

LEGISLATIVE COUNCIL ENVIRONMENT AND PLANNING COMMITTEE

Inquiry into the 2026 Summer Fires across Victoria

Quantong – Wednesday 22 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

Darren Welsh, Executive Director, Quality and Safety, and

David Schultz, Director, Nursing, Natimuk Aged Care, West Wimmera Health Service; and

Lynette Morrow, Head Coach, Natimuk & District Gymnastic Club.

The CHAIR: Welcome back to the proceedings of the Legislative Council Environment and Planning Committee's inquiry into the 2026 summer fires in Victoria, coming to you today from the Quantong community recreation facility. We are joined by some community representatives.

I will just advise the witnesses that all evidence taken is protected by parliamentary privilege, as provided by the *Constitution Act 1975* and the provisions of the Legislative Council standing orders. Therefore the information that you provide during this hearing is protected by law. You are protected against any action for what you say during these hearings, but if you go elsewhere and repeat those 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 the evidence is being recorded, and you will be provided with a proof version of the transcript for review following today's hearings. All of those transcripts will ultimately be made public and posted on the committee's website.

My name is Ryan Batchelor. I am the Chair of the committee and Member for Southern Metropolitan Region in the Legislative Council. Welcome. I will get members of the committee to introduce themselves, starting down there.

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 too.

Melina BATH: Good afternoon. Melina Bath, Eastern Victoria Region. And Wendy Lovell is here.

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

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

John BERGER: John Berger, Member for Southern Metropolitan Region.

The CHAIR: Just before we begin, for the Hansard record if you could state your name and the organisation you are appearing on behalf of, just to make sure we capture all comments accurately.

Lynette MORROW: Lynette Morrow from the Natimuk & District Gymnastic Club.

Darren WELSH: My name is Darren Welsh, for the record. I am the Executive Director of Quality and Safety at West Wimmera Health Service.

David SCHULTZ: I am David Schultz. I am Director of Nursing at the Natimuk Aged Care home, part of the West Wimmera Health Service.

The CHAIR: Wonderful. It is pretty straightforward. We will let you make an opening statement and then we will get into questions. It is over to you, really, to decide who gets to go first.

David SCHULTZ: Looks like it is me. All right. As I said, I am David Schultz. I am the Director of Nursing at the Natimuk Aged Care home. On the day of the fires I was at home in Kingston south-east, because I work from home on a Friday. Just before 1:30 pm I was on the phone to Nimmi Jacob, who is one of the nurse unit managers at the home, and we both saw an alert on the VicEmergency app that there was a grassfire at Grass Flat, which is approximately 15 kilometres north-west of Natimuk. The alert did not sound particularly dangerous, but we agreed that Nimmi should call the West Wimmera Health Service incident management team in Nhill and make sure that they were aware, so we ended our call then so that she could do that. I cannot

say an exact time, but it was less than 15 minutes later that I was alerted to an online meeting of the incident management team for West Wimmera Health Service. On joining I found that the aged care home was already surrounded by dense smoke, which had set off the fire alarms and automatically unlocked all the secure doors. At this time there were 59 people in the building. There were 36 residents, 20 staff, two visitors and a local man who had to abandon his house and came in with his two dogs, because he would not leave his car otherwise. Nimmi and the nursing care team had already gathered the residents together in the foyer near the fire control panel and were providing reassurance and support. Thankfully the dense smoke outside prevented people in the building from seeing the flames, but there was already fire encroaching on two sides: in the backyard of the house immediately next door, so less than a metre from the building, and also in the trees and paddocks only a few metres from the back of the building. There were also embers falling all around and igniting spot fires in the gardens of the aged care home and other properties in the vicinity. The dense smoke was also causing our fire panel to open the front doors, and at the time we did not know how to override that. The decision was made then to move all the building's occupants to another area usually used for group activities, which was past a fire door and firewalls and also had the advantage that it had a kitchenette, so we could provide the residents with snacks and drinks.

