

Interview with [REDACTED] for Bushfire Inquiry

ANNE-LOUISE: Now just to start off with I've got some questions, demographic-type questions that usually is part of the submission process. We would ask people to complete, if that's okay to go through quickly?

[REDACTED] Sure.

ANNE-LOUISE: So in regards to the submission would you like your submission to be published? You don't have to.

[REDACTED] Oh that's fine.

ANNE-LOUISE: Would you like your name on the submission or it can be anonymous?

[REDACTED] Anonymous.

ANNE-LOUISE: I'll ask this question but I think I know the answer, were you in an area where the fires occurred?

[REDACTED] Yes.

ANNE-LOUISE: Were you involved in responding to the fires?

[REDACTED] Not actual fighting of them, no. Well -

ANNE-LOUISE: Not from an emergency services perspective.

[REDACTED] No.

ANNE-LOUISE: Do you continue to still be involved in supporting communities and individuals after the fires?

[REDACTED] Mm-hmm.

ANNE-LOUISE: Local government area is obviously East Gippsland Shire Council. Your postcode?

[REDACTED] 3890.

ANNE-LOUISE: What town is that then for you?

[REDACTED] Cann River.

ANNE-LOUISE: Up to you if you want to answer this next question, age group in decades?

[REDACTED]
ANNE-LOUISE: [REDACTED] would you like to receive the updates about the inquiry going forward?

I would, yes please.

ANNE-LOUISE: Via email? Are you okay for me to send a copy of the transcript to you via email?

Yes, that's fine.

ANNE-LOUISE: Lastly just to make you aware, obviously talking and retelling your story may bring up a range of emotions for you. If at any point you want to stop the interview just let me know, we can pause the recording. I can also provide information about support services if you require that.

I'm all good, thanks.

ANNE-LOUISE: So basically you're welcome to talk to me about any aspects of the relief and recovery and also the response, if there's things back from that time that you want to talk about. Providing examples is really useful for us, particularly things that either worked really well or didn't work so well. I will basically just be listening and if you talk about a topic that we have lots of interest in or I'm keen to get some more information I may just ask you a few more questions to talk a little bit more, provide a bit more detail but otherwise I'll just be here making a few notes and listening. So whenever you're ready away you go.

Just stream of consciousness from me. Well look, I guess I'll start from the very beginning when I was staying here.

I had decided to stay so I started bringing things into [redacted]. It's a double brick building so I did that fairly early on. I was taking a trip to get stock to Eden when the Wingan fire started and I actually had to divert coming home, I had to go around Imlay Road which is a long detour because of the fire, it was that quick. Within 24, 48 hours we were in trouble.

So when I came into town I had the pets here and everything, I stayed here on the first night but at one stage I went to the school, registered. There were people evacuated down there, that's the safer place. I came back to [redacted] to try and get some sleep and I remember seeing the weather app saying at 1:00 – 2:00 I think it was – there was a huge wind change coming through and that was potentially a very serious fire threat for us. Woke up on the dot when the wind came through, there were police dotted all through the town because they had stopped. They were on their way to Mallacoota but couldn't make their way up there so there were a lot of police services here stopping traffic coming through and when I heard the police sirens going off they all congregated at the roundabout in town and then headed to the school and I went no, I'm out of here so I went down there for that and stayed for the duration of the morning.

I've been through the bushfires here but bushfires in Beechworth when we were surrounded over there, got a lot of friends in DELWP and things like that so I know how it all works, how fires are fought, all these sorts of things. I'm pretty up-to-date with that. But seeing what's been happening in Cann River since logging has finished, and I'm not particularly pro or anti, it is what it is but the resources that have left

Cann River particularly because of logging, we don't have Vic Forests in town anymore, we've got a reduced DELWP staff. Certainly summer crew comes in but we still have a reduced staff up there and again I think it's outrageous for a place like Cann River that has Croajingolong National Park and Errinundra and all the national parks around us that we have one part-time ranger with Parks Victoria.

So the services aren't there. So the night of the fires, one of the guys who works for [REDACTED] Earth Contractors, earthmoving contractors here in town, because they get seconded to fires with their equipment, as far as I'm concerned [REDACTED] from DELWP and his guys that were here and [REDACTED] earthmoving crew, those guys, they're my personal heroes because I believe they saved Cann River, I absolutely know that. But I was talking to one of [REDACTED] guys that had come in for a break and those guys worked – I just don't know how they – I think they just survived on caffeine, chocolate and adrenaline, they just worked so hard putting containment lines around the town and keeping us safe that way. But I spoke to one of the guys who came in and he's worked with DELWP for many years and I just said [REDACTED] how many strike crews are out there?" and he said "this is it".

I am not having a go at any agency but our CFA is dysfunctional, I think there's probably two active members and the summer crew that were left here, because all the other strike teams were out further up Wingan, that direction, probably the summer crew ones that we did have here weren't very experienced so I don't know how much they actively participated. Later we got a couple of strike teams, CFA ones came in from Greensborough, Eltham, I think maybe Olinda might have been the other one so they were a huge help as well. But as [REDACTED] aid to me at one stage "Cann River would have been fine, it would have been completely protected with DELWP 10 years ago, 15 years ago when we had all those people here". That's a huge concern.

Also that the ICC wasn't in Cann River, it was managed out of Orbost and that created huge amounts of problems, I think.

