



Centre for
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Country Fire Authority and New Engagement Approaches – Evaluation

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Acknowledgments

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Executive Summary

The Country Fire Authority tried new engagement approaches in four localities across Victoria. The approaches were: arts-based, using music, drama and visual art; a modified community fire guard program; a scenario mapping exercise; and a community-led volunteer brigade support committee. Evaluation interviews were conducted with trial participants, CFA staff and volunteers and facilitators. Key findings included social networks were developed by building new links between CFA and residents. Spin-off activities were also reported including the music-approach being tried in a further two localities. Knowledge about bushfire risk was reaffirmed rather than developed, although some new learning was reported among facilitators. Concerns were raised about the capacities of CFA (both volunteers and staff) to deliver new ways of engaging with residents. The CFA should consider developing more innovative engagement approaches through supporting staff and volunteers to gain the appropriate skills and by conducting longer-term trials.

Background

Australian emergency management agencies face considerable challenges. Due to climate change, the risk of fires is increasing (Williams et al 2001; Hennessy et al 2005; and Jolly et al 2015). Growing population and urban development is placing

more people at risk during an emergency (Foster et al, 2013). Agencies are increasingly being called upon to integrate the public's views and concerns into decision-making processes and to make arrangements towards a model of 'shared responsibility', into what has been termed 'people-centred' approaches to disaster risk-management (for a review see Scolobig et al, 2015).

Agencies also experience difficulties in communicating information about risk. Evidence demonstrates that there is a weak link between information provision and preparedness behaviours (Paton & Johnston, 2001). Post-bushfire interviews show that preparedness levels remain low despite the availability of bushfire education materials and programs (McLennan, Paton & Wright, 2015).

The challenge for agencies is how can they work more effectively with residents and communities? The CFA's 2010/11 Evaluation (Rhodes et al, 2011) argued that education should aim to enhance communities' capacities to prepare for bushfires. Rhodes and colleagues propose that agencies need to engage a broader cross-section of the community and to promote outcomes such as improving decision making capabilities and strengthening community resilience. Rhodes and colleagues also recommend using a broader range of strategies to move beyond information-based approaches towards a greater emphasis on locally relevant and credible programs to increase the salience of bushfires in people's minds.

The RMIT and Bushfire CRC Engagement and Education Guidelines produced from the *Effective Communication: Communities and Bushfire* project 2010-13 (Phillips & Fairbrother, 2013) argued for new thinking to develop more effective ways for agencies to engage the public. The authors state that "Education efforts should involve local people in their design and delivery, be localised to account for specific contexts and fire agencies should work towards a more collaborative model that promotes authentic community engagement. Further work is required to develop education materials that affirm people's values; rather than challenge predisposed world views." This view builds on previous work conducted by the CFA following the 2009 Victorian bushfires.

Given the problems outlined, how should agencies approach community engagement? What should they focus on? A way in which agencies could proceed is to look social and cultural aspects. For example, social networks have been highlighted as a feature of communities that can promote adaptive capacities (Akama, Chaplin & Fairbrother, 2014) and an analysis of the CFA's Community Fire Guard program showed how it could develop and strengthen social networks

(Fairbrother et al, 2013). There is also evidence showing the influence of social capital on disaster preparedness (Mimaki & Shaw, 2007; Aldrich & Meyer, 2014; Bihari & Ryan, 2012).

Another approach to engagement and community development is through cultural action (Matarasso, 2007). Matarasso writing about community work in the UK concludes that ‘...the arts have the potential to define and symbolize alternative realities, while working through them can build people’s capacity for and interest in shared enterprise (p. 457); aspects relevant to promoting disaster preparedness. Community arts and well-being were examined in a three year Australian study (Mulligan & Smith, 2010). The authors found that arts-based approaches helped foster senses of community across the five Local Government Areas that participated. This relates to bushfires as a sense of community and attachment to place has been found to be positively linked to wildfire preparedness (McCaffrey et al 2011; Anton & Lawrence 2015).

The challenges outlined above and developments in emergency management thinking inform the context for the projects evaluated in this report. The CFA successfully applied for funding from the Victorian Natural Resilience Grant Scheme (2013-14) to trial new community engagement approaches. The funding was released in June 2014 after a delay due to a change of government in Victoria. The project commenced September 2014. Working with researchers from RMIT, four types of approaches were devised and implemented in four localities in Victoria. A small scale qualitative evaluation was conducted by RMIT University.

Methods

Participants were initially identified by NDRGS 06 (member of the project’s steering committee) and consisted of brigade volunteers, residents, CFA staff, community leader and facilitators (see Table 1). Participants confirmed that they were willing to be interviewed and a researcher from RMIT made appointments to conduct telephone interviews. Participants were informed about the nature of the study and conditions of the interview (such as assurances about confidentiality; participants could withdraw from the interview at any time; and interview transcripts would be securely stored at RMIT and destroyed after 5 years). Consent was given verbally and recorded or in writing. The interviews focused on participants’ involvement in or experience of the trial and their assessment of the

trial's impact. Interviews were conducted between 10/02/2015 – 05/10/2015. In total 20 participants were interviewed with one repeat interview with NDRGS 06.

	Locality 1	Locality 2	Locality 3	Locality 4
Residents	NDRGS 01; 04; 07	NDRGS 09; 11		NDRGS 16; 20
Community Leader	NDRGS 05			
Facilitator	NDRGS 08	NDRGS 13	NDRGS 12	
CFA Staff	NDRGS 02; 03			NDRGS 15; 19
CFA Volunteer		NDRGS 10		NDRGS 17; 18
CFA Staff Oversight role across localities	NDRGS 06; 14			

Table1 Participant type by locality

Interviews were transcribed and after multiple readings, analysed to address the evaluation questions, developed by CFA head of evaluation, CFA project team and Dr Richard Phillips, RMIT University.

