

SAFER TOGETHER

BUSHFIRE RISK REDUCTION PROGRAM EVALUATION



SUMMARY REPORT



Acknowledgements

We acknowledge and respect Victoria's Traditional Owners as the original custodians of the state's land and waters, their unique ability to care for Country and deep spiritual connection to it. We honour Elders past and present, whose knowledge and wisdom has ensured the continuation of culture and traditional practices.

We are committed to genuinely partner and meaningfully engage with Victoria's Traditional Owners and Aboriginal communities to support the protection of Country, the maintenance of spiritual and cultural practices and their broader aspirations in the 21st century and beyond.



We would like to acknowledge all the workshop participants and the partners, agencies and community groups that provided participants to attend each session for their contributions to the evaluation. We would also like to acknowledge those who participated in the partner and community surveys for their comments.

Authors

Prepared by members of the Monitoring, Evaluation and Research Unit - Forest, Fire and Regions Group. The evaluation was undertaken by Grosvenor Performance Group.

Aboriginal people should be aware that this publication may contain images or names of deceased persons in photographs or printed material.

Photo credits

Ecological burn jointly delivered by FFMVic and CFA, Loddon Mallee Region (2017). Department of Environment, Land, Water and Planning.

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A new approach to reducing bushfire risk

Background

The state of Victoria is one of the most bushfire prone areas in the world. Bushfire risk is increasing due to population growth and our changing climate, bringing more hot days and less rainfall.

While bushfires will always be a threat, together we can make our communities safer, our economy stronger and safeguard our environment.

Safer Together: A new approach to reducing the risk of bushfire in Victoria, is the Victorian Government's multi-agency bushfire risk reduction program. Launched in late 2017, the program uses a collaborative approach to bushfire management that involves agencies working together with communities. Safer Together combines stronger community partnerships and local knowledge with contemporary science and technology to more effectively reduce bushfire risk on public and private land. Key government agencies are the Department of Environment, Land, Water and Planning (DELWP), Country Fire Authority (CFA) and Parks Victoria.

Safer Together priorities

Safer Together's vision is for safer and more resilient communities and resilient ecosystems. The overarching objective is that communities, government agencies and partners collaborate to reduce bushfire risk through the delivery of capability building and on-ground projects.

Safer Together has four priorities:

- Community Engagement
- Fuel Management
- Research Modeling and Knowledge Application
- Understanding Risk

Using these priorities, Safer Together is delivered via a range of jointly designed, proposed and implemented projects and on-ground activities.



Project purpose and scope

Evaluating the success of the Safer Together program is critical for ensuring bushfire risk is managed in the best way possible. Therefore, in 2020 an independent consultant, Grosvenor Performance Group, was engaged to evaluate the past four years of the program's delivery. The evaluation focussed on how well the Safer Together program achieved the 'resilient communities' part of its vision.

The evaluation used the Safer Together Monitoring, Evaluation and Reporting (MER) Framework to measure progress against the outcomes related to 'resilient communities'. The findings will be used to drive program improvement and inform future decision making.

The evaluation focused on a selection of key activities, outcomes and outputs related to the delivery of the program, reflected in the program logic (Figure 1).

The five key evaluation questions were:

1. What is the evidence of a continued need for the program and role for government in delivering this program?
2. How effective has Safer Together been?
3. How well has the program been delivered?
4. What would be the impact of ceasing the program and what strategies are there for minimising negative impacts?
5. What lessons are there from the Safer Together program?

Key evaluation questions 1 and 4 were only briefly considered in this evaluation as they were addressed through a previous program evaluation in 2020 (see Box 1). The present evaluation largely focussed on key evaluation questions 2, 3 and 5 – effectiveness, delivery, and lessons learnt.

Box 1: Evidence of a continued need for Safer Together and the risks of ceasing to fund the program

The findings of an evaluation of key evaluation questions 1 and 4 in 2020 are summarised below.

