

2015/16 Fire Danger Season and Pinery Fire Review

Infrastructure Division

Document control

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Contents

Background..... 3

Discussion 4

 Preparation and planning..... 4

 Response 6

 Recovery..... 10

Summary..... 12

Pinery Fire Review – Recommendations 13

Appendix 1 – Preliminary Review Recommendations 18

Background

At approximately 12.05pm on Wednesday 25 November 2015, a bushfire started in Pinery in the state's Mid North, approximately 16km from the town of Mallala. The resultant bushfire burned under 'catastrophic' weather conditions and was fanned by winds in excess of 80kph. The bushfire escalated rapidly and resulted in the destruction of 91 houses, 271 other structures and 483 vehicles. Two people died in the bushfire and 31 people were injured.

The Department for Communities and Social Inclusion's Pinery Bushfire Recovery Summary Report documents that, as at 17 December 2015, the fire had burnt 82,600 hectares of land – an area larger than the size of Singapore. Official reports indicate that the Pinery bushfire burnt at a rate of roughly 14,000 hectares an hour or 235 hectares per minute.

The Pinery bushfire caused the forced evacuation of Mallala Primary School by emergency services and necessitated the invoking of emergency procedures for a number of schools and preschools in the region.

A number of schools and preschools were required to be closed on Thursday 26 and Friday 27 November owing to unsafe roads in the area. The Department for Education and Child Development's (DECD) Deputy Chief Executive, Corporate Services, authorised these closures as the delegate of the Minister for Education and Child Development. There was also a substantial impact on school transport services in the region as a consequence of the uncertainty around travel conditions.

On 7 December 2015, the Security, Bushfire and Emergency Management unit undertook a preliminary review of the manner in which the Pinery bushfire was managed by DECD. The preliminary review assessed the impact of the event as it unfolded, the actions taken by schools and preschools, and the effectiveness of existing policies and processes.

The 7 recommendations arising from the preliminary review (see appendix 1) were approved by the Chief Executive for immediate implementation on 9 December 2015. Recommendations 1 – 5 were implemented in time for term 1, 2016 in accordance with the agreed timescales.

At the request of the Country Fire Service (CFS), DECD representatives attended Pinery fire community debriefs at Hamley Bridge and Wasleys on the 11 and 17 December 2015 respectively. The wider community did not raise any specific issues regarding DECD's management of school operations during the fire.

The education director and representatives from the Security, Bushfire and Emergency Management unit have been heavily involved in both the Local Recovery Committee and State Recovery Committee respectively. The department has contributed to the interagency recovery effort, regularly reporting on the actions and activities it has undertaken to address staff and student welfare, as well as remediating asset damage. These activities include:

- deployment of social workers and support staff through Integrated Support Services
- availability of ongoing welfare support services to staff and students
- minor repairs to damaged infrastructure at Wasleys Primary School, Freeling Primary School and Roseworthy Primary School
- development and enactment of a 'return to school plan' for term 1, 2016
- interior and exterior cleaning for schools affected by soot and dust in preparation for term 1, 2016. Additional cleaning services were also provided on request for the duration of the term.

On 10 February 2016, representatives from the Security, Bushfire and Emergency Management unit attended a recovery workshop, organised by the education director, for the school and preschool leaders affected by the Pinery bushfire. During the workshop, a number of the issues arising from the active bushfire incident were discussed, debriefed and explained. Although not the original intent of the workshop, its informal setting enabled candid communication between all parties and a valuable opportunity to appreciate the demands experienced both corporately and at the site level.

The report of the DECD preliminary review into the Pinery fire was provided to the Minister for Education and Child Development in December 2015. The Minister was advised that a formal debrief process involving appropriate internal and external stakeholders would take place prior to the end of term 1, 2016.

Discussion

A formal review of the Pinery bushfire was undertaken on 5 April 2016. The review involved principals and site leaders from schools affected by the fire, the education director and staff from within Asset and Business Services, as well as representatives from the Association of Independent Schools of South Australia (AISSA) and Catholic Education SA (CESA). In addition, the Country Fire Service (CFS) and South Australia Police (SAPOL) attended and contributed to the review process.

The purpose of the formal review was to examine the actions taken by DECD during the bushfire, and to identify areas for improvement. As part of the review, the Security, Bushfire and Emergency Management unit sought input and feedback from the attendees in relation to the department's existing Bushfire Response Procedure. The procedure governs the actions all DECD sites and services must take in response to CFS fire danger ratings and potential bushfire threats.

The formal review was conducted as a half-day workshop / forum, with a planned agenda, keynote speakers, targeted questioning and open group discussions. At the commencement of the review, the attendees were canvassed to determine their expectations from the day. This ensured that, during later group discussions, there were clear focal points. In addition, it enabled the facilitator of the event to ensure that all potential discussion areas had been addressed during the review.

A number of potential recommendations and suggested improvements to DECD processes were identified during the course of the review. These have been divided into three areas, in line with the Emergency Management Australia's themes of Preparation & Planning, Response, and Recovery.

