

TRANSCRIPT

LEGISLATIVE COUNCIL ENVIRONMENT AND PLANNING COMMITTEE

Inquiry into Climate Resilience

Emerald – Thursday 10 October 2024

MEMBERS

Ryan Batchelor – Chair

David Ettershank – Deputy Chair

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Gaelle Broad

Jacinta Ermacora

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John Berger

Ann-Marie Hermans

Evan Mulholland

Rachel Payne

Richard Welch

WITNESSES

Rachelle Mechielsen, Team Leader, Emerald and Cockatoo Emergency Support Team;

Dr Dan Jeyaseelan, Member, Monbulk and District Community Working Group; and

Peter Edyvane, Member, Monbulk Emergency Management Group.

The CHAIR: Welcome back to the proceedings of the Legislative Council Environment and Planning Committee's Inquiry into Climate Resilience in Victoria. We are joined by members of some local emergency support groups, who are very enthusiastic.

I will just tell everyone that evidence taken today is protected by parliamentary privilege as provided by the *Constitution Act 1975* and the provisions of the Legislative Council standing orders. Therefore the information that you provide during the 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 those same things they may not be protected by this privilege. Any deliberately false evidence or misleading of the committee may be considered a contempt of Parliament.

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

My name is Ryan Batchelor. I am the Chair of the committee and a Member for Southern Metropolitan Region in the Legislative Council. I might ask the members of the committee to introduce themselves.

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

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

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

John BERGER: John Berger, Member for Southern Metro.

Jacinta ERMACORA: Jacinta Ermacora, here online, Member for Western Victoria.

The CHAIR: Wonderful. It would be very helpful for the Hansard record if you could each tell us your name and the organisation you are appearing on behalf of, and then I will invite you to make an opening statement. Peter, would you like to start?

Peter EDYVANE: Yes. My name is Peter Edyvane, and I represent the Monbulk Emergency Management Group.

Dan JEYASEELAN: I am Dan Jeyaseelan. I am a local doctor, and I am actually representing my patients. I cover a large cohort of patients, so I will mention some of the impacts that have affected people over this period of time.

The CHAIR: Wonderful.

Rachelle MECHIELSEN: My name is Rachelle Mechielsen. I am the team leader of the Emerald and Cockatoo Emergency Support Team, and we have Luke, who hopefully will be quiet.

The CHAIR: He can be as loud as he likes.

Wendy LOVELL: I am happy to take him for a walk.

The CHAIR: I might present you with the invitation to make opening statements. I do not know how you want to start. Peter, if you want to start and then move down –

Peter EDYVANE: Okay. I am sure you have heard a lot of this. I was here just 5 minutes beforehand with Dan. I have lived in the hills all my life – Emerald, Mount Evelyn, Monbulk for the last 25 years. I am a

founding member of the Monbulk Emergency Management Group. We formed in 2017. I have been a serving member of the CFA for 46 years. I was a captain up there – Black Saturday fires, Ash Wednesday fires – so I have seen a bit and have just retired from the police after 30 years. I would just like to speak about community resilience and the apparent communications issues that everybody in the Dandenong Ranges and Yarra Valley talk about and have been affected by.

Like most people, not all people, I believe in climate change. We are seeing storms in the Dandenong Ranges – over Victoria, I suppose, but certainly in the ranges – that we have never seen before: winds, unusual fire behaviour I have seen in recent years, with fires burning at 2 or 3 o'clock in the morning in Bunyip State Forest. Daytime fire behaviour was happening at 2 or 3 o'clock in the morning and in the middle of the night. I have seen recently landslips in the hills. We do not normally have a lot of landslips, and in the last three years we have seen three or four places where we have had landslips happening. So something is happening with the weather as far as the amount of rain, I suppose, but certainly it is the storms.

These sorts of issues do not affect people in suburbia. For people in suburbia, if the power goes out for half an hour, it is the end of the world. We are only 40 or 50 k's from Melbourne, but we are in smaller communities, and although it is an outer suburb, they are like country towns here – Emerald, Monbulk – and that is how we look at it. When a fire starts, the wind blows. We potentially could lose our house, with a tree going through it or the whole thing burning down, our business and our life. In recent times there have been a lot of lives lost in the Dandenong Ranges with trees falling on cars or moving vehicles and certainly trees falling through houses. The amazing thing is that we only hear about the trees that kill people. There are so many houses that get destroyed when we have these storms, and I am talking about the big storm. There were, I do not know, 40 or 50 houses that were destroyed. That night I do not think we lost any person, which was just a fluke, just luck. This is the sort of stuff that we have not seen before.

Now, I am part of the emergency management group, and we were approached by EMV, Emergency Management Victoria, in 2015. They came to the MADCOW the community group and asked if we could start up an emergency group to help during an emergency. The bloke took it on, and there was no framework. EMV came along. They did not give us any framework. There was no funding, there was no framework. We just had a bloke come along, Steve Pascoe, who said, 'We want you to do this. Every community is different, and you make it suit your community' and this, that and the other. The bloke that took it on chased his tail for two years, with good intent, and it went nowhere. In another two years they came back to us again, and they said, 'What are you going to do?' So I started it with another bloke, who works at Parks, Paul Bennett, and we got it off the ground.