1. What is the evidence of a continued need for the program and role for government in delivering this program?
 - Bushfire risk continues to increase in Victoria. Specifically, the number of days with a Fire Danger of Very High or higher is increasing annually.
 - Government intervention in reducing bushfire risk continues to be justified on the basis of:
 - The worsening impacts of climate change and the increased movement of population to peri-urban areas is evidence of an enhanced need for interventions to reduce bushfire risk in Victoria.
 - There is a market failure in the provision of an optimal level of bushfire prevention and management activities because the full benefits of reducing bushfire risk do not accrue directly to the individual who undertakes prevention and management activities.
 - Alignment to statewide priorities and strategies.

4. What would be the impact of ceasing the program and what strategies are there for minimising negative impacts?

Specific risks to ceasing of fund the program include:

- Impact on the cross-tenure approach and risk reduction target (i.e. activities that have specifically increased our understanding of bushfire risk associated with private land)
- Erosion of community trust and commitment
- Government's ability to meet the recommendations of the recent IGEM and VAGO inquiries into the 2019-20 bushfire season would be impacted.

Based on the worsening impacts of climate change, the increased movement of population to peri-urban areas and the alignment of the program to statewide priorities and strategies – along with the continuing need to engage communities and to ensure agencies are working effectively together – there is an ongoing need for a program such as Safer Together.

Program logic

The Safer Together program logic (Figure 1) is used to evaluate whether the program is working as intended. The program logic was reviewed in 2020 to ensure it reflected any significant changes to the program since its launch. The program logic sets out how the program's activities and outputs lead to delivering the outcomes that contribute to the the program's objective and vision.

Safer Together Vision: Safer and more resilient communities and resilient ecosystems

Safer Together Objective: Communities, agencies and partners collaborate to reduce bushfire risk and impacts through delivery of a range of capability-building and on-ground projects.

