

**IN THE MATTER OF
The Hazelwood Coal Mine Fire Inquiry**

STATEMENT OF NICHOLAS JOHN POLE

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Filed on behalf of: The State of Victoria
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Attention: Peter Stewart

I, **Nicholas John Pole**, of 2 Treasury Place, Victoria, Deputy Secretary, Regional Services Group, Department of Education and Early Childhood Development, will say as follows:

A. Introduction

1. My full name is Nicholas John Pole. My date of birth is 5 July 1961.
2. I am the Deputy Secretary, in the Regional Services Group, at the Department of Education and Early Childhood Development (**DEECD**) based at 2 Treasury Place, Melbourne, Victoria.
3. I have been in this role since April 2012. My primary responsibility involves managing the Regional Services Group, which comprises four regions with staff distributed throughout Victoria and four central divisions within DEECD, including the Emergency Management Division (**EMD**).
4. The Regional Services Group has oversight of the operation of early childhood services and government schools.
5. I hold a Bachelor of Education and Masters of Business Administration.
6. I have been an employee of DEECD since 2012. Prior to commencing my current role, I was Deputy Secretary, New Zealand Ministry of Education and had responsibility for the New Zealand Government's education recovery response to the 2010 and 2011 Christchurch earthquakes including the relocation of 18 schools and 7000 students.
7. This statement has been prepared pursuant to the request made by the Hazelwood Mine Fire Board of Inquiry by letter dated 9 May 2014 (**Letter**).
8. I note that the Letter requests that this witness statement answer the following:

- What emergency planning had DEECD and the relevant facilities done prior to February 2014 to prepare for an emergency such as the mine fire? Attach relevant documents.
 - How were the risks to the health of children, contractors and employees at the facilities managed?
 - Provide a chronological account of what information, advice and recommendations the Department provided to the facilities about the impact of the smoke on the health of the employee, contractors and the children.
 - What advice did DEECD seek about the health effects of the smoke? What advice did it receive?
 - What air quality monitoring was done by or for DEECD and the facilities during February and March 2014 to inform the response to the smoke from the Mine fire?
 - Did any employees, contractors or children require medical assessment or treatment as a result of exposure to the smoke? Provide details (the privacy of individuals will not be breached by the inquiry without their permission).
 - Provide an account of what worked well and what could be improved in the event of a future similar emergency.
9. This statement addresses each of these matters in Part C below.
10. This Statement comprises information predominantly from my personal experience and knowledge, and information and belief following any inquiries.
11. I wish to begin my statement by acknowledging the principals, staff and centre managers of early learning centres, kindergartens and outside school hours care programs (**OSHC**) (**Children's Services**) and schools that operated in Morwell over the course of this event. These individuals worked tirelessly to support those in their care and their families through what was an unsettling and difficult period.

B. Overview: Scope of DEECD role, resourcing, executive oversight, co-ordination of DEECD response and educational outcomes

12. DEECD's EMD provides policy and operational direction for all government schools and Children Services in respect of emergency management. However, DEECD is not the first response agency.
13. Pursuant to a Memorandum of Understanding for Co-ordinated Emergency Management Activities (**MOU**) with Catholic Education Commission of Victoria Ltd (**CECV**), Independent Schools Victoria (**ISV**), and Municipal Association of Victoria (**MAV**) dated 12 September 2012, DEECD, CECV, ISV and MAV work collaboratively in the event of significant emergencies such as bushfires, floods or pandemic influenza that affect Children's Services and educational facilities in Victoria. DEECD has the responsibility and authority as the lead agency for the overall coordination

and management in this context. A copy of the MOU is attached.

(Attachment 1) [\[DEECD.0001.001.0026\]](#)

14. The Hazelwood Coal Mine Fire (**Fire**) affected a number of Children's Services, schools and a TAFE within Morwell. In Morwell there are nine Children's Services, five Government schools, two Catholic schools, one independent school and one TAFE. Three of the schools (Commercial Road Primary School, Sacred Heart Primary School and Berry Street School) and two Children's Services (Maryvale Crescent Kindergarten and Goodstart Early Learning Morwell) are located south of Commercial Road Morwell and within 0.8 to 1.3 kilometres of the mine.
15. Primary school populations range in size from 95 to 330 students. Secondary provision is via the Morwell campus of Kurnai College catering for approximately 380 students year 7 - 10 while a large cohort of students travel out of Morwell to the Gippsland Education Precinct at Churchill to undertake VCE study. Mainstream education provision is supplemented by an independent, alternative school Berry Street School. A list of schools by enrolment numbers is attached. **(Attachment 2)** [\[DEECD.0003.002.0112\]](#)
16. Morwell schools cater for students from disadvantaged backgrounds. The Index of Relative Socio Economic Disadvantage identifies the Local Government Area of Latrobe City as one of the most disadvantaged in all of Victoria. School populations are characterised by high levels of socio-economic disadvantage and transience with some schools reporting up to 30% student mobility. The average Student Family Occupation Index (SFO; used to determine the level of disadvantage in school communities) for Morwell primary schools is 0.80 compared to the state median of 0.50. A large cohort of Koorie young people are represented in both primary and secondary schooling along with higher than average numbers of students with moderate to severe disabilities and living in Out of Home Care. Average student attendance data is lower than state median benchmarks; all schools have significant support and wellbeing programs aimed at supporting improved student engagement. The provision of stable learning environments is of critical importance to the engagement of students at Morwell schools.

