

LEGISLATIVE COUNCIL ENVIRONMENT AND PLANNING COMMITTEE

Inquiry into the 2026 Summer Fires across Victoria

Melbourne – Friday 1 May 2026

MEMBERS

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

WITNESSES

Dr Emily Phillips, Inspector-General for Emergency Management; and

Niall Blair, Fire Services Implementation Monitor.

The CHAIR: Welcome back to the proceedings of the Legislative Council Environment and Planning Committee's Inquiry into the 2026 Summer Fires across Victoria. We are joined now by the Inspector-General for Emergency Management and the Fire Services Implementation Monitor.

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 this hearing is protected by law. You are protected against any action for what you say during the 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 the Parliament.

All evidence is being recorded. You will be provided with a proof version of the transcript following the hearing, and those transcripts will ultimately be made public and posted on the committee's website.

Welcome. My name is Ryan Batchelor. I am the Chair of the committee and Member for the Southern Metropolitan Region. I will ask the committee to introduce themselves.

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

Melina BATH: Melina Bath, Eastern Victoria.

Wendy LOVELL: Wendy Lovell, Northern Victoria Region.

John BERGER: John Berger, Member for Southern Metro.

Sarah MANSFIELD: Sarah Mansfield, Member for Western Victoria.

Rikkie-Lee TYRRELL: And Rikkie-Lee Tyrrell, Member for Northern Victoria.

The CHAIR: For the Hansard record, if I could ask you please to state your name and the organisation you are appearing on behalf of.

Niall BLAIR: Niall Blair, Fire Services Implementation Monitor.

Emily PHILLIPS: Emily Phillips, Inspector-General for Emergency Management.

The CHAIR: Thank you very much. I will invite you now to each make an opening statement, and then we will begin questions. So over to you.

Emily PHILLIPS: Thank you. Chair, I am intending to go first if you are comfortable with that.

The CHAIR: Totally fine by me.

Emily PHILLIPS: Wonderful. Thank you for the invitation to appear today and to talk to the written submission I have provided to your inquiry. I would like to acknowledge the significant impacts that the recent fires have had on communities across Victoria and the efforts of our emergency services, our volunteers and our communities over what has been a very challenging summer across Victoria.

The Inspector-General for Emergency Management was established 12 years ago following the devastating Black Saturday fires to provide independent assurance of Victoria's emergency management arrangements and to promote continuous improvement. I was appointed to the role in June 2024. The *Emergency Management Act* sets out my functions, including monitoring, reviewing and assessing Victoria's emergency management arrangements at the systemwide level. I do this through conducting systemwide reviews of our arrangements, including policy, processes and practices, to identify opportunities for improvement. I can initiate systemwide reviews myself by including them in my annual forward plan of reviews, following consultation with the sector,

or they can be undertaken at the request of the Minister for Emergency Services under section 64(1)(c). Recent systemwide reviews have looked at the arrangements for water safety; our preparedness for chemical, biological and radiological emergencies; and our preparedness for major health emergencies.

My current reviews include how a statewide all-hazards community preparedness program could support community preparedness in Victoria and how training can better prepare councils for their emergency management responsibilities. These reviews respond to enduring system-wide issues that have emerged from multiple post-event inquiries and reviews. Under the Act I am required to monitor and report to the minister on the implementation of agreed recommendations from reviews that I have initiated. I can also be requested by the minister to monitor and report on the implementation of recommendations or actions from other reviews and inquiries, including those requested by the minister, as was the case with the Inquiry into the 2019–20 Victorian Fire Season.

Finally, I am required to develop and maintain Victoria's assurance framework for emergency management, which guides my assurance work and guides the assurance activities undertaken by the sector. I have provided a detailed written submission to assist the committee. It focuses on terms of reference (11) lessons from and progress on the implementation of recommendations from previous inquiries, reports and royal commissions, and in particular the work my predecessor and I have undertaken to monitor the implementation of the 37 recommendations and 139 actions arising from the review of 10 years of reform in the emergency management sector and the inspector-general's inquiry into the 2019–20 fire season.

The review of 10 years of reform was completed in 2019 and examined the impact of reforms since the 2009 Victorian bushfires. It made five recommendations. In February 2020 the Minister for Police and Emergency Services requested that the inspector-general conduct a two-phase inquiry into the 2019–20 Victorian fire season. Phase 1 was completed in 2020 and considered preparedness for and response to the fires and made 17 recommendations. Phase 2 was completed in 2021 and considered relief and recovery arrangements and made 15 recommendations. In July 2021 the government released an implementation plan for the 10-year review and phase 1 of the fire season inquiry with 139 actions and asked the inspector-general to monitor progress against these actions. For phase 2 of the fire season inquiry the inspector-general was asked to monitor implementation against the 15 recommendations. The inspector-general has produced three reports, in 2021, 2022 and 2024, that monitor the implementation of these actions and recommendations, and the table in attachment B of my submission summarises the implementation monitoring that has been undertaken in these three reports.

