

REPORT ON PROCEEDINGS BEFORE

**LEGISLATIVE ASSEMBLY COMMITTEE ON
ENVIRONMENT AND PLANNING**

**INQUIRY INTO THE ELECTRICITY OUTAGES AFFECTING FAR
WEST NSW IN OCTOBER 2024**

At Wilcannia Community Hall, Wilcannia on Wednesday 5 March 2025

The Committee met at 11:05 am

PRESENT

Mr Clayton Barr (Chair)

Mrs Judy Hannan

Mrs Sally Quinnell (Deputy Chair)

Ms Maryanne Stuart

Mr James Wallace

The CHAIR: Before we start the proceedings, I acknowledge the Barkindji people, who are the traditional custodians of the land. I extend my thanks to the witnesses for coming out today. I also pay my respects to any other Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islanders who might be present today. We are the New South Wales Parliament's Legislative Assembly Committee on Environment and Planning. My name is Clayton Barr, and I'm the Chair of this particular Committee. My Deputy Chair is Sally Quinnell. We've got Maryanne Stuart from Heathcote; Judy Hannan, who is the member for Wollondilly; and James Wallace, who's the member for Hornsby. We're all MPs. Anna, who is right here beside me, is from the Committee secretariat, who makes sure we do everything right. She's my left hand, although on the other side.

Obviously we are inquiring into the significant power outages that happened around October last year and how it affected the different communities. Your local member of Parliament, Roy Butler, has been adamant that we don't just hold a hearing in Sydney, or that we don't just hold it in Sydney and Broken Hill, but we actually get out to the communities. So we've been to Menindee already. We've been up to Tibooburra. We were at White Cliffs overnight and had a town hall meeting at White Cliffs this morning. We're here in Wilcannia today. Then tomorrow we'll be back in Broken Hill about the same topic. We've received quite a number of submissions and we've also heard from a number of other people.

There are two other reports taking place: one by the Australian Energy Regulator and the other by IPART. They're looking into the technical nature of responsibility and contracted arrangements about whose responsibility it is to provide power. The work of this Committee is trying to understand how it impacted on communities: what you heard, what you saw, what you experienced. We will report that back to Parliament with recommendations. I ask you to not name certain individuals if you're going to speak not nicely about them, because we might find ourselves in a bit of legal trouble. There will obviously be every chance that you've had a bad experience with person X, person A or person F. Rather than naming them, we'd ask you to just avoid that, please. Hansard sits over there and they will record all the conversation today. You'll be provided with a copy of that, once we can turn it into words on paper, so that you can check it and let us know if you think it's a true and accurate record.

MICHAEL KENNEDY, Chairperson, Wilcannia Local Aboriginal Land Council, affirmed and examined
JENNIFER THWAITES, Wilcannia Local Aboriginal Land Council, affirmed and examined

The CHAIR: Do you have any questions about the hearing process that we're about to undergo?

JENNIFER THWAITES: No. It's nice to know, though, that you're all MPs. Some of you will understand the issues out here. I don't know about Hornsby. Yes, if you've got Hansard here, great. We'd really like to see a copy of the report, because one of my concerns is that—without naming anybody—the Ministers, and you as MPs, are not necessarily being well informed by certain parts of—and this department in particular, actually.

The CHAIR: Before we start, would either or both of you like to make a short opening statement or comment?

MICHAEL KENNEDY: No. I'm interested to hear what you guys have got to say.

The CHAIR: Our understanding, loosely, is that the power went out either late on the night of the 16th or in the early hours of the 17th. Most people probably went to bed with power turned on and woke up the next morning with power off. As we all know now, which you wouldn't have known then, a whole bunch of the big power lines down south of Broken Hill blew over. So it was a fairly big event. When people woke up in the morning and realised there wasn't any power, how did this community start to have the conversation with each other about that, and who knew what and what was going on? How did that happen for the community in the morning? Do you start with a conversation with a neighbour? Is there a central meeting place that the community come to in times like that?

MICHAEL KENNEDY: No, it's just normal conversation between family and friends. Every time the power does go out, you always message your mother, or see if anyone knows any information on how long it's going to be off for. No-one really knew for a while. Then there were talks that it was going to be two or three weeks. Word just got around the community then.

The CHAIR: When you say messaging, did you still have your phones connected to the towers when you woke up in the morning? Could you still use messaging and stuff like that?

MICHAEL KENNEDY: It was coming and going, the service. When you got it you just did what you could, and other times you just waited and searched.

The CHAIR: Was that just on the first day that it was coming and going, or was that over the whole next week or two or three or four?

MICHAEL KENNEDY: Just on memory, I reckon it would have been at least the first week, or first few days.

The CHAIR: Because some of the other communities have told us that within about four hours it was gone and they had nothing. They couldn't even message each other. It sounds like you might have a slightly better arrangement here about staying connected?

MICHAEL KENNEDY: Yes, it must be.

The CHAIR: Obviously it ended up being out for quite some time. Do you remember how long you were out of power here in Wilcannia for? I think it was about two days, but I might be wrong.

JENNIFER THWAITES: Try weeks.

MICHAEL KENNEDY: Yes, but it was coming on and off.

JENNIFER THWAITES: Yes.

The CHAIR: Let's dig into that a little bit, if you don't mind. Initially it was off?

MICHAEL KENNEDY: Yes.

The CHAIR: But then they got one of the generators in Broken Hill up and running. Then it was off and on?

MICHAEL KENNEDY: Yes, it was off and on.

JENNIFER THWAITES: Yes. First up, they only had a small generator in Broken Hill and they were warning us when the power was going off. They got a bigger generator—in fact, I think they ended up getting up

to three generators, wasn't it, in Broken Hill? It was still going off, but most of the time we were warned about it. In the early stages, it was just impossible. No-one knew what was going on. I happened to be one of the fortunate people with a small generator. As Cass says, people find out because your next door neighbour's right next door.

MICHAEL KENNEDY: I reckon it was three or four days with no power, in the beginning, just on memory.

The CHAIR: Jennifer, how many people locally would have had just small generators?

JENNIFER THWAITES: We've got two main areas of Aboriginal housing. One has 38 residential properties on it. The other one has got 10 residential properties on it. To the best of my knowledge, nobody on any of those has a generator.

MICHAEL KENNEDY: Land council houses?

JENNIFER THWAITES: Yes.

MICHAEL KENNEDY: Sixty-two houses.

JENNIFER THWAITES: Not on the mallee. We've got 64 all up, but on the mallee itself—

MICHAEL KENNEDY: Yes, but the 64 houses that we own, there would have been none of those tenants with power or a generator. Then with the AHO houses, there's another thirty-odd. They wouldn't have had generators or power, either.

Mrs SALLY QUINNELL: Was that more than 90 in total that you would—

MICHAEL KENNEDY: Yes.

The CHAIR: Did any of the local businesses have generators and stay open and operating?

JENNIFER THWAITES: I actually went in this morning and asked them how much it cost them to run those generators. They're new people in the shop, but they said they had been told it was \$1,800 to run their generator. The other small cafe, which is fairly recent but a really positive input into the community, bought a big generator at \$9,000. It's a small cafe. It's now sitting out the back, but it was the only way they could stay open.

The CHAIR: They bought that after they had lost power, thinking, "Well, what am I going to do for power?"

JENNIFER THWAITES: When we found out that it was going to be such an extended period of time—

The CHAIR: It was a big outage, yes.

JENNIFER THWAITES: It took ages to even tell us what the problem was. I'll get my gripe in now, and that is, I really believe that Transgrid should be being belted for about a \$20 million fine, not the \$1.5 million that they've put in. They are the ones responsible. As far as I can find out from looking at the research that I've done, they have five investment companies, four of which are overseas companies. There's only one Australian company. So we've got a privately owned essential service that is there to make money and nothing else. I just think the State Government needs—when the Premier came out here, I've got to admit, I'm not normally a supporter of politicians, sorry, I was really impressed when he stood up there and said, "I'm a city boy, grew up on the beach, I had no idea of the issues out here." To me, that was quite an admission.

He heard from the community about what had been going on, but his information on Transgrid was that they were looking at the contract. I don't know if they've got any further because we don't have any more information on that side of it but, as far as I'm concerned, essential services should be government-owned, government-run. We've got a crazy situation: We've got Transgrid, owner; Essential Energy, maintenance; and Origin Energy does the billing. Now, I'm sorry, does that put the power price up, or not?

The CHAIR: Thank you, and thank you for all those opening—shaking it up for us. I'm going to throw to Judy Hannan.

Mrs JUDY HANNAN: I'm just curious, when you said you were given some communication or some information about when the power was going to come on or off, who was it that was sending you that information?

JENNIFER THWAITES: Essential Energy. Once they had the generators up and organised in Broken Hill, it was Essential Energy.

Mrs JUDY HANNAN: Do you have a local emergency management committee? Do you have a real organised emergency program?

JENNIFER THWAITES: I'll leave that one to you, Cass.

MICHAEL KENNEDY: Yes, we do, but in the couple of emergencies we had they weren't very helpful, especially with information, and having community involved in their meetings.

