

REPORT ON PROCEEDINGS BEFORE

**LEGISLATIVE ASSEMBLY COMMITTEE ON
ENVIRONMENT AND PLANNING**

**THE ELECTRICITY OUTAGES AFFECTING FAR WEST NEW
SOUTH WALES IN OCTOBER 2024**

At Menindee Civic Hall, Menindee, on Monday 3 March 2025

The Committee met at 14:13.

PRESENT

Mr Clayton Barr (Chair)

Mrs Judy Hannan
Mrs Sally Quinnell (Deputy Chair)
Ms Maryanne Stuart
Mr James Wallace

Aunty DOROTHY STEPHENS: Hi, everyone. My name is Dot Stephens. I am the local Aboriginal Barkindji person. I would like to acknowledge the traditional owners of the lands on which we meet today: the Barkindji people and other river people. I would like to pay my respects to Elders past, present and future. I acknowledge the land we are on, the land on which we live, work, breathe, eat and sleep—always was and always will be Aboriginal land. I recognise our connection to Country, caring for it and maintaining Country over thousands of years—past, present and future. I would also like to recognise our non-Indigenous people who have joined us here today. Thank you all very much. May we please stand and have a minute's silence for our recently departed Elders and ancestors.

The CHAIR: After that wonderful and warm welcome, good afternoon everyone. Before we start the hearing I would like to thank Aunty Dorothy Stephens for welcoming us onto this Country that we're meeting on today. I also extend my respect to the custodians of this land and to all Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people present. We are the New South Wales Parliament Legislative Assembly Committee on Environment and Planning. This is the first public hearing for our inquiry into the electricity outages affecting Far West New South Wales in October 2024.

The Committee began this inquiry in November after it was referred by the Minister for Energy, the Hon. Penny Sharpe. The Committee has received over 40 submissions from community members, organisations and businesses across the Far West, and we sincerely appreciate everybody's contribution to this inquiry so far. The issues that have been raised are complex and will require the Committee to consider a range of perspectives in trying to reach recommendations to reduce the severity and impact of any future outages.

We recognise the importance of hearing directly from people who were impacted by the outages, and in addition to today we will also be hearing from other impacted communities at further hearings this week in Tibooburra, Wilcannia, Broken Hill and White Cliffs. We hope that coming to this region and holding these hearings in affected communities will help us to directly understand your experiences of the outages in October and how the uncertainty about the power supply affected your decisions during that time.

We also want to hear about how agencies, councils and energy providers managed the emergency response to the outages and the communication around that response. My name is Clayton Barr. I am the member for Cessnock and the Committee Chair. With me here today are Committee members Ms Sally Quinnell, the member for Camden and Deputy Chair; Ms Maryanne Stuart, the member for Heathcote; Ms Judy Hannan, the member for Wollondilly; and Mr James Wallace, the member for Hornsby. We will now begin with our first witness.

MICHELLE KELLY, Menindee Local Aboriginal Land Council, affirmed and examined

The CHAIR: Thank you for appearing before the Committee today to give evidence. Before we start, do you have any questions about the hearing process we're embarking on?

MICHELLE KELLY: No.

The CHAIR: Before we start with questions would you like to make a short opening statement of one or two minutes?

MICHELLE KELLY: Yes. I don't know. I thought that this whole process has been a little bit rushed in the fact that we can see there are not a lot of people here, so how it was put out. February is when school goes back and there were a lot of things happening in the community that, unfortunately, other people didn't know. I got a phone call so I was a little bit different. But I've been away in Sydney for the last two weeks, or whatever it is, so I couldn't even get out and let people know that anybody could actually come and listen. I think people thought they had to be invited. I don't know where it was advertised because I don't think it was in the school news, where it comes. Menindee relies on the school news that comes out every week to put advertisements out and information out. There was no information put down at the local shop. Then the board at the front, I don't think that was updated from the shire to say that this was occurring today.

I think people got confused because we had Roy Butler come on Friday and they were doing the official opening of the road between Pooncarie and Menindee, so maybe people got a bit confused that this was happening last week or something. I don't know. There just doesn't seem to be a lot of talk about it, only between—like I know Graeme McCrabb, who's away this week, but I think he put in a submission. I think there was a bit of confusion about what it was. As you can imagine, in Menindee since the outages and since the fish kill we've had every man and his dog and every media outlet out here. So people are a bit over it—can I say that?—because we seem to be talking, talking and talking with no outcomes.

The CHAIR: All of that commentary is fair and I take it on board. In terms of the timing and the rush—I think that was the word you used—we're wanting to not wait until the power outage is all forgotten. Ideally it would have been great to get out here before Christmas when it was still really fresh in everyone's minds. Obviously we had that Christmas/New Year period in the middle that was a disruption as well. Please accept my apologies. Both the Minister and the local member, Roy Butler, were really keen to make sure this Committee travelled to the communities instead of just having something at Broken Hill and expecting people to come in. We're really looking forward to getting up to Tibooburra, White Cliffs and Wilcannia as well.

I take on board everything you said, but I'm really hopeful that people take the chance to come and talk to us and have their say. Based on the submissions, it sounds like everyone's experiences are really quite different, depending on where you were located and what services were around you. The RFS submission sounds like they did a lot of work, working with community. As Chair I am going to let other Committee members ask their questions first. Thank you again, Michelle, for being here.

Mrs SALLY QUINNELL: I also want to reiterate how much we appreciate you coming today. The question I have is in response to the submission by one of the other organisations—a large organisation, shall we say—who suggested that the rollout of food hampers specifically was something that they thought should have been handled by Aboriginal agencies. Is that something you agree with or completely disagree with as your head is indicating?

MICHELLE KELLY: When you talk about Aboriginal agencies, we've got the land council—that is an ACCO—we've got the Mirrimpilyi out-of-home-care agency, not their core business, and then the land council owns the shop so we've got our hands full. The RFS does have the resources to be able to do that. I know their volunteers as well. They did it in the past when we had the flood relief. Then you've got to think about where you're going to store all the stuff, and then all the other fights and everything that comes with the hampers. As far as the land council—if we had to do it we would have, but when there was another agency that was willing and able to do that, I think that's fair.

At any time that an Aboriginal person came up to us and said, "How do we go about getting a hamper?", one phone call to the RFS, whether it be to Rob Woods or Graeme McCrabb, we just said, "Look, this person needs a hamper." Prior to the hampers coming—and this is what Menindee does—there was myself, the school, Health, Graeme McCrabb and somebody else had a meeting and we identified those people who would be needing generators because they have some sort of condition that they require power, but also those who would require hampers sooner rather than later. When Penny Sharpe came, there were a lot of complaints about the quality of the hampers and all that sort of stuff. It's like, well, they're free. They did the job that they had to. From my understanding, I think there are still a lot of hampers that were left. I don't know whether they've since been handed

out, but most people did. They had people in Broken Hill that they could go across and get stuff. I think the way the hampers were handled by the non-Aboriginal agencies was fine. Like I said, if we had an issue we just had to ring up and say, "Hey, Graeme, hey Rob, we've got this person who's asking for a hamper."

Mrs SALLY QUINNELL: Thank you; it is a great answer. One of the things that struck me with your opening statement was our desire as a Committee not to have this as a talkfest, but to come up with some things that we can enact to change. As members of Parliament, I think we become aware very quickly that many people in the community often have solutions to a lot of problems that are quite simple. Are you able to outline any very simple solutions to some of the issues that were faced that you've heard?

When there were issues in the conversations on the street, what were some of the solutions that were coming up?

MICHELLE KELLY: During COVID—I'm going back to COVID days—Menindee didn't have a representative on the ground. The local people again got together and established our own group. We knew we were able to go through, write down who lived at what address, if they had people that could visit them, were they a vulnerable person, did they have mental health issues and what assistance would be required. We'd give that to the RFS. Also the health service was able, because of confidentiality, they did it directly, like who required special equipment and all that sort of stuff.

We were one of the first communities to get 100 per cent COVID vaccinations. That was done by the community. That wasn't done by Health, it wasn't done by the shire, and it wasn't done by Maari Ma Aboriginal Health. When the first outage happened in 2022 for the 48 hours and we had no phone service and we had no electricity, I went up to the SES shed and said, "What are you doing?" They said, "We're heading back to Broken Hill." I said, "Why would you?" with a few adjectives in there—nice ones. They said because they weren't from here they didn't know who needed what and where people lived. I was able to give them a screenshot off my phone of where people lived, who didn't have anybody that could go and check on them and all that sort of stuff. They didn't do it.

We own the shop. Our power went off and we had no electricity, so we lost a hell of a lot of goods down there. We tried to do our generator. The generator was wrecked, so I asked the SES could they go and at least organise that before they went back to Broken Hill. They weren't any use to us because they didn't have local people there. Even with the last ones, as soon as that happened, I was able to ring Roy Butler's office. This is back in 2022 with our first outage. They were putting updates on Facebook not knowing that we didn't have a phone service out here, so nobody was getting the information. When I rang Roy Butler's office, he said, "How are you doing?" I said that, one, we've got Starlink, and, two, I was down at my niece's who had a generator, so that was the only way we could get in and out.

I think this time when it happened again, everything was too late. We had our own little meeting and then there was talk that they were going to give us diesel to continue to run the shop. They sent the pod with no diesel. "Good on ya," I said. Then they were going to send out a freezer that was going to be stored up at the petrol station, but that arrived too late. People had already lost everything that they had in their freezer. Then there was talk about the generators coming out and that talk went on and they were telling people in Parliament, "Yes, they're there," but it took about 2½ weeks or something to actually get those generators. I think the power had actually come back on when the generators had been received. I think they got a few that were sent out that the RFS distributed to those who needed it for CPAPs and for everything else. But then you had people questioning the health service about why people were getting them, not fully understanding what it was about.

I think the biggest issue is we don't have a local voice on the LEMC and we don't have an Aboriginal representative on there. There are Aboriginal reps on there that I was told had nothing to do with me who don't live in Menindee. They had Nola Wyman, Justin Files and Bilyara Bates on there. They don't live in Menindee. They were saying, "We're getting it from them. They represent us." No. We're quite willing and able to represent ourselves. We know what we want. We know what we need, and it was minimal. The first day they were saying, "Great. Send out generators," but we had no way to get the diesel because the service station didn't have a generator to be able to pump the diesel. They were going to send out some pumps and pods, but that didn't happen. Everything was promised. From what I understand, they were telling people in Parliament, "Yes, this has happened," and it hadn't happened. There was a real lack of communication between the LEMC and the people on the ground.

That's what we do. When there is a crisis, we come together as a community, and we try to work out what we can do ourselves. We don't expect people to be able to come in and solve our problems. We're not looking for handouts or anything like that, but come to us because we live here. We've been through so many crises. We know what to do and we know what sorts of services are needed. I know that the school offered stuff up because they have a big backup generator that generates the whole school, so they offered up their kitchen. We had a group of

young girls who made meals and took them around to the elderly, especially those who we knew didn't have anything.