The emergency group basically is there to help the community when an emergency arises, and for the first 24 to 72 hours we are activated, and we believe only activated, when there is a really big emergency: when the shires cannot help us, when the state government cannot help us; when we are on our own – the Ash Wednesday type emergencies and the Black Saturdays. We are set up in the local RSL – that is our headquarters, if you like – and we have got liaisons with the footy club. I was listening to the other lady before, Jacinta. It is not happening for them, but we have got the footy club on board. They will open up when there is a fire so they can get out of the sun, they can use the toilets, they can get water and then we can use a shower – there are 16 showers at the new footy club – and things like that. That is part of our plan. We have got a deal going with Woolworths where they will give us food, as much as we like, in an emergency through their emergency fund so we can get things started and going and things like that, and then we are working in conjunction with the Shire of Yarra Ranges, and they have been really good. Our idea is to go until the local government comes along and says, 'We'll take over' – or the state government or whatever. But in actual fact at the times we have activated the shire have come along and said, 'What do you need?' and they have helped in that way. To be honest, I did not think that would happen. I thought, 'Oh, yeah,' but they have been really good. So that is what we need.

But what I think we need as far as these emergency groups go: we need a framework. Now, EMV came along and there was no framework at all. We need some basic funding; and we need an assurance that we are covered by insurance. I have just written down a basic framework is required to be drawn up – maybe several options for different towns and different communities – so a community can adopt an option best suited to them and they can run with that option. They should have access to very basic funding. I am not talking about \$50,000; I am talking about a thousand dollars, a couple of thousand dollars. We do not have that without having to jump through hoops and apply for grants or go to the Bendigo Bank.

Melina BATH: Cap in hand.

Peter EDYVANE: Yes. It is not right. The state government wants to do this, and we are happy to do it, but we need some assistance. The other thing is insurance. Now, we act in good faith, but as we know, civil litigation can be anything, you know. We worry that if we say, 'The footy club's open. You can use the showers there or get out of the sun there,' or whatever, and there is an accident, they will come back on us. We have got no assurance that we are not going to get sued. EMV or the state government, I am not sure who – there should be these things addressed.

Wendy LOVELL: VMIA.

Peter EDYVANE: Yes. They should be addressed. I know for certain at the Shire of Yarra Ranges – this is the Cardinia shire – the groups over there struggle, and a lot of them chase their tails. If they had a framework to go to and they had these things in place, it would certainly help them – if they had guidelines – but they have not got that. We are lucky. We have got local people, we have got practical people, and we can get things happening locally. If something has got to be open, we can open it up. If we need to feed people, we can feed people. That is the plan. Our plan is a simple plan. It is not convoluted. It is easy to run. I am not talking about us, because I reckon we have got ours off the ground, but for the state and other groups, for resilience, they need to do these things, or the relevant party needs to do these things.

The CHAIR: Thanks, Peter. Dan.

Dan JEYASEELAN: I will come to the fore. Thank you so much, Peter. That was wonderful. Firstly, thank you for the invitation. I really appreciate this, and I think this is a wonderful initiative. I wanted to particularly also acknowledge the traditional owners, past, present and future, and connection to the country is important to health and wellbeing – I think that is really important.

My personal introduction: I am Dr Dan, or that is what everyone knows me as. I have been in this community for 16 years working closely with lovely community groups, including Peter and MADCOW and so on and so forth, and worked through a few emergencies, obviously, over the last few years. I think all of you have come up to our wonderful community and navigated. I live off town, so this is where I will pass to both of these lovely individuals who actually live onsite and live with these problems. I commute up the hills, and as you may have noticed, there are access issues. Roads are narrow. If there is an emergency, access and leaving are very tricky, in particular with severe weather events. Obviously the last few years have been a significant challenge. We had 2021 with the severe storms. We did have some wonderful work with VicEmergency and so on, and I will touch on that in a tick, but we did not actually know what we were heading into. These two lovely people who live on ground, they would have seen everything and they knew what was happening. As I was travelling up the mountain, obviously powerlines were down, trees across the road, severe risks were associated with that which off the mountain I was not aware of, and there is very little ability to predict those scenarios as you come up. So there is an inherent risk element that we are aware of and we work with. That geography obviously has its own inherent challenges as well.

So what I wanted to discuss in reference to your terms of reference were particularly points D and E. While on record, I want to commend firstly the CFA app and VicEmergency for the amazing work that has been done and the ability for us to actually be able to see things, predict things slightly and be somewhat prepared. I think that is really important. Now, where this falls through, and this was highlighted this year actually where we had a significant event – and Monbulk was reasonably preserved. We lost power – that is not an unusual occurrence – but this time we also lost communication. Now, communication is the only way for us in an isolated community – and this is applicable to multiple communities, not just Monbulk. If we lose communication, we lose the VicEmergency app, we lose CFA. We are sitting ducks. We do not know what is around the corner. We do not know, say, exit routes. We do not have any ability to call for emergency. And we actually tried to call 000 – this was our experience – and there was actually no reception. We were not able to get through. We could not get an ambulance for over 50 minutes. It was fortunate we have got a medical clinic, we are able to manage those situations, and that is me talking as a business, but as a community member, say you have got a lovely little baby there. If something had happened and she needed to call 000, she cannot. What is she going to do, run up the main street and hope that I may be open?

We have got a significant risk issue that can be mitigated. And this is where I would respectfully ask if possible, and I do not know if this is in this forum, maybe to legislate for some background or some redundancies for communication. It is perhaps also something, and this ties into what Peter was saying, some minor funding – we are not talking huge amounts, but even just a satellite phone that is publicly accessible. And I love that these community groups – as I said, I am talking myself – are so actively involved and they do such an incredible job. I do not think I can really put that into something that you could actually appreciate without being there, but really if we had access 24/7 independent of community groups that are reliant on volunteers, for communication, for ability to maybe have some power backup, some fuel resources to maintain that significant little – let us call it an emergency hub, that would save lives. It would be incredible.