Mrs JUDY HANNAN: Do you have a representative on them? The land council—do you have rep on them? Did they come out here and help? Did they do anything to help?

MICHAEL KENNEDY: No. The LEMC didn't do nothing during that.

JENNIFER THWAITES: The LEMC is basically council and—

MICHAEL KENNEDY: Police.

JENNIFER THWAITES: —the police.

MICHAEL KENNEDY: Yes. They pretty much say who they want on the committee.

Mrs JUDY HANNAN: With the 90-something houses that have no generator or anything, how did those people survive through the heat and different things?

JENNIFER THWAITES: With a great deal of difficulty.

MICHAEL KENNEDY: We just had to go back to the Stone Age.

Mrs JUDY HANNAN: Do you have town water and sewer?

MICHAEL KENNEDY: We have town water and sewerage, but I was one of the ones whose fridge blew out from what they call a brownout, so we were sharing a lot of our food, lost a lot of food. Luckily, my sister had a spare little, tiny fridge but you can barely fit anything in that. I'm still using it today. Also, I had a couple of little gas burners, so family was coming home and we were just cooking big pots of stew and stuff that we had to cook before it went bad. Between me and my partner, we fed three different families in the first three nights. Might have even been four different families because they had no gas burners and no way to cook their food. We just all went home and done it all from there with our little gas burners. But then, because of the situation, you were running out of gas cans. It was obviously hot, so you still had to light a fire and just put up with the heat and cooking.

Mrs JUDY HANNAN: It's pretty dire.

MICHAEL KENNEDY: It's unbelievable. People don't realise how bad a situation it is. I say to everyone, "We were in the year 2024 when it happened, and to go that long without power is just insane." It really makes you think the Government, and whoever else, thinks there's no life over the mountains. They got no idea how hard it is. We have a higher case of unemployment in our community. There's many different reasons behind that. A lot of us have to depend on Centrelink payments. You go fortnight to fortnight trying to keep food in the house, and when something like that happens, it just sets you back so far, and you don't recover from it. You can't recover. There's no recovery from it. They offered \$200 per person, but the amount of crap that you had to go through to get that \$200, and the length of time that it took for you to get that \$200, a lot of people didn't even go for it because it was just too much trouble, too much paperwork.

Mrs SALLY QUINNELL: Michael, no-one sat with you and helped you fill out those?

MICHAEL KENNEDY: They did bring out people to help with that, but still, the ID that you had to provide, a lot of people didn't have it. It was just the whole process that people would just chuck their hands in the air and say, "No, I'm not worried about it; it's only \$200." You go to the shop over here and spend \$200, and you'd be lucky if you get two nights worth of food. It's that dear over here for food. I showed a picture before—I should have printed it out—two boxes cost me 400 bucks one day in there.

The CHAIR: Two boxes of food.

MICHAEL KENNEDY: Yes, so people don't really understand the extent of it, and how much it really affected us financially, emotionally. It was so hard and tough, especially when you got kids. It was tough.

Ms MARYANNE STUART: You've got children?

MICHAEL KENNEDY: Yes.

Ms MARYANNE STUART: How many do you have?

MICHAEL KENNEDY: I got five all up: two here and three in Dubbo.

The CHAIR: I might just throw to James, the member for Hornsby, for a question.

Mr JAMES WALLACE: Thank you, and thank you to both of you for sharing those details about what's been happening. I know that the outage which occurred last year in October and November was really difficult. Is this something that keeps on happening? Have there been other outages since? Or were there multiple outages, smaller outages beforehand? Is there a problem in general with the reliability of getting power in your house?

MICHAEL KENNEDY: Yes, we always have power outages. Every time we get a storm out here, the power trips out or goes out, but that was the longest and worst period. Any other time it might stay off for a day or a few hours. It just depends.

JENNIFER THWAITES: Fundamentally, we need a generator here.

MICHAEL KENNEDY: Yes because they're all hooked up to the same line. Common sense would tell you that—

Mr JAMES WALLACE: When you say "always", is that like a couple of times a year? Once a month?

JENNIFER THWAITES: Once every couple of months.

MICHAEL KENNEDY: Yes, a few times.

Mr JAMES WALLACE: When the power goes out like that, do your mobiles keep working? Does the mobile phone reception stay on, or does that go out in town?

JENNIFER THWAITES: It really depends, actually. Obviously, the mobiles go flat and you can't recharge them. The main tower is 15 kilometres out on a property, and it really depends on what happens with that as to what's on in that area and what isn't.

MICHAEL KENNEDY: Yes, it depends. When it goes out, sometimes you got no service whatsoever. Other times it'll go out and you still got service, but regardless, you still got to keep your phone charged.

Mrs SALLY QUINNELL: Thank you for being here today. We really appreciate it. Please excuse my ignorance with this question. Does Wilcannia include outlying stations and properties that are outside of the town as well as the township? I suppose I'm asking, does Wilcannia include some distance outside of the town?

JENNIFER THWAITES: There's the township. There are properties as part of Central Darling Shire's coverage. So, yes, we've got the township and then there are properties that are linked to Wilcannia.

Mrs SALLY QUINNELL: Did you see a disparity between the way that people within the township and the outlying properties were affected? Was one better or worse than the other or were they pretty much rubbish across the board?

JENNIFER THWAITES: The majority of properties have got generators.

Mrs SALLY QUINNELL: The power goes out—and I'm aware that, unlike some of the other places we've heard from, you kept phone coverage most of the time, on and off, but did you feel that there was a centre point of truth or information coming to people within Wilcannia?

MICHAEL KENNEDY: The first three or four days there was nothing. It was just like word of mouth that people were saying that it could be off for quite some time.

Mrs SALLY QUINNELL: Where were people getting that information from?

MICHAEL KENNEDY: I'm not quite sure, but being out here—

Mrs SALLY QUINNELL: I suppose I'm asking, were they making it up? And that's not a judgement because if you're not—

MICHAEL KENNEDY: No, well, being out here, being such small communities, a lot of people know people around this whole area, so they could have got the word from one of the workers on the powerlines, and it just sort of spread from there maybe. Someone might know someone in Origin Energy or somewhere, and then word just spreads fast because we're all small communities and know a lot of people in Menindee and Broken Hill.

Mrs SALLY QUINNELL: You're all yearning for information, yes. Thank you. That's exactly what I was after. At which point did we have members of any of the levels of government—council, State or Federal—come to Wilcannia and set up help or any sort of organised assistance? Was there anyone that came to Wilcannia and said, "Okay, this is how we're going to help"?

MICHAEL KENNEDY: The only one that I know of was the—and I can't quite remember if it was the school. They delivered boxes of a bit of fruit and veg. I think it might have been the school, but I'm not 100 per cent sure. But other than that, there was no support or help from no-one.

Mrs SALLY QUINNELL: So when people turned up from Service NSW to talk about the reimbursement of the money, was that sort of the first—

MICHAEL KENNEDY: Well, that wasn't till well after—

Mrs SALLY QUINNELL: No, I appreciate that and I'm making a point of the vacuum of assistance.

MICHAEL KENNEDY: During the three weeks of the power outage, there was no support or assistance from anybody, except from I think the school that delivered some fruit and veg. Afterwards that's when we had the \$200 assistance and people came out and helped people try and apply for it, but during the time there was no-one, no help from anyone.

Mrs SALLY QUINNELL: I'm assuming then Wilcannia residents stepped into that void and assisted each other?

MICHAEL KENNEDY: Yes.

Mrs SALLY QUINNELL: Did that happen in an organised way, or was it haphazard? For example, we were at Menindee. They were saying the RFS kind of filled that void. Was there anything like that happening here in Wilcannia, or was it more family- and friend-based?

MICHAEL KENNEDY: It was just family and friends just doing what they had to do to get through it. There was no RFS. There was no Central Darling Shire or LEMC. There was none of that good support or help from any of it. We got a mate that does roo shooting here. He had to chuck out I think it was something up around 200 or 300 kangaroos because his chillers weren't working. But then when the company got him a generator, he was quite willing to open it up to community, so long as he could get the help, and they could store food or meat or whatever in the chiller. But, again, there was no help from no-one, you know?

JENNIFER THWAITES: Am I mixing this up with something else? At one stage they had stuff in the council shed and they were delivering stuff from there. It was one of the teachers—what's her name? One of the teachers.

MICHAEL KENNEDY: It could have been the same set-up, but I know the school was doing a bit of fruit and veg. But it could have been through them. Like I said, I wasn't 100 per cent sure.

Mrs SALLY QUINNELL: I realise it was last October and we're asking you to remember back, but I appreciate it can be really hard to remember anything from a traumatic incident anyway.

JENNIFER THWAITES: Actually, sorry, that was during COVID. I was just thinking back. During COVID we actually did get quite amazing responses in some ways.

Mrs SALLY QUINNELL: During the brownouts, during the power-sharing situation after the initial blackout, were you given specific information about when power was going to come on and when it was going to go off? How was that communicated to the town, that you were going to be doing this power sharing while it was being figured out?

JENNIFER THWAITES: On our phones.