Incident Management Executive Oversight and Support

17. DEECD was aware of the mine fire from its outset as a result of its membership of the State Emergency Management Team (**SEMT**).
18. At the core of our approach was ensuring the safety, wellbeing and education needs of children and young people affected by the Fire.
19. From 9 February 2014, DEECD's Emergency Management Division (**EMD**) worked with the South-Eastern Victoria (**SEV**) Region staff to manage the DEECD response to the Fire.
20. In the week beginning 10 February 2014, Morwell school principals were in contact with the DEECD Senior Advisor Regional Performance and Planning, SEV Region, regarding the impact of smoke on their school communities. These concerns were monitored through that week with representation about our concerns made to the SEMT through the week. I escalated DEECD's response in the week commencing 17 February 2014,

following reports of what had been a 'bad weekend' for smoke through the Morwell township. On the evening of 17 February 2014, I made arrangements to travel to Morwell on the morning of 18 February 2014 in order to assess firsthand the situation as it was impacting education provision.

21. I briefed DEECD's Executive Board on the situation prior to travelling to Morwell on 18 February 2014. This prompted the Executive Board to activate the Central Office Incident Management Team (IMT) and to form an Executive Board taskforce led by the Secretary, Mr Richard Bolt. The taskforce comprised six Deputy Secretaries and other relevant DEECD personnel.
22. The DEECD Executive Board taskforce for the Fire met on four occasions between 18 and 21 February 2014.
23. The IMT is a key coordinating component of a command and control structure and is consistent with the Australian Interagency Incident Management System (AIIMS), which is used by emergency management authorities in Victoria and a number of government departments. A Central Office IMT is activated when an incident is of a level of complexity or scale that necessitates the involvement of the Central Office in addition to the region/regions in the management of the incident.
24. DEECD took the lead in co-ordinating and advising schools in Morwell in the response to the Fire. In accordance with the MOU referred to in paragraph 13, CECV and ISV representatives were invited to join the Central Office IMT. This close engagement and information sharing enabled a coordinated and consistent response across all affected schools and assisted CECV and ISV in making decisions about their own schools. CECV attended the majority of the IMT meetings. While ISV was not in a position to attend IMT meetings, the association was updated on a daily basis by telephone or email by an EMD Senior Policy Officer.
25. The Director Strategic Communications, Communications Division, represented DEECD on the Emergency Management Joint Public Information Committee (EMJPIC) and was also a member of the Central Office IMT.
26. Mr Bolt and I visited Morwell on two occasions (21 February 2014 and 17 March 2014) during the Fire and the Regional Director SEV Region and I also visited on two other occasions (18 February 2014 and 28 February 2014). The purpose of these visits was to meet with principals and directors of affected schools and Children's Services to ascertain, at first hand, the issues schools and Children's Services were experiencing and to discuss potential support mechanisms.
27. The three education ministers, Minister Dixon, Minister Lovell, Minister Hall/Minister Wakeling (Minister Wakeling was sworn in as the Minister for Higher Education and Skills in March 2014) were provided with both verbal and formal daily reports on the impact of the Fire on education and programs in Morwell from 19 February to 18 March 2014. These reports were also distributed to DEECD's Secretary and Deputy Secretaries.

Whole of Victorian Government Liaison

28. DEECD Central Office was represented by relevant staff (Mr Bolt, myself, the Executive Director Emergency Management, the Manager Emergency Management, two Senior Emergency Management Policy Advisors, the Director Strategic Communications) at Whole of Victorian Government state-wide strategy and coordination meetings, either in person or via teleconference. These meetings were essential for keeping up to date about progress of the management of the Fire and for obtaining information on air quality issues and health advice. These meetings included:

- State Emergency Management Team (**SEMT**) meetings
- State Strategic Support team meetings, a subgroup of the SEMT
- State Crisis and Resilience Council (**SCRC**) meetings
- Special State Crisis and Resilience Council meetings
- Emergency Management Joint Public Information Committee (**EMJPIC**) meetings

Lists of dates of the above meetings and DEECD representatives are attached. (**Attachments 3 to 5 inclusive**) [\[DEECD.0003.002.0121\]](#), [\[DEECD.0003.002.0123\]](#) and [\[DEECD.0003.002.0079\]](#)

