T R A N S C R I P T

LEGISLATIVE COUNCIL LEGAL AND SOCIAL ISSUES COMMITTEE

Inquiry into Homelessness in Victoria

Wangaratta—Thursday, 12 March 2020

MEMBERS

Ms Fiona Patten—Chair Dr Tien Kieu—Deputy Chair Ms Jane Garrett Ms Wendy Lovell Ms Tania Maxwell Mr Craig Ondarchie Dr Samantha Ratnam Ms Kaushaliya Vaghela

PARTICIPATING MEMBERS

Ms Melina Bath Mr Rodney Barton Ms Georgie Crozier Dr Catherine Cumming Mr Enver Erdogan Mr Stuart Grimley Mr David Limbrick Mr Edward O'Donohue Mr Tim Quilty

WITNESS

Mr Lenny Jenner, Acting Chief Executive Officer, Towong Shire Council.

The CHAIR: Good afternoon. Thank you so much for coming. What is your badge?

Mr JENNER: It is just a little pair of scissors.

The CHAIR: I see that. Because you like scissors?

Mr JENNER: I have a range of brooches that I put on for different times.

The CHAIR: Right. Fantastic! I love that. Today is a scissor day—to cut to the chase. Lenny, thank you so much for making the time to come and see us today. As you can see, we are the homelessness Inquiry. Have you got a PowerPoint as well?

Mr JENNER: I have.

The CHAIR: Excellent. Lenny, I will just explain that all evidence taken at this hearing is protected by parliamentary privilege, and that is through our *Constitution Act* and through the standing orders of our Legislative Council. This means that any information you provide today is protected by law. However, if you were to repeat those comments outside, they may not have the same protection. Any deliberately false evidence or misleading of the Committee may be considered a contempt of Parliament. As you can see, we have got the wonderful Hansard people here who are hanging on every word you say. We will send you a transcript of today, a draft transcript, and I encourage you to have a look at that and make sure that we represent you accurately. Ultimately that will go up on our website and form part of our Inquiry and hopefully form part of our solutions to this wicked problem of homelessness. But if you would like to go through the presentation, then we will open it up for questions.

Mr JENNER: Okay, thank you. Are you happy for me to refer to you by your first names?

The CHAIR: Please refer to us by our first names.

Visual presentation.

Mr JENNER: Terrific. Thank you, Fiona. The presentation that I want to give today, there are people that are eminently more qualified to speak to this topic today than I am, but those people are meeting for the first time with the inspector-general for emergency management in Towong shire today. And Juliana Phelps, the CEO, is in fact returning from a brief break this afternoon for that meeting.

The CHAIR: Great. That does take precedence.

Mr JENNER: I suppose the other two introductory comments that I would make is that it was wonderful that the Committee reached out to in many respects look a little bit more laterally about the question of homelessness, because homelessness in the context of an event is in some respects a bit different. Some of the wicked problems are incredibly difficult to resolve, but this one lands and it is sort of like 'Well, how do we respond to this intense, very difficult circumstance in people's lives?'. So in many respects the comments that I am making are really just framing the context of that today to give you a deeper insight in terms of what has happened in terms of the fires in the Upper Murray area of Towong shire.

In some respects, picking up on your point, Fiona, that you have underlined in terms of the importance of giving accurate information, what I am providing today is in fact a picture that we have got part way through what is called a secondary assessment after the fires. So where does a secondary assessment fit in? What happens is that a fire occurs or a flood occurs—a major disruption occurs—and there is a primary assessment that is undertaken by the lead emergency response agencies in order to determine whether it is safe for people to go back into that area. Then, later, they say, 'Okay, it is safe. Here's the opportunity to pass over and start a recovery program'. At the time that you get into that recovery phase you start a secondary assessment, and that is done property by property. So a group of people—and people are doing it today and every day for the next X number of weeks—are essentially a multidisciplinary team going property by property looking at the impact

of the property on that family, the business, the farming, if it is the case of a farm, and then putting that together through a software program called Crisisworks that every agency uses. Then Crisisworks essentially enables you to start thinking about where are the areas that you want to invest to have the greatest impact in terms of how that emergency has impacted on the lives of individuals and communities. Is that clear?

The CHAIR: Yes, thank you.