Mrs SALLY QUINNELL: And was it specific? Was it it'll come on at this o'clock and go off at this o'clock or anything like that?

JENNIFER THWAITES: Further down the track, yes. In the early stages, no—we were just left walking around in circles.

MICHAEL KENNEDY: But then for some of us, like we said before, a lot of people had flat phones and were trying to find ways to charge them, so it was only again by word of mouth that people were getting that information.

Mrs JUDY HANNAN: Does this hall have a generator?

JENNIFER THWAITES: It does now.

MICHAEL KENNEDY: They had a brand-new generator sitting at the back. Central Darling Shire wouldn't open the hall up.

Ms MARYANNE STUART: Jennifer and Michael, thank you for being here. I'm sorry that you have felt that people like us didn't think there was anyone over the mountain. That's why the Premier and the Minister came. We as a Committee were actually taken off work we were doing by the Minister to do this inquiry.

Mrs SALLY QUINNELL: As a priority.

Ms MARYANNE STUART: Yes. It was your State member Roy Butler who said, "Can we come to you rather than you come to Broken Hill?", for example, and we have really appreciated the distance and the difficulties that you face. It's good for us because, as you said, Jennifer, when the Premier came out, he was quite honest about his background and where he'd been from, and we're pretty much the same, sitting at this table.

JENNIFER THWAITES: Yes, I sort of noticed. I grew up in Pymble.

Ms MARYANNE STUART: We have gone to Tibbooburra, Menindee and White Cliffs, and the reason why we are asking these questions is because we want to see if there is some sort of pattern. So when we talk about are you a seat at the table for the LEMC so that you have input and you're able to get some assistance quickly, that's why we are asking these questions. And if this is a council hall, is this an evacuation point? Is this an emergency point? Should it be in the future for something like this that happens again? And let's be honest, it is going to happen again. If we've got a privatised entity—like Transgrid—that has not been maintaining their equipment, I am concerned that it may happen again. And if it's not an electricity issue, it might be other challenges that Mother Nature throws at us.

JENNIFER THWAITES: Sorry, can I come in there?

Ms MARYANNE STUART: Of course you can.

JENNIFER THWAITES: One of the reasons I'm glad it's parliamentarians rather than bureaucrats is that—and I didn't ever believe I'd say this because I'm definitely not a Liberal government supporter—since the change of government the bureaucracy seems to have gone really off. I don't think it's at the bottom level; I think it's higher up. Just as an example, I was told the other day in relation to another area—I don't know if you know about it but we've got a big program called Roads to Home. We've got a very large grant for that. I was in consultation with the people from that department—and, I'm sorry, I can't remember which department it is this week, because it changes so often. I was told by a middle-level person in that—and up until this stage our relationship with that department has been really good. He told me there was absolutely no need for me, as CEO, to consult with my board about decisions. I said, "I beg your pardon?" Gina was actually in there too. I said, "Of course I have to consult with my board." "No." And I'm thinking, "What?"

I am really fortunate in that I have an exceptional board, an exceptional chairperson. But, no matter what, I have to consult with them about things like that. I'm just finding this shift in the way information is presented, or not given to the appropriate people—I've spent five years in the bureaucracy in the Department of Education, and I just don't remember it being quite as obstructive as it is now. I don't know what's happening. I don't know whether they've dug their heels in because they don't like the Labor Government, or what the issue is. But at the middle and upper levels they are really not doing a good job.

Ms MARYANNE STUART: You and I could have a conversation for quite some time on this issue, Jennifer. I have more to ask. Some food came from, you think, the school. Did you get any hampers? Because there were hampers that were done. Do you know anything about those?

MICHAEL KENNEDY: I can't quite remember.

Ms MARYANNE STUART: It's okay if you don't. That's fine. It was a long time ago, as Sally said. We've spoken about the vouchers—

JENNIFER THWAITES: With the vouchers, I actually came down here one day, because there was a panel, including Gina, helping people to do that paperwork. The queue was all around the building.

Ms MARYANNE STUART: How many people were here from Service NSW?

JENNIFER THWAITES: Gina was on the panel. I think there was another local—

MICHAEL KENNEDY: It might only have been two or four of them in the first lot.

JENNIFER THWAITES: I think four.

Ms MARYANNE STUART: Four people, thank you. The electricity surges—one thing that we've heard consistently is that when the electricity comes on, it comes on with such a surge that you can have your fridge or your freezer blow up. Have you had any experiences with that?

MICHAEL KENNEDY: Yes. When it cuts out immediately, or back on immediately, that's what happens. Like I said before, my fridge blew up. I know of another four or five family members that had fridges or freezers blow up. Another mate had a wi-fi box blow up. As I said, we're still suffering today from it. I don't got the funds to buy a brand new fridge. Other family and friends don't have the funds, either.

Ms MARYANNE STUART: With the community housing here, I heard you say before that there's no generators. Do we have people with any health issues that would need medicines or the like?

MICHAEL KENNEDY: Yes.

Ms MARYANNE STUART: They need it refrigerated, or they need electricity for nebulisers or things like that? Do we have anyone like that?

MICHAEL KENNEDY: Yes.

Ms MARYANNE STUART: Do you want to talk about that for me? Can you cite some examples please, Michael?

MICHAEL KENNEDY: I've never really dug in that deep to the friends and that that needed power for those types of reasons, but I do know there's a few of them that do need constant power for the oxygen machines and stuff like that.

Ms MARYANNE STUART: Over the last couple of days we've heard about people that require insulin, for example, and they need to keep that refrigerated. If it's not, they have to throw it out and buy new stuff. Do you have the RFS here, or the SES or police in town?

MICHAEL KENNEDY: SES, isn't it?

JENNIFER THWAITES: Yes.

Ms MARYANNE STUART: And they're not part of the LEMC?

MICHAEL KENNEDY: Yes.

Ms MARYANNE STUART: They are? Okay. Lastly, we've heard that some electricity providers are giving their customers rebates because of what's happened—refunds. Do you know if you've got a refund from any of your electricity providers?

MICHAEL KENNEDY: I wouldn't have a clue. If it was, it probably was a very small amount.

The CHAIR: We're going to have to wrap up.

MICHAEL KENNEDY: If I can just say to Maryanne, talking about the hall, during that power outage, the Central Darling Shire had a generator sitting at the back. I know one or two of the community members asked the Central Darling Shire if they could open the hall up for people to come and charge their phone or sit for a while in the cool. Their response was they wouldn't do it, for whatever reason. After that, they started to find—well, there was two places where you could go and charge your phone up. One was the shire chambers and the other one was the golf club.

Mrs JUDY HANNAN: I have to say, it seems like an ideal place, if they had a generator with air conditioning, cooking—

Ms MARYANNE STUART: Yes. A hundred per cent.

MICHAEL KENNEDY: They had a brand-new generator sitting at the back.

JENNIFER THWAITES: They would have had to clean it. We know the problems with that.

MICHAEL KENNEDY: And the LEMC—we went through it with COVID. I don't know if you know the COVID story, but we jumped up and down 18 months prior to COVID hitting our community on wanting to put an emergency plan in place. The LEMC wouldn't listen to it. Every organisation in the community wouldn't listen to it. We went through the COVID set-up, and it's the same thing with the power outage now. From LEMC, Central Darling Shire or anybody, there's no emergency plans in place for anything: power outages, fire, flooding. There's no emergency plans in place for any of it.

That was our point that we kept arguing: Why don't we have an emergency plan in place? They will always wait until the emergencies happen, and then they want to try and figure it out. But it takes them a week just to put a plan in place. Most of the damage is already done, you know? I'm 42 years of age. I've lived here all my life. I was born in the hospital up here. I still don't know of an evacuation point or a place where people can

go if emergency situations happen. There's no emergency spot that you can go to in the community. And I lived here all my life. The only emergency place I know to go to is to stay at home.

JENNIFER THWAITES: And one of the problems, of course, is we have a 69 per cent Aboriginal population. Community consultation is, "We don't really have to listen to them, because they don't know what they're talking about." No-one will say it openly, but—

MICHAEL KENNEDY: That's exactly what happens, like with the LEMC. They didn't even want the land council as a part of the board on that LEMC.

The CHAIR: That's concerning to hear, to say the least. Thank you very much for appearing here today. I do want to flag with you that we have had some photographs taken from behind you during this process. If you've got any concerns or worries about that, please speak to Shanshan on your way out. And that's no dramas. We can just delete all the photos and move on. We as a committee over the next couple of days might formulate some extra questions we want to send to you, and we'll send them out. I think we've got your email address, Jennifer.

JENNIFER THWAITES: Yes.

The CHAIR: So we'll send them out, and we just ask if you can turn them around. If you can turn around in seven days, that would be awesome. If you can't, just talk to us about it.

JENNIFER THWAITES: If my internet is working.

The CHAIR: If your internet is working—fingers crossed. Other than that, I thank you very, very much for spending time with us this morning. It's been really helpful. I know we've gone over time, and I apologise for that. We've been hanging on every word, clearly. Thank you so much.

(The witnesses withdrew.)