It was just, come to us. Like I said, local solutions for local problems. We know what we're doing. We're more than willing to get in and help. We don't need somebody coming in and telling us what we should do. The whole issue about this hall being the evacuation centre, yet it doesn't have a generator, and it doesn't have a shower. If this was to become an evacuation centre, we'd only have toilets. We wouldn't have access to showers, and we'd have to wait for the generator to be brought from somewhere to be able to generate the hall.

Mrs JUDY HANNAN: I just want to clarify a couple of things. You said they sent diesel. Who was "they"?

MICHELLE KELLY: We got a call from NIAA who said that they'd organised for, it might have been, 600 litres of diesel.

Mrs JUDY HANNAN: From?

MICHELLE KELLY: From Sydney to come out. I don't know what organisation it was. Apparently, the shire in Wilcannia said, "No, we don't need that." But then a pod rocked up with no diesel. I said, "You might as well shove that where the sun don't shine, because it's no good to us." Plus, if we had a pod, and then we end up getting a donation from one of the clubs in Broken Hill—and that's why I said, "Put it at the service station and they can keep it." If we had the pod, we'd have to then worry about a pump and all that sort of stuff. It ended up working out okay, but I don't know where the other 6,000 litres were supposed to come from. For us to run the shop for a 24-hour period it was \$625 a day.

Mrs JUDY HANNAN: You said there's no Menindee representation on the LEMC. Who makes the decisions about who is on that LEMC?

MICHELLE KELLY: I think it maybe comes from the emergency that it comes down, but the last I heard it was Andrew Mansford, who is an inspector of police. I think he chairs the meeting. When I rang and asked him about it, he said, "We don't need you, Michelle. We have representatives representing Menindee." I said, "Who?" When he told me I said, "Well, one, they don't live in Menindee. Two, they haven't had any contact with us. And, three, what is the point of having the Menindee working party through the regional assembly and through Closing the Gap and the Coalition of Australian Governments if you're not going to follow the protocol and go to the Menindee working party?"

Mr JAMES WALLACE: My name is James. I'm the State member for Hornsby. I want to ask a follow-up question to that. Was that your only engagement with the LEMC during the process?

MICHELLE KELLY: No, I'm always arguing with them. It's just little issues. We don't have police. We can go three weeks without having police in town. When we're trying to report crimes, we solve them ourselves, basically. He said to me, "Our police are overworked, blah, blah, blah." I said, "What about us? We're solving our own crimes. We don't even get paid for being recalled." At the moment we've only got one police officer, who's finishing up at the end of March. They haven't been able to fill the last two positions for, I think it's been, probably three months. This is not just since then; this has been an ongoing issue that we raised with the Community Cabinet that came out with the police Minister then as well. You couldn't even go up to the police station if there was an emergency and ring the buzzer because the buzzer didn't work. The buzzer goes straight through to Broken Hill.

Mr JAMES WALLACE: During the power outage last year, where were you going to to get updates on information? Was that the working party you talked about earlier, or was that—

MICHELLE KELLY: The working party wasn't involved. I'm the deputy chair of the working party. I was ringing people in Broken Hill to say, "You went to the LEMC. What was discussed about Menindee?" Graeme would try to find out what he could. The health service manager would try to find out what Health had said at that meeting, and then we'd all come back. The school had contact with Jihad, because he'd not long visited just before that. They'd had that with Jihad. We were keeping in contact with him so we could talk to emergency—well, he's the emergency Minister—and try to get that information back to him. We were going straight to him sometimes, but we were ringing people who we thought might have been at the meeting to try to get an update about what they were going to do. It was as frustrating as I don't know what.

Mr JAMES WALLACE: That's really interesting.

Ms MARYANNE STUART: Thanks, Michelle, for coming today and for giving us your time. We really appreciate it. Part of our job is to look at recommendations. Once we've heard about what's happened on

the ground, we need to be able to put a report together. In the event that something like this happens in the future, what would you like to see put in place now?

MICHELLE KELLY: I'd like to see an emergency plan put in place for Menindee so that we know who does—at the moment, like with everything, you had one agency doing one thing and you had another agency. I don't know whether ADRA is still around, but then you had the Salvation Army. We want to know who is going to come out to Menindee. We want an emergency plan for Menindee. What's going to work for Menindee? If it is about the water, who do we contact in Water, because there are 50 different agencies within Water—that sort of stuff. Is it about electricity? Is it about Telstra? Do we go to Telstra, or do we go to somebody else? We need an emergency plan to say, "Okay, this is what we need to do. These are the people that are vulnerable. This is who we need to check on," and making sure that we are doing welfare checks on those people who need it.

We have a lot of people there with mental health issues. During that time mental health didn't provide a service because it was going to be a drain on the community, whereas by not having that service could have had a detrimental effect if someone couldn't have access to mental health, because you couldn't ring up and have the 1800 number. And the mobile phones, the satellite phones, don't work out here. They're very hit and miss. Another issue is with our health service. We had health workers actually sleeping at the health service because their phones weren't going through.

When you go up there normally, you'd go up there, you'd ring the bell, or you'd call, and it would go through to the on-call phone. That wasn't happening, so the health workers, the health service manager and whoever is on call, actually slept out there on the floor on mattresses during that time if someone came there. However, because they had Starlink and a generator, the minute they walked out of the health service there was no communication with anybody. If they were going to a job where they needed police assistance, they had no way of contacting police, because both cars with the two-way radios don't work. I think they're trying to resolve that at the moment, but they don't talk to each other. Not only did you have a work, health and safety issue of them sleeping up there on the floor and everything else, but the minute they left the building there was no communication either.

The CHAIR: During that time—it was several days that became a week as best as I can figure—did you notice new arrivals of government agencies and departments that suddenly turned up into town to try to help, or did you just not see really any extra bodies on the ground?

MICHELLE KELLY: I think people were here, but I think they were a bit confused. We had people, I think it was perhaps Salvation Army, come up here and hand out vouchers to use at the local shops. It was \$100 per household, I think, at that time. There were people here, but they were running around, and nobody knew what they were doing. There was no coordinated approach, and that's what we want. We want to say, "I'm here. I can do this for you. I can look after you if you've been displaced, housing. I can help you with food. I can help you with your medical equipment, or if you've got appointments that you need to attend, I can do that." There was no real coordination or talking to community. Oh no, that's not my role.

Whereas in the country you just can't work for your agency; you've got to be across everything. But also people expect—just say Aboriginal Affairs came around. They might have come here for one reason. I don't think they did, but anyway. They're going to expect them to know, "Okay, this is where you're going," not just to be at their own agency. I think that was a difficulty and people were trying to navigate that. Also, when people were trying to apply for the \$200 per household, a lot of people still haven't got that because the process of uploading documents was too hard. You've got a lot of elderly people in the community who didn't know how to do it on their phones, and there was no-one coming out. We don't have the RMS here—it only visits every two or three months—and then you had to have a bill within that certain period. There were all sorts of problems around that, so a lot of people still haven't applied for that because the process was too hard, and they just didn't apply for it.

The CHAIR: What about from local council, from the Central Darling shire? Did the resources change here in that regard?

MICHELLE KELLY: Central Darling shire does nothing. They've been under administration for 10 years.

The CHAIR: I appreciate that they're Wilcannia-based primarily. There's a depot just around here though, isn't there?

MICHELLE KELLY: Yes, but they won't do anything. They have to wait for the phone call from Wilcannia. We only have a road crew up here. We have an office down there and those girls can't do anything without the say-so of Wilcannia. I don't even think that their offices will open up to people to go to. The RFS put a Starlink internet at the shop so people at least could go down there. Because we had the generator running 24 hours they could go to the front of the shop and sit down and make their phone calls or cancel their

appointments. Like if someone was in hospital, they could find out that sort of stuff. But there was nothing from the shire.

The CHAIR: From memory, can you tell me how long was the town of Menindee without its petrol station?

MICHELLE KELLY: It was only, I think, one or two days because someone had arranged for them to get a generator that was brought into town. But, like I said, some of them took two and three days. Like the freezer that came in, it was too late. Everybody had already lost their stuff.

The CHAIR: Michelle, that's all very helpful. It must have been a shocking experience for everyone. While some of the government agencies and different departments might not have been great, as a community you've done a wonderful job together.

Mrs SALLY QUINNELL: Understanding, as Clayton has just pointed out, that this community is used to just getting on with it and doing what needs to be done, do you think the promises that were made to you by organisations slowed down the process because you were waiting for generators or waiting for freezers when otherwise you would have found some sort of workaround?

MICHELLE KELLY: I think we did all that we could in relation to calling in favours from different people but, like I said, if the generators had been sent when we were told they were being sent instead of waiting for 10 days or whatever to get here, we would have been able to say to the community, "Actually, they didn't get on that truck. They're coming from somewhere else." A lot of that I think the shire was doing too but, like I said, they don't communicate with the community. We don't see the shire. We haven't had a shire for 10 years, so nothing has really changed in that respect because they don't do anything for us anyway.

The CHAIR: Again, thank you very much, Michelle. We want to flag with you that the Committee may provide some additional questions to you, if that's okay. If it's at all possible, we'd appreciate getting those back seven days after you receive the questions. You won't receive the questions until the end of next week at the earliest. If seven days isn't long enough for you to respond, please talk to us about that. By the same token, we might not send you any further questions either. I want to thank you for appearing before us today. You will also be provided late next week with a copy of the transcript of what was said here today during your session. If there are things there that you think need to be corrected, then by all means be in touch with us about corrections. Thank you for being with us today and giving us some of your time.

(The witness withdrew.)

(Short adjournment)

MARGOT MUSCAT, President, Country Women's Association, Menindee, affirmed and examined

LORRAINE LOONEY, Secretary, Country Women's Association, Menindee, sworn and examined

BARBARA STEPHENS, International Officer, Country Women's Association, Menindee, affirmed and examined

RENA CALLOW, Country Women's Association, Menindee, affirmed and examined

The CHAIR: Thank you for appearing before the Committee today to give evidence. Before we start, do you have any questions about the hearing process that we are embarking on?

MARGOT MUSCAT: No.

The CHAIR: Would you like to make an opening statement before we go to questions? I would ask that the opening statement just be one or two minutes.

MARGOT MUSCAT: I'd just like to thank you for giving us this opportunity. Yes, we have disasters at any time—

The CHAIR: Yes, you do.

MARGOT MUSCAT: But to be given this opportunity, especially it being so widespread around this area—we're very thankful for that, so thank you.

The CHAIR: Your local member of Parliament was really keen that the Committee come out to the communities instead of just sitting in Sydney or even sitting at Broken Hill and asking other people to travel in.

MARGOT MUSCAT: Can I just say that what we've seen with this new Government now—they are looking at people from on the ground and giving them the opportunity and really hearing what we're saying. Our local member, Roy Butler, is excellent on that.

The CHAIR: It's too late now. You've already said it. It's in *Hansard*. It's on the public record.

MARGOT MUSCAT: I'll tell him that to his face.

The CHAIR: Margot, as a Committee collectively, our sentiments are that it's great to come out. We're very happy to be here. We have the submission that came through the CWA, and we thank you very much for making the submission.