The other thing I was going to bring up which I think is relevant is obviously we are all using petrol and generators, and Peter and the CFA, they do a great job sending messages about fire risk and people not catching on fire while refuelling their generators, carbon monoxide – maybe some work could be done regarding education of people when they are cooking on gas stoves inside their house that they have brought in from their camping. Things like that could actually save lives and maintain safety, because heating is a problem, cooking is a problem, and sometimes these events are very significant and for a prolonged period of time. So people do get desperate, and they do little things that they would not normally do in their usual domestic functioning.

Really, thank you very much for having me at the inquiry. Happy to answer any questions.

The CHAIR: Great. Thanks very much. Rachelle.

Rachelle MECHIESEN: Thanks. Hi, my name is Rachelle. The Emerald and Cockatoo Emergency Support Team has been in place for over 30 years in various forms. It was born out of an idea after Ash Wednesday. In 2019 – I am part of the Cockatoo township committee – we decided that we wanted to have a branch of the emergency support team, which existed only in Emerald, so we worked with the founding group member Wayne Collins and set up an auspice for Cockatoo. Then, not long after that, Wayne retired and we merged the two groups, and I came on as team leader of both the groups. I have been in Cockatoo for about 15 years. I have run the local community market for 10 years and the township committee and this group, so I am well connected – know lots of people, hear lots of things. I have two adult sons aside from Luke, so my life is kind of full, which is great.

Our group exists as ‘the locals who help the locals’. We have about 20 active volunteers. We have got two trailers, one specifically for catering and one for logistics, which means that we can set up wherever the people are, wherever the need is. We are not tied to a building. However, if there is a building, obviously that is advantageous. We have had several large activations in the last few years: twice in 2021 for the two big storm events then and earlier this year for 12 days. I coordinated two relief centres, Cockatoo and Emerald, with Luke on the front of me. That was great fun for 12 days. I am probably glad he cannot talk; he would tell you all sorts of things.

What we see the most is that people feel frightened, displaced and anxious. They come in and they see council or the bigger services, if they are able to get there, and then they do not get locally specific information, so they feel like they are not heard and they feel like they are not understood. That is where our volunteers have a role to play. We are all local. We are all affected by whatever is happening, or we know people who are. We have got that local knowledge. We can come in and say, ‘Yes, on the map that looks fine, but that road’s actually got a huge, big hill in it or a tree in the way or something else.’ People feel like they are understood because we know what is going on and can help advocate to get the help where it needs to go most. In the February storms earlier this year there was no access to fuel within a 20-kilometre radius. I know that council and emergency services worked extremely hard lobbying the state government for access to fuel and to water. It kept going up and down – ‘yes, no, yes, no’ – and finally there was nothing more that could be done. As community members we were able to advocate through our local MPs and actually get a small delivery of fuel and get AusNet on board to have some community generators installed to get the petrol station up and running and get the CBD Main Street services up and running as well.

Our group has lobbied quite hard with Cardinia Shire Council. We have been able to get some funding and some pilot projects in place. Gembrook, Emerald and Cockatoo each now have a building that has a generator, solar panels and a battery back-up, so there is a relief centre in place. That solves the first couple of days with no power. It gives people a safe place to go to, assuming that that building is not compromised. It does not

solve the communications issue, so I really strongly echo what Dr Dan said about telecommunications. I could not get a phone call out to volunteers to get them to activate, never mind an ambulance or a doctor or anything else. For us, the single biggest concern in our community is communications, followed by the frequency and the intensity of these events. They are happening more, they are happening for longer and they are affecting more people, and whilst the community learns each time, it also gets harder to bounce back each time. They are the big considerations.

I would echo the comments from the other two panellists around funding. We do have public liability and professional indemnity insurance, but that means our members are busy fundraising, running barbecues and writing grants and doing all the things that we are not actually here to do to fund us and keep us going.

The CHAIR: What is it costing?

Rachelle MECHIESEN: It costs us about \$5000 a year to keep our first aid, mental aid first aid training, insurance trailer registrations and equipment up to date, and that is being extremely careful with the money.

The CHAIR: Thank you very much for the opening statements. We will now move to some questions. Peter, at the start of your opening statement you talked about how the storms were like you have never seen before. I think it would be really useful evidence for the committee to hear, in your words, how things have changed and what you have noticed changing about the way those weather events are happening, whether they are storms or fires.

Peter EDYVANE: Yes. As I said, I have lived in the hills all my life. We had a storm three weeks ago, I think it was, up here. It was a storm where Emerald got hit really hard. At Monbulk it was blowing – I thought the roof was going to blow off the house, it was just so extreme. The difference was we did not get hit that hard three weeks ago, and I think it has got a lot to do with the direction of the wind.

In the storm we had in 2021 the wind came from a different direction, and we lost some houses. All the hills were affected, as you know. I am in the township of Monbulk, just down from the main street, and we lost our power for 10 days. We had another storm three weeks later, and we lost it for eight. I do not live in the back of the mallee, up in the bush; we 40 k's from Melbourne. During the night of the storm in 2021 the fire brigade was activated. Monbulk has got a rescue truck; we have got a heavy rescue at the fire station. Every time a house is hit by a tree or something we get a call. We could not go more than 200 metres from our station because there were just trees. We had all these rescue calls; we could not go anywhere. People would say, 'Just cut the tree out of the way.' We could not, because first of all the trees are this big, but then there was tree and there was tree and there was tree. So all those rescue calls to the Dandenong Ranges that were from up in Olinda, Kalorama and Monbulk – we did not answer them; they just had to fend for themselves.

