. Discussions centred on the responses from Council, the Recovery group and insurance companies.

Firewatch admins posted all information about special Council meetings, and the updates from the official Recovery team. Admins also began to regularly post the fire danger ratings, and any total fire bans. The 'official' admin post was pinned to the top of the group and read:

"With the fires out and the recent rain, the mountains are back to normal. As is the case each summer, on some days we'll be more alert than others.

The RFS ratings are published every afternoon for the next day on this page (click on area 4) - http://www.rfs.nsw.gov.au/dsp_content.cfm?cat_id=1109.

Please read our group documents:

Important Links - <http://tinyurl.com/bmfwimp>

Emotional Support - <http://tinyurl.com/bmfwemo>

Donations - <http://tinyurl.com/bmfwdon>

If you see a fire without a truck in attendance, ring 000 immediately.

Stay safe,
Admin"

There was much sadness and grief in the community at this time, particularly leading up to Christmas. Many organisations focused their Christmas events around fundraising, with particular emphasis on the people who had lost their homes.

The admin team were very aware of this, and spent considerable time discussing how to support the community and balance posts to the groups so they were a combination of positive and helpful, while also conveying essential information. Their end of year message to the group was:

"To all the Firewatch members

As 2013 draws to a close, the admin team would like to wish everyone a safe and happy festive season.

We remember, especially, those who have lost so much in the recent fires; may the New Year bring renewed hope to you all.

This supportive and informative group is only made possible by all your thoughtful and generous posts. We have all learnt so much from the real experts in the field and would like to acknowledge their amazing contribution.. Our sincere thanks to you all.

Onward to 2014!
Firewatch admin team "

One aspect of fire emergencies that was canvassed in the group, was the provision of accessible fire information. An Auslan interpreter provided Youtube videos of fire warnings, and prompted a greater awareness of the need to make information available for everyone. The Firewatch admins began to implement this by using alternate text for images, and captions where available for video.

A frequent topic raised in the group in this period was what was appropriate information to post in Firewatch. There were many discussions that canvassed the range of reactions, from exasperation to serious anxiety. (See Appendix A, part two, Firewatch 18.) For example, a group member would post that they had heard sirens, or smelled smoke, in a particular place and wanted to know what was going on. Often they would post in Firewatch before checking other sites, so admins (and other group members) would check the RFS Fires Near Me app and website, then post those results. This reinforced the idea that official information sources were to be used regularly and were the ones to rely on.

However, often the RFS information ran behind the information posted on Firewatch, due to the hyper-local nature of the group, as discussed in the previous section of the evaluation. This had positive and negative aspects, but overall, the information needed to be verified. One aspect of these posts was the generally raised level of anxiety in the community. This meant that significant admin resources were given to recognising that anxiety and providing links to resources that were available to help people cope. The other aspect of these posts were the comments about how silly, and unnecessary they were, and that people needed to stop panicking and posting this information. Again, the general levels of anxiety so soon after the fires, was not going to dissipate quickly, so sharing those emotions and receiving reassurance was part of the community providing peer support.

These kinds of posts did not abate, prompting repeated iterations of the same discussions.

By the end of December, admins had discussed stepping back from frequent posting and eased up on moderation tasks. The expectations on how often to check the group were lessened. This was the beginning of working out a procedure for non-emergency periods, while still being able to scale up if there was an active fire. (See Rosters document.) By March, admin checkins were being done three times a day, and by the end of April, once a day. This remained the case throughout winter, before ramping up again as the summer approached. The first fire of the 2014 season was a blaze at Cliff Drive, Katoomba - see discussion of this in part 3.

Admins also worked through some internal process, such as the main tasks for admins rostered on, and updating the information available to the group. Several admins also stepped down, either entirely, or from actively monitoring the page, but indicated they were available for another emergency. Other admins were recruited in this period, again using personal and community networks, plus observations of their participation in the Firewatch group more generally. The admin group was committed to the longevity of the Firewatch group, as it had been useful during the October 2013 fires, so ongoing recruitment of admins continued.

Admins also used this time to take breaks from being active in both Recovery and Firewatch. After several months of active work, this was important to ensure everyone was able to wind down and get some rest.

