

LEGISLATIVE COUNCIL ENVIRONMENT AND PLANNING COMMITTEE

Inquiry into the 2026 Summer Fires across Victoria

Alexandra – Friday 24 April 2026

MEMBERS

Ryan Batchelor – Chair

David Ettershank – Deputy Chair

Melina Bath

Gaelle Broad

Jacinta Ermacora

Wendy Lovell

Sarah Mansfield

Rikkie-Lee Tyrrell

Sheena Watt

**Necessary corrections to be notified to
executive officer of committee**

WITNESSES

Sam Hicks, President, Fawcett Mechanics Institute Reserve Committee of Management;

Colleen Furlanetto, Tablelands Fire Recovery Hub; and

Andrea Bauer, Highlands Relief Hub.

The CHAIR: Welcome back to the proceedings of the Legislative Council Environment and Planning Committee's Inquiry into the 2026 Summer Fires across Victoria, coming to you today from the Alexandra shire hall. We welcome the representatives from various relief centres who will shortly be giving evidence.

All the evidence that we take is protected by parliamentary privilege as provided by the *Constitution Act 1975* and the provisions of the Legislative Council standing orders. Therefore the information you provide during the hearings is protected by law. You are protected against any action for what you say during this hearing, but if you go elsewhere and repeat the same things, those comments may not be protected by this privilege. Any deliberately false evidence or misleading of the committee may be considered a contempt of Parliament.

All evidence is being recorded, and you will be provided with a draft version of the transcript for review. Those transcripts will ultimately be made public and posted on the committee's website.

Welcome. It is good to see some of you again and to meet you, Andrea, for the first time. My name is Ryan Batchelor. I am the Chair of the Environment and Planning Committee and Member for the Southern Metropolitan Region in the Legislative Council of the Victorian Parliament. I will ask the committee members to introduce themselves.

Rikkie-Lee TYRRELL: Hello. I am Rikkie-Lee Tyrrell, Member for Northern Victoria Region.

Gaëlle BROAD: Hi. I am Gaëlle Broad, Member for Northern Victoria Region.

Melina BATH: Good morning. Melina Bath, Eastern Victoria Region.

Wendy LOVELL: Wendy Lovell, Member for Northern Victoria Region.

Jacinta ERMACORA: Good morning. Jacinta Ermacora, Member for Western Victoria Region.

Sarah MANSFIELD: Sarah Mansfield, Member for Western Victoria Region.

John BERGER: John Berger, Member for Southern Metro.

The CHAIR: For the Hansard record, if I could get each of you just to state your name and the organisation you might be appearing on behalf of first. We will start with you, Sam, then work down the table.

Sam HICKS: Sam Hicks, Fawcett Hall Reserve committee of management, lovingly referred to as Fawcett Hall.

Andrea BAUER: Andrea Bauer, Highlands hub and also the Highlands Community Fireguard group.

Colleen FURLANETTO: Colleen Furlanetto, the Tablelands Recovery Hub leadership group.

The CHAIR: Thank you, all. Pretty straightforward proceedings – we will invite you to make an opening statement and then we will ask you some questions, so I will hand it over. I am in your hands as to who wants to go first.

Colleen FURLANETTO: You go first.

Sam HICKS: Okay. No pressure. I would like to thank the two ladies that have joined me. Our entire hubs are not represented today, but they are standing right behind us. Thank you for the opportunity to speak today. My name is Sam Hicks. I am a 25-year resident of Fawcett, and President of Fawcett Hall. Fawcett Hall was established in 1882, and at the time of the fires our remit was 129 landowners across Fawcett and Koriella. In

the eight weeks following the fires that remit expanded significantly. Through the hall we have supported over 165 fire-affected landowners with practical recovery, particularly fencing materials, fodder, tool lending, local business vouchers and community connection. This has also extended to supporting clean-up on properties, including tree removal along fence lines, and assisting emergency services personnel and returned veterans. This work has been delivered through strong partnerships across Victoria with more than 3000 hours of volunteer labour – real boots on the ground.

But what I want to speak to you about today goes beyond the numbers. I want to talk about what I am now seeing or observing, and this is bushfire poverty. Bushfire poverty is surviving the fire but not having the means to recover. It is not always visible. It is not always captured in data, but it is very real. It looks like landowners who do not ask for help. Damien's point before – we are seeing it regularly: people are now just knocking on the door. A lot of landowners say, 'Give this to someone else who needs it more,' because they are proud. They may be generational farmers, or they just might be feisty couples or families managing on their own, or 80-year-olds – I do not need to tell you about the 80-year-olds who are feisty. It looks like people returning to their properties with no services, unable to afford travel between temporary accommodation and their land, or where suitable accommodation is not available. They feel the need to be onsite due to clean-up delays, red tape with utilities and a strong drive to move forward. Being back in their community and maintaining connection is vital. It looks like limited income because every available dollar is going back into fencing, stock and basic infrastructure just to stay operational, and often it sits outside formal systems.