During this time Nimmi, the nurse unit manager, as the local incident controller, was also sending staff with walkie-talkies to look outside windows and check for spot fires outside. Our maintenance man, a local firefighting volunteer who elected to stay at the aged care home, was doing what he could to damp down those fires using buckets and hoses. I cannot say how long it took for the fire front to pass by, but the incident management team and I were in constant communication online until 7:30 pm, by which time we were advised that the immediate danger had passed. Throughout this time the West Wimmera Health Service incident management team were in communication with the area incident management team in Horsham.

During this time staff in Nhill were tasked by the West Wimmera Health Service incident management team with calling the next of kin of all of our residents to update them on the situation and reassure them that their loved ones were being protected and kept safe. They also tasked some staff to call the next of kin of all of our staff that were in the building to also update them and keep them reassured. We were lucky that, although mains power was lost, our generator kicked in automatically and ran for two days until power was restored. We were also fortunate we did not lose communications at any stage. Some of our staff could not return home and remained at the facility overnight. Nimmi Jacob, the nurse unit manager, remained onsite for 31 hours until she was relieved. I returned to work on the Saturday as soon as I could get in and remained until Monday morning. During this time I was regularly walking around the buildings looking for spot fires, and on several occasions had to put out smouldering mulch in the gardens immediately outside residents' windows. Trees around the facility continued to smoulder and reignite for days afterwards, and we were very grateful that firefighters remained and patrolled and helped control those.

I would like to commend the staff that were onsite during the fires and in the days afterwards. They did a magnificent job of caring for our residents and keeping each other safe and calm as well at this difficult time. The residents have been checked on by West Wimmera Health Service social workers regularly since that time, and I am glad to say that none have been found to have any lingering effects from the fires. Likewise, our staff have been supported by the employee assistance scheme, who have conducted several site visits and provided counselling by phone, and while some of our staff are receiving counselling, all are doing very well. I might add that three of our staff who were not at work on that day lost their houses in the fires. Again, I would like to commend and extend my thanks to the firefighters who came from far and wide to defend the aged care facility and to the locals, with their small personal equipment, who spent so much time patrolling and putting out spot fires. Their efforts gave our staff and residents the confidence to remain calm and carry on.

We have been asked repeatedly to explain why we did not evacuate. As you have heard, the fire approached very rapidly and burnt fiercely in close proximity to the building, and it would have placed the residents in far greater danger to take them outside. The building itself is most likely the safest place in Natimuk in the event of a fire. It has six fire zones within the building protected by fire-resistant walls and doors, and it has a sprinkler system which automatically activates if a fire should break out, which is supported by two very large fire water tanks. Evacuation would have required us to organise buses, at least some equipped for wheelchairs, and at least six of our residents would have required an ambulance to take them away, so it would have taken hours.

In finishing up, we have learned some important lessons, and redevelopment of our fire plan to better address fires external to West Wimmera Health Service facilities is in progress. Some simple things, like printed

instructions on how to override the front doors opening when there is smoke in the building, are now in our fire panel, and we have also acquired some more walkie-talkies so that we have got plenty for staff that are leaving the fire panel to remain safe. Thank you for conducting this inquiry and for looking for more ways to keep our residents and the people of Victoria safe.

The CHAIR: Thank you. Lynette.

Lynette MORROW: On the Friday of the fire we did not have anyone at the gym, so the building was empty. I was notified that the gym club had been affected in some way. We did not know how badly it had been impacted, but looking back and speaking to some of the fire people and receiving some photos, we know that the local fire brigade attended the gymnastics club and saved the building. However, the contents inside were totally damaged through fire, smoke, ash damage, obviously foam – being porous, it has penetrated through it all – and we have lost up to about \$1 million worth of equipment.

Melina BATH: A million?

Lynette MORROW: Yes. That is the figure that we have been – we have done an inventory so far; we are still waiting on insurance. We are not operational at the moment, and of course when a gymnastics club like that is affected, there is no other close club to go to. So currently we are still waiting on the insurance to give us a figure that will get paid out so we can move forward. In the meantime we are trying to keep our members engaged through training elsewhere – so some juniors are at the local school that I work at and then some are travelling to Stawell, Warrnambool, Mount Gambier or Ballarat during this time. But certainly thank you to the firefighters who did save the building. It would have been a very different story if we did not have a building to repair and keep.

The CHAIR: Thank you.

