

CORRECTED VERSION

STANDING COMMITTEE ON FINANCE AND PUBLIC ADMINISTRATION

Inquiry into Victorian Bushfire Reconstruction and Recovery Authority

Melbourne — 19 February 2010

Members

Mr G. Barber

Mr P. Kavanagh

Ms C. Broad

Mr G. Rich-Phillips (**Chair**)

Mr M. Guy

Mr M. Viney (**Deputy Chair**)

Mr P. Hall

Substituted members

Mrs D. Petrovich for Mr M. Guy

Mr B. Tee for Mr M. Viney

Staff

Secretary: Mr R. Willis

Research Assistant: Mr S. Marshall

Witnesses

Ms C. Nixon, chair, and

Mr B. Hubbard, chief executive officer, Victorian Bushfire Reconstruction and Recovery Authority.

The CHAIR — I declare open the Legislative Council Standing Committee on Finance and Public Administration public hearing. Today's hearing is in relation to the inquiry into departmental and agency performance and operations. Specifically the committee is examining the performance and operations of the Victorian Bushfire Reconstruction and Recovery Authority.

I welcome Ms Christine Nixon, the chair, and Mr Ben Hubbard, the chief executive officer, of the Victorian Bushfire Reconstruction and Recovery Authority.

All evidence taken at this hearing is protected by parliamentary privilege as provided by the Constitution Act 1975 and further subject to the provisions of Legislative Council standing orders. Any comments made outside the precincts of the hearing are not protected by parliamentary privilege.

All evidence is being recorded by Hansard, and witnesses will be provided with a proof version of the transcript in the next couple of days for any corrections.

On the committee this morning we have two substitutions for committee members. Mrs Donna Petrovich is substituting for Mr Matthew Guy and Mr Brian Tee is substituting for Mr Matt Viney.

I now invite you to make an opening statement if you wish, and the committee will then proceed to questions.

Overheads shown.

Ms NIXON — Thank, Chair, for the opportunity to come along and talk about the progress so far with the reconstruction. As you would know, we have given members a handout, but I will just fairly rapidly work through it because I think it gives an overview that is quite worthwhile. I have to say I have given this kind of presentation to many communities and groups so that people would understand what happened, because so many people were involved and were affected.

There are a couple of points here. Obviously the size of the disaster is one. The bushfire authority covers not just the fires of 7 February but also the fires that occurred in Boolarra the week before, and if there had been subsequent fires, then we would have been responsible for supporting people in those circumstances. The fires went across 25 municipalities, so we have been working with local government as well as the state and federal governments. But as to the harm done, there are actually 107 individual communities that were affected, and many of those communities, as was made clear at the anniversary events, very much wanted it to be known that they were part of it but we have combined them, in a sense to work more effectively, into that group of 33 community groups.

As you can see on the overhead presentation, there have been environmental effects as well as land mass burnt. The amount of land mass burnt has not been perhaps as much as on previous occasions — for instance, the fires in 2006 — but because of where the land mass damage was we obviously had the loss of life, which was an extraordinary number, and there were others who were burnt and many thousands more who were harmed in so many different ways.

As to the way that the Victorian and federal governments determined fairly quickly to deal with the fires, this response came on the back of the emergency management response, which is well practised in Victoria, and it then added to that, I think, into a much more longer term response. Obviously the fires affected those communities; the establishment of the Bushfire Appeal Fund under the auspices of the Red Cross was the next phase. I am a member of that appeal fund. Then of course the royal commission was announced, and then on 10 February the government announced the creation of the authority itself.

The responsibility — I think this is worthwhile mentioning — is that sort of coordination role across the three levels of government, and of course also with many other private owners and supporters and many, many volunteers. We focus here obviously on what we have done, but there are so many more people who have made an enormous contribution across all of these communities to assist as well.

In early days we chose a model which is actually an adaptation of a recovery and reconstruction model of the New Zealand government. We did a fair bit of work fairly quickly to see what kind of framework we might use to be able to respond. We felt this model was fairly simple and well used in New Zealand. It has guiding principles about fairness and about trying to be fair and equitable in the way you respond.

We felt having local communities at the heart was a really important response. A lot of the literature around recovery and reconstruction is very strong in saying if communities are involved, then they are able to recover more effectively. That has consequences, because obviously people were very strongly affected by these bushfires and the effect in terms of both grief and trauma is really quite significant. That has meant that different communities were able to respond at different paces.

But in regard to the people, obviously individuals and families were a part of it, and then there was the reconstruction stage itself, and that goes all the way from the clean-up to the current process involved. The economy part was about individuals and businesses and being able to generate that, in many cases, back again, and of course the environment. We think that model has been pretty good as a way for us to work through it, and then it has the principles set out there on that overhead.

Governance was around our coordination process. We are an administrative office under the Department of Premier and Cabinet. That overhead shows the structure, and it just works through what we are trying to do; and then of course the budget, which is there — that is the 2009–10 budget. It is not a huge structure. In terms of staff, a lot of the staff came from other government departments which very quickly volunteered people to come and work with us, particularly people from the Department of Sustainability and Environment, the Department of Human Services and a range of others, and then of course some corporations also volunteered people pro bono. We were really small to start with. We have come to probably about the maximum size, and then we will work through where we might go in the future.

Again following the model that I outlined, it encompasses the people and communities, so it is very much about individuals and communities recovering at their own pace. We have tried to work with those communities and local government to understand their needs, and very early on the needs were around water, food and shelter. Those needs changed over time, and in some cases we are still working on some of those issues with people as well.

Services were provided under what I think is quite an innovative model for delivery of government services, which is community hubs. These 10 community hubs are in place. They are locations where local, state and federal government agencies, as well as many community agencies, are able to provide services to the community. Just as an example, the overhead shows the number of visitors each week, which is 747. That is about the average number of visitors. They also have an internet service there for people who might have lost their homes and those sorts of things.

In relation to the community recovery plans, we have worked with 33 community recovery committees that were established by us with local government. They in some cases grew out of the community itself — the Kinglake example. Kinglake is a very interesting community to work with and very strong about what it wants to see. They called public meetings; 500 to 600 people were called to those meetings. I went along in the very early days. They elected representatives as part of that process. That is the group of people who currently make up the community recovery committee. As I said, it is different with different communities as to how that occurred. We worked with them to be able to develop plans about what it was that they thought would help that community recover. Often also they gave us information about the needs of individuals. Those plans are part of it. Some are funded, and some are now partially funded.

We were given a massive amount of donations — 21 000 pallet loads. It ranged from hundreds of dinner sets to hundreds of thousands of toothbrushes. A lot of material was given. The normal way you would handle that in this state through the emergency management structure would be with the Salvation Army or with St Vincent de Paul or the Red Cross, that kind of structure, who would have the responsibility, but in many cases we have had to come in because the donation management was overwhelming. We have been part of working with them and the joint logistics groups to figure out to do that. We also have a very good model of distribution of that aid to people through the 27 local relief centres that have been established. They were established either through some of those not-for-profit agencies or in some cases we have established locations ourselves. But most of that is gone; there is about 9 per cent of that material left. That is nearly to the point where all of it will be sent out to finish off, and people of course can come and get the material. We also provided people with a card enabling them to access material aid. That was important support for people along the way as well.

In relation to the bereaved, which is the last item, those who lost loved ones probably number about 600; probably the family members close to those people who died. Initially they were supported through the

coroner's office because of the identity process that had to go on. It took about three months for that identity process to confirm that particular individuals had died. Then many of those people had case managers to work with. More recently we have been running forums in each of the fire-affected areas to bring together the bereaved families to ask them what support they needed. There was obviously financial assistance initially given to pay for funerals. Then there was a compassionate payment of a financial amount to the next of kin as well to try to support people and help them through that process.

