

LEGISLATIVE COUNCIL ENVIRONMENT AND PLANNING COMMITTEE

Inquiry into the 2026 Summer Fires across Victoria

Harcourt – Thursday 30 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

Toby Heydon, Mayor, and

Darren Fuzzard, Chief Executive Officer, Mount Alexander Shire Council.

The CHAIR: I declare open the public hearing of the Legislative Council Environment and Planning Committee's Inquiry into the 2026 Summer Fires across Victoria, coming to you today from Harcourt. The public hearing is for the Environment and Planning Committee, an all-party committee of the Parliament looking into the 2026 summer fires. The committee is undertaking public hearings and receiving submissions and will provide a report to the Parliament, which will include recommendations to the government. Can I ask everyone who is here today to ensure your mobile phones are switched to silent, particularly those in the public gallery, to assist the broadcast by minimising background noise.

I will begin by acknowledging the traditional owners of the lands we are meeting on here today and pay my respects to elders past and present. I welcome those in the public gallery who are joining us in Harcourt and also those who are following along online. I ask everyone who is participating in today's proceedings to please remain respectful of the proceedings and for those in the gallery to remain silent at all times.

The committee acknowledges the significant impact that the recent fires have had on many communities, particularly here in Harcourt, and that the information we discuss today may be distressing for some people. We do have a counsellor and members of the CFA wellbeing team onsite to offer support to anyone who may need it. If you would like to speak with any of those people, the committee secretariat is here to assist.

For our witnesses, all 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 today 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 comments, 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.

As you can tell, the evidence is being recorded, and you will be provided with a proof version of the transcript to review before it is made public.

With all that out of the way, welcome. My name is Ryan Batchelor. I am the Chair of the Environment and Planning Committee and a Member for Southern Metropolitan Region in the Legislative Council. I will ask members of the committee to introduce themselves.

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

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

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

John BERGER: John Berger, Member for Southern Metro.

The CHAIR: And online we have –

Jacinta ERMACORA: Jacinta Ermacora, Member for Western Victoria Region, coming to you today from Warrnambool.

The CHAIR: First up, for the Hansard record, if you could both state your name and the organisation you are appearing on behalf of, please.

Toby HEYDON: Toby Heydon, Mayor of Mount Alexander shire.

Darren FUZZARD: And Darren Fuzzard, Chief Executive Officer of Mount Alexander Shire Council.

The CHAIR: Toby and Darren, thanks so much for taking the time to join us today and for the assistance that you have given us in getting into this part of the world.

It is pretty straightforward. In terms of proceedings, we will invite you to make a short opening statement and then the committee will get into questions. I will hand it over to you.

Darren FUZZARD: Thank you, Chair. The Mayor has given me permission to speak first, if that is okay, Chair.

The CHAIR: So long as it is okay by him. That is what is most important.

Darren FUZZARD: That does matter more; thank you, Chair. Thank you, Chair and members of the inquiry. We really appreciate the opportunity to, first of all, make a submission to the inquiry and then to be able to talk with you about that today. Thank you for that. I will pass over to the Mayor after I say a few things, but for your information also, Chair, I do want to acknowledge that we have got a couple of members of staff here in the gallery, being Alanna Cooper, who is our manager of community partnerships, and also Phil Harrison, who is our senior recovery coordinator. The two of them, together with Lisa Knight, who is our director of healthy communities and who is not here, were really the leaders of council's response in the initial response. Also they are very much a part of the long-term recovery effort for the shire and the community here as well. I just wanted to acknowledge that they are in the room as well, from council's perspective.

You have got our submission of course, and I will not repeat all of the written detail that is in there. There are a couple of updates for you since that was put in, because we are learning a lot as we go along. The total number of properties burnt from the fires here now is 228. The number of homes identified as completely lost to the fires now is 74. It had been 54 for some time, but secondary impact assessments and further work have now identified 74. There are a further 11 houses that cannot be lived in currently but are repairable, and there are another 27 houses that were impacted but do remain habitable, fortunately. We have not got figures on the number of people who have been displaced – council does not have those – but we do know that DFFH has made 908 different payments to a variety of people affected by the fires. That is a bit of a sense of perhaps how many people individually have been impacted.

