

# Youth-Focused Disaster Recovery Protocol

January 2026

This protocol was originally developed in 2020 following the Black Summer Bushfires of 2019/20. It has been updated in January 2026.

## Who is this protocol for?

This protocol is for use by Federal, State and Local Government emergency and recovery services and institutions, and local youth services, youth workers and others who engage with young people in disaster affected areas.

It aims to provide guidance on key matters for consideration/inclusion in post-disaster recovery and rebuilding, to ensure positive outcomes for young people aged 12-25 who have been affected directly and/or indirectly by a disaster.

## Why is it important to have a special protocol for young people?

In times of disaster, when families and communities are stressed and disconnected, and resources are channelled to dealing with disaster relief and recovery, it can often be the young people of the community whose needs are sidelined, and often at a crucial stage in adolescent development that can never be revisited.

Many young people will be required to step up their responsibility to their families and will also feel that they cannot voice their normal adolescent/early adult concerns in the context of a disaster environment when everyone's needs are so dire.

Their connections to peers and support networks are often significantly compromised by transport and communication outages which can compound feelings of disconnection, loss of control and mental health issues.

There is also a risk that more young people will leave their communities and not return because they have been displaced or to search for jobs.

Young people from farming and small business backgrounds have identities that are linked to their family's business, and expectations that they will continue that legacy. If the property or business is destroyed, their livelihood, expectations and plans for their future may also be destroyed. In addition, young people may be expected to leave school to help on the farm or in the business, or there may be no money to send young people to boarding school which may also destroy chances of getting into university.



## What are some of the key principles for young people in disaster recovery?

It is vital to provide resources specifically to support and empower young people in a disaster situation, both in the immediate aftermath of the disaster, and then as part of the ongoing recovery and rebuilding process over several years. Young people should play a central role in determining how the resources should be utilised to ensure the strongest outcomes.

Young people should have a dedicated and specific role on local, state and National recovery committees, and advisory bodies.

It is vital that young people are considered and included in any economic and infrastructure planning / rebuilding that a local community, state or national body may be working on (ie. BCA) and their views are included in both immediate and long-term modelling and or impact statements.

### Youth Participation in disaster resilience

In 2025, the Centre of Excellence: Young People & Disasters developed a youth participation [resource](#) as a key principle of the Centre.

### Rights based

The United Nations state that participation is a fundamental human right, enshrined in the [Universal Declaration of Human Rights](#) and for young people under the age of 18 this is reiterated in the [Convention on the Rights of the Child](#).

According to UNICEF, participation enables young people to “play a vital role in their own development as well as in that of their communities, helping them to learn vital life-skills, develop knowledge on human rights and citizenship and to promote positive civic action.”

- **Article 12:** You have the right to say what you think should happen when adults are making decisions that affect you, and to have your opinions taken into account.
- **Article 13:** You have the right to get, and to share, information as long as the information is not damaging to yourself or others.
- **Article 15:** You have the right to meet with other children and young people and to join groups and organisations, as long as this does not stop other people from enjoying their rights.

### Principles of Meaningful Engagement

The Victoria Government outlines [principles of safe and meaningful participation](#) with children and young people.



### Code of Ethical Practice

The [Code of Ethical Practice](#) was developed by the Victorian Youth Sector for working with young people to enable their participation. The Code includes a set of youth work principles and practice responsibilities that reflect values that inform youth work.

## What support do young people need after a disaster?

- ***Mental health services*** can be key to ensuring that young people are able to process their experiences. It is important to note that mental health services must be trusted by the young person, trauma informed, able to be provided without stigma, and easily accessible (taking into account cost, referral pathways, transportation needs etc). Often, mental health services will be better provided by local youth or health services with which young people have an established relationship.
- ***Recreational programs*** to provide some semblance of a normal life, and to promote connection to their communities and with people who understand what they have experienced. Such programs can also provide a platform for youth workers to subtly assess young people's wellbeing and needs for referral to mental health and other services, in situations where young people may not even realise they need help, or be able to articulate their needs, or may be reluctant to 'bother' others for help as their family and community face significant troubles.
- ***Empowerment, coordination and support*** to be 'part of the solution' and play an important role in contributing to recovery and rebuilding efforts, including renewing community cohesion. In other conflict and disaster zones, it has often been young people who have led community projects to rebuild their communities.