GREG HILL, General Manager, Central Darling Shire Council, before the Committee via videoconference, affirmed and examined

The CHAIR: As always, thank you for giving us your time. Did you want to make an opening statement at all about the experience for you, as the general manager of Central Darling Shire, of waking up that morning with no power, and what the next day or two days looked like for you and the community?

GREG HILL: I suppose, just briefly, I imagine you would have read the submission that the council has made on behalf of the community.

The CHAIR: Yes.

GREG HILL: It wasn't so much waking up that morning, we did have power, it wasn't until later—apologies, we didn't have power. It wasn't until about 11 o'clock that morning that we realised that there was a major issue, that the power wasn't going to be resumed. That's when we started discussions, around about 12 o'clock, forming our LEMC. By about three o'clock that afternoon we had our LEMC in place. We had about three significant power outages over a three-week period, which caused a fair bit of disruption to our communities, from Menindee through to Wilcannia to White Cliffs. I'm happy to discuss the submission or any questions you have of me.

The CHAIR: I will start with the obvious question. You're the general manager of a council that's affected by a power outage. Was there not a direct contact out to you from someone to say, "Hey, Greg, this is what it looks like."?

GREG HILL: No, there wasn't. The way I picked it up, I was actually sitting on a meeting. It was the Barwon-Darling water users group meeting run by an advisory group—run by WaterNSW. We'd just had an intermission and I was flicking through my phone on Facebook when I picked up a social media post by ABC Broken Hill about the powerlines being knocked down by the wind from the night before. When they said seven, that's when I realised this is going to be a significant outage. So I made contact with our local REMO. He advised me, "Yes, it is serious," and from there we discussed setting up our LEMC. He got back to me within half an hour and he said, "Yes, let's do that." His advice from Transgrid was that this is going to probably be about at least three days without power. They were trying to get the turbines up and running in Broken Hill. [Audio malfunction] at that stage.

The CHAIR: When people woke up that morning and there was no power, we've had some people kind of go, "Well, you know, the power drops out sometimes and it's not that big of a deal."

GREG HILL: Yes, that's correct. It's not a big deal. We get power outages all the time in the Far West. It's quite common to wake up in the morning and go, "The power's out. Oh well. It'll be on within the next three or four hours." If we have a thunderstorm go through and the power's out, it depends on how much [audio malfunction]. It could be out for the day. Okay, we can live with that. We understand if a powerline is felled on an unsealed road, where they can't access it, obviously it's going to be boggy and the truck's going to have difficulty to get out there. The community is actually quite tolerant to power outages, but when it comes to an extended period of time it becomes a major concern.

The CHAIR: Just one small technical question: You referred a moment ago to your REMO. Could you just tell us exactly what a REMO is?

GREG HILL: Regional Emergency Management Officer. They sit under the arm of the police.

The CHAIR: That's a police officer. That's not one of your employees?

GREG HILL: No, it's not an employee. I'm a LEMO. Then you've got the LEOCON with police. Then we've got a REMO, which looks after the whole—I suppose a dedicated area for emergency management. That's how that structure works.

The CHAIR: When you rang your REMO, you were essentially ringing someone inside of police?

GREG HILL: Yes.

Ms MARYANNE STUART: Thanks for your time today, Greg. You mentioned the LEMC. Can you tell me who the committee members are?

GREG HILL: I'm the LEMO, as general manager. Then you've got the LEOCON, which is Inspector Andrew Mensforth at that time. He was based at Wilcannia.

Ms MARYANNE STUART: Police. Is the RFS there, SES?

GREG HILL: Yes. Then we've got the REMO, which is police, or sits under police. We had SES, RFS. We had Essential Energy there. I think we also had Transgrid there. We had Aboriginal Affairs, Health.

Ms MARYANNE STUART: Aboriginal Land Council?

GREG HILL: No, not at that stage.

Ms MARYANNE STUART: So they are now?

GREG HILL: Yes, they are. Invitations have been sent just recently. We had an LEMC for Central Darling two weeks ago and invitations were sent to both Aboriginal land councils at Wilcannia and Menindee. Neither of them turned up.

Ms MARYANNE STUART: You'd be aware as to what this committee is doing whilst we're out here, and where we're going. This place that we're in, I believe it's a council building. Is this ever used for any emergency or evacuation events that happen, or could it be in the future, as a central point that everyone can go to find out what's happening, or to get what they need?

GREG HILL: Yes. The Wilcannia hall at that stage never had a backup generator. What we did do through our social media is use the council office and the chambers, because that's on a backup generator. We put out that if anyone wanted to recharge their phones, if they wanted to come in and use the fridge, or if they wanted to just get out of the heat—because it was starting to get fairly warm on some of those days—they could come in and sit in the chambers and sit under the air conditioning. At that stage we didn't have the Wilcannia hall on a generator. The Wilcannia office is on a generator and the Wilcannia Post Office is on a generator.

Ms MARYANNE STUART: How far away is your office? Where are you now?

GREG HILL: The office is only one street away. Probably 450 metres—not even that. So, basically, almost the centre of town.

Mrs SALLY QUINNELL: Did council staff, at any point during the blackout and subsequent brownouts, travel to any of the smaller towns or villages to talk to community members?

GREG HILL: Not so much to talk to community members. We had staff travelling backwards and forth with generators, fuel, equipment and stuff like that. What we agreed on in discussion with the LEOCON, myself and the LEOCON, he would be the contact down at Menindee—he had a dedicated police officer at White Cliffs, to travel up to White Cliffs, to do the communication, and I was to look after Wilcannia. Being that the shire is so big and the tyranny of distance, we split up the responsibilities that way.

Mrs SALLY QUINNELL: How would you have those conversations with your liaison in White Cliffs? We believe that their phones were completely out.

GREG HILL: That's why the LEOCON sent someone up to White Cliffs, to have that conversation. I was in conversation with a number of residents up in White Cliffs because they did have power backup in their dugouts and at the hotel, so there was communication. Likewise, down to Menindee. I've also got an office down at Menindee. That office didn't have power backup. The staff then went into the Menindee hall and sat in the Menindee hall and worked from the Menindee hall, which we had connected to the power backup generator.

Mrs JUDY HANNAN: I just want to clarify what communication was made to you. You said that you found out through Facebook that there was an issue. What was the ongoing communication to you?

GREG HILL: Once we established the LEMC, we had good communication through the LEMC. Initially, we set up the LEMC just to cover Central Darling. Then we realised, instead of duplicating the LEMCs across the Far West and Broken Hill, we just combined the three LEMCs into one. That meant then that different organisations didn't have to turn up to three LEMCs, probably following each other, so we just combined them together. The communication was reasonably good through the LEMC, from Transgrid, Essential Energy.

Mrs JUDY HANNAN: Transgrid and Essential Energy communicated with you through that?

GREG HILL: Through the LEMC, from where we—

Mrs JUDY HANNAN: Keep going. So you're communication then out to the community?

GREG HILL: Our communication that went out to community was mainly through social media, through Facebook. We understand that the Menindee hall had power backup generation through the RFS. That was delivered in a reasonable time. Within 24 hours that was up and going. We had the White Cliffs store and, I think, the White Cliffs hotel also had social media—Wi-Fi access as well.

Mrs JUDY HANNAN: It was good to hear that the LEMC started to meet. What would you say to the fact—if I said somebody had lived in one of these towns for their entire life but they had no idea where to go in an emergency situation, what would the response of the LEMC be?

GREG HILL: I suppose the answer to that is that we've got a fair idea who is vulnerable in our communities. Between council staff, we actually checked on a few people. Police checked on a few. Once we got Aboriginal Affairs involved, they started doing checks as well. I don't believe anyone—how would you say—would have been missed or not followed up on. RFS also done some checking of people down in Menindee as well.

Mrs JUDY HANNAN: So every town knows where the emergency evacuation place is?

GREG HILL: I wouldn't say—not everyone. Commonly, it's generally the council office here in Wilcannia, the hall at Menindee or the hall at White Cliffs. Now, we can't afford to put generators on all the halls. It took nearly two days, three days to get generators in from Cobar to actually put generators on the hall up at White Cliffs. In the end, we opted not to put the generator on the hall at White Cliffs. We ended up putting it down at the sporting club, which has got a full maintained, commercial kitchen.

Mr JAMES WALLACE: Thanks, Greg. I just had a couple of questions following reading your submission. You mentioned in the submission that recovery centres were established in Menindee and White Cliffs. Which buildings were those centres in and when were they established?

GREG HILL: Menindee was the civic town hall, and White Cliffs was the sporting club.

Mr JAMES WALLACE: The city town hall and the sporting club?

GREG HILL: Yes.

Mr JAMES WALLACE: When were they established?

GREG HILL: Menindee hall was established within 24 hours, and White Cliffs was probably two days later.

Mr JAMES WALLACE: We've just come from White Cliffs, so some of the things that affected that town are fresh in the mind. In your submission, you talked about the Telstra tower on top of the hill there. You talked about the fact that council's looked at potentially buying—that Telstra's happy for you to pay for a generator to sit at the Telstra site. Can you talk us through the discussions you've had with Telstra around getting continuity of power supply to that mobile tower, and unpack for me how is council getting involved in that problem?