The most recent 2024 progress report sets out the progress made by the sector. So 118 of the 139 actions from the 10-year review and the phase 1 fire season inquiry were complete or closed. Five of the 15 recommendations from the phase 2 report were completed or closed. I am currently preparing a fourth implementation progress report, which will be completed this year. It will report on the implementation of the 31 recommendations and actions that remained in progress in the 2024 progress report.

Finally, I would like to touch on the inspector-general's review of the fires this year. So in January the Premier announced that the government would refer the 2025–26 summer bushfires to the inspector-general for a formal review. Under the *Emergency Management Act* I can only undertake a review of a major emergency event at the request of the Minister for Emergency Services. I can advise the committee that I have received a formal request from the minister to undertake a review, with the timing to follow the conclusion of this parliamentary inquiry. I expect to receive a terms of reference for the review at that time.

I would like to close by thanking you again for the opportunity to appear today and to speak to my submission and for the important assurance work that you are undertaking through this inquiry. I very much look forward to hearing your deliberations and seeing your findings and recommendations. Thank you.

The CHAIR: Thank you. Mr Blair.

Niall BLAIR: Thank you, Chair and members of the committee, and thanks for the opportunity to provide a submission and appear before your inquiry today. As you know, my name is Niall Blair and I am the Fire Services Implementation Monitor. I hold this role as an independent statutory office holder under the *Fire Rescue Victoria Act 1958*. I was initially appointed in December 2020 and then reappointed until June 2027. My role is to observe, analyse and report. For five years I have sat at the centre of Victoria's fire services

reform, attending governance meetings, examining evidence, speaking with firefighters and volunteers across the state and reporting publicly on what I have found. My monitoring is delivered through quarterly reports on CFA and FRV's performance against their respective outcomes frameworks and five annual reports to Parliament. All of my reports are publicly available on my website.

You may be aware that the year 2 to 5 implementation plan concluded on 30 June 2025. The conclusion of that plan does not mean that the reform is complete. It means the first structured phase of a major organisational change is behind us. The work of embedding those changes, resolving what remains unresolved and building fire services genuinely fit for the conditions Victoria now faces continues, and I continue to provide oversight of it. Over five years I have observed agencies progress from the earliest stages of structural transition through to completing all 41 actions in the implementation plan in genuinely difficult circumstances, such as COVID-19, consecutive major emergencies and sustained industrial complexity.

At the highest level I can attest to the goodwill, intent and dedication from all stakeholders to work constructively to implement the reform actions. Some of the achievements that I have witnessed that warrant mention include the development of an agreed definition of 'complementary fire services' by both agencies, which has provided a principled framework for joint decision-making that continues to anchor how agencies work through difficult issues; CFA's successful work to build genuine improvements to the volunteer life cycle, resulting in modernised recruitment, strengthened training and mechanisms connecting volunteer feedback directly to organisational decision-making; and FRV's effort to create and embed a new agency across Victoria, invest in its workforce health model, strengthen connections with regional communities and set up the secondment management unit. I commend everyone across both agencies who delivered these outcomes, especially the leaders of the agencies and those involved in the heads of agency steering committee.

While much progress has been made five years into the 10-year reform, I have also been consistent in reporting the challenges that persist, and they are significant. I have been quite clear in my assessment of the reform, and in particular the secondment agreement, that it cannot be fully implemented as intended due to structural and legislative barriers combined with workplace and industrial limitations. The secondment model, through which FRV provides senior operational staff to CFA, has presented persistent challenges from its inception. I am happy to expand on these challenges later during questions.

The topic of vacancy and relief of operational seconded staff to CFA has also been an issue since monitoring began in October 2020. CFA has operated with an average shortfall of more than 17 senior positions per week at commander and assistant chief fire officer level due to vacancy and non-relief. Senior command capacity at the district level is foundational to CFA's ability to support its volunteers during major emergencies. While there are many reasons for this shortfall, I must acknowledge that vacancy and relief issues within CFA predate the reform. However, that has been consistently under-resourced during my time of monitoring, and in 2026 the numbers appear to be getting worse.