29. DEECD SEV Region was represented by relevant staff (the Regional Director, Deputy Regional Director Service Planning, the Senior Advisor Regional Performance and Planning, the Manager, Provision and Planning, two Senior Provision and Planning /Emergency Management Co-Ordinators) at Whole of Victorian Government regional strategy and coordination meetings, either in person or via teleconference. These regional meetings were essential for keeping up to date about progress of the management of the Fire and for obtaining information on air quality issues and health advice. These meetings included:

- Regional Emergency Management Team (**REMT**) meetings
- Regional Emergency Management Joint Public Information Committee meetings (**REMJPIC**) meetings
- Relief and Recovery Committee meetings

Lists of dates of the above meetings and DEECD representatives are attached. (**Attachment 6**) [\[DEECD.0003.002.0113\]](#)

30. EMD Senior Policy Advisors represented DEECD on various occasions at the State Control Centre as Emergency Management Liaison Officers (**EMLO**).

31. SEV Region's Senior Provision and Planning /Emergency Management Co-Ordinator represented DEECD on various occasions at the Traralgon Incident Control Centre and Hazelwood Incident Control Centre as EMLO.

Educational Outcomes

32. DEECD invested in a range of strategies to ensure that the educational outcomes of students were not adversely affected by smoke from the Fire.
33. To minimise disruption and maintain continuity, all the students of Commercial Road Primary School were relocated with their entire class and teacher, and taught together as a group by the same teacher at the new location. Commercial Road Primary School junior school students were relocated to Newborough Primary School; Commercial Road Primary School middle school students were relocated to Moe (Elizabeth Street) Primary School; Commercial Road Primary School senior school students were relocated to Newborough East Primary School. This relocation occurred from 20 February 2014.
34. Upon the Chief Health Officer issuing a health advisory on 28 February 2014 recommending temporary relocation away from the smoke for people aged over 65, pre-school aged children, pregnant women and anyone with a pre-existing heart or lung condition living or working in Morwell, the SEV Region issued a communiqué for schools principals to distribute to parents of children enrolled in schools in Morwell who had not relocated advising them that they could temporarily enrol their children at another Victorian government school closer to where they were temporarily living. A copy of the communiqué to principals dated 28 February 2014 with the suggested text for messages to parents is attached. (**Attachment 7**)
[\[DEECD.0006.003.0019\]](#)
35. On 28 February 2014, I issued a circular to all Victorian school principals informing them of the status of the Fire and informing them that parents seeking to temporarily enrol their child at their schools should be given priority. The circular included advice for principals on how to temporarily enrol students. A copy of the circular is attached. (**Attachment 8**)
[\[DEECD.0003.001.0191\]](#)
36. DEECD worked with principals of the affected schools to identify areas of need and allocated additional resources to ensure that students who were absent during the relocation period were supported to achieve their individual learning objectives.
37. Commercial Road Primary School developed and distributed homework packs to families of these students to ensure continuity of the students' education.
38. Families who chose to relocate outside of Morwell and not temporarily enrol their children in another school were offered access to learning materials developed by the Distance Education Centre Victoria. These materials were made available through student's home schools.
39. I directed that DEECD provide additional funding to schools to cover the cost of employing Casual Relief Teachers to replace staff absent as a result of the Fire.

C. DEECD Response to Board of Inquiry's questions

1. What emergency planning had the Department and the relevant facilities done prior to February 2014 to prepare for an emergency such as the mine fire? Attach relevant documents.

40. EMD's business activities involve ongoing planning, policy development and review, inter-agency liaison and training in respect of emergency management to ensure the safety of children, students, staff, volunteers and visitors in Victoria's schools and Children's Services.
41. EMD works closely with emergency organisations and DEECD's regions, schools (including Catholic and Independent schools) and Children's Services to facilitate a high level of preparedness in the event of an emergency.
42. All Government schools in Victoria are required to complete and submit an Emergency Management Plan (EMP) to DEECD. EMPs are mandated for schools as part of the Victorian Registration and Qualifications Authority registration requirements. Emergency planning is mandated for Children's Services through the National Quality Framework.
43. In 2013, the EMD reviewed and updated the EMP template and guidelines to provide a more robust process that enabled schools and Children's Services to more accurately identify the facility's risks for their particular environment. Copies of the guidelines, checklist and templates are attached. (Attachments 9 to 12 inclusive) [\[DEECD.0003.001.0192\]](#), [\[DEECD.0003.001.0223\]](#), [\[DEECD.0003.001.0225\]](#) and [\[DEECD.0003.001.0263\]](#)
44. During September and October 2013, EMD in collaboration with regional DEECD emergency management staff, delivered 62 workshops Victoria-wide on how to complete EMPs. This included three workshops for surrounding schools and Children's Services held in Moe on 3 September 2013.
45. In August 2013, DEECD's Central Office IMT members participated in a training exercise. The scenario used for the exercise focused on a sustained toxic smoke event similar to the Brooklyn Subsurface Tip fire of July 2013. Preparation for this type of event has assisted DEECD with its response to the Fire, in that it gave DEECD opportunities to plan for facility relocations.
46. In October 2013, EMD collaborated with the Country Fire Authority (CFA) and the Department of Justice in a fire preparedness campaign to ensure consistency in fire risk education in schools.
47. In December 2013, EMD participated with DEECD regional staff in two IMT practice exercises based on managing a DEECD regional response to a fire.
48. In December 2013 and January 2014, EMD staff participated in the SCC fire season planning, received training in EMLO role, and participated in a training exercise at the SCC.