Darren WELSH: If I can just make one further statement other than David's, I thank also our emergency services and the Department of Health, particularly in their support of West Wimmera Health Service and the aged care facility. Horsham rural city were critical to maintaining our fuel supply for our generator. Whilst the generator kicked in and worked perfectly, we have fuel supply for about 24 to 36 hours, and they assisted us greatly throughout that period as well, so I just wish to also make that acknowledgement. So that incident response and the exercises that are conducted across the subregion et cetera do play a part in this.

The CHAIR: Thanks very much. David, I might ask you: how are the residents and how are the staff now, three months on?

David SCHULTZ: They are doing remarkably well. As I say, they were very reassured to know that the firefighters were out there protecting them. They were, in a lot of ways, fortunate that the smoke was so thick they could not actually see any flames. We have had social workers checking on the residents on a regular basis and the employee assistance scheme have sent a counsellor out three times now, I think, for onsite sessions and staff are availing themselves of phone counselling, but everyone is doing remarkably well. To see the staff and the residents today, you would not know that there had been an incident.

The CHAIR: It is absolutely remarkable.

David SCHULTZ: They are a wonderful team. They pulled together so well on the day.

The CHAIR: We heard evidence from the CFA about just how little time there was between the first alert and the alert about the aged care facility. How did the staff respond? In your view, what made the saving of the facility a success, given the little time that existed to mobilise?

David SCHULTZ: I think in some ways not having time to worry about it was a blessing, in that it was less than 15 minutes from the time that Nimmi and I saw the alert to the time that the building was surrounded by smoke and the flames arrived. I do not think they had time to really think about what the danger might be. They were just focused on bringing the residents together so they could keep an eye on them and support them. Again, as a wonderful team that work well together, they just did all the things that were needed, and they were focused on keeping the residents calm, safe, fed and watered and, as much as possible, occupied so that they did

not really think that much about what was going on outside the building, other than knowing that the firefighters were there and that they were being protected.

Darren WELSH: If I can add, our staff undergo training – not for fast-moving bushfires external to the building, might I add, but certainly internal. So there are elements within that about coordination, lateral evacuation within the building and where fire doors are. Those sorts of things are already in train – again, not for a fast-moving bushfire outside the building, but certainly internally. So elements of that kicked in on the day.

David SCHULTZ: The staff just followed their training in moving the residents to a safe place, keeping them occupied and keeping them safe.

The CHAIR: All right. Thank you. Ms Lovell.

Wendy LOVELL: Thank you for the presentation and thank you for the work you did on the day keeping people safe. I am interested to know about the impact of smoke on the air quality and the impact of that on residents, because I know during the 2019–20 summer bushfires, the biggest issue for Alpine Health in some of their facilities was the air quality control. I am interested to know whether your filtration systems worked adequately and what that impact was.

Darren WELSH: I will let David answer first for the residents et cetera.

David SCHULTZ: In the first instance when they were gathered around the fire panel, they were actually in the front foyer, and that was where the main doors were opening. It was allowing a lot of smoke in, so yes, the air quality was very poor. That is one reason why the decision was quickly made to move them to another area that was away from that. The fire door then stopped that smoke from penetrating to where they were moved to. I did not hear any feedback that the air was particularly bad in the area they were removed to, but certainly even when I returned on the weekend, I could smell smoke throughout the building. So there would have been some impact through the filtration.

Darren WELSH: We are not aware of any adverse events.

David SCHULTZ: No. Certainly there were no adverse health events as a result of smoke.

Wendy LOVELL: Did you lose power? Did the air-conditioning system continue to operate?

David SCHULTZ: Yes. Correct. The power went off momentarily, but our generator automatically kicked in as it was designed to do and then ran continuously.

Darren WELSH: I might add that we had great support from Lister House, the local GP practice. They were in contact with the facility and also offered in subsequent days priority appointments for the staff and the residents as well. They were very much monitoring their health care in consultation with David's personnel.

Wendy LOVELL: Thanks very much. Lynette, I was just interested in the smoke damage to the equipment. What type of equipment was damaged by the smoke?