The industrial environment has also had an impact and appears to be directly in conflict with the secondment agreement. The consult and agree clause in FRV's enterprise agreement has consistently required management to reach consensus with the United Firefighters Union before implementing policies or changes. This has at times slowed key reform actions and limited the ability of agencies to implement agreed actions. I have also reported consistently that there are legislative barriers to the successful implementation of the reform. The lack of legal delegation of authority for FRV to carry out certain activities across the country area of Victoria has resulted in inefficient workarounds, duplication and frustration for those within the system.

Over five years I have travelled across Victoria and spoken with the people inside this reform. I have heard from volunteers for whom their brigade is a second family, providing purpose and connection across generations. I have spoken with career firefighters for whom their station is a source of genuine belonging. For some reform-related change has brought real loss alongside everything else that they carry. They have honestly shared their experiences with me, and that has shaped how I understand what their evidence reflects in human terms.

Throughout my monitoring I have noted that the reformed fire services had not been fully tested under widespread catastrophic fire conditions, and I have identified that consistently as a genuine and material risk. That test has now arrived. This committee will hear important evidence on how the arrangements I have been monitoring performed when they were needed most. I will draw on five years of data and evidence to assist the

committee wherever I can, and I will continue to provide independent oversight as the reform progresses. I acknowledge the extraordinary contributions of Victoria's career and volunteer firefighters this summer. What they have done for their communities, often at great personal cost, deserves our highest recognition. Thank you again for this opportunity to share my findings.

The CHAIR: Thank you. We will go to questions. Dr Phillips, you said that the minister had asked you to do a review of the bushfire season but to wait until this committee had concluded its work. Do you have a view on whether waiting is appropriate? What are the advantages and disadvantages of you waiting for us?

Emily PHILLIPS: Thank you for that question. You are correct that the minister has made that request and set the timeframe. Under the provisions of the legislation, under section 64(1)(c), which enables a review to be requested, the minister will also set the terms of reference and the duration of the review as part of that request. The inspector-general has undertaken four event reviews in the past, and that has been the case with all of those.

One of my other responsibilities, which is very important, which I touched on in my opening statement, is that I am required under legislation to develop and maintain an assurance framework for the sector. That guides the assurance work that I undertake, but it also guides the assurance work that the sector undertakes. It has a bunch of principles in it that are about what good assurance looks like. It says that assurance activities should be coordinated, they need to add value, they need to reduce burden and they need to generate continuous improvement in the sector. Whilst it is not appropriate for me to comment on the decision that the minister has made, I can certainly offer some comments from the perspective of being the independent keeper of the assurance framework in emergency management for Victoria.

The way I think about this is that there are two reviews currently underway into the fire season we have just experienced. There is your inquiry, which is very important. I have been watching your hearings, and I am working my way through your 320-plus submissions, which is an enormous body of evidence. I have heard with immense interest the issues that are being raised through the hearings and particularly the regional hearings that have occurred over the last couple of weeks. You are going to have a significant body of evidence by the time you have completed this inquiry, and the timing enables that body of evidence to be available to me in the review that I undertake and for your findings and recommendations to be available as well.

I did not watch all of the previous session of evidence, but I believe the commissioner referred also to the coordinated after-action review that the sector is undertaking following the summer fires. This is an approach that the sector has been developing over time and has been improving over time from an assurance perspective. So rather than just undertaking individual after-action reviews within agencies, there is now an approach of a whole-of-sector after-action review which is coordinated and really looks at how the different agencies worked together in and around an emergency event, which is really important. I think the commissioner set out some of the things he is doing through that.

Both of those activities will report well ahead of the next fire season. In doing that, they present an important opportunity I think for the minister to consider their lessons in the case of the after-action review and the findings and recommendations in the case of your inquiry and then task me as the inspector-general accordingly. So that could be to do a bigger event review if the inquiries perhaps have not reached as far as they need to, but it could also be to pick up recommendations that come out of your work that could be directed to the inspector-general. It could also be to address gaps in the work that has been done. It could be to do deeper dives on issues that have really been shown to be very pronounced during those review activities. For those reasons, I do see benefits to a staged approach to assurance and to ensuring that our assurance activities are additive and complementary.

The CHAIR: I was going to ask you about the after-action reviews, because it did spark my interest when the commissioner mentioned them. Also I think it is heartening, although probably a little nerve-racking sometimes, to note that you are watching what we are doing as we do it. There has been a lot of evidence, and a lot of really I think courageous evidence, given to the committee by witnesses who have put a lot of themselves into difficult stories that they have had to tell us on record. We have thanked them repeatedly and I will thank them again. So I am glad that you are looking at that now. Ms Bath.

