

REPORT ON PROCEEDINGS BEFORE

**LEGISLATIVE ASSEMBLY COMMITTEE ON
ENVIRONMENT AND PLANNING**

**ELECTRICITY OUTAGES AFFECTING FAR WEST NSW IN
OCTOBER 2024**

At Albert Hall, Tibooburra, on Tuesday 4 March 2025

The Committee met at 14:30.

PRESENT

Mr Clayton Barr (Chair)

Ms Judy Hannan

Ms Sally Quinnell (Deputy Chair)

Ms Maryanne Stuart

Mr James Wallace

The CHAIR: First of all, I offer the sincere apologies of all of us about the timing. There is only an apology that we can offer. We are sad and disappointed about that, but I'm glad that you've given your time to be with us this afternoon, and I sincerely appreciate that. We don't mean to disrespect that in any way. We have decided to combine all three witnesses in the interests of time, and so that people don't have to wait any longer than necessary, but we are also guessing that there will be some pretty common things for you to talk about. That's certainly been our experience out at Menindee yesterday, and it's certainly the experience with a whole bunch of the submissions.

The final thing I just want to give you notice of is that during our hearings, we typically have some photos being taken as we progress. If you've got any concerns about photos, please let us know. What do we do with the photos? We might simply use them on our Committee page on the website, just to flag with people that, yes, we actually went out and spoke to real people. So if you have any concerns about that, please let us know. Before we get started, I would like to acknowledge the Wangkumara people, who are the traditional custodians of the land that we are meeting on today. I also want to pay my respects to the Elders of this country and all of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people that may be present today.

We are the New South Wales Parliament Legislative Assembly Committee on Environment and Planning. My name is Clayton Barr. I am the member for Cessnock and Committee Chair. With me today are Committee members Mr James Wallace, the member for Hornsby; Ms Judy Hannan, the member for Wollondilly; Ms Sally Quinnell, who is also Deputy Chair and a musical person of note who's also got an interest in locusts; and Ms Maryanne Stuart, the member for Heathcote.

MIA DEGOUMOIS, Packsaddle Roadhouse, affirmed and examined

TRACEY HOTCHIN, Tibooburra Village Committee, affirmed and examined

PHYLLIS AINSWORTH, Tibooburra and District Progress Association, sworn and examined

The CHAIR: This is the second of four public hearings that we are holding in the Far West for our inquiries into the electricity outages affecting this region from October last year. This inquiry began in November. We are, of course, grateful for everybody's engagement. I want to emphasise that your local MP, Mr Roy Butler, was extremely keen for us not to sit in Sydney to do this, not even just to sit in Broken Hill to do this, but to get out. I don't know, we might be one of the first committees to actually come up here to Tib?

PHYLLIS AINSWORTH: I think so.

The CHAIR: We might be the first for quite a while. I've been in Parliament for 14 years now. I can't remember it before. Thank you, because us seeing the country is an important part of it. I know that Roy Butler, MP, gets pretty frustrated in Parliament that, with our east coast lenses on, it's difficult to understand what it's like. We want this to be a really informal conversation and chat. It is being recorded, simply so that when Hansard capture the record we can get an accurate record. That record will be sent to you for you to review and correct and come back, but this is a really informal conversation as far as we're concerned. We want to learn from you. Before we start, do any of you have a very brief opening statement you want to make about your own personal experiences?

PHYLLIS AINSWORTH: My own personal experience—I was a little bit lucky, where I had access to some sort of power supply. My father didn't, so I had to organise power supply for him for this. But outside of that, there were other residents in town that suffered really badly through this. My own personal thing, one of the generators that I had, I had leads going to two of my neighbours to keep fridges and freezers running for them, because one of my neighbours looks after her young grandchildren. She needed some sort of power. Just little things like that. I'm going to throw it out there now: If Transgrid had done something about things earlier, a lot of it wouldn't have happened. Allowed the power not to come up and do what they needed to do. A lot of it wouldn't have gone on as long as it did.

The CHAIR: We heard some advice offered for Transgrid yesterday in Menindee, and I think we're going to hear advice offered all the way around. There are two other inquiries running at the moment—the Australian Energy Regulator's inquiring into that as well, and IPART are inquiring into the event as well. They will get into the more technical side of things. We can't ignore the technical, but we want to hear personal experiences.

PHYLLIS AINSWORTH: I would just like to add this last bit. Our community isn't just those of us in town. Our community goes 400, 500, 600, 700 kilometres around, and a lot of station people were left high and dry, because some of them don't have generators. They had to go and organise generators for themselves, as well. A lot of them have got families with young children. So it's not just us in town, here. It's everyone around.

The CHAIR: If you needed to source a generator and you live somewhere in the vicinity of Tib, where would you go?

PHYLLIS AINSWORTH: Broken Hill. The SES have a couple of generators, but they were being utilised in town. Other than that, people had to purchase or borrow from wherever they could.

TRACEY HOTCHIN: What we're talking about here is not a first for us. I need you to understand that. This has happened before. This has probably arisen because this made the news. This got to you guys, on the coast. I'm on a property, as well. We've got a sheep and cattle property, as well as I own the hotel, and I'm here to represent the village committee for Tibooburra. What I would like to say is that I think, first and foremost, maintenance is a big thing. Natural disasters are going to always happen, and I think we need to get past a lot of it, because we can blame and do whatever we need to do, but that windstorm was nobody's fault. It happened.

The fault is, in my opinion, the maintenance wasn't kept up on the towers or the equipment that's there, and the same for us with the poles. We've had plenty of outages here that didn't affect Broken Hill, when our poles go down near Packsaddle, down on Nundooka. There is a big flat there and we've lost poles there numerous times, the windstorms and everything blows them over. When those poles were put in 30 years ago, we went years without any power outages, no problems whatsoever, because those poles were stable. They were new. Now they're starting to degrade because they're made of cheap shit, because they were only supposed to—when they put them in, because on our property we had to pay \$190,000 before they even put the poles in for us to actually get the power to the property. They told us then that these poles would probably only last 30 years, and then there will be something else happening in the system.

So my problem or my thing is, for the community of Tibooburra, for the outlying properties, and from Broken Hill to Tibooburra, I think we need to look at—not you. Different energy companies come out. They got us all to pay. All the properties had to pay to get the power poles put in. We did all that. We got this service that was put in. This is this new beaut thing—which happens in the bush, it doesn't matter whether it's power or what it is. We get offered these things and then we get forgotten about. So you put the system in, but you don't keep the system running.

Out of this inquiry, I think it's more about making sure that if you're going to offer people in the bush a remote system—in Sydney, it's just a given that you're going to get power to your house. To us, it's not. I've got a generator at the hotel, so I run that. We've got a generator at the property which we've had all the time because the only way we had power was with a generator. But, as Phyllis says, there's a lot of people that felt a little bit secure in the fact that they've got this power that's delivered to the house. They haven't maintained their generator, and all of a sudden they've got lost in the system because they didn't have something to run their power.

Sorry, I'm on a spiel, but it's covering a lot of areas. I just believe that we need to have this inquiry and make sure that you take information back about how it won't happen again rather than blaming people and going on with all this other rubbish. If you're not going to do it or if they're not going to want to continue offering power to people in the bush, just tell us, and we'll all get our generators and we'll all go back to what we were doing and what we've done for 50, 60 or 100 years, to self-maintain—which we're very good at self-maintaining out there. As Phyllis pointed out, a lot of it was the older members of the community. You know, I had people's stuff in my freezers and everything at the hotel to help people out.

If you want something that may be what I think should happen, we should still go ahead with the grid, the microgrid, that they're putting in Tibooburra here. We still need to make sure that this generator stays here for backup and, if I could go a little further, I think there needs to be a generator which will back up from Broken Hill, a generator at Packsaddle which will back up and come up. Therefore, all the people on the properties won't lose power. It's not about Tibooburra. Those people are out there. They can't leave their properties because they've got to be filling up generators, they've got to be doing this. They've got other jobs to do. Some of these properties—well, ours is 230,000 acres. So by the time you go out, do a water run, check the stock, muster cattle, brand, truck or whatever, you've got to be back to start the generator, or you've got to be back to fill the generator up.

I think if these generators or something can be put up as backups. It could be at Packsaddle. Mia could be able to go out and start that one up, and then that would power up all the properties. Tibooburra would have its own, so it wouldn't be an overload on the generator from Packsaddle, but at least the properties, the stations north of Packsaddle, would get it, and then one at Milparinka in case that one at Packsaddle goes out. I mean, in case it's out between Packsaddle and Tibooburra, we'd be able to do that. So I think we need to look at what is more of a positive sustainable way of guaranteeing that power is out here if the people or the groups involved want to maintain the service to the bush. If they don't want to maintain the service to the bush, we can talk till we're blue in the face, but we're not going to fix anything.