## What are the mechanisms to get support to young people?

### Youth services in local communities

Local youth services will already be known and trusted in the community, as well as being easier to access, so are generally a better investment than fly-in-fly-out models of support, or bigger services in regional centres. They will also often be based in Local Government Associations, which take the lead on recovery and rebuilding efforts, which positions youth support and action as a key part of recovery and renewal.

The work of youth services can be remedial, such as on-the-ground generalist support and mental health services, or recreational programs to ensure young people have some semblance of a normal life, and stay connected to their communities and with people who understand what they have experienced. Importantly, youth services can also coordinate, support and fund young people to



play an important role in contributing to recovery and rebuilding efforts, and rebuilding community cohesion.

It is critical that young people are consulted and empowered to take a lead in determining the support that they need, the projects that they can lead and contribute to, and how they would like to see their community (including infrastructure and economic prospects) be rebuilt. Youth services can play a role in supporting and coordinating young people's safe and effective participation in such decision making.

It will also be vital for young people to be involved at the centre of decision making for recovery and rebuilding for their communities, to ensure their perspectives and lived experience inform decisions such as rebuilding of community facilities, and the creation of jobs. It is also as a matter of respect, as they are essential citizens for the health and future of the communities.

Youth Development Officers in the LGAs are ideally placed to coordinate young people's involvement, supported by YACVic and other state peaks. For immediate / quick action, grants to each affected local council should include an amount specified for youth services, to ensure that the unique needs of young people and the role they can/do play in the community are addressed.

Structures exist in most communities that would allow quick and expert deployment / utilisation of funds. Based on consultation undertaken by YACVic with colleagues and members, and we would advise that immediate funding is best placed via allocations to each affected Local/Shire Council, and to Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisations (ACCO). In addition to having existing mechanisms to distribute equitably and quickly, they are best placed to know what is happening on the ground.

We would also recommend that the funding is specifically identified and allocated for youth services, and overseen by a Youth Development Officer at the council (rather than health services, which tend to be more narrowly focused and can be stigmatising).

In the mid- to long term, other community youth services can also play a key role as lead agencies for recovery and rebuilding work with young people. Youth services can operate in/via a multitude of environments (local council, community, school, health, sport and recreation, etc), and ideally the services would be funded to be located within, or be able to easily and regularly travel to, each affected town, so that the young people are being supported by trusted community members who are there for the long term. It is also often difficult (emotionally, financially, or due to transport availability) for young people to travel to other towns.

Such investment will have enormous economic and social benefits, and could save millions in tertiary end services. Professional youth workers have specific



skills that are often not fully recognised, and are also usually very good at stretching dollars to deliver great outcomes.

## What should funding be spent on?

Meaningful funding would allow additional youth services – to be determined by each community based on their needs – such as:

- Creating a team of generalist youth workers who can run activities and events where young people can gather for some normality and social connection but also be subtly assessed and referred for other needs. This should be a medium-term investment (i.e. 5 years), recognising the need for continuity, and that issues will continue to emerge over time for traumatised communities.
- Providing additional community-based services for young people who are traumatised. This may include mental health services, as not all young people will want to / be able to travel to where services such as headspace operate. If these are offered as outreach services they are best done in person as young people in rural locations may not have free access to technology.
- Coordinating and paying young people to take on projects to help their communities to rebuild and recover. Rural communities are made up of incredible, resilient people – many of whom are driven young individuals who are passionate about where they live.
- Consulting with young people for their unique perspectives on solutions for rebuilding, both for community infrastructure and for economic recovery, especially the tourism, construction and agriculture industries.
- Providing opportunities for young people, such as apprenticeships while they assist with rebuilding, or community services training for those running youth programs, which could allow local skills development to be one of the silver linings on the disaster.
- Training staff from local institutions (schools, health services etc) and community members to understand the support that young people will need immediately and in the longer term. This should include training in the Code of Ethical Practice in Youth Work.
- Investing in local service providers and community members to become accredited instructors in Youth Mental Health First Aid training, to support young people in the immediate aftermath of the disaster, and to build the resilience of the community for the recovery and rebuilding stage, and future disasters.
- Provide access to safe sex information, sexual and reproductive health resources and services.