Preparation and planning

During the course of the review, some schools raised the issue of the CFS fire danger rating on the day of the fire. A total fire ban was in place for the Mid North Fire Ban District, with a forecast fire danger rating of 'extreme', although the fire danger index reached 'catastrophic' on a number of occasions during the actual day in question. A number of site leaders were of the view that, had the day been declared a 'catastrophic' fire danger day in advance, there would have been much less risk to schools.

Under the DECD Emergency Management Framework, on days of forecast 'catastrophic' fire danger, schools and preschools in the relevant fire ban district that have a bushfire risk rating of R1(extreme / very high) or R2 (high) are directed to close. All other schools in the district remain open. This policy has been in place since the 2009 Cabinet approval.

In addition to the school closures, all DECD operated bus and taxi transport services scheduled to operate in the relevant fire ban district are cancelled, provided that a R1 or R2 school exists in that fire ban district.

It was acknowledged that, owing to their low bushfire risk rating, all but one of the schools affected by the Pinery fire would have remained open in the event of a 'catastrophic' fire danger day and that only bus transport would have been affected. A number of sites indicated that the cancellation of formal transport arrangements would have resulted in the majority of children affected by the cancellation remaining at home. It was apparent that it is common practice in the region for large numbers of children to remain home on 'catastrophic' fire danger days, irrespective of the fact that their school remains open.

In the vast majority of cases, medium and low risk schools and preschools in designated bushfire prone areas are located in bushfire safer precincts – areas that the CFS would advise people to go to if they are under threat of bushfire. As a consequence, in the vast majority of cases, DECD schools and preschools with a risk rating of 'R3' (medium / low risk) or those that are non-rated (negligible risk) are amongst the safest local places that children can be on days of 'catastrophic' fire danger. Ensuring and facilitating school attendance has notable bushfire safety benefits for rural communities. It is therefore not proposed that 'R3' or 'non rated' schools be considered for closure in response to forecast 'catastrophic' fire danger days.

Recommendation 1: That school closures for forecast 'catastrophic' fire danger days remain limited to 'R1' and 'R2' sites and services.

The cancellation or suspension of DECD operated bus and taxi services on 'catastrophic' fire danger days can become an issue as it applies to the entire fire ban district. Bus services that operate in regional areas exist to facilitate school attendance for children living in those areas. Although parents and caregivers are expected to make alternate transport arrangements, this may not be practical for many families and the blanket cancellation of bus services is clearly having an impact on school attendance during fire danger season.

In November 2014 there were issues raised regarding the cancellation of transport services in the North West Pastoral fire ban district. At the time, Ernabella Anangu School (then rated as 'R2') was directed to close, and bus services at Roxby Downs over 800kms away were cancelled raising concerns for the local community. The sheer size of the North West Pastoral and North East Pastoral fire ban districts, added to the fact that the terrain in those areas is not generally likely to present a notable bushfire risk (there are no high bushfire risk schools in the North East Pastoral area) necessitated a review of the transport cancellation policy that had been in place since 2009. The stipulation that a R1 or R2 school must exist within the fire ban district was added in 2016. In addition, bushfire risk reduction strategies have been implemented to reclassify Ernabella Anangu School as 'R3'.

In the Mount Lofty Ranges fire ban district, Adelaide Metro bus services continue to operate on 'catastrophic' fire danger days in locations such as Willunga, McLaren Vale, Lobethal and Chandlers Hill at a time when DECD operated transport is cancelled for the very same areas.

There are a number of potential solutions to the transport management issue, ranging from dynamic risk assessments to designated pick up and drop off at 'safer' locations.

Recommendation 2: That a review of the DECD policy in relation to school transport arrangements on days of 'catastrophic' fire danger rating and total fire bans be undertaken.

A number of site leaders from smaller sites raised the issue of the capacity of their site to respond to emergencies in the absence of the site leader or other key staff. Other issues identified included school or preschool staff travelling through a fire ban district on a 'catastrophic' fire danger day in order to attend work and that doing so put them at risk.

Leaders also raised the issue of being away from their site at the time of the fire, owing to other meetings and work commitments. It was identified that, whilst there was a clear policy position with regard to work-related travel on 'catastrophic' fire danger days, there was no such guidance for other total fire ban days. Given that the Pinery fire and other notable bushfire events have occurred on 'extreme' fire danger days, it was felt a wider ranging policy position was required.

Recommendation 3: That information be added to the Bushfire Preparation Procedure, and any other relevant policy, to provide clearer direction on risk assessments for travel to work and work-related travel during fire danger season.

One of the key themes to arise throughout the course of the formal review was the impact of 'R3' and 'non-rated' schools and preschools being less well prepared for bushfires than their 'R1' and 'R2' counterparts. In a number of cases, staff, students and community members remained on the school grounds for several hours without adequate contingencies in place for food, water or other essential supplies.

