

Burning Seed 2025

Debrief Summary

Finalised 25 July 2025

Core Issues

Structural governance failure between SBE and SBA - contributing factors included but not limited to:

- Lack of clear communication and collaboration between committees
- Unclear roles, undefined decision-making authority, and an untested organisational model
- Limited funds and unclear budget ownership — \$25K was allocated to SBE, leaving SBA with \$105,316
- Unclear communication channels - resulted in lack of communication, lack of engagement, little marketing. (No Vibe Check or community buy in)

This created an unsustainable operational environment, compounded by unclear expectations and significant personal risk for directors.

Choice of event dates

- Fear of another event without an Effigy burn drove consideration of winter dates.
- Key stakeholder advice on event dates was limited to fire stakeholders, with other considerations being prioritised lower.
- Event dates were announced without consultation of SBA.
- Event dates were announced without explanation of considerations provided until afterward.

Ticketing (volume limit, pricing, platform)

- Overestimation of community interest
- Underestimation of the effect of winter event dates
- Late release of tickets (for a variety of reasons including delays in ratifying licensing agreement)

Key Events Timeline

- **First SBA-SBE Boards elected at AGM - 23 July 2024**
 - **SBA Directors:** Andrew Lau, Ben Fornarino, Pete Ingram, Daryl Paulger and Bea Pierce
 - **SBE Directors:** Sam Carman, Felipe Aires, Ariane Blanch, Bjorn Margon
- **SBA–SBE Initial Directions:** SBA and SBE discussed an agreement to generate a 2025 event, to be formalised under an incoming licensing agreement
- **Date Announcement (16 Sep 2024):** SBE announced the event date based on internal discussion.
 - SBA was not consulted before the date posted.
 - Greater community consultation did not occur
 - Resulting in confusion and public perception concerns.
- **First SBA Board Resignations (Oct 2024):** Daryl Paulger and Bea Pierce resign.
 - Remaining board: Andrew Lau, Ben Fornarino, Pete Ingram.
- **SBA Board stabilisation (Jan 2025):** Alicia Boyd and Hamish Guinn were recruited to the SBA board based on their past histories with Burning Seed.
- **Draft Licensing Agreement submitted by SBA - January 2025 -**
- **Licensing Impasse:** SBA and SBE unable to reach consensus on risk parameters and scale of event. Agreement stalled.
- **Second Board Collapse (Feb 2025):** Alicia Boyd, Hamish Guinn and Ben Fornarino, resigned citing inadequate planning, volunteer capacity, and a lack of budget clarity which created high risk of failure — leaving Andrew Lau as sole director.
- **Emergency Rebuild SBA (Mar 2025):** Leanna Pugliese, Madeline Fountain, Gabe Reyes, and James (Myke) McQuaid join to stabilise SBA
- **Ticketing Issues (March–May 2025):** Price and structure changes — implemented in good faith — significantly complicated systems and created 80% of ticketing issues. Communications with participants became disjointed due to troubleshooting new software under pressure.
 - Sam Carman Resigned from SBE citing personal issues
- **Licensing and Professional Services Agreement ratified:** March 17th 2025
- **Tickets go on sale to the public:** April 17th 2025 - Two months after SBE intended to have tickets on sale.
 - Troubleshooting ongoing with ticketing
 - Slower than anticipated take up
- **Event cancelled 7th May 2025 -** Due to ticket sale threshold not being met
- **Volunteer Burnout:** Volunteers reported psychological stress, unclear direction, and deep divisions between teams. Cultural disunity and poor communication led to multiple resignations.
- **SBE Directors Felipe Aires and Ariane Blanch resign:** May 16th 2025
- **SBA Director Madeline Fountain resigned:** 30 June 2025
- **New Directors added to SBE:** July 16th 2025 to enable business continuity, David Wieruszewski (Hotwire) and Marcelo Araujo.

Root Causes Identified

- **Undefined Roles and Expectations:** From inception, there was no shared understanding between SBA and SBE about operational or governance remits.
- **Unfamiliar Governance Model:** The new board structure, though well-intentioned, had competing interpretations. Critical misunderstandings were not addressed until too late.
- **Power Imbalance and Mistrust:** SBA was perceived as over-reaching in their authority/role, an external controller, stepping in late and appearing to override SBE operational decisions — resulting in delays, frustration, and emotional exhaustion.
- **Communication Gaps:** No systematic consultation process. SBE managed community comms while SBA remained underpowered and reactive.
 - SBA were not able to maintain community engagement responsibilities.
 - SBA failed to address misinformation surrounding the financial mismanagement from Rekindle in 2023 and Restructure wrap-up.
- **Volunteer Trauma:** Emotional fatigue, unresolved interpersonal dynamics and a lack of psychological safety caused widespread volunteer attrition and disillusionment.
- **Overestimation of the effect of positives on ticket sales:** Addition of Afterpay, completion of restructure, larger event size, enthusiasm of the community
- **Underestimation of the effect of negatives on ticket sales:** Winter dates and discomfort of the cold, short window for purchasing tickets, reversion of theme camp grants policy
- **Overestimation of volunteer response** (in speed and volume)
- **Underestimation of workload and delays**

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.
- **Board Instability:** Repeated SBA resignations left governance fragile and slow to respond. Reduced capacity to perform cultural responsibilities.
- **Urgency Without Alignment:** Financial pressure and tight timelines prompted unilateral action from SBE, with little opportunity for shared decision-making.
- **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.
- **Ticketing Restructure Fallout:** SBA-requested changes to pricing models — though well-intentioned — contributed to system breakdowns, communications failures, and community frustration.

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.

Current Status and Path Forward

- **Reconciliation Underway:** Both organisations acknowledge the breakdown and are committed to reconciliation and reform.
- **Governance Reform Proposed:**
 - SBA to function as a “cultural” and membership committee — with clear scope, budget, and documented roles — focused on culture, arts, community consultation, and longer-term community trust-building.
 - SBE streamlining roles and responsibilities of team leads and functional/operational members
 - Clear definitions in working relationship to be ratified between SBA and SBE
- **Collaborative Events Emphasis:** Future events to focus on scalability, sustainability, collaboration and shared confidence before returning to large-scale events.
- **Defined Onboarding and Governance Tools:** Work is underway to create better onboarding processes, governance agreements, and shared decision-making frameworks.
- **Volunteer Culture Reset:** Psychological safety, respect, and constructive communication are being prioritised to foster a healthy volunteer environment.
- **Success Preconditions:** Clear governance, defined roles, mutual trust, and robust consultation must be in place before planning any major events.
- **Recruitment:** SBA and SBE are actively seeking skilled, collaborative volunteers to take on leadership roles and co-create the future.