There are a few numbers still being worked through. One of those is the number of commercial properties that have been burnt. At the moment that number sits at 16. We are still to confirm also the number of farms and orchards that have been impacted, but we believe at the moment that six farms and three orchards were impacted. One of those commercial properties – and you have probably seen a fair bit about this one in the media anyway – was the Harcourt Coolstore, just down the road from here, which was completely lost in the fires. That alone has impacted at least 80 businesses inside and beyond our shire through its loss. Overall, we think that there are at least 157 businesses that have been impacted by the fires that we know of to date, with an estimated initial loss, at least, of around \$24 million.

In land area, the fires impacted more than 4400 hectares, including burning about 80 per cent of Mount Alexander, which is the mountain Mount Alexander, just to the east of Harcourt, as you may know. That has got great significance to the Djaara people here, as well as being a significant tourism attraction and ecologically significant.

From a council perspective, we did not lose any major council assets. Certainly NBN, Coliban Water, Powercor and radio and TV communication towers were significantly impacted by the fires. Some were lost for quite some time, and some still are. They had impacts on the initial response as well as the recovery efforts. The train line and the Calder Freeway were impacted for a time as well by these fires.

Regarding the response itself, though, both during and after the fires, I think the message that we would really like to get across to you is one of gratitude. The response from the CFA, the Forest Fire Management group, VicPol and even our own staff and many members of the community, whether that was as volunteers defending their own or their neighbours' properties, was just an exceptional effort, we think. Equally from a local government perspective, the generosity, the capability and just the straight-out fleet-footedness of our neighbouring councils – in particular the City of Greater Bendigo and Macedon Ranges Shire Council, who both established emergency relief centres, in Bendigo and Kyneton, within hours of us realising that we could not safely establish a relief centre in Castlemaine at the time that people were starting to look for those services – was immensely appreciated.

In addition, the city itself offered us resources in the incident control centre because we just could not get there, so really fantastic support from the other councils. A couple of other points: once it was safe to do so, and it was

two days after the fire started, council was able to establish a recovery hub in the Castlemaine town hall, and that came with some enormously important support from Gaelle Broad and Maree Edwards and also at the federal level from Lisa Chesters, which, alongside some really well-established local relationships that we have with various government departments and other service providers, meant we had more than 40 service providers in that town hall within three days of the fire starting. The fire started Friday night. As of that Monday morning, those service providers were helping people in the community. That, of course, was all happening back in Castlemaine, a relatively safe location, 8 or 9 kilometres away from the active fireground, and it was active because the fire was still continuing to push east over the mountain and still threatening a lot of communities, as well as still burning where it had previously.

What we were soon to learn was that alongside our collective efforts away in Castlemaine was this group that were inside the area that was closed off to the general public. These impacted residents had already come together to form their own recovery centre inside the firegrounds, if you like, at the Victorian Miniature Railway site in Harcourt. None of us could be in there to support that group due to the ongoing fire threat. That requires, of course, non-essential support agencies to stay out of those firegrounds. But the work of that group – many of them had lost their homes or their businesses or both; I am sure you are going to hear about this today – was just an extraordinary example of community leadership, we think. Within hours, they had established that site. They were providing food, shelter, supplies and support to each other in that impacted area. I guess that is the perspective we would really like you to understand, and the absolute gratitude from the council's perspective for all of those people who made that response the way that it was. The theme for us in our messaging is really just thinking about better preparedness. That is what we would really like to see a focus on, but not necessarily in the traditional sense. Absolutely there is how do we make sure that we have got reduced fire loads and can get more individual landowners to be more ready for whatever might be coming their way. We absolutely endorse it. There is more work to do on that side of it. But I guess the point we would like to think about from a preparedness perspective is: can we invest in things like assisting whole communities to have the tools and the plans in place so that they could have a response a lot like what the Harcourt community chose to do, if that community feels like they are ready for it. They did an incredible job of creating the tools and doing the thinking on the spot. Maybe you do not need to do that every time because a lot of it could be pre-planned, so that is one of the things that we would suggest.

Ensuring the resourcing across multiple response agencies in the lead-up to those high-risk and complex times is comprised of sufficiently experienced people in that readiness group and also making sure that they are available – and we certainly had our own challenges with that because it was the Christmas period. Just really thinking ahead to not only are the people within the teams, but are those people going to be available when you need them, I think, at an entire response level is worth thinking about. Exploring how support agencies can be enabled to have an earlier presence alongside those displaced people who are inside the fire-impacted areas – if that is where those residents want to stay and it has been deemed acceptable for them to stay, why only them? Why cannot we get in sooner and be there alongside them? And predetermining how clean-up operations can be done so that the insurance status, whether that be fully insured, partially insured or not insured, does not lead to extended periods of inaction and does not appear to be uncoordinated from a community perspective as well.