More recently there was the service that was held in St Paul's Cathedral, and there were a number of services held throughout the whole of bushfire-affected communities as well. We are working with them with an advisory group now. That will stay in place for quite some time, which is the history of disasters: those groups are often in place for a long period of time to support the bereaved. In fact the Bali people are still meeting after six years. We think that will be a long-term process.

The plans I have already talked about. There is a lot of work that goes on, both obviously ours as well as more broadly in the community. Just one example is the retreats for about 600 women from the bushfire-affected communities, but there have also been other retreats for men as well as ones that we are involved in organising now.

Community development officers were put in place very early to work with local councils. They were the ones to provide community support. There were workshops. The case management service was in fact the biggest case management service ever put into place in Australia. I think it has been an excellent model. It was announced by the Prime Minister, I think, on the second day. Initially many of the people came from the federal government — about 100 case managers came out of the federal government structure — and then the Department of Human Services very quickly moved to negotiate with the not-for-profit sector in Victoria to be able provide case managers. So at its height there would have been about 500 full-time or part-time case managers working with any individual or family who said they wanted that assistance. The case manager model has been a really effective way. At the moment a number of cases have been finalised but we certainly still have some, and we have about 206 full-time-equivalent case managers operating.

A lot of people needed assistance with housing. That is the kind of example of it there. But people still do need assistance, so we are working with them. The other point is temporary villages. The community recovery committees on a number of occasions, particularly in Marysville and Flowerdale to start with, said that they wanted to have some accommodation so people could stay locally within the communities. We know that is an important part of recovery. There are three villages in one small location in Whittlesea where people have been given housing in temporary villages, which are very reasonable places. There is counselling et cetera, and obviously bereavement support.

Economic recovery is obviously an important part of these communities, particularly communities like Marysville, and Kinglake to a slightly lesser extent. There have been a lot of local tourism initiatives, and I will work through some of those. There is the Commitment to Lake Mountain. The assessment for that was done by Boston Consulting for free. It did an economic assessment for us and told us what we would need to be doing to be able to help those communities come back. One of them was that Lake Mountain needed to be a 365-days-a-year location, not just a skiing location. That is in fact why the money was put aside as a commitment to do that.

The motor museum over time, eventually, was purchased by, I think, the state and federal governments.

Mr HUBBARD — Yes.

Ms NIXON — It was to be a shopping centre and is in fact now operating as a shopping centre with a range of services in it, including a bank, which was opened last week by the Bendigo Bank. That was really about trying to get support back. There are staffing initiatives to hire staff, and that is being supported as well.

Skills: there is a whole range of those sorts of things. As well, income recovery subsidies were provided to those who had perhaps lost their jobs during the bushfires. For people such as those who perhaps worked at a service station that does not exist any longer there were income subsidies provided by the federal government at the time. Some of those I have already talked about.

Mentoring assistance, phone support — a lot of those sorts of issues — are all part of working across government and the community to provide that support to people. A lot of events have been held. At Kinglake and Marysville particularly there has been a significant number of events run by the community itself or supported by a range of others as well to get that back, including recreational fishing.

The environment has been significantly harmed, and a range of activities have gone on across the whole of these areas trying to rehabilitate parks, but then you get something like the Kinglake National Park, which was entirely destroyed. It is starting to come back now — nature is an amazing thing to watch — but there have been issues around that. We have started to look at our own facilities. We really only have two facilities that are ours. There is the rebuilding advisory centre, and we are trying to put into place some sustainable practices around our facilities. We also lost some indigenous cultural heritage sites.

Farm and land management has been an important part of the recovery effort. The Victorian Farmers Federation and DPI have been involved, particularly in fencing for people in rural areas, and given that so many people in rural areas were harmed, this fencing has been an amazing initiative. Probably about 82 per cent of boundary fencing has now been replaced. That has been done, obviously, by some land-holders, but insurance levels for many land-holders is quite low so it is principally being done by volunteers. The Salvation Army, Rotary and a whole range of people have been involved in that part of the process.

Initiatives have included reseeded of forest, rehabilitation of fire control lines, rebuilding of visitors centres, catchment initiatives to be able to protect the catchment, a lot of advice given to owners of land about how to deal with their land, field days — all of those sorts of things.

In terms of the reconstruction, 1506 permits have been issued. Those permits are for sheds, for buildings, for houses and for a small number for businesses. What we think is occurring in this space is that people are gradually making decisions to come back and in some cases build sheds, which is perhaps what some of them had done previously. Then they will build the house and take time to think about that. But in respect of those who have made that decision I think it is reasonable to say that the houses people are building are better than the houses they had before. The bushfire fund itself actually acknowledged that support would be given, and a significant amount of support from the bushfire fund has gone to people to help them rebuild along the way.

Many community facilities are at various stages and it would be terrific to see them on the way, but some have taken a little time. Partly that has been about saying to the communities, 'What is it you want? What you should have is better than you had before, and you need to, if you can, integrate facilities together'. This is because they are small communities in some cases. That is what the communities have been working through, and I think they are very happy with the kinds of proposals for the schools, for instance, and/or early childhood centres. Many of those are proceeding along.

The bushfire attack level was a particular process the government put into place to require people who lived in these areas, and others where they were building in the future, to meet certain standards.

Other initiatives include new urban frameworks; mobile rebuilding service — we have a number of people who are experienced in the industry; and free showers and toilets to encourage people and obviously to provide health and safety along the way. They are just reconstruction initiatives, and some of them I have obviously talked about. There was advice given to people about the bushfire attack level; restoration of damage, the villages and the showers and toilets.

The clean-up itself was a significant decision by the federal and state governments, and it was very much underpinned by an understanding that some of these premises had different sorts of chemicals in them; some had asbestos. At community meetings people were very concerned about the wind blowing from the property next door into their property — a whole set of those things. There was also the issue that many people who had insurance were concerned that the clean-up cost would come out of their insurance. If they had to do that themselves, many just said they had no chance, as there was no way in the world they would know how to do that clean-up. So the state and federal governments determined to conduct the clean-up, and that was by people registering their property to be cleaned up. Some people had cleaned up their blocks before the clean-up was announced, and they were given money to pay them for the clean-up they had done. The process was that you went forward; if you wanted to stop, then the provider stopped. Grocon was hired. It was a fairly quick contract on the basis of needing to get started. People were saying to me at large community meetings, 'We want this

done straight away'. We had had some assessment of the size, but we really did not know how many properties there were. There had been assessments undertaken of damaged properties, and as it turned out there were over 3053 properties that were cleared, and that was any kind of property. If you owned a mill it was cleaned, and if you owned the Cumberland it was cleaned, as well as any private housing, sheds and all those sorts of things. I think the response from the community on that that has been overwhelming. Insurance companies in some cases as well gave people the additional funding they may have had to spend on clean-up. That meant people had some more funds to be able to think about utilising, particularly those with insurance.

The issue around local contractors is something you may want to talk about later, but it has certainly been an issue. I have been to lots of community meetings where people said, 'You should use local contractors'. We tried to do that as best we could. The contractors were told that as well; it is part of our arrangements to do it. We have not met everybody's needs in that. Some perhaps did not have experience, some did not have qualifications, and I guess we had a timetable, and in four and a half months those properties were cleaned up. There was a range of those issues. I will stop at that point. Thank you.

The CHAIR — Thank you, Ms Nixon. Mr Hubbard, is there anything you wish to add at this point?

Mr HUBBARD — No, I thought that was an excellent presentation.