2. How were the risks to the health of children, contractors and employees at the facilities managed?

Closure and relocation of schools and Children's Services

49. DEECD relied on advice from Dr Lester in its decision making regarding the minimisation of the impact of smoke on child/student and staff health. In the event of a wholesale evacuation of the Morwell township, DEECD would have taken advice from the Fire Services Commissioner or State Controller.
50. Between 13 and 18 February 2014, DEECD's SEV Region encouraged schools and Children's Services in the Morwell area to ensure students and staff avoid prolonged physical activity outdoors, consistent with Dr Lester's High level smoke warning for Latrobe Valley issued on 13 February 2014. A copy of Dr Lester's advice is attached. (**Attachment 13**) [\[DEECD.0004.001.0001\]](#). A copy of Dr Lester's advice was distributed by SEV Region to schools and Children's Services. Copies of the emails from SEV Region to principals and Children's Services directors are attached. (**Attachments 14 and 15**) [\[DEECD.0006.002.0001\]](#) and [\[DEECD.0005.002.0003\]](#)
51. DEECD commenced planning for the possible relocation of schools and Children's Services on 18 February 2014. Relocation was undertaken on the advice of Dr Lester to provide students and children respite from the smoky conditions.
52. On 20 February 2014, in response to Dr Lester's advice, two schools south of Commercial Road and closest to the mine (Commercial Road Primary School and Sacred Heart Primary School) were relocated away from Morwell. A third school located south of Commercial Road (Berry Street School) had been closed since 13 February 2014. Following the identification of appropriate accommodation, this school was relocated on 25 February 2014.
53. By 19 February 2014, three Children's Services (two on or south of Commercial Road - Maryvale Crescent Pre-school and Goodstart Early Learning Morwell) and one located north of Commercial Road (Dala Lidj-Woolum Bellum Kindergarten) had closed pending relocation; by 27 February 2014, four other Children's Services in Morwell, all north of Commercial Road (Carinya Early Learning Centre, Elizabeth Wilmot Pre-school, Parklands Pre-school and Gunai Lidj Child Care Centre) had closed or announced their intention to close, pending the identification of appropriate accommodation.
54. By 4 March 2014, all seven of these Children's Services were operating at new temporary locations away from Morwell. Two Children's Services operated by private providers north of Commercial Road had decided not to relocate. A copy of a map of Morwell showing the location of educational facilities and their status as at 4 March 2014 is attached. (**Attachment 16**) [\[DEECD.0003.001.0307\]](#)
55. One Children's Service (an out of school hours care (**OSHC**) program located at the Sacred Heart Primary School) was closed during the

relocation period. Affected families were offered the OSHC service at Tobruk Street Primary School.

56. I directed that DEECD would pay for the cost of transporting students between Morwell and their host schools. In response to this direction, SEV Region provided daily transport for students of Commercial Road Primary School to and from their new temporary school locations in Moe and Newborough. Sacred Heart Primary School arranged its own transport to and from the new temporary location in Newborough.
57. I am informed that the Morwell campus of GippsTAFE monitored conditions and modified work locations for staff and dispersed classes as required.
58. On 17 March 2014, Dr Lester lifted the advice for temporary relocation of 'at risk' groups in the southern parts of Morwell, advising that they could now plan to return to their homes and work places. A copy of this advice is attached. (**Attachment 17**) [\[DOH.0001.001.0001\]](#). This led to the commencement of the clean-up of the schools and Children's Services in Morwell that had been vacated and the planning for the return of students, children and staff.
59. By the start of Term 2 on 22 April 2014, all schools and Children's Services in Morwell had been cleaned and staff and children had returned.

Respite

60. DEECD encouraged schools in the Morwell area that had not relocated to undertake respite activities at locations with better air quality to enable children to undertake physical activity and to assist in psychosocial wellbeing given the uncertain duration of the Fire. Activities included trips to the beach, swimming pools, the Melbourne Zoo and historic towns in Gippsland. Some schools rotated students to other schools for a day at a time as well as taking excursions out of the area. Five government schools undertook a total of 44 respite activities from 23 February to 27 March 2014. DEECD provided funding for bus travel to respite locations and additional teaching staff to support these trips.
61. I am informed that the CECV provided respite to its school north of Commercial Road through visits to schools outside of Morwell on three occasions and attendance at community engagement activities organised by the Morwell Emergency Management Committee. Other Catholic schools in the Latrobe Valley conducted activities according to the weather and the air quality on the particular day.
62. I am informed that the Morwell campus of GippsTAFE continued its classes during the period and maintained a policy to send home any students and staff affected by smoke.

