

REPORT ON PROCEEDINGS BEFORE

**LEGISLATIVE ASSEMBLY COMMITTEE ON
ENVIRONMENT AND PLANNING**

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

At Preston Stanley Room, Parliament House, Sydney, on Monday 17 March 2025

The Committee met at 11:50.

PRESENT

Mr Clayton Barr (Chair)

Ms Maryanne Stuart

Mr James Wallace

PRESENT VIA VIDEOCONFERENCE

Mrs Judy Hannan

Mrs Sally Quinnell (Deputy Chair)

The CHAIR: Good morning, everyone, and welcome to the final hearing of the Legislative Assembly Committee on Environment and Planning inquiry into the electricity outages affecting Far West New South Wales from October last year. Before we start the public hearing today, I acknowledge the Gadigal people, who are the traditional custodians of the land on which we are meeting in Parliament today. I also acknowledge the traditional custodians of the various lands on which our virtual witnesses are appearing at this hearing, and I 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.

An important part of this inquiry has been engaging with the people who were impacted by the outages. As you are likely aware, the Committee travelled to the Far West region two weeks ago and visited affected communities in and around Broken Hill over the course of the week. Across several town hall meetings and public hearings, we were able to hear directly from residents impacted by the outages. We greatly appreciate the time and effort made by every person who spoke to us, particularly those community members in the smaller isolated towns of Menindee, Tibooburra, White Cliffs and Wilcannia. This is the fifth hearing that we are holding as part of our inquiry, which the Committee commenced last November, after it was referred by the Minister for Energy. Between December and February, the Committee received close to 50 submissions from individuals, organisations and agencies. On behalf of the Committee, I also thank all of the stakeholders who have made written submissions.

My name is Clayton Barr. I am the member for Cessnock and Chair of the Committee. With me here today are the Committee members—Ms Maryanne Stuart, the member for Heathcote, and Mr James Wallace, the member for Hornsby. Online, we have Deputy Chair Mrs Sally Quinnell, the member for Camden, and Mrs Judy Hannan, the member for Wollondilly. This hearing is our final committee proceeding for this inquiry, and we thank the witnesses who will be appearing before us today.

Mr ROY BUTLER, MP, Member for Barwon, sworn and examined

The CHAIR: I welcome to the hearing today our first witness, Mr Roy Butler, MP, the member for Barwon, who advocated for the referral of this inquiry to this Committee. Thank you very much. Would you like to make a short opening statement?

Mr ROY BUTLER: First and foremost, I'd like to thank the Committee and the witnesses who have given evidence to this inquiry, especially getting out into the smaller communities. I really appreciate you doing that. The first official meeting I had in regards to this matter was on 17 October at 8.00 p.m. At that point, we were already a fair way into the problem, and there was a whole lot of planning but not a lot of decision-making. There needed to be some decisions early on, particularly when you're talking about getting a truck from the east coast out to Broken Hill being about 20 hours, with the stops, for a heavy vehicle, unless you've got multiple drivers. That was a problem that I suppose we can come back to.

I can't stress enough how important it is to have clear and consistent communications during a crisis. Any crisis needs really solid, reliable information. That was hampered through this process by the lack of connectivity. You would have heard the story by now of the mobile phone towers that have a battery that's meant to last for maybe four, five or six hours, but because the batteries are stuffed, they tend to last more like two or three. As soon as that happens, the ability to get information into a community is severely curtailed. It was a failure point in communities that no government agencies actually have contact lists for these remote small communities. I want to acknowledge the work of my team in actually having the ability to set up those community meetings. When you've got something like this going on, you've got no way of communicating with people, or no reliable way anyway.

You need to have contact lists to be able to know who to contact and how to get in contact with people in these remote communities. That was something that, thankfully, we were able to do, but there was no-one on the response side who could do that. Obviously, you would have heard—and I'll try not to cover the same territory—that distance and disadvantage exacerbated the problem for everyone. You may have heard that in the mid-'90s, the whole area of the Far West was serviced with generators, until the Darling Electricity Construction Agency came along in about '95, '96, and we went from 32-volt generators over to a 240-volt system. It's that recent that the area actually was on generators. As a result, a lot of properties out west have access to some form of generators. Where you saw the biggest problem was in towns.

The status of the two 25-megawatt gas turbines, GT1 and GT2, and the apparent lack of redundancy measures while one of those, at least, was out of service, is something that we all want to get to the bottom of. I really want to acknowledge the way the community's pulled together. There was some amazing kindness and generosity that went on. We saw that too with clubs in New South Wales: the Mounties, Broken Hill Musicians Club, Michael Bolland did an amazing job. They stepped in where maybe government wasn't agile enough to be able to do it. They were stepping in and doing it, and they could bypass a lot of the governance that has to be done for government to get involved in those sorts of things.

One of the other things that I really want to put on the table is that we need some emergency provisions for information sharing. We had situations where the health district knew the locations of people with life support or CPAP machines but because of privacy did not want to hand over that information. That's something we need to get better on. Obviously you would have heard through your evidence that the response from insurers has been inconsistent. I know that insurance is regulated mostly at a Federal level, but it's something that we need to be aware of.

There are a number of actors in this story. Obviously there's Transgrid, there's Essential Energy, and then you've got Tilt and AGL, Hydrostor, who's a newcomer. I really want to just give some acknowledgement to Essential. They were good actors in this. They've since moved really quickly on microgrids in Ivanhoe and Tibooburra, which will mean that those areas can be out of power for over a week—if the ground's too soft to get equipment in to put a power pole in, you don't get power—so that's a really positive thing. There's also the SAPS, or the Standalone Power Systems, that are going into end-of-line or remote properties, and that's a really positive thing as well. We'll get on to some of the other actors, I'm sure.

I also want to thank the Premier, Chris Minns, and Penny Sharpe for the time we spent out there. I'll tell you a story. One day, about the Friday afternoon, when I thought two weeks sitting are done and the visit with the Premier's done and I can finally sit down and have a rest, I was straight back out there for nine days. That wasn't as hard for me as it was for the people out in the Far West, but it was certainly a tough time. At some point, it would be great if we could talk a little bit about the current situation with the Generator Performance Standard for BESS, or the battery energy storage system, and the Tilt wind and solar that's out there, and the ability, in

conjunction in the future with Hydrostor, BESS and the renewable projects, to make sure this never happens again. Thank you.

The CHAIR: Thank you so much, Roy. I'm just going to ask the first question, because I'm interested in something you said very early. You had your first meeting, or discussion, or conversation, with, I'm assuming, a group of people on the Thursday night of 17 October. This is day one.

Mr ROY BUTLER: Yes, 17 October. That's right.

The CHAIR: Around midnight, they went out—16th, 17th.

Mr ROY BUTLER: Yes. In terms of the time it took for them to get along the line—because it's quite a distance from Broken Hill to Buronga—find where the damage was, get a handle on how much damage there was, that all took time. That was the first meeting I had. I met with people from Transgrid, from Essential. There were departmental people in that meeting. As I said, there was a lot of planning and not a lot of decision-making. It was in that meeting that I said, "While we're sitting here talking about it, we should have generators on trucks now, because it's going to take 20 hours to get them out there."

The CHAIR: Were local councils involved at that point?

Mr ROY BUTLER: No, not in that meeting. The council involvement probably was more in the LEMC level, as opposed to at that meeting at that point, given that we were still gauging exactly what we were dealing with.

The CHAIR: That early meeting on that night was stood up by a State government agency with those various players and participants in the market?

Mr ROY BUTLER: Yes. The other participant was a representative from the Minister's office as well. I'd spoken to the Minister at about 4.00 p.m. Ironically, that was just over here at a Hydrostor demonstration, or an information session, and I'd spoken to her about it at about four o'clock that day.

The CHAIR: I think that Central Darling tried to stand something up in terms of LEMC on that first day, but I think we heard from Broken Hill that they maybe didn't stand something up until about day four or five, or something like that. I was just interested as to who was involved in those earlier meetings that you were getting onto?

Mr ROY BUTLER: I'd have to refer to my notes to actually work out when the LEMC stood up. My recollection is that eventually it all started running under one LEMC because essentially the area was all impacted, whether it was unincorporated, Central Darling shire or Broken Hill city, so it made sense to coordinate it through one LEMC.

Ms MARYANNE STUART: Thanks, Roy. It was great to be out in your community. Thanks for advising us to go to all of the different remote communities because they are very different, all beautiful people, and, yes, it was important to hear all of the things that have happened to them on the ground, so thank you for that insight. You've spoken about lack of connectivity and lack of communication. That was very obvious as we went around. I just want to talk to you about being offline. What we heard was that these communities are often offline for short periods of time. Are you aware of that?

Mr ROY BUTLER: Absolutely.

Ms MARYANNE STUART: With that came that Telstra was offline, and one thing that's really stood out for me was that that meant that people couldn't ring 000 if there was a life-threatening situation, so that's disturbing. But you're aware that Telstra goes out when the electricity goes out?

Mr ROY BUTLER: Yes, absolutely. As I referred to in my opening statement, the batteries that are meant to keep those going for a longer period—batteries only last so long when they keep getting cycled and with age and heat out there. So the batteries that are meant to last for maybe five, six or seven hours often only last for two or three hours. There was no other communication. It's too far for UHF, and not everyone has UHF. There's a lot of complexity to that, but I suppose the one thing that does work in these situations is Starlink, for example, which is how I talk to people in the car when I'm driving because there's no other communication for hours. Mobile phones frequently go out and until we've got low Earth orbit satellite technology in a handset, which is coming—there's a USO with the Federal Government now—we're not going to see a drastic improvement because of the cost of putting towers in.

Ms MARYANNE STUART: Your office became extremely pivotal during this time, and that has been acknowledged in every public forum that we've had. Can you just talk me through a little bit about Service NSW?

There seemed to be some issues around being able to access the \$200 or \$400 voucher. Your office, I think, assisted with that sort of thing. Can you elaborate?

Mr ROY BUTLER: The announcement of the \$200—originally per household and then it was changed to \$200 per person and \$400 per business—was made by the Premier when he was out there to front the community. He went to the park and spoke to hundreds of people. But there was no system in place to actually deliver that payment at that point in time, so Service NSW had to go away and build the system to actually be able to allow people to apply for and receive the grant of \$200. So that's an understandable delay, and it's amazing that it worked first time because often when we do things in a rush they don't work.

The other weakness with that one was around the identity documents. A lot of Indigenous people in my communities don't have ready access to birth certificates and the like, and then you've got the general connectivity issues where not everyone has the technology to be able to go online and make the application. That's if they've got the service to be able to do it. They were some of the weaknesses. I think it was a good idea to offer that money, and it was an acknowledgement, but I suppose I wouldn't be doing my job as a local member if I didn't say that there's no way that anyone is pretending the \$200 or the \$400 actually covered the costs, but it was an acknowledgement from the Government that people had suffered a loss.

Ms MARYANNE STUART: I thank you for your time today. I have no further questions.

Mr JAMES WALLACE: Thank you, Roy. I greatly appreciate your time here today. I just want start by acknowledging the role you personally played as being the main source of communication and information for so many of the people that we heard at those public hearings. I know the other Committee members have acknowledged that as well, but I wanted to put that on the record for myself. You talk in your submission around issues of communication and potential perceptions that Transgrid wasn't being honest about the status of the GT1 and GT2 generators. Are you able to go into a little bit of detail about what was happening on the ground in Broken Hill and in other communities? What was the perception as to the status of those generators and some of the issues associated with that? Were you having direct communications with Transgrid over where those generators were up to? Were you aware that GT1 was out?

Mr ROY BUTLER: Okay, that's four questions.

Mr JAMES WALLACE: Yes, it's a lot, but it's a general description of those issues.

Mr ROY BUTLER: It wouldn't be allowed in question time. Was I aware that there was a problem with the generator? No. I think everyone assumed that the generators were, as a redundancy measure, going to be available and provide up to 50 megawatts of power. Broken Hill is about a 35-megawatt town, so 50 megawatts is a comfortable amount of power to have. But obviously with one of them disassembled and not functional, that was severely limited. There's also some stability issues with the GTs, in terms of the solar coming online. So there's a whole lot of complexity around the use of the gas turbines to supply the Far West, but that's probably another discussion. In terms of what was happening in the communities, there was a lot of uncertainty and there was a lot of anxiety. I think the overwhelming feeling was powerlessness, and that's not meant to be a pun. That was just that people had no ability to influence what was happening. A lot of the time they couldn't get reliable information that was accurate.

In terms of the perception of Transgrid, I certainly was in regular contact with Transgrid from that first night on 17 October—regular contact—both in meetings, briefings and also phone calls and discussions. I think there was a perception that Transgrid hadn't met an obligation to make sure that redundancy measures were in place, and certainly there's also a perception, which I'm sure you've heard through the enquiry, about the maintenance of the towers. I'm not a metallurgist or an engineer, so I can't speak to that, but certainly that was a strong sentiment in the community that the towers, I think, were originally 1972 and that perhaps they had some age issues, and they weren't galvanised. It has been explained a thousand times why they're not galvanised, but there's a perception that they hadn't been looked after, they were too old, and that somehow that lack of maintenance and lack of care had resulted in what had happened, as opposed to a freak storm that had ripped them out. What other parts are there to your question?

Mr JAMES WALLACE: I think that was it. You covered that quite nicely. I just have one more question. In relation to Essential Energy, there was some concern in some of the remote communities that these outages occur quite regularly and that they're very frequent. As a consequence of that, we heard great support in public hearings for microgrids being established in different communities. I wonder if you want to comment on that and whether that's something you think is a good idea.

Mr ROY BUTLER: As I think we all know, these things don't happen quickly. My first discussion with Essential Energy about microgrids and SAPs was in January 2023. There's been difficulty sourcing batteries of the size that are required for the microgrids in places like Tibooburra and Ivanhoe. The discussion I had with Luke

Jenner from Essential, who's always been on the end of a phone for me, is let's crack on and get the generators in and let's make them auto-start generators. So as soon as the power goes out, they can be remotely started without having to send a technician out. As I say, those generators are currently in Tibooburra and in Ivanhoe.

We've also got some solutions coming for Packsaddle and Milparinka. Mia Degoumois, who runs the Packsaddle Roadhouse—I mean, there's not enough power coming out of that transformer for the roadhouse, the SES shed, the RFDS, the RFS and the volunteer ambulance because that all comes out of that one place, and Mia's got a hand in it all. So, again, through Luke they've been able to upgrade the transformer, but previously the generator that runs the roadhouse has also been used to support everything else. The last discussion I had with Luke about that is that he would put in an Essential-owned generator that would cover everything for when the power goes out. As I alluded to in my opening statement, the issue with places like Packsaddle, Tibooburra and Milparinka along that supply line is that if you have a storm come through and you lose a pole, if it's wet, the equipment you've got to get in there's quite heavy, and so you're not doing anyone any favours if you just bog lots of equipment.

They've got to wait for it to dry out enough to get the equipment in to actually be able to stand a pole back up, which is why the microgrids are such a great solution with battery, solar and a generator. It's got something for everyone. For people that like renewables, it's got that. For people that like big diesel engines, it's got that. For people that like batteries, it's got that. The idea that we can use that battery as a community battery, so that people can put their rooftop solar in it through the day and then discharge it back into the house at night at no cost, that's a real win for everyone if we can make it work that way.

I would say there's one community that's probably been treated a little differently in all of this, and that's Silverton. Hats off to the Silverton Village Committee. They're a great group. Because Tilt now owns the wind project at Silverton, they've come to some agreements with the town about generators on residences and businesses, which is great, because that gives them a bit of reassurance that if something happens and the Buronga supply line goes down again, they're still going to have power in that town. They are all different communities. They're all different. They're all unique. They've all got their own quirks.

The CHAIR: Thank you, Roy. We did hear positive things about the relationship between Tilt and Silverton as well.

Mrs SALLY QUINNELL: I wanted to congratulate your staff as well. I think we all are very aware of the roles our staff play in providing that interface with the community, but I thought that was really, really interesting. It was just across the board. I'm sure there's a price to pay, but the capacity for you and your staff to provide information to the community was really something else, a lesson for all of us, I think. I was wanting to know where your staff found their information, in order to promote that out, where that was coming from and how they were bringing all of that together.

Mr ROY BUTLER: That's a good question. I guess within your question, there's a three-way flow of information. There's the information from transmission network, information from Essential, as the distribution, information from communities that are cut off or affected that don't have comms—that's always a challenge—and then the communication with the Premier, the Minister. There's a few different channels of communication that go on here. I thank you for acknowledging my staff. They were very busy the whole time, and they were able to sort things out that, as I said, government agencies couldn't sort out, because in any disaster plan or emergency plan that we had, we didn't account for the outcome that we had. The communication in, there were some people out west that had access to Starlink and that sort of thing, and they were able to use that with wi-fi-assisted calling. People could make some phone calls.

There was in Menindee, for example, the use of UHF's, and nurses were sleeping somewhere else, so they could be within proximity to be able to respond. People make do. That's the great thing about people in the Far West. They do have frequent power outages. Especially out of town, a lot of people have a generator, so they can plug in a generator outside, run it outside, run an extension cord in with a power board and distribute power to fridges and that sort of thing, but certainly in the townships, that's not the case. In places like Broken Hill, that was the exception, not the rule. The communication in and out of the communities to my office was always a challenge. I've got to acknowledge again that Transgrid, Essential Energy particularly, they were always accessible when it came to me calling them and asking them for information, being on the ground with Minister Sharpe, in Broken Hill, and we had agency people with us and regular access and regular contact with Transgrid and Essential.

Rather than having to go digging for information and searching hard—we were working out of the police station as well. We had the emergency management officer, the REMO, who was also involved. We had a whole lot of resources around where we could get timely, good information, and we could try and push that out as best we could into those communities. I can't say often enough, during a crisis, clear, consistent communication, and

trusted information—because there's always scuttlebutt, there's always rumours, there's Chinese whispers, and you end up with misunderstandings. That just raises anxiety, and it also undermines people's confidence in the next piece of information they receive, which is why for my team and I, it's really important that anything that we said to the community was solid, that we were on really solid ground.

I think that when it comes to those other actors, Essential, people like Mark Summers and Damian Smith, when they were out there, they were very trusted. Transgrid had a fellow by the name of Sam Pickering who came along and spoke on behalf of Transgrid every day. I think he's a good guy. But there was just that undercurrent of scepticism in the community about Transgrid and their role and the lack of redundancy and perceived lack of maintenance on the actual transmission towers. If I can just come back to something that I forgot to say earlier—it was your question, James. You talked about the maintenance of the GT. We've got some conflicting information, which I think has been provided to the Committee, in terms of when that GT was out.

On the ground, the sentiment very strongly in Broken Hill is that it was out in September of '23. The records provided by Transgrid say that it was only just taken offline for refurbishment and that the other one had just been refurbished. The one that had just been refurbished is also the same one that tripped and was only running at about 14 megawatts, instead of anywhere near its capacity, and it was having stability issues, particularly with the feed-in solar and all that sort of thing.