Ms NIXON — Thanks, Ben.

The CHAIR — I will start by going back to your slide which set out the governance arrangements and spoke about the budget for the authority. The slide indicates that you have got outward funding of \$55 million. Does that represent your full operating budget for the 2009–10 year?

Mr HUBBARD — That is the figure for the 2009–10 financial year; it does not include any other financial years. In terms of whether there is any supplementary funding — —

The CHAIR — Is there any commonwealth funding coming in? Is there any third-party funding?

Mr HUBBARD — The statewide plan funding profile included a contribution towards some project management costs, which are things which would supplement activities already being done within VBRRRA. That is not captured in this number. I will take advice on that to double-check it, but my understanding is it is just straight Victorian government funding for VBRRRA for this financial year.

The CHAIR — There was mention at the time the authority was established of a joint commonwealth-state arrangement. Does that extend to operating funding?

Mr HUBBARD — For the project management costs associated with rolling out a range of activities; there are contributions there. There is broad and consistent support across the statewide plan and a range of activities earlier in the previous calendar year which were supported, but if you are asking if it is 50-50 down to the dollar, it is not. Is it broadly consistent? Absolutely.

The CHAIR — Do any of the bushfire appeal funds go into the operating costs of the authority?

Mr HUBBARD — No.

Ms NIXON — No. The fund is very clear about what it does. If you take the showers and toilets as an example, we manage that on behalf of the bushfire fund — that is, our staff would manage it — but in fact all of the money and funds for that have to be accounted back to the bushfire fund, so it does not pay for us to do any of that. We just manage that for it.

The CHAIR — Thank you. I would now like to ask you about the reconstruction statistics. You referred to the 1506 buildings permits that have been approved since Black Saturday. Can you give the committee a breakdown of that 1506? You mentioned that some are sheds, some are dwellings, some are businesses.

Mr HUBBARD — As of February, 405 were new dwellings, 40 were extensions and repairs, 243 were farm or machinery sheds and 693 were domestic carports, garages or sheds, and then there were a number of other items, such as a miscellaneous item which was 39 commercial buildings. We will provide that full breakdown to the committee, but it adds up to 1543 as at February.

The CHAIR — Right; thank you. Of those 405 dwelling permits, how many of those dwellings have been completed?

Mr HUBBARD — How many certificates of occupancy have been issued?

The CHAIR — Yes.

Mr HUBBARD — I think it would be fair to say it is a minority.

Ms NIXON — Yes.

Mr HUBBARD — And certainly when you visually see different towns they are all at different stages of activity. To give one example, my recall is that approximately 60 houses were destroyed in Bendigo in the Long Gully, Eaglehawk and environs fires in February, and 77 building permits have been issued. Of course parts of the Redesdale fires were in the city of Greater Bendigo, but we know that the pace of recovery, particularly for families and individuals rebuilding in Bendigo, has been very quick. Contrast that with the likes of Marysville, where a number of weeks went by when residents could not get on because it was a crime scene. The rate of rebuilding there is lower than in Bendigo.

For the building permits issued we do not have that granularity of data. We get building permits issued from councils, but we do not have a full picture of certificates of occupancy.

The CHAIR — Do you have an estimate? Is it 50?

Ms NIXON — Sorry, 50 who have what?

The CHAIR — Certificates of occupancy; completed houses.

Ms NIXON — It might be something like that, I think, yes. It might be a bit lower.

The CHAIR — A bit lower than 50?

Ms NIXON — Yes, and I understand this is an issue that people talk about a fair bit, but in some cases people do not go to the council and get certificates of occupancy, and some people partially finish houses and move into them. That might not be legal, but that is what they do. I think it is not always the highest priority to rush off to the council and get a certificate of occupancy. So there is that part of it. But my sense is that it is different in different places. If you go down to Callignee and watch people building houses down there, there seem to be more of them coming along and more people at least moving in, whether they have got a certificate or not. That is part of it. But in other places it is obviously much lower than that, in terms of the rate of their rebuilding.

The CHAIR — Accepting your argument about certificates of occupancy, do you have an estimate on how many dwellings have been finished?

Ms NIXON — I am thinking about all the places I have seen; maybe 100. That could be about right, but that is just a guess.

The CHAIR — With roughly half of them having certificates of occupancy?

Ms NIXON — Yes.

The CHAIR — And how many dwellings would have commenced reconstruction?

Ms NIXON — We have already said that there were 405, which were permits for dwellings.

The CHAIR — But a permit does not mean construction has commenced.

Ms NIXON — Most of those. Before Christmas I drove to just about all of the communities where we lost houses, and I would have thought that there are a lot of them on track out of that 405.

The CHAIR — But you do not keep statistics on reconstruction?

Ms NIXON — We keep them as best we can from local councils, and it has taken them a while to be able to make sure they calculate the houses that were affected by bushfires and separate them from the normal work they do. We are talking to 23 local councils about that. They provide us with the information. We see it as an important piece of information, but we work with them about what it is and they give us what they can give us.

Mr HUBBARD — In terms of the reporting requirements on councils, the number of building permits issued is the standard measure for building activity across the country. We are also very mindful of not imposing heavy reporting burdens on councils.

The CHAIR — You do not see the need as a reconstruction authority to track reconstruction?

Mr HUBBARD — Building permits are a very strong measure of reconstruction.

The CHAIR — Would completions be a more significant measure, or actual construction work?

Mr HUBBARD — We collect data.

Ms NIXON — We have had this discussion, and we have had a lot of experts talk to us about whether or not this issue was such a significant one. I understand why it is quite reasonable to think that, but you have to then have been very close to a lot of these communities and understand that what we have also said to them is that each community and each person should act at their own pace, instead of trying to force people or say to them that it is very important that they build their homes.

What we actually said to them was, ‘You just take your time, and we will help you to work through that’. We had building advisers, and they have seen 500 or 600 people. People have to look to sign contracts; they have to look to figure out the money. It is actually quite a complicated process, so perhaps we have not put the pressure on people that is seen necessary by some to force them to build their homes.

I understand your point that we should collect the data. We have worked with councils, and once we have started to see some houses come into place we have asked them for the permit data. We are trying to encourage people who want to go back to do that.

The CHAIR — Does the authority have reconstruction targets that you have set for 12 months, 18 months or two years, to assess whether you are progressing satisfactorily or not?

Ms NIXON — We looked at very broad considerations but it was really only a sort of ‘what would we think’, and partly that was on the basis of looking at the Canberra data and perhaps other data. You cannot quite find the same kind of disasters like we have had, and that was 25 per cent in the first year. We said that would be reasonable, but if you take the Canberra data, it takes people quite a long time to make a decision. What we have looked at is the figures about what people’s intentions are, and that has been done through studies with case managers who have asked their clients, and we are up to a point now where 75 per cent of the people who have spoken to their case managers have said they think they would like to go back and build.

The other piece that influenced some people, of course, was 12 months rent being paid for by their insurance. In some cases they had a safe place to live for a while, so I think all of those things have been part of it.

The two pieces are, firstly, what are people’s intentions, and the other is to have a look at similar disasters. I suppose the first year was about 25 per cent — at least people thinking about it or getting permits, which is not bad for where we are, I suppose, and then it was really thinking about what would it look like after that.

Ms BROAD — Thank you for the presentation. As one of the members here today from northern Victoria, which includes the great majority of the communities affected, I am particularly interested in the aspect of your presentation and the many reports issued by the authority about the affected communities. The reports refer to 33 affected communities across 25 municipalities, and I think in fact there are many more than that affected in one way or another, and there has been a lot of discussion about the varying pace with which those communities have progressed with their plans.