Mr JENNER: So we are part way through that secondary assessment, so some of the information I will refer to today has a clearer perspective on what the impact of the fires have been, and other things, where I have identified with an asterisk, give us a sense of where we are up to in the secondary assessment. So the final picture will be revealed over the next weeks or months.

Keep in mind as well that making contact with people is not always easy. If someone has had their property burnt and you turn up to the house today or the property today, they may not be home for lots of reasons, some of which may be to do with the home being uninhabitable and therefore the person is not there. On other occasions it might be that people do not want you there, and that in its own right presents a whole range of challenges. So that is the context if that makes sense.

This is the first slide, and I will forward a copy of this through to people. I would have done that, but I just did not have the chance to do it.

The CHAIR: Wonderful. That is fine.

Mr JENNER: There is a couple of things that I would not mind particularly emphasising in this slide. So the fire started on 30 December, it was contained—formally contained—on 24 January and it was almost a month until we got to a point where we formally transitioned from response to recovery. That is the first point I would underline. That was because of how so much of the municipality is. If you have travelled through there, there are lots of beautiful valleys, an incredible amount of forest right up to the roads, and you can imagine with an intense fire like this that travelling back through those roads—and I will tell a couple of stories about that—creates an urgent and immediate danger for public safety. So it is all very well for emergency service response officers and staff to go out and work in that environment, but if you are sending a whole range of staff and people are going to go back into that environment, then there is a scale of risk that is involved in it.

Towong is an interesting municipality, and you can see the towns that have been severely impacted and many of the little tiny hamlets and farmlets in between. This is the Towong shire, so around 6000 residents, and each resident has about a square kilometre. Seventy-five per cent of the municipality is public land. Our key industries are really a range of different areas of agriculture and tourism, and I will speak about that further in the presentation. Leading up to the fires we actually had an area of prolonged dry conditions. So just to make sure that you have got a sense of that, if we went south from the most east end or right-hand side of Towong shire, you would go down to East Gippsland shire, so a point of connection. A couple of little quick images—this is a town called Colac Colac, and I will come back to it later. They are not very clear.

The CHAIR: It was not clear, yes.

Mr JENNER: But you get a sense of substantial change, the substantial impact of the fire. I went to Corryong yesterday, and just to sort of give you a sense, I went early and I drove into Corryong just as the sun was coming up. I would not have wanted in a thousand years to have been in Corryong on the days around the fire. Corryong is a town in a valley of around 1600, 1700 people. It is very much a flat valley. Yesterday it was beautiful because we have had the rain and the grass has grown, or the sense of greenery is there, but it is a town totally surrounded by hills and mountains. Those hills and mountains must have been incredibly frightening just in terms of the whole area around the town and then the fire jumping into the town and burning sporadically houses and so forth in the town.

So in terms of where we are up to, as I said, in terms of the secondary assessment, there have been 95 houses directly impacted, 68 of those totally destroyed and 27 made uninhabitable. So this is important. This is in the context of the secondary assessment. We think we will be finished the secondary assessment in about three weeks time. Forty-nine of the 95 are the primary place of residence. So those others would be potentially a second house on the property. It might be that people have got their farm, but they might have a bed and breakfast or another residence provided on the property. There was a significant interruption to power supply,

water supply and landline and mobile telecommunications services, and that extended for weeks. The mobile services are very difficult at the best of times, so this was particularly concerning for people. The road closures had an enormous impact on people's lives. The emergency services often prevented people from going back into their homes, but there are lots of little goat tracks et cetera and people found the way to get there.

In terms of the impact on farm or agricultural properties 5500 stock are dead or missing, and I have given a little bit of a breakdown of where we have got to at the moment with information through Agriculture Victoria; 2000 kilometres—and I think this is going to be a gross underestimate—of boundary fencing, so fencing around the perimeter properties, and 1500 kilometres of internal farm fencing; 20 000 tonnes of hay and silage; 35 000 hectares of grazing pasture burnt; and 926 hectares of crops, and you can read the rest.

I grew up in Gippsland and my heritage in terms of my mother is from a dairy farm. Whenever I work in a location I try and find out as much as I can about that area, and to my surprise when I came up and started doing some work in Towong shire, the Upper Murray area is in fact the most productive of any beef or dairy area in Victoria. So if you put together the 35 000 hectares of grazing pasture burnt and you put that with the 20 000 tonnes of silage destroyed, there is serious pressure on people who are on the land. So many people have in fact chosen to find another place for their stock to live for a period of time because there is nothing for them too. The average price, as I understand it, for someone to relocate their cattle or their cows is about \$80 000. The maximum grant available for people through the Federal Government is \$75 000. Now, that is just for that. That is the total grant.