- In the case of bushfires, fund the Country fire Authority (CFA) Junior Volunteer Development Program (JVDP) (Junior Brigades) across all branches, to encourage and train local young people to join the CFA.

## Past Inquiries: What has been recommended after previous disasters?

### High level Recommendations involving young people

#### 2009 Victorian Bushfires Royal Commission

- **Recommendations**
  - Six: 'Victoria lead an initiative of the Ministerial Council for Education, Early Childhood Development and Youth Affairs to ensure that the national curriculum incorporates the history of bushfire in Australia and that existing curriculum areas such as geography, science and environmental studies include elements of bushfire education.'

#### Victorian Bushfire Reconstruction and Recovery Authority

- **Recommendations**
  - 'VBRRA adopted a ... framework that has the concept of community at its centre.'
  - 'VBRRA would be involved in all four domains in varying degrees but the local community would be central to decision-making processes. Once people had a chance to convene and reach some kind of consensus about their needs, they would be invited to submit a proposal for community recovery which the Authority would help them enact. The combined proposals from all the affected communities would then form the basis for VBRRA's long-term master plan.'
  - 'VBRRA began by encouraging affected townships to set up Community Recovery Committees (CRCs) for the express purpose of developing recovery plans.'
  - 'VBRRA suggested that groups consult widely, hold open meetings and make consensus-based decisions wherever possible.'

## What specific needs might some young people have?

### Disabled young people

Disabled young people can be particularly vulnerable during bushfires due to a lack of accessible information, emergency housing, vital equipment and many other factors. The Victorian Youth Disability Advocacy Service (YDAS) has collated some [useful resources](#) for disabled Victorians who are impacted by the bushfires.

### Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Young People

Agencies must recognise the distinct challenges that First Nations communities face in times of disaster and make sure their support is culturally safe and empowers First Nations communities to take the lead in their recovery.



For best practice advice on working with First Nations young people, YACVic recommends you:

- Refer to Aboriginal-led child and youth organisations, like [Koorie Youth Council](#) or [Victorian Aboriginal Child Care Agency \(VACCA\)](#).
- Refer to the [Federation of Victorian Traditional Owners Corporations' Cultural Fire Strategy](#)
- Use online resources created by Aboriginal people, like [Common Ground](#), and the [VACCA Cultural Hub](#) platform.

### Ensuring disaster resilience is safe and inclusive

Young people who have intersectional identities and experiences may experience racism and discrimination as they seek assistance and support in the aftermath of a disaster. It is important to assess arrangements at relief centres, recovery activities, and decision-making processes to ensure they are inclusive and accessible.

YACVic's Youth Engagement Resource Platform (YERP) has information about inclusive disaster resilience, including:

- [How to make evacuation centres more youth friendly](#)
- [Making disaster preparation and planning more inclusive](#)

### Key YACVic initiatives and programs since 2020

Since first developing the protocol in 2020, YACVic have consistently and significantly expanded its disaster-focused work, shifting from reactive bushfire recovery to building long-term, youth-led disaster resilience in partnership with local communities and members. See the end of the document for key highlights.

#### **Bushfire Recovery Working Groups and Consultations:**

- **Working Group:** A group of 12 young people from eastern Victoria (East Gippsland, Towong, Alpine) assisting in the development of recovery resources.
- **Consultations (2020-21):** Engaged by the Victorian Government and the Inspector-General for Emergency Management to hear directly from young people about their bushfire response and recovery experiences.

#### **Future Proof: Young People, Disaster Recovery and (Re)building Communities (2022-2025):**

- A major collective impact project funded by a \$9.93 million grant.
- YACVic led this 14-partner initiative to support young people (ages 12-25) in fire-affected areas of North and North-East Victoria through leadership development and emergency management career pathways.



