

██████████ - 12 February 2021

Anne-Louise: What will happen is that the transcript from the interview, I'll provide that back to you so you have a copy of it, you can check it and then we keep a copy like a submission into the inquiry. I've just got a few demographic-type questions at the start to ask you if that's alright around that sort of thing. So firstly would you like your submission to be published or not? It just means it would be on the website. You don't have to, it doesn't make any difference.

██████████ I don't mind, yeah, sure.

Anne-Louise: So therefore would you like your name on it or would you like to be anonymous?

██████████ Probably anonymous, I reckon.

Anne-Louise: I think the answer is yes, were you in an area where the fires occurred? Yes.

██████████ Yes.

Anne-Louise: Were you in any way involved in responding to the fires in like an emergency services capacity?

██████████ No.

Anne-Louise: Are you involved in any of the assisting individuals or communities with support after the fires like in any sort of official role or anything like that?

██████████ No.

Anne-Louise: Local government area is Gippsland?

██████████ Yes.

Anne-Louise: Your town where you are?

██████████ Well I was doubly hit because I defended in ██████████ meanwhile lost my place in ██████████ so at that time I had just moved back to ██████████. We'd moved away for high school so my situation's unique because we stayed and defended yet I lost my other place.

Anne-Louise: I'm going to just put ██████████ and ██████████. You don't have to answer this question if you don't want, age group in decades?

██████████ ██████████

Anne-Louise: Gender?

██████████ Female.

Anne-Louise: Would you like to receive updates about the inquiry? We send them via email.

Yeah. I think I'm already getting them anyway.

Anne-Louise: So that email address you gave me is the best one -

Yeah.

Anne-Louise: The last thing, I'd just like to remind people that when you share your experiences and stories with me today it could bring up a range of emotions. If at any point you want to stop just let me know, we can just pause the recording, take some time out, have a breath, cup of tea, whatever and I can provide any additional support information for you if you require it.

Yeah.

Anne-Louise: So with this part of the inquiry we're most interested about understanding about people's experiences of recovery, what things have worked, what haven't, opportunities for improvement. The best thing for us is where people give us examples of something that didn't work or did work and that way it's really good for our team to analyse that information. So I'm not going to guide you in any way. Depending on what you talk about I may ask you some more questions to get a little bit more detail but otherwise I'm just going to let you talk for as long as you want to talk, basically. So away you go.

Okay so I think for me the recovery has been mostly really positive. Sarsfield Community Centre which is just down the road from me, they've been awesome, putting on dinners every Friday night – not that I always went to them or anything like that but they were really great. I think having a case manager, they gave me a case manager which she's been so good, she's really good and I have heard some people have had really poor case managers but that's not my experience at all. Just a couple of my friends have said they're not very helpful but my case worker, she seems to have her finger on the pulse on money available or tools or anything like that. She checks in with me all the time so she's great. Red Cross has been great.

One thing was terrible at the start which was how long it took them to clear the road to . We actually went through ourselves, we made our own way through, we just cut a little path through but for a long, long time they were saying it's too unsafe, we can't go, we're not opening the road and that was ridiculous because people needed to go and get supplies and stuff like that. I think they could have been quicker about that.

The other bad thing was Vic Roads and the Department – so I've got lots of trees and some of them had fallen off the road onto my property where it was sloping and I called Vic Roads to get them to clear it because I couldn't rebuild my fence and Vic Roads said that it's the Department's – that's their whatever, jurisdiction. I rang the Department and they said it's Vic Roads so that was just really shocking and I ended up getting a contractor in myself to clear that tree, the big tree that was difficult and I couldn't get my fences back up. So I wasn't very impressed with them.

Anne-Louise: Were you trying to work between the two of them like once one said the other, no, it's the other's role -

█ I went back and said I that it's your role" and they're like "oh well see the thing is that some parts of the road is ours and some parts of the road is theirs and it depends what timeframe because we got too busy and sometimes it's even been contracted out to private contractors and so we don't really know". So no-one knew anything. It was just too much, I just gave up. █, my case worker, she briefly got onto that but she's really great with lots of other things anyway so -

Anne-Louise: I was going to say was she able to assist in any that sort of negotiating?

