Evaluation of the Warrumbungle Bushfire Support Coordination Service Final Report

October 2014
## Contents

Research Team .................................................................................................................. 5
Acknowledgements ............................................................................................................ 6
  List of Acronyms ............................................................................................................ 6
Introduction ....................................................................................................................... 7
Background ....................................................................................................................... 8
  Service Establishment .................................................................................................. 8
  Staffing ......................................................................................................................... 8
  Service Location ......................................................................................................... 9
  Communication ......................................................................................................... 9
Service Implementation ................................................................................................. 9
Service Evaluation ......................................................................................................... 10
Aims .................................................................................................................................. 10
Method ............................................................................................................................ 10
  Participants and Recruitment ...................................................................................... 10
  Data Collection and Analysis ...................................................................................... 11
  Ethics ............................................................................................................................ 11
Results ............................................................................................................................. 12
  Former Service User Surveys ...................................................................................... 12
  Key Stakeholder Interviews ......................................................................................... 15
Discussion ....................................................................................................................... 18
  Limitations .................................................................................................................. 19
Lessons Learnt and Considerations for the Future ....................................................... 19
Conclusion ...................................................................................................................... 21
List of References ........................................................................................................... 22
Appendices ..................................................................................................................... 23
  Appendix A .................................................................................................................. 23
  Appendix B .................................................................................................................. 24
  Appendix C .................................................................................................................. 32
List of Tables

Table 1. For how long did you use the service? ......................................................... 12
Table 2. Support ............................................................................................................. 13
Table 3. On the whole, did you feel satisfied with the support provided by the BSCS? ....... 14
Table 4. Bushfire Experience .......................................................................................... 14
The evaluation of the Warrumbungle Bushfire Support Coordination Service was requested by the Ministry of Police and Emergency Services and was conducted by staff at the Centre for Rural and Remote Mental Health, University of Newcastle, Australia in collaboration with staff from the Ministry of Police and Emergency Services. The research team was comprised of the following people.

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We also extend our thanks to Dr Kerry Inder, Dr Jane Rich and Mrs Angela Booth who provided feedback on draft versions of this report.

List of Acronyms

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Acronym</th>
<th>Full Form</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>BSCS</td>
<td>Bushfire Support Coordination Service</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CRRMH</td>
<td>Centre for Rural and Remote Mental Health, University of Newcastle</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MPES DWS</td>
<td>Disaster Welfare Services Branch of the NSW Ministry for Police and Emergency Services</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>EMA</td>
<td>Emergency Management Australia</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>FACS</td>
<td>Department of Family and Community Services</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MPES</td>
<td>NSW Ministry for Police and Emergency Services</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>VBCMS</td>
<td>Victorian Bushfires Case Management Service</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>WSC</td>
<td>Warrumbungle Shire Council (the Council)</td>
</tr>
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</table>
Introduction

January 2013 was the hottest month on record for Australia, with most of the country experiencing extreme heat sometime between the end of December 2012 and the start of January 2013 (Australian Government Bureau of Meteorology, 2013). On Sunday 13 January 2013 the Wambelong bushfire burnt out of control in the Warrumbungle National Park, threatening homes and the Siding Spring Observatory (Van de Wetering, 2013). It continued to burn for a number of days before it was finally contained (Van de Wetering, 2013). It had destroyed more than 53,000 hectares of land, 51 homes and 113 outbuildings, livestock and farm machinery in the region (Rural Fire Service, 2013), as well as causing significant damage to the Warrumbungle National Park and the Siding Spring Observatory.

It is well documented that natural disasters may inflict significant trauma upon the communities in which they occur. Individuals living in these communities may face major personal and community wide challenges throughout the recovery process (Grealey et al., 2009). Recognising the difficulties which lay ahead for the recovering community, the Warrumbungle Bushfire Support Coordination Service (BSCS) was implemented in the Warrumbungle Shire as a response to the January 2013 bushfires by the NSW Ministry for Police and Emergency Services Disaster Welfare Services Branch (MPES DWS). The BSCS was designed to assist affected individuals, families and the broader community through linkages with services to address their tangible and intangible needs. Utilising a person-centred, strengths-based and solution-focused approach, the BSCS support workers aimed to aid bushfire recovery, decision making and promote well-being within the community. The BSCS functioned within the community for approximately 6 months, with the service commencing in February 2013 and closing in early August 2013.

While the implementation of support services aims to assist individuals through these challenging times, there is a paucity of research reporting on the degree to which these services help or hinder the recovery process. Although past service evaluations have indicated that successful interventions promote social connectedness and community development, there is no consensus over which intervention strategies result in positive outcomes (Grealey et al., 2010). Further, the role of government assistance in post-disaster intervention is not well understood, despite research which indicates the necessity of governments to be ‘evidence-informed’ in implementing post-disaster community services (Grealey et al., 2010).

In the Australian context, there have been very few evaluations conducted on government initiated interventions aiming to aid recovery following a natural disaster. One Australian post-natural disaster service evaluation was conducted on the Victorian Bushfires Case Management Service (VBCMS) following the 2009 Victorian Bushfires. Although this evaluation identified an overwhelmingly positive community response to the VBCMS, it also noted that ‘the quality of the evidence available to guide governments and policy makers in responding to disasters is limited’ (Grealey et al., 2009, p. 2). Given the potentially devastating impacts of natural disasters on communities, there is a need to evaluate and
improve government services that are strategically implemented following a natural disaster (Dufty, 2013).