Mrs SALLY QUINNELL: Sorry, am I good to keep going, Chair?

The CHAIR: We've just gone over time as it is at the minute.

Mrs SALLY QUINNELL: Okay. I will defer and put them in writing.

The CHAIR: I was just going to ask Roy if you don't mind sticking around for a couple of minutes, because Judy hasn't even had a go yet.

Mr ROY BUTLER: This is very important to my communities. I'm here for as long as you need me.

Mrs JUDY HANNAN: Yes, the community out there certainly spoke highly of the communication from your office. One comment that I make is that people out there didn't seem to know where to go in an emergency for support. I might get you to comment on that. And the other question was relating to the fact that AGL—the frustration of the solar and the wind farms sitting there. AGL finally came in, from what I believe, to help Transgrid out. The minute that Transgrid was up and going, that contract, or the agreement, has been cut off again. What do you believe, going forward, should be in place there?

Mr ROY BUTLER: You're referring to AGL's battery BESS, or the battery energy storage system, which I think maybe six days in was allowed to be used at 10 per cent of its capacity. Batteries in electrical systems are really good for smoothing out power, because they can soak up load when there's too much and then at night, obviously, can discharge. There's a couple of things with that arrangement. At the moment, there's a thing called a Generator Performance Standard, and it's the technical people within Transgrid who actually provide that. They're the ones who have throttled that to 10 per cent.

I've had discussions as recently as three days ago with Transgrid in regard to lifting that 10 per cent, which has to be done by Transgrid. They have to actually approve lifting the Generator Performance Standard beyond 10 per cent. I'm aware that AGL has an investment in that battery. They're a listed company. They want to get a return for their investors. At 10 per cent, it's not viable for them. They need to actually be able to use more of it. Then there's the commercial agreements for wholesalers to access the network. That's one thing. There's a commercial agreement for Tilt to be able to feed into the AGL BESS battery. Those commercial arrangements need to be expedited. But the linchpin is the Generator Performance Standard being stuck at 10 per cent. I've said to Transgrid I'm happy to work with them on that, but if they can't get it moving then I'll go through the Minister to get it moving.

Mrs JUDY HANNAN: Do you believe that commercial interests are interfering with the best outcome for your community?

Mr ROY BUTLER: I can't prove that that's the case, but I think that there might be an element of that. Essentially, if the battery comes online—it's a wholesaler. It can sell power into the network, sell it to retailers, who can then pass it on to consumers. In times that the GTs are running, Transgrid is also a generator, selling wholesale power. I think that at the very least, that's a perceived conflict. And then you've got Hydrostor—we could talk about Hydrostor for a long time—who will also be a wholesaler of power into the network. So, yes, there's a few moving parts there. But I think, in the interests of the people of Broken Hill and the Far West more broadly, what we need to do is expedite that 10 per cent use of BESS—that's the Generator Performance Standard, the 10 per cent. We also need to make sure that the commercial arrangements are in place to be able to ensure that

the solar and wind projects, and Hydrostor, and the battery are all working as one system of power for the Far West. There was another part to your question, the first part. What was that?

Mrs JUDY HANNAN: It was just about the fact that people didn't know where to go, where their emergency services were, whether it was power or fire or whatever—the number of people that said they were unsure of where to go.

Mr ROY BUTLER: Yes, I think that's a really good point. In a lot of my communities, as you'd know, the only emergency services that might have a constant presence in the town is police, and there might be an RFS shed or there might be an MPS. I've got 27 hospitals and MPSs, and some of those small MPSs are also sort of hooked into information—they have a generator and can get information. But I think I'd be remiss if I didn't acknowledge the importance of things like the Wilcannia Golf Club. The Wilcannia Golf Club became a hub for the community. They have a generator, power supplied by Mounties and Broken Hill Musicians Club, so air conditioning and the ability to charge a phone—that was a key thing for the community, to be able to have a rallying point where they could go and get information.

I think that you can't underestimate the importance of having that place where people can go, where there is power, where they can get an update or get some information, especially if the mobile phone network and everything else is not working. But, yes, there were suggestions in places like White Cliffs, "Can't we have like a solar-powered screen that uses Starlink to have current information supplied on it?" I thought, well, that's not a bad idea, because we've got a lot of people out there who don't use technology. They mightn't have a mobile phone or a smart phone. So having something that, even in a power outage, could still provide up-to-date information, even if it was just one way, into a community, would be good. But even better than that is putting a microgrid in so that they've got power and they've got mobile phone connectivity the whole time anyway.

Mrs JUDY HANNAN: Thank you. Noting the time, I will put any other questions in writing.

The CHAIR: Thank you so much, Roy. That was a good summary of the types of stuff that we were hearing out there. I'm glad Judy came to that question about a single source of truth or a noticeboard, what do you do when there's no power, and how do you get that information, because I think that was a recurring thing in each of the communities that we visited. Roy, we would very much like to spend more time with you but we do have a schedule to get through today, so thank you so much for appearing before us. If we send you some supplementary questions, which would happen around Tuesday next week, we would ask if it's possible for you to respond to those within about seven days so that we can match our timeline in terms of reporting. If that's a problem, please just talk to the Committee secretariat around the timing for that. But we are aiming to table our report in May. Thank you very much, Roy. Good to see you, as always, mate.

(The witness withdrew.)

Mr DAVID BOTHERA, Inspector, NSW Police Force, Western Region Office, affirmed and examined

Mr ANDREW HOLLAND, APM, Assistant Commissioner, NSW Police Force, Western Region Office, sworn and examined

Mr PETER McKECHNIE, Deputy Commissioner, Strategic Capability, NSW Rural Fire Service, affirmed and examined

The CHAIR: I welcome our next set of witnesses. Thank you so much, gentlemen. I apologise for the delay but you were seated in the gallery and I'm sure you can appreciate the importance for this Committee to hear from local member Roy Butler. Thank you for appearing before the Committee today to give evidence. Before we start, do you have any questions about the hearing process?

PETER McKECHNIE: No.

ANDREW HOLLAND: No.

The CHAIR: Thank you so for taking time out of your busy schedules to be with us today. Would you like to make a short opening statement? On behalf of the RFS, Deputy Commissioner?

PETER McKECHNIE: Thank you. When the impact first occurred on 17 October and we started to realise the scale of it through discussion with our brigades and our local district management, we made a decision to deploy a number of assets, for communications, fuel support, initially in support of our brigades to make sure they could stay online and be able to support their local communities. Ultimately on the 18th we had a truck depart Sydney, a B-double, that was loaded with a mixture of coolrooms, fuel cells, some Starlink capability for communications and generators. That was informed to the State Emergency Operations Controller and through our area command onto the Regional Emergency Operations Controller so that we could start the discussion of what else might be possible and what else might be needed, knowing that we had initially deployed those assets, as I say, for the brigades to be online.

We remained in contact with the regional and local teams throughout. Ultimately we ended up with equipment that was supporting a number of schools in the Broken Hill area, the Telco Authority with some radio towers, a number of communities, at least one pharmacy and the ambulance station in Broken Hill. On 23 October we deployed some additional Starlink kits at the request of the regional emergency management committee, again to just support local communications. Throughout, through our emergency logistics services that we have in place for larger scale fire events, we were able to provide access for a number of community groups and some councils to some of that logistical support as well.

Ultimately we ended up with some RFS aircraft involved, which assisted in some of the reconnaissance of exactly where the impact had been and how broad it was to the towers. We'd just call out something we thought worked really well, given the Government initiative around it, as being our Starlink capacity, particularly in communities like Menindee, where we were able to provide it not only to the brigade but also allow community access for things like contacting 000, seeking updates and the like. For us, it worked very closely in with the regional emergency management committee, our local brigades, and ultimately the best outcome we could supply to support that community.

The CHAIR: Thank you so much, Deputy Commissioner. It's a good point that you make about there was no fire out there, but you have a certain set of resources that you're able to put into play. Thank you for making that point. Assistant Commissioner?

ANDREW HOLLAND: Thank you. My first knowledge came with a phone call from Jamie Caldwell, who is the EUSFA controller, basically advising that there was a major power outage to the Far West of New South Wales. Noting that this would obviously affect the three local government areas, that being Central Darling, the Broken Hill city and the unincorporated area, a decision was made by me to stand up the Regional Emergency Management Committee. Probably the thing I will say is that the engagement and the free flow of information between all agencies was pivotal in making sure that all emergency services and essential services to the areas were maintained, albeit in a limited capacity at that time.

I do acknowledge their concerns in relation to communications across the time and the time span. I note Mr Butler's comments previously about how information was getting out to the more remote communities. Probably the things that saved us in the location was the resilience of those localised and remote communities. A lot of those people do have their own generators. Obviously, without that assistance, the ability to contact those people would have been struggling. We made a decision very early on for the police in those local communities to have local community meetings. I think that's one of the ways the information got out across the communities. I think that probably one of the better things that came out of it was the information-sharing along those

community lines. But, as we mentioned before, I heard the conversation about where those meetings took place. That's something I will take on board.

One of the things we talk about in the future was making sure that those communities do have the ability to remain connected, because that ability to pass that information on in the future is probably imperative in the way it worked. As I said before, we're now working with the local emergency management committees to make sure they have contingencies in place for their plans for power outages in the future, noting that this does happen on a regular occurrence.

The CHAIR: Thank you so much. It is my understanding that typically a LEOCON is a police officer?

ANDREW HOLLAND: Yes, that's correct.

The CHAIR: A senior police officer. They would typically be the ones who stood up an emergency management committee?

ANDREW HOLLAND: Yes, that's right, sir.

The CHAIR: Is there a capacity for a local government LEMO—I think that's the term—to request or ask for it to be stood up?

ANDREW HOLLAND: What would usually happen is the LEMO would be approached. They'd be notified of an incident in their local government area. Then it's the decision of the LEOCON to make that decision whether they stand up the EOCN.

The CHAIR: My memory from Central Darling is that the REMO is at your end?

ANDREW HOLLAND: The REMO covers the whole area, so he covers the whole Far West area. I got a phone call in relation with Jamie Caldwell, identifying the size and catastrophic nature of these towers being knocked over. When I saw the first photographs, I realised that this was going to be a long-term event. That's why I immediately made a decision to stand up the Regional Emergency Management Committee.

The CHAIR: Thank you so much for that. I just want to get into the detail of the regional emergency management committee. Central Darling certainly said that they had a conversation and things were happening on that first day, but I feel like Broken Hill were telling us that maybe things at their side, in terms of emergency management committees, didn't happen until day four or five. Could you provide any clarity about the initial decisions to stand up a regional emergency management committee? Did that only include Central Darling or did it include Central Darling and the Unincorporated or did it include all three local government areas?

ANDREW HOLLAND: From my recollection, all three were involved. We called a Regional Emergency Management meeting online early on. I think it was the general manager from Broken Hill council that attended. He was part of that. The decision for him to be part of that meeting means that he's accepted the responsibility that we've gone to the regional level.

Mrs JUDY HANNAN: Everybody seemed to do some good work out there. I appreciate your comment about local community committees. The REMO seemed to be working and the LEMC, but the communication from that through to community—the number of people who didn't know where to go for emergency services worried me about that whole program of emergency committees not filtering through to the people who needed it at the end. I don't know whether you'd like to comment on that. I know you just said that you're looking at that.

ANDREW HOLLAND: In those remote communities, a lot of the time it falls to the local police officer. I heard Mr Butler talk about the Wilcannia Golf Club, for example. That information gets out, and then we have to use the word-by-mouth example because of lack of telecommunication assistance in those areas to get the information out there. A lot of the Indigenous community in those locations get the information through our ACLOs. Our ACLOs were travelling to those locations to bring the people in. Whether they made that information in time is obviously one of those concerns, but every effort was made to keep those communities informed. Probably the hardest part to get that information out was when the load shedding was happening across the commands, or across the areas. That wasn't coming out in a timely fashion. That's one of the concerns I do have.

Mrs JUDY HANNAN: Maybe some work to be done on community being aware of where to go and where those things are before an emergency happens might be worthwhile looking at.

ANDREW HOLLAND: In some of those smaller remote communities, there is only one location they can have it—the community hall. They would definitely be aware of the locations. It's probably the timing more than the location itself.

Mrs JUDY HANNAN: There were many people that were unaware of where to go, even when they were next door to a building. It's just something to note.

Mrs SALLY QUINNELL: My question is for RFS to start with. The Menindee community were very appreciative of the RFS in Menindee, and the crew were highly spoken about, particularly the connection to generators and sharing generators. I do think it's interesting. We heard that there are power outages a lot in that area, and there seems to have been—I don't want to say a disagreement—an understanding that this was not necessarily a disastrous situation straightaway, because power goes out all the time. When did you know this was going to be bigger than just a single power outage?

PETER McKECHNIE: From our perspective, on the 17th the feedback we were getting very quickly from our brigades was saying that they felt this was going to be a more significant event. Whilst they couldn't confirm the exact level of impact to the infrastructure, from their local knowledge they felt that it was more than they'd previously experienced. We took ultimately the risk, the chance, that it could be a lesser event, but we just felt that, given what they'd told us, it was worth us deploying the extra assets. Ultimately, if we had turned those trucks round partway there, that would have been an exercise in loading trucks and turning them round.

Mrs SALLY QUINNELL: No harm done. Yes, that's right.

PETER McKECHNIE: But very much reliant on that local knowledge.

Mrs SALLY QUINNELL: I'm wondering where they got that knowledge from. We have heard evidence that the power went out. Well, that happens all the time. In certain areas, it came back on, and then it went. What information were they getting that told them it was different?

PETER McKECHNIE: One of the unique things we have in the RFS, in our brigades, particularly in the more remote areas, is they're made up of the community. There's landholders, shop owners, people who work in different parts of the community. They'll very quickly piece together what it is that they're hearing by word of mouth. It makes it easy as a single agency to use that information at times, but for us in how we can generate that with our agency colleagues, how other agencies make decisions based on what we're getting as that word of mouth, is a little bit harder. Ultimately, we have some very strong captains in our local communities. They know the people in their community, and they'll piece together what they're hearing and allow us to make decisions based on what is often, early in the piece, nothing more than word of mouth.

Mrs SALLY QUINNELL: And if I could just go to police. When did you know this was going to be bigger than just a single power outage? How did you know that?

ANDREW HOLLAND: I think I mentioned before that very early on I got the photographs of the towers that had been knocked down. In layman's terms—I'm not an electrician, by any means—I know that that was the one point where the power was coming from to the Broken Hill area.

Mrs SALLY QUINNELL: Yes. You went, "Oh, that's bad news."

ANDREW HOLLAND: That's exactly what I thought.

Mrs SALLY QUINNELL: So there was no inclusion then of if the backup generators had come on board as per normal, we would have just gone back to business as usual?

ANDREW HOLLAND: I don't think it would have been business as usual. As I said, we weren't aware that the second generator was offline. Again, we were advised that there were two generators, and it wasn't till very early in the piece that we were advised that the second generator was offline. The gas turbine that they were going to use as the replacement wasn't able to make the capacity to generate enough power to do the whole three districts. That was the first conversation we had with probably EUSFAC about whether they would need to increase the power. That was the information about the battery energy storage locations, bringing the battery power in to get to those locations to boost that ability to maintain power across the services.

Mr JAMES WALLACE: My first question was to the New South Wales police, either representative, and was around the role that the police play in the REMC and the LEMC. I'm just wondering whether those committees are encouraged to undergo training for power outages as a type of emergency, or is a power outage emergency something that's not really contemplated, and it's more focused on flooding, fire, terrorist attack and other types of emergencies. Is power outages something that you say, "Yes, that's fully within our remit; that's an emergency that an LEMC and REMC needs to cover", and police have that direct role in helping manage?

ANDREW HOLLAND: I would say that, in my 40 years in the police, this is the first power outage that I've actually dealt with, so it was obviously at a major scale. I would definitely say that LEMC, when they practice, would probably look more towards floods, bushfires. Again, I think they'd be more likely to challenge an earthquake rather than a power outage because I think the power stability is usually one of those things which comes out, especially in the western region, as was noted before that there are outages that occur fairly regularly. Things happen. For example, a line goes down and it's a single line, whereas in major metropolitan areas, there's

always a way to divert the power around that location, and I think that's one of the challenges that the remoteness of this incident probably highlighted. So will it be one of the conversations I'll be having with the LEMCs in the future? Most definitely.

Mr JAMES WALLACE: Peter, I was just wondering, you talked before about how the trucks got loaded from Sydney to send out generators, Starlink and other essential things. What you stocked in those trucks and the decisions you made, was that informed with discussions with State Emergency Services, or were you really reliant just on your own network of brigades?

PETER McKECHNIE: In that initial stage, it was our own network of brigades through feedback from the brigades of what they were seeing and they believed was unfolding and equipment that they thought may be useful. This was that very early stage of we thought we were just going to make sure our brigades were coming online. We wanted to be able to have some extra equipment there to support the community as need be. But those discussions happened over ensuing days with police, the rest of the REMC and, for us at a State level, with the SEMC colleagues as well.

ANDREW HOLLAND: Mr Wallace, I think it's one of the conversations at the REMC level, which is thought about by Pete. He made a good point, that all of the agencies were actually volunteering their information and obviously volunteering what they could provide, so everyone knew that it was going to be an extended period. And I think that one of the best things about the process is that all the agencies combined so well, you know. If, for example, SES were talking about what they could get to a certain location, RFS would then back it up and say, "Well, we can get something else to another location just as quick." So it was a really good coordination in that respect.

Mr JAMES WALLACE: That's really positive to know, and well done on taking those initiatives. Thank you.

Ms MARYANNE STUART: Assistant Commissioner, nice to see you again. I am aware of the enormous region that you are responsible for, so I just want to say thank you very much for being here today in Sydney at this hearing. In regards to the Regional Emergency Management Committee, do the ACLOs sit on that committee?

ANDREW HOLLAND: Not usually, no. It's more an emergency management process, but if there is a need for the ACLOs to get the information out to our more remote communities, that information is usually passed through a Local Emergency Management Committee.

Ms MARYANNE STUART: When we were out at Wilcannia, we met with the Wilcannia Local Aboriginal Land Council, and they were saying that they hadn't been invited to the Committee, so that's why I asked that question about ACLOs. So that's just for your information.

ANDREW HOLLAND: Yes, thank you. I note that.

Ms MARYANNE STUART: The other thing that we found out in some of these communities is how important the local schools are, and that to be able to get information out to everyone it could go through the school newsletter. So I'm just bringing this to your attention. Often schools have the visual boards and things like that. Of course if the electricity goes down, that's not always beneficial. But, yes, just to keep in mind that there's that source of communication. To both of you, to the RFS and to the Police Force, when the electricity's gone down, when Telstra's gone down, do you have what you need in these remote communities to be able to ensure that everybody is kept up to speed with communication, or is there something that, as a committee, we need to know that you need?