ANNE-LOUISE: Were those issues about communications? What type of -

[REDACTED] Oh communications for sure but look, [REDACTED] to me all of these – it should be very individual for each place. I mean Cann River is ICC-capable as far as I know, [REDACTED] is incredibly experienced, he knows this area, why then have it based in Orbost and also bringing in people from other districts who aren't up-to-date? This was a common complaint with the Bush Nurse and other services who had to go through ICC. They change their staff every two or three days. I know they have to but you can't keep on going through the whole thing over and over again explaining to people what's going on. So that made it difficult. I strongly believe that that sort of stuff should be dealt with from the base that it is and I strongly believe that DELWP here, we are in the centre of it, we are absolutely in the centre of it, 92% of our district got burnt out and I'd say the majority of our area is bushland.

We should have an amazing facility here, we really should and I think it's just gotten less and less and less. If [REDACTED] got his business for sale, if we lose his floats and equipment and his manpower and the experience of these guys, that's another thing. You've got a lot of people coming in from DELWP who have been maybe DELWP-trained in machinery operation but they're going to be following OH and S guidelines and won't go where the

loggers would go and those guys with decades of experience and bush knowledge, they're fearless, they are absolutely fearless. So that's another huge concern that we're losing them. Again I mean Vic Forest is winding down. Why not utilise those loggers, bring them into the fold of DELWP and keep them on the ground track-clearing and all those sorts of things? But we've got to keep the equipment here because if [redacted] goes we're in trouble. We don't have floats, we don't have dozers, we're really in trouble.

ANNE-LOUISE: I think in phase 1 quite a lot of people from the community talked especially about that issue you just raised.

[redacted] The other thing too with the communications like the actual telecommunications, that was a massive issue. Where I live there's a little parking area like a little drive that comes in off the highway there and I couldn't quite understand why all of these police units were going out there and parking. It turns out because I had probably some of the best mobile reception. Those batteries were running out, we had no electricity to charge phones -

ANNE-LOUISE: Do you remember how long you were out of power for? Do you remember how long that was?

[redacted] We weren't as bad, I think it was about four or five days for us because the line up the valley wasn't damaged so we were pretty lucky but the residents, Club Terrace, I mean they didn't even have potable water and someone was telling me that they took one shower and didn't bother again for two weeks because there were dead animals in it, there was ash in it and not even having drinking water. They were relying on I think water that was being brought in by the ADF, it's not good, it's not good.

ANNE-LOUISE: Do you remember back then with regards to communications if they were down, how were people communicating information amongst your people who were there still in Cann River? How were you finding out what was going on?

[redacted] This is probably the double-edged sword but I'm fortunate in that I'm on quite a few committees so I was working a fair bit with [redacted] from the Bush Nurse. I live across the road from [redacted] so to be honest a lot of it was word of mouth. You'd see [redacted] [redacted] – that's another thing that was crazy, that when the state of emergency was declared all our emergency – like the police all left. As I said this isn't my first bushfire, I know what happens and everything so I've been through it before. It was scary, there were certainly moments of fear but I never ever felt that I was going to die. I felt pretty safe down at the school as far as that goes. But when police left and I was down at the school when the second evacuation left and all of those vehicles left and [redacted] and I did question "have I made the right choice here?" because what happened is there were people at the school – the school is a safer place for emergencies but what happened was people just took over the school and stayed when they shouldn't have stayed and I had problems with some things that happened down there [redacted]

It became that once there was no-one in authority, if you stuck your head above the parapet you were going to get it shot down. [redacted] I was suddenly "oh she's doing this, she's doing that" sort of stuff. But I was concerned because there were people there drinking, there were people there on drugs or coming off drugs. Even people who were

getting so snarky because they didn't have any cigarettes, it was ridiculous. I don't know if this is true but apparently [REDACTED] was giving away alcohol and some of these people are pretty dysfunctional anyway. Into that mix was scary, I was fortunate enough to be able to stay at the Bush Nurse after that. But I wouldn't have stayed at the school and I know other people who wouldn't go into the school because of that and people who had been there and left and I think that it's absolutely disgraceful that we have a safer place and people didn't feel safe to go there, not because of fires.

ANNE-LOUISE: Did it morph into a relief centre-type thing so instead of it being a short-term like neighbourhood safer place people felt like this is where I'm going to go and I'm going to stay here?

[REDACTED] Exactly but there were people there that really didn't need to be there, their properties weren't under threat. They were town people, some of them. Certainly where people from Club Terrace and up the valley and things like that but certainly a lot of people outstayed their welcome. The SES had set up with the local business here, Relics, they stayed and they were providing food for the emergency personnel and anybody else. So people were having a great old time down there, they were getting free food, socialising, having a drink. The other thing that was just horrifying was the number of people that the CFA just said "here, you should be wearing a jacket, have a CFA jacket". So there were all of these non-CFA, nontrained people wandering around in CFA uniforms so I don't know who they were, they could have been CFA, I don't know. Some other people who were trying to actually take charge, teenage kids in CFA jackets. I was offered a jacket, it was just absolute – that was just crazy.

ANNE-LOUISE: Who was managing the facility like who was coordinating anything or managing? Was anyone doing that? Was any agency that lead that role?

[REDACTED] No, it was pretty haphazard and so what happened was in the morning we came back, my friend and stuff, I remember [REDACTED] came back. We just decided well the power's out, we're going to lose all of our food so we made sandwiches, used up what we could, took it down there. Relics came in and did an amazing job feeding everybody but there was [REDACTED] from Red Cross who was there a lot, she did an amazing job. Then we had police liaising but again the first few nights all of these people came in, their pets came in with them, dogs fighting, cats running away. In the end the school had to replace the carpet because there was mess everywhere.