I invite you to outline to the committee what you believe are the significant reasons why different communities with the plans that they have adopted have progressed at varying rates according to the priorities established by

those communities that the authority then works to support, along with the many agencies that come in behind the authority.

Ms NIXON — I think that it is partly dependent on the death rate, for want of a better way to describe it, which has been a very significant issue for many of the communities, and then the volume of damage or harm — in a sense the houses that have been lost — probably correlates with some of the communities struggling. I think it is also partly about where the communities were beforehand. These communities had some difficulties in some cases, or in other cases they had community development activities where it was able to just come on the back of those activities and people and communities were able to be able to go forward. I think particularly communities where, say, a small number of houses were lost or in fact no houses were lost but property was damaged, you can see that they have fairly quickly said, 'We are okay, and we just need you to work with us on these issues and then we will be all right after that'. If you took a place like Pomborneit, that is a community where the cricket ground was really important to them, so you take that in. Then you say Coleraine or Horsham where again they lost properties and they want work done around a hall and community activities and thing like that. Then you get on the other side — Marysville — where only 14 houses were left, so in some ways that is one of the ways you can correlate the ways communities have been able to work together.

Marysville people did not come back in, as Ben said, for six weeks, but the thing is that very few people were living there anyway so you have a very dispersed community trying to get itself back together and figure out where it was going to go. I think a lot of that has underpinned the way forward.

Gippsland is an interesting community. Boolarra was the fire before 7 February, and the day I went to Boolarra on about 2 March last year they produced a plan and said, 'There's our plan for recovery'. I said, "Wow, that's pretty good". I think it was a plan they always had for what they wanted done, but they are a really good community and they have able to hold tight together.

Callignee is a bit more disparate around that area. Jeeralang, which is way up in the hills did not even know, as they said to me, that they were a community but in fact had one asset they called a hall, and that asset is going to be replaced, but they have got four or five priorities. They are all different and they are all at certain pace, and I guess we have tried to work with them according to that pace.

If you took Kinglake at the moment, for a whole set of reasons it is a very complicated community across a ridge and one where they have taken probably longer than any other community to figure out what it is they want and what they think will help that community recover in the longer term. Do you want to add anything?

Mr HUBBARD — It is probably also worth noting that community structures bring together a number of communities, and often they are communities that did not have a lot to do with each other before the fires and this event has brought them together. To take an example in your electorate, Ms Broad, at Redesdale South where you have Mia Mia and Barfold and Redesdale and a couple of other places — and I cannot remember them right now — there are five or six separate localities there and this has brought in a few things but one of them is a community newsletter, again across all of those communities — something that was not there before — so they have not only progressed well in terms of the community recovery but they have brought together neighbouring localities for the first time for a long time.

Ms BROAD — Thank you. Looking at this for a moment from the perspective of some of the agencies that came in to support, which you referred to in your presentation, accommodation support, just to take one example, the reference here is to 780 households that were assisted with accommodation support, including 165 households housed in temporary villages. Just recently I visited one of the agencies that assisted — the Loddon Mallee Housing Services — and they have very helpfully produced a report on the work that they did, which they have presented. One of the interesting things to come out of that for them was that a lot of the people they were providing accommodation support to were not people who were accustomed to going to agencies to seek support.

Their experience, which is outlined in their report, is that this required quite a bit of adjustment all round for their staff, and a lot of information needed to be provided to households whose members were not accustomed to going to government agencies and seeking support. Is there anything that you could add to that?

Ms NIXON — I think you are perfectly right. Many of the people involved in these bushfires — and many people in our community — do not have the experience of having to gain support from government or of

accepting support from a charity or accepting clothes from donations and having to deal with insurance companies and with a whole set of identity issues, because they walked out of their house with nothing. That has been a very hard part for many people to come to terms with.

Housing was just one of those issues that people needed a lot of support with. I think that is why we had the case management service. One case manager said to me, 'I feel like 12 families' PA', which I thought was a really good way to describe the model. Not only did she understand their psychological situation, but she was trying to help them with housing, grants and getting their licences back — or whatever it might have been. I think for a lot of people who had never had to do that before, it has been really complicated but I think made a bit easier by a lot of the agencies you have talked about; and the case managers are part of that process as well.

Ms BROAD — In the case of Loddon Mallee Housing Services, I think they set up an office particularly to deal with people concerned. Can I just ask also about the clean-up? The presentation refers to the fact that the program is now complete and that there is only one registered property that was unable to be cleared, due to access issues which are still being investigated, which is an enormous effort in the time. Particularly on that issue of local contractors, which was certainly raised quite strongly by communities, can you outline for the committee just how that outcome was achieved? I think you have indicated here that around 69 per cent or almost 70 per cent of the work was undertaken by local contractors.

Mr HUBBARD — Grocon were engaged after a short but appropriate process as a master contractor for the work. A key objective was to maximise use of local contractors. Of course there was a range of training and delivery standards that had to be met, so there was a training component of this as well. The two key numbers are that 69 per cent of the work was undertaken by local contractors and 50 per cent of the workforce was local on those jobs.

The experience — and this is relying on advice from before I was in the role, to be frank — is that sometimes contractors and suppliers missed out because they did not meet the requirements to carry out the work, remembering of course a lot of this material is quite hazardous. That might have been a lack of qualifications and licences, inappropriate or substandard machinery or inadequate insurance.

Mr BARBER — Can I ask: is it still intended, as far as you are aware, to roll up your office in February next year?

Ms NIXON — I think we are probably at a point where we are trying to understand what are the needs of the community in the future, what would be the sorts of things that need to be delivered and done, and keep them on track. I think we are still at the stage of having that discussion. People often ask me.

In my case, I was to be there until March next year, personally, so that was part of it. But I think we are still really trying to assess what is needed, what are the outstanding things, before we really have a way to go forward.

Mr BARBER — I cannot begin to imagine what it would be like to have to set up an agency like this from a standing start.

Ms NIXON — I can tell you that, if you like.

Mr BARBER — It would take you a long time to even tell me about it. I think what is happening now is that as members of Parliament, we are turning our minds to: do we understand what will be the length of the task and how much of that has been completed? Your plan, which came out in October 2009, certainly explained the breadth of the issues and talked about what was intended to be done, but it did not tell us how big the task was, if you like.

Again, I do not underestimate how hard it would be to walk in and even within six months necessarily understand the full size of the task. Likewise in your 12-month report. Every time I read a figure about what has been done, I ask the question: how much more of that is there to do and how long do we think it will take?

Again, as an agency like yours, I would not expect you to have the kind of regular measures and KPIs that a standing agency like a hospital or a school would have. But will we and when will we as members of Parliament be able to understand your view of the complete nature of the task, which will never be completed,

and also how much of that has been achieved? It seems to me that once the agency folds, if we as members of Parliament want to ask these questions, we will actually have to go back to every single agency, from DHS or DOE to local councils and so forth.

Ms NIXON — Sure. In terms of the data, I have to say that coming out of the police I was always someone who was very keen about data and about understanding where you are up to. In this place, with other committees, I have obviously worked through that. I think the Chair was on one of those committees at one stage. So we did actually pay attention to that, but there is a difference. You look at things like 8760 kilometres worth of boundary fencing being lost.

We then set in place a process that said: we know that boundary fencing is really important to people. We are now at a point where we know that about 82 per cent of the boundary fencing has actually been replaced, because we have watched that over time.

You took other indicators, around provision of case managers. We had to get them on board, and we had to get them operating, and that was another indicator. In some ways what we have tried to report on is what we are putting into place and the problems that people face.

We had 22 000 pallet loads of goods donated; we are now reporting that I think there is — —

Mr HUBBARD — Nine per cent.