Just two more points from me, Chair. Establishing for any given type of event across the state what is the agreed list of agencies and service providers whose presence you know is going to be needed in a recovery hub within days of an emergency – how do you get that predetermined, preset and precommitted to as well? We are, as I say, incredibly fortunate to have had support from people like Gaelle and others – our local connections – that helped us get that to happen, but it is only because of that. It is not a pre-planned arrangement that guarantees that every community gets what they need as quickly as possible.

The last one that I will mention before I hand over, Chair, if that is okay, is we do think that there are more conversations to be had about what the purpose is of last places of resort and what they do and they do not offer. And also are there opportunities to help communities have a better understanding about when they may be receiving messages to go elsewhere – in our case, 'Don't stay in Castlemaine'; there was no messaging about 'There's somewhere safe for you in Castlemaine', even though there was no apparent immediate danger there – helping people to understand why that might be the case and to not choose to still stay in those areas that were yet confirmed to be safe. We think that there is an opportunity in that pre-planning work about getting people understanding the messaging that does and does not come out when an emergency is on. I will stop there, Chair, and if I may, hand over to the Mayor.

Toby HEYDON: Thanks, Chief, and thank you, Chair. Thank you for this invitation. I, too, just want to note that we are indebted to our neighbouring shires and MPs' outstanding outreach in the heat of that moment from the evening of the Friday night all the way through until we had the recovery centre up and running. It was really impressive how well we worked with our state and federal colleagues and not least some of the people here today. We are very grateful for that support that we received.

An interesting point here to follow on from Darren's comments around the immediate evacuation and response that may be a little bit different to some other firegrounds is that obviously Harcourt is a bit unique in that it was a township fire. It was different to the other firegrounds around the state. Overwhelmingly, most of the evacuees were evacuated within the shire and remained at communities close by – neighbouring communities. That was very important in terms of the recovery of those communities, to be able to relocate with family or friends to other parts of the shire. That speaks about the interconnectedness of the shire. It is interesting to note that all these months later, enrolments at the local primary school have not been impacted as much as they could have been. Often, I think, a litmus test about how well a community is recovering is how the enrolments are at the local primary school. There are some families that were evacuated to the City of Greater Bendigo. Some of those parents are bringing their kids to school here. There have been a couple who have left the shire, but it is enormously heartening for me to know that the primary school, which is such an important nexus for the community, is recovering.

I think a couple of points I would like to make, too, are about community responses. Like a lot of communities, we have a range of different, very local instant messaging support groups, commonly on WhatsApp but not always. It is interesting to note, when we compare back to other disasters in previous years, how to the fore those networks came and how important they were for connecting communities. It is also heartening to note that since the fires there are so many more of those local resilience groups, local suburban collectives who are forming, looking out for neighbours, especially elderly residents who do not have smartphones. So that has been a really important response.

Something else about information flow – as you would know, we lost the communications tower at Mount Alexander. That was really critical for us. Old people like us knew that we could tune into ABC radio 774 on the AM dial. A lot of people younger than me do not even know what an AM dial is, perhaps even a radio. We started messaging from the Saturday. I was doing short, little 3-minute videos, and I realise now how important they were for many members of the community. Faced with so many channels of different information – of different news services, of different online resources and of information and misinformation on social media – the single voice coming from the Mayor of the shire actually proved to be incredibly important for residents, and still the rates of listenership of my weekly updates are extraordinary. I think this is an important point for us to think about: how in times of crisis – with or without losing a communications tower, like at Mount Alexander – the confusion with the number of different news sources and the array of information and misinformation really provides an opportunity for leadership at local council. People are looking for a friendly voice they recognise. It is interesting how my short updates were just simply bringing together information from the incident control centre, otherwise publicly available information, but packaging them in a very short 2- to 3-minute message. I continue to get feedback about that. I just think that is interesting to note. I think a generation ago, perhaps when we all watched the same TV shows, that might not have been the case. It is just an interesting point there.