A key admin tool, that was set up during the fires, then refined and revised in this period, was a Facebook interest list that aggregated information from many different sources. The software to do this was called RSS Graffiti that pulls information from a Facebook page or group to a central list. The software developers were able to upgrade the Firewatch use to the more useful premium version, free of charge. The list setup required some knowledge of how RSS feeds work, and how to access the RSS feed for individual Facebook pages. This enable the Firewatch admins to be able to quickly access the latest information from official sources, as the list would update every five minutes. Google Alerts were also used to monitor and track information. This has since been replaced by a Facebook Interest list with updated and relevant links. Only Facebook pages can be included, so relevant groups still need to be manually checked.

A common theme during this period was trying to resolve issues through Blue Mountains City Council. With a variety of agencies engaged in the recovery process, it was often difficult to know who was responsible for what. The large amount of damage, and then starting the rebuilding process created tension when there were delays. Firewatch hosted a range of these discussions (see Appendix A, part two, Firewatch screenshots 13-15) that were responded to from both the elected Councillors and the Mayor, and also from the official BMCC communications officer.

Admins tagged Councillors and BMCC in various threads, and also send them direct messages to alert them to relevant posts and comments. Both the Councillors and the Council have reported that this was an effective mechanism to activate processes and begin to resolve issues. BMCC's Program Leader Corporate Communications and Marketing, Adrienne Murphy, provided detailed feedback about this interaction for this research. Ms Murphy commented that she used BMFR to:

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

The challenges of responding to questions on BMFR was raised in the context of "assisting to regulate the duration of a particular Facebook commentary by advising the member when a debate or enquiry has run its course." This is in response to threads that continued long after BMCC had formally responded and stated clearly that no further action would be taken.

BMCC suggests some formal meetings with BMFR admins to ensure that there is clarity about roles and responsibilities.

"Understandably, residents will often perceive risk differently to Council or authorities. It is a tricky balance between a) Council relying on residents to inform us of actual and emerging risks and b) community understanding that

council has to prioritise its work according to greatest risk."

[See Appendix C for full BMCC stakeholder response.]

Screenshots - refer to Appendix A, part two

Firewatch 13

A resident posts about BMCC charging fees for DAs, after indications were given that this would not occur. She links fundraising efforts with these fees and expresses considerable anger. In the first comment, an admin tags the Mayor, Mark Greenhill, to alert him to the content of the post. BMCC staff then post a detailed response to the poster's concerns, laying out the exact commitments that BMCC gave after the October 2013 fires. The Mayor also responds with details about how the money raised for the Mayor Fund has been spent.

Firewatch 14

The poster asks for the correct contact at BMCC to alleviate her concerns about trees and leaf litter. Again, Ward Councillors are tagged by admins. Commenters express frustration at the lack of action by BMCC, and Councillors commit to taking up the matter at the next Council meeting, explaining the service gaps caused in the recovery period. There are several comments following about how fire-affected communities are annoyed at the difficulty in resolving issues. Again, BMCC staff provide a lengthy answer, explaining State Government programs and future Council plans.

Firewatch 15

Concerns are raised by this poster about why BMCC will not allow a caravan on a cleared block, so that residents can live there while they are rebuilding. Many comments suggest various options, but again, admins tag the Mayor to alert him to the issue who encourages the poster to contact Ward Councillors. The Councillors propose items to be discussed, and add suggestions made by the community. Commenters express support for BMCC, and awareness of the complexity of other levels of government. BMCC staff then respond, acknowledging that they need to revisit the policy and explaining that they are talking to other fire-affected communities in Victoria. The Mayor then follows up, posting the details of what BMCC will do in response.

Firewatch 16

Here is an example of how 702ABC used the BMFR group. They have since begun posting updates directly in the group.

Firewatch 17

This is the one of many conversations that occurred as the BMFR group expanded and tried to clarify the role of the group. Often people would post about sirens, with little other information, and there was clear division about whether these were appropriate for the group. The discussion also touches on the general levels of anxiety about sirens and worrying if there was another fire.