The trials took place in four localities across Victoria (for further details see boxes below). To ensure participant confidentiality, the identity of the localities has been anonymised and participant names have been changed or removed from any quotes.

Location 1

A small, remote rural township east of Melbourne, population around 150

The trial in location 1 involved an arts-based approach. More specifically, music facilitators were employed to work with local children. The performance incorporated bushfire safety information. The trial concluded with a performance on Australia Day as part of other activities. The CFA also tried to trial a modified Community Fire Guard program, but this failed due to insufficient staffing and resources.

Location 2

A town south east of Melbourne, population around 2000

This trial involved music and drama components. Facilitators wrote materials based on bushfire safety information, such as fire danger ratings. Children participated and performed as part of a bigger community event / festival.

Location 3

Suburb east of Melbourne, population around 2000

The proposed approaches in location 3 were a modified Community Fire Guard program and a scenario mapping exercise. The distinctive feature of this trial was adapting CFG to use with an existing group such as a playgroup or a pony club. Usually CFG is aimed at residents in the same street. However, due to insufficient interest the trials did not take place.

Location 4

A regional city, west of Melbourne, population around 8000

The focus of this trial was on supporting a volunteer brigade. The notable feature was that this initiative was devised by the volunteer brigade captain. The implication from this is that the usual dynamic of CFA advising the community is reversed and instead community members provide advice and skills to the CFA. The impetus for this trial came from within the brigade's leadership and was supported by CFA regional staff. The trial involved: a steering group; and a support committee. The steering group was formed from brigade members and community members. The steering group's role was to formalise the scope for the support committee, to write terms of reference and to select committee members. At the time of writing (October 2015), the steering committee was finalising its work and was recruiting committee members.

Evaluation

This evaluation is based on six questions (in bold). These were developed by the CFA and RMIT University. Under each question the findings from each locality are presented using supporting quotes from the participant interviews. The quotes were selected on the basis of providing the fullest account of the trials and include both negative and positive views.

1. How successful were the approaches at engaging with people who had not previously been involved in CFA programs?

Location 1

The residents interviewed from location 1 reported that their children or grandchildren took part in the rehearsals and performed. The music/drama-based event did attract new interest in the CFA. This was confirmed by residents (NDRGS 01; 07) who reported that they had no previous involvement with CFA programs. A senior CFA manager summed up the approach in location 1:

“[It] helps put the brigade back in the focus of the community a bit and the community back into the brigade a bit. I think they’ve actually got a couple of new recruits or they’ve had some interest from people joining up which is a good thing because there’s only a handful of volunteers down that end of the world anyhow.” NDRGS 14

Location 2

A similar impact was reported for location 2. The three residents interviewed all stated that they had no previous contact with the CFA. Resident, NDRGS 09 in particular spoke positively about establishing links with the local CFA:

“it's actually my first significant contact with the CFA. So that's been really good to connect up to a really key organisation in a town that isn't often connected to the arts. So yeah, it's been very positive... So that's been a really major benefit actually, making those connections.”
NDRGS 09

Location 3

Due to insufficient interest, the CFA were unable to run the modified Community Fire Guard program. However, the facilitator articulated the positive possibilities:

“I remember being quite pleased that [CFA] were looking at that CFG style because I've always felt that it had such potential in engaging community but it was so limited in that it... focused on being people in the same street. I always felt that that was a hindrance for a lot of people that might benefit from that type of engagement but it didn't necessarily suit areas because they weren't in the same street.” NDRGS 12

Location 4

The focus of this trial was for community members to support the CFA volunteer brigade through offering advice and skills. Community members formed a temporary steering committee to oversee the process of developing a support committee. At the time of this report, the steering committee was finalising the recruitment of the support committee. A community leader and brigade volunteer, (NDRGS 17), explained the rationale for the support committee:

“We have plenty of people that are very keen to be firefighters and everything like that. But we don't have that managerial support. We did have them but we didn't engage them and get them interested. For us here, they've gone - those sorts of people have gone and joined the headquarters brigade where they still feel valued and are able to help. So the initial idea was that we do have these people in the community. Let's try and engage them and get them to help the brigade in that managerial type role - in a support role.” NDRGS 17

This participant reported an outcome from the early stages of the trial:

“A couple of those business people we did speak to have come out and said ‘well, we know nothing - we don't know enough of the brigade. We know there's a fire brigade in [name of place] but we don't know anything about them’. One guy actually come in and said ‘oh, I've never been in here. Oh, these are the trucks you've got. Oh, these - oh. Okay, this is the stuff you've got’. And he said ‘this is the first time I've actually been in here and had a look at the fire trucks’. So - and for me it was an eye-opener and for him it was a - well, the community know there's a fire brigade in [name of place] but they don't know much about it.” NDRGS 17

Overall there is some evidence to suggest that some of the trials attracted people who had no previous experience of or little contact with the CFA. The CFA was unable to generate sufficient interest in the modified CFG or scenario mapping trial in location 3. A further consideration is that projects operated at a small-scale and the evidence presented offers potential insights into the value of alternative engagement approaches. Such methods need to be trialled at a bigger scale and for a longer period in order to make a more confident assessment regarding their usefulness.

