

REPORT ON PROCEEDINGS BEFORE

**LEGISLATIVE ASSEMBLY COMMITTEE ON
ENVIRONMENT AND PLANNING**

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

At Broken Hill Civic Centre, Broken Hill, on Thursday 6 March 2025

The Committee met at 8:15.

PRESENT

Mr Clayton Barr (Chair)

Mrs Judy Hannan

Mrs Sally Quinnell (Deputy Chair)

Ms Maryanne Stuart

Mr James Wallace

The CHAIR: We'll get started. Just so people understand, the basic format that we're going to try to roll through is to have four at a time come up to the microphones. We need the microphones for the sake of the public webcast and broadcast as well as for the sake of Hansard to record the words spoken here today. So we can only have people speaking from the front at the microphones—speaking at the back will be lost anyway. We do ask you just to speak your name as you start to make your comments. And, please, we can't talk over the top of each other. We can only have one person speaking at a time, otherwise it ruins the whole system.

The other thing about only having a panel of four at the time is that we've got multiple panels that we need to rotate through, and we've only got about an hour this morning to do that. So at this stage, I think we've got at least three panels that we need to get through, meaning we've got about 15 minutes each. I'm going to ask each of you if you can make an initial opening statement. I'm going to ask that to be no more than two minutes, and I'm going to time you and ding you on that, because that's already eight minutes out of the 15. There may be one or two questions that the committee may want to throw at you, and then we'll rotate through and get the next group forward. No-one needs to swear an oath or anything like that.

Good morning. I welcome you all to this morning's town hall meeting. Before we begin, I wish to acknowledge the traditional owners of the land, the Barkindji people, and pay my respects to the Elders of the Country, to any Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people who may be present. We are the New South Wales parliamentary Committee on Environment and Planning. My name is Clayton Barr. I am the Chair. With me are my fellow members: Sally Quinnell, the Deputy Chair; Judy Hannan, the member for Wollondilly; James Wallace, the member for Hornsby; and Maryanne Stuart, the member for Heathcote. This is our fifth and final public open town hall meeting as part of our inquiry into the electricity outages that affected the region from October last year.

We are holding the town hall because we received a number of submissions from affected community members in Broken Hill and have invited those community members to speak today, but also the broader and wider public. It is and has been our intention to try to break down the barriers between people and participation in a parliamentary inquiry, hence we're doing these more open forums. On behalf of the Committee in advance, I thank you for contributing to the inquiry and being willing to speak here today. The individual experiences have been vitally important in terms of us getting a good sense of what it was like on the ground, where you felt well supported and where there was a gap in how you were feeling about that difficult time.

We're going to ask you to make your opening comment for just a couple of minutes, and while we want you to be open about your dialogue, please don't use individual names to be derogatory. We might all expose ourselves to legal liability if we're going to make derogatory comments about certain individuals, so if you are going to identify a particularly bad instance that relates to an individual or a business entity, we might ask you to just be mindful of that. I also want to let you know that the Committee staff will email to you a copy of the transcript—the Hansard written record—of what we hear today, when we have that available, probably in the coming days, and you can, of course, make comment about correction. If you think you've been misheard or you've been misquoted or something like that, you can raise those concerns. That's as long as we have your email addresses, of course. We'll now go to our first panel of speakers.

BARBARA WEBSTER, before the Committee: G'day. I'm Barbara Webster. I'm a very part-time worker. I work from home, at Broken Hill, here. When the power outage was on, there was no phone over our way, which is quite a bitch, actually. It's disconnected. All the phones were out over there. You had to come over this side and be lucky to catch a phone. My business wasn't running at that stage. But it's not the first time I've been without power, so I don't think that it affected me in that way as well as much as it obviously affected a lot of other people. I was very disappointed that we've got a lot of electricity being laid up here with the solar farm and the wind farms and all the solar panels on the roofs, and not enough alternating current to go through just to help those systems get us a bit of power during the day.

It's not as if this is going to be something that's a one-off. We get really strong winds at times before we knew we had a bit of climate change coming up. It's not the first time that the big powerline outages have caused problems in this district, and it won't be the last, and they'll probably get worse. And to make a more resilient future, we really, I think, need to be more of a localised grid, for backup, and this is within all areas that have the ability of producing power. All areas, all over the country, should be able to be a little bit self-sufficient, even if it's only just to start the solar panels on people's roofs, to keep those inverters moving.

The CHAIR: Good.

ASHLEY BYRNE, before the Committee: G'day. I am Ashley Byrne, councillor, Broken Hill City Council. First of all, I'd just like to thank the Committee for coming to Broken Hill and holding this meeting. For the public, it shows them that there is something in the background going on and then hopefully we get the desired results that we're after. And, secondly, I'd just like to thank the Premier for his prompt response. I don't think there's ever been a Premier who in an emergency turned up so quickly. So we thank Chris Minns, and we've done that through council as well, for coming and meeting the stakeholders at the time, and also Penny Sharpe, for coming and staying in town for the lead-up to turning the power back on, and being that central point. It was great for people to see that. It puts faith in those people that the Government actually—out there there's usually that "governments don't care about western New South Wales and we might as well be in South Australia". So for those two, the Premier and the Minister, to come out was great, and the public do thank you for it, so thank you.

The CHAIR: Thank you.

STEPHEN PASCOE, before the Committee: Name is Stephen Pascoe, from the Silver City Car Wash. Just to let you know, our business runs solely on either water and power. You take one away, we have no business. And when the power went away, we had no business. So that was down for many days. When the power comes back on, we know that pumps, sumps, power cards don't play the game. So everything had to be reset, redone. Power cards were burnt out. The auto car wash was down for up to a week after the power was put on: trying to find parts that did fit, that whirrs wrong, that was burnt out, customers turned away, revenue lost, many thousands of dollars just gone missing, simply because of that. You had to have an employee there most times of the week to let people know, "Yes, it's not working", or, "It will be up and running. We don't know when", while you spent—income not coming in, so a lot of money was lost, a hell of a lot.

The CHAIR: Thank you.

JILL SCHINELLA, before the Committee: My name's Jill Schinella, from IGA Broken Hill. We suffered significant losses due to the power outage, being that the day of the power outage was the day that most of our fresh stock arrived into Broken Hill. So all our coolrooms and freezers were chock-a-block full. Our fridges in the shop were chock-a-block full. By the end of the day, there was nothing we could do to the inside fridges and freezers. We had to let that stock go. But my husband, Michael, stayed there overnight trying to keep our little generator going to keep our coolroom and fridges and the big freezer in the back of the store going. He slept there so that every couple of hours, he could put diesel into the generator to keep it going.

We couldn't get a generator in Broken Hill big enough to run our store because we needed something more than 100 kva generator to run the store to keep the store open, so our losses were significant. The insurance company has said they would prefer us to go elsewhere to get compensation for this, so it's a bit of a battle and things like that. But I just wanted to let you know that we have suffered significant losses, which I put in the submission. It was just really, really hard to run with the power coming on and off all the time. We've had major breakdowns with all our fridges and freezers because of this as well, so our staff have been very, very good. Our staff were supportive and that, but it did take its toll on Michael at the end of the thing.

Once we got the generator in, because it had to come from Merbein—and they were good. They actually drove the generator up for us and installed it—not fully, but partly installed it for the hire of it and things like that. We have since bought that generator now, so that it never—we hope it never, ever happens again. But at the end of it, when the town all went back on to power, Essential Energy then asked us would we stay off the grid until they got the town running, because our solar panels—we have solar on top. We endured diesel for another week

to keep that generator going so that the town—and that was okay because the town needed to get back on and they wanted to make sure that they were working on the grid properly and the town was being supplied, but it was at our expense as well, too.

The CHAIR: Thank you to the four of you.

Mr JAMES WALLACE: I suppose I want to just acknowledge what happened last October and the challenges and difficulties each of you have talked about. Thank you for sharing some of those different experiences today. I want to ask about the communications you received during that period. Did you feel like you were getting good access to information about the fact that the outage had occurred, how long the outage was expected to go for and when power was coming back on. Was that communication forthcoming in Broken Hill?

JILL SCHINELLA: Andrew Schmidt from the ABC, he was very, very good. If you had power or you had a transistor radio—the old transistor radio—you were listening to the ABC because he and his staff were updating us all the time, and that was the only communication that we were getting.

Mr JAMES WALLACE: Was there any communication that was coming from government agencies like Essential Energy or from emergency services or others that you were paying attention to?

ASHLEY BYRNE: I think it was just the general SMS dump that you get saying, "There's a power outage; 13,000 people affected. It'll be back on in due course." That was sort of what he got, but then there was an SMS and the phones, after a few days, weren't working because all the towers, the batteries went flat and so it was very hard for your phone to work. In 2025, if your phone is not working—there's a lot of people—that's it, your life is done until the phone comes back on. I think from my point of view as well, because of my role in council, we were getting information from the general manager who was attending those different meetings, but if you didn't have a radio some of that information didn't flow to the whole community.

Mr JAMES WALLACE: Just on the mobile coverage and the outage there, do you guys recall when that happened and what your experience was with that? Was it out straightaway or was it out a couple of days later? Do you remember how long it was out for?

ASHLEY BYRNE: I suppose on the south side of town it was within 24 to 48 hours that you noticed a significant drop-off in phone communication. Then, after that, generators and stuff were brought in and taken away, so it was ad hoc from then on in as well. It would drop in and out every few days.

Mrs JUDY HANNAN: I have two quick questions. One was I know this was a significant amount of time that you were out, but we're led to believe that outage occurs quite regularly. Is that true, and how often? Or are you on most of the time and this was a one-off?

ASHLEY BYRNE: Well, we have had a major outage like that before due to another once-in-a-lifetime weather event. Then I've seen at least three or four now in Broken Hill. Those lines have been knocked over before, but a full outage like that is not a regular occurrence, no.

Mrs JUDY HANNAN: So it might be the outside towns that have that issue?

ASHLEY BYRNE: Possibly.

BARBARA WEBSTER: That's more like it. When I was living in Menindee, it was frequent.

Mrs JUDY HANNAN: My other question is seeing as you were out for varied amount of times over a two- to three-week period, were your electricity bills slightly lower that time around?

JILL SCHINELLA: No, they weren't.

The CHAIR: Let the record show laughter.

JILL SCHINELLA: No, our electricity account was basically the same, even though we were running on a generator. We still paid the same amount.

The CHAIR: We're going to need to wrap up. Was there LEMC meetings taking place and what was the frequency?

ASHLEY BYRNE: I'm led to believe. I wasn't involved due to my role, but I'm led to believe there were regular emergency LEMC meetings held.

The CHAIR: Were there then public announcements that came on the back of those? Once a team of people had gotten together to have that meeting and a course of action or information, was there then an announcement?

ASHLEY BYRNE: From my experience, the announcement for me came from my company and through council, who were involved in those meetings. So that's my experience.

Ms MARYANNE STUART: What about the rest of you as ratepayers? Did you get any information from council?

BARBARA WEBSTER: No. My stepson, who's on a machine to breathe, he was just lucky he had the generator, because he got nothing. He had to get in his car with his oxygen bottles to get fuel for his generator and wait for hours and hours and hours at the fuel station because there were big queues. I was surprised that that could possibly happen these days because people who are reliant on—he specifically asked that question when we signed up for electricity to come on.

ASHLEY BYRNE: Can I just add, also through my experience in my own employment, I manage 120 residents off the mine grid, and the only way we could get communication out to them—because we usually email—was going knocking on the doors and saying, "Hey, the power's going out for an X amount of time", or, "It's not coming back on. You're going to need to make alternative arrangements." There was no announcement or any information through any other—in my experience.

The CHAIR: So that was a door-to-door knock?

ASHLEY BYRNE: That's what I had to do for my residents that I look after, all the houses that I look after.

Mr JAMES WALLACE: Good on you for doing that.

Mrs SALLY QUINNELL: Yes, well done.

Ms MARYANNE STUART: Well done.

The CHAIR: We are going to change panels. Thank you all so much. Because of the time and the rotation of the panels, we are going to ask you to limit your opening comment to about two minutes, and then we're going to have some questions. A reminder to please don't be defamatory of certain individuals because that could expose us to a legal problem. Also, because of the limited number of microphones, only one person at a time will speak.

VICKI CHORLTON, before the Committee: My name is Vicki. The power outage for us, it was 27 hours—that was a short time. Up the north had 40-something hours. Menindee had five days. I'd been shopping the day before—everything defrosted, lost the lot. Kids were not happy because their iceblocks melted. But it was just hard having to try and replace things. The \$200—thank you, it was a blessing. But it didn't really cover everything that we lost. And it was a stinking hot day too. Stinking hot. It was 36 degrees here, and it was hot. No air cooler, cold showers—blessing.

RITA BRUGGY, before the Committee: I'm Rita. I live down north, and it appeared to us that we were first out, last back on grid. I was home on my own, and I was a bit cluey about leaving the roller door up because I have no idea how to put the roller door up manually. Being home on my own, I didn't realise how long it was going to last. At several stages, I had absolutely flat—my phone, my iPad, my CPAP machine and my safety recall. Everything was flat, flat. I had no idea. I had candles on like everybody else, and I'd sort of sit around at night with the candles out thinking if I need the ambulance, fire brigade, no contact with the outside world. It was frightening being home on my own.

I did have a couple of people who were keeping in contact, which was really good for me; it was reassuring. But then their phones also went flat. To me it was a personal thing. A lot of people lost a hell of a lot more than I did—okay, food, and we're grateful for the \$200 and the \$50 petrol voucher. But we did have a generator, right down the back shed. I had no idea, could not lift it down and had no idea how to connect it up. So the frightening thing was being in the dark and everything was flat, several times, and it just seemed to go on for so long.

MICHAEL BRUGGY, before the Committee: I'm Michael. This is my wife, Rita. I was about 600-odd kays up the road when it went out, and when I come home I thought "What the bloody hell's going on?" I'm speaking not only on my own behalf but on probably about 300 other people in Broken Hill who use breathing apparatus at night time. And this was my concern: that this outage could very easily have resulted in many deaths. Think I'm crapping? No. It could have resulted in many deaths. Rita could have been one of them. Let me give you the little story. It's in my submission there. What Rita said—when you've got a mask on, it's tied tight. If you are disturbed during the night and you can't breathe, what's the first thing you do? If I put my hand over your mouth and your nose during the night, you're going to get into a panic state. And we're not young. Rita's not

young. She got into that state. "I can't get my mask off! I can't breathe!" What are you going to do? All sorts of hassles.

Of course, you don't think clearly, you don't think straight to undo this, undo this, take this and do that. When she did finally get the mask off, it was dark. So she went to get out of bed and turn the light on—of course, that didn't work—and grabbed the bloody torch. Would you believe it? It was flat. She needed to, in the rush—bladder said, "Listen, I've got to go." How do you find your way around in that state? It's a state of mind that was caused by a lack of oxygen or breathing, for a number of minutes it may have been. It feels like a long time, at the time. I must admit that when I come home, Rita was in one hell of a state, and I mean a hell of a state. She'd been through the panic, panic, panic stage. Could go nowhere. On top of that, everything else went flat. The emergency service went flat. The roller door's down. She can't open it—not strong enough, for a start, and didn't know how to.

The other services that would apply to other people with similar—I've been talking to many, and they've all got the same story. If you haven't got a partner lying alongside of you, it's a very difficult situation. I'm sure you're all mature enough to know it's only a matter of minutes, when you can't breathe, that things are going to go pear shaped. That was my biggest concern—to make sure that people knew of this. I don't know what the answers are. Money's not the answer. But I don't know what the answer is—some sort of battery back-up to these machines? I've written to the suppliers; they don't have one. I've written to other electrical people; they don't have one. There is a machine you can buy which supports your computers et cetera—a pretty lot of pennies and they're not easy to get.

I think we need to consider—and as I said I know of around about 300 I'm talking about. There's probably many more. I don't know if any of you on the Committee here are on breathing apparatus, but it's a frightening experience. One of the things, when you get frightened and you reach the crescendo, is that you don't think straight; you do things upside down and back to front. That was basically a brief summary of my submission on behalf of Rita. It really took many days to get Rita back to accepting things as they are.

The CHAIR: Thank you very much. When you sign on for an electricity arrangement with a retailer, they ask, "Do you have a medical device that you need support with?" Do the sleep machines—I think they're called CPAPs—are they counted as a medical device that needs power?

MICHAEL BRUGGY: Yes.

The CHAIR: So that would be registered with the electricity retailer?

MICHAEL BRUGGY: Yes.

Ms MARYANNE STUART: Thank you for being here. It means a lot to us to hear these stories, so we appreciate your time. Rita, I know it's a little bit triggering for you, but can you talk to me about the safety recall—what that is?

RITA BRUGGY: It's battery operated. I've had 19 falls so far, so trying to manoeuvre through a dark house—all I do is press this button and I've got six contacts. First contact was out of town. Second contact was out of town. Then it goes to third, fourth, fifth and sixth. That was flat. I charge it every now and then when I think it's going flat. So that was flat as well as my phone, torch, CPAP machine and iPad. Everything was flat. That was the main thing.

Ms MARYANNE STUART: Following up from the Chair's question about electricity suppliers, providers, retailers knowing that you are on this sleeping apparatus, did any of them contact you afterwards in regard to a rebate or anything—

RITA BRUGGY: No.

MICHAEL BRUGGY: No.

Ms MARYANNE STUART: —because their towers fell over and they only had one generator that worked?

RITA BRUGGY: We had a generator—

Ms MARYANNE STUART: No, I mean we've since found out that Transgrid should have had two functioning. You didn't know about that either?

MICHAEL BRUGGY: Of course they should've had, but they didn't. Transgrid basically washed their hands—Pontius Pilot.

RITA BRUGGY: Can I just say if there's going to be compensation, I'm saying that I don't expect the Government to have an input. I think it shouldn't be taxpayers; it should be the provider.

Ms MARYANNE STUART: We've heard that all across the board.

RITA BRUGGY: I need to get that across, because taxpayers should not compensate.

Mrs SALLY QUINNELL: You mentioned a \$50 petrol voucher. We haven't heard that from anywhere else.

RITA BRUGGY: We got it from St Vincent de Paul.

The CHAIR: On a similar vein, Vicki, a question for you. The \$200, I know that you mentioned it wasn't enough to sort of restock the fridge but it was welcomed. You've just stopped your fridge—you lost power, you lost all those goods. The \$200 is somewhere down the track. What's the gap there, and what do you do for the middle?

VICKI CHORLTON: It was a couple of weeks.

The CHAIR: So what do you do for the middle?

VICKI CHORLTON: In the middle? Well, you just—

The CHAIR: Just get by?

VICKI CHORLTON: Exactly. Exactly. There's not always—you go shopping. I'm on a Disability Support Pension. I've got two grandchildren; family payment. There's not always enough money left over to go out and buy more stuff. So we just made do.

Mrs JUDY HANNAN: With the registration of the sleep machine and all the rest of it, we've been told that while that's registered, that information is regarded as private information. Do you think there's the possibility of being able to tick a box that shares that information with an emergency service or something?

RITA BRUGGY: Absolutely.

Mrs JUDY HANNAN: We're told it's registered, but because of privacy, it goes nowhere. Do you think there should be a box to tick to say that that's able to be shared?

RITA BRUGGY: Absolutely. I think that all people who are involved know about it. I mean, I did get messages from Essential Energy saying power is on, power is off, power is on. But when it said the power is on, it wasn't on. It was ages after. It may have come on, but all of these messages came through 20 and 25 at a time, one after the other. But when it said it was on, it was not on at all. Nothing. There was nothing on at all. And it was extremely scary at night, having 19 falls already, manoeuvring through that, and no torch, no phone, no nothing.

Mrs JUDY HANNAN: It's a shame somebody wasn't around to help you.

MICHAEL BRUGGY: I think you'll find that because it's a life thing, yes, it should be connected to some sector. I don't know what sector, but in our case—I can tell you many stories of many people who had a similar experience. One man had a fall and hit his head, and that didn't do him any good either, so it added to his temperament and his—I'm surprised to find, in talking around, that Rita's reactions were normal. I thought, "God almighty." I'm her husband, so I'm a male. Simple as that. But I found out that I was wrong. It was a normal response, and when I think about it, it's a very much normal response. You try it one day with your child or your children or your grandchildren. Put your hand over their mouth. You watch them kick and buck. I haven't tried it—and I don't intend to—but it's a frightening situation.

The CHAIR: Just to be clear: Can I just recommend that people don't try that with their children.

Mr JAMES WALLACE: Given you had those two medical devices in your home, and I know you got the text messages about power coming on, power going off, was there anyone that contacted you from department of health or Essential Energy or anyone that contacted you to check in whether you had a generator to support those devices?

RITA BRUGGY: No, nobody at all. Nobody. I just had two friends who kept contact, but then their phones were flat as well. And being home on my own was really—for a start, it's quite unsettling. Especially during the night, if the power came on, but when the power went off and I'm still asleep, waking up, with this thing over my face and not breathing, that was scary. The whole thing was—and when Michael came home, he said, "I see you coped." Well, actually, it took me ages afterwards to kind of get back to normality. But it wasn't

until he spoke to other people that he realised the severity of the whole ordeal. Yes, it was eerie, creepy, spooky—horrible.

Mrs SALLY QUINNELL: Do you think in this process there has been a mental health cost that we're not talking about?

MICHAEL BRUGGY: Absolutely.

RITA BRUGGY: Absolutely.

Mrs SALLY QUINNELL: Has anyone approached you, apart from family and friends—and thank goodness we have family and friends that are stepping into that void in this situation—formally approached you about that mental health cost to you and the recovery of many days?

RITA BRUGGY: Nobody at all.

Mrs SALLY QUINNELL: I'm sorry you went through that.

Ms MARYANNE STUART: Yes, very much so.

Mrs SALLY QUINNELL: And the other 300-odd people. Thank you for reminding us of that cost too.

MICHAEL BRUGGY: Well, in an organisation I'm in, we're all old farts and, consequently, we have similar problems, either ourselves or with our wives. And the talk started. Wow! I'm not the only one, and it went on and on and on from there. There'd be a minimum—

The CHAIR: I thank our second set of panellists for sharing your experiences. I'm letting you go. I thought that we had a third panel, but we might not have. I put out an open invitation to people in the gallery who want to say something that haven't had a chance yet, you're more than welcome to come down and fill this third time slot. Is there anybody who has already sat down who wants to say a bit more than they've already said?

Ms MARYANNE STUART: Can we have the first panel back to ask questions?

The CHAIR: I think Barbara has left, but I'm pretty sure we've still got Stephen and Ashley, and Jill. Did you want to ask some questions?

Ms MARYANNE STUART: Yes.

The CHAIR: If you don't mind, can I ask those three to come back, please?

Ms MARYANNE STUART: Thank you to the three of you for being here. Can I just start with Ashley. I think it was Barbara before. We just heard that there were 300 people who went through this very similar experience to Rita. Ashley, can you tell us, do you know from council what the ratio of elderly citizens are in your LGA?

ASHLEY BYRNE: That would be accessible information, yes.

Ms MARYANNE STUART: It would be, but we don't know today?

ASHLEY BYRNE: I don't know off the top of my head, no.

Ms MARYANNE STUART: No, it's fine, but it would be fair to say it's a significant portion?

ASHLEY BYRNE: Broken Hill has a significant elderly population, yes.

Ms MARYANNE STUART: Yes. To Stephen and Jill, both as small business operators—Jill, you made the comment that your insurance company said go elsewhere for compensation?

JILL SCHINELLA: That's right.

Ms MARYANNE STUART: Can you elaborate on what they meant by elsewhere?

JILL SCHINELLA: Well, I guess they're telling us to go back to Transgrid.

Ms MARYANNE STUART: Yes, that's what I would have thought too.

JILL SCHINELLA: Personally, I think it is Transgrid—I mean, they're a business. They do wrong.

Ms MARYANNE STUART: Private sector now.

JILL SCHINELLA: That's right. They do wrong. If we did wrong, if our business did wrong, we would have to fit the bill to everybody.

Ms MARYANNE STUART: Customer service, it's called, I think.

JILL SCHINELLA: That's exactly right.

Ms MARYANNE STUART: Have you found that your insurance premiums have gone up over time?

JILL SCHINELLA: Yes. Our insurance, we were paying \$54,000 a year to insure our business. Our renewal policy has just come in. I haven't put this claim in to the insurance yet, but we're paying \$59,000 this year for insurance.

Ms MARYANNE STUART: And Stephen, with your car wash business?

STEPHEN PASCOE: I'm an employee there. The owner actually is down in Adelaide. I dare say, along with Jill, it would be in the same boat. It will raise, don't you worry about that. Nothing is ever going to go down. With our boat, in our situation, the owner had to transit from Adelaide to Broken Hill on many occasions, putting in parts that the car wash manufacturer said would be the part that you need, to find out that it wasn't. Then you've got to go through the process again—eliminate this, eliminate that; buy this, buy that; put it in; hope that it goes.

Ms MARYANNE STUART: As small business owners, you have all taken a significant hit?

JILL SCHINELLA: We have.

Ms MARYANNE STUART: And I think my colleague Judy asked a question that I couldn't really hear about rebates. Is that the question you asked before—did they get a refund? Yes? And Transgrid didn't come and offer you a refund or—

JILL SCHINELLA: No. I did personally reach out to Transgrid, and they told me to go back to the Government, that because they had given—I think it was 100K or something to be disbursed in Broken Hill. And, yes, that's okay. There's a lot of people that got \$10,000 grants for sporting groups and all that, and that's good. That's fine. But as a business, we support all those sporting groups ongoing all year, all the time around. With our significant losses—and I will tell you, it was over \$90,000 that we've lost. So with that, it's hard now for us to keep supporting these groups that are going on. The Government gave us \$400. Four hundred dollars on \$90,000 is a smack in the face, as far as I'm concerned, and that's the way to put it.

Ms MARYANNE STUART: So you've lost \$90,000. We know that Mother Nature is going to throw these sorts of challenges to us again in the future, so part of our job is not only to find these findings that you are presenting to us, but it's also to do a written report with recommendations. For small business here in Broken Hill, what would be some recommendations you would like us to consider?

JILL SCHINELLA: We've taken that onto ourselves because it's our business. It's not the Government's business, so therefore we try to stand alone and the Government don't need to support us even though we pay lots of taxes and things like that. We've been in business for—Michael's been in business for 60 years now. We've been long-time business people. We had three businesses at one stage. We've only got one now. We've sold two off now. We're getting older, and I had a tile shop for 36 years. So we've been in business and we've supported our community all the time that we've been in business, and we've enjoyed doing that. But we have now bought that generator, and what I'm talking about, the \$90,000 that we've lost, that doesn't include the purchase of the generator. We've just paid a \$23,000 bill to have the generator powered onto the business so that when it kicks—power goes out now, it kicks in and things like that. We still have to fence the generator. We still have to put a shed around the generator. So we've still got ongoing costs for all this, so I would say we're going to go somewhere near \$112,000 is what I've actually worked out so far.

The CHAIR: Can I ask the two small businesses, what about the employees? What happened to the employees? Were they put on leave or do they still get a salary? I don't mean to pry into business, but I'm just curious. What do you do with your employees when your business isn't functioning?

JILL SCHINELLA: We paid our employees even though we were closed, because it wasn't their fault. It wasn't our fault, but they still had to live as well, so we just footed the bill for—

The CHAIR: Stephen, do you know what happened in the business?

STEPHEN PASCOE: They could employ an employee there for so long, but with no income, you're digging into whatever money that you had put aside. Transgrid had generators as backup, but they failed. I think they failed to maintain them, hence why they failed to work, so someone's got to be responsible for the large amount of money that we've both lost as a business.

Mrs SALLY QUINNELL: So power went off, then came back on. Were there rolling brownouts after that?

STEPHEN PASCOE: Yes.

JILL SCHINELLA: Yes.

Mrs SALLY QUINNELL: And how long did those brownouts go on for?

MICHAEL SCHINELLA, before the Committee: Twenty-four hours.

JILL SCHINELLA: They were putting some parts of the city, and they would roll from the north to the south to the west and things.

Mrs SALLY QUINNELL: Right. And so were you notified of specifics regarding those brownouts—what time the power was coming on, what time it was going off—so that you could react accordingly?

MICHAEL SCHINELLA: No.

JILL SCHINELLA: No. We never knew when it was—

MICHAEL SCHINELLA: You'd basically be at work—

Mrs SALLY QUINNELL: Can you come up to the table so that we can capture your—thank you. Appreciate it.

MICHAEL SCHINELLA: Just about became an expert when they were going to go off.

The CHAIR: Before you start, could you please just introduce yourself so that the transcript can reflect that.

MICHAEL SCHINELLA: I'm the owner and manager at Broken Hill IGA Fresh.

Mrs SALLY QUINNELL: Thank you. And so you were saying that you became experts in when the power was going off.

MICHAEL SCHINELLA: You'd get a very light flicker or your lights dimmed for a minute, and then you knew it was going to happen within five minutes.

Mrs SALLY QUINNELL: So you had a full five minutes to be warned—

MICHAEL SCHINELLA: To start closing down your registers because it kept blowing out our backup batteries to the register. They kept knocking out our back office.

Mrs SALLY QUINNELL: So when they then came back on, was that power when it came back on at normal level, or did it surge on or—

MICHAEL SCHINELLA: Oh, no. It was a great level. I hate to know—what did we spend up with the new—I think we had to get up five or six brand-new—

JILL SCHINELLA: We're about \$40,000 now with repairing our registers and our refrigeration.

MICHAEL SCHINELLA: And also, we've got a backup battery thing that's supposed to stop surges, but it was blowing them out.

Mrs SALLY QUINNELL: And, Stephen, were you finding the same thing?

STEPHEN PASCOE: Exactly the same. Pumps failed to kick in, so it's hard to tell. The lights would flicker, thinking that you've got power to everything, but pumps wouldn't kick in, power cards burnt out, everything was fried, and it's just a process of elimination that what you were paying for to replace wasn't the actual problem; it was somewhere down the track. So you were paying for things all the time.

Mrs SALLY QUINNELL: So power came back on, and you were like, "Great. That's fantastic. We've fixed it," and then it just was this never-ending—well, it must have felt never-ending at the time.

JILL SCHINELLA: It was, because you were repairing all the—and we're still repairing.

MICHAEL SCHINELLA: The other point we'd like to make—once we got the generator in, our bigger generator, we could run the whole store. There was a lot of stuff that we had to basically do manually because the electricity guys that installed everything didn't have all the equipment, because they sort of basically drove up at five o'clock in the afternoon, dumped the generator and worked until eight o'clock the next night to get us up and running. Cost us a fortune, but we were lucky that—

Mrs SALLY QUINNELL: So when that was happening, how did people pay for anything?

MICHAEL SCHINELLA: Pay?

Mrs SALLY QUINNELL: Yes.

The CHAIR: If your registers weren't working because you didn't have electricity—

MICHAEL SCHINELLA: We were closed for two days.

Mrs SALLY QUINNELL: You lost power; you closed—

MICHAEL SCHINELLA: Yes, we had to close for two days.

Mrs SALLY QUINNELL: —got power; opened up.

MICHAEL SCHINELLA: It was after that that what we done was we opened. We used our small generator to run the registers, our big generator to run the three coolrooms, the freezer, the 18-door freezer in the store, the 18-door dairy. The back one could do it, but we thought if we separated—the other problem we had was when power went off, not so much of a problem, but when it came back on—I actually rang the electrician one day and I said, "What can I do, Dave?" I said, "We're losing—it's blowing things out." He said, "Go to your back main board, go switch on, switch off, switch on." He said, "That will stop it all coming on all at once."

Mrs SALLY QUINNELL: So you were graduating, basically. You were doing a graduated on, but yourselves.

JILL SCHINELLA: Yes, that's right.

MICHAEL SCHINELLA: The other problem we had was with Transgrid, they had a number and you rang them and there was a tape recording, but it never told you what time or what time it wasn't—

Mrs SALLY QUINNELL: That's reassuring.

MICHAEL SCHINELLA: We wouldn't have had the losses we had, even with our small generator, if the power had came back on when they said it was.

Mrs SALLY QUINNELL: Yes, you could have planned.

MICHAEL SCHINELLA: Because by nine o'clock that night, we were running out of diesel, which the power was supposed to be on at five o'clock that afternoon. We sent two of our guys out to south with jerry cans. There was an hour and a half wait. It was just impossible.

Mrs JUDY HANNAN: Jill, you said that your insurance company suggested that you'd prefer to get the recompense from elsewhere. Have they suggested a way, or how are you going to act to do that? Are they going to do it on your behalf or is there forms to fill out? I don't understand how you can choose to. And is there costs associated with that?

JILL SCHINELLA: I guess what they're saying to me is, "You go to Transgrid and see how you go there before you come back to us again."

Mrs JUDY HANNAN: And do you know if there's a process to do that?

JILL SCHINELLA: Transgrid won't even answer my emails now.

MICHAEL SCHINELLA: I was talking to—what's the insurer's name? He said it might never happen. If we put the claim in they'll most probably knock back 50 per cent of it. Because they'll say, "Fifty per cent was your fault. You didn't have a generator big enough to cope." Then what they try and do is you get 50 per cent out of Transgrid. It apparently works that way when you have a car accident.

Ms MARYANNE STUART: That's right.

MICHAEL SCHINELLA: Whether it will or not. But he's guaranteed me one thing: For the \$90,000, our premium next year will go up 10 grand.

The CHAIR: We'll go to closing statements now.

ASHLEY BYRNE: Speaking for myself as a member of the community and what we expect out of this—it's 2025. We shouldn't be worried about if the power's going to be on. If the power goes out, there should be reliable backup power supply. The other thing is for these insurance companies to expect them to pay 50 per cent—and this is the first I've heard of it—because they didn't have a generator. Like I said, it's 2025. Why should the power go out for several days?

STEPHEN PASCOE: With the power outage and the time frame it was out, we're all sort of forgetting the time it happened was in the middle of our tourist season. We had a lot of people being turned away and being very disappointed with the services that Broken Hill were providing. Why have we got no power? Why?

ASHLEY BYRNE: We heard at one stage the police were saying to people, "Don't go to Broken Hill."

The CHAIR: We have heard that. Again, thank you very much. Just so that everyone knows, we have had some photos taken during the course of proceedings today. If you have any concerns about being photographed, please let us know. They would typically only be used on our parliamentary website on our Committee webpage. If you have any concerns, please let us know. It's not a problem; we can just remove those images from our file.

Town hall concluded.