Recently a family reached out regarding a relative who had returned to a heavily impacted property. They had not presented at any relief centre. Through community support we delivered practical items directly – no forms, no queues. Many landowners are living on properties with no basic services, including water. Even early supplies of IBCs with drinking water would have made a significant difference, yet communities have had to fundraise for this, along with storage, wire, gripples and star pickets, which I have brought in just in case you non-farming folk – and there are only a couple of you – do not know what we are talking about. It would have been absolutely amazing if we had had those IBCs early on, and this also shows us that recovery is not linear.

People are at very different stages across our region depending on their circumstances. On the surface our landscape is green again, but underneath we are still deeply impacted. Along with this we are seeing significant barriers to recovery. Delays in case manager allocation leaves some residents without guidance at critical times. We are now facing a large-scale clean-up challenge on private land, particularly with access to arborists and machinery, with costs averaging \$500 or more per hour, and for those without insurance this directly impacts mental health and recovery.

Underinsurance is also a major issue. Many long-term policyholders are discovering their cover is no longer fit for purpose. In some cases farmers have diverted funds into fodder during drought rather than insuring fencing, leaving them exposed, or they cannot afford or could not afford insurance, or in very big circumstances have not actually been able to obtain insurance – and that one is a hidden one.

In speaking with others across the region, four consistent issues have emerged. Firstly, the allocation of firefighting resources on the day, with reports of minimal support, ageing equipment, communication failures and limited use of local knowledge. Secondly, community infrastructure readiness – local halls should be equipped in advance as relief and recovery centres. We have all had to scramble for these resources. Thirdly, livestock welfare, where farmers were left to manage euthanasia themselves due to access limitations. Finally, the big one: fencing. Without fencing, there is no security, no containment of stock and no pathway back to operation. We estimate a need for 500,000 star pickets across the region to rebuild thousands of kilometres of fencing. This equates to around 2000 tonnes of steel, millions of dollars and significant supply chain pressure if not centrally coordinated – and that only stands the fence up. That does not include the wire, the strainers, the gripples, labour or transport. Additional complexity exists for those bordering rail trails or Crown land, where support is unclear or capped well below the scale of loss.

In closing, community-led recovery has worked. Many call it community-enabled recovery. Local people and organisations moved first, using local knowledge. This works well in regional areas, but it works best when government recognises it and backs it early with targeted immediate funding. We need funding on the ground now. No more programs – we do not need any more programs. We need a practical framework, a simple cheat sheet for next time, because there is going to be a next time, we all know it, and we need to demonstrate we have listened and learned and that these losses incurred have not been for nothing. Thank you.

The CHAIR: Thanks, Sam. Andrea.

Andrea BAUER: Thank you. Good morning. Thank you for the opportunity to speak. I wish to speak about the CFA community fireguard program and the Highlands Relief Hub submissions, referring to the submissions that I have made. I am currently the brigade community safety coordinator for the Highlands brigade, a position I have held since January 2025. I have also been the community fireguard coordinator for the Highlands group for nearly two decades. It is a large group that supports residents in a region classified as very high risk on the Victorian fire risk register, the only region of that type for our whole brigade. Over time our group has grown from a small neighbourhood network into a much larger network to cover the high-risk area. That growth has increased both the importance and the complexity of communication and coordination.

The Longwood fire clearly demonstrated the value of community-based preparedness. Our community had two days lead time before the impact of the fire. This enabled us to activate prepared plans as residents and collectively share information and support people in making early decisions about their safety. During the incident and for weeks afterwards the community fireguard network provided ongoing local updates about fire behaviour, flare-ups and local hazards. Incidentally, we had fires for 34 days after the main event. These communications were especially important for residents with limited access to technology or difficulty interpreting official emergency notifications. Community fireguard groups do not replace the official alerts. They complement them by providing trusted local context.

There is a risk as this community fireguard group relies heavily on one or two people to coordinate and distribute information to a large group. This creates vulnerability during fast-moving emergencies. A recent survey has shown that the community members greatly valued the additional local information that was provided during the recent event, and I recommend the development of further community fireguard groups across our brigade area and also across the state and the country.

Now for the Highlands Hub. I am the main coordinator of the Highlands Hub, with a core group team of three but also an incredible group of volunteers. I want to be very clear about who the hub is. It is not an outside agency. It is a group of local volunteers – community members who were all, without exception, touched by these fires. In those initial weeks we were completely cut off from official support. There was no internet, no power and no safe way in or out, with official road closures in place. Because official infrastructure could not reach us, we endeavoured to meet the needs of the community with the assistance of volunteers far and wide. We established our own hay and fuel depots. We organised Sunday worship for spiritual comfort. We provided many, many hugs, comfort and support, along with showers, toilets, clothing, frozen meals and high-speed wi-fi. We created our own database to reflect the suffering on the ground and define the extent of the impact. Forty-four houses were lost in our area alone. Local volunteers helped neighbours with complex grant applications when there was not a case manager in sight. We have just in the last two weeks received some case managers. All of this occurred before the first official state help could navigate the road closures. While agencies did visit, practical operational support in the early stages was very limited and key resources were severely delayed when they were absolutely urgently needed. Pressure on volunteers was extreme, to say the least. Over time fatigue, both physical and emotional, has become debilitating. Now in early recovery the community continues to rely heavily on the hub. Essential needs have not disappeared. Psychological support, safe drinking water, water delivery and the cost of fuel and water remain a challenge for many and hinder recovery.