The CHAIR: Earlier in the piece you said, "This isn't the first time it's happened." You didn't say all the time, but you used a phrase there that suggested it happens regularly.

TRACEY HOTCHIN: It happens regularly, yes. We've had poles down.

The CHAIR: Can you give me a rough idea of what regularly means when you say it? Is it once or twice a year or five or six times a year?

TRACEY HOTCHIN: Usually during the summer—lately we've probably had it out three or four times through each summer period when the thunderstorms are around and the wind's there. The poles just aren't stable anymore. They bend over like bananas. They just fold over. Don't get me wrong; it's not like we've been tormented by this, but it's something that is because of maintenance. If they maintained the poles, put the right ones in and didn't do a cheap job in the first place, everything would be all right.

The CHAIR: We were told yesterday that in a normal city sort of area the poles would probably be inspected once every 12 months.

TRACEY HOTCHIN: Probably, yes. I don't know how often ours are done.

PHYLLIS AINSWORTH: We probably wouldn't know.

TRACEY HOTCHIN: And when it rains, you can't get out to the poles. We've got the road sealed now, which can get the trucks up, but then the creeks get silt in them and they can't get by with those, but then when they get to the point, they've got to be able to get access. The lines aren't on the road. They're off the road a bit. So we've had power poles down, which has taken days for it to get there. If we lose a pole, we're looking at five days probably for them to be able to get up, get access and get into the wet area to be able to dig the holes and put

the new holes in and do the job. So most times if we've got poles down, you're at least four to five days minimum with no power, or self-generated power.

But to me, I've lived with no power all my life. I've lived with generating my own power until '90—when did that come through, '92 or something? We generated our own power all the time. So we're self-sufficient in that matter, but it comes to people—as Phyllis said, the older members in our community who don't have that and then the property owners who haven't maintained their generators, they get themselves into there. But I think now this 19 days woke a lot of people up and they realised they had to do it. But then getting back to what Phyllis was saying, to buy a generator was Broken Hill. Broken Hill was sold out, so therefore they were online. I had to buy one online just to keep my little house going. Then you've got to wait for the post, and we only get two posts a week. That's one truck service a week, so one freight service a week.

The CHAIR: Can I jump across to you, Mia? Did you want to say something to open up?

MIA DEGOUMOIS: Everything Tracey said about the poles, and it's always normally when there's a storm. Sometimes Essential Energy can be stuck overnight at the creeks just trying to get up. You've heard all about that. After so long, you lose your mobile service. Tibooburra did here as well. Some of us have got Starlink, which is great. With our generators, we needed diesel. That's all sort of remotely done with IOR, but if you didn't have—

TRACEY HOTCHIN: Power.

MIA DEGOUMOIS: Yes, you need them to be working with that so you can get the fuel out, so if the signal wasn't working—they've got their own signal which doesn't go via our Starlink. It just created another problem that we had to go get fuel from another station to help us keep our generator going.

TRACEY HOTCHIN: And that was the problem in Tibooburra too. You couldn't get fuel out of the IOR because Telstra had gone down and there was no power connected to that IOR tank. So we couldn't get fuel. We were bringing fuel for the generator for the hotel in from the station to run the generator at the pub. We give fuel to other people too.

PHYLLIS AINSWORTH: Yes, the fuel bowsers wouldn't work.

TRACEY HOTCHIN: Because there's no power. You guys have got no idea. Stick with us for a fortnight, and then you'll be right.

Mrs SALLY QUINNELL: I think it's a self-acknowledged fact that we come in going, "We don't know, so tell us."

Mr JAMES WALLACE: I'm the State member for Hornsby. I wanted to start off by understanding that last late October period in 2024. Each town we've seen experienced things differently. How long was the power out here? Can you talk me through what happened? Was it completely out? Was it coming off and on again?

TRACEY HOTCHIN: For the station, it was out for 19 days. For in town here, when Broken Hill could load us up, they loaded us up, and when they needed to give some power to another town or something, we would be blackout for three hours while they'd give the power to Menindee or somewhere else.

PHYLLIS AINSWORTH: They were load sharing, so little towns would get shut off for up to two or three hours and then share that around with everybody, especially through the peak power times. We were notified, as long as you were able to receive the texts because it all came through on text. It was quite frustrating for quite a lot of people, especially if their phones didn't work because they couldn't charge them. So they weren't getting these notifications to say that load sharing would be happening.

Mr JAMES WALLACE: You mentioned the mobile service was out as well. Was that for the whole 19 days, or did it come back on earlier?

PHYLLIS AINSWORTH: No.

MIA DEGOUMOIS: When the power was off for an extended period, like for Packsaddle—and before that, when stuff had happened, they actually sent someone out from Dubbo. He comes all the way from Dubbo and sits up there with the tower, wherever he needs to be, and charges the battery.

TRACEY HOTCHIN: With a generator.

MIA DEGOUMOIS: Yes, with a generator. But he didn't come this time.

PHYLLIS AINSWORTH: He spent a few days here in Tibooburra, yes, because he was sorting out the towers around here, but that's all he did.

MIA DEGOUMOIS: So down the bottom-end block, we relied on the Starlink.

PHYLLIS AINSWORTH: Going back and forth to where the towers are to refill the generators to keep the power going. Basically, once the power goes out, we get between 12 and 24 hours and then our phone towers go out. After that, we have no phone service because that's how long the batteries last. Then it's a generator.

Mr JAMES WALLACE: You guys represent different committees in town, and different associations, but was there a focal point in the town that was coordinating information going out, or was there a group that you were relying on? Was everyone coming together at one location to understand what was going on? Was there any coordinated effort locally around sharing information and resources?

PHYLLIS AINSWORTH: No.

TRACEY HOTCHIN: Not really. Everybody's self-sufficient in the sense that they know what to do. They'd come to the pub. They'd bring food to me and ask me could I store it, and of course I did. They'd come and charge their phones, or leave their phones with me and go and come back, and then they'd have their phones charged, or whatever other devices. We had people come and stay at the pub. I had mattresses on the floor in the bar just so people could stay cool, because we had a lot of heat as well. So it's just about bush community spirit. It comes to the forefront when it happens.

PHYLLIS AINSWORTH: We just look after each other.

Mr JAMES WALLACE: Was there anyone in government or council or anything like that that you guys—

TRACEY HOTCHIN: We're unincorporated, mate. They forget about us.

PHYLLIS AINSWORTH: Yes, we have no council.

Mr JAMES WALLACE: Was there anyone in the State Government you were looking to for guidance on this?

TRACEY HOTCHIN: We just keep in touch with Roy Butler and those guys, but their hands are tied, too, when it comes to making something happen.

Mr JAMES WALLACE: I think you mentioned a microgrid was being talked about locally. Can you let us know where that's up to and what your understanding is of that?

TRACEY HOTCHIN: I don't know, mate. You'd have to ask Essential Energy about that because we hear these things. They come in—I don't want to be fluffy around the edges, but we get so many groups like you guys and other people come in, promise us the world, and go and we don't hear any more back from you. We don't even get any notification letters, any outcomes or nothing. That's why we can sound a little blunt in the start of things, because that's what it is. The only thing we got was the guys came in and they got sent in to go through and see whether we needed some money for groceries and things like that, and then power. But I own the pub. I had a generator. Because I kept my food, I didn't get any money for anything. The \$50 was what they said you could go for for the generator, and I just said, "Give my voucher to somebody else that needed it."

They all came in and did that, and they came here three times to do that. I just think that was a waste of money. It could've been done on the phone. It could've been done anywhere, or just pretty much know that everybody that's on that grid was out of power. You know who they are through the electricity company, so instead of wasting money—we had people fly in. Politicians flew in in a helicopter all the way—left Sydney, flew in, here for 15 minutes and told us exactly what we'd heard. The press release that morning was the only thing they said, and got up and left. I guarantee you, if you looked into it, it probably cost 50 grand to bring them out here in the big chopper they had. Fifty grand would have put a generator here for us. That's how we look at it. To us, it's a waste of money. You can talk till you're blue in the face, but you've got to make sure that the people that you go back to are going to listen to what you're going to tell about what we're going through.

PHYLLIS AINSWORTH: Essential Energy have had two or three different community meetings looking at putting in this grid. It was looking at sites, local community information on where would be a good site to put it. They've had two town meetings so far. The last one was still probably three or four months ago, and we haven't heard anything back since.