Cleaning

63. On 26 February 2014, I directed that schools in the Morwell area receive additional funding support and were authorised to undertake additional daily cleaning to remove ash and dust from inside buildings. This occurred throughout the Fire.

64. On 21 March 2014, a cleaning contractor engaged at significant financial impost to DEECD by DEECD's Infrastructure and Sustainability Division, commenced cleaning inside and outside the buildings at nine educational sites – two government schools, three non-government schools and four Children's Services. As near as possible, DEECD retained local Morwell businesses for cleaning so as to assist the local economy. I am informed that all cleaning was completed by 17 April 2014. To minimise further disruption to schools and Children's Services, much of the cleaning occurred during the term holidays (7-18 April 2014).
65. Following completion of the clean-up work, hygienists conducted an inspection at the nine sites. The inspections confirmed that no visible ash or smoke residue remained in accessible areas and that the clean-up was successful at each site.
66. DEECD provided grants to four government schools who wished to arrange their own cleaning. I am informed that five Children's Services arranged their own cleaning and GippsTAFE arranged its own cleaning and will invoice DEECD.
67. The Clean Up Recovery Sub Committee of the Hazelwood Mine Fire Recovery Committee was established to develop the Clean Up Recovery Sub-Plan.
68. DEECD undertook clean-up planning inspections prior to the development of a scope of work by the Clean Up Recovery Sub Committee.
69. DEECD's scope of works was based on the Residential Clean scope of works included in Clean Up Recovery Sub-Plan (Version 1, 14 March 2014). A copy of the Clean Up Recovery Sub-Plan is attached. **(Attachment 18)** [\[DEECD.0003.001.0310\]](#). The objective of the plan was to outline arrangements for the coordination and management of clean up recovery activities.

3. Provide a chronological account of what information, advice and recommendations the Department provided to the facilities about the impact of the smoke on the health of the employee, contractors and the children.

70. On 11 and 12 February 2014, I issued circulars to schools and Children's Services asking principals and service providers to take appropriate precautions for the health and wellbeing of staff and students, particularly those with heart and respiratory conditions. Copies of the circulars are attached. **(Attachments 19 and 20)** [\[DEECD.0003.001.0318\]](#) and [\[DEECD.0003.001.0319\]](#)
71. On 19 February 2014, I approved letters and a Question and Answer sheet for distribution to families via their child's school. Separate letters were developed for facilities that had relocated as well as those that were remaining in Morwell. Copies of the letters and the Question and Answer sheet are attached. **(Attachments 21 to 23)** [\[DEECD.0006.002.0002\]](#), [\[DEECD.0006.002.0006\]](#) and [\[DEECD.0006.002.0010\]](#)
72. On 20 February 2014, I approved a letter for SEV Region to distribute to Children's Services to send to families. A copy of the letter is attached. **(Attachment 24)** [\[DEECD.0004.001.0013\]](#)

73. From 21 February 2014, DEECD put in place an on-call health advice service to schools and Children's Services. A team of three Primary School Nurses were pulled together to provide this service. A copy of the SEVR communiqué of 21 February 2014 informing schools and Children's Services of the nursing support is attached. (**Attachment 25**) [\[DEECD.0003.001.0328\]](#). No calls or requests for nurse support were received during the Fire period. Despite the fact that no calls were received, I believe that establishing the service was a sensible and responsible measure under the circumstances.
74. I am informed that communiqués were provided to DEECD's Higher Education and Skills Group to tailor as required for the needs of staff and students of GippsTAFE. I am also informed that copies of communiqués developed for government schools and parents of children at government schools were provided to CECV and ISV for their use as required.
75. From 9 February 2014 to 22 April 2014 (**Relevant Period**), DEECD provided 11 communiqués to SEV Region staff, principals, children services' directors and parents consistent with the Department of Health and EPA messages. Copies of these communiques are attached. (**Attachments 26 to 29, 30 and 30A, 31 to 36 (all inclusive)**) [\[DEECD.0006.003.0001\]](#), [\[DEECD.0006.003.0003\]](#), [\[DEECD.0006.003.0005\]](#), [\[DEECD.0006.003.0007\]](#), [\[DEECD.0006.003.0009\]](#), [\[DEECD.0007.001.0001\]](#), [\[DEECD.0006.003.0013\]](#), [\[DEECD.0006.003.0015\]](#), [\[DEECD.0006.003.0017\]](#), [\[DEECD.0006.003.0019\]](#), [\[DEECD.0006.003.0025\]](#) and [\[DEECD.0006.003.0026\]](#)
76. I approved SEV Region's arrangement for three former principals to attend the three DHS information and recovery centres established in Morwell (at Commercial Road Primary School, Hazelwood Road and Maryvale Road) from 28 February to 2 March 2014. One former principal also attended the centre at Commercial Road Primary School on 3 March and 4 March 2014. The principals provided advice to families on access to Children's Services and schooling options should families choose to relocate out of Morwell.
77. On 28 February 2014, I approved the establishment of a DEECD call centre for the weekend of Saturday 1 March and Sunday 2 March 2014 to respond to phone calls from parents in the Morwell area about relocating students to other schools given the health advisory. I am advised that no calls were received.
78. DEECD responded to media requests for information so as to ensure the Morwell community was aware of the arrangements for schools and Children's Services; for example, the Regional Director, SEV Region was interviewed on ABC local radio on two occasions and Commercial Road Primary School was featured on the ABC's 7.30 program.
79. DEECD SEV Region maintained regular liaison with schools and Children's Services in Morwell as well as those relocated out of Morwell to monitor staff and student/child wellbeing.
80. I note that it was important in all DEECD communication to articulate DEECD's role. It was not a lead agency and therefore took advice on air quality and health and any subsequent actions, such as temporary relocation.