Recovery

The Recovery group was more active during this period, with constant updates about donations and other recovery information. Some information was duplicated with Firewatch, however the two groups continued to have separate goals and audiences. There were many discussions about insurance, and utility companies being difficult to negotiate with.

Various community groups that were conducting recovery activities, used Recovery to post information about their programs and events.

Many members posted about rebuilding, asking for recommendations for tradespeople and for information about insurance.

Council also made official comments in the Recovery group, as questions were raised about the progress of DAs and other Council related matters, similar to the discussions in Firewatch.

The visit of ABC702 on 7 February was also canvassed widely, with residents taking part in the program, and reflecting their appreciation of the ABC's role as emergency broadcaster.

By February, the Recovery group had begun the process of winding down, with the group going from Public, to Closed and then to Secret in April. Strong appreciation was expressed to the two Recovery admins from members, and one continued to be a BMFR admin.

However, due to Facebook's technical limitations, in reality, Recovery was shut down, and members were encouraged to join Firewatch, if they were not already members. The group referred to itself as Firewatch and Recovery.

When the merger was announced, many Recovery members requested that the group be able to be re-established in case of another fire emergency, so the group remains intact, but marked private.

“As of the end of April the Fire Recovery group will merge with the Firewatch group. This will entail the Fire Recovery group being closed down and any remaining Recovery activity will be transferred to the Firewatch group. I will become an admin in Firewatch.

This decision hasn't been made lightly, as I know many people are still struggling with the recovery/rebuild process, but I feel that the resources available to the Firewatch group will enable us to provide information and links to recovery resources over the longer term. And whilst we all hope very much that this group will never be needed again, the knowledge and resources will be kept intact, just in case.

I know that many of you are already members of the Firewatch group, for those who aren't I would encourage you to join:)

<https://www.facebook.com/groups/BlueMountainsFirewatch/>

Finally I just want to say thank you to everyone who has contribute to this group since October 2013, it wouldn't have operated so successfully without you.

Regards, J”

[Post in Recovery about merger]

“A big warm welcome to our new admin J from Blue Mountains Fire Recovery. Recovery and Firewatch groups are now merging here. Facebook won't let us change the group name, so we're showing the merge with the new group banner. You are welcome to post any fire or recovery related information in this group.”

[Post in BMFR about merger]

Screenshots - see Appendix A, part two

Recovery 7

Praise for the Mayoral Relief Fund from a community member who had received money and was able to use it to rebuild.

Recovery 8

Various innovative recovery programs sprang up during this time, with this car-pooling initiative a good example.

Recovery 9

This is a post is an example of how Recovery was used to ask for specific help for people who are unable to prepare their home for fire. Several options are offered, from individual to community organisations, who are able to assist.

Recovery 10

This post from Recovery admins explains the closure of the Recovery group and why, while making clear that the combined BMFR will remain active.

Recovery 11

The community appreciation of the work of the Recovery admins is clearly seen in the comments on this post, as the group winds down.

Part 3: Post group merger – April 2014 to October 2014

Firewatch and Recovery

During the non-fire season, the BMFR continued to grow, although at a much slower pace. The content during this time was a mix of fire preparedness information and continued recovery themed posts.

The admins firmed up internal processes, with three regular posts made in the admin group each week:

AVAILABILITY - to note when admins were free to moderate, usually posted on the weekend

ROSTER – the weekly roster (see 'Rosters' in Appendix B to see the change over time in the rostering arrangements.)

CHECK IN – this post contained instructions on what was expected from admins during their shift, and allowed admins to record the activity during this time. The same post was used throughout the week, unless there was an active fire, where a separate post would be created.

The check ins started as a way to measure how many times per shift that the group needed to be looked at, and admins take action. This progressed into only needing to check the group twice a day during the winter.

One of the key reasons for this kind of monitoring was to ensure that admins were not reacting to every notification and that a system was put in place to also manage group expectations that outside a fire emergency, the admin team would not be as available.

The ongoing issue of which topics were suitable for Firewatch Recovery, and which needed to be excluded was extensively discussed, both in the group, and among the admin team. As the group was one of the larger in the region, the temptation was to expand BMFR's remit and allow posts about storms, road closures and other emergencies.