In evaluating the Warrumbungle BSCS post-implementation it is anticipated that a greater understanding of the perceived positive and negative aspects of this NSW based service will be obtained. This will allow development of a revised service framework to better meet the needs of future clients of similar services. An evaluation of the Warrumbungle BSCS will ascertain the acceptability, feasibility and effectiveness of the service, and will begin to fill the gap in the NSW Government's toolkit for disaster response and recovery.

Background

Service Establishment
Due to the losses sustained for householders and the significant recovery process that needed to be undertaken, a coordinated support service for people adversely affected by the bushfire was conceptualised within the Disaster Welfare Services Branch of the Ministry for Police and Emergency Services (MPES DWS), and discussed with Warrumbungle Shire Council (the Council) in the days immediately following the fire. Consultation with NSW Treasury and the Emergency Management Australia (EMA) Division of the Attorney-General’s Department gained support for the proposal. The NSW and Commonwealth governments, through the Natural Disaster Relief and Recovery Arrangements, jointly funded the service, with in-kind support from the Warrumbungle Shire Council (WSC) and NSW Health. MPES DWS then administered these funds.

MPES staff, together with a seconded officer from the NSW Department of Family and Community Services (FACS), developed the model for the service and a detailed manual of operating guidelines and tools. Colleagues involved in the recovery from both the Victorian Black Saturday Bushfires and New Zealand Canterbury Earthquakes also provided reference material regarding support services implemented in both jurisdictions. The BSCS commenced operation on 18 February 2013.

Community consultation was extensive throughout January and February 2013, with MPES DWS meeting with the Coonabarabran Interagency, local and district NSW Health management, FACS, Barnardo’s and Council. A Recovery Committee chaired by the local council was established and a Recovery Coordinator was appointed by the state government, which functioned separately to the BSCS. Consultations with the Recovery Committee and Coordinator, as well as the MPES Response and Recovery Branch and the Warrumbungle Shire Mayor’s Bushfire Appeal Fund Advisory Panel also occurred. A BSCS Steering Group of representatives from key human service agencies was established to provide ongoing local level consultation regarding community needs.

Staffing
Identified as crucial to the effectiveness and credibility of the service were skilled, local workers. Workers with backgrounds/training in crisis intervention, basic counselling, family support, paediatric and mental health experience, and familiarity with local networks and
services, were required. As a result, the BSCS Coordinator was sought from local/district health units and the additional family support worker hours through Barnardo’s, a well-established local outlet of a key non-government agency with specialist skill in family work. The intent was for Barnardo’s support workers to mainly engage children and families, and the fulltime Coordinator to engage adults and couples. A former mental health staff member was engaged as a casual staff member of MPES to fill the BSCS Coordinator position.

The core of the support worker role is to provide support for people seeking assistance across a variety of issues, including insurance claims, completion of forms, replacement of lost documents, assistance with future planning, and brief psychological interventions and support when necessary. Through secondary interventions such as consultation, community education, media releases, and specific problem-solving meetings, other inputs include psycho-education, peer support, professional development for other agencies, needs analysis and individual or systemic advocacy.

Service Location
The BSCS Coordinator was initially located in part of a community services office of Council, before moving to a private office space in the new Council office which was completed during the term of the BSCS. The Council manager who had managed the Recovery Centre also moved near to this office in the new Council premises thus affording a strong communication link between the Council, Mayor’s Fund processes, and BSCS. This location was considered ideal for the BSCS Coordinator, as the only other potential site was the Community Health Centre which was deemed less suitable due to its geographic location. Additionally, space at Community Health was not guaranteed. The Barnardo’s workers who provided part time case work to the BSCS delivered this from their own shop front a couple of blocks away from the Council building. This meant that clients had the choice of two outlets or auspices to obtain assistance. All three BSCS workers also conducted many home visits which was considered a flexible, approachable, accessible way to provide support to the community.

Communication
Both BSCS outlets/worker groups maintained a common case management system via a shared spreadsheet database and hard copy case notes. This data was shared with MPES DWS and regular teleconferences were held; weekly initially and then fortnightly. Regular communication was considered the most appropriate approach to best manage the virtual team, across two agency auspices/employment contexts, and across different theoretical backgrounds and models of practice. The BSCS client data was confidential to BSCS and MPES DWS and not shared with other agencies. Clients were actively referred to other services as appropriate and using Barnardo’s and NSW Health’s standard informed consent and confidentiality provisions.

Service Implementation
The BSCS started operating approximately three weeks after the fires and was funded for six months; the limit of what NSW Treasury would provide. An approach for extension of funding was deemed not appropriate as by the six month mark, the workload of BSCS had
reduced and it was decided by MPES DWS, Barnardo’s and the full time BSCS Coordinator that Barnardo’s itself and the core of ongoing local services could provide sufficient support. The BSCS was the first such service ever funded in this way in NSW so was in that respect a pilot.

**Service Evaluation**
An evaluation of the BSCS was negotiated with The University of Newcastle’s Centre for Rural and Remote Mental Health. An evaluation of the service was considered instrumental in assessing whether the objectives of the BSCS were achieved and would also allow assessment of how well the BSCS aligned with community needs. Together, these findings will lead to recommendations for continued and future service provision following natural disasters such as the Warrumbungle bushfires. This document outlines the findings of the evaluation and provides suggestions for future service provision.

