

TRANSCRIPT

LEGISLATIVE COUNCIL ENVIRONMENT AND PLANNING COMMITTEE

Inquiry into Climate Resilience

Melbourne – Wednesday 20 November 2024

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WITNESS

Dan Cowdell, Chief Executive Officer, Geelong Sustainability.

The CHAIR: Welcome back to the Legislative Council Environment and Planning Committee's Inquiry into Climate Resilience in Victoria. Welcome to the representative from Geelong Sustainability.

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Welcome. My name is Ryan Batchelor. I am the Chair of this committee and a Member for Southern Metropolitan Region in the Legislative Council. I will ask the committee to introduce themselves.

David ETTERS HANK: David Ettershank, Western Metropolitan Region. Hi.

Wendy LOVELL: Wendy Lovell, Northern Victoria Region.

Sarah MANSFIELD: Sarah Mansfield, Western Victoria Region.

Melina BATH: And Melina Bath, Eastern Victoria. Hello.

Gaelle BROAD: Hi, I am Gaelle Broad, Member for Northern Victoria.

John BERGER: John Berger, Member for Southern Metro.

Dan COWDELL: Great to meet you all.

The CHAIR: If you could state your name and the organisation you appear on behalf of for the Hansard record, then I will invite you to make an opening statement.

Dan COWDELL: Yes, certainly. Daniel Cowdell. I am here representing Geelong Sustainability group.

The CHAIR: Over to you.

Dan COWDELL: Yes, thank you. I really appreciate the opportunity to address the inquiry, committee. As I said, my name is Dan Cowdell. I am the CEO of Geelong Sustainability. We are a not-for-profit community organisation based in Geelong, working across the Geelong region and surrounding areas to support our community to act on climate change. We have been doing that since 2007 and in recent years have grown our impact and scale of the programs, events and support that we are offering to the community. We now have a small team of eight staff based in Geelong.

For our area, the risks around climate change, we are already facing considerable risk in terms of a whole range of areas, and they are expected to increase for the next at least two decades regardless of what is happening in terms of emissions reduction. I am talking about increased frequency of heatwaves and severity of those heatwaves, bushfire risk, reduced rainfall but then also increased deluge – so flooding risks from the more intense rainfall events – and also, being on the coast, sea level rise and coastal inundation. Our community is absolutely at risk, and I am really pleased that this inquiry is underway to look at how we can improve climate resilience, particularly in the built environment.

Our submission that we have put to the inquiry essentially advocated for three main things. One was funding and support for low-income households to improve the energy efficiency of their homes and electrification of their homes, statewide support to electrify and accelerate the community to get away from gas and build more

resilient homes, and finally a call for a Victorian climate change adaptation fund that would support localised community initiatives.

In terms of lower income and disadvantaged household support, I am sure the panel is pretty aware the Victorian housing stock is really poor quality. Homes that are built before the 1990s have a star rating on average of 1.8 stars out of 10. It is very low. Most of those homes are extremely draughty, they have very little insulation, if any, and I have heard the term ‘glorified tents’ – that would probably be a great description. In fact I think a glorified tent would probably be better because you can zip it up and make it airtight. So there is a lot of work that needs to happen in terms of our built environment for households, and more often than not it is the low-income, disadvantaged households that are in the poorer quality stock and unable to address that situation, lacking the means financially to be able to improve that. We have tried to work on this at a localised level with an initiative called Climate Safe Rooms, designed to support the most vulnerable people in our community who have quite extreme health conditions that put them at adverse risk around climate extreme, and I am happy to talk more to the panel about that if you are interested to hear some more specifics.

In general, we know low-income households need a lot of work, but the community at large needs support also, and there are a lot of barriers around building more climate resilience into people’s everyday lives. Just in terms of home upgrades – trust, finding providers that we know are going to do a good job, confusion around the types of upgrades that we might need to do and what is required, and then of course financial barriers we are seeing quite a lot, and we have developed initiatives to help households electrify as well, as an example of that.