Kids after a while were just running riot. I don't know who did it but somebody broke into one of the rooms and took iPads, going into the principal's office and using it. Like confidentiality, no-one should have ever been anywhere near that admin area except Vic Pol which yes, they shouldn't have but these kids in CFA jackets who were going in there and trying to boss people around, it was absolutely ridiculous. So there was no authority once the police left, there wasn't and that's when it started to feel really a bit Lord of the Flies and I didn't feel comfortable at all.

[REDACTED]

So it's about personal safety. I'm not trying to make it out that all the residents here are like that and the stress and the fear and everything else. Yeah, it wasn't very pleasant and I think that's something we need to look at in community when these things happen, is we have to have a command chain or we need to know who's in authority like [REDACTED] yes, he's in authority, [REDACTED] at the Fires, we know those things but those guys are just flat out trying to do this stuff. But the day-to-day handling of who's in charge for food and all of those sorts of things, that's something we really need to work out which I think we're doing.

The public hall next to the school, adjacent to the school with the hall committee has got some funding and a huge renovation's been done to the kitchen there. That was used as a base for food distribution and for the fire crews coming in because they set up base camp on the oval next door, it's between the school and the hall. But we'd really like to see that hall being a functioning place and as [REDACTED] says "you've got the school as the safer place, it always will be, it's the best place but in your down time you could go over to the hall, get something to eat, have a shower, have clear places for animals, stock it up with water, food, pet food and everything for the summer periods. We need fuel". People were running very low on fuel, all those sort of things.

But one good thing that did come out of this, as a community about two years ago now the East Gippsland Shire Council used us and a couple of other areas as a model for developing a community plan. Have you heard about-

ANNE-LOUISE: Yes, I have.

[REDACTED] Yeah so I was part of that development, [REDACTED] but – so we understood that model. We hadn't put it into process but when [REDACTED] from the Shire rang me at one stage and said "we can't get out there, we can't do recovery, it's just not possible, [REDACTED] and there'd been a community meeting, they recognised five things that needed to be taken care of – this is what the community were talking about – and so she [REDACTED] to get one person for each of those five issues. [REDACTED] were meeting just about every day and it worked beautifully. We got the food organised in a more cohesive manner, we got -

ANNE-LOUISE: Do you mind telling me the five main issues that were raised?

[REDACTED] Yeah so it was basically the food, it was wildlife because there was a lot of injured – and we were worried about all of that – agriculture with people whose cattle – I think most people still had food for their stock out here but there was one guy whose cattle, he couldn't get his milk out and things like that, fencing, those sorts of things so it's agriculture. Communication, that was another big thing so we started putting out a bit of a – almost an

updated newsletter kind of thing so people knew. I'm just trying to think what the fifth – oh the health so the bush nursing sort of stuff, their role anyway. [REDACTED] came back very soon afterwards so she was here. So we just co-ordinated those things and that worked really well, I think. It wasn't perfect, obviously but it worked a lot better than just this haphazard attempt that we were all trying to do.

ANNE-LOUISE: The type of community groups or people that came together to lead these things, who were those groups or individuals if the council wasn't there to be able to coordinate and manage this relief and recovery space?

[REDACTED] It would certainly be me, [REDACTED] from Red Cross, she was involved, [REDACTED] who works for DELWP but she's a property owner here, farming family and [REDACTED] from the [REDACTED]. [REDACTED] was just extraordinary, what she did. She was probably one of the first people to go out to Club Terrace, Combienbar and just again fearless and tireless and just amazing, amazing woman.

ANNE-LOUISE: Be good to speak to her and -

[REDACTED] I would actually like to talk to her. [REDACTED] I was talking to her last night and I thought oh I think you need to talk from her experience because she's also dealing with the initial emergency but also the follow-up with health and mental health issues and things like that. That was one of her big gripes was the communication, that co-ordination of everything. That was really, really difficult. But fortunately she's got a fantastic working relationship with [REDACTED] so they had their little network going and they were really good.

ANNE-LOUISE: [REDACTED] do you think that because you had those relationships before the fire that you were able to get going relatively quickly? Like seems to me like quite a well coordinated, organised, connected community. I've had a few of these examples now which has been really interesting, about how they've mobilised relatively quickly to go into this recovery space.

[REDACTED] Yeah. Look, I think out here, because we're a remote community as well and the older locals are all like "oh here it was bad but oh" and there was this huge debate I remember hearing quite a bit was with the older locals, debating was it worse than '72, than the fire of '72? All of this sort of stuff so there's a lot of stoicism there but I think we also know out here that if you want things done you do it yourself and our towns here, we operate by volunteers. That's the way we operate, that's the way it's done. So there are those good connections there.

ANNE-LOUISE: Do you think that that community planning process had an influence on this as well?

[REDACTED] Yeah, absolutely because I think Cann River, when I first came here [REDACTED] years ago I remember it was quite a thriving, very – like I remember going down to the pub for the first time on a Friday night, you couldn't get a seat, it was absolutely packed out. There was a lot of socialising amongst DELWP and Vic Forests and the school and there was quite a lot of activity in that respect but slowly, slowly it's eroded and these things don't happen anymore

and it's become a very fractured community, very fractured. So I think that planning started to bring people back to get some cohesiveness going and certainly now that we've had a group going for a while people are recognising us as the representative group. Like Cann River's population is basically half of what the actual district is, there's still Tamboon, there's still all of those people, Club Terrace and we're all trying to unite together and that's having a really positive impact, I feel.