GREG HILL: To start with, the biggest issue was communications right across the shire—communicating with our residents, communicating with just anyone. With the phone tower down at White Cliffs—even we had issues down at Menindee and right across the whole shire because the battery backup on the Telstra towers only last a maximum of four hours. White Cliffs was problematic because Telstra delivered a generator up to White Cliffs probably about four hours before the power came on in the first phase, or the first outage. Then we had a couple of days or 36 hours of power. In that time they actually decided to remove the generator and take it to another place which then—the turbine in Broken Hill failed. Then the battery backup failed up at White Cliffs.

Now there is an already existing generator at that phone tower with a fuel pot. However, that generator is deemed by Telstra unusable. They are not looking at replacing it. The discussion I had with Telstra towards the end of the power outage or the dilemma we were facing was if council could manage the power backup for the Telstra tower in conjunction with, potentially, the emergency services. Apparently, the discussion went along the lines of, "No, not to start with." Then a couple of days later they came back and said, "Yes, there is a trial pilot program in WA where a remote community is actually servicing the Telstra tower over there with a power backup." So we sat down, I think it was early December, with Telstra over a videoconference. They outlined what they could provide in the sense that they'll build the hardwiring for a generator, they'll train people and go through the legal documentation side of things of how to manage the power backup. But, ultimately, it was up to the council or the community to purchase the generator. The purchase of a generator for that tower would be up around about \$30,000.

Mr JAMES WALLACE: And they're effectively saying they won't cover it, the council needs to step in?

GREG HILL: They won't cover it. Council or someone else needs to front up the money.

Mr JAMES WALLACE: On a separate issue, I think you've identified \$150,000 of costs the council's incurred as a consequence of the outage in October last year. You've talked about seeking to recover those costs.

It's not entirely clear to me from whom you're seeking to recover those costs. Is that a particular government agency or department, or Essential Energy? Do you have a compensation claim?

GREG HILL: You broke up a little bit, but I think I understand the question. Yes, we've incurred costs of \$150,000. It was \$110,000 worth of creditors, being generator hire, fuel and electrical services, so electricians coming in and having to wire up the hall. We also provided a generator to the local chemist in Wilcannia. Our water treatment plants, our pump stations in Wilcannia and White Cliffs—we do the water supply there. But also, too, council staff time incurred about \$40,000. Under the natural disaster declaration, it stipulates that in a case like this that council staff time or cost isn't claimable. However, I think under this circumstance—being an out-of-ordinary situation and being that council is a very low income council with very little rates revenue and heavily reliant on funding through the State and Federal government—this should actually be overlooked, and council should be reimbursed for the actual staff wages.

Mr JAMES WALLACE: Is capex claimable, to your understanding?

GREG HILL: Yes, it can be claimed.

Mr JAMES WALLACE: You're saying you can claim the \$110,000 of generator costs and other capital expenditure from emergency services?

GREG HILL: Yes, through the natural disaster declaration.

Mr JAMES WALLACE: You've articulated sort of a strong view that the hamper program which occurred was not a good idea and diverted resources. I don't fully comprehend the alternative you've suggested. Are you able to explain that in layman's terms?

GREG HILL: Yes, I've been through two rollouts now with hampers. One back in COVID and just now with the power outage. During COVID it was very resource heavy to manage it. It took a lot of work. So this time around the hamper rollout, again, council didn't really agree with it. A lot of other government agencies also in the background didn't agree with it. A lot of the community who lost food would have been better off served by going to the local supermarket. Our supermarkets in Wilcannia, Menindee and even the store up at White Cliffs were all on generator, and they were still getting good supplies of food. So with minimal cost compared to the hamper rollout, I believe that food could have been purchased at the store through a government agency putting up some sort of line of credit at the stores.

Mr JAMES WALLACE: In your submission you talk about the need for agencies supporting Indigenous people to diversify what they do. It's quite a general comment. Could you expand on which agencies you're referring to and what gaps you think exist that need to be filled?

GREG HILL: Yes, what I was referring to there is Aboriginal Affairs. They've got a presence in the Far West, and they work out of Broken Hill. Their role, I believe, is more advocacy than actually hands-on doing in the community. I think they could have played a good role in the sense of providing relief in the way of actually having the ability to actually go out—they're the ones in our community who have probably got a good handle on who is vulnerable in the Aboriginal community. In this case, if they had the autonomy and were allowed to, they'd be the ones who'd be able to set up the line of credit at stores and identify the people who could go in and purchase fresh groceries to replenish their food lost through the power outage.

Mr JAMES WALLACE: You mentioned before in response to one of my colleague's questions that council, Health and the police had gone and met and reached out and driven around to see people that were vulnerable. Have you identified a list that you sort of maintain of vulnerable people in the community? Do you do that with Aboriginal Affairs?

GREG HILL: No, we didn't. We didn't record anything. It was just basically staff going around and who they and the police knew and just knocked on doors, just checked on people. Don't forget, too—what you mentioned is great in hindsight. I don't have a lot of staff, so when things happen like this—now I've been in Central Darling for seven years. During that seven years, I've faced seven situations like this—not just power outages, but also two floods, COVID and two fish kills. I have very limited resources. I have to rely on government agencies to back us up. So pushing things down on local government, especially us at Central Darling is—sorry, it gets under my skin because I'm getting tired of it, of having to put up. A lot of the government agencies don't have an understanding of our communities. They expect we'll react, that we've got resources, we can take minutes and we can keep registers. I've only got 70 staff to manage the size of Tasmania and four towns. It makes it very difficult, I'm sorry.

Mr JAMES WALLACE: Yes, and that was sort of my question. Did your council, did you reach out to Aboriginal Affairs in order to identify vulnerable people—because you did allocate your limited staff to reach out to people, did you get names and addresses of people from Aboriginal Affairs of who you would prioritise?

GREG HILL: No.

Mrs SALLY QUINNELL: One of the things that I have been asking everywhere we go—and I realise not everywhere is covered by your council, so I'm not including those areas. But everywhere I've gone I've asked at which point did any level of government—council, State or Federal—turn up in your town? Pretty much across the board, the first response they've given has been Service NSW when they came for the rebate. And now we're hearing that you had people in each of those towns. I suppose I'm just wondering your thoughts on the disconnect between what council believes they've offered and what the townspeople feel has happened.

GREG HILL: I can't speak for what those people are saying in the towns, but, like I said, down at Menindee I had two staff sitting in the hall. So I've got staff working in Menindee. I've got office staff—

Mrs SALLY QUINNELL: I suppose I'm asking, too, how were the community told that those two staff were in that hall?

GREG HILL: If they went to the hall, they'd see them.

Mrs SALLY QUINNELL: But if they didn't know they were there, why would they go to the hall?

GREG HILL: The hall was advertised as the emergency centre.

Ms MARYANNE STUART: I just asked that question before—why hasn't it been an emergency centre?

The CHAIR: Greg, thank you again for being with us today and giving us your insights. We really appreciate that. And, again, apologies for the delay in coming to you because we got caught up in the earlier session. We as a Committee of course will send you a copy of the Hansard transcript so that you can just check that everything's been recorded and reported accurately. We may also develop some supplementary questions that we'd like to fire off to you just to clarify a few things. If we do that, you'll probably get them late next week, and we'd ask you to do your best to try and turn them around within seven days, but I know that you're stretched in terms of resourcing. Please just talk to us about that. In any case, again, thank you so much, Greg, and I wish you all the best and I look forward to seeing you again next time, mate.

(The witness withdrew.)

The CHAIR: I welcome you all to the town hall meeting this afternoon. Thank you all so much for coming out to give us your time, and to offer your advice and recollections of the event which was the power outage in late October last year. I acknowledge that we're meeting here today on the land of the Barkindji people, who are traditional custodians of this land on which we are meeting. I want to pay my respects to the Elders of this country and to any Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people who are present today.

This is our fourth town hall meeting as we've travelled around into these regions. I want to acknowledge your local MP, Roy Butler, who insisted that, as part of this inquiry, we get out to the areas. So it was Tibooburra yesterday, Menindee the day before, White Cliffs this morning. We're with you in Wilcannia this afternoon, and then we will do a round of meetings in Broken Hill tomorrow. So we hope that we've covered most of the territories, realising that, of course, there's a lot of stations in between.

My name's Clayton Barr, and I'm the Chair of this particular Committee. It's the Committee on Environment and Planning. Sally Quinnell is my Deputy Chair, Maryanne Stuart is from Heathcote, Judy Hannan is from Wollondilly, and James Wallace is from Hornsby. Anna is the person who makes sure that I stay on track. She works for the Committee secretariat. She's the brains of the operation who makes sure we don't stray too far. We have received a whole range of submissions but, in this instance, we wanted to not make the process of submissions some sort of barrier to people having the chance to have their say. So the idea of an open town hall where anyone can turn up and sit down and have a say is something that we're trialling on this occasion. I like it. We hope that you feel like you're heard.