All DEECD communication clearly articulated this role. Principals and Children's Services directors were encouraged to monitor conditions via emergency information services. They were also referred to the EPA and Department of Health websites for up to date information.

81. At the end of the relocation period, Ministers Dixon and Lovell provided schools and Children's Services with letters for parents acknowledging their commitment to their children's learning and wellbeing and acknowledging the efforts of schools and Children's Services staff. Copies of these letters are attached. (**Attachments 37 to 40 inclusive**) [\[DEECD.0006.004.0001\]](#), [\[DEECD.0006.004.0002\]](#), [\[DEECD.0006.004.0003\]](#) and [\[DEECD.0006.004.0004\]](#)

4. What advice did DEECD seek about the health effects of the smoke? What advice did it receive?

82. On 12 February 2014 at the SEMT meeting, DEECD raised the issue of air quality and DEECD's concern regarding the impact on schools and Children's Services in the vicinity of the Morwell mine. This issue was submitted in the SEMT Situation Report (Number 5 of 'Fires 9 February 2014') on 12 February 2014. DEECD also raised the issue in reports Numbers 6 and 7 on 13 and 14 February 2014. Copies of these reports are attached. (**Attachments 41 to 43 inclusive**) [\[DEECD.0003.001.0334\]](#), [\[DEECD.0003.001.0345\]](#) and [\[DEECD.0003.001.0351\]](#)
83. On 13 February 2014, Dr Lester issued her first High level smoke warning for Latrobe Valley, stating that '...those at high risk should avoid prolonged or heavy physical activity outdoors...' This High level smoke warning for Latrobe Valley was reissued on 17 February 2014, a copy of which is attached. (**Attachment 44**) [\[DOH.0001.001.0009\]](#)
84. As indicated in paragraph 50 above, in response to Dr Lester's High level smoke warning for Latrobe Valley issued on 13 February 2014, DEECD SEV Region sent circulars to schools and Children's Services in the Morwell area to encourage them to keep students and children inside with windows and doors closed.
85. DEECD was provided with advice primarily through the SEMT on the progress of fire suppression. On 17 February 2014, at the SEMT meeting Mr Craig Lapsley, State Controller advised that the fire was 'a long haul and very significant event'.
86. On the morning of 18 February 2014, I had a discussion with the Manager Emergency Management in which we agreed that she seek advice from Dr Lester following the SEMT that day to assist DEECD determine whether it should consider relocation and closure of schools and Children's Services.
87. On 18 February 2014 following the SEMT meeting, I was informed that the Manager, Emergency Management DEECD met with Dr Lester and the Manager, Emergency Management, Department of Health to discuss the impact of smoky conditions on schools and Children's Services in Morwell, particularly those close to the mine. I am informed that during the meeting, Manager, Emergency Management, Department of Health, advised that a report had been received from a Children's Service of children exhibiting hyperactivity, headaches, flushed faces, and longer sleep times. I am

informed that at the meeting Dr Lester indicated that these symptoms may be consistent with carbon monoxide exposure. She advised that services south of Commercial Road relocate and indicated that relocation would be consistent with the current recommendations that people spend time out of the smoke if possible. The Manager, Emergency Management DEECD called me from the meeting and Dr Lester reiterated her advice to me. Dr Lester provided her advice in writing. A copy of this advice is attached. **(Attachment 45)** [\[DEECD.0003.001.0359\]](#)