ANNE-LOUISE: That's terrific.

Yeah. What else can I tell you about it? Look, there's been some amazing stuff that's happened and the support we're being given by BRV and just even things like talks from He's just been tremendous and the rep group particularly again coming from the CFA have been tremendous doing community catch-ups so -

ANNE-LOUISE: Is that debriefing process that was happening?

Yeah. I mean it's been incredibly difficult because of COVID but they managed to have a face-to-face at Tamboon and we had one out at Club Terrace. We tried a couple of online ones, two for Cann River and one for the Cann Valley, Noorinbee, Chandler Creek but it wasn't very well attended but we did get some feedback. But what we went in, it was basically your experience, if you want to talk about it, what worked? What didn't work? What do you think needs to be done? And we're getting some really good feedback from that. So with the BRV we're on the tail end of incorporation of the representative group which will also be the CRC, model we've decided on, with working groups and our action plan with the Shire has got all of the information back from those meetings and those things and now it's time to get some action, get some funding and do some stuff.

Look, we are so ahead of the game. When BRV came and said "we need to have CRCs" we were like "we've basically got it". I mean there's been a lot of jumping through hoops and there's been a lot of I think rockiness along the way with BRV -

ANNE-LOUISE: Can you tell me a little bit about that?

Oh look, I think we all were just feeling like – I think put it pretty well, she's an elder her with the first nations. She's also on our and she put it well, she said "I feel like we're having to justify ourselves all the time but really agencies need to justify themselves too". I mean again there's been a lot of difficulties, it's been very slow-moving but that frustration that we just want to get on and get it done. I was in a regional CRC meeting recently with and I thought yeah look, I think this is probably true – he just said "look, really what needs to happen in these situations is initial recovery phase, you go here we go, Cann River, Mallacoota here's \$100,000, \$200,000, use it in the short term to get the things you need done straight away then after six or 12 months that's when you can start applying for grants and having to quantify that". I think that's – probably would have been a pretty good use of funds, I think, just to get us rolling because there's that frustration. We just want to get on and have it done and we're really sick and tired of talking about it.

ANNE-LOUISE: Do you have any examples because Mallacoota gave us some really good examples of where if you just had what I call like operational, day-to-day money for you guys, you knew what you needed to do, whether it be printing or comms or something, that you just wanted to do it and yet it was -

Yeah look, I think the communications, getting the newsletters out early and things like that, straight into for BlazeAid. But it's sort of the smaller communities again. Club Terrace, they're the ones that we all really, really feel for and again there should have been stuff out there straight away to support them. I know people out there and it's - what would you describe Club Terrace as? Look, there's a lot of people out there who you'd probably call them fringe-dwellers. They're out there for a reason, they don't want to be involved in community but there's a lot of people who do but places like Mallacoota, they've got the professionals, the educated, the retirees with money, connections, media connections and they've been in the media and good luck to them, that's great. But places like Club Terrace, they don't have that and I think we needed to have got in there very quickly and supported them.

I saw people the first night who came in from Club Terrace and I know some of the kids that goes to school with and they were dazed, they were just dazed. Look, the school again has just done a tremendous job with the kids, they've really done well but speaking to some people and seeing featherless birds and seeing half a dozen dead deer up against their water tank and one of the kids saw one of her sheep on fire, the tremendous fear. One guy, he's very rough but he just said "I've been shot, I've been stabbed but I've never been as scared as I was for my life that night" and then they're just left out there, they're just left out there. They are so grateful for everything we're trying to do for them, it's just unbelievable. But yes so I think those people, those places needed our support straight away.

Another thing that happens very quickly, and it makes things incredibly difficult, you have all the agencies coming in wanting to help, that's great but then you have all of these charities as well and they muddy the waters, they confuse everything and they don't ask if what we need or do you need anything, they just presume we do. Almost try and push that on you and that becomes incredibly frustrating like he was telling me, he just said look, he's just so tired and he said you don't want to appear ungrateful, and we don't, we're not ungrateful by any means but he was saying fielding calls, up to a dozen calls a day from people. He gave me an example of a Lions group somewhere, I think it was Mornington Peninsula or somewhere, rang him up and said "right, we have 17 laptops we're sending for your staff" and just said "sorry, our staff have computers, we're fine, we don't need" - "well we'll give them to your students then" and aid "we're fine, all the kids have laptops" and then they got a bit shirty, "well why don't you want our laptops?". "Well I'm sorry but we don't - we're a functioning community before this, we're not helpless at all people and that patronising nonsense wears thin very quickly.

But also a huge problem is that there are no checks and balances on who's getting what through the charity that I can see and it has created huge division and huge resentment within the community. There are people who didn't lose anything or had very little damage or very little losses who are doing very, very well at the moment, very well and the other people who

haven't applied for these sorts of things or gotten stuff are very resentful for that, very resentful and that goes deep, that goes very deep.

ANNE-LOUISE: I've heard that in some other communities -



ANNE-LOUISE: Certainly one of the aspects we're looking at is obviously that donations and -

 So much waste.

ANNE-LOUISE: Potentially inappropriate, wastage, not coordinated, not responding to people's needs. There was quite a few funny examples of ridiculous types of donations that people were given and so I think it is a really significant issue and it hasn't really resolved

itself over a number of years like do you have any thoughts on how that type of thing could be done better?