Finally, the ask around a Victorian community climate adaptation fund – we are part of the Friends of the Earth call for that fund, asking for ongoing, permanent funding that would support community-led initiatives. In 2017 the state government delivered a program called the Virtual Centre for Climate Change Innovation, which enabled some really amazing collaborative programs to be developed on a localised level, and that one-off funding program saw 24 different projects happen across Victoria. That is just one example of what a permanent fund could lead to with ongoing support, essentially making sure that community has the funding and ability to be able to do deliver funding that is localised to the specific needs of their community, and we see across Geelong and the Barwon south-west – in the Geelong region the issues around resilience are very different in the CBD there versus issues, for example, in Apollo Bay, being more of a remote area that has far greater bushfire risk. I think that is probably a good summary of our submission. Thank you for the opportunity, and I am looking forward to the discussion.

The CHAIR: Thanks very much, Dan. I might start. You mentioned the poor-quality housing stock and homes that are 1- and 2-star. What are some of the consequences that individuals face if they are living housing stock that is a 2-star home?

Dan COWDELL: Essentially, you are unable to stay within a comfortable temperature. They are far greater to move below 18 degrees – the World Health Organization says anything below 18 is too cold. And then above 24, 25, 26 degrees – again, we know there are adverse health effects when we start to move beyond those temperatures. You are in a home that just cannot maintain a comfortable temperature, and also more often than not they are lacking any cooling or adequate air conditioning that is able to be used. You are often having to pump a lot of energy into the home to try and keep it comfortable, meaning your energy costs are a heck of a lot higher and that energy that is going into the home is just leaking out through all the draughts and insulation.

The CHAIR: So if you have got a 2-star home that you can actually get an air conditioner in, it is going to –

Dan COWDELL: It is still, like, a draughty, leaky home, so it will lose that energy very quickly.

The CHAIR: Which I presume means it is going to be costlier to run.

Dan COWDELL: Correct, yes.

The CHAIR: So were asking some of the poorest in the community to spend more of their low incomes.

Dan COWDELL: Yes.

The CHAIR: Really that is probably getting to the point of what the consequences are for those low-income people living in these sorts of low energy efficient homes. What do you see as being some of the biggest consequences for the people who are living in these places?

Dan COWDELL: Well, the adverse health effects that I touched on earlier – the sort of worst off, the most vulnerable in our community that are living with chronic health conditions, so respiratory conditions or other chronic conditions that really mean that they are unable to regulate their body temperature, are at huge risk, and they suffer the most. During the Climate Safe Rooms program pilot, where we piloted 16 home upgrades, we heard some really harrowing stories, to be honest. One example, a participant whose name is Deb had no air conditioning at all in her home. It was a home up on stumps with no underfloor installation and minimal ceiling insulation – a very draughty home – and her respiratory condition got so bad during summer she was admitted to hospital many, many times across the period of a summer. She had no air conditioning, so her way of staying cool was defrosting ice blocks in front of a fan that was blowing, because she was not able to afford an air conditioner. The work we did with the Climate Safe Rooms initiative providing an air conditioner and providing a solar system that could cover the costs of that just made the world of difference to her life – so, yes, one example of thousands.

The CHAIR: Climate Safe Rooms – talk to me a bit about that program: where it came from, how it is funded and what impact it has had.

Dan COWDELL: We have delivered a pilot that was funded through the VCCCI climate change innovation grant program, which I spoke about. We upgraded 16 homes, and the concept was to make a safe space in the home. Rather than retrofit the whole house we just retrofit the room that they are in most of the time, so it is normally a lounge room or the kitchen–dining area. We went in and upgraded insulation levels, we added draught seals – we fixed a draughty problem – and we put a very efficient split-system air conditioner in and a small solar system that would generate enough electricity to cover the running costs of the split-system air conditioner. So no matter what is going on in terms of climate extremes they have a safe space that they can go into, turn the air conditioner on and stay comfortable. We piloted that, and it was a collaborative project involving the City of Greater Geelong, the CSIRO and Uniting. The CSIRO was involved to monitor the outcomes in terms of temperature changes and changes in activities of daily living, as they are called – so how often people are getting up and moving around the home et cetera. In what was a relatively small pilot we were able to prove that there are significant benefits from doing this sort of work in terms of the health improvements – mental health as well as physical health, reduced admissions to hospital, reduced doctor's visits – energy savings and reductions in bills. So it was one of these programs that I think are really needed to address the most vulnerable.

The CHAIR: Before I hand off, what was the average cost of the upgrades?

Dan COWDELL: For the upgrades we spent around \$8000 per home in terms of capital works, so not a significant amount when you are talking about what sorts of renovations people do to their homes.

