



# Terms of Reference

## LEGISLATIVE COUNCIL ENVIRONMENT AND PLANNING COMMITTEE

### Inquiry into the 2026 summer fires across Victoria

#### **On 4 February 2026, the Legislative Council agreed to the following motion:**

That this House requires the Environment and Planning Committee to inquire into, consider and report, by 1 June 2026, on the 2026 summer fires across Victoria, including but not limited to —

- (1) the preparation and planning by government, emergency services agencies and the community ahead of the fire season, including management of public and private land and roadsides;
- (2) the causes and circumstances of the bushfires, including climate change and the adequacy of the Government's climate policies and actions, forecasts, warnings and public education on bushfire threats;
- (3) funding, equipment and appliances for the Country Fire Authority (CFA), Fire Rescue Victoria and Forest Fire Management Victoria, and recruitment and retention of CFA volunteers;
- (4) the emergency responses to control and contain the fires, including adequacy of resources and communications;
- (5) resilience of critical services and infrastructure such as electricity, water and telecommunications during and after the fires;
- (6) the impact on the community, business and agriculture and efforts to aid in recovery;
- (7) the impact on the environment, including native wildlife, and any measures to better protect native forests, including technology for early detection and firefighting in remote locations;
- (8) the impacts of climate change on the natural environment, which has resulted in more frequent and intense bushfires occurring in Victoria;
- (9) the prevalence and impact of misinformation leading into and during the fire season;
- (10) the interjurisdictional support into and out of Victoria leading into and during the fire season, including interstate and international deployments, Commonwealth support and relief efforts; and
- (11) lessons from and progress on the implementation of recommendations from previous inquiries, reports and Royal Commissions

**On 5 March 2026, the Legislative Council resolved to extend the reporting date to 28 July 2026**

**Submission To**  
**Legislative Council Environment and Planning Committee**  
**Inquiry into the 2026 Summer Bushfires**  
19 April 2026

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**Background**

Horsham Rural City municipality was impacted by two fires of note during the 2025-26 high-risk weather period, specifically:

- The significant Grass Flat, Mitre - Grass Flat Rd fire on 9 January 2026, occurring on a day of Catastrophic Fire Danger. This fire impacted the township of Natimuk and surrounding areas, including Quantong and Vectis. It resulted in the loss of 19 houses, 40 other structures, and further losses of livestock, farm machinery, fencing and community facilities.
- The Rocklands, Smiths Rd fire on 27 January 2026, near the Glenelg River in the area south-west of Telangatuk.

While this Inquiry relates to the 2025-26 fires, Council notes that several major fires in preceding seasons have informed our understanding of fire behaviour, response challenges and recovery needs. These include:

- The 13 February 2024 Mt Stapylton fire, which started in the Grampians National Park and impacted private land in the area within and around Dadswells Bridge township.
- The major fire in the Grampians National Park, initially called the Yarram Gap Road fire that started on 17 December 2024, and burnt some 76,000 ha.
- The major fire that started within the Little Desert National Park on 27 January 2025, that burnt over 95,000 ha, leading to the evacuation of Dimboola, primarily to Horsham.

Note that Horsham Rural City Council staff and resources provided support to the Yarram Gap Road and Little Desert fires beyond our municipality, including through the operation of a relief centre in Horsham to support the evacuation of Dimboola during the Little Desert fire.

**Themes**

**Catastrophic day declaration:**

- Our observation has been that the recent declarations of Catastrophic Fire Danger days has been appropriate and timely. Several of the fires listed in the background above ignited on days declared Catastrophic. Council staff have assisted DEECA / FFMV and CFA in the response to those fires, particularly through the provision of graders and water tankers. Operational observations confirm that fires under these conditions are extremely difficult if not impossible to control, unless there is a significant change of circumstances, such as in weather conditions, or an environmental barrier (e.g. a

river with riparian vegetation that was much greener and slowed down the advance of the fire). Fire behaviour observed during these events strongly supports the necessity and validity of Catastrophic Fire Danger Rating declarations, given the level of posed risk to life and property.

**Preparedness:**

- Reliable forecasting of the likelihood of Catastrophic days brings with it the opportunity to maximise messaging about fire preparedness. While much of this should be done before the fire season, even last minute preparation can make a difference. Good personal / family / business fire plans are an important tool in preparedness, and the publication by Joan Webster, “The complete Bushfire Safety Book” is recommended in this regard as an adjunct to existing agency material.
- It is equally, if not more important for public land managers to undertake preparedness on their land. Some specific comments are made in some of the themes below, but in general:
  - Road managers need to have effective programs in place to reduce vegetation height. In some years we have seen the situation where late spring rains (as occurred in November 2025), have seen regrowth of this vegetation after an initial control program. There has sometimes been an excuse offered that the budget did not provide for a second-cut of this regrowth vegetation, creating an increased fire hazard. These critical budgets need to be flexible to adjust to variable seasonal conditions in cases like this.
  - Public land managers need to establish fire breaks around their reserves. Due to significant advocacy in the 2024-25 season, a section of the Grampians near the Wartook locality had fire breaks installed, and these proved very effective when the major Grampians fire in late 2024 impacted on this area. These fire breaks need to be maintained as permanent features.
- An issue for recovery, which goes to subsequent preparedness, is where there is partially burnt timber left on roadsides, it becomes a problem for subsequent fire seasons. Recovery funding and processes should include provision for removal of this timber.
- A review of previous Inquiries, including the Black Saturday Royal Commission, should be conducted to ensure that the recommendations from those Inquiries have been acted on. Are we repeating mistakes from the past?