That's a really, really difficult one because I mean these are charitable organisations who have their own – but maybe that's something that government needs to communicate with or sort something out with these charities because it just makes it really difficult. It does create a huge divide and it's just a waste. I mean I remember being just outraged one night when I was back at the house and continually coming into town and at that stage we had things set up at the hall for food and we were getting fresh food and all sorts of produce there for people. I saw some people in there from further up the valley and then later that night these people are ringing the ICC in Orbost on a fairly regular basis and the ADF and things and getting things flown up in a Chinook helicopter and they've just been in town. That's just outrageous, what a waste of money. Yeah so people were benefitting fairly well but you've been in town, you can obviously drive yourself in here but you're getting a Chinook helicopter to deliver things for you. So I had to go out and talk to the cows that night.

ANNE-LOUISE: Did your community have any issues with regards to road closures and therefore not being able to access that flow of food and fuel, that type of thing? How did that work for your guys?

Look, none of us were starving. I think everybody had a fair bit of stock and probably people know to do that. But look, there was – I'm just trying to think when the first – we started getting food coming in, deliveries – ADRA out of Bairnsdale, they're a group there. They were amazing, they just helped a lot but I think the ADF started bringing things but we certainly were getting deliveries and it wasn't too long before we started getting fresh fruit. But as somebody said so what if you got to eat out of a can for a while so that was fine. Then it was coordinated down at the hall so people could come and get what they needed.

If there were any special requests people could get things like that as well but look, certainly for the first few days, yeah, there was – but again there was food being provided down at the school, things like that. There were probably a couple of people that we kept our eyes open, we delivered food to as well but again because we're a small community we know who's who. The Bush Nurse have a list of people at risk so they knew how to take care of them as well so that was all good.

But look, as far as the communication goes with the road closures there was a lot of anger – again it was shown in a couple of town meetings but it wasn't representative of everybody. I think a lot of these things, you get people stressed out and angry and they've always got the loudest voice but I know a lot of other people were just sitting there feeling very embarrassed, saying “this isn't representative of all of us”. Yes, it was frustrating that we couldn't get through but all of these people who just like “let us through, let us through, let us through, we've been here for years, we know how to drive on these roads, blah, blah, blah” but it wasn't an any old fire, it was an incredibly dangerous one in the trees and everything and I understand how it takes a long time to clear the roads. But I think there needed to be more communication of where they were at, things like that because when the convoys started going through they'd be like “there could be a convoy on Friday, there's definitely a

convoy on Friday, there's no convoy on Friday", those sorts of things and that became very frustrating for people.

But look, there's always going to be angry people who it's not working for them and they don't like it just like a few people that screamed at CFA members and stuff like that. You can't do anything about that too much, I don't think. But yeah, that communication and I think – like the Vic Emergency app is tremendous but again I think we need more communication as tailored to that community rather than just a general East Gippsland, this is what's happening. We need all of that much more pinpointed information to go out to people and that's when we got that group operational, that helped a fair bit just to say "you go to the school for this" or "this is happening" or whatever. So hopefully that will continue with our newsletter that we've now got, they're producing every fortnight, those sorts of things.

So that certainly was an issue. Fuel I think was another issue, diesel was I think still available but unleaded petrol for fuel, that just wasn't around.

ANNE-LOUISE: Did you have in your community, was there a lot of stock that were burnt and required to be buried or euthanised or anything like that?

Not that I've heard of, no. Like any bigger livestock I haven't heard of. I've heard of ducks and a few things like that but not that I've actually heard of, no. I think everyone's stock was pretty good, actually.

ANNE-LOUISE: I know the Valley is a larger area but were any homes destroyed in Cann River itself or in more of those outskirts, those Club Terrace etc?

Club Terrace I think lost 15. There were no losses in Cann River, I don't think there was any damage. I know of one woman up [redacted] who was living in a caravan and lost that and I think there were some sheds and outbuildings lost but I think the majority of the homes lost would have been Club Terrace, possibly Combienbar.

ANNE-LOUISE: Do you have representatives on your – I can remember from the other week when I met you all from Club Terrace on your committee?

We're trying hard. Again they're a very disparate group out there and a lot of them just do not want to be involved -

ANNE-LOUISE: Do you think anybody would be interested speaking with me?

Look, possibly. I think I could probably get maybe [redacted] Yeah, I'll try and get a few more people from out there. Yes because again they need to have their voice heard out there.

ANNE-LOUISE: Yes and we're very conscious of the fact that we don't want it to be just yeah, the ones that are much more capable and organised and all that kind of stuff, we do really want to make sure we try to hear from as many people as possible in the differing areas so who had different experiences and losses and so forth because they're probably the people that have got a lot to say and we can learn a lot from. It's just how you make them feel comfortable enough to have a conversation.

It's interesting, though, because you would think they're the ones that have got the most to say but they're probably the most stoic. I was amazed when we went out – I went out for the community catch-up because there was DELWP and CFA and everybody out there representing and I just thought we're going to get a huge serve here today, they're going to be so angry and we're really going to get a serve. No, complete opposite, there were a couple of things but generally they just said "well we choose to live out here, we have to take responsibility for ourselves". I was just in awe of them, I really was. Their stories of "oh well we all came to da, da, da's house and that's where we fought the fires" and "oh you saved my life, didn't you? I didn't know they were happening but you rang me and came and got me, yeah, you saved my life". Wow, you people are extraordinary.