Looking forward, the community has identified clear priorities. These include reliable delivery of water in all locations, essential supplies, continued face-to-face access to caseworkers, practical information sessions to help residents navigate recovery and rebuilding processes and, most importantly, the ongoing support for community connection and mental wellbeing. The community has established the Highlands Relief Hub incorporated, creating a formal structure to coordinate recovery priorities and work constructively with government and service providers.

In closing, our experience shows both the strength of community-led action and the risks when systems depend too heavily on volunteers without sufficient support. Community fireguard and community-led hubs are critical parts of emergency resilience. With increased emergency resilience planning, stronger coordination, earlier resource deployment and genuine partnerships between communities and agencies, recovery outcomes can be significantly improved. Thank you.

The CHAIR: Thanks, Andrea. Colleen.

Colleen FURLANETTO: Thank you, Chair, panel members and colleagues. I present on behalf of the Tablelands hub team: Anne, Katie Bogie, Don, Flic, Katie Euroa and me. We have spoken about the fires, that they affected homes, sheds, fencing and livestock and that livelihoods have been lost. In those days and weeks – when roads were blocked, communication was down and formal systems overwhelmed – the community itself became the first responder.

Six district residents formed the Tablelands Fire Recovery Hub leadership group, although we did not know that is what we were getting into when we first started. We have had no paid support beside us. With hundreds of volunteers, together we built a full-scale emergency relief recovery centre from the ground up – not planned, funded or resourced by government, but created because there was no other choice. For nine weeks the hub operated seven days a week and continues three days a week today. We have people coming in at least weekly that have asked for no supports as yet. It has provided hot and cold meals, food and clothing, pantry and personal care items, first aid supplies, welfare checks, fodder and stock support, water for human consumption, showers and laundry access and a safe place to gather. It became the centre of gravity for the entire district, the only surviving community facility – apart from the CFA shed, which we are very grateful for – after the fire in Ruffy, with the Tablelands Community Centre and the Ruffy Recreation Reserve lost.

Alongside the hub the hay and fodder depot was established. With no agency-led fodder support, volunteers sourced and transported it, largely from the Longwood hay depot that was set up so quickly. We distributed thousands of rolls of hay, pellets, chaff, fencing materials and essential supplies and lots of gripples. This was not supplementary help – it was essential. It kept animals alive, farms functioning, people connected and people alive.

Communication was another lifeline. With no mobile coverage, internet or power the community built its own neighbouring community networks, like the *Granite News*, WhatsApp groups – I do not know how many we are all in – Facebook, whiteboards and word of mouth. We even had to borrow a Starlink. After several long weeks the Telstra satellite beacon was installed at the hub and became a single point of contact with the outside world, enabling welfare checks, volunteer coordination and agency communication – although that was very limited. Safety and vulnerability were consistent challenges. Theft, scams and confusion compound the trauma. The hub became a trusted place to verify information, report concerns and feel protected. Reliable, concise and consistent communication was and is essential.

Wellbeing has always been at the forefront. We now host visiting services every Tuesday with psychologists provided by our health service, which has had no additional funding to do so. Case managers, financial counsellors, lawyers and more are assisting with the recovery. Earlier in April we partnered with Emergency Pedagogy Without Borders Australia and also the schools and kinders from Alexandra and Mansfield to provide emotional stabilisation – first aid for the soul. The first six months after a disaster are critical, especially for children, and without structured support trauma can harden into long-term mental health impacts. This partnership helped some way to protect our community in that window.

The hub is the lounge and the kitchen that many no longer have. Operationally the hub runs on volunteer labour and community donations alone. Power alone is a significant cost, with only one partial bill being supported by council at this stage. This is not optional; it is a baseline to keep our doors open. We have advocated for and received donated infrastructure. Split systems for our heating are being donated, outdoor patio heaters, security cameras – how sad that we need security cameras. These are not luxuries. They are resilience assets for residents, volunteers and visiting agencies. We still need a generator if anyone is listening. For our hall power reliability remains a challenge. And a permanent shower toilet block would be far more cost effective than hiring facilities for years to come.

The tablelands community has shown extraordinary strength and leadership, but community capacity must never be a substitute for government responsibility. Our experience demonstrates what communities can achieve and what must change. We ask this inquiry to recognise that communication, connection and community-enabled coordination are not optional extras; they are critical infrastructure. Support them, fund them and embed them so no community is left to carry this burden alone. The coordination of informal and formal supports and services in 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 openly that continuity is everything. Without a place to gather, to check in, to keep momentum, communities fade. The Tablelands fire recovery hub has been crucial in keeping the community connected to itself at a time when connection could have been lost. It protects the ethos of the tablelands at the 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, staying linked to their community, and that has assisted them to see a path to rebuild – 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.