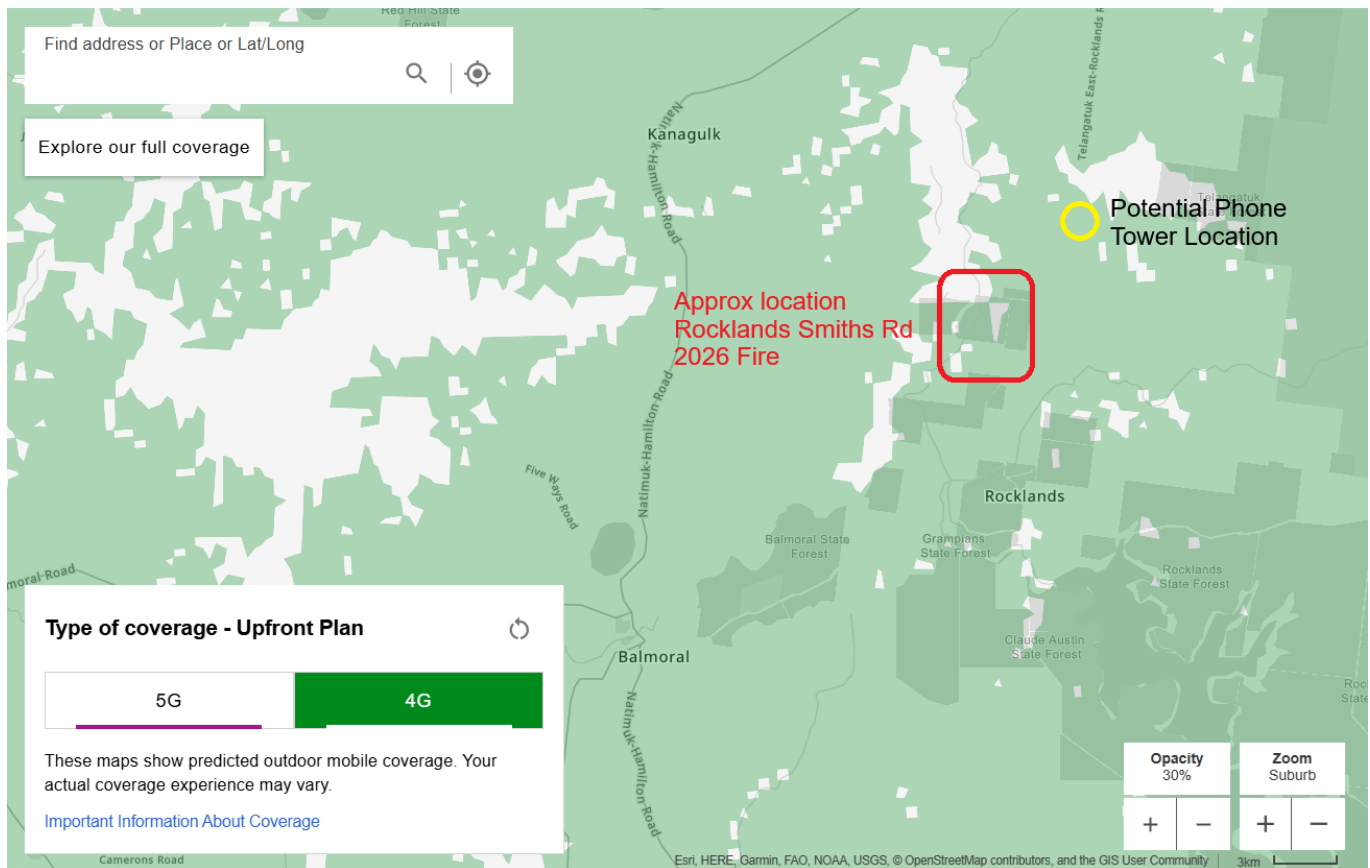
**Fire Response:**

- Fuel management on Crown Land
  - Many fires that impact significantly on the Horsham Rural City municipality start on public land.. These areas are often more difficult to monitor and access, limiting early detection and rapid initial attack. While that was not the case in the Grass Flat fire, the other fires mentioned in the background did start in public land.
  - Council emphasises the need for:
    - Increased and sustained fuel load reduction on public land. Not enough progress seems to have been made in this regard.

- Greater prioritisation of strategic fuel breaks both around and within these areas.
- At one stage during the 2026 Grass Flat fire, there was a credible concern that the fire was heading towards Horsham City, and consideration was being given to evacuation of Horsham. The logistics of evacuation of a city with a population of around 15,000 are significant. While fire response resources were heavily committed, working the active fire front, should consideration have been given to preparing a fire break well ahead of the fire front during these events? Should there be a greater emphasis on larger fire breaks around townships as part of pre-season mitigation preparations? Given the logistical complexity and risk associated with evacuating regional population centres, especially on a declared Catastrophic Fire Danger, preventative landscape-scale mitigation warrants stronger consideration.