**Aims**

The evaluation aimed to answer the following questions:

1. Do former BSCS clients:
   a. Know where to seek support when required?
   b. Know how to navigate, access and engage appropriate recovery services?
   c. Perceive that an individualised, relationship-based and responsive service was provided to them?

2. Do key stakeholders from the BSCS team and other human service agencies involved in the service perceive that their specialist skills, reputation and capacity have been effectively utilised by the BSCS?

3. To what extent do community members perceive that the BSCS has promoted resilience and self-sufficiency and provided benefits to the Warrumbungle Shire, at individual, household and community levels?

A mixed methods approach was used, incorporating data collection by both survey and interview. To address Aim 1, the perspectives of former service users were assessed via their voluntary participation in a paper survey. Interviews with key stakeholders were utilised to address Aim 2 and an online survey was dispersed to a sample of the local community to address Aim 3.

**Method**

**Participants and Recruitment**
Participants were former services users of the BSCS, key stakeholders involved with the BSCS and local community members who were residents of the Warrumbungle Shire (see Appendix A) during the January 2013 bushfires. They were identified and recruited via the following methods:
**Former Service Users**

Former Service Users were identified by the MPES DWS who retained all client information at the conclusion of the BSCS. Approximately 78 former service users who had previously indicated their consent to be contacted for matters involving their use of the service were posted an invitation letter, participant information statement and paper survey (see Appendix B for a copy of the survey). Two reminder letters, including another participant information statement and survey were mailed out to the participants who had not responded after 2 months. To facilitate easier completion, a link to an identical online survey was also provided at this stage.

**Key Stakeholders**

MPES DWS identified key stakeholders from the human services sector who worked closely with the BSCS during its term of operation. MPES DWS compiled a mailing list of 26 potential participants and emailed a participant information statement and informed consent form to these people. Participants were asked to complete an informed consent form, including their contact details and return it to the researchers. They were advised that the researchers would be in touch to organise a mutually convenient time and day for an interview (see Appendix C for the interview schedule). Two reminder emails were also sent via email.

**Members of the Warrumbungle Community**

Recruitment posters were given to local organisations to recruit members of the Warrumbungle community to the study. These posters included information about the research and a link to an online survey. Very few responses to this survey were received and the research team made the decision to terminate this aspect of the study.

**Data Collection and Analysis**

Data collection continued for approximately 5 months. All former service user paper surveys were posted by reply paid envelope to the CRRMH. The online versions were administered via Survey Monkey (https://www.surveymonkey.com/). Interviews with key stakeholders were conducted by a member of the research team and audiotaped with the participant’s permission to facilitate transcription and analysis. All data collection concluded in July 2014.

Former service user surveys analysed using IBM SPSS software. Basic quantitative statistical tests were undertaken. Key stakeholder transcripts were uploaded to NVivo to facilitate qualitative analysis. A thematic analysis approach as described by Braun and Clarke (2006) was utilised to identify key themes which emerged from the interview transcripts. This approach to analysis included familiarisation with the data, generating initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing themes and defining and naming themes (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

**Ethics**

Ethical approval was granted by The University of Newcastle Human Research Ethics Committee (H-2013-0271) prior to the commencement of the project in October 2013. All participants were required to give their informed consent prior to inclusion in the study. This involved either the completion of a survey for the former service users and community members, or an informed consent form for the key stakeholders. Additionally, former service...
users had given their consent to MPES DWS to be contacted about matters regarding their use of the BSCS prior to the commencement of the project. All of the participant information was kept safely, securely and separately from data collected by the researchers. All potentially identifying information was de-identified and no identifying information will be published or reported.

Results

**Former Service User Surveys**
A total of fourteen former service user surveys were returned to the research team; two were completed online and twelve were paper surveys (response rate of 18%). Of the fourteen respondents, nine were male and five were female. The mean age was 60 years (range 43 – 73 years) and all participants indicated that they lived within a Warrumbungle Shire 2357 postcode (see Appendix A).

**Support Services**
Many of the participants indicated that they had first heard about the service via a friend. Some participants chose the ‘other’ option to this question and provided specification about this source of information. These ‘other sources’ were “a Warrumbungle Shire employee”, “community fire recovery meetings”, “council newsletter”, “the Recovery Program” and “work”. Open-ended responses to the question ‘What made you decide to use the service?’ generally included a reference to ‘help’, be that in regards to paperwork, financial assistance, personal support or a combination of these. Additionally, the participants indicated that the most useful roles played by their BSCS worker were also related to these helping activities. Almost half of the participants utilised the service for six or more months (see Table 1).

**Table 1. For how long did you use the service?**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Answer</th>
<th>Frequency</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>One month or less</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>7.1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Two months</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>21.4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Three months</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Four months</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>14.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Five months</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>14.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Six months or more</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>42.9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td><strong>14</strong></td>
<td><strong>100%</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

All of the participants chose to answer the question ‘How were you linked to the appropriate support by your BSCS worker?’ Responses ranged from the methods service users employed to contact the BSCS, including over the phone, face-to-face and email conversations, to the actions taken by the BSCS workers to link service users to appropriate support. ‘Appropriate support’ included providing information and giving advice, making personal visits to affected households, linking service users to other agencies and completing various forms. One participant expressed their negative experience with the BSCS and reported that although appointments were made, these were not kept or followed up by the BSCS worker.
There were mixed responses to the open ended question ‘In what ways if any, did the BSCS fail to provide you with the appropriate support?’ Of the nine participants who chose to answer this question, five indicated that the BSCS did not fail to provide appropriate support, with one participant responding “I could not find fault with these wonderful people”. The four other responses indicated that spontaneous, proactive support was not always provided.