The CHAIR: Before we start the public hearing elements of today, having finished the town hall element of today, I would like to acknowledge the Barkandji people, who are the traditional custodians of the land on which we're meeting today. I also pay my respects to Elders, past and present, and extend that respect to any Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people who are present or who are viewing the proceedings through the public broadcast today. This is the fourth set of public hearings that we are holding in the Far West as part of our inquiry into the electricity outages affecting the region in October last year.

In November last year, the Legislative Assembly Committee on Environment and Planning, which is who we are, commenced this inquiry at the request of the Minister. Between December and February, the Committee received over 40 submissions from individuals, organisations and agencies, and we sincerely appreciate all of those. An important part of this inquiry is also hearing directly from people who were impacted by the outages and/or were part of the support mechanism during the outages. For this reason, we sincerely appreciate the time that people have given to us to actually appear in person and to speak to us directly. Complex issues have been raised in this inquiry and we have heard, and will no doubt continue to hear, a range of different perspectives.

We're scheduled to have hearings all day today. We have one more hearing to take place in Sydney, where primarily we will hear from government agencies, and we are scheduled to table our report into Parliament in May this year. The Government will have six months from then to respond. My name is Clayton Barr, and I am the Chair of this Committee as well being the member for Cessnock. Beside me is my Deputy Chair, Ms Sally Quinnell, the member for Camden; Judy Hannan, the member for Wollondilly; James Wallace, the member for Hornsby; and Maryanne Stuart, the member for Heathcote.

GERRY LEAVER, Executive Committee Member, Business Far West NSW, affirmed and examined

ROSIE SIEMER, Executive Committee Member, Business Far West NSW, affirmed and examined

MICHAEL BOLAND, General Manager and Company Secretary, Broken Hill Musicians Club, sworn and examined

SIMON SAWDAY, Director of Government Affairs, Clubs NSW, affirmed and examined

The CHAIR: Thank you all very much. I will now give you the opportunity to make a very brief opening statement, if you'd like to for just one or two minutes about your experience. I know there have already been submissions from some. I will sweep from left to right this time. Simon, I don't know if you want to make an opening statement on behalf of Clubs NSW?

SIMON SAWDAY: Sure. Thank you, Chair and members of the Committee, for arranging this hearing and listening to my feedback on behalf of Clubs NSW. Clubs NSW is the peak body for more than 1,200 registered clubs, and we're proud to count the Broken Hill Musicians Club among our members. We have participated in this inquiry because clubs regularly act as evacuation centres during natural disasters and emergencies. In fact, right now, four New South Wales clubs are evacuation centres for Cyclone Alfred. During the 2022 Northern Rivers floods, 11 clubs acted as evacuation centres, safely housing more than 800 people. During the 2019-20 bushfires, 38 clubs provided refuge for 24,000 displaced people. To assist our member clubs and their communities, Clubs NSW also supports disaster relief efforts, having pledged \$50,000 to aid the storm recovery efforts in western New South Wales recently.

It is not by chance that clubs across New South Wales repeatedly play this role in support of their communities. Clubs can often accommodate hundreds, if not thousands, of people. They have kitchen and dining facilities. Clubs are accessible places for people with disabilities, and parents with infants and perhaps, most importantly, clubs are not-for-profit community assets. When people must evacuate their homes, the club personnel don't think about the financial costs of transforming their premises and providing free meals to members of the public, they just step up and support their communities. These costs can be quite significant, particularly when the club is facing weeks without any trade. Our submission details a range of opportunities for the New South Wales Government to work more closely with clubs and Clubs NSW to help clubs help their communities. I look forward to answering any questions. Thank you again, Chair.

The CHAIR: Thank you, Simon. Michael, would you like to make an opening statement?

MICHAEL BOLAND: Thank you, Chair, Deputy Chair and Committee, for taking the time to conduct this inquiry. It's a very important inquiry for the people of the Far West, to make us feel like we're being heard, when we felt that we weren't being heard back in October. It's no stretch to say clubs were about 72 hours ahead of government and other departments during this outage and this emergency, and that's nothing bad towards government. That's simply because club CEOs and club GMs are embedded in their communities, and we know what's happening in our community, and we can react in time.

I spent 10 years in North Queensland and went through Cyclone Yasi in 2012 and Ita in 2015, so I had a good knowledge and information on what to do. The club turned around and the staff pulled together and we opened as a respite centre for the community very, very quickly. But I had access to information that wasn't available to the average community. I think information needs to be transparent. It can't be given out depending on your position in the community. I had access to information due to serving on the local council as well that the community didn't have.

There was the failure of the Telstra towers, and I think Telstra needs to be held responsible for the poor emergency generation facilities at their cell towers—000 wasn't able to be called. During that period, people rely on their clubs and they feel comfortable at their clubs. They were contacting me, who was using our battery backed-up nbn at home to get services such as CPAP machines et cetera. It was a life-threatening situation. Flying Doctors couldn't fly, couldn't call 000, as I said. There were also businesses operating on small generators that were able to provide services to the community of Broken Hill, but with Telstra being down and extended power outages, the club was the only place in town you could get money out, because we had ATMs.

The reliability of the Transgrid backup GTs has been questionable at best for a long time now. There was outages in 2019, and a November 2023 outage. The club also stepped up in the 2023 outage. That was only—I say "only"—12 hours. It's part of our charter, our membership et cetera and, as Simon said, four clubs right now are acting as an evacuation centre as the cyclone is bearing down on the east coast. I have personally provided some assistance and insights from the lessons learnt from the Far West power outages to some clubs along the coast. The Musicians Club itself provided storage for medication—to keep it cool—for local doctors' surgeries

and local staff. As Roy Butler, our MP for Barwon, said, clubs provide something that local, State or Federal governments couldn't provide. Also, shadow Minister Kevin Anderson said that in time of need people turn to their local club. We've seen that during the October 2024 power outages. Again, thank you for the Committee for coming out, and I look forward to answering any questions that the Committee may have for me.

The CHAIR: Thank you. Rosie or Gerry, did you want to make an opening statement?

ROSIE SIEMER: Thank you very much for coming here and having us. We're both on the executive of Business Far West NSW. We were formed a couple of years ago to give support and advice to not only small business but also large business in the Far West of New South Wales. We are jointly funded by Foundation Broken Hill and the Broken Hill City Council, and basically we are here today not only as business owners ourselves but to give some feedback on some of the local businesses through the power outage. Thank you.

GERRY LEAVER: I haven't got too much to add. Firstly, thank you, Chair and Committee, everyone, for having this hearing. I'm new to the system, so I haven't got a lot to add on top of the submission other than to just bring to the fore the exposed failures in the system that happened with our power outage. As it's already been touched on, communications were a super big one. It goes right across the board from life-threatening situations with the Flying Doctor, bushfire service, CFS services, all that, no phone service, and it's something I've also seen happen from reports on the bushfires on the east coast. So there has to be a more reliable communications system put in place with backup generation. It just goes without question. It's super important that something happens here.

The other thing is looking at the transmission lines that caused this problem to start with, or were the problem resulting from the strong storms. That could happen again today. It could happen tomorrow. If we don't do something about that in the near term—I realise new transmission lines et cetera is a big, big process and there is a long lead time to rectify, but there can possibly be temporary solutions, like putting guy-wires on the existing transmission towers that are really at the end of their lifecycle. It may give them a few more years of reliable service. So things like that should be looked at just to bolster up what we've already got there while we're waiting for something new to happen. That's about it in a nutshell from me, and the rest I think's in the submission.

The CHAIR: I want to ask a really quick question before I throw to the rest of my Committee, and it's to Business Far West. We've been up to Tibooburra, White Cliffs, Wilcannia and Menindee. Does your organisation also have contact and reach into those areas as well?

ROSIE SIEMER: It does. Obviously, we get more Broken Hill people to our events and things like that for the travel but, yes, we've definitely got people.

The CHAIR: I just wanted to clarify that. We won't go into it just at the minute, but clearly the experiences of the different businesses—some of those more remote ones clearly have regular problems with power and already have generators and stuff in place, to their enormous credit. The Broken Hill community probably have a more reliable power supply, and this is a question. Is there less generator backup capacity or dependency in Broken Hill compared to those other areas?

GERRY LEAVER: I guess, in Broken Hill, the general public don't have the need for a generator because we do have relatively reliable power apart from when this sort of incident happens, whereas the bush, you've got a spiderweb of supply lines, so there's more chances of things going wrong. The outback stations and things like that will most times have backup power because they can't rely on it. It still affects them, of course, when something like this happens, where it cuts everything out, but if every Broken Hill house had a backup generator, it'd be a—

The CHAIR: A festival of generators.

GERRY LEAVER: Pretty much. So it's not something that would happen. The other thing I just add with this power outage is that, even with our motley backup generators that we had going to supply to Broken Hill, even if they were functional 100 per cent, they won't run the likes of Perilya mining. So the mine's shut, and so those people are out of work for that period of time. Also, as a business owner, we were looking at around two months plus before the work came back online from the mines, because it's not like a flick your switch and it's all happening again. There's a ramp-up period and the lag time starts. We do a lot of work for the mines. We had around an 80 per cent reduction in work for a couple of months, and that has a big effect and a flow-on effect on employees and money that's spent around the town.

Mr JAMES WALLACE: Thank you all for your presentations today. They're really insightful. I wanted to start by acknowledging the role, clearly, that Broken Hill Musicians Club has played, as well as Clubs NSW. We would all say when we read through your submission, the amount of effort and energy and commitment that the club showed towards the community in Broken Hill and the wider community is really outstanding. I think

that needs to be acknowledged. In the two submissions I've read—I think from you, Gerry, as well as from the club—you talk about some of those business costs which have been experienced. Has there been any efforts by Business Far West to better understand and quantify what the total value of the economic impact was in the community? Have you gone down that way of looking at it and trying to come up with a number of the total costs at all?

ROSIE SIEMER: We haven't personally, but the RDA actually put out a survey at the time. The unfortunate position we were in is the survey—to their credit, they did an amazing job, but the survey was put out during a very busy time for business owners. They had a lack of internet, a lack of power. You can understand where I'm going there. I do know that a lot of business owners that we've spoken to actually didn't take part in the survey, so it's been very hard to get exact figures. Just to give a little bit of a backstory, this has been a thing that has snowballed. It happened towards—17 October, I think the date was. We were still having internet and EFTPOS problems in December leading up to Christmas.

With the lack of the workers on the mines, the lack of the economy, it meant that Christmas was very quiet for Broken Hill. It meant that no money was put away for our quiet January/February times. Business owners are still flat out from this power outage at the moment. It's hard to get someone to find time to sit down and do a survey at the moment. We're here in numbers. I heard from a very small local retail business that just in Christmas orders alone that she would usually take in November, she lost \$15,000. That's without looking at anything else. That's literally just her Christmas orders that the local people couldn't afford.

Mr JAMES WALLACE: Then a question to you, Michael, was you mentioned before that you were able to gain access to certain information by virtue of your position at the club and your position with the council you talked about. Can you talk more about that setup which was occurring locally? Was that through the REMC, or was that through another structure? How were you getting access to that information? I'm asking this because I agree with your proposition that that transparency of information to the wider community is so important. Can you talk about what information you were getting access to and any ideas on how we can disseminate that?

MICHAEL BOLAND: I was getting information straight—well, not straight—from the regional emergency committee. It was coming from the regional emergency committee, but it was then emailed across to councillors and we were asked not to share it widely due to wanting consistency with messaging. But, unfortunately, when telecommunication lines are down, there is no consistency with communications with messaging. Being really the centre of city for that period of time, we could get information out to members. Through the work of the Wilcannia Golf Club, which also did an amazing job up at Wilcannia—I was forwarding emails to Wilcannia because they were getting no information at all. They were getting less information than Broken Hill. They were relying on really the local ABC in the morning to broadcast information. I was providing information to them so they could get their community ready but really, to answer your question, it was straight from that committee and also being on the council, and also having people I knew in the local trades that had knowledge of the situation happening at Pinnacles Place substation.

Mrs JUDY HANNAN: I'm looking at the actual communications. It's been really handy because we hear it, but to actually be able to read it in that submission is really handy. My question probably goes to Clubs NSW as well as Michael. Clubs, as you say, are usually evacuation places. Are they involved in the local emergency management committees at all?

SIMON SAWDAY: I can start. A lot of clubs really aren't sure what their role is to play if there is an emergency, depending on the type of emergency. When we speak to some of our members and ask them if they are evacuation centres in the event of an emergency, a lot of clubs think they're evacuation centres but not official evacuation centres. That seems to be a distinction that they have. A lot of clubs haven't seen the local emergency management plan, or they're otherwise not aware where the club is listed. For instance, are they an evacuation centre for one type of emergency but not another. They might just generally know that they might be an evacuation centre, or there might be an emergency and people will turn up at the club. I guess, to answer your question directly, I'm not aware of many clubs that do sit on that committee as a member or the type of consultation that clubs have beyond clubs generally understanding that they may be called upon to support the community in the event of an emergency.

MICHAEL BOLAND: That pretty much sums it up. I was able to email the local committee. Very early on Monday into Tuesday the club was becoming very busy with people heading to us. We've had experience through the outages as I mentioned in November 2023 and the 2019 outages when people were congregating at the club. So I sent an email out to the committee and they were able to get information out that the club was operational. But not being part of that committee or having a club GM as part of that committee meant that—and the communication lines being down—we were running dangerously low with diesel. That's something that, if there was a club general manager on that committee, could be communicated quite quickly. I had to tap into the

Clubs NSW resources in Sydney which was able to organise storage and diesel for the club. That's the kind of thing that comes about from that.

The one official emergency centre that was open straightaway was the Royal Flying Doctor's centre just up the road here. But it was only capable of maybe 100 people, where my club can fit thousands and had full air conditioning and a full commercial kitchen. So it's important that there's representation from local clubs on those committees. Clubs are officially recognised as places people will go. People will tend to go where they feel the safest in an emergency and a natural disaster, and for a lot in our regional communities that's their local club.

Mrs JUDY HANNAN: And Clubs NSW would cover a lot of New South Wales, I imagine, out of all the different facilities? A lot of people have not known where their emergency evacuation centres are so if it was an official thing it might be useful.

The CHAIR: Can I just follow up on that, because it's completely different in my neck of the woods. The clubs are recognised in the local council emergency management plan, so I can name the two clubs that are the go-to places. Has Broken Hill council not got a formalised plan where the club is recognised as the spot to go to? Is that not in place?

MICHAEL BOLAND: I'd have to take that on notice and check it, and obviously being part of council as well—

The CHAIR: Sorry, I didn't want to talk to you about council stuff as a musician club. But you mentioned it at the start and we've ended up in that space. As a musician's club, are you not aware that you are formally recognised in the emergency management plan?

MICHAEL BOLAND: I'm not aware that I'm formally recognised but certainly we are the place people go in any emergency in Broken Hill.

Mrs SALLY QUINNELL: As a follow-up, can we also find out on notice—because I realise you're not going to know this now—if the golf club in Wilcannia is also formally recognised as an evacuation space within that plan?

The CHAIR: I just say it because I know in my local area the clubs are recognised in the plan.

SIMON SAWDAY: I can respond to that, Chair. There is also a distinction between the club being recognised in the plan and then the club being activated as an evacuation centre after an emergency. Sometimes a club is aware that they're recognised in the plan but because, for instance, the telecommunication infrastructure might be down or because the emergency on-sets really rapidly, people will just turn up at the club before the club is aware that they have been activated as an evacuation centre. In those instances the clubs, as you would imagine, will just take in people and accommodate them before they find out if they are activated as an evacuation centre.

Mrs SALLY QUINNELL: Is Business Far West on the committee? Are you formally on that Local Emergency Management Committee?

ROSIE SIEMER: We were invited for the weekly and sometimes twice-weekly talks. I'm unsure if we are formally on there but, yes, we were invited; we were involved. One of the issues we had, I was trying to join in on the weekly zoom meetings and I had three in a row that it either didn't work, dropped out, didn't have. Unfortunately, whilst we wanted to be there—and it wasn't only us on the zooms that were having the same trouble—it's really hard to get that communication. It's great and it was wonderful to be involved and that's exactly what needs to happen, but without reliable internet, it just can't happen.

Mrs SALLY QUINNELL: We've been told in those towns that we've been into that the impact of "Please do not come to the Far West; we don't have power", had an incredible impact on local businesses. Could you please expand on that and what you've heard?

ROSIE SIEMER: That was one of the biggest things with feedback we were getting from our members, that the news sources that were going around everywhere—social media, everything—were saying, "Don't come here. We don't have food. We don't have fuel." The caravanners were apparently getting turned away. There wasn't any hospitality, any accommodation. But we were all here and we were all open and we were all doing our very best. We had bought our own generators and things like that. It was really disappointing to see, and a lot of it was media fuelled. But it was really disappointing to see that message getting put out.

Mrs SALLY QUINNELL: We heard as far as Wilcannia, Tibooburra, White Cliffs, that access to fuel was a really major issue due to lack of telecommunications and lack of power. Did you find any businesses that were affected by that specifically, that the lack of fuel or having to ration fuel became an issue?

ROSIE SIEMER: On the second day it happened, I lined up for over an hour, personally, to fill a jerry can for my generator for my business. So the line-ups were quite large. One of the feedbacks that was touched on earlier was about the local graziers. Yes, they've got their own generators, but they were also rationing their fuel. They would run their cool rooms for a certain part of the day and then maybe put a cooler on or something else in the house for another part. They couldn't order more fuel deliveries because the phone lines were down. They couldn't contact the RFDS if there was an accident. Yes, fuel was a very big issue.

GERRY LEAVER: I can only add a little bit. I know that the local fuel delivery suppliers—the trucks and that—had priority for the one generator that was partially working, so orders for fuel were all put aside to keep it going. Then the next one might be the hospital generators and then there's generators everywhere, so people and businesses would be waiting in line to hopefully get a truck to deliver fuel and refuel generators. That was certainly a problem.

Mrs SALLY QUINNELL: I want to go back to the communications. We know that there was a blackout for—depending on where you were—various amounts of time. Then there were brownouts that were ongoing and of varying degrees of strength, shall we say. Did you have regular communication as to when those brownouts were occurring, how long they were going to last for and the impact so that you could plan around that? Was that something that you were aware your members and guests knew about?

MICHAEL BOLAND: I can start off. No, there was no warnings when the brownouts were going to happen. I did a tour of the Essential Energy depot, and they went through the process that they went through, and they literally got a phone call from Transgrid saying, "You have to take X amount of megawatts off the grid, and you've got 30 seconds or the whole grid will collapse, the island grid." So Essential Energy didn't have time to let people know. When the one GT that was operating overheated to 1,000-plus degrees, they weren't able to access it to find out the damage until after 10.00 a.m. the next morning, which was Tuesday. So there was no real communications. With the cell towers, they were operating on battery backup, so that didn't last very long. It wasn't as long as a diesel generator. So the communications around when they were going to occur, how long they were going to occur just wasn't there.

They shut the GT down on the Sunday evening for maintenance, even though the local techs advised them not to, and they said it would be restored by 4.00 a.m. The city started waking up around 6.00 a.m. and the power was still off, and the power was not restored until after 8.00 a.m. Business Far West may have some more information on that, but I believe it was 8.00 a.m. And there was no communications. We had to listen to the local ABC Radio to find out, and they were basically saying, "Oh, it should be on by eight o'clock." And that was really the communication through that initial part.

ROSIE SIEMER: I just want to touch on the graziers again. The feedback we got from the graziers, the local property owners—they were left a lot longer without power, days and days longer. And they had very limited communication, again because they had no access to anything from the outside world. They were literally an island that was separated. That was really tough to hear. They're just as important as everyone else, and that was really tough that they felt like they were out on their own, basically.

Mrs SALLY QUINNELL: Literally, yes.

ROSIE SIEMER: They literally were. And they felt like maybe, because they do have their own generators and things, that they were kind of just put on the backburner. So that was very interesting to hear.

Mrs SALLY QUINNELL: That's tough, yes.

GERRY LEAVER: Just touching on if we knew there was going to be a brownout coming and all the rest, there's generators tripping. It was on and off. My particular business is in the industrial area, and we would hear the explosion from where we were. There was those things dropping out and blowing up, and things were going bad, and there were voltage spikes like you wouldn't believe. We were, I suppose, earlier on the grid with our business, but a lot of equipment was blown up from voltage spikes. Also, during the day the rooftop solar power was becoming a real problem. It would spike the voltage, and they'd be asking the mines to turn on big equipment just to suck some power to keep the voltage down a bit; otherwise everything would trip and blow up. So, yes, we lost quite a bit of equipment, security equipment mainly, on the workshop, and computer-type stuff and backup there. So there was a lot more to it than just the brownouts or the blackouts. There was damage as well.

The CHAIR: Just following on from that, has anyone heard any conversation about voltage spikes being used as a means to shed load? Because if you want to shed load and trip things out, you just send a voltage spike. That blows up a whole bunch of refrigerators and whatnot, but you shed load.

GERRY LEAVER: I don't know the ins and outs of it. I just know the local mines were asked to turn on big equipment to try and bring the voltage down.

The CHAIR: Yes, they absorbed.

GERRY LEAVER: They were absorbing it, yes. I don't know the rest of the technicalities of how it worked, but there were spikes.

ROSIE SIEMER: There were a lot of spikes.

GERRY LEAVER: Yes.

The CHAIR: I think we've heard this morning—we've certainly heard it as we've travelled around—that this blew up a lot of fridges and freezers. I think the car wash gentleman today was saying it was blowing up the computer power boards and things like that.

GERRY LEAVER: Yes, all that sort of stuff.

ROSIE SIEMER: Tills and monitors in their businesses and fridges and things, yes.

MICHAEL BOLAND: Mr Chair, if I can just add that the club received a significant donation from the Mounties Group in Sydney, of \$100,000, and we actually used that towards replacing low-income earners' refrigeration and whitegoods. So we partnered with St Vincent de Paul, and they would go out and shop for whitegoods. There was a significant amount of whitegoods that were destroyed, and particularly concerning were low-income earners. We're in the middle of a cost-of-living crisis, and they're the last people that can afford to replace a fridge, and we were coming into summer. That could lead to spoiled food et cetera. A significant amount of the donated money went towards replacing whitegoods, and some also went towards mental health support for low-income earners as well.

The CHAIR: That's magnificent. Of the \$100,000, do you have a ballpark-ish figure of how much was ultimately spent on whitegoods, like half of it or most of it or—

MICHAEL BOLAND: I can take that on notice and certainly get the answer from St Vincent de Paul. We needed to partner with an organisation that knew how to make sure the right people got the support. So I can certainly check with them. They would just ring me up and say, "We've done this", and we would get the funds to them. We have a fundraising event this weekend that will go towards the same type of stuff as well, because St Vincent de Paul is still dealing with the fallout from those outages.

The CHAIR: We have spoken to people who still don't have a replacement fridge. So that is magnificent.

Ms MARYANNE STUART: I might start with you, Michael. First of all, thank you so much for what you've done for the community, particularly in regard to storing medication because we've heard quite a lot about things like insulin, for example, that had to be thrown out, rebought. So thank you for what you did, stepping up in such a big way. Did I hear you say that you are on the council?

MICHAEL BOLAND: Yes, I am.

Ms MARYANNE STUART: You spoke about the REMC. You spoke about the fact that council sits on that REMC. Did I hear you say that you were given information but were told not to share it widely?

MICHAEL BOLAND: Yes, that's correct, and that was due to making sure the messaging was consistent. Obviously, during emergencies, the whispers can get out of control, and I guess we're seeing it right now with the unfolding disaster on the east coast. A lot of information can be changed around and used to frighten people. So I understand why we were asked not to share that messaging and it come from one source, to ensure that it was consistent in messaging and we weren't frightening people that didn't need to be frightened. But, obviously, the communication lines were down.

Ms MARYANNE STUART: So can you tell me who gave you that direction of not to share it widely?

MICHAEL BOLAND: That was directly from the committee. So when the emails came out, it was directly from the committee.

Ms MARYANNE STUART: Who on the committee?

MICHAEL BOLAND: I'm guessing it would have been the chair of the committee. I was just going on I guess you could call executive summary emails that we were receiving.

Ms MARYANNE STUART: You said there were outages in 2019, November 2023, from Transgrid?

MICHAEL BOLAND: That's correct. The main X2 line was down. And through the research of doing the submission, there may have been more, but what I could work out from researching through social media and local media outlets is that that line goes offline or has a fault 1.4 times a year, every year.

Ms MARYANNE STUART: So there's history of this sort of—

MICHAEL BOLAND: Certainly is, and I can almost certainly say that the November 2023 outage was a warning to Transgrid that there is serious issues on that line. That was when one of the GT failed due to rooftop solar. They're 40-year-old GTs that can't cope with renewables on the grid, and I believe that that November 2023 outage should have been a warning to Transgrid that something needed to be done for the power reliability of the Far West. To be honest, they probably played with a bit of fire and got their fingers burnt, and it was just lucky that there was no deaths resulting from that.

Ms MARYANNE STUART: You spoke about the communication before. You got your operational team to start communicating to the community to let them know that your club was open. How was that done? You said before that Telstra also went down. How do people communicate here?

MICHAEL BOLAND: We were trying to get messages out the best we can. Ultimately in a modern society that's through social media et cetera. Local radio played an important role, particularly the local ABC. Other than that, we've been there for our members time and time again during long power outages. And our members knew that we would be operational and they knew they could come to us. I think in regional areas, it's ingrained that "Just head to the local club. They'll be able to help us out." We've certainly seen that during the major outage between that Monday and Thursday of the first week.

Ms MARYANNE STUART: Thank you. Over to the business sector. Gerry, you also said this is not a standalone event, and Rosie, I thank you for acknowledging the graziers and those that live on properties that are isolated. We spoke to one person who spoke about the fact that they were in the middle of holding a rally event with 500 people. Are you aware of that?

ROSIE SIEMER: I'm aware of that, yes.

Ms MARYANNE STUART: And the toilets couldn't flush because there was no electricity.

ROSIE SIEMER: No pumps.

Ms MARYANNE STUART: So that's a common thing that would happen on those sorts of properties when the electricity goes down? Seems a bit of a public health issue, when you've got 500 people there.

ROSIE SIEMER: Absolutely. That aside, the biggest concern that was raised with us is the lack of being able to contact the Royal Flying Doctor Service. That was the biggest thing that was raised, because people with families—anything can go wrong.

GERRY LEAVER: Life-threatening.

ROSIE SIEMER: It's life-threatening. It is absolutely life-threatening, and to not even be able to call 000, it's frightening.

Ms MARYANNE STUART: We did talk about the fact that tourists were told to stay away. We've heard that as a consistent thing across the board. Nobody ever thought to say, "We're open now. Come back"?

ROSIE SIEMER: We didn't have access to communication to be able to put that message out, to be honest.

Ms MARYANNE STUART: So what would you like? The whole purpose of this Committee is to hear about the challenges. We all look at findings, but we also want to make some recommendations going forward. Knowing that small business is the lifeblood of any community being the primary employer, what would you like to see put in place next time around so that folks can know that your doors are open?

ROSIE SIEMER: Clear communication across the board and transparency. We were only fortunate that we had an ex-local, Lucy Phillips, who is employed with Service NSW. Lucy and her team got in touch with us directly—knew who to get in touch with, because that's part of it. If she wasn't an ex-local, that would be a little bit more difficult. So we had some clear messaging on access to not only the funds when they started coming through—the very small amount of funds, I might add—but the services that were available for businesses as well, where they were. There were certain spots set up in town that they could access. You could go there and you could use the internet. You could do things like that. But there was just no communication to start with. We weren't being told anything from anyone, and that was really frightening. We needed some transparency, some communication. Again, I understand it's really hard to not get that out there. Again, Michael touched on the fact

that we did rely on social media because you did have intermittent mobile reception that you could quickly get on and check Facebook, for example. I think social media was very important during that time.

Ms MARYANNE STUART: So would you like to have seen the REMC, the LEMC, local government step up in that space to be more communicators or better communicators?

ROSIE SIEMER: Absolutely. People on the ground. We're located in Argent Street in the CBD. We didn't have anyone walk down the street and ask if we're okay.

GERRY LEAVER: I was just going to add to that. I think, going forward, you're asking about what we'd like to see happen. Communications is one of the major things, apart from the actual outage of power, but going forward we need to try and stop this happening again, and that's what I said earlier. It could happen tomorrow, and the first thing is the transmission line, which is the weak point of the system. As soon as it goes out, our solar and our wind farm—which is 200 megawatts of wind farm and 50 megawatts of solar—is just switched off because it's not connected to the main grid anymore. Hopefully, Hydrostor, when that comes online in a few years, will help that situation, but in the interim we need something to stop the next whirly wind that goes through this transmission line and that goes through there regularly—stopping them falling over again. And they're old—end of their life. They're most likely weakened, and my suggestion is guy-wires. There might be another solution. But that would be a relatively cheap solution to extend the life of them in the interim.

The CHAIR: The guy-wires might pull them down.

GERRY LEAVER: I hope not.

The CHAIR: Thank you all so much for appearing with us today and making your submissions. The insights have been absolutely wonderful. Some of you have taken questions or notes. Thank you so much for doing that, Michael. We will send you a copy of what you've taken on notice so you don't need to remember it. We would ask that you turn that around in seven days. We might also develop some additional questions that we want to send all or any of you, and when we send them out to you late next week, we would also ask you try and turn them around for us in seven days. We're on a real timeline to table our report here. If you can't do seven days, that's okay, but just talk to us about that. Thank you again so much.

(The witnesses withdrew.)

TODD FERGUSON, Organiser, Mining and Energy Union, affirmed and examined

BRUCE BYRNE, Chief Operating Officer, Perilya, affirmed and examined

JOHN BRAES, Acting General Manager, Perilya, affirmed and examined

The CHAIR: I welcome our second panel of witnesses today. Thank you all so much for coming along today. During the course of proceedings with our backwards and forwards and questions and answers, if there's a question that we ask you that you don't know the exact answer to today, we talk about "take it on notice". That's just a phrase that we use. You can take it notice and just say, "Can I get back to you on that?" If that happens, we will send you a copy of the question that you've taken on notice and the context in which that question was asked. Also, at the end of the session and over the coming days, we might develop additional questions that we'd like to send out to you to get further information because you've triggered some thinking in our brains. Before we start, do you have any questions about the process we're about to embark on?

TODD FERGUSON: No.

BRUCE BYRNE: No.

JOHN BRAES: No.

The CHAIR: Would you like to make a short opening statement before we begin questions? I'll come to Perilya first on this occasion.

BRUCE BYRNE: I will be just a couple of minutes.

The CHAIR: Go ahead.

BRUCE BYRNE: I will give some background and a bit of context from Perilya's point of view regarding the outage. Perilya probably are the largest single employer in the region who was affected by the outage. A little more background just for context: Origin Energy are the energy retailer to Perilya. Essential Energy are the distribution network service provider to the Perilya mines and we share what is known as an operating protocol to manage the electrical systems between Essential Energy and Perilya. There's no direct affiliation between Perilya and Transgrid. Instead, all communications and operations of electrical supply to Perilya are coordinated between Perilya and Essential Energy. Transgrid is the transmission service network provider to the region. Perilya, in conjunction with Essential Energy, operate the protocol and in that protocol there is no provision or obligation for back-up power. This falls under the Australian Energy Regulator framework and the New South Wales electrical transmission reliability performance standards.

The incident itself—obviously we know, but just to recap. The power was lost to Broken Hill township and Perilya mines early in the morning of Thursday 17 October 2024. All mineworkers at the time were safely evacuated from underground and sent home on that shift as no work was available without power. The mineworkers on alternate shifts were notified that no work was available due to the availability of no power. The entire operations of the mine were suspended from that point. Approximately 450 direct Perilya employees and 150 contractors were impacted from the suspension of work, with only essential staff kept during the operation to manage maintenance issues and the coordination between Essential Energy and Perilya.

On the morning of 17 October, Perilya lost internet and phone reception as the Telstra towers failed due to the power and the UPSs not keeping up. Perilya couldn't process pay for employees on that day, which were due on that day: Thursday the 17th. And additionally, payment to suppliers that would normally have been paid on that day was also not completed due to the fact that we didn't have internet, power and other important services. Security to the mine site was compromised completely with no tag-in or tag-out facilities available across the three mine sites. With no power available, the site security systems were compromised completely. The critical mine remote control monitoring systems for underground access had failed. This made it impossible to monitor rising levels of water within the mine and the mine safety systems.

The mine residential—we have up to 120 residential houses, and the septic systems obviously failed because there were no mine pumping systems operational due to the loss of power. It required us to quickly come up with an alternative means to manually pump the septic systems into trucks and dispose of the effluent until diesel generation could be put in place. That was all at Perilya's expense. All mine-owned residential houses lost power for durations up to 40 hours of continuous loss of power, with approximately 200 people being affected.

Perilya mines does not have any backup power generation and we rely heavily on Transgrid for backup power generation. At the time of the outage, Transgrid had only one backup generator—I know we're all aware of that—with the second generator out of service. The in-service generator failed early in the outage, and the emergency power was not restored to the mine site for, once again, another 40 hours. When power was eventually

restored, further delays to the mine power restoration were evident due to problems with the high-voltage circuit breaker in the Transgrid yard that failed.

Perilya, during this process, had supplied some critical items to Transgrid to help them in the form of cooling water—demineralised cooling water—and specialised bolts to help repair the failed generator. During the extended outage, communications in the region failed again and communications between Perilya and Essential Energy, which were critical, were lost again. At this time there was no reliable information coming from either Transgrid or Essential Energy throughout the entire process of the outage. Essential Energy controller and operators, following the initial outage, advised Perilya that we would not receive any power when the incident first occurred, indicating that this was an instruction from Transgrid. At this point, no contact was made to Perilya from senior members of either Transgrid or Essential Energy. Following a call from myself to Roy Butler, he was able to get communication working and gave me contacts of people I could call in senior executive roles in Essential Energy.

Perilya do have 80 residences and at that time, initially as I said, there were up to 200 people without power housed in those residences. Power was required to pump the mine water and stop it flooding and potentially losing the ability to reopen the mine if we didn't get power. Finally after this communication was passed on to Essential Energy, they did allocate minimal power to Perilya.

Following that came the issue of rooftop solar. We were then approached by Essential Energy to take more power than what was initially allocated. Perilya was requested to take power in what was required to keep the town residential solar system generating and it threatened to stall or impact the Transgrid generator. We obliged by that and we immediately had people working 24/7, switching large equipment on and off at the request of Essential Energy to manage the power loads and keep the Transgrid generator operating during the solar surges and drops. Perilya was called at a moment's notice to shed load, to take load, in accordance with Transgrid instructions at very short notice, to provide supply stability during the periods that were influenced by rooftop power. So all of a sudden when we weren't very important in the early stages, we were very important.