We hear governments say funds are released; we hear councils say they have not received them. The gap between those statements is being carried by our community. The community stepped up because we had no choice, but community strength cannot be used as a substitute for government responsibility. Showers are not a luxury; they are a necessity. The hub filled gaps left by delayed agency presence. We expected the cavalry. We realised we are the cavalry. Meetings do not keep the lights on – funding does. Everything from heating to hay has been donated. That is not sustainable. This was not a small community effort; this was a district-wide community operation. If a community-enabled recovery model is the model, then government must enable the community. Thank you on behalf of the Tablelands fire recovery hub.

The CHAIR: Thank you all for the very powerful statements. I just want to place on record the appreciation of the committee to Colleen and Sam for the sessions that you coordinated, organised, pulled together yesterday. Just for the benefit of everyone and to put it on the record, the committee went to Ruffy and Fawcett yesterday afternoon and spent about an hour in each of the halls listening to members of the community telling their stories. It was exceptionally powerful. We had a long chat about it last night, afterwards. It was a profound experience for the members of the committee, and we really appreciate the efforts that you put into organising that. If you can pass back to everyone who came our deep appreciation for what we were told.

Andrea, I might ask you just a little bit more about the community fire guard group, and I am particularly interested in your evidence in the submission about the bushfire essentials meeting that you had in November. I assume it was a sort of preparatory exercise for members of the community. Can you talk a little bit more about that – if they have been held in the past, your experience of them, what about them works well and what benefit you think they bring to get the community ready for what turned out to be a pretty catastrophic fire season.

Andrea BAUER: Thank you. It certainly did. The bushfire essentials meetings are run generally annually – more frequently annually in the last five years. Previously I had organised them just as part of the community fireguard group, but I have invited the community to attend those as well. Becoming brigade community safety coordinator has facilitated that we do this collectively. The bushfire essentials meeting is in addition to the core program that we do with community fireguard. It is really just a general community meeting. This one we had in November was exceptional and very different to others that we had had. We fortunately had the ability to have some visual displays as well. It was presented by the district 12 community engagement coordinator. Words were not minced. Previously there has always been this little bit of ‘We better go gently, we frighten people.’ We sort of sugar-coat it. It was not at that meeting. The conditions were described, and how many years it had been since we had had these conditions. It had been about 100 years before since we had had a significant fire in our area, so everything was ready to burn, and they drummed that home. I did do some surveys, and people said it actually impacted the way they responded and the decisions they made. A lot more actually chose to leave early and understood that that was about their life – nothing else, their life. That is why you leave early. It is not worth it. It did have an impact. We only had about 40 members of the community turn up, and previously other years there have been about eight maybe. Certainly one of the limitations is actually being able to reach people, engage people and educate people to the dangers and the preparedness that we need to have and can have to protect us in the areas that we are living in, particularly in the highlands. It is one of the highest fire danger areas in the world.

The CHAIR: Thank you. Ms Broad.

Gaëlle BROAD: Thank you very much. We heard really clearly yesterday about people being just so overwhelmed initially after the emergency – ringing the state government line then being told their area was not covered when their house was already burnt to the ground, being so confused and not being able to remember who called them or with what support. I know, having just been at the recovery hub, that there are so many different groups having to go so many different places for information – state grants, federal grants and other

grants from people like the Salvation Army. Can you talk to the caseworkers? You mentioned the need for caseworkers on the ground very quickly. How long have you had to wait and what needs to change, because we are making recommendations back to the government.

Sam HICKS: I think from our point of view I started realising about week 3 that people were coming back into the hall and saying things like, 'Sam, our case manager hasn't been appointed. We've rung. They're going to return our calls maybe in two or three weeks.' These were people without houses who were trying to make critical decisions with fire fog, overwhelm and confusing points of entry to get into the system. I was quite shocked to hear what Andrea was saying, so I am going to be quiet in a minute to let Andrea talk more about it. In a time of crisis that person on the other end of a phone can make a helluva difference, especially if it is not their first rodeo as far as bushfire or flood. To have somebody that can just sift through 3000 layers of programs and eligibility and anything to do with their circumstance, because everybody is so different, is vital, and it just was not there. I was happy because Windermere has been around since 2017, but it was very obvious at week 3 that nobody was coping.

Andrea BAUER: For us, just a little bit of background: Kate, who is part of the core team, had Services Australia experience. She stepped in and did grant applications one on one with people that she had grown up beside in our community, and she was vital in that support right up until two, three weeks ago, I saw that Ruffy had five sessions of caseworkers, and we had not seen anybody – no-one. I rang them and said, 'Are you not coming because the people aren't registered for here?' And they said, 'Oh no, no, we'll start coming.' They have started to come, and it has made such an amazing difference that face-to-face connection. It is not who you are registered with, be it Primary Care Connect or family care. They are assisting everybody. It was timely with the payment release that they could get people those payments there and then on the spot. I do not know why it has taken that long. Highlands generally has felt left out of a lot of what has happened in other parts of the area and the services provided. We had not seen any caseworkers.