The CHAIR: Right, yes-for everything, not just for cattle.

Mr JENNER: In terms of the impact on tourism, we had an extended pre-fire period of serious smoke leading up to the bushfires. There had been a number of dry lightning strikes in the months leading up to the fires, and those fires were identified as being under control—they may or may not have been under control, but they were perceived to be not a risk given that they were in remote areas of national park or whatever. The fires occurred in one of the peak tourism periods. Certainly in the post-fire period and even in the lead-up to the fire period there was an increased public fear, particularly given the fires in New South Wales, and people starting to say, 'Well, do we want to really go to a remote place?'. And some of the people that were providing some of the more group accommodation were also concerned about, 'Hey, there's a two-edged sword here: an upside for our income but at the same time there are some serious safety issues'.

There was an extended period, as I said earlier, of road closures after the fires. There was a dramatic impact on the waterways and fish habitat, and the indications are that the minimum period for those waterways to recover in terms of fish stocks is three years, primarily due to the impact of what is running into the waterways in terms of toxins from the fires.

There have been some positives associated with the recovery effort in the sense that many people have gone in to assist and therefore they need accommodation, and therefore people that have been in the tourism industry who have had primarily a focus on tourists coming in to look around have got a focus on people coming in to assist in the recovery program. That said, people who are interested in rekindling that tourism connection, people that are picking up the sorts of messages that are coming out of other levels of government around, 'Hey, get back into these communities because they need you', there are people that are wanting to travel back into the area but there is not accommodation available in terms of tourism accommodation.

The CHAIR: Because the workers are now taking that?

Mr JENNER: Yes. In terms of community wellbeing, there has been an extraordinary demonstration of community resilience. I could sit here until the cows come home, so to speak, in terms of being able to just relay story after story after story.

The CHAIR: They are not coming home for a while, though, Lenny.

Mr JENNER: It is just extraordinary. In terms of the number of livestock that were killed or maimed and needed to be euthanised, one of the big pushes or calls from the community was, 'Can you assist us with burying those livestock?'. But anybody's capacity to actually go out and dig holes could not be done because of the level of risk associated with going even on main roads into local roads and onto properties, where trees could have fallen over at any point in time. And so how was that done? The people did it themselves. So at a

time of most significant stress and challenge the extraordinary way in which the local community responded was quite incredible.

There have been enormous challenges for community wellbeing and maintaining positive mental health. Part of my trip to Corryong yesterday was just to touch base with some of our team. About 40 per cent of the staff that work at Towong have been directly affected, and for those people, many of them have put aside their own needs at the time of the fires and in the immediate recovery period and have responded to the community because they are part of that community. They have in many instances put aside their own needs, as I said. But in the aftermath of recovery people do get frustrated, people do get angry, and council, given we are running the recovery centre, staff are often the point where that is expressed. So for people who have given their all to be on the receiving end of what is completely understandable is very, very difficult.

Coming to your particular interest, at this stage, again, in terms of the secondary assessment, there are 49 families that are in some form of temporary accommodation at this point in time, but that is in caravans, that is in tents. We have no evidence of anybody sleeping rough, so to speak, at this point in time, but there are certainly people living on uninhabitable properties, and what length of time it takes to be able to be in a circumstance that is far safer and more secure and meets their needs remains to be seen.

I have mentioned a little bit of this: Towong is the smallest rural council in Victoria in terms of budget and staff resources. Approximately 40 per cent of council's workforce live in the fire-impacted area. Many of their homes have been directly impacted. They have continued to provide essential services, and I have talked about the impact of fear, fatigue, grief, anger and the stress of supporting others through their experience.

That was probably where I wanted to leave it. There are other parts of the presentation that I did not really put down, but it is more just an opportunity to engage about some of our ideas around how we might be able to support people just in terms of—I would not say 'short-term accommodation', because by the time people work through statutory planning processes and work out whether they are going to stay or leave, where they are going to rebuild on the property and whether they decide to rebuild where the house was, I suspect that we are talking two, three, four-year sort of time frames where there will be a need for it. I would not describe that as short-term housing, but you know what I am trying to say.