2. How did the approaches impact on the brigade's knowledge and skills to engage residents?

Location 1

Most participants including CFA staff and residents reported that the event and associated processes were well organised. However, in location 1, the local brigade's capacities and resources were limited. This meant that the brigade members were unable to take the opportunity to further develop their skills and

knowledge. An assessment of the brigade's capacities was made by NDRGS 02 who had experience of supporting volunteer brigades:

“Most of the issues are probably personality things and it's to try and change and [skill] the brigade members, so it's not something we [CFA] can do instantaneously. I think it's going to be a long term thing.”
NDRGS 02

The extent of the brigade's involvement was summarised by another CFA staff member:

“We didn't get them [local brigade] actually involved in the event because of the pushback in the community. But what we did was get them involved around the periphery of it. So they brought the truck down there so that the kids were able to squirt the hose around. [The brigade] were well aware of [the event]. So I guess they were supportive in the background, [so] we could have equipment dropped off there at the brigade and things like that. So behind the scenes if you like, but not actual direct involvement in the activities.” NDRGS 03

NDRGS 03 noted that despite the challenges of involving the brigade, the engagement trial had facilitated her professional role to support existing brigade members. NDRGS 03 also reported that the event had also promoted a more positive view of the CFA in the locality. This aspect was also confirmed by NDRGS 14, a CFA senior manager.

However, residents' comments about the local brigade added further insights regarding how the brigade was perceived. Participants were asked if the trials had changed their views about the local brigade. NDRGS 01 remained sceptical about the brigade's capabilities. NDRGS 04, a resident, stated that she had heard reports ('the talk of the town') regarding the brigades' performance, but did not want to elaborate.

Whereas NDRGS 07 was generally positive about the brigade and argued that they needed more resources:

“The problem we have in country towns is that the - there just aren't enough people. The people that are here do a good job, but they need - they can only work with the resources that they have. But like most of town, we see them respond at all hours. Then those people get up and go to work to earn a livelihood, a town with very few jobs, you know?”
NDRGS 07

In summary, the CFA paid staff found that they used the event and associated processes to initiate conversations about bushfire safety with residents and visitors. The event enabled CFA staff to deploy further resources to support the local brigade. There was little evidence to support the view that residents' perceptions of the local brigade had changed. The local brigade also appeared unable to fully participate in preparing for the event and had little input regarding the performance on Australia Day.

Location 2

Participants from location 2 provided evidence about the brigade's knowledge and skills. Generally this related to developing relationships between the brigade and residents, promoting opportunities to have conversations about bushfire safety and the possibilities of widening the diversity of local brigade membership.

NDRGS 10, the brigade member who actively supported the drama/music-based event, reported that he had limited opportunities to talk with parents of the children taking part as:

“Some of the parents did stay for periods of time but they never stayed for the full length of the time [of the rehearsal]. During that time I took that time to say ‘so have you got a fire plan, where do you live, what do you do, what are you going to do?’ So I had that opportunity with people but there wasn't a lot of that type of activity.” NDRGS 10

NDRGS 10 also reported making new contacts through proactively supervising the rehearsal sessions held in the CFA fire station. NDRGS 10 confirmed new networks were established as:

“I'd never met any of the kids. I'd never had any involvement with any of the families prior to the exercise.” NDRGS 10

NDRGS 14, who had a senior management role with the CFA, argued that the process of implementing the arts-based approach had helped to further the brigade's capacity to engage local residents:

“I think the brigade was quite surprised how well it went. It did foster a positive image of CFA and the brigade in the community. We know there was a good relationship there anyhow. It made [CFA] look good. What it’s done is [Peter - Name of volunteer] has actually stepped up so we’ve got the individual and the brigade that has stepped up, taken on a role and responsibility around community safety, community education. I’m going to struggle to keep him at bay now. He’s going to be out and about probably promoting and that’s a good thing in a way.” NDRGS 14

While the brigade’s reputation may have been enhanced through its connection to the arts-based event, the following comment suggests that it was just one brigade member who took most of the responsibility for supporting the activity:

“There was no-one else that could help me with the drama group; that was just my responsibility so I did that. All I could really get out of the brigade were people willing to drive the trucks in the parade and smile and wave.” NDRGS 10

Although the trial in location 2 did not appear to attract wider involvement from other brigade members, a senior CFA manager (NDRGS 14) identified other potential benefits in trying different engagement approaches. NDRGS 14 reported that trying less traditional methods of engagement may make volunteering for a local brigade appeal to a wider range of people:

“I think by doing this type of approach, someone that might have an interest in art... might feel like they just wouldn’t fit in or belong [to a volunteer brigade]. Now someone might see [Peter -Name of brigade volunteer from location 2] walking down the street and he goes ‘oh that’s the guy that did the art thing’ and stop and talk because they’re interested in the arts or they’re interested in theatre. Then they might just turn up at the brigade where there are a couple of people there that have the same interest outside of everyone that has an interest in jumping on a fire truck. Sometimes you need something else to bring [new volunteers] in.” NDRGS 14

In summary, the drama/music-based event helped one brigade volunteer to develop new contacts with residents who had no prior experience of the CFA in the locality. This approach did not appear to attract the other brigade members to participate apart from on the day of the performance. This aspect could not be confirmed because other brigade members were unavailable for interview.

Location 3

Not applicable

Location 4

Participants reported (interviewed October, 2015) that the first phase of the trial was nearing completion after 3-4 months. This phase involved establishing a temporary steering group to support the second phase – a brigade support committee. The steering group was made up of local business owners, former volunteers and paid CFA staff. This group also supported the brigade to organise a community engagement activity at a farmers' market.