Melina BATH: Thank you very much. Apologies for my cough. I will direct a couple of different sets of questions. Niall, the other day we heard from Lachlan Gales, who was a group officer at Wangaratta. I scribbled his quotes – they are not direct quotes – but he talked about some significant failures, the shortage of the right people in the right locations at the right time. Could you expand on your secondment concerns? These are concerns that we actually addressed in debate; it feels like the chickens have come home to roost. But what has been your understanding, and what needs to change? What can we recommend government to change in the secondment model?

Niall BLAIR: There is quite a bit in that. I will try and limit the –

Melina BATH: Take it on notice too, if you want to.

Niall BLAIR: Well, I will start with the fact that I think the secondment model has not actually been given the ability to be implemented properly.

Melina BATH: What are the blockers in that?

Niall BLAIR: There are some legislative barriers to that. In my reports, I have clearly articulated what those are.

Melina BATH: They are identified – great.

Niall BLAIR: To give you a sense, what has happened is, in some cases the people were transferred from CFA to FRV, but the legal delegation for FRV to do particular work in the country areas of Victoria did not follow. So there were potentially some drafting errors there, in that it did not transfer the same delegation, so you now have the people sitting in FRV but the legal delegation sits in CFA. So that is a clear example there.

There are some impediments and challenges which I have mentioned as well around some of the industrial interfaces between what is happening in FRV, for example, and what is required at CFA. I think the best example for that is the case of working with children checks. This is something that I have highlighted in my reports very plainly. CFA is a child-safe organisation that requires their people to have working with children checks. There are different requirements at FRV because traditionally they have not been working directly with children.

Melina BATH: This is not rocket science though, is it? It should be reasonably easy to overcome those impediments.

Niall BLAIR: The challenge is under the way that things are constructed, the chief officer, for example, cannot request a secondee to prove that they have done the working with children check, so there is this reliance upon them voluntarily doing that. That has been something that I have raised as well. So that is another example there. When we come to things like vacancies and relief, that has been an ongoing issue. I think that CFA have reported that when the reforms started, the number of ACFOs or commanders in certain areas reduced. When we talk about vacancy and relief, which I am sure we will probably get a chance to expand on –

Melina BATH: That was my next question, yes.

Niall BLAIR: you cannot use the term vacancy without adding the term relief.

Melina BATH: That is right – or non-relief.

Niall BLAIR: Or non-relief.

Melina BATH: Yes. Thank you.

Niall BLAIR: And what we are seeing, from a range of challenges – and I do not apportion any blame here, I have seen some incredible attempts, particularly from both agencies and FRV in this space to try and address this, and I heard the commissioner earlier say that there are challenges with personnel on medical leave, an ageing profile, difficult to recruit people into certain areas, that is leaving –

Melina BATH: Vulnerabilities.

Niall BLAIR: vulnerabilities across the state.

Melina BATH: Niall, thank you very much. If you have got additional things that have not come up, please, I request that you expand on them.

I do want to go to the inspector-general. You have, in appendix B to your document – that is, overview of implementation process – on page 22, action 6.9 ‘identify, prioritise and conduct fuel management along major arterial roads’. That is stated as being closed, and the reason given for the issue being closed is lack of funding. How does this impact the risk of bushfires spreading?

Emily PHILLIPS: Thank you for your question. Yes, I have turned to that page and action 6.9 was closed, and you are correct that that was identified as one of the reasons for its closure.

Melina BATH: So we have not addressed the issue, we have just not funded it.

Emily PHILLIPS: So the process that I undertake in implementation status reporting is that the agency proposes a status for the action to me. I go through a process. They provide requested evidence and I analyse that evidence and agree a final status. With closed actions, they can either be because an action has not been commenced or an action is partially implemented but the organisation advises that they do not intend to take any further action. I require sign off by the head of agency for those decisions because they are significant.

Melina BATH: Thank you, and apologies, please. Page 17, actions 3.5 and 3.6 are specifically around road corridors, reported as ‘Complete’. The Hume Freeway Longwood issue, in that period, in the 2025–26 bushfire season, how can that be considered complete when, from your perspective, when the fires started on the edge of the road with high fuel load and dry fuel load? I think you might have to take it on notice.

Emily PHILLIPS: I am happy to take that on notice.

The CHAIR: Thank you. Dr Mansfield.

Sarah MANSFIELD: Thank you. And thank you for appearing today. Mr Blair, you indicated that in your reports you have made recommendations about legislative reforms that need to take place. When did you first identify those legislative reforms that were required?