Whilst bushfires are the most prevalent major emergency within South Australia, there was a genuine likelihood that any sort of emergency event could result in staff and students being required to remain on site until safe to leave. Contingencies for non-perishable food, water, gas, torches, battery operated radios and mobile phone battery backs should be incorporated into the emergency management plans for all DECD sites.

Recommendation 4: That the DECD Emergency Management Plan template be adjusted to address requirements for adequate contingency supplies for all emergencies.

At the time of the Pinery fire, the education director for the education portfolio most affected by the fire was on sick leave as a result of a recent vehicle collision. In addition, the education director's own home came under threat from the bushfire, resulting in a decision to evacuate to a safer location. Site leaders and the education director herself identified that the absence of the education director impacted on the effective management of and response to the emergency.

It is recognised that the education director has a major role to play during an emergency and that additional support may be required immediately in the case of an emergency.

Recommendation 5: That each education director have a nominated first and second proxy in the event of illness or operational incapacity.

Response

During the course of the formal review, site leaders were asked for feedback in relation to the recently released Bushfire Response Procedure. In the 'Bushfire Threat Steps', the procedure states that the Security, Bushfire and Emergency Management unit will "provide direction and assistance on being made aware of a fire in close proximity to a DECD site or transport route". Site leaders indicated that the term 'close proximity' required clarification.

Recommendation 6: That the Bushfire Preparation Procedure provide greater clarity around the term 'close proximity' and the associated impact on actions to be taken.

The Bushfire Response Procedure also requires that, following the enactment of a site emergency management plan or bushfire response plan, sites and services must seek advice from the Security, Bushfire and Emergency Management unit or education director. Sites must then implement their communications plan to ensure parents, caregivers and relevant corporate personnel are advised of the incident and the actions taken. In providing feedback regarding the procedure, site leaders noted that the requirement for communications to parents to be 'approved' or endorsed by centralised personnel would be difficult in an emergency scenario. Leaders stated that it would be preferable for the Security, Bushfire and Emergency Management unit to provide sites with a pre-determined template for use in bushfires and other emergencies.

It was also noted that low risk schools and preschools, for whom many aspects of pre-season preparation are not mandatory, required greater access to information and details including the DECD Parent Bushfire Hotline and the purpose that it served in directing all parent communication to a centralised location during an active bushfire. It was agreed that the hotline number (1800 000 279) required further publicity and would be referenced in the pre-determined communications template.

Recommendation 7: That the DECD Security, Bushfire and Emergency Management unit release a parent communications template to schools and preschools for use in bushfires and other emergencies.

Recommendation 8: That the Parent Bushfire Hotline telephone number and its purpose be widely promoted.

Site leaders and attendees at the formal review were provided with copies of the recommendations from the preliminary Pinery fire review, which included a number of recommendations related to improved communications methods and systems. The Security, Bushfire and Emergency Management unit demonstrated the SMS alert system that had been instituted in the wake of that review and the circumstances under which it was intended to be used to communicate with schools and preschools. Whilst impressed by the simplicity of the system and the concept, a number of schools requested clarification of the methodology for system use (e.g. how many schools would be contacted in the early stages of an incident or how wide would the communication 'net' be extended).

Site leaders were advised of the importance of ensuring that their correct contact details had been provided to the department in order to effectively receive SMS alerts. Concern was expressed about the potential complications around principals and site leaders having both a personal telephone and business telephone. Concerns were also expressed about the impact of a principal or site leader not being available to read or respond to SMS alerts.

Attendees were also concerned that, during an active incident, if parents and caregivers were correctly contacting the Parent Bushfire Hotline for information, that the volume of calls to the Security, Bushfire and Emergency Management unit would impact upon the ability of schools to seek advice themselves.

During an active bushfire incident where there is a genuine threat to one or more DECD sites, the department's Emergency Coordination Centre (ECC) is to be activated. The ECC, now located on Level 11, 31 Flinders Street, is responsible for coordinating the response to the active incident, including communications to sites, external stakeholders and notable corporate personnel. The SMS alert system is merely one of the communication methods

that would be employed during an active bushfire emergency. In an activation of the ECC, specific roles and responsibilities are allocated to individual staff. One of those roles is 'School Communications Officer' and is the dedicated point of contact for principals and site leaders. The details for this individual will be provided during the initial emergency notification to schools and preschools.

At the time of the Pinery fire, the terms of reference for the ECC were under development. The preliminary review of the Pinery fire recommended further action including staff training and the deployment of DECD Media unit staff to assist with internal communications – which has already been implemented and has been used to great effect in the management of the school bomb hoax calls in February 2016.

Recommendation 9: That the terms of reference or standard operating procedures for DECD's Emergency Coordination Centre be approved and made available to all school and preschool leaders.

Recommendation 10: That the Emergency Coordination Centre terms of reference or standard operating procedures provide clear instructions regarding internal and external communications protocols and methodologies.

Recommendation 11: That the Emergency Coordination Centre terms of reference or standard operating procedures include minimum resourcing requirements with documented contingencies.