ANDREW HOLLAND: I'll use the example of Broken Hill Police Station being used as the location for our REMC and obviously LEMCs for locations, and I think it might have been the Parliament location when they came out as well. But again, in saying that, Broken Hill Police Station is a relatively new police station which has had generators built in to obviously cope with the facility. Does Wilcannia Police Station have it? No. Does the other police station have it? No. So what we are reliant on is then the Ausgrid and those people at Essential Energy providing us and the other essential services generators to maintain radio networks and obviously power and communication networks so we can obviously keep the community updated and managed.

PETER McKECHNIE: Look, from an RFS perspective, certainly our stations are a mixture of types of stations across the State. Part of building those stations now is that we do look at all of the redundancies. That's a work in progress. Still I think something that stood out to us is that technology is changing so fast and where we've been able to head with the Starlink capability is very much still in its early stages. We're installing that on all our appliances right across the State. That's a three-year program just to get that done, as well as a number of more mobile units that can be used, you know, just to put in a community. The ongoing effort to do that is going

to be vital, and what we learnt out of this was the ability to not just to make sure the RFS and our brigades can communicate, but what we saw in Menindee was that we're able to provide the Starlink set-up.

People could go to the general store and get access to Starlink. That helped with emergency communications. It helped with them catching up and seeing where recovery points were et cetera. So I think, across the agencies, we'll continue to work with them around what can be achieved through that. But certainly it is a long program, and I would suggest to the Committee that it is something that is certainly going to provide a great benefit at the end of it. But it does have a fair tail to be able to finish it off and ensure that it's not just an agency network access, but that it's actually something that we can do for the community as well. As we install it on our trucks, it'll be in the stations. That's our intent to be able to achieve so that literally even a fire truck could be in a community, not just able to communicate itself, but allow community access to a certain degree of the capability.

Ms MARYANNE STUART: If I may just move a vote of thanks. Every town hall meeting we had, every public forum that we had, everybody was so grateful to both the NSW Police Force and the RFS. So we just wanted to move a vote of thanks, of gratitude. You went above and beyond, and thanks a lot.

The CHAIR: For the police, I've got a bit of a technical question. In your submission, it refers to the Public Information Services Functional Area for consistent messaging. What does that mean, I'm sorry?

ANDREW HOLLAND: PIFAC. So what happens is when we get to the point where a major incident occurs, we contact our police media unit. They stand up at what's called PIFAC, which is then all the government agencies reporting there, so there's one point of reporting going through. There's not multiple different information coming out; it's one point of information.

The CHAIR: And so then RFS and SES and, I guess, the Premier's Department or whatever, they're all tapping into that one?

ANDREW HOLLAND: Yes. So if we have an REMC meeting and the information we need to get out from that meeting, obviously we speak to our partners, the agencies at the RFS, and there might be information they want to pass on. So it'll all come through there and be passed on to PIFAC as part of the REMC, and then they would obviously get the information out to the networks, as required.

PETER McKECHNIE: Particularly during events like power, you know, as we saw in this, it's not—I suppose it is that little bit different. You touched on before around the exercising, it's different to where fires, floods et cetera, we're issuing warnings and providing public information to communities to make decisions on a very regular basis. For us, we're issuing some level of warning most days, so there's a really strong presence around that public information piece for that, but even then we'll also engage with PIFAC. Where an event like this that, you know, there are more few and far between, PIFAC provides that good coordination right across government and gives everyone a point to access it.

The CHAIR: I think this question is probably more for the police but, Assistant Commissioner, do you have a memory that Transgrid in the early days had some sort of commercial, contractual or regulatory restriction on being able to honestly tell people that the second unit wasn't working?

ANDREW HOLLAND: There was some information that came out that the second unit—Transgrid, I believe, did have their own media unit passing on information. It was along those lines of "The outages will be this time. Power should be this time"—those sorts of things. But I can't remember when the actual information came out about the second unit not working, no. We made a decision then to bring it all back under PIFAC, which was all part of the REMC then.

The CHAIR: Finally, a bit of a weird question, your police officers were getting in their cars and going out to community at a point where they had no telecommunication contact back to base, as I understand it—correct me if that's wrong. Is there a WHS sort of element to police being out there without communications, in case they need to call in other agents?

ANDREW HOLLAND: No, our radio network did have power, so we were able to keep contact with our police officers. When they get out in the far remote locations they may have lost communications, but obviously we had access. We'd say, for example, "I'm going to White Cliffs. I expect to be gone for two hours", then they'd know where they are, for example. That's the way. But our radio network did work the whole time. Again, that was reliant on Essential Energy providing generators to the police station so our network could be maintained.

The CHAIR: Is that part of the critical communications network?

ANDREW HOLLAND: Yes, so we can keep the essential services going.

The CHAIR: Because I was led to believe from Menindee RFS that at one point the police, the medical centre—

ANDREW HOLLAND: The batteries did run out and that was one of the concerns. As I think I heard Mr Butler say before, the battery generators did run out, and then it's a matter of being able to change them over to diesel. That sorted some of the concerns. So we lost contact sometime until the technicians were able to get out there and switch it across.

The CHAIR: Out at Menindee, I think, there was a reliance on the UHF system there at one stage. Is that right?

PETER McKECHNIE: Certainly, we see it in most rural communities—the UHF network, citizen band network, becomes a very strong point of communication. It was something for the RFS, after the Black Summer fires, we reinvigorated, I suppose, making sure that all of our appliances still have access to the UHF network, and it's not just agency networks. Because farmers have UHF, even truck drivers have UHF, so it just creates another level of access, noting it is a citizen band network, so it's not as regulated as our own agency systems. Again, I think as the technology changes now, where we go with communication and our reliance on towers, our ability to access satellite and backhauls through things like Starlink will continue to evolve. Starlink is but one, but it is certainly the lead point that we have access to now.

The CHAIR: Thank you all for appearing before us today. You will be provided with a copy of the transcript of evidence for your correction. That will be coming to you in the coming days. The Committee may develop supplementary questions, and we would get them out to you early next week. We would ask, if possible, that you return these within seven days. Please talk to us if you can't. Again, our collective thanks for the work that you did in yet another emergency situation. Albeit a bit unusual, Assistant Commissioner—the first time in 40 years. We really appreciate everything that your teams do in uniform. Thank you so much.

(The witnesses withdrew.)

(Luncheon adjournment)

Mr GREG WELLS, Managing Director, Service NSW, sworn and examined

Mr JIM HENRY, Executive Director, Disaster Preparation and Recovery, Service NSW, affirmed and examined

Ms RANIA WANNOUS, Chief Customer Officer, NSW Telco Authority, sworn and examined

Mr JOSH WESTON, Manager, Telecommunications Emergency Management Unit, NSW Telco Authority, affirmed and examined

The CHAIR: I welcome our third panel of witnesses. Thank you for giving us some of your valuable time here today. Before we proceed, does anyone have any questions about the hearing process?

RANIA WANNOUS: No.

The CHAIR: Excellent. I'm going to give you a chance to make a brief opening statement, if you'd like to do that. First of all, someone from Telco?

RANIA WANNOUS: NSW Telco Authority welcomes the opportunity to appear before the Committee today and we thank you for the invitation. We manage and operate the public safety network known as the PSN, which provides mission-critical communications for emergency and essential services. The PSN is a P25 radio network with a target availability of 99.95 per cent. It is different technology to mobile carriers, and it is required to operate at a higher standard of reliability than commercial carriers due to its mission-critical requirements. I'm pleased to report that during the Far West power outages, the PSN remained operational and stable for use by emergency and essential services.

The Telco Authority also leads the State's Telecommunication Services Functional Area under New South Wales emergency management arrangements. Our functional area protects and coordinates support for telecommunications. This includes working with carriers to protect commercial infrastructure during emergencies to ensure continued connectivity for communities. We also coordinate the deployment of mobile assets to support the stable operation of the PSN for frontline responders, and since December 2024 we now also have the capability to deploy up to four broadband Cells on Wheels, which can provide temporary wi-fi coverage at evacuation centres when traditional telecommunications infrastructure is damaged or destroyed.

We successfully deployed these assets during the recent response to Ex-Tropical Cyclone Alfred. NSW Telco Authority continues to advocate for reforms that would enhance our capabilities during disaster response. This includes the provision of data relating to mobile tower sites, topography and facilities, real-time operational data from carriers, as well as always-on disaster roaming for emergency services organisations and temporary disaster roaming for communities.

GREG WELLS: Again, thank you for the opportunity to provide input through the Government's response and to appear today. The Service NSW role in this response, as it has been over the past three or four years in other incidents, has been primarily to provide financial assistance to families and businesses as part of the recovery phase. For Broken Hill, that took the form of a \$200 individual grant and a \$400 business grant, which we deployed about 10 days from the request on 7 November. That's a capability that we've used and improved on over the past three or four years, as various things have happened. Just as Ex-Tropical Cyclone Alfred is happening right now, we're responding to that process as well. Our assistance for Broken Hill was both online and in person. We also provided advice via our contact centre.

The online process, as with other grants, is via the MyServiceNSW account, website and app. The in-person response was both through recovery centres, which we participated in through the Reconstruction Authority, through our service centre in the region, and also through our mobile service centre which we used in outreach during the event, and continue to this week, as well as grants get closer to closing on 31 March. We assisted 10,249 customers with payments of grants during the process, and the main issue that we worked through—which we always can work through—is proof of identity and proof of address for these grants. As I said, I think that's an issue generally for servicing a lot of vulnerable customers and certainly was the case for Broken Hill, but is, again, something we can always work through, and did so in this case. Always our role in administering grants is walking a very fine line and balancing customer experience, making sure there is speed to delivery, so that we are a meaningful part of the recovery, but also managing fraud, which unfortunately is part of all grant processes. Thank you again for the opportunity and happy to take your questions.

The CHAIR: Thank you all so much. A really brief question for you, Ms Wannous. What percentage of that Far West area we're talking about do you have uninterrupted coverage for our emergency services on a normal given day?

RANIA WANNOUS: In the city of Broken Hill?

The CHAIR: No, once you get outside of Broken Hill, so once you get out into those communities like Tibooburra, Packsaddle, White Cliffs, Wilcannia and Menindee. You don't have 100 per cent coverage, do you?

RANIA WANNOUS: No, not yet. The PSN coverage across the State of New South Wales is about 58.8 per cent. In Broken Hill, we have PSN coverage in the city of Broken Hill.

The CHAIR: But once you go outside of Broken Hill, no coverage?

RANIA WANNOUS: No PSN coverage at this point. It is part of the rollout of the PSN, which is currently underway through a program called the Critical Communications Enhancement Program. That program will be completed in the second half of 2027, and at full State coverage, we will achieve 85 per cent land coverage in New South Wales.

Mrs SALLY QUINNELL: Thank you for being here today and for your submission. What is the relationship in an emergency situation between you guys, the Telco Authority and Telstra in that sort of situation?

RANIA WANNOUS: We're responsible for the Telecommunications Services Functional Area. That is one of the functional areas that sits under the New South Wales EMPLAN. During an emergency response, we coordinate responses with Telstra and all mobile carriers, depending on the nature of the response. So we work quite collaboratively with all carriers, and they do provide us information, as required, during events. We don't have access to live data or real-time data from carriers, but we do receive them at static points throughout the day. To a more recent example, during Ex-Tropical Cyclone Alfred, we were receiving twice daily updates at particular points in time. I don't know, Josh, if the carriers gave us those same kind of updates during—

JOSH WESTON: Yes, we did have regular communications with the carriers. I do want to also point out that the NSW Telco Authority does not regulate telecommunications in New South Wales, including 000 or emergency call services, and the Federal Government has regulatory oversight over telecommunications and commercial network operators.

Mrs SALLY QUINNELL: Yes, I understand. So you're there for support, not to regulate?

JOSH WESTON: Correct. We facilitate the support of the carriers via New South Wales emergency management arrangements. We act as a conduit and have the ability to share priorities from ESOs and the carriers to be able to support emergency response.

RANIA WANNOUS: One thing I would like to add is that during an emergency response, we will protect telecommunications infrastructure, whether it's public or the infrastructure of carriers. So we will protect commercial infrastructure to ensure connectivity stays in place for communities wherever possible.

Mrs SALLY QUINNELL: During this situation, we've heard that it was a matter of hours between the power going out and the batteries of the mobile phone towers going down or just reaching the end of their capacity. Did Telstra come and ask for support or let you guys know that telecommunications had broken down in large areas of this affected area?

JOSH WESTON: I might start with that one. As I'm sure you're aware, the telecommunication sites have a reliance on power and they have alternate—as opposed to just mains, often they have battery or generator, whether they're fixed or mobile. We provided Telstra and all of the carriers with a number of situational updates throughout this event. We hosted meetings with the carriers and with the ESO comms commanders specifically looking at this event—key priorities, key outages and key restoration times. We offered support through the carriers in regard to both the potential turning on of generators and delivery of generators. One of the key challenges that has been communicated back to us is the requirements for safe and secure access, and it's also things like some sites may need a technician to actually go and reset certain elements of their sites. As such, there was a reliance on carrier staffing and resources to be able to return service to those sites.

Mrs SALLY QUINNELL: You speak about support to emergency services. Could I just have a bit of a list of what that entails, like who is included and who's not included in the umbrella term of emergency services?

JOSH WESTON: This is probably best described through the telecommunication services supporting plan. We have a number of member agencies through that. We liaise through the New South Wales Government emergency management arrangements, so the functional areas as well as ESO—being police, fire, ambulance, RFS, SES and a number of other agencies through that. We are a member and participated in the SEOC meetings throughout this event, as well as participating in the Regional Operations Centre meetings remotely as well.

Mrs JUDY HANNAN: To the Telco Authority, can you please list what you actually deployed to the Far West during this process?

RANIA WANNOUS: We deployed 21 mobile assets in total. These included Cells on Wheels, which we call COWs, as well as generators. This was deployed to either support or augment the PSN's coverage. Locations for our deployment included Broken Hill, Wilcannia, White Cliffs, Tibooburra and Menindee.

Mrs JUDY HANNAN: At what point were they deployed?

RANIA WANNOUS: The exact day? I think I might have to take that on notice. We'll get you those exact details, unless you have them?

JOSH WESTON: No, I was just going to say that, as the situation unfolded and we became more aware of the extended nature of the event, that it wasn't just a small blip in power supply, that's when the operational decisions were made to deploy additional resources. But the exact timing we'll have to come back to you on.

Mrs JUDY HANNAN: Can I please get those details from you? You were talking about Alfred and what you deployed in preparation, so I'd be curious to know when you actually deployed your assets. And they only got deployed to help Broken Hill area, is that correct?

RANIA WANNOUS: And some of the towns around there. We can provide you with a list of the assets we deployed and the locations we deployed them to, yes.

Mrs JUDY HANNAN: That would be really good. Thank you very much. Over to Services NSW, there's been some discussion about the financial handout. As you recognised, people had difficulty with identification, but there's been some discussion about whether it wouldn't have been better to have given vouchers to local stores. Can you comment on that, please?

GREG WELLS: In terms of our response, what we were tasked with as part of the arrangements was, were these financial assistance packages for individuals and businesses. I think in discussion across the response generally for government, that's probably a question that's maybe better directed to the Reconstruction Authority. That's someone that had overall policy ownership of this piece, so I probably am not best to comment on that. The piece that we were administering were the financial grants. That being said, wherever we could assist local businesses through the business grant, we made sure we did that. We have someone we call a business concierge on the ground in Broken Hill permanently who knows those businesses and assisted them with applications for grants and those sorts of things. That's some assistance we were able to provide, but in terms of vouchers for groceries and other things, that might be a broader question for the Reconstruction Authority.

Mrs JUDY HANNAN: What percentages of businesses do you believe claimed and what percentage of locals of the population do you believe claimed?

GREG WELLS: I'll have to come back to you on notice with the percentages, but I can give you some overall totals of applications and what we paid for both individuals and businesses. So far for individuals, noting the grant's still open until the 31st, we've received 12,167 applications. We've paid 9,690 of those. There were about 1,591 that were not approved, and there are still 854 in progress. "In progress" means that we are waiting on or there is some outstanding documentation in terms of an application. We are still able to assist customers through many channels, if people would like to get back in contact with us and complete those applications. For businesses, we've received 764 applications. We've paid 559. There are 160 not approved, and 29 are in progress.

Mr JAMES WALLACE: I might start with two questions to Greg and Jim from Service NSW. Of the \$200 and \$400 rebates that were provided, what's your understanding of the intention of those? Was that to provide an immediate assistance? Was it meant to be a form of compensation for losses that may be suffered as a consequence of the outage? What's your understanding in Service NSW as what was intended by that payment?

GREG WELLS: I think in terms of overall policy intent, it was to assist customers that had experienced immediate issues with food going off, medicines being at risk, other things from power outages. I think that was really the target for those customers, and same for businesses.

Mr JAMES WALLACE: In relation to the 1,591 individual cases that were not approved, what was the reason for those failures or the reasons for the rejection? Were they fraudulent claims? Were they simply not enough paperwork completed? What was the reason they weren't approved?

GREG WELLS: They wouldn't have been rejected. We haven't rejected anything because they're missing paperwork at the moment. To be clear, those 854 applications that are in progress, we have missing documentation. Again, if there are ways that we can assist customers with proving eligibility, in terms of identity or address, we can still do that. The 1,591 would primarily be where residents weren't residing in the impacted LGAs, for example. They're potentially fraudulent applications.

Mr JAMES WALLACE: In relation to those that are in progress, what action has being taken by Service NSW to assist or complete those?

GREG WELLS: Good question. We do multiple follow-ups with customers where we're missing information. We make phone calls. We send customers emails from the email address that they've logged on and tried to submit the application from. We make sure that customers know, via our various communication channels, whether they be email messages or whatever, where they can come to get assistance. During the time of the response directly, that was both in the recovery access point and through the service centre, but also in terms of the mobile outreach that we performed in the communities outside of Broken Hill as well. We try to do everything we can to make sure customers are aware that we're there to support. They can also give us a call and we can try and sort that out through our contact centre as well.

Mr JAMES WALLACE: Of the \$4 million envelope that you started with for these payments, how much money is left over?

GREG WELLS: I might take an exact figure on notice, but going off those figures, it's probably in the vicinity of around half a million left, I would say. Rather than give you that figure, I'll take on notice and get you an exact figure.

Ms MARYANNE STUART: I'll stay with you, Mr Wells. When communication is down—both electricity and the mobile phone network—how do you communicate with people?