It is just the intensity of the wind. My fear, or our fear, is that if we have one of these windstorms in summer and we have a fire start –

Dan JEYASEELAN: It would be just devastating.

Peter EDYVANE: It would be awful. Trees would come down. The biggest threat in the hills is a decent fire and trees blocking the road.

Dan JEYASEELAN: Yes, no access.

Peter EDYVANE: And there will be Kinglake over again.

The CHAIR: I know it is not pleasant to think about, but those kinds of worst case scenarios are the scenarios of the most extreme risk that we need to be most concerned about. From an infrastructure resilience, built environment point of view, which is what the committee is trying to look at, are there any things that you can think of that would help your preparedness for something like that?

Peter EDYVANE: First of all, I know this is an impossible task, but I will just say it: underground powerlines. The main lines in the hills should be underground, because that is the first thing to go out. As soon as the wind blows, we lose our power, we lose comms. That should be a consideration. I think some of the major buildings in communities, like the shire hubs, should have generators. They build these great big

buildings – I think the one at Emerald was finished a year ago, and I do not think it has got a generator. I am not sure.

Melina BATH: No, it does not. We have heard today.

The CHAIR: No, we have heard today it does not have a generator.

Rachelle MECHELSEN: The football club next door does, and they have put it there so that there could be access to showers and things like that. It was a deliberate decision.

Peter EDYVANE: Our generator we had to get from Bendigo Bank for the RSL to run for emergencies. But it is ridiculous because in the planning of these multimillion-dollar buildings we should spend \$100,000 for the generator.

The CHAIR: Just to pick up on that point, in terms of the planning of community infrastructure, you think we need to take account of these sorts of emergency situations.

Peter EDYVANE: Without a doubt – if we are going to use these buildings. Things seem to be getting worse. We need to plan for these. I am talking about, if they are going to build a decent building – a new footy clubroom in the hills or in country towns a new shire building – spend a little bit more money and put a generator in so it can be used in emergencies.

The CHAIR: Add an emergency preparedness dimension to the build.

Peter EDYVANE: Yes. And the other thing is – we did not mention it – telecommunications, just some of the practical things. We lost the internet. Now, the fire brigade have got pagers, and when we get a fire call the pagers go off and off we go. But we work on WhatsApp. So when they ask the strike team members ‘Who’s around tomorrow so we can do this?’, if we have got no WhatsApp, we cannot communicate. We can only communicate for an emergency, but we cannot communicate in planning. Our community group – when we had that last storm I was going to activate it, but I had to actually go around to houses individually and knock on their doors.

The CHAIR: Knock on their doors, right.

Rachelle MECHELSEN: I do the same.

Peter EDYVANE: I was going around trees and powerlines. I had one of the blokes come out with a metal bar, because I had the headlights on his house at 10 o’clock at night. He was going, ‘What’s going on? What’s going on?’ That is what it has come down to. I just keep thinking, ‘We’re 40 k’s from Melbourne.’ There are parts of Monbulk where you can get on a hill and see the buildings. It is like we live in Coober Pedy.

Going back to the communications, we have always said that there should be generators there that kick in automatically. The batteries run out after 6 hours and we have got no comms. After the storm in 2021 they said, ‘We’re going to fix all of that. We’re going to do this. We’re going to do that.’ No, they have not.

One last thing – we have got a telco tower in Monbulk right in town. That was connected to a business – it was on their land – and the deal was that the business would keep the generator fully loaded up with diesel and keep the maintenance going. Well, the business went under. So when we had the power outage the generator would not start because it was not working. All these things should be taken into consideration. There should be maintenance on things and there should be plans for fires, storms or whatever and for upkeep to keep these basic things going. Because as Dan said, there are no comms – no phone calls and no mobile phones. Pretty well everybody has got a mobile phone now; not many people have landlines now. Plus, we do lose the landlines anyway.

Dan JEYASEELAN: Absolutely. That is what I was going to add. Regardless, because we do not have the old landline system that actually worked without power –

The CHAIR: The old copper system?

Dan JEYASEELAN: Yes. With the NBN, as soon as the power goes, all of it is gone. If you lose the mobile network, everything is gone. It is like we are back in the 80s, but we do not have a landline, right, so there is no option. So Peter is running around and we are trying to figure things out, and it is reliant on a lot of active community members, who do an amazing job. I will add to your question to Peter: as you rightly said, if we did have a large fire with winds, it would be devastating. I think we may not be able to escape. We do have places of last refuge. They are generally open. I think from a planning perspective – I do not know if this is for this forum – something, maybe some sort of bunker or safe last resort, would be useful. But that is a huge ask, I think. I am trying to be pragmatic and reasonable about our requests. I think the biggest thing is maybe some satellite communication. That would not cost very much. A basic satellite phone that has some solar backup or something like that that is accessible with an emergency door would save lives.

Rachelle MECHELSEN: Can I add to that, Dan?

Dan JEYASEELAN: Yes, of course.

Rachelle MECHELSEN: Great. Thank you. Some of the community refuge centres have been set up with Sky Muster internet. It is funded through a federal government program called STAND. That funding ends – I have forgotten whether it is next year or the year after, but that funding is coming to an end, and then we will lose that service. At the moment that is the only way to get internet connectivity when there are no communications. If you can get to a community centre, there is community internet funded via that program.

Dan JEYASEELAN: If you can get there – that is the key point, absolutely.

The CHAIR: Ms Bath.