Lynette MORROW: Most of it is foam, so matting. It absorbs – it is porous, so it certainly goes through and makes it unsafe. When the little kids are jumping on it obviously it will release toxins. We have had someone in to assess it, and it has all been deemed unsafe. The gym club at the moment is totally empty. Bars and things like that – the metal side, I believe we have been able to save some of it. Some of that is still being assessed. But yes, there is damage through even shifting the equipment. There has been an external company come in, and of course not knowing the equipment some of that has now been damaged, which has put our bill up a little bit higher.

Wendy LOVELL: Is the gym not being operational having an impact on the young people in the town and their mental health or their ability to recover from the fire?

Lynette MORROW: Yes, definitely. We have over 300 members. We have quite a large waiting list as well. The participants range from confident walking right through to adult, doing it for a range and variety of reasons, some rehabilitation. We have not been able to provide that service to them. We have not been able to

provide for kids who do it for balance and for other reasons other than competitive gymnastics. None of our young programs are able to get up and get going. We are currently only able to service about 80 gymnasts to give them access to some kind of gymnastics at the moment.

Wendy LOVELL: Thank you.

The CHAIR: Dr Mansfield.

Sarah MANSFIELD: Thank you so much for appearing and for all of the work you have done to support members of the community. I am interested in understanding – did you have a fire plan, or particularly for you, David, was there a fire plan at the facility? You said that there are a few updates that you have already made, but by and large, do you feel that that put you in good stead?

David SCHULTZ: The fire plan – yes, we do have a fire plan. It is more geared to internal fire at this point, but obviously since this event we have been working on upgrading it and adding in more information about external fire. However, I do believe that the fire plan did work well in that it allowed staff to follow that plan in moving residents away from any danger, which on this occasion was more smoke than fire. But yes, they followed the plan. It worked quite well on the day, and we will be upgrading it to provide them with more information about some aspects of the outside fire. I believe it worked well on the day.

Darren WELSH: If I can add, Dr Mansfield, that there is an additional plan called a business continuity plan, which speaks to things like evacuation and resources. The West Wimmera Health Service is part of the municipal emergency management planning group within the Wimmera area, and so that has allowed us contacts and training with emergency services equally. Sheltering in place is part of that process, and so that is what was enacted on the day in this particular situation.

Sarah MANSFIELD: Yes. Communication is an issue that has come up in different ways already through this inquiry. How did you find communication on the day, both in your professional capacities but also as individual community members?

Lynette MORROW: Communication – there was not a lot, to be honest. The communication I received was through my husband, who was just on a personal firefighting unit, and what he was hearing. It was only probably the Saturday that communication started coming through to me in regard to what had happened. But at the time, no, I had not received any communication.

Darren WELSH: We had a different experience professionally. David has already spoken about the alerts that come through VicEmergency website, app et cetera as well. The Department of Health were immediately onto this. Once that grassfire had been alerted, they were making contact with our incident management team in the facility et cetera as well. We had good communication with the ICC through the Department of Health as well. So from that perspective we felt well supported.

David SCHULTZ: Yes.

Darren WELSH: Certainly with the fire crews onsite as well, the staff, as I understand it, felt well supported and communicated to.

David SCHULTZ: As I say, we were on a Teams meeting with the staff onsite for that entire afternoon. We did not lose communications with them, so that was really good. We were constantly talking, getting updates, giving advice and making suggestions to the onsite controller. Likewise with phones, I had a number of phone calls with different people within the facility and also other staff members worried about the facility throughout that afternoon. So that was good. We did not lose communications with the facility, so that made a big difference.

Sarah MANSFIELD: Thank you.

The CHAIR: All right. Thank you. Ms Ermacora.

Jacinta ERMACORA: Thank you for achieving the outcome that you did achieve on the day, and I think thanks also goes to the broader Natimuk community volunteers who took a decision to protect some of the most vulnerable members of their community –

David SCHULTZ: Absolutely, yes.

Jacinta ERMACORA: literally within 90 minutes. So it is a very strong community. I want to talk to Lynette about the gymnastics club, if that is okay. I know that the Natimuk gymnastics club is a regional club. There is no gymnastics in Horsham and other small communities. The 350 children and adults – the population of the town is about 500, so it just shows the regional facility that you provide, and you employ about 34 people, part-time instructors, and run a whole heap of stuff there. Your building has – you have received insurance, and the repairs are nearly complete, if I am correct. But the internal equipment insurance claim: what is the status of that?