GREG WELLS: That's a very big challenge. It's impossible. What we did do from the outset—and Mr Henry might like to add to this as well—in preparation for grants becoming available, whatever we could get to council agencies or local community centres in terms of flyers and other things, in order for people to get ready to download their Service app and understand the eligibility requirements and so forth, we made sure we did that on paper. We also engaged a lot through the local member's office as well, in case they had channels in locations where that worked as well. We spent a fair bit of time with ABC Broken Hill, trying to make sure that people heard our message as well and what was potentially coming available. It is a big issue for us, when power is out, obviously, but we try to work around that wherever we can.

Ms MARYANNE STUART: As a New South Wales State service, you don't sit on the REMC?

GREG WELLS: We're a supporting agency in terms of response.

JIM HENRY: We don't actually have a seat at the REMC, but we do have a seat at the Regional Recovery Committee, when that is activated. When it transitions to recovery, we will then have representation on that regional one and, if we have to, the Local Recovery Committee as well.

Ms MARYANNE STUART: That's helpful. Thank you. We've noticed there are people that rely on electricity for sleep apnoea machines, nebulisers and dialysis machines. Because Service NSW covers things like motor registration, do you know those vulnerable people?

GREG WELLS: That's a really good question. I think we'd know to some extent. I don't think we would have a specific list of those customers directly, but we may have had interactions before where we do understand a customer's situation and how that works. I might have to come back to you on notice specifically on that detail.

Ms MARYANNE STUART: That's fine. Thank you, Mr Wells. Just one for Ms Wannous. The COWs, Cells on Wheels—were they rolled out because Telstra went down?

RANIA WANNOUS: The Far West power outages took place, as you'd be aware, in October. Those broadband COWs were operational in December last year. They weren't available—

Ms MARYANNE STUART: They weren't available at the time?

RANIA WANNOUS: No. The four broadband COWs were an election commitment of the New South Wales Government. They were finalised and ready for deployment in December, which is why they weren't available for deployment in October.

Ms MARYANNE STUART: Before, you said that the PSN covers 58.8 per cent of the State. Is it fair to say most of that would be in regional New South Wales, Sydney, Newcastle, Wollongong, but not rural New South Wales?

RANIA WANNOUS: Our coverage is across the greater metropolitan area, but in terms of our coverage, it's actually to Port Stephens and then down south to Nowra. We have coverage along northern New South Wales. In fact, when rolling out the Critical Communications Enhancement Program, northern New South Wales was prioritised as a region, because it's usually at risk of major events, whether they are bushfires or floods. The PSN is built to be a contiguous network, so it needs to be built out in a way so that there's no drop in coverage. We can't say, "There's a site here and there's a site over there, and there might be a little bit of a black spot here." It's required to meet mission-critical standards, so it is being built out in that way.

Ms MARYANNE STUART: Just to be clear, when Telstra goes down in the State of New South Wales and people can't ring 000, there's nothing else they can do? NSW Telco Authority does not step in in any way. Is that correct?

RANIA WANNOUS: We have tools in which we understand which communities are at risk of telecommunications isolation, and we use that depending on what the situation is and what the event is. It will depend on how we then engage, during, with the SEOCN. We are also reliant on Telstra for that information. We don't receive live data updates.

Ms MARYANNE STUART: When Telstra went down and people couldn't ring 000 for life-threatening reasons, there was nothing NSW Telco Authority could do to assist those people that are isolated? It's just a yes-or-no answer.

JOSH WESTON: It's a little bit more complicated than that in this circumstance. We do a lot of work with the carriers to understand the network coverage. So for Broken Hill area itself, there is coverage from TPG, Optus and Telstra. A lot of the further-out communities are Telstra reliant only. However, I would say that with the ability of things like if they've got NBN or satellite coverage, then that may actually provide additional options to call 000. There's also the ability of things like Starlink, which has also been rolled out, as well as new technologies with satellite direct to handset. Apple phones have the ability to contact satellites at the moment.

Ms MARYANNE STUART: Mr Weston, when this went down on 17 October and people didn't have electricity for 19 days, and people couldn't ring 000 to get the Royal Flying Doctor Service or anybody else, the question is a yes or no answer: Is there something you could have done to step in to give those people peace of mind? Yes or no?

RANIA WANNOUS: At the time, had our broadband COWs been available, we would have been able to deploy them to evacuation centres. They weren't available at the time. No.

The CHAIR: Following up on that, once the Cells on Wheels go out—regardless of whether I'm with Telstra or Vodafone or Optus or whatever—am I, as a person with a mobile phone in my hand, able to tap into that coverage that you've got on wheels that's going to give me access?

JOSH WESTON: I might start that off. There are different types of Cells on Wheels. There are PSN-specific Cells on Wheels which support the Public Sector Network specifically. There are carrier-based Cells on Wheels that Optus, Telstra or NBN may have—Optus, Telstra and TPG. They're linked to their specific networks, so if you're a Telstra customer, you can use a Telstra COW. What we've been developing is broadband COWs, which basically create a wi-fi bubble for that area, so it doesn't replace terrestrial mobile networks, but it does give the ability to use wi-fi calling.

The CHAIR: Thank you, that helps enormously. Mr Henry, I'm interested to know about preparedness. In terms of Service NSW and being ready to go out to an affected community, what steps are being put in place in terms of getting ready to deploy that? We know there's going to be a next event, it's just a question of where, so what sort of work is going on in the background there for you guys?

JIM HENRY: The type of steps we've taken to be prepared is firstly after-action reviews from every incident so that we're continuously learning. In the context of Service, we've taken this role on and out of the 2019-20 fires, COVID, so on and so forth. Throughout those major events, we've taken on board the lessons from there. Our team that actually deploys, we work very closely with the Reconstruction Authority as well. The capability is in training our staff to be trained in customer service, obviously, to be trained in provision of frontline services, and also to be trauma aware so that when they're dealing with disaster-impacted community members, they're able to manage working with that person who's affected. They're the key elements of the training that we provide. We also undertake exercises internally, and that includes the executive of Service NSW. Pre-season, we conduct an exercise based on various scenarios to ensure that all of Service is ready to undertake a deployment, whether it be deploying grants or in support of Reconstruction Authority.

GREG WELLS: The couple of pieces I'd add was in administering grants—we've obviously done a lot of those. We've tried to make sure that as we've done each one, we've improved on that technology and are more ready to go. I think this was around 10 days from request, and some of those previous grants were more like three, four, six weeks, so we've got a lot better at being able to turn on a grant's capability. The only other things I'd quickly mention were we have teams based regionally in service centres, or supporting businesses, that we can deploy into recovery centres. They're trained, as Jim said, to be ready to do that. We also have some technology supported through the Telco Authority that helps us run our technology in those recovery points. So that's ready to go as we need it. So we've done as much as we can to think about what might be the next issue.

The CHAIR: To give two classic examples—the power outage in Far West and then the weather event up on the Mid North Coast—have you got teams of experts, trauma-informed specialists, that you move into those areas or are you saying that it's the local workforce capacity that can step up to that trauma-informed response?

GREG WELLS: A little bit of both. We have a core team that specialise in exactly doing this—a disaster recovery and preparation team. We then have a surge workforce where we've trained other people across the Department of Customer Service to be able to step in and assist where possible and then also, wherever possible, we can look to local resources as well, noting that people will still need to turn up to Service NSW centres. We can manage demand across centres, recovery points and other places as well. So it's a combination of all of those things.

The CHAIR: To clarify, you roll into town with your support when we shift to recovery, as opposed to response. That's dictated by Reconstruction Authority stepping into the frame as well?

JIM HENRY: It's actually dictated between the combat agency and Reconstruction Authority. It's under the legislation and the plan. There is a point in time where the combat agency will go, "We're ready to transition." Then with RA—between the State Emergency Operations Controller and then the State Recovery Controller—they hand over and that's when we will come and support Reconstruction Authority and other agencies.

The CHAIR: Can you put into really simple and practical terms what types of on-the-ground actions you took for a community at Wilcannia or White Cliffs or Tibooburra? What did that look like? Like a handful of people in a car turn up into town with laptops, set up at the community hall and invite people in? Could you explain that in really simple terms for the Committee, please?

JIM HENRY: Service has a broader capability with our mobile service centres and they've existed for several years. Fortuitously, we had one doing a regional deployment at the time, which acted as a force multiplier. That is a specific team. They were bolstered by some of the recovery staff who were also there. On the ground, the practical is very much helping people access their MyServiceAccount on the app. It's helping people with proof of identity, proof of address, and if we see there's an issue with digital literacy, we make sure we help step them through the processes as best we can. We were bolstered—when we deployed into those regional areas such as Wilcannia, Menindee et cetera, we were also going out with Reconstruction Authority staff, and we were taking other relevant government agencies as appropriate, based on the advice that the local recovery committee were feeding to us.

The CHAIR: Were the Reconstruction Authority staff going out and doing a doorknock?

JIM HENRY: I don't know.

The CHAIR: I know it's not your department and your agency and I'm asking you to—

JIM HENRY: We conducted outreach. But I can't clearly say today if RA conducted doorknocks.

The CHAIR: Fair call. That's fine.

Mrs SALLY QUINNELL: I wanted to ask Service NSW if they were aware the \$200 and \$400 amount that was claimed—where that money came from? Was that money that was paid by an organisation in response to this situation, or was that Consolidated Revenue that was distributed?

GREG WELLS: I'd need to get the exact breakdowns from Treasury or people that were provisioning this, but there was both a contribution, as I understand it, from the energy company and from the Government.

The CHAIR: Ms Wannous, can you clarify, if the police were outside of Broken Hill, if they were out at White Cliffs or Menindee or something like that, and they were still trying to drive around and attend to the community, did they have access to the emergency network so that they could still continue to talk to each other in their various cars as they were moving around those isolated communities?

RANIA WANNOUS: Police would have had access to their own PMR, their own radio network, and within the city of Broken Hill, then, there is PSN coverage. Where there is no PSN coverage, there usually still remains police coverage.

The CHAIR: So police have their own emergency services network telecommunications?

RANIA WANNOUS: They have their own radio network. In fact, all the ESOs have their own radio networks. The PSN is the network that provides them with interoperability. That means they can all communicate with each other on one single network. As part of the expansion of the PSN, all emergency services, the five ESOs, will be migrating onto the PSN.

The CHAIR: At the moment, ambulance service has their own network?

RANIA WANNOUS: Yes.

The CHAIR: And RFS we heard from earlier.

RANIA WANNOUS: Yes. Our ESOs will use the networks interchangeably, based on requirements, locations, what the response is and where there is coverage.

JOSH WESTON: We also did roll a number of our own PSN Cells on Wheels out to that location for network augmentation, to provide additional coverage. We also worked for four days straight to bring one of our sites, Thackaringa, which is on the western side of Broken Hill, online early to again provide that additional backup communications for emergency services.

The CHAIR: Do you have satellites, or dishes, or something on towers out there? Is that what's going on here?

JOSH WESTON: We utilise different types of backhaul, which is basically how the radio communications talk to our tower, then the tower talks through our core network. Some of those are through commercial carriers, some are through satellite.

The CHAIR: In some instances, you have a dish on a commercial tower?

JOSH WESTON: [REDACTED]

The CHAIR: I'm sorry, I'm confused. I thought Ms Wannous said you didn't have Cells on Wheels available at the time, to roll out.

JOSH WESTON: Different type, sorry. I'll clarify. There was the PSN Cells on Wheels providing coverage and support for the PSN. They were available and rolled out for that circumstance. The broadband community wi-fi bubble COWs weren't available at that stage.

The CHAIR: How quickly does your ability to provide your service drop out once power is lost?

JOSH WESTON: Our sites, they have a battery standard, I believe, [REDACTED] as a standard level. Sites that have been identified at higher risk or higher vulnerability have an increased level of battery duration, as well as some sites having onsite generators with onsite fuel supplies to be able to last for a longer period of time.

RANIA WANNOUS: And we have a number of solar sites as well.

The CHAIR: Do solar sites basically mean that they never run out of power?

JOSH WESTON: It's basically multiple layers of redundancy. If you have a significantly cloudy period for a long period of time, that solar may be impacted, but the combination of battery life and solar, it tends to be able to last right through the majority of those type of events.

The CHAIR: Our time has come to an end. Thank you all so much. It's been fascinating, the two organisations that you represent and their role here. We're hearing stuff today that we probably haven't had a chance to delve into previously. You will be provided with a copy of the transcript for corrections. Ms Wannous, I think you took one question on notice. Did Service NSW?

GREG WELLS: I think I did too, yes.

The CHAIR: We'll send you copies of that as well as the language around that, to give you context as to the nature of the question. As well as any additional questions that we might develop in the coming days that we send out to you, if you can turn those around in seven days that would be greatly appreciated. If that's not possible, please talk to us. I know there's a lot going on in your worlds, but we are working to a timeline as well. Thank you all so much again. Thank you for the work that you do in serving the people of New South Wales.

(The witnesses withdrew.)

Dr SARAH WENHAM, Executive Director Medical Services, Far West Local Health District, NSW Health, before the Committee via videoconference, sworn and examined

Mr SHANE HAMILTON, Deputy Secretary, Aboriginal Affairs NSW, affirmed and examined

The CHAIR: Thank you for appearing before the Committee to give evidence. We sincerely you taking time out of your busy schedules. Do you have any questions about the hearing process that we are about to engage in?

SHANE HAMILTON: No.

The CHAIR: Would you like to make a brief opening statement? I'll start with you, Mr Hamilton.

SHANE HAMILTON: In New South Wales we have 61 discrete Aboriginal communities. These are the former reserves where Aboriginal people were displaced and forced from their traditional lands. The ownership of these discrete communities was transferred to local Aboriginal land councils. Funding for these communities is limited. Many of them do not have services and infrastructure available. The infrastructure in many of these communities has well and truly passed its use-by date and some would argue has never been designed to be fit for purpose. Discrete Aboriginal communities are the most vulnerable and there needs to be a voice at the table for them. This is what Aboriginal Affairs is focused on, and in emergency situations this becomes even more relevant.

An Aboriginal man, Bhiamie Williamson, in 2022 published research through CAEPR on Aboriginal community governance and complexities when engaging with combat and support agencies during disasters. This research provides pertinent insight and recommendations. Emergencies are happening more frequently. In 2022, according to the Federal Treasury analysis, 68 per cent of Australians lived in local government areas covered by a natural disaster declaration. In 2024, 84 per cent of people in a national YouGov poll reported being directly affected by at least one climate-fuelled disaster since 2019, with many having experienced more than one disaster in that period. People living in regional, remote and rural locations are more likely to have experienced one or more disasters compared to their counterparts in metropolitan areas.

Disaster justice recognises that while all people are impacted by disasters, some are impacted in differing ways, with notable different consequences due to a range of factors such as geography, socioeconomics, racism and culture. There is a perceived and actual injustice when the same support is provided to people in communities affected differently by disaster events. Aboriginal communities are disproportionately exposed to risk and impacts from the climate polycrisis and related emergencies, compounding historical injustices and potentially disrupting cultural and spiritual connections that are central to health and wellbeing. Additionally, access to solutions for Aboriginal communities are not equally or equitably available. These are linked to the structural and systemic inequalities and inhibit measures to close the gap in health between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal populations.

SARAH WENHAM: Mr Chair and Committee members, on behalf of the Far West Local Health District, we would like to thank you for this inquiry and the opportunity to appear before you today. I live and work across Broken Hill and across the Far West New South Wales, and I'm a member of the Far West Disaster Management Committee and Incident Management Team. Far West Local Health District is responsible for the management of 10 public hospitals, multipurpose facilities and healthcare clinics that are located throughout the western third of New South Wales, which spans the geographical area of 195,000 square kilometres that borders South Australia, Victoria and Queensland. Far West Local Health District provides emergency, acute, subacute and non-acute clinical services to the 30,000 people who reside in our four local government areas of Broken Hill, Central Darling, Wentworth and Balranald and incorporates the seven traditional lands of the Aboriginal nations of the Barkindji, Mutthi Mutthi, Wilyakali, Ngiyampaa, Wadigali, Maljangaba and Wangkumara peoples.

In preparation for unexpected events, Far West Local Health District undertakes a range of preparedness actions to enable a systemic and focused approach when responding to unplanned emergency situations, such as the Far West electricity outage. These include embedding downtime procedures and business continuity plans, which assist in preventing, minimising, responding to and recovering from disruptions to normal business as usual and establishing emergency management plans, which provide a phased and detailed approach to responding to large-scale emergency situations and disasters. Also, convening quarterly Far West Local Health District management committee meetings and participating in regular local emergency management committee, regional emergency management committee and local rescue committee meetings and activities

With specific preparedness for an electricity outage, Far West LHD has onsite backup generators at each of our public healthcare facilities. These generators are serviced and maintained regularly and are refuelled frequently, including with an allocation of reserve fuels. In response to the Far West electricity outage, both in order to maintain essential clinical and corporate services across the LHD and to contribute to a coordinated

multi-agency response, Far West LHD activated our downtime business continuity and emergency management plans, activated our Far West LHD incident management team, notified the State Health Services Functional Area Coordinator, participated in multi-agency emergency management meetings with local stakeholders, including the local and regional emergency management committees, and communicated frequently with our key partner organisations, including NSW Ambulance Aeromedical Control Centre, NSW Neonatal, Paediatric and Emergency Transport Service, the Royal Flying Doctor Service and tertiary referral hospitals in Sydney and Adelaide.

In order to provide a focused support for our patients and community members, Far West Local Health District redeployed staff to our HSFAC and disaster management team, increased frequency of home visits to patients supported by community services and implemented home visits to ensure the safety of vulnerable patients, particularly those living in smaller communities where telecommunications were affected. We also allocated a dedicated staff member to focus on supporting vulnerable patients across the Far West LHD footprint, collaborated with Essential Energy to identify vulnerable patients who relied on power-operated life-support equipment and refrigerated medications to ensure that these individuals were provided with alternative power supplies to maintain their safety and wellbeing during the outages and redeployed mental health staff to support operations at the NSW Reconstruction Authority. We also enacted recovery assistance points in all communities across the Far West to provide mental health support. The LHD remained actively involved in the recovery committee to support ongoing recovery efforts until they ceased operation at the end of November 2024.

During the outage, many LHD staff worked overtime in order to maintain essential clinical services and support vulnerable patients. Following the outage, Far West LHD, in partnership with key stakeholders and local and regional emergency management committees, have reviewed our business continuity and emergency management plans to incorporate the lessons learnt from the electricity outage and to improve our future preparedness and response.

Ms MARYANNE STUART: Thank you both for being here today. Dr Wenham, that was an extraordinary overview of everything that your LHD did. We know just from being out there that you all punched above your weight and were just so instrumental in taking care of each and every person within those communities. So we thank you for that. I couldn't quite hear everything. Did you say that NSW Health does sit or did sit on the REMC at the time?

SARAH WENHAM: Yes, we did.