The CHAIR: Yes.

Mr JENNER: And those people needing accommodation—the people coming in and providing that recovery role in terms of labourers, builders, tradespeople in whatever form it takes and then the whole range of recovery people—I think we are right at that front end at the moment and we have already got serious challenges, so the question is, when this starts to ramp up there is going to be a serious problem.

The CHAIR: Thanks, Lenny, and thank you for that snapshot. I think it is really special just to see at this point in time where you are up to, and obviously a clearer picture will emerge over the coming weeks. Is council seeing this as a moment in time, as an opportunity, to build up some housing stock, or are you looking at releasing some land to be further developed? Because obviously you are going to need housing over the next three years.

Mr JENNER: There are two responses to that, Fiona. The first is that we are hopeful that possibly even today or tomorrow, but probably by the end of the week, we might get some positive news out of the Minister for Planning in relation to a planning scheme amendment that is potentially imminently going to occur.

The CHAIR: Let us know if you do not get that.

Mr JENNER: The second dynamic, because that is going to take some time, and this was the other part of the presentation that I was keen to explore, is one of the fantastic grants that has been announced by the Premier since the fire is a grant to Colac Colac Caravan Park.

Ms LOVELL: At last.

Mr JENNER: To me I think that caravan parks have actually got part of the answer. Now, it is not ideal, but in these circumstances we are not going to be able to get to the ideal. The grant that has been announced will provide a fantastic opportunity for the infrastructure at the caravan park to be upgraded. The question would

then become: how might we complement that infrastructure in terms of something well designed, of different sizes, with the capacity to accommodate a family, with the capacity to accommodate older people? And we have already heard of people through the fires who would have never made this decision who have moved into aged accommodation back in Albury or Wodonga as a result of this incident. It would not have been their choice.

Mr BARTON: The decision was made for them.

Mr JENNER: Absolutely, and I suspect that we are going to see that. As the weight of what has unfolded is going to be realised I think that we are going to have potentially a number of people saying, 'No, it's all too great'. If we were able to present some alternative accommodation options, I am not sure that that would be a choice that would be made by people.

The CHAIR: And if it means that they can stay in the townships—

Mr JENNER: Or in the immediate area—

The CHAIR: In the immediate area that they—

Mr JENNER: Colac Colac is a township just before Corryong, for example. There are two or three other caravan parks in the area, one that has been almost completely destroyed.

Ms MAXWELL: I gather too, Lenny, that for those who have had to go into aged care, that means signing contracts. That means a commitment. It also means a financial commitment, so it is not something that they can easily reverse should they then wish to go back to their community.

Mr JENNER: At a time that is incredibly stressful, because they are not going to know the answer, Tania, in relation to what the insurance outcome will be. There is a whole range of stressful decisions, I think, in there.

Ms MAXWELL: And it is a very difficult time to be making those long-term life choices for those people, so an alternative would be seen, I think, as a great opportunity.

The CHAIR: Yes, it is awful to be making decisions like that at that point.

Ms LOVELL: Lenny, has there been any discussion with the Government about providing more social housing in the area as a bushfire recovery effort?

Mr JENNER: There has not been at this stage, Wendy, but it is a good question. It is almost as if we have not caught up with it. The only real question we have turned our attention to at this point in time is the caravan park option, but it is certainly one that I can take back in terms of feedback or follow up with your office.

Ms LOVELL: Do you know if there were any department homes that were destroyed?

Mr JENNER: I suspect that there were some connected to Corryong Health and Tallangatta Health, but only small scale.

The CHAIR: And presumably some of the housing that you may build now while people are rebuilding may actually be able to revert back into social housing or into those areas.

Mr BARTON: Great presentation. It is a great snapshot to see what is happening, because we do not always get to see that stuff, so it is really important. But through all the devastation and harm we have now got an opportunity to look at how we do housing for those who were there and social housing and opportunities that can go through there. That is more of a comment, but thank you.

Ms VAGHELA: Thank you, Lenny. That was very informative. Now, what, 49 residents are living in different types of accommodation? Some of them are in tents. So because of the scale of the damage that has happened to the property, you say it will take about two to three or four years before they have their own accommodation or the recovery has happened or the rebuilding has happened. So people who are in tents, how long do you think they have to be in tents for?

