

# Towong Community Bushfire Disaster Relief Fund Community Consultation



November 2024



**BORDERTRUST**

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## Background

The Towong Community Bushfire Disaster Relief Fund (DRF) was established in response to the devastating 2019-2020 Victorian bushfires.

Entrusted by the Victorian Government to manage the distribution of funds on behalf of Bushfire Recovery Victoria and the Victorian Bushfire Appeal, Border Trust has been working closely with the community to ensure funds are efficiently and effectively directed to address local recovery needs.

Since its launch in 2021, the fund has distributed \$2.05 million to support recovery initiatives across the Towong Shire. Projects funded to date include community gardens, hall refurbishments, health and wellbeing programs, and community events.

As recovery evolves, Border Trust remains committed to aligning its grant-making with community priorities to ensure the remaining \$800,000 delivers maximum impact.

## Consultation Goal

The purpose of this consultation was to check in with the Towong community to identify emerging needs and local priorities. By engaging directly with residents, leaders, and community groups, Border Trust will ensure that future grants address both immediate recovery challenges and longer-term opportunities. This process reflects Border Trust's commitment to working alongside the community to achieve sustainable benefits and locally driven outcomes.

## Methodology

The consultation process was designed to gather comprehensive insights and involved the following approaches:

1. **Community Survey:** A targeted survey was distributed across the Towong Shire and received 22 responses.
2. **Community Representation:** Respondents collectively represented 38 community groups, with many individuals sitting on multiple committees and organisations.
3. **Ongoing Engagement:** Meetings were held with community leaders to gain further insights into recovery needs and priorities.
4. **Grant Review:** Border Trust reviewed grant applications and grant acquittal reports to identify successes, challenges, and ongoing funding gaps.

The combination of survey responses, conversations with community representatives, and analysis of grant applications ensured a broad and representative understanding of community priorities.



## Key Themes

The consultation highlighted several recurring themes reflecting both ongoing challenges and emerging opportunities for recovery in the Towong Shire.

**Mental health** and **social connection** emerged as top priorities, with many respondents emphasising the importance of programs to foster resilience and reduce isolation. Other significant areas included elder support and education programs focused on addressing trauma and post-disaster behavioural challenges.

**Infrastructure** and **community spaces** were another key focus, with respondents advocating for upgrades and maintenance of community halls, recreational facilities, and relief centres to enhance safety and usability. Specific project suggestions included a bike track linking community halls, upgrading the Corryong Memorial Hall to better serve as a community hub and disaster relief centre, and installing outdoor exercise equipment. Respondents also proposed developing a local toy library, funding skills training for young drivers, and creating community programs such as painting classes and cultural events.

There was also a strong desire for **sustainable recovery projects**, such as environmental initiatives, preventative health programs, and ongoing support for community organisations to ensure long-lasting benefits.

In addition, we discovered some community priorities that were not specific to bushfire recovery, though remain important for community wellbeing and prosperity. **Economic development** and **tourism** were frequently highlighted, with calls for initiatives to create local employment, promote tourism, and develop micro-industries that could support long-term sustainability.

**Youth and education** were identified as critical areas, with suggestions for programs to support young people, including driving lessons, career pathway initiatives, and skill development opportunities.

The community survey invited perspectives on whether Border Trust should retain a portion of the remaining \$800,000 for future projects. Most respondents supported this approach, acknowledging that recovery is a prolonged process, and that the pandemic had delayed many initiatives. Conversely, some respondents expressed a view that funds should be distributed promptly to address immediate needs.

Border Trust acknowledges retaining funds would allow time for the development of well-researched and impactful projects, particularly those requiring volunteer-driven implementation. We also note the immediate need for programs that address the community's need for mental health support and greater social connection.

## Recommendations

Based on the survey findings, it is recommended that future DRF grant-making prioritise initiatives addressing mental health and fostering community engagement.

Sustainable recovery should remain a key focus, with funding allocated to projects that deliver enduring outcomes while addressing immediate needs. Border Trust's strategy of aligning grant-making with community priorities ensures the remaining funds will continue to make a meaningful and measurable impact.

Furthermore, targeted investments in youth programs, preventative health care, and educational initiatives would help build resilience and long-term capacity within the community.

Programs that promote economic growth and tourism, such as micro-industries and infrastructure upgrades, are clearly valued and worth supporting to create lasting benefits for the region. These projects, however, do not align with the DRF funding agreement. The survey findings will be shared with the Towong Shire Council and used by Border Trust when assessing submissions for alternate grant programs.

## Conclusion

The Towong Community Bushfire Disaster Relief Fund has been a vital resource for recovery efforts across the Towong Shire, enabling communities to rebuild and thrive.

The insights from this community consultation will guide the next phase of funding, ensuring that resources are allocated effectively to address both urgent needs and long-term challenges.

Border Trust remains committed to supporting the resilience and well-being of the Towong community as it continues its recovery journey.

*"It's reassuring to know Border Trust is listening to the community. This consultation shows they're committed to managing the funds responsibly and ensuring they make a real difference where it's needed most."*

*"Mental health and connection are the two biggest issues we face right now. Programs that bring people together and help reduce social isolation are critical for our recovery."*

*"Supporting young people is vital. Many of our school leavers have no option but to move away for work. Programs like learner driver training and career pathways could help keep them connected to the community."*

*"Halls and community spaces are the heart of our towns, but they need ongoing support. Upgrading these facilities will make them safer and better prepared for the future."*

*"We need to invest in preventative health. Things like outdoor exercise equipment, walking trails, and programs for healthy ageing would have long-term benefits for everyone."*

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