During the course of the formal review, a number of site leaders raised the issue of staff at their location leaving the site as a result of the staff member's property or their family being impacted by the fire. The issues raised by the attendees were twofold:

- their concerns for the safety and welfare of a staff member placing themselves in immediate danger
- the inability to maintain National Quality Standards (NQS) and duty of care requirements.

The issue of whether principals and site leaders are expected to direct staff to remain on site to satisfy duty of care requirements in circumstances where the staff member has a personal emergency to attend to (e.g. child / family member injured or suspected to be in danger) requires further investigation.

Recommendation 12: That the department's human resources and legal services units provide formal direction on the management of duty of care issues that compete with staff personal emergencies.

During the course of the Pinery fire, there were reports that some students had left school grounds without parental supervision and instances where parents and caregivers did not sign out their child or insisted on collecting a child that was not their own. In some instances, staff were met with resistance whilst trying to enforce 'sign out' requirements.

Unlike some of the other site management issues raised during both the preliminary and formal Pinery reviews, difficulties experienced in the enforcement of student collection requirements in an emergency is predominantly limited to bushfires and other natural disasters. Whilst some sites had clear processes in place to assist in ensuring children had left with a nominated parent or caregiver, others were less developed in this area. It was unanimously agreed that the attitude and behaviour of some parents and caregivers in difficult circumstances was a major contributor to the difficulties experienced in enforcing student collection protocols.

Through discussions with the attending members of the emergency services, it was apparent that the second largest contributor to the problem of student collection related to the concept and rationale behind 'evacuation' during a bushfire event. SAPOL and CFS indicated that the word 'evacuate' was not used in formal communications at any time during the Pinery fire. It was acknowledged that, whilst CFS emergency warning or 'watch and act' messages included recommendations for people to leave the area (or not to leave, in some cases) they did not direct people to leave or 'evacuate'.

In some cases, parents collected their children from the relative safety of the school building and encountered hazardous bushfire conditions on the roads as they attempted to flee the area. Similarly, families are known to have placed themselves at risk of harm in travelling towards school after being advised of the bushfire in the area.

It was clear from discussions with all attendees that improved planning was required by both schools and families to ensure:

- a) parents and caregivers are not ordinarily directed to collect children during an active bushfire incident
- b) a system is in place for parents and caregivers to confirm emergency collection instructions for their children
- c) parents and caregivers are aware of the school / preschool / departmental bushfire response procedures, with an emphasis on the concept of 'Bushfire Safer Places' and the importance of providing up-to-date contact information to the school or preschool
- d) schools and preschools are able to implement an emergency response process that includes provisions for ensuring all children are collected by a nominated or otherwise approved person.

Recommendation 13: That a 'Bushfire management in schools and preschools – parent information' brochure be professionally developed and disseminated.

The Emergency Management Framework mandates the provision and availability of an 'abridged' version of the school or preschool emergency management plan for the information of parents and caregivers. Inclusion of protocols for student collection into both the main emergency management plan and the 'abridged' version that is accessible to families will ensure that local arrangements are appropriately communicated.

Recommendation 14: That student collection protocols be incorporated into the emergency management plan template and emergency management plan (abridged) to ensure arrangements are communicated to parents.

Although it was acknowledged that neither the CFS nor SAPOL issued a direction for townships to 'evacuate', the subject of evacuation was important to the attending school and preschool site leaders. Many raised the issue of physically evacuating a school with tens or even hundreds of students on site.

The Security, Bushfire and Emergency Management unit highlighted the departmental stance on evacuation from the site – that it should only be undertaken when a site has:

- a) time to evacuate
- b) the means to evacuate
- c) a safer location to evacuate to.

Further promoting the importance of understanding the relative risk levels of remaining on site or attempting to leave, it was clear that in all but the most extreme of circumstances, evacuating a school or preschool in a bushfire was not viable. This notion was supported by the attending CFS and SAPOL members.

A number of preschool sites noted that even a basic site-level evacuation from one building to another could prove problematic because of the difficulties in moving babies or very small children. Factors likely to impede such a transition included an absence of suitable emergency evacuation cots and a lack of suitably constructed evacuation routes within the school grounds.

Recommendation 15: That emergency evacuation cots be standard equipment within all newly established early childhood settings.

Recommendation 16: That clear and suitably constructed evacuation routes to be standard requirements at all newly established early childhood facilities.

As detailed in the 'Planning and Preparation' section earlier in this briefing, the education director for the affected area was unavailable at the time of the Pinery fire. Attendees from within DECD discussed the responsibilities and expectations of the education director during events such as the Pinery fire as well as the Security, Bushfire and Emergency Management unit. It was determined that the relative responsibilities of the unit and the education director in the management of bushfires and other emergencies required further clarity including notifying schools and preschools of forecast 'catastrophic' fire danger days.