█ I think it's actually current. I think I just told her "I'm giving up and getting a contractor to do it because I can't fight all these battles, it's too much".

Anne-Louise: I've heard this quite a few times about differing issues, a whole range of different issues and people have said exactly as you've said and a couple of people have actually persisted. It's taken a very, very long time. They did get an outcome. But they've also raised – well for most people, they were just "can't, it's too hard, I haven't got the energy, the time".

█ No.

Anne-Louise: So it's a really interesting point about those sort of bureaucratic challenges for people, something that I think we need to be aware of about that.

█ And giving up and every now and then thinking about it and going that's just so unfair like especially losing everything and then it's so unfair like I shouldn't have to fight over getting a tree and I shouldn't have to chase up like maybe someone should have more understanding about bushfire survivors and just do it. I don't know, maybe there should have been even more money allocated, I don't know. Anyway I didn't bother with that battle, that's for sure. But in saying that it might have been the power people. Someone came and cleaned up some trees, not the ones along the road onto my place but they were actually trees on my property. I can't remember who that was, sorry, but they've damaged my culvert and they weren't going to come and fix that and █ got onto that and they actually came back and fixed it and put the culvert back in because they'd made my whole place flood because they damaged it.

But that was resolved but that was something that wasn't really well done. It seemed quite disrespectful that they'd come in and left it in a big mess and I took photos and showed them and they're like "oh yeah, that was us". But the boss was like "I showed them what to do, where to clear the trees to" and he left so he just told his young people, his offsiders to do it and so it wasn't really him. When he saw the pictures he's like "oh yeah, that's terrible" and he fixed it straight away. Probably shouldn't have happened in the first place. I didn't like going in and going "oh great well now you've blocked my culvert with all your mud and you've dug in half of my gully" so that was bad as well.

Anne-Louise: Again I've heard a similar thing in other places, different scenario but contractors doing a job but actually making a whole lot of mess or creating difficulties for the person and again having quite a bit of trouble trying to get that resolved.

Yeah but I wouldn't really complain about that, I mean that was okay, they did resolve it. I feel like I'm complaining – on the whole it's good -

Anne-Louise: No, keep going to us like whatever it is it's really important like good examples like you're giving really good concrete examples of things that didn't work so well and that's what's really helpful for us so positive or negative, it doesn't matter.

The other negative thing was how long the shed people took to put up the sheds. The permit came through fairly quickly and then they took the sheds out there and I appreciate it's a long way and I wouldn't really want to complain about that company because I've worked with them before but they dropped the shed out and then it wasn't for – oh my gosh like four or five months later when they actually put the shed up. So I had an empty – I couldn't live on my property because I've got no dwellings anymore. I used to have two dwellings on the property. I was there four days a week and I had a tenant there who also care took – because I had stock out there, had my horses out there and so I had no tenant there either so there was no-one. I'd already lost everything so I guess I was a little bit worried that when my new sheds arrived and they just sat there for months and months, I was worried they were going to get stolen, I just was a bit more precious about my stuff, I guess, because I'd lost everything.

I told them that and there was emails back and forth and they said they were coming and then they didn't come and then they were coming and they didn't come. Then in the end they came and it was very muddy and it was quite hard to put the shed up and they left big muddy marks from their bobcat or whatever. That's okay but I think that's not their incompetence, a lot of stuff had been lost in as well and I'm talking about my property in and that's two hours from Bairnsdale so I do appreciate they were busy. But also they had a shortage of builders and it needs to be not a carpenter but an actual builder even though I felt a builder could have just signed off on a carpenter's work and so the builder, they had to use their own builders because he said to me “find a builder if you like, you're welcome to and he can do it”.

So I actually found a carpenter and they said “a carpenter can do it but they have to do a \$5,000 course or something to build the sheds” and so the carpenter's like “it's not worth it like how much work am I going to get from this?”. So even that was a bit difficult as well.

Anne-Louise: Was that through your insurance like the company? Was it through the insurance or anything like that?

Insurance was great, insurance just paid me out and that was that so it wasn't through insurance.

Anne-Louise: Just like a delay based on the amount of availability of contractors and that kind of thing.

Yeah, they just didn't have enough to keep up with demand.

Anne-Louise: We've heard a bit of that as well.