**Communications:**

- The 2026 Grass Flat fire resulted in the loss of power in the area, impacting the mobile telephone network and presenting as a major constraint on communications for fire responders. While CFA and DEECA / FFMV staff have access to their dedicated radio network, Council staff who support these agencies do not. This impacted on communications in the chain of command for Council operations. Further, Council has GPS tracking devices on its plant. These were impacted by the loss of phone communications, leading to disrupted operational coordination and reduced situational awareness, impacting on the safety and coordination of these resources with DEECA / CFA. The reasons for this loss of power to the communication facility need to be addressed.
- The poor communications experienced in the Grass Flat fire due to failure of the mobile phone network were compounded by the progressive shutdown of the 3G network in rural areas. Often overlooked, or discounted, people in rural areas have continued to be impacted by reduced network coverage compared to the past. This poses a further risk to the community, as a rapidly moving grass fire under Catastrophic conditions, such as the Grass Flat fire, can present limited timeframes for notification to evacuate or shelter in place.
- This poor phone service is exacerbated when fires are being fought in areas with terrain challenges, such as the 2026 Rocklands Smiths Rd fire which was in the Glenelg River valley. Included below is an extract of the Telstra mobile phone coverage map (from the Telstra website), showing the location of this fire, and the location of a prominent local hill that would be a suitable location for a mobile phone tower. It should be noted that the mapped phone coverage is based on idealistic conditions, and is not accurate for phones located in vehicles or buildings, so it overstates the practical coverage. The white areas in the map include significant areas of the deeply incised Glenelg River valley, which also includes areas with increased fire risk, for example associated with camp fires in an area popular with campers.



- An important element of communications during fire events is the conduct of public meetings. Meetings were scheduled for Quantong and Natimuk during the Grass Flat fire. These were to be chaired by the Mayor, as the Mayor is a key figure the community looks to for reliable information in emergency events. Subsequently, the Incident Controller determined that access to the meeting venues was not safe for attendance by the Mayor. Yet the events proceeded in a modified and limited manner, with information being presented by CFA / DEECA at these venues with very little notice, shared via social media with the community – if they had internet access which many did not. A significant level of community expectation had been created about these meetings and residents had made their way to the original proposed locations, which were still impacted by a communications outage. It was also clearly known by the Incident Controller and Police that the local community was finding safe detours around the fire areas to access various meeting sites within the burnt fire grounds. As it turned out, the Mayor attended the venues for these meetings, but the format of them had changed so that they were not as effective. Greater consideration is needed when planning these engagements to better reflect realistic community movement and behaviour during emergencies, avoiding misalignments between expectation and delivery.

**Recovery:**

The magnitude of the response from the Government to facilitate community and asset recovery has been significant and highly noteworthy, and some initial responses were

immediate and are greatly appreciated. This point is worthy of emphasis. However, several challenges were identified:

- While the magnitude of the financial response has been noteworthy, the bureaucratic processes have mostly not lived up to this same high level.
- The time frame for establishing the main ongoing recovery arrangements was too slow, with confirmation of the Community Recovery Officers funding being some two months after the fire.
- Further, the administrative processes are too complex, both in terms of interpretation of the application of the funding, and the level of evidence required to justify specific claims. These processes add significant cost and time to resolving claims, adding to the level of frustration within the community.
- While some initial assistance was delivered promptly, the overall system does not consistently match the scale or urgency of community need. Simplification and acceleration of recovery processes would significantly improve outcomes and reduce community frustration.

### Links to Terms of Reference - Recommendations

Council wishes to highlight the following recommendations drawn from the above discussion, related to specific Terms of Reference of the Inquiry.

- ***TOR 1. The preparation and planning by government, emergency services agencies and the community ahead of the fire season, including management of public and private land and roadsides;***
  - Public land managers, e.g. of national parks, and other reserves including roadsides, need to ensure that their fuel reduction programs, including fire breaks, are effective, regularly maintained and adapt to seasonal conditions.
- ***TOR 4. The emergency responses to control and contain the fires, including adequacy of resources and communications;***
  - Non-government personnel involved in supporting core fire agencies, e.g. Local Government, need access to common communications systems used by Government agencies.
  - Practical arrangements to management of road blocks need to be put in place to enable effective community engagement within fire ground areas, while still maintaining public safety.
- ***TOR 5. resilience of critical services and infrastructure such as electricity, water and telecommunications during and after the fires;***
  - The circumstances of the loss of mobile phone coverage in the Natimuk area need to be understood and addressed to avoid a repeat at this and other sites.
  - The mobile telephone black spot area in the vicinity of the Rocklands Smiths Rd fire can be remedied with installation of a local tower.

- **TOR 6. The impact on the community, business and agriculture and efforts to aid in recovery;**
  - Systematic recovery funding arrangements are needed to improve the timeliness of delivery of Government support to communities in their recovery from fires.
  - The administrative processes for managing recovery funding arrangements need to be streamlined, while still ensuring accountability of spending of public money.

## Conclusion

Fire events during the 2025-26 high-risk weather period highlight the increasing frequency, scale and complexity of bushfire events in western Victoria. While significant strengths exist within current arrangements, particularly in operational response and financial commitment to recovery, key systemic improvements are required. In particular, enhanced fuel management, improved communication resilience, strengthened community engagement practices and more efficient recovery processes will be critical to improving outcomes in future events.

Council also wishes to highlight and acknowledge the extremely significant role played by the community themselves in the response to the fire, including the use of private fire units and speed tiller machinery during the fire, and the extent of caring support that members of the community are providing to each other in the aftermath.

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# Submission to the Inquiry into the 2026 Summer fires across Victoria

## Background

This submission is provided by the Wimmera Southern Mallee Council Alliance (WSMCA) representing Buloke, Hindmarsh, Horsham, Northern Grampians, West Wimmera, and Yarriambiack councils to the Inquiry into the 2026 summer fires across Victoria.