88. On 18 February 2014, the Manager Emergency Management sent an email to Mr Craig Lapsley, as Fire Services Commissioner and State Controller, to advise him of DEECD's decision following advice from Dr Lester. A copy of the email containing this advice is attached. **(Attachment 46)** [\[DEECD.0004.001.0005\]](#)
89. On 20 February 2014, at the SEMT meeting the Deputy State Controller, reported significant progress had been made in the suppression effort with a 'further 350 metres suppressed on top of the 800 metres already completed'.
90. On 24 February 2014, Mr Euan Ferguson, Country Fire Authority Command, reported at the SEMT meeting that the estimated time to extinguish 90% of the fire would be 14 days.
91. The Country Fire Authority and Latrobe City Council distributed face masks around the Morwell area. On 24 February 2014, following consultation with Dr Danny Csutoros, Senior Medical Advisor, Department of Health, the Manager Emergency Management DEECD sought advice from the DEECD Senior Medical Advisor. The DEECD Senior Medical Advisor's view was consistent with that of Dr Csutoros which was that the use of face masks for children was not recommended due to the impracticality of prolonged use by children and the likelihood that most generic masks would not fit a child's face. Instead, Dr Csutoros recommended that children reduce their exposure to smoke and ash by remaining indoors or taking respite from the area. A communiqué to service providers concerning these decisions sent on or about 25 February 2014 is attached. **(Attachment 47)** [\[DEECD.0004.001.0003\]](#). The introduction of air quality monitoring (discussed in Section 5) assisted in this practice. To the best of my knowledge, this practice was followed by schools and Children's Services.
92. On 27 February 2014, at the SEMT meeting it was reported that the fire may burn for a further 10-14 days.
93. On 5 March 2014 at the SCRC meeting, Mr Lapsley reported 'cautious optimism' that, subject to weather conditions, the focus may move to towards the recovery phase after the weekend. By the following day, 6 March 2014, it was reported at the SEMT that fire services were confident that the fire would be contained by Sunday 9 March. On 7 March 2014, it was reported in the State Control Centre's Key Messages and Incident Summary document that the final 15 percent of the fire remained a challenge but that the Hazelwood Incident Controller remained confident that the fire would be contained by early in the week of 10 March 2014.
94. On 10 March 2014, Mr Lapsley deemed the Fire to be controlled. A copy of this advice is attached. **(Attachment 48)** [\[DEECD.0004.001.0011\]](#)

95. Although Mr Lapsley had deemed the Fire to be controlled, the potential risks to health from the smoke continued to be of concern for some time. DEECD continued to monitor Department of Health and EPA advice through the SEMT meetings and information published on their websites.

5. What air quality monitoring was done by or for DEECD and the facilities during February and March 2014 to inform the response to the smoke from the Mine fire?

96. At its meeting on 18 February 2014, DEECD's Executive Board took the decision to secure air quality monitoring for all schools and Children's Services across Morwell.
97. In response to the Executive Board's decision, the Executive Director, Infrastructure and Sustainability Division, engaged hygienists to conduct air quality monitoring using hand-held devices at 21 facilities in Morwell and surrounding areas. This monitoring gave an instantaneous reading of carbon dioxide, carbon monoxide and air particulates (PM10) in specific locations. Monitoring using hand-held devices was followed by the installation of real-time data logging monitors at these sites.
98. There were eight facilities north of Commercial Road in Morwell that continued to operate during the Relevant Period. These facilities included four government schools (Morwell Primary School, Morwell Park Primary School, Tobruk Street Primary School and Kurnai College), one Catholic school (St Vincent de Paul's Primary School), two Children's Services (Mid Valley Kinder and Child Care and Kylie Early Learning Centre) and GippsTAFE. Air quality assessment was conducted at these locations from 19 February until 27 March 2014.
99. The air quality monitoring equipment enabled staff to monitor the indoor concentrations of carbon monoxide, carbon dioxide and particulates (PM10), relocate children outdoors when it was clear outside and ventilate the buildings by opening doors and windows.
100. Principals and Children's Services directors were briefed and trained to read the data produced by the monitors and DEECD engaged a hygienist to provide further assistance. The hygienist provided regular advice to schools and Children's Services on air quality readings. It was an expectation of DEECD and SEV Region that had there been sustained levels of poor air quality observed by the hygienist that this would be reported to DEECD and that appropriate action would be taken including the implementation of further relocations. No such reports were received from the hygienist.

6. Did any employees, contractors or children require medical assessment or treatment as a result of exposure to the smoke? Provide details (the privacy of individuals will not be breached by the inquiry without their permission).

101. In terms of the physiological impacts of the exposure to smoke from the Fire on staff and students at schools, I am informed that:
- One staff member from Commercial Road Primary School made reports to DEECD's Occupational Health and Safety reporting system following complaints of respiratory issues resulting from smoke during February and early March. The staff member lives

outside of Morwell and was instructed to attend the Newborough Primary School directly rather than meet with other staff members and students at Commercial Road Primary School before and after school.

- A further two staff members from Commercial Road Primary School provided doctor's certificates for several days due to respiratory issues. Both have pre-existing respiratory conditions which appeared to be exacerbated by the smoke.
- Morwell Park Primary School reported one staff member requiring a week's respite due to respiratory issues exacerbated by the smoke.
- Kurnai College reported one staff member requiring a month's leave due to suffering respiratory distress.
- All schools reported higher than usual absenteeism of students; however it is not clear if the absences were specifically as a result of the mine fire smoke.