The three most frequently used services suggested to the participants by the BSCS were the Mayor’s Bushfire Appeal (12 participants), the Australian Government Disaster Recovery Payment Centrelink (10 participants) and Australian Red Cross (6 participants). The three most frequently used types of assistance made available to the participants by the BSCS included financial assistance and/or advice (8 participants), personal support and counselling (8 participants) and clean up and restoration information/support services (7 participants).

All of the participants bar one indicated that the BSCS successfully informed them about where to get support. However, of the thirteen participants who answered the question ‘Do you now feel confident that you could access appropriate recovery services without the BSCS?’, only seven participants indicated that they were confident (see Table 2).

Table 2. Support

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Question</th>
<th>Yes</th>
<th>No</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Q9. Did the BSCS help inform you about where to get support?</td>
<td>13 (92.9)</td>
<td>1 (7.1)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Q10. Do you now feel confident that you could access appropriate recovery services without the BSCS?</td>
<td>7 (53.8)</td>
<td>6 (46.2)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Twelve participants indicated that the BSCS was responsive to their individual needs and all fourteen participants reported that they felt respected as an individual in their interactions with the BSCS.

Twelve participants indicated that the BSCS was available to them when they needed it. In response to the open-ended question, ‘How could the availability of the BSCS to you have been improved?’ suggestions included unsolicited visits, keeping appointments, mental health qualifications and “being proactive, personal, intuitive and flexible”. Many of the participants indicated that nothing needed to be changed in response to this question. Nine participants responded to the question ‘What suggestions do you have for improvements to the BSCS?’ Of these, six responded with variations of ‘no suggestions’. Unsolicited visits, employing a “genuine community committed person”, using a BlazeAid\(^1\) prototype and using the money spent on employing BSCS workers elsewhere, were improvements suggested by the other three participants. One participant suggested that unsolicited visits might assist in reducing the self-consciousness experienced when visiting the service.

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\(^1\) See [http://blazeaid.com/](http://blazeaid.com/) for more information about the work that BlazeAid conducts in natural disaster impacted communities.
Eleven of the fourteen participants recommended the service to a family member or friend. Ten participants indicated that they felt satisfied with the support provided with the BSCS; two indicated that they did not feel satisfied and two participants skipped this question (see Table 3). Participants who indicated that they were satisfied with the service generally used the service for longer than those who were not satisfied.

Table 3. On the whole, did you feel satisfied with the support provided by the BSCS?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Answer</th>
<th>Frequency</th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>(83.3%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>(16.7%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>12*</td>
<td>(100%)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*2 people skipped this question

Mental Health Concerns and Help Sought
Nine participants indicated that they were concerned about their mental health after the bushfires. Of these nine, only five sought any support or advice to help with this concern. Three participants indicated that the BSCS did not help support them with this concern.

Informal and Peer Support
In terms of informal and peer support, eight participants reported meeting new people or renewing an old friendship, and of these seven were still in contact with these people. In response to the question ‘Did the BSCS help to improve the sense of community in the Warrumbungle Shire since the bushfires?’, nine participants answered yes. Extended responses about how the BSCS helped to improve the sense of community included: by providing linkages between local charities and services, mutual support, financial assistance and introductions to people in similar situations. One participant indicated that it was the fire that helped improve the sense of community, not the BSCS.

Bushfire Experience
Ten of the fourteen participants reported evacuating due to the bushfire. All participants experienced personal loss or property damage (see Table 4). These losses included houses, stock, fencing, farming infrastructure and personal belongings.

Table 4. Bushfire Experience

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Question</th>
<th>Yes</th>
<th>No</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Q25. Did you evacuate due to the bushfire?</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Q26. Did you experience any personal loss or property damage due to the bushfire?</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Eleven participants provided additional comments at the conclusion of the survey. These comments were broadly about:
Suggestions for improvement to the service, such as supporting a citizen-run public forum with regular meetings to facilitate community discussion and mutual support.

Comments about how the BSCS was run in their community including: “I was really surprised at how well the whole exercise of support and coordination was carried through.”

General comments about the bushfire itself, including: “Bugger the bushfire!!”

Key Stakeholder Interviews
Six people identified as Key Stakeholders by MPES consented to participating in an interview about their involvement and experiences with the BSCS (response rate of 23%). All of these participants were female. While overall the participants indicated that they were satisfied with their involvement with the BSCS, some criticisms did arise. The most common themes which arose from the interviews are as follows.

Positive comments about the BSCS
Each participant had something positive to say about the BSCS. These comments broadly indicated that the model utilised by the service was appropriate, that it served the community in a positive way and that the agencies involved were generally happy with their relationship with the service.

