

## Summary of feedback from community engagement Mirboo North - 23 and 24 March 2024

The Network Outage Review Panel attended Mirboo North for engagement with the community across Saturday 23 and Sunday 24 March 2024. Over 80 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:

- *"Communication is so important. Everything was so much harder once comms went down ...There needs to be more resilience from telcos to operate for longer after these kinds of events"*
- *"Better preparedness is required for radio and priority towers for communications"*
- *"When the mobile phone network drops out the whole community gets anxious"*
- *"It is very isolating with communications and there is a need for connectedness"*
- *"We practice scenarios where there is communication loss but we never tested such a widespread a long duration loss".*
- *"The hardest issue was the petrol station in town being closed because there was no power – so I was unable to operate"*
- *"Vegetation management needs to be realistic. Keep trees below powerlines and remove the bad trees"*

## We heard:

- Mirboo North is a resilient township with a strong sense of community and self-reliance.
- The capacity to respond, the impact and the trauma of the event were compounded by the loss of other essential services such as communications and water. Improvement in the resilience of radio, telecommunications and petrol station facilities to power outages is sought by the community.
- Many community members intend to implement their own preparedness measures, including battery backups in the future.
- Preparedness planning had not sufficiently tested such a significant communication loss.
- Individual households and schools would benefit from preparedness and response plans that include storm events and prolonged power outages.

## Readiness

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

## You said:

- *“There were children still in the local swimming pool when the storm went through. There was no warning.”*
- *“The BOM has an advanced notification system which wasn't being used and they didn't provide updates on the storm enough.”*

## We heard:

- The community would like better forewarning about the severity of a storm and other weather events impacting their area to help them with planning and keeping safe.

## Response

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

### Ausnet response

#### You said:

- *“My experience with the AusNet restoration crews was exceptional – well-handled and made me feel confident that the community were being looked after”*
- *“I was very pleased to see Ausnet people coming to inspect. They showed us a map of dots where lines were down.”*
- *“The AusNet CEO visited the town hall and gave community context and really spent the time. It was very helpful and best part of the day.”*
- *“Where was AusNet?”*
- *“I couldn’t get information on the AusNet website after my power went out and the call centre took too long”*
- *“AusNet advised that a return to service would be a week on day three. We took action and cleared out freezers only to have supply restored that day - with that food wasted.”*
- *“I felt like communications, particularly around life support customers, wasn’t appropriate. I received an initial message asking if I needed help ... but there was no recheck throughout the duration of the event”*
- *“The High Voltage Generator installed by AusNet on the main street was excellent. If it could have been hooked up earlier, it would have been even better.” “Generation from the main street was provided by AusNet, which helped a lot”*

#### 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. AusNet’s response was viewed more favourably by community members who experienced AusNet’s physical presence in the community.
- AusNet should prioritise being physically and visibly present during power outage events to support the community.

- More accurate and timely communication from and access to AusNet is required for the community to make the best decisions for them.
- Better communication with life support customers should be prioritised.
- AusNet should continue to prioritise early deployment of high voltage generators to restore priority areas within a township.

## Safety

### **You said:**

- *“It was anxiety inducing driving over downed powerlines” “Is there a way AusNet could have notified emergency responders and the community that wires were not live” “There were powerlines laying on roads for days”*
- *“The usual response practice was irrelevant due to the scale of how many lines were down. We opted to just shut down roads to manage the risks of fallen powerlines and trees to take out the guesswork”*
- *“With no communications we had no intelligence of what occurred on the ground”*
- *“Practical help is required to operate temporary generators” “Generators are unsustainable due to running costs, access, and capability requirements, as well as leads running everywhere” “People were unsure how to get a temporary generator. Fuel for generators was needed during the event”*

### **We heard:**

- Downed powerlines caused significant concern for the community. They want a faster response to assess and rectify downed lines and better communication and information about the status of downed lines to address this concern and enable a more effective response from other agencies.
- More resilient communications are required to improve the visibility, welfare, and safety of responders.

## 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:**

- *"Losing comms was much worse than losing power"*
- *"The biggest issue was the loss of communications and disconnection from the people"*
- *"Comms is so important to help with connection. Everything is so much harder once comms went down. Communications is a higher priority over power ... I fear now about how to communicate in future events if the power is out."*
- *"Communications being down meant it was harder to share the trauma experience"*
- *"The AusNet outage text message updates were ineffective because of communications delays"*
- *"Lack of access to cash was an issue early in the event because I couldn't access my electronic banking or an ATM"*
- *"There were 4 days without fuel, ATMs, phone access, no shops or cooking. Accessing this required a 2-hour trip to Morwell"*
- *"We want better information about weather events with potential to impact our area."*
- *"AusNet Call Centre could tell the customers to call council to see if they have a generator program for emergencies."*
- *"There is digital exclusion for people who aren't on Facebook."*

### **We heard:**

- Effective communications are important in remaining connected with the community during significant events - the community wants better pre-warning before a communications outage.
- Functional telecommunications are required for an effective response and multiple telecommunications levels failed during the event. Maintaining telecommunications is a higher critical infrastructure priority than power for the Mirboo North community. The loss of multiple pieces of critical infrastructure made the experience worse.

- 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 which became ineffective due to communications and power loss, so information relating to the event was difficult to access.
- When telecommunications are out, the community would like to have alternate communication approaches used such as notice boards, letter box drops, and community meetings.
- The community felt AusNet's website and call centre and the Council website could be better utilised as centre points for information during the event and in the post-event recovery.
- Simpler language is required when communicating with the community.
- The community wants compensation for communications outages.

## Water

### **You said:**

- *"The potential for no water immediately after the event was very concerning"*

### **We heard:**

- Community members were concerned about the potential and actual loss of water supply during the event.
- There was concern about health issues arising from the community over the event associated with drinking mains water.