Niall BLAIR: Pretty early. I could come back and get the exact dates for you, but it has been consistent and it was relatively early. It was quite clear from the start, and as I said, I do not apportion any blame or any malice here. It was, I think, just an oversight when creating the specific delegations. There were areas like dangerous goods, caravan parks and land use planning, I think. The delegation in those pieces of legislation was not actually changed from CFA to FRV. A very simple drafting error that has had, I would say, a huge impact on the ground for particularly those that are tasked with doing the job, that do not have the delegation to sign off on it, and then the ones that have the delegation to sign off on it not having done the job. So we have this at times, and this is historic, and in some areas it still occurs. Then the agencies, they have got workarounds. But if you are looking for cutting out duplication, if you are looking at making sure that someone who turns up every day and does a job then does not have to hand it over to someone else to check whether it is right or not, that would be an area that I think would be very easily solved by changing some of those delegations.

Sarah MANSFIELD: Have you been given any indication from government if they are looking at that legislative change or whether anything is being worked on?

Niall BLAIR: There have been plenty of conversations around what may change in legislation, but as far as timings and those sorts of things, I think that is probably a question better directed to the department.

Sarah MANSFIELD: Yes. Okay. I do not know if you have been following what has been happening in this inquiry, but there is certainly a lot of evidence that has been produced that has talked about that interface between the agencies and there being issues we have already touched on – secondment and potential lack of personnel in the right positions to support teams that were out on the ground. With any of the issues that you have seen come up, are you able to see, from previous work you have done, the links between what has actually played out and recommendations you have previously made about what needs to be fixed?

Niall BLAIR: I have been following some of the evidence and the deliberations of the committee. I too am very interested in the joint after-action review that will be carried out, and I have had conversations with the agencies about having an observer role in that, because that body is where I think that we will see what has worked really well and what may not have worked as well as anticipated. I think it is too early for me, given the resourcing that I have and the limited amount of looking into the operational issues, to be able to answer that, but I think having a good look at that after-action review will identify – anecdotally, there have been plenty of examples, not just in the bushfires but even since then with the refinery fire just recently, where the agencies are absolutely working in a complementary manner and supporting each other. I would hate to cast a shadow over everything. I think that the agencies have also been very good at – where issues have been identified, they do step up. One of my earliest recommendations was the establishment of the heads of agency governance committee. I sit in those with both agencies very regularly, sometimes weekly, where these issues are raised. So I think the after-action review will potentially identify areas we may need to look at more closely and give us the examples of how it has worked really well and where there may be some more work that needs to be done.

Sarah MANSFIELD: Thank you. Dr Phillips, with the progress report that you have provided, there are still quite a number of actions that are in progress, some of which are delayed in terms of where they are up to. One that had not commenced yet was around a fit-for-purpose emergency management platform. Can you provide any insights into how long you think that work will take to complete and whether any additional resourcing is required to get that progress happening?

Emily PHILLIPS: Thank you for your question. I am currently undertaking the 2026 progress report, and I am in the middle of that process, so I cannot comment on that until the process is complete; I have to follow a legislative process on implementation monitoring. There are 31 recommendations that remained in progress from the 2024 progress report, and they will be the subject of the 2026 progress report.

Sarah MANSFIELD: Thank you.

The CHAIR: Mr Berger.

John BERGER: Thank you, Chair. Thank you both for your appearances today. Dr Phillips, in our tours around, we had the open-mic sessions, and you might have seen a couple of them online, but there were a couple that were not. And some of the themes that traversed those two areas were that this was just another inquiry, this was just another royal commission. You are charged with the responsibility of following up on some of the implementations or some of the outcomes of the inquiries. How do we get back to those people to say, ‘Yes, that was followed up, and this was the action that was taken’?

Emily PHILLIPS: That is a really important question. I am required under the Act to undertake particular processes around implementation monitoring. I can monitor the implementation myself; I can initiate it myself with reviews I have undertaken. Or if the government asks me to undertake a review, the government can ask me to monitor the implementation of it. That process is a very evidence-driven process, and it results in a report that provides for the government an update of progress so the government can hold agencies to account. With the agreement of the minister, that can be published, and that enables the Parliament – you – and the community to hold the government to account. Certainly, if you think about the 2019–20 fire season inquiry and the 2009 bushfire royal commission, the implementation monitoring on all of what has been undertaken since both of those events has been published, and it has enabled the community to follow progress. With the 2019–20 fire reporting, because it is so complex – 37 recommendations, 139 actions – I have also gone the extra step of providing a tracker on the website, a dashboard, to try and make it much easier for members of the community, people who are not daily involved in assurance activities, to monitor the progress of actions.

