

Summer Fires Inquiry

Tablelands Fire Recovery Hub

Leadership Group April 2026

Supporting doc for the hearing 24th April session

Introduction

The January 2026 Longwood fires devastated the Tablelands, destroying homes, sheds, fencing, livestock, and the physical and emotional stability of our community. In the days that followed, when systems were overwhelmed and formal support had not yet arrived, the community stepped forward. Six local community members formed the Tablelands Fire Recovery Hub Leadership Group, and together with hundreds of volunteers, have built a recovery effort from the ground up.

The coordination of informal and formal supports and services for the Tablelands is essential, it was recognised early that it needed to happen because the community needed to stay connected, with consistent, access and availability of place and space. People have been saying that openly that continuity is everything. Without a place to gather, to check in, and to keep momentum, communities fade. The Tablelands Fire Recovery Hub has been crucial in keeping the community connected to itself at a time when that connection could have been lost. It protected the ethos of the Tablelands at a moment when it could easily have disappeared.

Residents who lost their homes have said they could keep connected even if not living on their land temporarily, staying linked into their community, and that assisted them to see a path to rebuilding *because* the Hub existed. Without it, many would not have believed they could remain here or start again. The Hub has kept people connected to their place, their neighbours, and their future and that has been the difference between a community surviving and a community disappearing.



Photo: *Max Furlanetto*

Tablelands Community Centre, 8th January

(Former Ruffy Primary School)



Photo: *Former Ruffy Primary School*

This summary outlines what the community achieved, the challenges we faced, the gaps left by delayed agency response, and the structural changes required to ensure communities are not left to carry this burden alone.



Photo: *Ruffy Recreation Reserve days after the January 8th Fire impact in Ruffy*

COMMUNITY- ENABLED RECOVERY:

WHAT WAS BUILT WHEN NOTHING ELSE EXISTED

Community-enabled recovery sits at the heart of the Tablelands Fire Recovery Hub because it is the only model that reflects how this community survives, responds, and rebuilds. When the January 2026 fires cut roads, power, and communications, it was local residents who stepped in, organised, and created a functioning relief and recovery centre long before formal systems could mobilise. That lived knowledge, trust, and connection continue to drive the Hub today. Community-enabled recovery ensures decisions are made by the people who understand the land, the needs, and the vulnerabilities; it keeps recovery grounded in dignity, agency, and local identity; and it builds the social cohesion that no external agency can manufacture. It delivers faster, more accurate support, reduces duplication and waste, and strengthens long-term resilience by embedding capability within the community itself. For the Tablelands, community-enabled recovery is not a theory it is the proven foundation of everything that has worked.

The Tablelands Fire Recovery Hub at the Ruffy Mechanic Institute the only community infrastructure remaining, as the Tablelands Community Centre and Ruffy Recreation Reserve were lost to the fire, the hub became the centre of gravity for the entire district. It was not planned, funded, or resourced by government. It was created because the community had no other choice.

For more than 9 weeks, the Hub operated seven days a week, since then till now is 3 days a week providing:

- Cold meal (drinks)
- hot meals (drinks)
- Ice (via donated ice machine)
- food supplies
- clothing
- pantry items
- personal care items
- limited medical first aid supplies
- welfare checks
- fodder and stock support
- Water stock and Human consumption
- showers (showers funded by recovery funds from government) and laundry access (Donations)
- a safe place to gather
- a point of connection for visiting services
- trauma-informed support
- a communication lifeline

This was / is not a small operation. It was a full-scale emergency relief and recovery centre run entirely by volunteers.



THE HAY & FODDER DEPOT:



A COMMUNITY LOGISTICS OPERATION

The Hay and Fodder Depot were established immediately after the fire. With no agency-led fodder support available, the community mobilised its own supply chain. Supported as a sub depot of the Longwood Hay Depot.

Volunteers sourced, transported, unloaded, and distributed:

- thousands of rolls of hay
- pellets, chaff, and feed
- fencing materials
- essential supplies
- Water (IBC's)

Pick-ups occurred directly to those who could deliveries were coordinated across the wider Tablelands.

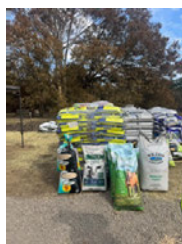


Photo: *Tablelands Hay Depot*

This was a complex logistics operation run with professionalism, compassion, and efficiency despite having no structural support from CFA, EMV, or state agencies.

The community prevented animal starvation, stabilised farming operations, and protected livelihoods. This was not supplementary support. It was essential. It was more than fodder it offered emotional stability and support connection also.