The CHAIR: Thank you. Dr Mansfield.

Sarah MANSFIELD: Thank you. And thank you for appearing today and for all the work that you are doing supporting your communities. Just following on from that line of questioning, obviously we have heard, and we heard this yesterday as well, that better access and earlier access to caseworkers would be really helpful. What else could be done to simplify the process for accessing funding for communities? What would you like to see? If we could redesign the system for disaster recovery – because as you have said, this will not be the last time a community experiences some sort of weather-related disaster – what could we do just to help make that funding easier to access and to get it out there faster so that you could get on with the job? Some of the things you are asking for are very simple – they are not complicated – a generator and a portalo, that sort of thing. What needs to be done to make access to those sorts of things much easier?

Colleen FURLANETTO: Thank you. Just listen to us. If we are asking, we are asking for a reason. We should not have to jump the hoop and go wait for weeks before we are sure that that can be what we need. If I can just give an example about a shower. We had shower facilities. It was about week three. A woman who I did not know had a shower, and she came out and said, 'Colleen, you were a nurse, weren't you?' I said, 'Yes, a very old one, a long time ago, retired.' She took me into the showers, and she had a burn on her back the size of a bread-and-butter plate that she did not know that she had because it was so deeply burnt and she could not see it. She had not actually showered for that whole time, so you can imagine she was in a whole world of pain literally. She got the services that she needed. That goes some way to a basic fundamental human right to access what we need. The justification for showers – we have to justify them, and I have been asked to count the people that are going in there using them. That is a bit creepy, and I do not mean that in a derogatory way because that is the evidence that council is having to give. I am sorry, that is just not okay. I am also told that there are showers sitting in a warehouse in Melbourne somewhere that could be out at these hubs so council does not have to find \$300 a week. I think listen to what we are asking for. We know on the ground what we need. Allow us the opportunity to be heard on that.

If I could just add about caseworkers, we had to rattle the cage really loudly and be a little bit direct, as in 'Get up the hill. This is not the end of the earth. We are only 35 minutes from Euroa. We are not a Third World country.' It was not okay. I would like to say that I have had over 20 people contact me – it was seven in the five days after the fire – that were about to take their life. I have now had over 20 contact me personally. That is not okay. That is not my wheelhouse; I am not trained in this. I have a nursing background. That does not mean

that I need to be hearing these conversations. We need that skill and those people that are a right fit. Whether they are paramedics, whether they are other trained first responders, they should have been with us from day dot.

The CHAIR: Ms Ermacora.

Jacinta ERMACORA: Thank you. I reiterate the appreciation expressed by other committee members. It is a great follow-on question from Dr Mansfield – what is the first thing that people need most commonly? Okay, there is lots of diversity around the recovery space. Some people will be saying they need fencing first and housing second, back on their properties, in that recovery. What were the first couple of things that you were coming across that people needed that could form a part of their recovery process?

Colleen FURLANETTO: If you asked the farmers what the first thing they needed was, it was fodder for their stock – and water. We had stock lost after the fire because they did not have water. They survived the fire and then did not survive. But what we know is what people did not ask for – the basics that they needed. That is where the hubs come in. Yes, it was food. Yes, it was showers and toilet facilities and the hubs being pop-up shops. But it was a connection that they needed to then be able to go and talk about it. We found that we did not ask, ‘What do you need?’ to people because they could not even think about the next hour, let alone what they needed next week. We know from this what we need, and we are working together to write our own playbook, because there will be a next time. That playbook should have some of those things that we know immediately on the ground in a timely way will help. Yes, it is all of those things.

If I could just broaden now to recovery. The delay in the recovery of the containment lines and the fencing has left it to people to do it on their own. I wonder if that is convenient, because then it does not need to be paid for by the state because it has been done. They need their boundary fences up. We have got stock coming back in – truckloads yesterday – because they are calving or because where they were on agistment has run out of water. You need your boundary fences up. We need the practicalities of fencing for farming – even for non-farmers; not everybody up our way farms – and water, potable water and water for stock. We had weeks and weeks before that was forthcoming. We had people running around doing anything they could with anything that could carry water. We had people coming into the hub carrying buckets and taking buckets into their utes and driving really carefully to get home to put it where it was needed. This is Australia. This blew us away.

Sam HICKS: To reinforce the water and the fodder – I have gone through many droughts in my lifetime. When I woke up – I think it was about day four – I could hear the cattle that were left behind in our valley screaming for fodder. I made a call to the Western District and I asked for semi-loads of hay. We got them in because I had gone through bushfire recovery before. Our Koriella fire brigade drove all the way to Yea and escorted the fodder in. When you see a 70- or 80-year-old farmer crying because it is the one bale that is going to feed his cattle, it is hard. It is hard on us. We were fortunate: we saved our cattle and our fodder. But we carry guilt. A lot of people that have not lost homes, fencing, fodder or their livelihoods will say the same thing – that they feel guilt. So water and fodder – then followed by communications. They needed to let people know they were okay. My partner was on his tractor fighting fires sending me text messages about who he had seen while he was trying to put fires out, because I was getting up to 300 messages a minute from people right across our region asking about the 11 people that stayed behind to fight and save their properties. I can only imagine the drama and the messages that these two ladies would have got as well, because we knew as a community who was on the ground. But yes, fodder and water.