TRACEY HOTCHIN: Tibooburra actually produces more power than it uses from the solar on the roofs in town. If we had something there that we could put that power into, instead of sending it down the road, and then it comes back to—if you want to get me started on renewable energies, look at the wind turbines at Silverton and all the solar at Broken Hill. Everybody said, "Well, what about the batteries?" They're not connected. They've been finished for a bloody long time. They bring big batteries in there. What do they do? They have to

bring a big generator from Sydney to charge the batteries. It's a no-brainer to us. If we were in the bush and we were looking after ourselves, the first thing you'd do the day after you had that set up was connect it. But it didn't happen. It looks good; it looks pretty on paper. They can go away and say, "Look at us; we've put all this renewables in", but it's not working.

The CHAIR: Tracey, can I just interrupt. You said that they came out to ask about food, food vouchers or hampers, or something like that. Do you know who "they" were? Do you know which agency or which department it was that—

TRACEY HOTCHIN: Service NSW.

PHYLLIS AINSWORTH: Service, yes.

TRACEY HOTCHIN: But the forms—we had older people that were coming here, and the questions and the forms they had to fill out were horrific. It was just a yes or a no. You know we've been out of power; you know I don't have this. If you're going to come out, just give them \$400 and see you later.

PHYLLIS AINSWORTH: Yes, and proving that you lived in town—like, come on. You know we live here. The paperwork was ridiculous, to be honest.

Mrs JUDY HANNAN: I know that you came in and washed the chairs and everything down before we got here, so thank you for all that, and thank you for coming. All of those were questions that I had, but I'm curious. You were talking about having the generators, looking forward, and the generators at the Packsaddle and at different places. Would it be true to say that even if you had those there, and the poles weren't in good condition, you could end up in the same circumstance?

TRACEY HOTCHIN: That's what I'm saying. If it's between Broken Hill and Packsaddle, Packsaddle would power north. Then if it was between Packsaddle and Milparinka, Milparinka would be able to power north. I think everybody would accept that they may be out of power, but it would isolate it. It wouldn't be hundred of people out; it'd just be an isolated area that would be out. If this one stays in Tibooburra, then that's not going to pull the power that would go out to the properties. I think that needs to be—the properties are our community. They are part of this, so it's not just Tibooburra. It's those people, the graziers that are out there, that need to be looked at as well as Tibooburra. It's not about—it's just people. You've just got to look after people, doesn't matter where you are. Especially, as I say, the service has been offered. If the service is offered and we pay top dollar for our power, it just needs to be—either it is or it isn't.

Mrs JUDY HANNAN: It sounds like those poles might need continual maintenance to see where they're up to.

TRACEY HOTCHIN: They do.

Mrs JUDY HANNAN: All the other questions about timing and coordination, I think I've probably got all the answers that I wanted.

The CHAIR: That's good. Sally.

Mrs SALLY QUINNELL: I understand your frustration at feeling like you're telling the story over and over. Hopefully this time we'll come through. To me it sounds like an issue with expectation management. If they said to us, "We can't provide you with permanent power", then you could act on that.

PHYLLIS AINSWORTH: Yes.

Mrs SALLY QUINNELL: Get generators and do what you needed to do as a community. Would that be a true representation of what you said?

TRACEY HOTCHIN: If they can't maintain their delivery then they need to be honest about it, because they're offering a service. If they're going to offer the service, supply the service. If they're not going to maintain the power poles, fix the ones that need fixing and do regular checks and maintenance, let us know. Then we can all be there. Because we had a generator up here—a town generator here. We didn't get power put on in Tibooburra until 1977, and that was a generator. Otherwise, prior to 1977, everybody generated their own power in town.

Mrs SALLY QUINNELL: But you've been promised a service and—

TRACEY HOTCHIN: Yes, so they took the generators out of commission up here. Therefore, with every blackout, everything that went on, we couldn't get those generators. Then we find out that when they brought the raw power to town, the power to town, they put the thing down at the tower down at the roadhouse there, not over at the shed. That's been the biggest issue. They had to redo all the poles in town so that they could make that over there the centre point because that's where they need to put the generator to power the town. There was a big

job they had to do before they put the generators in, so they haven't really—what we see in the bush is nobody really thinks things through. Come in and ask a bushman, "How would I go about supplying power to Tibooburra?", and they'd tell you straight up and you'd know what you were doing. But when you've got people that come from the city come and tell us, they've got no idea how it works. Can you get what I'm saying?

Mrs SALLY QUINNELL: Yes, 100 per cent. I want to talk about this particular incident, understanding that this is not infrequent, and maybe I am talking about the frequent happenings as well. Say a pole goes down. Before you lose mobile coverage, do you get notification of what's happened and how long it's expected to be out?

TRACEY HOTCHIN: Most of us ring and find out from Essential Energy.

PHYLLIS AINSWORTH: If people have a mobile phone, yes.

Mrs SALLY QUINNELL: But you have to actively ring?

TRACEY HOTCHIN: Yes.

PHYLLIS AINSWORTH: Yes.

Mrs SALLY QUINNELL: Do they send you a text or anything?

TRACEY HOTCHIN: No. They'll send you a text after, saying—

MIA DEGOUMOIS: That's only been pretty recent.

TRACEY HOTCHIN: Yes.

PHYLLIS AINSWORTH: Somebody will ring in and say, "Our power is out." Then—

Mrs SALLY QUINNELL: So the community will bush telegraph their way through it?

PHYLLIS AINSWORTH: Yes, then we'll start receiving text messages to say, "The power is out in your area." You get a little map—

TRACEY HOTCHIN: You'll get a call from a property and they'll say, "Have you got power in Tibooburra?" "No", and then we start trying to work it out. "Have you got power at Milparinka?" "No."

PHYLLIS AINSWORTH: And then you go back down the line.

TRACEY HOTCHIN: "Mia, have you got power at Packsaddle?" "No." Then we'd say there's power at Broken Hill and there's power at Sturts Meadows or Fowlers Gap, so we say "Right, it might be at Nundooka." We can pretty much target where it might be.

PHYLLIS AINSWORTH: So we give them the information that they should know, pretty much.

Mrs SALLY QUINNELL: So in those 19 days that the stations were out—I completely understand; I'm from an area where there's a township and then there's everybody else outside of the township—was there any attempt, apart from text messages and ABC Radio, to contact people in town and surrounds?

PHYLLIS AINSWORTH: No, I don't think there was.

MIA DEGOUMOIS: No. Because we've got SES, volunteer ambulance and RFS, they contacted us. They said, "Are you guys okay? Have you got enough power? If something happens, can you guys respond?" So they were the ones that were communicating.

PHYLLIS AINSWORTH: The general community, no. But if you're—like, Mia and I are both tied up with emergency.

Mrs SALLY QUINNELL: Were they being proactively contacted, or were they seeking information?

MIA DEGOUMOIS: They were seeking information.

PHYLLIS AINSWORTH: They were seeking information.

Mrs SALLY QUINNELL: And then distributing that information? Was there any central point of truth in town? I know you have assumed central points of truth, like the SES and RFS. You know from experience that they've got the info. But was there any central point of "This is what's happening. You can come here to find out what's going on if you feel like you—

PHYLLIS AINSWORTH: No.

TRACEY HOTCHIN: It's a bit like this meeting today. There's a few people that, I've found out, didn't even know it was happening, because there's nobody—if you did send information to both the pubs, that's

probably, and I know it sounds—but the hotels are where the information will get out. Totally different but Service NSW come up with their van, and it's only if you walk out and see them parked in the street that you realise they're in town.

PHYLLIS AINSWORTH: And they don't always let us know.

TRACEY HOTCHIN: And I'm thinking, "Come on, just send me an email." I've given them my email address. I can put a notice at the hotel. Melissa can put one at her hotel, and then we can make sure we tell people that they're coming to town. But nobody lets us know anything. It's as if you're supposed to be a genie and work it all out for yourself.

PHYLLIS AINSWORTH: I did try and pass the word around town.

MIA DEGOUMOIS: Yes, stuff goes on that—there is a Tibooburra page, but you have to be following that.

TRACEY HOTCHIN: But there's people that aren't on Facebook, see?

MIA DEGOUMOIS: That's why I say if you haven't got that, you're—

PHYLLIS AINSWORTH: I did put it on the page. And there are people that aren't on it, but word of mouth does end up getting around, but—

Mrs SALLY QUINNELL: In Menindee they were talking about a separate communication avenue, and I think it is knowing the town and knowing what works for that town, or area, region.

PHYLLIS AINSWORTH: Yes.

TRACEY HOTCHIN: I don't think we need another committee or another organisation that—

Mrs SALLY QUINNELL: No, no. I was saying it's knowing which one to contact.