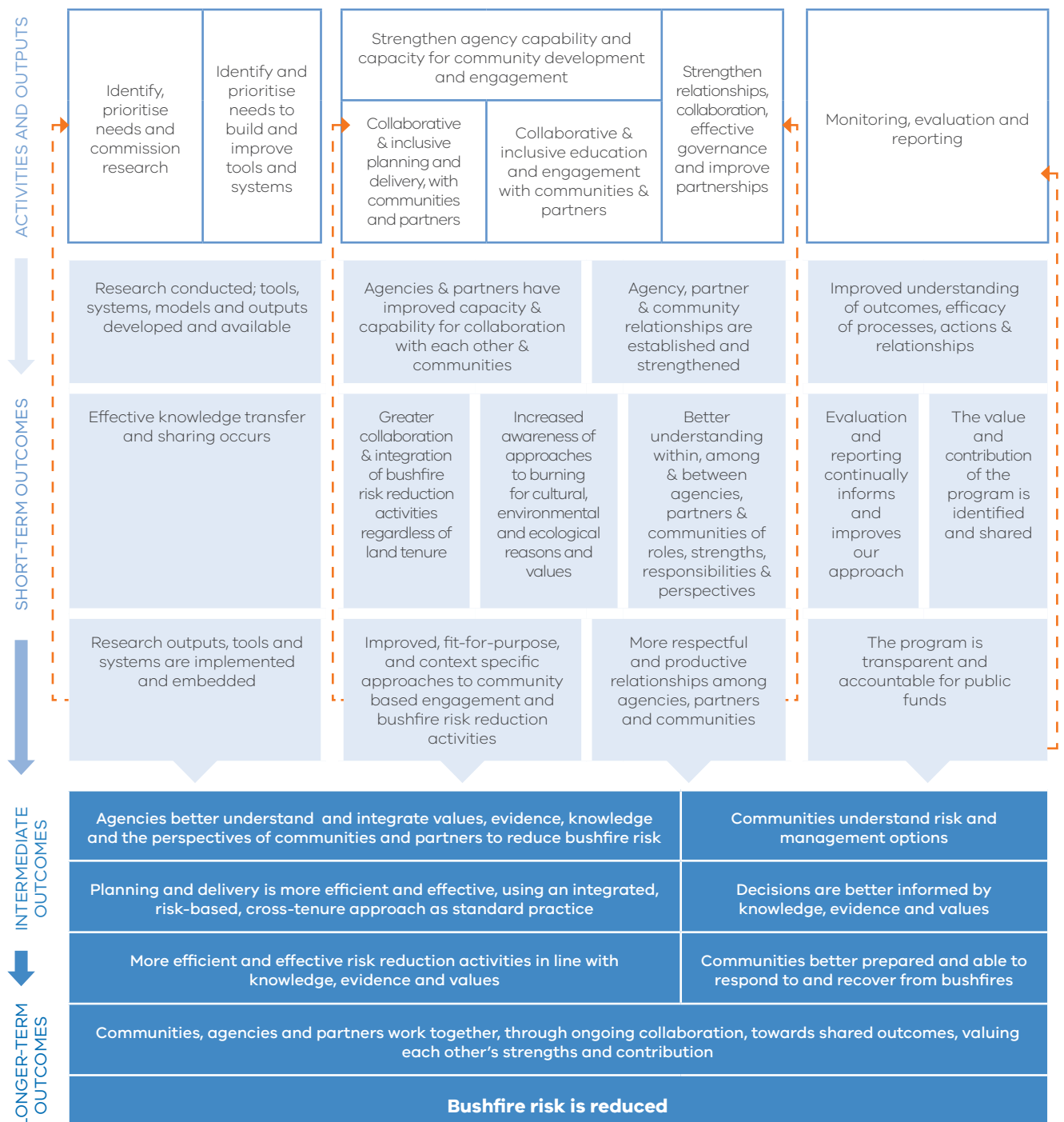


Figure 1: Safer Together program logic

Methodology

Evaluation approach

The evaluation methodology included:

- development of the evaluation and engagement plan
- distribution of staff perceptions survey, which received 92 responses, of which DELWP and CFA made up 52% and 32% of responses respectively
- distribution of community perceptions survey to community groups statewide through local government and Community Based Bushfire Management facilitators, which received 22 responses
- 21 semi-structured stakeholder focus groups and individual consultations with internal and external stakeholders, as well as community members
- review of key documents, reports and data; and
- development of a preliminary findings briefing pack and final evaluation report.

Stakeholder groups

Representatives from the following Stakeholder groups were consulted:

- Victorian Bushfire Risk Mitigation Committee
- Bushfire Risk Mitigation Management Group
- Safer Together Project Management Office
- Safer Together Partnership Groups:
 - Community Engagement
 - Fuel Management
 - Research, Modelling and Knowledge Application
 - Strategic Planning
- Safer Together Project Leads
- Community Based Bushfire Management Project Lead and Project Officers
- Parks Victoria
- Local government
- Regional staff across DELWP, CFA and local government
- DELWP Units:
 - Forest and Emergency Management Planning Unit
 - Regional Fire and Emergency Preparedness Unit
 - Regional Forest and Fire Planning Unit



How effective has Safer Together been?

Key evaluation question 2

Overall, Safer Together has demonstrated it is working towards meeting its objective that communities, agencies and partners collaborate to reduce bushfire risk through the delivery of capability building and on-ground projects.