The last one I want to refer to here is that on the evening of the fire – and Darren mentioned the challenges around if we could even set up recovery centres or relief centres – the community was kind of out in front of us. By the time the wind had changed and when the threat was no longer imminent to Castlemaine, a number of local businesses and organisations in Castlemaine had opened their doors for evacuees. I spent that night visiting those centres. There were people with horses and livestock at the Camp Reserve in the middle of Castlemaine. We had 300 to 400 people at the old jail site, which was quite extraordinary, and that was until 11 pm. It is interesting to note that, while we were so focused on material responses and getting ready for the next 24 hours in terms of what we could provide materially – it was very striking to me, and I am sure you have heard this in your other submissions and other hearings – immediate emotional first aid was occurring between residents and the value and importance of having those venues for the community to come together and just share that moment. Some of that was grief and some of that was humour – there were an extraordinary range of emotions there. I just want to underline that. It is a really critical part I think, and as Darren explained, of how well this community responded to Harcourt. I feel that the care and support for each other that the community demonstrated on that Friday night and again on Saturday night – this also was at the Bendigo centre and the

Kyneton centre – provided a kind of foundation for the response. I think we cannot lose sight of how important those relationships are in those circumstances. We naturally spend a lot of our time, as I said, focusing on the material and focusing on resources, and I for one perhaps was reminded of the significance of that peer-to-peer emotional support that that community could provide each other and receive from each other in that time of crisis. I think that was really key.

The CHAIR: Thanks very much. Let us go to questions. I want to talk a little bit about preparedness, because you mentioned it, Darren, in your statement. Does the council have a municipal fire preparedness committee? Do you have something like that that works particularly well? It is something that has come up in the course of our hearings.

Darren FUZZARD: Yes, we do. I will not go through the long list, Chair, but we have quite an extensive preparation program in the lead-up to both the fire danger period and the flood danger period, because we get to enjoy both of those in our shire.

The CHAIR: As do many, and often they are happening at the same time it seems.

Darren FUZZARD: Yes, absolutely, which is part of the challenge of being able to prepare for one while you are still dealing with the last one and helping people through the last event, and sometimes they can be not very many months apart. We do have those fire prevention committees. There is a long list of the activities that happen there in our submission. We had one on 8 December, actually, in the council chamber. It was coordinating the CFA, Vic Police, SES, Coliban Water, V/Line, VicTrack, Department of Transport and Planning, us, department of justice, Forest Fire Management Victoria, DEECA, Parks Victoria and Department of Health, and even the Victorian Goldfields Railway were in there as well.

The CHAIR: That was like a month beforehand that you had all those people together thinking about preparedness?

Darren FUZZARD: That was on 8 December, one month ahead.

The CHAIR: Wow. One of the things that came up a lot in the committee hearings last week across regional Victoria was the devastating fire – and particularly here where lots of structures and lots of homes were lost and lots of businesses were lost and affected – and the contrast to where we were on Black Saturday, with a lot of loss of life. There were very few deaths as a result of this fire. With the messaging to the community, what was that like? How do you think it was received? What is your perception of the community's view about what to do on days where they are warned that there is going to be catastrophic risk?

Toby HEYDON: Well – if I may, thanks, Chair – the catastrophic moniker has been very effective in that the message about leaving early has really penetrated the community. If we think back to 2009, 'stay and defend' was a respectable concept; it is not really anymore. I know that a number of people did stay and defend and successfully, but overwhelmingly people chose to not stay and defend. For me, that is a really critical outcome of that royal commission in 2009. That said, I think following the fires that weekend, some confusion over the role of council persisted. Even 15 years after that royal commission, although we were aware of the changed circumstances, that was a lesson for us – that actually a lot of community members are not familiar with the changes to the structure, with the incident control centre being the source of all information, and us underlining or repeating that information, as opposed to the role that local government had before 2009. The catastrophic rating is something that has been well understood by community, and 'leaving early' is another key message, thankfully. But a lot of the other provisions, a lot of the other recommendations that have been enacted are less well known. So that is something we can work on.

The CHAIR: Mrs Broad.

Gaëlle BROAD: Thank you. Thank you so much. I think you have acknowledged well today the incredible response from the local community, the efforts of volunteers and the impact that this bushfire has had on this region. It is hard to describe, but I guess just from a practical level, I want to get your thoughts. With the clean-up program, you mentioned delays, and there is a bit of a mismatch between those insured and those not. A lot of people still need to clean up and take things to the tip, but I am aware – and it has been raised with us across the state – that at the moment the ability to take material that has been bushfire impacted to a tip free of charge,

which the state government is operating, only runs until 12 May. Residents are saying they need more time. What is your view? Does the government need to be extending that immediately?