There is an ABC journalist in the room who is going to be taking some photos. His name is Oliver. If you have any concerns about photos, please just let him know. He can leave people out of photos and whatever else. The other thing I do ask you to do during your contributions is maybe to avoid naming individuals if you're going to have a real crack at them. We might find ourselves in legal trouble around derogatory comments et cetera. Please stay away from that but, outside of that, we do want to hear the truth. We do want to hear about your experiences, warts and all, because the honesty of our report will depend on the honesty of your contributions.

I will give you all one to three minutes just to make your initial statements and comments. Then we'll ask questions about what you might have said. We'll give you the floor for the first bit, and then we'll have some backwards and forwards after that. It's very informal. Everyone cool with that? Rhonda, do you want to open us up and give us your opening thoughts, ideas, suggestions and recollections?

RHONDA HYNCH, before the Committee: I'm the chair of the Wilcannia working party. Just around our power outage back in October—six months prior to that, we had a power outage. It pushed me to the brink of getting onto Essential Energy to get a generator put here. I'm hoping community will support me in this run because, in all the years of growing up here in Wilcannia, I've seen my share of power outages. You put all those together, you'd probably get about nearly a year of power outages that we've got. We've got half of the town now on power outages.

The CHAIR: Right now?

RHONDA HYNCH: Right now, as we speak. When we did have the power outage way back in October, my daughter went home a day before, stocked her fridge and had to cook it the next day. All her food. All her meat. She's one girl on her own with three babies. She had a newborn. I was getting to the point where I would have had to go to the hospital just so he could have aircon. He was a newborn baby. Leading up to all of that, around the community, we were sharing food, cooking an amount of food that we had to cook out of our fridge and freezers. That was the toll that it took on our community.

With the local people that are meant to be helping us, a couple of us went to a meeting just around the emergency, but it took them nearly five days to call that meeting. We were five days in. No power. These are the things that, as Wilcannia people, our community always have to suffer. They go three to four days, maybe five days, without having to deal with the crisis, then they overlook that. Our local shire, I'm not blaming them. I'm just saying they live here. They're based here. They see our struggles.

It has been a major concern for a lot of the people because we were screaming out for little gas barbecues just so people can cook. They were having open fires. It was fire season. These are the things that this community—they didn't know how to cook, and they were scared whether to make the fire. We were saying, "Do it in the afternoon." During the day, it's really hot, so a lot of the people had to wait for the afternoon to actually cook a meal. Then they tried to keep that on ice. I remember one woman went over to the shop and bought 15 bags of ice just to put in her freezer to keep her meat. She's got a fair few kids. These are the things that our local community strived on. I understand that when I spoke with Roy and Minister Harris—was I allowed to bring their names up?

The CHAIR: Yes. Or are you going to have a big crack at them? No, we serve you, so go ahead.

RHONDA HYNCH: When I spoke with them about it, it was concerning. Two hundred dollars, it didn't even scratch the surface of the amount of food that—what they gave us was hampers. Hampers sit in the cupboard, not in the fridge. They didn't replace what came out of the fridge. That was the fresh meat and veggies. It was the wrong way they did everything. They meant well. I guess the food did help. At that time, we had to have cupboard stuff. But still, all in all, \$200 wouldn't have replaced—considering that you have to drive to Broken Hill to get the food. Our local shop can only cater for so much. I've got to spend up to at least \$150 even before I buy food. That's every time. Not only me. That's everybody else in this community when we have to drive.

The CHAIR: That's fuel costs? Fuel and car running costs.

RHONDA HYNCH: Exactly. That's what they were saying early on. Our shops cost too much, you know what I mean? To go over there, to get a decent order, we have to drive over there, we have to catch the bus over there. Just on that, I always said, and I always say it, we might be sitting here but we are humans just like everybody else. Sometimes we feel like we're still in the Third World. We shouldn't be living like a Third World country. Especially out here. It's supposed to be the richest land of all. I feel like there's times where we've been overlooked around a lot of things.

Sad to say, but we as Wilcannia people, we still carry on, but it's not the point of that. I think the point is the privilege is—and when they did put on the power and switch off the power, the messages were coming in too late. Sometimes you get them. Sometimes you don't. So that sort of didn't prepare us for how long we had to have this power out. We'd get a message four o'clock, saying it's going to be turned off at 4.30, and then we don't know how long it's going to go for. Sometimes it used to be three hours, and sometimes it was five hours. Come back on at 10, 11 o'clock at night. It took a toll on, especially, most of the people that have got children—especially around the fridge, because the little fellas, they kept open, shut, open, shut.

Not only that, speaking on behalf of Wilcannia, I rung our GM and I said to him, "We need to get water out, because I don't know about the pump station, around the pump station, and get water to our Elders and our young ones," for clean water, and things like that. So we had water sitting in pipelines. They end up bringing out another generator just for the pump station, but that was about four days later—four to five days later. So we still had to push through all that other—that water was sitting.

The CHAIR: Rhonda, I'm going to interrupt you there, and I apologise in advance for interrupting you, but thank you very much.

RHONDA HYNCH: Okay, that's cool.

The CHAIR: That's quite a picture you paint. We'll come back to you with some questions, I imagine.

PAT BARRACLOUGH, before the Committee: I run the BP fuel depot, transport. My son is a stock and general carrier. We are lucky that we have a generator. We kept the town going, and White Cliffs going, with fuel. It was non-stop for 17 days. We didn't even switch it off when the power did come on and go, come and go. It wasn't worth it. A lot of our friends, we'd ring them up and say "If you've got frozen goods, bring them down; we'll stick them in our spare freezers", which we did—all that sort of thing.

It was a sad event. It was untoward. We've never had anything like that before. It was nobody's fault; it was just a big storm followed by rain, hot weather, big winds, but it just went on and on, and nothing was being done. I'm sure it was, but to us it wasn't. As Lee said, we were getting messages later rather than sooner. We were, when the power was actually put on to the town, supposed to have a backup generator here. That's umpteen years ago. But it just never eventuated. I don't know who or what or the whys of it, but we've always understood there was supposed to be a backup generator here.

The CHAIR: Was that in the '80s, '90s, '00s? When was power connected here? Do you roughly remember that? Does anyone remember that?

PAT BARRACLOUGH: No, I don't.

WILLIAM MURRAY, before the Committee: Early '70s, I think it was, Pat?

PAT BARRACLOUGH: Late, wasn't it? Late '70s. I don't know. We had the powerhouse, Jim Robertson, then the power came, and when they swapped over they said that they were putting a generator here, which, as I say, never happened.

WILLIAM MURRAY: It never happened.

Ms MARYANNE STUART: So, Pat, who was that that said they were putting—

PAT BARRACLOUGH: Oh, mate, I don't remember.

The CHAIR: Yes, it was the '70s.

PAT BARRACLOUGH: It was just, you know—things that way back, to me, is a memory. I could possibly find it out.

BILL ELLIOTT, before the Committee: Just as a matter of interest, there was a generator here, at Essential Energy, until a few years ago. It moved to Ivanhoe.

PAT BARRACLOUGH: Thanks, Bill.

The CHAIR: Bill, would you like to come up and sit at the table?

BILL ELLIOTT: No. I've been trying to get a D4 going all morning.

PAT BARRACLOUGH: I can't smell you. Come on!

BILL ELLIOTT: I'll have a yarn later.

The CHAIR: Pat, have you finished your opening comments?

PAT BARRACLOUGH: Yes, that'll do.

The CHAIR: William, do you have some opening comments or remarks?

WILLIAM MURRAY: I don't come from here, but I've lived here since 1965, so I know a lot about what happens around here, actually. My old wife what I married is from here—that's why I'm here—but she's passed on and I'm still here. I got a son that lives here, and probably about six, seven grandkids and a couple of great-grandkids now. That's why I'm still here. But like these girls were saying, I've seen the river run dry twice since I was here. I walked from down the oval there right up to the bridge here in the middle of the river. There was no water right up there. Only a bit of water was here over the weir, what was held up—what the weir held up there at that time. Back in '66, I think it was. That was the water problem then, and you couldn't drink it. You had to get it out—if you were living on the mission over there, there wasn't no filtered water there at that time, so you had to boil the water to drink it.

The CHAIR: Specifically about the power outage in October last year, it sounds like you've got an extended family in the local community—

WILLIAM MURRAY: Yes.

The CHAIR: What are your thoughts about when the power went out, and that next couple of days, or the week? How did you all survive?

WILLIAM MURRAY: Well, I was going to get to that, but anyway—

The CHAIR: I do apologise.

WILLIAM MURRAY: I'm a pensioner. I live on my own, and I live in a flat there. I pay 500 and something dollars a fortnight to live there as a pensioner. I buy tucker enough. I go to Broken Hill once a fortnight, get some food over there and bring it back, and when the power outage went I lost everything out of my fridge. I had a little freezer on top of the fridge, like every fridge has got, and I used to have a bit of meat and sausages, you know, what you save up for to keep you going for the fortnight, but I had to throw it all out, plus all the veggies and whatever I had in there. And nothing then, for the next couple of weeks, until I got the pension again. So a bloke had to starve for a fortnight. I used to be 118 stone, nearly. Now I'm only 18 stone. Lost a lot of weight in them few weeks when the power outage was on. Lost a lot of tucker, actually. Couldn't eat it. Had to throw it out. That's my story of it.

