



# KNOW YOUR PATCH TO GROW YOUR PATCH

Alison Cottrell | [alison.cottrell@jcu.edu.au](mailto:alison.cottrell@jcu.edu.au)

**Understanding Communities  
Project Bushfire CRC**



**Centre for Disaster Studies  
James Cook University**

This guide for the process of knowing and growing your patch is deliberately brief. It is a guide, not a recipe, nor a set of operational procedures. If more detailed information is required, a supporting briefing paper is available, which describes how this guide was developed, the social research that underpins the guide, and more detailed descriptions of potential methods for achieving the information.

A workshop guide is the second part of this document.



# KNOW YOUR PATCH TO GROW YOUR PATCH

‘Knowing your patch’ at the local level for fire services is not just about knowing what the fire risk is and the important infrastructure that needs protecting. ‘Knowing your patch’ is also about who lives in your community, their vulnerabilities and capacities for dealing with bushfires, their perceptions of bushfires, expectations of fire services, expectations the fire service have of the community and organisational needs to address these issues.

What follows is a method for gaining information that can be used for identifying:

- a community profile
- people’s capacity to deal with and vulnerability to bushfires
- people’s perceptions of bushfire issues and expectations of service delivery
- organisational needs at the local level for clarifying community members
- ways of moving forward

Based on the research available to date, particularly through the Bushfire Co-operative Research Centre, key points that apply to each of these topics are identified.

# Community profiling for fire services at the local level

## IDENTIFYING THE CONTEXT

An important part of the context for this activity is the geographical area that is to be covered. For example, if it is a brigade it would be the area covered by the brigade, a fire education officer may have a different area, and a local government would most probably confine itself to its boundaries. It may also be that a particular part of the service area may need to be targeted, in which case the geographical focus would be smaller, or in some cases larger.

What follows is a locally based approach to developing a community profile at the local level. It is a starting point, not an end point and should develop over time.

## SOURCES OF INFORMATION ABOUT WHO LIVES IN THE AREA

There are several sources of relevant information each has its strengths and limitations.

The important point is to get information from as many different types of sources as possible. A rule of thumb is that at least 3 different sources of information are

needed to give reliable information. Information about the community can be gained from information that is already published, interviewing local government and organisational representatives and attending meeting of other groups in the community.

Note:

- the more direct the contact is with people, the more sensitive and careful the person collecting the information needs to be.
- this is not a 'one-off' activity, the information needs regular updating.

## PUBLISHED INFORMATION

Census data (collected by the Australian Bureau of Statistics) helps identify:

- how many people live in an area,
- how old they are,
- whether they are male or female,
- level of education,
- home ownership levels,
- income levels,
- the types of employment people have,
- types of dwellings,
- occupancy rates,
- marital status,
- household composition and
- rate of change of the population

- ethnicity
- indigenous status

Census data are collected every 5 years in Australia and have the limitation that the information ‘dates’, but the census is a solid starting point.

Your organisation can probably provide a census profile for the area required, but it will not be exact because the census collects on the basis of its own geographical boundaries and these often don’t align with even local government boundaries, partly because these change over time. Local government websites often summarise the census information that applies to their area and publish this in yearbooks or on websites. Some agencies have centralised services which can provide this information.

#### COMMUNITY ORGANISATIONS

Local government websites or contacts lists often include community organisations such as:

- Child care facilities
- Schools, preschools and kindergartens
- Service clubs
- Conservation groups
- Sporting clubs
- Hobby groups
- Support groups

- Libraries and museums
- Welfare agencies
- Health care facilities
- Government agencies
- Religious organisations
- Ethnic associations/groups
- Indigenous communities
- Chambers of commerce and tourism associations

In some cases, a community ‘audit’ might be collected by a brigade to gather information similar to, but not as detailed as the census. This can be done along with the process of making connections with community members. Should this be undertaken it needs to be done so within the boundaries of the privacy legislation, and by people who are sensitive to these issues, and personable in their approach. An audit can be useful in communities where it is recognised that census and other formal data may be highly unreliable.