Ms NIXON — There is 9 per cent left. We count what we actually can count; we try to do that — and the same with the indicators about who was going to build. That took us a while; we had to get to the councils — and some of them are not big councils — to figure this data out. I understand your point, and Ben might want to pick up the state-wide plan and how we intend to report on that. I have always been really keen that we report. So every three months we report as best we can.

I give lots of public presentations and go back to the community about what has happened. If you look at our facts sheets, which I think are part of the state-wide plan, then you will see exactly what has happened in those communities. If you were to take the school in Kinglake Central, the first bit was: is there a temporary school in Kinglake Central that is in place and operating? We did not have one, but now we do. Is there a community and committee that is together to say what the new school is going to look like? You also have to put all these other hub things with it. It was not as if we were not trying to do that.

But I understand your point. Part of what the government is talking to me about is whether — because it is the chair's report and every three months we have reported — we will continue that, so the community does have a way of understanding what has been achieved, which is really important. If you were to take the clean up, we tracked that there were 1100 properties and the following week there were 1400 properties and they worked their way through them. We did pay attention to the data and we think it is really important, because so many people put so much money into this.

Not only was government doing this, but so many other people — private people, charities, organisations, big companies — and they need to know what happened and what is being achieved.

Mr BARBER — I understand. We all took the attitude, of course, that money was no object. We are 12 months into a process that might run for two years with you. With those very tangible things that are easy to measure — the amount of fencing, the number of sites cleared — I can understand why you can report on that very easily. The direction in which I am heading is that there will be a whole range of agencies, particularly state government agencies but also local governments most critically, that will continue to carry these costs for a long time after your agency is not there to report on it.

Ms NIXON — Yes, right.

Mr BARBER — For example, a large amount of private property was destroyed and from what you are telling us much of it may not be rebuilt very quickly simply due to people's preferences. That has a huge impact on local council rate bases. We can say for the foreseeable future those councils will have a rate base that is probably hundreds of millions lower, which means they are faced with the invidious choice of rating higher

their remaining people versus seeking ongoing assistance — I suppose, from the state government. How will we ever get a handle on, in a transparent way, the ongoing burden to agencies but particularly local councils?

Mr HUBBARD — If I could answer it in two ways? As one example of a recognition of that proposition, last December the government announced essentially a capacity building package for Murrindindi council. There was a recognition there of a loss of their rate base as well as a whole set of new challenges where they needed leadership capacity in the organisation, and that was a four-year proposition in terms of that funding profile. I think that one example does meet that need.

The second thing is probably something which is more related to need and whether it is now or whether it is at the end of this year, there will be a whole suite of community needs. If you break it down into the 33 groups of communities that we talked about with the recovery committees, each of them has put together a recovery plan. I think the figure as of yesterday was 1106 propositions, ideas or projects across the 33 plans and we are working intensively with each of the communities to meet their priorities. So the definition of need at that level is driven by a structure where we have 33 separate conversations.

To take Christine's fencing example, obviously some boundary fences are easier to rebuild than others and in parts of Gippsland, where the typography is pretty challenging — there may be a steep hill, getting volunteers to do that is pretty hard work and we were able to match donors with those community needs. So a number of fencing projects has been funded by a donor to do that. Essentially that is just one example of about 280 projects where we have successfully found support for the projects that the communities have put forward, and we have a group of people working intensively with these recovery committees in terms of meeting those other needs. So that is community need.

Mr BARBER — Do we know the total value of public infrastructure that was destroyed?

Ms NIXON — I am thinking — we might have to come back to you on that.

Mr BARBER — And do we know the total proportion that has been rebuilt?

Ms NIXON — The principal assets that were lost, aside from national parks, were not nearly as much as people might have assumed in the sense of damage to halls, the three schools which were a key part of that and then of course roads and those sorts of public assets as well along the way. It was not as much as people had imagined in that sense of what needed to be replaced by the state.

Mr BARBER — Sure, but I am left to imagine. I see in here that 400 kilometres of road have been rebuilt. I do not know how much was destroyed or damaged. That might be 100 per cent or it might be 50 per cent or it may be that decisions have been made about certain assets that we do not want to rebuild. That is the kind of overall point I am making, if you know what I mean?

Ms NIXON — I do.

Mr BARBER — I do not think the priority up until now has been reporting everything, but we will turn our minds, before we get to the end of your tenure, as to completion of the project.

Ms NIXON — I understand that. I think that is quite a reasonable thing to do. Your point about a shire like Murrindindi is valid. First of all, its rate base is quite low because it just is not that big.

Mr BARBER — The southern end was always the growing end and most valuable part.

Ms NIXON — As you said, it was always growing and needing resources et cetera. That is perhaps why that whole community recovery committee of the ranges is trying to work through what it needs and we are working with them to do that for the future. But Murrindindi, as you may know, have publicly increased their rates increase and the mayor I think stood down over the fact that she did not think that should happen.

Mr BARBER — I read your budget.

Ms NIXON — But the other six councillors said it should and it did. So that is part of it. But we also obviously through government understood that in the end it would be the citizens who would be harmed if they were not supported, so that was the decision taken.

I do take your point about the longer term. We have tried to report on a regular basis. There is a lot of material there that is in fact released to the community. But I get your point.

Mr KAVANAGH — I would like to thank you both for appearing today.

Ms NIXON — Thank you.

Mr KAVANAGH — I would also like to thank you for all your efforts and work over the last 12 months, which I am sure go beyond normal job requirements.

You have referred to lots of different categories of people today in your presentation, and I am wondering in particular about people who were perhaps most terribly affected: the badly burnt who survived nevertheless. Obviously that is going to be mainly the responsibility of health authorities and so on, but do you have a particular role in helping those who have been burnt and are recovering?

Ms NIXON — I think there has been a range of supports. Initially none of us really knew how many people were burnt and what that would look like, so the state made a decision that it would use the Alfred as the key location because of its burns skills, and that if there were children burnt, they would be treated by the Royal Children's Hospital, and that is what happened.

I have been to the Alfred and spoken with the people in the emergency area and also met with a number of the senior management there. There are some sad parts but in other ways it has been more positive. The sad part was that we lost 173 people, and clearly they were killed during the fire. About 30 people were significantly burnt, and they were given treatment through the Alfred in the main, and in the younger person's case, through the Royal Children's.

They were supported by case managers, obviously through the Department of Health, but they were also given additional financial support through the bushfire fund, which allocated resources for those people to be able to return home and also for long-term care. We are still working with the burns unit at the Alfred about the kind of long-term support people might need. The fund is monitoring that and there are people in contact with a number of those people who were burnt. As they settle back into their lives and have longer term health issues, we are helping them with what kind of financial support they might need and obviously also through counselling and bringing people together.

We have also had a discussion with a burns trust in South Australia set up by a man who was burnt in Bali, and he has talked with us about getting the burns survivors together. We are very happy to do that and are putting a proposal together so we can support them.

Mr KAVANAGH — Can you give us a general idea about how they are faring on the whole?

Ms NIXON — I know some of them personally, and I think they are getting there. They have had numerous operations, and perhaps the youngest one particularly will have a long-term recovery. Others I know were in hospital for six weeks and are now out. From what I understand, they are gradually coming to terms with the process of recovering from severe burns.

Mr KAVANAGH — You may feel that there have been no major mistakes made, but do you think something could have been done better over the last 12 months?

Ms NIXON — Given the size and geography of this disaster, we are trying to work through what you would do in circumstances like this again. What could be done differently across the whole range of responses? I think that is a really important part of the legacy that we should leave and so we have people working on what we would do differently from the very beginning. Given that I was there from the very beginning, I certainly can contribute to that, but we also have a team that Ben has put in place. Do you want to talk about that?