It outlines the unique challenges faced by WSMCA members, who must manage critical emergency responsibilities before, during, and after incidents. These duties often stretch limited staff and resources across multiple simultaneous emergencies.

## Regional Fires

Over December 2025 and January 2026, Victoria experienced extreme fire weather, with a statewide Total Fire Ban, Catastrophic/Extreme Fire Danger Rating (FDR) forecasts, and a subsequent State of Disaster declaration covering multiple Local Government Areas (LGAs). Fires were characterised by fast-moving grassfires across the State.

These fires had significant impacts on members of the WSMCA and came off the back of losses and impacts from earlier fires.

In particular:

### 27 January 2025: Little Desert Bushfire (Hindmarsh Shire)

#### Impact:

- 93,124 hectares burned over a prolonged period of unstable weather patterns resulting in the evacuation of the township of Dimboola. Concurrently, the Grampians National Park was withstanding a campaign fire, which drew many resources from across the State
- Little Desert Lodge near Dimboola was destroyed, causing significant tourism and economic impact to the area
- The fire was linked to Lillimur fire and Digger's Lane, Minimay fires, which occurred in the same period (**West Wimmera Shire**)

### 18 December 2025 Charlton–Jeffcott Fire (Buloke Shire)

#### Impact:

- Approximately 3,000 hectares across private and public land burnt
- Destruction of primary residences and multiple outbuildings, significant agricultural losses across approximately 15 farm properties (including crops, hay, fodder, machinery and equipment)

- Extensive fencing losses exceeding 100 kilometres, livestock evacuation and agistment support at two properties, displacement of multiple households requiring ongoing relief and recovery support, and Council-led Essential Water Replacement works to restore critical services

### **9 January 2026 The Grass Flat, Mitre - Grass Flat Rd fire (Horsham Rural City Council).**

#### **Impact:**

- 8,190 hectares, with initial impact assessments reporting 17 houses destroyed. This figure was later revised to 19, following secondary impact assessments
- Significant impacts to and losses of farmland, sheds, water tanks, facilities, vehicles and irrigation systems

### **27 January 2026 The Rocklands, Smiths Rd fire (Horsham Rural City Council)**

#### **Impact:**

- 20 hectares
- Fatigue, staff and community wellbeing impacts
- Resource challenges and crew availability issues

It is also important to acknowledge that these fires occurred in a region that is heavily impacted by drought and cost of living pressures. The ongoing drought has strained local water resources, making fire suppression efforts more difficult, while rising costs and fiscal challenges have limited Councils' ability to respond effectively to emergencies.

## **Issues**

The issues arising from the fires can be articulated under the following themes

- Preparedness
- Response
- Recovery
- Sector wide capability uplift and support

### **Preparedness**

#### *Forecasting*

Reliable forecasting of the likelihood of catastrophic days brings with it the opportunity to maximise messaging about fire preparedness.

Forecasting did not keep up with the rapidly changing conditions. Real time updates would help councils and community respond as conditions change.

#### *Fuel Loads*

The summer fires illustrated a growing and systemic gap between bushfire risk across roadside and public land management. Fuel loads are not being managed with seasonal variability (such as regrowth following late rainfall).

This is compounded by inconsistent implementation of critical measures such as fire breaks and the failure to address residual hazards like partially burnt timber, increasing risk in subsequent fire seasons.

Our members raised concerns at the December Wimmera Integrated Municipal Emergency Management Planning Committee meeting about the sequencing of roadside slashing activities on publicly managed roadsides (starting in Ararat and working towards Wimmera). This approach was not aligned to the dates that LGAs went into the fire danger period.

Key issues with fuel load management across the Wimmera Southern Mallee:

***Fuel Management***

- Vegetation control (spraying, slashing) is inconsistent and underfunded, particularly along roadsides
- Ad hoc response to seasonal variability (e.g. regrowth after late rains)
- Lack of follow-up actions (e.g. second cuts) is directly increasing fire risk
- Local government and land managers are operating under growing system stress

***Gaps in managing fuel loads on publicly managed land***

- Fire breaks are not consistently established or maintained
- Post-fire hazards (e.g. partially burnt timber) are not adequately addressed, increasing risk in subsequent seasons

***Commitments not delivered on***

- Gaps between publicly stated commitments and actual delivery of fire prevention works undermine local confidence and increase community angst about bushfire preparedness
- Lack of management of fuel on public land compromises the fire prevention program which asks private land owners to manage fuel loads
- Inability to issue and enforce Fire Prevention Notices on state-owned and managed land, as per the Country Fire Authority Act 1958, resulting in gaps in fire mitigation maintenance in areas of public housing, rail tracks, public roads and land

**Response**

Issues with communications infrastructure had major impact during the fire events, these included:

- Power and telephone network outages that were compounded by the progressive shutdown of the 3G network in rural areas
- Lack of access by Council staff to dedicated radio network which can be accessed by other response agencies, leading to potential missed key messages, including around safety issues
- Confusion regarding Bushfire Places of Last Resort (BPLR) and misinformation about warnings compounded by inconsistent understanding by the CFA regarding the Councils role in BPLR and dedicated BPLR site locations

## Recovery

Local Governments play a significant role in recovery which is increasingly complex and requires intensive resourcing. Once the emergency conditions have ended, Councils continue to actively support recovery and are in some cases the primary coordinating entity.