#### KEY STAKEHOLDERS

‘Interviewing’ local government and organisational representatives

Local and state political representatives should have a picture of the community that votes them into office. Representatives of local organisations can provide a view of their organisations. Regular discussion

with these local leaders will provide information about current issues and trends in the community, particularly issues such as population change.

- Local political representatives
- Representatives/office bearers of community organisations (previously identified)
- Local employers
- Real estate agents

#### ATTENDING MEETINGS OF OTHER GROUPS IN THE COMMUNITY

- Regular organisational meetings
- Public meetings called for other purposes

#### RECORD YOUR BRIGADE/ GROUP KNOWLEDGE ABOUT THE COMMUNITY

- What key stakeholders are part of existing links
- What community organisations are part of existing links

#### Recording the information

This information about the community needs to be recorded and kept in a place that is accessible. Information should be shared and be able to be updated. It should not stay in someone's head.

Notes about issues that arise from meetings with community members, or attendance at meetings need to be kept, also in a place that is accessible.

Issues to consider:

- Is this a well-networked community and/or are there groups which are isolated or not so well connected into the mainstream?
- Are there groups you possibly do not know about?
- Has looking at the information you have gathered changed the way you see this community in terms of bushfires?
- Do the brigade members have good relations with the broader community?



## Assessing community capacity and vulnerability to bushfires at the local level

### PEOPLE'S CAPACITY TO DEAL WITH BUSHFIRES

Community is basically about the relationships and networks that people have. Places with a strong sense of community tend to be well networked and communicate well on issues such as bushfires. Similarly, a well connected community which shares and discusses concerns about bushfires tends to be better prepared. Despite the increasing risk of fire over time, as the time since the last fire increases, community concern or attention decreases. The last fire may be beyond collective memory, or the make up of the community may have changed considerably.

- is the community well networked
- does the community talk about bushfires
- from observation are they well prepared
- has there been a fire recently

### GROUPS OR SECTIONS OF THE COMMUNITY WHO MIGHT BE VULNERABLE

We need to be careful that we don't make assumptions about people's capacities or vulnerabilities. For example, over 65s might be healthy, well networked and informed about local issues and less vulnerable, or in aged care facilities where other people have responsibility for them. People who are not permanent members of the community can be unaware of the risks. Recent arrivals from urban centres, other states or countries may be unaware of local risks.

- are there new arrivals, tourists, seasonal workers, fly in-fly out workers
- are there commuters or other groups not so well connected in the community
- bushfires matters are often seen to be men's roles, so are women and children getting the necessary skills or information as well
- residents of health care, aged care and other types of health and welfare facilities need special consideration and it may be necessary to ensure the preparedness of their carers

- everyone exposed to a bushfire is potentially vulnerable, but they have different capacities to respond what needs to be done is to help them identify their capacities

Issues to consider:

- The people who join a fire brigade are aware of fire issues, the broader community generally is not aware of fire issues.
- Don't make assumptions about people's capacity, vulnerability or lack of capacity
- Fire fighting and fire issues tend to be seen as a 'man's' job but women and children may find themselves in a situation of needing to take action
- Households plan to be together, but may not be when a fire comes





## Assessing community perceptions of bushfire issues and expectations of fire service delivery at the local level

### PEOPLE'S PERCEPTIONS OF BUSHFIRE ISSUES

In many communities, householders see fire issues quite differently to fire service providers. Sometimes views are shared, and sometimes they are quite different. Issues with a shared understanding can be viewed as being a starting point for cooperation and/or matters that may not require focus for a time. Issues which are viewed differently may require tactful negotiation and help from other parts of the agency or even other agencies in order to move forward. These might also be issues to be treated with priority.

As well there is a tendency for day to day activities to be of more concern to people in the community.