Photos: *Need 4 Feed Hay Run to Tablelands
8th March 2026 with over 50 Trucks and 1000
Rolls of Hay.*



THE TABLELANDS FIRE RECOVERY HUB:

A PLACE OF SAFETY, ROUTINE & CONNECTION

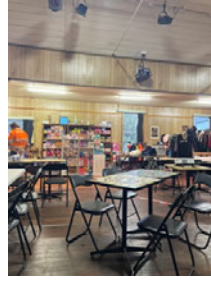
The Hub operated from the only remaining community facility in Ruffy a building that survived when almost everything else was lost. It became the heart of recovery.

Over 140 meal services were delivered, feeding thousands of people. At times, more than 200 people were fed in a single sitting. For many weeks, around 100 people were fed per meal. The individual meals for everything from sandwiches to fully catered wholesome fresh food is estimated to be over 4000 individual meals.

The Hub provided:

- hot meals
- frozen and fridge meals
- showers (government-funded)
- laundry facilities using donated washing machines
- a warm, safe place to gather
- a stable environment for children
- a point of connection for visiting services
- a place where people could breathe, talk, cry, and be heard
- clothing
- food
- other supplies (batteries, torches)

The Hub was not just a kitchen. It was a stabilising force in a traumatised community.



Photos: Hub, facilities, pop-up hub shop, meals, teamwork and events

COMMUNICATION:

THE LIFELINE THAT HELD THE COMMUNITY TOGETHER

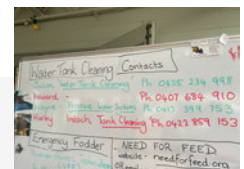
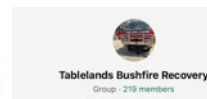
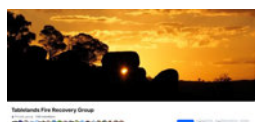
The fires destroyed not only homes and infrastructure but also communication networks. Many residents had:

- no mobile coverage
- no internet
- no power
- no ability to receive emergency updates

The community and the leadership group built a multi-layered communication system to ensure no one was left behind:

- **The Tablelands Fire Recovery Hub Newsletter** – regular updates on meals, services, events, and recovery information.
- **The Granite News** – a trusted regional publication that reached residents beyond social media.
- **WhatsApp groups** – essential for welfare checks, fodder coordination, volunteer rostering, and urgent updates.
- **Facebook and community pages** – for flyers, service notices, and real-time communication.
- **Word of mouth** – critical for residents without connectivity or those overwhelmed by trauma.
- **Hard copies of information**
- **White boards for key information**

This communication network became the backbone of recovery.



The Telstra Satellite Beacon – A Critical Success

When all other communication failed, the Telstra satellite beacon installed at the Hub became a lifeline. It enabled:

- contact with agencies
- welfare checks
- access to online services
- coordination of volunteers
- communication with isolated residents

Without this beacon, the community would have been effectively cut off

SAFETY, THEFT & COMMUNITY VULNERABILITY

During the relief and recovery period, the community experience includes:

- theft of fuel, tools, and property
- limited police presence due to resourcing and geography
- residents living in caravans and sheds feeling exposed and unsafe
- increased vulnerability to scams and inflated quotes
- confusion leading to overinflated repair and renew accounts

The Hub became a trusted place where residents could:

- verify information
- seek guidance
- report concerns
- feel protected
- supported in connecting to the right services for them
- ensured communicative choice as a priority to be understood by the community, they are in control of their individual relief and recovery. That everyone is different.

This role was essential and filled a gap left by limited agency presence.

EMERGENCY PEDAGOGY:

FIRST AID FOR THE SOUL

In April 2026, the Hub partnered with **Emergency Pedagogy Without Borders – Australia** to deliver trauma-informed support across Ruffy, Alexandra, and Mansfield.

Led by international trauma specialist **Bernd Ruf**, the program provided:

- rhythm, movement, and coordinated activities
- creative arts and play
- circle games and shared rituals
- routine, structure, and community connection

Participants described feeling lighter, more grounded, and more able to understand their own reactions.

This intervention was only possible because the Hub provided a stable, welcoming environment.



International Trauma Specialist, Educator and Emergency Pedagogy founder Bernd Ruf, with some of the National Emergency Pedagogy Team and Tablelands Fire Recovery Volunteers. Outside one of the few remaining buildings in the main street of Ruffey Victoria Australia

OPERATIONAL REALITIES:

THE COST OF COMMUNITY- ENABLED RECOVERY

Despite delivering essential services for more than twelve weeks, the Hub received no formal operational funding.

The Ruffey Mechanics Institute carried the full cost of powering the Hub:

- cool rooms
- freezers
- heating
- lighting
- kitchen operations
- service delivery

Only one partial power bill has been supported by the council to date, and it will be looked at on a bill-by-bill basis.

