



Burning Seed 2025 Town Hall

27 July 2025

Hosted by Sunburnt Arts Ltd

Acknowledgement of Country

On behalf of the boards, I'd like acknowledge the Gadigal people as the Traditional Custodians of the lands we meet upon, and pay my respects to Elders past, present and emerging. I'd like to also acknowledge any Aboriginal people joining us here today and thank them for sharing their knowledge with us.

This Country has always been a place of teaching, community building, learning and knowledge sharing, and that continues here today. I honour the enduring connection of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples to this land, culture and community. I recognise their ongoing presence and contributions and commit to listening, learning and walking together.



Agenda

1

Introductions & Housekeeping

Board introductions and meeting protocols

2

Acknowledgements

Recognition of contributions to Burning Seed's development

3

2025 Event Debrief

Critical issues, timeline analysis and root causes

4

IBAG Survey Results

Presented by Peter Simpson-Young

5

Future Planning

Important upcoming dates and looking ahead to 2026

6

Q&A and Discussion

Open floor for community feedback and questions

Introductions



Sunburnt Arts (SBA) Directors

- Andrew Lau (July 2024 - Current)
- Gabe Reyes (Acting, February 2025 - Current)
- Leanna Pugliese (Acting, February 2025 - Current)
- Myke McQuaid (Acting, February 2025 - Current)

Sunburnt Events (SBE) Directors

- Bjorn Margon (July 2024 - Current)
- Marcelo Villa (Acting, July 2025 - Current)
- TeeJay Wier (Acting, July 2025 - Current)

Acknowledgements

We extend our deepest gratitude to all who have contributed to Burning Seed's community-led transformation

After 10 years of restructuring efforts, Burning Seed is finally in the hands of the community—where it truly belongs!

Sunburnt Arts Directors 2025

- Ben Fornarino
- Pete Ingram
- Daryl Paulger
- Bea Pierce
- Alicia Boyd
- Hamish Guinn

Sunburnt Events Directors 2025

- Felipe Aires
- Bjorn Margan

Thank you for taking up the mantle of leadership within this pioneering governance model.

What is our purpose?

Foster Deep Community Connection – Create spaces where we can build lasting relationships through shared experiences, mutual respect, and radical inclusion.

Celebrate Creativity and Expression – Provide a platform for individuals to share art, music, performance, and innovation in an open, non-judgmental environment. Create a space where our true selves are celebrated.

Empower Participation and Collaboration – Encourage everyone to contribute, co-create, and take ownership of the event, blurring the lines between participant and organizer.

Nurture Sustainable and Intentional Living – Promote values of self-reliance, environmental responsibility, and mindful interaction with both nature and each other.



What is our purpose?

The Global Burn Phenomenon

You're Part of Something Bigger

200,000+

Annual Participants

Burners attend an event every
year worldwide

85+

Regional Events

Thriving burn communities
across the globe

34

Countries

Nations with active burning
communities

\$1.67M

Art Funding

Annual art grants distributed
globally

i The Secret: Burns aren't entertainment—they're community made manifest. Regional burns now exceed Black Rock City attendance. We're not starting from scratch—we're joining a proven global movement.

Burning Seed 2025 Debrief

Timeline and Critical Issues

This summary has been created after conversations with current and former SBA and SBE members. It represents:

- The best, objective summary of "what happened" based on minutes, official documents, meeting notes and personal experiences
- A balanced perspective that aims to foster learning rather than assign blame

- ❑ Each Director has also been given the opportunity to compose their own personal version of events and notes for publication and distribution as an annexure to the debrief.

The following slides outline key events, contributing factors, and lessons learned from our 2025 experience.

Critical Issues: Event Planning

Choice of Event Dates

- Fear of another event without an Effigy burn drove consideration of winter dates
- Key stakeholder advice limited to fire stakeholders
- Event dates announced without SBA consultation
- Rationale provided only after announcement

Ticketing Challenges

- Overestimation of community interest
- Underestimation of winter dates impact
- Late release of tickets due to licensing agreement delays
- Price point and structure complications

Timeline: July – October 2024

23 July 2024

1

First SBA-SBE Boards elected at AGM, beginning a new era of community governance

2

August 2024

SBA and SBE discuss agreement to generate a 2025 event, to be formalised under an incoming licensing agreement

3

16 September 2024

SBE announces winter event dates based on internal discussion without SBA consultation or broader community input

4

October 2024

First SBA Board resignations: Daryl Paulger and Bea Pierce step down, leaving three directors

This period established the foundation for subsequent challenges, as communication gaps and governance uncertainties began to emerge.

Timeline: October 2024 – March 2025

January 2025

SBA Board stabilisation: Alicia Boyd and Hamish Guinn recruited based on past Burning Seed experience. Draft Licensing Agreement submitted by SBA.

1

January–February 2025

Licensing impasse: SBA and SBE unable to reach consensus on risk parameters and event scale. Agreement stalled.

2

February 2025

Second Board collapse: Alicia Boyd, Hamish Guinn and Ben Fornarino resign citing inadequate planning, volunteer capacity issues, and budget concerns.

3

4

March 2025

Emergency SBA rebuild: Leanna Pugliese, Madeline Fountain, Gabe Reyes, and Myke McQuaid join to stabilise SBA. Sam Carman resigns from SBE.