Ms MARYANNE STUART: Thank you all for being here today and for your time. I'd like to hear a bit about the experiences that you had. Part of our job is to put recommendations forward, so is there anything that you think we should take on board—anything that you would like us to implement in the event that you have another challenging period of time?

MARGOT MUSCAT: Our challenges emotionally were unbelievable—that this could happen in our day and age. Fair enough; you can't predict nature. That happens at any time. Yes, maybe we should expect it. But, in this day and age, you'd think there would be services and programs in place to be able to alleviate the immediate need for services.

Ms MARYANNE STUART: Margot, what services would you like to see put in place? What programs?

MARGOT MUSCAT: For starters, I was very frustrated and angry when I heard that Transgrid had only one operating generator. Before that, I thought, "They've come on the ground very quickly to start repairs." You understand all that. But word then got around that there was only one generator operating for this whole area. That's not good. Maybe we all need a generator to immediately start up or have that process. Can I say one thing? Our fire service here was brilliant on the ground, and especially our local electrician. He was just on the run all the time. We're very fortunate that we have those people here to be able to think straightaway. They know what can be done and what should be done.

LORRAINE LOONEY: I was very disappointed that finding out anything was a very big problem. In the Dark Ages, you had the town crier and a bell, and everyone came to find out what happened. In this day and age, with all the disasters that happen, why isn't there some system—some type of board or something put up—that people can write on what's available and where to go for help? There was none of that. We were running around in circles. Somebody knew something, somebody else knew something, but half of the community didn't even know anything.

We were chasing our tail all the time, trying to find out information. It took days, and by the time we found out, it was too late. We had the power back on again. There should be some system. Disasters happen everywhere, so surely there must be some system that you can put up that doesn't rely on power, or some way of putting a board up somewhere in town so that we know what's going on. That makes you feel better because you know that there's some help at hand and when you can go and get it, or if you can't get it. That's my really big issue.

BARBARA STEPHENS: The main thing I found was the lack of communication in the town. We didn't know that there were places available where you could put your insulin or anything. No-one came around, doorknocked and said, "Look, go up to Civic Hall. They've got refrigeration up there. You can put your insulin and medical supplies there." To me, that was the main thing—the lack of communication—apart from losing food and everything. That's just the normal run of the mill when there's no power.

Ms MARYANNE STUART: If you don't have insulin refrigerated, do you have to dispose of it after a certain period of time?

BARBARA STEPHENS: Yes. I've got three lots of medication that have to be insulated, and I also use a nebuliser all the time as well.

Ms MARYANNE STUART: How did you get around that, then?

BARBARA STEPHENS: Ice. I grew up in the bush, so I've learned to cope with things like that.

Ms MARYANNE STUART: How did you go, though? You didn't have the oxygen?

BARBARA STEPHENS: I was lucky. I didn't need the nebuliser while the power was off, so I was very lucky.

The CHAIR: Rena, did you want to offer?

RENA CALLOW: No-one came around to see whether I was all right, apart from my friends. See, I live by myself. What made it hard, too—probably a week before this, I hit an emu in my car, so I had no car. With my health condition, I can't walk far because I have chronic fatigue syndrome. I would just like more communication, especially for the elderly or people living by themselves.

The CHAIR: Can I just jump in there, Rena, and clarify? Do you live right here in town, in Menindee, or across the river, or down the road?

RENA CALLOW: I'm right in town. My house is not far from here.

BARBARA STEPHENS: Just there, behind us.

Mr JAMES WALLACE: Hi, guys. I just wanted to ask about the CWA in Menindee. How many members do you have? What do you guys usually do? How did you come together when the power outage occurred?

MARGOT MUSCAT: We have eight members at present, and that fluctuates year to year. This is our core active group, plus another one or two. I'm sorry to say that Barb has a lot of health issues, so we're not all active as such. We have been going since—I think this is our seventy-third year, if you want to do the add-ups, and it's a credit to four ladies that have kept the CWA in Menindee functioning for the past 10 or 15 years. Menindee is getting to the stage where our volunteers are getting old and the younger generation is not looking to come on board, which is a shame, but we're not the only ones in that situation.

We hire out our hall and we do catering when we're asked. We've been very lucky with government departments coming through with water and road issues. We've been asked to do some either hall hire and/or catering. That's what keeps us afloat. We endeavour to have a community catch-up once a month for the community to come on board, just to have a chat and just catch-up in general. We haven't got a lot of takers on that, but we keep striving for it. The offer is there.

We currently also are in contact with a business, a not-for-profit organisation in Broken Hill who are donating bread to the community at present. We don't know how long that will go for. Some weeks we get, say, seven boxes of bread that's been freshly frozen. We haven't got the storage on hand here so it's a matter of us running around town and delivering that, depending on how much there is. With that, some weeks we may not get anything and other weeks we get two or three boxes. But that's been very well received around the community. The lady that we're in communication with from Broken Hill, she said that they've always sent it to Wilcannia. Menindee, sorry to say, has always been classed as the poor cousin of Wilcannia for receiving donations. We're pretty resilient down this way, but we work it out ourselves. Do you want to put any more into that, Lorraine?

LORRAINE LOONEY: No, I think you've got it covered.

Mr JAMES WALLACE: When the outage happened, did anyone from a government organisation, like the council, emergency services or anyone else, get in contact with you about helping to support people on the ground?

MARGOT MUSCAT: Not directly they didn't, but you have that conversation with the individuals as you're running around town trying to catch up with different ones, especially the fire brigade. I was very, very thankful for them. They just took that early initiative. I think it was them that organised the freezers, or the chillers, to come here and the generators. I'm practically sure it was them that got on board to get all of those services here. It did take a few days and, as the girls have said, that communication-wise—I wasn't aware until after the fact that we could have put freezer stuff. My son-in-law went to Mildura and he was buying a generator and asked if we wanted one. I said, "Well, I can come and get mine from you back again," but he'd already had that working somewhere else, so we had to buy a generator.

Mr JAMES WALLACE: In terms of the outage, what was each of your experiences? I think there's a note in here from someone from your organisation saying, "We were without power for 33 hours. The next day we were without power for 12 hours. We then had rolling outages until the 31st." Was that a common experience you each had in terms of the extent of the outages that occurred?

LORRAINE LOONEY: Yes.

MARGOT MUSCAT: Most definitely. We ended up going to Ivanhoe a few weeks after and they had everything on board. They weren't affected with the power outage over there. They were very fortunate that we were willing and able to still come over for our annual conference over there. It's so frustrating. Did you want to say anything?

LORRAINE LOONEY: With the power outages I found out that one of the old pensioners, when they get their pension, they go and buy their groceries and everything else. Then when you have a power outage they've spent all their money. They can't cook a hot meal or anything. Because the supermarket did stay open, they can't go over there and buy something because they've got no money, so they've just got to battle their way through. As I said, with the lack of generators and even people that have got those little portable gas stoves, if you haven't got any gas cylinders you can't go and buy one. We're in Menindee, we're not in Broken Hill or a big city where you can go and purchase these things. That's where we found it very difficult. By the time you find somebody that actually did have a spare cylinder it's all over. That's what I came across with a lot of people.

BARBARA STEPHENS: Rena, she was in a bad way because she lost everything and had nothing.

RENA CALLOW: Because I've got no generator.

BARBARA STEPHENS: No little gas stove or nothing.

RENA CALLOW: I don't have a generator. Like I was saying before, it was just unfortunate that I hit an emu probably under a week just before this happened. I had no car and with my health condition even sometimes short walks just make me tired. My friends, Barb and other friends, stepped in and helped me out, but no organisations came and asked me if I was okay or anything. I never knew that you could store stuff in the fridges and that, or charge phones or anything. That's where I got upset.

Mr JAMES WALLACE: I just have one final question if that's okay. There was the \$200 that the Government was giving as a bit of compensation money. Did you guys access that money in the end?

LORRAINE LOONEY: It took some time, but we did.

MARGOT MUSCAT: That was individually, not as a business or anything.

Mr JAMES WALLACE: Did Essential Energy offer any compensation or anything like that?

LORRAINE LOONEY: No, not with me.

BARBARA STEPHENS: No, they didn't knock anything off our power bills.

MARGOT MUSCAT: To me, that would have been a better way of doing it rather than \$200 per person over the age of 18 per household. It would have been a lot easier, quicker and cheaper for them to put that \$200 onto each household account, rather than individually.

Mrs JUDY HANNAN: I'm from Wollondilly where we have a very active CWA. As you say, volunteers in our area are getting older and it's more difficult. But thank you for being here. I hear varying stories about the rolling outages. I'm yet to get a nice, firm time frame of when that actually happened, how often that happened, and whether people knew that the power was going to come back on or go back off. Has anybody got any ideas

of how it went out and how the rolling ones—were you informed that this was going to come back on for a period of time? Was there anybody that informed you about any of those sorts of things?

MARGOT MUSCAT: I got sick of getting three copies of messages on my phone, for the one message. That was from Essential Energy. Did you get them?

LORRAINE LOONEY: Yes.

BARBARA STEPHENS: Yes, I got them all of the time.

MARGOT MUSCAT: You got three copies from three different numbers for the same message. I suppose they were trying to make sure that the word got out that they were going to—

Mrs JUDY HANNAN: Would they tell you when it was coming back on or when it was going to go off?

BARBARA STEPHENS: No.

MARGOT MUSCAT: The first couple of rolling stages no-one knew about it because you don't hear of those types of things. Like what is a rolling thingo? We weren't informed straight up, or in what order, that that's what would happen. We weren't aware—or I wasn't—that that sort of thing was happening. It wasn't until a few days later that I started to understand that's what they were doing. I think it was the ABC that I listened to at one stage that that's what was happening. They were interviewing the Transgrid chaps.

LORRAINE LOONEY: To start with, when the power went out, a lot of people never had any charge on their phones, so the phone was no good to them anyway.

MARGOT MUSCAT: And then we didn't have any coverage.

BARBARA STEPHENS: And then we didn't have any coverage for about four or five days.

LORRAINE LOONEY: The information just never got to us.

Mrs JUDY HANNAN: When it came back on the first time, did you think that it was all fixed?

LORRAINE LOONEY: No.

Mrs JUDY HANNAN: You knew better?

BARBARA STEPHENS: We were hoping that it was fixed, but it wasn't.

MARGOT MUSCAT: History has it that when you've been out for a while it takes a little while for that to—

Mrs JUDY HANNAN: But once the power was back on and you had your phones back on, nobody said, "You're going to lose power at two o'clock tomorrow for the next four hours," or anything like that?

MARGOT MUSCAT: No. It was a few days before we got that message.

LORRAINE LOONEY: To start with, what they did is they gave power to one town for so many hours and then another town for so many hours. That's the way they rolled it out, so you were without power for so many hours.

Mrs SALLY QUINNELL: But they didn't tell you that ahead of time so you could plan around it or anything?

MARGOT MUSCAT: No.

BARBARA STEPHENS: No, they never told me.

MARGOT MUSCAT: No.