Key findings:

- Of Safer Together's 14 short-term outcomes (described in the program logic; Figure 1), seven were achieved and seven were progressing towards achievement (Table 1). This is a strong result for a program like Safer Together, where programs can at times still be at risk of not achieving outcomes at this point in the funding lifecycle.
- All eight of Safer Together's medium-term and long-term outcomes were progressing towards achievement. Safer Together is demonstrating that it is well-positioned to progress towards or achieve these outcomes going forward.
- Significant effort had been invested into the research stream, with a number of research projects, tools, models and other outputs produced. The focus going forward will be on ensuring that research is both used and embedded into agencies' practices to capitalise on this investment.
- The Safer Together program has improved the capacity and capability for collaboration between key communities, agencies and partners, and equally has improved communication and the understanding of roles and responsibilities between these groups.
- One of the most valuable aspects of Safer Together is the establishment and strengthening of relationships. This has supported greater collaboration and integration of bushfire risk reduction activities compared with the level of collaboration and integration at the time of Safer Together's commencement.

Overall, the program partners engaged through this evaluation were overwhelmingly positive about the value of Safer Together, particularly how it has helped build relationships, drive and complete projects and develop new fuel management approaches.

Similarly, the majority of community survey respondents agreed that Safer Together is a valuable program (Figure 2). Stakeholders also provided positive feedback about the use of evaluation to ensure the program is effective and to provide transparency and accountability about the use of public funds.

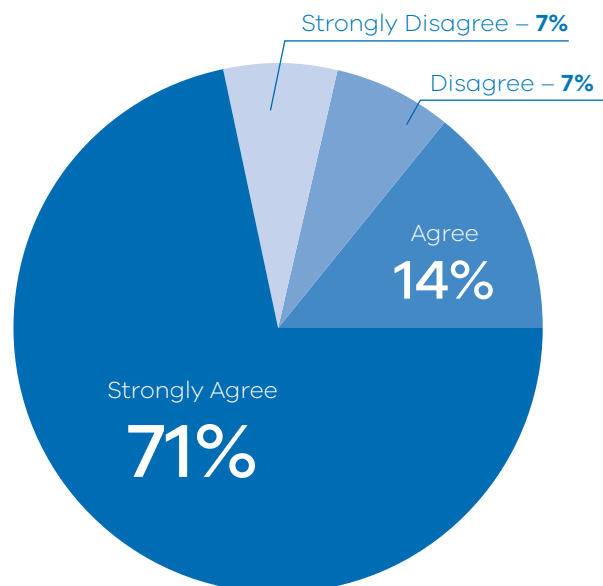


Figure 2: Extent to which community members agree that Safer Together is a valuable program

Table 1: Level of achievement of the Safer Together program short-term outcomes

	Intended short-term outcome	Grosvenor assessment
1	Research conducted; tools, systems, models and outputs developed and available	<i>Progressing towards achievement</i>
2	Effective knowledge transfer and sharing occur	<i>Progressing towards achievement</i>
3	Research outputs, tools and systems are implemented and embedded	<i>Progressing towards achievement</i>
4	Agencies & partners have improved capacity & capability for collaboration with each other & communities	Achieved
5	Agency, partner & community relationships are established and strengthened	Achieved
6	Greater collaboration & integration of bushfire risk reduction activities regardless of land tenure	<i>Progressing towards achievement</i>
7	Increased awareness of approaches to burning for cultural, environmental and ecological reasons and values	<i>Progressing towards achievement</i>
8	Better understanding within, among & between agencies, partners & communities of roles, strengths, responsibilities & perspectives	Achieved
9	Improved, fit-for-purpose, and context specific approaches to community-based engagement and bushfire risk reduction activities	Achieved
10	More respectful and productive relationships among agencies, partners and communities	Achieved
11	Improved understanding of outcomes, efficacy of processes, actions & relationships	<i>Progressing towards achievement</i>
12	Evaluation and reporting continually informs and improves our approach	Achieved
13	The value and contribution of the program is identified and shared	Achieved
14	The Program is transparent and accountable for public funds	<i>Progressing towards achievement</i>




How well has the program been delivered?





Key evaluation question 3

With regard to Safer Together's program management, while there are some opportunities for improving Safer Together's governance and risk management, the program's scope, budget and timelines have been well-managed and that the program was efficient overall, providing assurance that Safer Together has been delivered in line with expected government standards (Table 2).