102. In terms of the physiological impacts of the exposure to smoke from the Fire on staff and students at Children's Services, I am informed that:

- Mid Valley Kinder and Childcare reported that two children's asthma was aggravated but no medical assessment or treatment was required.
- Gunai Lidj reported that one child had a mild dose of carbon monoxide exposure and was monitored for two weeks by his doctor.
- Goodstart Early Learning Morwell reported that several staff experienced headaches and nausea on 19 February 2014. Medical assessment or treatment was not required. In addition, I understand that medical assessment or treatment was not sought for any children at the centre.
- Latrobe City Council reported that two staff presented to the ambulance service for health checks but that no staff members sought medical assistance from a GP. Latrobe City Council also advises that at least one child was taken for a health check to a service other than a GP and believe it is likely that other children underwent health assessments.
- Latrobe City Council Maternal and Child Health nurses undertook two and four week health checks via home visits rather than at Maternal and Child Health Centres as is usually the case. Maternal and Child Health nurses increased their home visits by approximately 14 visits per week for four weeks.

103. DEECD has no way of ascertaining whether adverse health effects are attributable to exposure to smoke at a school or Children's Service, home or elsewhere.

104. I am informed that GippsTAFE has advised that no staff or students reported any health effects resulting from the smoky conditions related to the Fire. On days of poorer air quality GippsTAFE requested that staff with known medical conditions to relocate to a different campus.
105. In addition, I am informed that there has been no increase in requests for psychosocial support for students as a result of the Fire.
106. I am informed that DEECD offered staff at affected government schools an information session conducted by DEECD Employee Assistance Program provider. The information session covered reacting to traumatic situations and managing wellbeing. Two schools (Commercial Road Primary School and Kurnai College) attended and provided positive feedback.
107. I am informed that data from the Employee Assistance Program provider shows that five staff from Morwell sought an individual support session during the Relevant Period. Due to confidentiality of the service, data is not available to ascertain whether the support sessions related to impacts of the Fire.

7. Provide an account of what worked well and what could be improved in the event of a future similar emergency

108. In my assessment the following worked well:
- **Relocation of schools and Children's Services.** Once the advice to relocate was confirmed the identification of and move to alternate sites occurred swiftly and efficiently.
 - **Respite.** Schools that engaged in respite activities consistently reported the benefits for children having time away from the smoky conditions. To this end, the Morwell Primary School prepared a 'thank you' gift book from students and staff to show their appreciation of DEECD's efforts in supporting them through the Fire. Excerpts from the 'thank you' book are attached. (Attachment 49) [\[DEECD.0003.001.0372\]](#)
 - **Support provided by Victorian schools and the Distance Education Centre Victoria.** Schools outside the Morwell area were quick to provide priority access to temporary enrolments for students whose families moved away from Morwell due to the impact of the fire. For students not seeking temporary enrolment in another school, the Distance Education Centre Victoria provided materials that helped ensure that students' individual learning objectives could be appropriately supported.
 - **Installation of air quality monitors and training of Children's Services directors, principals and TAFE staff.** This enabled staff to interpret air quality data and gave them confidence to make judgements about when they could allow children, students and staff to engage in outdoor activities.
 - **Cleaning.** The investment by DEECD in a comprehensive cleaning strategy was appreciated by schools and Children's Services and may have offset some of the frustrations of those dealing with the

challenges of managing business as usual activities in a difficult environment.

- **Effective engagement with stakeholders.** DEECD Central Office and SEV Region ensured messages to parents and carers were channelled via principals and Children’s Services directors and that communication was regular and presented in plain English. DEECD did not directly write to parents and carers; nor did it undertake any paid advertising. I consider that this approach managed any concern that information was being created by remote ‘experts’ who were not part of the community
- **Collaborative relationships.** DEECD’s close engagement with stakeholders, throughout the period of the Fire resulted in improved levels of cooperation and collaboration with key DEECD specific stakeholders, CECV and ISV. A copy of a thank you letter from the CECV is attached. (Attachment 50) [\[DEECD.0003.001.0393\]](#)
- **Specialist health advice.** The responsiveness of Dr Lester and her staff was of critical importance in enabling DEECD to take decisions about closures and relocations and to communicate specific health advice for students.
- **Whole of Victorian Government coordination.** From a DEECD perspective, the SCRC and SEMT proved to be effective mechanisms for collaboration and information dissemination throughout the Fire.

109. In my assessment the following would benefit from improvement:

- **Better access to air quality data.** The ongoing monitoring of air quality by the relevant government agency via a comprehensive range of fixed monitors in communities located close to mines would help ensure that any future decisions made by DEECD regarding the implementation of respite, relocation and health protection measures for children and students would be timely and evidence-based .
- **Community contingency planning.** The development of a plan by local government and emergency services (similar to Community Information Guides developed for bushfire prone areas) that would address hazmat risks, given the proximity of Morwell to the Hazelwood Coal Mine, should be prioritised.

Dated

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NICHOLAS JOHN POLE