During these periods, loads managed by Perilya consumed large amounts of power, and operating and turning on and off this large equipment was necessary to keep the mine on life support. This load was sometimes in excess of five megawatt, and consumed purely to assist Transgrid and Essential Energy to control the rooftop solar which, in turn, kept the lights on in Broken Hill. If Perilya had done nothing, the town would have stopped and Essential Energy and Transgrid would have required our facilities to assist in regulating the load. It's not normal to have communication with Transgrid. It all—as I mentioned earlier—comes via channels through Essential Energy. They were heavily reliant on that process between Perilya and Essential Energy, during this phase, to keep emergency and stability in the whole system.

Perilya went out and hired a six-megawatt generator to provide emergency power to the mine site and 100 residents. The decision to hire the generation system was made very early in the outage because it was unclear if Transgrid or Essential Energy would provide emergency power, and at the time we were being told that we were not going to get it. The estimated cost of the hire of that equipment was \$500,000.

It also needs to be stressed that during the outage and all previous outages at the mine site, it was only ever supplied as emergency life support. It was never support to the mine. This supply was as low as one megawatt and only reached five megawatts to assist and to manage their situation with rooftop solar. Perilya does require up to 21 megawatts to operate normally, and I genuinely believe this should be considered in any future upgrades and modelling. Thank you. That was probably a little bit more than two minutes.

Ms MARYANNE STUART: No, it was great.

The CHAIR: It was a little bit more than two minutes, but it was quite stunning, to be perfectly honest. I just want to clarify in my own brain. During the day, one of the generators for Transgrid was operating as a backup. But the sun comes out and solar is coming through people's roofs, so they can access that into their house. The generator is running, but it hasn't got anywhere for its power to go. So, to help with that and to buffer that, you were turning on some of your big engines just to absorb some of that.

JOHN BRAES: Yes. We were being requested by Essential Energy to start and stop our equipment to handle the loading.

The CHAIR: So you were absorbing the power, and then you get a phone, "No, no. We need the power back in the system. Stop."

JOHN BRAES: Yes, take it down. Or at night, when rooftop solar had stopped, we'd get a request to go on to a lower megawatt.

The CHAIR: But then, at midnight, people go to bed, so there's all this spare electricity floating around.

BRUCE BYRNE: Yes. They would give us about a megawatt during that period, so all we were able to do during that period was dewatering of the mine. But all of this was done literally at a moment's notice. As I said, for a long period of time we didn't even have the communication channel, so we were blind to what was happening.

The CHAIR: I just wanted to clarify in my own brain about the technical sharing of the load. Todd, after the two-minute statement by Perilya, do you have a two-minute opening statement?

TODD FERGUSON: Yes, just a quick one—a few comments to follow on how this has affected my Mining and Energy Union members locally. We have a lot of members at the mines and through the energy providers in town. A lot of people were stood down. If the mines can't run then people can't go to work. I will say that Perilya and CBH, at the time, took care of their employees by allowing them to use annual leave. Bruce would be able to talk to the cost of that to the business. If people aren't coming through the gate to work, the mine is not producing. But Perilya made the call to actually let people use their leave in those circumstances, which kept a lot of people in food and bills and roofs over their heads.

The effect of that is still being felt now. People have annual leave plans for the future. They put money aside for the future. That all had to be used not when they wanted to use it, and that's still being felt now. People had holidays planned for this year, but they had to use their leave back then to keep the wolves from the door. It's an ongoing battle that people are still feeling the effects of. Credit to the company for allowing the employees to use their leave. I'll answer any questions after that.

The CHAIR: That's an excellent point to make. I've lost track; I think I'm starting over here with you, James. We are into our last 10 minutes.

Mr JAMES WALLACE: I'll be very quick. You say there was that communication where you were being asked to turn on equipment in order to deal with those power surges, for want of a better word. How was that communication occurring?

BRUCE BYRNE: It was a bit haphazard, to be truthful. It was done between our technical people and engineers on site and the Essential Energy people.

Mr JAMES WALLACE: So the Essential Energy technical team was contacting a technical team on your end, and then you'd turn on the power?

JOHN BRAES: Through the control room. The Essential Energy control room was contacting our people.

Mr JAMES WALLACE: Just via phone call, or something like that?

JOHN BRAES: Well, it had to be, because there were no communications at the time because there was no power. We actually had one landline that was the cable being used at the time, which we have at our supply point, and that's where a lot of the communication was done. Other communication was done by going up to the top of one of the hills in Broken Hill where you could get communication—the only place.

Mrs SALLY QUINNELL: Just yell real loud.

BRUCE BYRNE: It was the only place that mobile phones would work.

JOHN BRAES: Communication was very hard at the time. That was mostly the communication trail until we got communications back to the towns et cetera.

Mr JAMES WALLACE: My final question was that you mentioned, Bruce, at the start of your presentation that you were informed by people at Essential Energy—I assume in conversations that you had with the senior executives after Roy Butler had connected you—that Transgrid had given an instruction to Essential Energy not to supply power to the mine site. Can you elaborate on that? What was the reason given for that by the Essential Energy executive that you spoke to?

BRUCE BYRNE: Just to go back a bit on that point, all of this communication was never made at any senior or executive level. It was really just the control room talking to our guys, saying, "No, we've been told we can't give you power." There was no-one from Essential Energy or Transgrid coming to me or John or any of the senior managers on site to give us an explanation. It was just that, and always has been that, "Under emergency situations, we don't have to supply the mine power." Although we accept that, we've got 100 houses—200 people who are residents. They should be treated no differently than anybody else, and that was probably one of the strong points that we were making. As far as the communication goes, it was quite haphazard. It was conflicting, and we never had a consistent story coming through those communication channels.

Mr JAMES WALLACE: When you had the conversations with the senior executive, did you get a story?

BRUCE BYRNE: At least I got a commitment that he would push his engineers to be able to re-establish power to the site, and that's when we got our first one megawatt. Up until that, we had nothing.

Mrs JUDY HANNAN: As one of the biggest employers in the area, are you ever involved in the local emergency management committee?

BRUCE BYRNE: Yes.

Mrs JUDY HANNAN: During that process, what information were you getting from them or were you involved in?

BRUCE BYRNE: Initially, none. But, following the call to Roy Butler, we were drawn into that committee.

Mrs JUDY HANNAN: So you're not a regular in that committee planning?

BRUCE BYRNE: Interestingly enough, we are. But we weren't involved in those earlier discussions.

Mrs SALLY QUINNELL: You mentioned that payroll couldn't be processed on that day, nor invoice payments. I'm assuming also that contractors couldn't be paid on that day. Can I just clarify, is payroll done weekly, monthly, fortnightly?

JOHN BRAES: Fortnightly.

Mrs SALLY QUINNELL: So a fortnight's pay couldn't be processed?

JOHN BRAES: Correct.

Ms MARYANNE STUART: Bruce and John, have you worked in the organisation for a long time?

JOHN BRAES: Yes, a long time.

BRUCE BYRNE: Yes.

Ms MARYANNE STUART: Have you ever seen this sort of thing before?

JOHN BRAES: Yes, when the towers went down last time, around—I'm not even sure of the time. It was a couple of years beforehand. It was a similar arrangement where—

Ms MARYANNE STUART: Was it handled differently back then?

JOHN BRAES: I think it was the fact that we had the generators available.

Ms MARYANNE STUART: So the two Transgrid generators actually worked back then?

JOHN BRAES: Yes. Whereas, this time, we only had one generator available. From what I am led to believe, that generator was de-rated because it had issues. So the amount of power it could actually generate for the town, for us et cetera, was limited. Throw solar into it as well, from the rooftop—it was causing all sorts of issues to the point that the generator was going to go down if we didn't take power. At the end of the day, yes, we have seen it before, but it was handled differently.

The other part, too, of the handling of it, last time, it was putting the poles up, the wooden poles. It was handled a lot quicker and a lot more efficiently than what it was this time. This one here, there was no communication. It seemed to be very slow to get the towers to a point that they were—everything has got to be designed these days, I understand that, but it was a very long time before those towers even started to go up. When they started to go up here, they went very quickly. But again, you're getting this information that it's going to take this long then, all of a sudden, it was coming in earlier. People were doing a good job getting it on quicker but, at the end of the day, we were told we would be informed first because power had to come through us to get to the town hub. We hear from Roy Butler's Facebook page that the power is coming on, and we're not even notified, as a critical person in that loop. Yes, it was definitely handled a lot differently. Previously, I think it was a lot better; this time not as good.

BRUCE BYRNE: Can I add, there is one point that John hasn't made. At the time, Essential Energy had a presence in Broken Hill. The general manager of Essential Energy at the time was Guy Chick. We used to meet regularly. We used to have regular meetings between Essential Energy and Perilya. He had made contact, and we had constant communication during that period.

The CHAIR: To clarify, that was the previous occasion?

BRUCE BYRNE: That's the previous occasion.

Ms MARYANNE STUART: Was it 2023 or 2019?

BRUCE BYRNE: It was 2019. Since then, Essential Energy decentralised their management and services away from Broken Hill, and we don't have those meetings anymore.

Ms MARYANNE STUART: I just want to say that you did an outstanding job with all of the challenges, the security issues and everything that you faced, making sure that each and every one of your employees and their families were kept safe, so well done you.

The CHAIR: Thank you. We've only got a couple of minutes left. Todd, I want to speak to you about your mining and energy union. We've got the mine thing. Your energy workforce, are they the ones trying to restore power, trying to re-erect the towers and all that? Is that your mob as well?

TODD FERGUSON: No, my members are for Essential Energy, but it was Transgrid that was doing all that side of it. Locally, here in Broken Hill, we have a depot for Essential Energy. They're our members. They liaised, and they were the boots on the ground here in Broken Hill, but I think the erection of the towers fell on Transgrid and their force. Locally, it was the Essential Energy people that were running around delivering generators to the elderly, those on critical health plans, all those sorts of things. They were instrumental in all of that, locally. It was very good.

The CHAIR: Thanks for clarifying that. Do your members have concerns about the age of the infrastructure, the deterioration of the infrastructure, frequency of outages, maintenance and upkeep? Is that something you're hearing from your membership or are you not hearing that at all?

TODD FERGUSON: Yes, we're hearing that, definitely. In regard to the 2019 one, I believe it was handled differently, as has already been alluded to here. They built a temporary line on the ground and then fixed the towers and stood everything and put it in place. That didn't happen this time. From what I'm hearing—from my members, anyway—it was, "Let's fix it properly the first time," which led to a longer outage as opposed to putting in temporary—lay it on the ground; don't worry about it—towers; get power back to the town and region, and then fix the infrastructure; lose a little bit of downtime in that swap over. Yes, there's definite concerns over how it was handled and, if it happens again, how are they going to do it again, because it wasn't the Essential Energy—

The CHAIR: Some of our submission-makers have actually suggested this idea of a temporary cable to fill the gap or to go around the gap while the repairs are done. I didn't even know that was actually a possibility. It has been done in the past?

TODD FERGUSON: That's how they did it in 2019, I'm told by my members that were involved in that job. Rumour has it they offered the same services this time—let's do that—but it wasn't their show to run so they were just directed to do what they did.

The CHAIR: Gentlemen, thank you so much. It's been quite an interesting 30 minutes. I don't think anyone took any questions on notice but we, as a Committee, may develop some additional questions to send you. They will probably arrive late next week. Sally has got a whole bunch.

Mrs SALLY QUINNELL: I've got 10 here.

The CHAIR: Once we send the questions out, we do ask if you could turn those around, please, in seven days, if that's at all possible. If it's not, please speak to us. You will also be provided with a copy of the Hansard transcript of what has been said today. If you have any concerns about what was said, please just mark those corrections and come back to us and work with us around that as well. We sincerely thank you for your time. As Maryanne said, also what you did during that moment of crisis, we sincerely thank you very much.

JOHN BRAES: Just one thing, going forward, just communication on the generators, even now, I don't know whether we've got two generators or one generator. To the relevant bodies of Broken Hill—councils, union, ourselves—it would be nice if it was put out what is actually happening with that infrastructure. It's critical because it could go at the end of today; we don't know. What are we going to do today?

Ms MARYANNE STUART: Even if social media goes down, there's always things like the radio stations. A novel idea, really.

The CHAIR: So your question is: if at the moment you had extreme confidence that both generators were working and ready to kick into gear, then you could have confidence that, should anything happen—

JOHN BRAES: Yes, there's that side of it. The other part of it is actually letting the community know that if they take a generator out for a major outage et cetera—they're telling us now that they're going to have this

outage in May because they've got to reconnect the existing towers or the new towers and the line. That's another inconvenience to us again. We're going to go out for two days, three days, because basically they've got to jump the lines, they've got to get the town back on. But we've got to go offline so, as a company, we won't be operating for two to three days in May while this occurs.

So communication, while we've got that through our superintendent, that should really be coming through our management team, the communication from Transgrid et cetera. But we just get it verbally from somebody to one of our supervisors or superintendents. Communication is the key to everything, as I heard just before from the other group. But I think the communication through the whole lot has been pretty poor. It still think the communication at the moment is still very poor. I don't know what the infrastructure is like. We don't know where we are at the moment. We're still in a situation that the power could go out at any time. Is that generating set available? I don't know. It just puts all our employees on uneasy street.

The CHAIR: Good point to make. I'm glad you made it.

Ms MARYANNE STUART: Me too.

The CHAIR: Again, thank you very much. We really appreciate your time today.

(The witnesses withdrew.)

ELIZABETH LEHMANN, Senior Outreach Solicitor, Disaster Response Legal Service, Legal Aid NSW, before the Committee via videoconference, affirmed and examined

ELIZA SOUTH, Country Women's Association Broken Hill, affirmed and examined

HEATHER PICKEN, Treasurer, Meals on Wheels Broken Hill, affirmed and examined

The CHAIR: I welcome our third panel of witnesses. Thank you all for appearing before the Committee today to give evidence. In advance, I thank you for the work that you did with your community groups during this time of power outage in October of last year. I'm going to give you each a chance to make an opening statement, which hopefully will just be one or two minutes. Ms Picken, on behalf of Meals on Wheels, would you like to make a comment about what was happening at that time and how you and your fraternity dealt with it?

HEATHER PICKEN: It just had to be dealt with. It was a big mess, a big shemuzzle, that we had to deal with, trying to get rid of all the spoiled food and replace the spoiled food. In the meantime, we didn't deliver the service that we were supposed to deliver to our clients.

ELIZA SOUTH: The CWA has a wonderful bunch of women who represent the broader community here in Broken Hill and regional areas a fair few hundred kilometres out and about. What we were able to enable through the power outage disaster was we made significant donations to several other operators in town. So in total we donated \$30,000 through head office, and that went to six separate organisations. It went to Mission Australia, Meals on Wheels, Foodbank, the 123 Community Hub out in Creedon Street, the Salvation Army and the Pantry.

ELIZABETH LEHMANN: I'm a senior outreach solicitor with the Disaster Response Legal Service at Legal Aid NSW, and live in the Northern Rivers. Legal Aid NSW is the lead government agency for disaster recovery legal assistance in New South Wales. The Disaster Response Legal Service is a specialist service that provides free and accessible legal help to anyone affected by disaster across the State. All our lawyers are trained in trauma-informed practice and specialise in legal issues that arise from disasters, which if left unresolved can escalate to cause acute hardship and homelessness. The Disaster Response Legal Service employs a multichannel service model that includes outreach at disaster recovery centres and recovery assistance points, a 1800 helpline, telephone advice, referrals, community legal education and a dedicated website.

I attended the recovery assistance point at Broken Hill with our community engagement officer and the recovery hub at Wilcannia, both established by the NSW Reconstruction Authority. The Disaster Response Legal Service delivered 52 legal services in response to the power outage in Far West New South Wales, with the main legal issues being insurance and financial hardship. Many clients didn't know that they could claim for food or medicine spoilage under their insurance policy and questioned if excess applied. Most clients went on to make insurance claims once they received legal advice. We also referred many clients to financial counsellors who were at the recovery assistance point, and they assisted clients to waive or reduce debt.

Disasters often have a disproportionate impact on communities that are already vulnerable or experiencing low socio-economic disadvantage. In Far West New South Wales I assisted many First Nation clients and many clients with vulnerabilities. Some were elderly, digitally illiterate, in poor physical or mental health, experiencing financial distress, and victims of domestic violence. All clients were vulnerable by virtue of being in a remote location, which acts as a barrier to accessing services. The clients I assisted benefited significantly from being able to get legal advice and support in one coordinated location at the recovery assistance point.

The Disaster Response Legal Service is designed to mobilise rapidly to respond to any disaster across the State. The Broken Hill power outage was different in scale and nature to previous disasters, such as the 2020 bushfires and the 2022 floods, and we were there to ensure that the community legal need was met in a timely and compassionate way. Currently the Disaster Response Legal Service has temporary funding from State Government until 30 June 2025 to provide statewide legal services in response to both new and past disasters. Without further funding, the Disaster Response Legal Service will cease operation on 30 June this year. I will now take questions from the Committee.

Ms MARYANNE STUART: Thank you to all of you for your attendance today and submissions that were made, and thank you for all the work that you've done in looking after some of the most vulnerable people in our community. I just wanted to ask Meals on Wheels, so Heather, and Elizabeth from Legal Aid NSW, you in particular would look after some of the most vulnerable people in our communities. Are you on the local emergency management committee?

HEATHER PICKEN: No, we're not.

ELIZABETH LEHMANN: I'll have to take that question on notice. In terms of our response to disasters, we respond to the NSW Reconstruction Authority when they set up the disaster recovery centre or the Recovery Assistance Point, and they notify us of the impact and need in the community. Then the essential services are contacted to attend.

Ms MARYANNE STUART: When you talk about the financial side of things that you were helping your clients with, was that in regards to the Service NSW \$200 per household or \$400 per business? Did that include that side of things?

ELIZABETH LEHMANN: No, it wasn't in relation to that. It was actually in relation to clients in the community already experiencing financial hardship and having debts. Obviously, with the power outage, that exacerbated any financial hardship. In terms of that \$200 and the \$400 grant, what we did more in relation to that was systemic advocacy. So we had meetings with Service NSW and identified what might be some barriers for vulnerable clients in terms of accessing those grants. One of the most obvious barriers is if that grant had strict identification proof requirements. We know that people might not have access to birth certificates and driver licences in communities like Wilcannia and Menindee. So it was advocacy at that level, to prevent the problem and make the rollout seamless.

Ms MARYANNE STUART: Thank you. The reason I asked that question is for the answer that I just got, which was we've heard along our trip this week that there were significant people that didn't have ID or had a PO Box instead of anything that showed that they actually lived in town or wherever. So thank you for that. Heather, Meals on Wheels does a phenomenal job. You would know the most vulnerable people that you've got here. Did anybody ever ask you—did council ever come and ask you—about who's sleeping rough or how we might be able to take care of everybody during these challenging times?

HEATHER PICKEN: No, we weren't approached. We weren't approached for that.

Ms MARYANNE STUART: So when you lost electricity, you lost all your meals?

HEATHER PICKEN: We did. We lost the cool room and a big double-door freezer and a single freezer full of food. It turned out we'd had deliveries the day before so we were well stocked up and yeah, we just lost it.

Ms MARYANNE STUART: Any ballpark as to how many that might have been?

HEATHER PICKEN: From a stock point of view, probably it was about \$5,000 worth of stock. From the delivery point, we do 100 meals a day.

Ms MARYANNE STUART: A hundred meals a day? Goodness. And to CWA, thank you for everything that you've done as well, with the fundraising. As we've gone around, we've met lots of the local CWAs and they're such an important part of the community; they're so pivotal. So thank you for what you do as well.

The CHAIR: I've got a very quick question for the CWA. Thank you for the donation you made. Did you all stay in touch with each other and try and keep an eye on each other, as well as to how people were travelling and faring?

ELIZA SOUTH: Yes. The CWA here in Broken Hill particularly is a very close-knit group and the ladies do support one another. There's always a phone call or an email. We've got a Facebook group. We are in constant communication. Some of our women are amongst the most vulnerable here in town and they are always well taken care of. I myself am one of the more vulnerable. I was unable to access the Service NSW link to be able to get the \$200 cashback. I also have a business here in town that suffered during that time, so I've been unable to receive any of the cashback stuff. But the CWA is a wonderfully supportive group of women from all backgrounds. They're a tough bunch, and they're a great bunch.

The CHAIR: Eliza, just to clarify, when the power was out, telecommunications were down and emails weren't an option. Were you still staying in touch with each other? I guess knocking on each other's doors or calling by, swinging by?

ELIZA SOUTH: Yeah, people were swinging by people's homes, knocking on doors, saying, "Look, I've got this. This is going to spoil. You need to eat it. Here you go. Here's a bunch of stuff." It was a physical type of contact that was maintained during that. We had sporadic power when the generators were up and running so we did have a couple of hours a day where we could quickly charge our phones and maintain communication that way. Of course, a lot of people have Facebook and all of those communication tools as apps on their phones. People were driving around town to charge their phones from their cars. Where there's a will, there's a way, and the CWA will find that way.

The CHAIR: One last question—I don't want to just slip past this. You've been unable to access the \$200 personal payment and the \$400 business payment. Why?

ELIZA SOUTH: Initially when the power outage occurred, I went to the disaster recovery point which was just around the corner here in Blende Street. I had all of the proper ID. I stood in the queue. It was a 36-degree day. A lot of vulnerable citizens were there on that day. We waited 2½ to three hours to be seen. My details were taken and I was assured I would get a phone call. I'm still waiting for that phone call from Service NSW.

The CHAIR: There was a disaster recovery point set up?

ELIZA SOUTH: Yes.

The CHAIR: Who set that up? Service NSW?

ELIZA SOUTH: Service NSW set it up but it was a word-of-mouth thing because we had little communication so it became a word-of-mouth thing. People who found out about it were told, "Head on down"—there was a lot of misinformation. Initially we were told, "If you head on down, you'll get a \$200 grocery voucher." That turned out to be a \$100 grocery voucher. We were promised that we would get petrol vouchers and they were supposed to be emailed to us. A lot of us didn't have access to email because that was not our priority to charge up our computers when we needed to maintain telephone communication.

I'm still waiting on the phone call for the petrol voucher. I don't drive but I have carers—because I'm blind—that drive me around and it would have been fabulous for me to be able to offer that petrol voucher to my carers who get me out to the CWA on occasion, or to do my shopping. There was a lot of miscommunication. I also work in media. I'm the station manager at 2DRY FM and I went through the process to see if it was going to be worth reporting on. It was such a debacle that I thought if I put together a journalistic piece, or I report on this, I will then be giving misinformation again, so I chose not to. There was a disaster recovery point set up. It moved from time to time without notice, and the food hampers that were handed out were not available at that point. You then were told to head to the Salvation Army or to Mission Australia or to Foodbank to grab your box of goodies. That box of goodies was substandard and the whole thing was an absolute mess. Chris Minns came out during that disaster and the town was not notified effectively. Apparently there was a barbecue that took place in Sturt Park. Normally the CWA would be notified of something like that.

We would go along and we would provide tea and coffee and cakes, and we would have the opportunity to approach the minister and have our two cents' worth. We have not a lot of pull but we like to contribute to how government passes legislation and the like, if it's relevant to us here in the Far West. Chris Minns came and went, and we were not notified. Some real deficits in how the locals here were communicated with were discovered during that period. We really needed someone driving the streets with a loudspeaker, saying, "Head down to Sturt Park today"; "Go to Sturt Park now, there's a barbecue there. The Federal Minister for such and such is down there"; "Head to the disaster recovery point between this hour and that hour"; or "There isn't a queue there at the moment." We're an ageing community here. We have an awful lot of vulnerable people. We're one of the lowest socio-economic demographics in the country. A lot of people have deep freezers, including Meals on Wheels, and the \$200 that we were offered—and a lot of people didn't receive it—barely covered the food losses on those days.

Mrs SALLY QUINNELL: Heather, my question is for you. Thank you for everything Meals on Wheels does; it's imperative to our communities. We have heard there was an initial blackout of a certain period, and then rolling brownouts for a period after that and that as part of that, there was damage done to fridges and freezers and various electronic equipment. Have your clients reported loss of equipment, loss of appliances and things like that in that time frame after the blackout?

HEATHER PICKEN: No, we've not had any reports that they had damage to fridges or to freezers. Most of them told us that they were okay.

Mrs SALLY QUINNELL: Did you have any damage to any of your equipment at Meals on Wheels?

HEATHER PICKEN: No, because we were very fortunate. When it happened on that first day and we were in there cleaning up, Barker Electrical turned up and said they would provide us with a generator because they'd heard us. We'd gone down to the ABC Radio to get the word out—it was the only thing we could think of because they do the emergency broadcast—to let people know we couldn't deliver meals. They'd heard that and they turned up at Meals on Wheels and said they'd supply a generator, which they did, but it wasn't big enough. So then they contacted Inlay Managing. We finished up with a generator and they kept that generator there and paid for that generator until the power supply was guaranteed not to go off again. It was wonderful.

Mrs SALLY QUINNELL: Okay, great. And we've heard previously today about the need for a central point of information distribution. I suppose, Eliza, you kind of really just spoke to that. But did you feel like that was forthcoming or was it something that needed to be sought out, that central form of information?

ELIZA SOUTH: It needed to be sought out. It wasn't forthcoming. In that initial blackout phase—I live in the CBD. I was without power for 26 hours. And it was frightfully hot at that point in time. I found out

subsequently that we could have all headed down to the Demo Club, which had generators. They had electricity and they were able to run their kitchens. But, at the time, there was just no information sharing. There was no central point. Nobody knew where the disaster recovery point was. There was misinformation being sent around. We could smell onions and sausages being cooked somewhere but weren't sure if we were welcome to attend the barbeque in Sturt Park that Chris Minns attended. There was just a huge lack of knowledge sharing and a deficit in having that disaster recovery point that could supply us with what we needed at the most important time when we needed it.

Mrs SALLY QUINNELL: Okay, thanks. Elizabeth, just a very brief question. You were speaking about the centre that you were in in Broken Hill but also in Wilcannia. Are you aware of how that is being advertised or was or is advertised to the people of those areas, that you are there for that legal advice? I'm aware that legal advice to some people may be seen as, "Well, I'm not going to court. I don't need legal advice." Is there some explanation provided as to what you can help with in that communication?

ELIZABETH LEHMANN: Yes. I might answer that question first. At a recovery assistance point or a disaster recovery centre, there is a morning briefing with all the key services. The NSW Reconstruction Authority sets up the centre, and the model is that all essential services come. So, for example, you have Service NSW, the Royal Flying Doctor Service, financial counsellors, Vinnies, Salvos et cetera, and Legal Aid, Insurance Council of Australia. At the beginning, we do a briefing about what services we provide. For example, I'll explain that we provide legal advice on insurance, tenancy, access to government grants, employment law issues et cetera. And it changes and it tailors to whatever the need is in that community and the demographic and the problem that presents.

The benefit of that is that when clients come in, they might not realise that they have a legal issue, and often they've lost everything and they're overwhelmed. They haven't had power. They're stressed. And one of the stakeholders says, "Oh, that sounds like a legal issue you could get help with", and brings them over to us. In the same way, it's a wraparound service, so that when they're telling us what their legal problems are, we're identifying other legal issues and saying, "That's financial hardship. We can take you over to the financial counsellor." Or, "It sounds like you're in a lot of distress. Can you talk to one of the mental health counsellors?" So that's the service model.

Mrs SALLY QUINNELL: So that's become the one-stop shop?

ELIZABETH LEHMANN: It is, and that's why it's effective in that way. In response to your question of the advertising, the recovery assistance point at Broken Hill went over two weeks. In the first week, it was at one location, and there was a decision that it wasn't fit for purpose in that it was a small building and the waiting times were a lot and people were waiting in the sun. There was an elderly community and quite vulnerable. So that location then changed to another address, which was the old Harvey Norman building, and it was much bigger and had a lot of better access for disability, and people could also stand in the shade et cetera, so there was that change in venue.

In terms of advertising, we advertise Legal Aid services on our website, and also, I did some interviews with ABC Radio, and also the services are advertised by NSW Reconstruction Authority in the way that they do. The outreach to Wilcannia and Menindee and White Cliffs was a different model in that it was a mobile hub, and so the services all moved over to that region. When I was in Wilcannia, it was certainly also a word-of-mouth situation and people were coming once they heard about it, and they were there, and they were making it very clear, "This is the next day that we're going to come."

Mrs JUDY HANNAN: Just one question to Heather. I know Meals on Wheels prepare meals and serve them. It's also the dropping in and out to people and checking on people. And I know that you therefore need petrol to drive the cars around. I don't know how large an area you service. Did you have any issues with the ability to get fuel to deliver?

HEATHER PICKEN: No, that wasn't an issue. We only deliver to clients in Broken Hill. We don't go out of town. And once we were back up and running again, our deliverers had enough petrol to do the delivery. We have the most wonderful band of volunteers to do this. And we have offered petrol to them in the past as part of that, and they went, "No. This is our bit for the community." And in a town this size, because we divide it up into four sections, 10 or 12 kilometres a day is what they do, which when you're on a pension, it does eat into your particular amount of money that you might do. But, no, they've always gone, "No, this is our bit for the community, and we won't take your petrol money."

Mrs JUDY HANNAN: So is there another provider that does Meals on Wheels type services outside?

HEATHER PICKEN: There is another provider that delivers meals. They do provide petrol amounts. They're actually the funded meal providers, so the CHSP-type funding. We're an independent standalone

organisation, even though we belong to Meals on Wheels NSW. So, at this point, we manage our affairs. That's now become extremely difficult because costs have just blown out, so we may have to do something about that.

Mr JAMES WALLACE: Thank you very much for your time and sharing those insights. I found that really valuable, to get that insight today. I just had one question, which was for Elizabeth. You mentioned earlier that you'd assisted some clients with processing insurance claims in relation to losses they experienced. I was wondering whether you've also had any experience in advising clients on claims that they might make for compensation to their energy retailer.

ELIZABETH LEHMANN: That wasn't a legal issue that I provided any advice on.

The CHAIR: Thank you to all of the witnesses. We really appreciate your time. In particular, Elizabeth, I know that you will be doing some work around the Northern Rivers—if not already, certainly coming up—but also thank you to Heather and Eliza for your time. Elizabeth, you might have taken a question on notice, so we will send you a copy of that question and the context in which that question arose, so that you don't have to worry about remembering that. The Committee may develop some additional questions that we'd like to send out to you. If that happens, you will get those towards the end of next week, and we would ask if possible to respond to those within seven days. We are working to quite a tight timeline for this particular Committee. If you can't respond within seven days, that's okay. Just talk to us about that. That would be greatly appreciated. Having said that, we are now breaking for a truncated morning tea, because of course we've gone overtime—because that's what we do! I thank you all as a panel, and I say to my Committee colleagues, have a quick morning tea, and we'll be back very shortly. Thank you very much.

(The witnesses withdrew.)

(Short adjournment)

The CHAIR: We are going to resume after morning tea with a Welcome to Country. I would like to introduce Taunoa Bugmy from Wilyakali women of Broken Hill to deliver the Welcome to Country. Thank you very much, Taunoa.

Ms TAUNOA BUGMY, before the Committee: My name is Taunoa Bugmy. What I was just explaining or saying then, naya, is hello in our lingo. Welcome to Wilyakali country. Thank you for having us here to present a welcome to country. It's a very important cultural protocol. It's an honour to represent my Elders and our people that can't be here today. A welcome is performed to recognise our people's country but also to awaken our ancestors' spirits and give their blessings to provide a feel-good energy in the area. Today the country you are on is Wilyakali.

I would like to acknowledge our Elders, past and present, especially for the passing of our gifts of our stories, methodologies and in terms of creation. They play a significant role in our keeping of culture alive and instilling a sense of us and our ways in modern society, and the way we access, manage or handle things today. Welcomes are important cultural practices to all of us as this instils a sense of belonging for my people. It also gives us a sense of ownership and involves our voice in a culturally sensitive way. A welcome acknowledges our Aboriginal people living, working and contributing to the country that we reside on.

Today I'd like to acknowledge you all that are here today and welcome you. I gather that you guys are here to talk about our recent power outage, and you would have collected this information over the duration of your visit from other communities. It's quite similar, so things such as communication, and the response really didn't hit many ears of our people, unless it was our community people actually out doorknocking and saying, "You can access this. This is how you do it."

One barrier that stopped our local Aboriginal liaison officers within the Police Force—they have a van, and they were actually told from their workplace that they can't support and assist in this matter when that would have been critical for people being able to access what was available at the time because transport is not so common in our community. The health transport, that's only for Health in terms of what they're doing. Aboriginal people didn't have access to generators, and thankfully the land council was able to get in contact with an energy company that was here setting up—they're about to build a new energy business here—and they were able to assist in providing generators for those in Aboriginal Land Council houses. A few of our Elders are in there, so thank you for that.

I'm sorry I can't actually name the business right now, but they are out still installing those generators, and that's one step forward to access when these crises do happen, that they have power in those circumstances. From my own experience in having babies, it was difficult at the time just keeping food fresh. We lost a lot. Our freezer went, a whole freezer of meat and supplies for them. Fresh food then became a problem because it was all getting taken from the rest of the community. When that trouble does happen, everyone runs out to the shops and buys everything. If you're on a low income, you've still got to wait until your payday to be able to access those goods. It was a bit difficult, but we pulled through it. I think you'll notice that our country people are very resilient people. But, yes, I think that moving forward there could be better processes put in place for all community to have access to power.

Just back to the welcome, thank you for having us. Like I said in those points, it's very important to have welcomes to country. They're not just a tokenistic speech or welcome. We truly welcome you with our spirits and hope that your journeys are safe, your time here is well spent, you come back when it's not business and explore the country. It's beautiful. It's actually very peaceful if you need that time out just to breathe and declutter your minds. You'll notice that Broken Hill is very slow. It's not as fast as cities, so you can really think out here. Once again, thank you on behalf of Wilyakali for having us here. I hope this is very progressive for you.

The CHAIR: Thank you so much, Taunoa. We really appreciate that.

LACHLAN GALL, Councillor, Pastoralists' Association of West Darling, sworn and examined

TERRY SMITH, President, Pastoralists' Association of West Darling, sworn and examined

GERARD GLOVER, Chair, Western Division Council, NSW Farmers, affirmed and examined

PENELOPE CLARKE, Member, Western Division Council, NSW Farmers, affirmed and examined

ELEN WELCH, Policy Director, Socio Economics, NSW Farmers, affirmed and examined

MICHAEL WILLIAMS, Chief Executive Officer and Director Regional Development, Regional Development Australia Far West, affirmed and examined

The CHAIR: Thank you all for being with us today. Before we begin, do you have any questions about the process that we are about to undertake?