Council recovery activities involve

- Case management
- Direct engagement with affected landholders and facility operators
- Community referrals and support navigation
- Local secondary impact assessments to accurately capture immediate and longer-term effects
- Management of environmental, access, and safety issues within and adjacent to affected areas

These responsibilities were delivered with minimal dedicated recovery funding, requiring Council to absorb costs within existing operational budgets during a period already characterised by drought pressures, workforce constraints, and escalating service delivery costs.

Following the Grass Flat Fire, the Council Support Fund was allocated to Horsham Rural City Council in a very timely manner, which is noteworthy and appreciated. However, the funding guidelines constrain the expenditure and exclude activities which may be deemed eligible under the Disaster Recovery Funding Arrangements (DRFA), making it complex for Council to plan and administer.

Further stringent evidence requirements for eligible claimable activities through DRFA along with delays in the claims or pre-payment processes results in reliance on existing operational budgets as the primary source of funding for a period, with no guarantee of reimbursement.

The recovery experience highlighted a systemic gap whereby small but highly consequential events, particularly those affecting community, cultural, or social infrastructure, can fall between existing funding frameworks. This leaves councils managing complex recovery expectations without the scale-appropriate resources required to deliver meaningful outcomes.

## Issues for Councils

### **Fires create complex, multi-dimensional impacts for councils and their workforce.**

Fires have emotional, economic and logistical impacts for Councils and our staff.

### **Centralised recovery models can exclude impacted communities when they lack flexibility.**

Centralised program responses that do not consider local needs this limits access to flexible recovery funding despite the significance of the impact.

### **Gaps in coordination structures and resourcing delay effective recovery responses.**

Lack of formalised structures and adequate resourcing to support coordinated responses including delays in the Community Recovery Officers program, which had delays between announcement and delivery.

### **Current disaster funding thresholds fail to capture the true impact of smaller, place-based events.**

Small-scale fire events can lead to large-scale social and economic loss, exposing a gap in disaster funding models, such as the activation of the DRFA, that fail to recognise place-based and community-level impacts in rural areas. Illustrated by the loss of the Little Desert Lodge near Nhill, a unique facility with significant social, cultural and economic value, not meeting standard disaster thresholds to activate the required category to assist with reestablishment of the facility.

### **Uncoordinated external support can reduce the effectiveness of recovery efforts.**

Disaster Relief Australia was mobilised to Natimuk to help with clean-up and the reestablishment of fencing. However, there was little warning or opportunity for consultation about the process. Although a significant amount was achieved during their week-long deployment, more could have been accomplished with clearer communication and better preparedness. For example, there was no chance to coordinate with local volunteers or clarify clean-up priorities, which created confusion and led to missed opportunities.

### **Inconsistent application of recovery support creates inequity between affected communities.**

Disaster relief and recovery support has been inconsistent between significant events, as evidenced by the stark disparity in Primary Producer Bushfire Recovery Grants and concessional loan support available to landowners affected by the Charlton–Jeffcott fires compared with those impacted by the broader January 2026 Victorian bushfires.

## **Sector support and coordination**

Local Governments, along with other agencies, are at the forefront of emergency management and have significant responsibility in the preparation of communities and council owned assets and land. Councils have key responsibilities during the emergency and are often the face of the recovery effort.

### **Local Government Capacity Constraints**

Councils are managing multiple, concurrent responsibilities, including:

- Relief centres
- Debris and hazardous tree management
- Case management and triage
- Road access restoration
- Events occurring across multiple locations and regions simultaneously significantly stretch resources. This was seen both in the 2026 fires, when State and regional resources were stretched across multiple impact areas within the Grampians Region, as well as in 2025, when resources were dedicated to the Grampians National Park fire at the same time as the Little Desert Fire occurrence.
- Uncertain and inconsistent funding responses limit effective planning. While the rapid allocation of funding in this instance is welcomed, the absence of clarity on future funding availability constrains councils' ability to plan with confidence.
- Variable funding triggers create confusion and inequity; differing activation thresholds between events are difficult for communities to understand, particularly when the impacts of fire are indiscriminate and do not align to funding criteria.
- Workforce sustainability, fatigue and operational risk

### **Structural Underinvestment in Capability and Capacity**

- Absence of a funded, structured approach to capability building across local government and the broader emergency management system, such as expected timeframes and tiers of the Council Support Fund, along with consultation to assess local need to mitigate the risk of underspend and the subsequent return of funds, as seen in previous years
- Current arrangements leave the system increasingly vulnerable to future fire seasons
- Municipal Emergency Resourcing Program funding has not been indexed since the program was established, with no opportunity for advocacy for a tier review, resulting in less funding available in real terms

### **Inquiry considerations:**

#### **Increased and sustained fuel load reduction on public land including**

- Improve mechanisms to ensure public land managers deliver fire prevention works committed to in post incident community meetings
- Improve accountability and reporting for fuel management in high-risk areas and adjoining locations
- Enforcement capability for publicly managed land
- Clearer communication with councils and communities where priorities, funding constraints, or delays affect delivery
- Enforceable timeframes and monitoring where mitigation actions are publicly promised following major bushfire events
- Greater prioritisation of strategic fuel breaks both around and within these areas
- More consideration for fire mitigation activities relative to grass cutting rates and Fire Danger Period commencement dates need to be considered