Participants also expressed views about the potential of the support committee. In particular, the support committee was seen as being able to provide business skills such as financial planning and effective recruitment processes. The following quotes are representative:

“One of the things that this committee can do, maybe try and assist the people in the brigade, the officers in the brigade and the brigade management team in holding onto members that they've already got rather than having them turn over.” NDRGS 18

“It will allow the brigade to develop a lot more and develop more in what the brigade's there for: in training, firefighting and just getting themselves out in the community. I believe the committee will be able to help do that. By taking some of the workload that means the current members, they're going to be able to spend more time doing the training that's required. They'll have more time to get out and do community activities, if the brigade was able to organise them. So I think their skills as firefighters will increase a lot because they can concentrate on that more. I think that will have a huge impact on helping the brigade grow a lot stronger.”NDRGS 19

In summary, the evidence regarding the impact of the trials on brigade members was mixed. The general opinion of CFA staff reflecting on the trial in locality 1 was that it had a number of positive aspects. However, serious pre-existing challenges facing the brigade impacted on the volunteers' capacities to engage with the trial. In locality 2 the brigade member interviewed was clearly enthused and had used the project to develop new links. However, other brigade members did not participant to the same level. In location 4, the evidence was based on potential impacts as the trial had not been completed.

3. What were the experiences of the participants? What role did the different types of engagement play in the experience of the participants?

Location 1

The three residents interviewed confirmed that their children enjoyed taking part in the music/drama-based event. The residents observed that the rehearsals and the event were well-organised (for example, the sessions started on time). NDRGS 05 who had regular and close involvement with the process observed a positive impact:

“Some of the parents said ‘it was great because it built their child's confidence’...Some of the children who attended do have challenging home lives. It was brilliant to see them...To give the children the music and happiness and to create and think about making music, it could take them anywhere in their life. It could be a starting point for some of these children and young people to where they want to go next.”

NDRGS 05

The reported impact on confidence could not be confirmed from parents interviewed for this evaluation.

The music facilitator described the effects of the arts-based approach and also reflected on his own understandings of the process:

“As far as the work we did with the kids, it was all really great and positive. [We] got great feedback from the community. The kids really liked it. Initially I didn't really know why I was getting CFA funding for a music [and] a drama project. As it unfolded and through talking to CFA people and their challenges with engaging community in looking at fire plans and disaster plans. [The arts-based approach]... engaged the community through the children. So engaging the children in those issues but also the parents who came along to the workshops and the performance. I was really quite surprised how much impact it did have on the community and spreading that word. It was a bit greater than the normal CFA procedure of pamphlets or apps or other ways they try and get the community to think about these sorts of issues.” NDRGS 08

Participants (NDRGS 08, 06 & 05) reported that due to the positive response to the trial, the music-based program had been extended and the music facilitator

continued to work in the locality for several weeks after the trial had finished. NDRGS 05 also noted that an art teacher in the local school had taken the props painted for the event and had used them to deliver further sessions relating to bushfire awareness. In addition, NDRGS 08 (facilitator) with support from the CFA, was using the idea of the music program in two other communities in Eastern Victoria.

Location 2

The parents and brigade volunteer reported very positive views about the children's involvement and their performance. Generally, the event was enjoyed by the participants. The following two quotes show the parents' assessment:

“I think it was well received and we had a lot of fun. The kids kept saying to me, “oh [name] it's so much fun, it's so much fun you know. Can we do this again?” I thought that was something I learnt. When you asked me that initially I sort of went blank [laughs] but what I hadn't appreciated was how much fun they had.” NDRGS 13

“But at the end of the day [the children] were all smiling and laughing and it was - they were having a ball, to be honest.” NDRGS 11

Similarly, the brigade volunteer reflected on his experiences:

“Look I had a beautiful day. I really enjoyed it. I think the kids enjoyed their performance. They had smiles on their faces, they were excited. They had a message to get through, like the performance itself had some good messages in it about fire preparation...The performance was fun and entertaining, people enjoyed it. It was appropriate for kids... and it was a really great day and I really enjoyed it. I felt a great sense of achievement and it was fun.” NDRGS 10

Participants stated that there was a limited range of community activities in locality 2. The opportunity to initiate another type activity was appreciated as shown by NDRGS 10's observation:

“So there's sport and then there's Scouting. I can't actually think of any other adolescent and primary school level activities that are involved that are other than sport or Scouting. So to do a drama group, a number of the parents went ‘oh this is so different, this is really good, this is something my kids are interested in because they're not into sport’. So the fact that it was an alternative was very positive. That's the feedback from the parents that I received.” NDRGS 10

A ‘spin-off’ impact was reported by NDRGS 09 who following the trial was exploring the possibility of establishing a theatre / drama group for young people in the town.

Location 3

Not applicable

Location 4

The trial participants in locality 4 were the brigade volunteers. While the trial had not been completed, evidence from the CFA staff member who was supporting the brigade indicated the influence on volunteers of the approach and associated activities:

“What I am seeing as observing the brigade and that is the very first meeting I went to with the brigade. I walked into the fire station and I went ‘oh my goodness, what have we got here?’ They were all shoulders slumping, there were no chairs set out, they were all hanging around the edges of the room. By the third one, I walked in, they had the chairs out, they're sitting there waiting. The atmosphere was lightning...And then when we had the [community] activity at the market, the group that I first met that first night I would not have recognised them as the same brigade. It wasn't just the clothing [new brigade polo shirts]. It was their openness. They looked happy to be a part of the brigade.”

NDRGS 15

“At the community engagement activity day, at the community market, [Jim] who's one of the implementation team, he's very proud to say that three brigade members walked up to him and shook his hand to say 'hello'. Didn't mention the steering committee but they know the work he's been doing. I suppose for me people who don't have a lot of words normally, don't talk a lot, that they've come up to him to shake his hand is a very positive sign that the brigade are on board with the concept.”
NDRGS 15

In summary, the trials were generally well-received in the localities. Both residents and CFA staff and volunteers, and a facilitator identified several positive outcomes and developed spin-off activities.

