Far West NSW Major Power Outage - October 2024

Post Event Review Report
April 2025

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This report has been prepared by SAF Leading Advisory Pty Ltd and C2 Operations Pty Ltd on behalf of, and for the NSW Department of Climate Change, Energy, the Environment and Water (DCCEEW), Energy and Utility Services Functional Area (EUSFA). The report is based on 'lived' emergency management and operational experience, supported by research, and shaped by feedback provided by stakeholders and agency representatives interviewed during the review process. While every effort has been made to ensure accuracy and completeness, readers are invited to consider the information alongside their own context and needs when operationalising these recommendations.

1. Executive Summary

In October 2024, a severe weather event caused extensive damage to critical energy infrastructure in Far West New South Wales, leading to a widespread and prolonged power outage. More than 10,000 electricity connections were impacted, affecting essential services across Broken Hill and surrounding communities. This incident triggered a significant multi-agency response effort, tested existing emergency management arrangements, and highlighted systemic challenges in supporting remote and vulnerable communities during infrastructure failures.

This review was commissioned by the NSW Department of Climate Change, Energy, the Environment and Water (DCCEEW) Energy, Climate Change and Sustainability (ECCS) with a specific focus on the performance of the Energy Combat Agency (ECA) role and the Energy and Utility Services Functional Area (EUSFA) role. The review applied a structured methodology, incorporating operational data, desktop analysis, and feedback from key stakeholders across government, industry, and emergency services through group sessions and personal interviews.

The findings confirm that the operational response was successful in restoring power, maintaining essential services, and avoiding more serious health and safety consequences. Importantly, it was acknowledged by all involved in the review, that whilst EUSFA are activated as a support agency in almost every disaster and emergency impacting or affecting the State, this was the first known declaration of an Electricity Supply Emergency and activation of the NSW Electricity Sub Plan.

The review found that the leadership provided by senior officials in DCCEEW ECA and EUSFA was a defining strength of the response. Their visible presence, coordination of daily meetings, and commitment to multi-agency cooperation ensured continuity, accountability, and cohesion throughout a dynamic and politically sensitive incident. This leadership was consistently recognised and praised by stakeholders at all levels, both internal and external to DCCEEW.

While individual and organisational efforts were commendable, the event also identified critical areas for improvement. The declaration of an Electricity Supply Emergency and activation of the Electricity Sub Plan (and importantly, the associated command, control and coordination arrangements) were not well understood by many stakeholders, leading to confusion about roles, escalation processes, and activation protocols. Coordination structures at the regional and local level varied in effectiveness, particularly in unincorporated areas where support systems were underdeveloped or absent.

Notwithstanding the limited and/or varying levels of awareness and understanding concerning the Electricity Supply Emergency declaration or activation of the Electricity Sub Plan, there was strong recognition of a "can-do" attitude, adaptability, and commitment of individuals and teams across agencies, organisations, industry and local communities. Responders acted quickly, improvised where needed, and collaborated effectively under pressure, often bridging gaps in plans, systems, or governance through their professional judgment and shared commitment to community service.

The coordination and compilation of reports and information in support of Government briefing materials and the provision of public information, warnings and messages was another key challenge identified by stakeholders. Whilst solutions were developed along the way including, the Minister responsible for Energy, and her office, providing necessary coordination and strong leadership with information and communication messages across Government and the community, the lack of an identified and integrated information management unit or messaging system, and a 'single source of truth', from the outset, allowed inconsistencies in operational information and importantly, public information to emerge. The absence of an early-established public information cell limited the ability of agencies and Government to speak with a single, coordinated voice.

Community support activities were often largely driven by the initiative of local agencies, organisations and entities present in impacted and affected communities, such as local Members of Parliament, Local Councillors, community leaders and agencies such as the RFS and Central Darling Shire Council. While many communities received valuable assistance, the delivery and distribution of support and assistance was identified as uneven and inconsistent. In some cases, delays were claimed to be due to unclear roles and responsibilities, limited, if any, tracking systems, and a range of logistical barriers associated with remoteness, travel distances and infrastructure damage.

A critical concern during the outage was the identification and support of medically vulnerable individuals, particularly those dependent on electricity for life-sustaining equipment such as oxygen concentrators, dialysis machines, or refrigeration for essential medications. The review found that there was no comprehensive or pre-established mechanism to identify and prioritise these individuals in real time. Instead, welfare checks and referrals often relied on informal networks and local knowledge, leading to delays and operational complexity. This exposed a significant gap in coordinated data sharing across emergency management agencies, electricity suppliers, and retailers. Addressing this issue is vital to ensure timely and prioritised assistance for those most at risk during future infrastructure disruptions.

The report identifies opportunities to strengthen doctrine, confirm energy emergency declarations and state plan activations, clarify coordination roles and responsibilities, formalise surge staff arrangements, integrate public information, warning and messaging communications, and improve recovery transition planning. A series of targeted recommendations are provided to enhance operational readiness, interoperability, and resilience, particularly in regional and remote contexts where infrastructure vulnerabilities are most acute.

Overall, the Far West Power Outage response demonstrated the strength of the people and partnerships involved. Going forward, NSW has an opportunity to build on that strength by embedding lessons, formalising capability, and ensuring that the systems surrounding that human effort are as strong and reliable as those who operate them.

2. Scope

DCCEEW/EUSFA required an after review following response to the Major Power Outage Event in the Far West NSW, in October 2024. The review will focus internally on the DCCEEW/EUSFA regarding preparedness, response and the transition to recovery.