Yeah well they could probably do something about that, couldn't they? You wait for a long time for a rebuild. I never would have guessed it would take this long and maybe COVID's come into it. The worst thing was Blaze Aid, they were shocking. They -

Anne-Louise: Can you tell me a bit about that because again we hear on the positive angle and the negative side so I'm interested on your feedback?

I don't even think there was anything positive, actually. They had a base camp in [REDACTED], they came to my place like I put my name down, they came to my place as did half of the other people. Said "yeah, we'll put your fence up, we walked around the fence line, no problem". They changed the ground crew. The first people that I talked to - he was actually really good and we had a good discussion about what I wanted. [REDACTED] from [REDACTED] Blaze Aid who lived in a caravan in [REDACTED] over the border in New South Wales so I'm guessing this was New South Wales Blaze Aid, he was the manager or whatever you call it, team leader and then there was a crew on the ground which changed not long after they were coming to help me. They said they're just basically working down the list. They also said that they have an order of importance I've got nine horses, I evacuated all my - for my business and usually there's - I don't know, between two and four out there and every now and then I have clients' horses out there too.

So I couldn't take on any clients' horses because there's no room here for them and I still haven't to this day which is really unfortunate and been bad for my business. So I had evacuated my horses at the start of December because the fire was raging around and so I had all nine down on my five-and-a-half acres in [REDACTED] so they said to me "you're at the top of the list because it's actually impacting your business" and I said to them "well I would prefer you fenced stock that are getting out on the road" because the neighbour's sheep were getting out on the road and I said "fence them first" which they didn't anyway. I said "fence them first, I'm quite happy to do that like I can wait, I don't want stock on the road more than anything so I'm happy to wait".

Anyway it went on, they were going to do my - so they didn't do it in any sort of order. The ground crew, the foreman of the ground crew, his name's [REDACTED] he just seemed to pick and choose wherever he wanted to go, whoever he made friends with. It's a small town, there's a bit of politics there and he seemed to get very involved in the personal politics of the town. He wasn't very - neither of them, [REDACTED] as well in the caravan at [REDACTED], he wasn't very understanding about the stress that - I was very stressed at that time because we're going back to February where it was all really new and I could barely even run my business and I had way too many horses here which I still do but I've just come to terms with that. That was before feed was starting to come in as donations and that too so it was like a really, really stressful time for me and the horses were getting hurt because they weren't used to all being together in such a small area. So managing it was just a nightmare plus trying to manage the rebuild.

Also we were in drought so I didn't really have enough water here for all the horses either so we were driving in to get water from the Water Board, you can just take a thousand litre thing so we were driving in to get water from the Water Board as well. Meanwhile [REDACTED] saying "yeah, we're going to do your fence, we're going to do your fence next week, we're

going to do your fence” and then he just kept coming up with excuses or reasons not to do it. I did send him some emails in the middle of the night, actually because I would wake up and so basically a panic attack, going “I’m going to lose my business, I’m going to lose my horses”. It was like I was just going ‘round in circles going I don’t actually know what to do with this. Do I sell my horses which are my friends and my work colleagues because I do equine-assisted therapy and so I did send him a few emails just going “this is causing me so much stress, stand by your word like you’re supposed to be an organisation that is a helping organisation and I feel you’re just not standing by your word and you’ve got no integrity” and I did say some things like that which put him offside.

A few times he said to me “yeah, we’re going to come next week” then everything was good again, he was going to come and he wanted to buy the fencing. By this time COVID was happening and he said “do you want an exclusion fence?” and I was like “that would be really great” so an exclusion fence is a very tall deer fence – there’s deer there, it stops the deer getting in, six foot high ring lock and BlazeAid have been putting that up for other people and he suggested that to me and I was like “that is a great idea, that would be really awesome”. Some of my fencing was actually tall fencing to keep the deer out in a couple of paddocks which had better grass in them. So I said “that’s a great idea”. Then he said “so I actually have emails. After it went bad on the phone I actually was like I am going to keep a record of this so I emailed him and said “I think it's going to be better to email from now on”.