Andrea BAUER: Hubs.

Sam HICKS: Hubs.

The CHAIR: Ms Lovell.

Wendy LOVELL: Thank you. I am going to ask a question that I asked at Ruffly yesterday, because the answer was outstanding: ‘It was terrible.’ Housing response – what has been offered to your community in the way of assisting people with the housing response? We know after Black Saturday there was a huge effort with caravans and dongas and stuff, and again after the floods in 2022, caravans. What has been offered to your communities in the way of assisting people to get back onto their properties?

Andrea BAUER: Nothing. We have had second-hand very dilapidated caravans come and be donated that we have taken to put on people's properties – extremely substandard substitutes. There has been no offer of any housing. After the experience of Black Saturday, where are the caravans that they all got? I actually even asked can there be some temporary housing in Yea so that the kids can still go to school and not have the trauma of being displaced from all of that. Surely we can activate these things much more quickly than is happening to get people back on their places. It is so important for their mental health. The change in the little old fella up with us – he completely transformed when we got him back in one of these dilapidated caravans, to just be in his place on his land.

Colleen FURLANETTO: If I could just broaden that. There were some discussions with EMV I think, or ERV – one of them; so many acronyms – that 'Yes, there'll be caravans, but we need to ensure that their services can be connected to the street.'

Andrea BAUER: I heard that too.

Colleen FURLANETTO: You know, connecting to the water – that is mains pressured. I mean, seriously, that just blows our mind. There is no mains pressure. There is no sewage treatment plant.

I just want to address that we are witnessing haves and have-nots happening here. This is in the recovery, whether you qualified for clean-up or you did not, and the haves at the moment are those that were not insured. Why was this disaster treated differently and not consistent with 'If you lost your home, your clean-up's sorted.' It is not okay. It has been that way in other disasters. That precedent has been set. But now we have community members who say, 'You're getting the help. I'm not. I'm underinsured. I got approved within heaven and earth for items that I don't have, because they're all in my home that I lost. To give that evidence I need to prove and my insurer needs to state that I was underinsured and we've got to skip through all these hoops.' They have had to, nearly four months later, still be looking at their same property – their same house standing there – every time they go there. They are on their property retraumatized daily by seeing what has not been cleared. It is not okay.

The CHAIR: Ms Tyrrell.

Rikkie-Lee TYRRELL: Thank you, Chair. I will start with an easy one first. Just so the panel is aware, how much does it cost per metre to build a fence? How much is getting quoted at the moment?

Sam HICKS: Council put it down at \$25. When I spoke to my insurance broker, who has handled thousands of claims over the last 10 years, she told me that that is a very conservative figure. This is a \$7 star picket that is in front of me. A lot of our farmers would like the maxi ones that are worth twice that and nice and shiny and silver, but a lot of farmers just want the plain \$7 star pickets. That is not your roll of wire. A roll of wire is around \$300. Gripples – these things are like gold. These are worth a hell of a lot of money, and a lot of the younger farmers like to use them. And then you have got portable fencing units that will go up to about 200-odd dollars.

Rikkie-Lee TYRRELL: Okay. Thank you. Now the juicy question. You are the beating hearts of your community – you hear from everybody; you are the unofficial councillors. What government bodies failed your communities, and how would you like to see that change for the next fire season?

Sam HICKS: That is a leading question.

Andrea BAUER: All of them.

Sam HICKS: We are on Crown land, Fawcett Hall. I have been President for 25 years. We have been there since 1882. If it was not for the CEO of the shire, DEECA would not have even reached out to see how we were, how the hall fared or how our community was. And yet everything has to be put through the portal. Two days after the fire came through and impacted the reserve I logged on to the DEECA portal. I explained what had happened, and I wanted a response regarding the fencing because we had lost fencing. We had cows, sheep, llamas, you name it, in the reserve, and that was okay. There was nothing for them to eat. But I asked through the portal to DEECA, 'Is this an insurance claim? What do you want me to do?' To date I have had no response. If it was not for operation vet assist – they reinstated our fences and built our front fence, so at least

then we could keep stock out and help and assist with neighbours keeping stock in. That is the biggest one for me, but there are quite a lot.

Andrea BAUER: Our hall was in the same situation, being Crown land and DEECA. We had quite large burnt trees, and only in the last week has there finally been the approval that they will pay for them to be removed. But it took a lot of time to work out who was actually responsible. It seemed to be: what is the shire doing, what is DEECA doing? Our septic is not fit for purpose and needing to be replaced because it is not coping with everything. Who do you go to? The energy that it takes to just sift through the bureaucracy, I guess, to get even anywhere near the person that might actually be able to do something about it.