Mr JAMES WALLACE: I think we've got a good sense about what happened, but it'd be good to understand—from our understanding, there was the outage which occurred, and there was a couple of days there where there was no power at all, and then power slowly came back on, but then would go off and on again as power was shared around the different towns. Is that your understanding about how things happened locally?

PAT BARRACLOUGH: Correct.

Mr JAMES WALLACE: Did you have mobile coverage reception during that period? Or was that out too?

WILLIAM MURRAY: I think that was out too.

PAT BARRACLOUGH: I can't answer that, because I had power.

Mr JAMES WALLACE: Was your mobile phone working?

PAT BARRACLOUGH: My mobile was working.

WILLIAM MURRAY: My mobile wasn't working, because I had no power, no portable generator.

RHONDA HYNCH: Sometimes.

PAT BARRACLOUGH: There were points in town where you could go and charge your phones. I think the shire had one. I'm not sure whether the police did. They also had signs where, if you needed to use the internet or needed the wi-fi, you could park outside the front of the buildings and get access. But as to mobile phones, I'm not sure.

WILLIAM MURRAY: Mobile phones, you could do it that way too, park at the front of the—

BILL ELLIOTT: There's the golf club too.

Mr JAMES WALLACE: When this was all happening, where were you guys turning to to get official advice about when the power would come back on, or what you should be doing and where you should go? Was it word of mouth spread around, or was there an official source you guys were looking to for information, like a radio broadcast, morning news on the radio, or council's Facebook page? Did you have an official source you went to, or was it just word of mouth?

WILLIAM MURRAY: The only thing what I can remember is people, when you walked down the street here or something and they pull up and have a yarn to you, and you get a bit of information off them.

PAT BARRACLOUGH: Word of mouth mostly.

WILLIAM MURRAY: Word of mouth, yes. That was all.

PAT BARRACLOUGH: I'm sure there was notices put up, but you had to have the power to get them.

WILLIAM MURRAY: Yes. I never seen nothing anyway.

Mr JAMES WALLACE: I know that the events last October and November were really bad, but does this keep happening? Are these blackouts pretty constant that are going on? You're getting blackouts for a day or two, or you're getting scheduled maintenance?

WILLIAM MURRAY: There was a blackout on today down my end.

PAT BARRACLOUGH: Yes, but that's a set one. They're doing work.

WILLIAM MURRAY: Yes, but I'm just saying it's out.

Mr JAMES WALLACE: But is that common to get unplanned outages?

PAT BARRACLOUGH: Normally if it's planned in the town, they do send messages out.

WILLIAM MURRAY: I never got a message.

PAT BARRACLOUGH: But you've got to be accessible to the message too. I get it by email.

WILLIAM MURRAY: I've got no email.

Mr JAMES WALLACE: Is it common for unplanned outages to occur?

PAT BARRACLOUGH: Yes.

RHONDA HYNCH: Yes.

WILLIAM MURRAY: Yes, very.

Mr JAMES WALLACE: And how often would you guess that occurs?

PAT BARRACLOUGH: No set time.

WILLIAM MURRAY: If we get a thunderstorm here, it goes out.

RHONDA HYNCH: It goes out.

WILLIAM MURRAY: Just out like that.

PAT BARRACLOUGH: Especially further away, mainly down the Wentworth Road, over towards Broken Hill and then Menindee. We go out, White Cliffs goes out and everybody in between.

Mr JAMES WALLACE: And when that happens, maybe you get a text message that it's out?

RHONDA HYNCH: Nothing.

PAT BARRACLOUGH: Nothing. Once it goes out, well, you know it's out. Normally they're not warned.

Mr JAMES WALLACE: I mean around how long it will take to get fixed up.

PAT BARRACLOUGH: Well, you can ring up. I always ring up in case they don't know that we're out, which they normally do, and the message is, "We don't know where it is yet. We're still looking, and we'll notify you when we know something." They've got lots of people to notify. Then I generally ring later to see if they know anything, and they might say, "It might be four hours", or, "We can't get there yet", sort of thing. You do get messages but, yes, sparse.

Mrs JUDY HANNAN: Do all the messages come from the same place? Who sends the text messages?

RHONDA HYNCH: The text messages sometimes come from Essential Energy, especially around when they do find a place and they could give an estimate. Sometimes they don't send text messages and, when you ring, they couldn't tell you. So half of the time, yes—it's always Essential Energy or Country Energy. It depends on what power outages they're with here.

Mrs JUDY HANNAN: I'm curious about emergency situations and what everybody knows about emergency situations. Rhonda, you were talking about your grandbaby, the newborn, and the lack of air conditioning. Would you know where to go in an emergency locally if you needed that air conditioning?

RHONDA HYNCH: I always tell them to go to the hospital.

Mrs JUDY HANNAN: How close is the hospital?

RHONDA HYNCH: It's just over—

PAT BARRACLOUGH: Four blocks.

Mrs JUDY HANNAN: So you know to just go up there?

RHONDA HYNCH: Yes.

Mrs JUDY HANNAN: Now we've got the generator here, do you think having a facility that everybody knows to go to in an emergency situation would be beneficial?

RHONDA HYNCH: I think there should be an emergency point here for all of Wilcannia to know, but half of the time we tend to turn to our general manager and see what they can do or whatever they're meant to do in emergencies, but if we can't find anything, especially on a weekend, we have to sit it out, not knowing.

Mrs JUDY HANNAN: So on the weekend the hospital's still there?

PAT BARRACLOUGH: Go to the hospital.

RHONDA HYNCH: Go to the hospital. Yes, they always open their doors. And they did send out messages, just around especially little babies, to take them up, because of the aircon and make bottles and things like that.

PAT BARRACLOUGH: And the oldies go up there too if it's very hot.

Mrs JUDY HANNAN: So everybody knows that?

PAT BARRACLOUGH: Yes.

Mrs JUDY HANNAN: I just wonder about the plan. There should be a plan in place where you all know where to go. It sounds like you've got the hospital sorted.

PAT BARRACLOUGH: I'm sure there is a plan, but everybody just knows. It's a five by three town, and you go to the hospital.

Mrs SALLY QUINNELL: Pat, my question is for you. Outside of Wilcannia we've heard a lot about the impact that not being able to access fuel had on a lot of the smaller communities. I'm really asking you to speculate a little bit, so I'm aware that I'm asking you to speculate, but what impact would it have made on the coping mechanisms for the town and White Cliffs if you hadn't have had your own generator to provide that fuel?

PAT BARRACLOUGH: There would have been no fuel because the roadhouse didn't have a generator. Topar was out of power too. They would have had none. We could have sourced it bulk, but not bowser wise, yes.

Mrs SALLY QUINNELL: And that's car fuel as well as diesel fuel?

PAT BARRACLOUGH: As well as diesel, yes.

Mrs SALLY QUINNELL: One of the things that has become apparent coming out and talking to different communities is the dependency on car fuel in a situation like this, especially in stations and outlying areas.

PAT BARRACLOUGH: Generators, everything, yes.

Mrs SALLY QUINNELL: Yes. So that generator, your generator, really batted above its weight, didn't it?

PAT BARRACLOUGH: It did, and it cost a lot to do it.

Mrs SALLY QUINNELL: Do you have a ballpark figure for what it cost you to keep that going?

PAT BARRACLOUGH: I do, and this is generous because it also powered our house and our workshop. I did a letter to Roy Butler, actually. It cost us, in gas, to run the generator, nearly \$3,200. My power bill, with 17 days out of 96 days, which makes it 79 or so, was \$754.57 dearer.

Ms MARYANNE STUART: Dearer?

PAT BARRACLOUGH: Dearer. The bill I got after the incident, which—it had just been read. My first bill was \$4,264, which encompasses our house, our business and our workshop. I got it, and I was stunned because there were 17 days where four or five we had absolute no power and then coming and going, coming and going, and we very rarely had switched the generator off and left it switched off. So I contacted them and explained about the power outage, and the young gentleman was kind enough to say that he could put me on a new plan and give me 15 per cent less in charges. "Thank you very much; I'll do that. But what about, you know?" Anyway, he asked me would I go out and take some photos of the box and send it to them, which I did.

I sent the photos, didn't get a reply. There's my new plan. I sent the photos again on 10 February saying, "Did not receive a reply, sending again." I got a message saying that—no, I rang and I spoke to a lady called Rebecca. She explained that an email had been sent to me, and I said, "Well, I'm sorry, I didn't receive any email after I sent the photos off. That's why I sent the second lot." She said, "We couldn't read them." I said, "Okay, not a problem. Okay, what do you want me to do?" "Well, can you take them again and send them to us?" So I sent them again, and she said she'd look at it again. I sent the photos off. Then she asked me, could I please confirm our residency, our name, our account number and all that, but she already had that with the account and all of that. Then I get an amended bill. The amended bill turned out to be \$5,145.72. That was for the other bill. Then the eight days of the ones they couldn't read—the photos they couldn't read. Then there was 27 days for the new photos. I'm kerfuffled, because I can't read it. I don't understand it.