Darren FUZZARD: We would certainly encourage anything that allows people to take the time they need. We would certainly support that as a principle because different people are at different stages here. Our staff who I introduced before are still meeting new people who have just started to be ready to talk about their situation. I think anything that can be done to let them work at their own pace for as long as possible would be really appreciated.

Gaelle BROAD: So you think additional months could be needed for that clean-up and recovery process?

Darren FUZZARD: Absolutely, yes. Also, because there is the challenge that some people may be doing some of their own clean-up work and others have that managed for them, they still need options, and they need options when they are ready to deal with those challenges as well. So I would expect more months would be very much appreciated.

Toby HEYDON: We are reminded of the unevenness of recovery. It is not a straight line. It has become a bit trite that saying, but it is so true. Everyone's recovery is very different. It stands to reason that there will be people who are relying on those services now.

Gaelle BROAD: Yes, so they need more time. Well, we certainly hope to see that occur, because I know it has been an issue across a number of councils. I see in your submission that there were 45 fire prevention notices and you conducted 177 property inspections. Just on fire prevention, maintenance has been raised, and it is not just here; it is across other areas. I was reading one of the submissions – one was in Harcourt – and it was mentioning that on VicTrack land and part of council land there was a strip near their home, approximately 35 metres. They mentioned that it was around 6 foot high in spots of dry, tall, dead grass. They concluded that, 'In my circumstances, a bushfire isn't what directly destroyed my home and my neighbours' homes. It was a grassfire that was owned by government bodies.' I guess they are keen to know who has responsibility to maintain the land, grass and trees in residential streets and are also keen to see maintenance records. But what are your thoughts on that whole reduction and prevention – who is responsible?

Darren FUZZARD: Thank you. I guess our overall view is that the coordination of all of that work could be better amongst all of us – agreeing on what needs to be done and making sure that it happens to provide as much protection as possible in the lead-up to the fire danger period. We absolutely support that that could use more attention across a lot of areas. Again, we have great relationships with those other authorities and providers, and we do talk to them about making sure that they have got in their minds the work that they need to do in the lead-up to the fire prevention, as do we. We also have quite a strong program of works that we do, and like everybody I have to say you have to work out what you can do within what you have got. That does not mean that every single area that individuals believe should be treated does get treated. We all have to rationalise and make sure that we get the really critical spots. That is how we approach it, and I am sure that is how other departments and organisations approach that as well. But absolutely we think it would be great to have a better collective understanding about fire readiness from that perspective, about managing high grass areas and the like and clean-ups well ahead of the fire danger period. That would be excellent.

Gaelle BROAD: So more a statewide monitored program?

Darren FUZZARD: It would be of assistance, I think.

The CHAIR: Thank you. Dr Mansfield.

Sarah MANSFIELD: Thank you for appearing today and for everything you have done to support your local communities here. In your submission you make some comments about the municipal emergency resourcing program and about some of the challenges with the funding and the uncertainty of the program and where the funding is coming from, and also that you are being asked to do more with the same funding stream. Further to that, in another inquiry from another committee looking into local government funding you made the observation that the financial sustainability of council operations is at risk, particularly for rural councils. This event has happened in the context of an already very strained financial environment for councils. How are these funding pressures impacting on your ability to prepare for and respond to disasters?

Darren FUZZARD: They challenge it, is what I would say, Doctor. Again, we do what we can within what we have got. I believe the funding that we get is at the top end of the range that is available to councils to get from the state, and that is one person. That enables one person to be funded, and the rest of the funding either we have to do through a grants program or for council to find funds to put towards that and take those away from other things that council is trying to achieve. As you say, we have got lots of financial pressures on us, as every council you talk to will be telling you, I am sure. So it is really challenging. The insecurity for the staff, who never know: 'Are we going to get more funding or not?' Alongside that it is just not enough funding to do the work that we know is ahead of us and which we see being put to councils through legislative changes. That is a big challenge for us. But again, like everything else that we do, we look at it from a risk perspective and say, 'So what must we get done?' and we try to make sure that that happens.