Notwithstanding the earlier acknowledgement of the need for a revised terms of reference for the DECD Emergency Coordination Centre, the requirement for emergencies to be managed or overseen from a central location was discussed with the assembled site leaders. It was noted during the course of the review, that DECD's Emergency Management Framework has since been formally released. Under the framework, the Corporate Emergency

Response Team (CERT) will provide centralised coordination and multi-unit representation to contribute to the effective management of both the 'response' and 'recovery' phases of an emergency.

Recommendation 17: That the roles of, and communication paths between, education directors, the Office for Education and Early Childhood, Zone Emergency Centres and the Security, Bushfire and Emergency Management unit be clearly defined within the Site Bushfire Response Procedure.

Recommendation 18: That the terms of reference for CERT and the development of an instructional 'Emergency Management Procedure' be finalised.

The preliminary review identified that greater clarity was required around the decision making process for the closure of schools and cancellation of transport services in the immediate aftermath of the Pinery fire. Recommendation 7 from that review states that consideration should be given to the closure of schools in the affected areas based on the advice of the education director and / or site leader.

During the course of the formal review, attendees expressed concern that school and preschool closure decisions were being made from a centralised location without an understanding of local conditions or impacts. It was discussed that, on the evening of the Pinery fire, DECD executives were informed of a potential for the Premier to declare the area an "emergency zone" and that as a consequence, potential school closures were unable to be determined until such a declaration was made. It was further communicated to attendees that, following the briefing at the State Emergency Centre where it was revealed there would in fact be no directive from the Premier, the Manager, Security, Bushfire and Emergency Management, sent an SMS to all affected site leaders asking them to confirm their operational capacity or request closure authority, as appropriate to their individual situations.

It was acknowledged that some site leaders may not have received the communication because of telephone infrastructure outages in the area and/or because the leader's contact information had not been updated.

It was determined that, taking into account the existing communication issues across the affected area, there was a genuine likelihood that not all parents and caregivers could successfully be contacted or informed of school closures, even through the use of available media outlets and communication channels. As a consequence, for sites undertaking a closure where safe to do so schools and preschools were requested to ensure at least one staff member was present at the site in case families began arriving. This rationale was explained to the attendees, who were assured that the intention of the decision was to allow school and preschool communities a few hours to 'take stock' of their situation. There was not intended to be any impediment to principals or site leaders explaining to families that the school would be unable to operate that day.

Site leaders reported that some staff had felt 'let down' by the department when they were expected to attend work to enable the school to operate on the day after the bushfire. It was reiterated by the Security, Bushfire and Emergency Management unit that, whilst not all schools were formally authorised to close, no school was directed to operate 'as normal' on the day following the bushfire. As a consequence, there had been no expectation that all staff would attend their respective schools and preschools unless safe to do so.

It was apparent that the highlighted difficulties in establishing effective lines of communication resulted in an inability to satisfactorily notify parents and caregivers of school closures and transport cancellations, which in turn resulted in not all services being authorised for closure. The communication issues contributed to misinformation about the expectations of DECD staff. As a consequence, there remains a question mark about the viability of successfully implementing locally determined school closures (recommendation 7 of the preliminary review) following an emergency that results in damage to public communications infrastructure.

Although, as stated, a number of schools and preschools were authorised to close as a result of the bushfire, there were notable inconsistencies for services operating within the same township. A primary school, whose staff cohort predominantly resided some considerable distance from the school, was granted authority to close as a consequence of staff being unable to traverse the fire ground. Although there was no actual damage to the school and no elevated threat posed by the contained bushfire, the school was unable to operate. However, the town's high school and kindergarten staff were largely unaffected by the fire. As a consequence, both facilities remained open in the days following the bushfire. The closure of the primary school, whilst justified and formally authorised, has resulted in some negativity for the school.

Attendees were of the view that, following an emergency incident of this type, there needs to be a consistent approach to the availability of school or preschool services in an affected town or suburb.

In the hours that immediately followed the Pinery bushfire, the prevailing thought process of DECD, under the advisement of Security, Bushfire and Emergency Management unit personnel, was that there was no guaranteed means of communicating the closure of all schools in the area to every parent or caregiver affected. During the course of the formal review, it was proposed that a potential solution was to change the department's stance following major events impacting upon school services - that schools and preschools should be deemed 'closed' unless otherwise notified. The consequences of a child failing to attend a school that was actually 'open' would surely be less significant than the issue of a child or family travelling in potentially unsafe conditions to attend a school or preschool that they did not know had closed. It was further proposed that the same methodology be applied to school transport routes, thus alleviating the fear of a child waiting for a bus that is never going to arrive.

Since the interpretation of major event requires definition, it is clear that any change in response methodology needs to be aligned to a set of specific criteria. It is insufficient to refer DECD's Emergency Management Framework in isolation, since a 'Level 3' incident may be quite localised to DECD.

The *Emergency Management Act 2004* legislates the declaration of emergencies within South Australia. The State Coordinator, which is invariably a senior police officer, has authority to declare an emergency as an 'identified major incident' or 'major emergency' based on the severity of the event. In addition, the Governor of South Australia has authority to declare an emergency as a 'disaster'.