#### **Investigate options to better link Council staff with other agencies during the emergency**

- Provide access for appropriate Council staff to the dedicated radio network
- Leverage councils' community connections to improve communications with community, including Bushfire Places of Last Resort, misinformation about warnings and council roles

#### **Acknowledge Council role in recovery**

- Implement a consistent and transparent funding framework with standard triggers, consultation and pre-agreed surge funding to enable confident planning and equitable, timely support
- Explore flexible recovery funding models that recognise the impact of bushfires on social, cultural, and community infrastructure, not solely residential or agricultural loss. This should include recognition that the loss of a single community or tourism asset in a small rural municipality can have long-term economic and social consequences comparable to larger-scale events in metropolitan or peri-urban areas
- Mechanisms to support recovery for facilities that provide significant social benefit to disadvantaged groups, even where asset ownership or geography sits outside conventional eligibility criteria

- Provide councils input and flexibility into the allocation of recovery funding, program delivery and their design
- Provide councils input and feedback into the Disaster Recovery Funding Arrangement guidelines and eligibility criteria, taking feedback into account regarding stringent evidence requirements and resource-intensive claims processes
- Apply indexation and consideration for tier adjustment on the existing Municipal Emergency Resourcing Program funding allocation to improve Council emergency management arrangements capability and functions

**Consideration of a Statewide Surge and Support Model to:**

- Support councils during peak demand
- Reduce reliance on “business-as-usual” staff

# WIMMERA SOUTHERN MALLEE COUNCIL ALLIANCE



## MINUTES

**Horsham Bypass Planning Community Reference Group  
Thursday 9 April 2026, 5:00 pm  
Former Kindergarten, 23 Roberts Avenue Horsham  
Opposite Council Offices**

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### Attendees

#### **CRG Members:**

Brian Klowss	HRCC Mayor (Chair)	Leoni Heard	Community – South Rural
Angela Munn	HRCC Councillor	Rob Moir	Community – South Urban
Dean O’Loughlin	HRCC Councillor	Stan Ellis	Community – West Rural
Sheridan Clancy	Community – North Rural	Glenn Ryan	Community – West Urban
Shayne Keenan	Community – North Urban	Peter Moore	Industry – Agriculture Business
Jamie Sleep	Community – East Rural	Brian Watts	Industry – Retail / Service
June Liddy	Community – East Urban		

#### **Staff:**

John Martin	Director Infrastructure
Dianna Blake	Senior Project Manager – Planning

### Apologies

Greg Schultz	Industry – Transport
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### **Agenda Items:**

#### **1. Welcome**

- The Chair opened the meeting and emphasised respectful listening, openness to differing views, and constructive discussion.
- It was noted that the meeting was being recorded to facilitate preparation of the minutes.

#### **2. Background to the Project**

- Bypass Planning Panel – November 2015, did not lead to a clear outcome.
- Council confirmed this Bypass Planning process starts with “no lines on a map”.
- Ten years ago truck volumes through Horsham were about 2,000 per day. Currently we see around 3,600 trucks per day, with potential to significantly increase over the next 5–10 years due to proposed industrial, agricultural, renewable energy, and mining developments.
- Although funding and building a bypass is the responsibility of State Government, they are unlikely to proceed with this without a community-supported preferred option.
- The bypass is considered an issue of State and National significance, involving multiple highways.

#### **3. Conflicts of Interest and Confidentiality (John)**

- Explanation of Conflict of Interest and Form
- Conflict of Interest forms:
  - Required from all members.
  - Purpose is transparency, not exclusion.

- Confidentiality:
  - Most information intended to be public.
  - Confidential items (e.g. cultural heritage or financial matters) will be clearly identified when applicable.
- Forms to be returned by next meeting.

**4. CRG Member Introductions**

- Each member introduced themselves to the meeting.

**5. Minutes and Action items from previous meeting**

Date	ACTION ITEM	Who	Outcome
	Nil – First Meeting		

**6. Project Activities**

No.	Item	Details	Attachment
<b>1</b>	<b>Project Plan</b>	<b>Outline of the Project Process</b> <b>Project timeline</b>	<b>6.1</b> <b>6.2</b>

Key stages discussed:

- **April–May 2026:**  
Establish community engagement approach to understand issues relating to the Bypass that are important to the community. No routes identified at this stage.
- **June–July 2026:**  
CRG reviews community submissions and develops evaluation criteria and weightings.
- **Mid–Late 2026:**  
Indicative bypass corridors/options developed and evaluated.
- **Late 2026 – Early 2027:**  
Second round of community engagement on evaluated options.
- **Early 2027:**  
Final recommendation to Council.

Principles emphasised:

- Community values are the priority of this group, aspects like the engineering and design will be considered at a later stage.
- Cost should not be the primary consideration for the community, but clearly the cost of a bypass cannot be excessive.
- Avoid repeating past mistakes of premature route identification.

Discussion of potential involvement of consultant in the establishment of criteria as well as evaluation of route options.

<b>2</b>	<b>CRG Terms of Reference</b>	<b>Key aspects for Members</b>	<b>6.3</b>
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- CRG members are asked to:
  - Engage openly with the wider community.
  - Listen to and reflect community views rather than advocate personal outcomes only.
  - Help shape how community engagement is undertaken.
- Members may speak freely with the community unless information is specifically identified as confidential.
- Media engagement is to be managed via the Mayor.
- End goal is to identify a preferred outcome to recommend to Council.
- If people need support to enable their attendance and participation – let us know.