So I emailed him so I think from about this exclusion fence on there’s emails about that and so he said “do you want an exclusion fence?” – that was on the phone – and I said “yeah, that would be really great” and then he said “can you source the exclusion fencing?”. So BlazeAid don’t give you any money, they will buy the fencing off Waratah Fencing who apparently also was on the board of BlazeAid which seems a little bit of a conflict of interest to me. Anyway Waratah Fencing couldn’t get their exclusion fencing, there’s like months and months’ wait because of corona because Waratah Fencing is owned by China. He said “is there any way you can source your fencing and you can pay for it for \$26,000 and we will” – because I’ve got 1.2km of fencing – “and we will do all your internal fencing as well like do extra fencing to make up that money and we’ll give you all the internal fencing because that’s easily sourced wire and just plain wire. So I was like “I’ll see”.

So my fencing contractor who’s done some work for me in Sarsfield, I contacted him and he said “██████████ crap anyway, use Gallagher” or whatever and he could source it and so I said to ██████████ “no problem, I’ll source the fencing”. So prior to BlazeAid I had actually already got a quote – because I desperately needed my fencing to get my horses back there so I got a quote from Reninback Fencing to fence the whole of ██████████ in seven strands plain wire so it wasn’t exclusion fencing and that was including labour so that was about 24,000. So when I found out that the exclusion fencing materials were 26,000 I thought that’s okay, I’m getting labour for free so it’s the same price anyway because labour’s for free so I said “yeah” and I was really excited and I was like oh my god, it’s a win-win for everyone here and ██████████ like “it’s awesome” and then he said “my people have never done an exclusion fence so would it be an option that your fencing contractor would come out and train them” at my cost again for \$1,700 for the day for him and his offsider “and we’ll give you more fencing, do something else for you through BlazeAid”. I was like “yeah well that’s going to be okay because the volunteers then know how to do the fencing so it’s good for me and he’s

like “and I’ll send another crew, if you don’t mind I’m going to send another crew to learn about it. They won’t be doing your fence but I’m just going to send them down for the day to do the training” and I was like “yeah, no problem”. So the contractor went -

Anne-Louise: Where are we at now? What -

Just trying to think what I was wearing, it was quite a warm day so I’m thinking that we are probably at – and I’ll know the timeline properly – I’m thinking that we are pre- - like May I would say, around May, prewinter. This has gone on. So the contractor brought the exclusion fencing out on his truck, charged me \$1,700, trained the volunteers that were going to work at my place and also extra volunteers that got sent down. – so I’ve never met , by the way, he’s just stayed in his caravan in , the , was awful, he was just so rude. I was shocked, I had no idea why or anything and he’s like – so is teaching all the volunteers and I checked in with the volunteers and they were happy and really happy that they’d learnt how to do exclusion fencing and loved the thing and all that.

I wanted to make sure everyone was good. wasn’t, though, was awful. He wouldn’t listen to he walked ahead of everyone, he’s like “I’m not learning this” and he walked ahead of everyone and just basically cut some little trees off the fence line meanwhile – and he was just really rude to , he’s like “you’re the only one getting paid here, you know?” and so what? So that really shocked me. Anyway after that the rumour went ‘round, he’s like “I’m not doing her place”. He just wanted to be the boss, basically.

So then he said “I’m not fencing” and it happened, he was saying to people "I'm not fencing her place, she can get a contractor in". I don’t even know why he was offside.

Anne-Louise: Do you think it has anything to do with you being a woman?

Yeah, he is awful to his wife and he was not nice to his wife and he talked down to all the girls, all the volunteers as well. Yeah, definitely, he was really awful.

Anne-Louise: It’s interesting because the negative comments I’ve heard have actually been from women.

So way further after winter I rang up BlazeAid, the contact number for the CEO or whatever he is, the Director of BlazeAid, Kevin, and he talked down to me as well. He was actually awful as well and I was just like “is this like a bunch of ?”. Yeah, he was really not nice. So -

Anne-Louise: Interesting, sorry, I was just interested because you’re about the third or fourth female who’s talked about the issues with BlazeAid.

I don’t know, I mean I’m trying to think of the houses he did. I guess most of them were all men, actually. They did do place who’s female. I’m not the only one that have got complaints about them at that place either like my neighbours, both of my neighbours were just like “if you take this further” which I am “if you” – that is my one battle I will keep fighting because I just feel ethically that was no good, not right at all.