Melina BATH: Thank you very much, Chair. Thank you so much. I feel like we are very privileged to have you here today, Rachelle, Dan and Peter. Peter, thank you for your service in VicPol for many decades and with the SES. You are absolute gold, and we appreciate you all being here. I want to pick up on the idea about the emergency group, Peter, that was established. Was it about 2015 that EMV came to you?

Peter EDYVANE: They initially came to us in 2015 or thereabouts, and for two years it floundered because there was no structure given to the bloke that took it on.

Melina BATH: And then you have become involved –

Peter EDYVANE: Two years later. We had a MADCOW meeting, and we had the bloke from EMV come along. He said, ‘Look, are you going to take it on or not?’ They all looked at me, and I said, ‘Okay, I’ll do it if this other bloke does it,’ and off we went.

Melina BATH: With a good heart, you put your hand in the air. What I am floundering to understand is that EMV, the government entity, comes to you and says, ‘Set up a group,’ but really you are not resourced.

Peter EDYVANE: No.

Melina BATH: So here is a government entity with funding, with staff – ‘Set it up,’ and then off you go. I do not understand why there would not be some framework or support around you.

Peter EDYVANE: Unless it has changed, no, there is not.

Melina BATH: But you are not receiving –

Peter EDYVANE: I was at those meetings and asked. They said, ‘Oh, every community’s different. You’ve got to tailor-make it to you,’ which might be true to a degree, but you still –

Melina BATH: But you still need operating costs.

Peter EDYVANE: Well, we had nothing.

Melina BATH: Does that group still exist today?

Peter EDYVANE: What is that?

Melina BATH: Your group, your emergency group.

Peter EDYVANE: Yes, absolutely.

Melina BATH: I was just confirming that. So no funding still; you are just fundraising for yourselves or you are using your own pockets to raise money.

Peter EDYVANE: I think the key to a lot of this is to, in our case, keep it simple. We have got about six people on our committee, and we have got contacts at the CFA, the footy club, whatever, so if something happened, we would drag in their members.

Melina BATH: As a resource.

Peter EDYVANE: Yes.

Rachelle MECHELSSEN: We do the same.

Melina BATH: Thank you.

Peter EDYVANE: We have that, but as far as funding goes, we have brought sandwich boards for directions when the power goes out. With a big texta we write 'Go to the footy club for hot showers' or whatever.

Melina BATH: 'Go this way', sure.

Peter EDYVANE: They came from the Bendigo Bank. I think Dan gave us some money from his business, and there is the Monbulk RSL.

Melina BATH: Thank you.

Peter EDYVANE: We had to have an information night a couple of months ago, and I hit the fire brigade up for a couple of hundred bucks. That is how we get our money. We have not got any funding at all.

Melina BATH: So a recommendation from our committee back to government – because we are a multiparty committee here – is: if you are going to ask the community to do something, provide a reasonable level of funding for its survival, and we want flourishing, but also some support resources for a governance framework so that you feel that you are supported.

Peter EDYVANE: Yes.

Melina BATH: I am not putting words into your mouth?

Peter EDYVANE: No.

Melina BATH: You would like to see that happen?

Dan JEYASEELAN: That would be wonderful.

Melina BATH: The next question – and I can open this up: in terms of that organisation, and also yours, Rachelle, if there is a major event, there is incident control. My office is in Traralgon; incident control sits above us. Are you invited into incident control?

Peter EDYVANE: In our case we have the RSL, and we have got that because the other major player and my partner in this, Paul Bennett, is the treasurer of the RSL.

Melina BATH: Yes, so you have got that connection.

Peter EDYVANE: Yes. We have got that building, and in that building we have got another smaller meeting room which we use, because people will come into the RSL and then come into the footy club, the whole thing. That is what we use, and we contact the Shire of Yarra Ranges, their emergency management, and liaise with them.

Melina BATH: I guess what I am going to – and this one might be something, Rachelle, that you want to buy into – is around local content, local knowledge, local streets and local people. When there is an incident – fire, floods, which we heard about in a previous inquiry – sometimes the community does not feel that the incident control centre, ICC, or the regional control centre, taps into local knowledge and expertise.

Rachelle MECHIELSEN: I was not invited directly into the ICC but had an excellent relationship with the VicPol MERC in the region – he has since moved on – and I am building a new relationship with the current MERC. He was fantastic. He would ring me and say, ‘This is what’s being talked about. What do you need? What can I advocate for on your behalf?’ He was excellent. Also, the Cardinia Shire Council have a very strong relationship with their EM team and our local emergency services, so the SES controller and the CFA captains. I believe you are hearing from Klaus from Emerald shortly. I work closely with him and also Marcus at Cockatoo. So whilst we are not directly in the ICC, we leverage those local relationships to make sure there is feedback up and down.

Melina BATH: Yes. Do you feel that feedback is getting up to that –

Rachelle MECHIELSEN: Not enough, no, and it is relationship dependent. As I said, I had a fantastic relationship with the VicPol MERC. He has moved on; now I have to start again. Whereas if there was a framework involved, a conduit for that communication –

Melina BATH: A more formal –

Rachelle MECHIELSEN: Yes, it would not be relationship dependent.

Melina BATH: You would not be knocking on the door; the door would be open.

Rachelle MECHIELSEN: That is right.

Melina BATH: In the right context.

Rachelle MECHIELSEN: Yes, that is right.

Melina BATH: Sorry, Dan, I think I have run out of time.

Dan JEYASEELAN: Perfectly fine. I resound with all of them. I think a small, we are not talking large, amount of funding – and it is not relevant to me; it is to these groups – could make a huge difference. I am very proud of Monbulk. I think it is a beautiful little community, and I think we have some amazing locals who do a lot of the heavy lifting. But if you can, from a legislative perspective or from a Vic government perspective, help these groups, it would transform things significantly and save lives.