Ms MARYANNE STUART: Great. Thank you. So in regards to Wilcannia hospital, just to give you an example, people spoke there about how the hospital was extraordinary and opened up the doors for very vulnerable people, babies, elderly people, and provided not only shelter but a place for people to be able to charge their phones. So I just wanted you to know that and to pass on our thanks to all of the team out there. A question in regards to life support, sleep apnoea machines and dialysis. The electricity providers would know the folks who were vulnerable in that circumstance. You would also too, as NSW Health. Who is the one that contacts—did you say NSW Health contacts them to find alternative arrangements for them to be given a generator or whatever?

SARAH WENHAM: Yes. There is a collaborative approach with Essential Energy. We use the medical assessment criteria of the NSW Life Support Energy Rebate, which requires a medical certificate for that. Anybody that either NSW Health or any of our partner organisations, particularly our vulnerable patients who have received life support equipment from Adelaide—we contacted all of them, and that's what we used for our dedicated team member to contact them. Then, with their consent, we provided their information through to Essential Energy so that they could then provide them with a home generator if that's what was needed. So in addition to the vulnerable members of our community that Essential Energy were already aware of, we made sure that any equipment we provided, we did contact the patients to seek their consent to hand that information on to Essential Energy.

Ms MARYANNE STUART: And can NSW Health provide that information for vulnerable people in our community to, in this case, Transgrid, and vice versa?

SARAH WENHAM: Only with the patient consent, obviously. That's why we contacted all of the vulnerable members of our community in order to provide that information, with their consent to do so.

Ms MARYANNE STUART: Yes, okay, that's good to know. Thank you. And just one question for you, Mr Hamilton. Some of the land councils are not party to the REMCs or the LEMCs. I heard today that the police Aboriginal liaison officers may or may not sit on those as well. What sort of position does your organisation play in making sure that these communities and community leaders are part of the communication and are part of the discussions? What we saw in Wilcannia, for example, I think off the top of my head, there's like 90 community housing sites there for our First Nations people. They're not in a position to run out and buy a generator, and yet

there didn't seem to be the support for them when their food had to be thrown out. There was still a lack of communication and a lack of connectivity because they didn't have a seat at the table. Can you elaborate on that for me, please?

SHANE HAMILTON: I think that's the fundamental problem. What I talked about in the opening statement is that that has since been changed. The land councils are or have been invited onto LEMCs, I think, post Broken Hill. With the recent cyclones in the northern district, land councils and other Aboriginal organisations were part of that, and we helped coordinate that. Our role is really around coordination and communication through those LEMCs. I sit on the SEMC, and that's only in recent times, so that's been strengthened. But when it comes to the nuances in these communities, particularly discrete Aboriginal communities are not the same as others. If emergency services organisations aren't aware of that and who to contact and how that coordination happens, it can be detrimental for the people that live there.

Mr JAMES WALLACE: My first question is to Dr Wenham. You mentioned earlier you weren't able to provide the details of those known to have life support equipment unless the individual had provided their consent. Would you be able to go into a little bit of an explanation as to how people provided that consent? Was it at the time that they started contact with Health over that equipment or were you after the outage occurred trying to call through affected individuals and residents known to you to ask whether you could share that information on?

SARAH WENHAM: There are two ways that happens. When a person is given life support equipment, we also provide them with information about the NSW Life Support Rebate, which allows them to get a rebate from the electricity company. We provide them with the required medical certification for that. So we encourage people to already register and provide their information ahead of time to the energy company. The patients would have already provided that consent by signing that form to the energy company. However, what we wanted to also do is to make sure that every patient we have provided equipment to has done that. Hence, we contacted everybody at the time. We've got a list from all of our different services, both within our organisation—we actually reached out to interstate organisations that may have provided life-support equipment.

We have a number of patients, for example, who have ventilator machines that have been supplied by respiratory services in Adelaide. We proactively reached out to them to get the names of those shared patients. Our teams, if they were already known to our clinical services, reached out and contacted them to see whether they required a home generator, and if they did, and they hadn't already given their consent to Essential Energy, we then sought their consent to provide their details to them.

Mr JAMES WALLACE: Assumingly, then, if they weren't contactable during that period, you didn't provide the information on to Essential Energy?

SARAH WENHAM: That's where we used our community teams. We've got lots of small community services out here. We're a small community. If we knew somebody had a life-support machine and we weren't able to contact them, we weren't just going to let them be at home non-contactable. We used our community services and if necessary, we visited them at home to check on them and to seek their consent to provide that information across to Essential Energy.

Mr JAMES WALLACE: In our earlier hearings in relation to Broken Hill, we'd heard that at Broken Hill hospital certain services were unable to proceed because of a lack of power supply. Whilst the hospital had a generator, there wasn't sufficient power to, for example, run the imaging department. We'd also heard in a submission from Roy Butler, the local member, that there were reports of lights on phones and other things being used in the hospital in order for people to see. Has an assessment been made about whether the generator capacity at Broken Hill hospital is sufficient? Those reports that I've alluded to, are they correct? Are you aware of those?

SARAH WENHAM: With regards to the imaging, some of our imaging department is on essential power, and other pieces of equipment, due to the energy that they require, were not. Our plain X-ray and our ultrasound modalities are on essential power, so they were able to be used on generator power throughout the outage. Probably what you're referring to is our CT scanner. During the 28 hours of power outage, we weren't able to use our CT scanner. We did enact our CT downtime, and we worked very closely with the energy company throughout that time to look at alternative ways to power that if the outage was going to be long term. As it happened, as soon as we were back on town power, we were able to restart the CT scanner. In terms of going forward, certainly that is one of the lessons we have learnt from this power outage. We are currently going through an ED redevelopment. As part of the redevelopment, we're looking at how we can incorporate both our whole emergency department and our imaging department, including the CT scanner, to make sure that it is on the essential power.

Mrs JUDY HANNAN: Question for Dr Wenham. When you talk about life support systems and these people that were health vulnerable at the time, what do you take that down to? Do you go down to sleep apnoea machines, or exactly what machines and things do you count as vulnerable-health people?

SARAH WENHAM: The NSW Health life support medical energy reports have specific criteria. We use those pre-existing criteria. That includes oxygen concentrators. It does involve medically prescribed CPAP machines, BiPAP machines, ventilators, enteral feeding pumps, so patients that have feeding tubes into their stomach or a tube down their nose that requires a pump so that they can be fed. It includes home dialysis, power wheelchairs, power banks, any equipment that required power that had been provided by the hospital, such as for our palliative care patients. For those patients that were on oxygen concentrators, we also made sure that they had not only access to power but they had additional supply of oxygen cylinders delivered so that they always had available oxygen should they need it at home.

Mrs JUDY HANNAN: I know people acted as quickly as they could, but for some of these people that you were checking on, obviously, some of them wouldn't have had phones or would have been non-contactable. If they hadn't previously put down that they were needing electricity for their life support, how long do you think some people may have gone for?

SARAH WENHAM: We had multiple meetings, as I'm sure you'd be aware of. On the very first day, on 17 October, we convened an emergency incident management team meeting, and then we subsequently had a second meeting on that day. We enacted plans immediately. If people weren't contacted on that first day, they certainly were within the second or the third day. Obviously, we did prioritise those patients that, for example, had a ventilator and the more higher acuity life support machines. We made sure we contacted them first, and whilst we had an individual dedicated to supporting vulnerable patients, we also used all of the teams that were known to them in order to contact people as quickly as possible—our dietetics team contacted our patients on parenteral feeding, our palliative care team contacted our palliative care patients, our chronic care team contacted our respiratory patients—tried to use as many of the teams so that we contacted people as quickly as possible.

Mrs JUDY HANNAN: We just heard from some telco authorities that different emergency services have their own system of communication. Can you tell me the system of communication when phones go down that Health have?

SARAH WENHAM: Within the Far West Local Health District, within Broken Hill, we obviously predominantly rely on telephone, but we also do communicate both within the LHD and to other LHDs on other platforms, such as Teams and the internet, many of which continue to still happen. Particularly with consultations between some of our specialist services supporters like the Aeromedical Control Centre and NETS, we still were able to use our video links through the internet. It was more difficult out in our remote facilities, such as Menindee, Wilcannia, Tibooburra, for example. The Far West Local Health District, our staff are the ambulance drivers in each of those communities, as I'm sure you may have heard when you did your visits to them. Obviously, they use the Public Safety Network. Some of our remote facilities also have access to Starlink as well, which was not affected.

Mrs SALLY QUINNELL: Thank you for both being here today. Dr Wenham, my first question is for you. I'd like to reiterate what Ms Stuart said about the amazing things people have said about staff on the ground, and the support that people felt they received. What I'd like to explore with you is that, in some of the more remote areas like White Cliffs and Wilcannia, health services were using Starlink to keep in contact with people. However, that only enabled them to call out and not receive calls. Was that the sort of information you were hearing? They could receive calls, but the people making the calls didn't have phone coverage, so they couldn't call in.

SARAH WENHAM: I'll have to take that specific question on notice to find out exactly what happened in those communities. However, those small communities are where our staff—if they weren't able to communicate back and people weren't able to receive calls—would actually go to people's homes. I'm sure you know they're very small communities. Just going back to what you were saying about our staff helping on the ground, all of us that work in health, we all live in these communities. We were all impacted by the power outage as well. I think it's a highlight of how small communities do band together and help each other out, and often they find ways of communicating. They're pretty resilient communities, so they'll find the ways around where they need to.

Mrs SALLY QUINNELL: That segues beautifully into my next question. Has there been any ongoing mental health support for the staff and the community as a whole following this situation?

SARAH WENHAM: As I mentioned in my opening statement, the Far West Local Health District was part of a multi-agency response as part of the Recovery Assistance Program, which did provide mental health

support both during the outage and continued until the end of November 2024. We specifically redeployed staff from the local health district to support that, where that operation continued. The other thing to say is that we did actually notice an increase in presentations, both to our hospitals and subsequently both in terms of physical and mental health diagnoses. It's obviously difficult to exactly tease out how much of that was related to the power outage. But we've continued to provide whatever mental health support is required through our existing mental health services. For staff, we also have an EAP service—an employee assistance program—which we obviously made sure was available for staff and continues to be funded.

Mrs SALLY QUINNELL: We heard of a situation where a person in the community was doing home dialysis that had been trained and set up in Adelaide. However, due to a lack of continual power, they were unable to do dialysis at home and were given the opportunity to have a chair at Broken Hill. I realise it's a completely different State, but is there anything that could be done to make that process easier in case of emergency, where that sort of flexibility is needed? Was there anything in the way of delivering that easily?

SARAH WENHAM: I certainly think one of the lessons learned is how do we make sure that we communicate very clearly with our interstate organisations? And I think that's one of the things that we've learned from this is that there were a number of patients in our community who have treatment overseen by interstate organisations that we were unaware of. One of the learnings that we have taken from this is how do we communicate better ahead of time, so we're aware of those patients and we can support them locally if we need to?

Mrs SALLY QUINNELL: Mr Hamilton, are there any learnings that you've got from the community? Obviously the community is probably more likely to speak to you than to us, so are there any learnings that the community has said, "This would have been way better if this had happened or this hadn't happened"?

SHANE HAMILTON: Yes, I think there's a couple of things. I think one is probably a deeper understanding of Aboriginal communities and Aboriginal people, particularly in regions like that and, as I mentioned at the beginning, of discrete Aboriginal communities. The more our frontline services, emergency services, are aware and understand the nuances that exist for those communities, I think much better. When it comes to an emergency, quite often you're bringing people from different parts of the State to deal with that emergency, and the better culturally aware—and they're able to understand that particular region and the nuances that exist I think really help. When it does come to an emergency, that really does stand out and then there's confusion. The other understanding is that when an emergency occurs, the community are more likely to lean heavily on local Aboriginal organisations like land councils, like Aboriginal medical services and others. So the better prepared we are and the better connected we are at a local level with those organisations, I think helps when it does become an emergency.

Mrs SALLY QUINNELL: Do you think they lean on non-formal hierarchical structures as well? If there's a really prominent Elder that is really organised and knows their stuff, does that play in as well?

SHANE HAMILTON: Yes, I think given that we've made some changes, we are now better linking those organisations, particularly land councils, into the LEMCs. We are playing a much more active role on the emergency services across the State, and we have nine regional offices and staff in those locations. We've done our own work on what we need to improve on as an agency, supporting our regional staff through these, because quite often they come from those communities and their families are in those communities, so it impacts them.

Mrs SALLY QUINNELL: They know them.

SHANE HAMILTON: That's right. That's a double-edged sword for them as well, so they need that extra support from us as well.

Mrs SALLY QUINNELL: Is that a situation where, say, people from a State organisation that come in to assist maybe take stock for a minute and listen to local people on the ground about the intricacies of particular community groups?

SHANE HAMILTON: Yes, because if they don't get an opportunity to convey those nuances and the differences and to relay the type of support that's needed at that level, then they can feel themselves a bit helpless. And then, of course, they know the community is going to turn to them and say, "Well, why didn't that happen?" or "Why didn't we get support?" And there are little things that make a difference at the time. So, for example, if you are giving out food hampers, if you've got one food hamper per family or per house, that doesn't always work for Aboriginal communities, particularly in some of those locations. There might be, in some cases, three families living in that overcrowded situation.

The CHAIR: Mr Hamilton, when was Aboriginal Affairs first brought into the emergency management realisation and response for this event?

SHANE HAMILTON: I think it was 17 October.

The CHAIR: So on that first day?

SHANE HAMILTON: Yes.

The CHAIR: That's excellent. I also wanted to ask about the proof of identity and residence. It was kind of what you've just finished on there at the end. We've had submissions and commentary that proof of identity and residence is disproportionately difficult for First Nations people. Do you have any suggestions for Service NSW about how they can work through that quickly and simply so that the resources, whether they're a hamper or a \$200 voucher, can go out the door?

SHANE HAMILTON: I think the connection that you have at a local level with those local organisations—as I said before, Aboriginal people that live in those smaller communities at a local level will rely on, and probably have a really good connection with, either land councils or health centres or others. That's always a really good contact point. If they have that relationship and connection at a local level with those key organisations, they're going to pick up the large majority of Aboriginal people that live in that area.

The CHAIR: One of the things I think that everyone has been saying is that we don't necessarily have terrific up-to-date lists about who is where, who needs what and who might be more fragile or vulnerable compared to others. Councils don't do it. Local communities do it by word of mouth and hearsay, but there's nothing formal. We heard from the CWA that they check on each other. There's an informal sort of group and cluster there. How do our First Nations people keep track of each other and make sure that no-one falls through the gaps in times like this?

SHANE HAMILTON: Again, I'd say it comes back to at that local level with community. The other point on that might be that even if it's at a—if I can just give an example: In the recent events a couple of weeks ago—

The CHAIR: Up north? The flood?

SHANE HAMILTON: The cyclone. In the early days of that, we were able to give emergency organisations information about, within the boundaries of where they thought it was going to hit, how many discrete Aboriginal communities there were, on a map which we've developed; the number of people that we think live in these regions, because we do follow a population where we try and make an estimate based on ABS and other information that we might have, so that they're armed with, "Okay, within these areas there's X number of discrete Aboriginal communities, with this many people living there"; and any other information that we can give around the nuances within those communities. If we give that information early, that helps an enormous amount. And it was taken up by emergency organisations. I think the more forearmed you are with information about communities—and when the event does happen, inevitably Aboriginal communities lean on those local organisations where they have that connection, more so than they might do with other agencies.

The CHAIR: I think this is my final question for you. Let's say the local community hall, or the local golf club, or the local something else became the emergency go-to spot for a small community, would I be naive to think that our First Nations groups would feel equally comfortable going into those environments? Or do you think in those types of small communities, like Wilcannia, Packsaddle, Menindee, or whatever, that there's not the historic racism that we probably have in some other parts of Australia, that everyone there feels a lot closer together and comfortable to be together at a civic hall or a town hall or something.

SHANE HAMILTON: I would say that people generally would be reluctant to go to those places. They'd go if they had to. If they were experiencing, or they had experienced in the past, any negative behaviour, racism, or whatever it might have been that they've come across, they'd be less likely to go to those evacuation centres. It's not to say that Aboriginal people don't go there, because we know that they do, but sometimes it might be—their first preference would be to go with another family member and stay with another family member that would keep them safe, rather than their first option to go to an evacuation centre.

The CHAIR: Ms Wenham, for you, you spoke about your more remote medical sites having generators at those sites. Is that true for all of your sites?

SARAH WENHAM: I believe that is the case, but I can confirm that on notice for you.

The CHAIR: Could I ask you just to confirm that, please? I'd also then ask, as an extension of that, do they have access to backup telecommunications—for example, Starlink?

SARAH WENHAM: Again, I will take that on notice to provide you with exactly the generator status and communication status for each of our facilities.

The CHAIR: Finally, probably as an addition to that, if there are generators and they do require diesel, fuelling and things like that, are the staff out there aware of how that works and how often it needs to happen and all of that sort of stuff?

SARAH WENHAM: I believe they are, but I will confirm that all on notice for you.

The CHAIR: You mentioned earlier that part of what your staff were doing in a very proactive and supportive way was to go out and check on some of the people and the individuals that were known to you to be vulnerable. Given that telecommunications were down, did that become a work health and safety risk, that you were potentially sending people out and that they would not have access to emergency calls if required?

SARAH WENHAM: Whenever we do home visits to people, we would also do home safety assessments before we go. If there was any concern around safety, people wouldn't be going out on their own; they would be going out in pairs. All of our normal safety processes and procedures remain, and actually are more important in such disaster management and incident management situations.

The CHAIR: Can I just clarify before I ask this next question, because it will make less sense or more sense: Dr Wenham, are you based in Broken Hill?

SARAH WENHAM: Yes, I live in Broken Hill.

The CHAIR: As I understand it, when the power went out that night, and people woke up in the morning in Broken Hill, for example, the power was returned by about 11:00 a.m., but if you were in one of those more remote and isolated communities, when the power went out that night it didn't come back on for two or three days.

SARAH WENHAM: Yes, it was very variable across the different communities.

The CHAIR: On that first day, in that first 24 hours, were you aware that some of your satellite sites were without power still, and without telecommunications, on that first day? Was that an awareness that people in Broken Hill had?

SARAH WENHAM: I wouldn't be able to talk for the community of Broken Hill, but from a local health district perspective, the incident management team were aware of the status both of power and telecommunications for all of our facilities, yes.

The CHAIR: The health district was sitting on the emergency management committees, weren't they?

SARAH WENHAM: Yes, we were.

Ms MARYANNE STUART: Can I ask a follow up question, Chair? Dr Wenham, did Transgrid reach out to NSW Health to say what had happened, or did you find out via ABC News, or—

SARAH WENHAM: Again, may I take that on notice? Whilst I sit on the incident management team, I don't personally sit on the emergency management committee, so I would have to take on notice exactly how the communication happened directly between the LHD and Transgrid.

Ms MARYANNE STUART: I just wanted to see whether, as such a big stakeholder, Transgrid directly came to you to advise what was happening.

SARAH WENHAM: I will take that on notice, and I will find out that information for you.