- How widespread in the community is the sense that bushfires are an issue
- How widespread in the community is preparedness
- Do people (think) they have plans
- Are plans well thought out
- Are other natural hazards more frequent
- What social issues are at the forefront





## PEOPLE'S EXPECTATIONS OF SERVICE DELIVERY

People are generally unaware of who provides fire services in rural areas. There seems to be a general perception that along with the kerbing and channelling in a development comes fire, police, and ambulance services. For some people there is no differentiation between urban and rural fire services. Many do not realise the role of volunteers in service provision. Importantly, it seems that people who plan to 'go' rather than 'stay and defend' are more likely not to prepare at all, and are more likely to rely on fire services.

- Does the community know who provides fire services in their area
- Is the community aware of the potential lack of services
- Is the community aware of the service being provided by volunteers or a combination of paid and volunteer staff
- Does the community understand what controlled burns are and why they are necessary
- Is there a widespread objection to controlled burns, and why

## Identifying agency expectations of communities and organisational needs

### FIRE SERVICE EXPECTATIONS OF THE COMMUNITY

At different levels of fire services there are different expectations of the community. At the local level, expectations of what people in the community might do to protect themselves become more specific. In essence though, fire services want the community to 'own the risk'.

- Clearly identify what you are asking members of the community to do – are these realistic
- Is the expectation that every member of the community will take the same actions or is there an expectation that actions taken might differ

Communities should not be viewed as being a 'problem'. It is essential to engage with communities to seek solutions to fire issues.

## FIRE SERVICE NEEDS

It is quite clear that fires services calling a community meeting is not a successful way of engaging with the community and just telling people what they need to do does not work. Some research even indicates that community members would prefer not to meet with the fire services. This requires some creative thinking about how to reach the community. It is also important to be clear about what other activities fire services and fire community education are undertaking. It is very important to work harmoniously with organisational objectives (ie check out what you plan with your boss).

- What fire service resources are available at the community level
  - What can be achieved with the available resources
  - What other resources can be tapped within the fire services to meet local community needs
  - Prioritise who you want or need to contact for example, either on the basis of exposure to risk, or relationships to be built on
  - where possible work through community organisations which already exist
- employers, tourism providers and managers of large facilities should also be considered
  - where possible, include community members in the discussions about what is important in their area, and how issues might be resolved
  - most importantly do you have the right kind of person available to do the liaising with other community groups and stakeholders – they don't have to be an active brigade member but they do need to have experience and sensitivity

# Growing your patch

---

## A WAY FORWARD

The framework which starts with developing a community profile not only offers the means to obtain information about vulnerabilities, capacities, perceptions and expectations, it can serve to identify the ‘entry point’ or key contacts for particular groups.

This process is about engaging with a community by understanding its makeup and its needs, and then negotiating a way with the community to address bushfire issues. It is an alternative to telling people what to do, something which clearly does not work. It is only through engaging with the community in this way that it can be determined what organisational needs there are at the local level.

This guide for the process of knowing and growing your patch is deliberately brief. It is a guide, not a recipe, nor a set of operational procedures. If more detailed information is required, a supporting briefing paper is available which describes how this guide was developed, the social research that underpins the guide, and more detailed descriptions of potential methods for achieving the information. Feel free to contact the author.

# A workshop guide to community profiling for fire services at the local level to achieve:

.....

## Enhanced

- Community Education
- Community Understanding
- Community Engagement
- Community Participation
- Community Safety**

## Introduction

- What is community profiling and how might we do it?
- What are the questions we might be asking?
- How to use this guide

## What is community profiling and how might we do it?

Community profiling is an activity which draws a picture of the community being provided with fire services.

Remember communities consist of

- individuals
- family, household or workgroups
- organizations,

## What are the questions we are trying to answer?

- Where might fires happen?

- How might the population be affected by fires?
- How many people could be affected, and where are they?
- Who is likely to be most vulnerable and why?
- Who in the community can help prepare for fires, support the response to fires, and what are the immediate capacity gaps?
- What are the key information gaps about who lives in your community which should be addressed?