Table 2: Summary of findings – program management and efficiency of delivery

Program management	Findings
 <p>Scope</p>	<p>Safer Together was delivered in scope, yet one opportunity for improvement was that projects were not always linked to program outcomes. A recommendation from the evaluation was that future projects are more closely aligned to the program's intended outcomes.</p>



Program management	Findings
 Budget	<p>The Project Management Office employed good budget reporting processes with frequent updates to budget reporting. Best practice on a program of this scale would include quarterly budget reporting to enable responsive decision-making.</p>
 Timelines	<p>Key stakeholders within the Project Management Office and other central governance groups were satisfied with the program's overall timelines while noting that some projects were impacted by COVID-19 and experienced delays to achieving objectives.</p>
 Governance	<p>Strategy was a challenge, with concerns around a lack of clear purpose and vision between governance groups. Further, while the vertical communications of the governance structure were working, there was less evidence that communications were occurring horizontally (i.e., between partnership groups and across regions and local areas), except informally through duplications of membership or reliance on personal networks.</p>
 Risk management	<p>While there was evidence of individual project risk management and a risk framework with the Safer Together MER Framework, a program-level risk management framework does not exist and would improve program management practices.</p>

What lessons are there from the Safer Together program?

Key evaluation question 5

While there were many lessons identified and learnt from the evaluation, those lessons which span all elements of Safer Together are:

1. the program approach needs to be designed with sustainability in mind
2. the program requires staff with the skills and capability to give focus and gain commitment.
3. Safer Together spans many projects, but there needs to be more clarity on how the projects contribute to outcomes and a clearer definition of what success looks like.
4. success requires top-down leadership, ownership, ways of working, culture and commitment

Lessons about building the capability of agencies, partners and communities to work together

- need to navigate and balance the different perspectives and priorities of each stakeholder over the life of the program
- need to resolve reported issues regarding implementing a truly tenure-blind approach and joint planned burning approaches
- **success** requires a clear shared understanding of intended outcomes, which requires a focus on building capability to collaborate and having effective systems and processes to enable this

Lessons about building the capability of agencies to engage with the community

- upfront design should identify how to find the right stakeholders, link them together and support them to build sustainable networks. Consider how relationships will transition effectively into the future, as individuals change over time
- strong localised presence and links are important
- **success** requires focusing on the community as a whole, not just specific individuals, being aware of and tactically using the many and varied reasons why communities may be motivated to engage in bushfire preparation



Figure 3: Key lessons identified and learnt through this evaluation

5. given the regional expertise and localised connectivity of local councils with their communities, there is opportunity to place more focus on local government engagement
6. there should be a structured approach for knowledge sharing to: ensure consistent communications, knowledge and outcomes; reduce variance in localised experiences of Safer Together; and mitigate the risk of key individuals turning over.

The lessons summarised in Figure 3 were informed by a synthesis of all preceding insights and observations, survey and consultation feedback, a sample of project closure reports and review of the lessons learned register.