The CHAIR: Thank you both so much. Mr Hamilton and Dr Wenham, we appreciate your time with us today. We know that everyone's time is precious, and we thank you very much for taking time out of your busy days to be with us. A copy of the transcript of today's hearing and evidence will be provided to you for correction. Please have a look at that when we send it through to you. The Committee staff will also email to you any questions that you've taken on notice. That will include some of the context in which the question was asked. That always helps to understand. We as a committee may develop some additional questions to send out to you as well. With all of that, when you receive all of that, we ask you to try and turn that around for us within seven days, if that's possible. We're working to timetables, as we all do. If that's not possible, please talk to us about that and we'll go from there.

(The witnesses withdrew.)

(Short adjournment)

Mr ANDREW NICHOLLS, PSM, Chief Executive Officer, Independent Pricing and Regulatory Tribunal NSW, sworn and examined

Mr JONATHAN COPPEL, Tribunal Member, Independent Pricing and Regulatory Tribunal NSW, affirmed and examined

Ms KELLY KWAN, Executive Director, Regulation and Compliance, Independent Pricing and Regulatory Tribunal NSW, affirmed and examined

Mr JUSTIN OLIVER, Deputy Chair, Australian Energy Regulator, sworn and examined

The CHAIR: I welcome our penultimate panel of witnesses in this incredible journey we've been on. Do you have any questions about the hearing process?

ANDREW NICHOLLS: No.

JONATHAN COPPEL: No.

KELLY KWAN: No.

JUSTIN OLIVER: No.

The CHAIR: Before I ask you to make some brief opening statements, I want to acknowledge and recognise that both the Australian Energy Regulator and IPART are undertaking their own investigations into the event that we are calling the power outage of the Far West in October 2024. We appreciate going into this session that there might be limitations about what you can and can't say, and we would encourage you to recognise and put those up-front if we ask questions that you can't answer. There's no dramas at all about that. We genuinely thank you for your assistance in helping us to work through our inquiry, which I'd like to summarise in terms of we're trying to focus on the impact on the people, as opposed to the technical nature of the contracts, compliance and regulation. Would a witness from each agency like to make a short opening statement? I'll come to you, Mr Oliver.

JUSTIN OLIVER: Thank you for the invitation to appear at this inquiry today. I certainly won't repeat what the AER has set out in its written submission, but I thought it might be helpful to just very briefly highlight some of the functions of the AER that are potentially relevant to the events that are the subject of this inquiry. Firstly, the AER is the economic regulator for the electricity networks in New South Wales. In that role, we are chiefly concerned with how much the networks are able to charge for the services they provide. That is a very, very brief description of a very lengthy and rather complicated process, but we do outline that process in some more detail in our written submission. Secondly, the AER has a compliance and enforcement function under the National Electricity Law. This includes investigating and, where appropriate, taking action in relation to compliance with the rules and standards that govern the operation of electricity networks and generation assets.

Finally, the AER has a compliance and enforcement role under the National Energy Retail Law. Those rules are chiefly concerned with the way energy retailers engage with their customers, but they also set out obligations of distribution networks in relation to customers with life support needs, for example. These are fields where there is considerable overlap between national and State laws, not just in New South Wales, but elsewhere. But in this case, therefore, there's overlap as well in some cases between the responsibilities of the AER and IPART. The AER and IPART have always maintained a cooperative and collaborative relationship. We do communicate with each other frequently, both in recent months and before then, and we are working together in relation to our inquiries into the events of last October to avoid duplication and to make sure that appropriate outcomes are achieved. That's probably where I'll stop by way of introductory comments, but obviously I welcome any questions you may wish to ask.

The CHAIR: Thank you so much. Who would like to take up the cudgels on behalf of IPART?

JONATHAN COPPEL: I shall. Thank you for the opportunity to appear before this inquiry. The Independent Pricing and Regulatory Tribunal NSW welcomes this examination of the outages that affected the Far West region in October 2024. Reliable electricity supply is crucial for regional communities. The outages in October 2024 underscore the need for a robust and coordinated approach to managing energy infrastructure risks, particularly in remote and climate vulnerable areas. IPART oversees and enforces licences granted to operators of electricity networks and regulates the safety of electricity networks in New South Wales. The network operators are responsible for complying with the conditions of their licences, including reliability obligations and taking all reasonable steps to operate the electricity network safely. IPART has a range of compliance and enforcement powers that it uses to hold electricity network operators accountable for meeting their licence conditions and other regulatory obligations. We do this through our risk-based approach, which is a risk-based compliance and

enforcement framework, including through reporting, a program of independent audits and by making inquiries and obtaining information from network operators.

We do not manage directly network infrastructure or emergency response measures. IPART commenced an investigation into the outages in October 2024. We're investigating whether Transgrid complied with its regulatory obligations under its licence, as well as under the Electricity Supply Act and regulations made under that Act. This will include investigating whether Transgrid complied with the obligations relating to the reliability of its networks supplying the Far West, in relation to its management and maintenance of its assets and in relation to its management of safety risks. We're also investigating the circumstances of the tower failures, the backup generators and other matters that we consider to be relevant, such as the restoration of the towers and any system gaps. We are committed to ensuring that lessons are learnt and actions are taken to mitigate the risk of similar events happening in the future. As part of our investigation, we're considering whether to make recommendations to improve the regulatory and licensing framework for electricity network operators in New South Wales for the New South Wales Government's consideration.

We're also considering whether improvements can be made to our own regulatory and compliance approach. We appreciate the Committee's attention to this important issue and we look forward to contributing our insights into the broader factors affecting electricity reliability and reliance in regional New South Wales to this inquiry. However, in order to maintain the integrity of our investigation, we will be unable to comment publicly on the investigation while it is underway. We welcome any questions from the Committee and are committed to assisting the inquiry in achieving meaningful outcomes for affected communities.

The CHAIR: Thank you all very much. I'm just going to ask the first question. I'm not sure who might be best placed to answer this, but it seems that Broken Hill and the surrounding communities, being on a single line of electricity supply/transmission is particularly vulnerable. Do we have many similarly vulnerable isolated populations who also operate on a single line transmission, like Broken Hill and the surrounds, or do other areas tend to have multiple pathways into their community so that they don't become an island? I'm not sure who might be able to just give me a bit of guidance here.

KELLY KWAN: My understanding is that Broken Hill is one of the only single line communities in New South Wales.

The CHAIR: That's just for a bit of broad-brush context.

Mr JAMES WALLACE: I wanted to start by asking a question to Kelly and to the AER. There was a discussion that we heard at the last hearing around the AGL battery at Broken Hill and conditions that are imposed on the operation of that battery, including that if Broken Hill becomes islanded, the battery has to immediately switch off. Could you talk us through why that type of condition would be in place? Is that something that's imposed by yourselves as part of their licence? Also, do you impose that based off your own assessments of the technical issues that are associated with that battery, or with any other equipment, for that matter? Do you take into account views of Transgrid in determining whether to impose those conditions?

JUSTIN OLIVER: Every generation asset in the National Electricity Market has to have a Generator Performance Standard with which it complies. That's a requirement of the National Electricity Rules. There are very detailed provisions in the rules, mainly in chapter 5, which talk about the kinds of things that must be dealt with in the performance standard, the parameters, when you can vary and depart from them, and so forth. The settlement of that standard for each particular unit is generally a task that's undertaken between the generator and the transmission network. Ultimately it has to satisfy the market operator, AEMO, the Australian Energy Market Operator. The AER, for example, is not involved in settling performance standards, because you're now getting into that technical system operation requirement, which is a bit outside of our remit and our areas of expertise.

I can't go into too much detail about why you would have that requirement, only because I'm not qualified to do so. You certainly can see a situation where, when there is a network outage, that may necessitate curtailment of generation into the system, if only for safety reasons. It's a different scale, but it's not that different to solar panels, for example, having to switch off in the event that there's an outage in a neighbourhood. You don't necessarily want live wires that are not functioning normally. But ultimately those judgements are really made to the satisfaction of the market operator, AEMO. As I say, the transmission network, which has to connect those assets, is also involved in the negotiation of the connection agreements and therefore those performance standards as well.

Ms MARYANNE STUART: Thank you all for being here today, by the way. We heard in our public hearings that Transgrid reported some loss of supply back in 2018-2019, 2023-2024. Could you please supply some further information in regards to that? Is that not showing a bit of a pattern in regards to maintenance? IPART, you said before that your job is enforcement and things like that. Does maintenance not fall under that?

Is there no checklist to make sure that the—the towers, I think, back from the 1970s were first put in. I guess my question is: If they've been that old, is there no-one that questions the maintenance, the safety, the reliability along those lines? Because we've heard that there are often power brownouts, they call them, in this region and sometimes load-shifting from one community to another to get electricity. It seems like there's a bit of a pattern here. Whose responsibility is it to check in with Transgrid, for example, to look at the maintenance, are the two generators fine to go if anything happens? That's my question.

KELLY KWAN: IPART is responsible for regulating Transgrid in that regard. As Mr Coppel said in his opening statement, we use a combination of directed audits as well as reporting, and then also incident reporting as well, and incident follow-up and inquiries from IPART. Last year we directed an audit of Transgrid's safety management system that also included an element of how they're managing loss-of-supply incidents, so the processes and procedures they have in place for that. Transgrid is also required to report annually on their asset maintenance arrangements: their asset inspections, if there are any asset maintenance backlogs, any corrective actions they need to take to fix any maintenance issues. They are required to report incidents as well, loss-of-supply incidents, depending on the category.

We will assess that information and determine what was the incident, what action did they take to correct it, and is that showing us any patterns and trends where we might need to direct an audit of a particular element of their system. We do a regular suite of audits and reporting as part of our assurance mechanisms in holding Transgrid to account for ensuring that they have appropriate systems. Under their licence, they are required to have an asset management framework and asset management system. Our audits will go in and check that, and check that they're implementing in accordance with that. The same with the safety management systems as well. They have to have a safety management system, and then we'll go in and audit that as well.

Ms MARYANNE STUART: Ms Kwan, did Transgrid ever provide information around the fact that one of their generators was not working?

KELLY KWAN: No, we weren't aware of that.

Ms MARYANNE STUART: That was never disclosed?

KELLY KWAN: Unfortunately no, that wasn't disclosed. We became aware of that at the time of this October 2024 incident.

The CHAIR: In normal course of business, would you expect to have been informed of something like that?

KELLY KWAN: No. Transgrid has a substantial amount of assets across the State, so they aren't required to report to us when they take particular assets out for maintenance, because it's quite a regular occurrence across their assets across the State. Where it becomes important is obviously if there is a change to their network that's a more permanent change that may affect their reliability and their ability to meet their reliability obligations. There would be some reporting requirements required then, but not in the normal course of affairs.

Ms MARYANNE STUART: This generator wasn't taken out for maintenance though. There's GT1 and GT2. GT2, from some information we've got, had been out since September 2023.

KELLY KWAN: GT1, I think, is the one.

Ms MARYANNE STUART: I thought it was GT2, but if it was GT1, I beg your pardon. Was it out for maintenance or was it just out, broken?

KELLY KWAN: My understanding was that they had planned maintenance on that generator and then, during the course of that maintenance, they realised that that needed to be extended because there were more issues with it. But I don't have the full detail in terms of the timings of that.

Ms MARYANNE STUART: There was no backup plan, knowing that the maintenance was going to be a lot longer?

KELLY KWAN: To our knowledge, no, there was no backup to that.

Ms MARYANNE STUART: Over to AER, are you able to order compensation to any energy users that are impacted by these power outages? For the record, we spoke to some businesses. IGA at Broken Hill had to throw \$90,000 worth of stock out, because of what was on the floor and also what was out the back in their freezers and coldrooms: \$90,000. That's why I asked that question.

JUSTIN OLIVER: It's a very fair question. I'm afraid the short answer is no. That's not a power that we have. Most of the powers that we have—we have the ability to impose or issue infringement notices for pecuniary penalties of a fixed amount or, in more serious cases, we can take matters to the Federal Court. The

court has the power to impose much larger penalties. The court generally does not have the power either under the national law to order that compensation be paid. The only situation where we might produce an outcome like that is if there's a negotiated resolution. There might be an enforceable undertaking. There might be an agreement in that context to provide some measure of redress to consumers who are affected by non-compliance, if that has not already been done. We haven't negotiated an outcome quite like that in the past, but we have obtained undertakings from service providers in other contexts to refund monies or to make contributions to financial counselling services, for example. In that scenario, there might be a way to produce an outcome like that, but it's not a power to direct that it be done.

Mrs SALLY QUINNELL: I want to follow up that question with IPART. Do you have any powers to order the organisations to provide compensation?

JONATHAN COPPEL: The short answer is we do not have powers to order compensation. We do have powers that can impose a fine in the event that an infringement or that a contravention has been made. Those payments go into consolidated revenue and we have no say over how those revenues should be used. Like AER, however, we do have the possibility to have an enforceable undertaking, which to my knowledge has not been used, but that is an option and would be one way, perhaps, in which some form of compensation could go to those that have been most impacted.

Mrs SALLY QUINNELL: At the moment there's no capacity to have a situation whereby, say—I'm not suggesting one way or another—if there is a fine imposed on a certain organisation, there's no capacity for that fine to be used to upgrade poles and wires that continually go down so that we can stop this happening or stop similar situations or something like that? There's no capacity for that to be used for good?

KELLY KWAN: No.

ANDREW NICHOLLS: I suppose it would be a matter for the Government to decide. It's not something where we would have powers to order it.

Mrs SALLY QUINNELL: I don't really know who I'm asking this to, so please excuse my ignorance, but we have heard that power outages in certain areas, such as Tibooburra, Menindee, Wilcannia, White Cliffs, are frequent. In fact, one witness provided information half jokingly that on a Friday afternoon you know it's 2 p.m., because the power goes out. Is that something that you're aware of being a regular occurrence?

JONATHAN COPPEL: The short answer is no, I'm not aware that it's a regular occurrence. But when I was in Broken Hill and in the surrounding area in late October, we did hear about the impacts of power outages in a general sense, and the consequences that can stem from that, both economic and also health-related risks.

ANDREW NICHOLLS: It's a question that we might take on notice. We receive reporting from Transgrid, but also each of the distribution networks around outages. For clarification, outages can occur through the distribution networks—often more frequently, in fact, than the transmission networks—just because of the nature of the way those distribution networks are set up. So it's possible that some of those outages may be through distribution as much as transmission. So I don't have that information in front of me, but I'm happy to take on notice what we're aware of.

Mrs SALLY QUINNELL: I am aware that it is a combination of the two. I do believe it's not just one or the other.

The CHAIR: I want to send my first question to the AER. I'm working on a recollection here and there might be some confusion about what I thought I heard. When we had Transgrid as our witness in Broken Hill about 10 days ago now, I think they said that once the emergency had been declared, the customers of the distribution network could not be spoken to or approached because they were customers of Essential, and then the retailers are not customers of Transgrid. So Transgrid weren't allowed to speak to the customer base as per regulation, as per the rules of AER. Does that sound right? Could you maybe further identify where the line of you can say something or you can't say something lies?

JUSTIN OLIVER: Yes, certainly. Sitting here now, I can't think what that rule might be or what rule would have that effect. We certainly don't have a specific rule which says that in a situation like that a transmission network service provider is forbidden from contacting a customer connected to the distribution network. It might be a reference to what we call our ring-fencing guidelines. We have guidelines that apply both to distribution networks and transmission networks. I'm speculating, by the way. I don't know if that's what they're referring to.

The CHAIR: I'm speculating about my memory as well, so let's go forward.

JUSTIN OLIVER: We can speculate together. We do have those guidelines and they do impose obligations on networks to protect electricity information that they have and not disclose it except in certain

circumstances, or use it for purposes for which it was not obtained. So, for example, if Essential Energy had details around customers—which they may well have because they're connected to Essential's network—the ring-fencing guideline would say that that's ring-fenced information and it should be kept confidential.

However, there is an exception in those guidelines, if, for example, it was necessary to disclose that or the purpose of disclosure was to respond to an emergency or some other circumstance beyond the control of the network. So Essential could, for example, make that information available to Transgrid, who might not have it because they're not necessarily dealing with a lot of individual customers. So they might have needed to get that information from Essential, for example. But on my reading, our ring-fencing guidelines would not prevent that from happening, if that was the situation that they found themselves in. Again, those ring-fencing guidelines say that the transmission network, Transgrid, can only provide those transmission services. It can't provide other services except in limited circumstances. But here we're talking about communicating with people about the status of their transmission services, so I don't think our ring-fencing guideline would prevent that.

In terms of other rules we administer, there are confidentiality obligations under the National Electricity Rules, but I don't think they would necessarily be applicable here either. So it is possible that I'm missing something or that they're referring to some other rule that I can't think of at the moment, but sitting here right now, I don't know quite what that rule might be.

JONATHAN COPPEL: I think it's a very important question. Again, it was something that we heard following the initial outage that the poor communication was a source of anxiety for some. There are powers that we have that relate to the obligation to consult with the community by Essential and different ones with respect to Transgrid, but I'll pass on to Ms Kwan to elaborate on the details.

KELLY KWAN: Under the New South Wales licensing framework, there is a licence obligation on Essential Energy when there's major events to communicate with their customers and it has detail. Transgrid doesn't have that obligation within its licence itself because its customer is Essential Energy. It's not directly servicing customers. But as I mentioned, under their safety management system, they do have to have processes and procedures in place to manage incidents arising from loss of supply and any safety risks that might come out of that. Our expectation as the regulator would be that Transgrid is proactively communicating with the emergency services, with community—with whoever they need to in order to actually acquit themselves of those obligations around managing incidents around loss of supply. It's not specifically set out in their licence, but I think, through the safety management system arrangements, there'd be an expectation that they would openly communicate.

The CHAIR: Did you say, "proactively"?

KELLY KWAN: I suppose making sure that they're communicating appropriately in terms of any of the risks around impacts to human health and safety consequences that are foreseeable arising from the loss of supply. We would expect that they would communicate.

The CHAIR: I like the sounds of that. The reason I asked the first question is that I actually wanted to ask this question: Was there anything preventing Transgrid from openly declaring, early in the piece, "GT1 is down; it's offline; it's not functioning; GT2 is in a fragile condition and can only operate to a certain capacity"? I'm not sure if you're allowed to answer that in this forum, given your current inquiries. But was there anything in the rules that you know of that was preventing Transgrid from being open about the nature of the backup systems?

KELLY KWAN: Not to my knowledge.

JUSTIN OLIVER: I can't think of anything that would stop them making an announcement, for example—putting something on the internet.

The CHAIR: There wouldn't be broader national electricity grid market implications et cetera?

JUSTIN OLIVER: No.

The CHAIR: Because at this stage Broken Hill and the surrounds are an island.

JUSTIN OLIVER: Correct.

The CHAIR: There's no electricity going in or out.