The review will consider or address:
1. Timeline and Impact of the outage.
2. Key challenges encountered during the response.
3. Existing plans, policies, and frameworks utilised during the event.
4. Adequacy of resources, systems, tools and training.
5. Activation of the DCCEEW response.
6. Coordination with local, state and commonwealth agencies.
7. Decision-making processes and incident management structure.
8. Communication with energy providers and stakeholders including impacted communities.
9. Transition from response to recovery.
10. Identify recommendations to ensure enhanced operational readiness and effective response.
11. Identify recommendations to ensure effective transition to recovery.

3. Emergency Management Arrangements

In NSW, the emergency management arrangements, which are outlined within the *State Emergency and Rescue Management Act 1989* (SERM Act) and the NSW State Emergency Management Plan (EMPLAN), allocate various roles and responsibilities throughout the entirety of the emergency management cycle of prevention, preparation, response and recovery.

The DCCEEW ECCS has been assigned two distinct functionalities as part of the State's emergency management arrangements: Combat Agency (*Electricity Emergency and Natural Gas Supply Disruption*) and Functional Area (*Energy and Utility Services*).

The arrangements not only apply to the DCCEEW ECCS, but also to various other emergency service organisations, functional areas comprising government departments and agencies, as represented on the State Emergency Management Committee, as well as other non-government partners, industry and community organisations.

The below instruments were activated or have particular relevance to this event and include:
- State Emergency Management and Rescue Act 1989.
- NSW State Emergency Management Plan (EMPLAN).
- NSW Recovery Plan.
- Energy and Utility Services Supporting Plan (EUSPLAN).
- NSW State Electricity Supply Emergency Plan (ESEP).

4. Area of Impact

The Far West region of New South Wales (NSW) is an expansive and sparsely populated area, covering approximately 30% of the state's total landmass. It is characterized by its remote landscapes, arid climate, and significant reliance on mining, agriculture, and tourism. The region's primary urban centre, Broken Hill, serves as a hub for government services, healthcare, and commerce. Other smaller communities, including Wilcannia, White Cliffs, and Tibooburra, are more isolated and have limited access to essential services. Given its geographical remoteness, the region faces ongoing challenges related to infrastructure reliability, service provision, and economic sustainability.

Demographically, the Far West has a relatively small population, with Broken Hill being home to approximately 17,000 residents, while many of the smaller townships have populations in the hundreds. The region has a higher proportion of older residents compared to the state average, and there is a significant Indigenous population, particularly in communities such as Wilcannia, where Aboriginal people make up much of the population. Socio-economic indicators reflect significant disparities, with high unemployment rates, lower median household incomes, and limited access to education and healthcare services compared to urban centres along the East Coast. Many communities in the Far West experience economic vulnerability due to the decline of traditional industries, reliance on government support services, and the impacts of climate variability on agriculture.

The major power outage in October 2024 significantly impacted the Broken Hill and Central Darling local government areas, as well as the Western Unincorporated Area of NSW. This widespread disruption affected essential services, including telecommunications, water supply systems, and business operations, compounding existing socio-economic challenges in the region. The outage particularly impacted vulnerable communities with already limited access to resources and emergency support. Given the region's reliance on a single major electricity transmission line and its distance from major support hubs, approximately 1,100 kilometres from Sydney and 500 kilometres from Adelaide. Such incidents highlight the need for enhanced infrastructure resilience, backup energy solutions, and targeted emergency response planning to mitigate the impact of future disruptions.

5. Review Methodology

A systematic approach was applied to the conduct of this review and the development of this report, including research and desktop reviews, interviews and traditional After Action Review (AAR) engagements. This enabled the development of an in-depth appreciation and understanding of context, in addition to operational, organisational, community and environmental factors influencing the response to the Far West Power Outage. The methodology included the following key components:

i. <u>Research and Desktop Reviews</u>
Background research and desktop reviews were conducted, examining relevant plans, policies, guidelines, and operational data. This phase aimed to enhance understanding of needs and requirements and existing capabilities.

ii. <u>Group Sessions and Personal Interviews</u>
To gather insights and perspectives from a wide range of stakeholders, informal and structured interviews were conducted via telephone, online and in person or workshop settings. These interviews targeted key individuals and agency representatives including, staff, contractors, volunteers, and other stakeholders regarding capabilities and previous experiences that have informed the Interim Resource Plan 2024/2025. Interviews followed a semi-structured format to allow flexibility while covering essential topics relative to the stakeholder and their knowledge, skills and experience.

6. Stakeholder Engagement

Stakeholder engagement was at the core of this review and directly informed the findings and recommendations outlined in this report. Stakeholder engagement was undertaken via telephone, online and in person meetings or workshops.

Refer to Appendix A for a detailed list of stakeholder engagements.

7. Event Timeline

At approximately 0029hrs (AEDT) on Thursday 17 October 2024, a severe weather front moved through the Far West Region of NSW, just south of Broken Hill, and damaged infrastructure critical to the power supply of Broken Hill and surrounding communities. Specifically, the severe weather impacted and significantly damaged 7 Transgrid transmission towers on the Buronga to Broken Hill 220kV line, also known as the "X2" line. More than 10,000 connections were without power, including critical infrastructure such as hospitals and telecommunication sites.

DCCEEW ECCS, through the Energy and Utility Services Functional Area (EUSFA) Duty Officer was notified by Transgrid at 0744hrs. The first situation report (SITREP) was circulated at 1029hrs. SITREPs were shared daily until Friday 1 November, following successful re-energisation of the 220kV powerline on newly erected transmission towers. A final SITREP was circulated on Tuesday 5 November, following the formal handover to NSW Reconstruction Authority (RA) to continue with recovery activities.