It is therefore recommended to use these formal, legislated definitions in addition to DECD's own incident classifications.

Recommendation 19: That the Emergency Management Framework and Bushfire Response Procedure be updated to state that 'following a bushfire event that is a 'Level 3' incident or a declared major emergency or disaster all school and preschool services in the affected area will be closed and all transport services will be cancelled unless otherwise advised'.

Recommendation 20: That the Minister (or delegate) determines that where there is genuine cause to justify the closure of a singular service following a bushfire event that is a 'Level 3' incident or a declared major incident or disaster, that all other services in that township or suburb are also directed to close.

Recovery

The transition from 'response' to 'recovery' following an emergency incident on the scale of the Pinery bushfire is difficult to delineate – particularly for schools and preschools. DECD did not attend the first Extraordinary State Recovery Committee meeting on Thursday 26 November on the basis that, not being actively involved in emergency management on a broader scale, the department was still very much in its own 'response' phase of the incident – managing school closures and establishing the safety and welfare of staff and students displaced during the event. For this reason, the roles of the DECD Emergency Coordination Centre and Corporate Emergency Response Team will be critical to the successful management of the 'response' and 'recovery' phases and transitions for future events.

Since the inception of the Security, Bushfire and Emergency Management unit in early 2014, major bushfires at Sampson Flat and Pinery have necessitated the management of short, medium and long term recovery programmes for schools, staff and students affected by the incidents. In collaboration with the respective education directors, the unit has been heavily involved with both the State Recovery Committee and local recovery committees for both bushfires.

Whilst there has been a notable improvement in the provision of recovery and support services to schools affected by Pinery (when compared to the already well-received work undertaken after Sampson Flat) there are still improvements to be made. A number of principals and site leaders spoke of the emotional affects and the memories of the fire itself and the challenges of managing staff and students experiencing post-incident trauma themselves.

Counsellors and social workers arranged through DECD's Integrated Support Services (ISS) and the Education Portfolio's Channel Manager were deployed to schools and preschools affected by the Pinery fire within two working days of the incident. A programme and schedule were developed by ISS to ensure that all affected services

were captured in the remaining weeks of the school term. Site leaders raised concerns about the knowledge and experience of the counsellors deployed to school sites. On at least one occasion, the counsellors were reported to have actually elevated the anxiety of staff and students, as they appeared not to be appropriately trained for the management of post-emergency trauma.

Recommendation 21: That principals, counsellors and support workers receive appropriate training and development in post-emergency trauma management and psychological first aid.

During the course of the formal review, principals and site leaders raised a number of issues that they would expect to be implemented or available in the future. Many of these tasks would ordinarily be expected to fall within the management scope of the Corporate Emergency Response Team as part of an agency recovery plan and are therefore not necessarily recommendations in their own right. Suggested recovery tasks arising from the formal review that may form part of the agency recovery plan include:

- contact from corporate personnel in the immediate aftermath of the emergency to provide a preliminary communication and recovery plan for the next 48 – 72 hours
- a ‘cluster’ of education directors to be deployed on the day following the incident, to provide support and assistance to affected schools, preschools and site leaders
- clear allocation of responsibilities within Corporate Office (e.g. support for staff who have had property destroyed / lost family members)
- arrangement and coordination of post-incident parent / school community forums, including attendance of corporate emergency management personnel to explain and rationalise centralised decisions
- nominated and publicised contact personnel / teams during the recovery process
- dedicated recovery programme for leaders, including compulsory meetings / conversations where necessary.

Recommendation 22: That a formal agency recovery plan be developed, for implementation by DECD following a bushfire event that is a ‘Level 3’ incident or a declared major incident or disaster.

Summary

The preliminary review in December 2015 concluded that DECD policies and procedures regarding bushfire management and response were followed on the day of the Pinery fire. At the time of the bushfire, a new Emergency Management Framework, Bushfire Preparation Procedure and Bushfire Response Procedure were in the process of being approved for implementation. As a consequence, whilst policies and procedures that were current at the time of the bushfire were followed, sites were utilising documents constructed in 2014.

The content of this review and its subsequent recommendations will be used to inform the ongoing evaluation of the DECD Emergency Management Framework and associated procedures for 2016.

The consistent theme of the formal review and subsequent recommendations is the need for accurate information to be disseminated and readily available to all DECD staff. This has proven to be true across the planning, response and recovery stages of an emergency incident. The preliminary review highlighted the need for principals and site leaders to be more aware of the respective roles of sites, education directors and corporate personnel. This has been further highlighted during the course of the formal review. Whilst there has previously been discussion around the training and development needs of principals and preschool leaders with regard to 'emergency management', it is apparent that this training need not extend to specialist courses. Provided the respective elements of the DECD Emergency Management Framework and Bushfire Response Procedure are in place, it would be more than appropriate for 'training' to be undertaken at a partnership or education portfolio level to ensure all staff in leadership positions are aware of their responsibilities and paths of communication.