Toby HEYDON: Through you, Chair, if I may. Doctor, I think this is heightened, not least by the increased frequency of natural disasters, but also – and this comes back to your question before, Gaelle, about preparedness – the rapidly shortening window of times when we can actually perform cool burning or fuel reduction burning. All of these challenges become quite a wicked problem when we have a very short window. Some seasons we have very short windows, as you would be aware, when CFA and Forest Fire Management can actually engage in some cool burning. As we have submitted, just the increased frequency and the expectation of increased frequency of natural disasters is another ingredient in that challenge.

Sarah MANSFIELD: Have you had to make cuts to other areas? As you said, you have to prioritise disaster response and recovery. It is really important. Has that impacted on your ability to then fund other services – infrastructure, other priorities?

Darren FUZZARD: Yes is the answer. But it is not as easy to show you how that plays out, because what we start with is: what must we do? What is left, after we have committed ourselves to the things that we must do, is we can then talk about the opportunities for council to invest in other things. It is more the opportunity to do other things that is reduced because we have already said, 'No, that's so critical. We need to do that work and fund that work.' Whether that is in emergency response or other areas, funding what is critical first and then seeing what is left afterwards is a very common approach for local government, especially small rurals and rurals, these days.

The CHAIR: Thank you, Mr Berger.

John BERGER: Thank you, Chair. Thank you both for your attendance this morning. I just want to talk about the recovery hubs. What did it take to set them up?

Darren FUZZARD: What did it take?

John BERGER: Yes.

Darren FUZZARD: Those two people. They are only 21 years old.

John BERGER: I am more interested in understanding: you had 40 providers available to do that. That is a pretty big task to get all those people in one area to help with the recovery.

Darren FUZZARD: It was an enormous effort from a number of people, including these fabulous people here that I mentioned before, as well as Lisa Knight and many others inside our organisation, and as I mentioned before, Gaelle and Maree and Lisa Chesters. Everybody knows somebody who can get help. What we relied on a lot was: 'Who knows somebody who can get somebody into this place for us?' I guess that is why we make that point – but surely you should not have to have the right people in the room who know the right people outside of the room to get them there helping you. We were very fortunate. This is a very well-connected region. I would say from a government departmental, local member and local government area perspective, we are very well connected here. We are lucky. But it should not be up to luck – having happened that the right people were available at Christmas to make the right phone calls. It took a lot of work. I think we are probably all still amazed that the fire starts Friday night but come Monday morning we have got 40 of the most critical service providers in the room providing services to people. It was astounding I thought.

John BERGER: And the funding from the government obviously supported that?

Darren FUZZARD: Yes, absolutely. The initial funding from the Minister for Local Government came very quickly, which gave us a lot of confidence that we could get on with the job as well. I certainly say to you that confidence that the money will be there is a bigger and bigger thing for councils. In reality we will do it anyway, because our community needs us to do it. But the risk that then puts onto the council is ‘Are we going to be able to fund this?’ and ‘What are we going to stop doing?’ Nobody has got a lot of money these days in local government. ‘What could that mean for us?’ can be a big concern when you do not know for sure that the work you do is going to be covered.

John BERGER: Toby, in respect to communication – and you spoke a little bit about the misinformation that might have gone on – what was the biggest cause of that misinformation? Was it the WhatsApp groups or the inconsistency of peoples messaging? Where were the mixed messages coming from?

Toby HEYDON: There were a few, but I think the main one on the night was people who were staying and defending in town making reports – in one case on Melbourne ABC local radio and in others on social media channels – that this facility or that facility had been lost to the fire. That was the really big one – ‘The school is damaged’, ‘The kindergarten has gone’ or ‘The BP has gone’ – with so many people evacuated from the town and unable to check that. I think too when you are in the middle of, say, Harcourt and you are trying to defend your home or you are wetting down what you can and preparing the best you can and there is smoke and flames and the mountain is on fire and it is night-time, it is very hard to actually get a sense of what has survived and what has not. I think that a lot of that misinformation was not the result of bad faith acting; I think it was genuine misunderstanding of what infrastructure had been damaged. So that was one key one. That generated a lot of attention at the time because obviously there would have been a lot of grief if we had lost the kinder and so on.

But I think there were also issues around, for instance, what services were going to be made available to residents in terms of a relief centre and then later a recovery centre. I mentioned before that a number of private organisations and community groups had opened their sports clubs, cricket ovals, the old jail and so on. There was some confusion in the first 24 hours around, as I said before, the role of council. A lot of people were expecting that they would go to a place of last resort and find council services there, and as you would know, that is not the role of those places of last resort. Word got out that, say, the old jail was functioning as a relief centre on the night, and then there was misunderstanding that that was being led by council or by state government. In the immediate heat of the fire there was that typical kind of misinformation. As I said before, I do not think it was the result of bad faith; it was a lack of better communications.