4. What factors contributed to the success (or otherwise) of the different approaches?

Location 1

The evidence indicates some of the challenges and opportunities that occurred from working in location 1. A significant issue was the brigade's limited resources and capabilities. The local brigade's standing in the community was also mixed.

NDRGS 06 a steering committee member also reported problems at an organisational level relating to skills and confidence:

“That [event] went very well but the skills currently within CFA, I don't think - people aren't used to dealing with these types of approaches. It's a little bit of fear of the unknown. It does need perhaps not necessarily a different skill set but a level of comfort in working with the arts and things that are less practically oriented within the mainstream of what CFA does.” NDRGS 06

Several factors contributed towards achieving the positive outcomes from the trial in location 1. First, the contribution of the CFA staff member (NDRGS 06) who took on a more hands-on role. Second, that other CFA staff were willing to support the trials. Third, the limited opportunities in the locality for younger people especially during the holiday period meant that residents were enthusiastic about the chance to take part in the event. Fourth, that local people were willing to host the event.

Location 2

As NDRGS 09 (a parent) observed having staff and volunteers with the appropriate skills and commitment was an important contributing factor:

“[Peter: Name of brigade volunteer] did a profoundly important-important role in making those connections. But NDRGS 06 [CFA] did as well. NDRGS 06 wasn't there on the ground each Sunday, but certainly in terms of coordinating aspects of it that were important to her role. I spoke to NDRGS 06 quite a lot, particularly early on. NDRGS 06 was responsible for gaining the initial publicity and helping to get people involved and that kind of thing. Whereas Peter was more on the ground. Both roles were essential to its success.” NDRGS 09

At the local level, the trial in location 2 was heavily dependent on the involvement of one brigade volunteer. Trying this approach in locality 2 raised some difficult questions for the brigade and for the CFA, as the following quote demonstrates:

“What I find is that there are things that I would like to do that would be better in the community but I don't have enough people to assist in roles like that. So I am constrained by the number of people that are willing to assist me...Dealing with the public generally is a skill set that not a lot of people have; the brigade is full of very practical people.” NDRGS 10

Similarly, a CFA manager who supported the trials also experienced challenges in generating support from colleagues:

“That was one of the issues around Locality 2. That was some of the pushback I was getting from some of my staff. They were really concerned that it could turn pear shaped or everything just fails. They could have lost face I suppose with that community. That's what they're worried about.” NDRGS 14

Trying new ways of working can be difficult to implement and it is unsurprising that participants reported the above issues. A concern for the CFA would be if such attitudes were widespread throughout the organisation and common among volunteers.

Location 3

In locality 3, there was insufficient interest for the trial to proceed. The following quotes report the reflections of NDRGS 12, a facilitator responsible for liaising

with local residents. NDRGS 12 argued that a limiting factor related to the timings of when particular safety information is communicated:

“We need to change our mentality on bushfires, preparing for the summer and do it as a full year thing, always keep putting the message out there to people. I think if we keep doing that and we keep trying things like that then we'll eventually we'll turn people's mentality around and say, ‘hey, it is winter, but I might get that old tree sorted out in my backyard, or I might think about my fire plan while I've got time to do that’.” NDRGS 12

“I approached those two groups and after a little while - it just wasn't successful, we couldn't get enough interest or any interest really in taking part...No one had put up their hands to say that they wanted to do it. I know that the church group - they said ‘if it had been later in the year closer to the summer, they would have been interested in doing it. But they felt that there wasn't enough notice and it was the wrong time of year to do that’. So then what we did was I went back to the brigade and they suggested the primary school and the preschool. So I went through the same thing with them, spoke to the director of the preschool, printed them off another letter to their families, and did the same with the school but got nowhere.” NDRGS 12

NDRGS 12 also suggested that new approaches needed to be tried several times:

“I think if we just try something once and expect it to happen, we're going to be disappointed. I think we need to give it another go.”
NDRGS 12

Location 4

The evidence from locality 4 demonstrates that there can be multiple factors influencing the success or otherwise of a trial. The following quote from NDRGS 15 refers to appropriate investment in the brigade and the legacy of previous CFA volunteer management and support:

“I think one of the things that really helped is to have had the financial backing... and the fact that NDRGS 06 had some money, we went polo shirts and a banner and the brigade were going ‘wow’”. One of the things that the captain said, [was] ‘the brigade have got enough money to pay for those polo shirts but they have felt so let down by CFA over the last 10 years that for CFA to provide the money and give them a shirt is going to go such a long way towards moving forward in a better way’...That bit of money used carefully can just make a big difference.”
NDRGS 15

Another factor was tailoring the intervention to the local context. The following quotes from NDRGS 16, a steering committee member, and NDRGS 15, a CFA staff member, reported how the trial was adapted according to the commitment that the committee members could give:

“There was myself and a couple of others who were asked, were more than willing to be involved with the CFA to get something up, but didn’t have the time to commit to this ongoing or this pilot program for 12 months but suggested that we would be able to pull a team together that would be appropriate with the skills required. So we came up with the idea of having a steering committee which would then create a support committee.” NDRGS 16

“So the people I worked with on the implementation team who didn't have the time to do the work, I was determined to make it as simple as possible for them to give us their expertise in the easiest way possible so it wasn't onerous for them so we got the best outcome we could and for the brigade.” NDRGS 15

Another aspect was appropriate and respectful processes:

“I think it’s been successful because we put a lot of thought into the processes just putting this support team together. We brought together knowledge that we’d had. [From my previous experiences]I was able to bring a bit of structure into our thought process. We did everything systematically. We didn’t jump ahead without getting an awareness out there that this is what we’re trying to do. We had big article, photos, everything in the paper about what we were doing...What do I take out from why it worked? I think it was just that we had a group, our implementation team were all on the same level of thought and we all understood and valued each other’s comments. We took on board everyone’s thoughts and came out with an end result... it’s about just working through the process slowly and getting an understanding of the CFA’s level of commitment to it.” NDRGS 16