A minimum of \$1,000 per month is required to keep the Hub operational. (without including food and consumables)

This is not optional. It is the baseline required to keep the doors open.

INFRASTRUCTURE NEEDS:

TOILETS, SHOWERS, STORAGE, POWER, SECURITY

The leadership group is currently advocating a proposal for urgently needed infrastructure:

- Showers and toilets on a more permanent basis
- Split systems for the Hall (Currently in the process of being donated)
- Split system for the Kitchen provided heavily subsidised
- A new oven for the Hall (Donated and installed)
- generator for the Ruffy Hall
- Patio heating x 2 (Currently being sourced and donated)
- Due to the threats ongoing security cameras (Currently being sourced by donations)



Photos: *New oven donated after a story in Shepparton News. A fully donated, including installation fully possible due to generous donations.*

These assets are essential for:

- residents without functioning home facilities
- volunteers
- visiting agencies
- community events
- future resilience

KEY ISSUES FOR THE INQUIRY

1. Delayed and insufficient agency support
2. Community capacity substituted for government responsibility
3. Lack of integrated recovery planning
4. Escalating physical and mental health impacts
5. Operational costs are left almost entirely to the community
6. Communication and connection are essential infrastructure
7. Vulnerability to theft, scams,
8. Misinformation, confusion over which agency is responsible for what
9. Community volunteers must be supported
10. Community Recovery Committee support is essential if the community decides so.
11. Working with other hubs, large and small, borrowing, sharing has been extraordinary and continue to be in recovery.

CONCLUSION

The Tablelands community demonstrated extraordinary resilience, leadership, and operational capability. But community strength should never be used as justification for delayed or inadequate government response.

The Tablelands Fire Recovery Hub and the Hay & Fodder Depot show what the community can achieve. They also show what must change.

Tablelands Fire Recovery Hub

Timeline Summary



JANUARY 2026 — IMMEDIATE RESPONSE

- **9th Jan – 11th Jan — Hub and Depot opened (Fast rallying by community and response with food, clothing and supplies, The first fodder day 11th January)**
- **20 Jan – 19 Feb — Outreach Truck (Seymour Toyota Loan) Daily deliveries of food, water, clothing, and welfare checks across the Tablelands. Critical for residents with no power or communication.**
- **Late January — Leadership Group Formed** Six local leaders coordinate relief operations. Hub established at Ruffy Mechanics Institute.
- **Late January — Hay & Fodder Depot Established** Community-run logistics hub supplying hay, feed, fencing materials, and essentials.

FEBRUARY 2026 — EARLY SUPPORT & CONNECTION

- **February — Psychologist & Counsellors Volunteering Weekly** Trauma-aware support during the critical first six weeks.
- **15 February — Kids' Day** Play, movement, and reconnection for children living in disrupted conditions.
- **Outreach Truck Continues** Daily deliveries across the Tablelands.

MARCH 2026 — COMMUNITY EVENTS & HAY RUN

- **1 March — Hay & Fodder Depot Closes.** After delivering thousands of rolls of hay and essential supplies.
- **8 March — Need for Feed Hay Run + Community Dinner** Major hay run supporting landholders: community dinner that evening.

- **9 March — Need for Feed Breakfast** for volunteers, drivers, and residents.
- **9 March — International Women’s Day Event:** Wellbeing and connection for women carrying significant emotional load.
- **11 March — Mini Sediment control on farm field day:** Services and agencies shared practical tools and tips.
- **March, April (weekly) — Alexandra Community Radio Updates** Regular communication on meals, services, and recovery information.

APRIL 2026

- **8 April — Emergency Pedagogy Talk (Bernd Ruf)** “First Aid for the Soul” community presentation.
- **10 April — Emergency Pedagogy Workshops (Day 1)** Movement, rhythm, art, circle games, trauma-release activities.
- **11 April — Emergency Pedagogy Workshops (Day 2)** Continued trauma-informed support for adults, youth, and children.
- **7 Apr — Outreach Truck** Second loan period ends, deliveries across the Tablelands.

FEB–APRIL — ONGOING SUPPORT

- **Friday Community Dinners:** Routine, connection, and companionship.
- **Visiting Services at the Hub** Primary Care Connect, Family Care, GV Health Psychologist, Mental Health & Wellbeing Local, ARC Justice, financial counsellors, case managers.

MAY 2026 — WOMEN’S DAY EVENT

- **31 May — Women’s Day** Planned Connection, wellbeing, and shared recovery.

JUNE 2026 — CHILDREN’S RECOVERY

- **14 June — Kids’ Day:** Planned Trauma-aware activities