MICHAEL WILLIAMS: No.

ELEN WELCH: No.

PENELOPE CLARKE: No.

GERARD GLOVER: No.

TERRY SMITH: No.

LACHLAN GALL: No.

The CHAIR: Thank you all so very much. I am going to give you the chance to make an opening statement, if you'd like to make one to kick things off. If you could keep your statement to one or two minutes, that would be appreciated.

MICHAEL WILLIAMS: As a community, and from an RDA perspective, we appreciate that natural disasters do happen, and we understand that they can be very severe in consequences. I think the great frustration from our community in our region was a lack of communication and transparency once that disaster did happen, and a lack of suitable backup mechanisms that would enable our community to be able to survive through that disaster and actually come out the other side of that.

GERARD GLOVER: Good morning, and thank you for your invitation to appear before this Committee to provide evidence for this inquiry. I am chair of the NSW Farmers Western Division Council. I'm a cattle and sheep farmer from near Brewarrina—not so much this area. I'm joined by my colleagues Penny Clarke and Elen Welch. NSW Farmers advocates for agricultural communities and rural industries, employing over 75,000 people in New South Wales and contributing more than \$24 billion to the economy. The devastating storm that occurred in October last year caused the collapse of transmission towers, which led to significant disruptions to the power supply in the Far West, followed by a failure of backup generators, which left many communities without power for prolonged periods.

This had serious consequences not only for the residents but also for critical services and industries such as agriculture that rely on consistent power, especially for communication. The critical issues we would like to see addressed are around the preparedness, response and resilience of telecommunications infrastructure during emergencies in this region. Mobile towers rely on a steady stream of electricity. When the power goes out, telecommunications also go offline. This puts community members and businesses at greater risk due to the lack of emergency communication, including farmers, their families and employees. This leaves very remote communities vulnerable as distances are vast and resources are limited.

The risk of isolation is significantly heightened during outages. The Government needs to work with communities and service providers to bolster network resilience and ensure adequate redundancies to ensure that rural and remote areas are not left vulnerable in the event of future outages. This outage has highlighted some key system weaknesses and can provide opportunities to minimise future disruptions, and we urge the Committee to consider these lessons to improve future responses. This will help community safety and the productivity and sustainability of our farming businesses. Thank you for the opportunity.

TERRY SMITH: Thank you for the opportunity to speak to the Committee. The Pastoralists' Association was established in 1907 and has been going strong since then. Our membership is made up of livestock producers in the Western Division. Almost all were affected during the recent outage. Transgrid has a responsibility to ensure reliable electricity supply to its customers. In October 2024 Transgrid failed this community. The weather event that brought down the main supply line from Buronga was an act of nature. These

events happen every so often, and as such are unavoidable. However, Transgrid failed to have sufficient backup for the community after the weather event. One of two backup generators had been out of service for more than 12 months, and a subsequent fire in the last generator shut our community down for two weeks.

The lack of electricity shut down most remote communication networks, making it impossible for many to call for emergency help if it was required, and the direct cost to community businesses was immense, with spoiled food and an inability to operate at full potential. The indirect cost would also be considerable, with staff downtime, unpaid leave, and unpaid hours securing, supplying and setting up alternative electricity supplies over vast distances. If a member of the public damages electricity or communication infrastructure, they can be held to account for the costs incurred. Transgrid appear to have been negligent by not having adequate backup power for this community, and we expect that they be held accountable. The Pastoralists' Association has made a submission to you guys. Four recommendations are in there, and I would recommend that you have a look at those.

Mr JAMES WALLACE: Thank you for your presentations today and for the submissions that you provided. You talked about the issues that are faced in the unincorporated areas, in particular ongoing issues around electricity supply, in your submission. Can you expand on that and talk about how frequent are these outages which are occurring? What is the dimension and dynamics of what's being experienced in the unincorporated areas?

MICHAEL WILLIAMS: As I'm sure you are aware, the unincorporated area is unincorporated and doesn't have local government. They don't have paid staff, so they really are run by volunteer mums and dads who have already put in 12- or 14-hour days that day. The issues that they have with electricity are vast. Towards the end of last year, or the middle of last year, we did a lot of research around the issues for electricity, and we actually put a submission in to improve the electricity in the unincorporated area. For the communities of Packsaddle, Milparinka and Tibooburra, they operate off a transmission line that runs north-south, yet the vast majority of our storms come west-east. Those poles were adequate and served their purposes back in the day that they were put in. They regularly now fail because of the distance of the poles and the age of those poles.

When they do fail, the landscape there is very harsh, and it often takes the providers days to be able to find out where they are, especially if it storms. If the ground is wet, they're unable to access that for several days, which then means those communities of the unincorporated area are without power for days, and sometimes up to a week, on a semi-regular basis. That has an impact on the entire community. We don't have backup generators in some of those communities. They rely completely on the power from the grid. They don't have emergency access like we would expect in some other communities. They are very, very isolated.

Tibooburra is about 400 kilometres from Broken Hill. People in those communities, like every other community, have health issues that rely on constant electricity—sleep apnoea machines, all of those types of things that people then are reliant on generators, if they are lucky to have those generators. If they don't have those generators, they're really left to their own devices to be able to deal with that. The community of Silverton have a similar issue in that they actually have transmission lines out to Silverton, but they're at full capacity, so they really need an upgrade of power going out to their community to give them capacity to grow. They have opportunities to grow. As I mentioned in the submission, they hold a lot of significant events in our community that are very important to the economic growth of our region. The Mundi Mundi Bash attracted 14,000 people last year, yet we've got a community that has insufficient power to be able to cope for those people coming into their community and insufficient power to be able to grow their economy and actually live a lifestyle that we all enjoy.

Mr JAMES WALLACE: In the Pastoralists' Association submission, you talked about the nature of the communications that you were receiving about when would power be restored, and some frustrations around the uncertainty that existed there. I wanted to ask you about that and whether you wanted to expand on that, but I also wanted to ask you whether, as a formal association of pastoralists, you received any additional communication as the leadership of that association from any government agencies at all?

TERRY SMITH: The short answer for additional communication is no, apart from the fact that we couldn't be contacted. I'm also the captain of the local fire brigade. My fire brigade covers 14,000 square kilometres. I had zero contact with anyone at the brigade for 48 hours over those two weeks, or maybe three or four days of the first outage and the second outage. My home phone, my home internet and my mobile service all operate off a tower called the Glenlyon tower. The tower is 38 kilometres from the closest bitumen road. The power went out for 12 hours, and then that tower went down for about 14 hours after that, until Telstra could get a generator out there, or get someone out there to reset the tower.

So for the initial power outage, I had communications, but after that the power went down, as most towers in the Far West did as their batteries ran out, and we had zero communication, basically, with the outside world after that for a period of 12 to 14 hours on the initial power outage. Then I think once the generator caught fire

and the second major outage, we were out for close to 24 hours as well, for communications. In my personal instance, I run two properties. I've got a manager on another property. As soon as the power goes out, we require a cel-fi booster around the house to use mobile coverage. So he's automatically uncontactable. He was uncontactable for 48 hours. He's there on his own—on 100,000 acres. So there are serious issues there with the communications around these—Telstra often say that they've got a reasonable backup, which we find quite different.

When we have any kind of storm event where it knocks one tower out, or several towers, the first thing to go in a catastrophe is the phones. If there's a major event, everyone gets on the phone to ring their neighbours and see how they're going. They're on the internet looking at the weather. That drains the batteries at the towers much quicker. We've been urging for a considerable amount of time for Telstra to put a generator backup, particularly at the towers that are hard to reach in the event of a storm and a surge. I hope that answers your question.

Mr JAMES WALLACE: It does. Thank you very much.

Mrs JUDY HANNAN: To the same folk, the RFS you said you are a member of, is there any generator at the RFS station? To broaden that, does anybody use Starlink out that direction?

TERRY SMITH: The RFS station is actually my property. We don't have a station base in that brigade, just basically due to the size of the brigade area. As I said, it's 14,000 square kilometres and we have two appliances to cover that area. The generator I had was my generator. I now have Starlink. I didn't then. It certainly would be an asset for RFS and I believe it is being rolled out to RFS. I also believe that the western region is prioritised to receive those mobile units at some stage, but it's a long-term plan and I think there's something like 5,000 units to be rolled out across the State. When that happens I'm not sure, but it has been prioritised. I believe Menindee, which is my closest brigade, now has a Starlink, but it's not much good if I can't talk to them. I know in Menindee they were back to UHF communication. The same thing, I guess, a lot of pastoralists, once they've got their generators up and running, which a lot of people on rural properties have got a generator that they can use, then they can get their UHFs up and running and call their neighbours and get communication going that way. So the technology is going back 50 years, but at least it's reliable.

Mrs JUDY HANNAN: I guess the other question—and probably to NSW Farmers as well as you—if people are in trouble, do they know where to go for help? Or can they go anywhere for help? I imagine evacuation-type areas would be the RFS. You'd be going to neighbours because there is no particular site to go to in such remote areas. Would that be fair?

TERRY SMITH: In a medical emergency, in that situation, the best would be to evacuate yourself, if you could. That was all you had. That was it.

PENELOPE CLARKE: I will speak to that. I'm on a property north of Broken Hill. The big problem is that normally we would call the Royal Flying Doctor Service to do anything with an emergency, or call 000 and they would put the Royal Flying Doctor Service in motion. Just about a month ago, our neighbour was bitten by a snake and he was able to call us whilst calling 000, and we were able to drive the 30 kilometres to assist him and get him flown out of White Cliffs. That wouldn't have been possible without power. We were fortunate that we have—a lot of people are resilient; they have backup generators. But it was the communication issue. We have Starlink as well, so we could then look at Roy Butler's Facebook page, the pastoralists' association Facebook page, but those people who don't have that extra facility of the Starlink literally were incommunicado. So, yes, if that snake bite had happened then, he would have been there on his own and not able to contact anybody. So those telecommunications are absolutely the thing most affecting our community. Not being able to get emergency services I think has put fear into people. I haven't heard actual instances at the time, but the fear and uncertainty that comes from that inability to be able to communicate, and knowing that you can't get help.

Mrs SALLY QUINNELL: Following up that last statement you just made, we know that people on property are particularly susceptible to mental health challenges. What would you say was the biggest contributor, that people have spoken to you about, to the continual fear that people have now regarding the situation?

PENELOPE CLARKE: Certainly the lack of communication. We didn't have a communication plan because our tower is White Cliffs. That tower went out within two hours—the Telstra tower. That link was gone very, very quickly. So the uncertainty of that. Then the ongoing uncertainty of when power would be resumed and not having any consistent messaging. At different times we were getting different text messages over the course of the time. It was interesting—I heard the Perilya statements. Once the power had been restored, we were getting messages—really good messages—from Essential Energy every day saying, "Don't put your solar on. Use the power here. Keep your supply tight and don't use your solar." They got really good at wanting us to contribute to the response, but they didn't actually include us in any of that communication when it first happened. A clear

directive, "It's going to be down for this long. Get yourself sorted. Get your contingencies in place. Start your generator and leave it on, rather than stop/start it. We're going off again. Woops, it's gone off. Turn your solar off." All of those things, rather than having a really good communication strategy to tell us once and tell us well so that we can take care of ourselves.

Mrs SALLY QUINNELL: Did that communication vacuum contribute to maybe misinformation, or filling that void with information or half information?

PENELOPE CLARKE: I thought the half information was from Essential Energy, because they weren't very clear. I thought the people actually helped each other very, very well. The Pastoralists' Association were using Facebook and they were getting the information from Roy Butler. So we sought him out as a central—he became the central hub.

Mrs SALLY QUINNELL: So he became the source of all truth?

PENELOPE CLARKE: But, obviously, he was still the secondary point of communication. We didn't ever hear it from Essential Energy.

TERRY SMITH: Yes, I think the information coming from Transgrid is where it started. It's a small community and the network is immense in this community. When the generator overheated, caught fire—however you like to put it—people knew that at the coffee shop before Transgrid had got to the ABC. We knew as a community that we were in it again and Transgrid hadn't—the thing has got to 1,000 degrees, and the CO2 has come on, it's going to be out for a while. Get on the radio and tell us that you've got 12 hours of darkness. On a lot of these properties not only is the house on 240 volt, but also our watering system, our pipeline pumps for our livestock are all on that power supply. So we need to back that up quickly.

Otherwise, if you've got 5,000, 6,000 or 8,000 sheep drinking water, and then you've lost 24 hours of water pump or water supply, that can take you a week to catch up, or longer if you have any sort of accident. We can deal with the catastrophe, we just need to know that we've got to get into it. Often, as Michael alluded to, our power is irregular. It'll go off for an hour or two hours, possibly once every three months, something like that. You let it ride because you know the Essential Energy guys are onto it and it'll be back up and running at some stage—normally quickly. But with this incident, where it was going to be a major challenge to get power restored, go to the ABC radio—because that was about the only communication we had left—and say, "We expect this to be 12 to 24 hours, so if you've got a contingency plan, get into it."

Mrs SALLY QUINNELL: One more brief question that I will again put to all three groups. We've been told from station owners, from people in between here and Tibooburra, where we've been, that having a generator was one solution, but access to fuel became an ongoing issue, both for your vehicle and to power your generator. Could we just unpack that a little bit, for those of us who are from the city and wouldn't know a generator if it hit me over the head?

MICHAEL WILLIAMS: The anecdotal evidence we got—because a lot of our data was around the business needs and the business impact for our community—was that not only did they not have fuel for their car, they had to line up for hours to be able to get fuel for their generators. Once they did get fuel for the generator, paying for that fuel became a challenge because obviously our EFTPOS machines were down. So not only was getting and accessing fuel a challenge, accessing a generator was a challenge, for a lot of people accessing a jerry can was a challenge because our community sold out very quickly. They then dedicated four or five hours of their time to sit in a line to line up for that fuel, to then not be able to pay for that fuel.

PENELOPE CLARKE: A lot of us have backup generators because of this inconsistency with our power, so we're used to doing that. The only anecdotal evidence I have was that there were some people that said that they didn't have enough supply at their property, so then they had to travel long distance to go and get the diesel to get back to their place to be able to supply themselves with electricity.

TERRY SMITH: Again, a lot of properties have a large supply at hand but, if they were at point of being needing to be refuelled at that stage, then they just had to wait and go without. Anecdotally, I was in that position myself. We required some gas for our house. Or house runs on bottled gas, and that was unavailable out of the supplier at Menindee. I was only allowed to have one bottle because they were running short. They could access gas. That got me out of a pinch but, at some stage down the track, I've got to make a trip to 60-kay trip Menindee to get the other bottles of gas and the fuel et cetera that I need. So it's just the inconvenience more so than anything else.

Mrs SALLY QUINNELL: It goes back to then not having that time to work on the business.

Ms MARYANNE STUART: Terry, I think it was you that said you bought a Starlink. How much was that?

TERRY SMITH: Off the top of my head, it was through a Telstra plan. I think it was 500 and something dollars, plus \$130 a month for the data. I had rejigged some of my Telstra stuff—got rid of 60 bucks worth of Telstra costs. It still put the price up, but I think it's worth it for reliability. Anecdotally, a lot of people bought Starlink since these outages.

Ms MARYANNE STUART: Yes, we've heard that along the line. Were you talking about the train before?

TERRY SMITH: No, the train line does go through my place. I didn't notice any difference there.

Ms MARYANNE STUART: We did see a freight train come in the other day. That would be quite relevant, I would think, to all of your membership.

TERRY SMITH: As far as I'm aware, you cannot get freight on or off a train in Broken Hill.

Ms MARYANNE STUART: Okay, so where does that freight train stop?

TERRY SMITH: It would be going to Adelaide or Port Pirie from probably Newcastle or Sydney. I stand to be corrected there, but I don't think you've been able to put freight on a train at Broken Hill for a considerable amount of time. I live on the east-west train line. It's on one of my properties. They're often delivering stuff to that property—from trucks, ballast, sleepers and stuff—so they're not even delivering their own goods on those trains.

Ms MARYANNE STUART: Can we come back to the question about Starlink. It seems a very consistent pattern anywhere we've gone that there has been personal cost—that you have had to buy Starlink, buy generators. Are you able to talk about any stories that you're aware of in regards to personal cost on behalf of your membership? I say this because the constant theme that we're getting back to is not only communication, but accountability and responsibility, particularly in things like maintenance. Today we've heard that this is not an uncommon thing from Transgrid. There was an event in 2019 and one in 2023. When you look at it, it's as if there is not only communications being a big issues, but there's not any accountability or transparency. But there's a heck of a lot of personal cost on each and every one of your families, on each and every one of your businesses. Is that fair to say?

TERRY SMITH: I think the cost of time, and the cost of stress is something that's often overlooked in these issues. As I said, I operate two properties that are about 200 kilometres apart by road. The first power outage at my property, we set up the generator, were organised. Power came back on. I thought, "Beauty, I'll go over to the other property, get a bit of work done." Got up the next morning, the power's off. We eventually worked out around lunch time that the power wasn't coming back on. So I just threw everything out of the freezer, which is probably the best part of a full sheep there, and whatever else was there, and went home to start the generator back at home to save what I had at the other property. For me, the cost of replacing that sheep is minuscule because I run them, and that's what I do. But if someone else had to throw out a freezer full of meat, you're probably looking at 600 bucks worth of meat in the tip.

It cost me two or three days from one property back to the other property, back to the first property when I wouldn't have needed to have been doing that running around. As everyone else in this room is, getting their auxiliary generator set up, getting it fuelled, finding fuel, looking out for your community, trying to get in touch with—I was trying to get in touch with the guys in the fire brigade in Menindee to see how they were coping. If they, once solar was up and running, whether they needed any extra assistance or extra manpower to deliver—but I believe you've spoken to those guys and you'll get their full story on that.

There's those things, but when you can't actually just get on the phone or on—once my power went down, emails were out, communication was out, internet was out, mobile phone was out, landline was out, so I had zero communication at all. So it's really hard to try and to do that. My wife and I actually drove into Menindee to make some calls and pay some bills and tell her parents, who are in Adelaide, and my parents, who are in town—to ring them and see how they were faring as well. So there's another three hours. It's just the personal cost of time also. I think the stress element of that—for everyone, not just us—is something that needs to be considered too.

PENELOPE CLARKE: I think that there are lots of personal stories, and it relates to maybe that fear of the unknown, and the pressure that that puts on people. They're already busy people, and then they're doing these contingencies of not knowing, so that kind of stress that came out of it. We were able to access the \$200 individually, and the \$400. We also had trouble with ascertaining who we were, some of those systems, inputting that information. I was able to get it. My husband—they didn't like our address for some reason when that came. Those little glitches add to that feeling of frustration. We felt that the \$400 would not have covered the diesel that we had put into the generator, because we actually did end up running our generator much longer once we were up and running and had the secondary generator on.

It would go out sometimes when they weren't expecting it to, just for an hour or two, so we'd just leave our generator on all night rather than deal with going out and actually restarting that generator, ensuring that it's going, checking when the power—going out to the pole to see whether the power's back on so you can turn it off. It sounds silly, but we just elected to run the generator for longer. I know there was some evidence—somebody had shearing at the time. When you're running a shearing team, they've come in. You might have an extra 15 people that you have to look after, so you're making sure that everyone's got power, can get their phones, taking responsibility and, of course, you're always concerned about people's safety. We have such a responsibility to keep people safe when they are at our properties, and you need to be able to do that effectively.

ELEN WELCH: If I can just add to what Penny's spoken through there. Farmers, by nature, are very good at solving problems, but there can be disruptions with these sorts of events. Business continuity is really important. As farms have advanced over the last 50-odd years, there is Agtech, there is platforms that people use to sell livestock, like AuctionsPlus. You become very reliant on online systems to actually sell your produce, whether that's sheep, goats et cetera. You also might be using apps to upload your livestock movements, which you're required to do under the NLIS standards. There are a lot of different things that you're actually required to do, or that you might be using in the business which, without power or telecommunications, can be disruptive if you don't have access to fuel or power to be able to use these systems, or if you run out of fuel, for example.

Ms MARYANNE STUART: Thanks, Elen. That was helpful.

The CHAIR: Thank you to the panel for your insights. Again, it's very fascinating. This inquiry is very much like an onion; we just keep hearing all these different layers and angles of people's personal experiences which, again, emphasises the value of hearing personal experiences and journeys. You will be provided with a copy of the transcript from today's hearing for correction. If you feel like you've been misquoted, or misunderstood, or taken out of context, or you said a word that was interpreted the wrong way by our Hansard team we do, of course, allow you to offer up corrections to us. You'll get a copy of that. If you need corrections, come back to us.

The other thing is that over the coming days the Committee might develop some further questions that we'd like to put to you. If that happens, they will be sent out to you late next week. If you do get those questions, we just ask you to turn them around inside of seven days if that's possible. If it's not, please talk to us. We're on a timeline, but we obviously appreciate you're all constantly under timelines as well. Other than that, thank you very much.

TERRY SMITH: If I could just have on the record our thanks for the local Essential Energy workers who were out and about trying to solve the problems as best as they could during this outage. I think they did an amazing job over and above what they probably turned up for work for that fortnight, so thanks to those guys. They did a great job.

The CHAIR: Good comment. We have heard good things about the workers.

LACHLAN GALL: I second that comment from Terry. Over a long period of time, since electricity was extended to the Far West of New South Wales as a concept of the Pastoralists' Association in the early '90s, the Essential Energy workers on the ground have done a marvellous job many, many times to restore power after storm damage, time and time again.

(The witnesses withdrew.)

HELEN MILLER, General Manager of In Home Supports and Clinical Lead, LiveBetter, before the Committee via videoconference, affirmed and examined

DIMITY PHILP, Service Manager, Westhaven, affirmed and examined

JASON HARVEY, Outback Pharmacies, affirmed and examined

LEROY JOHNSON, Private Citizen, affirmed and examined

The CHAIR: I welcome our next panel of witnesses and thank you very much for attending today. During the course of proceedings today, if there is a question that you're asked that you don't know the exact answer to, you can offer to take that question on notice and find that information later on and get back to us. If that happens, we will send you a copy of the question, and the context in which it was asked so that you can get that information and come back to us. Thank you very much for appearing before us today. Before we start, do any of you have any questions about the hearing process we are about to engage in?

HELEN MILLER: No.

JASON HARVEY: No.

LEROY JOHNSON: No.

DIMITY PHILP: No.

The CHAIR: No, okay. I'm going to give you the chance to make an opening one- or two-minute statement.

LEROY JOHNSON: I'm a home dialysis patient. I do dialysis at home, here in Broken Hill. I've been doing that for 12 months. I normally live and work out at Mutawintji, which is about 140 kays north of here. I was driving in to do dialysis at the hospital, but had the opportunity to do it at home. But, funnily enough, they said I couldn't do it at Mutawintji because of the unreliability of the electricity and the water, so I had to rent a place in Broken Hill to do it. Home dialysis gives you flexibility around work, so that's why. Then, obviously, I was on a dialysis machine when the power went out. When I had the opportunity to write something in to you mob, I thought you should hear about what I went through.

DIMITY PHILP: I'm the service manager from Westhaven. I'm here to discuss the NDS's submission around the lack of support for the disability sector.

The CHAIR: In context, I should come to Ms Miller, because the two of you work together, do you?

DIMITY PHILP: No, we work in the same sector.

JASON HARVEY: I'm one of the owners of Outback Pharmacies. We operate five pharmacies in Broken Hill. With our relationship with the RFDS we also service a population probably about a quarter of New South Wales in area. Obviously, power outages have a very, very big effect on a patient's ability to access their medication. Also, with the big move towards electronic prescriptions, just people in general are not able to access anything. On top of, I guess, just the physical costs, obviously people's mental health, and the cost of the actual medications that we had to throw out because the fridge items went out of range. So we had to throw out more than \$60,000 worth of medications. We got that back from insurance, but it cost us a lot in excess.

HELEN MILLER: LiveBetter community services are an aged care and a disability service provider. We have a strong presence in Broken Hill. Even though I'm based in Orange, I was very much involved with supporting our team in relation to our response when we had the power outage. I'm also here because I'm part of the NDS response as well because we've been a member of NDS.

Ms MARYANNE STUART: Jason, did you just say \$60,000?

JASON HARVEY: Yes. There are a lot of fridge items that are very expensive. We are actually lucky because I think the day before the power outage we had a patient pick up a medication that was kept in the fridge which cost 50 grand by itself.

Ms MARYANNE STUART: So you were covered by insurance?

JASON HARVEY: Yes. That's between four stores. The total was \$60,000-plus. There's also some things that—so you don't necessarily have to throw it out, but a clock starts. So with insulin, once it gets outside of a range, basically you've got to use it within a month. So we actually had to throw out a bit, but we kept some. We were giving some to customers to get them through, basically saying, "You've got to use this within a month." Then we'd have to order more to resupply the rest of their script afterwards.

Mrs SALLY QUINNELL: Can I just ask a follow-up on that one? That customer who took that \$50,000 product—it was then on them to refrigerate that product?

JASON HARVEY: Correct. I can't say whether they used it that day, and it was all fine, or whether they were affected by it as well.

Mrs SALLY QUINNELL: But that could be—

JASON HARVEY: Potentially, yes.

Ms MARYANNE STUART: We did hear from people that do need insulin who had to throw a lot out and waste a lot of money, but is that going to affect your premiums, do you think?

JASON HARVEY: Yes, it absolutely will, no doubt whatsoever.

Ms MARYANNE STUART: Leroy, you're on dialysis?

LEROY JOHNSON: Yes.

Ms MARYANNE STUART: Can you tell us what happened?

LEROY JOHNSON: I've been on home dialysis for about 12 months now. I started in February last year. I went to Adelaide and did the training to learn how to do it myself, and I did that so I could continue work, basically. It allows the flexibility of making my own times and stuff like that. I've still got to do that dialysis three times a week, and I have to do it five hours at a time.

Ms MARYANNE STUART: What happened when the electricity went out? What did you do?

LEROY JOHNSON: When the power goes out—my machine's got a battery for 20 minutes, so I've got 20 minutes to reinfuse all my blood and pack it all down. And then after that, you can't work it, so as soon as the power goes out, I have to quickly stop it, reverse it, go back in and get off the machine.

Ms MARYANNE STUART: Did you have to go and get a generator or something?

LEROY JOHNSON: Well, I tried. When that happened, I rang the unit here in Broken Hill, the renal unit. Luckily they had a spot the next day open up so I could go up there the next day, and then the other times—I think this lasted for around two weeks. So the power would come back on for a little while. Another time I set it all up and it went off again, so I had to do the same thing. Then I couldn't get into the hospital because they didn't have a seat for me, so I had to wait for an extra day to do my dialysis, and that's not nice, when you have to do that. You don't feel very well. So through the whole period I just wasn't sure when the power was going to be on. I wasn't sure if I should book into the hospital. I wasn't sure if they had a spot for me. I was just sort of, like, doing that. They ended up, in the second week, sending me two generators but when I tried to ring the energy company I couldn't get onto anyone to do that. I've got a partner that has connections at the ABC, and I rang up them, and they rang up Sydney Essential. Then within that day someone brought a generator, but I couldn't—someone from the ABC organised it for me, which I'm grateful they did.

Ms MARYANNE STUART: And you're okay now, mate?

LEROY JOHNSON: Yes, as long as I can regularly get my dialysis, it's not a problem.

Ms MARYANNE STUART: Dimity and Helen, have you got any stories from your clientele that you would like to bring to the Committee's attention?

DIMITY PHILP: We had several participants who were affected by the power outages that needed essential health care that needed to be provided. We were essentially assisting and helping them get the best care that they could. Then also comes on the effect with complex behaviours of not being able to communicate with our participants, of them not understanding why they couldn't be cool when it was 38 degrees, and then dealing with escalations from our participants through that. We were just dealing with the care of our participants the best that we could and making sure that we were continuing to provide the services that were required through the whole time with our participants. We were lucky enough that there wasn't any critical urgent care or no-one was on life support machines. But we did support our staff, who also then had to take time off because they have their own sleep apnoea machines or they couldn't get their diabetic medications and they were unwell. So we were also supporting not just our participants, but we were also supporting our staff through the whole process as well.

HELEN MILLER: Certainly from our perspective, I would support what Dimity said. We experienced the same, so I won't repeat all of that, but we also then supported our customers to enable them to go to Lifeline and receive food. We also helped them—through the Royal Flying Doctor Service we were able to support our customers in getting things charged, which I think was a really critical element. And I agree with Dimity. It was very much about supporting our staff. We definitely were business as usual as much as we could because we

thought that was the best way to provide support to our customers, but we did experience many challenges in relation to food supplies, medications and access to fuel. They were the things that provided some of the challenges for us in relation to that provision of ongoing service.

Mrs SALLY QUINNELL: Thank you for being here today. We really appreciate it. I don't know if you were here when the Chair was talking earlier about how this is like an onion and every time we peel off a layer, we're finding another layer of impact. Leroy, are you registered with your power company that you need the power for your medical needs?

LEROY JOHNSON: Yes, and water.

Mrs SALLY QUINNELL: And, Dimity and Helen, your clients would be as well, in many cases?

DIMITY PHILP: Yes, all of the participants and the organisation would be, yes.

HELEN MILLER: Yes.

Mrs SALLY QUINNELL: When the power was lost—let's go with the time that phones were working, or not, as such. Were the communications enough and were they easily understood by people under duress in that situation?

DIMITY PHILP: Our head office is in Dubbo, so our communications at times were very hard because we were communicating and our head office was trying to communicate with us to assist us. Then we were at times left to try and find out what was going on Facebook or source other services, so we were all grouping together to try and see who had what information so we could safely deliver services to get all of that information out to our participants and continue to check on everyone's safety. We were then setting up, like, a home base on our site and then communicating what we were communicated to all of our participants because people with a disability don't have the correct understanding, or they weren't understanding what was going on, or they didn't have the devices. They don't have access to internet. They don't have access to a mobile phone. Some of them don't even have a home phone. Their only source of communication was from us.

Mrs SALLY QUINNELL: And is that someone turning up to their property?

DIMITY PHILP: Yes. All of our staff—we did have to shut down for the first day and we set up a base at our local site and I distributed teams to certain allocations to all of our participants. We had food and water in eskies. Myself and another team member actually drove to Mildura to source petrol and generators, we bulked on food items and water and drove back in that day. I had a team on the ground doing certain times and allocations to all of our participants giving what communication—and every time we got new communications they would go out again. We had a run sheet and that just continued the whole time until we were able to have the offsite participants come back on site.

We obviously had staff 24/7 in our supported independent living homes. They just ran off and we had one person lead each individual group of teams to continue support and communication to our participants, every time we got that. They don't have a clear understanding and they were sitting in the dark. They were eating rotten food because their fridges have been off and people with disability don't have the understanding or the knowledge and with no-one and no communication, it was difficult for them.

Mrs SALLY QUINNELL: Can I just say thank you for doing that for our most vulnerable. Wow, what an incredible service you give to those members of our community. Jason, can I ask you to comment on how you felt the communication worked and the idea of having one sense of truth, one idea, of what was going on?

JASON HARVEY: We got most of our information from Roy Butler's page and from ABC News. We're a little bit unique because I'm very good friends with someone who is relatively high up in Essential Energy so I had basically a direct text line. We'd go back and forth a bit and he'd give me a bit of a heads-up: "It's coming back on soon." With our medication fridges, we still had to order fridge stuff, so we were still very dependent on when the power was going to be on and off. We did have some generators given to us by Essential Energy and they obviously need to be refuelled. Myself and one of the other partners were having to go in at midnight to refuel them so the fridges stayed on overnight and things like that. The communication side between us was pretty good and from Essential Energy was pretty good—obviously from Transgrid it was non-existent. But communication for us was actually pretty good, considering.

Mrs JUDY HANNAN: I have two questions and the first one relates to registration. You're registered with your health issues through your energy provider. Can anybody tell me across the board, for people who are registered, was there any benefit of being registered? Was there any outreach? Was there anything?

LEROY JOHNSON: Not at all. I tried to ring them and tell them I was registered and they just basically said, "We are aware of the power problem and it'll come back on," and I started getting text messages. Pretty much

those text messages were wrong. They'd say, "The power's coming back on at 11.00 a.m.", and it didn't come back on until after midnight. I was trying to make decisions on when I should do dialysis or what I should do on this information that was ad hoc. I told them I was on dialysis. I wasn't even aware that I could be eligible for generators and stuff like that. You just got into the system and no-one told you anything. It was just like "We're aware that the power's out, we're working on it and here's a few text messages."

Mrs JUDY HANNAN: Has anybody else got any information that people that are registered have any special care?

DIMITY PHILP: No.

JASON HARVEY: No.

HELEN MILLER: We experienced exactly the same. It was very ad hoc and it was often not correct. So it wasn't helpful.

Mrs JUDY HANNAN: To Jason, I've been involved in an emergency situation before where people were evacuated. With the implementation of e-scripts—and you would have had people travelling through here whose doctors were not available to phone to check on e-scripts and all the rest of it—I don't know what the legalities are but I've taken somebody to a pharmacy who's dispensed without a script for that reason. What's the legalities for pharmacy in that situation?

JASON HARVEY: It is very hard because digital health is such a big part of how we do things now and we're very reliant on e-scripts. Back in the day, in a situation like this, a person would bring a script, we would still be able to essentially do it because we'd just handwrite the label, we'd print it. But with e-scripts it's just a QR code on someone's phone so we can't do anything. We don't have the specifics of what the script actually is and we can't access our computers to see what it is, what dose it is and what the directions are. So we physically can't do it.

Especially the community—say, the Aboriginal Health Service, who are looking after probably some of our most vulnerable clients—they basically do exclusively e-scripts. It's much easier because there's a system called Active Script List so if the person loses the token on their phone or they don't have the physical one, we can log into a cloud and see all their e-scripts there and we dispense it straight from the cloud. When there's no power and no internet, we can't access that cloud, we can't access any of their scripts. We physically can't do their scripts. We can't look it up on the computer, if there's no power, to see what they were previously on to give them the week's emergency supply, which we are able to. But if we physically can't see what they're on—unless they've got an old box they can bring in and we can give them a supply and handwrite it—we can't actually do it at all.

Mrs JUDY HANNAN: So a diabetic or somebody that was travelling and ran out of medication and rolled up to your door—

JASON HARVEY: It's just the way it is now, moving towards digital. Probably at least more than half of our scripts would be e-scripts that we do now, and that really limits what we can do when there's no power and no internet. There would have been people that went without, no doubt.

The CHAIR: Sorry, I'll just pick myself back up off the floor.

Mr JAMES WALLACE: Thank you for what you've shared with us today. Dimity, I had some questions based off the submission of the National Disability Service.