Customers endured an initial outage of up to 41 hours, as Transgrid worked to energise the large scale back up generator (gas turbine). Due to damage to a 66kV Essential Energy powerline, communities outside Broken Hill were not re-energised until after 18:00hrs on Friday 18 October. However, the load exceeded what the gas turbine could supply, and load shedding occurred to two community segments, for less than two hours.

The gas turbine required a planned outage for maintenance on Sunday 20 October into Monday 21 October, and proactive communications were sent to residents, including via social media, and text messages from Essential Energy. Prior to the planned outage, there was unplanned load shedding due to high demand. Unexpected issues were identified, and there were unscheduled delays in re-energising the turbine and returning power to the community, with remaining customers connected at 0900hrs.

On the evening of Monday 21 October, the gas turbine unexpectedly tripped at 1745hrs. It wasn't until 1400hrs on Tuesday 22 October that the generator was restarted. Customers had power restored from 1630hrs until 0400hrs Wednesday 23 October. This same evening, the temporary transmission towers arrived at the worksite.

Wednesday 23 October, the NSW Government declared an Electricity Supply Emergency under the Electricity Supply Act 1995. Whilst the declaration was made, the Premier/Minister for Energy never made any directions under the declaration, however directions were developed should they have been needed.

Customers experienced load shedding from 1800hrs to 2230hrs, in various customers groupings, on the evening on Wednesday 23 October. The following day, Essential Energy moved customers outside of Broken Hill to a generator bank and off the gas turbine, and these customers experienced a one hour planned outage. Later that evening, the generator bank tripped, impacting 1800 customers between 2109hrs and 2217hrs.

The Commonwealth and State governments announced on Thursday 24th October 2024, Disaster Recovery Funding Arrangements to support local council and the community.

At 0230hrs on Friday 25 October, the gas turbine experienced an unplanned interruption due to a fuel forwarding pump issue, isolating 10,854 customers in Broken Hill. The last of affected customers had power restored at noon.

No load shedding occurred over the weekend. Customers outside of Broken Hill experienced an unexpected outage on Monday 28th and Tuesday 29th October in the evenings, both for less than 2 hours in duration.

Thursday 31 October, Transgrid successfully tested the 220kV power line, and commenced the process to restore all customers to being connected to the NSW Electricity system. By 2226hr AEDT, all Far West communities were reconnected.

The first SEOCON briefing was at 1600hrs on Thursday 17 October, and a REMC was held at 1700hrs. This was informed by the first of daily meetings with Essential Energy at 1500hrs on 17 October. On Friday 18 October, the first communications alignment meeting was held with Essential Energy, Transgrid, Department of Premier & Cabinet, Public Information Functional Area Coordinator (PIFAC), DCCEEW media and communications teams.

8. Findings and Opportunities for Improvement

This section presents the key findings and opportunities for improvement, as identified through the review group sessions and personal interviews concerning the mass power outage event. The findings are structured under specific thematic areas and reflect the performance, coordination, and systemic challenges observed. Each section includes, a brief summary, a set of key findings, and targeted opportunities for improvement aimed at enhancing future operational readiness.

8.1   Key challenges encountered during the response

The event response across the Far West region of New South Wales highlighted a range of operational, procedural, logistical and strategic challenges.

The response to the widespread power outage and its cascading impacts across the Far West region of New South Wales revealed a number of operational and systemic challenges that affected coordination, public confidence, and the overall effectiveness of the emergency management arrangements.

There was confusion surrounding the notification and implications of the emergency declaration under the Electricity Sub Plan. Some stakeholders were unaware of the declaration at the time it was made, while others received information through informal channels. This contributed to uncertainty or confusion concerning roles, activation responsibilities, and the appropriate implementation and escalation of response arrangements.

A lack of shared understanding around agency roles further affected coordination. Agencies, utilities, and political offices had trouble aligning responsibilities, particularly regarding operational coordination and public information and communication. The DCCEEW Energy Combat Agency (ECA) role was not consistently recognised or understood, which limited the ability to function as a central coordinating point.

Public information management was fragmented. Inconsistent, and at times, inaccurate public messaging caused confusion among communities and operational personnel. Public statements or commitments, such as assurances of 48 hours' notice prior to power disconnections, were actually, both operationally impractical and unfeasible, contributing to confusion, frustration and undue pressure on field personnel already operating in challenging circumstances.

While operational relationships were generally strong and well established, communication and media teams lacked such pre-existing relationships. This delayed the alignment of key messaging and reduced the effectiveness of coordinated public communication efforts during the initial stages of the response.

The fundamental elements concerning energy repairs, management and restoration processes were not well understood by many stakeholders. There was limited awareness of the technical and logistical challenges involved in restoring power, which led to unrealistic expectations from community members, political and community leaders, as well as supporting agencies.

Coordination at the local level varied. In some areas, Local Emergency Management Committees (LEMCs) were slow to activate or had limited reach. This created gaps in consequence management and delayed support to affected communities.

There is a need to implement a clear, multi-agency notification protocol for Electricity Supply Emergency declarations and NSW Electricity Sub Plan activations. This should include defined triggers and agreed notification distribution pathways to ensure consistent and timely awareness across all responding agencies and organisations, both within the emergency management networks and importantly energy sector partners.

Roles and responsibilities across agencies, utilities, and political offices should be clarified and embedded into DCCEEW ECCS emergency management doctrine, operational procedures, and high-risk weather pre-season briefings. In particular, the functions and responsibilities of DCCEEW ECCS and EUSFA and other coordinating roles should be clearly defined and reinforced through scenario-based exercises.