Lynette MORROW: We are still waiting on the insurance company to give us an amount.

Jacinta ERMACORA: Who is that insurance company?

Lynette MORROW: I am not sure off the top of my head.

Jacinta ERMACORA: Could you give us that on notice?

Lynette MORROW: Yes.

Jacinta ERMACORA: So how long have you been waiting for them to –

Lynette MORROW: Probably four to five weeks, currently. We have done a full inventory list, and with the clean-out, the company that they employed to clean out the gym club took photos and had a brief description of what they had taken out. The club have sat down and done a full inventory. We have provided either a quote or a link to the equipment for pricing and provided that four to five weeks ago to the insurance company. So I am not sure now what the hold-up is. We are just waiting on them to get back to us.

Jacinta ERMACORA: Okay, thank you. So how are you keeping the next generation of gymnasts involved whilst we are waiting on that insurance company to act?

Lynette MORROW: On a Monday night at the Lutheran school we are able to provide a very basic gymnastics program for up to about 60 children. And then on a Wednesday we travel to Stawell; that is the next-closest gymnastics club. It does not have the same facilities, but it allows us to have some training for our intermediate and senior gymnasts. And then on weekends we are either travelling to Warrnambool, Mount Gambier or Ballarat, just depending on what is available or where we can fit in. That is at the moment. But again, we are only really catering for about 80 to 85 gymnasts in total. There are a lot that we are unable to service at the moment.

Jacinta ERMACORA: It is a pretty horrific example of how delays in insurance claims can impact people's lives, and I suppose we can multiply that if there are people with their homes in that same situation. But I do not know if that is the case, and I am sure it is not the case for everybody. Thanks.

The CHAIR: Ms Bath.

Melina BATH: Thank you. Lynette, I will start with you. Thank you so much for the work you are doing to keep your wonderful charges engaged. It is clear that the gym club would be an economic driver for our community here. Is that fair? They stay at the pub, or parents might shop and stay at the accommodation. Does that happen?

Lynette MORROW: Yes. We also run a competition in November, which brings around 350 gymnasts from all over Victoria, so accommodation, using restaurants et cetera. The last two years we have run the regional championships at our club. Again, that has been bringing in up to 300 visitors or competitors, so that is supporting the town and the surrounding areas.

Melina BATH: Absolutely, and diversity here – not every town has as large and as successful a gymnastics club as yours. Over the years, how have you acquired this equipment? Have you done grants over many years?

Lynette MORROW: There have been some grants. We have fundraised a lot ourselves. The club has been going since 1960, so way back then they bought the land and the building, and then a lot of it has been

fundraising, generating funds just through fees – trying to keep our fees low because we know everybody travels – and everything goes straight back into the club. There has been a closed-off road that we have cropped for years as well, so generating funds like that, doing wood chops and those things to generate bigger funds. The competitions do provide some funding for our club as well, and that has been quite successful. That is pretty much how.

Melina BATH: Thank you. We are a parliamentary inquiry and we make recommendations to state government. Is there anything that you can think of that would help you or people like you or organisations like yours in the future that we could hear?

Lynette MORROW: Yes, it would be good to build perhaps more of a greater regional facility for things like this if they are looking at the way we can provide for the region. Homing in on some clubs and providing and having easier access to some funding would be good.

Melina BATH: Thank you.

Lynette MORROW: No worries.

Melina BATH: Thank you very much. I hope it all goes well. And to Darren and David, you have done an amazing job for your community, so thank you very much again. You talked about looking at your own internal plans. We are going to do a recommendation to government. Is there anything that you think should be top of the list from an aged care facility in a – I will say a remote, or not remote, but in a rural setting that clearly had to fight for its own survival? Are there things that you would like to say there?

