Summary of feedback from The Hills community engagement 4-5 May 2024

The Network Outage Review Panel attended Monbulk, Emerald, Gembrook, and Cockatoo for engagement with the community across Saturday 4 and Sunday 5 May 2024. Over 85 community members attended to engage with the Panel. The following document is a summary of feedback received from this engagement.

Planning, Preparedness, and Mitigation

> **Preparedness includes activities taken to prepare for and reduce the effects of emergencies by having plans, capability and capacity for response and recovery. Mitigation is the elimination or reduction of the incidence or severity of emergencies and minimisation of their effects.**

You said:

- *"Community needs support and 'expertise' to plan our own way forward for energy resilience – community knows the outcomes wanted but doesn't know what technology or how to get there."*

- *"People are being proactive and getting generators".*

- *"I would like to know what type of generator or power bank I should get to mitigate prolonged power outage".*

- *"I'm concerned for people in our community that do not have the means to be resilient".*

- *"The Community House (at Upper Beaconsfield created after the 1983 bushfires) has no backup power. Therefore, Upper Beaconsfield is less prepared locally for an emergency."*

- *"We have an aging population. We have people who are frail, infirm, and dependent on external support to go about daily lives. Not tech savvy. Then you take communications away - they are most at risk."*

- *"Individuals should know who they can go to within 500m and where can they drive to for their own safety".*

- *"We need more conversation about how the community can help itself".*

- *"Putting high voltage lines underground would assist in repair speed in treed areas".*

- *"Trees coverage in bushfire prone areas - the bushfire commission recommended power lines underground. The sewers, water, utility providers are underground."*

We heard:

- The capacity to respond, the impact, and the trauma of the event, were compounded by the loss of other essential services. Continued operability of radio, telecommunications, fuel stations, supermarkets and water and waste water services are critical to the community during prolonged power outages.

- Community and community groups reported they have a good idea of what they want in terms of preparedness to power outages but need support in realising what is the best technology to implement or pathway to success. They are also looking for support to invest in these outcomes.

- Preparedness planning for a multi consequence event like a storm with communication loss had not been sufficiently tested.

- Community sentiment was that they must chart their own survival plans because emergency services can't guarantee they will be able to help during storm events.

- Many community members identified that they had their own preparedness measures, including battery backups and generators, whilst others felt that they didn't have the means and weren't able to do more.

- Each of the four localities identified strong community preparedness. Both formal and informal groups were active to support planning and response. Community reported a broadening of existing groups (eg Fireguard groups) to be more community and multi-hazard oriented rather than just bushfire.

- Back-up systems at community facilities and hubs, and investment across the whole area, is reported to be at different levels. Particularly, more local hubs and community access points (with backup power and telecommunications) were seen as needed across the broader geography and townships.

- Individual households (especially newer residents), businesses and public facilities (e.g. schools) would benefit from preparedness and response plans that include storm events, prolonged power outages and telecommunications outages.

- There was a strong desire across the localities to have powerlines undergrounded.

Community hubs and facilities

You said:

- *"Local hubs are more than just the "community centre" - they are the supermarket, bakery, cafes, and pubs"*

- *"This facility (hills centre) was closed".*

- *"Council will close community centre on extreme fire days which is counter to the purpose of the resilience hub".*

- *"Council decisions about their facilities don't make any sense."*

- *"Need clarity about what community's role in regard to staffing during events".*

- *"Community hubs should be advertised in the community and explained".*

- *"Main street - get them connected ASAP".*

- *"When main street went on temporary generation, some shops went on and some didn't. We also need schools to have power for normality".*

We heard:
- The community would like greater access to community hubs and facilities in emergencies.

- Community want access to tools (funding and expertise) to be self-sufficient in a prolonged power outage.

- The Monbulk, Emerald, Cockatoo, Gembrook, Upper Beaconsfield communities have identified key infrastructure in the main street, like the supermarket, butcher, pharmacy, doctors, and fuel station, that they would like supported with backup power, ensuring that businesses can stay open, communities retain their essential services and stock doesn't go to waste.

- There was an expressed interest in the main streets being enabled with plug and play connections for rapid connection to large generators.

- The Monbulk community has identified key emergency relief centres required during power outages and would like more support to enable them to provide adequate services and facilities.

- The Gembrook community identified that improved preparation and consistent planning for events as well as the town's main street better set up to support them.