LORRAINE LOONEY: Just before it happened. "At four o'clock, your power's going to be off."

Mrs JUDY HANNAN: You would have had the opportunity to charge your phone or do your washing or cook your dinner or whatever, but you had nothing.

MARGOT MUSCAT: It definitely wasn't explained right from the start.

BARBARA STEPHENS: No, definitely not.

Mrs JUDY HANNAN: You said that you got it from Essential Energy. Was there anything from Transgrid at all, or was it all through Essential Energy?

BARBARA STEPHENS: No, all through Origin.

MARGOT MUSCAT: I think I got mine from Essential Energy.

BARBARA STEPHENS: I get mine from Origin, I think.

Mrs SALLY QUINNELL: Thank you for coming today. I also have a very rich CWA membership in my area and I'm a very big fan of the organisation, so thank you for everything you do. We've heard that the RFS was outstanding in Menindee. If we can park that to the side for a second, do you feel that it was a little bit of a case of, let's assume, well-meaning government bodies or organisations coming in and making things happen in the town, but that kind of got in the way of the natural community groups doing what they would have done? Or was it just a case where this was so dire that it all fell apart? I understand that the RFS was incredible and did a lot of the work and filled those gaps. But, assuming they didn't do what they did, I'm wondering what would have happened if they hadn't sourced generators and done all of that sort of thing.

LORRAINE LOONEY: We wouldn't have had any petrol or diesel because, to start with, the generators run on petrol. In the first 24 hours, there was no access to any petrol. If you never had any fuel in your vehicle, you couldn't travel to Broken Hill to try to source some petrol from there. To start with, it was just at a loss. From what the Rural Fire Service did—most of us weren't even aware that they'd done anything because there was no communication.

RENA CALLOW: That's where they should add doorknocks and all that, I reckon.

Mrs SALLY QUINNELL: I was going to ask that, too. In the case of communication, what was missing? I suppose doorknocks is the answer.

RENA CALLOW: It would have been a help.

MARGOT MUSCAT: But, being out here, a lot of people don't like to ask for assistance either. You're pretty resilient and you just get on with it. Especially if you knew that power was coming on within a few hours or something like that, you'd make arrangements with whatever—

Mrs SALLY QUINNELL: Or going off, as we pointed out.

MARGOT MUSCAT: Yes. It's the same with the elderly, especially if they're on their own. They're not aware of who they can ask, so they just get by. Unless you've got your friends to check up on you, you just do as well as you can until you're able to get out and about.

The CHAIR: We are out of time.

Mrs SALLY QUINNELL: I think we could listen to you all day.

MARGOT MUSCAT: I think we're comfortable now.

The CHAIR: We're just hitting our straps.

LORRAINE LOONEY: Okay, we're not going anywhere.

The CHAIR: Thank you very much. I wanted to notify you that we have had Shanshan taking some photos in the background. If you have any concerns about that, please let her know. There's no dramas; we're not emotionally attached to any of the photos or images. We want to make sure that everyone is happy to have been in them.

RENA CALLOW: Excuse me, where do the photos go to? Facebook?

The CHAIR: Probably nowhere is the truth. On our trip this week we might take 100 photos. In reality, we might end up choosing one, two, three or four to use as part of our social media. If you have any concerns at all, just tell us that you'd rather not. Thank you very much for appearing before us today. There is a chance that in our deliberations early next week we might instigate extra questions that we want to send to you in writing. We would ask that you send them back inside of seven days, if that's possible, once you've received them. If that's not possible, please talk to the Committee staff that you've been talking with to be here today and we'll figure that out. Again, we might have questions that come your way, and if you have any concerns about photos or images, please see Shanshan. We thank you very much for appearing before us today and, of course, to your organisation, which made the submission, we thank them very much as well. Good job on helping each other and helping the town during that difficult time. Well done.

(The witnesses withdrew.)

(Short adjournment)

GRAEME McCRABB, Captain, Menindee Headquarters Brigade, NSW Rural Fire Service, before the Committee via videoconference, affirmed and examined

ROB WOODS, Secretary, Menindee Headquarters Brigade, NSW Rural Fire Service, affirmed and examined

ROB GREGORY, Volunteer and Contractor, Menindee Headquarters Brigade, NSW Rural Fire Service, affirmed and examined

The CHAIR: I thank Graeme McCrabb, Rob Woods and Rob Gregory for appearing before the Committee today to give evidence. Before we start, do you have any questions about the hearing process?

ROB WOODS: No.

The CHAIR: Before proceedings start, I acknowledge that I know Graeme McCrabb through a number of visits out here. There might be a bit of friendly banter here, but I want to recognise the work that Graeme does in the community here, as well as the RFS at large. We have already heard from our witnesses this morning that the RFS massively stepped into the breach during this entire experience, and we sincerely thank you for that.

Before we start questions, would anybody like to make a brief, one- or two-minute opening statement to kick things off? No? Thank you very much for your submission. We were talking about it over lunch. We have scribbled all over your submission, saying, "What? Did that really happen? What does that mean?" So I'm sure there's going to be some interesting questioning. I'm going to throw to my Deputy Chair and member for Camden, Ms Sally Quinnell, to open up the questioning, and then we're going to go around the circle here.

Mrs SALLY QUINNELL: Thank you, Chair. Great submission, can I just say. There was a lot to take out of this, and I thank you for putting it in. I thought it was interesting that you spoke about the lack of a clearly identified location where the community could come for information. Did you feel that that was something that would have really helped with the information flow? Is that something that would have allowed information to go out, especially at a time when phones were not happening?

GRAEME McCRABB: Chair, I can't hear the others, so if they answer, you'll have to chop me off or point away. Did one of the others want to answer that first, or will I have a go?

The CHAIR: Mr Woods was just about to launch into it, I think.

GRAEME McCRABB: Away he goes.

ROB WOODS: That's correct. During the incident, there was no other form of communication, electronic or otherwise. In the first instance, I take my hat off to Graeme, who stepped up with Rob. They were the main push behind getting information, resources and support to our community. The government agencies didn't do anything. There was nothing. That would have been a great help and assistance if the community knew where they could go to get accurate and up-to-date information. There was a lot of rumour and innuendo and Chinese whispers and lots of things going on, and no-one knew exactly what was going on. Text messages came out when the power came back on, and they were three or four days behind the times, saying, "The power's going to be out for at least 24 hours."

Mrs SALLY QUINNELL: Did that then create a sense of fear that it was a fresh text and that you were going to lose it again for 24 hours?

ROB WOODS: Yes, definitely.

ROB GREGORY: There was certainly that possibility.

ROB WOODS: No-one knew. It was an unknown element. We didn't know how long it was going to be off. We didn't know what engineering or other support was getting done to get the seven towers back up into place, or the workarounds. I mentioned in the submission about the local emergency management committee. They formed and they met, but the community don't sit in that forum, so the information didn't get out to the community. Currently we have one police officer in town when we're supposed to have three. Law enforcement and the police would have been overwhelmed, even if they were at number—to be able to have a place where people can go and read a handwritten noticeboard with notes and updates and things like that. There were a lot of people, and particularly the elderly, who were really concerned about "How long is this going to go for? What do I need to do? What about my medication? How do I get to the chemist?" The chemist was closed because they didn't have a generator. There were a whole range of resources that were just shut down like that.

Mrs SALLY QUINNELL: Mr McCrabb, no-one directed you as the local community organisation. Was there any direction to say, "You're going to need to get generators; you're going to need to get diesel," or was it just from your experience that you knew how to react to the situation?

GRAEME McCRABB: Experience, really. The RFS did ring on the Thursday when the power went out—correct me if I get these days wrong—but the Thursday was when we lost the power. They rang Thursday afternoon to say that they'd organised a couple of semi loads of generators, lights et cetera. I was requested then if there was anything, off the top of my head, that I thought we'd need. I threw in Starlinks and said, "That's probably the best". They organised it in a matter of a couple of hours. They got two Starlinks to come out on those trucks, which arrived on the Saturday morning. But at that stage that was just a conversation between myself and Nick Medianik. I can't be more thankful for his work. But really there was no direction at all from anywhere, to be honest.

Mrs SALLY QUINNELL: I'm not from the country and never have been, so for me it's just a matter of going down to my local Bunnings. But if you needed generators at that sort of number, where do you source a generator from?

GRAEME McCRABB: Yes, there are a few in the community. I've got an extra one now. Rob Gregory actually supplied me some. I rang some people that had offered or had people offer generators. We used Rob's. I think the pharmacy was using Rob's, and the next-door neighbour, so we had a lead running across a couple of properties for that place. We were matching that with the town, but you can't get them. At that stage generators were non-existent, really. Mildura was sold out; Broken Hill, clearly, was sold out. It was the locals trying to help. To be fair, the RFS got a fair pat on the back for some of that work, but those generators and that truck didn't really arrive until the Saturday morning. We were 2½ days into this before we had anything show up on the ground, and it was really more larger generators than what were required at the time.

Mrs JUDY HANNAN: Who is on the local emergency management committee and where are they from?

GRAEME McCRABB: I'm struggling to hear that question, sorry.

Mrs JUDY HANNAN: Who is on the local emergency management committee and what towns do they come from?

GRAEME McCRABB: I'll have a go at that one. It's made up of multiple agencies—Health, RFS, SES, and police obviously chair it. There are a number of other ones. Essential sat in on it through the power outage, and Transgrid, Telstra, I think, sat on it. But really, at the end of the day, we don't have anyone locally. The Central Darling shire is still in administration. The general manager lives at Wilcannia, but still pretty well removed. It's been extremely difficult for local input into the LEMC, and the LRC, to be fair.

As we touched on before about the communication, you end up with an organisation trying to communicate to a community that doesn't understand some of the local politics and doesn't really have a lot of trust within the community. Trust is a big one, and that becomes dysfunctional, and we've seen that now through the fish kills and the flooding in 2022-23. Those agencies are really not effective, and they lack the local knowledge of what is required in the community.

We talked about messaging before. Health put out, in one of their updates, that everything was fine through the power outage and everything was operating as per normal. But that certainly wasn't the case in Menindee, and I think White Cliffs was similar, in the fact that the 000 function was down. If you needed help in Menindee, you actually had to go and find help. There was no status quo, no normality about it. You actually had to probably make a conscious decision. You probably needed to have people keeping an eye on neighbours et cetera, which did happen locally. But the LEMC's job is to coordinate that, lead that and be really clear in where people can go to get help. Certainly that was lacking again, as multiple times before. We've seen that the chief scientist's report highlighted the lack of functionality of the local emergency management committee.

Mrs JUDY HANNAN: While I appreciate you used your initiative and did a whole lot of things, and we've heard really great feedback from your community, where in a disaster would you expect to get your directive from?

GRAEME McCRABB: We don't. We don't get any directive.

Mrs JUDY HANNAN: What communication—and I guess I know the answer—did you get saying when these outages or rolling outages would be? Your community seemed to be relying upon you, to an extent. What information were you being fed about what time the rolling outages and outages would be?