We did struggle, and some citizens also struggled, with updating of the app on the night. This was quite a big news story on the evening, and I was grateful to the ABC that someone got on and said, ‘If you pinch out the map and pinch back in again, it reloads,’ which it did. So we all furiously shared that information. But there were a lot of people who were not getting their app to update. I think that again fed into why people were looking to us for some critical statements around what the extent of the damage was and where they could find relief and recovery.

It became clear the next day that we had not lost so many buildings as what had been feared on social media, and that also coincided with better communications, or I should say more fulsome communications, coming from the incident control centre. That confusion and even surprise at what council was and was not doing abated fairly quickly after that Saturday town hall meeting, when Michael from the ICC gave a very clear explanation of what that relief policy was and why we were not opening a centre in Castlemaine and so on. The worst of it was in the first 24 hours. But, gee, I still hear people, Mr Berger, say things about the different impacts on different infrastructure that did not occur, even to this day, so it rolls on.

The CHAIR: I should go to Ms Lovell.

Wendy LOVELL: Okay. Thank you very much. There were a few things that were done post the 2009 bushfires that enabled recovery to move forward a little bit quickly. One was the one-stop shop clean-up that went through and cleaned up. Another one was exemptions from planning for rebuilding. I had a couple of locals here raise it with me. I think they are builders, so it is a bit easier for them. One of them has even got their insurance all sorted out. I think I might change to their insurance company, because that is amazing. They are wanting to get going, but there are no exemptions for them from planning. They have told me the council are going to waive the fees, but they have to go through the full process.

Another thing that happened post this fire was that the \$1000 emergency relief grants were not announced until 9 January. That for you was day one, but for people from the Longwood area, that was the third day into the fires. For Walwa it was four or five days into the fires. I had people at the relief centre in Seymour saying to me on the Thursday night, 'We just want to get a motel. We don't want to spend another night on the floor on a gym mat in the basketball stadium.' Do you think that there is a minimum package that could be put together that would allow you to better plan for emergencies, so you knew that minimum package was coming, that there were going to be those \$1000 grants immediately, that you were going to get funding for your relief and recovery centres and that there was going to be clean-up and things like that?

Darren FUZZARD: Yes. Absolutely is what I would say, member. It is part of creating that certainty, because we are certain these things are going to happen again in one way or another, and why can't we be certain about many aspects of the response? That is the thing that we would really like to put forward. There are lots of things like that that you just know are going to be needed, so can't we agree beforehand on how that is going to happen and have a mechanism for that that is fast? We would absolutely support anything that can do that, and there is a wide range of things that could fit into that package as well, I think. I thoroughly support the idea of having that all worked out beforehand and the appropriate person saying, 'Let's go.' We would love to see that. That could reduce a lot of pressure for a lot of people, whether that is supporting or actually experiencing what is happening.

Wendy LOVELL: I was just going to say that could be what a minimum package would be. As disasters become worse and worse, it could be expanded upon.

Darren FUZZARD: Yes. I think it is that initial response bit – acknowledging also that, again, the community group here was already helping itself to get what the people inside of the fire-affected areas needed right there and then; they were doing a huge amount of that work already and money was not probably the first thing that they were thinking about. The fact that as soon as they were ready to think about it it was switched on is a really important thing, I think – having it ready for when people are ready to go for those services. And it is the same thing to do with having that facility ready on Monday morning for people if they are choosing to go to it; that is the important thing. The offer is as important as the acceptance, I think – having it ready.

The CHAIR: Ms Tyrrell.

Rikkie-Lee TYRRELL: Thank you. In relation to the preparedness methods that you used, what feedback from residents did you hear actually worked best?

Toby HEYDON: One thing – and this was luck in a way – was we were able to get a printed card on disaster preparedness into people's mailboxes. What was that – two weeks before? And it was kind of like a DL that fitted nicely on a fridge. We had good feedback about that.

Darren FUZZARD: I am not sure if you have seen that one, but that is the 'What's your plan?' preparedness information that all of our residents got just before the fires.