I don't know, I was talking to somebody, "you go into BRV", "oh we're alright, we're alright". That sort of attitude. But there are others out there who they need help and I think the thing about all of the bushfire recovery and preparedness now, there's a lot of people who have never been through that before and got really scared. They're going to listen now which I hope they do. I've always said for years and years and years that there needs to be more communication about who does what during these fires because no-one has any clue, everybody just thinks it's CFA because they're always in the news. They don't understand about DELWP and Parks Victoria and Vic Forest and those. I think that needs to be made abundantly clear to people and it still amazes me even now how many people are still whinging and griping that the CFA didn't come to their property. I don't know how you communicate these things to people.

Well look, we've got some ideas starting to happen here. Tamboon just had a really good session last weekend. Again Tamboon's doing a great job of getting stuff organised down there. They've got their own association, they've got big plans for a shed, getting a tanker in there, hopefully a little auspice room for the Bush Nurse out there, stuff like that. They're really kicking goals. A floating jetty, all sorts of stuff, they've really got it going.

ANNE-LOUISE: Yeah, sounds good and again like if you're chatting with any people from these areas we really would love to hear their experiences and their suggestions.

After I finish here, Anne-Louise, I'm writing people as I think of them, I'll do a ring around and ask if they're happy to speak with you and I will pass on their mobile numbers.

ANNE-LOUISE: That'd be awesome. I had one other question just going back to – I'm interested about how your recovery got going without the council. How long was it before the council was able to have a presence in -

Oh look, it was a little while because I think things like they tried to come out in a helicopter and they couldn't get out here and all sorts of – look, I don't think it was particularly long and as I said I was liaising with every day, we were having our meetings with her every single day so look, hats off to them. There was a lot of people who were very damning of them but I just think what they did was extraordinary, I think they did an excellent job. Again no-one's ever seen a fire -

ANNE-LOUISE: Mm.

no-one knew what to do or prepared for it but look, I think they did a good job and they've certainly been incredibly helpful afterwards.

ANNE-LOUISE: That's great to hear. Yeah, no, I just think it's really interesting about that sort of conversation of "well we can't provide that co-ordination, these are the areas, can your community do it?", I think that's really interesting.

Yeah look, it was just extraordinary and I don't know if that was each area or whether it was just because was our Place Manager at that stage and she is an amazing woman.

ANNE-LOUISE: Was that associated because of the community plan? Is that how that was or -

Yeah, that's how I got to know So that worked out extremely well and as I said we had our community plan and that group already running so when BRV started the CRCs we were well ahead of the game.

ANNE-LOUISE: I was reading about your plan and that quite in the early days when I first started and my background – well my background's in local government some time back in community development and community planning and then I moved more into regulatory stuff, emergency management, local laws, environmental health but I've got this thing about the benefits of community planning and its link with emergency recovery like I think it's really strong. So I noticed that you guys had a plan and that you had a reference group and that kind of thing. I thought oh that'll be interesting to see how that works but it's very similar to a couple of other little communities up in the northeast who just were extremely well connected, mobilised very quickly, pretty much led their own recovery, got what they needed to do. Very similar story to yours in that were then questioned a little bit by the powers that be. But they're like "we've already done this work, we are the representative group" or "we do know what our community wants".

Yeah so no, I think that worked out really well and we're in good stead to move forward. I think everybody's just chomping at the bit to actually get some work done now.

ANNE-LOUISE: Yes.

Look, I think we're getting there. Look, I just think it's been tremendous in that it's really bringing the community back together again, it really is and people you probably would only say hi to on the street you're now friends with and that sense of camaraderie amongst a lot of people is really good. I think that's probably more important for people's recovery knowing that they're a part of something and they can do something about it. We're just not helpless and waiting for a hand to make it all better for us, we're very capable, independent community. Yeah, it's great if we can get on and do it, I think it gives the community confidence.

ANNE-LOUISE: Definitely. Look, if possible it would be great to have a conversation with the bush nurse because there's that whole side of that mental health and health support

services that we're interested to understand how that's being working at those local levels, how some of those other organisations have fitted in etc.

Yeah well I know the Royal Flying Doctor Service has been terrific. During the early stages when we had a few meetings and things I can't remember – that might have been Royal Flying Doctor Service but there were a couple of counsellors just sitting in and just keeping an eye out, seeing what was happening. But Royal Flying Doctor Service counsellor who comes out, he came to a few times and I chatted to him but I saw a presentation he did specifically for Club Terrace and I was just blown away, it was just such simple but profound, what he said, I was just amazed.

ANNE-LOUISE: He's very, very good.

Yeah, very -

ANNE-LOUISE: Very good.

Look, all of that support has been absolutely amazing. Look, in a lot of ways Cann River was fortunate that the built environment, we didn't lose a lot, things like that and we got BlazeAid in very quickly and got a lot of the fencing done, all these sorts of things. Again Club Terrace is a big priority and I think just the economy. I've been days this year. Between bushfires and COVID it's really been difficult. Again I am just so grateful because DELWP – DELWP could have probably at some stage brought base camp in and brought all of the things to cook out of there for their personnel but they didn't so the hotel and bakeries and myself and Relics and others, we did very well from DELWP with doing lunch packs and the meals for staff. So incredibly grateful for that then all of the government support with grants and funding, tax breaks.