“Well one thing is if it happened again - hopefully it won't - I would be very happy, and my colleagues would be, to be involved in [sic] again. I thought it was a good model for what we had to do at the time, never having had it done before.” (Stakeholder 1)

“So it stood up by itself and worked quite well and everyone knew about it by that stage and yeah, I think the people appreciated having a set place to go to - the clients - that they could go to and see the vast, huge array of services and things that were available to them.” (Stakeholder 2)

“Overall from where I sit it was a privilege to be involved in a service like this and it did give us another perspective and another set of skills and we were very well resourced to respond. So overall I was pleased that we were able to support the community. I think also what the staff would say there was it raised our profile in the community considerably.” (Stakeholder 3)

“Yeah, I mean there were lots and lots of positives, there were lots of good things that came out of it.” (Stakeholder 4)

“Oh look I think it was a good service generally. I think it's a fabulous model.” (Stakeholder 5)

“They did an absolutely amazing job. I just couldn't comment [sic] them highly enough.” (Stakeholder 6)

Communication
Communication was another theme which commonly arose in the interviews with key stakeholders. Many of the participants indicated that improved communication resulted from
the implementation of the service, particularly between the agencies involved in the BSCS, between agencies in the region and between the agencies and the community in general.

“One of the outcomes of it was - I don't know if this is answering your question, but the agencies were drawn closer together.” (Stakeholder 1)

“I mean it wasn’t a huge number but it did, I think, open up the potential for partnerships and information sharing between the local services and more regional services.” (Stakeholder 2)

“There was a very high level of communication at times I thought it was a bit of overkill we were doing a lot of virtual telephone calls...So we were doing it initially weekly, telephone hook ups and weekly reports, that was quite intensive, took up a lot of time. By the same token I take my hat off to them it's quite complex setting up a virtual team and the communication was really important.” (Stakeholder 3)

“So the biggest impact that I think we had on the clients in general as they came, was a bit of an open door policy. Come in, have a chat, debrief, get things validated, someone to update, someone to share that whole validation processing thing.” (Stakeholder 4)

“Well, I think it helped with the connection of the service system, like the service system certainly connected a lot more. That's probably what it did do well. It made us get together and talk for sure, even though some key people were missing - those that attended, yeah.” (Stakeholder 4)

“The level of communication was just absolutely fantastic and when - as they were building those communications and different [sic] - other people were targeted to come into those groups as well, they were added into the group distribution lists. No, the communication was absolutely fantastic.” (Stakeholder 6)

Administration of the BSCS in the Warrumbungle Community

There were a number of comments made about the practicalities of running the BSCS within the community. These were both tangible, such as the location of the service, and intangible, such as the working relationship between the agencies and people involved in administering the service. The working relationship between the BSCS workers on the ground was discussed by some of the participants, who articulated the difficulties inherent in working with multiple theoretical backgrounds and models of service. This particularly impacted the communication between the collaborating agencies, and is illustrated by one of the stakeholders who commented about the transparency of the appointment of the BSCS Coordinator role.

“It's a really hard one because they had to get someone, they had to get up and running and they had to do it now and MPES did it and they selected someone who was very appropriate. But I just wonder if the rest of the service sector felt like there was transparency in how that person came on board.” (Stakeholder 5)
Suggestions and comments about how this could be better addressed in the future were provided by some of the participants who also acknowledged the characteristics of and the difficulties in working within small communities.

“So I think the key thing is to try and [sic] - and I know that's very hard, especially in a small community where everybody knows everybody and it can get quite tricky. But choosing key people that have really good solid relationships in the community and that's very hard to find in setting up a very quick service to [sic] - after a disaster.” (Stakeholder 4)

“A very similar practice approach. I think things that are strength based, those that are already well connected in the community, that [sic] - sorry, small communities talk so they have to have a reputation, a good reputation in the community, otherwise nobody's going to walk through the door. Approachable, not seen to hold any power anywhere for any reason. So quite a neutral [sic] - it would have to be a number of agencies, but there'd have to be neutral similar practice approaches and really wanting to have the same message of, - whatever the message is, whatever support is going to go out there, it all has to be delivered the same way, in the same manner.” (Stakeholder 4)

More tangible practicalities of the administration of the service were also commented upon. The location of the BSCS was perceived as problematic by some of the participants.

“...the BSC[S] was based in council. So that was perceived as a bit of a conflict of interest and of course with the service being based there they [BSCS clients] tended – [sic] the feeling was that they [the BSCS] were biased more towards complying with council processes. So I think that was a little bit tricky as well and that it [BSCS] perhaps could have been located in a more neutral location. (Stakeholder 3)

The timeframes of the service was also discussed. While all of the participants indicated that they believed the service was activated in an appropriate timeframe, some noted that its closure was not appropriately timed.

“Well, when the service wound up that was it and [first name] just sort of disappeared and that was quite fast for some of the people. I know that there was the lead up to [the end of the service] and people – [sic] the statistics were saying that the service was no longer needed. I think it's like after any big event like a bushfire, or any natural disaster, the support's there and that's great and they mightn't be utilising it quite as much, but when it suddenly disappears all these issues come to the front.” (Stakeholder 4)

“I think it probably – [sic] it may have wound up too soon but it was quite amazing that you would assume that if somebody had lost everything or had lost quite a lot of stuff, you would assume that we as a community would know about that straightaway and we assumed that those people would seek help straightaway.” (Stakeholder 6)
Recommendations for the Future
The participants were asked a specific question about what they thought were the three most important things to get right in a service like the BSCS in the future. Some of their responses are as follows.