Anne-Louise: In the end did it get done?

Right so then the exclusion fencing's all there, I paid my \$26,000 and they didn't come and didn't come and didn't come so then went all through winter, I sent photos of my horses with thrush and mud fever standing in a muddy yard going "I can't do this to the horses, this is becoming a welfare issue now. I need my horses back in [redacted]" and he's like "it's too wet to fence now" which it is and I was like "well you've been meaning to fence for the last four months".

So that just went on for a while and then up until I think November I just said "don't contact me anymore" and so he just kept saying he's doing it and he will do it and he will do it and he will do it and then I'm like "I'm out of pocket \$26,000" and then in the end he said "we're not doing your fencing anymore, we've heard you don't run a business and so we're not helping you anymore". Then he wrote at the bottom of the email "and I see you've got a brand new shed, what paid for that? Red Cross?" and I was just like oh my god, am I not allowed to rebuild? It was actually insurance money that paid for the shed anyway but who cares? Well what does that even mean?

Anne-Louise: That's none of his business.

So I was like I actually feel I have to defend myself for starting the rebuild process and so then I just said "I don't want to have anything to do with you anymore, I don't believe this is BlazeAid, I don't believe that you're a small faction of BlazeAid, this is shocking and I don't want to talk to you anymore". I told [redacted], my case worker, and she said "do you want me to ring him?", I was like "yeah, sure" and he didn't say he's not doing my fencing anymore, he was just like "oh yeah, we'll see when we can get 'round to it, we'll get back to you in a week or two". Anyway he told me he's not doing it because I don't run a business which I totally run a business and that was really weird.

Someone's obviously said that to him, I don't know. Anyway I actually then wrote an email to everyone in [redacted] and I said "if this is what has been said I would like to know and please get in touch with me and you obviously don't know my situation at all, please get in touch with me and I'll tell you because this is really bad for my business that I apparently don't run a business and I've spent \$26,000 on an exclusion fence for my business, why would someone spend that much money?". I got all my friends and even people that I don't really hang out with there were like "this is absolutely shocking, I'm so sorry to hear this. You've been running a business for however many years" and things like that. No-one said "yeah, you didn't" so I just left it at that. Then I just contacted [redacted] and it was just like "can you give me a quote to put my boundary fence up?" like I can't afford to do internal fences and I said "but I have to get some stock back there, maybe I'll just do electric fencing" and I said "can you give me a quote?".

So now he's actually up there this week fencing, it should be finished today for another 12 grand. So there goes half my rebuilding a house money and that sort of thing. I'll put a little cabin there. I can't even afford a fire shelter now nor a tractor. So then [redacted] who's been through this whole saga with me, I had to actually stop for a while, for probably I guess maybe even two months or six weeks, I just was like "can we not talk about BlazeAid anymore? I can't". So then it's more recently, I was just like "I need to get my fencing done,

I'm just going to do it, I'm just going to pay the money" because [REDACTED] is like "I'll get them" and she said "do you want to talk to a lawyer?". There's a bushfire lawyer, [REDACTED] her name is and she touched base with me a couple of weeks ago and she said to me "what do you want out of it?" and I was like "well I don't know".

She goes "do you want the money back?", she goes "how much do you think you've lost?" and I'm like "thousands, I've lost clients, thousands and thousands of dollars because I don't have any horses there so I'm feeding more horses here, I'm driving back and forth without collecting horses just to check on the property and stuff like I've lost thousands of dollars" let alone the \$38,000 in fencing now and no boundary and so she said that it's a familiar story with BlazeAid. But also I said to her "I think what I want out of it is that someone looks into their procedures, their training" like for me it's more of a moral issue of how they just dealt with it so badly. Yeah, I'm out of pocket for sure but money comes and goes, I don't even know what I would want BlazeAid to do. Come and do my boundary fencing in what, a year's time? I need to get the place up and running so I don't even know what I'd want. So that's the BlazeAid story that was really terrible.

Anne-Louise: It is really terrible and I'm hoping that you were able to get some support at some stage because it obviously still sounds like it was a very traumatic experience for you.

[REDACTED] Just awful.