GRAEME McCRABB: I was in the same boat as the rest of the community. Mark Summers from Essential—I actually thought he did a good job on the radio. I thought he was quite clear in his messaging, but I had the same information that everyone else in the community had. Every now and then I might ring Roy Butler's office. Karen Nash is certainly very good in there. If she's got some more updated information, she'll feed that out. But certainly I'm not privy to any more information than anyone else, in essence.

The CHAIR: If I can jump in on that, Rob, earlier you were saying that there was a lack of information and you were trying to piece together the information as best you could. I was going to ask at the time: Where were you pulling information in from? Of course, then you were doing your best to distribute it out here, but where were you pulling from?

ROB WOODS: Basically, Graeme was the point of contact in town here for Roy's office, and we were getting information from there. But again, without mobile phones, without internet and without landlines, it was basically people talking to people—"I've heard this" or "I've heard that." As far as the generators go, and the other resources that were pooled, basically, Graeme was the one who stood up and recognised it and then started putting the feelers out and getting things rolling. This is where we felt, as a community, we were being let down by respective government agencies, other than our own. It's their role to do this, and not a firefighting agency. If it hadn't been done by the RFS, it wouldn't have been done at all. That's the scary part.

ROB GREGORY: Once the RFS brought the Starlink in and we established some communications back out, that's when we could get information fed back in. It was only limited through the group of the RFS and local people, particularly Health. They had their Starlink, which was borrowed at the time, and then we could set up another one down in the supermarket, because it had a genny running, where we could have some communications or a communication hub for people to ring out. So the communications started to come back in that way as well.

The CHAIR: But at that stage you were running on a Starlink that Graeme had asked for, off the cuff, from one of the suppliers that was coming in?

ROB GREGORY: Yes, the RFS.

The CHAIR: And Health had borrowed one from somewhere, somehow.

ROB GREGORY: Yes, it was a personal one.

Mr JAMES WALLACE: A private one, wasn't it, Graeme, from the—

GRAEME McCRABB: No, we had a personal one to start with, but the two RFS ones were the ones that I asked for. So one went to Health and one went to the supermarket because they both had generators running in the back there.

The CHAIR: Of course—you've got to put Starlink where the power is.

GRAEME McCRABB: Yes.

Mr JAMES WALLACE: Was Starlink the RFS or Health?

The CHAIR: Graeme, could you please just repeat who did you ask to bring those Starlinks in? Who provided them? Was that the RFS?

GRAEME McCRABB: Yes, that was the RFS. I heard the momentary silence when I asked for them and they questioned themselves. I think they had an upcoming event or something and they stole or borrowed the two from where they were going, so it went from one truck across to the ones coming out to Menindee. That was on Thursday night.

ROB WOODS: Can I just finish off with the communications? The local police patrol vehicles and the ambulance don't have UHF radios. We had no direct communication with the police or ambulance.

The CHAIR: Part of your submission is that you as the RFS were providing UHF's, so there was one with police, one with ambo, one with the medical centre and one on you guys.

ROB WOODS: Yes.

The CHAIR: So at least there was some communication out there like that, yes?

ROB WOODS: Yes.

GRAEME McCRABB: I'll have a crack at that. That's been a pretty standard thing since I've rolled into the RFS. We go up and we check the satphones when we lose phone service. I'll go and check the satphones with the health service. They've got two satphones and we've got one. They are a really poor form of communication. They're better than nothing, but only just. Then we set up the UHF network. Again, the ambulance doesn't have UHF and still doesn't. The police car is supposed to have UHF and still doesn't. We had ordered some UHF's previously and we use them quite a bit operationally, but that's certainly not a direction.

We don't have a communication plan for the town. That is something of a local arrangement that we do. I think that that could be a lot better. If we had a proper public communication plan that would make up part of

that. Again, the frustration sits there. We're six months on and still there have been no steps from those groups, agencies, or the LEMC to instigate some better form of communication to be honest—the RFS certainly locally and from support from within the RFS as well. We've definitely led the charge on trying to have better communication within the community, by a mile. That is one thing we can really hold our head high on.

Mrs JUDY HANNAN: Since then do you have a generator and Starlink somewhere near your RFS?

ROB GREGORY: We've got a Starlink on trial on our rescue vehicle, so there's a Starlink available there for us to do a call remotely. If we go 40 kays out of town, we lose RFS communications. We've barely got some of the UHF repeaters that work, so there is a Starlink available there now. That's only a trial. It's not related to this; it's only a trial that RFS is going through.

Mrs JUDY HANNAN: But it would be beneficial if you had Starlink with generators all over the shop?

ROB GREGORY: We're in the process of installing them and backup generators.

ROB WOODS: Just further to that, the health service should have it there as well. Every major amenity service should have a 24/7 guaranteed line of communication, and they don't. Someone's going to die if this continues.

Mr JAMES WALLACE: It sounds like recommendation 1, right? I'm the State member for Hornsby. Just maybe taking it back a step, can you talk through in general—we've heard bits and pieces coming through today and there are bits in your submission as well. What role were you playing during the outages? Obviously sourcing generators was one of them. What other aspects did you guys take on through that period?

ROB GREGORY: As a contractor, I was installing the RFS generators to the hall here, the service station and anyone else that needed to plug in their personal generators to run things. That was as a personal job that I did as an electrician, but I didn't get a cent for it. It was basically done as a volunteer through the RFS, I suppose, because we were half doing RFS stuff and half organising refuelling of generators. Health couldn't even organise their own generator. They had to be refuelled because it's only a small tank. There were arguments over that. Graeme would probably go better into the facts of that. There was no plan—or there is no plan. It was just that we were the centre of the town at the time and the RFS, Graeme and myself and all the other members were basically organising the whole show.

Mr JAMES WALLACE: Did you guys make logical calls as to where to put the generators first? Was it like, "We'll put it at the petrol station because that way people can get fuel." You made those logical calls?

ROB GREGORY: Yes. Normal community members had generators, but they only had 20 litres of fuel, maybe, so once that was done they were dusted, so we had to get the servo going.

Mr JAMES WALLACE: Did you supply any of the generators to Telstra for the mobile towers?

ROB GREGORY: No. They brought in their own and they had problems. We weren't sure whether they actually took the generator away at one stage because they thought the supply was back on, then it off again, and then we lost it again and then they decided they left it there finally. We're not sure whether it's even still there now today.

Mr JAMES WALLACE: You obviously supplied one to Health.

ROB GREGORY: No, Health have their own.

Mr JAMES WALLACE: Health have their own—sorry, that was the Starlink. Did you supply any other government agencies with generators or Starlinks, like the council or anything like that?

ROB GREGORY: No.

ROB WOODS: We supplied it to the community. There was one down at the local supermarket because that has its own generator.

ROB GREGORY: RFS supplied the generator for this hall.

ROB WOODS: Yes.

Mr JAMES WALLACE: For this hall?

ROB GREGORY: As a community centre it's got air conditioning and whatever, and people were coming in and getting drinks and things because it was pretty warm then. It was just a place for the kids to play because a lot of people didn't have aircon and that sort of thing.

ROB WOODS: We were probably very fortunate as well at that particular time the weather was very favourable for us out here. Two weeks later we were up to 41, 43, 44 days. We dodged the bullet big time because it would have been a lot bigger impact.

ROB GREGORY: Yes, people could have died, most definitely.

Mrs SALLY QUINNELL: Not to mention if a bushfire had broken out while you were busy setting up the town.

ROB GREGORY: Assistance from the shire was very, very limited. The local guys themselves did what they could, but from the management of the Central Darling Shire there was basically—they turned up at the LEMC meetings and there was no communication back from the shire. The only sort of real communication came back through Roy, and he was onto it. Roy did a fantastic job on his Facebook profile, letting people know what was going on.

Mr JAMES WALLACE: Did you have any call-out during that outage period? Were there any emergencies?

ROB WOODS: Can you remember, Graeme?

The CHAIR: Graeme, during that emergency period when you were trying to organise power, did you have any call-outs to do RFS stuff?

GRAEME McCRABB: Yes. We had a couple. I think we had a fire call-out on the Saturday night, and we had one other. They weren't majors. I think we had an ambulance assist in the middle of all that too, if I remember correctly. It was probably 20 per cent of our calls. I heard bits and pieces there, really limited, but 20 per cent of our calls are fires. We obviously do a lot of road crash and support the health service. We have one ambulance, and we cover the district as well, Clayton. But patient lifts and CPR or restart events—we attend all of those as well. I can half hear Rob in the background, but one of my main concerns is that there seems to be no contingency for where we sit today in the hall. It took Rob probably two or three hours to hardwire that in. We still don't have the capability to connect a generator to the hall to run an air-conditioned place. If that stuff was done or available, then we wouldn't be relying on the electrician. We could have a simple process. It's a 10-minute job. Move a generator in, plug it in and do a changeover switch.

Some of that really basic, fundamental planning stuff is desperately lacking from any sort of coordinated response in the town. And then to the point that we don't know what to ask for when you're getting a phone call at six or seven o'clock at night and they say, "What else do you need?" We haven't been involved in any of the planning. We haven't been in any conversations about what other towns do. We've had no chance to put any thought to it. It's all controlled through the LEMC. I'll just touch on LEMC again. The last LEMC meeting was two weeks ago. The police didn't show up at all. There are still no minutes for that meeting. That was a waste of time. Some of these issues we're discussing today on communication stuff, I've put emails in after making phone calls and they didn't even get tabled in the LEMC. That will have to wait until the next one if I bother to follow them up again. We cover a lot of different and more major roles than just fire, obviously, as you've heard.

Mr JAMES WALLACE: In relation to the call-outs that occurred during the outage for the fire and I think you mentioned the road accident as well, you may not recall this, but do you know if the power outage impacted your ability to respond to that in terms of getting a crew together to go out or in terms of the response itself or your communications whilst you were out?

GRAEME McCRABB: No. In this case it hasn't. In the two or three events we had we haven't had an issue with that, and that's been fortunate. Murphy's Law says it has to happen. I don't know why for the number of times that we've lost 000 access for community to ring and then our ability to call-out. But we rely heavily on the ACTIV app for our call-outs, which is driven by Telstra coverage. Obviously, we have a conference call because we cover such a big area. The day that we have no phone service and a really serious incident all at the same time it will be a cluster. It shouldn't have to come to that for us to actually start to make some genuine change around our communication.

Telstra have been terrible. I couldn't be more critical of Telstra. You're lucky I haven't dropped out following them already. The generator is there now. I'm sure there's no commitment that it's to stay. I'm sure you guys coming out has put pressure on them to make sure that generator stays there. They haven't told anyone it's there. They haven't told anyone or organised any other maintenance. If we get an inch of rain, 25 ml of rain in Broken Hill, no-one can get access from Broken Hill to Menindee for several hours. There doesn't seem to be any real contingency or planning around that generator, just that it's there at the moment so they can tell you guys that they've got a plan in place, but it certainly doesn't feel like it's permanent.

Mr JAMES WALLACE: Recommendation 1 in your submission is:

NSW Government investigated the feasibility of a purpose-built appliance that can deliver emergency cable connection to quickly recover heavy transmission mains supply.