TRACEY HOTCHIN: Yes.

PHYLLIS AINSWORTH: Yes.

Mrs SALLY QUINNELL: In Broken Hill, one of the places that we've heard about that sort of stepped into the breach was the club. Do you feel like the pubs were playing that role here?

PHYLLIS AINSWORTH: Yes.

TRACEY HOTCHIN: The pubs are the hub of town. Most people go to the pubs. You can get a message or any yarn or something like that but, if the hotels don't know, it's hard to pass it on. And Vicki's store, and the roadhouse. You've got four places that can be an email point, or a flyer or something that can be printed out, and every business will do it. I do it if I get it, but if I don't get it I can't do it.

Mrs SALLY QUINNELL: I apologise for being an ignorant city girl, but can you explain to me why the fuel pumps didn't work with the Starlink? Can you explain that to me?

PHYLLIS AINSWORTH: They weren't hooked up with Starlink.

MIA DEGOUMOIS: Because they're self-set up, so it's got nothing to—they own their own set-up. The way it works, it goes to Brisbane. It's all off them, so it's completely separate. None of us can touch that. They can't remotely connect unless they've found a way out to do it since then.

TRACEY HOTCHIN: But they also need power to operate the pumps.

Mrs SALLY QUINNELL: To make that happen.

TRACEY HOTCHIN: Yes. So Mia's—is yours connected when your genny's on?

MIA DEGOUMOIS: Yes, ours is connected. What was it? You can't the fuel out if the tag—the tag has to connect to get authorised. And that's working through the mobile service and not through its own mobile. Do you know what I mean? Like they have on—

TRACEY HOTCHIN: Yes, so you have about three different elements: power, mobile—

Mrs SALLY QUINNELL: So they've put all these protections on it, and those protections are what stops you accessing that, in need?

PHYLLIS AINSWORTH: Yes.

MIA DEGOUMOIS: Yes.

TRACEY HOTCHIN: So the power stops the connection with Telstra, or what you get for your phone service, and that's what the tags or whatever work on. Then the power needs to be there for the pumps to work, and then you need their system, which needs power, to get back to Brisbane to let them know.

Mrs SALLY QUINNELL: I just wanted to understand, if someone said to me, "Well, how is that?" My last question is just about the logistics of sourcing food, fuel when the pumps aren't working. Where does that stuff come from? Do you go to Broken Hill?

PHYLLIS AINSWORTH: Broken Hill.

Mrs SALLY QUINNELL: Is everything from Broken Hill?

PHYLLIS AINSWORTH: Pretty much, Broken Hill. Unless you buy online, but then it still has to come via Broken Hill anyway.

TRACEY HOTCHIN: We get one freight service a week. That's on a Tuesday. And we get two posts a week, on Tuesday and Thursday.

Mrs SALLY QUINNELL: Do you have any health services that are set up in town?

TRACEY HOTCHIN: Yes.

PHYLLIS AINSWORTH: Yes, we do.

Mrs SALLY QUINNELL: And what was the impact on them?

TRACEY HOTCHIN: They have their own generator which starts three seconds, I think, after the power goes out.

PHYLLIS AINSWORTH: Yes. They're fully self-sufficient, and that's been set up through NSW Health. That's just the way they're set up.

Mrs SALLY QUINNELL: And do they have a Starlink?

PHYLLIS AINSWORTH: They do, now.

TRACEY HOTCHIN: To add to that, they've only just put Starlink in, because they lost their services when we had that long outage without power. So they've now got Starlink.

Mrs SALLY QUINNELL: So that's post this 19 days?

TRACEY HOTCHIN: Yes.

PHYLLIS AINSWORTH: Yes, this is only very recent—in the last month or two.

Mrs SALLY QUINNELL: Look at that! We achieved something that quick.

The CHAIR: Thank you, and thank you for humour.

Ms MARYANNE STUART: Thank you to all of you for your time. Like Sally said, I apologise if you have to repeat yourself with some of these things. We were talking on the way out here that we didn't realise the distance between each township, and therefore the importance of why Roy was saying to all of us, "You have to go to them." Again, thanks a lot for your time. The distance is incredible. So the emergency response and the communications and things like that—I want to talk very similarly to what Sally was talking about. Yesterday, we were at Menindee. They said if there's anything that needs to get around town, put it in the school newsletter. I'm hearing the same thing here. You've got to ring Tracey—

PHYLLIS AINSWORTH: Or Melissa at the pub.

TRACEY HOTCHIN: Or Vicki.

Mrs SALLY QUINNELL: Or Mia at Packsaddle.

Ms MARYANNE STUART: So that should be basic knowledge that government agencies and departments should know.

PHYLLIS AINSWORTH: Yes.

TRACEY HOTCHIN: But they don't even send it to the village committee, and they would have the village committee email address. They don't even do that.

PHYLLIS AINSWORTH: No.

Ms MARYANNE STUART: Communication seems to be a very big thing, and particularly when we are hearing that blackouts are not uncommon, and these challenges are not going to be uncommon.

TRACEY HOTCHIN: No. And normally it's in the summer, so you've got all the added elements to it. When it's storm season, that's when we get our thunderstorms. That's when we get the rain.

Ms MARYANNE STUART: Being so remote, if I can put it like that—and I'm not being disrespectful to you—did you get hampers? Food delivery?

PHYLLIS AINSWORTH: Yes, we did get them in town, towards the end.

TRACEY HOTCHIN: Somebody did them, I'm not sure. They came through the land council. The Aboriginal Land Council got some to give out to people.

Ms MARYANNE STUART: That's good to know.

MIA DEGOUMOIS: I want to say, too, we were contacted by Roy Butler's office. Someone from there did contact the roadhouse—I know that for sure—and I'm guessing probably, maybe Vicki.

TRACEY HOTCHIN: They did me too.

MIA DEGOUMOIS: Yes, so they were trying to do what they could do, which there wasn't much.

TRACEY HOTCHIN: Roy was very active in wanting to know what we were up to.

MIA DEGOUMOIS: Yes, he was. I didn't want to forget what he did, because he's been unreal.

Ms MARYANNE STUART: We also heard yesterday—and it might come back to you, Phyllis—that people have medical conditions and rely on electricity for that. For example, we heard a story yesterday that someone has to keep insulin refrigerated and then, when the fridge didn't work, they had to throw a lot of that out. Have you got any stories around town here?

TRACEY HOTCHIN: I stored medication for people at the pub. So I know there were people in town that were just worried that they weren't going to keep their medication to the right temperature.

PHYLLIS AINSWORTH: There is somebody in town that knows somebody that has some sort of medical condition that needs that sort of help so, yes, we look after our own.

Ms MARYANNE STUART: No, I hear that. I love that country community spirit. It's very good to hear. But you also need to have support and you need to have better communication, and you need to have better communication from the services. You also need to have better maintenance of the electricity that's being supplied that, at the end of the day, you're paying for.

TRACEY HOTCHIN: Yes, and big money for it. Then through that power out, they wanted us to turn all our solar off so that we didn't upset their generators in Broken Hill.

Ms MARYANNE STUART: Yes, we heard that yesterday as well.

TRACEY HOTCHIN: I understand it because we produce way more power than Tibooburra ever needs, but come on. Through the days that we didn't have our—we could help our generators out and take the load off them.

Ms MARYANNE STUART: One of the things we heard yesterday as well is when you get these messages—most of the time it was after the fact—that "We're going to have another outage, we're going to have a brownout," like the load share, it would have been helpful to have been told, "You're not going to have electricity today from 4.00 p.m. till 8.00 p.m." You could have cooked your dinner or done your washing—

TRACEY HOTCHIN: They did do that once they got the generators in Broken Hill. Because they had two generators down there, but one was out for maintenance and had been out for maintenance for two years.

Ms MARYANNE STUART: The Transgrid one.

TRACEY HOTCHIN: Yes, so we only had one generator there. So once they got that generator going and powered us, when they were going to take us out—I, at least, got text messaged to say, "We were going to have a brownout for X amount of hours to load share." And they were going to send power to somewhere else, which we all accept that.

Ms MARYANNE STUART: So you've had the equipment in for 30 years. You appreciate and had a hope that maintenance had been done. Did you know there was only one of two generators that worked?

TRACEY HOTCHIN: No, but we also only found out when all that was going on in Broken Hill that the solar and wind turbines down there aren't connected to the batteries that have been sitting there for ages too. They've all got a lifespan—or the wind turbines do, and they've been there for about 12 years, so 12 years of their life is already gone. But it looks pretty.