Network Outage Review

Readiness

> **Readiness increases to ability for a timely response with activities immediately before and in anticipation of a potential or actual emergency**

You said:

- *"They should have told us that the comms were going to go down, they would've known in advance"*

- *"The most debilitating aspect of the blackout was no mobile reception – went out quickly when power went out",*

- *"Initial information is critical to our response".*

- *"Storms are now worse than fire because in a fire you get warnings and can prepare".*

We heard:

- Community expects a much greater reliability of telecommunications than power.

- Community feel that telecommunication businesses should inform community in advance of service failing where they can monitor this remotely.

- Community would like better forewarning about severity of storms and other weather events impacting their area to help them with planning and keeping safe.

Network Outage Review

Response

> **Response is the action taken during and in the first part of an emergency to reduce the effects and consequences of the emergency.**

Private backup systems and generators

You said:

- *"Refuelling locally became a problem as fuel stations were not able to deliver fuel without power to pumps. When temporary generation was available for the fuel stations, they could only accept cash as telecommunication was still down.*

- *"We had battery and solar and for the entire black out, we never ran out of power. We were supplying freezer space for neighbours and charging their phones".*

- *"We don't want a generator and wouldn't feel safe having one".*

- *"I can't leave generator on overnight".*

- *"Its an inconvenience running a generator plus needing to refuel it, fuel was difficult to access".*

- *"Most storm events create prolonged power outages in Monbulk".*

- *"Eventually I just aimed my car and pushed it until it rolled down the hill and I just hoped there was fuel there."*

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We heard:

- Home generators help to maintain operation of key appliances (eg freezer / refrigerator), However they can't run all appliances, and not multiple large appliances at the same time.

- Maintaining access to fuel for generators (petrol, diesel and gas) during a prolonged power outage is critical to community's ability to remain in their homes.

- Not all community members identified generators as a suitable option for their circumstance, noting concerns including the refuelling, safe management, noise.

- Battery and solar systems worked well for residents who had clear access to sun, but not all sites in the hills are suitable for solar panels.

- Effective use of home generators requires pre-event electrical works including isolation switches and wiring directly into the house.

Community volunteer response

You said:

- *"Community volunteers know the community and the vulnerable people in the community but don't have access to the [formal] registers".*

- *"Community volunteers can assist with welfare checks".*

- *"There are less people assisting in the township committee as personal resilience dwindles".*

- *"People are becoming less resilient, and more dependent on the community facilities in times of crisis".*

We heard:

- Community volunteer groups provide a real opportunity to augment existing emergency response capacity:

  o They can supplement the capacity of formal emergency management services and respond flexibly to where the needs are.

  o They can be trained in managing spontaneous volunteers and donations.

  o They are known faces and provide reassurance to their community in times of crisis.

- The Community reported that new and reinvigorated community and emergency volunteer groups not tied to traditional response organisations are uniquely placed to support place-based planning and response.

- Demands on community groups are increasing during emergencies, with a decreasing number of volunteers.

- The community would like to see greater incentives for community volunteers to support retention and growth of the volunteer base in each community.

AusNet response

You said:

- *"Eventually text message from AusNet let us know power would be out for 1 to 2 days."*

- *"Went for drive around, went to McDonalds to try to call AusNet again."*

- *"We heard nothing from AusNet on the ABC".*

- *"Some of AusNet messaging had all the warmth of a thrown knife".*

- *"We know not to trust expected time of restoration".*

- *"The AusNet app is useless. It points you to the wrong place, will often tell your power isn't restored when it is … Gave up looking at it as it bore no resemblance to what is happening."*

We heard:

- There was a divergence of views from community on AusNet's response to the event – with some complementary of the response, while other highlighting shortcomings.

- The community would like to see AusNet's physical and visible presence during power outage events.

- More accurate, tailored and timely communication from, and access to, AusNet is required for the community to make the best decisions for themselves.

Safety

You said:

- *"I was hyper alert trying to work out a plan to keep my husband alive without internet or mobile phone access."*

- *"Messages from AusNet were not accurate nor reflective of our reality of lines on the road."*

- *"Lines down all over street but didn't see AusNet for a week – people in street cleared the lines. Rang AusNet three days later and told six times not to go near the lines due to safety but that was impossible".*

We heard:

- Downed powerlines caused significant safety concern for the community. Community wants faster assessment and response to rectify downed lines and better communication of

information around the status of downed lines to enable a more effective response from other agencies.