I didn't fully follow that recommendation. Are you able to elaborate on that?

ROB WOODS: I can answer that one. What it was is we're talking about the micro-grid arrangement where a local power supply can be established very quickly. One generator on the back of a truck gets dropped off, gets hooked up to the Menindee set-up, and then we have power.

Mr JAMES WALLACE: Like a distributed network?

ROB WOODS: Yes. That's what that is aimed at.

Ms MARYANNE STUART: I believe you're away, Graeme, so thanks for finding the time to talk with us today. Are Transgrid and Essential Energy members of the LEMC?

GRAEME McCRABB: No, they were invited in, I understand. The four meetings I attended right near the end, Transgrid and Essential were both on there, but in normal circumstances they're not involved. It's really ad hoc. I look at the last time when we had a meeting, probably at LEMC, over the recent earthquakes. Issues were raised and WaterNSW weren't there. It doesn't seem that we are well—they are tick-a-box processes, the LEMC and the LRC, but certainly Essential wouldn't be a normal one on there.

I'd suggest that they had some frustrations with the lack of planning out here because they didn't know how to respond either, from Essential Energy, what they were required to do and what the LEMC expected. There's a real lack of team knowledge or drive within the LEMC. I'm sure there are other places that do it better, and I'm sure there'd be some pro forma type sheets that could be adapted to help the Central Darling LEMC, but we're certainly a long way from that at the moment. I don't have any plans at all. The only plan that we have from within that organisation is what we've done ourselves, what we do locally. There's no direction from above.

Ms MARYANNE STUART: So you did all of the heavy lifting. Have Transgrid or Essential Energy contacted any of you directly?

GRAEME McCRABB: I reached out to Essential. I spoke to Mark Summers when we were chasing the generators. I'm not sure how that conversation went, but there were 20 donated generators that got buried in the LEMC and they went to the Essential Life Support program, which is really almost unobtainable for most people. I think they talk about 20 pages to fill in. I certainly spoke to Mark about getting those 20 donated generators to Menindee, and the two Robs actually did a great job in preparing them to put them out in community. But I certainly haven't spoken to Transgrid, apart from the grant application that we did recently and were successful on. Had I not reached out to Essential and made some noise about the generator, we wouldn't have heard from them either.

Ms MARYANNE STUART: Did you fellows know that Transgrid only had one generator that worked?

GRAEME McCRABB: No, I had no idea. I didn't realise there was even generation back up there, to be honest. It's well above my pay grade. Rob might be better.

ROB GREGORY: There is some history to that. We had a similar occurrence a few years back when the same sort of thing happened. The second generator failed during that outage, and then there was talk about those generators being decommissioned and having the solar and the wind enabled as a backup from Broken Hill, from Silverton and the solar farm. But nothing seemed to ever happen there. Technically, it didn't seem that they could manage it without the stabilisation of the main transmission line. It appears a bit of smoke, maybe fire. I don't know whether it's just the way I feel, but that second generator was never repaired. It just sat there idle until the fan hit this next lot of transmission lines. Then, all of a sudden, we've only got one generator, and then that generator failed.

Ms MARYANNE STUART: We heard from residents who had found that out after the fact, and they were quite emotional about finding out the hard way. If Transgrid was in the room today, what would you like to say to them?

ROB GREGORY: They should have had the backup system in place. There are other alternatives, other than relying on renewables. I spent 17 years in the power industry for Integral Energy down on the South Coast, which is now Endeavour Energy. There's an opportunity that Broken Hill could be ring-mained by another high-voltage feeder which, say, comes from Cobar and interconnects across to Broken Hill, so if you get a failure on one line you can feed it back to the other. You don't have to rely on expensive generators to be maintained and all that sort of stuff, but it costs money to build another high-voltage feeder. They're building another one up from Buronga out through to South Australia, and possibly that could have another parallel feeder run back off that one

to Broken Hill. But now they're talking about the gas compressed air business in Broken Hill. It's experimental—the first one wherever. I'm a bit sceptical. I'd like to see another physical powerline to Broken Hill.

Ms MARYANNE STUART: Transgrid, of course, was privatised. Do you see this as a cost-cutting exercise, not keeping their generators maintained?

ROB GREGORY: They've got an agreement they should abide by, and if they've failed on their agreement they should get a slap on the knuckles. It's all about money nowadays, of course, and they've got to satisfy their shareholders without building a \$3 million generator.

ROB WOODS: Transgrid, as well, post-incident—there were stories going around that the towers that fell over were 20 or 30 years past their use-by date. Transgrid hasn't come out and said yes or no. There's been nothing come out from them saying that that was what the root cause of the problem was. Yes, the weather played a significant factor, and it was a very significant cause, but were Transgrid ready for this? Was their equipment being checked? Was it being maintained? There's no record. There's been no communication from Transgrid whatsoever. From my point of view, it could be another 12 months and we could be sitting around a table again discussing this outage.

ROB GREGORY: But the energy authority sets targets for when these poles and wires have to be inspected. It happens on every pole in the street. They have to be inspected at least once a year on certain items, or whatever it is. I've been out of the industry a long time, but there is a regime that they have to be inspected. Were those powerlines or the structures inspected?

Ms MARYANNE STUART: That's a good question.

The CHAIR: I remind everybody that in parallel with this inquiry, which is very much focused on the people, there are also two other inquiries happening—one from the Australian Energy Regulator and one from IPART, who are going to dig into all of that detail about contractually what was in place, who was responsible for what et cetera. I think that between the three reports that come out, there should be some interesting reading. I hope that all of those questions are answered. Those reports are due out in April, from memory, so maybe in the coming weeks. We are a little bit over time. We're even over time beyond the time that I promised you that we'd try to get back. Just before I close off the hearing, is there any final comment that you think there hasn't been a question about, to dig into a certain topic that you wanted to dig into?

ROB GREGORY: Not really. We certainly need to get some communication improvements—ambulance, cops, even probably our own RFS network needs work on it—but communications. That's evolving pretty fast now, with the talk about mobile phones having satellite connection, but you've still got to charge your phone. You can charge it in the car, I suppose, if you don't have anything. That could happen a lot quicker than we ever thought now, with what Mr Musk's doing.

ROB WOODS: Looking forward. Everyone's looking back and I can understand that, but looking forward. I don't know if the Committee is aware of the cyclone up north, off the coast. One of the three predictions for that particular cyclone is if it comes in near Goondiwindi, they're going to be seeing flooding events that equal to 1893 and 1974. In 1974 it was the highest recorded flood level in this town. And 1893 was the one previous; however, there are no records for that.

Potentially, a month to six weeks, if that cyclone comes inland and goes on course, and drops a heap of rain around Goondiwindi, which is our catchment area, we could see, within six weeks of that event, major flooding in this town and the surrounding areas again. Worse than what we've had in the last couple of years. That's my biggest concern, that we need to start to look forward a little bit and see what's coming. It's nice to talk about what should have been done back here and what can we do now, but let's start preparing for probably six or seven weeks away.

The CHAIR: The diversity of events that this community faces, whether it's flooding or fish kills or power outages, is really quite something. Mr McCrabb, is there anything you wanted to dig into that we haven't touched on yet?

GRAEME McCRABB: I'd just like touch on volunteering and emergency planning within New South Wales. On a personal note, I've had a gutful of the lack of planning and the amount of money that gets spent and wasted on looking at fish kills. I look at the three chief scientist's reports which have given a heap of time for the EPA mucking around with fish kill clean-ups, the flooding, a combat agency that just basically doesn't exist in New South Wales anymore, which is SES. We have all this talk and guff that goes on. At the end of the day, everyone just heads south and we get left to hold the can. I think I had 80 pages of phone calls—that's 80 pages—through the floods because there was just no-one there to give any direction. The combat agencies failed dismally, and we continue down the same path.

To be honest, we've got 40-odd on our active app. We don't have an issue with getting volunteers. Volunteers are sick of having their time wasted. Everyone's happy to give time, everyone's happy to see results, but they're tired of just being the scapegoat for poor planning and the amount of money that just gets wasted. I think that is an issue that we keep highlighting. It needs to be addressed. We can't just continue down this path of "She'll be right, mate" and head off into the sunset again.

ROB GREGORY: Can I just add one thing. Graeme, just about the LEMC meetings regarding the earthquakes in Broken Hill. Do you think that's worth adding?

GRAEME McCRABB: It's the same. The earthquake, we still don't have any minutes or any follow-up from that. I'm not sure what point you're trying to make exactly there, Rob. But, again, the LEMCs just don't function. Someone really needs to sit down and take control of that. We spend so much money on achieving so little. WaterNSW still don't have any flood mapping for its main weir if it fails. I've asked for that over the years. That went to the LEMC and we still haven't heard anything back on that. Fundamentally, LEMCs are failing. Ours is not the only one.

Mrs SALLY QUINNELL: You spoke very briefly, Mr Woods, about the lack of information about this situation being fixed. I just want to find out—and feel free to take this and give us a reply later—about the ongoing stress and trauma that's causing people in the community that, at any moment, it feels like this could happen again, and that leads into, as you said, looking forward to future incidences. I'd just like some reflections on that when you get a chance.

The CHAIR: We'll call that one a question on notice. We'll send you a copy of that. There's no need to worry about trying to remember that. We thank you very much for your attendance here today. The Committee may well develop some more questions early next week that we might send out late next week, and we'd ask that you respond to them as well. I'm very mindful that you're feeling a bit fatigued about making submissions and responses. We are trying to get to the bottom of this slightly unusual one, but there has to be stuff that we learn and do better next time. Graeme, I know I've spoken to you about the diversity of the work that this particular RFS does, so I thank you all for that. Thank you so much.

(The witnesses withdrew.)

(Short adjournment)

IAN GREEN, President, Silverton Village Committee, affirmed and examined

PETER PRICE, Treasurer, Silverton Village Committee, affirmed and examined

HELEN MURRAY, Secretary, Silverton Village Committee, affirmed and examined

The CHAIR: You guys have travelled quite some way to get across here. We really appreciate you doing that for us. We've got the big hitters with us here today from the Silverton Village Committee. Thank you so much. I've got to say, as Chair, reading submissions, it seems like the individual pockets, each community had slightly different but sometimes the same experiences.

Thank you for your submission. In particular, your submission spoke about a topic that others didn't. Ms Murray, I know your name is on the front of it, so I'm not sure who might want to speak to that. I'm going to give you the chance to make a short opening statement of a minute or two. Can I request that you also in that minute or two speak specifically to what you've observed in your submission about the impact on business, because everyone changed their travel plans.

HELEN MURRAY: Thank you for the opportunity to come to this hearing. I put in a very brief submission, as you say, and I did it firstly from my business point of view but also then from the village committee point of view. We're a very small community of roughly 50 people. We're quite often left out of things, so we really appreciate this today because, even though we're in the unincorporated area, we're only 25 kilometres from Broken Hill, which in itself made this whole thing really incredible.