Sam HICKS: We still have not had trees assessed on Crown land. There are no arborists.

Colleen FURLANETTO: A few things there. If I could just say that our hall has a hall committee, like these gorgeous people here, that have all been impacted by the fire. They are having to answer these questions. They are getting hammered by – well, trying to be. We had a conversation early and said that there need to be some funds for our hall post this recovery phase, because it is getting smashed. Some funding was given to the hall, but it has to be spent by 30 June. They have got to clean the hall curtains so they can get cleaned, knowing that this hub will be operating for 12 months, two years, who knows, because the money has to get spent before 30 June. It is absolutely ridiculous. Why polish floors when it is still being used as a community recovery hub?

I want to be really clear that I think that our council has done what it has felt has been its very best. I do feel: who is prepared for something like this? I do think that there have been communication breakdowns and opportunities that we hope that we have had learnings from, from our point of view – from all points of view. But we have not been heard. We have not been resourced. We have not been in a timely way communicated – something that actually stays fact for more than 5 minutes. We have had to fact-check every number, every link to make sure it goes to where it is. If I could just say that ERV's 1800 number, whichever number that belonged to – we rang it as a secret shopper and were pushed to go here: 'I'm sorry, this isn't connected and up and running yet. Call back at another time.' We do not share any number or link unless it works, and we check them because they stop working. They get overwhelmed or they change to some other number, and no-one tells anybody. I think the government lead-in needs to be more on the ground as a collective. This is everybody in. It is not just council's responsibility. It is not just the person's responsibility; it is not just the state's. It is everybody. And we need to be in the same room. We are not having conversations in the same room, so you get silos of conversation and Chinese whispers. By the time what the community actually said gets to possibly your table, it is not relevant. If we can ask something of you, ask us directly, because we are more than happy to tell you straight-up and cut out the middle people.

The CHAIR: Mr Berger.

John BERGER: Thank you, Chair, and thank you all for your appearance here this morning. We have heard in the Otways, the Wimmera and now here today and yesterday about the community-enabled and community-led recovery. For the record and for the committee to fully understand, can you give us some comparisons as to what that actually means and its practical implementation?

Colleen FURLANETTO: If I could just start. We started and did a beautiful logo after we had 5 minutes and thought, 'This is great, we're going to put 'community led'. Then we thought, 'Hang on a minute, did that shoot ourselves in the foot? That might be saying we've got this and we don't need any help.' So we changed it to 'community enabled'. As I said in my opening statement, community enabled does not take place at government levels of responsibility. 'Enabled' means we know what our community needs. Our communities are setting up the community recovery committees in whatever form that will be, as they decide. 'Community enabled' sees that the funding that is given is quadrupled, is tenfold, because of the volunteer input and management of those funds. If you give us a dollar, I guarantee you are going to get \$10 worth of value back.

I think the enabled part is do not come and tells us about or build us some shiny new building that we cannot afford to maintain or that we do not need. We have had offers of things that are just absolutely ridiculous. We need the grassroots stuff to function at the moment. We need the rebuilds. At Ruffy we lost two significant community spaces – our community centre, which was our school, and our Ruffy Recreation Reserve. It should never, ever be an argy-bargy of which one of those is going to be built. They were there for us beforehand and they should be there for us after, and we need that not to become an either-or. We need to be enabled as a

community. All things should be on the table, of course, and maybe there might be some big picture thinking, and we hope there is, but please do not impose on us.

I can give you an example of what was imposed without consultation, and I do not mean any disrespect because I think it was done with really good intentions. We had ten 40-foot containers come illegally up to us to assist us. Now, I do not know if many of you know the roads that you were on – 40-foot containers are pretty useless to try to get around. No-one asked us what size containers might be helpful. Seven of them have sat in the depot largely empty, because we have only got them for six months. No-one wants them for less than six months. Can we purchase them? No, they cannot be purchased. I am told it cost \$20,000 to bring them from the Port of Melbourne. I am told it will take \$20,000 to take them back. Just leave them where they are. We will sort them out and give them homes. That is the kind of thing to not impose. ‘Community led’ means ask us what will work.

John BERGER: Chair, if I could just ask one last one?

The CHAIR: Yes.

John BERGER: You three have been the brunt of quite a lot of people’s anguish and hurt. Who is looking after you?

Colleen FURLANETTO: We are.

Sam HICKS: We are.

Andrea BAUER: Our community.

John BERGER: Good.

Sam HICKS: I would love the containers – we want 11. We have got people that do not have homes and no long-term storage. There are 500,000 star pickets needed and a bridge. It is not much. Oh, and an ultralight, because every time the truck goes out the rest of the community is stressed. We have got a resource. Our only resource out might be a 34-year-old truck, but it did a lot of good on the day.

The CHAIR: Ms Bath.