DIMITY PHILP: Laurie will answer any NDS questions.

Mr JAMES WALLACE: So it's best to do those as written questions?

DIMITY PHILP: Yes.

Mr JAMES WALLACE: I won't ask that question then. This is more of a general question as the local service manager. Did you ever receive requests from any government agencies or Essential Energy around getting access to any of your client base around people that might need support?

DIMITY PHILP: No.

HELEN MILLER: Same for us. None.

Mr JAMES WALLACE: Another question was based off the submission that was provided. It talks about there being around 900 clients in the Far West. When care providers and careworkers go out to visit people in different communities, do you have protocols that they have to be contactable, they have to have a phone to be able to call people in response to an emergency? How do you deal with that, if you do? How do you deal with that

in the circumstance where you know the power's out, you know the phone lines are out and you know the mobile coverage isn't there?

DIMITY PHILP: We don't service anywhere out of Broken Hill, so none of our staff had to travel outside of Broken Hill. With how we set it up, we did have time frames for the staff to meet back and forth. Helen can probably talk more because I know they do service outside of Broken Hill, but just being local, we were just given the staff time frames to come back and forth. That was because we couldn't communicate, we couldn't pick up the phone if they needed any assistance.

HELEN MILLER: We service customers in Menindee and outside in Wilcannia and other areas. Our approach was—yes, I agree with Dimity—for Broken Hill it is easy because we ensured that they came to the office, and we could then dispense people out and monitor. For the person that travels to Menindee, what we did was we ensured that she left from our office and when she returned she had to come back to the office. If she had the opportunity, if power did come back on, then she would contact us. But we felt the risk of not servicing those customers and being in touch with them was much greater than the support worker back and forth. They do it all the time, so we felt comfortable with the fact that they're very experienced and understand what needs to be done. But it was something in our debrief that we do need to look at, from an internal perspective, around how we can ensure that they are contactable. But that's how we managed it. It was really a risk-based approach. And obviously the staff had to feel that they were confident and comfortable to enable them to go out and do that, and they were. They really wanted to go and check in on their customers. That was really their priority.

Mrs SALLY QUINNELL: Can I ask a follow-up question to that one? Helen, did part of that debrief include the idea of workers taking a Starlink with them in that case?

HELEN MILLER: Yes.

Mrs SALLY QUINNELL: I thought it might be.

The CHAIR: Leroy, can I just ask you about dialysis? I'm sorry, this is a gap in my knowledge and awareness.

LEROY JOHNSON: That's all right.

The CHAIR: You do home dialysis three days a week. Do you do that during the night-time?

LEROY JOHNSON: In the afternoon, normally. I do it Tuesday and Thursday afternoons, and then Sunday I can choose whenever.

The CHAIR: But it's about five hours or something, did you say?

LEROY JOHNSON: It takes about six hours: a half-hour to set it up, five hours on doing dialysis and another half-hour to clean it all down, yes.

The CHAIR: Five or six hours. Is it the same if you go to the hospital and get that service anyway, as well?

LEROY JOHNSON: Yes. Well, what it is, you need to clean your blood. If you don't, toxins build up and you get real sick. That five hours is that process of cleaning your blood through the machine.

The CHAIR: It doesn't matter whether you do it at home or in the hospital?

LEROY JOHNSON: So when it cuts short, I still need to do it.

The CHAIR: That leaves you feeling unwell, obviously, because you haven't cleaned your blood?

LEROY JOHNSON: Yes, you don't feel good at all.

The CHAIR: But if you go to hospital, sit in a chair and get the treatment at hospital—

LEROY JOHNSON: That's if one's available, yes.

The CHAIR: When one's available, is that still a five- or six-hour process, as well?

LEROY JOHNSON: Yes.

The CHAIR: You said that when you first approached the hospital, they didn't have a chair available for about 24 hours?

LEROY JOHNSON: Yes, because I'm not technically their client no more. My home unit is in South Australia, where I've learnt how to do it at home. They haven't got me on the books, but they're pretty good. Sometimes I've needed to go up there when I've run out of a bit of equipment that I need or something. They're

pretty supportive because I was doing that up there with them for the 18 months before I did it at home. No-one checks on you, and you don't know what you should do in terms of whether you should try to get in line. The hospital has got set times. They do a morning shift and an afternoon shift. If you're outside of that, then you can't do it. They need their nurses and stuff to do it for you.

At the time I just thought I didn't have enough information from anyone, specially to work out when the power's going to come on so I can do it, how long I should wait before I go up to the hospital, you know. It was scary just to think, "I don't know what's going to go on here." And if the power comes on—a couple of times the power came on and lasted for like a half-hour and went off again. No-one could tell you how long it was on, and all that. I didn't know I could get access to generators until someone from the ABC rang up the people in Sydney and then he got through it all, and I'm thinking, "That's good. What about if I didn't have that contact in the ABC? What would I do then?" I thought, "Oh, you need to be media to get access to these fellows to help you." It was just confusing. You didn't know.

The other thing about that \$200 support grant, it turns out I wasn't eligible because my licence is out at Mutawintji, where I used to live. And I still do live out there; I've got a residence out there. I went to police in town. So I pay rent here, and because my licence didn't match up to where I had my lease, I wasn't eligible for it. I lost food out there and in here, and they said I'm not eligible because my information didn't match up, which is fine; it's 200 bucks. Through that whole 10 days I had to take sick leave. Because I'm in line for a kidney transplant, I'm trying to bank my sick leave so, when the time comes, I can use that. But then I had to use it because I wasn't sure when I could get on. I had to wait the next day when I was supposed to be at work, so I had to take that day off. So it just ate into my sick leave. When you're sick and I'm trying to work towards a transplant, I want to bank my sick leave so, when that comes up, I'll have enough there to do it. But this ate, I reckon, at least a week of sick leave that I was forced to take. I couldn't not.

The CHAIR: Thank you for sharing that because that's another whole layer in itself. I apologise if I was prying about the dialysis. I was just trying to understand the serious risk.

LEROY JOHNSON: No, that's fine.

The CHAIR: One of the risks here was possible loss of life. In your situation it might not have been possible loss of life, but just to your health. There are so many risks now when we don't have electricity.

LEROY JOHNSON: Yes, for sure.

Mrs SALLY QUINNELL: So does that mean, Leroy, that when the power came on, you needed a guaranteed six hours of power?

LEROY JOHNSON: Yes, pretty much. Because it'll just turn off again.

Mrs SALLY QUINNELL: If it turns off mid-dialysis?

LEROY JOHNSON: And if there's enough battery in the actual machine. All my blood's just stuck in the machine, so I've got to lose all of that.

Ms MARYANNE STUART: Say, for example, the electricity comes back on, you get three hours along in the five hours of dialysis, and it stops, what happens then?

LEROY JOHNSON: I still need those two hours. So it's about clearance. It's about cleaning your blood and fluid too. You retain fluid. Having too much fluid is toxic. So I still need to make up those two hours somewhere.

Ms MARYANNE STUART: You need to make the two hours up. So the next session could actually be seven hours instead of five hours?

LEROY JOHNSON: Yes. It's hard to keep it up and do an extra half-hour, because you dry your body out. So you've got to make it up over time, yes.

The CHAIR: Jason, can I come to you? You mentioned, I think, earlier that in terms of seeking out information about what was happening, you were looking to Roy Butler's page, but you had your own personal contact. Can you just help me work through this? Were you able to get any useful information from the Federal member's page? I'm going to work through a list here. About what was happening, what was going on?

JASON HARVEY: Not really. No.

The CHAIR: Okay. Roy's a State member. He had useful information up. Local council page, was that useful, up-to-date information that you could access?

JASON HARVEY: Not really. Like I mentioned, the ones we got most of our information from were Roy Butler's page and the ABC.

The CHAIR: So Essential Energy weren't updating the information on their page?

JASON HARVEY: Not really. I probably didn't look at that as much, because I had my own personal source.

The CHAIR: Transgrid didn't have information up on their page to say, "This is what it looks like at the moment"?

JASON HARVEY: No.

The CHAIR: Police weren't posting something?

JASON HARVEY: I don't follow their page.

The CHAIR: Well, they follow you! Sorry. I just want to work through that list in terms of where the source of information was coming from.

JASON HARVEY: I guess it is hard without kind of a daily local paper as well, because that would have probably been a source as well at some point, but actually that's not a thing anymore.

The CHAIR: Yes, we don't have the daily paper anymore. That's right. And it would have been yesterday's, up to date, as well.

JASON HARVEY: But the BDT also had kind of their own website, for an online version, so they would often update that with information as well.

The CHAIR: Who was that?

JASON HARVEY: The *Barrier Daily Truth*, the local paper.

The CHAIR: Yes, because they're online.

JASON HARVEY: Yes. They've got their own Facebook page, and they would update it regularly if there was information to pass out like this. Obviously, that's not around anymore.

The CHAIR: Most people didn't have access to telecommunications, but you've mentioned you did, so you could follow some of this stuff.

JASON HARVEY: Yes.

The CHAIR: Thank you. I think that's it for us as a Committee. Thank you all very much.

JASON HARVEY: Sorry, can I just mention a couple of other things?

The CHAIR: Yes, please. Go ahead.

JASON HARVEY: I should have mentioned it in my opening. When I said we claimed \$62,000 worth of medications, the actual value in our fridge was probably closer to \$200,000. But we spent tens of hours phoning the individual drug companies to see what the status of the vaccines were, and medications, to see if we had to toss them out or if a clock started with them. That took hours and hours, because there is no hard and fast list which is available to the public about if a vaccine reaches 25 or 30 degrees, what you actually have to do with it. There's hundreds of different products. We had to basically ring the company for each one and determine if we could keep that, if we had to get rid of it, if it started a clock and you had to use it within 28 or 42 days, whatever, things like that.

So that took hours and hours and hours of staff time, because there is no database for that, and a lot of the drug companies aren't always very fulfilling with the information, because they don't want to be held liable, if there's no hard and fast data if you're using it and it's not effective. So that may be something to look toward in the future, if there might be some type of database that people could use to access this information. We had hundreds of customers trying to contact us as well, about, "What do I do with my medication in the fridge?" We were posting on our Facebook, and we were getting hundreds and hundreds of likes and comments about what we were posting, because that's what people needed to know at the time.

Another thing, we service through previously Webster-paks and now sachets, so probably about 1,000 people in town, in the region around Broken Hill. Obviously, they're packed in a robot, a very, very expensive robot with a checking camera, so obviously when there's no power, we can't pack that. It got pretty dire towards the end, so we had the staff coming in and working all hours to try and get these packed. If that went on

for much longer than it actually did, or if we didn't get some generators from some places, there would have been hundreds and hundreds of people who may have had to miss out on getting their meds.

We've had to put some things in since then, to put some contingencies in place, because there's no guarantee this is not going to happen again. There are always blackouts in Broken Hill. So we've had to look at generators and batteries, and we've got some quotes. One of the pharmacies is totally off the grid, to bypass this, and that's north of \$50,000 as well, if we're going that road. This is just all things we've got to put in place, because, yes, obviously we are an essential service, as most people who speak today are, and without power, and how reliant we are on power and the internet, it can be devastating on people's access to medications.

The CHAIR: We've spent 130 years making sure everyone is connected to power. I don't think we need to step back or step away from that. But I appreciate what you need to do as a business in terms of taking those risks out of your business model. Nobody's taken questions on notice, I don't think. We as a Committee may develop some additional questions over the coming days. By the end of next week, if we did have any questions, we would send them out to you. If you get questions, we would ask that you try and turn around an answer in about seven days if you can. If that's not possible, please talk to us. But we're working to a timeline as well, and we understand you're all working to timelines in your own work and business and play. Thank you once again for appearing before us. Your time is valuable. Your insights are incredible.

(The witnesses withdrew.)

(Luncheon adjournment)

LUKE DRISCOLL, Chief Executive Officer, Barkandji Native Title Group Aboriginal Corporation RNTBC, affirmed and examined

The CHAIR: I welcome our next witness. We are expecting to be joined potentially by a representative from Maari Ma and we'll deal with that if or when it happens. I again of course acknowledge that we're on the Barkandji land and pay my respects to Elders past and present and anybody appearing or in the audience or watching online today. Luke, thank you for appearing before the Committee today to give evidence. Do you have any questions about the hearing process?

LUKE DRISCOLL: No, I don't.

The CHAIR: Would you like to make an opening statement for one or two minutes?

LUKE DRISCOLL: No, I think just addressing the questions will get there.

The CHAIR: I'll just introduce the Committee. We've got Maryanne Stuart, the member for Heathcote. My name's Clayton Barr. I'm the Chair. We've got Deputy Chair Sally Quinnell, who's the member for Camden. We've got Judy Hannan from Wollondilly, and we've got James Wallace from Hornsby.

Ms MARYANNE STUART: Luke, thanks for coming today. The purpose of this Committee is to talk about the situation that happened in October 2024 with the towers coming down and the impact that had on the community and the ongoing impacts, to be honest. We've spoken about health issues people had and not having accessibility to refrigeration of medicines. We've spoken about communication. We've spoken about personal, genuine hardship, including financial hardships—personal costs. Just wondering, what did your organisation have to do for your community and what sort of stories can you share with us? We will be looking at recommendations going forward in the event, or when the next event comes, because Mother Nature does throw us some challenges and we know we're going to have something in the future. So it's about looking forward as well.

LUKE DRISCOLL: I was receiving a lot of calls from our smaller communities, out in Menindee and Wilcannia. I had my rangers go and pick up—we have a refrigeration trailer and a generator that we store in Mutawintji. We sent them out to pick that up. It wasn't for medications but it was more for people with—if they need to keep some meat cool or some milk cool or anything like that, so they weren't disadvantaged. Let everyone put it in a bag, put their names on it. That's what our team was doing out there. In Menindee we had our team—they could drive in here once the shops had reopened to get some more stuff to get back out there because the prices in those supermarkets are really high, so replacing that is really hard. The effect, it was an ongoing thing. They were just like, "Oh, our power's out. What do we do?"

Everything that I could do in terms of our organisation—I couldn't go hand out cash or anything to them, but use of our resources, I could do. Things like the petrol for the generator and all of that stuff was certainly covered by us. It's an ongoing thing and now there's a stress that what happens if it happens again. I know we as communities, especially my consultation with speaking to members of those smaller ones, is that they solely blame Transgrid for not keeping our infrastructure up to date in the Far West. At one stage there—me, personally—what we were doing was, once a fortnight, going and buying two weeks worth of meat. The day before the power went out, I'd just done that and all my meat was gone. So the \$200 did not replace all of the \$400 of meat I bought.

It is what it is. It's an unfortunate incident. I have a full-time job, so the effect on me is far less than what it would be on people who are on the dole or in a socio-economic area that is not as high as Broken Hill. I speak of Wilcannia and Menindee, where they will travel into Broken Hill to do their shopping on the bus and then travel back. Those who lost those foods, they don't have a fallback—it's the dole. The financial implications that happened to them was far worse than me losing my \$400. It was really hurtful. I was like, "I wish I could do more." Outside of the limitations of what I'm prescribed to do in my position, it was really unfortunate.

Ms MARYANNE STUART: We were at Wilcannia yesterday. We heard that there are 90 homes, social housing out there. None of them had generators—couldn't afford generators.

LUKE DRISCOLL: That's right.

Ms MARYANNE STUART: So when you say it is what it is, could it not be better than this in 2025?

LUKE DRISCOLL: It definitely could. You'd think so, yes. A lot of what I do, as I'm moving forward, is creating economies or industries in those smaller towns. Once you start generating economies therefore there's less reliance on social welfare and more relying on industry to grow those areas. With Wilcannia—the second largest river port in Australia—once we stopped using paddle boats to travel wool and stuff down, the industry that was Wilcannia is over. That would be similar with Menindee. Menindee had a really big grape-growing region

but because there wasn't enough water in the river, they stopped farming. That's what collapsed those two economies, which was a thriving area.

At some stages during picking you'd have 3,000 people in Menindee working. It was people from Wilcannia, it was people from Dareton. The lack of that—what you end up with is what we've got in Wilcannia and Menindee, which is the reliance on social welfare. Of course they couldn't afford generators and stuff. We only have one, so I couldn't exactly go handing them out, as they were important. But I certainly told my rangers to get out and try to get the word out that we've got our refrigeration trailer there if they need a fridge or we've got a generator there if they need to charge their phones. But Telstra was down for the best part of two days, so I don't know if charging your phone would have fixed that issue either.

Ms MARYANNE STUART: One of the other things that we picked up is communication. Communication could have been a whole lot better. What was your experience and what do you think we need to look at going forward?

LUKE DRISCOLL: That's right. Once they were finally able to get a hold of me, prior to them actually being able to call out, I'm guessing they would have felt trapped, isolated. That's what they are: They're isolated towns. Even Broken Hill, within itself is an isolated town. If it's not here, where is it? It's Adelaide, Mildura. We're not close to anything to support. We don't have those supports and I don't expect—I don't know if there's a right or wrong way to fix that. I think the designation that this is a rural city is probably not quite correct because it really is an isolated place in Australia. That's the thing. Who do you call for help when you're a little dot 12 hours away from your closest capital city of your State, which is Sydney? Obviously Adelaide is closer, but you understand what I mean—you're isolated regardless of where you are in our small towns or even in our bigger town, Broken Hill.

Mrs SALLY QUINNELL: Thank you for coming here today, Luke. Is your organisation part of the Local Emergency Management Committee?

LUKE DRISCOLL: We have been, as a part of the fish kills that happened in 2021. At other times, I'm not included in emergency stuff. If it's specifically stuff around the river, we are included because the Barkandji people are people of the river. We were having issues just before Christmas where there was low DO water in that Menindee weir pool, in which case, over Christmas, every two days they'd have a meeting. I pulled in my rangers from their Christmas break to go out and do the manual testing and I'd go out there with them to make sure those buoys that are currently out there are monitoring correctly, because they had some issues. Two of them had shut down over Christmas, in which case they started a flush from the lakes. That's an emergency moment where we're included because we're first responders generally to anything regarding that. Or if there's some dead fish we'd start taking dead fish out before—the more dead fish you get, the more fish that die, perpetuating. But, no, I wasn't a part of the LEMC regarding the power outages.

Mrs SALLY QUINNELL: Understanding that for a period of time telecommunications were out, did your community report feeling that communication with them about this issue was particularly good, or particularly not good, or somewhere in the middle?

LUKE DRISCOLL: Well, I think the lack of the internet was—finding emergency information wouldn't be through contacting you; you would find it on the internet, but there was no internet. We were completely shut off. Even me, I struggled to do my actual job just because a lot of my job involves being on the phone. So if I can't be on the phone and then I can't be on the internet, I can't send emails, so I can't even put a Facebook post up saying, "Yes, we understand the power outages." Obviously I'd been told of certain supports that were there with the power outages, what happened with St Vinnies and Red Cross and stuff, but I couldn't put anything out to even get that information disseminated. I couldn't call my rangers to go, "Hey, let everyone know that if you bring in a couple of them, or bring in your ute, fill it up with some of the food and stuff and hand them out to the community." I couldn't do any of that. It was just a really tough situation.

Mrs SALLY QUINNELL: One of the community members mentioned to us this week that for the entirety of their 42 years they've lived in one of these towns, they still don't know where to go in case of an emergency. They're not aware of where they should go for help. Is that something that seems to be reflected throughout the community, or is that—

LUKE DRISCOLL: That would be a holistic thing, yes. I would say even the same for Broken Hill community members, like Aboriginal—I would say the same. They would not be sure until someone tells them. Otherwise—even I personally wouldn't know, outside of someone telling me, and then I'm just echo-chambering it. I wouldn't know.

Mrs SALLY QUINNELL: There's no sort of communal knowledge that in case of X you go to Y?

LUKE DRISCOLL: Yes, that's right.

Mrs JUDY HANNAN: You said you got some information that you were echoing along. Did you get that information from council? Did you get it from the electricity providers? What did you get from those particular groups?

LUKE DRISCOLL: Nothing directly, but a lot of the Essential Energy posts would tell you all of that stuff, which is why, when I could get in touch with my employees that were in Menindee and in Wilcannia—but the two I had in Broken Hill, obviously it's easy. They're there, so I could tell them. I could drive around, go to Creedon Street—there's a lot of Aboriginal social housing in Creedon Street—and go, "Let them know this", so they know. And—what was the question again?

Mrs JUDY HANNAN: It was about communicating.

LUKE DRISCOLL: Yes, not directly. There was no real direct—outside of what was provided online, when I got access to it, I didn't get any direct calls going, "Hey, we've got this happening. Do you want to let the communities know?" We never got that.

Mrs JUDY HANNAN: But you went out to some communities to let them know?

LUKE DRISCOLL: Yes, that's right.

Mrs JUDY HANNAN: How many staff would you have, to let people know? Is it just you, or how many staff?

LUKE DRISCOLL: Oh, no. We've got rangers out in our community. We've got four in Menindee, four in Wilcannia and two in Broken Hill, and an admin officer and myself.

Mrs JUDY HANNAN: So some staff that went out into it?

LUKE DRISCOLL: Yes.

Mr JAMES WALLACE: We've done some other hearings this week. One of the comments that came up was around how organisations needed to change and be flexible in what they were doing. Can you maybe clarify what it is that your organisation normally does, and then how you shifted in those two weeks? Is that normally something you're doing: going and speaking to people, checking on their welfare?

LUKE DRISCOLL: No, that's not something that we normally do. Our rangers do do a lot of community-based stuff. But for the most part they do a lot of land management, protection of the river and cultural monitoring of certain areas that are significant to the Barkandji people. The aspect of community is not a large part, but over those two weeks none of those other things happened. It was more community side. Me talking with community is not a massive part of my role. I certainly field a lot of calls from community if there's issues, but not like a main part of my role as a worker. That two weeks, we ceased doing what we actually do, to respond to the actual emergency that was present.

The CHAIR: I want to just concentrate a little bit on that first 24 or 48 hours. The power goes down. You at that point, in that immediate moment—am I right in thinking you're completely unable to connect with or contact your workforce?

LUKE DRISCOLL: That's right, yes. I couldn't get in contact with them and they couldn't get in contact with me. Intermittently my phone would work, and then it would stop working. I'd get a call, and then it would just cut out. But the first 24 hours it was none. I had no reception on my phone whatsoever. I couldn't speak to anybody in my workforce to see what was happening, and how everybody was, because I wouldn't have known.

The CHAIR: After that first 24 hours, when you started to get a little bit of connectivity, or occasional connectivity on your phone, at that point in time were you here in Broken Hill?

LUKE DRISCOLL: Yes, I was in Broken Hill.

The CHAIR: The calls that were making it to you, were they all Broken Hill based calls?

LUKE DRISCOLL: I never thought about that. Actually, they would have been. Yes.

The CHAIR: This is my thing: I'm pretty confident that would be the correct answer, because when we talked to community in Menindee and Wilcannia and whatnot, they were saying, "Well, we lost our communications within about four hours and then we lost it for 48 or 72 hours."

LUKE DRISCOLL: That's right, yes. I'd never thought about it, but yes, that would be correct: It was all Broken Hill based calls I was fielding for the first two days, I would say. I drove out to Menindee on one of those days just to speak to them.

The CHAIR: That was going to be my next question. Then how do you make that initial contact?

LUKE DRISCOLL: Yes, I drove out there. Because it was really important.

The CHAIR: Of course.

LUKE DRISCOLL: Not to mention I didn't want my workers stressing out thinking—they can't get in touch with me, so they don't know what they're doing. So what are they meant to be doing? So I had to go out there. I did get a hold of Wilcannia eventually, I think, by the third day. They were already doing what I would have expected. The third day, I got a call, "Hey, can we go pick up the refrigerator and the generator so we can get it here and keep all of the community's stuff cold?" I was like, "Yes, of course." That was never a no to answer.

The CHAIR: That refrigerator was picked up and then taken back out to Wilcannia?

LUKE DRISCOLL: Yes. It was picked up from Mutawintji and then driven back out.

The CHAIR: To Wilcannia?

LUKE DRISCOLL: To Wilcannia, yes. It's still currently there, just in case.

The CHAIR: What does it run off?

LUKE DRISCOLL: It's electrical, so it needed the generator to run it.

The CHAIR: It comes with a generator?

LUKE DRISCOLL: No. The generator was separate to the refrigerator.

The CHAIR: But you had a generator to run the refrigerator?

LUKE DRISCOLL: Yes, that's right. Normally you would just plug it in to an outlet or a generator. In this instance the generator was running the refrigeration. That's why I said they can come and plug in their phones and stuff to the generator as well, while it's running the refrigerator.

The CHAIR: I just want to reprocess that your workers typically work with the land and the river as opposed to community and mob?

LUKE DRISCOLL: Yes, that's right. They're rangers. There is an aspect of community stuff that they do, but it's not primarily their role per se.

The CHAIR: In that instance, then—I just want to double-clarify—it would be fair to say that you as the land council wouldn't necessarily have a good idea or a list of really vulnerable members?

LUKE DRISCOLL: All of our rangers are community members. They would be very aware of who would be vulnerable in their communities, very much so. Even I, since I've been out here, have had roles in aged care and so on, so I already know of a lot of vulnerable community members, specifically old or NDIS clients that exist within our smaller communities at least. Could you go check up on an Elder, go do all those things? I already know, but they already know as well because they're already community members. They're not driving in from Broken Hill to Wilcannia. They're already Wilcannia based, or Menindee based, as I say.

The CHAIR: That's terrific. Thank you very much, Luke, for appearing today, and thank you for the work you did during that difficult time. We really appreciate your time here today. Over the coming days we, as a Committee, may develop some additional questions that we want to forward through to you. If that happens, you will get them at the end of next week. We would ask you to try and turn around an answer in about seven days, if that's possible. If that's not, please talk to us. We're just running to a timeline because we've got to report in May.

LUKE DRISCOLL: That's absolutely fine.

The CHAIR: Thank you very much, Luke.

(The witness withdrew.)

Mr TOM KENNEDY, Mayor, Broken Hill City Council, sworn and examined

Mr JAY NANKIVELL, General Manager, Broken Hill City Council, sworn and examined

The CHAIR: I welcome our next witnesses. It's good to see you guys again. I had the chance to meet you out here when I was with the Select Committee on Remote, Rural and Regional Health. Before we start, do you have any questions about the hearing process? No? Great. Before we start questions, would you like to make a short opening statement of up to a couple of minutes?

TOM KENNEDY: I'll just make a really brief one. The power outage that did occur in Broken Hill did have a significant effect on the community. The way it was handled and communicated to the community was substandard. A lot of faith was lost in authorities behind supplying power to Broken Hill. People, in the end, were craving any sort of information that could be accurate that was provided them, even in the form of me personally posting on Facebook. A lot of people were then relying on the only information that they were getting that they believed to be somewhat reliable. That was coming from what we were hearing from the council, which wasn't always the most accurate information or the most timely information.

The CHAIR: I might lean straight into that if you don't mind. You said that the information you were getting might not have been the most timely or the most accurate. The emergency management committee must have been set up, and up and running. Is that correct?

TOM KENNEDY: I'll just go from the very—the blackout happened on the Thursday night.

The CHAIR: The early hours of the morning, yes.

TOM KENNEDY: I went on radio almost immediately after that. The radio was very interested in what could happen.

The CHAIR: What was going on, right?

TOM KENNEDY: Because it was—the backup generator did kick in, so we did have power. It was made quite clear then—because people do speak, particularly to me as the mayor, of what's going on. They said there was only one power generator that was supplying Broken Hill, instead of the two that we rely on. I went on to the radio then saying the importance of having both. If one did go down, it would become catastrophic for Broken Hill. At that time, the emergency management committee hadn't been informed or even told about how critical it had become. I think they started Monday. We started getting information as a council on the Monday, so this was several days after the power outage. That then really come to a front when the generator did go down. Then we had up to 48 hours—and up to 78 for some—households and businesses without any power at all.

The CHAIR: Mr Nankivell, council would have a local emergency management officer, right—a LEMO?

JAY NANKIVELL: Yes, that's correct.

The CHAIR: Can the LEMO of council not stand up, or ask to stand up, the emergency management committee, or does it have to be the LEOCON from the police?

JAY NANKIVELL: The general process is that it has been the LEOCON or the lead agency in the emergency. That was stood up on the Monday night as part of the Regional Emergency Management Committee¹. Both LEMCs of Central Darling Shire Council and Broken Hill City Council joined together for that Regional Emergency Management Committee, but that was following the storm event and the power outage that had already commenced.

The CHAIR: In the early hours of Thursday morning we've got a power outage. At what point did it become known that there were half a dozen towers blown over and that this was obviously going to be an extended outage?

JAY NANKIVELL: Once we got to, obviously, office hours that Thursday morning, but at that point in time I think it was still the understanding of the majority of people that there were still two backup generators that were able to kick into gear and supply power to the town and region, as it did probably about 10 years before, when we had the last lot of towers go down. It wasn't until later that we were aware that there was only one

¹ The Committee received correspondence from Mr Nankivell, providing clarification on this statement, which is published on the Committee's [webpage](#).

generator, which was at the point in time when the local emergency management committee set up and we went into that active phase.

The CHAIR: A question for either of you: I just want to clarify that term "later". Mr Mayor, you said people speak to you and pretty early on in the piece it sounded like only one of the two were running, but something was running. But what does "later" mean? When was it confirmed and, I guess, how? By what means was it confirmed that there was only one?

TOM KENNEDY: Transgrid were very sketchy about providing any information that could be critical of anything they'd done. So, for council's perspective, it wasn't until the emergency management committee did start that they then actually started to let the council know just how devastating it was for the community. They didn't let the emergency management committee know at any stage that there was only one generator until it had become apparent. And really, even up until the point, it wasn't confirmed if it was completely offline until our one remaining generator did go offline. Then they started to admit that there was a problem. They tried to get other redundant power. I think it was on the Tuesday after the blackout started and we met with Transgrid. Transgrid said that they had redundant power, enough generation coming into the city, and it'd probably be up and running within 12 to 24 hours. They went on ABC television. We found out probably only an hour later that that was completely false, and that it would be up to another week before they had enough power in the city to make sure that there was no need for rolling blackouts.

Mr JAMES WALLACE: How did you find out that that was completely false?

TOM KENNEDY: Within a very short amount of time they went on to make another public statement that said it would be at least two to three days before it would come online. I made it clear at that meeting that they'd already given us false information on a number of occasions where I went onto Facebook to put it out there and it wasn't correct. I said to them, "I've got no problem backing this up to give confidence to the community, but you need to tell me now whether that information is correct or not correct." They gave a commitment, and there was four of them in there, their CEO, media person and technical person. They said, "No, it will be." Within about an hour of that it was confirmed that it was completely false.

Mr JAMES WALLACE: When you say it was then confirmed, they told you personally that they were incorrect an hour before?

TOM KENNEDY: They went out and made a public statement that contradicted what they'd said to us, that within 12 hours they would have enough redundant power in the system to ensure that there'd be no need for rolling blackouts and there'd be no risk of failure again.

Mr JAMES WALLACE: I think in your submission you pointed to certain instances where you'd requested or sought certain information from different government agencies which hadn't been provided. Are you able to articulate on that? Is that correct? Are you able to articulate whether you did request information from Health that didn't come through? And what access in general was the REMC getting from state government agencies during that process?

JAY NANKIVELL: Yes, the REMC was getting access to the information. At that point in the submission related specifically around some of the privacy details of residents within the city that had health needs that required backup supply. So part of one of the actions out of the REMC was for Essential Energy to be able to ensure backup supply or backup generators were supplied to residents that required that lifesaving medical equipment. However, there was a delay there as Health couldn't release that information to the REMC to be provided to Essential Energy to go around to those residences. So there was a delay there. The information eventually came through, but there was around a 24-hour delay for the information to be passed over to Essential Energy to put those backup generators to those residences.

TOM KENNEDY: Just following up on that, over that 24-hour period, I and many councillors, including the council, were contacted by numerous people that were worried about actually potentially dying, so there was a lot of grief and worry in the community about that information. So Essential Energy couldn't just provide the generators without the information. Once that information was provided, then the people were supplied with generators that ensured that their medical equipment would continue to operate if there was another blackout, and there was several blackouts after that period.

Mr JAMES WALLACE: So you had 24 hours of Health refusing to provide you with the details of people who, from your understanding, from the pressure you were getting from the community, needed the electricity to be able to have their lifesaving medical equipment?

TOM KENNEDY: They were in a panic, so they were contacting anyone they could to try and get that. I think at one stage a lot of them were going to the hospital themselves because they were worried that they

wouldn't be able to—if something happened, if there was a blackout at home, that they would potentially die, so they were going to the hospital to try and get any sort of help they could.

Mr JAMES WALLACE: That leads into my next question. In your submission you point to inadequacies in Health's generators that they have onsite there and the potential for that to be placing patients at risk. Can you expand on that a little bit? Are you aware of surgeries being cancelled? What was the REMC's oversight of what was happening with the health centres?

TOM KENNEDY: A big problem there was radiology couldn't operate. There wasn't enough power within the generation to operate radiology. That includes CT scans, X-rays et cetera. I do know of an example where a lady went there in the early hours of the morning just as the blackout had started. She spent from about four o'clock in the morning to eight o'clock at night in severe pain, and they couldn't do a CT scan to check what was going on. They assumed that it may have been a bowel perforation. It ended up being an ulcer. Her stomach contents were leaking into her intestine. They really needed fly her to Adelaide, but it was too late, so they opened her up from the top of her chest down to her stomach and cleaned out what they could. She's now in a situation where, since the blackout, she has been in and out of hospital and probably won't work again. And that was solely because she could not get a CT scan.

Mr JAMES WALLACE: A more general question is in relation to the REMC. Does the REMC each year or every couple of months undergo training programs? Do you run drills and practice sessions? Can you expand on that? And can you also talk about whether there's any support, teaching, lessons that come from State government emergency services to help you in performing those REMC responsibilities?

JAY NANKIVELL: Yes, the LEMC members are provided with training around disaster recovery and specifically going through our manual, which lists our responses for all those emergencies. A practice run is carried out every 12 months with the LEMCs. At this stage, there's no joint REMC practice run that happens each 12 months, but it does happen with the LEMC. And then just the widespread State training that's provided to LEMCs and specifically your LEMOs and your LEOCONs. Not all members but the LEMOs, which is myself and my director of infrastructure and environment, have been through that training.

Mrs JUDY HANNAN: I have to be a bit more particular. Blackout Thursday morning—is that correct?

JAY NANKIVELL: Yes.

Mrs JUDY HANNAN: And the LEMC met Monday night?