Ensuring that existing brigade members supported the trial was another important issue. The brigade captain, who thought of the idea for the support committee, described the process of getting ‘buy-in’ from other volunteers:

“So it took a little bit of explaining. But it still - at the end of the day, I explained that we need people to support us non-operationally. That's what I started selling it as. I said ‘we have the people in the community that have that expertise. We need to engage those people to help us be a better brigade.’” NDRGS 17

This feature was confirmed by another member of the steering committee:

“The other aspect to this has been the acceptance from the brigade of outsiders coming in to again, volunteer their time for the benefit of the brigade. If the brigade had a group that says ‘look, we know what we’re doing’ or ‘they’re not welcome’, the thing wouldn’t work. So right from the start we’ve always had a clear understanding that it’s what they want.” NDRGS 16

A strongly reported influence was leadership – both at a local level and an organisational level. NDRGS 19 who had knowledge of the CFA summarised how support for the trial developed:

“Obviously, the people involved and the way they've done it. [The brigade captain] came up with the idea that he wanted this support committee. I know he's thrown [the idea] around down at the regional headquarters a bit. They weren't really interested in the idea. But I know when NDRGS 15 started working, she heard about the idea and she took it on and just really ran with it. So I think that the passion that she had for it has been the key to getting this up and running, and she's been able to get the support through the CFA as well”. NDRGS 19

The positive contribution of NDRGS 15 was also confirmed by another committee member:

“I thought it was one of the more successful things that I've been involved with through the CFA. The young woman (NDRGS 15) who has been implementing and then leading the group has been, I think exceptional in her dedication to what she's had to do and done it very well.” NDRGS 18

However, a change in leadership within the organisation can be problematic. As NDRGS 15 (CFA brigade support worker) reported:

“[My previous manager] was right on board. Absolute support. Then that manager was seconded into another role and there was another manager came in and he told me that my priority was to run a recruitment campaign for the brigade.”

Interviewer: “Oh right. That's going backwards a bit.”

NDRGS 15: “It was and I tried to explain that I see this as just one big recruitment campaign; it's a very complex recruitment campaign. But we butted heads a bit (disagreed).”

The final factor related to diversity and partnership:

“The process is great because we're working with paid CFA as well as volunteers and us outsiders. The process was quite fair and equitable, so I think it's got a great opportunity to go state-wide in these volunteer services.” NDRGS 20

“It’s been very good, I think all the way through and involving local people, local businessmen on the committee as well.” NDRGS 18

In summary, the evidence suggests that the capacities and abilities of CFA staff and volunteers was an important factor across all locations in contributing to the success or otherwise of the trials.

5. How effective were the different engagement approaches at developing people’s capacity to respond to the bushfire risk / challenging people’s thinking about bushfire risk? Did the approaches lead participants to act (or form the intention to act) to improve their bushfire safety?

Location 1

There was little evidence to suggest that the engagement approach in location 1 had developed people’s capacity to respond to bushfire risk or that it challenged existing thinking about bushfire risk. However, some participants reported that there was existing awareness about bushfire risk. A CFA staff member observed that:

“when we started talking to the kids and people they had a fairly high degree of awareness of various fire messages. It wasn’t something that was totally new to them.” NDRGS 02

A different perspective was offered by NDRGS 01(resident) who when asked whether or not residents generally talked about bushfire risk stated:

“I think everyone is a bit blasé, really, like at the end of the day, you don't really think about it until it happens.” NDRGS 01

Nonetheless, when asked about the impact of the event, NDRGS 01 stated that her children’s knowledge had been reaffirmed:

“[my children] learn it at school as well, but I think it gave them more realisation of bushfires, like, what can happen if you're not prepared. I think they probably, well they would have definitely took it on board more because it was done in a fun kind of way, like, they were doing a play and they were practising, so obviously they were going over their lines. So I think it definitely sunk in more for them.” NDRGS 01

Another type of impact was reported by participant NDRGS 07. This participant reflected on the different types of responses to natural hazards by drawing a distinction between the everyday view of risk and those who compartmentalised bushfire risk into a discrete activity:

“I learnt that people have a different perspective of fire preparedness or how it affects different areas, and how they see fire, how they go about dealing with it and that, which is a little bit different to the locals. I mean where we live, we've had constant fires, floods, whatever, natural disasters. People in small country towns don't always have the services or responses there. So they don't separate - lifestyle in these little country towns is like - you get the feeling that yes, other people coming in see fire as this, this and this. Getting back to those little compartments, they tend to put it in compartments. That would be the biggest difference that we notice, whereas because we're talking about not just the fire but perhaps community responses and how we deal with it, it's the same people. They're in various community organisations and they overlap. I don't know whether it just seems like it's a more everyday thing that we deal with.” NDRGS 07

Location 2

From this trial the facilitator reported learning about fire danger ratings:

“I learnt a lot about bushfire control which even though I was born [overseas] but I have been here most of my life but I have never really been exposed to that concern. It was an education from that point of view for me. I look at the five danger rating codes now and I know what they mean.” NDRGS 13

When asked if they undertook particular preparedness activities, NDRGS 09 spoke about having conversations at a community and family level about bushfire preparation prior to the bushfire season. In terms of the trial, NDRGS 09 reflected on the way in which the information was communicated:

“I watched the performance and I was at the rehearsals and - well, most of the rehearsals in different ways and the message was communicated in a really different way but also really clearly, and I genuinely think that you will reach different people and the audience will be very substantially extended.” NDRGS 09

Location 3

No

Location 4

Not applicable

In summary, the evidence suggests that existing knowledge about bushfire was confirmed rather than enhanced. A facilitator reported that she had learnt new information concerning the bushfire danger ratings.