<b>3</b>	<b>Engagement Plan</b>	<b>Proposed Approach</b> <b>Key engagement steps</b>	<b>Refer 6.1</b> <b>Page 4</b>
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- Media releases after each meeting of the CRG (within 5 days of each meeting)
- Inclusion of confirmed CRG minutes in Council meeting papers

- Specific engagement with the community at key stages of the project, as per **APPENDIX 9.3A**
  - Full transparency of public submissions (subject to privacy considerations)
- Guided by the CRG on how we do this. An agenda item at every meeting.

<b>4</b>	<b>First Community Engagement</b>	<b>To discuss the purpose and method of the initial community engagement</b>	<b>6.4</b>
<p>General consensus:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>No specific routes</b> in first engagement.</li> <li>• Use broad concepts (e.g. arrows, traffic flows) if needed.</li> <li>• Focus on criteria, not corridor selection.</li> </ul> <p>Key questions supported:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Do we need a bypass?</li> <li>• What type (truck-only vs full bypass vs none)?</li> <li>• What matters most to you and why?</li> <li>• What impacts must be avoided or mitigated?</li> </ul> <p>Suggested and supported approaches:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Online survey (short, plain language, mobile-friendly).</li> <li>• Paper surveys (Council offices, drop-in points).</li> <li>• QR codes in public places.</li> <li>• Verbal submissions (phone / assisted).</li> <li>• Targeted outreach: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ Businesses</li> <li>○ Farming community</li> <li>○ Schools (senior students)</li> <li>○ Sporting and community groups</li> <li>○ Tourist Information Centre</li> </ul> </li> <li>• Promotion via: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ Council website and newsletter</li> <li>○ Community radio</li> <li>○ Social media</li> </ul> </li> <li>• Accessibility considerations: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ Simple language</li> <li>○ Voice/audio options where possible.</li> </ul> </li> </ul>			

<b>5</b>	<b>Consultancy brief</b>	<b>Explanation of purpose, methodology Review of brief</b>	<b>6.5</b>
<p>Two options discussed:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Consultant assists with <b>evaluation only</b>.</li> <li>2. Consultant assists with <b>theme analysis and criteria development + evaluation</b>.</li> </ol> <p>Decision deferred until:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Likely volume of submissions clearer</li> <li>• Consultant proposals received</li> </ul>			

<b>6</b>	<b>Background Material</b>	<b>Horsham Bypass Planning website</b>	<b>6.6</b>
<p><a href="https://www.hrcc.vic.gov.au/Our-Council/Projects-and-Works/Horsham-Bypass-Planning">https://www.hrcc.vic.gov.au/Our-Council/Projects-and-Works/Horsham-Bypass-Planning</a> Contains background reports, links to media releases and Council reports</p>			

## 7. Communications

Date	Item	Details
14 April 2026	Post-meeting media release	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• CRG photo taken for publication.</li> <li>• Regular updates will be included on the Council website.</li> </ul>

		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Meeting minutes to summarise issues (including comments to individuals).</li> <li>• Ongoing communication to reinforce that this is a <b>two-stage process</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ Criteria/values identified first</li> <li>○ Potential lines second</li> </ul> </li> </ul>
14 April 2026	Website	Updated with media release Updated with meeting minutes when approved at next meeting

**8. General Business**

No	Item	Who	Details
	No additional business		

**9. Next Meeting**

- Key agenda items:
  - Review of Project Plan
  - Finalisation of First Community Engagement Brief, to present to Council
  - Finalisation of Consultant Brief
  - Communications
- Discussion of meeting schedule / time of day
- CRG Meeting 2 to be held 5:00 pm, Tuesday 28 April 2026

**10. Meeting Close 7:00 pm**

Chair

Cr Brian Klowss

**Mayor**



**MINUTES OF INFORMAL MEETINGS OF COUNCILLORS**  
**COUNCIL BRIEFING HELD AT THE ROBERTS AVENUE KINDERGARTEN**  
**MONDAY 23 MARCH 2026 AT 6:53PM**

**ATTENDED:** Cr Brian Klowss (Mayor), Cr Bec Sluggett (Deputy Mayor), Cr Cam McDonald, Cr Dean O'Loughlin, Cr Ian Ross, Cr Todd Wilson, Gail Gatt, Chief Executive Officer; Kim Hargreaves, Director Corporate Services; Brett Luxford, Director Communities and Place; John Martin, Director Infrastructure

**APOLOGIES:** Cr Angie Munn

**1. WELCOME AND INTRODUCTION**

**2. DISCLOSURE OF CONFLICT OF INTEREST SEC 130 and 131, LOCAL GOVERNMENT ACT 2020 AND HORSHAM RURAL CITY COUNCIL GOVERNANCE RULES**

NIL

**3. PRESENTATIONS**

3.1 Capital Works Program community engagement workshop/discussion

**4. CLOSE**

The meeting closed at 7:46pm.