## **Coordination**

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

## You said:

- *“Everyone focussed on the fire in the Grampians ... who knows how many homes were impacted in Mirboo North”*
- *“The initial response from locals was very special ... then government and local authorities swung into action”*
- *“Did the government know how severe things were here ... did the comms outage prevent them from knowing?”*

## 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. It was questioned whether emergency services knew the extent of the situation in Mirboo North due to communication outages and felt that attention was focused on other events.

## 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.**

## Small generators

### You said:

- *“Practical help is required for operation of temporary generators”*
- *“Generators are unsustainable due to running costs, access, and capability requirements, as well as safety issues with leads running everywhere”*
- *“Residents didn’t know how to access generators”*
- *“Generators in storage should be distributed with fuel to carry people over”*
- *“They needed to get generators there quickly and that would have made things easier”*

- *“Websites should link to information regarding available support during prolonged outages and availability at the time for things like generators”*

## **We heard:**

- Better communication and coordination of relief measures including small generators needs to occur. This could be achieved through better ‘cross promotion’ of relief services amongst the network and responding agencies websites.
- There are divergent community views on small generators. Some want generators sooner for relief, while others acknowledge practical constraints to generators as a relief option.

## Compensation/Insurance/AusNet

### **You said:**

- *“Very happy with PPOP speed, applied on Friday and received on Tuesday, then bought new tires.”*
- *“There was a delay in getting my prolonged power outage payment”*
- *“I experienced multiple issues trying to claim PPOP. AusNet informed me there were issues with the individual's account which was frustrating, especially following the storm impact and a recent death in the family”*
- *“AusNet payments were slow and frustrating.”*
- *“The claims process is not suitable ... there's too much government speak. The messaging needs to be reviewed to focus on the what, who, and how”*
- *“Half the town in lower socio-economic background and losing food is a real financial hit and there's no ability to buy gear to cope”*
- *“Community starts feeling the cost of a power outage from 48 hours to 72 hours onwards due to food spoilage, generator fuel usage and other incidental costs.”*

### **We heard:**

- Claims processes need to use simpler language.
- Compensation needs to be better to 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



- More flexible eligibility criteria to accommodate shared account holders or properties operating under dual purposes (e.g., business from home)
- More responsive and timely resolution of PPOP applications, particularly more complex cases.
- Easier access into the distribution business to resolve application issues
- Better communication on PPOP application progress
- Proactive engagement with customers eligible for PPOP
- 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:**

- *“Resilience hubs are practical for everyone ... they need to be a whole state effort as we don't know where the next event will be”*
- *“Wanted more people on the ground talking to people to provide emotional support and undertake welfare check calls.”*
- *“Thought there should be more counsellors on foot as they are kind people”*
- *“Trauma services should have been coordinated to come here”*
- *“There was no support for volunteer resources and they didn't have power or other services.”*
- *“Who was doing door knocking and checking on people”*
- *“Communications being down meant it was harder to share the trauma experience”*

## We heard:

- Resilience hubs with secure electricity access are important for these events and should be developed across the state.
- Life Support Customers would like improved welfare services including physical check-ins during long outages.
- 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.

## Recovery

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

## You said:

- *"The locals did a great job – clearing roads, using chainsaws, fixing fences ... it all just happened"*
- *"Spontaneous volunteers were great but there was a challenge to coordinate them"*
- *"The shire representatives are not local and don't know the area or people well to coordinate their efforts"*
- *"I needed information about how to get the power back on at my property"*
- *"Local Council/s are siloed. Better social planning is needed" "The shire doesn't care"*
- *"The town needs to know what's happening, and who we can contact through multiple avenues. We don't hear much from the council"*
- *"We had no access to showers and hygiene" "Why weren't showers on trucks brought in for residents. Work in clearing is dusty"*

## We heard:

- Better coordination of recovery efforts, information, and resources was needed. Community members highlighted a need for better cross promotion of relief programs and resources between agencies and the distribution networks.
- The local Reference Group should be used to collaboratively guide recovery.
- The community want better information and guidance to support customers who need resolve damage on their side of the meter to enable faster reconnection.
- The community wants more coordinated efforts from local council.
- The community wants better access to temporary shower facilities in future events for the safety of recovery crews, and community wellbeing.

## Vegetation/Wildlife

### You said:

- *“Vegetation clearance teams would cost me \$2500 a day. I have 30 acres”*
- *“People don’t know who is responsible for tree damage, it’s unclear.”*
- *“It’s well beyond my own capability to safely clear my land with so many trees fallen ... there needs to be an extension on the green waste disposal amnesty”*
- *“My experience with the vegetation clearing crews was exceptional – well-handled and made me feel confident that the community were being looked after”*
- *“Neighbours mobilised chainsaws and tractors. Council contractors did an excellent job of tree clearing ... It took a long time to get people to come to properties and do clearance. We can’t continue to ask volunteers to keep doing this work”*

### We heard:

- There are barriers to private vegetation and debris clearance after the event. The community want to see:
  - o Better information on responsibilities and available support in relation to vegetation clearance in communities and for private properties.
  - o Greater support to undertake private clearing works, as many in the community don’t have the physical capability, training, or equipment to do this work safely and effectively. Many cannot afford the costs associated with machinery hire, third party clearing, transport, disposal works, or time lost from being unable to work.

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- The Green Waste Disposal Amnesty extended to reduce the pressure and cost of private clearing works.
- The community felt reassured as the volunteers and community vegetation clearing crews were excellent and well-handled.
- The community want to focus on restoration of the nearby forest and rehabilitation of wildlife injured in the event.
- The community wants identification and rectification of any trees weakened by the storm to mitigate any potential impact on any future events.