Peter EDYVANE: Insurance is a big thing. I believe I have \$5000. We have got no insurance, and we just wing it. We just hope that we are acting in good faith. They keep talking about the good Samaritan Act or whatever, but it is all a bit grey to me. We need something on paper to give us 100 per cent guarantee that, acting in good faith, we are covered. We have not got that now.

Rachelle MECHIELSEN: I work in an executive role. I have had to leverage a lot of corporate contacts to get good deals on insurance like that. It does not come cheap.

The CHAIR: I might go to Ms Ermacora.

Jacinta ERMACORA: Thanks very much – absolutely fascinating. Thanks for the clarity of the story that you are telling – a simple framework, a small funding model and insurance. I do know that emergency services do talk about that first 24 to 48 hours. Often emergency services cannot get in before then and in some cases even longer. They also talk about the uniqueness of each emergency incident, which I know that the people on the panel would know about.

I just want to go to communications and particularly telecommunications as a small aside from that. What has been the response during the various incidents but also subsequent in relation to those businesses? Have they been assisting communities to plan for the future as well?

Dan JEYASEELAN: The short answer is no. We have had multiple meetings. Basically we have had meetings with different key stakeholders, and we even have a fantastic local MP who has been trying to really champion this for us to get backup communication or at least backup power for the communication towers. But there are multiple steps. That is why I made that simple request for something to bypass, because there are messes. As Peter said, it is on domestic land or private land. There are other key players. There are insurance issues. There are other layers that complicate our communication dilemma, so if that could be bypassed with satellite phones or something else, that would make a big difference.

Jacinta ERMACORA: It sounds like there are layers of bureaucracy within the communication businesses. I wonder: are they focused enough on preparing for the future or even supporting communities for future incidents, or are they more focused on just responding as it happens?

Peter EDYVANE: They have been responding as it happens. The first storm we had was terrible, and they were going to play merry hell and change things, and we had another one a couple of years later and things had not changed at all. We lost comms again, and we fear the next time around the same thing will happen again.

Jacinta ERMACORA: Would you recommend that communication companies strengthen their engagement with communities and also get more involved with community preparation between incidents? Would that be something you would advise the committee?

Rachelle MECHIESEN: Absolutely. We are aware that telecoms are federally legislated. We would like to see the telcos compelled to have a seat in the ICC or the state control centre and be a part of the response, because at the moment there is nothing compelling them to do that.

Jacinta ERMACORA: Right, yes.

Dan JEYASEELAN: I could be completely wrong – as I said, this is completely out of my area – but from what I understand I think the landlines had some legislative requirement to have redundancies, whereas I am not sure if the current systems have any requirement for emergency backup. That is the issue. It is not about the commercial viability of systems and so on and so forth, but it is about the requirement that, if we do have an emergency, we have access to communication.

Jacinta ERMACORA: Yes. We know with the NBN, when it was being introduced or first drafted, that for properties in rural communities that were not able to get access to the NBN, the NBN were required to provide satellite access under legislation. It sounds to me like it would not be that much of a stretch to strengthen that same principle in the emergency space.

Rachelle MECHIESEN: Cockatoo was told that Telstra were going to strengthen their battery capacity in the local towers after the February event. In the most recent August event, the towers went down faster than they had in the previous events. So if they did anything, it was not effective.

Peter EDYVANE: The sad thing is, with the infrastructure as far as the towers go, the towers are not falling down, not being hit by trees, everything is there, it is just the generators; the batteries run out. There are no generators for a lot of them. They run on batteries and the generators run out of fuel or they are not working, so they need to have a continuous secondary supply of power to this infrastructure, which they have not got.

Jacinta ERMACORA: Would you say that they are an essential service but they do not have adequate redundancy and emergency responses to match that essential service status?

Peter EDYVANE: Without a doubt, yes.

Dan JEYASEELAN: Yes. I do understand that. I know that we are short on time. I know that this is supposed to conclude at the end of the financial year next year I think it is, but if something can be done about communication sooner rather than later, it will be life-saving. If we can get something in action before that time – because we are just lucky. That is what it is. We have been so lucky that nothing has actually happened: that no-one has had a massive heart attack or that no-one has been crushed by a tree and we have not been able call anyone. That is what we are – we are lucky. If we can somehow get that organised asap, that would be wonderful for the community and multiple other communities.

The CHAIR: Thanks. Ms Lovell.

Wendy LOVELL: I was just going to ask about your connections with the ICC. Did you say that you were actually located within the ICC with some of your people?

Rachelle MECHIESEN: No.

Wendy LOVELL: During the floods we heard different scenarios from emergency groups with their ICC. In Shepparton it worked particularly well. There are good connections. We have an incident controller that is quite experienced and fairly local, and everybody knows him, so all the groups felt that they were well supported by the ICC. It was not the case for Echuca, especially for the volunteer fire brigades and the SES, and it was not the case in the Mitchell shire. I was just wondering about your local relationships with your incident control centre, where your incident control centre is actually located and how it works.

Rachelle MECHIESEN: It is in Dandenong South, so it is nowhere near the hills. It is a 30-minute drive away; it could be an hour and a half if there are trees and powerlines all over the road. It is in a suburban area, so not anything like this area. The people who are working there have not had to drive through and see what is happening to get to that ICC. As I said before, our connection through to the ICC is purely relationship based with the heads of local emergency services.

Wendy LOVELL: Okay. Did you not feel very well supported by the ICC?