- The project concluded in April 2025. Impact reports are on the YACVIC website

### **Umbrella Flood Recovery (2022-23):**

- A specific grants-based project focused on developing local initiatives focused on young people and recovery efforts following the 2022 Victorian flood events.

### **Centre of Excellence: Young People & Disasters (2023 - current):**

- Established in 2023, in partnership with Victoria University, the Centre champions the active involvement of young people to contribute to all aspects of disasters, including readiness and risk reduction.
- The Centre features a Youth Advisory Group (YAG) to guide its projects and direction.
- Youth Participation is a key element of the Centre and in 2025 the Centre published its [definition of youth participation in a disaster context](#).
- In 2026 the Centre will launch its website, acting as a clearing house for knowledge translation, commissioning, contributing to, and disseminating research with, and about young people's engagement with disasters. The Centre will also publish the findings on a limited review of how youth participation is being enacted in the development of emergency management planning across Victoria, and conducting pilot projects to champion youth participation in disaster responses.

### **Disaster Hub and Resources:**

- An online platform providing tools like "Change Agents" training for youth participation in resilience, and specific resources for [young people with disabilities](#).

### **Advocacy and Submissions:**

- **2022 Flood Event Inquiry:** Provided formal recommendations to the Victorian Government on supporting young people affected by the floods.
- **Climate Resilience (2024):** Submitted to the Inquiry into Climate Resilience in Victoria, focusing on infrastructure risks and community preparation.
- **National Volunteer Incentive Scheme (2025):** A submission to the Australian Senate Foreign Affairs, Defence and Trade References Committee inquiry into the formation of a national volunteer incentive



scheme (Climate Army) to respond to the immediate aftermath of natural disasters in Australia.

- **Victoria's Climate Change Strategy (2025):** A submission to the development of Victoria's 2026-30 Climate Change Strategy.

## Key reports and other resources

- *Engaging Youth in Post-Disaster Research.* Lori Peek, Jennifer Tobin-Gurley, Robin S Cox, Leila Scannell, Sarah Fletcher and Cheryl Heykoop (2016)
  - 'Children and youth have a vital role to play in disaster risk reduction, research activities, policy creation and decision-making.'
- [Kids the hidden victims of Black Saturdays](#)
- [Psychological effects on young people ten years on](#)
- [The Code of Ethical Practice for the Victorian Youth Sector](#)

## Media and Communications

What are young people's communication needs in/after a disaster?

### Media coverage of/by young people

Young people's experiences can be exploited by the media following a disaster

If you're engaged with a young person and they have been approached by the media, remember the following:

- Ensure the young person is supported and has all the information they need to make an informed decision on whether to be interviewed.
- Ensure the young person has given their consent for photographs or quotes to be used. If they have not given consent, this needs to be communicated to the media.
- Ask the media person to read through YACVics [trauma informed language guide](#), prior to the interview taking place.

### Misinformation and disinformation

Misinformation and disinformation are dangerous during times of disasters, particularly on social media which is where a lot of young people seek their information.

Consider setting up a social media delegate for the centre so people can receive accurate information when they need it.

### Triggering news



- Consider limiting the 'news times' in evacuation centres to well communicated times of day so young people can determine their own exposure.
- If possible, in a relief centre, have a separate room with a TV that young people can access if they don't want to watch the news.

*“There is so much that comes to mind, of course the practical needs, assistance opportunities, and the targeted mental health care is what most people are thinking about at the moment. But my experience with these types of things says that what young people want in particular is space and time that helps them forget a bit about what is happening. A chance to reduce responsibility, even for a few hours, and be young. I’d really love to be able to take some fun, engaging, ‘distracting’ youth programs into the worst affected areas in the recovery stages, and be an outside support to put young people in a space where they are allowed to have fun and enjoy themselves, despite their situations and their families devastation. There’s so much responsibility on young people to be grown up, to be responsible, to be present throughout the unknown grey period of recovery. It’s a tough space for them to be in, and often they don’t know how to balance the responsibility and the pre-existing needs of a developing young person.”*

Bonnie Clark, Youth Services & Partnerships Coordinator, Mansfield Shire Council