“So you’d always have to have a leader, who that leader is and where their standing is in the community. Then probably some really clear things around what that actually looks like, as in how will this service then operate and here's some simple, but clear guidelines. This is the way you'll share information, this is the way you'll support the community. Even if it has to be developed on the run, I think those clear guidelines need to be in place, whether it's through procedures or something quick and simple.” (Stakeholder 4)

“…the person who's fronting it is really important; where it actually is physically located I think is critical and its actual and perceived links with other services... The fourth one I think is probably to be really clear about what it's there to do because it's easy for people to think it's all things to all men, and it can't be. So I think it's important it has got a bit of a fence around it in that sense.” (Stakeholder 5)

“Well I guess the first thing I would imagine would be how timely it was. The second thing is it's absolutely essential in those sort of groups to have the right people and [first name] did a very good job. Then I guess, as we've been talking about, just that communication, making sure that everyone's in the loop and knows exactly what's going on, well and truly.” (Stakeholder 6)

Discussion
Overall, both the former service users and the key stakeholders were satisfied with the support the BSCS provided to the Warrumbungle community immediately after the January 2013 bushfires. All of the former service users who participated in this study had experienced personal losses or property damage due to the bushfires. For them, assistance with paperwork, financial assistance and personal support were all cited as reasons for initially seeking the service. Most participants felt that the BSCS was responsive to their individual needs and all fourteen participants reported that they felt respected as an individual in their interactions with the BSCS. The majority of the participants also referred the service onto a family member or friend.

Interviews with key stakeholders revealed that all felt that the implementation of the BSCS into the community was conducted in a timely manner. Both the former service users and the key stakeholders indicated that a positive outcome of the BSCS was an increase in communication in the community. For the key stakeholders this communication constituted increased interaction between themselves and agencies involved with the BSCS, agencies in the area and with the wider community. The assistance the BSCS provided in linking local charities and services was also reported by the former service users. Future evaluations may
consider exploring whether a greater communication or repour is developed between service users and service providers who have all experienced and are impacted by the same disaster event.

Despite these positive outcomes of the BSCS, there were a number of comments made around challenges with or potential improvements to the service. Interviews conducted with key stakeholders raised a number of challenges related to the administration of the service in the community. This became a key theme and included issues such as the working relationship between some of the on the ground agencies, the location of the service and issues with how the BSCS was terminated. Some of these issues may have been resolved by increasing the communication lines between these agencies and ensuring a common theoretical background and method of service was utilised.

Additionally, despite all of the former service users except one indicating that the BSCS had successfully informed them about where to get support, only seven of thirteen participants reported that they felt confident accessing the appropriate recovery services without the BSCS. This suggests that almost half of the participants did not gain knowledge of how to navigate, access and engage appropriate recovery services on their own, after their involvement with the BSCS concluded. In the future, further investigation into what factors contributed to this lack of confidence in accessing services would be beneficial.

Limitations
The small number of participants who responded to this research is a limitation. However, the information provided will allow for improvement in the implementation, management and design of support services like the BSCS in the future. The small sample size may have been a consequence of data collection commencing one year after the disaster had occurred and this delay in data collection may have also impacted on the depth of data provided. Four former service user invitations were returned as unknown addresses and three key stakeholders invited to participate had left the jobs they were working in during the term of the BSCS, had left town or were on long service leave and were therefore un-contactable. Future evaluations would benefit from more timely administration.

Further, in analysing data from both the former client surveys and key stakeholder interviews, it became apparent that at times the participants were talking about services other than the BSCS which operated in the immediate recovery period. This is perhaps indicative that in times of disaster, people impacted by the event may not distinguish between what service is offering what help. While this is understandable, future evaluations would benefit from being clearer about exactly what recovery service they are interested in hearing about.

Lessons Learnt and Considerations for the Future

In evaluating the Warrumbungle BSCS post-implementation we aimed to gain a greater understanding of the positive and negative aspects of the service. In turn, we hoped this would assist in the development of a revised service framework to better meet the needs of
future clients of similar services. With this in mind, lessons learnt from the evaluation of the BSCS and considerations for the establishment of future services are outlined below.

- While the authors acknowledge that choosing people with diverse skill sets in the aim of meeting the multiplicity of community needs was deliberate, strategically choosing people and agencies that have a strong relationship with the community and similar practice approaches and methods would potentially improve the way it functions in the community. Thus, a compatible theoretical background and practice approach between all the agencies involved in the service is important for effective communication and collaboration between these services. These characteristics should also be taken into consideration when employing someone to coordinate the service within the community.

- Many of the stakeholders indicated that the location of the service was problematic. In the future, locating a service like the BSCS in a more neutral and therefore, accessible location would be beneficial. Additionally, some of the former clients indicated that more proactive support, particularly by visiting clients in their homes, would have positively impacted their use of the service.

- Some of the key stakeholders made comments which indicated that communication lines between themselves and the BSCS were not always utilised effectively. Although the authors acknowledge that the local council Recovery Committee and Recovery Coordinator are generally responsible for the dissemination of information in the post-disaster community and that factors not related to the BSCS may have impacted on lines of communication, the importance of informative communication with key stakeholders who in turn disseminate this information to community members could be utilised more effectively in the future.

- Evaluations on disaster recovery services, while needing to be mindful of not placing undue burden on impacted communities, might consider conducting their investigation closer to the event in the hope of achieving higher participant numbers with potentially more accurate recall. Additionally, placing researchers within the community to collect data, by conducting interviews or handing out surveys for example, may also assist in increasing participation.