Rachelle MECHIESEN: No, I did not. I think that is because they had a lack of understanding of what was happening on the ground here. I think the local heads of emergency services were advocating and communicating well. I just think there was a big gap in understanding. People outside the hills had no idea what was happening in the hills. People were ringing their employers and saying, 'I can't come to work; I've had no power for a week,' and they were like, 'What are you talking about? We don't know anything about that.'

Dan JEYASEELAN: I second that, because I live off the mountain, as you do –

Wendy LOVELL: Yes, as you said.

Dan JEYASEELAN: and you have got no idea until you are actually in this setting and you see the level of devastation and therefore have that understanding of people literally off-roading it to get to work and trying to go past significant devastation.

Peter EDYVANE: When we lose power, we do not talk about it in hours, we talk about in days and weeks.

Wendy LOVELL: Yes. I think that experience is very much what we heard with the floods as well. ICCs which were embedded in communities worked well. ICCs that were remote – like Echuca was managed from Bendigo; it did not work.

Peter EDYVANE: The local connections are a big thing – local knowledge, local connections. If you know the person you are talking to or the people you are dealing with, that connection, things just go so much more smoothly.

Wendy LOVELL: Yes, absolutely.

Peter EDYVANE: But that is just networking or whatever you want to say.

Rachelle MECHIESEN: Understanding.

Dan JEYASEELAN: Communication, yes.

Wendy LOVELL: Thank you.

The CHAIR: Thanks. Mr Berger.

John BERGER: Thank you, Chair. Thank you all for your appearance today. I think my question is more directed to you, Peter, and it is about generators. It seems to be a bit of a flavour today, hearing some of the concerns people have got with them in relation to maintenance of them, knowing their generator capacity, whether they have got inverters and whether or not you can refuel them when they are hot. Would a recommendation out of this committee be to put together a program to give people just some general basics

about what generator operation would be? I understand that Bunnings might just come and give you a bunch of generators and say, 'Here, hope for the best.'

Peter EDYVANE: Exactly. We were dropping off generators to people that had never even see one before. We dropped them off recently. In the storm we had three weeks ago there was a lady in Silvan who had no power, and we had to drop one off there. She got online, and some person trying to do the right thing dropped one off and it would not start. Then he went, 'Oh, it's too hard.' They contacted us, and we managed to get them through the fire brigade. All the people in the hills now actually are getting the direct plug-in points. It costs about a thousand bucks, something like that, to put a point in. You get a generator, plug it into your carport and it runs half the house. It runs your lights and things like that. So a lot more people are buying generators and using generators. But you are right; when we had the storms a lot of these community groups and Bunnings and people like that were saying, 'There's 20 generators. Off you go.' They were getting dropped off to people who needed them the most. But then there are a lot of issues that go with that, not just the actual use of the generator. They were getting knocked off.

John BERGER: Yes. I think my concern is that if there are older generators being distributed around through the community, they do not have the proper safety things with them.

Dan JEYASEELAN: Absolutely.

Peter EDYVANE: That is a good consideration with the generators, because they are being used more and more and more now. Dan is worried about some of the effects of that. A lot of my friends now – Dan's surgery – have had to put a generator in. I have got a generator. We have got a couple in case one breaks down. We are running leads from our house to the neighbour's house and things like this.

Rachelle MECHIESEN: In the 2021 storms there was a house fire in Cockatoo caused by a generator. In the February storms this year there was another house fire in Cockatoo caused by a generator. There is a real gap in community education: what is safe, what is appropriate, what I can do and what I should do.

Dan JEYASEELAN: Absolutely, John, the education would be wonderful. The other thing I want to highlight here, which I think everyone will agree on, is the generators are part of the equation. I have a generator, and we can power our site, which still does not fix the NBN and still does not fix mobile towers. Lots of hills residents or businesses et cetera have some backup capacity, but it still does not fix the potential risk issue.

John BERGER: Thanks, Chair.

The CHAIR: Thank you. Ms Broad.

Gaëlle BROAD: Thank you very much. I just want to echo comments that have been made. I have got family that live in the region, and they have been involved directly with you guys. I just really want to say thank you for the work that you have done and continue to do by being here today, because we recognise there is a lot of volunteer work that gets done. I want to just understand your groups and how they function. With your checklist, what are the first things that you are doing? Say, the trees are down. What is the original checklist that you are looking at to get off the ground?

Peter EDYVANE: We have actually got a bit of a spiel. Every member has got a hard copy, or there is one at the police station and a few other places. We have actually got steps available as to what we do, and Paul Bennett and me are the main ones, because we have got the contacts at the CFA and police and Parks. We sort of make the call the night before, and we will get on WhatsApp and say, 'Who's around tomorrow? It's going to be bad – windy with storms coming up' or 'We're going to have a TFB' or something like that. We work out who is around so we have got an idea. We monitor it until the next morning, the next day. If we think things are starting to develop or the flags are going to go up, then we will get some of the RSL and they will start following this checklist step by step, and off we go.

Melina BATH: Peter, can you provide that document to our committee?

Peter EDYVANE: Yes.

Melina BATH: Thank you.

Peter EDYVANE: One of the first things is to notify the shire and emergency management. We WhatsApp all the members about what is going on, get some people up to the RSL to open that up and get things going there and contact some of the footy club members, the committee members, to open up possibly the footy clubrooms. But our place of last resort is the footy oval, and we do not tell people to go there. We want people to go off the mountain. But we know from local experience when these things happen, fires happen, people go to the footy ovals. We had a fire in Emerald about 15 years ago, and between Monbulk and Emerald it was only about 5 acres. People filled the Emerald footy oval up with horse floats and cars and whatever, and it was going to get worse. We know that will happen. We do not want people to go to the footy club or whatever, but we know they will go there, and if they are there, then that is when we are going to open the buildings up and they can use the buildings and things like that. But that is how we get off the ground.