MIA DEGOUMOIS: Another thing too is that even when the power was working, you remember Tibooburra when you had a lot of tourists here, the town was having brownouts then. So the infrastructure can't supply the demand on it at some times. The Government gave us this wonderful funding to do upgrades to our gymkhana grounds, but they've got this little tiny transformer. They're trying to help the bush and all that, but the energy supply isn't capable to do what they want us to do. We can do it, but we can't use it.

Ms MARYANNE STUART: We also heard in Menindee that the RFS stepped up and really punched above their weight. Sally asked you the question before. You've got SES, police and RFS here?

PHYLLIS AINSWORTH: Yes, and volunteer ambulance as well.

TRACEY HOTCHIN: Everything that happens in here is volunteer. We don't have council. We don't have nothing. Our water is supplied through volunteers. Everything is voluntary. So we're really proud of our community.

Ms MARYANNE STUART: Yes, you should be.

TRACEY HOTCHIN: But it's just you feel like you get your head and you smack it up against a brick wall every time we get people in that we—as I said, I've got nothing against any of you, but I'd be surprised if we really get an answer out of anything, from whoever is supposed to answer us.

Ms MARYANNE STUART: I think I know the answer to this last question, but what would you like to see done to make sure this sort of thing doesn't happen again in the future?

TRACEY HOTCHIN: I've put my thing forward. I think they need to put generators to generate power at those points, so that everybody has got a chance of having some power. It would take a load off, and if Tibooburra's powered up with its generator, all the solar that's on the roofs in town is going back into that line, and if they've got another source of power at Milparinka, it can at least go to there and help feed that. So we need the power connection to be able to utilise our solar out.

We all generate a lot of solar. We had a blackout here once before. They bought a generator into Tibooburra and put it on, and I got power at the hotel, and I thought, "Oh, beauty, we've all got power. They've put the generator in." You could hear the generator running and everything, but no, it wasn't. It was only a certain part of the town and the other part of the town didn't, so I got a bit of crap from people because, "She's got a big generator. Why has she got power when she could be running the generator?" So I went to the guys and I said, "Can you please turn me off and give the power to other people? I've got a generator." And they just said to me straight out, "Tracey, we need you to be powered up because the amount of solar you've got on the roof at the pub is going to help us take the load off that generator to give people power, so we're not actually giving you power. You're powering yourself while the generator's allowing them to take that solar out." So they wouldn't turn it off.

PHYLLIS AINSWORTH: And whoever owns all the powerlines, do your maintenance. Get off your arses and get the maintenance done.

MIA DEGOUMOIS: The whole thing needs to be upgraded.

PHYLLIS AINSWORTH: Without maintenance—it's going to keep happening, but they've got to maintain the infrastructure they've got already.

TRACEY HOTCHIN: But when they put it in 30 years ago they told us all, on the properties, "This is not a lifetime thing."

The CHAIR: I've just got two quick questions to finish us up for this session. Are any of you or do you know of anyone in Tibooburra who is part of the local emergency management controls or plans?

PHYLLIS AINSWORTH: I attend the local emergency management meetings.

TRACEY HOTCHIN: It's usually the policemen.

PHYLLIS AINSWORTH: Yes, police, SES and RFS. I go too.

Ms MARYANNE STUART: The LEMC?

PHYLLIS AINSWORTH: Yes, the LEMC meetings.

The CHAIR: So when you got the blackout, was that stood up in town and those meetings were happening once or twice a day or something?

PHYLLIS AINSWORTH: No, I don't think—we had a meeting in late November.

The CHAIR: After the event?

PHYLLIS AINSWORTH: Yes, but I wasn't at that meeting. I was away with work.

MIA DEGOUMOIS: But we did get updated emails from—I can't think of the word—anyway, in Broken Hill, what was being coordinated. So in a way we probably knew a bit more than most other people did about what was happening.

The CHAIR: My final question is about the effect on tourism. Did you have tourists in town at the time when it happened? Did they flee? Did they stick it out with you? After the event, did you see tourists return, or was there a long delay in return? So a broad question about tourism for all of you.

PHYLLIS AINSWORTH: There were still a few tourists around. It was October, so we're still busy. We don't sort of back off until early December.

The CHAIR: When the heat goes up?

PHYLLIS AINSWORTH: Yes, when it starts to get really warm. Some people stuck it out for a little bit. Some people we just suggested, "Look, maybe move on to your next spot because we don't know how long our power is going to be out. Save the stress on the power in town." They were pretty good. People were happy just to talk about it with us. Yes, it dropped off a little bit but they still come back. Once the word got around, people still come back.

MIA DEGOUMOIS: For us, our generator isn't wired up to power everything, so we had to cancel everyone. You just had to do what you had to do.

The CHAIR: Would your normal tourism period be through the winter into spring, and then does it close off in the hotter months?

MIA DEGOUMOIS: Yes, and starts again in Easter.

TRACEY HOTCHIN: But for us and for Tibooburra, there was a lot of workers in town. The APA and the APT, they were in town—that's the Australian Pipeline Authority that gets the gas from Moomba to Sydney. A lot of those guys were in town, and they were scrambling for accommodation with air conditioning. I don't know whether you call me lucky or smart or whatever, but I've got a generator that does run all my rooms. So all our rooms were air conditioned, so we were fully booked trying to accommodate everybody. As I said, I had a couple of blokes sleeping on the floor in the bar. You let them camp on the bar floor with a mattress because I had no rooms and they were just—where they were staying, it was just too hot. But it affects everybody, in a sense.

The CHAIR: I'm sorry that we haven't got extra time to keep with it. We are going to shift into a more open town hall sort of environment. I want to thank you ladies for appearing before us today. You will be provided with a copy of the transcript, and you can check that for any corrections you'd like to make if you've been misheard. We also might be working on some additional questions that we'd like to send to you to clarify some of the stuff that you've said. If we do that, you'll get them late next week, and we just ask you to turn them around in seven days if you can. If you can't, talk to us, and we'll work through that. That's no dramas. That concludes our formal hearing element for today. I'd like to again place on the record my many thanks to you for taking the time to be with us, and I apologise yet again for us being late getting started.

(The witnesses withdrew.)

The CHAIR: First of all, thank you all for coming. I apologise to you, like I did to the group earlier today, that we're running so late. I don't mean to disrespect your time at all. We are very happy for you to be here to help us learn about your experience with regard to the power outages. There are a couple of things. We've set up as many microphones as we can. Interestingly, as you all came in, you grabbed your chairs and pulled them further away. If you're a big speaker like I am, it probably doesn't matter too much. If you're a softer speaker, when you speak you will absolutely need to be closer to a microphone. It's just so that when Hansard is recording what is said in this town hall we get a clear and accurate record of what was said.

The other thing I would ask is that as you start to speak could you please say your name, or if you are choosing to speak anonymously, please just say, "I'm anonymous", and then say what you want to say. Where possible, we will link the comment with a name. Where not possible, that's okay as well. It's all evidence either way because we are hearing it and it's going to be recorded by Hansard. So it's all evidence, which is great. It helps us enormously.

I begin by acknowledging the Wangkumara people who are the traditional custodians of this land on which we're meeting and pay my respects to the Elders of this country and to any Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people who may be present. We are the New South Wales Parliament's Legislative Assembly Committee on Environment and Planning. My name is Clayton Barr. With me are my fellow members Deputy Chair Sally Quinnell, Maryanne Stuart, Judy Hannan and James Wallace. This is our second town hall. We had a very small and intimate town hall out at Menindee yesterday. We just simply ask that only one person speaks at a time because of the microphones and the noise for Hansard. It's difficult if more than one person speaks.

My preference at this stage would be to try to go maybe from left to right to get you to make an initial comment. Once we get through all of that I might then throw to some of the members to see if they want to come back to someone just to get a clarification. Your initial comments are the most important thing that we're going to hear from you today because it's your experience and journey. Please avoid naming any private individuals unless necessary. If you had a bad experience with a person, then just "it was a person". Mia, you were here with us earlier. I don't know if there's something you want to say now.

MIA DEGOUMOIS, before the Committee: No, I'm just interested in learning a bit more about what it's all about.

The CHAIR: About other people's experiences?

MIA DEGOUMOIS: Yes, that's right.

REBECCA YOUNG, before the Committee: I'm from Milparinka Hotel, which is 40 kays south of here. I have the hotel there and there's also part of the Sturt's Steps, there's a caravan park and there's a museum, blah, blah, blah. I feel like I've been left out of the loop of all of this. I haven't heard from anyone about anything—what's going on, what's going to happen—and it affected me. Three days without power. I have lost fridges, freezers. I have no generators, so I've lost food and loss of business, and it was just a nightmare. Without power we can't even flush a toilet, so we've got three days where we can't even flush a toilet. I felt three days like I may as well have gone camping in the bush with nothing. I just feel very left out of the loop as my business and a small town—I've no idea what's going on.