- Alternate communication modes are required to improve the visibility, welfare, and safety of responders and community members.

Communications

> **Responding agencies require communications to respond well and make informed operational decisions. The community needs information to make informed choices about their safety and to take responsibility for their own recovery.**

You said:

- *"Risk someone will die is extremely high because communication is down".*

- *"Emerald Fire Station had no internet/phones even though deemed a major site."*

- *"We had sporadic communications for 3-4 days in Monbulk".*

- *"Council engaging with community during emergency via emails which didn't get through because people had no power".*

- *"Really scary with no communication".*

- *"Need to ensure backup generation on NBN nodes and that there is a plan for refuelling".*

- *"Make sure communications towers in the area don't fail when there is a power outage"*

- *"if we are forced to use the mobile phone network then it should be 100% reliable."*

- *"Key issue is comms as we are totally reliant."*

- *"Short term back up of telcos very important."*

- *"Mobile towers should have much better back up".*

We heard:

- Effective communication of information during an event is essential for keeping community members safe, connected and mentally well.

- The community wants better pre-warning before a telecommunications outage.

- When telecommunications are out, the community needs alternate communication modes such as notice boards and community meetings.

- The community expects a very high level of reliability from telecommunications, higher than the expectation on power reliability.

- Maintaining telecommunications for emergency services is a critical infrastructure priority. The loss of multiple pieces of critical infrastructure made the experience worse.

- Fibre to the premises (and not the node) or satellite internet at key emergency services sites are seen as essential to support their function. They can also support other agency and community communications access. These links need to be funded effectively.

- Telecommunications and electricity supply underpins the communities' access to money. The community want improved access to banking and financial services during emergency events so they can purchase the products and services they need.

- Most organisations communicated through electronic platforms during the event which was ineffective due to telecommunications and power outage.

Coordination

> **Coordination is bringing together of people, resources, governance, systems, and processes, to ensure effective response, relief, and recovery from an emergency.**

You said:

- *"Should we go or stay?"*

- *"Didn't know what was happening".*

- *"Had to drive to Ferntree Gully to find out what was going on".*

- *"Without comms emergency services couldn't coordinate a response."*

- *"Central sites in the community. Early identification and response and community guidance on what is available is needed."*

- *"Police were good but didn't know what was happening".*

We heard:

- The response within local councils, emergency services, and the community needs to be better integrated and coordinated. There should be better clarity about roles and responsibilities.

- Community members identified that the initial response from locals was great, but additional complexities occurred when local government and authorities were involved.

- Better communication and coordination of relief measures needs to occur. This could be achieved through better 'cross promotion' of relief services amongst the network and responding agencies websites.

Education and schools

You said:

- *"Very important to get schools back up and running in an emergency, routine is important for kids".*

- *"School closed therefore I needed time off work to look after kids".*

- *"Schools should let community know if there will be teaching or a supervised day".*

We heard:

- Communications plans for the schools were ineffective during the event as they relied on access to the internet.

- School closures have a substantial impact on families, as children miss critical learning days, and parents must take off work to care for children. In some families both parents are emergency responders and/or community volunteers impacting their ability to support the community response.

- Parents of older school children had to stay home from work as it was unsafe to leave their children alone without a means of communication.

Relief

> **Relief is the provision of assistance to meet the essential needs of individuals, families, and communities during and in the immediate aftermath of an emergency.**

Compensation/Insurance/AusNet

You said:

- *"There is no clear info about whether you're eligible for compensation and it feels like you have to fight for it. Eventually I gave up".*

- *"It should use a day rate, x days/y rate."*

- *"We were rejected because it was based on number of hours, not days".*

- *"The Prolonged Power Outage Payment needs to be simpler".*

- *"Needs to be pro-rata - if impacted during day, then should be counted, not 24-hour period".*

We heard:

- Claims processes need to use simpler language.

- Compensation needs to better account for actual losses incurred.

- The community had diverging views about the Prolonged Power Outage Program (PPOP). Some were happy with the speed of assistance. The community however, wanted to see:

    o Shortening of the compensation timeframe due to losses incurred during the event.

    o More flexible eligibility criteria to accommodate shared account holders or properties operating under dual purposes (e.g., business from home).

    o More responsive and timely resolution of PPOP applications, particularly more complex cases.

    o Easier access to resolve application issues.

    o Better communication on PPOP eligibility and application progress.

    o Proactive engagement with customers eligible for PPOP.

o Consideration of PPOP amount being evaluated pro-rata.