JAY NANKIVELL: I will have to clarify the first meeting, but certainly it was raised by the Regional Emergency Management Officer Monday afternoon that there would be a meeting called of the Regional Emergency Management Committee, and we met at 9.30 p.m. Central Standard Time on the Monday night, which was the lead into the major blackout that occurred all through Tuesday.²

Mrs JUDY HANNAN: That's a long time from the original blackout. Is that the usual process?

JAY NANKIVELL: No, the usual process is that—an example would be the recent earthquake tremors late last year. The LEOCON raised that. We had a meeting after the first tremor on the Sunday to monitor and activate the committee in the case of further tremors leading into a larger one. So the normal process is that it's activated quickly. I think in this instance there was no information that the LEMC had received that, with the main lines being down, that there wasn't sufficient backup power, as Transgrid hadn't notified the LEMC that they had one backup generator out of action. If the LEMC or the REMC had have known that there was only one generator active—then obviously there's no contingencies if one fails—it would have been activated a lot earlier.

Mrs JUDY HANNAN: So five days. Who told you in the first place that there was an outage? Did you just see that there were no lights on, or did somebody from Transgrid or Essential Energy ring the council? Where did the information first come from?

JAY NANKIVELL: The obvious answer there is there was no power, so we knew there was a blackout. But the first information did come through via the LEOCON, and that was that the backup generators had been activated on the Thursday, and it was back to business as normal. There was nothing coming through other than normal media channels from Essential Energy or Transgrid in regards to what the pending two weeks could potentially look like.

² The Committee received correspondence from Mr Nankivell, providing clarification on this statement, which is published on the Committee's [webpage](#).

Mrs JUDY HANNAN: Who would have told them? Did they just go, "Oh the lights are out, and we'll inform council"? Or did someone officially tell them?

JAY NANKIVELL: I believe the information I had at the time was that Essential Energy contacted the police—or the police had contacted Essential Energy through the LEOCON, which is how the information came through to the LEMC.

Mrs JUDY HANNAN: I know you said that on Facebook you put some information out. At what point did council put information out and through what sort of media did you put information out?

JAY NANKIVELL: For council, we followed our normal communication strategies—social media and radio—but all in line with what was coming out of the regional emergency management committee. Through that structure there's always one point of communication. At that point in time it was Essential Energy providing those updates to the community, being the local energy provider. Anything that council put out was only sharing information from Essential Energy so there could be no miscommunication. So one point of communication, as per normal procedures.

Mrs JUDY HANNAN: At one point we were told that while some people got information from council, people were told they were not to spread that information. Is that something that—

TOM KENNEDY: No. Council has always been open about what happened. Our problem was that the information that was provided, not just to council but also the local emergency management committee from Transgrid, wasn't always accurate. For a long time, they didn't admit that even the sole generator that was left there could only run at 60 to 80 per cent because they were worried about the reliability of that generator. There had been sensors in there and that's what happened when that generator went down. The sensor—thankfully it was only the sensor—stopped working, and it took about 12 hours before they could even enter the generator because of the extreme heat. Within the generation unit itself, they were able to pull that apart and it was a sensor. But they were also very worried that there could have been other damage that was done. If they'd run the generator at full capacity, which is about 25 megawatts of power—they were running it at about 18 megawatts, which wasn't enough to supply the city—it would then trip it out and we'd be in a situation with no power again.

Mrs JUDY HANNAN: Did council send any staff out to explain everything, or were social media and radio the only thing covered? Did council take any action before that five-day meeting to help people in the area? Was there any staff going out doing special things or anything? Or were you expecting the power to come back on any minute?

JAY NANKIVELL: No staff were in that time period because at that stage there was no inkling that there was only one generator functioning. There was no action taken because there was no known information that the power was going back out again.

TOM KENNEDY: Could I just explain? The power went off. By early the next day the power was back on when the generator came on. So people weren't really concerned at all, until—so this is the thing, in Broken Hill, our power will go off, our backup generator kicks in, we're offline for very little time. People don't really worry too much about just a short blackout. People found out that once it did go out, power comes back on with the generators once they kick in. They kick them in fairly quickly. It's isolated from everywhere else. The one generator wasn't enough to supply power to Broken Hill, White Cliffs, Wilcannia and Menindee by itself.

What happened was then we were told—or via media you're told—that seven towers had gone down. In the past those towers were fixed really quite quickly. They used just temporary wooden towers when Essential Energy was in charge. We then found out that it was going to be a number of weeks, and potentially up to four weeks, before those towers were going to happen. Then it came out that we were running on one generator. So people started to worry when they found out that we weren't going to have towers fixed for up to four weeks and we're running on one generator that wasn't capable of supplying the whole of Broken Hill or the surrounding areas and could not supply our local mines. That means that for up to four-plus weeks there'd be people in Broken Hill that would not be able to work, would not be able to make money. It put the risk of our local mining operations in doubt, which then sent the whole of the town into some sort of panic. Because if we'd lost our mines, virtually overnight you lose 500 or 600 people that work here.

So the power itself was no concern to people initially because we have a backup generator. It comes online, it's something that as a community probably happens several times a year. It could be a bird strike; it could be anything. Generators can kick back in. They've been reliable in the past and with two, they're completely reliable—reliable to the point where they're able to provide power not only to the city but to the mines themselves and, with the two generators, chances of both of them not working at one time would be almost zero. So that's why we had that redundant power. It was critical redundant power that, as a council and as a community, we all

thought was there that would be safe. We then found out that the second generator had been offline, and perhaps offline for over 12 months.

Mrs JUDY HANNAN: Sorry, I just need to be clear in my head—when you get these strikes or the outage, then you know it's going to come back on, the generators will kick in, is it always for 24 hours? Would you not have thought, once the first one went for a long period of time, that you were in deep trouble?

JAY NANKIVELL: The first power outage wasn't for 24 hours. It's only when the—

TOM KENNEDY: The power comes back on almost immediately. Well, not immediately, but it went off in the early hours of the morning. By fairly early the next day it's back online, as they did it. The problem was when the second generator went off, there was no way of getting power online. They had to bring in extra generators and they had to get the backup generator going. That was the period where then it became an emergency. That's when State Government came out and that's when the Minister came out. It was when the second generator failed.

Mrs JUDY HANNAN: What date was that?

TOM KENNEDY: That was the Tuesday, wasn't it?

Mrs JUDY HANNAN: And the first outage was for how long in Broken Hill? You said it went out and then it was back on—

TOM KENNEDY: Back on at 11 or something, wasn't it?

JAY NANKIVELL: Yes. We'd have to confirm the time, but it was early morning.

Mrs JUDY HANNAN: I'd really like that time frame of when the power went out each time and when the generator came on each time, and when council took certain action at specific times, including the local emergency meeting time.

The CHAIR: Can I just clarify that what you're saying about that generator kicking in and providing power as of Thursday morning is, I believe, contrary to what we've heard from the other witnesses who are Broken Hill based, who are saying there wasn't any power on Thursday morning. So this is confusing for us right now, because what you're saying is different to what we've heard.

TOM KENNEDY: It went out in the early hours of the morning, so everyone's asleep, you hear your air cooler go off. I went into work, for example, and I think it came on at about 11 o'clock. I can't be exactly sure, but the power came on really quite quickly because we had a backup generator.

The CHAIR: Okay.

TOM KENNEDY: That's the way it works. The generator gets kicked in as soon as they acknowledge that the power's out. The initial blackout wasn't a 24-hour period or anything like that. The first major long-term blackout was when the generator collapsed and then we had a second blackout that lasted about 12 or 16 hours after that, where the generator went down again and we were worried as a community—that's when a lot of people in the city lost faith because we were told that there was enough generation, that we wouldn't lose power again, but we did lose power again. That's when people lost the second lot of food and businesses were then worried about opening up their business. The initial blackout when the towers went down wasn't the same sort of issue because the generator was put into service. It was an issue for the mines because the mines could not operate because the mines use up to about 10 meg themselves—21 meg. So they couldn't open up because there wasn't enough generation for the mine with the one generator.

Mrs SALLY QUINNELL: I suppose my confusion is that that may have been the situation here in Broken Hill, and I understand you're Broken Hill council—I'm not expecting you to be keeping an eye on everywhere else—but regionally it may have come back on, but it was for two or three hours and then it was gone.

TOM KENNEDY: Yes. What happened in the outlying areas, because the generator couldn't provide enough power to supply all, those outlying areas, like White Cliffs, Wilcannia and Menindee, took a lot longer to come on. They had to be supplied with their own power generation, and that took several days, so they went through a lot more grief than Broken Hill did in that initial stage.

Mrs SALLY QUINNELL: So, my question being, then, are they not included in the REMC?

JAY NANKIVELL: They're included in the REMC.

Mrs SALLY QUINNELL: So at no point in those five days was the REMC saying, "We've got a big issue out there. We need to have a meeting about this emergency situation"?

JAY NANKIVELL: That's my point before. I'd have to check the dates, but it certainly wasn't initially, straightaway, on that Thursday, with the REMC, but our Local Emergency Management Committee looks after the city of Broken Hill, so we don't activate the REMC.

Mrs SALLY QUINNELL: No, no. I totally understand. Who does, then?

JAY NANKIVELL: That would go through the Central Darling LEMO and LEOCON to the Regional Emergency Management Officer and REOCON.

Mrs SALLY QUINNELL: Okay. Thank you. Where we're getting a little bit confused is we've had four days now of hearings, and what we're hearing is vastly different from each area, but also within Broken Hill, about when power went off, when it came back on. Please excuse if we're just kind of getting our heads around the various bits of information.

TOM KENNEDY: Could I just expand on the question you asked?

Mrs SALLY QUINNELL: Yes.

TOM KENNEDY: For Broken Hill, our power came on straightaway. There's also a smaller powerline that feeds Wilcannia and Menindee et cetera. Their power didn't come straight back on. So they were in a situation where there was food spoiling right from the start. And that was one of the issues that started people with that concern, because there wasn't enough power generation. We were given a commitment, and Transgrid had an obligation, to have two generators to make sure that there was enough power to supply the whole town and surrounding areas.

Even though Wilcannia and Menindee are not part of our area, they were contacting us regularly, and they did contact me regularly. There was real concern in those communities about what needed to happen, hence I go on the radio to say, "Look, I have a concern." I did speak to Jay almost straightaway, saying, "I'm really concerned. They're talking four weeks to fix towers." I think Jay even then followed up with emergency management then, and I think Cody after that started getting some information back—which is the manager of the infrastructure.

Mrs SALLY QUINNELL: Great. So if I can now move us forward to that Tuesday, when it went down and it went down. What was enacted within Broken Hill from council, as part of that LEMC reaction, to give people access to air conditioning, power, mobile phone charging, and how were people in Broken Hill told about what council had enacted?

JAY NANKIVELL: We activated our emergency management protocol, so that was the evacuation centres.

Mrs SALLY QUINNELL: Where were they specifically?

JAY NANKIVELL: The Aged Persons Rest Centre, next door to the Civic Centre, has a backup generator for those purposes. That was activated to provide air cooling, milk, coffee, biscuits, just general small items, as well as phone charging. We were also in constant contact with Essential Energy for the provision of backup generators so that we could actually have this, which is the nominated evacuation centre, the civic centre, with backup power to provide a community facility. That was put on line in the early hours of Wednesday morning. We activated that when the power went out again Wednesday, but it wasn't needed after that. Obviously, it became stable.

One of the issues out of that was this evacuation centre didn't have a backup generator to be able to turn on line in the case of a power outage. So the only provision was the Aged Persons Rest Centre. That was provided out through social media as well as to the ABC, for radio, which had a backup generator, and was running through the entire period, so that information was getting out there. We also provided it through the REMC and the LEMC contacts so they could distribute it to their wider database of contacts as well. To answer an earlier question, there wasn't any doorknocking of staff around the community to notify them of that. We were relying on the REMC and the other agencies involved to be able to distribute that information.

Mrs SALLY QUINNELL: So were you aware that people had lost phone coverage?

JAY NANKIVELL: Yes, we were aware of that. That was raised to the REMC as well. Obviously, the generators were getting put in place by Telstra, but there was still access to ABC Radio during that time, but internet connectivity to phone reception on the northern side of the city wasn't disrupted. It was mainly South Broken Hill that was disrupted.

The CHAIR: I apologise in advance; I know Telstra are in the room waiting to come online, and we're six minutes overdue. But this has been a fascinating exchange, because it's really rocked the world of what we thought we'd already heard. Maryanne? Over to you.

Ms MARYANNE STUART: My colleague James Wallace was talking before about Health, saying that NSW Health—to the best of my ability, on the fly—were "refusing to provide" information about vulnerable patients, to give you that information. Were they refusing or was it along the lines that they didn't have the right, from those individuals, to pass that information on?

JAY NANKIVELL: Yes.

Mrs JUDY HANNAN: Did Essential Energy not have that information already when people fill out their forms? Why did they have to wait for Health to give you that information? Would Essential Energy not have had that information?

TOM KENNEDY: Essential Energy did have some of the information and were able to provide it with the people that did have the information, but there was a number of people that didn't. I know the people that come to me, so they rang Essential Energy. Essential Energy couldn't actually act until they were given the authority. In some cases it was quite quick, but in other cases it was longer. Jay would know more.

JAY NANKIVELL: Yes. And I'll just answer that. The Essential Energy office representation through the REMC said that they didn't have all the information, and they asked, through the REMC, to be able to access that information of Health.

Ms MARYANNE STUART: One of the things that we're looking at is what worked, what didn't work and what we need to look at going forward. So if I am a patient that relies on a breathing apparatus, for example, do I need to tick a box on a form to say I'm happy for that information to be provided to a third party? That's the sort of example that we're looking at going forward, so that's why I asked that question. Mr Mayor, you said that the patient couldn't get a CT scan. That was because the electricity wasn't on, not because the hospital couldn't do it, right?

TOM KENNEDY: No. So, what happened was, when the hospital went to generator because of the blackout, the generator that's there at the hospital doesn't have the power to supply anything other than lights and ordinary equipment. I think even in some areas the air conditioning wasn't working. But they definitely couldn't do radiology. When they couldn't do radiology—unfortunately for this lady, she needed a CT scan but was unable to get a CT scan and then spent three months in the Adelaide hospital.

The CHAIR: But hadn't the generator kicked in at 11.00 a.m.? Why couldn't the hospital go back to normal power supply from the generated power?

TOM KENNEDY: There was no power supply. This was over the period where there was a 24-to-36-hour blackout. Over that period, the hospital was on backup generation from their own generator.

The CHAIR: Sorry, I thought you said earlier that that woman presented to the hospital around about the time of the blackout.

TOM KENNEDY: This is the second blackout when the generator went down, not the initial blackout. The initial blackout wouldn't have caused much inconvenience across the city.

Ms MARYANNE STUART: We've had previous people attend today that have said that this event is not a standalone event. They spoke to us about a Transgrid event in 2019, one in 2023. So I dare say your council, as the local government, would be quite up to date with having an emergency plan et cetera. We've spoken about evacuation points. I just wanted to let you know we've had people here today that do not know where that evacuation or that emergency centre is. You referenced an aged centre. Is that correct?

JAY NANKIVELL: The Aged Persons Rest Centre next door is our activation point for the Local Emergency Management Committee. This civic centre that we are in is our evacuation centre, as well as another evacuation centre in South Broken Hill, being the old police boys club. The reason the Aged Persons Rest Centre was activated is because that was the only facility that had a backup generator to be able to provide cooling, lighting and phone charging to the residents, which is one of the downfalls of this being an evacuation centre in a power outage, because there's no backup generator.

Ms MARYANNE STUART: Which is fine. I'm just saying that we've had people in today that live here, and we have asked them, "Where do you go to in these sorts of events?", and they had no idea.

TOM KENNEDY: Could I just expand on that as well? You're talking about an event in 2019 and 2023. These are local outages as opposed to transmission line outages.

Ms MARYANNE STUART: Yes, but I think it's pretty fair to say we're going to have other challenges that Mother Nature throws to us.

TOM KENNEDY: Yes, but just from a local point of view so we do understand it, some of the other outages that happened is where there's been a bird strike on a generator, for example. They're the main reasons that the power outages happen across the city. They're usually localised grid outages. I think you would have had different people speaking here about when they had the rolling blackouts on.

Ms MARYANNE STUART: I think you're missing the point, with all respect. What I'm saying is, whatever the emergency is, people here in Broken Hill do not know where to go when there is an emergency. That's my point. Because of the experience that you've had out here in, unfortunately, having multiple events, I'm just raising a point about through the REMC, through the LEMC, ensuring that everybody is represented on these committees going forward. We can't rely on Facebook, we can't rely on electricity, and we can't rely on social media. [REDACTED]

TOM KENNEDY: [REDACTED]

Mrs SALLY QUINNELL: [REDACTED]

Ms MARYANNE STUART: [REDACTED]

TOM KENNEDY: [REDACTED]

Mrs JUDY HANNAN: One of the Indigenous groups also went and knocked on some doors, and one of the care providers went and knocked on some doors.

Ms MARYANNE STUART: My point is, with the experience that you've had and the vulnerable people that you have—we had some elderly citizens come here today that said that there's a substantial demographic of elderly citizens here in this LGA. We know there are rough sleepers. What communication can the council look at going forward in another emergency to make sure that everybody has the transparency, the communication and the safety that you, as the local government, can and should be providing in the future?

TOM KENNEDY: I think I can speak on behalf of my community when I say this. What we want to see as a community, whether they're vulnerable or not vulnerable, is a power supply that is reliable for our city. Give us two generators or give us a double transmission line so we're not without power. That's what we want to see. What we've come in here to do is to spell out that the community does not accept the fact that we have substandard services here in Broken Hill.

We do not accept it, and as a council we will continue to fight to make sure that we have a power supply that is reliable, that includes two generators, that provides enough redundant power to make sure that we don't have a mine that loses operations when we have a blackout, whether that is loss of the transmission line from Buronga or any other. We've just given approval for Hydrostor. Hydrostor will become our redundant backup power. What's happened is the State Government and Transgrid have let this community down. You started bringing up and you're trying to say that the council is the one that let it down. What let it down was we don't have enough power.

The CHAIR: Mr Mayor, the question from the member was what will you do to make sure that for any future emergency, no matter what it is, the community know where they should be going to as an emergency centre? That was the question.

TOM KENNEDY: We just had an emergency the other day, which was a smoke emergency from Perilya mine. There was chemical smoke into the city. The Local Emergency Management Committee, with the police, made sure that everyone in the community knew exactly what was going on. Now you're talking about back in October. People forget very quickly what information is provided, but there is an exact incident that happened not that long ago, and I can tell you everyone in town was completely informed about the chemical smoke that was coming from our local mine.

The Local Emergency Management Committee was involved, the police were involved, the information gets out there. One of the issues with getting the information out was with the Telstra mobile towers. People's mobile communication was down because a generator had been moved early, which was a backup power for the mobile communication because people involved thought that maybe the electricity issue had been resolved, but we had an additional blackout after that that caused more communication problems, which then makes it more difficult for everyone to communicate.

The CHAIR: The member's point was we had witnesses today who still don't know today where to go in case of an emergency, and that's why the question was asked.

Ms MARYANNE STUART: Because, as the Chair has said, we are getting a very different story here now from what we have heard over the last few days—a very, very different story. We've had so many people come and speak to us. We're just trying to seek some clarity.

JAY NANKIVELL: If I can just add to that information going out. The LEMC committee and the REMC is very broad in regard to the reach it has within the community with the agencies and not-for-profits that are also involved. It widened during COVID-19 to make sure that we were getting out to the outlying areas and that the vulnerable and non-vulnerable were being reached. This happened again during this electricity outage, but all those services were informed. I think a part of this as a learning would be that those agencies and support services that are on the committee as well are to provide that information back to their services and go out to those outlying areas. Obviously we received feedback from them in regard to vulnerable people that need support. The REMC and the REOCON in this instance were instigating actions to be able to affect those people. But that information also needs to go back out via their representatives so they are reaching everybody.

Ms MARYANNE STUART: Correct, Jay.

The CHAIR: We have gone way over time. I again apologise to the current members who stayed with us for longer than expected, but also to Telstra who have been very patiently waiting. We may develop some questions over the coming week which would be sent to you late next week. If we send them out to you, we will ask, if you can, to return them in seven days. If you can't, just talk to us about that, but we're all working to timelines and that would be greatly appreciated. Thank you all so much.

(The witnesses withdrew.)

BRONWYN CLERE, Operations and Management Executive, InfraCo, before the Committee via videoconference, affirmed and examined

PAUL HARRISON, National Emergency Manager, Incident Operations, Telstra, before the Committee via videoconference, affirmed and examined

LISA McTIERNAN, Manager, Government Relations, Telstra, before the Committee via videoconference, affirmed and examined

GERARD TRACEY, Group Owner, End to End Service Performance and Resilience, Telstra, before the Committee via videoconference, affirmed and examined

The CHAIR: Thank you for being with us today. Do you have any questions about the process you are about to engage in?

GERARD TRACEY: Not at all, no.

The CHAIR: Before we start questions from our end, would you like to make a short opening statement of up to two minutes, to frame the conversation we're about to have?

BRONWYN CLERE: I did want to start by acknowledging the traditional owners of the land on which we meet today. I'm joining you from the land of the Wurundjeri people and the Kulin nation in Melbourne. We pay our respects to Elders for all countries that we're joining on. We also do want to extend our apologies for not being able to be there in person. The logistics wouldn't work for us today, but we're very keen to provide some perspectives and some information to the Committee. I did think I'd start with just talking a little bit about Telstra's long and proud history of investment in Australia. Our mobile network is by far Australia's largest, in terms of coverage. We know that more than ever Australians continue to rely on us, and on connectivity. In terms of mobile network, over the last seven years, to 30 June 2024, we've invested \$11.8 billion nationally, and \$4.3 billion of that importantly has been specifically allocated to regional areas.

In recent times, one of the themes of our investment program is to broaden the focus of that investment to increase the emphasis on our network resilience, which is the theme of today. It's a really important focus for us. We look at it in our technology architecture and also the way in which we operate our networks. Telecommunications equipment is fundamentally dependent on a stable mains power supply. Unfortunately, power outages impacting the Telstra network are a fact of life, and something we manage every day. For example, last year alone our network experienced 90,000 power outages to our sites nationally. That equates to over 400,000 hours of network outages and impact for customers. We've got very mature operational and engineering capabilities that prevented around 95 per cent of customer impact in those cases, but where it does impact us we move to restore sites really quickly, when outages occur, and track those very, very heavily.

To improve our resilience—and I know this will be a theme of the Committee—against the loss of mains power, we do invest in backup power systems, including things like batteries, diesel/petrol generators, and solar generation at our sites. However, these assets only have finite capability, as you'll know. While they can withstand short-term power outages, they can't withstand longer term prolonged outages. Our focus is on annually renewing and uplifting that in-built resilience of our sites. For example, in the last financial year, the year that we're currently in, we've upgraded in New South Wales alone over 1,700 power systems and just over a thousand sites. That equates to around a \$32 million investment in the communities. These are just some of the programs that we've got underway. We've also got an ongoing program of work for new and innovative technology to improve power resilience. One of those is standalone power systems that don't rely on the energy grid. In New South Wales alone we have around 188 of those sites currently that are powered by Ausgrid power systems.

We do appreciate that the Committee is interested in the mass power outage that impacted many Telstra sites and our customers in Far West New South Wales, in October 2024. We really understand that reliable access to phone and internet services is essential for our customers, including in times of emergencies. We're dedicated to continuing to provide the most reliable services we can for our customers. The weather event that we're talking about today did lead to widespread mains power outages, as you know. Despite all of our base stations having some form of power backup, the impact on our network was also significant. Some of the data from that event is 32 Telstra facilities, 18 of which were mobile-based stations, were off air for a portion of that period, or for that period. We saw disruption to over 400 fixed landline services to the communities and over 3½ thousand Telstra NBN voice and data services also went offline or were disrupted during that period. So that was an event that we focused on very, very severely and made sure that we were there to respond.

While there wasn't any physical damage on our network, when we face such widespread damages and extended duration impacts, there are challenges. They include mobilising a workforce and accessing temporary

assets such as standalone generators, to be able to get into sites and support those sites and support the communities. We have very robust processes and restoration mechanisms that prioritise the sites of greatest urgency. That includes consideration such as the number of customers that are potentially impacted, communities that may be isolated, our ability to actually physically access the site in terms of a flood or a fire, risk, and also the impact that a site might have on upstream and downstream services. Importantly, we also embed ourselves in the State emergency response processes and work with our colleagues in power companies, as well, to understand restoration priorities and time frames. But the reality is for us that, for any major power outage incident of a significant size, there will be some network downtime. We encourage the community, of course, to prepare for these eventualities, knowing we will do our utmost to also respond and restore quickly.

Just finally, I just wanted to draw the Committee's attention to our commitment to developing and delivering other cross-industry initiatives to improve telecommunications during national disasters. There are two things that are underway at the moment. We know that other telcos experience the same type of issues that we do. As a sector, we have met to talk about those and to talk about how we can better share information, to talk about how we can better share assets in a time of a natural disaster. Then late last year, the Communications Alliance and NEMA, which is the National Emergency Management Agency, convened a workshop that brought together the power companies and the telcos to talk also about the actions that we can take going forward to strengthen our service for communities and for the country. We do trust that these comments and the hearing provides a useful opportunity for the Committee to better understand our actions and activities. Of course, we welcome your questions and comments.

Mrs SALLY QUINNELL: I suppose I want to start today by letting you know that out here Telstra has a monopoly. I'm not with Telstra. I'm from Sydney. I can shop around; I can go to lots of different telcos to figure out who I'm going to shop with. For three of the four days that we have been out here I have had zero coverage because I'm not with Telstra. What we've heard over the last three days is that communities out here measure outages by how long they have between the power going out and their phone going down, and it ranges from three hours to eight hours. They know that. That is every time the power goes out, which I understand is not your responsibility. But they measure that their connectivity to anywhere else has a window of four to eight hours. So my question is that we're talking about finite capabilities, which is a battery that lasts four hours, and communities are asking for—maybe there's probably five or six towers that need a generator. I suppose I'm asking: Why don't those towers have a generator that kicks in when that power is lost?

BRONWYN CLERE: Great question. A couple of thoughts from me on that one. The first one is our battery lives differ, depending on the site and the load that they take, as you know and you've called out. So those batteries do hang in there until they're drained through the power being out. We do have permanent generators at some of our sites. However, it is not always possible to put a permanent generator at a site because we don't have access to land, we don't have the planning permits or we don't have the safety considerations in place. We are working in this region as well to uplift resilience overall. We've got eight new resilience or new battery installations going in over the next 12 to 18 months. Two of those are underway at the moment. That's intended to lift the battery lifetime. But, as I said before, we are also exploring alternate technologies such as solar and standalone programs. So that is part of our program, and we are focused on those investments.

Mrs SALLY QUINNELL: Great, thank you. Did the communities that were without telecommunications get charged for the time, on their phone bill, that they did not have coverage?

LISA McTIERNAN: I can take that question. Thank you, Deputy Chair. So we would have looked at the length of time that our customers would have been without service and looked at that on a case-by-case basis. Given certainly the outages did differ across the duration of this particular event, we absolutely do have the capability to look at each customer's circumstances and apply credits and other support where necessary.

Mrs SALLY QUINNELL: So do they need to apply separately to Telstra or will someone proactively come out and talk to the communities as a whole?

LISA McTIERNAN: I understand that on this particular occasion our disaster assistance package wasn't applied. Typically when the disaster package is issued for our customers, it is an automatic process where we are bestowing extra data, we are offering bill suppression and so on. But, on this particular occasion, that wasn't in place, no.

Mrs SALLY QUINNELL: You said that you encourage community to prepare contingencies for such outages. We're hearing testimony today that there are customers out here who are purchasing Starlink and paying an ongoing monthly rate to back up a telecommunications system they are already paying for. So are we just asking people out here to pay for their telecommunications plus pay for the contingency for that telecommunications? Are they paying twice?

LISA McTIERNAN: I'm happy to answer that question and then I may pass to my colleagues. Typically what we do always advocate for is that if we do have customers who are in locations where there may be ongoing and recurring power outages, where clearly loss of power does mean that the telecommunications is lost as well, or where customers may be in areas where communications are difficult—so mobile coverage is difficult to achieve for a variety of reasons—it is an important consideration to consider what other options are available so that there is telecommunications available to them in the event that their primary source of connectivity may be disrupted from time to time due to issues that could be outside of our control.

Mrs JUDY HANNAN: One of your poles has a generator on it and, when it needs to be started, somebody has to come from Dubbo. Can somebody remind me—

The CHAIR: That was out at White Cliffs.

Mrs JUDY HANNAN: I beg to ask a couple of questions. It's a six-hour trip, at least, one way. They say that sometimes the power might only go out for 20 seconds or a couple of hours. The guy could be halfway here or whatever. If it's six hours one way and six hours the other, presumably there's at least a night's coverage. Two questions. Why do you not have somebody locally that can do that generator that's either employed by you or some contractor locally that can do that for these people?

BRONWYN CLERE: Thank you. I'm happy to take that. I'm not aware of the specific instance, so I can take any other details on notice, but, yes, getting to sites is one of the pain points that we feel. We have a very distributed workforce right across the country, and there are times when travel time is a problem for us. That's actually something that we're working on with our primary maintenance vendor and getting people that are located more in the community that can do this work.

One of the initiatives that we have developed is a concept called an ATU, which is a device that we can connect to a base station or a fixed network site which allows a generator to be plugged into that. However, it does require some electrical qualifications to do that, and so it's not just as simple as sort of turning up and switching it on. We're now progressively doing a country rollout of training people in the community and we're working with councils. At the moment we're working down in WA on that facility, which may provide some support there. Generally, our generators, though, are auto start. So, if we have a generator at a site, it is calibrated so that if the power grid and batteries are drained, the generator will automatically kick in. That's the way we design them for utmost resilience. But, yes, I agree that getting into those very remote parts of the country can be problematic. We use helicopters and we use all sorts of mechanisms to get in there as fast as we can.

Mrs JUDY HANNAN: So maybe having a look at White Cliffs might be beneficial.

BRONWYN CLERE: I'm happy to take that one.

Mrs JUDY HANNAN: The other question I had related to responsibility as the telco provider for Australia or out Far West. What's your responsibility to cover the areas out this direction? Seeing as you're the sole provider, what's your responsibility?

LISA McTIERNAN: I can take that question, thank you. Telstra has the obligation under the Universal Service Obligation regulatory requirement, so that requires us to provide a working landline to our customers, and we do have service-level agreements around new connections for landlines as well as fault repairs. That does not extend to mobile coverage, but we absolutely do have a regulatory obligation for the provision of a voice service. I will say that that can be offered through alternative means in the event that a copper connection can't be achieved or is not the most suitable option for our customers.

Mrs SALLY QUINNELL: Sorry, just as a follow-up to that, where we've been the last couple of days landline is not possible. The landline is delivered through the mobile tower. So is that still covered under the regulatory requirements?

LISA McTIERNAN: Yes. In the event that we're not able to provide a customer with a fixed service, there are options available to our customers to have a voice service delivered through alternative technology, such as mobile and satellite.

Mrs JUDY HANNAN: So you said your disaster assistance package didn't kick in at this particular point. What makes that kick in versus not kick in?

LISA McTIERNAN: Typically the thresholds where we would make a declaration to offer customer assistance in the wake of a disaster is typically where there is fairly significant physical impact to a customer's home, where they may be displaced because of a natural disaster. We're gearing up to look at what options and support we can provide in the lead-up to Cyclone Alfred across New South Wales and Queensland, but specifically where there is a fairly significant physical impact as a result of a natural disaster is where we would look to offer

that support to our customers. But as I mentioned earlier to the committee, we absolutely do encourage our customers to reach out to us in the event that they have been without service for an extended period of time. We do take that seriously, and we do look at bill credits and other options available—financial support available to our customers where they have been without service for quite some time.

Mrs JUDY HANNAN: And that would count for businesses as well? Because we've got businesses that have no access or can run their petrol bowlers or have payments or all sorts of things. They should reach out?

LISA McTIERNAN: Absolutely. We do businesses as well.

Mr JAMES WALLACE: Thank you for your time today. Thanks for sharing some of the details about the investments that Telstra or InfraCo is making in its network. Are you able to break down some details around what's the level of investment or if there's a budget that has been determined for the Far West, in particular a budget for building power resilience at your macro sites, whether that's through ATUs or the standalone power systems you mentioned earlier? Do you have a budget for the Far West region?

BRONWYN CLERE: Annually, we look at what needs to be done. That's the first point. So I talked about the eight sites that we were augmenting this year. The \$32 million that I quoted up front was what we actually will spend in the Far West this year. I don't have a budget that's allocated purely to the Far West. We look at our sites. We look at their resilience levels. We look at the age of the site. So one of the interesting facts about this incident is that the majority of the sites in this area, the age of their batteries is just under four years, which means they've all been cycled through very, very recently. We've invested a lot in those. But, no, I don't have an absolute number that I can share with you, or an absolute go-forth number. It's based on the sites and the site health.

Mr JAMES WALLACE: Did Telstra apply for any funding or has it been awarded funding under the Federal Government's Mobile Network Hardening Program for the sites that are in the Far West?

LISA McTIERNAN: We absolutely were recipients of a number of grants to improve network resilience across a range of government co-investment programs. If my colleagues today are not aware of funding that was made available to improve resilience at any of those sites impacted by the outage event last year, we will need to take that on notice.

BRONWYN CLERE: The funding I talked about is the funding that we're investing directly.

Mr JAMES WALLACE: When an outage does occur and if an automatic generator stops running, where there's multiple sites that are down, what gets prioritised to be restored first? Related to that, do you liaise with government, local councils or State emergency services over those decisions as to what gets prioritised first?

PAUL HARRISON: I will take that one. In terms of prioritisation, when you have more than one or a handful of sites off the air, we do need to go back and have a look at how to prioritise, because it's not just about putting a generator at the local base station supporting that community. It's about making sure that the transmission that supports that community and that base station is also up and working. We have a hierarchy of prioritisation in terms of how we look at prioritising our network. It starts off with maintaining our core network. Without that core network, nothing else works. Then we go through and look at support for the emergency services. We look at mobiles, communities in isolation, and it goes so on and so on down the list.

Our prioritisation is based on the network hierarchy of that site, not necessarily what it provides to the community. But then, having said that, to your second question, we are absolutely engaged with the State, and in this case through the NSW Telco Authority, where any escalations that come in either through the Telco Authority or through our regional Australia principals for that particular region give us an understanding as to why a site should be prioritised over any other site. Because when you have quite a number of sites off the air, some of the sites will be of equal value, and that's where that escalation and that understanding of what that site is and how critical it is to that community—it might be a water treatment plant that it's servicing communications to, it might be something else, and that then allows us to determine where that priority sits in the grand scheme of things.