- People and agencies in a community affected by disaster do not always differentiate between which organisation is responsible for and is offering what service. When evaluating disaster recovery services like the BSCS in the future, it is important to be descriptive and specific in data collection methods about the particular service that you require information about.
Conclusion

In general, both former service users and key stakeholders were satisfied with their interactions and experiences with the Warrumbungle Bushfire Support Coordination Service. Former service users indicated that they sought support from the BSCS for administration (i.e. completing paperwork), financial and personal support. However, not all of the former service users reported that they felt confident seeking out these services without the aid of the BSCS. Additionally, while key stakeholders reported positive outcomes of the BSCS and their involvement with the service, there were a number of criticisms and suggested improvements put forward. These criticisms and suggested improvements provide valuable insight into the way the service functioned within the community from the perspective of people who regularly interacted with it to improve services like the BSCS in the future. While keeping in mind the broader disaster context and in particular, the issue of needs versus resources, improvements in the implementation, management and termination plan of disaster recovery services like the BSCS can occur to ensure the needs of the affected community are appropriately met.
List of References


Rural Fire Service (2013). [RFS Briefing to State Emergency Management Committee as at 1830 hours 19th January 2013].

## Appendices

### List of Appendices
- **Appendix A**: 2357 Postcode Suburbs
- **Appendix B**: Former Service Users Survey
- **Appendix C**: Interview Schedule for Key Stakeholders

### Appendix A  2357 Postcode Suburbs

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Coonabarabran</th>
<th>Bomera</th>
<th>Box Ridge</th>
<th>Bugaldie</th>
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<td>Dandry</td>
<td>Gowang</td>
<td>Purlewaugh</td>
<td>Rocky Glen</td>
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<td>Tannabar</td>
<td>Ulamambri</td>
<td>Wattle Springs</td>
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Appendix B Former ServiceUsers Survey

WARRUMBUNGLE BUSHFIRE SUPPORT COORDINATION SERVICE EVALUATION SURVEY

FORMER SERVICE USERS

The purpose of this research is to understand how former service users view the Warrumbungle Bushfire Support Coordination Service (BSCS).

You can participate in this survey if you are over the age of 16 and have used the BSCS.

Undertaking of the survey is entirely your choice and your responses will remain anonymous. The survey will take approximately 20 minutes, and will ask questions about your knowledge of the Warrumbungle BSCS, your experiences of the January 2013 Bushfires and some general demographic information. Researchers will use these responses to evaluate the service provided by the BSCS.

Completion of the survey will be taken as your informed consent to participate.

Some of the questions in the survey may cause distress in some participants. Answer those questions that you feel comfortable with, and keep in mind that you can stop the survey at any time without giving a reason.

Please contact the support services listed below if you need further assistance.

Lifeline Australia: 13 11 14 (24hrs/7days)

Mental Health Access Line: 1800 011 511 (24hrs/7days)

Please ensure that you understand the information above before consenting to participate. If there is anything you do not understand, or if you have any questions, please contact the researcher below:

Professor Prasuna Reddy
Chief Investigator
02 6363 8440 or 0417 029 936
Prasuna.Reddy@newcastle.edu.au

Please return the survey in the reply paid envelope provided by (due date).

Thank you for taking the time to complete this survey!
1. For how long did you use the service?

☐ One month or less
☐ Two months
☐ Three months
☐ Four months
☐ Five months
☐ Six months or more

2. How did you first hear about the service?

☐ Through a friend
☐ Through a family member
☐ Through the media
☐ Other (please specify): ________________________________

3. What made you decide to use the service?

____________________________________________________________________________________
____________________________________________________________________________________
____________________________________________________________________________________
4. In your view, what was the most useful role/s played by the BSCS worker, John, Catherine or Carolyn?
_____________________________________________________________________________________
_____________________________________________________________________________________
_____________________________________________________________________________________

5. How were you linked to the appropriate support by your BSCS worker?
_____________________________________________________________________________________
_____________________________________________________________________________________
_____________________________________________________________________________________

6. In what ways, if any, did the BSCS fail to provide you with the appropriate support?
_____________________________________________________________________________________
_____________________________________________________________________________________
_____________________________________________________________________________________

7. What services suggested to you by the BSCS did you use?

☐ Australian Government Disaster Recovery Payment (AGRDP – Centrelink)

☐ Australian Tax Office (ATO)

☐ Department of Primary Industries

☐ Office of State Revenue

☐ NSW Disaster Assistance Grant (Disaster Welfare Services)

☐ NSW Disaster Assistance Grant (Rural Assistance Authority)

☐ Insurance Council of Australia

☐ Australian Red Cross

☐ Mayor’s Bushfire Appeal

☐ Other: ______________________________
8. What assistance made available to you by the BSCS did you use?

- Financial assistance and/or advice
- Public health information and/or support
- Insurance and legal advice
- Accommodation and housing services
- Material aid information
- Medical/medicine services
- School and/or childcare services
- Clean-up and restoration information/support services
- Employment services and/or training and vocational placements
- Disability support services
- Personal support and counselling
- Business information and support services
- Other: _____________________________

9. Did the BSCS help inform you about where to get support?

- Yes
- No

10. Do you now feel confident that you could access appropriate recovery services without the BSCS?

- Yes
- No

11. Do you feel that the services provided by the BSCS were responsive to your individual needs?

- Yes
- No
12. Did you feel respected as an individual in your interactions with the BSCS?