Anne-Louise: Yeah so were you able to access some support, counselling or -

[REDACTED] Yeah.

Anne-Louise: Through your case support manager or anything like that?

[REDACTED] Yeah, I will, I am. I don't really like the counsellor that I've got, I think I'll just get a different one which is tricky because [REDACTED] still a small place anyway and I work in the industry, the [REDACTED] industry and I said I wanted someone out of town and she's not from out of town and a lot of the psychologists send me their clients anyway – not that she does. Yeah, I will access support and I think the rebuild and recovery process, I felt that I was too much in the rebuild to even stop and go "this is what's happening" because it was current. I would like to talk to someone now but before that I didn't – I knew I would want to down the track but the time wasn't right. I was too much in it, you know?

Anne-Louise: Yeah, for many people they just do the doings, they -

[REDACTED] Yeah.

Anne-Louise: - the fencing then everything and that's why it's really important that support services are available 12 months after the fact because often government will stop some of the funding, it's like people aren't ready for it. You're very focused on doing your doing which is -

[REDACTED] Yeah, exactly -

Anne-Louise: - described that today and maybe [REDACTED], your case worker, can help you find somebody else that you can chat with.

[REDACTED] She did her best, she found me this one. She did her best and it was through the [REDACTED]
[REDACTED]
[REDACTED] she just wasn't for me. I know what that's like.

Anne-Louise: Yeah well [REDACTED], absolutely.

[REDACTED] Exactly.

Anne-Louise: [REDACTED] I was interested with regards to your business like were you able to access any of the financial supports available for business owners?

[REDACTED] Yeah, I accessed the small business grants like there was a couple of them and that was great. Because I lost my stables, my arena, my hay shed, none of that was insured, the only insurance I had was for my tenant's house. My tenant was awesome but I didn't know that when I was renting it out so I just got tenant renter insurance in case he trashed the place which never happened so my place, my straw bale building that we lived in wasn't even insured and nor was the property. Insurance is too expensive and nothing's insured again and I've got two brand new sheds up there and a cabin. But I accessed the small business stuff because early on I couldn't get or I thought I couldn't get the DPI grant because I wasn't a primary producer.

But then when I went to my accountant just recently he said "you are a primary producer, you don't need the primary producer number or whatever anymore, you just have to have that as your primary income as your stock" which I totally am. So then I tried to access that but because I got the small business grants I now can't get the primary producer grants which are much, much bigger and I really could have done with those. It's up to like 75,000 -

Anne-Louise: Well they're like 50,000 or something like that with the primary producer one?

[REDACTED] Yeah. But anyway so I couldn't access that but I did access the small business one so it's either one or the other.

Anne-Louise: Was that accessible, easy to do, that kind of thing? Did you require support like someone to help you do all that stuff because again we've heard a lot of different things about the grant availability and access.

[REDACTED] Yeah, [REDACTED] did that for me so I couldn't even tell you. It seemed easy for me, she asked me a couple of things. But I handed a lot to her, I gave her a stat dec saying "you can act for me" and I just handballed a lot of stuff to her and she just did it and she was just really great.

Anne-Louise: Awesome.

[REDACTED] Yeah.

Anne-Louise: I've actually heard a lot of very positive reports about case workers, particularly in your area, [REDACTED] way so I have met one of them at least face-to-face and many people have been very positive about it which is great. Yes, I wrote business, I was interested about those types of things. Other things? Anything else that you want to share with us? Any other examples of things that were good or if this happened to you again what would you want to see done differently?

[REDACTED] I would want BlazeAid to be more accountable, people to stand by what they're saying they're going to do which really was only BlazeAid. I got used to it but what was hard – I feel like it would be easier if there was some sort of database because I actually had to go through my story multiple times early days and that was hard and I ended up not wanting to get the grants or anything because I just didn't want to talk about what happened.