Toby HEYDON: We had that, yes. It was remarkably fortunate timing. The event that Darren mentioned earlier – we had a few, and we had the expo. We had a few emergency services events in December and the months leading up to it, which I think personally were much richer and deeper in terms of information. But that little card – the fact that just by dumb luck it came out a week or two right before the fire and people still had it on their kitchen table – was very fortunate. It reminds us, too, that, you know, for so many people, accessing things online is great, but there are so many of our residents that rely on printed material who do not have access. Again, it is always a reminder to us that it can be tempting to cut costs and just provide everything online, but it is advertising in local papers and having physical, printed material in the community about access points. Once people can pick up the phone and speak to someone, then we are sort of halfway there, right? As Darren alluded to before, people are still making contact with our teams in terms of recovery and response. It is a little bit of a tangent, but just the diversity of how people consume their news and information continues to be a challenge.

Rikkie-Lee TYRRELL: You mentioned the last place of resort. I have been speaking to councils a lot in the last few days, and some of them say that they do not have a town's emergency evacuation point. Do you have one of those? And if you do not, what would you like to see change in this space?

Darren FUZZARD: I hope I get this right. I think we have got four across the shire. They are there and they are available for people. I think the challenge with them was what the offer was and what the belief was about the offer. That is the main challenge with those. People honestly think that they can go to those and they are going to be okay, and that is not what they are about. That is not ever what they have been about, but it is what people often believe is the case. They also believe that when they get there that the kinds of services that we have talked about happening after the fires have gone will be there instantaneously. Neither of those things are true. I think it is really important that there is a revisit of what their purpose is and whether everybody understands that or not. If not, what can we agree is the purpose, and how do we make sure everybody knows what their real place in the whole response is or is not? I think it causes confusion, and it has the risk of people going to places that they just should not. Because they are not serviced by us or anybody else, they could be there and in danger, with nobody managing that situation.

Rikkie-Lee TYRRELL: Thank you.

The CHAIR: Ms Ermacora.

Jacinta ERMACORA: Hello. Thanks for the work that you do. Sorry that I am online today. I am very interested in the preparatory work that you did. Did the council take a lead on engaging those agencies beforehand? Was the council doing that or was some other entity? You said that you had got 40 agencies by the Monday in one room, so to speak –

Darren FUZZARD: My apologies, I was just checking. I did not know the answer to that. My staff are telling me that DFFH actually took a strong lead on that previous coordination.

Jacinta ERMACORA: Excellent. Prior to the fires?

Toby HEYDON: I think on the weekend. If I can just add, Chair, Darren mentioned the generosity and flexibility of the agencies we worked with, and that was clearly demonstrated on that Saturday, with all of us frantically telephoning everyone we could think of. There was the response from those agencies. When we think about Services Australia, for instance, they were incredibly flexible in that response. But yes, my understanding is that those communications occurred over that weekend on the Saturday and the Sunday.

Jacinta ERMACORA: Prior to the fires?

Darren FUZZARD: The moment that the fires became live in our shire, that was when phone calls started to be made along those lines to prepare for that Monday morning.

Jacinta ERMACORA: I thought you described some preparatory work that you did in the December that engaged some of those agencies – not guaranteeing there was going to be a fire but in the event of a fire so they would be coming? Is that what you did?

Darren FUZZARD: Apologies. On two levels – back in early December it was the emergency management coordination group, which is a cluster response in this region, with us and other councils, as well as all of those big agency responders like the police, the SES, the CFA and others. That coordination meeting happened, as it always does. That group meets fairly regularly throughout the year to look at a variety of coordination efforts. So that happened, and that was really that big fire response preparedness work. The decisions and the effort to get a recovery centre up was separate to that, but it was because of the relationships that are formed through that group, which met back in December, that enabled that to happen so quickly. It is part of what enabled that to happen so quickly, because we all knew who to get into the room and who to call to get that to happen. Does that make sense?

Jacinta ERMACORA: Yes. Thank you. I think that was what I was trying to get an understanding of, that kind of relationship building.

Darren FUZZARD: But it did not get down to that level. I guess what we would say is: why couldn't it? Why would that not be part of that work?

Jacinta ERMACORA: Yes. Sure. Thank you.

The CHAIR: Thank you, Ms Ermacora. That is time for the session. Gentlemen, thank you so much for the evidence you have given today and all the work you have been doing in the community. You will get a copy of the transcript to review. With that, the committee will just take a short break and get the next witnesses ready. Thank you.

Witnesses withdrew.