Mr HUBBARD — Certainly. I often say one of the things that is very enjoyable and very challenging about this role is that you do things for the first time. In most jobs someone else has been there before you. With that comes learning. We have a very small and modest legacy team because people should learn from those processes and the systems should not be lost. Let us hope nothing like this happens again in Victoria, but if it happens somewhere those learnings will be able to be used by a government and community somewhere else as well.

Mr KAVANAGH — You have indicated that you have asked yourself the question, ‘What would we have done differently?’. Do you have an answer to that question?

Mr HUBBARD — I will offer one. Certainly this was a personal experience from late last year where I would be talking to communities about their community recovery plans and they would say to me, ‘Ben, we are really tired. It has been a very big year. We just need a break. This is important to us but can we go a bit slower?’. Different communities do go at different speeds. Christine has talked about that. Obviously there is a relationship to the level of damage, but no single community is the same. They will not recover at the same pace, and their needs will be completely different as well.

I will give you one example of how very different they are. To use another Bendigo example, I went to a community recovery committee meeting there and they kept talking about red sand. I thought, ‘What do you mean? What is red sand?’. They said, ‘It is toxic’. There were mine tailings which were about 130 years old, and there was 130 years of scrub on top of them. The mine tailings — there were about 2 hectares of it — contained arsenic and cyanide.

The fire came through. The wind was picking the dust up and blowing it onto people’s roofs. They could not use their water tanks. The kids could not play in the backyard. That was quite an extraordinary specific thing. We had to move on that quickly, and we did. That was a very different set of issues to those in all the other 33 communities, but I think that is one lesson we can take away.

Ms NIXON — Just to pick up on that, I think case management and getting things into place quickly and getting people who can try to assist people was a lesson learnt. I think the clean-up was probably one of the best things the state could have done. I do not know how you could do it any faster — I thought 4.5 months was pretty good actually — but I think the clean-up would be important.

I think it is important to try to make it quicker for people to get aid and assistance, and I think there are some systems that need to be improved in that process along the way. Community recovery committees need to be in place as quickly as you can get them, and we need to facilitate that a lot more quickly. I would probably put a senior public servant in every location where you had a disaster and say, ‘You are the commander in charge’. I think that is a sensible thing to do for the future. They would do the assessment; they would work with all the other agencies. I think that would allow us to have a much, much more focused, quicker response. I think those sorts of things we have learnt along the way.

You watch other places. I have to say there is one example where we got a lot of water to get up to Kinglake, and perhaps in the future I might sink a bore. That is a bit of a flippant response, I’ve got to say, but that might have been a bit easier than what we ended up doing.

I think there are all of those things: the things that have worked positively and the things that are negative. How you cut the paperwork: if you could do it earlier and register people more quickly, so that they are registered once that would be a much better system. I think that has been worked on, because it is actually a federal system and the state is trying to work out how you could use it, so people would not have to tell everybody and fill the forms in. I think people tried hard, but that has been one of the things that people complained a lot about.

Mr KAVANAGH — Your idea that perhaps there should be one person in charge of each township — does that suggest that there was a diffusion of responsibility that negatively impacted the recovery effort?

Ms NIXON — I think that there was a range of responses. In some cases councils stepped in. Marysville formed a group that was in fact supported by Fran Bailey. Because there was hardly anybody in Marysville, some of them came in and out and they were sort of there to start with. I think what we watched was that when you had people step up like that quickly then you got a lot more focused support.

Kinglake was another interesting example: every day Kinglake had a public meeting. I would make sure that in the future everybody was having a once-a-day public meeting. I went to another community where they had not had a public meeting in eight weeks, and the anger in the room was enormous. I said to them, ‘What happened?’ They said, ‘We have not met before’. You would say that needs to be a mandatory thing.

Local government has learned lessons and state has as well in terms of its recovery response and its early relief response. But having someone like that who had standing authority and could bring it together quickly — do a quick assessment — I think would be really helpful.

Mr KAVANAGH — You said ‘a senior public servant’ — could you clarify that at all? What kind of person should it be?

Ms NIXON — It could be a superintendent from the police. It could be a senior grade person from the Department of Sustainability and Environment. I think it is really a matter of fairly quickly looking to — and this is part of the legacy stuff for us — identify people who could take responsibility. It could be the local mayor. I think in some cases what you have got is, particularly if you are affected, you then have someone who is not quite living in the community and affected by it as badly. It might be useful to have someone from outside pull together that group around them.

Mr KAVANAGH — Should plans be made now for future — —

Ms NIXON — I think that is the point. We have been talking with many people across government. For instance, the Department of Human Services who have responsibility for recovery — they are certainly taking on board — —

Mr KAVANAGH — Regarding this official position, the person who occupies that position might vary from place to place?

Ms NIXON — I think so, and according to the kind of location, the support around them and those sorts of things. I think it is just an idea that will be a way of focusing that support.

Mrs PETROVICH — Thank you very much to both of you for your time and your presentation today; it has been very valuable. I also share the region with Ms Broad, much of which has been burnt, and have spent a lot of time in those communities myself. Obviously I have some concerns, like everybody, about those pieces of infrastructure, particularly those places — informal and formal — which have become or used to be community hubs. I would like to ask you about the progress of the three primary schools that have been noted in your submission today: Strathewen, Marysville and Middle Kinglake. I would like to have an undertaking as to where we are at with the planning. Has the construction of any of those schools started and when will they be completed?

Mr HUBBARD — We can come back on specific milestones, but with regards to Marysville: the roof is on, I’m seeing its brickwork. In the last picture I saw from last week the brickwork has been done. You can see online the day-by-day snapshots of construction at Marysville.

Regarding the central Kinglake site, there is the temporary school over the road from the proposed site. Land has been secured. There was a specific challenge in Kinglake around a lack of public or community land. Land needed to be secured for that site; that has been secured. There has been a very generous donation from a local landowner in that area adjacent to the existing school site. The department of education will go to market on that school within weeks or I think even less than that.

Part of the challenge there, of course, is that it is not just a school in Kinglake, it will be a community centre and they will provide maternal and child health services and early childhood services, too. We are having to get this information off the education department with regards to how that site will be delivered, but my understanding is that it is a single tender for the entire site. That is a contrast to Marysville where the school site was tendered first and that construction has started. Of course, again, there was existing land to use in Marysville adjacent to Gallipoli Park. Committee members would probably know the site there.

In Strathewen the architect has been working intensively with the school community. That community has been intimately involved in the development of the school design. It is a smaller development, and Christine might be able to help you in terms of delivery dates.

Ms NIXON — September 2010 for Strathewen, April for the Marysville school, and I think Middle Kinglake is a little further than that. Partly it is about the land. Partly it is about the amalgamation of a lot of other material with it. But I have to say the Middle Kinglake school, which I am sure you have been to as well,

is actually not a bad school. In fact it is probably as good as some other schools. The point was that it was about taking some time, and we certainly worked with the committee there. We hope to get that on the ground as soon as we can with all of the other amalgamated services.

I suppose the other thing that communities have said to us, as you pointed out about a hub, is that they actually do want to have a lot of other services as part of that. The other service is the Flowerdale early childhood centre, and that will go out the back of Flowerdale and be part of that school as well. They are on the track, but they have probably taken a bit longer and for the various reasons Ben said.

Mrs PETROVICH — I am a little disappointed in the response to the Middle Kinglake Primary School, because I actually worked in that community in the days after the fire, and to the best of my knowledge the land was available very soon after the fire. There is no definitive time frame on that. There is a press release which was put out on 14 February 2009, in which the Premier stated these projects would be delivered as soon as possible. I ask you, in regard to Kinglake, when is ‘as soon as possible’?