Mr JENNER: I think the caravan and tent-type arrangement is really just, 'Hey, we are just trying to come to terms with things. We want to remain at the property until we have got an alternative'.

Ms VAGHELA: So with this government assistance that you mentioned regarding the caravan park, there is a possibility of these people being transferred from the tent to caravan parks, then? Do you think caravan parks would be a better option than tents? Do you think there is a possibility of them moving from tents to a caravan park?

Mr JENNER: What I am saying is that if we were able to progress the caravan park option and the range of different cabin-type accommodation, which is really like a small house. One of my previous jobs was in the lovely area of Queenscliff, and the council managed a number of caravan parks. They included two- and three-bedroom little-type units on the caravan park. That would be a far better option for people. It would give them a base for a period of time and provide the opportunity for tradespeople to come in and work at that property.

Ms VAGHELA: They will need other assistance as well—other than the accommodation—because if they have lost livestock or crops, then there is no income coming.

Mr JENNER: Yes. Depending on rain, again, it will take a couple of seasons at least. For some people who have had significant livestock burnt it will take an enormous period. The silage that was on one of the previous slides, that is an enormous loss in terms of it is an important resource in terms of where there are dry periods over an extended period and being able to continue to feed the livestock. There has been an enormous effort in terms of truckload after truckload, lorry load, of feed coming in from other places that have reached out and are providing that support.

Ms VAGHELA: So have you thought about the partnership between private organisations? Say, if you go to BeyondHousing and council and State Government and build something now to help these people, and down the track these properties can be used for social housing. Have you thought about that option?

Mr JENNER: No, I have not thought about that yet. It is parallel with Wendy's question, but it is one that we will take back and give some more thought to.

Ms MAXWELL: I guess you have got some people, Lenny, for who farming is in their blood. I guess many farmers have lost so much that they do not want to have to leave their property too. And for whatever is left, some of them will not want to leave because they do not know who is coming onto the properties. Do you find that? That people have that sense of wanting to be where they feel they belong even though there is that devastation around them?

Mr JENNER: Yes, for sure. There are also people that despite best efforts, Tania, do not want to be part of any offer at this point in terms of support, and that is really difficult. In the media yesterday and the media last night, in light of Minister Foley's announcement around additional funding to mental health services, there was a poignant piece around a young person that committed suicide in the Corryong area and the impact that that has had on young people in the area. A highly regarded young person. We have got two trainees at work that have both been incredibly devastated by that event. People's level of resilience at this point in time, the sense of normality in people's lives—those things often give you a sense of a bit more structure and a bit more capacity and ability to deal with those things, but in the context of the level of stress that people are experiencing at this point in time those things can be incredibly stressful.

The CHAIR: And you can understand why people actually go back into their shells and just stay and retreat like that for now. Hopefully they will be able to come back out and make use of the resources that hopefully will be on offer for them.

Ms MAXWELL: Do you feel that the shire as a whole has been supported through this process? Have you identified areas, particularly now as we move on? Once things come into the recovery process all of a sudden now it is all about coronavirus. Do you feel that you are still being supported and do you have gaps in that support that you would like to raise?

Mr JENNER: It is a complex question. It sounds like a simple question but it is a complex question. I think that the fires that Australia has experienced have probably generated a significant opportunity to again stop and reflect on what every level of government needs to think about in the context of emergency management and

prevention and response and recovery. At the national level we have had new structures created for the first time as a result of this experience. The level of activity or the involvement of the army has just been something that everybody has never experienced, but it has been an absolute godsend in some respects. In a probably unintended sort of way, at a time that people were feeling most vulnerable, having a group of 200 people from the army living at the Corryong rec reserve provided a really strong sense of security for people. So at the national level there are new things being introduced. At the State level there is already the inspector-general of emergency management being tasked with stopping and thinking about what we can learn in terms of response and recovery from these events, and that is being undertaken in a really constructive, positive way, and Bushfire Recovery Victoria creating a set of structures and processes to support local council—all really positive things.