John BERGER: Thank you. Niall, your most recent annual report spoke of significant progress having been made in creating complementary fire services since reform. Can you go through some of the areas where you have seen the progress?

Niall BLAIR: There has been a lot. And again, it is that journey, having seen what has happened over the last five years. But if I just take it really simply to say that to get to that definition, I think, is incredible. I mean, the reform put a big challenge to both organisations culturally but also operationally. And for the goodwill and for the work between the agencies to be able to come together and say, ‘How are we going to complement rather than duplicate or compete?’ – that is a massive effort.

When you look through the implementation plan, you know, to go through the years 2 to 5 plan or those 41 recommendations, some of those specific activities – whether it is transferring equipment, whether it is working on service-level agreements, whether it is on marrying the doctrine between the two agencies on how they do training, their policies and procedures, how they work within the secondment environment – has been very, very challenging. And I have got to say, in 2026 I am much more – I was not going to say happy – I am going to say content, compared to where we were I think a few years ago. So I think there has been a lot of progress.

Again, I would acknowledge the effort that has gone in. This has actually required – because of the systemic challenges within this, and again, I keep going back to the system – more effort than probably any other type of reform, because the system that all agencies are working under presents challenges in the first instance, and then they have got to try and find ways to come up with a resolution. Quite often those resolutions then require third-party sign-off. Then they will require change, education, those sorts of things. So in my reports I have tried in the last five years to be quite balanced and highlight what has been done and what is working well and also where the challenges are, and I think they do get that balance right.

John BERGER: In the 50 seconds I have got left, you mentioned ‘culturally’. Can you give us some examples of what that might look like?

Niall BLAIR: Well, you know, again, you take it from the very premise of first and foremost being an organisation that is a full volunteer bushfire agency and a career firefighting agency. That, in a sense, has some challenges. What has been reported to me is that some of the cultural challenges existed even when the CFA had career firefighters embedded in it. Some of those challenges continue culturally, and then it is also taking an organisation that traditionally had covered the metropolitan Melbourne area and then moving that into regional communities. As someone from a regional community I know that we like to be a little bit different than what happens with our city partners. So culturally there have been some challenges in those spaces when bringing those two together.

The CHAIR: Ms Lovell.

Wendy LOVELL: Thank you. Niall, I note that the government’s fire services reform package was stated to take 10 years to implement. A five-year implementation plan was developed, and you have reported against those actions. Is there a 6- to 10-year implementation plan, and if not, why not?

Niall BLAIR: There is not another plan that has been developed by the minister to follow the same type of structure that the first five years did. What happens now is we move into what I am calling the effectiveness phase, and also making sure that areas in the old plan that were moved from an action item to business as usual, I am monitoring those to follow those through. So in the absence of a structural plan, I still have my reporting functions. I still do my quarterly outcomes framework reports, and then I still do my annual report to Parliament. So I have carried over some of the actions that the agencies have moved to business as usual. I have labelled some of those as partially completed in some aspects of it, happy to sign off on the plan, and then I am monitoring those through my annual reporting process.

I also think that this inquiry and the timeliness of that coming off the back of the finishing of the structural plan will allow me to be able to look at things like that after-action review and also provide another report to Parliament on how effective the implementation of that plan has been. So I viewed it in my mind, the first five years, as structural – you know, even to the point of swapping knives and forks in fire stations from the ownership of one agency to another – some real, tangible transitional things, and now we are moving into that effective phase. And that does not need, per se, a structural ‘Do this item, do that item’. This is more moving into the methodology that I am applying around effectiveness.

Wendy LOVELL: Thank you. Have the staffing levels afforded to you to support your important work as the Fire Services Implementation Monitor been reduced?

Niall BLAIR: The staffing levels that I have have reduced over time. Some of that was planned because some of my staff in the early days were on termed contracts, and I think that is natural because of the heavy load that was required at the front. We have been impacted by some of the freezing of filling vacancies in my office over the last few years, and the government and the department is now looking at what my resourcing levels may look like going forward, and that is a conversation that is live at the moment with the department. I

think, like everyone in the public service, we would welcome more resourcing rather than less, but there obviously are some decisions that are beyond my remit to be able to be made in that area. I get my resourcing from the Department of Justice and Community Safety. We have had to work hard in the early days, because when there were some action items for the department that I was also overseeing, it was an interesting intersection where I am overseeing an entity that I am relying upon to give my resources and to sign my staff's leave applications, for example. But we have worked very well in that environment.