Ms NIXON — We cannot give you a date. We will come back to you about it.

Mr HUBBARD — There is an important point in that it is an education department-led project, so we are happy to get that information from the education department for the committee.

Just with regard to the donation of the land, it was not until a public meeting — my recall is last November — where there was a specific, firm commitment that that land would be donated, and people who work on these things have been working intensively ever since.

Mrs PETROVICH — If I might just follow up, because it was a fairly succinct answer, on some of the obstacles, which the Chair mentioned in his initial question about building and construction: my background is the building industry, and I have had many people coming to my office to talk about the obstacles that are preventing them from getting on with it.

I understand everybody is going at their own pace, but I did talk to you, Ms Nixon, in those initial weeks, at Broadford, and one of the things I flagged with you was how we were going to fast-track the permit system, because we do know those shires are very small. I am disappointed to hear that we do not have the statistics of fire-affected or just normal — I would have hoped we would have been able to obtain those — but is there an explanation for the main obstacles to rebuilding?

We have nearly 4000 properties that were damaged or burnt, and we know 1500 permits have been issued. It is my guess, driving around my electorate, that there is probably a very small number of houses that have been completed. You said 100; I think it is much less. This is 12 months on. Is there any way that we could get those statistics, but also look at the obstacles for those communities, because it is a huge source of frustration for them.

Ms NIXON — It is a huge source of frustration for us on occasions too.

Mrs PETROVICH — But you have a house to go home to at night.

Ms NIXON — True, and what we have done is look to councils. As you know it is not only councils that do permits; it is surveyors and other people as well, so we work with the Building Commission to try to get them to provide advice to people about building. The other issue around building is time to get a builder to come on to your land. I think some of the communities have been frustrated by builders who have made promises and then have not turned up.

We are in the middle of a fairly significant expansion of building, particularly for first home owners. We always knew the affected communities would have to compete with those, and then we are also talking about communities which are somewhat away from the main community or main sort of metropolitan area, so there is also that issue around travelling.

We did bring construction people together in the first place, including master builders, home building companies and the like, to tell us how they could help. There was an organisation — I will not name it, but it is a big home builder — and it said, ‘We cannot fit any more in. We are flat out because of the first home owners grant’. So I think you have a broader issue that was always there. That is part 1.

The second is around the time that permits took. A decision was made that if you were building in a similar modelling — you know the wording — to what you had before you could go on and go back, and people did.

The third part was around the introduction of the bushfire attack level standards, the BALs, which came in in March, I think. I think that meant that some people got frightened off, or concerned about what that would mean for them. In the early days people were trying to determine what that meant, and what an FZ was, and they had to work their way through that. But then free service was given on that, and I think gradually people got to understand it.

I think all of those things have been part of the factors that have slowed people down. We now understand that in that FZ zone, and a small proportion of these homes are actually in that zone, people are able to make decisions about cutting down trees to reduce the risk; and they have also now found substances like double glazing, window guards and roofing to use.

We have run rebuilding advisory workshops particularly in the Yarra Ranges and Whittlesea areas. We have had hundreds of people come along to those. We have building advisers out there who will be trying to help people work their way through a lot of these things. There are a lot of decisions to make, and I think all of that effort is put into it. It is not as if we are trying to stop anybody; I think we are trying to overcome the hurdles when we —

Mr HUBBARD — Certainly for those people who are ready to take that next step our rebuilding advisory service staff have worked with about 600 households to date. Their work is driven by community needs. They work closely with the hubs and the DHS housing advisers, and referrals for the case management service as well. One role we do play is to provide that assistance. Obviously the Building Commission has a range of statutory responsibilities which are external to us, but we have been very focused on giving that level of support. As part of that, there are rebuilding advisory centres, one in the main street of Marysville and one in Kinglake being built, which will be handed over to the community as well in due course.

Mrs PETROVICH — One issue that comes to my office and to my attention is that under the changes to the building code some of the material that is prescribed in that is impossible to obtain in Australia. Have you come across that, and is that a prohibiting factor?

Ms NIXON — I think it was in the early days, but many of the manufacturers have now put their products forward to be assessed, and certainly there are roofs and windows and also more recently shutters, I think. It has been the responsibility of the Building Commission to make sure that those materials can be provided. I have certainly visited houses, and a little while ago I visited a house in Callignee that was based on that model, and they have in fact found double glazing, roof materials and other materials to build, and we try to distribute that information through our rebuilding advisers so that people know those materials are available.

Mrs PETROVICH — Should we have thought through that a little bit more carefully when we developed that code so that we could make sure those products were available?

Ms NIXON — I am not sure that is a decision for me. It was a decision the government made, and it took many issues into account when it made that decision.

Mr TEE — I suppose I just want to start with the time that it has taken. It appears to me in a sense that part of the challenge that you have got and part of the timing issue relates to the fact that you are building better rather than building the same. That means that we take into account the fact that you have got different standards; you have got better standards now. I would have thought some of these houses would have been built 20 to 30 years ago under a very different regime. Also, the other time factor would involve getting the communities together so that instead of just building a school you are building a community hub. Obviously that involves a fair bit of consultation to try to make sure you maximise the opportunities so that you have got something which does not only reflect the past but is a legacy for the future. Would that be a fair assessment in terms of some of the issues that you have and the challenges that you are confronting in terms of getting building done essentially?

Ms NIXON — Every time we have been at a community meeting what we both try to say when we talk with the communities is that you need to think about bringing things together. If you take the schools, there are some wonderful schools in Victoria where you do have early childhood and other community facilities. Part of what

we said to the Kinglake community — and education obviously was leading this, and we were part of it — was, ‘Go and have a look at some of the other opportunities that are there. Do not just come back to what you had, but in fact take the chance and the opportunity to do it much better’. That was the philosophy. I think people have taken up that very much and that has taken a bit longer. But it is also now about funding. It is not just about the government because we have private funding and VBAF and a whole range of others that are part of this process as you put together packages to provide a much better resource. If you took the Kinglake Ranges area, we are looking at an assessment of what is there now and in the broader term what are the kinds of facilities needed for growth and for the community that might be living there in the future. Most of the communities have understood and taken that as being an important part of the way forward.

Jeeralang is another example, which is a hill. They built a hall in Jeeralang in 1944 after the last bushfires. They could have just had a toilet and shower and kitchen put back, but in fact they had a much more expansive view about the role that hall would play in their lives in the future. That is what they wanted to have. Callignee is another one. It has got community facilities, it has got a cricket pavilion, it has got a hall and it has got a CFA station. That is a location that I think will grow over time. It is a wonderful space and a great community. They have taken the time to get that together in a model that suits the environment. It has been funded and they are off and running. It is an important part to take your time, and that is what most people are doing with their houses as well.

Mr TEE — I suppose on the houses issue — we have had some evidence in relation to the taking of time — I think I read somewhere that with previous fires what occurred was that people might have decided to come back or not to come back and then subsequently, months later, they might have changed their minds. Is that something that you have come across when you have been speaking to people? It takes people a long time to work through the trauma and come to a final conclusion.