□ Yes  □ No

13. In your opinion, was the BSCS available when you needed it?

□ Yes  □ No

14. How could the availability of the BSCS to you been improved?

____________________________________________________________________________________
____________________________________________________________________________________
____________________________________________________________________________________

15. What suggestions do you have for improvements to the BSCS?

____________________________________________________________________________________
____________________________________________________________________________________
____________________________________________________________________________________

16. Did you recommend the service to a family member or friend?

□ Yes  □ No

17. On the whole, did you feel satisfied with the support provided by the BSCS?

□ Yes  □ No
Mental Health Concerns and Help Sought

18. Were you concerned about your mental health in the weeks or months following the bushfires?
   □ Yes, I was concerned.
   □ No, I was not concerned.

19. If yes, did you seek any support or advice to help with this concern?
   □ Yes
   □ No

20. If yes, did the BSCS help to support you with this concern?

Informal and Peer Support

21. Did you meet any new people through the BSCS, or renew an old friendship?
   □ Yes, I did.
   □ No, I did not.

22. If yes, are you still in contact with these people?
   □ Yes
   □ No

23. Did the BSCS help to improve the sense of community in the Warrumbungle Shire since the bushfires?
   □ Yes, it did.
   □ No, it did not.
24. If yes, how did the BSCS help improve the sense of community?

____________________________________________________________________________________

Bushfire Experience

25. Did you evacuate due to the bushfire?
   □ Yes, I did.
   □ No, I did not.

26. Did you experience any personal loss or property damage due to the bushfire?
   □ Yes
   □ No

27. If yes, how extensive was this loss or property damage?

____________________________________________________________________________________

Demographic Information

28. Are you male or female?
   □ Male
   □ Female

29. How old are you?

   

30. What is your postcode?

   

31. Any other comments?

____________________________________________________________________________________________

____________________________________________________________________________________________

____________________________________________________________________________________________

____________________________________________________________________________________________
Appendix C Interview Schedule for Key Stakeholders

Warrumbungle Bushfire Support Coordination Service Evaluation
Key Stakeholders Interview Schedule

Interview Introduction

Thank you for agreeing to participate.

The purpose of the interview is to understand how key stakeholders view the Warrumbungle Bushfire Support Coordination Service (BSCS). I will call it BSCS throughout the interview. Give background re MPES and CRRMH and the survey of BSCS clients.

Undertaking the interview is voluntary and your responses will remain anonymous. I will record your name at the beginning of the interview for my identification, but this will be removed once the interview tapes are transcribed.

You may terminate the interview at any time, and withdraw from the research entirely without giving a reason until publication of the report.

The questions I am going to ask are based on those constructed by the research evaluation team of the Victorian bush fires recovery program in 2009.

Questions 1 – 4 cover The BSCS Service and Your Role

Questions from 5 onwards are seeking your views about the service more generally.
BSCS Stakeholder Interview Questions

1. In what capacity were you involved with the BSCS?

2. a. What kinds of things did you feel had the most impact on your clients in terms of this role you played?
   b. What were the areas that were the most challenging to you? Why was this?
   c. What were you expecting the outcomes of the service to be? What were some of the unexpected outcomes?

3. How has working in collaboration with the BSCS affected you as a practitioner? Do you think that any of these positive changes and connections can be sustained in the future?

4. a. Can you tell me anything more about your experiences in working with a temporary emergency service like the BSCS?
   b. Is there anything that could have improved the experience?
   c. In your opinion, did the implementation of the BSCS have an impact on the quality of the service you provided in your agency?

Barnardos Employees
a. Has the BSCS impacted on the services provided by your agency?
   b. Has this effect changed over time?
   c. What do you think will be the long term effects for your agency on having had workers engaged with the BSCS?
   d. In what ways has the BSCS affected agencies that did not contribute staff members?
   e. What would you say are the attributes of the agencies best able to deliver a service like this in the future?

5. a. How would you describe the level of communication between your organisation and the BSCS?
   b. How would you describe the level of communication between the BSCS and other organisations involved?

6. The BSCS was a temporary service and this implies a rapid establishment and eventual closure as part of the model. What do you think are the three most important things to get right in a service like the BSCS in the Future?

7. What, if any, changes would you suggest to make in services operating like the BSCS in the future?

8. a. Do you feel that a service like the BSCS was beneficial to the wider community?
   b. Can you give some examples of these benefits?
9. What would you say is the place for a BSCS type of service in disaster response?

10. To the extent that you can comment, what has been the impact for the BSCS for its clients?

11. a. What would you say has been the impact of the BSCS on the service system in the local area?
   b. If the BSCS had not been implemented, would this have occurred?

12. a. Do you believe the BSCS was activated within an appropriate time frame?
    b. What are your reasons for this answer?

13. As a consequence of your participation in the BSCS, what, if any, of your services in emergency response will change?

14. Let’s think about support for families following any future disasters, and how we plan that support. What would you say are the critical things to get right in that planning?

15. a. Did the BSCS have an impact on any other services your agency delivers?
    b. Did it reduce, increase or divert demand for some services your agency delivers by the BSCS providing help directly?

16. Do you have any other comments about your experience with the BSCS?

    That ends the interview. Thank you for participating.