ANNE-LOUISE: How's that been for you - personally has that been relatively easy to access with regards to those grants? That's another part of -

The business grants haven't been too bad but I have had so many problems with JobKeeper. I finally got paid oh probably two months ago and I'm now again on a high priority list because something's gone wrong and I haven't had my JobKeeper payment for August yet. I don't know what, my accountant says "you are the most difficult case and I don't know why". She's in contact with the ATO all the time and that's been a nightmare. But look, I'm okay but it's just like oh boy that's been difficult. But look, as far as I know everybody else's was fine. I think the businesses are going to survive here but I think now that the border's reopening everybody's wow, it's amazing and I think we're all preparing to get absolutely hammered.

ANNE-LOUISE: I think so.

We're really going to get hammered so I think there's like it's going to be great but oh no.

ANNE-LOUISE: It's going to be flat out, yeah.

That's good but we need long-term things of the economy.

ANNE-LOUISE: The other thing just to get your thoughts on, we are definitely keen to come out to see people face-to-face like obviously we understand that doing things like this is not appropriate or adequate for a number of people, particularly somewhere like Club Terrace, that would be something that would be better to visit face-to-face then -

Oh absolutely. That's the thing, we've got to go out to them, why should they all be coming here? Also you've got to realise too that it's a long way and there's some kids up in Combiobar and I've figured it out, I think they spend – it's close to 100km they travel each day to go to school. Also a lot of people can't afford it. If they're going to do shopping or anything they're going to Orbost, they're not coming to Cann River so there's a lot of things like that so I think we need to be going out to them more.

ANNE-LOUISE: So we definitely will be coming up next year so I don't know if I said this at the start but we've got two stages of our engagement so this stage now that started back in August which was looking about emergency relief and the first six to eight months of recovery then we'd like to come back to communities next February, March and say "well it's now 12 months down the track, what might have changed in that recovery space that we need to talk to you about?". We may still be able to get out your way this side of Christmas, we're just not 100% sure yet. I live in regional Victoria but the others are in Melbourne and there's a few other bridges to cross.

You might not want to be out here with the traffic. Caravans have already started. I mean they're the bane of my life, to be honest. Whereabouts in regional Victoria are you?

ANNE-LOUISE: I'm in [redacted] in the Macedon Ranges. Yeah so we're feeling a bit the same, everybody's like "oh the Melbourne people are going to be here soon" because we're much closer.

You're going to get it next week.

ANNE-LOUISE: Yeah, that's it which is what happened in the break between the two lockdowns before, the town was pretty crazy but it's so important for the businesses so absolutely, I understand that.

We just didn't have it because the town isn't big enough to support businesses and without the border we completely rely on through traffic but there's just nothing we can do. So myself and the bakery, we've been closed since June or something, it's been a while. But anyway.

ANNE-LOUISE: Well we'll make sure we call in for a coffee or whatever.

That'd be lovely because I have spent months painting and doing all sorts of renovation so it's looking really good, just needs people here.

ANNE-LOUISE: In regards to everybody, I said it would be good to hear from someone in Club Terrace but there's no pressure from us like if people want to talk they want to talk, we've found that generally this is quite an effective and efficient way of doing it because they

can then put in a submission and they really haven't had to write it down or anything like that. Hopefully it's a comfortable, safe space for people but again no pressure because I haven't really heard from anybody yet around the whole rebuilding – we have heard a tiny bit about the rebuilding, any issues associated with that but that's obviously something we would be interested in, understanding from people, the clean-up processes, all that type of stuff -

█ I think the clean-up process was very, very quick, really, considering how much stuff – like Sarsfield and those regions, I mean in Mallacoota there was a huge amount of stuff that needed to go. Certainly I think Club Terrace got cleaned up relatively quickly but just go out there, it's very sad. The other thing to consider with Club Terrace is a lot of people don't have very good internet access, any internet access so maybe that's something we might have to organise with █ doing it through the hub or something when coming into town, I don't know.

ANNE-LOUISE: Do they have any community facilities at Club Terrace?

█ That's the big problem, the community facility out there is the old school. The outbuildings got burnt and the building is not fit for purpose. We had a meeting out there and it's a disgrace, it's an absolute disgrace. Somebody had been living in it after the fires and they managed to get all the fleas out from his cats before that happened, no air-conditioning, no heating, it was freezing. There's no safe place for them to go. I think it's a knockdown but anyway he's trying to get the funding for that so no, they don't have anywhere out there.

ANNE-LOUISE: Actually I think maybe Tony, Inspector General, and one of the staff did go out there not long after the fires, I recall some of that now about the building.

█ Yeah, no, it's appalling.

ANNE-LOUISE: █ helping me but I was really keen to chat with █ as well just to ensure that any Aboriginal peoples in the community would be able to provide their feedback. I haven't had any luck just making contact with her, I've tried a few times on the phone and email.

█
ANNE-LOUISE: █ was going to talk to her for me and just ask her to give me a call.

█
because we've also got people, universities wanting to talk to us, we've got - █ the bush nurse was telling me last night – she spoke to a guy who's doing a podcast and things like that. She said oh maybe I'd like to talk to him and I just said “look, you know what? I can't speak for everybody on the group but I know █ said this too but there are stories and we're sick and tired of telling people over and over again and I think we've got to the stage, unless we're getting something from this, why talk about it again?”. That's why I said in that meeting that I think this is a really significant thing that people do need to be talking about, this is a worthwhile thing to be doing. So I will talk to those people and explain that again.

ANNE-LOUISE: Look, we're very conscious of that. I saw another one yesterday, Melbourne Uni, wanting to do something else like oh there's another research project or whatever it is but ultimately the Inspector General's role is about continuous improvement, making it better for the next time and the information from the community's so valuable and really it does have a very positive influence over what can be done in the future. They are longer-term things but at least we can put forward those recommendations to say "this is what's required to change".