Ms MARYANNE STUART: Dennis was telling me that he was cooking for 500 people. You had some events and things like that, is that right?

REBECCA YOUNG: It happened to Ross too, yes. We had to go out in the middle of the dark and start the generator, because that was for the initial first part of it. At the time I had a rally of 500 people, and I was speaking to someone from Essential Energy. They said, "Yes, we've got you at the top of our priority list." I said, "Look, I just need a generator. How can I run this function without power?" And, "Sorry, Rebecca, we can't do anything for you." I just think that's absolutely disgraceful. I lost big time that night because as soon as the power went out I had to shut the show down. And then in the morning the power was supposed to be back on at whatever time. It never came on. So here I am, cooking breakfast—and Dennis was there—for 500 people without power. The rally organisers were starting to get a bit shirty at me because we were struggling to keep up.

DENNIS DEGRUSSA, before the Committee: I'm here to support Bec in exactly what she said. She's been left out of this loop. She didn't even know this was on. She wasn't informed. Yet she's on the main power, the same as Mia. We are just at the bottom. We're at the end of the line, and we need our own generators. They've got to be standalones. They have to be. There are no two ways about it.

VICKI JACKSON, before the Committee: On top of that—I own the shop across the road.

The CHAIR: We're coming around that way. We'll get to you, no doubt about it. Tracey was with us earlier.

TRACEY HOTCHIN, before the Committee: I was just going to add to what Bec was saying. Her situation is similar to what the properties are going through, where we talked about it earlier. Also, I wanted to just tell these guys what I suggested before. I suggested we put a generator at Broken Hill. We need a generator at Packsaddle, we need a generator at Milparinka and we need one in Tibooburra. Then if the line goes down between Packsaddle and Milparinka, Milparinka can kick in and then that keeps the properties going as well as the town. Tibooburra needs to keep its own. It would then draw off of those smaller generators, but at least the properties would get power and those other centres would get power. I just wanted to tell them that that's what I did.

EMMA McLEAN, before the Committee: I am a resident of Tibooburra. I guess the thing that was most difficult for us was the heat. Today is actually a bit cooler. When the power did go out, we had temperatures over 40 degrees, and I don't have any way to run my fridges. I since do, but at the time we didn't have any way to run our fridges or any cooling at all. That's just days and nights of relentless heat and also not knowing what was going on. It's pretty hard to take with children.

Ms MARYANNE STUART: Did you have to throw lots of food out, Emma?

EMMA McLEAN: No. Luckily, I didn't have to throw out food. It was more just trying to sleep, just trying to do whatever you have to do during the day. The only option we had to get out of the heat would be to go and sit at one of our pubs. Luckily for us, these guys don't kick us out if we come up. But it's not a great back-up plan to take the kids to the pub if you have no power for three days.

ANNY O'CONNOR, before the Committee: I've got a thousand things and no notes. I'm off Mount Arrowsmith station. I own it. My 92-year-old dad lives with me. I guess the elderly and the young are the most important. The rest of us, it's something we're able to get through. I've got my own generator and I've got it wired in. As Tracey said earlier, if you're go and get something like that, you get it sorted so it's there. I can go and start it. I don't know what I'm going to do when the genset doesn't work anymore; I really don't.

There's a couple of things. Number one, it's probably my fault I didn't know anything about this because I'm not on Facebook. When that 17 days was on, I didn't know when the power was coming off and on. In the end I didn't care; you just dealt with it. My dad was born in Tibooburra and has lived on the land all his life, so he just dealt with it too. It's a bit funny. They've got your mobile number when they want it, and then all of a sudden it goes out of the system. I keep thinking, "Yeah, but you used it six months ago. How come it's still not there?" "Oh, you know, you're not on our system." "Well, that's funny. I've paid my bills. You've used it." But anyway, I haven't got time to fight with them or go through it all every six months to make sure they've got my mobile.

TRACEY HOTCHIN: Can I just cut in? They know where the power was out, and they can all send us a power bill, so they know how to contact us.

ANNY O'CONNOR: They do know how to do that. There are a couple of things that I want to say. The health centre manage very well, but they're very mindful of everybody else. Their workload increased for welfare checks when that happened. I just want to put that in for the health centre. I just know that. They don't grizzle; they don't moan or groan. But I know they were doing extra welfare checks on everybody, especially the elderly. Apparently, you could get money or you could get a hamper, or you might get sent this or that. Nobody on a station got a thing, that I know of—never got a phone call, never got a visit, never got a card in the mail, never got a hamper, didn't get a voucher, that I know of.

TRACEY HOTCHIN: While I come here and Gumbo couldn't get one because we had our own generator.

ANNY O'CONNOR: That was really good. I've got a really good question at the end of this that I know the answer to, but I want someone else to tell me. It gets a bit hard, but you just put up with it. There are two major things. Tracey has already got onto it with the generators at each section. Thirteen months ago, four power poles got blown over. You're never going to stop Mother Nature. That's fine by us; we know that. Four power poles get knocked out three kays south of Tibooburra, and how long did that take—two weeks?

TRACEY HOTCHIN: Yes.

ANNY O'CONNOR: Two weeks to get fixed. But Packsaddle were on, and Cobham station and Milpara station were on, and then there's that big common town and there's a transformer there. Everyone up the road had to go off for that two weeks while they're trying to get these four power poles fixed up.

TRACEY HOTCHIN: And it was too wet. They couldn't get in there. They had to get dozers and loaders.

ANNY O'CONNOR: Yes, all that sort of thing. But I can't work out why from Milparinka up wasn't—like, leave Milparinka down. It would have been a bloody station, except now it's Stuart station, that would have blown off if they just could have kept the power coming up the road. There was no trouble on our lines. Is it because of the transformers?

TRACEY HOTCHIN: I think it is, because I asked that question. That's when they said if they put standalone—like, put generators along the line, because I asked that question of them when they were here, the power bokes. If they had one at Milparinka, that then they can isolate. If they had one at Packsaddle, they can isolate. So they should do it.

ANNY O'CONNOR: It's 175 kays and there are square lines going everywhere. I know about going out. When the power first went on, I'm on the longest square line on this line. Every Friday afternoon—I should have run a bookie's thing on it. Every Friday afternoon, at somewhere between two and four o'clock for at least 12 months, the power would go out.

The CHAIR: Every Friday?

ANNY O'CONNOR: Just about every bloody Friday. Inland Energy were running it then, and this local guy said, "Anny, you're going to have to help us out here", because obviously there was a tree or just something that was putting our line out all the time. It was just stock standard.

Mrs SALLY QUINNELL: But that tree is only there on Friday?

ANNY O'CONNOR: Yes, only moved on a Friday afternoon, so work that one out. Anyway, it took them a couple of years. The guy would never, ever tell me what the problem was, but they did fix it eventually. I could never find out. I couldn't get it out of him what it was, just quirky little things. So you just put up with all that. You just put up with it all. But you're getting a little bit sick of everyone south, until the Nundooka poles blew over or whatever—everyone south is still going, and everyone north is getting knocked out because of two poles somewhere that have got nothing to do with it.

MIA DEGOUMOIS: So that switch they put in at Cobham, that hasn't been there that long. That's only been there in the last few years.

ANNY O'CONNOR: Well, if they can put it in there, they can bloody put it in everywhere.

TRACEY HOTCHIN: They told me they'd put one at Milparinka.

MIA DEGOUMOIS: Yes, which makes heaps of common sense. Put them along the way, not just—but for them, I guess, it's right bang in the middle. We'll put one there and we can keep this side and that side, because that whole line was out. If there was one pole down in Tibooburra, all of us were out. I think they thought it was a start, I guess. We can at least keep some people going. But then, like you said, why not put it in more stages?

ANNY O'CONNOR: A hundred and seventy kays worth. My last question or my last comment is, because it's a maintenance thing and a Mother Nature thing, which you're never going to stop—the maintenance you should be able to stop—why can't this powerline go underground?

The CHAIR: Why can't it go underground? I don't know the answer to that. That's a question you're posing?

ANNY O'CONNOR: Yes. Why can't it go underground? Your poles will never get knocked over.

TRACEY HOTCHIN: If they maintain them, though, because through that 15 to 20 years, I don't think we had an outage because the poles were new.

ANNY O'CONNOR: They're always going out. I'm sick of it. Put it underground—no more trouble.