JUSTIN OLIVER: The market isn't really functioning in that part of the network at that time. No, I can't think of any rule that would have prevented them from providing that sort of information by way of updating people on the restoration of supply or the nature of the outage.

The CHAIR: Mrs Quinnell has just raised her hand there, and then I'm going to come to Ms Stuart, because apparently our line of questioning at the moment has just triggered some offshoots.

Mrs SALLY QUINNELL: Yes, it sure has. I was just wondering if there's any extra requirement on the companies due to the fact that this is pretty much people's only option. It's not something where they can shop around, like in my area. They have one option and one option only. Are there any requirements on the companies regarding that situation?

KELLY KWAN: The reliability conditions that were set for Transgrid for Broken Hill are different to reliability obligations in other—

Mrs SALLY QUINNELL: Right, kind of due to the fact that it's a monopoly.

KELLY KWAN: Yes, the fact that there's one radial line in means that their reliability condition requires backup to be in place. Yes, there is, I guess, a somewhat bespoke arrangement for Broken Hill, although there are arrangements in place for other bulk supply points across New South Wales.

Mrs SALLY QUINNELL: But that one is specific to that particular situation.

KELLY KWAN: Yes.

Ms MARYANNE STUART: The mining company that we spoke to out at Broken Hill—just remind me of the name again.

The CHAIR: Perilya.

Ms MARYANNE STUART: Perilya said they were contacted by Transgrid, not at the senior level but at the operational level. The operational level of Transgrid contacted the operational level of the mining company to ask them to turn their electricity on and off due to load shedding. Carrying on from the Chair's point of view about communication directly with the people of Broken Hill and outer suburbs, why do you think Transgrid contacted an organisation but didn't contact consumers?

The CHAIR: That's a hypothetical, if anyone wants to have a swipe at it.

JUSTIN OLIVER: Indeed, I don't know that I could speak for Transgrid in that situation. I can conceive of a situation where they know the load of that mine, for example, so they know they will get a measurable impact on the network if they ask that mine to either turn on and turn off or curtail their demand. It's not unheard of on a particular hot day for a network to go out and put out a call to ask people to turn down their air conditioners, for example. It's obviously not in an emergency, but it's a way of trying to manage demand—manage load—in times where there is peak demand forecast. What you don't get in that situation, of course, is a predictable impact. You might have some impact on demand, but you know you're not going to shed, for example, X number of megawatts. That might have been the reason why they would have started with the larger mining load, in that situation. But there would be nothing to have prevented them putting out a similar request to individual users—customers—to either curtail demand or to use electricity as required.

Ms MARYANNE STUART: Sorry if my question wasn't very clear, but I'm coming back to the fact that communication was so vital for people. We had electricity go down, then we had Telstra go down. We had people that did not know what was going to happen the next day and food being thrown out. Some people had to go and buy a generator; other people couldn't afford it. I guess what I'm saying is, if Transgrid can take the time to go and talk to a company, why did they not communicate to the community on an ongoing basis about what was happening—that is, that these generators weren't working, what they were trying to do and who they were working with.

There didn't seem to be the ongoing communication that people expected. I guess my question was around that. It might not be a question; it might just be a statement, now that I say it like that. But there's an expectation in 2025 of transparency, accountability and good communication, and we don't seem to have seen that on this occasion. I just can't fathom why they would take the time to ring the mining company—which it was good that they did; don't get me wrong—but thousands of other people were being left high and dry. This cannot happen again like this. It just can't.

The CHAIR: I think it is more of a statement, because our witnesses can't respond as to why Transgrid didn't do something.

Ms MARYANNE STUART: I understand.

The CHAIR: But we have clarified that there weren't rules preventing them from doing that.

Ms MARYANNE STUART: No.

The CHAIR: So they chose, I think we can—

Ms MARYANNE STUART: If the towers had been built back in 1972, is there any life expectancy of those towers? Are they supposed to be renewed every so often?

JUSTIN OLIVER: Transmission assets do have an asset life. It's a notional asset life, and then they are routinely inspected to see whether their condition is such that they require replacement.

Ms MARYANNE STUART: What is the life span, then, Mr Oliver?

JUSTIN OLIVER: I'd have to take the exact life span on notice, but the idea that it might be 50 years, for example, that's possible. They are long-lived assets. The exact life span I would need to take on notice, but it's possible that they were within their normal life span—that they were not, for example, overdue for replacement. But there'd always be a program of inspection to see if their condition was such that they should have been replaced at an earlier stage.

Ms MARYANNE STUART: We spoke before about the electricity companies having to tell you when there has been a blackout. Is there criteria—for example, if it goes out for five minutes they don't need to tell you, but if it goes out for half an hour they need to tell you?

KELLY KWAN: We have different incident categories. I'd probably have to take the detail on notice. We have different—if it's a major incident or minor, et cetera, there are some thresholds, but I'll take on notice the detail around that.

The CHAIR: I'm going to run through a whole bunch of questions that I suspect IPART won't be allowed to answer. On page 12 of your submission, you talk about licensed network operators are required to comply with IPART's *Incident reporting - Electricity networks reporting manual*, which includes reporting reliability. The dot point under there talks about immediate risks, and the paragraph under there goes back to the word reliability. In that context, would you have expected Transgrid to have spoken to you about the nature of their network at that time and their backup options?

KELLY KWAN: That's something that's part of our investigation.

The CHAIR: Yes, you can't answer that. That's fair. At page 14, under the heading "Compliance priorities approach", the second paragraph states, "We also consider historical compliance trends." Was there a historical compliance trend for Transgrid along this powerline that you are allowed to talk about?

KELLY KWAN: It's probably something that's part of our investigation. We do know that there has been previous incidents, and we're sort of looking at that as part of our investigation.

ANDREW NICHOLLS: Yes, specifically looking at each report and seeing if there are trends.

The CHAIR: Because there was a 2019 event as well.

ANDREW NICHOLLS: That's right. Correct.

KELLY KWAN: That's correct, yes.

The CHAIR: You're definitely not going to be allowed to answer that, or that. This is the same question three different ways. But I'm just going to ask again that there was no requirement or notification from Transgrid that the one of the gas turbines was offline.

KELLY KWAN: That's correct.

The CHAIR: There was no notification; there was also no requirement to notify?

KELLY KWAN: That's correct, prior to the incident. We found out, obviously, as part of the incident that it was offline, but not prior.

ANDREW NICHOLLS: Perhaps if it's helpful for the Committee, the way the reporting works is that it's the obligation of Transgrid to meet the performance standards that are set out in their licence. If Transgrid formed the view that taking the generator offline or some other aspect that they might be doing anywhere else in the State would jeopardise their capacity to deliver that performance standard, then they have an obligation to consult with us and seek our approval. But as Ms Kwan explained, in this case, there was no process in that regard.

The CHAIR: My memory of the evidence given by Transgrid about checking the reliability of their gas turbines was that they turned them over every two months or something like that. Do they provide you with history and evidence that they have done that, or only if there's a concern?

KELLY KWAN: Every year they're required to report to us on whether they continue to meet the reliability standards. It's exception reporting, so if they've been non-compliant with a standard in that year, they do need to report something, but they don't go into the level of detail around turning generators on and off or

anything like that. But they are required to report compliance with our reliability conditions annually, and they have reported that they've been fully compliant with those conditions since 2018.

The CHAIR: So if in the months leading up to the event they had tried turning their turbines on and realised that they didn't work, is that a noncompliance with the contracted expected standards?

KELLY KWAN: That's going to be part of our investigation.

The CHAIR: Okay. I assumed that you wouldn't be able to answer any of that, and I totally get it. Your submission was fascinating and very enlightening. Thank you both because I found them really helpful in simple-to-understand terms where this was sitting at, and I appreciate we're limited in what we can talk about today. So there's no drama there. I think that's it for us right now. I thank you again for taking time out of your incredibly busy schedules to provide us with your insights here, as well as your submissions. You will be provided with a copy of the transcript of your evidence today for correction. The Committee staff will also email to you any questions taken on notice from today, and there were some. We'll also provide you with the language around that for context of the nature of that question, which will help you.

We as a Committee may develop additional questions in the coming days that we'd also like to extend out to you early next week. In any case, for all those things, once you receive them from us, we ask that you could turn them around within seven days, if that's possible. We're working to a timeline, the same as you all are, and if it's not possible, please talk to us about that. Could you just remind us of when you're expected to table your reports? I believe it's early April. Is that still roughly about where you're at?

JONATHAN COPPEL: We haven't given a specific date.

The CHAIR: My apologies.

JONATHAN COPPEL: I think it's a question of months, but we have an in-depth investigation. We're at the stage where we're collecting the evidence. We've appointed a metallurgist to do work on the tower stubs and we've got a meteorologist looking at the meteorological data, so we need to go through that. There will also be requirements on us with respect to procedural fairness vis-a-vis Transgrid.

The CHAIR: I'm looking forward to reading your report, that's all. I'm just thinking about what I'm going to do in April and May. I'm trying to schedule when I'm going to read your reports. AER?

JUSTIN OLIVER: We won't necessarily produce a report. So one of the decisions is we may file proceedings in the Federal Court, for example, in which case we would announce that and there would be a statement of claim. I would emphasise we've not decided to do that. We can only follow a conclusion that there'd been a contravention. Obviously we would consult very closely with IPART as well. But that's one option, for example. There might be a decision to issue infringement notices. Again, there might be an announcement, but not necessarily a report. So in that, once we're into that enforcement stream, it's coming to a landing and then taking action.

The CHAIR: You don't want to table a public report.

JUSTIN OLIVER: Obviously if it does go to court, any matter that went to court, then it is ventilated very thoroughly through that process, but it takes time.

The CHAIR: Again, thank you all for coming. We really appreciate it.

(The witnesses withdrew.)

Mr JAMIE CALDWELL, Director, Energy Operations, Energy & Utility Services Functional Area Coordinator, Energy & Utility Services Functional Area, Energy, Climate Change and Sustainability, Department of Climate Change, Energy, the Environment and Water, affirmed and examined

Mr LIAM RYAN, Advising Executive Director, Energy, Climate Change and Sustainability, Department of Climate Change, Energy, the Environment and Water, affirmed and examined

The CHAIR: I welcome our final witnesses. We thank you very much for giving up your important time to be with us today. Do you have any questions about the hearing process that we're about to enter into today?

JAMIE CALDWELL: No.

LIAM RYAN: No.

The CHAIR: Would one of you like to make a brief opening statement?

LIAM RYAN: Thank you for the opportunity to appear before the inquiry today. I'm employed as the advising executive director in the Department of Climate Change, Energy, the Environment and Water. I wanted to give you a brief overview of my role generally and specifically on Broken Hill. I'm employed as advising executive director, but I'm also appointed as the primary New South Wales Jurisdictional System Security Coordinator, which is a role under the National Electricity Rules. I'm supported by two deputies in that role. That role has responsibility for preparing and maintaining guidelines for shedding and restoring load to maintain power system security, including specifying sensitive loads and priorities for restoration. In New South Wales, that role is also combined with another role, referred to as the jurisdictional designated officer, which is established under the National Electricity Market memorandum of understanding.

In that role, I provide advice and support to the Minister in exercising emergency powers—for example, the emergency powers under part 7A of the Electricity Supply Act. The Jurisdictional System Security Coordinator becomes the incident controller in an electricity supply emergency under the New South Wales Electricity Supply Emergency Sub Plan. In the power outage in the Far West, I was the primary incident controller. On activation of the sub plan, the electricity incident controller is responsible for the control and coordination of the electricity supply response and recovery measures, and as part of that role requests that the SEOCON coordinate the consequence management and response to the emergency's impact on the community. I wanted to just make that clear, because in some other kinds of emergencies, the incident controller takes a much more active role in consequence management. In this specific instance, in electricity supply emergencies, the incident controller is really focused on restoring power.

JAMIE CALDWELL: Following Liam's piece there, as mentioned before, I'm the director of energy operations in my BAU role. Legislatively, I also hold under the State Emergency and Rescue Management Act the Energy and Utility Services Functional Area Coordinator role. I'm also the combat agency controller for our responsibility as the combat agency for electricity and gas hazards. I also hold the jurisdictional contact officer role, which is a role within the gas emergency management side of the coin. My role across the piece of what we do is very much in the emergency management space, to ensure that we have the planning, preparation, response mechanisms, and, obviously, are involved in the recovery mechanisms from that overarching governance and framework point of view.

The plan that Liam spoke about there before, the Electricity Supply Sub Plan, the Natural Gas Supply Sub Plan and also the Energy And Utility Services Functional Area Plan are three various plans that we have as part of our framework within our emergency management responsibilities. I oversee the assurance of those plans being in place, up to date, available and ready to go. I sit on the State Emergency Management Committee in that role that I hold as the functional area coordinator and, obviously, during the incident, supply a supporting, enabling style of a role, as the combat agency controller, to the incident controller.

The CHAIR: Wearing a few hats, both of you. When did you first stand up in response to this particular event that happened around midnight on 16 and 17 October? Do you recall when you first got to see images or footage or photos of those seven powerlines laying down on their side? When did you first stand up?

LIAM RYAN: I was first notified as the jurisdictional system security coordinator—that's the general role with the National Electricity Market. I was first advised by Transgrid that the X2 line was down at around 6.55 on Thursday morning. I was advised they were trying to restart the generators at that time as well. It was about 11.30 that morning when we convened a meeting within the department to partially activate the sub plan. In the intervening time, we were trying to get information about the generators restarting. The storm at that point hadn't completely subsided, so for the first day, Transgrid hadn't actually done a full site inspection of the full X2

line. I don't think it was until the following day that we actually saw photographs of the towers that had been destroyed. That was when Transgrid had completed the aerial surveys of the line to inspect the damage.

JAMIE CALDWELL: We'd had verbal confirmation, obviously, that morning, that there were issues with the towers being down. That was obviously part of the justification to stand up our arrangements, as Liam said.

The CHAIR: Sure. If it's just a blown transformer or something that's going to be out for a couple of hours, you don't start standing up.

JAMIE CALDWELL: Correct.

The CHAIR: You start to stand up when you become aware it's a bit more serious.

JAMIE CALDWELL: Yes.

The CHAIR: That's why I asked about the footage and the image, because we had the assistant police commissioner in here earlier, and I think he said he saw it somewhere midmorning at lunchtime or something and went, "Oh, this is going to be big. We need to—" I'm not sure when that came out. I normally defer to my colleagues for their insightful questions first. Deputy Chair Mrs Sally Quinnell, the member for Camden, would you like to fire a few questions at our witnesses?

Mrs SALLY QUINNELL: Thank you so much, and thank you for being here today. The sub plan states that the department's media plays a role in—that you were part of the control and coordination of public information. I'm curious as to how you went about informing the community of what was happening on the ground.

LIAM RYAN: First off, we were coordinating with the PIFAC area. We're also cognisant that we had other channels to communicate with the local community, so our internal communications area set up a dedicated website for this information. They activated a paid social media campaign and used our department's own social media presence to alert people that the situation was serious. That evolved over the following days, but it was within the first, I think, 24 hours that we'd put a dedicated webpage and those initial bits of information into the public domain. In that first 24 hours, we did know that there was some damage to the line, but, again, we didn't know the extent of it, and we were still waiting for information on what the estimated time to restore was.

In that first period, the information was not great. From that point on, though, that internal communications area did activate all of the pre-approved campaign funding and material that we had available for energy emergencies. Ultimately, that included the website, paid social media campaigns and paid advertising on commercial radio. We had some paid advertising in a new local newspaper, as well as, obviously, coordinating information with PIFAC for release through those pre-existing emergency management channels.

Mrs SALLY QUINNELL: Were you aware from quite early on that people lost telecommunications, that they had no phones?

JAMIE CALDWELL: In the first instance, there was information still readily available and being distributed out. From our particular piece, we weren't 100 per cent aware of all of the telecommunication-style impacts. Obviously, as time went on, that information became much more available and we could then work to those particular situations. But in the first 24 hours in trying to get information out, that style of impact was unknown to us at that point in time. We knew there would be impacts. The extent of what those impacts were, we didn't have complete details of.

Mrs SALLY QUINNELL: I want to move now to load sharing. There was the initial blackout, and then we went to load sharing. Is there a standard practice for communications when dealing with load sharing? Understanding that that has a knock-on effect as to how much power people use. Is there a standard, I suppose, of best practice for communications during that?

LIAM RYAN: Part of my role is preparing and maintaining guidelines for load shedding, which is ostensibly the same practice as load sharing, or at least it's the guidelines that we used to inform the load sharing during this event. Those guidelines are written in anticipation of a statewide supply shortage where you wouldn't have enough power in a particular five-minute or hour-long interval. In that situation, the way it works is the market operator informs Transgrid how much power needs to be shed. Transgrid then shares how much power needs to be shed across the three distribution businesses, and then each of those three distribution businesses has a schedule for which of their feeders might match the amount of load that they need to shed.

In that context, it's very difficult for the operational staff in the control rooms that are turning off different sections of the community to know in advance which particular suburbs or areas of the State they might need to turn off for a period of time. Those guidelines don't go to public communications. They're more about how the

networks and Transgrid will communicate with each other and the market operator. In this particular instance, we're in a microcosm of New South Wales. We're not dealing with a statewide issue where location is less known. So the opportunities for sharing in this instance were far more limited. The information provided to us by Essential and Transgrid indicated that because the Far West has a few sensitive loads—it has an airport, it has a hospital there, they're sensitive loads under the guidelines—

Mrs SALLY QUINNELL: It has a mine.

LIAM RYAN: There's a very limited number of areas that they're actually able to turn off. Normally under the guidelines there's a concept called rotational load shedding, which would mean one set of customers is only ever offered two hours at a time. In this particular instance, that opportunity to share was far less limited. It meant that the area to the south side of Broken Hill suffered the brunt of needing to curtail load. So the guidelines themselves don't get to it. To answer your question specifically, they don't get to communication because in an operational sense, it's very hard to know who you would be communicating to in that statewide sense. How we applied it in this circumstance, it only became apparent after we'd really understood that load shedding at all was necessary, that it was going to be impacting specific sections of the community.

We had asked Essential Energy to communicate with the people they knew where there were planned outages, effectively. Load sharing, though, didn't come into that, because we didn't know for certain that we would have to shed load, basically. We didn't know every day that the customer base demand would actually be higher than what the generator would be able to put out. So in that circumstance, it didn't seem appropriate to be telling people that their power might be cut if we weren't certain about it. In hindsight, I have thought about the need to adapt the load shedding guidelines to take into account some of the practices that we've managed to have in the Far West. But hopefully the inquiry can give us some good recommendations in that place as well.

Mrs SALLY QUINNELL: I think the opportunity is there, considering it is its own line, to have something a little bit different out there maybe.