Mr JAMES WALLACE: That view comes from the NSW Telco Authority?

PAUL HARRISON: Correct. That is our engagement point into the State, yes.

Mr JAMES WALLACE: My next question was in relation to the site at White Cliffs, which my colleague mentioned earlier. The Central Darling Shire Council, in the submission they made to us, talked about the need the community has for an automated generator at that site. They talked about the engagement they've had with Telstra as part of representing the community to make that request. They presented to us in the submission effectively that Telstra was willing for council to incur the cost and supply of that generator, and then presumably

Telstra would install the generator at the site, the ATU. Is that normal practice for Telstra to ask councils or local communities to pay for ATUs at their sites?

BRONWYN CLERE: I'll take that question. Firstly, it is not our policy to ask Australia to pay for resilience on our sites, so I'll make that point straight up now.

The CHAIR: She has frozen.

BRONWYN CLERE: The ATU technology, though, we're hearing from many councils—

The CHAIR: Ms Clere, you froze for a little bit. We heard you say it's absolutely not your policy to ask councils to pay up. Could you go back to that point and start again.

BRONWYN CLERE: That was the important point: it is not our policy. The second point being obviously we do have these ATU units that we pay, fund and install. Also, we don't ask communities to pay for that. But some of the feedback that we've been receiving through our regional Australia teams is that our communities are comfortable to have generators and they would like to be able to use them to support us. When we can't get into a site or when the travel time is extensive, they can then use those and plug them in. As I said, we're rolling that program out. If a community does require that additional level of resilience, beyond the work that we do and the support that we provide, then, yes, we'll ask the community to pay for the generator. We will, however, pay to make sure that it's maintained appropriately and connected appropriately.

Mr JAMES WALLACE: I have one final question, which related to Broken Hill council's submission where they discussed Telstra's role. They spoke about the Telstra-activated generators and towers within Broken Hill on 22 October. However, once power was restored to diesel generators, Telstra disconnected and removed the generators. Effectively they're saying that Telstra installed generators at sites in Broken Hill and then removed those after 22 October, and then there were further outages after 22 October, which meant mobile coverage went out. My question was why did you de-install generators from towers around Broken Hill and what information were you relying on? Did someone tell you, "Crisis over. Get your generators out of here?"

PAUL HARRISON: I'll take that one. Good question. It is standard practice for whenever we have a large-scale mass power disruption that if we don't get intelligence for once mains power is restored, as in this instance, mains power was being restored through the engagement of the gas turbine, so once the 66kV lines from Essential Energy were all restored as well and everything was hanging off that gas turbine out of Broken Hill, it was deemed restored. We knew that there were going to be potentially rolling outages of up to two hours across each day during certain periods in the evening from that point on, but the battery reserves at our sites would well and truly cater for those short duration couple-of-hour outages during those times of high load.

Normal practice is, once it's restored, unless we get intelligence to say that that it's not a stable situation that it's currently in, then we do take them away. It is noted, though, that once the gas turbine did fail in a big way, after a fire, and that was deemed that we had to go and start again and bring all our generators back to that particular region, we made the commitment, now knowing that the stability of that generator was not very good, to stay there for the next week plus until a better solution was put in place through the building of those towers and the injection of a number of local community generators brought in by Essential Energy as well.

Mr JAMES WALLACE: So just as a follow-up, who were you liaising with to receive the communication that the sole generator was working, and then who did you liaise with when you were told there was an outage again?

The CHAIR: Where'd you get your intelligence from?

PAUL HARRISON: It was coming from the NSW Telco Authority and Essential Energy. We had direct links into both of those departments.

The CHAIR: So nothing from Transgrid?

PAUL HARRISON: No, our engagement with Transgrid was through Essential Energy. They were providing us the intel of what was happening on the ground from a Transgrid perspective.

Mr JAMES WALLACE: And what date were you told, "You can remove your generators. It's stable. It's good to go"?

PAUL HARRISON: No, I need to be clear here. We weren't told to remove our generators, nor that it was stable. We just weren't told that it wasn't stable. Normal practice is that once mains power is restored in some fashion, if we're not told anything to the contrary, that it's not stable, then we will pull back.

Mr JAMES WALLACE: What date did you make the decision to pull back?

PAUL HARRISON: I'd have to take that on notice. Either the 21st or the 22nd. But we'll take that on notice and confirm.

Mr JAMES WALLACE: That would be good to confirm. Thank you.

The CHAIR: I was also going to ask you about who was briefing you and giving you intelligence as well, so I'm glad that my colleague made that point. Are you acutely aware that as a result of the power being out, which caused your coverage to be out, we had a situation out here where police, ambulance, fire and health couldn't talk to each other? The 000 is gone. Telstra's been a wonderful long-term company in this country. You used to be just a bit of a side item on the desk at the front door that you might sometimes ring and talk to your neighbours. Telecommunications now is at the centre of our society. Have you been briefed that our emergency services were without communications? There's a nod of the head there, Ms Clere. Have you been briefed that our emergency services had no communications?

PAUL HARRISON: Sorry, there was an understanding that there were multiple emergency services without communications. We had escalations come in from Menindee hospital at one point. We're aware that other police services were out. But that's not when we were pulled back. That's when we were trying to maintain support to our sites throughout this event. Our network is extremely complex in the way it needs to be restored. It's not just a simple "put a generator on here, there and everywhere". There were other upstream dependencies that came into play here. There were some network failures that weren't related to specifically just restoring power to sites. There were some card failures and hardware failures that also occurred as well. So quite a number of things came together to make the impact statement that we spoke about today, but the awareness that it impacted community and it impacted emergency services, everyone that relied on communications, was well and truly at the forefront of our response, absolutely.

The CHAIR: Thank you all for appearing before us today. I apologise for the delay in getting you started. I apologise for keeping you longer than you probably planned. I hope we haven't interrupted your schedules. A number of you have taken questions on notice. We will email you copies of those questions and the context in which that question was being asked at the time. We may also develop extra questions as a Committee that we would like to send you. If we do that, you will get those questions late next week. In both cases, supplementary questions and questions on notice, we ask that you try to turn those around in seven days if that's possible. If it's not, please talk to us. We also want to let you know that your submission as of today is now online and published, and we thank you very much for making that very helpful submission. Again, thank you for your time today. We will see you soon, or next time, I guess.

(The witnesses withdrew.)

JOHN McCORMACK, General Manager, Stakeholder Engagement, AGL, sworn and examined

DAVID BOWLY, Operations Manager, Battery Energy Storage Systems, AGL, sworn and examined

DAVID BEAVERS, Head of Origination, Tilt Renewables, before the Committee via videoconference, affirmed and examined

NATHAN VASS, Head of Government Affairs and Media, Tilt Renewables, before the Committee via videoconference, affirmed and examined

JON NORMAN, President, Hydrostor, before the Committee via videoconference, affirmed and examined

MARTIN BECKER, Senior Vice-President, Origination and Development, Hydrostor, before the Committee via videoconference, affirmed and examined

The CHAIR: Thank you for appearing before the Committee to give evidence today. Do you have any questions about the process? No? All good. Would you like to make a very brief opening statement of no more than two minutes?

MARTIN BECKER: Yes, that would be wonderful. Hydrostor has had a presence on the ground in Broken Hill for several years now as we work to bring our Silver City Energy Storage Centre to life. At Hydrostor, we deploy a technology called advanced compressed air energy storage, or A-CAES. It's a proven technology that stores energy by using excess off-peak renewable energy to compress air and hold it in underground caverns. When energy's needed—for example, during peak periods or during periods with low sun or wind—the compressed air is released through a turbine to generate electricity. Our technology is optimal in areas with lots of solar and wind generation, like Broken Hill and the Far West, and we can soak up excess power and store it when those intermittent resources aren't generating. That could be overnight or it could be over extended periods when powerlines go down.

Last year's outage highlights the critical need across Far West New South Wales for an electricity supply to be secure against both unexpected outages and necessary maintenance outages on a regular basis. Our Silver City Energy Storage Centre is part of providing a permanent solution. It utilises an existing mine and infrastructure with Broken Hill. The project will deliver about 350 full-time jobs and 30 ongoing jobs during operations over asset life, which is about 50 years. The 200-megawatt project proposed can discharge 1,600 megawatt hours of electricity, capable of delivering eight hours of energy at full output. What is important to note is that the facility can meet a wide range of load needs, from very small to very large, and it can run much longer than eight hours at a lower power output. This becomes increasingly important as demand for electricity during the day in the region decreases as rooftop solar kicks in.

Electrical load in Broken Hill and its surrounds very rarely exceeds the 50 megawatts, so we have long periods of supply from the project when transmission is interrupted, even without further recharging. Hydrostor's been actively working with Transgrid on designing what we refer to as mini-grid. It enables Broken Hill and its surrounds to operate with what we refer to as an islanded mode, and that means it's disconnected from the main grid. This mini-grid will connect the Silver City project to existing power and renewable assets in the region, enabling the supply of electricity for days and even weeks without support from the National Electricity Market. And these local renewable generators, which currently sit idle during outages, can then be used to recharge our facility as we begin to run out of air, and therefore deliver reliable and sustainable power indefinitely to the region.

What's important to note is that in event of an outage, the Silver City project and the mini-grid we talk about is able to provide backup power not just to the community but also the mining loads, so a business as usual solution. And it was noted that in the October event, mining loads were curtailed and the workforce severely impacted. The mini-grid means no blackouts for homes and businesses and no load shedding by local industry, and it safeguards existing economic activity and protects existing jobs. The project is moved closer to commencing of construction after the Silver City project received our development consent from the New South Wales Government only a week or so ago, and we expect to begin construction later this year.

NATHAN VASS: Thank you very much for the opportunity to address you today. Tilt is one of the largest owners and operators of wind, solar generation and battery storage in Australia. We've got 1.8 gigawatts of renewable generation across 11 operating renewable projects and battery assets across Australia, and that includes the Rye Park Wind Farm, which is the largest operational wind farm in New South Wales. We also have a development pipeline that shapes up to five gigawatts of wind, solar and storage projects. Importantly for today's discussion, our assets in the Far West include the 200-megawatt Silverton Wind Farm and the 53-megawatt Broken Hill Solar Farm.

During the October 2024 outage, our assets were islanded from the national electricity network, and the generator performance standard for both the Tilt wind farm and the Tilt solar plant prevented generation. However, Tilt's assets in the region were ready to generate once the transmission lines were repaired and local transmission network re-energised. Our on-the-ground response to the outage, which I'm happy to go into in more detail later, provided practical support to residents and businesses, and particularly we've targeted those who were most vulnerable and at risk in the community, during and after the outage. We would say that with modifications to Tilt's wind farm and solar plant, these assets can be utilised to supplement the supply from the proposed Hydrostor facility during potential future outages in Far West New South Wales. I'll probably leave it there at this stage except to say that we welcome the opportunity to work alongside government agencies, local authorities and our peers in the industry to ensure that Far West New South Wales is better prepared for future electricity outages and disruptions. Thank you.

JOHN McCORMACK: On behalf of AGL, I'd like to acknowledge the serious impact that the October outage had on Broken Hill and the surrounding communities in this part of our State. AGL is an electricity generator and retailer. However, we do not operate the poles and wires of the electricity distribution or transmission networks. AGL also has a proud history in Broken Hill. As part of the Powering Australian Renewables Fund, AGL developed the Broken Hill Solar Plant in 2015, in partnership with the New South Wales Government and ARENA. In 2017, again with the Powering Australian Renewables Fund, AGL managed the construction of the Silverton Wind Farm, just down the road from here.

In 2024, AGL handed over the operations and community management of the Silverton Wind Farm and Broken Hill Solar Plant to Tilt Renewables, in which AGL has an ownership stake. Due to our experience operating assets in this region, AGL understood that there were ongoing risks to the stability of the local grid, with certain vulnerabilities, due to the reliance on the single transmission line into this area. This is why AGL saw an opportunity to install a battery energy storage system in Broken Hill that could be utilised to provide both energy storage and other system services to assist with local grid stability. So in August last year, AGL's 50-megawatt one-hour Broken Hill battery became operational. The Broken Hill battery received an almost \$15 million grant from the Australian Renewable Energy Agency to test the grid-forming capabilities of the battery, due to Broken Hill's grid location, which often results in low system strength.

From the outset, the battery project aimed to be capable of providing support to Broken Hill if it were to be islanded in an outage. However, as we outlined in our submission, under the National Electricity Rules, as a market participant, AGL must comply with connection and registration requirements to commission and connect any asset to the grid. This involves interactions with the Australian Energy Market Operator and the relevant transmission network system provider, who decide how the asset should operate. This is then set out in the generator performance standard approved by AEMO and Transgrid. At the time of the October outage, and at this current moment, our battery has been commissioned with anti-islanding protection. To put it simply, AGL's battery has been directed to turn off in this circumstance as part of its approval to commission and operate the battery.

At the time of the outage, we stated on our website that providing the service was possible. However, as I stated before, we were not allowed to provide this service, and so for that error, we apologise. The reason for this error is that it had always been, and still is, AGL's intention for the battery to provide this capability but, ultimately, this is not our decision. To be clear, AGL has designed and built the battery with the capability needed to provide these services. I would also like to correct a suggestion in the submission to this inquiry from Broken Hill council that at the time of the outage the battery was not active or available when required due to the ongoing commercial negotiations between AGL and Transgrid.

While I have no doubt this statement was made in good faith, it is not correct. It is a requirement placed on AGL to have our battery automatically disconnected under certain conditions. There was no ongoing discussion until the outage occurred. From the first day of the outage, AGL teams worked around the clock with Transgrid, after a request to provide the services we were asked not to provide as part of our connection agreement. We worked closely to resolve the technical challenges, and make the battery operational in an islanded condition, to support other forms of backup generation. So after the battery was brought back online on Saturday 26 October, it continued to support the local grid until the X2 line was brought back into service on 31 October. AGL received feedback from Transgrid's engineering team that further load shedding was averted due to these efforts. Based on AGL's experience with similar large batteries in other parts of the country, we believe that the Broken Hill battery can provide a significantly more sophisticated support service in islanding situations, if allowed to do so. Thanks for the opportunity to appear today.

The CHAIR: Thank you. Who needs to tick that off and approve that for your battery to work in an island format?

JOHN McCORMACK: Any market participant who's participating in the national electricity market needs a connection agreement to generate a performance standard, and that's done through the Australian Energy Market Operator and the relevant transmission company.

DAVID BOWLY: So the document is approved by AEMO and by Transgrid.

The CHAIR: And that hasn't happened?

JOHN McCORMACK: We have one, but we're not allowed to provide the services in an islanded state.

The CHAIR: Didn't you develop the battery for the purpose of providing electricity and power in an islanded state?

JOHN McCORMACK: That was our intention at the start of the project.

The CHAIR: I'm still confused.

Mr JAMES WALLACE: I have a number of questions to AGL based off that presentation. Once your battery reconnects to the network at 5.00 p.m. on 26 October—based on your submission—what's the impact that it has on electricity and supply of electricity here? What happened once the battery came back into play?

DAVID BOWLY: I can cover this one. I don't have access to all of the background information that Transgrid has, so they can probably give you more information. But my control room was in close contact with Transgrid's control room during the process. After we brought the battery online on the 26th, Transgrid's control room was communicating with our control room and asking for different set points from the battery. In simple terms, in the middle of the day, the battery was charging, and in the evening peak the battery was discharging. That solved two different problems.

The feedback from Transgrid was that the second gas turbine was not in a particularly good state—they'd already had a trip on it. To run stably, the generator had to operate between about nine and 11 megawatts. That was about the operating range that they had available. In the middle of the day, there's a lot of rooftop solar in town, and so the generator was struggling with minimum load. And in the evenings, as everyone was trying to cook, the generator was struggling with overload. Our battery was able to resolve both of those. Transgrid gave me some excellent graphs at the end of the outage to show, as the evening peak ramped up, they were able to bring the battery on and take that six megawatt load swing out and keep the gas turbine running at a steady rate—so that was the purpose. That's what batteries are really designed to do, is to shave the peaks and troughs.

Mr JAMES WALLACE: When I read the submission from AGL and the submission from Transgrid side by side, Transgrid talks about the fact that the battery, being activated, was fast-tracked when it was brought online ultimately on 26 October. Yet when I read the timeline in your submission, it effectively says, "AGL was ready to go and activate the battery on 19 October"—one week earlier.

DAVID BOWLY: Yes, that's correct.

Mr JAMES WALLACE: Why was there a delay for a week? What were you doing during that week? What was happening?

DAVID BOWLY: We provide a detailed timeline in our submission. I'm wondering if it might be worth me giving a couple of highlights from that submission?

Mr JAMES WALLACE: What was the tone of what was going on?

DAVID BOWLY: Essentially, the concern that Transgrid's technical team raised—which was valid—was that they didn't want to exacerbate the situation by bringing the battery online. It's important to understand that the interaction between different generators on a generating grid is one of the main reasons we have a generator performance standard in the first place. It's a complex document that describes how we interact with the power grid. The power grid in Broken Hill was already in a fairly delicate state. Transgrid have a technical team, called the grid modelling team, whose role it is to essentially model how the generators will interact.

To give you an abbreviated history of the timeline, on Thursday morning at 2.00 a.m., I had a text message from my control room saying that the X2 line was down and our battery had been tripped offline. We had a phone call that day from Transgrid with a request for help. My technical team had completed our due diligence by the Friday afternoon, and we had advised Transgrid that, from our perspective, our asset was safe to operate, but that there were a number of risks that Transgrid had to cover. My team were told to stand down on the Friday afternoon and not to work until the Monday; I stood them down. I had a call on Saturday morning—I stood the team back up again—but we didn't have any significant conversations until the Monday.

Then we had daily standups with Transgrid Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday, Thursday, where they asked us a number of technical questions around how the battery would operate. We gave them advice in those calls about how we could potentially operate the battery to meet their concerns, to essentially reduce the risks. But in between those meetings, Transgrid's grid modelling team were working through the technical detail that would allow us to connect. On the Friday before we connected—so this is now eight days into the outage—everything started happening quite quickly. We got approval at 2.00 a.m. on the Saturday morning from AEMO with a modification to our generator performance standard to say "you are now allowed to connect and these are the conditions under which you're allowed to"—so, very severely limited conditions. Then at about 12.00 p.m. on the Saturday, we got permission from Transgrid's control room to start connecting core transformers to come online. But the majority of that week was the grid modelling team working through the technical challenges to make sure the battery didn't cause any further issues on the grid.

Mr JAMES WALLACE: If another islanding event occurred, would you have to go through this same process again to bring the battery back online or do you now have permission in an islanding event to come back online?

DAVID BOWLY: It's a very logical question. On the day that the transmission line was stood back up, I received a reversing 522 notice from AEMO saying, "Your GPS is back to the way it was." That's the generator performance standard I'm still operating under. The protection system on the battery now is if the X2 line were to trip, the battery would immediately trip, and if we were called on to support again, I would have to go through the same process. The only difference would be we wouldn't have to have all of the technical discussions. Both technical teams now know what the answer is, but I would have to go through the same process. I'd have to get approval from AEMO to modify the GPS under a 522 process, and then I could bring the battery online.

Mr JAMES WALLACE: Have you or will you seek agreement—for want of a better word—of AEMO and Transgrid to be able to operate automatically in the event of an islanding event?

DAVID BOWLY: We have requested that from Transgrid, and Transgrid and AGL are working on that at the moment.

Mr JAMES WALLACE: Do you have a time frame as to when you expect that to be?

DAVID BOWLY: Unfortunately, we don't.

Mr JAMES WALLACE: What's the hold-up? If technical details are resolved—

The CHAIR: There might be some commercial in confidence?

DAVID BOWLY: No.

The CHAIR: I don't know. I'm just offering that up as—

DAVID BOWLY: No, it's a fair—something I need to be very clear on is we had very clear guidance from our COO when this happened that I was to only prioritise operational and regulatory issues. Commercial issues were secondary. Commercial issues throughout this whole negotiation have been of much lower priority. Regulatory is very important. AGL take our regulatory obligations very seriously. We're one of the biggest generators. The Australian Energy Regulator takes it very seriously when we breach our rules, so I would not be allowed to operate the battery in breach of its GPS. The thing that needs to be in place for this to happen is a modification of the GPS.

Mr JAMES WALLACE: And the commercial agreement.

DAVID BOWLY: The commercial agreement is secondary, but yes.

Mrs JUDY HANNAN: Tilt, I just have to say to you, thank you from the people of Silverton for helping them out. That was really, really stunning. I can ask a lot of questions of Hydrostor, but I'm probably more interested in what's happening down here. The mayor was talking about the fact, in May, I think, they're going to be out for another couple of days. Is that what I heard, that everybody should expect to be out?

The CHAIR: It wasn't the mayor. It was Perilya, explaining that they're going to be without power again for another two days in May.

Mrs JUDY HANNAN: You would be able to help in those circumstances, especially given notice?

DAVID BOWLY: Yes, so Transgrid control room have already given me notice of that outage, and the technical team that asked us to assist during the blackout have already asked us to assist as well. I've already explained to them to do that. We need the GPS changes in place, and they're very aware of that, so I suspect that will accelerate the changes.

Mrs JUDY HANNAN: And considering Hydrostor, whatever its success or otherwise is, likely won't be up and running until 2027, you would be able to provide the backup in the meantime?

DAVID BOWLY: There's an important point here. The battery has a lot more capability than was provided during the outage. Essentially, in order to get confident that the battery wouldn't cause any damage to the grid, we operated it in an extremely modified mode. The battery comprises 11 separate subsystems, and to generate its full 50 megawatts, all 11 subsystems have to be synchronised. To reduce risk to the gas turbines, our modifications during the outage, we only had one subsystem on at a time, and so I had to have two operational teams in play. One operational team was running the battery from the front end, so essentially the Transgrid control room would call and ask for, "Please charge at three megawatts." A second engineering team was running a 24-hour shift in the background, swapping out the subsystems, to provide a seamless support to Transgrid, because as 1/10 or 1/11 of the battery fills up, you need to swap it out to the next one to avoid overcharging.

AGL's view is that it would be more efficient for the entire battery to be online, and there's a number of other services that the battery is capable of providing. One of the key ones for a battery is droop control, so the battery controls frequency automatically on the grid. Essentially what that means is if someone turns on a large load in town, a large motor, or 100 people turn on their cooktops, the battery will automatically smooth out that bump. During the outage, Transgrid were doing that manually, because of the way that the gas turbines had to be operated. Now, for the battery to do that, there's more technical work required between AGL and Transgrid, but AGL do have a lot of experience in this area. We also operate the Dalrymple battery in South Australia, which is owned by ElectraNet. That battery isolates the town supply point if the upstream line goes down. There's a battery and a wind farm in that town. The battery starts controlling the grid and essentially runs the grid until the line can be restored, and that service has been in place for six years and proven. We know that batteries are capable of doing this. It just requires a fair bit of energy and work to make it happen.

Mrs JUDY HANNAN: The two backup turbines, did you know when one was in maintenance?

DAVID BOWLY: No. It's important to understand that AGL don't have any visibility over that. We connect into Transgrid's switchyard, and we have communications with Transgrid's control room whenever anything happens that affects us, but work on the gas turbines is sort of a secondary system off of that switchyard, so we have no visibility over that.

Mrs SALLY QUINNELL: I'm going to ask a question now of AGL, and feel free to let me know if I'm wrong. I didn't take notes on what I'm going to ask you about, so I'm kind of going from memory. There is a gas pipeline just north of White Cliffs that goes that way, east. Is this the case? You can say you don't know.

DAVID BOWLY: I'd have to take that one on notice. I work in the electricity generation department, and I'll also be clear, AGL don't operate a gas transmission network either, so it's most likely a question for a gas transmission operator.

Mrs SALLY QUINNELL: Sure. I suppose my question was a possibility one. I turn a switch on. Power comes on.

DAVID BOWLY: Yes.

Mrs SALLY QUINNELL: I would suggest that is how 95 per cent of people understand electricity. I'll go with each of the three companies. Have any of your staff been approached in the street with confusion or anger or distress? We've heard days and days of testimony now of extreme stress during this time. Was that reflected on any of your staff? As my colleague said, Tilt Renewables, we actually got the complete opposite from the people of Silverton, who said that they actually felt that the support they got from you guys was the complete other direction, so I suppose this question isn't really for you. But knowing that you've got staff walking round in high-vis, did any of your staff cop that in the street, is what I'm asking.

DAVID BOWLY: Yes, I have one staff member in Broken Hill, and we also have contractors who work on the battery. He's a very experienced guy. He's been around town for a long time, and he knows most of the town. So, yes, people asked him in the pub about what was happening. To be fair, he has a very central role in the whole power network here. There are a number of trained electricians who perform switching from multiple companies. You'll find that those electricians will often work at the mine as well as the switchyard. So you'll generally find those people are pretty well versed in what's happening around the whole town.

Mrs SALLY QUINNELL: So he was able to hold his own?

DAVID BOWLY: He understood what was going on. He was very aware of the severity of it. As I said, I had a team working 24 hours. So, yes, the team were very aware of it, and I think the submissions that happened earlier are probably painting a pretty clear picture, yes.

Mrs SALLY QUINNELL: Hydrostor, did you find anything like that reflected on your guys at all?

MARTIN BECKER: Yeah, we've been active in the community, as you would expect, for years, and we had a number of people in town when it happened. I wouldn't say we were impacted, because people looked to us as a future solution to avoid this thing happening, so we really weren't impacted on the ground. Our staff were just trying to do what they could to support.

JON NORMAN: And obviously we received questions about timeframe for our solution and the benefits that we'll provide long-term. If I can even pre-empt that question from the Committee, really what we're trying to do here is provide a backup solution that's in an order of magnitude greater scale than what exists today. But also, importantly, which is different from the diesel assets a little bit, when the line trips off, this solution can kick in and actually take energy from things like the Tilt Renewables energy plant, from solar generation, the regen, store it. It can compress and generate at the same time, so it provides system stability. It's a very different operating model that, interestingly, is not a single point of failure in the way that the diesel generators are now. We recognise there's a need for the interim solution, and I think all of us on this panel are trying to work cooperatively with Transgrid and other entities as they plan that out. But the intent is to have a more reliable and robust long-term solution, of which our asset would be the backbone of that but certainly not the only asset contributing to it.

Mrs SALLY QUINNELL: Thank you. The community has told us this week that their confidence is shaken in the reliability of power in this region, and many submissions refer to microgrids. Is that something that you would see working in an area like the Far West? I don't know who wants to answer that. Hydrostor, maybe?

JON NORMAN: We can start, and please feel free to add on from any of our colleagues here. I go back to the mini-grid being a very different operating basis than the current diesel assets, and the fact that it really does provide a lot of different contingencies. All the solar can contribute. The wind can contribute. Certainly AGL's battery would be intended to contribute as well, and these are all providing different services. Because we're also providing a whole suite of energy services to the national electricity market, our scale is much, much larger, so we have 200 megawatts of available generation. That creates significant amounts of redundancy relative to the load of the town. And we can also work towards any expansion of storage underground. There's additional room that could be available at the Perilya mine. There's a number of options for future improvements, if they were even required. But right now, we're working on the baseline establishment of the mini-grid, obviously, in cooperation with Transgrid.

DAVID BEAVERS: I will probably just to add to that comment that we've been working with Transgrid as well. Right now, we can make modifications to our solar farm or wind farm to support that microgrid functionality. Our wind farm and solar farm is quite large in relation to the load out of Broken Hill, but I guess working with Hydrostor and the battery, we can better utilise those assets in the microgrid scenario for future outages.

Mrs SALLY QUINNELL: Thank you. And, AGL?

JOHN McCORMACK: I just wanted to make clear, I guess, that we're not saying that our battery alone—to your very point and to Jon's point—can do it by itself.

Mrs SALLY QUINNELL: No, I wasn't suggesting that. Sorry.

JOHN McCORMACK: No, but I just wanted to make sure that the Committee was clear on that because, ultimately, a 50-megawatt one-hour battery is capable of delivering power supply to the mini-grid for short periods and, to provide that continuous supply, another renewable energy source is needed.

The CHAIR: Thank you all very much. If I could just ask Hydrostor a brief question. Please help me. What you are going to provide is actually a longer term backup sort of alternate energy? Is that the benefit that you bring?

JON NORMAN: Yes. Diesel generation—you're storing diesel and you're then running that, and there's diesel supply chain risks. We're very different than that in that we're a large-scale, long-duration storage asset. So we're taking this off-peak electricity or the renewable energy in the region, we're storing that in our caverns, and then we have a backup supply available for the town. Most of the time, we're actually selling services on to the national electricity market along the X2 line. If the X2 line trips, though, we instantly go down—well, not our asset goes down, but our asset goes online to provide the backup solution to the town—and we have two 100-megawatt turbines that provide a lot of redundancy in supply at that point. Then once it's operational like that, we can continue to compress, so take all this excess electricity from the renewable assets and the solar assets, put that into our system and be generating in parallel as well to provide system stability, and then also, in that sense,

operate on a multi-day basis, if that were actually required. We're working through those details of what those requirements are, cooperatively, Transgrid and the regulators.

The CHAIR: For Tilt, once we become islanded, you, obviously, were producing electricity that you couldn't send out to the grid. Is that correct?

DAVID BEAVERS: Yes. Once our assets were all islanded, then they were turned off. The turbines weren't spinning and the solar panels weren't producing electricity, so they were non-operational until the transmission line was back up and running.

The CHAIR: So financially, you're prevented from selling your product to market during that time?

DAVID BEAVERS: Correct.

Mrs JUDY HANNAN: Hydrostor, what percentage of your production is going to the national grid versus what you're going to use as a backup for Broken Hill?

JON NORMAN: Well, that depends on whether there are actually outages or not. So, we are generally supplying the town with generation through the storage that's being provided, and some of that's being delivered along the line. The electrons actually flow the way the physics requires at any point in time. Our hope is that the X2 line never goes down and that there isn't a need to supply this backup solution. Obviously, if it was in that islanded mode, that's where we kind of become a backbone and end up taking all this excess electricity and forming a mini-grid that actually supplies the backup.

MARTIN BECKER: Can I just add to that, though? One important point is that our agreement with Transgrid—we're obligated to keep a certain amount of air in the tank at all times. The last thing you want is a solution that's supposed to be a reliable backup, and then we have no fuel left, so we always have air in the tank to cater for an outage, and then the residual is what we would sell into the national grid.

Mrs JUDY HANNAN: So that was the December '23 agreement with Transgrid. Is that right?

MARTIN BECKER: That's correct.

The CHAIR: Thank you all very, very much. I don't think anybody took anything on notice. But we as a Committee may in the coming days develop additional questions that we would like to send to you. Thanks for appearing and for your submissions. They've been enormously helpful. If we send you questions, it will be in about a week's time, and we would ask that you try to turn those around in about seven days. If that is going to be a problem for you, please talk to the Committee about that. The Committee staff will now organise for the next witnesses, and this may take a couple of brief minutes.

(The witnesses withdrew.)

ANNIE PEARSON, Chief Corporate Affairs Officer, Essential Energy, sworn and examined

DAVID NARDI, Head of Major Projects and Transmission Services, Essential Energy, sworn and examined

The CHAIR: Thank you all very much for appearing today. Thank you also for your submission. Do you have any questions about the process?

ANNIE PEARSON: No.

DAVID NARDI: No.

The CHAIR: Would you like to make a brief opening statement to frame it up?

ANNIE PEARSON: Thank you, Mr Chairman. I will do so. Essential Energy's job is to receive electricity from the State's high-voltage transmission system, transform that to a lower voltage and deliver it to homes, businesses and communities. We acknowledge the profound impact the power outages in October 2024 had on local communities in this region. We deployed 70 operational staff to assist during the outages, including 47 workers from depots across the State, along with remote support from teams across the business. This is in addition to the 23 Essential Energy employees living and working in Broken Hill and surrounding communities. Our staff played a significant role during this complex and challenging event, working with local authorities to provide backup and emergency power for impacted customers, but we didn't get everything right.

We have learnt from this event, as we have from other incidents, such as fires and floods, and I suspect we are learning right now on the east coast. We welcome any feedback on how we can improve out of this inquiry, and already we've heard today, and earlier in the week, from the community on areas where we can do better. We are progressing some reforms that actually pre-date this event. By way of example, we have, along with South Australian Power Networks, submitted a rule change request to the Australian Energy Market Commission to enable electricity distributors and retailers to better identify the needs of registered life-support customers so that we can provide more timely assistance to them when these things inevitably occur. Clearer identification and prioritisation of life-support customers, who have critical life-support needs, is most important.

We're also focused on providing more resilience and reliable power supply to our communities in the Far West. By way of example, in Tibooburra, an automatic start generator to provide backup supply was installed in December 2024 and has already been used to prevent outages in that township. And we have more work underway to install a solar and battery microgrid. As I said, this was well underway before the events in October 2024. Thanks again for the opportunity to be here today. It's a real privilege to listen to the submissions made by various members of the community today, and my colleagues have been listening to it earlier in the week. We are happy to answer any questions that you have of us and, if we can't answer them, we will take them on notice.

The CHAIR: Thank you very much for that. Can I just start by clarifying about your comment about the customer base that has medical needs. Can you explain to me—wouldn't that information sit with the retail outlets and not with Essential Energy? Am I missing something there?

ANNIE PEARSON: The way the rules work at the moment is that customers provide their life-support information to the retailer. The retailer then passes on to the electricity distributor that they are a premises with a life-support customer, so the premises actually have the registration as life support. And where they can, they provide us with a telephone number attached to those premises. But that's all we know. What we don't know is the type of life support equipment or the life support needs of the individual residing at the premises. What we are seeking to do through this rule change that we submitted some time ago is to have a couple of categories of life support customers so that we can know and identify quickly those customers who have oxygen dialysis—the really critical needs, where they need the power to sustain life.

The CHAIR: Yes, a triage system.

ANNIE PEARSON: Yes.

The CHAIR: Let's get to the level fives first, and then level fours, and then level threes. Is that a little bit caught up in the question around privacy at the moment? Is that the barrier? I mean the legislation around privacy, sorry.

ANNIE PEARSON: The National Energy Retail Rules that govern this part of the customer protection framework have been in place for a long time. They seek to serve a number of issues for life support customers. You can't disconnect them for non-payment, and a whole range of other things. What we need to do is to modernise those rules so that we can manage the increasing needs of life support customers as our population ages. As we experience weather events that have an impact on our electricity networks, we need to be able to get to that group of life support customers that need the equipment to sustain life. We need to be able to get to them faster.