An attempt was made to put boundaries around the non-fire related emergencies, however this proved very difficult, and many members complained, saying they wanted BMFR to remain a fire-only group. This process took over six months of testing different guidelines with the community and among the admin team who then had to enforce them. There were other members who wished to expand the topics that BMFR would allow to be posted, but this became problematic when information from non-official sources was shared.

A key consideration about expanding the role of BMFR outside just fires was the capacity of the admin team to maintain the level of accuracy and consistency they had developed. There were also questions of how sustainable it would be, and what would happen during fire emergencies.

BMFR had a policy of using official sources for information about fire, so it was a logical step to make this the policy for non-fire information. However, it soon became clear that the resources this would require (check all non-fire posts against official sources) was well beyond what the admins were able to do.

“We need to remember that the work done here is voluntary and we shouldn't allow people to make us feel guilty for sticking to our own agenda. It's hard to do this if the issue is one that we care about but is outside the purpose of the page. If they want to use the group for their own agenda and it doesn't match

with ours then it's ok to say no to them. This is really important if we want the group to stay focussed on achieving its goals.

Also, if we want to have a reputation as a "Firewatch" page then we need to stay focussed on the aims of the group. A post during a fire about someone using a fire emergency to take advantage of others, such as children separated from their parents, would be entirely appropriate. Information about how to prepare your children against being taken advantage of during an emergency would also be appropriate. In my opinion, a post about a white van cruising the suburbs for children outside a fire emergency is not appropriate, whether it is verified or not. (That's the hard bit, saying no to something you care about because it doesn't fit the aims of the group.)" (Admin group discussion (10/08/14)

The discussion about 'sirens and smoke' as it came to be known has since led to the establishment of a second 'sister' Facebook group, called Blue Mountains Community Watch, in January 2015. This group shares many of the admins with Firewatch and the two groups liaise closely. Firewatch members made it clear that they appreciate the single focus of the group and have responded well to the idea of a new group.

During the first years of Firewatch, and then BMFR, members were able to approve new members, as well as admins, but, due to the rising number of spammers with fake profiles, membership approval was later restricted to just admins.

A key sensitive issue in this period was both reporting about the recovery process, and the anniversary of the fires themselves. There were many events held in the community to commemorate the first year since the 2013 fires which were widely publicised in BMFR. Admins liaised with local services to ensure there was support available and the group members posted about how they were feeling.

While outside the scope of this research, the evolution of BMFR became obvious by the time of the first fire of the 2014/15 season, on 31 October in Katoomba. Many of the systems that had been set up throughout 2014 were able to be tested and further refined during this fire incident, including admin roles in emergencies, information verification, messaging to group members and emotional support. These have since been further refined in the fires in Warrimoo and Wentworth Falls, that now include posting total fire ban and weather information throughout the summer fire season.

Screenshots - see Appendix A, part three

Firewatch 18

This post, celebrating the return of a group member's cat, was a welcome piece of good news that was widely welcomed and shared. It also shows the sense of community within BMFR that there were people who remembered the story of the cat from the fires, and were then able to continue the story.

Firewatch 19

This post, and all the following comments, used peer support as a way of sharing fire-preparedness with the community. This was particularly useful for those new to living in a fire-prone area and served as an opportunity to build resilience of group members through shared experiences.

Firewatch 20

This is another example of using group experiences to build resilience by discussing how to assess risk with fires are active. The 'when do I leave' questions was often ask, whereas the 'how do I make that decision', as shown here, is perhaps a better question to ask. The comments also show the value of hyper-local information, with each part of the Blue Mountains area having different responses.

Firewatch 21

This post, about the first anniversary of the 2013 fires, allows group members to both express significant emotions, and to reassure each other than this was both understandable and normal. The hazard reduction burns at the same time triggered many people, and led to some heated discussion in the comments about both hazard reduction and back burning. Again, group members were able to provide expertise about the difference between the two. The comments show that different group members have different expectations of BMFR.

Firewatch 22

Another post asking about the content of information in Firewatch, with a suggestion of different names for the group.

Firewatch 23

This post from the admin team both acknowledged the anniversary, and listed all the events taking place on the day.