Public information coordination can be strengthened through the early establishment of a joint public information cell. This would allow for the development of shared messaging, consistent and timely updates, alignment between operational intent and public statements, including those made by operational and political leaders.

Pre-established relationships between communication and media teams should be fostered through regular interagency training and joint participation in exercises. This would improve collaboration and responsiveness during future incidents.

Protocols for managing political and VIP visits should be developed and incorporated into operational planning. These should include requirements for advance coordination with field leadership teams to ensure that there are no disruptions or delays to operational activities and priorities.

Utility providers, in collaboration with emergency management partners, should invest in education programs that build awareness of restoration processes and procedures, technical challenges and limitations, and realistic timelines to manage expectations. These could be embedded in agency induction programs or delivered through stakeholder engagement forums.

Local coordination capabilities should be reviewed and strengthened. This may include targeted training for LEMCs, the development of scalable activation models, and the establishment of surge support arrangements for remote or unincorporated areas where governance structures are limited.

8.2   Existing policies, plans and frameworks utilised during the event

Several existing policies, plans and frameworks were referenced or activated to support response coordination and consequence management during the event. These frameworks

provided the foundation for decision-making, operational integration, and strategic oversight and coordination across agencies and sectors.

The Electricity Sub Plan under the NSW EMPLAN was a central point of reference, particularly in relation to the formal declaration of the emergency. While the plan provides high-level guidance on agency responsibilities and coordination mechanisms, it became apparent that its intent and application were not consistently understood by all parties. Some stakeholders noted that the declaration process and the operational consequences of activating the plan lacked clarity, resulting in variable levels of engagement and cooperation across sectors.

The broader NSW Emergency Management Arrangements, including the NSW EMPLAN supported the activation of coordination structures such as State/Regional Emergency Operations Centres (SEOC & REOCs), the Local/Region Emergency Operations Controllers (LEOCONs/REOCONs), and the engagement of Emergency Services and Functional Areas in support of the ECA. The ECA played a central role in supporting inter-agency and utility coordination, particularly using daily meetings and structured briefings. These forums were widely recognised as contributing to situational awareness, information sharing, and operational alignment, however, ECA and functional area responsibilities were significantly blurred.

Participating agencies also drew upon agency-specific business continuity and incident management frameworks. For example, Essential Energy activated its internal incident response procedures, including the use of its dual control rooms in Port Macquarie and Canberra, and formed an internal Incident Management Team. Transgrid similarly operated within established operational continuity protocols, while maintaining connectivity with state-level coordination efforts.

At the regional level, the activation of Regional Emergency Management Committees (REMCs) and their use of virtual coordination tools such as Microsoft Teams enabled agencies to connect and share information across a large geographic area. In several cases, local arrangements were adapted to suit the unique governance contexts of the Far West, including the support provided to unincorporated areas through the Central Darling Shire Council.

Pre-existing inter-agency relationships of the EUSFA, built through regular disasters and exercises within the SEMC and associated coordination frameworks, was recognised and understood. Even though numerous stakeholders were not aware of the ECA role being enacted, these relationships were especially evident in the operational space, where familiarity and trust enabled agile decision-making and collaboration under pressure however, were not as evident with the management and coordination of public information.

While the use of existing policies and frameworks provided structure to the response, there is a clear opportunity to improve understanding and application of these arrangements across all levels of government, emergency services, and industry. Greater emphasis should be placed on ensuring stakeholders are aware of the intent, content, and activation mechanisms of key plans such as the Electricity Sub Plan and the NSW EMPLAN. This could be achieved through targeted induction materials, cross-sector briefings, and regular inter-agency exercises. Functional roles,

including that of ECA and EUSFAC, should be consistently embedded in both planning documents and training packages to ensure seamless integration during real events.

Additionally, alignment between agency-specific business continuity arrangements and broader emergency coordination frameworks should be reviewed to enhance interoperability and reduce duplication. Finally, leveraging and sustaining the benefits of pre-existing relationships and regular cross-sector exercises will remain critical to future readiness and effective coordination.

8.3   Adequacy of resources, systems, tools and training

The EUSFA was formally activated by DCCEEW as the ECA, to coordinate multi-utility support and consequence management advice following the power outage in the Far West region. The ECA Incident Controller, was critical in facilitating access to essential services, enabling information flow, and supporting both government and utility sector stakeholders throughout the event.

The structure and facilitation of daily coordination meetings, led by the ECA, were widely acknowledged as effective. These meetings were well-run, purposeful, and included representation from a broad range of stakeholders. Participants reported that the daily briefings enhanced shared situational awareness, encouraged accountability, and improved the flow of information between utilities, emergency services, and government agencies for those that attended. ECA was also recognised for its flexible and responsive approach to coordination, including adapting meeting formats and accommodating rapidly changing priorities across the response.

Stakeholders noted that ECA and EUSFA acted as a valuable conduit for communication between utilities, state agencies, and other key partners. This was particularly helpful in the exchange of technical and operational information and in managing community and political expectations. ECA's ability to provide timely updates to leadership, and its coordination with groups such as the Premier's Office and relevant Ministers, contributed positively to government decision-making and public messaging, especially as the incident progressed.

However, several challenges emerged during the activation and operational period. There was an observed lack of clarity regarding the role and function of ECA v's EUSFA among some partners early in the response. Despite ECA's central coordination responsibilities, some stakeholders were uncertain about its authority, scope, and decision-making responsibilities. This limited ECA's influence in the early stages and may have contributed to delays in the centralisation of key information, reporting expectations and coordination efforts.

Further, there were varying levels of awareness and preparedness regarding ECA's function across agencies and utilities. While some had previously worked with the EUSFA and understood that role, others, particularly those outside of metropolitan areas or in sectors not regularly engaged with emergency management, lacked familiarity. This disparity impacted initial engagement and required time to build working relationships and clarify expectations.