TRACEY HOTCHIN: Yes, but you've still got issues.

The CHAIR: I'll take that as a comment just for the minute. I feel like that bloke on that show.

UNIDENTIFIED, before the Committee: When the power does go out here it's probably about—I don't know if anyone's mentioned it—four to six hours. We lose all phone service, communications and everything unless you've got power and Starlink or satellite internet that you can connect your phone to. Otherwise, we lose all mobile service in town.

The CHAIR: In four to six hours?

UNIDENTIFIED: In four to six hours of the power going out, and it can be out for days, or even until the power comes back on.

EMMA McLEAN: As a new resident, when I first moved here last year, I was actually warned. They were like, "Don't buy more food than you need because we lose power constantly, and it'll be for several days at a time." It's nearly an eight-hour round trip to the shops, so it's a bit of a hard deal—so things like that. Just expect the power to go out because that's what has always happened.

VICKI JACKSON, before the Committee: It's probably been mentioned before; I don't know. but I feel, with Anny, maybe we should consider underground power or just replace the whole line and all the power from Broken Hill right up to Narriearra, where the end of the line is. I think the last three years I've lost so many fridges and freezers due to power surges. They're really, really bad. I've actually had the hospital, the last probably 12 months, come in because I've had a generator, but now it doesn't work.

The last 12 months I've had the hospital coming to me to use the phone because I've had Starlink, because they've had nothing up there. Like Aimee just said, once the power goes out you've got four to six hours, max, and then you've got nothing, unless you've got Starlink and a generator to run everything to create the power. I think the problem is the infrastructure, like you guys have said, probably, with the powerlines to start with. We all know that, yes, we should have generators, but I think you've got to get the source.

The CHAIR: Committee members might want to go back to one or two people to ask a clarification question or a further advice question.

Mrs SALLY QUINNELL: Emma, as a newbie in the area, you come with an interesting viewpoint that many people are used to dealing with this. Is this something you feel that everyone else in New South Wales puts up with?

EMMA McLEAN: Absolutely not.

Mrs SALLY QUINNELL: I'm very well aware that people who are Tibooburra born and bred, and surrounds, just get on with it and deal with it. But as a newbie, you come in with a different understanding of what elsewhere is doing.

EMMA McLEAN: Yes, I've been here since April last year. I came from Bathurst, and I've worked around Bathurst and the Blue Mountains. Everywhere has power outages due to unforeseen circumstances, but you don't have the heat, for one thing, and you don't have the inaccessibility to communications and to services, and even just food. Even the way a grid—parts of a town will go out, but not the whole town, usually. Even if you were potentially a bit desperate, there's someone there. You could get something from somewhere. The fact that it's just par for the course kind of did blow me away a little bit. Here is a place where just part of your induction to living in the town is—

Mrs SALLY QUINNELL: You can't rely on power.

EMMA McLEAN: Yes, just expect the power to go out a lot and stay out. It's not even an hour or two at a time; it's days.

VICKI JACKSON: But we all should be on a par with whoever lives in Sydney to living out here. We shouldn't feel that we're missing out because we're living a bit more remote. We're all in the same kind.

Mrs SALLY QUINNELL: One of the things that we're hearing from various different areas and towns is that there are different types of communication that work within certain towns. Thinking about getting information to you and your town or area, what would be the best way? I want you to think of it in two parts. In that gap between power going out and phones going out—so while you've still got phones—and then after phones go out, what would be an appropriate way to communicate with your area in those two circumstances?

VICKI JACKSON: A helicopter drop. I don't have as long as what these guys have. Our landline will go out for maybe four hours, but I won't have mobile service because the tower is another thing that needs upgrading, and the service where we are is useless. Telstra is, so the phone is absolutely useless, no power for internet. So I really don't know—a homing pigeon.

Mrs SALLY QUINNELL: So it would literally be someone driving from, say, Broken Hill to you and saying, "This is the situation"?

VICKI JACKSON: During those three days I had absolutely no idea what was going on. Like I said, I was living like a nomad—no communication, no nothing. I had absolutely no idea.

EMMA McLEAN: And on that—correct me if I'm wrong in your situation, Rebecca—say, for example, if I've driven back from Broken Hill, I don't have enough fuel to drive back again or to drive terribly far. If we

have no power and no fuel, I can't then refuel to physically drive somewhere because there's not enough fuel. My personal car doesn't have a long-range tank.

Mrs SALLY QUINNELL: Therefore, you can't deviate to someone as well. You can't deviate off and go and check.

EMMA McLEAN: Yes. When I get back to Tibooburra, usually I have to go and refuel in a couple of days just in case we lose power and we can't get fuel. It is literally being cut off.

The CHAIR: Judy, did you have questions you wanted to put to any of our special guests.

Mrs JUDY HANNAN: No, I'm just listening. Actually, I guess I'd make a comment that you seem to be more organised, to an extent, than some other areas. It's no great thing to say but, because you have such poor services, you seem to take your own initiative. I'm curious as to—

TRACEY HOTCHIN: We can still survive. You put the same amount of people from the city here, and they wouldn't have a clue what to do. And that's why—

VICKI JACKSON: We just hope there are no accidents, because—

The CHAIR: We can only have one person talking at a time, for the sake of the microphones and Hansard. I'm really sorry about that. Did you want to finish?

TRACEY HOTCHIN: Yes, I was just going to say that's where it comes back to infrastructure, as I said. If you're going to offer a service, service the service. If not, we then make our own arrangements. We had the generator and they took it away, and then they put the service in and now we've brought a generator back. We don't want them to take that generator. I just think that it's all about making sure that the communication level is there, however you do it or whatever you do.

Me owning a hotel, I allow anybody to come into the hotel to keep cool or to do whatever they need to do. They can put a mattress on the floor; they can do whatever. I've stored their food in my freezer; I've stored their food in my coolrooms. It's about community, and it's about things that sometimes people in the city don't understand how we do have to pull together. It's not because we're some fantastic people; it's just our nature. It's how we've been raised. It's how we've been brought up. It's about helping one another, but we've got so many things. As I said, I think it comes back to infrastructure. Everything's about infrastructure, whether they're putting new infrastructure in or whether they're continuing to maintain the infrastructure that we have.

ANNY O'CONNOR: Put it underground.

The CHAIR: I want to go back to Vicki, because you were saying something.

VICKI JACKSON: I was just going to say, because I've dealt with Debbie for the last 12 months when we've had all these power fluctuations and outages, she always says, "Oh, my god, I hope there's not an accident on the road because nobody would bloody know because no-one can ring anybody". That's fairly imperative that the infrastructure's in place and working, because there's nothing out there if there's no—

The CHAIR: Anny, did you want to finish your thought that you were about to share?

ANNY O'CONNOR: I just said, "Put it underground".

The CHAIR: I can 100 per cent guarantee that's outside of our power here. But, again, we'll take that comment on board. There was also a committee inquiry into powerlines going underground. I didn't read their report, but I'll let you know that that happened.

Mrs JUDY HANNAN: My only question is we've got these reusable energy systems—solar and wind and all the rest of it. I know they're privately owned and all the rest of it. Do you think it's feasible that we should be taking some percentage of their power or something? With mining there were royalties that came to local areas. Do you think there should be something looked at with that power, whether it's for infrastructure or a certain amount of power?

TRACEY HOTCHIN: If they put a battery system here in Tibooburra and allowed our excess solar that we generate to charge that battery through the day, the guys I spoke to said that we generate more power than we need in Tibooburra and we send it down the grid, and they can't even give us 4¢ or some darn thing for feed-in tariffs. It's a joke, but there are so many things they could do. We've all tried to help ourselves by putting solar in. I don't think there are many places in town that don't have solar. We're trying to do what we can.

Mrs JUDY HANNAN: I know the laws in New South Wales are a bit behind. If you have solar in your house and you have a car that could work as a battery, in South Australia you can do that and recycle, but you

can't in New South Wales. You have to go back into the grid. I'm wondering whether those laws need to be looked at.

The CHAIR: We might leave that as a bubble. Melissa, I want to come to you because you haven't had a chance to make a remark just yet. I know you've been in and out with your business next door.

MELISSA THOMSON, before the Committee: Most of what I was going to talk about has already been spoken about, but there is one thing. Not everyone in town had a generator. A lot of the elderly lost stock. We had, I think, four generators we lent out. I didn't have a generator for my motel; I had it for the hotel. So I was fully booked when we went out for that 17 days with the crew, and I lost every one of them. I didn't get any compensation. Nobody said anything to me, yet we were giving our generators. We didn't have a generator in our house for a while. My husband went and got one. So there's a lot to be looked into. Somebody said SES has got one, but who do you give them to? Who makes the choice who gets those generators? That was my little bit of a beef, and it's not happened once; it's happened a few times. I don't have a generator over at the motel and as soon as it goes—I can understand that. If it was me, I'd want to go somewhere where it was cool. So I lost all my custom then.