Firewatch 24

Here, a local support service was able to post that they were available if needed through BMFR.

Firewatch 25

This discussion about a missing girl again prompted conversations about verification of information and what topics were appropriate for BMFR.

Operational plan

Blue Mountains Firewatch and Recovery Facebook group has been operational for over four years, but has increased in size since the October 2013 fires. The group now has over 6,000 members, and a team of 16 volunteer admins. The group has settled on agreed guidelines and the introduction of two new groups, the Blue Mountains Community Safety Watch, and the Blue Mountains Political Forum have allowed BMFR to be clear about the single focus of the group.

Since the research period of October 2013 to October 2014, there have been several significant fires in Warrimoo, Katoomba and Wentworth Falls. On each of these occasions, the systems that admins have introduced have been tested and refined. However, there remains significant work outstanding to ensure BMFR's long term viability.

There are now clear systems in place for admin and group functions during fire emergencies, during fire season and in non-fire season. During the fire season, admins post the fire danger rating daily, with links to the RFS website. They also post weather forecasts from the Bureau of Meteorology for Katoomba and Springwood, and any relevant weather or fire information.

The key challenges for BMFR to remain able to deliver the services it current does are:

- admin retention and recruitment
- admin tasks and training
- relationships with stakeholders
- trust of group members
- reliability of information posted
- continued membership growth

Each of the following recommendations is contingent on admin availability and commitment to the viability of BMFR. Without the willingness of volunteers to continue this work, none of this will be possible.

Admin retention and recruitment

Recruiting volunteers in all organisations can be a challenge, but by developing a long term strategy, volunteers can continue to be brought into an organisation and then retained. Currently, there are a few admins able to volunteer throughout the year, via flexible working arrangements, however this is the minority of existing BMFR admins. Most are only available in an emergency, so recruiting more people able to help consistently needs to be a high priority, as is the need to retain existing admins with experience of fire emergencies.

Admin tasks outside of fire season are relatively few, but it is important to be able to consistently monitor the group to check member requests, and clear any porn or spam. During fire season, admin tasks require more attention, as members are more active and post content to the group that needs to be verified with official sources. BMFR already has a wider pool of volunteer admins to call on in an emergency, but could definitely use more.

BMFR admins come from a wide range of suburbs in the Blue Mountains, but share common characteristics, as seen in the admin survey. They are motivated by a desire to help the community and to be helpful in an emergency. Both these characteristics are essential in new admins to fit

within the existing admin culture.

Admin tasks and training

The consistency of admin tasks has considerably improved, with regular, clear lists of expectations of admins posted weekly. These include how many times per shift or day to check the group, what to post and where to find it, and what to report back to the admin group. This also enables monitoring of how busy the group is, so the roster can be updated as the seasons change. (See Appendix B.)

Admin roles in both non-emergency and emergency periods need to be further clarified and recorded, so that there is consistency of responses during these times. During a fire emergency, the group can become very busy, so setting out the various tasks that need to happen (admit new members, check RFS pages, listen to the ABC, check group posts, delete as necessary, check other information sources) can be completed in an orderly manner. This will also help to not double up on tasks and ensure each admin has some time away from the group.

There is currently an adhoc system of training, where new admins 'shadow' a few shifts with an experienced admin, before doing one on their own. Also, each new admin brings ideas, experiences and reflections on both the current BMFR systems and what could be changed/altered. This is a valuable tool in refining these systems, to ensure they are still useful.

Admins do infrequent reflections on fire seasons and improving BMFR practices – there would be benefit in formalising this process and creating time and space for admins to meet and set some strategic directions for the group.

Relationships with stakeholders

There are clear gaps shown in the research conducted into BMFR's relationships with local stakeholders with great potential for growth and expansion.

The feedback from Blue Mountains City Council, both Councillors and staff, show clearly that they have some clear ideas on improving the relationship with BMFR, and that they appreciate the role the Facebook group plays in coordinating information and community concerns. BMFR would benefit from the following:

- setting out clear protocols for communicating with BMCC and Councillors,
- meeting with BMCC staff to gain clarity about key responsibilities,
- working with group members to assist in working through issues with BMCC.