Several months after the Pinery fire, attendees at the formal review unanimously acknowledged that this particular bushfire spread with breathtaking speed and ferocity, leaving little or no time for those closest to the fire to adequately respond. This in turn led to uncertainty and confusion for schools and preschools located a greater distance from the fire's origin, exacerbated by communications issues.

In the immediate aftermath of the event and in the weeks that followed, a number of questions have been raised associated with the management of the incident.

It was accepted, that whilst there are areas for improvement, many of which had been implemented after the preliminary review, the bushfire had exposed some inefficiencies at both a site and corporate office level that would otherwise not have been apparent through scenario based testing or simulation.

Some of the areas for improvement have been or are in the process of being undertaken, including policy improvements, a simplified Emergency Management Plan template and the planned development of a more instructional Emergency Management Procedure. This report contains 22 recommendations to assist in the improved management of bushfires and other major emergencies in the future and include recommendations that have arisen through the natural course of the annual fire danger season review. Whilst undoubtedly a significant event in itself, the Pinery fire formal review and recommendations should not be regarded as exceptional to DECD's existing continuous improvement methodology.

A report shall be submitted to the Chief Executive by 30 September 2016 to confirm the successful implementation of the approved recommendations and provide an update on the status of any outstanding matters.

Pinery Fire Review – Recommendations

Recommendation 1: That school closures for forecast ‘catastrophic’ fire danger days remain limited to ‘R1’ and ‘R2’ rated sites and services.

Timeline for implementation:

Immediate

DECD Business Unit(s) Responsible:

Security, Bushfire and Emergency Management

Recommendation 2: That a review of the DECD policy in relation to school transport arrangements on days of ‘catastrophic’ fire danger rating and total fire ban be undertaken.

Timeline for implementation:

Review to commence by 1 August 2016. Policy changes to be effected prior to 30 September 2016.

DECD Business Unit(s) Responsible:

Transport Services

Security, Bushfire and Emergency Management

Recommendation 3: That information be added to the Bushfire Preparation Procedure, and any other relevant DECD policy, to provide clearer direction on risk assessments for travel to work and work-related travel during fire danger season.

Timeline for implementation:

Document changes to be formally approved prior to 30 September 2016

DECD Business Unit(s) Responsible:

Security, Bushfire and Emergency Management

Recommendation 4: That the DECD Emergency Management Plan template to be adjusted to address requirements for adequate contingency supplies for all emergencies.

Timeline for implementation:

Documents to be updated and available online by 30th September 2016 (refer also Recommendation 14)

DECD Business Unit(s) Responsible: Security, Bushfire and Emergency Management

Recommendation 5: That each education director have a nominated first and second proxy in the event of illness or operational incapacity.

Timeline for implementation:

Prior to 25 July 2016 (Commencement of term 3)

DECD Business Unit(s) Responsible:

Office for Education and Early Childhood – School Operations

Recommendation 6: That the DECD Bushfire Preparation Procedure provide greater clarity around the term 'close proximity' and the associated impact upon actions to be taken.

Timeline for implementation:

Document changes to be formally approved prior to 30 September 2016

DECD Business Unit(s) Responsible:

Security, Bushfire and Emergency Management

Recommendation 7: That the DECD Security, Bushfire and Emergency Management unit release a parent communications template to schools and preschools for use in bushfires and other emergencies.

Timeline for implementation:

Communications template to be formally approved prior to 30 September 2016

DECD Business Unit(s) Responsible:

Security, Bushfire and Emergency Management

Strategic Communications

Recommendation 8: That the Parent Bushfire Hotline telephone number and its purpose be widely promoted.

Timeline for implementation:

Communications strategy to be developed and implemented prior to 30 September 2016

DECD Business Unit(s) Responsible:

Security, Bushfire and Emergency Management

Strategic Communications

Recommendation 9: That the terms of Reference or standard operating procedures for DECD's Emergency Coordination Centre be approved and made available to all school and preschool leaders.

Recommendation 10: That the Emergency Coordination Centre terms of reference or standard operating procedures include clear instructions regarding internal and external communications protocols and methodologies.

Recommendation 11: That the Emergency Coordination Centre terms of reference or standard operating procedures include minimum resourcing requirements with documented contingencies for absence.

Timeline for implementation:

Documentation to be finalised and approved by Executive Director, Infrastructure, prior to 30 September 2016

DECD Business Unit(s) Responsible:

Security, Bushfire and Emergency Management

Recommendation 12: That the human resources and legal services units provide formal direction on the management of duty of care issues that compete with staff personal emergencies.

Timeline for implementation:

Prior to commencement of fire danger season 2016

DECD Business Unit(s) Responsible:

People and Culture
Legal Services

Recommendation 13: That a 'Bushfire management in schools and preschool – parent information' brochure be professionally developed and disseminated.

Timeline for implementation:

Prior to commencement of fire danger season 2016

DECD Business Unit(s) Responsible:

Security, Bushfire and Emergency Management
Strategic Communications

Recommendation 14: That student collection protocols be incorporated into the emergency management plan template and emergency management plan (abridged) to ensure arrangements are communicated to parents.