From the business point of view, I think it was Essential Energy actually put out a media release asking non-essential travellers not to come to the Broken Hill area or the Far West area because of the power outage, because of the drain it would put on the resources and the power that they did have from the backup—which eventually failed too. Basically, from 17 or 18 October 2024, the tourist seasonal business—the tourists who normally come to the whole area, it just ceased. Stopped. That was it. People just did not come. There was still a few coming—they were self-sufficient in their travelling vehicles, caravans, whatever—but the majority of them, people even now are saying they're still not seeing tourists in the area, so it had a huge impact.

In Silverton, for example, we have Penrose Park, which is a camping ground. I know they lost bookings overnight. Our local camel farm, they do camel rides, and Petah who runs that, she's dependent, that's her business, she lost bookings for that. She's still struggling to get back on her feet. Some local businesses lost a huge amount of food because they didn't have backup generators to keep their fridges and things going, so it's had a huge impact from a business point of view, certainly.

The CHAIR: Do you recall that maybe that announcement was made in a media interview, or did something specifically go out online? Do you have a recollection of where you might have seen, or you think you might have come across, that notification? It'd be great for us to track down to get a copy of that.

HELEN MURRAY: From memory, I'm not sure if it was a media release, if I heard it on the radio because, when all the power went out—I have a little battery-operated radio because they're always telling us to have a battery-operated radio. I think I heard it on the radio. Because there was no other means of watching anything or receiving anything. The phones were all out.

IAN GREEN: I had a feeling, from what I heard, it was Dubbo police issued it. Someone said that. I don't know who.

HELEN MURRAY: I think once the initial announcement was made, then it was certainly conveyed through various other agencies. My feeling was that Essential Energy really emphasised the issues with the power and not to come. That's just my recollection.

The CHAIR: It would have been good if someone could put a caveat on it for just the next two to seven days. Give everyone a break but then, please, you'd be welcome to come back and help people get on their feet.

HELEN MURRAY: That was the issue. After they made that announcement, people just stopped coming.

The CHAIR: No-one's rescinded it.

HELEN MURRAY: They didn't actually say anything like, "Oh by the way, the power's back on now. It's okay, folks. Please keep coming." It was just boom. Stop. Just don't come.

The CHAIR: Ian, as president, I should come back to you. Was there an opening statement that you might like to make?

PETER PRICE: No.

Ms MARYANNE STUART: Part of our role is not only to look at findings—so the challenges around this whole situation—but also to look at what we might be able to do to take care of you in the event that something like this happens again. What sorts of recommendations would you like us to look at? What sorts of things would you like to see put in place?

PETER PRICE: If we rewind where we are a little bit, for many years in Silverton we're used to—I've got the hotel there, so I've got my own big generator, and this didn't impinge on me in any way. It helped, actually, because we were able to continue supplying food. We had people come out from Broken Hill that couldn't get things, so it helped in that course. But we seem to have a lot of power interruptions and "We're upgrading your system; we need to have planned maintenance", and it's probably every two or three months it happens.

HELEN MURRAY: Scheduled outages.

PETER PRICE: Over the years—yes, that's why I've got a generator. It's not uncommon for us to be losing power on a regular basis.

Mrs SALLY QUINNELL: Sorry, did you just say you lose power every two to three months?

HELEN MURRAY: They're scheduled outages.

PETER PRICE: "We're upgrading your system", but our system's going no better.

Mrs SALLY QUINNELL: How good is it going to get?

HELEN MURRAY: We're still waiting to see any kind of upgrade. We don't see any benefits for it. It's just that we go out for—it's usually eight o'clock in the morning until three or four in the afternoon. It could be the whole day. We had one on 10 February, I think, and it was like 40 degrees. Yay, can't use your air conditioners!

Ms MARYANNE STUART: Who notifies you about that?

HELEN MURRAY: Essential Energy.

PETER PRICE: Essential Energy, and we do get notified on our phones and normally a written notice that it's going to happen. So we're a little bit geared for it, but certainly not for a power outage like we've just had. But it still doesn't help. I might be jumping in a bit early now, but one thing that has come out of it is that Tilt, who are the owner of the wind farm in Broken Hill—every resident in Silverton now has an 8 kVA generator and a hardwired service into their house. If we have an outage—we hope we never have one. But if we do, and for all these other little planned outages that a lot of people have—especially in the hot weather, when there's some elderly out there who have no aircon, nothing, no refrigeration—we're able to provide that. That was a little deal that we did through the village committee to Tilt, and they came on board. It was identified that we had an issue and they came on board, which was nice.

HELEN MURRAY: If I can just butt in, when this power outage happened, I received one phone call to see if we needed assistance, and that was from the lady at Tilt Renewables. We didn't hear from any SES, fire service—nobody. Still haven't—no-one except Tilt Renewables.

IAN GREEN: We weren't even on the list for that emergency services—

HELEN MURRAY: No food packages and things like that.

Mrs SALLY QUINNELL: And they actively sought you out?

HELEN MURRAY: Because the wind farm is at Silverton, on the hills just over Silverton, we have a community consultative committee with Tilt, so we attend fairly regular meetings with them and they give us updates on the wind farm and whatever. Koel Wrigley, who usually comes to those meetings, actually rang me and said, "Helen, how are you faring? What can we do for you?"

The CHAIR: Wow.

Ms MARYANNE STUART: How good is that?

The CHAIR: That's fantastic.

HELEN MURRAY: And I said, "You have no idea how much that means to me". I think that was the second day. We still, to this day, have never had a phone call or any feet on the ground, nothing from any emergency services, police, SES—nothing. It wasn't until I got in touch with staff at Roy Butler's office in Broken Hill that then—well, even then nothing really happened, but we hadn't even been offered food hampers or anything. We had a few people in Silverton we knew would really need them, and I approached his office. Then

Minister Penny Sharpe came out for a meeting, and her staff member that afternoon delivered some food hampers for our community.

The CHAIR: How long after the power outage was that, roughly? Are we talking four, five, six, seven, eight, nine or 10 days later?

HELEN MURRAY: No, it was the following week, because the community cabinet meeting was happening in Broken Hill. Minister Sharpe was coming out, and so she actually organised to come to Silverton and have a meeting with us. I don't know if that was on the agenda to start with.

PETER PRICE: No, it wasn't.

HELEN MURRAY: But she certainly made the effort to come out.

The CHAIR: Yes, my recollection is she ended up staying at Broken Hill for three or four or five days.

HELEN MURRAY: Yes, she did.

The CHAIR: So you don't have an RFS?

HELEN MURRAY: We do.

PETER PRICE: With a nice big \$500,000 truck stuck in a shed.

HELEN MURRAY: There's two trucks in there, I think.

PETER PRICE: It's a volunteer system, like a lot of it is out here. There seems to be a little bit coming, we heard before. There's just this constant lack of communication right across the board. A is not talking to B. If we all got together, it would be great.

HELEN MURRAY: Even when you were speaking to the other gentlemen about the LEMC—I think it was last year I was invited a couple of times to the LEMC in Broken Hill because we have the Mundi Mundi Bash, the big music festival, just outside of Silverton. A couple of times I was invited to go to the Broken Hill LEMC to discuss traffic management and things like that, which was great. I didn't feel particularly welcome, but then through going to those I discovered that there's actually an unincorporated area LEMC. I'd never heard of it; we've never been invited to it. Anyway, earlier this year—

IAN GREEN: January, we had the—

HELEN MURRAY: January, yes, when the comet was visible. Anyway, I do photography, so I was actually up at the Mundi Mundi Lookout watching for this comet. I got speaking to a gentleman up there who was also into photography. It turns out he runs the LEMC, and so through that I ended up having an invitation. Ian and I attended via videoconference the unincorporated area LEMC.

The CHAIR: That's a nice story, but there should be a bit more structure around it.

HELEN MURRAY: Yes, this happens to us all the time. I kind of felt when you said about my submission that my submission was very short and sweet and whatever—because we have reached a point, because we're so close to Broken Hill, where we tend to be left out of a lot of things. I have spent hours and hours doing submissions for so many different things over the years, and you never hear anything about them again. I thought, "Yes, this is important. I'm just going to whack something together, put it in there and that'll be it." Anyway, then here we are, so this is really very much appreciated.

The CHAIR: It reminded me very much of the Lismore floods up on the North Coast. Initially they said to people, "Please stay away. All the accommodation is needed for emergency housing." But at some point somewhere that turns, and you actually need to say to people, "Please come back. Come and spend your money." Anyway, it really struck a chord with me.

Ms MARYANNE STUART: In fact, that happened when we had the bushfires down in the Mogo area—the same thing. But then they did say "Okay, you can come back now because the businesses need you."

The CHAIR: I'm going to jump across to Mr James Wallace, the member for Hornsby, at his first Committee.

Mr JAMES WALLACE: Yes, first day. I'll be very quick. I just wanted to get an understanding. I know each of the towns were affected differently. How long was the power outage in Silverton? Was it an immediate power outage? Were there rolling outages like other areas experienced? How did you actually experience it? How long were you impacted for?

PETER PRICE: We were on and off because they had the turbine problems. I heard that mentioned before, but that's been a bit of a standing joke in Broken Hill for years about the turbine generators that they've got there. They're either not working or they don't know how to work them or they're broken down. I don't think a lot of us were surprised that we did find out that there was one still in pieces, and they've got a notorious record for not going too long when they are going. They're always breaking down.

That's been there for a while, so when they started getting the backup generators coming into town, it was a slow, progressive—"We'll put you on and put that on and get people up here in Wilcannia and all that sort of stuff going". But we got our turns. We'd be on for a day and then we'd be out again for another couple of days, and then back on again. That went over the whole period until they settled it down, when they got enough generators in town and could do the whole area. I think, unfortunately, a lot of the surrounding areas probably suffered a bit more until they got generators into them. But overall, yes, we certainly had our fair share of it, like everyone else.

HELEN MURRAY: I think certainly the initial 36 hours or more, the 36 or 48 hours that we had no power—we lost all phones, internet, everything, and there was just no way of communicating. But I guess we do have the advantage of being closer to Broken Hill, so we could go and find information. Again, the little battery-operated radio came in very, very handy because we wouldn't have had a clue about anything, you know? Then phones came on and all these messages loaded up, and you think, "Well, how long ago were they sent?"

IAN GREEN: The phone tower lasted, I think, a day. And then that was it.

HELEN MURRAY: Yes, the battery backup was gone, so we had nothing.

Mr JAMES WALLACE: My final question is about the compensation regime that the Government set up. There was \$400 for businesses and \$200 for individuals. Did people in Silverton access that? Did they take it up? Was it widespread, the take-up there?

HELEN MURRAY: As far as I'm aware, it was fairly widespread, yes.

Mrs JUDY HANNAN: Thank you for coming. I'm curious about the LEMC. It sounds like Broken Hill has one, and it sounds like the unincorporated area has one. Is there more than that?

HELEN MURRAY: I have no idea.

Mrs SALLY QUINNELL: You need to do more photography. Then you'll find out more.

HELEN MURRAY: Just run into them up at the lookout, yes. Honestly, I have no idea.