DCCEEW also experienced pressure related to the delivery of public information, particularly as it intersected with political messaging and media interest. The absence of clearly defined boundaries between ECA coordination responsibilities and the expectations placed on it to manage or influence public-facing communication created some confusion and reputational risk. In a high-profile event with significant political and media scrutiny, ECA's ability to manage upward and outward communication needed additional support and structure.

To strengthen the activation and effectiveness of future ECA and EUSFA responses, there is a need to improve cross-sector understanding of the EUSFA role and the functional area's purpose compared with ECA's responsibilities within the broader emergency management arrangements. This can be achieved through improved doctrine, clearer operational guidance, and targeted cross-agency awareness education.

8.4   Activation of the DCCEEW response

The coordination effort across government, emergency services, utilities, and supporting agencies during the Far West power outage response was mixed, with notable examples of effective collaboration alongside areas of misalignment and inconsistency.

Operational coordination between utility providers and emergency services was widely viewed as a strength. Existing relationships, built through prior engagement and joint planning efforts, enabled rapid and productive interaction between key operational stakeholders. The willingness of organisations to cooperate, share resources, and support one another, despite the scale and complexity of the incident, was consistently highlighted as a positive feature of the response. Daily ECA coordination meetings, the integration of utility control rooms into the broader incident picture, and flexibility shown by ECA in adapting engagement methods (including virtual coordination) were all identified as contributors to this success.

Utilities such as Essential Energy and Transgrid, operated within their established business continuity and response protocols**,** and demonstrated the capacity to scale their internal arrangements to meet the demands of the incident. This included activating internal incident management teams, deploying personnel to the field, and maintaining effective internal coordination across geographically dispersed teams. These internal structures aligned well with regional and state-level emergency management arrangements, improving situational awareness and reducing duplication.

There was also strong evidence of productive coordination between regional emergency management structures, including the REMC, and functional areas. Remote operations, particularly using platforms like Microsoft Teams, enabled timely updates and collaborative planning despite the geographic spread of affected areas. Agencies such as the NSW RFS stepped in to support coordination in areas where combat agency or local capacity was limited or absent, demonstrating initiative and adaptability.

Despite these positives, several limitations were also noted. One of the most prominent was the lack of alignment and coordination between political, operational, and public information advice, warnings and messaging, especially in the initial phases of the response. Public

messaging was at times inconsistent with operational practicalities and/or realities, and there were instances where public statements undermined or confused technical advice. This poor coordination created friction across sectors and increased the pressure on both emergency services and utilities to respond reactively to public and media narratives.

Some agencies expressed concern regarding the ambiguity in control and coordination roles, particularly early in the event. While structures eventually became more defined, the lack of shared understanding of responsibilities, particularly regarding who was leading specific elements of consequence management, impacted the speed and cohesion of the initial response. These issues were exacerbated in areas without strong local emergency management capability, where the absence of experienced leadership or clear escalation pathways delayed awareness and necessary decision-making.

To enhance coordination across sectors in future responses, there is a need to improve the integration of operational and public communication functions under a unified coordination model, to ensure consistent and timely briefings to Minister and Government and importantly, impacted and affected communities. This includes clearer delineation of leadership roles, structured communication pathways, and shared messaging strategies that reflect operational realities. Strengthening the capability and confidence of regional and local coordination structures, particularly in remote and unincorporated areas, will also be critical.

Regular joint exercises and planning activities, involving both operational and corporate/public affairs teams, would help address integration challenges and build shared understanding. Reinforcing these practices within emergency management doctrine and agency procedures will support faster, more coordinated responses across all levels of government and industry.

8.5   Coordination with local, state and commonwealth agencies

Public information and community messaging played a critical role in shaping public understanding, managing expectations, and influencing stakeholder confidence during the event. The response environment was highly visible and politically sensitive, with significant media coverage and community interest. While there were commendable efforts to communicate consistently and proactively, there were also areas where the lack of coordination and alignment impacted the overall effectiveness of messaging.

A key strength of the public information effort was the leadership taken by the Minister responsible for Energy, who stepped in to provide clear and visible public messaging at a time of uncertainty. This leadership helped to fill a vacuum in the early stages of the response, when roles and responsibilities for public communication had not yet been fully established. The Minister's involvement was generally viewed positively by stakeholders and contributed to maintaining public focus and demonstrating government engagement in the crisis. Additionally, it was widely recognised the Minister and Local Member work collaboratively in support of community concerns and issues.

It was also evident that the Minister's Office assumed a significant coordination role in the development and delivery of public messaging. The Office worked directly with agencies and

utilities to shape statements, manage media engagement, and align messaging with broader government priorities. While this leadership helped centralise messaging and ensure consistent political oversight, it also created challenges when operational information did not align with public statements. In some instances, commitments were made publicly without consultation with operational leads, such as the widely cited assurance that 48 hours' notice would be given before any planned power disconnection. This statement, while well-intentioned, was not operationally feasible and caused significant disruption to planning, operational and on-ground activities, particularly for utilities managing equipment constraints.

At the operational level, agencies such as the RFS demonstrated strong community engagement, particularly in remote and rural areas. Local RFS members acted as trusted messengers, helping to share accurate information directly with community members and clarify confusion. This grassroots communication, although informal, was viewed as highly effective in bridging gaps between agency messaging and community expectations.

Community radio, especially ABC Broken Hill, played a vital role in disseminating reliable and timely updates. Stakeholders widely acknowledged the station's performance as critical to reaching affected communities and maintaining community morale.