6. Did the approaches expand people’s networks and increase sense of community?

Location 1

The evidence from location 1 indicated that the event did not expand people’s networks or sense of community. However, participants gave examples of existing close ties and a strong sense of community, although this was experienced in different ways. For example, NDRGS 01 identified that close ties could be a barrier:

“It's a beautiful little town, friendly community, takes a little while to adjust, though...it is a tight-knit community so it takes a bit of effort to actually get accepted into the community. It took us nearly a year.”
NDRGS 01

For other participants, the strong sense of community was viewed slightly more positively:

“I've had a good experience. I mean, yes, it's a small town and small town mentality sometimes. But everyone's there for everyone else in a crisis.” NDRGS 05

NDRGS 04 when asked if she had learnt anything new about bushfire safety because of the trial, explained how a sense of community helped in the context of an emergency:

“No it was all pretty straightforward you know. Because we've lived in a small rural town for so long and you're just aware of it and everybody is so close knit, everybody keeps an eye on everybody.” NDRGS 04

Participant NDRGS 07, a long-term resident, provided a more nuanced account of community by highlighting the changing nature of social networks, the different motivations that draw people to the locality and an assessment of the existing close ties:

“[It's a] small town. [There are] diverse reasons why people live in remote areas. Some families have grown up together with a closeness. People are here for different reasons, like the businesses are here. They've clearly got their own agenda. They may have a different agenda. They're just here, it's a business venture, and they're here and gone before we know it. But there are families who are here, have long-term roots and plan to be here for a long time. Not all members of the community have that, they certainly don't have long-term interests. But there are a small core of locals that would be close knit - yeah.” NDRGS 07

Location 2

Participants from location 2 reported two examples of how that the process of staging the music-drama event had extended social networks. First, a parent whose children had taken part was hoping that the event would help to establish a theatre / drama group in the town. NDRGS 09 reflected on the value in linking with other organisations and groups:

“...having the CFA involved in building new skills and making new connections was really powerful...It was quite unique I think in that perspective to have that level of community development occurring from quite different organisations I guess traditionally and to have that really uniting way of working together to create a really amazing production.” NDRGS 09

“So it was a really good opportunity to put that sort of in the front of people's minds and from a community arts perspective it broadens the sense of what community arts could be in this town and the way that it can connect up in such a really positive way to existing organisations. We don't have to sort of reinvent the wheel all the time. We can actually do things within existing organisations in a really positive way.” NDRGS 09

This was confirmed by another participant:

“One thing that did surprise me, one of the parents (NDRGS 09) of one of the children said – she pointed out very clearly that there was nothing other than sporting and scouts to participate in and her child was not interested in those things and was more interested in dramatic performance. She is seriously considering trying to find... a way to extend this drama group and make it ongoing. She's keen. I don't think she has the skills but the will is there to find a way to make this ongoing... That's come directly out of this exercise.” NDRGS 10

The second example of the trial helping to extend social networks was given by a brigade volunteer. NDRGS 10 confirmed how the process had developed relationships between the brigade and the parents and children:

“Well with regard to the parents absolutely. Like when I walk around [Locality 2] and I see them now I know their names, I know their faces and I say ‘hi’. So absolutely. It demystifies the station. It demystifies me as a fire-fighter...Yes, there's no doubt about it that relationships have been built up between me and the families that were involved in the exercise, absolutely. I'm sure that people will be more willing to participate, like to contact me and to contact the brigade, the families that were involved.” NDRGS 10

Location 3

No, trial did not take place.

Location 4

The aim of the trial in this locality was to establish a support structure for the volunteer brigade. As the focus was primarily on the internal processes of the brigade rather than the wider community, this trial was not expected to expand networks or strengthen sense of community. However, as NDRGS 17, a brigade member, reports, links were made through the process of setting up the steering committee:

“One of the things that really has come out with this committee...is from a couple of those business people we did speak to have come out and said ‘well, we know nothing - we don't know enough of the brigade. We know there's a fire brigade in [Locality 4] but we don't know anything about them.’ One guy actually came into the fire station and said ‘oh, I've never been in here. Oh, these are the trucks you've got. Okay, this is the stuff you've got.’...So - and for me it was an eye-opener and for him it was as well, the community know there's a fire brigade in [Locality 4] but they don't know much about it.” NDRGS 17

In summary, there was some evidence showing that the trials had developed some social networks and notably established links between residents and the local brigade. In one locality there was no evidence that the trial had influence residents' sense of community or networks, although participants indicated that these aspects were an existing feature.

Limitations

The overall project and evaluation had a number of limitations. First, the trials operated at a small-scale. Second, evaluation was limited to post-event interviews. Complementing the interview data with other techniques such as observation would have enhanced this report. Due to the timing of the trials, base-line data could not be collected. Third, trial 3 did not take place due to a lack of interest and trial 4 started late and consequently only reached phase one of a two-step process. This limited both the number of participants and data available. Despite these limitations, the project provided some insights into engagement processes and the value in trying different ways to communicate bushfire safety information.

Key Lessons for CFA

This section outlines some lessons for CFA and community engagement practitioners. After reflecting on the interviews and the trials several positive points can be made. First, three out of four trials were able to take place despite challenging circumstances. Second, CFA staff, facilitators and volunteers interviewed expressed enthusiasm for the engagement approach they were involved in. Some participants were initially unsure about trying new approaches, but through the process, learned to see the value of their work. Third, in two localities the engagement processes prompted interest in extending the initial trial in a modified way or initiated new community activities.