**GAIL GATT**  
**Chief Executive Officer**



**MINUTES OF INFORMAL MEETINGS OF COUNCILLORS**  
**COUNCIL BRIEFING HELD AT THE ROBERTS AVENUE KINDERGARTEN**  
**MONDAY 30 MARCH 2026 AT 5:35PM**

**ATTENDED:** Cr Brian Klowss (Mayor), Cr Bec Sluggett (Deputy Mayor), Cr Cam McDonald, Cr Angie Munn, Cr Dean O’Loughlin, Cr Ian Ross, Cr Todd Wilson, Gail Gatt, Chief Executive Officer; Kim Hargreaves, Director Corporate Services; Brett Luxford, Director Communities and Place; John Martin, Director Infrastructure

**APOLOGIES:** NIL

**1. WELCOME AND INTRODUCTION**

**2. DISCLOSURE OF CONFLICT OF INTEREST SEC 130 and 131, LOCAL GOVERNMENT ACT 2020 AND HORSHAM RURAL CITY COUNCIL GOVERNANCE RULES**

NIL

**3. PRESENTATIONS**

3.1 Peng Cheng Wheat Starch facility

**4. REPORTS FOR INFORMATION ONLY**

4.1 VCAT, Building and Planning Permit Report and Proposed Refusals

4.2 Strategic Risks

**5. PRESENTATIONS CONT.**

5.1 Property update

5.2 VicTrack lots incl FROR overview

**6. GENERAL DISCUSSION (Gail Gatt)**

Councillors agreed to formally extend the meeting by 15 mins at 8:57pm.

Briefing closed for CEO/Cr only time at 9:03pm.

**7. CEO/COUNCILLOR ONLY TIME**

**8. COUNCILLOR ONLY TIME**

**9. CLOSE**

**DINNER** (Dinner at 7:28pm, reconvened at 7:45pm)

**GAIL GATT**  
**Chief Executive Officer**



**MINUTES OF INFORMAL MEETINGS OF COUNCILLORS**  
**COUNCIL BRIEFING HELD AT THE ROBERTS AVENUE KINDERGARTEN**  
**MONDAY 13 APRIL 2026 AT 5:29PM**

**ATTENDED:** Cr Brian Klowss (Mayor) (via Teams), Cr Bec Sluggett (Deputy Mayor) (Chair), Cr Cam McDonald, Cr Angie Munn, Cr Dean O'Loughlin, Cr Ian Ross, Cr Todd Wilson, Kim Hargreaves, Acting Chief Executive Officer; Belinda Johnson, Acting Director Corporate Services; Brett Luxford, Director Communities and Place; John Martin, Director Infrastructure

**APOLOGIES:** Gail Gatt, Chief Executive Officer

**1. WELCOME AND INTRODUCTION**

**2. DISCLOSURE OF CONFLICT OF INTEREST SEC 130 and 131, LOCAL GOVERNMENT ACT 2020 AND HORSHAM RURAL CITY COUNCIL GOVERNANCE RULES**

NIL

**3. PRESENTATIONS**

- 3.1 Budget Impact – Fuel
- 3.2 LGPRF Update
- 3.3 Horsham Bypass Planning Update
- 3.4 Capex Report

**4. COUNCIL MEETING REPORTS FOR DISCUSSION**

- 4.1 Road upgrade grant (SLRIP)

**5. COMMUNITY RECOVERY UPDATES (if required)**

**6. GENERAL DISCUSSION (Kim Hargreaves)**

Briefing closed for CEO/Cr only time at 7:35pm.

**7. CEO/COUNCILLOR ONLY TIME**

**8. COUNCILLOR ONLY TIME**

**9. CLOSE**

**DINNER** (Dinner at 6:50pm, reconvened at 7:00pm)

The meeting closed at 8:32pm.

**KIM HARGREAVES**  
**Acting Chief Executive Officer**



**MINUTES OF INFORMAL MEETINGS OF COUNCILLORS**  
**COUNCIL BRIEFING HELD AT THE ROBERTS AVENUE KINDERGARTEN**  
**MONDAY 20 APRIL 2026 AT 5:30PM**

**ATTENDED:** Cr Brian Klowss (Mayor), Cr Bec Sluggett (Deputy Mayor)(left at 5:39pm, returned at 5:51pm), Cr Cam McDonald, Cr Angie Munn, Cr Dean O'Loughlin, Cr Ian Ross (joined via Teams at 5:51pm), Cr Todd Wilson, Kim Hargreaves, Acting Chief Executive Officer; Belinda Johnson, Acting Director Corporate Services; John Martin, Director Infrastructure

**APOLOGIES:** Gail Gatt, Chief Executive Officer; Brett Luxford, Director Communities and Place

**1. WELCOME AND INTRODUCTION**

**2. DISCLOSURE OF CONFLICT OF INTEREST SEC 130 and 131, LOCAL GOVERNMENT ACT 2020 AND HORSHAM RURAL CITY COUNCIL GOVERNANCE RULES**

NIL

**3. PRESENTATIONS**

- 3.1 Rail Freight Alliance
- 3.2 Valuer General's presentation
- 3.3 Gender Impact Assessments
- 3.4 Horsham Bypass Planning - Update
- 3.5 Capital Works Priorities - Engagement Update
- 3.6 Draft Fees and Charges - Engagement Update

**4. COUNCIL MEETING REPORTS FOR DISCUSSION**

- 4.1 VicTrack lots incl FROR overview (for decision)
- 4.2 Bushfire Inquiry
- 4.3 City Oval Fence

**5. COMMUNITY RECOVERY UPDATES (if required)**

**6. GENERAL DISCUSSION (Kim Hargreaves)**

**7. CLOSE**

**DINNER** (Dinner at 7:07pm, reconvened at 7:23pm)

The meeting closed at 8:26pm.

**KIM HARGREAVES**

**Acting Chief Executive Officer**