Timeline for implementation:

Documents to be updated and available online by 30 September 2016 (refer also Recommendation 4)

DECD Business Unit(s) Responsible:

Security, Bushfire and Emergency Management

Recommendation 15: That emergency evacuation cots be standard equipment within all newly established early childhood settings.

Recommendation 16: That clear and suitably constructed evacuation routes to be standard requirements at all newly established early childhood facilities.

Timeline for implementation:

DECD Design Standards to be updated and formally approved prior to 31 December 2016

DECD Business Unit(s) Responsible:

Asset Policy and Environmental Resources

Recommendation 17: That the roles of, and communication paths between, education directors, the Office for Education and Early Childhood, Zone Emergency Centres and the Security, Bushfire and Emergency Management unit be clearly defined within the Site Bushfire Response Procedure.

Recommendation 18: That the terms of reference for the Corporate Emergency Response Team and the development of an instructional 'Emergency Management Procedure' be finalised.

Timeline for implementation:

Documentation to be finalised and approved by Executive Director, Infrastructure, prior to 30 September 2016

DECD Business Unit(s) Responsible:

Security, Bushfire and Emergency Management

Recommendation 19: That the Emergency Management Framework and Bushfire Response Procedure be updated to state that 'following a bushfire event that is a 'Level 3' incident or a *declared major emergency or disaster* all school and preschool services in the affected area will be closed and all transport services will be cancelled *unless otherwise advised*.'

Timeline for implementation:

Document changes to be formally approved prior to 30 September 2016

DECD Business Unit(s) Responsible:

Security, Bushfire and Emergency Management

Recommendation 20: That the Minister (or delegate) determines that where there is genuine cause to justify the closure of a singular service following a bushfire event that is a 'Level 3' incident or a *declared major incident or disaster*, that all other services in that township or suburb are also directed to close.

Timeline for implementation:

Instrument of Delegation to be amended and approved prior to the commencement of fire danger season 2016.

DECD Business Unit(s) Responsible:

Security, Bushfire and Emergency Management

Recommendation 21: That principals, counsellors and support workers receive appropriate training and development in post-emergency trauma management and psychological first aid.

Timeline for implementation:

Ongoing

DECD Business Unit(s) Responsible:

People and Culture

Office for Education and Early Childhood – Statewide Support Services

Recommendation 22: That a formal agency recovery plan be developed, for implementation by DECD following a bushfire event that is a 'Level 3' incident or a *declared major incident* or *disaster*.

Timeline for implementation:

Documentation to be finalised and approved by Executive Director, Infrastructure, prior to 30 September 2016

DECD Business Unit(s) Responsible:

Security, Bushfire and Emergency Management

Appendix 1 – Preliminary Review Recommendations

Preliminary Recommendation 1: A system to notify schools and preschools of a potential threat to their site or their transport service, without the need to phone each individual location be instituted prior to the implementation of the Education Management System.

Potential solutions: Outlook to SMS system notifying Principals of all schools in local area, directing them to check emergency services websites, invoke emergency procedures where appropriate and contact Security, Bushfire and Emergency Management unit for advice

Timeline for implementation: Prior to 31st January 2016

Preliminary Recommendation 2:

That a system be developed to notify schools and preschools of a potential threat to their site or their transport service, without the need to phone each individual location. Potential solutions: Outlook to SMS system notifying Principals of all schools in local area

Timeline for implementation: Prior to 31st January 2016

Preliminary Recommendation 3

That a contingency process be established in the event that the Education Director is unavailable in an emergency situation

Timeline for implementation: Prior to 31st January 2016

Preliminary Recommendation 4: The addition of the AISSA and CESA to the proposed notification system, alerting them to the existence of a bushfire and a requirement for them to initiate their own communication protocols.

Timeline for implementation: Prior to 31st January 2016

Preliminary Recommendation 5: That a representative from the DECD Media Unit be appointed to attend Level 11, 31 Flinders Street to provide direct liaison and facilitate 'live' communication to OMECD and general media. Additionally, a member of the Security, Bushfire and Emergency Management unit is to be designated as a 'communications officer' for such incidents.

Timeline for implementation: Prior to 31st January 2016

Preliminary Recommendation 6: That DECD be represented at the State Coordination Centre during an active bushfire to obtain 'live' updates about the bushfire threat to individual schools and provide information relating to the emergency processes invoked by those sites and their current status.

Timeline for implementation: Unknown. Will require discussion between CE or MECD and counterparts during SEMC and EMC.

Preliminary Recommendation 7: That following bushfires or other major emergencies, consideration be given to enforced closures in affected areas on advice of the Education Director and / or Site Leader. The requisite authority will be obtained to enforce these determinations.

Timeline for implementation: Unknown. To be incorporated into Standard Operating Procedures. May require Ministerial authority to execute in principal or revised Instrument of Delegation.