That said, I would make a comment that I think that for the smallest group of local government authorities—I suspect that it goes beyond that, but for the smallest group of local government authorities, of which there are 19 in Victoria, and Towong is the smallest of the rurals—the challenges associated with being adequately prepared and responding and then recovering, I think there is still a way to go to work out what is the best way for that to be achieved. The State will stop and reflect on what is the best way to do that. Providing the opportunity for the council to stop and reflect on that and tell a council story rather than tell a story that is framed—appropriately—by the State Government in relation to how do we best respond, I think there is something still there in relation to that. Yes, we have got to sell a State story because they have lead responsibility in relation to emergency management, but I think we also have to tell a council story and a local community story about—

The CHAIR: And it will be different, the story of East Gippsland.

Mr JENNER: Yes, but they will complement one another.

Ms LOVELL: Lenny, if you were the minister for bushfire recovery and response, what are the three things that you would identify that you would do for Towong shire to help in the recovery process? Feel free to add something that is not being done or feel free to pump up something that is being done but not adequately.

Mr JENNER: State Government or any level of government?

Ms LOVELL: State Government. We are State.

Mr JENNER: Okay. Then I am sort of answering the question but in a slightly different way, Wendy. I think that there is a critical issue in relation to the Insurance Council of Australia and the way in which insurance is going to be managed in any event, but it will be an issue in this event. Therefore the role that the State can play either through the Federal Government or with the Federal Government in looking at that question, I think, is a critical one.

The second would be that I think that there is a range of issues that occur immediately after a major incident like this that are about how we quickly and effectively address access to essential services. Some of those things are done particularly well—like telecommunications, because people know how to do it, it works, people get on with it—but things like water can be really challenging because, yes, people can have a reticulated water supply and the water authority will get in and fix it, but if people do not have a reticulated water supply, it becomes challenging. If people need water for their animals, it becomes challenging. So that is an area that I think needs a bit more attention. It is a difficult one because who do you give that to? Who is responsible for it? If I have had all my water tanks burnt, how do we get that back working effectively and quickly? If I need water for my stock, how do I achieve that if the watercourses, the waterways, are significantly contaminated?

I do not think that we have worked out yet how to most effectively support people in terms of their psychosocial, emotional support and mental health needs in the aftermath of any fire.

Ms LOVELL: Okay. So that would have been a stunning PAEC performance by a minister, because you have just really given me a very serious answer to a question that I asked without specifically answering the question that I want. What I want to know are the three things for Towong shire. So these would relate to any fire anywhere in Australia—very important issues—but for Towong and the people of Towong, what would be the three things that they need immediately now—

Mr JENNER: Number three first.

Ms LOVELL: Yes.

Mr JENNER: Number three.

Ms LOVELL: I am not talking about general types of things, like-

The CHAIR: Well, he is saying that in Towong they need water, psychosocial and insurance.

Mr BARTON: In Towong they want the water.

Ms LOVELL: Yes, I know, but the people themselves—obviously these are things that are needed and are needed by everyone in any bushfire response, but for Towong shire in the way of infrastructure and in the way of special supports and stuff like that.

Mr JENNER: All right—I think the accommodation one that I was referring to earlier. A second one that is being presented as a priority to the State Government at this point in time is investment. So this is going to be a long-term—two-plus years; that is not long term—

The CHAIR: No. The cows will not even be home.

Mr JENNER: But having a recovery hub that can effectively support people and then transition that community in the aftermath or as the recovery needs are reduced is a critical one. And, Wendy, without echoing too much, I would probably say the number three again.

Ms LOVELL: Okay. Psychosocial, that is fine.

Mr JENNER: So finding better ways—more effective ways. I heard a story yesterday from someone who was trying to get access to counselling support and had registered her need for it. She can clearly identify that the experience is eating away at her and she is still waiting for that two weeks later.

Ms LOVELL: Yes. A very important issue. Thank you.

The CHAIR: Lenny, thank you so much. As I said, this was just wonderful to get a snapshot of homelessness in something like this state disaster. Please feel free to keep us informed on how that is going. We will be really interested to see how that progresses and, I think particularly around, for us, given what we are looking at, the accommodation component of that response. So please stay in touch with us, Lenny.

Mr JENNER: Thank you, Fiona. I am aware, Wendy, as well that you have reached out a couple of times. Thank you.

Ms LOVELL: I have been up there a few times and I speak to Juliana, yes.

Mr JENNER: Thank you very much, Fiona. Thanks, everybody.

The CHAIR: Thank you.

Witness withdrew.