The CHAIR: Can I just check in there with something that Mr Ryan said? Someone surely had a responsibility to be reporting to you as the stand-up emergency agency to say, "We've only got one generator online and we can only run it at X capacity, which only pumps out X amount of power." We know—depending on which submission you get—that basically Broken Hill and surrounds needs somewhere between 25 and 35MW. We know that the one generator that was running was running at about 15MW. Doesn't the simple mathematics of that stand that not everyone was going to be able to be serviced? I'm deeply upset that no-one was having that frank and fearless conversation with you so that you could make the decisions you needed to make.

LIAM RYAN: To be fair, Mr Barr, the Transgrid and the central control room staff were having that conversation with us. The unknown in this event was the weather. Customer load is highly, highly weather dependent. And so that 25 to 30MW that you mentioned before is during a very hot day in the evening peak. What we weren't confident on—with any kind of forecast out more than a day or two—was just what that customer demand would actually get to. We did know that load shedding would have to occur. And that goes to why we activated the plan on the 17th. Part of the thinking was we knew there was only one generator that would be operational and we knew that, to meet the redundancy requirement, there needed to be two. So we knew ostensibly that there wouldn't be enough.

The CHAIR: You were being informed about that?

LIAM RYAN: Absolutely, yes. That was very plain from the first phone call at 6.55 on the Thursday morning.

The CHAIR: Sorry about my confusion. I thought you weren't being told about that.

Mrs SALLY QUINNELL: Following up on that, we know that communities were told to unplug or take their solar offline because of spiking—or shall we say, inconsistent energy requirements. Having done an energy audit in my own home—and please excuse my ignorance—one of the things that surprised me was the parts of my home that were using energy that was just background. So a microwave, for example, that's plugged in. At any point, is there anywhere through this that a suggestion was made to go and turn off all non-essential power points and things like that to reduce the amount of non-essential energy, so that when we had a load going out, it wasn't just being sucked by the timer on my oven?

LIAM RYAN: Part of the prearranged core messages that we have go to that point—to switch off non-essential appliances and defer the use of energy for things that you might be able to do later or earlier in the day. One of the tricky things that came up in this situation that we hadn't experienced before, which goes to that point about solar as well, was that the net load, the amount of energy that consumers needed to consume from the grid, was very, very small during the middle of the day when the solar was running, but then would peak up when

solar went down. That was hard for the generator to manage, that change in demand. That informed part of the work that we did with Essential to ask the community members to turn off their solar. It also made the communication just a little bit trickier. Effectively, what we were wanting to ask the community to do was to use as much energy as they could during the day, and then not do it at night. That, unfortunately, is just not a message that we're well practised in yet. I have to say, though, I think it is then a good experience for us to have gone through, because that issue will become a broader statewide issue in the next decade.

Mrs SALLY QUINNELL: I suppose just the knock-on effect that people sound like they were being told to turn off the free power that they were making so that they could pay for power. That disconnect of information, and also the disconnect of people really understanding how power works. I put my hand up for that one. I turn a switch, a light comes on, happy days.

Ms MARYANNE STUART: Mr Ryan, can I come to you. You said initially that you got a phone call at 6.55 a.m., and that they were trying to start the generators—is what you said initially.

LIAM RYAN: I misspoke. It should have been the generator.

Ms MARYANNE STUART: It was at that stage that you got told that there was only one? I'm just wanting to confirm, because of the conversation before.

LIAM RYAN: It's at that stage I was told one of them was not operational. It wasn't until sometime later—and I'd have to check my notes—when I understood why the other one wasn't operational. At that point in time I guess my key concern was understanding what had happened to the X2 line. The only information available was that there was some form of fault about 40 kilometres south of Broken Hill—so they knew it wasn't the substation—but not what the fault was. It could have been something that was a simple fix, like some kind of debris across the line that had caused a short. So at that point I guess my key concern was understanding what had actually happened with the towers, and obviously to restore load as quickly as possible.

Ms MARYANNE STUART: You're both really experienced public servants. In your view, once you found what happened to that second generator, were you surprised that Transgrid felt no requirement to let the department know?

LIAM RYAN: We do have some information collection provisions. We work with the market operator AEMO around understanding the maintenance practices of the transmission businesses across the National Electricity Market and all of the generators. We use that information to help coordinate and understand what bits of kit might be offline. In this specific instance, because it was a redundancy asset—it wasn't like they were planning to take the X2 line off—it wasn't picked up in our coordination information. I think that's a lesson we need to take forward as well, is actually that when we're getting information about outages through that process we're trying to also gather information about the backups. I don't want to criticise Transgrid for not providing us that information, because I'm not sure our processes existed to collect it. Jamie, I don't know if you wanted to—

JAMIE CALDWELL: I think it's also safe to say at that point in time, as well, the priority for us was to ensure the right framework was being set up to deal with the situation at hand, and what we knew was starting to come to the table. There was obviously a lot of arrangements that we needed to get in place. There was a lot of discussions, phone calls, conversations to ensure that we got stood up all the appropriate arrangements to start to deal with what needed to be dealt with. To answer that question of what was my thought around that time, it at that point in time was not in my thoughts, because it was, "I have a job here to do", which was in relation to the information that we had at hand, then in relation to what mechanisms we needed to trigger to start to do the job that we needed to do.

Ms MARYANNE STUART: Just to be clear, I'm not blaming anyone, so to speak, but just this job of ours is to look at where there may be gaps, and where we need to look at how we plug those gaps in the future. Everywhere we went over the four days of public hearings and town halls, people were telling us that it's regular for them to have brownouts. You're aware of that, that there's lots of brownouts that take place in this part of New South Wales?

JAMIE CALDWELL: Not officially but, yes, when you look at that part of New South Wales, the infrastructure—and when I say the infrastructure, there's not a lot of it, because there's smaller communities out there. So when you put it in comparison to the infrastructure that's in bigger, more populated areas you can make that understanding and knowledge that, yes, there would be ongoing impacts along those lines.

Ms MARYANNE STUART: What is the criteria for the energy provider telling you when there is a brownout or blackouts? For example, do they need to let you know if electricity is down for half an hour, or two hours, or what is the criteria for the department being notified?

LIAM RYAN: We might need to take that one on notice. There are requirements for licensed network service providers to inform the Minister about breaches of particular requirements. My understanding is they're more around safety. All of the network service providers have outage maps, though, that in real time show the public—all the distribution network service providers have that, I should say. They provide information to the public about where elements of their networks are down. The transmission provider, Transgrid, has to provide information to the market operator about transmission assets being down. That information ultimately is in the public domain.

What I'll need to take on notice is whether or not they have to inform us specifically. As part of the responsible officer role that Transgrid hold—so I am the Jurisdictional Systems Security Coordinator, they have a kind of partnership role underneath the National Electricity Rules, called the responsible officer. That is an ongoing communication protocol. We're in almost daily conversations about what's happening in the electricity system. So they're not kind of required to, but that person's role within Transgrid is to keep me informed. That's why I received the call on that Thursday morning.

The CHAIR: When you got that phone call, getting a phone call from that officer isn't unusual. That's not an unusual thing for you?

LIAM RYAN: No.

Ms MARYANNE STUART: When, then, did you see it going from what might have been a minor incident to a major incident? What was the catalyst? What was the trigger for that?

LIAM RYAN: I think it really was that space between seven o'clock in the morning until 11.30, where we got information about physical infrastructure damage. That was really the moment. The 6.55 call had given me enough information that there wasn't enough capacity to meet customer load, so the current situation was bad. Then the information about the tower, or the line being damaged in some way, later that morning, was enough to say, "Well, this isn't going to be quick. It won't be over tomorrow. There'll be some time before the situation is resolved."

From memory, I don't think we had an estimated time of restoration at that point. But the person I spoke to from Transgrid at that time was able to tell me that, at a point in the past, in the late 2000s, there was a similar incident where some towers were damaged, and that process took about three weeks to resolve. That ultimately ended up being the kind of guidance that we worked with each other on. Before the extent of the damage and work to actually understand the restoration works was planned, 20 days seemed like an appropriate guess, and any guess that would be less than that would be setting expectations that might not be met.

Ms MARYANNE STUART: I was quite concerned to hear, like Mrs Quinnell, about the telecommunications going down and that people couldn't ring 000, for example, if they had a life-threatening situation. Does that fall under your remit or not?

JAMIE CALDWELL: No.

LIAM RYAN: No.

JAMIE CALDWELL: The Telecommunications Services Functional Area under the New South Wales emergency management arrangements, that's their piece. But obviously it is a concern of ours because of how closely telecommunications are linked to power.

LIAM RYAN: I should just say, as incident controller, although, as I explained at the beginning, my role was really about restoring load, I did care about the consequences on the community, so when we heard about that, it was concerning. But, yes, it's not formally part of our remit within energy and utilities.

JAMIE CALDWELL: If I can just maybe take a step back in regards to triggering our various mechanisms. One thing we failed to mention there before is that when we talk about having that around about 11.30 internal conversation between us about, "This is the information we've got. This is the situation at hand et cetera", we made that decision that we were going to activate the sub plan. Part of activating that sub plan is then, as Liam's spoken about, he goes off and starts working on the technical aspect. I go off, and the first phone call that I make after we make that determination is to the SEOCON, so Deputy Commissioner Peter Thurtell, or representative, to say, "We are triggering our sub plan." In our sub plan, as mentioned, we hand the consequence management over to the relevant emergency management committee. So from that initial point where I'm making that call to trigger the "We need the appropriate emergency management committee support here for the consequence management", then that starts to come in and play. So whilst we've still got that overarching understanding and concern, we're also working with the appropriate emergency management committee level to then have them work through that consequence management type piece.

Ms MARYANNE STUART: Can I just unpack that a bit more? So you said before you were on the State Emergency—

JAMIE CALDWELL: Correct, yes, the State Emergency Management Committee.

Ms MARYANNE STUART: What's the difference between what you just said and the state of emergency?

JAMIE CALDWELL: Our sub plan is a State-level plan. Now, with this incident, we made that early determination with the information that we had that obviously there was going to be some impacts and some big broad impacts that are going to require some significant supporting mechanisms to take place. We activated the State-level sub plan on a regional-based geographical area rather than it being the State plan activated across the whole State. So whilst my first initial activation across to the emergency management levels was at the State level, I determined at that point in time that we would need to go across to the State level because we were going to need the buy-in of the State Emergency Management Committee to support. Initially then, noting that it wasn't a State geographical incident, but it was a State-level incident, it then very quickly transitioned to the Regional Emergency Management Committee being the main vehicle and mechanism of supporting us then going forwards.

Ms MARYANNE STUART: And that's what I want to know. Who activates that? Who says, "Right, we now do the REMC"? Is it the department?

JAMIE CALDWELL: I go across to the SEOCON and ask for that support. The SEOCON determines that that is appropriate. They then obviously trigger that support at the appropriate level. In saying that, I believe in the emergency management arrangements, the EOCN at the various levels, whether it be local, regional or State, can activate the support they see needed in any style incident or situation.

The CHAIR: I just wanted to ask about telecommunications, to go back to that point that you said about that's not in your remit, that's someone else's.

JAMIE CALDWELL: Not directly.

LIAM RYAN: It's not the functional area that the NSW Energy and Utilities Services Functional Area looks after. I guess the redundancy requirements and reliability standards for telecommunications is a Commonwealth regulatory framework, not a State-based one.

The CHAIR: But I'm confused now, Jamie, because I thought that you were indicating that there was a disaster sort of plan for telecommunications to be rolled out.

JAMIE CALDWELL: No. So my understanding is the telco functional area have a supporting plan, like what the energy and utility—so every functional area in the State emergency management arrangements have a functional area plan. The telecommunications, the telco functional area, have a functional area plan.

The CHAIR: Was that stood up and implemented?

JAMIE CALDWELL: The functional area plan is active at all times and the functional area plans talk about how the functional areas support various different incidents, emergencies and mechanisms. The functional area plan is distinctly different to a hazard style plan. You would need to question the telecommunications functional area further as to how they utilise their supporting plan in this particular situation. But the telecommunications functional area, like all the other functional areas, sit at the State level, at the regional level and, depending on functional areas, some do drop down to a local level.

The CHAIR: Your remit then, in this instance, was about the loss of electricity.

JAMIE CALDWELL: Correct, yes.

The CHAIR: You and your teams would obviously brainstorm a scenario about a storm and losing electricity. Part of that must surely be that you know telecommunications is going to drop out within a couple of hours as well because of their battery backup systems et cetera. So you know, as this day's unfolding, that telecommunications, if they're not already gone, they're about to be gone widespread. Is that fair?

LIAM RYAN: One thing just to bear in mind in this particular situation and that first 48 hours is that Transgrid was restoring load in Broken Hill on the first day. And in the surrounding communities to the east, so Menindee, Wilcannia, White Cliffs, they all came off a line owned by Essential Energy between Broken Hill and Sunset Strip, and there was a fault on that line that Essential needed to inspect before it could restore load. So that's sort of why the power—I guess we knew the power wouldn't come back on in those towns until the following day. And so, yes, the logical consequence of that is that the telecommunications in those towns would have been impacted because they would have been off for more than a day and we do have a general understanding that,

unless there's a backup generator, the battery set-ups for those telecommunications towers are around four hours, is my understanding. So that would have been a consequence, yes.

JAMIE CALDWELL: As a functional area, we have a very close operational working relationship with the telecommunications functional area. Part of the operational piece is situation reports and information sharing. Throughout this period of time, us as a functional area are providing situational reports. We're providing key bits of information across to our other functional areas. Another example is Transport for NSW—obviously, Broken Hill having SCATS systems and other transport-related devices that run off power—providing that intel as best as we possibly can, so that they can then work with their partners and within their operational responsibility and space to do what they need to do. Yes, we do work closely with them. Yes, we have an understanding and appreciation of telecommunications systems and also other-style communications systems that sit under their remit. We provide that intel and information operationally, as best as we can, during those periods of time.

The CHAIR: This is more of a comment than a question. We now know that if power goes out, then telecommunications goes out, and so there's the whole question around health. Keeping medicine refrigerated, keeping health machinery functioning and operating—that becomes a health problem. People can't get petrol and fuel, so they can't travel and stuff like that, so that becomes that problem. There's just all these cascading problems. Telecommunications are just so in the middle of it all now. It's like an unresolved piece of this puzzle.

You guys have been through the process now, and you've sat down and reflected, hopefully before the Northern Rivers events kicked off. What are your key learnings? What are your key takeaways? What do you think you might be contemplating doing differently? What worked really well? What didn't? Are you able to give us a five-dot-point quick summary?

JAMIE CALDWELL: We currently have our formal combat agency after-action review still taking place at the moment.

The CHAIR: I'm sorry.

JAMIE CALDWELL: All good. We have engaged two independent facilitators to undertake our formal combat agency after-action review. That includes one-on-one conversations with key people involved throughout the whole incident, including Transgrid and Essential Energy, as well as the State Emergency Management Committee. As part of that after-action review, the facilitators are looking at us as a department and how we support the functional area and our responsibilities under that piece too. Formally speaking, the after-action review is still going at the moment. There's a fairly big process that the gentlemen that have been activated for this are going through. We believe we will have our final after-action review report delivered sometime mid-April.

LIAM RYAN: Maybe just a few things I would call out, though, immediately are the communications. The communications effort from within the department on the Far West was more than we had ever trained for or exercised in the past. That sort of effort we've already been redeploying as part of the EUSFA response to the tropical cyclone and earlier in the year with Port Stephens. Rest assured, there are lessons learnt. That's a good one that we can talk about, because we're actually already doing it. There will definitely be others that come out of that after-action review as well.

The CHAIR: This is a bit of a wild one. I know we're over time, and I apologise. We heard that in a previous event a large power cable of some description was able to be used to go from over here, where it was still functioning, and the towers have fallen down or whatever: Insert large cable, run it along the ground to the point where you get on the other side of the problem, then reattach and away you go and power is restored. I think that was the 2019 outage or it might have been one earlier. Would you like to make a comment about the practicalities and usefulness of that? It's also something that one of the small communities was suggesting—"Why don't we just do this? We did it in the past and it worked fine." Do you have any awareness of it ever being used? Do you have any concerns about what I've described?

LIAM RYAN: I'm not aware of that particular technology or approach. The only comment I would add is that the ultimate restoration happened faster than we anticipated, in part because Transgrid actually kept the cables intact. Just from what you've said, Mr Barr, it sounds like, if you're cutting into the cables, the ultimate long-term solution might then take longer. That's probably the only consideration I'd give to it, but I'm not a power system engineer. I'm not well equipped to actually opine on it.

The CHAIR: Nor am I, but something we heard right along the way is the emotional uncertainty during that time. First of all, it was lack of information, and then once the information was restored, it was still this "power's on, power's off, power's on, power's off" and an emotional roller-coaster for the community at large. I think that they would have preferred either "it's on" or "it's off" instead of the uncertainty.

Ms MARYANNE STUART: Especially for business. There's a lot of tourism out there, as you can imagine. There was an announcement made, "Don't come out here. Don't come out here." But no-one went back on and said, "We're fine. You can come now." There's been a lot that's happened to those poor folks out there.

The CHAIR: Who would authorise a message like that to say, "Don't come out here"? Whose idea would that be, to go, "I'm going to say, 'People, if you're planning on going out there, don't go.'"?

JAMIE CALDWELL: It really depends on where that message is coming from. If it was a public-safety-style message, or if that message was needed because it's a public safety issue, that potentially could be coming from the police lead. It's definitely not something that us as the combat—

The CHAIR: It didn't come out of your agencies?

JAMIE CALDWELL: No. As we've explained our role, Liam's role as the JSSC and the incident controller is from that technical point of view to work with Transgrid and AEMO. My role is to work with the emergency management arrangements for the consequence-management-type stuff. It's not something that we would sit there and publicly say. It really depends on why that message was needed and then where it potentially has come from, but not us.

LIAM RYAN: Having said that, it would have helped with the customer load and supply dynamics. There wasn't enough supply to meet customer demand. Having people come to that community during a blackout is not an ideal situation, but also it would have meant lower customer demand and less load sharing as well. If we were consulted on it, I would likely have supported it in hindsight, because of that.

The CHAIR: And Maryanne's comment was that on the flip side of that, after a week or two when it's restored, someone has to proactively say, "Hey guys, please come back. Help us recover."

LIAM RYAN: When it's restored, absolutely.

The CHAIR: Thank you again for appearing before us today. You will be provided with a copy of the transcript of your evidence for corrections. The Committee staff will also email any questions taken on notice from today and any supplementary questions from the Committee that we may develop. We kindly ask that you return these answers within seven days if that's possible. Please talk to us if it's not. That concludes our public hearing for today, and for this inquiry. I would like to place on the record my many thanks to all witnesses who appeared today but also witnesses who appeared throughout the inquiries. In addition, I would like to thank the Committee members, Committee staff and Hansard for their assistance in conducting the hearing. With that, we will call it a wrap.

(The witnesses withdrew.)

The Committee adjourned at 17:10.