Mrs JUDY HANNAN: It makes me curious, because usually whilst there might be individual ones, it feeds from one that's more regional down through those that go town-size emergency management plan, but there's no such thing.

HELEN MURRAY: The gentleman I ran into—and I'm afraid his name escapes me at the moment, but he was really lovely and very informative and whatever and very keen to have us on board. I think he actually runs the Broken Hill one, and I had seen him at one that I went to last year for the Mundi Mundi Bash. He commented that he had seen me there, and then he invited us to be part of the unincorporated one. We now have our Silverton sign on their banner for their unincorporated LEMC, so I'm hoping that we're included in more of those meetings. That includes Tibooburra and Packsaddle and places like that that are in the unincorporated area.

Mrs JUDY HANNAN: For the rolling outages, were you informed when the power would come on and then when it would go off, or anything? Did you have a time schedule that you were given?

IAN GREEN: We had no communication. There's a couple of landlines in town, but other than that—

Mrs JUDY HANNAN: So really not?

PETER PRICE: When the lights come on, we knew we were back online.

HELEN MURRAY: That's it.

Mrs JUDY HANNAN: I think I will reserve my questions in case something else comes up.

The CHAIR: That's a recurring theme, though, isn't it?

Mrs JUDY HANNAN: It is. Nobody knew.

The CHAIR: Because if you had a schedule in front of you that said, "This is what it looks like today," that town in the morning, that town at lunchtime, that town in the afternoon—

Mrs JUDY HANNAN: You could turn on and off. You said about the joke about the backup generator. So it's been a joke for many years, but for me this appears not to be power specific. This is about any crisis that might happen in this area, be it flood or fire or whatever. You don't actually have a really good local emergency management plan from the top down to the smaller towns.

HELEN MURRAY: No.

Mrs JUDY HANNAN: So it could happen any time, any day?

HELEN MURRAY: Yes. It's interesting that you bring up floods because, through being invited to the unincorporated LEMC, we discovered that there is actually a flood management plan for the unincorporated area. Just from the conversation we had in reading the minutes from the previous meeting, that plan seems to deal with more so the Tibooburra Road and access to people getting in there and out of there. I did ask if we were able to see a copy of it, and that hasn't arrived yet.

Silverton has a floodplain plan sort of thing, but when we have a big storm our community is divided into three by the creek system in there and our floods can range from a trickle to a massive floodout of epic proportions. My property can be flooded. But there is absolutely no contact. It's a big deal. "Oh, look, the creeks are running." Everybody gets all excited, but nobody ever thinks to ring up and say, "Those creeks are running pretty big today. Does anyone need any help out there?" And I don't know how they'd get there if we did need help, quite honestly. There's just no access.

Transport for NSW were talking last year about putting up an electronic board for road open, road closed and whatever that can be turned on and off. That hasn't happened. The best they do now, just to stop all the onlookers coming out to see the creeks drained, they put barricades up across the road at the Broken Hill end, which people drive around anyway. But in Silverton, if we need to go to Broken Hill, we don't know whether the road's open or closed or what the situation is further up the road. We're never informed. Nobody tells us anything.

Mrs JUDY HANNAN: My question is when you see these disasters and they put somebody that's been head of army or navy or whatever in charge post the disaster, do you think it's time that we had somebody come in and take charge and work out this local emergency plan? Do you think the locals would be keen for such a thing, or do you think they'd bat back?

HELEN MURRAY: From a local perspective, I think when you've lived there long enough you get to understand when the creeks run, how big they're going, what you can and can't do and where you should and shouldn't go, and you're sensible about it. The thing is now, with the advent of things like the Mundi Mundi Bash in August, the very first one we had there, the creeks ran that night. Everybody was absolutely panic stricken, and we were saying, "Just calm down. It's okay." It wasn't a big flow, but it was fair. My point being that if we have these things happen again when people are coming into Broken Hill and coming out to Silverton for this Mundi Mundi Bash—bearing in mind there's 15,000 people come to this thing—there's the potential for people to be stranded in between creeks and not know what to do. They can potentially do something silly because they don't know what to do and there's no-one there to tell them.

PETER PRICE: And the other thing is we're a bit of an ageing community, like everywhere, so in an emergency, like a heart attack, when these creeks are down, it's an eight-hour wait to get any vehicle out, so the only way would be helicopter.

HELEN MURRAY: Yes, and there isn't one. There isn't one in Broken Hill.

PETER PRICE: I don't think there's even any of that sort of thing in plan. I wouldn't even know where to go.

Mrs JUDY HANNAN: A plan for those situations.

PETER PRICE: It would be good if we had a plan to say if this happens, this is the services we utilise. That would be valuable for our little community. And when I say little, it's getting big. We're about to kick off. As Helen said, that October really kicked us around because it brought in an early downturn. December, January and February, because of the heat, are our quieter moments, but coming March now it'll kick up. And we've seen 170,000 people out every year. So we could have big groups out there and these creeks could run. It might not even rain in Silverton. It can rain in other sections out on the Adelaide highway and the creek's running at two metres deep. It's good for business. It keeps them in there at the pub for a while. But it's not good in, as Helen said, people are starting to get—

Mrs SALLY QUINNELL: It's not good for disaster mitigation.

PETER PRICE: It's not good for the visitors because they get panicky. There's no subways out there and there's no service stations, so they think they're locked into the middle of Australia. But, yes, it would be good.

Mrs SALLY QUINNELL: Also I wonder too—the fact that there's no plan, so no-one even from town can say that it's okay, this is what happens in case of—and you'll know because there'll be sirens or whatever.

HELEN MURRAY: Yes, we know how to deal with it.

PETER PRICE: It certainly needs some leadership.

HELEN MURRAY: It does.

PETER PRICE: A bit of direction.

HELEN MURRAY: Certainly through the height of tourist season, if there's big black clouds rolling in on a certain particular area, we all just say, "Now, if someone tells you to go back to Broken Hill, don't argue, just go," because the creeks can run so fast, so quickly. And we all say, "Don't ever camp in a creek," things like this. I mean, the creeks are beautiful. They're just sandy creek beds. They're dry and they have beautiful big gum trees.

Mrs JUDY HANNAN: Until they're not.

HELEN MURRAY: They're absolutely just magnets to campers and things and we just keep saying, "Do not camp in a creek. The creeks come down so quickly when it rains that you just get washed away." But people don't understand that. They don't see that vision of how quickly it happens and how much water comes down them.

Mrs SALLY QUINNELL: I was just going to ask, in light of that, and, as pointed out, it feels like we're looking at many, many different disasters that could be covered by this, but was this particularly exacerbated by the lack of mobile phone coverage. What sort of coverage did you end up with? Were you able to utilise mobile phones after a day or two days? You said they held out for a day, and then you lost it. How long did you lose it for?

IAN GREEN: Until the power come back on.

PETER PRICE: See, what happens is that Telstra are not that excited about putting battery backup power into a lot of these places, and they're not as good as what they used to be. Once you might've got—we've got a little exchange there. We've got a tower, a 3G tower. Once they had good battery backup that might have gave you a week without power, but now gives you a day—if it's got batteries at all. They took them out at one stage, even—removed them.

Mrs SALLY QUINNELL: In which case, what sort of services do you feel were left inaccessible due to that outage, due to that lack of communications? Were people able to call 000? Where they able to do some of those important phone communications?

HELEN MURRAY: I haven't heard of anything where people needed to make 000s or anything like that.

Mrs SALLY QUINNELL: Were you able to if you needed to?

IAN GREEN: On the phone, I think you can. I think if you've got service you can still dial that other number, whatever it is.

PETER PRICE: No, 000 is supposed to get through but we've never had to test it at this stage.

The CHAIR: I don't have anything additional from my perspective. Can I just ask, in terms of the RFS and the Silverton Village Community, you must have the same people wearing different hats. Most towns just have a core group of 10 or 20 people who chip in. Is that right?

HELEN MURRAY: It's basically us.

The CHAIR: Are you also the RFS, and are you also the—

HELEN MURRAY: No, that's a separate group.

PETER PRICE: Yes, but it feels like that sometimes, that it's left to—typically, probably smaller communities, the same ones do all the hack work and want to keep it going. We see value in it. We love our little village and we're really keen, but there could be—how could you put it? I sum it up, I probably shouldn't say it, but I still like it because it's a good laugh. How would you summarise Silverton? We've got 38 or 40 residents, four donkeys and more politics than Canberra. That about sums it up. We've got these little—people that—meeting away from meetings. We try to do our best. There's a broken link, no doubt between RFS and the village committee. I don't think there's all that many of them local, is there?

HELEN MURRAY: No.

PETER PRICE: There might be only two or three of the fire brigade, and a lot of them in Broken Hill.

The CHAIR: They travel out from Broken Hill to be in the RFS—

HELEN MURRAY: Yes.

The CHAIR: —out at Silverton?

PETER PRICE: So they may have some numbers. They might tell you, "Look, we got 30 members", but 25 of those are from Broken Hill. They've got these policies of the truck can't go out until three members turn up but, in an emergency, one day we're going to lose buildings because of the policies that are in place. It would be nice to think that we had more locals involved with it but, once again, an ageing population. Probably we can't even get qualified to get in there.

HELEN MURRAY: And, again, politics between people. I used to be a member, then I was informed that I was no longer a member because I didn't live in the Silverton area. I went, "Yes, that's good"—because the captain lives next door to me, and if I had a good arm I could throw a rock on the fire shed roof. Anyway, I got in touch with Cobar who was managing it at the time and ripped strips off them and then resigned. I said, "Look, if you don't want me, that's it." My husband and I walked away from it. Things like this happen. It's just personalities and things. It happens everywhere, but it's not a good idea. Having said that, it's not to say that we're not friendly with the people who are in the RFS, because we are. It's just—I don't know how it all came about, but it did. Certainly, through this power outage thing, even though we are a small community, and even though there are politics, we did all rally around and help each other, didn't we? We made sure that someone who needed a generator had one. If someone else had an extra one in the shed, it was delivered to them and connected up to try to keep fridges going and things like that.

The CHAIR: Thank you for doing all the work that you did on behalf of your communities during that difficult time. I also want to especially thank you for making the incredible effort to come today. Thank you for your submission and for talking about something that wasn't being otherwise spoken about in all of our submissions. You will be provided with a copy of the transcript of our hearing today, late next week probably. You can check it for corrections. If there's anything you want to correct, please just talk to the Committee staff that you've already been talking to. Between now and the end of next week, we might develop some additional questions that we want to send out to some of our witnesses that we've heard from. If we do send you some questions, we do ask you to try and turn those around in seven days if that's possible. But if it's not please talk to us about how much extra time you might need.

That concludes our public hearing element for today. We are going to go into an open town hall forum this afternoon in case anyone wants to call in and let us know it worked for them. We will now just take a very short break, and then we'll be open to anyone that wants to make a comment after that. Thank you again so much.

(The witnesses withdrew.)

The Committee commenced a town hall meeting at 16:40, and adjourned at 17:20.