- More generous Guaranteed Service Level (GSL) payments are required on Major Event Days to cover losses incurred.

- GSL payments as a reduction in bills does not provide support for the immediate costs the community is incurring.

- Small businesses want better support and to be provided with the right information, welfare, and financial support. Insurance for many businesses is limited and unlikely to cover the reasonable costs of damage incurred.

- Community members want an easier way to navigate the complexities of insurance processes after these events.

Wellbeing

You said:

- *"I was hyper alert trying to work out a plan on what to do to keep my husband alive without internet or mobile phone access".*

- *"Had friends without power for weeks in Cockatoo - It affects your functioning."*

- *"I'm worried about older people in the community".*

- *"Event led to trauma in the community and had to fight for assistance afterward".*

- *"I received no contact for my husband as a Life Support Customer".*

We heard:

- Smaller areas felt less visible and had to travel significant distances to access support due to access roads being blocked by downed trees and powerlines.

- Community hubs with back up power and telecommunications are important for these events.

- Life becomes even more challenging in a prolonged power outage. Regular tasks including washing clothes becomes impossible without power.

- Life Support Customers would like improved welfare services including physical check-ins during prolonged outages. Better communication with life support customers should be prioritised.

- The community felt proud and were appreciative of their volunteer services and resilience. They want greater support for these services in future events, including to support regular check-ins with community members.

- While there were positive experiences and a great appreciation of the trauma support services provided to the community, greater access and better coordinated 'on the ground' trauma support and welfare check-ins are needed for future events.

Use of gas and alternate fuels

You said:

- *"I used gas for cooking and hot water".*

- *"We cook with gas. We need to keep gas. Would be too difficult without. We need both for redundancy".*

- *"In 2021, having a fireplace kept us warm and meant we were happy to stay at home".*

- *Our wood heater was necessary in 2021".*

- *"Until electricity becomes more reliable, we'll stick with gas for heating and cooking."*

We heard:

- Many residents highlighted that when the power was out, they were reliant on gas for cooking, hot water and heating in winter.

- It can get very cold in the Hills. One of the primary concerns for the communities was keeping their homes warm, especially if an event were to occur during winter. This was a key source of reluctance towards electrification and the adoption of batteries and renewable energy sources.

Recovery

> **Recovery means assisting of persons and communities affected by emergencies to achieve a proper and affective level of functioning.**

You said:

- *"Different agencies didn't take responsibility for tree falls and dangerous trees".*

- *"Emergency website had lists of trees down and time to clear very useful".*

- *"Volunteers could have been utilised for tree or veg clearance".*

We heard:

- Better coordination of recovery efforts, information, and resources was needed.

- Local community groups should be used to collaboratively guide recovery. The community want better information and guidance to support customers who need to resolve damage on their side of the meter to enable faster reconnection.

- The community wants more coordinated efforts from local council.

Vegetation and debris management

You said:

- *"What will we do with trees on the road?"*

- *"There was one massive tree, 3 cars high, that took days to get sorted".*

- *"There are trees on an angle, and we feel like we are running the gauntlet and know they are going to fall".*

- *"Trees should be looked after more and more proactive works are needed. Residents have to complain to get vegetation works."*

- *"Still have debris in Cardinia but Yarra Ranges has completed clean up in 4 weeks".*

- *"The night the tree came down there was no wind, it had obviously been damaged by a prior event".*

- *There are only two other narrow roads to get through Emerald if the main road is blocked – if people had been injured by falling trees, they had no way of communicating to emergency services."*

We heard:

- The community wants identification and rectification of any trees weakened by the storm to mitigate any potential impact on any future events.

- Differences in approach and timelines for debris clear up by councils was highlighted. Community wants to understand more about when and how debris will be cleared up.

- The four localities expressed a lot of concern regarding access to their townships during storm events, with trees falling and blocking roads greatly restricting access and making driving much more unsafe.

- The community found it difficult to locate information regarding whether a fallen tree on a road had been identified as needing to be cleared as part of the recovery effort. The communities would like to see physical signs of acknowledgement placed on trees and additional signage used on roads to indicate that there was no through access.