Ms MARYANNE STUART: Melissa also wasn't eligible for the voucher because she doesn't have a residential address; she's got a PO box.

MELISSA THOMSON: No, and that's another thing too.

REBECCA YOUNG: That's me too.

TRACEY HOTCHIN: And me—I wasn't eligible either.

MELISSA THOMSON: I'm on the electoral roll. They know where I live. But you had to have three things. I didn't have a power bill in my name. The only thing I could come up with—they didn't accept a driver licence or Medicare or anything like that. I found an old registration of a trailer that was in my name, and it said "1 King Street, Tibbooburra", and it was not enough. They know where we live. I know there are a lot of scams out there and people who just rot the system, but I didn't get the \$200; neither did I get it in Broken Hill. We've got a House in Broken Hill purely for our freight line. I still couldn't get it there either.

EMMA McLEAN: I don't know anybody who actually got that rebate, that service. None of us were eligible, apparently.

MELISSA THOMSON: We got the business one because we could prove that. But how many people have things in their own name these days?

Mr JAMES WALLACE: As an extension of that, Melissa and Rebecca, have you thought about how much money you lost during that period? Was there a dollar figure you could put on it?

MELISSA THOMSON: I don't know.

REBECCA YOUNG: Thousands.

TRACEY HOTCHIN: Thousands. We all lost it. Even if I had a generator, I still lost it.

MELISSA THOMSON: If you look at 11 motel rooms for a week, and then some of them moved over into pub rooms, but not everyone wants to share a bathroom. And then I had to take the staff—like, I had other people I had put out there. I gave the residence away to a family in Tibbooburra, because they had little kids. So we really do try to help each other. But there was nothing said, and I know there's a lot worse off than us, but I just think that Tibbooburra seems to get forgotten. It does get forgotten for government grants—everything. It does get forgotten.

ANNY O'CONNOR: No, it doesn't; it's on the news for being hot.

Mr JAMES WALLACE: You had 500 people there. What happened then? Did people leave?

REBECCA YOUNG: They left.

Mr JAMES WALLACE: Did you kick them out? Did you make money out of them, or—

REBECCA YOUNG: Not as much as what I should have, because I had to close the bar down. As soon as that power went out I had to shut the bar down, because I physically couldn't do it. I had no power.

Mr JAMES WALLACE: What was that group there for?

REBECCA YOUNG: Plus, there were no toilets; there were no facilities.

Mr JAMES WALLACE: What were they there for, that group?

REBECCA YOUNG: A rally. It was like an overnight stop, so they were on a car trip and Milparinka was their overnight stop.

Mr JAMES WALLACE: So would you say it was about the same—thousands of dollars?

REBECCA YOUNG: Oh, absolutely. Because 500 people—I had a lot of food in my coolrooms, freezers, and not just then. After that I couldn't even open because I couldn't give anyone a bed. I couldn't feed them. My beer was hot so I had to shut. I had to close. So anyone driving past, I'd say, "Sorry, just got to wave you by".

TRACEY HOTCHIN: But even if you had a generator, you still lost business. So it's not about whether you've got a generator or you're self-sufficient or whatever it is, and that's why I want to come back to the point that I made before. I think the thing that needs to be put in place right now, here today, if we can, is those generators—one at Packsaddle, one at Milparinka, and keep this one here. Because if the power goes out, we've got a chance to keep a lot of places on power—as many as possible—and that's three generators they have to supply. It's not much; we're not asking much. That would be, as far as I'm concerned, part of Transgrid or Essential Energy's responsibility to the bush to maintain the service that they have. They've put the one here, but they need the other two.

The CHAIR: Anny, final word, please?

ANNY O'CONNOR: I just wanted to say in the last six months I have lost four fridge-freezer units, and it'll only be from electrical spikes. I've turned into a fridge mechanic, which I didn't want to be. But what do you do about that? You ring up—first of all, you've got to get an electrical report, and good luck with that. That's a lot in six months, so there's something wrong. The spikes, the ebbs and flows with the electricity supply, is not good.

The CHAIR: I'd like to thank you all for coming out this afternoon. Your time has been incredible and, indeed, this small, brief session this afternoon has helped to fill out and put some more meat on the bones of what we heard from our three witnesses earlier today as well. Just so you know what it looks like for us, we go through this process now of doing these site visits. When we go back to Sydney, we will have a day of hearings with all the government departments, Telstra and the electricity providers. We'll have a day of hearings with those peak bodies, and then we are scheduled to table in Parliament the report that we ultimately write and sign off on in May, I think it is. Once we table that, the government of the day has up to six months to respond to that.

TRACEY HOTCHIN: What do we do in the process?

The CHAIR: In the meantime, I'm not going to overpromise anything. As I said, there's the AER report and the IPART report. I think that your electricity providers have a licence and an obligation to do ABC or XYZ. It's up to organisations like the Australian Energy Regulator or IPART to bring down the hammer on those if they're not living up to their contracted expectations. That's not a job for us, to bring down the hammer on them; that's a job for others. But I hope that it goes that way because, let's face it, even the \$200 and \$400, some of you got it and some of you didn't—a lot of you didn't. But that ultimately ended up coming out of taxpayers' money.

TRACEY HOTCHIN: Oh, 100 per cent—waste of money.

The CHAIR: So taxpayers were funding a problem not caused by Government but caused by private entities. I'd like taxpayers to get their money back from them, as well, but that's a personal, private comment from Clayton Barr. It should not be interpreted as the position of the Committee. I hope the hammer comes down on them, Tracey. That's what I'm saying. You deserve better.

TRACEY HOTCHIN: All I meant by that is your comment—you table yours in May, it's March now, and then they might get it in June, July or August. Then, by the time they go through their process, it definitely will be February or March next year before—this is what happens in the bush. This is why, as I said earlier when we were in here on our own, the thing for me is that we get so many faces that come out to us and talk to us about things. As I said, those guys come out from Service NSW with all these banners flying and everything about all this money they were going to give out to everybody, and then they put you through the screws as if you're lying, and you've got to find an account. Most of us have a business, like Melissa was just saying. Everything's in a business name or something else. It doesn't mean that—I just said, "Go look at the directors; go and look at this".

Mrs SALLY QUINNELL: I think it's important that we, as a Committee, aren't promising what we can't deliver too, though.

TRACEY HOTCHIN: Oh, no, I'm not saying that. I just mean the outcome of your inquiry needs to bounce on the people that it needs to bounce on, because this is what—and I'm not being cynical at all; it's just what happens.

Mrs JUDY HANNAN: We did get taken off the inquiry we were doing. We were in the process of an inquiry on something else and we got taken off, so we came out here now. Literally, they chopped off what we were doing and made us come out here now.

The CHAIR: And I know that your local MP, Roy Butler, has been fantastic. He's been terrific in putting pressure on the Government to get this inquiry happening. He's been terrific in putting pressure on us to make sure we bloody get up here. I know that he will be terrific in whatever report we write, following up with the Government to chase it down, chase it down, chase it down. That's going to be one of your avenues going forward, as well, to just stay in touch with Roy about where it's at.

TRACEY HOTCHIN: Yes, Roy's been good. He's a good communicator.

MELISSA THOMSON: Just one other thing. With the money we were going to get back, I spoke to one of Service NSW, and he was pulling his hair out; he really was, because he didn't know what the criteria were. He was ringing them and everything, and he said, "It just doesn't make sense".

The CHAIR: It shouldn't have been that hard.

MELISSA THOMSON: And he kept putting it in and putting it in. I was really frustrated and I just said, "You know what? You've wasted six hours of my time. I know it's not your fault. Just forget about it". I just told her to forget about it and she said, "No, I'm going to keep trying". But I didn't get it anyway.

The CHAIR: No, it shouldn't be that hard, and you're not the only group—

MELISSA THOMSON: But she was really frustrated too. So Service NSW, in their defence, didn't know a lot of the criteria that was needed. So I did have that conversation.

Mrs JUDY HANNAN: It should be have been quite easy, because nobody's going to drive from Broken Hill to Tibooburra to try and get \$200.

The CHAIR: Well, they couldn't get petrol.

Ms MARYANNE STUART: Can I just say thank you, because I think quite a number of you have driven hundreds of kilometres to get here to this forum today.

MIA DEGOUMOIS: You guys have got a big drive too.

The Committee adjourned at 16:15.