Shared lesson

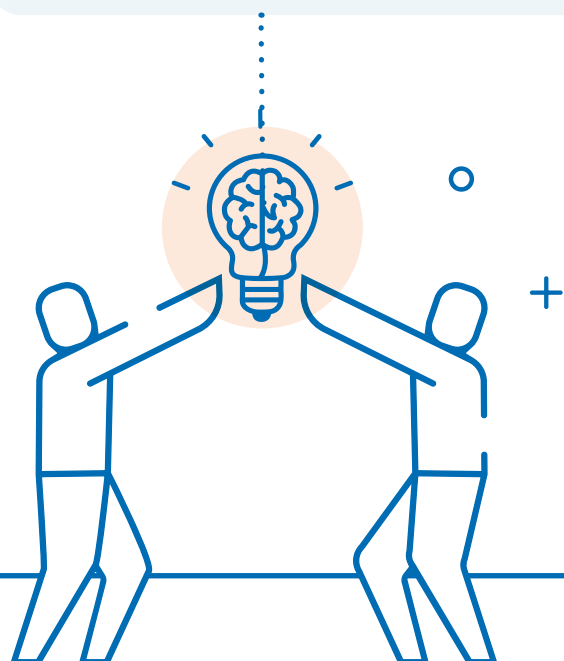
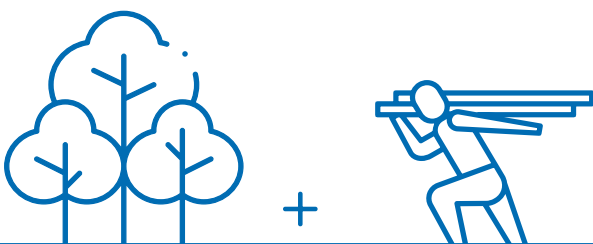
- **success** requires formalisation of engagement processes, otherwise the program activities and outcomes are dependent on individual people's goodwill and networks

Shared lessons

- recruit staff to roles that factor time for community engagement and relationship-building
- ensure ongoing capability development, in relation to joint agency processes and training, and community engagement capabilities.
- need more community place-based approaches
- **success** requires open engagement processes which build shared trust and responsibility between parties

Lessons about generating, using and sharing knowledge related to bushfire management and risk reduction

- knowledge generated must inform decision-making, processes and practices
- develop a clear process to prioritise research, from needs identification through to implementation
- **success** requires sound knowledge-sharing systems and a central repository accessible by all stakeholders and the public to maximise the benefits of the investment and ensure knowledge continuity as people turnover



Safer Together activities summary

Between the launch of Safer Together in 2017 and June 2021, there were*:



Between the launch of Safer Together in 2017 and June 2021, there were*:

	2017-18	2018-19	2019-20	2020-21	Hectares treated since 2019-20
CFA and FFMVic brigades leading or supporting planned burns	148	118	125	161	>5,100
Non-burn fuel treatment activities	Not available	Not available	15	57	>521

* These activities were impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic from March 2020 onwards.

Recommendations

Key recommendations from this evaluation were categorised into six key areas for Safer Together partners' consideration (Table 3).