The community and neighbourhood centres play a vital part in working with low income and disadvantaged groups in the Blue Mountains. Some have had significant involvement with BMFR, while others have had little or none. Developing a plan to both communicate with these groups, but also to reach the users of their services, would allow BMFR to reach further into the community. Facebook use has increased over the last few years, with [14 million users](#) in Australia, so it remains a platform that many people use for news and information. With the growth in smart phones, mobile users are also increasing, including for very [disadvantaged](#) communities. Connecting with existing services is an excellent way to include low income groups in the Blue Mountains.

A plan to address these gaps in BMFR's reach needs to be developed that includes, but isn't limited

to:

- meeting with each service to explain the relevance of BMFR to their clients,
- develop material outlining what BMFR is and what it does. This could include pamphlets, posters and shareable online graphics,
- follow up regularly with each group to ensure ongoing relationships.

A formal working relationship with the RFS would be of considerable advantage to both BMFR and the RFS. Currently, there are informal networks, with many RFS members being active parts of the BMFR community. BMFR regular shares both RFS NSW and local RFS brigades' updates. This project spoke to the District Office Superintendent, David Jones, and it is clear from that meeting that future conversations between BMFR and the RFS are to be a priority. Superintendent Jones has offered BMFR admins the opportunity to meet and tour the RFS District Office and it is recommended that this happens at the earliest possible opportunity.

There is currently an information relationship with the ABC, through a producer at 702ABC. However, it is recommended that a formal meeting be held with the head of ABC Emergency, Ian Mannix, to introduce BMFR and to establish communication channels.

Trust of group members

The survey of BMFR members clearly shows that they value the content, information and support available in the group. They also appreciate the postings of people with relevant expertise and the moderation of the admin team. Maintaining this trust is vital to the ongoing viability of the BMFR group which is due to the consistency of the admin group in applying the rules, and the quality of the information shared.

Reliability of information posted

As the BMFR group has expanded, there are often questions that arise several times that require similar answers. Admins have created some information files, but these could be expanded. With new members moving to the area and joining BMFR, some of the terms used by the RFS and BoM can be confusing and difficult to understand – for example, the RFS use of 'out of control' to tag fires on the Fires Near Me app and website can cause significant anxiety for group members who don't understand what that means. Having these shared content files will provide a consistent reference point for both admins and members, increasing reliability of the information posted.

Admins have already created explainer posts on some topics, and could create them on other issues as they arise, including SMS emergency texts and different fire alert levels.

However, this again relies on the consistency of the admin team, and underlines the importance of recruitment and retention.

When there is a fire emergency, often the BMFR group is swamped with posts about smoke sightings, sirens and repeated posts of RFS or other official organisations. There are some guidelines about the differences between posting rules in emergency vs non-emergency times, but these could be clearer, and engage group members outside of emergency periods to ensure that members are aware of expectations on them.

Continued membership growth

The significant spikes in BMFR growth have occurred at the same time as major fire incidents in the

area. This brings challenges with both the need to check member requests at a time when admin resources are already stretched, and an influx of new members who aren't familiar with the rules or posting guidelines. This shows the need to recruit new members in non-emergency periods and to post regularly about the rules in these times.

New members could be actively sought from the following sources:

- other relevant local Facebook groups,
- media outlets – both by coverage of the existence of the group and posting on relevant threads about fire,
- personal networks of admins and members – creating shareable material to encourage members to also seek new members.

Reflection

The only element missing from the Dufty index of using social media to build resilience was reflection - this would be a useful exercise for the BMFR admins to work through, but also for there to be a chance to include feedback from BMFR members.

Other

As a large local group, BMFR is positioned well to be able to work with the RFS, BMCC and other agencies to communicate some of the key messages about fire prevention, planning and preparedness. One key challenge from the 2013 fires was the urgent need to communicate about donations – what is needed, when and what is definitely not needed. BMFR, in conjunction with other agencies, could begin a conversation about donations, using the [National Guidelines for Managing Donations](#), published in 2011, as a starting point. The direct experience of BMFR with communicating these messages could add significant value to this conversation.