Melina BATH: Thank you. I think you are being far too calm. I am sure you are absolutely screaming at us on the inside. We are MPs in the upper house – a mixed bag of lollies, different parties. The obligation of the state government – the *Emergency Management Act* in 2013 post the Black fires royal commission introduced what is supposed to be a state emergency management plan. There are supposed to be state crisis and resilience councils. There is supposed to be a whole-of-government coordination, with support for local government hubs, monitoring and assessment and implementation. You are seeing ultimately none of that.

Andrea BAUER: That is right.

Melina BATH: We are going to write a report. We are going to listen to what you say. We are going to make recommendations. It is going to go into the churn of government. We have got an election coming up. You need stuff now.

Sam HICKS: We need cash.

Melina BATH: You need cash now. I guess my question is: I am still amazed that all this framework is there from government, yet on the material side nothing is happening on the ground. If you could speak not to us, because we are going to write a report – what about government now?

Colleen FURLANETTO: Government knows this is not the first rodeo. Why do we have to have people seconded for three months or 12 weeks or six weeks to EMV to sort of do the initial thing, then they leave. They handpass it to someone else, or that role does not exist because it is decided, ‘Well, we’ve done the emergency immediate phase, and that’s done.’ There needs to be a warehouse full of what we need when an emergency happens. I am told that we have warehouses full for international relief in disasters. I am not sure, and I cannot get a straight answer, whether we have the same ready to come to us. We begged for a marquee

for our kids to be in on the 40-degree days at our hall. I put in a request to the ICC formally, did it all properly, and nothing happened until an assistant chief officer came and visited us about four weeks, six weeks after the fires, and within three days we had what we call the MASH tent. It is 'Mending alongside Shared Hope', and those who visited yesterday saw it. It is like a MASH tent. It has air conditioners in it. We do not have a generator that can run the air conditioners – but that is okay; that is a slight technical glitch. But we have a marquee that is sitting at FRV urban rescue. They saw the need; they brought it up; they put it up and said we can have it for the winter. It can be done. These things are sitting somewhere, and the dots are not connecting.

There needs to be a committee that is connected to councils and community – 'What is it that you will need in the first 24 hours, 48 hours, five weeks, whatever?' – and supports councils. Our councils have been run ragged. They are good people, but they cannot make magic out of what they need. Our council cannot afford not to charge rates, because it cannot deliver the basics now. But all of us in the fire-affected areas cannot afford to pay our rates, because none of us have been working in our day jobs. We have all been donating and volunteering over and above what our lives can be. And then, as was mentioned earlier, you do not qualify, because if you have off-farm income, you do not have over 50 per cent. All of these things need to be totally thought about. And this is not our first rodeo. I do not know why we keep reinventing the wheel. It is absolutely ridiculous.

Sam HICKS: Can I just say in 2009, I was working at council for CFA. Koriella fire brigade were promised a generator. I have the email. I lost my crap on day four. You talk about being calm; hopefully I can say this without dropping an f-bomb. I lost my crap on day four because of the 34 days that they had been out subsequently. They did not even have a shower – no power, no comms. I lost my crap. I sent about 40 nasty emails, and I said, 'If that generator does not turn up, I will buy the generator and donate it to our Koriella fire brigade, because these guys are out putting out fires and will be for the next couple of weeks.' And they could not shower – 2009.

Colleen FURLANETTO: I know. Can I just add something? We heard earlier how this fire knew no boundaries, nor should recovery. However, if I could just say that our hub, when we heard that Terip, which is in a neighbouring shire 10 minutes away, were not getting much support – they were not able to get up to support them, but we could get across. And my colleagues, if they are listening – I will take my badge off; this is my thought. I felt like I was smuggling drugs into Mexico, taking food across the border to Terip. How ridiculous. They needed food. They needed support. We had that. We have to share it. I live with the fact that I did not get across to Highlands once, and I had a van donated, loaned by Seymour Toyota for nine weeks for me to drive around and support community. I did not get to Highlands once, or Fawcett, but I did get to other places, and we all supported as best we could. And I know these guys do not hold anything against that, but it really sucks because we were not there for our neighbours. But why were we having to do that?

Andrea BAUER: Especially because we had access available – the road that comes from Yea to Highlands had about 8 kilometres that was impacted by the fire. Relative to the rest of the shire and the fire zone, that is really quite small, and access could have been made safe. It was accessible. I returned on the Saturday. We could get to the hall. We could do all that. Everybody else was coming and going, but none of the official services would come in, because the road was closed and the work could not be done on that bit of 8 k's to get access to the hall for vital communication, generators and water. Everything that the hub needed, where everybody was coming to as that central point, could have been provided for us, and it just was not, because 'We can't come up the road.'

The CHAIR: I am going to have to draw this session to a close, unfortunately. I really do thank you on behalf of the committee for the evidence you have given today. We will give you a copy of the transcript to review to make sure we have got everything transcribed correctly. We really express our absolute gratitude for the evidence and for the hospitality you showed the committee yesterday. We hope that what we do here can provide some help. With that, we will take a short break.

Witnesses withdrew.