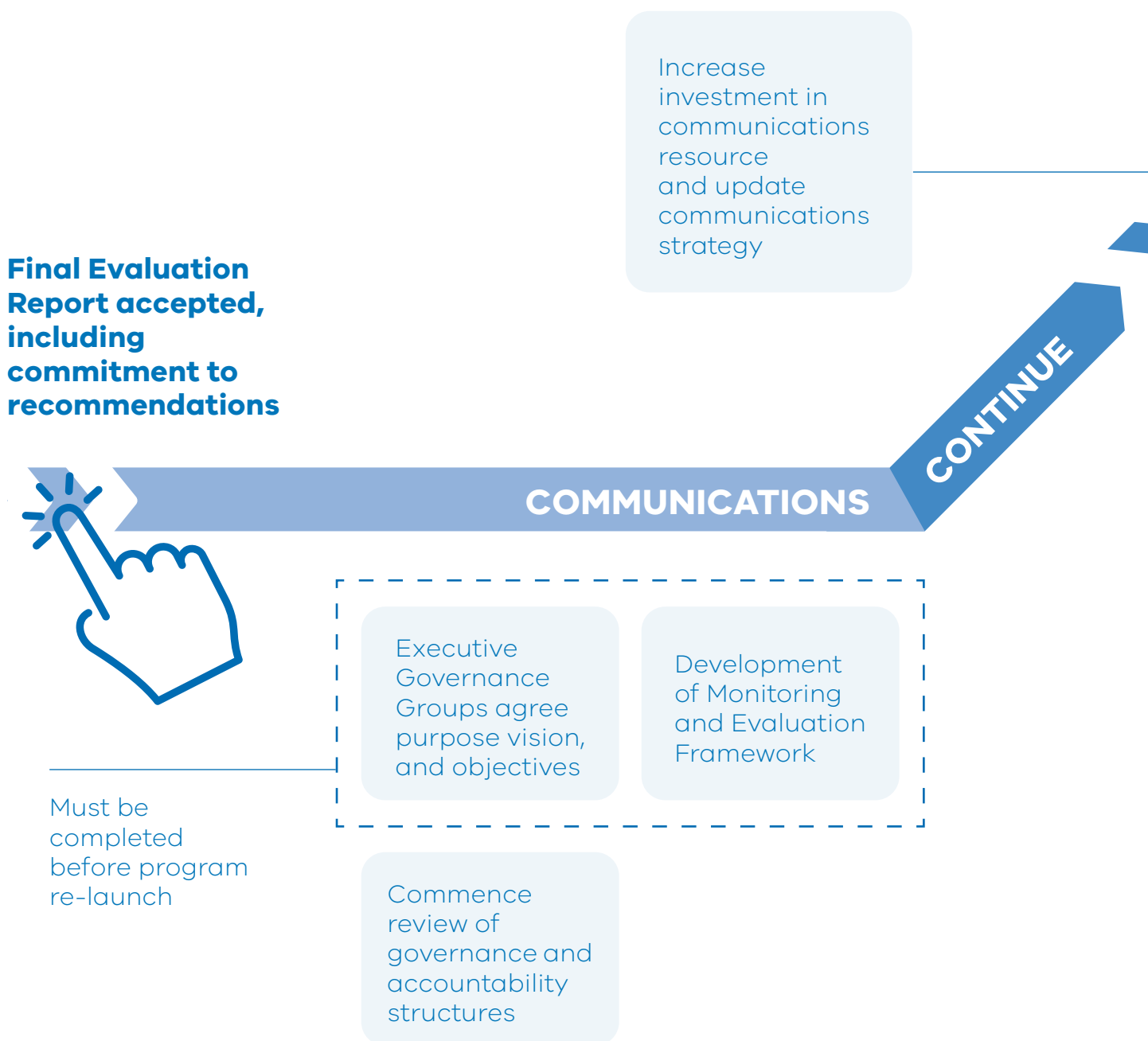
Table 3: Summary of recommendations

	Area	Recommendation
1	Governance	Improve governance by agreeing on a Safer Together vision, purpose, objectives and outcomes and conduct a review of governance and accountability structures.
2	Program management	Increase oversight and overarching program management to support delivery including through the development of an overall program management tool and risk management framework. Further, identify ways to increase transparency and accountability for expenditure of public funds and approach Safer Together with a mindset of designing this iteration for sustainability beyond the funded period.
3	Monitoring and evaluation	Develop an updated MER framework including a program logic in line with the needs and objectives of Safer Together going forward.
4	Implementation, planning and strategy	Focus on implementation, planning and strategy for Safer Together including implementation of research and policy, building on progress made with planning, and capitalise on strategy to achieve greater impact on Safer Together efforts to date.
5	Communications	Focus on greater investment towards communications including resourcing capacity. The current communications strategy should be reviewed and updated with a renewed communications strategy key to program management.
6	Training	Re-design and implement ongoing training for joint planned burns and community engagement.



Implementation roadmap

Based on their comprehensive evaluation of the Safer Together program, Grosvenor Performance Group recommended program partners consider the following roadmap to implement the key recommendations.



Development of key program management documentation

- project management tool
- risk management framework
- action plan for recommendations

Ideally all completed before program re-launch



OF PROGRAM

FOR LIFE

PROGRAM RE-LAUNCH

Discussion of key recommendation action items at relevant committees

Develop prioritisation strategy for program of works

Transparency and accountability of public funds

Governance improvements

Scan current and completed projects for implementation opportunities

Include training into program of works