Ms MARYANNE STUART: Who's it with?

PAT BARRACLOUGH: I'm with Origin. I believe that we live here—it's a bit like being with Telstra. There's better places or better services you could have, but you live here, and they're the ones who fix you. So I've just always stuck to who supplies me.

Ms MARYANNE STUART: Your story is very interesting, because we just came from White Cliffs where somebody spoke about the fact that a neighbour, with a different provider to her, had got a rebate—just instantly got a refund because of the electricity shortage. She then rang her provider and because she said, "My friend next door's got this," they went, "We'll give you"—was it \$50?

The CHAIR: Yes.

PAT BARRACLOUGH: On the first bill there is—

Ms MARYANNE STUART: But it took her to ring and ask.

PAT BARRACLOUGH: Yes. On my first bill, on 2 January, the Australian Government energy bill relief gave me \$81.25, but that wasn't to do with the power outage. That was a relief bill or something. So I'm in the process of doing a letter about that again.

Ms MARYANNE STUART: Good on you.

PAT BARRACLOUGH: But I don't know who to send it to.

Mr JAMES WALLACE: You mentioned before that your bill had gone up by \$750. Has it now come back down?

PAT BARRACLOUGH: No.

Mr JAMES WALLACE: Is it still \$750 more expensive than the previous quarter?

PAT BARRACLOUGH: They've just added that on to the seven days and the 27 days, or whatever it was, and that's there to be paid. I can't see any discount for the 17 days with no power. I can't work it out. If I'm pumping my own power—because of the power outage this morning, I went to my box to look at it to see if, when it was wired up by the electrician, it was still turning. It was completely blank. For the power outage, definitely the three or four days it was off completely, then the on and offs, and where we didn't switch off, there was nothing going through it. So why was my bill higher? But when you talk to the people in the offices, you can't ask to speak to the next person, or the next person, because they don't pass you on.

The CHAIR: No, they won't. I'm going to thank the three people we've got in front of us for appearing. Bill, we haven't heard from you, and we're pretty much out of time. So if you want to come and say something, you need to come and say something.

BILL ELLIOTT: Just briefly, if I may generalise a little bit, this was caused by a mini cyclone, a mini tornado, whatever you'd like to call it. These are not uncommon out here. I've seen them, tracks through the scrub 60, 70 years ago where the odd one just goes through. It's been happening since God had the measles. I know it was severe and my analogy there would be, perhaps, in three or four days time, have a look at TV and see what's happened up around Brisbane and Lismore, and you'll find that they will have done a lot worse than us. Lismore, a few years ago, when people lost everything—that didn't happen to us. I sympathise particularly with Pat, because she kept the place going and kept everyone going with fuel. The golf club had its own generator and had outlets for people to go up anytime to all charge their phones. A golf club in Sydney donated fuel for Wilcannia Golf Club, which was very good of them.

Mrs SALLY QUINNELL: Was that Mounties?

BILL ELLIOTT: I don't know how many drums it was, but they had fuel sent out from Broken Hill. Pat's got a generator that cost her a fortune to run. The hospital obviously has got a generator; IGA has. We're semi-organised for things like this to happen, in a way. We moved in on the property years ago and we've got a 5kva there ready to go whenever anything goes wrong. I heard of one Aboriginal lady with two children who bought a bag of ice every day and put it in her fridge and got through that way. I think the resilience was very good. The shire had a generator here for anyone that wanted to come down here, in comfort. They had a generator for our chemist, who didn't have anything, to keep him going.

PAT BARRACLOUGH: Two schools were given generators, or hired generators. White Cliffs Public School was given one.

BILL ELLIOTT: I think, to look forward, if there was a generator in Ivanhoe, Wilcannia, White Cliffs, and Menindee sitting there permanently—

PAT BARRACLOUGH: Ivanhoe has got one.

BILL ELLIOTT: —it would solve a lot of problems. On a more serious note, we've got to have gas and jet A-1 fuel available 24 hours a day out at the airport. We only got that in 12 months ago. I've now been able to get a toilet out there, which is pretty good. The problem there is, if that's available 24 hours a day, and this happened in White Cliffs only recently, if a plane comes in at 10 o'clock at night and there is a blackout, that plane is in serious trouble. For that reason, we need a generator at White Cliffs airport, and one up here, that cuts in—the same as the golf club one does—when the power goes out, to avoid what could be a bloody serious accident. As far as the townspeople go, as I said, we've got a generator. I've no doubt that there were fridges that lost food. Our \$200 certainly covered our fuel for our generator. Deep freezers will go a day and a half or so without if you leave them alone. It's one of those things, you know. You can always see somebody worse off than yourself. We'll see that in a few nights time—the same as we did at Lismore. If you're running out of time, I better shut up. Thanks for the opportunity.

Ms MARYANNE STUART: I just wanted to ask Rhonda, what's the Wilcannia working party? Is that part of the LEMC?

RHONDA HYNCH: No. We didn't get an invite to that. The working party is an assembly, made up of 16 communities. William was sitting chair a long time ago. We go to Cobar, sit and speak with local governments just around our community.

Ms MARYANNE STUART: Thanks for explaining that. When did the hampers come and when did the \$200 come?

RHONDA HYNCH: Same day.

Ms MARYANNE STUART: So you got the money in your hand on the same day?

RHONDA HYNCH: And then a week later—they only catered for so many and they sent some out to White Cliffs. I think it was only 260. So 150 stayed here and I think about 100 went out there. Then they had to replace it again.

Ms MARYANNE STUART: And to you, Pat, who's doing the work today? You said someone's doing some work today. There's a brownout today?

PAT BARRACLOUGH: Essential Energy's here doing some powerline—or something to the power down the south end of town.

Ms MARYANNE STUART: That's good, and they notified you beforehand?

PAT BARRACLOUGH: They notified us about three weeks ago. They always notify you. Then if it's not going to happen they'll let you know it's not going to happen, yes.

RHONDA HYNCH: I think they're putting in poles.

Ms MARYANNE STUART: How did you know, Pat, that you could go to the club or the police station to charge your phone?

PAT BARRACLOUGH: It was publicised.

Ms MARYANNE STUART: How?

PAT BARRACLOUGH: I had power, but they also came and told us. I think—Bill, the shire let us know? When they let us know about where they could go when the power was off: the police station for wi-fi, the post office.

BILL ELLIOTT: It was well publicised. The golf club, if you wanted to charge your phone.

PAT BARRACLOUGH: Yes.

Ms MARYANNE STUART: On your phone, though?

BILL ELLIOTT: The hospital was open for anybody that needed it.

PAT BARRACLOUGH: Post office, phone. Shire, phone.

Ms MARYANNE STUART: I'm just trying to establish how that communication came to you. Via your phone?

RHONDA HYNCH: No. Notices in the shops and—

PAT BARRACLOUGH: Word of mouth again.

RHONDA HYNCH: Word of mouth, yes.

The CHAIR: Thank you so much for coming along and offering your thoughts and your insights. Our travels have been very helpful in terms of putting all the meat onto the bones, for us who all live over on the east coast to understand what was actually happening out here and how difficult that was. For such a big community to be on a single line in, and rely entirely on that single line, is difficult for any of us to comprehend because we've got circular power supply.

PAT BARRACLOUGH: And when it happened it was stinking hot.

WILLIAM MURRAY: You couldn't sleep at night.

The CHAIR: We will send a copy of the transcript out to you, if you've registered with us and given us your email address. Could please make sure that it's a true and accurate record. Again, thank you all so much.

RHONDA HYNCH: Can I ask one question? What would happen now, just with the information that you've received?

The CHAIR: We've got until May to finalise everything and write a report. We write that report and we put it into Parliament. Then the Government has got six months to respond to that. Our report will have a whole bunch of recommendations about things that we think will make it better in the future. The Government has got six months to respond and say, "Yes, we're going to do that", or, "No, we don't agree with that", or, "We kind of agree with that but we don't have the resources to do it"—whatever the case is. Our work is really about the personal experiences on the ground. Separately from the work we're doing, the Australian Energy Regulator and IPART are doing their own inquiries into this. That's going to be more into the technical nature of power supply,

responsibility and contracted arrangements et cetera. That will come down through both Federal and State levels, as I understand it, for the governments to respond to that as well. So our report goes to Parliament in May, and the Government will respond within six months, which is November. I'm sure your local member, Roy Butler, will be chewing at the heels of the Government about making change.

BILL ELLIOTT: He definitely will.

RHONDA HYNCH: Yes.

PAT BARRACLOUGH: Yes.

The CHAIR: Otherwise you'll be chewing at his heels.

RHONDA HYNCH: I'll keep it up to him.

PAT BARRACLOUGH: Yes.

The CHAIR: Yes, stick it to Roy. Tell him I told you to.

Ms MARYANNE STUART: We'll try to get him some hard copies of the report, too, so that he can bring it out to you to read.

Mrs SALLY QUINNELL: Pat, you asked the question about not knowing who to send all that to. You might want to send it to Roy—the new letter.

PAT BARRACLOUGH: Yes.

The CHAIR: All right, thank you all.

The Committee adjourned at 13:15.