Mrs SALLY QUINNELL: As a follow-up to that, how does someone know to let you know that they're able to register that? If suddenly someone gets told they're on dialysis, and they're doing that at home, where in that process are they told, "You need to tell your energy provider that you need this"?

ANNIE PEARSON: When we developed this work, we did it through The Energy Charter and we worked with the Australian Medical Association. As part of this rule change, we are working with them on a broader education campaign to help doctors understand what the life support provisions actually mean, so there's a whole program around that. When customers contact a retailer for an energy plan, their retailer will ask them, "Do you have any equipment?"

Mrs SALLY QUINNELL: Yes, but if they don't seek to change provider—

ANNIE PEARSON: That's true.

Mrs SALLY QUINNELL: —how do they know?

ANNIE PEARSON: That's it. So there's a whole education program around this, particularly because—and David can explain this better than I can—we can never guarantee the supply 24/7, 100 per cent of the time. Acts of God are outside of our control. We're pretty good but we're not that good, and so it is important for customers to have backup. They need to work with their medical professionals and other support on what is the appropriate backup. Then, when the worst happens, we need to know who are the ones who are most critical, because there were 570 identified life support premises as part of this event. We think there were more out there. Our field crews on the ground were engaging with local health providers and the police to identify others who, to your point, didn't know.

Mrs SALLY QUINNELL: One of the suggestions that's been thrown around this week is asking people, as part of that identification, "Are you comfortable with us sharing this information, in case of"—and that just being a tick yes or no. I just wanted to throw that out there as a suggestion.

ANNIE PEARSON: Yes, I think that's a great suggestion, but we just wanted to change the rules just to make it happen.

Mrs SALLY QUINNELL: I totally understand, and you're right. Someone we heard from today had home dialysis, but his backup plan was in Adelaide. One of the things we have heard continually this week is that people, when they had mobile coverage, really appreciated the text message updates. One of the pieces of feedback we had was regarding the brownouts, the load sharing that was going on, not necessarily in Broken Hill but beyond. Is it possible to give people specific time frames that power will be coming on and off as part of that load sharing, so that they can know that "For the next three hours I'm going to have power, so I'm going to do a load of washing; I'm going to charge my phone". Is that something that is possible to make happen and communicate to people?

ANNIE PEARSON: I'll just start it in a general way and then maybe, David, if you've got any proper technical stuff or information, you can contribute it.

DAVID NARDI: Sure.

ANNIE PEARSON: When we send out these messages, we're trying to balance a number of competing priorities. We don't want to send out messages too early, because what that can actually result in is everyone deciding, "Oh, goodness, the power is going to go out in two or three hours", and then they turn everything on and use everything at once, which can then overload the system. So we've got to try to pick what is the optimal time. I appreciate the concerns that everyone provided today, but I think we've got to try to make our messages as simple as they can be, but also to be crafted and timed in such a way that we don't overload the system at any point in time, when it's very finely balanced. But, David, you might have some stuff to add.

DAVID NARDI: Just to add to that, it's our intention to provide estimated time to repair or restore supply where possible. Obviously, the only information we have for customers is the contact details on their account. If that account holder isn't in the premises or, alternatively, the account holder owns multiple premises, it's often difficult to get the message through. But definitely, where we can and as much as possible, we provide an estimate. In this case, obviously, we mightn't have got that right, but we were providing as much information as we could at that point in time.

Mrs SALLY QUINNELL: The town of Tibooburra told us about the automatic generator system that was installed in December. The suggestion from them was that there is that system put in place at Packsaddle, at Milparinka, so that if a system goes down, it's isolated to teen numbers rather than hundreds. Is that something that you guys are looking into?

DAVID NARDI: Yes, we're still working through that. The Tibooburra installation was essentially phase one, but Milparinka and Packsaddle are both currently being investigated to look at options around solar and battery off grid, so an isolated system. We're still currently in discussions of, effectively, a community centre type arrangement where we can get a hub in the community that provides supply or provides a backup for people where possible.

Mrs JUDY HANNAN: I've just got a couple of questions and a couple of comments. I have to say that people have said that your workers went out of their way to help them, so that was one thing. The other thing is that, even though they perhaps complained about the timing and all the rest of it, most people said they had communication from you. So then I come down to two questions. Did you know that your commercial suppliers had different takes on giving people a rebate or not giving a rebate? Do you know that there were different things done by different commercial providers?

ANNIE PEARSON: We waived the network component, the daily charge, for the period of the outage—the 15 days or so. That was included on our statements to retailers. What the retailers ultimately do, we're not privy to that; we don't see that. But we removed the daily charge, which I know for a residential customer is about \$1.90 a day. That was removed, and they wouldn't have had a variable network charge because the network wasn't being used. But what retailers then do with that is a matter for them.

Mrs JUDY HANNAN: So some got an automatic \$100 off, for example, and some people rang their retailer and said, "My neighbour got some, but I didn't." After they said that, then they got something. When did you know that you're in trouble with the second turbine? Did Transgrid let you know up-front? At what point did you know that there were problems? And who did you communicate with?

DAVID NARDI: So, effectively, our control room works in conjunction with Transgrid's control room, so from our accounts, the restoration was obviously identified early in terms of the generator. We were made aware that day that the second generator wasn't available.

Mrs JUDY HANNAN: So on the Thursday?

DAVID NARDI: On the Thursday, yes. We obviously mobilised as much as possible, but our focus was on working together to progressively restore supply. So effectively, most of the customers were back on supply by about three o'clock in the afternoon. Obviously, the rural and remote customers—they're out at what we call Pinnacles Place—weren't, and that was a result of a fault that was then subsequently found on that line when we went to restore it. That was late in the evening, and access was a problem, so we didn't get to repair that fault until the next day. But, yes, effectively during the day, we were in communication with Transgrid. It became apparent that, obviously, the second generator wasn't there, and the focus was on trying to restore supply progressively and keep the network stable to support Transgrid and support our customers.

Mrs JUDY HANNAN: And I have to say thank you for having an attitude of learning from the issue, because that's, I think, what we're all here for, learning and improving things.

Mr JAMES WALLACE: My first question was, it appears from the submissions we received, you took a decision around March 2021, if not prior, to sell the two generators that are located here in Broken Hill, or to decommission those generators, and ultimately, Transgrid purchased those generators from you. What was the motivation for the decision to sell those generators when you were operating the local network here?

ANNIE PEARSON: Those generators were owned by Essential Energy, previously Country Energy. They have never been required for electricity distribution purposes. They have always been there to provide backup for the transmission network. A decision was made to focus on operating and maintaining our asset base required to provide the services that we do under our distributor's licence, so we made a decision to dispose of the assets, which, I think, took a period of time. And then the sale completed mid-2022, I understand. David?

DAVID NARDI: Yes, just to clarify as well, the generators previously were owned by what was the Electricity Commission, which was the predecessor to Transgrid, so they were always intended to be a backup supply for the transmission network. For whatever reason, in the early 2000s, they were transferred to the electricity distributor at that point in time, which subsequently became part of Essential Energy. And, yes, as Annie said, on review, it really wasn't serving our network, and it wasn't a requirement for us. But it definitely was a requirement from a transmission reliability perspective.

Mr JAMES WALLACE: Okay. When they were sold, did you do diligence prior to that to understand the state of the generators, their apparent condition and what was their lifetime left? Did you have a look at that as part of the consideration?

DAVID NARDI: Yes. From our perspective, we offered all the information up, and there was a very comprehensive due diligence process, including investigations and reports that were undertaken to understand the

condition. We handed over all the information we had from a maintenance perspective. And, yes, we worked through that process.

ANNIE PEARSON: Transgrid also undertook a due diligence process.

Mr JAMES WALLACE: Did you make an assessment as to what its remaining life expectancy was?

ANNIE PEARSON: We can take that question on notice. What I do have is a note that we have prepared on this, if that would be helpful.

Mr JAMES WALLACE: Maybe we can table that.

The CHAIR: Can we publish that?

ANNIE PEARSON: You can.

The CHAIR: Thank you.

Mr JAMES WALLACE: My next question, it's a follow-on, because I didn't fully comprehend the discussion that occurred between my colleague and yourself in relation to what happened and the timeline. So, we've heard over the course of this last week that different areas and different towns were affected very differently during the outage, some with days where they were out of power, others in Broken Hill where power was returned that day. When the GT2 generator went back online, I think the Transgrid submission says within two hours of the outage on the 17th/18th, why was the power still out in all these other towns in the Far West for such an extended period of time? Was there an outage that was occurring on Essential's infrastructure, and how long did that take to fix and when was that discovered? Those types of details—

DAVID NARDI: To begin, because of the generator being reinstated, we worked with Transgrid to progressively restore supply, so we don't just let it go all on at once. Generators don't like that generally. And obviously, during the day, on the Thursday, it was a matter of progressively restoring. We have prioritised feeders, as we call them, which are sections of line that feed a number of customers. And, obviously, we prioritise those by critical loads. So, in our case, we would be requested to restore supply, a section of supply, and then stabilise the network and let the generator effectively stabilise itself, and then we progressively move through. That takes some time during the day. Obviously, we have challenges with solar being back in during the day as well.

The outlying community—Menindee, Wilcannia, White Cliffs and Tibooburra—are fed off a separate line, and we refer to Pinnacles Place, which later was a site that we established as a microgrid or basically off the transmission network. We took it out on our own generator supply. When we got to restoring that supply on the Thursday, we found there was a fault on that line, so that took some time for us to identify. It was out near Wilcannia, and there are access issues. The teams worked into the night, but we didn't get to restore that supply until the following morning, and we need to get access to it. Those customers in those communities, about 1,500 customers, were ultimately impacted until around about 6.00 p.m. the following day, on the Friday.

ANNIE PEARSON: I mentioned earlier that we've learnt, and one of the things that we have learnt in relation to the communications is to be clearer, if or when this happens again, about the difference in time between the generator coming back online and then when power is actually restored. And I think we could be clearer in our communications on that point. So that's one of the things we've learnt.

DAVID NARDI: And normally, we wouldn't have such a staged—so on a normal, stable network, not on a generator supply, we would be able to restore supply a lot quicker, because the impact isn't as major, I suppose. So it was slower than anticipated, balancing, obviously, stability of the generator and the solar being back as well.

The CHAIR: All right. I'm sorry. We're going to have to finish up. If you've got more questions, we can submit them to you going forward. I think you've taken a question on notice already as well.

ANNIE PEARSON: Yes.

The CHAIR: Can I ask this one simple question, please? I hope it's simple. Do you have an emergency response unit because you're aware there's some sort of emergency unfolding, and if so, when did you stand that up?

DAVID NARDI: We don't have an emergency response unit, but we have an incident management framework, I suppose, and we stood that up on the Thursday.

The CHAIR: You were suitably alarmed and concerned to go, "Let's treat this as an urgency"?

DAVID NARDI: Yes, we mobilised on the Thursday. We brought together what information we had. We made decisions at that point to start mobilising resources. And from our submission, you'll see that we made

a call to mobilise early in terms of our own mobile generation in the event that we would need to support individual customers, but also the following day. We basically hired a number of generators as well, and that took some time to mobilise. But that was effectively a decision that was no regrets, to get in and mobilise early.

The CHAIR: Good job.

DAVID NARDI: And we've learnt that from obviously our past experiences in both floods and fires, so we're well versed in that.

The CHAIR: Thank you so much. Thank you for appearing today. There has been, I think, just one question taken on notice. We will email you a copy of that and the context in which it was asked for you to respond. We may develop additional questions over the coming week. Towards the end of next week, you would receive them. We do ask you to try to turn them around in seven days if that's possible. If it's not possible, please talk to us about that. Thank you so much for your important and valuable time today. I just want to clarify that we have a tabled document from Essential Energy. We have to go through an entire process as a Committee to accept it and then make a decision to publish it et cetera. So that won't be happening straightaway, but we appreciate you providing that document for clarity. Thank you all so much. I ask the Committee staff to organise our next panel, our final panel, thus far—we've still got one more day of hearings to go. We're going to be hearing from Transgrid.

(The witnesses withdrew.)

MARIE JORDAN, Executive General Manager of Network, Transgrid, affirmed and examined

DAVID O'HARA, General Manager of Projects, Transgrid, affirmed and examined

The CHAIR: I welcome our final witnesses for today, from Transgrid. Thank you for appearing before the Committee today to give evidence. I note you've been in the room most of the day, so you've heard most of what we've heard today. Before we start, do you have any questions about the hearing process?

DAVID O'HARA: No.

MARIE JORDAN: No.

The CHAIR: Do you have a brief opening statement you would like to make?

MARIE JORDAN: Yes, I do. Good afternoon, Chair, Deputy Chair, and Committee members. Firstly, I want to acknowledge the significant impact that the October 2024 outage had on the communities and businesses of Far West New South Wales. Throughout the inquiry, we've heard more detail about the disruption and hardship experienced, and, on behalf of Transgrid, I do offer our apologies. We take responsibility to provide safe, reliable and affordable energy supply very seriously. I want to assure the Committee and, importantly, the communities affected, that Transgrid is fully committed to learning from this event. Our participation in various inquiries underway is giving us valuable insights. This will help us to improve energy resilience for the region, which is critical as extreme weather events become more frequent and more severe.

During the emergency response, Transgrid and Essential Energy worked closely with the New South Wales Government to provide alternative supply to the region, and I want to personally thank the community for their support of the hundreds of people who mobilised to that part of the region. I'm pleased to confirm that the work to replace the emergency towers with permanent structures has begun and is on track for completion in the middle of the year. We also continue to work with local communities, governments, regulators and other key stakeholders on viable long-term solutions to ensure improved energy resilience for the people of Far West New South Wales. Thank you, and we're happy to take any questions from the Committee.

The CHAIR: Thank you so much, Ms Jordan. I'm going to start with my colleague the member for Hornsby, Mr James Wallace.

Mr JAMES WALLACE: I have a very large number of questions. Thank you very much for your time today. You talk about when the towers on the X2 line came down. What were the conditions that caused that? Was it winds that were over 165 kilometres an hour that night?

MARIE JORDAN: Yes. It was much over that. The BOM referred to it akin to a tornado and, having my experience in the US, there isn't much that stands up to a tornado's winds. The way they fell and where they bent confirms that it was like a tornado. And that is what has likely impacted the 66 kV that Essential talked about, and took out another nine towers in South Australia.

Mr JAMES WALLACE: In your submission, you talk about, within two hours, the sole generator that was operational at the time was up and running.

MARIE JORDAN: That was correct.

Mr JAMES WALLACE: Do you have an internal timeframe or a regulated requirement for when that generator needs to be activated?

MARIE JORDAN: To meet our energy adequacy, it's between that 1½ and two hours, and that's pretty much been the history of that generator.

Mr JAMES WALLACE: Are both of the generators located in Broken Hill operational today? Are they ready to go if there's another outage?

MARIE JORDAN: No. GT1, which we sent for refurbishment, has major work to be done. And we have the gensets that we deployed that are there along with GT2, which is operational.

Mr JAMES WALLACE: GT2 is operational?

MARIE JORDAN: Correct.

Mr JAMES WALLACE: This is a related question, I suppose. The battery that's owned by AGL locally—is it your intention that if GT2 became operational, given GT1 is not there, would you require the use of AGL's battery in order to provide stable electricity throughout the region?

MARIE JORDAN: I chatted with them as they were leaving. On 20 December, we had an agreement in place, as well as the commercial terms, so our protections can be changed, their set-up can be done on their side. We did do it very quickly. We just need an AER variance to work under a temporary GPS.³ On 13 March, we are meeting with AEMO and others. There are some comments that came back from AGL. We're still working through, but I'm assuming a long-term agreement will be in short order.

Mr JAMES WALLACE: I mentioned, and you would have heard in the discussion before with AGL, there was a delay between AGL stating they were ready to go on their end, on 19 October, to activate their battery. That didn't occur until 26 October. What was the cause and what was happening during that delay period?

MARIE JORDAN: The biggest problem is the complexities on our side. The AGL battery, the magnitude and size and scope of that, to work on the grid—it's akin to taking a sledgehammer to what a ballpeen hammer can do. We had to make sure we had all the protections and everything in place so it wouldn't further damage equipment, appliances and things like that in the home. They're very powerful. They aren't designed for that system, and we weren't designed to take it on until we had done quite a bit of looking at our system, our protections, and making sure that when it hit the bus and went into Essential's side it was appropriate for use by the community.

Mr JAMES WALLACE: Why was that condition applied? Did Transgrid ask for there to be a condition to prevent the AGL battery operating once Broken Hill had been islanded? Or was that a decision involving AEMO, AER?

MARIE JORDAN: No, it was actually our engineers making sure that we could actually do it. We had people dedicated to doing this that entire time. I think the final protection standard, somebody was working till three or four in the morning to get them done, to be able to put it in play. It's not simple. Just as when we brought the gensets there, trying to connect them with a GT—a GT is a jet engine. They don't easily match with things, but we were able to match it with the AGL battery quite well.

Mr JAMES WALLACE: Do you have any objection to microgrids being established in Tibooburra, Wilcannia, White Cliffs? We've met with members of these communities, where there's a desperate desire to have locally sourced power supplying their town, to ensure resilience of the network.

MARIE JORDAN: We don't object to that at all. As a matter of fact, Pinnacles Place has generators in place there today, for Essential, to be able to take that whole line off as a mini-grid. We actually are paying for those gensets to be there, to support the load if, in fact, something else happened before GT1 is back in service.

Mr JAMES WALLACE: Is there a remaining life expectancy for GT1 and GT2? A related question is: Do you intend to decommission those generators once the Hydrostor project is completed?

MARIE JORDAN: That is our desire, to do that. Originally, when we purchased the GTs—you can look at the RIT-T, the regulatory investment test; it kind of lays out the journey. When we received the generators, they were in poor condition, and so it took some work for us to get them up and functional. We immediately put in a three-phase approach to the reconditioning. The first one was a quick reconditioning to ensure we could get them started and keep them running. We have a testing protocol. They run it every two months. We have spent, to date, about \$30 million on those GTs and, by the end of it, for the refurbishment with the backup generation, it will be over 60. Our question we have ourselves is ensuring that it can make it out to the new date of Hydrostor of December 2028. So we are looking now at: Is there an interim solution? Is there something we need to do sooner than that to be able to assure reliability? Like I said, we purchased these in July 2022, and we've been working on them since.

Mr JAMES WALLACE: Essential Energy mentioned earlier they'd reduced some of their charges that they passed through to retailers. Has Transgrid taken efforts to reduce its charges that it passes through in relation to the service it provides to those affected customers in the Far West? For example, the location charge?

MARIE JORDAN: Can I take that on notice? I'm not familiar with any accounting treatment of that.

Mr JAMES WALLACE: Okay. Have you provided any other compensation form to, hopefully, land on affected customers?

MARIE JORDAN: Yes, we have. We actually put forth \$1.5 million immediately. That was handed out by the governments. Those were the \$200 and \$400 funds to help the impacted members of the community. We've also put forth \$500,000 worth of grants for businesses and community not-for-profits, and that's underway.

³ The Committee received correspondence from Transgrid, providing clarification on this statement, which is published on the Committee's [webpage](#).

We have another \$300,000 in the wings on that, and next year there's a \$500,000 grant going into the community.⁴ So, yes, we have.

Mr JAMES WALLACE: That wasn't my question. My question was about customers that have compensation claims for the outages that have occurred. We've gone around and heard from businesses, some of which have told us about \$90,000 worth of damage to electrical equipment plus cancelled bookings and other things. Do you have any mechanism by which you provide a compensation direct to customers? Or have you tried to reduce your charges in order to compensate customers generally?

MARIE JORDAN: We would have a process for any kind of impact that we may have to customers, but I don't know the extent of it. These aren't our customers; they're Essential's customers. I did follow up with Jill and Michael as they left today to make sure we can find out where their communication went. I've been here all day listening to the stories, and anyone that had a problem with the communication with Transgrid—we aren't established for that, because these aren't our customers. Essential is our customer and so it becomes a little difficult—just even in the communications, we're limited. Once the emergency services stands up—EUSFAC, which happened on the 17th—our communications go into there, and the communication is from the Government and from Essential. So we don't reach out and communicate directly to Essential's customers. There's actually an AER rule against that.

The CHAIR: I'm just going to have to cut you off there. I'm going to go to Mrs Judy Hannan, the member for Wollondilly.

Mrs JUDY HANNAN: With due respect, if I buy a car from a car retailer, and it's a Holden, and it has an issue, Holden will back up if it's got a huge problem. I have a couple of questions. You said you worked closely with the New South Wales Government. Is that the money that you sent them? Is that what you're saying—you sent money to them? How did you work with the New South Wales Government?

MARIE JORDAN: We gave them \$1.5 million for distribution to the community.

Mrs JUDY HANNAN: Do you know when that happened?

MARIE JORDAN: I don't know the exact date. I'll take that on notice, but I believe we were still in the event when that occurred.

Mrs JUDY HANNAN: As part of your IPART agreement or whatever—and I know IPART's doing its own thing—you have certain conditions, and one is to have those backup towers in place. Do you think that it was under your obligation to have those two turbines in place? Was that part of your agreement with IPART?

MARIE JORDAN: There is very specific requirements for us by IPART, and there's ways we make decisions on when we're going to take a generator out of service. You have to take one out to be serviced on a fairly regular basis. So there are a couple of things we do. We look at the line condition and make sure there's nothing—we have a series of inspections, if you don't mind me dropping into that first. We do an annual aerial inspection. That was completed in March 2024 on X2. We have a thermal inspection every four years; we look for any potential failures, any hotspots on the line—

Mrs JUDY HANNAN: These are just the turbines that I'm talking about—the two backups?

MARIE JORDAN: Well, these are part of the decision-making to take one out of service. So we have our inspections, we look at the records, we make sure that—this line, contrary to what was shared, hasn't had a failure since 2009. We look at the probability—credible contingencies. We have a whole process that we have to go through before we take out the turbine. That was completed.

Mrs JUDY HANNAN: So when was number two taken out? When did we know number two just wasn't there for backup? I know that number one started and then it failed, but when was number two out for maintenance? At what point?

MARIE JORDAN: Number two is the one that actually ran the whole time.

Mrs JUDY HANNAN: It doesn't matter—number one.

MARIE JORDAN: We took out generator two for the third phase of its refurbishment. It was returned to service in August. We took out GT1 in August, and it was due to be returned to service, ironically, on

⁴ The Committee received correspondence from Transgrid, providing clarification on this statement, which is published on the Committee's [webpage](#).

17 October. It did not. There was a major problem in there that would have caused catastrophic failure, so we could not return it to service.

Mrs JUDY HANNAN: Only one more topic—and I know I'm pushing you along through, but I want to get these questions out. When you knew you had an issue, who did you let know?

MARIE JORDAN: That is one of our key learnings here, and I've already spoken with the mayor and the council. That is something we should have done. It's not a requirement, it's not in a regulation, but it should have been good practice. That's one of our key learnings: We have to have the conversations to let them know where we are with those GTs.

Mrs JUDY HANNAN: So what about the other council and the big mining companies in the area? Did you communicate with them at all?

MARIE JORDAN: No, we did not. We had not made any formal communications. I'm not sure where the control rooms were, if they were communicating with Essential; I don't have that information. But we did not publicly communicate the unavailability.

Mrs JUDY HANNAN: I guess that's something we've heard consistently—that there was nothing from Transgrid. I don't know what you think about that, but that's probably been one of the most consistent things across the board. I'm curious—I know you said it's not your customers, they're Essential Energy customers, but there are all these people out there that are hurting and have got issues. I've seen you speak to many of them as they've left here today, using our inquiry to connect with these people. I would think, as a provider—that that connection or an ability or an email address or something for people that wanted to talk to Transgrid would have had the opportunity. Because there's no information coming out for Transgrid, there doesn't seem to be anywhere for people to go into Transgrid.

MARIE JORDAN: Well, we weren't directly talking to the customers because that's one of them, the regulations, just like we talked about the Privacy Act—that's one more piece where we don't actually get to have the customer information. We were doing Facebook updates, and, of course, that was a bit of a struggle. We were feeding in updates to ABC. We had one person on the ground here in Broken Hill that came in each day to provide that briefing, along with Penny Sharpe and others, to say where we were on the status of the repair. So while we couldn't talk to consumers, the actually direct-connected customers, we tried to use the forums that we could to have those communications: our website, Facebook page and daily updates and the briefings that were held.

Mrs JUDY HANNAN: The mayor said that you said one thing and that wasn't true. An hour later, it was incorrect. Is that—

MARIE JORDAN: Actually, what I referenced, when we had the generator sets come in, to back it up, we had assumed, and we had spent a tremendous amount of time wiring those in, and it did not work with the GT, gas turbine, when we tried to connect. And that was to stop the load shedding at night. It wouldn't work. We continued to work on it. It was as frustrating for the engineers as it was for, I'm sure, the community, trying to get that to coordinate and work with the GT. They just were not compatible.

Mrs JUDY HANNAN: Last question. I know my colleague talked about your agreement with AGL and why it was that they couldn't step into that position, and I don't think he meant just in this particular circumstance. He meant in general, and I guess with some of the other companies around, why do they not have an ability to step into that space?

MARIE JORDAN: That's a key learning for us in this situation. It's the only place in our network where we have the generators as backup. And, as I said, we're moving forward with AGL. We'd be happy to work with the other generators in the area. Back too, in that RIT-T process, one of the options was for AGL to purchase those generators and use it as a backup for their system, their batteries. So there's been a lot of things looked at, but we were notified in 2018 that they were going to divest the generators. In March of 2021, we were given a date of 10 July.⁵ We had not intended purchasing them. But by December, there was no-one stepping in, and we could not not have a viable backup for the community of Broken Hill, so we stepped in and purchased those generators.

Mrs JUDY HANNAN: I think part of your IPART licence is having a backup system in there, yes.

Mrs SALLY QUINNELL: The generator that was online and came online on the Thursday, GT2, was newly refurbished. Why did it then fail?

⁵ The Committee received correspondence from Transgrid, providing clarification on this statement, which is published on the Committee's [webpage](#).

MARIE JORDAN: I have the whole series of events on those generators. I know that was one of the requests. So, when we got the generator started, it takes time every time to get everybody brought back up. There was a concern on the coolant and oil. Even though we had just refurbished it, the gauges were saying that it wasn't adequate. So we knew we had to have a planned outage. That was the first outage since the start. We actually used the out-of-service GT1 to figure out how we could make a temporary situation that we would not have to take another outage for the oil and the coolant. We did that.

Then the next outage was the most significant one, where the system triggered all the CO2 to be dropped and indicated that there was a fire or something wrong in the compartment. Further looking into it, it was a failure of the design of that system, which was similar to what happened in 2023 on the other GT. We didn't realise it was a symptomatic problem. Once we had that repaired, we had one other short outage for a fuel coupler but, other than that, for the balance of the time the generator ran. As soon as we had AGL up, for the balance of the outage we did not have to do any short-notice curtailments as well.

Mrs SALLY QUINNELL: One of the things that people have told us this week is that the initial blackout had its consequences for people but the rolling brownouts—constantly power on, power off, power on, power off—has caused permanent damage and in some cases just decimated their appliances. We had witnesses talking about just their fridge, their freezer, their monitors, their tills, they're no longer working. How could that have been mitigated, and what learnings can we take from that going forward so that we know that if this happens again—God forbid, but if it does—a problem that happened that may have cost the community \$200 doesn't end up costing them \$5,000?

MARIE JORDAN: When you look at the responsibility of a transmission system, it's to deliver at a certain voltage, at a certain point, with Essential. That question, I think, has to be asked of Essential, because we don't see their system, we don't see the fault current, we don't see the problems on the system, and maybe there were none. But I don't have that information. I do know that when we sync that generator in, all those things are validated before it connects in. And what you're referring to as brownouts are actually rotating blackouts.

Mrs SALLY QUINNELL: Yes.

MARIE JORDAN: So the rotating blackouts, the generator's still there and running, so we haven't changed. It's the on and off that occurs for different communities and different blocks as you roll through, and that is something that Essential does with their control room.

Mrs SALLY QUINNELL: You've explained you're not the interface with customers. If those companies that are the interface with customers have a large number of customers seeking compensation, do you foresee them seeking compensation from you for this period of time?

MARIE JORDAN: I wish I could answer to that regulation, but I don't know. We're so tightly regulated. But happy to take that question on notice, just as before, because I don't know that process. So I apologise.

Mrs SALLY QUINNELL: No, that's fine. This is my last question. Does Transgrid have a presence on the Local Emergency Management Committee? And were you at any point during this in communications with the Local Emergency Management Committee?

MARIE JORDAN: Actually, that's why my colleague is here. He ran that process.

Mrs SALLY QUINNELL: Oh, brilliant. There you go.

DAVID O'HARA: My involvement in this was somewhat limited to the response. I ran the crisis management team from Transgrid. There were multiple parts to it, but the role of the crisis management team was to gather the information from various stakeholders—internal and external—to provide, obviously, a safe response to the disruption, but then to ensure that we provided communication in a way that was accurate, valid and up to date. We had people on the ground. That included having a representative to front up to the press conferences every day with the politicians and the mayor, and also we had community liaison officers on the ground to interact with the local community. The purpose of that was to ensure that the local emergency services were kept informed on a daily basis, or better, to the extent that the community liaison officers were able to.

Mrs SALLY QUINNELL: And did any of those people leave Broken Hill?

DAVID O'HARA: To go out to the other communities?

Mrs SALLY QUINNELL: Yes, to the other communities.

DAVID O'HARA: I'm not exactly sure. My understanding is that they remained in Broken Hill and then were interacting in particular with the press conferences, which enabled them to engage with the—obviously, to be broadcast across the radio, which then enabled communication to go further out where possible.

Mrs SALLY QUINNELL: Where possible. Okay, thanks. No more questions.

The CHAIR: Do you appreciate the irony that you were posting notices about your power outage on appliances and social media means that require power to read? Do you appreciate the irony of that?

DAVID O'HARA: I completely acknowledge, and Transgrid acknowledges, the disturbance and interruption, particularly where mobile communications are required. And it was for that reason that we mobilised several people to sites throughout the disruption so that communication could happen in person, in press conferences, which enabled different types of communication, be that on the website, so that people could be informed, but also to the extent that it could be transmitted across a transistor radio.

The CHAIR: You knew that you only had one of your GTs operating, which only had a capacity, fundamentally, to support Broken Hill in part. You also must have logically known that all those other communities out and around weren't going to get any of that power. Is that true? Is that fair?

MARIE JORDAN: The actual load in the area, the average load, less the mine—and we've never had an agreement to pick up the mine with the generator, but our next solution will—did include the extenuating areas. Having to do load shedding in the peak time for periods of the day was part of the strategy, so to speak, much like any other part of the network, to keep your network stable and serve as many people as you can. But, yes, the 18 megawatts would have covered the average demand, but it wouldn't cover the peaks.

DAVID O'HARA: Chair, may I add to that, please? During the response to the crisis, one of the important stakeholders, as far as we were concerned, within the crisis management team, was Essential Energy. We had daily stand-up meetings with Essential Energy to address exactly the point that you're making: that there were communities that were not going to be serviced from within. We worked closely with Essential to advise them of what was available, and they advising us on what the load needs were for the remote communities, such that they were able to put in place a solution to service those from what's being called the microgrid.

Mrs JUDY HANNAN: Sorry. I couldn't help myself. I would have thought when you got into the situation with everything down and you knew you only had one generator that was ready to go, you would have been sourcing out AGL or Tilt or those companies right at that instant and getting them prepared to help you out of that situation, instead of waiting until the crisis got worse.

MARIE JORDAN: I reached out to the CEO of AGL that next morning. It would be all we needed to get through the event to have AGL. Early in the morning on 17 October I called them and our team started working. Typically, to get the GPS approved, it's three to six months. We did it in nine days.

The CHAIR: Yes, we heard that earlier today. So you knew that only one of your generators were operating. Did you make a public statement about the fact that you only had half of your backup capacity in operation? Did you put that information out into the world or just in a private conversation with Essential?

MARIE JORDAN: Actually, over many years, even prior to our ownership, there were periods of time when work was being on one generator and it wasn't shared. It's a lessons learnt. I appreciate that hindsight is always better. But in the future, we've already committed to make that communication and let people know. Right now, we do have gensets at that site with a plan on how to connect them if anything were to go wrong.

The CHAIR: Earlier today, you told us that you start the GTs every two months and roll them over.

MARIE JORDAN: Correct.

The CHAIR: So you started the GTs a couple of months prior to that and things were terrific?

MARIE JORDAN: Actually, we started GT2 once we knew the—

The CHAIR: No, we're talking about GT1, the broken one.

MARIE JORDAN: We started that prior to taking GT2 out of service, so that was August, and then it came back on. August/September, we took GT1 out, so it was not tested again. We didn't have to test that.

The CHAIR: So in June or July or May of 2024, GT1 was operating?

MARIE JORDAN: That is correct. It was misinformation that was shared. We have been operating and maintaining that GT, and we'd submitted all that information to both IPART and the AER.

The CHAIR: Council told us earlier today that they were not aware that one of the generators was not functioning until Monday, five days later. Did you have any opportunity or any means by which council did know that prior to Monday or was it indeed five days before they knew?

MARIE JORDAN: I do not know the answer to that question.

The CHAIR: Okay. You said you started attending press conferences every day and standing up with Minister Penny Sharpe. My recollection is Minister Penny Sharpe didn't arrive out here until about 10 days after the original outage. What were you doing for the first nine days? You weren't standing up and speaking to the press and the public and the community about this?

DAVID O'HARA: So, as part of the crisis response, we mobilised people to the ground, but we were also communicating in all the ways that were available to us at the time—communicating through our Facebook pages. I understand we were communicating through our website. And then the community liaison officer was on the ground.

The CHAIR: All of the means by which were available at the time. When did you first go to ABC Radio and talk to them and talk to the community about the incident that had happened and the fact that you only had half of your backup capacity?

DAVID O'HARA: So in relation to when we first communicated with ABC, I'll need to take that on notice. I'll be able to provide an answer.

The CHAIR: Thank you very much for your time today. I think you have taken one or two things on notice. We will send you copies of those questions with the context around them, to assist you in responding to those. The Committee will undoubtedly prepare a whole bunch of additional questions that we are going to send to you. They will arrive with you late next week. We ask for you to try to turn those around in seven days if you possibly can. If you can't, could you please talk to the Committee secretariat about that? And again, I thank you for your valuable time today. I do recognise that you've been here most of the day, trying to learn and take on board as much as you can, and speaking and engaging with some of the affected people directly as they were leaving the building. Other than that, we've finished the day today. Thank you all very much.

(The witnesses withdrew.)

The Committee adjourned at 17:55.