Gaelle BROAD: And just on that, Monbulk has relatively new facilities there near the oval. Is there any equipment in there that would help it be that resilient point that you could go to during an emergency?

Peter EDYVANE: Well, it is in a very clear, safe area, so it is an awesome place of last resort. It has got 16 showers in it. It has got a commercial kitchen in it. It has got air conditioning in it. We asked the shire to put in a generator when they built it, and we are still fighting the shire to put a generator in. They will not do it. They want to do solar, and we are arguing that solar will not last because in an emergency, if people are using all of the equipment, and usually it goes all night, the batteries will go flat. But it is like banging your head against a wall, because they have got other ideas too about having power hubs and things like that. The best they are going to do is put a plug-in point and bring a generator up, but the trouble is if we have a big bad fire day or a wind day, there is no access. So it is banging your head against a wall sometimes. But getting back to how we activate, that is how we activate. So amongst ourselves, we know how we activate, and we follow this plan and off we go.

Gaelle BROAD: Rachelle, what about you?

Rachelle MECHIESEN: Our group is similar. We would start a few days before when there is a severe weather forecast – who is around, who is able to pick up a trailer? We try and have our two trailers dispersed, so one in Cockatoo, one in Emerald, in case we cannot get to one. So who is around, who can transport a trailer, where do we think we are likely to need to go? We communicate via text message because when there is no internet and no mobile data, occasionally you will get a text through, but it is still extremely unreliable. And basically the same sort of thing as what Peter has described – we also have a handbook and an operating framework that I am happy to share with the panel.

Gaelle BROAD: Just driving in here today I saw the emergency bushfire place of last resort sign, the big building on the corner. Is that equipped at all for disasters? How does that function?

Rachelle MECHIESEN: The one in Emerald?

Gaelle BROAD: Yes.

Rachelle MECHIESEN: The Hills Hub we have mentioned before does not have a generator, but the football club on the opposite side of the oval does, and that building is set up to be the community relief centre. There are solar panels, batteries and a generator that will kick in as soon as the power goes out, and that will be the community hub. There are showers there, there is a commercial kitchen, the same sort of set-up – open space, car parking. The Woolies is across the road. Cockatoo has a slightly different setup, but it is much older infrastructure there. That works essentially the same way.

The CHAIR: That is your time, but if you would like to keep going –

Gaelle BROAD: Look, I was just interested in as far as communication or educating the community goes, because during a disaster everyone knows, and like you say, with repetitive disasters you get that experience. But what work is being done to educate the community to become more self-sufficient? I guess I am just interested – they come to the main street, an emergency reaction. SES does some information kits and everything, but do you feel there is much communication being done in the quieter times to help people prepare?

Peter EDYVANE: Our group does not. Our group feels that it is not our job to be doing that. We have got a Facebook page. We do not do that, and we want people to leave the mountain if a fire is coming. We do not want to encourage people by saying, 'If a fire starts, come to the footy oval. We'll have this going, we'll have that going. We'll have a barbecue going; come and grab a sausage.' We do not want that. But we know people will turn up there. For those people that do, we will have the building open and things hopefully running.

Gaëlle BROAD: So whose role do you see it as being to educate? Because I guess it is different for different events, isn't it? A windstorm is going to be different to a bushfire, but do you have any clear guidance on who should take that role?

Peter EDYVANE: Not us.

Rachelle MECHIELSEN: I think the existing emergency services and the local governments do a great job in that space. I think actually engaging with people who want to be educated is easy. Engaging with people who say, 'It won't happen to me. There'll be a fire truck at my house, and the relief centre will be open' – you are never going to get the attention of those people, and that is the hard bit.

Dan JEYASEELAN: Could it be incorporated in the VicEmergency app, where something could be done for these communities where there could be some information – this is just hypothesising – where we could actually have some details saying 'Your best option is'? Obviously we tell people to get out of the area et cetera, but could we have some framework put in?

Peter EDYVANE: The shire actually do that. When it happens, they put something on the website to say 'Monbulk's open between this hour, this hour and this hour' or, I do not know, 'Olinda or whatever is open, Emerald's open.' They do say that, but getting back to our original thing, if we have got no comms and we have got no internet –

Dan JEYASEELAN: It is redundant.

Peter EDYVANE: Yes.

Rachelle MECHIELSEN: I send volunteers up to the local supermarket to stand there because that is where people go in Cockatoo. They will go to the supermarket, so we go to them rather than them coming to us.

Peter EDYVANE: That is why we bought the sandwich boards. I mentioned before we bought 10 of them when we got funding from Bendigo Bank. We just write up what is going on, where they can go to charge up their points, where they can go to grab a shower, where can do this, that and whatever. So we just put them on the main street and whatever, and they can follow those. But that is our thing back to insurance – when we say, 'Okay, if you want to go and charge up your phone, go to the footy oval,' if somebody gets run over, they will say, 'They said to go, then I got run over by a car.' You know, it opens up Pandora's box. That is why insurance to us is a really big thing – coverage, or an assurance that we are covered.

The CHAIR: All right. That is the end of our session. Rachelle, Dan and Peter, thank you so much for the evidence you have given today. I think it has been exceptional and exceptionally useful. We really appreciate it. You will receive a copy of the transcript in about a week or so to review before it is published on the website. The committee will just take a short break to reset for the next witness.

Witnesses withdrew.