## How to use this guide

This guide is just that – a guide to finding out about the community you serve and of which you are part.

You may already have much of the information suggested. You may not need all of the information suggested – it will depend on what your community looks like, where it is and how big it is. The questions provided will help you build the profile.

## THE FIRST TASK: DESCRIBING POTENTIAL EXPOSURE TO BUSHFIRE IN YOUR AREA.

This needs to be done to make sure that the people who live in those parts of your community or area who are most vulnerable are clearly identified. This information is probably already available.

### What do we need to do this?

- Map of the area
- This can be as detailed or simple – whatever is available
- But most people find aerial photos easier to understand
- Map of the brigade area
- Again, this can be detailed or simple – the maps serve to focus the discussion and make sure people are talking about the same places.

### What do we do?

Talk about:

- When have fires occurred in the past and where?
- Does this reduce the risk for some areas?
- Where have controlled burns been and when?
- Does this reduce the risk for some areas?
- Where is the current bushfire risk in your area?
- Why is this so? Is this agreed by all or most in the area/group?
- Are there areas which are trouble spots for fires starting?
- Why is this so? Is this agreed by all or most in the area/group?

### Draw on the maps:

(Hint: on a laminated map you can use erasable markers so information can be revised more easily)

This type of information is probably already at the forefront of your concerns, but it is necessary to revisit this before you do the community profile.

- the current exposure by priority
- This will have been decided in the previous discussion
- long term or permanent exposure
- Areas adjacent to national parks etc., forestry enterprises and so on.
- Identifying short term or temporary exposure
- Areas of expanding housing developments – how long will they be exposed?
- What types of properties and land uses are exposed
- Do land use planning and building regulations support mitigation?
- What infrastructure is exposed

Are important building like hospitals, health centre, police and ambulance, schools, other community facilities at risk

Water, gas, electricity and other utilities.

Is there an area with only one road in and out, or dangerous/vulnerable exits?

### Other issues to consider at this stage:

- Other hazards that occur more frequently than bushfires

What other hazards matter to people in your area – do they think they are more important than fires?

- Other issues that pre-occupy the community

Are there unemployment issues, new industries coming in, economic issues affecting income etc.

- How to get the information

Census data (head/area office), local government websites, local political and organizational representatives, your own knowledge. Each of these has pluses and minuses, but together gives a more accurate picture.

- How to record the information

What works for you – paper, computer, but not in your head!

### THE SECOND TASK: PROFILING YOUR COMMUNITY

- Who lives in your community?
- Who comes into your area at weekends
- Who comes into your area for holidays
- Who comes into your area for seasonal work
- Who has moved into the community over the past 5 years?

- What are the peak daily travel times in your area and who is involved
- Vulnerable groups & locations
- How to get the information
- How to record the information

### Infrastructure/Built environment

- Engineering lifelines/utilities:
- Critical facilities/infrastructure
- Transport Network
- Administration/Institutions
- Support Infrastructure
- Built Infrastructure
- Redevelopment Planning Issues
- How to get the information
- How to record the information

### Community Engagement Activities

- What community groups are there in your area
- What political representation is there
- What school are there
- What businesses are there
- Which are the big employers

You made a profile of who lives, works and visits your community.

Now is the time to work out how to contact them without inviting them to a meeting, or door-knocking.

- Which organizations might you ask to brief key people







# KNOW YOUR PATCH TO GROW YOUR PATCH

Alison Cottrell | [alison.cottrell@jcu.edu.au](mailto:alison.cottrell@jcu.edu.au)

---

**Understanding Communities Project Bushfire CRC &  
Centre for Disaster Studies James Cook University**

---

The author would like to particularly acknowledge the Queensland Fire and Rescue Service, Queensland Rural Fire Service and Fire and Emergency Services Authority of Western Australia for their invaluable contributions to the development of 'Know your Patch'.