The following points highlight areas that CFA should consider in order to improve or develop its community engagement.

- **Processes are crucial**

An important distinction of the approaches reported is the role of process. This means that when residents, volunteers and staff work together to stage an event or to facilitate a support committee, capacities are built and learning and development occur. This feature should be recognised together with specific outcomes.

- **To communicate the nature of the engagement process and to be transparent about who is involved, who benefits, and expected outcomes and have a clear exit strategy. CFA staff should provide information and check for stakeholders' understanding on a regular basis.**

Some participants (residents and CFA volunteers and staff) also provided examples of where further thinking might be needed to improve service delivery. In locality 1, the community leader was generally very positive about the trial. However, NDRGS 05 also expressed a concern:

“But I felt misinformed or not informed about it, which is probably a failing on my part that I wasn’t entirely sure what was going on, in the sense that it was all about acquitting the grant basically. It was about doing this research and yourself [RMIT University] and the CFA doing what they did. Basically I took it like they wanted to do something from perhaps Melbourne-side of things to raise the face to the CFA. Word on the street is that they're going to close our CFA down anyway. If they do that now after having us all be happy with having the CFA people around and doing all this music stuff it will be a smack in the face...We're not some crash test dummy in that respect. It's just I wish I'd been aware of the exact reason to begin with, that's all.” NDRGS 05

- **Brigade management teams to have training in people management skills and conflict resolution.**

In locality 4, a brigade volunteer expressed concerns about the training offered for brigade management teams. NDRGS 17 argued that the current training provision was too narrow and needed enhancing to include aspects of managing people:

“One of my biggest criticisms of CFA is they teach us how to be wonderful firefighters, handle hose and play around with firefighting equipment but when we haven't got fires we've got a group of people that are trying to work together. One of the things that CFA don't do and don't do very well and that is, teach the senior members, the operational members or even the members in general how to deal with people and how to deal with issues.” NDRGS 17

- **To encourage innovation at a regional and district level through appropriate support structures and performance indicators.**

Some participants reflected on the difficulty other CFA staff had in supporting new initiatives. This raises questions about staffing levels and support structures:

“I just put it down to one thing, which always seems to be the case, that it could create more work. So if it creates more work for them, a lot of the times they're not interested, which is - like it's not their fault because I know the ops officers, they're really pushed for time. They've got a huge workload already. So it's always hard if you're taking the idea down to them and it's going to create more work for them. It will be hard to get done because they're so busy, and there's just not enough of them.”
NDRGS 19

Several CFA staff and volunteers were able to identify personal learnings from their involvement in the trials. However, NDRGS 06, a member of the new engagement approaches project's steering committee, reported examples of working with others who lacked the appropriate skills or attitude:

“The people who are engaging with community, they really need to have the skills and not everybody has those skills or can develop those skills.”
NDRGS 06

“Maybe the culture of CFA, the way they recruit people, the skill sets that are deemed worthy, they're not conducive to enabling these things to happen. They're sort of outside people's experience. It's quite conservative, the CFA is quite conservative. That's what I've found. You can be a person who doesn't have those skill sets yourself. You don't understand it but you can still be open and say ‘let's give it a go, I don't understand it, I don't feel particularly comfortable with it but let's try something’. The worse that can happen is it fails. There's learnings from everything. There are some people like that in CFA but the majority are not like that. I think that's a problem, that lack of open mindedness.” NDRGS 06b

- **To mainstream professional development opportunities that reflect community engagement values to develop associated skills.**

Participants NDRGS 14 and 06 reported push-back from colleagues and concerns about how the CFA manages community engagement initiatives, particularly around how projects finish and managing exit strategies. Community engagement is also an opportunity for CFA staff and volunteers to reflect on their relationships with residents and the lessons that can be learned from repeated interactions. Working *with* communities provides a platform for the CFA and its volunteers to be a learning organisation by reconsidering their approaches after reflecting on their engagement. In short, community engagement is a two-way process.

- **To promote longer term thinking when working with communities.**

“If we're [CFA] not engaging with the community as well as we would like to, that's not the community's issue... Things like engagement takes a really long time and you need to be on the ground and doing it consistently.” NDRGS 06

- **CFA commit resources to investing in arts-based approaches to engagement and to trial the community-led brigade support committee in other localities.**

Overall the trials demonstrated that using creative arts could lead to positive outcomes for the CFA and its volunteers. The community-led support committee should be considered as a model for other localities. Enhanced evidence might be provided by evaluating longer term initiatives with base-line data and using techniques that do not rely on self-reported data.

Conclusions

The aim of this project was for the CFA to try different ways to engage with residents. The trials were based on different delivery mechanisms (arts-based; CFG and brigade support committee). Evaluation interviews were conducted with CFA staff, brigade volunteers, facilitators and residents.

Overall, the trials produced a number of positive outcomes. CFA staff and volunteers interviewed demonstrated enthusiasm for trying new approaches. Trial 4 (the brigade support committee) designed to up-skill the brigade management team is a model that could be scaled-up. Further spin-off activities extending the trial or leading to other community initiatives were also evident. There are benefits for the CFA to be involved in communities in this way, although it is not without risks as outcomes can be mixed or the approach may not be supported.

The issues facing the CFA are considerable. Climate change is predicted to increase the severity and frequency of bushfires and other natural disasters. Research based on post-fire interviews indicates that preparedness levels remain low. There are also on-going challenges of recruiting and retaining younger volunteers; ensuring that volunteer brigades reflect the communities they are drawn from; and how best to motivate and support experienced volunteers. The CFA also has to operate efficiently and effectively with limited funding and resources. This context

represents an opportunity for the CFA to be more innovative in how it engages with communities and residents.

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