Wendy LOVELL: Thank you. To the IGEM, the State Crisis and Resilience Council is Victoria's peak advisory body for emergency management policy and strategy, established under the *Emergency Management Act*. It is chaired by the Emergency Management Commissioner and attended by yourself and departmental secretaries, amongst others. Are our fire agency chiefs members of this group, and if not, might this in part explain why Victoria cannot seem to get its bushfire policy settings right?

Emily PHILLIPS: The State Crisis and Resilience Council is chaired by Jeremi Moule, the Secretary of the Department of Premier and Cabinet. And no – my understanding of the arrangements, and I am an observer on that council, is that the emergency service organisations are represented by Emergency Management Victoria and the Department of Justice and Community Safety on that committee.

Wendy LOVELL: So wouldn't it be beneficial for the fire chiefs to be there?

Emily PHILLIPS: Well, I think that is a matter for the government.

Wendy LOVELL: Okay, thanks. Why haven't all the recommendations from the IGEM inquiry into the 2019–20 fires been implemented, including a review of fuel management legislation?

Emily PHILLIPS: Thank you for your question. That was a very important piece of work, and it remains a very important piece of work. As I spoke to in my opening statement, I think 118 of 139 actions for phase 1 and 5 of 15 for phase 2 had been implemented at the 2024 progress report. There were 31 that remained outstanding. I am currently undertaking a 2026 progress implementation process to understand where that is up to and to report. Again, I think the reasons are a matter for the agencies.

The CHAIR: Thank you. Ms Tyrrell.

Rikkie-Lee TYRRELL: Thank you, Chair. Is there anything that the committee has not been asking that you think we should be? Are we leaving gaps in this inquiry that might help you?

Emily PHILLIPS: To me?

Rikkie-Lee TYRRELL: Both of you.

Niall BLAIR: I think one thing I can say is I have been consistent over the last five years in raising the issues that I think need to be addressed. That is why I have pointed the committee to my reports. My remit in this space is quite narrow, remembering that there will be many CFA brigades across the state that I will not have any contact with, and there are many fire and rescue stations that I will not have contact with. My role is where the interface comes, so it is either at the very senior level and how they may interact with brigades in the CFA response or it is usually at co-located stations from an FRV and CFA point of view. I think I would just direct you to my previous five reports that have been tabled in Parliament. I have had good cooperation from the agencies: a lot of data, a lot of information, a lot of anecdotal evidence. I have sat through many, many hours of governance meetings. I have read minutes, but I have also sat face to face with firefighters, both career and volunteer, around the state. And I have tried to reflect and put in everything that I have seen, assessed and observed into those reports. I would probably just direct you back to my reports.

Rikkie-Lee TYRRELL: That is super helpful. Okay. Thank you.

Emily PHILLIPS: Look, I would probably say two things. Firstly, look at the past reforms and the history of reform, particularly post Black Saturday. There has been an enormous amount of reform in the sector. The 2019 report produced by the former inspector-general looked back over the 10 years, from 2019 back to 2009, and found that the sector was a lot less siloed. It was much more interoperable. It worked together to plan and prepare and respond in ways that had changed dramatically over that decade. It found that community information and warnings had improved, and that there was a culture of lessons management developing in the

sector around learning after emergencies. Having said that, and I have been watching your evidence, there is always a lot more to do in emergency management – always. The same things come up in every emergency, because they are the things that matter.

I would say to you: look at the reform that has occurred to date, look at where the gaps may still be, because we are coming to the tail end of the 2019–20 fire season implementation, and it is a great point in time to be thinking about the next wave of reform for the sector. I would say also: look at the things that are changing around the context in which emergencies are being managed. I know you have heard a lot of this, and these are the priorities I bring to thinking about how I undertake my role as well. We are seeing more frequent and severe emergencies. We are more reliant on technology, everything we do is more interconnected, and community expectations and the demographics of the state have changed. And so all of those things come together with the reform that has gone on in the sector, so you can think about not just the things you immediately hear and things you see that immediately require findings and recommendations, but how to position your findings and recommendations for the next wave of reform going forward into the next decade.

Rikkie-Lee TYRRELL: Thank you. Thank you, Chair.

The CHAIR: Thank you. Ms Broad.