So then [REDACTED] was really good and that's when the stat dec happened and all that and then she actually did a lot of that for me but even still sometimes they were like "we've talked to your case worker, that's great but we just need to check a few things with you". The other thing that was difficult was people that asked for photos like they said "do you have any photos of this stuff?" and I had photos of a cagillion sheds and houses burnt to the ground and I don't mind sending the photos but I actually had to keep looking at them every time I attached them and I did not like doing that at all. It could have been better if there was some sort of database. I mean the support workers did as much as they can, I suppose, without breaching privacy -

Anne-Louise: Again because we've heard this a lot and this is something that really we're quite interested around thinking about what could be done differently in the future. With the stat dec thing, was that something that you think came along as people progressed and were finding this challenging or did you know that that was available to you straight away with your case support worker? Because that's the first time I've heard anyone say "oh I basically just signed a stat dec and my case support worker did stuff".

[REDACTED] Oh she didn't say that straight up, maybe it did come along later. I don't know.

Anne-Louise: It's interesting, we have interviewed [REDACTED]
[REDACTED]
[REDACTED] that's something that they talked about. People having to retell their story all the time.

[REDACTED] Yeah, I don't know, that stat dec did come after a couple of months. I don't know, I know I said to her "I'm happy to give permission, I don't care like I'll do whatever for you to do stuff for me like isn't there something we can do?" and she said "oh I'll get back to you" and then she said "oh actually you can" – and she sent me the form so I don't know whether she looked into it and found out or whether it was something that was presented to her. But I guess it's not the sort of thing that you would want to offer someone because imagine if they said yes because they're vulnerable, it's a pretty private thing so I guess maybe they wait. I don't know because I found that really helpful but I guess if she'd said "do you want me just to take over everything?" I would have maybe been like "gosh". It's got to really come from the person, I guess.

Anne-Louise: That balancing thing but yeah, we have certainly heard people say in the end they didn't access grants as you said because they just didn't want to have to tell their story again. Yeah, it's very challenging.

█ Yeah.

Anne-Louise: Anything else that like again if that happened again what would work better?

█ I don't know, I mean you don't want it to happen like that again like I really think that people are going to live in the bush, that's the way it is and it's Australia and we're going to have fires. I actually think looking more at prevention instead of having such a full-on recovery that we just need to – I don't know, do some sort of research and a pilot program of people are going to live in the bush, let's pick a community, give everyone fire shelters, plant European fire-retardant trees, let's see. The people that are willing to stay and defend. Of course they don't have to, everyone changes their mind but █ a lot of people stayed and defended. No-one died and they didn't lose their houses, they stayed and defended and they were confident about it.

They've got a really active CFA there and if that community wants to stay or even wants to leave and the government throws money as a pilot program to "let's give everyone sprinklers who wants to be involved in this program", get everyone trained up with CFA, plant the trees, really concentrate on "right, you're living in the bush, this is what's going to happen. Some are going to stay, some are going to go, let's try and make it as safe as possible" because with climate change we have to start – everyone's not going to move out of the bush so we've got to start making it safer to be in the bush.

Anne-Louise: I was lucky enough to get up to █ last year and we met a few people, I know some of the people you commented on, █ was there at the meeting and things, it's a beautiful spot, really, really beautiful but obviously high-risk and many people who've told us across the East Gippsland and the northeast who were well prepared, had good plans and processes in place and actively saved homes, their own and others and that kind of thing. So there's definitely merit in that, for sure.

█ Yeah. I think that's all.

Anne-Louise: Anything else that you wanted to talk about?

█ I don't think so. I appreciate that COVID probably slowed it down too so that was pandemic on top of the crisis, natural disaster. Before that we were in drought so it was natural disaster on natural disaster on pandemic. I think that slowed it down and made it really hard as well.

Anne-Louise: Did you ever find that organisations or agencies couldn't do something – was COVID an excuse for anybody or anything?

█ Yeah, I heard a few times raw materials are – it's slowed down with materials or I couldn't get things, even just like I wanted to buy a sledgehammer, for example, and the sledgehammers were all out because they couldn't get the shipment in and things like that did

happen but due to COVID. But also I had to close my business down because of COVID until I got my head around what to do and wrote a COVID safety procedure as well so that impacted my business straight on top of the bushfires.

I tell you what happened, though, when I had to start wearing a mask that was awful because the last time I wore a mask was through the bushfires so that was really awful to me so I didn't want to go out – I stayed home not because I was scared of getting coronavirus so I mean I was careful, I wouldn't want to get sick from it but I didn't want to go out because I just did not want to put a mask on. It made me not be able to breathe because it was back like in the smoke because we had the peat moss fire just up the road so that was burning acrid smoke for weeks and weeks and so I couldn't have my clients here either. So that was awful, just putting the mask back on.