This critical period saw significant leadership turnover and growing tensions over operational planning, creating instability at a crucial time in the event planning cycle.

Timeline: March – July 2025

17 March 2025

Licensing and Professional Services Agreement ratified after months of negotiation

1

2

17 April 2025

Tickets go on sale to the public—two months later than SBE's original timeline, with ongoing ticketing platform issues, mainly due to inadequate time to test and troubleshoot

3

7 May 2025

Event cancelled due to ticket sales threshold not being met, triggering volunteer burnout and cultural disunity

4

May–July 2025

Multiple resignations: SBE Directors Felipe Aires and Ariane Blanch (May 16), SBA Director Madeline Fountain (June 30), followed by new SBE appointments in July



Throughout this period, volunteers reported significant psychological stress, unclear direction, and growing divisions between teams.

Root Causes Identified

Undefined Roles and Expectations

From inception, limited shared understanding between SBA and SBE about operational or governance remits.

Power Imbalance and Mistrust

SBA was perceived as over-reaching in their authority, an external controller, stepping in late and appearing to override SBE operational decisions.

Unfamiliar Governance Model

The new board structure, though well-intentioned, had competing interpretations. Critical misunderstandings were not addressed until too late.

Communication Gaps

No systematic consultation process. SBE managed community comms while SBA remained underpowered and reactive, unable to address misinformation.

Additional Root Causes

Volunteer Trauma

Emotional fatigue, unresolved interpersonal dynamics and a lack of psychological safety caused widespread volunteer attrition and disillusionment.

Overestimation of Positives

Addition of Afterpay, completion of restructure, larger event size, and perceived community enthusiasm were all expected to drive strong ticket sales.

Underestimation of Negatives

Winter dates and cold conditions, short purchasing window, reversion of theme camp grants policy all had stronger negative impacts than anticipated.

Workload Miscalculations

Overestimation of volunteer response (in speed and volume) alongside underestimation of workload and delays created unsustainable pressure.

These factors combined to create a perfect storm that ultimately led to the event's cancellation despite everyone's best efforts.



Immediate Contributing Factors

Misalignment on Decision-Making

SBE operated in silo, assuming constitutional autonomy over operations without consultation. SBA attempted to re-engage later with licensing oversight, causing friction.

Licensing as a Flashpoint

SBA's hesitance to sign off on a 3,000-person event without proper due diligence was interpreted by SBE as obstruction, despite extensive planning already in progress.

Board Instability

Repeated SBA resignations left governance fragile and slow to respond. Reduced capacity to perform cultural responsibilities.

Ticketing Restructure Fallout

SBA-requested changes to pricing models—though well-intentioned—contributed to ticketing system breakdowns, communications failures, and community frustration.

Urgency Without Alignment

Financial pressure and tight timelines prompted unilateral action from SBE, with little opportunity for shared decision-making.

Volunteer and Leadership Impact

Extreme Pressure

Directors described the experience as "pushing through a wall" while facing community demands and unclear internal structures.

Personal Risk

Fear of financial and legal exposure sitting with SBE directors, while SBA held governance power without equivalent liability. SBA did not properly address/assuage that risk.

Emotional Exhaustion

Feelings of isolation, betrayal, and futility were common amongst volunteers and board members, contributing to a breakdown in trust and morale.

We acknowledge the profound personal toll this experience has taken on our volunteer community and leadership team.

We promise to work together to ensure the good health of our volunteer community

Current Status and Path Forward

Reconciliation Underway

Both organisations acknowledge the breakdown and are committed to reconciliation and reform through honest dialogue and structural changes.

Governance Reform Proposed

SBA Refocus

SBA to function as a "cultural" and membership committee with clear scope and documented roles—focused on culture, arts, community consultation, and longer-term community trust-building.

SBE Streamlining

Restructuring roles and responsibilities of team leads and functional/operational members to create clearer lines of authority and accountability.

Clear Working Relationship

Developing formal definitions and agreements to be ratified between SBA and SBE, establishing boundaries and collaborative processes. Consistent communication between the boards to promote a united front.

Options of perceived governing structures

Discussions to be canvassed before AGM/SGM: Refine two-board structure and constitutions to rectify functional issues;
Consolidating SBA and SBE boards into a single, united entity to ensure cohesive operational structure

Future Vision and Next Steps

Scalable Events

Future events to focus on scalability, sustainability, collaboration and shared confidence before returning to larger-scale gatherings

Recruitment

Actively seeking skilled, collaborative volunteers to take on leadership roles and co-create the future



Governance Tools

Creating better onboarding processes, governance agreements, and shared decision-making frameworks

Culture Reset

Prioritising psychological safety, respect, and constructive communication to foster a healthy volunteer environment

Trust Building

Establishing clear governance, defined roles, mutual trust, and robust consultation before planning any major events

We're committed to rebuilding together, learning from these experiences, and creating a stronger foundation for Burning Seed's future.



IBAG Survey Results

Presented by Peter Simpson-Young

The IBAG (Independent Burning Advisory Group) survey results provide valuable community insights that will help inform our path forward. Peter will now present the key findings and recommendations from this comprehensive feedback initiative.