Darren WELSH: I think there are a couple of things. Within a week we had an engineer from Homes Victoria come and have a look at the facility and the impact of the fire. I can provide the committee with the name of that person if so desired. We do not know the outcome of that person's assessment. The building ostensibly was not damaged, and so it was around, I suspect, checking the integrity of the building and our protections that we had in place. I think one of the things that should be given some consideration, and we have certainly mulled this over internally quite a lot, is around asset protection outside the building. Whilst we have got a very sophisticated system internally for people protection and the asset protection as well in terms of sprinkler systems et cetera, I think there is some analysis that needs to be made about protecting aged care facilities and hospitals to a certain degree but certainly in the situation with Natimuk, which is on the verge of cropping land et cetera, about sprinkler systems externally to the building with a dedicated water source in addition to what we have for the internal system and dedicated pumping systems et cetera. That is not within our capabilities financially at this present time, but we are examining what that might look like in the future.

Melina BATH: Thank you very much.

Darren WELSH: But I think that is something that we would need to seriously have a look at.

David SCHULTZ: I can say, too, I was present on the day that the Homes Victoria engineer came and had a look, and he got up into the roof and looked at a few things. There are some vents on the roof there which we thought were protected against embers and things, but we found there was an awful lot of ash and soot in the ceiling, so that is something that is being reviewed as well and something that possibly needs to be considered in other facilities that might have roof vents.

The CHAIR: Thank you. Ms Tyrrell.

Rikkie-Lee TYRRELL: Thank you, Chair. It sounds like you have an amazing facility running, the way that you handled everything. David, there was something in your opening statement that really caught my curiosity. You said that it did not sound particularly dangerous, when it came to the warnings. What was it that you actually heard that had you thinking that?

David SCHULTZ: From memory, and I cannot remember exactly, the alert came up 'grassfire at Grass Flat', and initially I am pretty sure it said 'small'. It just expanded and accelerated so rapidly. Talking to David, the fire chief, he was telling me that they were chasing the fire and it was jumping ahead. The embers were being carried, the winds were gusting up to 100 kilometres an hour on the day. They would be chasing the fire

front and not able to keep up in their truck, then embers would jump ahead and start a new fire front. I think while the original alert was for a small grassfire, it very, very rapidly expanded and became so much more.

Rikkie-Lee TYRRELL: Now that you know what you know, in hindsight do you think that it should have been a different emergency warning?

David SCHULTZ: To be honest, I am not an expert in fires, and I think given the conditions on the day it probably would have been hard even for whoever manages that to have said that it was going to turn into something different. I do know that these days, if I see a fire that is in the vicinity, I look at the wind direction, and if the wind is blowing towards the facility, I am instantly on alert.

Darren WELSH: If I can add to that.

Rikkie-Lee TYRRELL: Yes, by all means.

Darren WELSH: The warnings about the catastrophic fire danger day were in place. You might have heard David speak about the incident management team at West Wimmera Health Service activating quickly et cetera, because we were on alert for whatever. I mean, we are talking about the worst of the worst situation – you know, dry lightning I think might have been the reason for the fire starting, catastrophic winds.

David SCHULTZ: So many things came together on the day. It was a hot day, strong winds. There were thunderstorms throughout the morning. In all probability it was a lightning strike that started the fire. Everything just came together – the wind direction heading straight towards Natimuk. It was just everything that could go wrong went wrong.

Rikkie-Lee TYRRELL: Okay. Thanks. That is it.

The CHAIR: Thank you. Mr Berger.

John BERGER: Thank you, Chair, and thank you all for your appearance today. A lot of my questions have been answered. I was looking to get some answers to the structural integrity of the building externally. If I move internally as to how people were getting their updates, was it via a landline? Was that the method of communication?

Darren WELSH: Not a landline as you would normally think of it. We have got a telecommunication system which uses internet access. We have got our dedicated communication system within the region supported by Grampians Rural Health Alliance, and the generator of course providing power to our servers et cetera assisted us on the day.

John BERGER: I cannot imagine a fire approaching the facility, people contained within it and the firefighters around it. Was there any communication between –

Darren WELSH: No, no. The communication I am talking about was verbal and directly to the staff in the building at the time, as best they could at the time. I am not saying that was constant. I am just saying there were opportunities for that to occur.

John BERGER: I suppose your fire plan did not at the time contemplate an external fire. It would have contemplated an internal fire.