Anne-Louise: Yeah, just re-traumatising, bringing back those memories of that last time. That's why my observation would be it sounds like you do need to talk through some of this with somebody now that you managed to get through a whole bunch of stuff and whatever, it's still very obviously quite close, quite raw. But thank you, you've given such great examples about the things which is really good.

█ There was one more thing, I've still got lots of burnt trees on my place and early days there was offers to come and clear those trees down and I said no because I didn't know – it was early days, it was February or something and I said no because I didn't know which ones would come back and which ones wouldn't, it was too soon. Now so day after day after day I'm looking at the burnt trees and I want them gone and that help, whoever it was, is gone now.

Anne-Louise: Yeah and I think that private property stuff is tricky around the burnt trees as well, again having heard it from other emergencies, there ends up being so many. It's hard to get assistance to help and whose responsibility and that kind of thing? But it's also a reminder for you.

█ I guess COVID would have impacted BlazeAid. The people that were up there, they stayed up there and it's a small place so they were quite safe up there and they just kept working as usual and didn't even wear masks to tell the truth and so it didn't really impact. That did not have any impact on the refencing process at all, they just stayed there and they were safe there.

Anne-Louise: Do you think from any of that – because I know Sarsfield had those Friday night dinners and then obviously they had to stop and that impact on that social interaction in the recovery like the fact that you couldn't get together, was that of an impact for you?

█ No, not really. Because at that point I wasn't wanting to go out at all. I actually loved it when COVID came and I was like great, I don't even have to come up with an excuse not to go anywhere, I'm just going to go no because I want to keep working and I don't want to impact my clients and make them feel unsafe so I'm not going anywhere. It was really great, actually, I loved it.

Anne-Louise: A lot of people benefitted from that, but from a recovery perspective. Often it is that social interaction that helps people with their recovery and a few communities have said that that's what was challenging, they couldn't come together.

Yeah, it would have been. I was in a really weird position because I'm living in fulltime now but I didn't lose my place in yet I had the trauma of losing my whole place. I felt like I didn't fit in anywhere because I'd left because I had nothing. Lucky I have this place as well so I'd left where all my friends are that went through the same thing as me up there yet I wasn't living there anymore and so when they were having events up there I didn't really go to events up there yet here like I lost everything but hang on, it wasn't I lost everything so it seemed really weird for me here as well because I didn't really feel – my biggest trauma – we fought the fire here which was very, very scary and I did think at one point I was going to die because you could not breathe. It was really scary so what happened here is the scariness of fighting the fire but I saved it yet I lost everything at my other place so people that lost everything herein I totally could relate to that but then I wasn't in when that happened.

So I think I disengaged a bit with the community because I didn't really feel like – it was that was making me sad that is a lost, not here because here I saved.

Anne-Louise: Yeah, you've got a very unique situation.

I can't believe it, I could have lost both places if I was in either place. It came to my driveway.

Anne-Louise: Well listen thanks very much. If there is anything else that you want to add, when the transcript comes back and it'll probably come back by early next week I'll just have a bit of a look at it, check and I'll send it through to you. You can have a look and then if you're all happy with everything we just keep it as a submission into the inquiry. I just want to say thanks very much for being so open and honest and I do hope you get yourself some support and your business goes really well. I've got a friend up here who's interested in doing that, I believe up in the Macedon Ranges, doing that She's just started thinking about it so -

Got to do it through the .

Anne-Louise: Yeah, she told me about some training, I think, that she's – yeah. She's very horsey and her husband has done and stuff like that so they're thinking together might be able to come up with a business but she's aware there's a few places so she'll be interested to know. Now that I've got the name of your business as well.

My business is going bangers now with COVID, everyone's really been stressed about that so there's no problem there and it's outside and so people don't worry about masks. We've got a really good policy in place so people feel safe so it's going crazy.

Anne-Louise: Oh good luck. Well good luck with that and as I said thanks very much, it's been lovely to talk to you and wish you all the best.

█ Thank you too.

Anne-Louise: Take care, see you.

A █ Bye.