Yeah, absolutely, we're not lab rats and as I said we're really sick and tired of talking about it. That's one of the things I am not looking forward to coming back into is talking about it. Again you don't want to be impolite but you cannot have the same conversation over and over again. I'm not traumatised but I'm so sick of talking about it to people coming in every day "oh we've just been through the devastation", "oh it must have been terrifying", "oh you poor things". it's okay, we're cool. Anyway we'll see what happens but I will definitely talk to but she is an extraordinary woman and the perspective from the Aboriginal community, it's just completely different.

For them the big thing was the separation of family because in times of crisis they come together and when they couldn't be together that was really hard, that was really hard. Just their country, their connection to country, it's just so palpable and you can feel it, it hurts them. But again got some really good funding, they're going to be doing some regen, some track work which hopefully might fill in a bit with things that Parks can't or won't out here and again I cannot stress enough the inadequacy of the amount of Parks people here. We should have more Parks people and we should have indigenous rangers as well, it's just absolute madness.

That's probably another thing that's going to be hurting our local economy for a while because the Point Hicks area, Thurra completely destroyed, not the light house but the camping ground. Parks are saying that that probably won't be reopened until Christmas next year. Mueller I think is just unlimited so all of our places that people would normally be going for summer we won't have them this year which is going to hurt as well. So there's a lot of affected national park area that needs to be helped out as well.

ANNE-LOUISE: Yeah, definitely.

That was the other one, it was environment when I was trying to think of the fifth one. Look, a lot of work to be done, a lot of work to be done.

ANNE-LOUISE: Yeah, most definitely and it's a long-term process, recovering.

Oh look, absolutely. Again I'm very hopeful that from bad things good things can come and there'll be a lot of positives coming out of this.

ANNE-LOUISE: Yeah well it sounds like you and the committee and the community are doing really well so congratulations from that part so far as -

Yeah, I'm trying to get a – economic development group happening in town as well which I think would be really good for everybody. Again look, the school did a

tremendous job with their kids, just amazing and again I think it's that sort of stuff like with COVID. A small community where all of those teachers know every child and they know their circumstances – I remember an audit by the Education Department a few years ago and they spoke to parents and I was one of them. He said “you see all these schools particularly private schools say oh we’re one big happy family and we’re a family” and he said “Cann River P-12 is probably the closest I’ve ever seen to that actually being true” and I think that's a tremendous thing.

ANNE-LOUISE: Yeah. Look, thanks very much, [REDACTED] I’m conscious of the time for you, I don’t want to take up any more time.

[REDACTED] I keep on rattling on when I get talking.

ANNE-LOUISE: You’ve been fantastic and provided such really good examples of things that -

[REDACTED] Oh look, if you want to follow up with any other questions I’m happy to answer that. As I said I’m pretty opinionated about this. I just think just because we don’t have the population and things like that it doesn’t mean we’re less deserving and we work really hard to keep our towns operating. I just think God, if I was on these committees in Melbourne or something I’d be getting a bit of money. Yeah, a lot of time and effort goes into committees and things out here, people are just doing it. They’re not looking for thanks or anything, they just do it because they're good people.

ANNE-LOUISE: Yeah, that’s it and those smaller communities – I was interested that you said you were on this, [REDACTED] you're on something else, you’re on something- that’s what happens, same here in my community too. I’ve always been involved in lots of different things as well -

[REDACTED] I love it, I really enjoy it but yeah, you know what it’s like, it gets very tiring sometimes.

ANNE-LOUISE: Yeah and I think that's what’s interesting regards people on Community Recovery Committees, you’re putting so much time and energy into it and I just hope that people don’t burn out and have got the support that they require because it is such a long and intense journey and you do have to meet all these requirements and that kind of thing which can make it challenging. So I just hope that everybody will be alright -

[REDACTED] I think we're all doing pretty well, I think we all look after each other. We’re pretty tough, stoic kind of characters.

ANNE-LOUISE: Yeah, definitely. In those rural areas they’re definitely stoic and resilient and all those things so you’re doing well. Look, thanks very much. So what I’ll do, once the transcript comes in, takes only just like a few days, I’ll check it over and then I’ll send it back to you via email, if you’ve got any things you want to change. With regards to the publication, when it gets published it takes out all the names anyway or anything that could identify anybody, takes out any of that sort of information on that when it’s actually

published. But yeah, otherwise thank you so much and as I said I'm keen to chat with any of those other people that you think -

[REDACTED] I've got my little list here and I'll make some phone calls and see who I can rustle up.

ANNE-LOUISE: Yeah and so there is a bit of time. I think you said [REDACTED] might be going away or something. If she's going away it could happen in a few weeks, it doesn't really matter, it can happen next year so don't put any pressure on them that it's got to happen in the next few days.

[REDACTED] Excellent.

ANNE-LOUISE: Alright well listen, you look after yourself and I'll look forward to keeping in touch.

[REDACTED] Thanks Anne-Louise.

ANNE-LOUISE: Thanks [REDACTED] okay, see you then.

[REDACTED] Bye.

Details are:

Submission to be published - yes

Submission to be named - no, anonymous

Were you in an area where the fires occurred - yes

Were you involved in responding to the fires - no

Do you continue to be involved in supporting individuals or community members - yes

LGA - East Gippsland Shire Council

Postcode/Town - 3890, Cann River

[REDACTED]
Keep up to date - yes - email [REDACTED]