Despite these strengths, the overall public information effort was described by several stakeholders as disjointed and reactive in the early phases. There was no pre-established central media coordination cell or single point of truth for messaging. As a result, public statements were sometimes issued independently by different agencies, utilities, or political offices, leading to inconsistencies. This fragmented approach undermined the clarity of public information and community confidence and created confusion both within agencies and among the public more generally.

Further, some agency and utility corporate affairs teams were not fully integrated into the broader emergency coordination structures, which limited their ability to contribute to shared messaging and engage proactively with media or government stakeholders. Where integration did occur, such as through EUSFA's daily coordination forums, alignment was improved, but this was not consistently achieved across the board.

The response to the Far West power outage demonstrated the strength and adaptability of agencies operating within the NSW emergency management arrangements. Agencies at local, regional, and state levels worked collaboratively through established structures under the State Emergency and Rescue Management Act and the NSW State Emergency Management Plan (EMPLAN). Coordination occurred through Local and Regional Emergency Management Committees, the State Emergency Operations Centre, and functional area support arrangements, enabling timely information sharing and decision-making. Agencies participated in multi-agency briefings, consequence management activities, and resource deployment. While challenges emerged in some areas, the overall integration of agency efforts under EMPLAN reinforced the value of structured emergency management arrangements, pre-existing relationships, and shared commitment to supporting impacted communities during a large-scale and complex event.

The review found that engagement and coordination with Commonwealth agencies, particularly the Australian Energy Market Operator (AEMO), was a notable strength of the response. AEMO provided timely technical support, situational awareness, and expert advice throughout the event, helping to inform operational decision-making and reinforce state-level planning efforts. Their involvement was characterised by professionalism, responsiveness, and a clear commitment to collaborative problem-solving. Communication channels between AEMO, state agencies, and energy sector stakeholders remained open and effective, contributing to a shared understanding of system vulnerabilities and the operational feasibility of restoration options. This strong Commonwealth–State partnership supported the broader coordination effort and was instrumental in maintaining confidence and continuity during a complex and high-profile incident.

The response demonstrated the importance of clear leadership in public communication, but also highlighted the risks when messaging is not grounded in operational realities. There is an opportunity to formalise a joint public information approach that integrates combat agency, political offices, emergency services, and utilities into a single, coordinated messaging structure. This should include protocols for establishing a public information cell early in the response, with designated leads and pre-agreed message clearance pathways.

Ministerial and political offices should be actively included in communication planning and briefings to ensure public comments and commitments are aligned with relevant operational realities and capabilities. Regular exercises involving public affairs teams across agencies, utilities, and government offices can support shared understanding and improve interoperability. Strengthening the integration of corporate affairs teams into emergency coordination structures will also support the delivery of timely, consistent, and technically accurate information to the public in future events.

8.6   Communication with energy providers and stakeholders

The support provided to impacted communities during the response was characterised by strong intent, adaptive local efforts, and a broad commitment across agencies and sectors to deliver assistance despite challenging conditions. While there were clear examples of effective community support and collaboration, several gaps and inconsistencies were also identified, particularly during the early stages of the response.

A major strength was the rapid deployment of support by local and regional agency personnel, particularly through the NSW RFS, who were instrumental in maintaining access to essential services in isolated and affected areas. NSW RFS teams provided community-level engagement, facilitated access to communications and backup power equipment, and delivered welfare support. In many cases, NSW RFS members acted proactively, establishing generator access, deploying base camp equipment (such as air conditioning units), and maintaining fire station operations with the community's wellbeing in mind. These efforts were not necessarily directed by formal planning but arose organically from a strong local understanding of community needs.

The availability of internet access through NSW RFS facilities was also highlighted as a valuable community support mechanism. With connectivity disrupted in many areas, the ability to access the internet through government satellite technology helped residents stay informed, communicate with family, and access assistance. Similarly, Central Darling Shire Council played a significant role by extending support to residents within unincorporated areas, providing coordination and connection to resources where other structures were absent.

Coordination at the regional level through the REOC/REMC structures contributed to broader consequence management relief efforts, including the delivery of fuel, food, and medical support. Welfare checks, assistance to schools, and targeted outreach to vulnerable populations were delivered through cooperation between state agencies and local government (where present).

Community sentiment also reflected the value of political visibility and engagement, including on-ground visits by Ministers and Local Members, senior agency personnel, and the activation of a Far West Support Package through the Premier's Office. These actions reinforced a sense that government was present, listening, and committed to supporting those impacted and affected throughout the region.

However, despite these strengths, the initial phase of the response was marked by inconsistent delivery of relief support, particularly where formal arrangements were unclear. Several stakeholders noted that coordination of community assistance was slow to activate, and that in the absence of clear structures or pre-positioned capability, much of the early response relied on the initiative of individual agencies or personnel using initiative, especially those locally based.

There were also challenges in aligning support activities with the actual needs of the community, particularly in the context of limited situational awareness and rapidly evolving priorities. The geographic spread and remoteness of affected communities further complicated logistics, with some areas waiting extended periods for access to generators, fuel, or essential supplies. These delays, while understandable given the circumstances, highlighted the vulnerability of isolated communities during prolonged disruptions.

While many community support activities were well intentioned and impactful, documentation, tracking, and visibility of these efforts were not always consistent. This made it difficult to assess the reach and effectiveness of support in real time and limited the ability of coordination centres to make fully informed decisions regarding resource allocation and follow-up actions.