Ms NIXON — They did some work in July last year with, again, the case managers asking, so it is not quantitative and all the rest of it but it is pretty good. At that stage there were about 60 per cent that said, yes, they were keen on coming back. Twenty per cent said, ‘Nope, I’m never coming back’, and 20 per cent said they had no idea. I think that was pretty reasonable. Then gradually though in a more recent general asking of, ‘What you are doing and how you are going?’ it started to move up. I think there is clearly a group that just walks away; some people have never been back to their block of land again, who have been traumatised by it. You get all of those responses. One woman and her husband were one of the very early ones to go back to Kinglake. She wrote me a letter saying, ‘I made a major error; I should never have done this. All I look at now is burnt trees. Can you do something about all the burnt trees?’. It is act in haste and repent — —

Mr TEE — I suppose it comes back to the point you made about each community moving at its own pace and not feeling pressured. The other aspect that I have been interested in is in terms of the way you work with the communities, both in terms of identifying their needs but also implementing them. There are some innovative things that have been done. I understand essentially you are part of owning a supermarket. I am wondering whether you could elaborate on how that came about and where that has gone.

Mr HUBBARD — There was a building that survived the fires. It was previously an old car museum. After a couple of months of process the government in its good wisdom decided to buy that site, and the federal government supported the fit-out. The existing operator of FoodWorks at Marysville has gone on to that site. There are a number of small shops. One of the local cafe owners, My Chef Mike, has gone in there. I am sure it is appropriate to do advertisements here — My Chef Mike does a good line in wood-fired pizzas. To be frank, Mr Tee, it is somewhere to buy milk, it is somewhere to buy papers, it is somewhere to see people who might be living in Marysville or the Triangle. It is putting retail life into what was previously a very busy retail strip. A few businesses did survive. The bakery and Fraga’s have come back, but it is providing those basic items which are critical for everyday life.

My understanding is that the fuel has returned just outside of the Marysville Central building. There are bowsers there with a swipe card. Petrol is one of those very important staples. It is something that we know from Kinglake. For the last two months we have worked intensively after the two existing operators could not come to an arrangement where they would rebuild quickly. VBRR has established a temporary fuel facility, which is not a simple thing — it is not milk and bread and papers — but we have been able to source three 4500-litre above-ground tanks. We work closely with the likes of CFA, EPA and WorkCover on the safety issues. The opening of that is imminent. Concrete was poured yesterday for the driveway. The site office and Atco hut will

arrive early next week. The electrician is turning up on Tuesday. The CFA is booked for a safety inspection on Wednesday.

This is not something that government typically does; I think you may struggle to find another bit of government that has set up a temporary fuel facility. But we came to the point last November where community need was obvious, the market was not going to deliver it in the short term and the community said very clearly, 'This is an important priority for us', so we have been driven by that. Alongside the supermarket land ownership it is another surprising aspect of our work.

Mr TEE — And probably a welcome one as far as the community is concerned.

Ms NIXON — It is.

Mr TEE — I wanted to follow up some of the questions in relation to accountability and transparency, and again there are a number of ways you measure that. The fact that you are here and that you have a very high profile not only in terms of the media but also in terms of your visits to the local community are clearly indications of that. But I suppose a lot of the evidence that you have given suggests the difficulty in defining in advance how many buildings should be completed by a particular date — that is, there are so many variables, so many human emotions, that really play a part of the picture. That part of the difficulty, I suspect, presents to you as you report on your three-monthly basis. Is that a challenge for you to try and work through — anticipating some of those very human conditions that will influence your capacity to move?

Ms NIXON — One of the things for me has been not the shock but in a sense trying to understand how badly harmed people have been. You can talk to Rob Gordon, the psychologist we work with, who has just been fantastic. He said that you cannot underestimate both the trauma and the grief. People have grief in their lives, but when you add the trauma and you add the neighbours lost, all of that gets much worse. There are business people who just say, 'I can manage about 3 hours a day', and this is 12 months later. That has been a piece of it — understanding that that was important. We were looking around the world for comparable situations so we could get some evidence about it. For example, I know what the New South Wales crime rate looks like and I can tell you exactly where Victoria stands on that and all the rest of those indicators, but it is very hard to say, 'Who says I am supposed to have 100 per cent of the houses back?'. Those sorts of indicators have been a lot more complicated. 'Measuring what matters' is a term I have used before. For us, what mattered to people was getting their fences, getting food and getting lot of those things, and that is what we worked on. Then we tried to get over the barriers we have spoken about so that people who do want to build their houses actually can do that without frustration. Then we tried to get financial support out. The bushfire fund has been an amazing resource and support for so many people as well. I suppose we have tried to find the things to measure, but a lot of the measures that perhaps might satisfy in some cases are a bit hard to compare with us as to where we should be. But I get it, and it is an important issue for us to keep working on, so I take your point on that as well.

Mr TEE — Thinking ahead to the next 12 months, can I just get a sense as to what the priorities are for yourselves and for the communities, particularly in relation to how we are travelling with getting people back in, getting tourists back in, getting some of those businesses moving again and getting the jobs that many in the community rely upon back in those communities? Is progress being made in that area, and how is that going in a more general sense? Can you give us a sense of what the priorities are for the next 12 months?

Mr HUBBARD — Certainly. I will just use the example of Marysville, where I think the greatest economic damage has been done by the February fires. Very early on, as one of the many very generous corporate offers of work and donations, BCG did an economic study on Marysville and what was required for its recovery. It had a very clear picture of what was there previously in terms of hospitality, retail and tourism, the relationship between Marysville and Lake Mountain and the broader links across that tourism region.

It was a very sound report, and as part of the response to that there were a number of announcements made in the Rebuilding Together Plan. One of those was providing new investment for Lake Mountain, in addition to insurance, which reorientated it as a year-round facility. I can tell the committee that, I think it is this weekend, they are doing their first mountain bike race at Lake Mountain. Rather than being a ski resort at 1600 metres where it had to make snow, and it moved around from season to season, the year-round activities are critical for

the economic sustainability of Lake Mountain and the rest of the region. That is one thing that is happening straightaway as part of reorientation.

When I was up there two weeks ago the foundation works were happening on the new chalet building which will bring together the activities that were done in five smaller buildings previously into a new modern facility adjacent to that existing large chalet that is already there. That is a critical driver for visitors coming through Marysville. If you look at the people who went to Marysville before the fires, it was one of the drivers.

Something that was announced in that plan, and the final details are being agreed between the two governments, is an investment fund to drive new investment into bushfire communities. Again, this was something identified by the BCG report as being critical to drive large-scale investment back into that town. Certainly before there were three conference centres, and there is no indication that any of those previous owners or operators is going to rebuild. The way that local economy worked, conference centre business was critical for the B and Bs, for the restaurants and for the shops.

This is just a small thing, just a third example on Marysville, but there was a summer staffing initiative which provided staffing support for existing Marysville businesses and 37 job placements were done over summer. They were things like respite, giving small business operators the chance to have a break and for someone to come in and operate the business while they had a break. That was done with the very generous support of the Salvation Army. We have had some very positive discussions with the Salvation Army to run that scheme again through autumn and into winter. It is a very small thing but a very real thing for those business operators that are there.

In tourism marketing there are some existing commitments and programs being delivered with both the local tourism body and also Tourism Victoria, and between Lake Mountain putting together an events calendar through the economic leadership group, which is convened by the council but part of the community recovery committee structure, we are working intensively with them to do more on top of all that. Certainly as far as being a key priority for the authority, the economic recovery of Marysville is one of them.

The CHAIR — Thank you, Mr Hubbard. We are going to have to leave it there, Mr Tee. The committee appreciates your attendance here this morning, your presentation, evidence and indeed the additional information you have provided to us. There are a number of matters that Ms Nixon and yourself have said that you will take on notice and come back to us with answers. We will appreciate receiving those. We will provide you with a draft version of the transcript in the next couple of days for any corrections you may wish to make. Thank you very much for your attendance and evidence this morning; it has been a very useful session.

Committee adjourned.