Gaelle BROAD: Thank you very much for appearing today. I am interested in IGEM's analysis. Is there a playbook? We know Victoria, as you mentioned, has frequent disasters. Are there agreements or do we need more agreements in place before a disaster occurs? It appears that with things like the waste program, things like the clean-up program, rules are changing. With the grants programs rules can change. With the emergency fodder program some things are in place, but on the ground it is definitely urgently needed. With wildlife assistance we heard that it took two weeks before approvals were granted. The support for councils seems different – very slow to roll out. With all of those things, from what you have seen, would you say Victoria needs to be better prepared to ensure those things roll out as a minimum – I think Ms Lovell said that yesterday – like a minimum package, rather than all this working out once a disaster has already started?

Emily PHILLIPS: I would say a couple of things, and I have to caveat this by saying that I am going to be undertaking a review later this year. I cannot pre-empt the findings of that review, and it would be wrong for me to form opinions ahead of doing that. I have a legislative process I have to follow to form opinions and to undertake a review. I know that coming out of the 2019–20 fire review and coming out of Black Saturday there has been work on having a more consolidated sense of what offerings should be after emergencies. I also would draw your attention to my assurance and continuous improvement priorities that are on my website. I have identified recovery as one of my four priorities, and it is an area that I do intend to do some reviewing work in the coming couple of years, dependent obviously upon now undertaking an event review later this year. And as you would know, they often offer the opportunity to do reviews that otherwise would have occurred as system-wide reviews through normal IGEM work.

Gaelle BROAD: Okay. You mentioned earlier that you are waiting on the minister to provide the terms of reference. Do you actually draft those terms of reference? Who determines that?

Emily PHILLIPS: My understanding of how this has worked in the past is that the minister has provided the terms of reference to the inspector-general in the form of a letter.

Gaelle BROAD: Are you tempted to make recommendations following our report? Will you be monitoring our report recommendations as well?

Emily PHILLIPS: That is a very good question. I cannot automatically. Under the legislation, I would be required to be asked by the government to do that formally, and that has happened many times in the past, so there is provision for that request to be made.

Sorry, what was the first part of your question? I want to answer that too.

Gaelle BROAD: I am not exactly sure; I cannot remember. I guess we have heard a lot from the committees that we have spoken to that they are so frustrated. They feel like it is review after review after review, and you have stated yourself that it is not the recommendations that matter, it is the actual implementation of the recommendations that matter and being able to monitor what we put forward. I hope that it will be a report that

captures the sentiments that we have heard. It was disappointing – the delay in that analysis. It did seem a bit unusual at the time.

Just from the previous reports that you can speak to, what are perhaps the top three issues that keep coming up from those previous inquiries that are not being implemented on the ground?

Emily PHILLIPS: I can only really speak to the things that come up in every inquiry, because they are the things that matter. My role is to look at the system-wide level; it is not to look at the operations per se. It is to look at the settings around the emergency management system and the arrangements that we have in place. That is why an operational review will be a good proving ground for my review this year. All of the inspector-general's reviews previously –

Gaelle BROAD: Are there any practical things that you could perhaps point to?

Emily PHILLIPS: In terms of –

Gaelle BROAD: Well, I guess the things that have come up with us – planned burns. We know from the royal commission following the bushfires that there was a recommendation of 5 per cent for planned burns on public land. On the ground it is about 1 per cent, so there have been concerns raised with us that it is not sufficient. There is roadside vegetation and maintenance of public property, including by organisations like VicTrack. I heard from a resident of Harcourt who lost their home that it had a fence line facing six-foot-tall grass. They feel there is no responsibility on the government to maintain their land, when currently we have private landholders that can be fined for not maintaining their land. Those are the kinds of practical issues we are hearing. Is that something that you have seen that is not occurring on the ground?

Emily PHILLIPS: The previous inspector-general in the 2019–20 fire review dedicated nine of the 17 recommendations in phase 1 of that review to land management and fuel management issues, so there is a long history of the inspector-general making recommendations in that space. I am not a regulator, and I do not have powers to compel agencies.

Gaelle BROAD: Just with the limited time I have remaining, on the local governments and the inequity of funding that they seem to receive, we heard of some that have been impacted by a huge amount. I think it was Murrindindi that got about 8 per cent of the funding. We have had other councils still waiting for funding for the recovery officers, although they were announced in March. Is that something that you are aware of from previous inquiries – that it has taken too long or been inequitable?

Emily PHILLIPS: I know that the 2019–20 inquiry did have some things to say about local government. A lot of it went to the capability of local government, and that has been one of the key themes, which is why I noted the MAV in their submission have noted the review I am undertaking at the moment around training to support councils.

The CHAIR: Dr Phillips and Mr Blair, thank you so much for the evidence you have given today. You will receive a draft copy of the transcript for review in about a week. With that, the committee will take a break for lunch and resume at 2 pm.

Witnesses withdrew.