A critical issue raised by several stakeholders was the identification and support of medically vulnerable individuals, including those reliant on electricity for life-sustaining equipment such as oxygen concentrators, dialysis machines, and refrigerated medications. While some support was provided through local agencies and health networks, there was no comprehensive or pre-existing system in place to rapidly identify and prioritise these individuals during the outage. This resulted in delays to welfare checks, ad hoc referrals, and a reliance on community networks to flag high-risk cases. The absence of a coordinated, cross-agency and cross-industry process for

identifying and managing medically vulnerable residents, created both operational complexity and risk, particularly given the scale and duration of the outage.

There is a clear opportunity to strengthen the planning, coordination, and delivery of community support activities during widespread infrastructure disruptions. This includes formalising arrangements for supporting unincorporated and remote communities, with clear escalation pathways and predefined agency responsibilities. Investment in scalable, pre-positioned support packages (including generator access, welfare kits, and communication tools) will enable faster and more consistent delivery of assistance.

Enhancing the visibility and integration of community welfare support within coordination structures, through dedicated liaison roles or consequence management dashboards, can improve real-time decision-making. Lastly, continuing to empower local responders and councils with flexible, needs-based support mechanisms will allow for timely, locally driven responses that reflect the unique needs of each community.

8.7   Transition from response to recovery

The transition from response to recovery was generally well supported by agency personnel and political leadership. However, there was a perception among some stakeholders that this transition was delayed, particularly during the final weekend of the event. While operational activity was still ongoing in parts of the Far West, the absence of clear public messaging or structured transition planning during that period, contributed to uncertainty about whether the response phase had concluded.

Future responses would benefit from a more structured and visible transition to recovery, including the formal declaration of transition points and public communication of who is leading recovery activities. Establishing clear internal and external triggers for transition, aligned to operational tempo, community needs, and agency readiness, would improve clarity and ensure seamless continuity between response and recovery phases. Embedding these practices into existing ECA and EUSFA emergency management doctrine and exercising them in multi-agency scenarios will further support smoother transitions during future events.

9. Conclusions

The Major Power Outage in Far West New South Wales in October 2024 was a severe and multifaceted disruption that challenged the state's emergency management arrangements, infrastructure resilience, and coordination systems. It affected thousands of residents across Broken Hill and surrounding communities, highlighting the vulnerability of remote regions with limited redundancy and constrained logistics. The event unfolded rapidly and required coordinated, sustained action across government, utilities, emergency services, and local leadership.

This review has applied a structured methodology to understand how the event was managed, what factors contributed to success, and where future improvements are required. Across all

stakeholder feedback and operational analysis, one observation was unanimous: the response succeeded not necessarily because it was perfectly planned, but because of the extraordinary commitment, flexibility, and "can-do" mindset of all people involved. Responders acted quickly, adapted when systems fell short, and demonstrated a strong willingness to collaborate in unfamiliar and uncertain conditions.

The leadership demonstrated by senior officials within DCCEEW ECA team was a defining feature of the response. Their presence, coordination, and decision-making provided confidence to agencies, utilities, and the broader government. Stakeholders consistently acknowledged the steady influence of this leadership in maintaining momentum, facilitating cooperation, and resolving critical issues as they emerged. The coordination led through ECA daily meetings was especially effective in connecting sectors, aligning information, and managing operational pressure during the most intense phases of the incident.

Nonetheless, this review has identified several areas where systems, plans, and preparedness arrangements did not perform as intended. The declaration and activation of the Electricity Sub Plan created confusion for many stakeholders, particularly regarding notification protocols and the operational implications of the declaration itself. Roles and responsibilities across sectors, especially in public communication, were not clearly understood in the early stages, resulting in conflicting messages, unrealistic public expectations, and additional strain on utilities and field teams. The absence of a unified public messaging strategy, combined with the prominence of political voices, created tension between operational realities and public comments and commitments.

While many existing policies and frameworks were technically activated, their use was varied and inconsistent. Some plans were unfamiliar to key personnel, others lacked relevance to the situation, and several were not sufficiently exercised to support real-time application. Coordination structures performed strongly at the operational level, particularly in regional centres and among established agency relationships, but local capability was variable, especially in unincorporated areas. In these places, early consequence management relied on improvisation, goodwill, and agency initiative rather than formalised structures.

Public information was identified as one of the most challenged areas of the response. While the Minister's leadership in this space brought visibility and reassurance to the public, it also revealed gaps in the supporting structures needed to align messaging with operational input. The lack of a centralised, joint public information mechanism or unit early in the event, allowed inconsistencies to emerge and undermined confidence in official communications. Some stakeholders were left managing the consequences of public statements that did not align with the operational environment or constraints.

Community support efforts, while ultimately effective, also varied in quality and speed. The strongest support came from on-ground agencies who worked with limited resources to meet urgent needs. However, the reach and visibility of support was varied and inconsistent, particularly in more isolated areas. Efforts were often not systematically tracked or centrally coordinated, which limited the ability to prioritise and direct assistance in real time.

Finally, the transition from response to recovery was not clearly articulated or communicated. While recovery activities began informally and continued without significant disruption, the absence of defined transition points created uncertainty about leadership roles and responsibilities. Field teams and community members were unclear about when response structures had concluded and who was leading ongoing support and recovery activities.

Despite these challenges, the outcome of the response was broadly successful. Power was restored, essential services were maintained, and more severe consequences were avoided. This outcome was due to the people involved, their initiative, professionalism, and shared commitment to doing what was needed. The lessons identified in this review should be seen as opportunities to build on that success by ensuring that systems and structures are better aligned to support those efforts in the future.