Darren WELSH: To a degree it is silent on that as such. In its iteration prior to this event, it more deals not exclusively to the internal fire situation, but it makes a large impact on that – not so much a fast-moving grassfire on a catastrophic day. In saying that, we certainly have procedures and policies around what to do on a catastrophic fire danger day in terms of the wider West Wimmera Health Service and our aged care facilities. For example, we do not put people in a 12-seater bus and take them on a trip around the Wimmera on a catastrophic fire danger day. We do not do that. Our staff are restricted in terms of their movements, outside the facility particularly. We make significant alterations to our home visiting practices et cetera. People are on alert for the situations on the day.

David SCHULTZ: Normally there would have been a bus trip on that day as part of the activities, the leisure and lifestyle program, for our residents. As Darren said, with the announcement that it was going to be a

catastrophic fire danger day, that was cancelled and other things were put in place to replace that. So yes, we do have plans around that sort of thing.

John BERGER: Can you give us a bit of a range as to, when the fire was within close proximity, how long they were subjected to the intensity of that particular event?

Darren WELSH: I suppose the most intense element of the fire – and correct me if I am wrong, David – occurred on our western front near the medical facility. There is a private residence there. That was one intense area. It was on our boundary right at the medical centre. The medical centre was not occupied at the time. The residents were in a connected building a couple of hundred metres away, I suppose. At the southern part of the boundary there were trees alight et cetera, and there were spot fires going into our garden beds et cetera around the building, which were extinguished.

John BERGER: Thanks, Chair.

The CHAIR: Ms Broad.

Gaelle BROAD: Thank you so much for your contribution today. I am interested: the mayor earlier talked about there being no water, no power and no communications and still 500 people in Natimuk. Can you give us an insight into the challenges or the practical issues that arose with having so many people in the town and those restrictions?

David SCHULTZ: I probably do not have the information to respond to that because, as I said, I was working from home on the day. I am obviously not a local, because home is Kingston South East in South Australia, but maybe Lynette could offer something on that.

Lynette MORROW: I was in Horsham, where I live. I did not have a lot of communication, but I was not in the town of Natimuk on that day either.

Gaelle BROAD: Okay. You are from outside the region too, are you?

Darren WELSH: I am actually. My home base is in Nhill in the Wimmera. I was actually on annual leave on the day, but I had certainly been briefed and have been part of the planning process subsequently associated with it.

Gaelle BROAD: I understand. A few of my questions then will not be as relevant, but I am interested. David, you did mention that three staff had lost their homes. Can you share a bit of what that is like? Where do they live? What has that recovery process been like for those families?

David SCHULTZ: Certainly. None of those three were on duty on that day in the facility, but they have been very well supported by West Wimmera Health Service. They were given, automatically, two weeks paid leave additional to their normal entitlements to allow them time to process what had gone on and to make other arrangements. One of them, I believe, had another house which she was actually living in. She was not living in the one that burnt down. But one of them, who is a staff member who reports directly to me, had their house up for sale. They were actually, I believe, on the point of signing the contract and the house burnt down. She has been able to find a rental in Horsham. West Wimmera also put together a webpage whereby staff members with furniture they did not need could put it up as a donation for any of these staff members to pick up what they needed and so forth. I must say at this point that of all of the organisations I have worked for, and there have been a lot of them over 50 years, West Wimmera is far and away the best I have ever worked for in terms of supporting staff. Even though she lost her house, she is at work now. She is studying to be an RN, and she is doing remarkably well.

Gaelle BROAD: We have heard about mental health support being very limited and long waiting lists in other areas, but you did mention – is it the EA program that you have got going? How has that been effective?

David SCHULTZ: That has been good, because as I say, they have made three visits to the site and spent the day available to staff. They have done group debriefs. They have had time where people could go to them individually and have a counselling session with them. The residents have been supported by social work, who come every week and make time to go around and talk to all of the residents. They have found no ill effects ongoing. I might add that at the Natimuk show recently the social work team and I went along and were

available to offer support to community members if they felt the need. We did talk to quite a few people on the day, and I know there are a number that are being followed up as part of that.

The CHAIR: Thank you. Lynette, Darren and David, thank you so much for coming in today and for telling us your stories. They are very powerful stories, and hopefully we can draw some important conclusions from them. You will be given a copy of the draft transcript to review in the coming week. And with that, we will take a quick break and reset for the next witnesses.

Witnesses withdrew.