9. Recommendations

The recommendations provided in this report aim to strengthen interoperability, clarify roles and responsibilities, prioritise communications and public information management and coordination, improve fatigue and logistics management, embed recovery readiness, and better connect community-level action to regional and state-level coordination. Moving forward, deliberate investment in capability, doctrine, education, and cross-sector collaboration will be essential to enhance future resilience, particularly in remote, high-risk areas such as the Far West.

1. **Recommendation: Develop a Surge Staff Framework and Onboarding Program for DCCEEW/EUSFA to support Combat Agency and Functional Area Operations**

To ensure effective and sustainable operational capacity during energy emergencies, it is recommended that DCCEEW, through the ED and EUSFA, establish a formal Surge Staff Framework supported by a structured onboarding program. This framework should enable rapid mobilisation of internal DCCEEW staff to fulfil EUSFA roles and responsibilities as either Combat Agency or Functional Area support.

2. **Recommendation: Review and update the NSW State Electricity Supply Emergency Plan to Ensure Relevance, Scalability, and Operational Alignment**

To ensure the NSW State Electricity Supply Emergency Plan (ESEP) remains fit-for-purpose, scalable, and aligned with current emergency management arrangements, it is recommended that DCCEEW ECCS undertake a comprehensive review of the Plan. The review should address recent operational learnings, evolving energy sector risks, and the need for seamless coordination from local to state-level activations. Specific consideration should be given to roles and responsibilities and the Concept of Operations framework.

3. **Recommendation: Develop a detailed Cross-Government Concept of Operations (CONOPS) to Operationalise the NSW State Electricity Supply Emergency Plan**

To enhance readiness and ensure the consistent application of the NSW State Electricity Supply Emergency Plan (ESEP), it is recommended that DCCEEW ECCS lead the development of a formal CONOPS. This CONOPS should outline how the ESEP is operationalised - activated, escalated, and managed under the NSW emergency management arrangements in detail. Specific consideration should be given to roles and responsibilities and the Concept of Operations framework.

4. **Recommendation: Establish a Standardised Cross-Government Notification Protocol for Declared Electricity Supply Emergency Incidents**

To improve coordination, clarity of roles, and timely mobilisation of support during declared incidents, it is recommended that the DCCEEW ECCS establish an Emergency Supply Incident declaration and notification protocol. This protocol should include clarification of the ECA role and associated EM support and coordination arrangements being effected.

5. **Recommendation: Develop an Internal Doctrine Library for DCCEEW ED/EUSFA to Standardise Operational Guidance and Support Staff Readiness**

To enhance consistency, role clarity, and operational effectiveness across emergency energy responses, it is recommended that DCCEEW ECCS, through the EUSFA, develop a centralised and accessible Internal Doctrine Library. This library will house key procedures, guidelines, workflows, delegations, and other operational documentation to support staff during preparedness, response, and recovery activities.

6. **Recommendation: Strengthen Internal Communication Protocols Between SEMC, DCCEEW ECCS/EUSFA, and Electricity Sector Stakeholders**

To ensure consistent, timely, and accurate information flow across all levels of emergency response, it is recommended that internal communication protocols be formalised and strengthened between the SEMC, DCCEEW ECCS and electricity sector stakeholders including both suppliers and distributors.

7. **Recommendation: Establish a Unified Public Communication Framework for Energy Emergencies with an Identified Combat Agency Spokesperson**

To ensure accurate, timely, and trusted public information and communication during significant energy-related emergencies, it is recommended that a unified public information framework be adopted, anchored by a single, clearly identified spokesperson from the DCCEEW ECA, and supported by the NSW Police Force (SEOCON) spokesperson and the Public Information Functional Area Coordinator (PIFAC).

8. **Recommendation: Establish Secure Cross-Sector Data Sharing Arrangements with Emergency Management Agencies to Support Medically Vulnerable Persons During Emergency Energy Disruptions**

To improve the protection and support of medically vulnerable individuals during protracted power disruptions, it is recommended that the NSW Government, in partnership with NSW Health, DCCEEW ECCS/EUSFA, electricity suppliers, electricity distributors, and electricity retailers, establish formal, secure, and scalable cross-sector data sharing arrangements. These arrangements should enable the sharing of data and information with emergency management agencies during emergencies, identifying those particularly vulnerable to power outages, including those relying on essential medical and life support equipment, to enable the provision of necessary and prioritised assistance.

9. **Recommendation: Develop and Implement an AIIMS-Based Incident Management System (IMS) for DCCEEW ECCS/EUSFA**

To strengthen internal emergency response capability and ensure alignment with broader NSW and national emergency management arrangements, it is recommended that DCCEEW ECCS, through the EUSFA, develop, implement, train, and exercise a formal Incident Management System (IMS) grounded in the Australasian Inter-Service Incident Management System (AIIMS).

10. **Recommendation: Implement a Fit-for-Purpose Operational Management System for DCCEEW ECCS/EUSFA that Supports Activation, Coordination, and Interoperability**

To enhance situational awareness, decision-making, coordination, and accountability during emergencies, it is recommended that DCCEEW ECCS, through the EUSFA, implement a scalable and secure Operational Management System (OMS) to support its dual role as both a Combat Agency and an Emergency Management Functional Area.

11. **Recommendation: Establish a Cross-Sector Generator and Energy Support Capability Register for DCCEEW ECCS/EUSFA Operations**

To support timely and coordinated deployment of backup power and energy support during outages, it is recommended that DCCEEW ECCS, through the EUSFA, establish and maintain a cross-government and industry, Generator and Related Capability Register. This register should provide visibility of available assets and support services from across NSW Government agencies, electricity distributors and suppliers, and key infrastructure operators.

10. Appendices

- Appendix A: Post Event Review Report - Stakeholder Engagement Register.