The CHAIR: Mr Ettershank.

David ETTERS HANK: Thank you, Chair. Thank you for coming along today. It is terrific. Both Climate Safe Rooms and the electric homes program look like just incredibly useful, practical solutions that you can deliver at the community level. Are they funded for ongoing operations?

Dan COWDELL: No. Being a not-for-profit organisation, we are largely funded by grants and philanthropic donations. Climate Safe Rooms was funded by a one-off grant from the state government. We are seeking further funding to continue to do this program. We have been lucky enough to receive some small philanthropic funds that mean we can do another 10 homes, and we currently have that underway, but beyond that there is no further funding for the program. For our electric homes program, again, we are having to find grants on an annual basis to try and keep those programs going. Probably one of my biggest challenges in our organisation is how to keep our initiatives underway.

David ETTERS HANK: Sure. That is very sad. In your submission you have endorsed the proposal from the Friends of the Earth for a Victorian community climate adaptation fund. I think maybe your last answer might have pre-empted this question in a way, but if the government were to step up and meet that demand

from Friends of the Earth and allies for a dedicated fund, what would your organisation be prioritising out of that fund?

Dan COWDELL: Thank you. Great question. We would absolutely be prioritising the work we do in climate resilience and supporting the households who can least afford it to have those upgrades, so initiatives like Climate Safe Rooms are really important for us to expand, and we want to see it on a state if not national level. I think there is absolutely a great call to do that, so that would be our priority. Second to that are initiatives like our electric homes program, where we are providing more support to the broader community to build more resilience. But I think the priority really needs to be for vulnerable, low-income households. In the Geelong region we have a couple of pockets of disadvantage, I would say, in the Corio, Norlane and Whittington areas, where we need some focused, targeted programs.

David ETTERS HANK: Okay. And in terms of that, I love the fact that that safe rooms project brings together both climate change and social justice.

Dan COWDELL: Yes, and health outcomes as well. That is correct.

David ETTERS HANK: Yes. You talked about the confounders or the constrainers in terms of things like trust – financial, obviously – and access to competent contractors and stuff like that. I think lots of us have travelled this journey and ended up with a slapping of the palm of the hand on the head or whatever. If that fund was provided by the state government for, for example, the safe rooms project, do you see that there would be major constraints in terms of Geelong Sustainability rolling that out? And how many people do you think it could affect if it was adequately funded?

Dan COWDELL: Excellent. For us, there is a barrier around overcoming distrust, as you mentioned. We have found that the way to overcome that is that we need to be approaching people via a trusted organisation. We know that to find new participants for a program like Climate Safe Rooms we need to work in close partnership with community service organisations such as the City of Greater Geelong's community care team and other not-for-profit service organisations that are going into homes day to day and have established relationships – for us to overcome that barrier. Certainly in our pilot program that was the main way we were able to bring participants into the program.

It is kind of a sad state of our society that when you knock on people's door and say, 'I want to do a program. We're going to be able to upgrade your home and spend \$10,000 on your home,' they do not believe you. They think it is a scam, so it is important to have that trusted pathway.

We have the ambition to do at least 1000 homes with Climate Safe Rooms in the Geelong region, and we need \$18 million to be able to do that work. That is a proposal we have submitted to the state government. We are in discussions with local members and the energy minister regarding that. But obviously the adaptation fund would be an easy mechanism whereby we could just apply for that.

Over the last few years we have seen a huge reduction in grants that support community work on climate change, renewable energy and sustainability in general. Although there are pockets of work going on in certain areas, like neighbourhood batteries and circular economy et cetera, in general we have seen a reduction, so it is getting harder as a community organisation to deliver the work that we are doing. So this climate adaptation fund, in an ongoing form, would absolutely support not just our work but the other community organisations across Geelong to prioritise resilience work.

David ETTERS HANK: Terrific. Thank you so much.

The CHAIR: Ms Lovell.

Wendy LOVELL: Thank you very much for your presentation; it was really interesting. The Climate Safe Rooms – you say that you are doing that for low-income households. Are they public housing households or private rentals? What are the criteria on that side?

Dan COWDELL: Yes, we have selection criteria. In our pilot program it was a requirement to have some sort of low income, be it a healthcare card or a pension. Also, we are targeting people with chronic health conditions, so we are making sure that that is part of the requirement at the moment. Just because we have such

little funding, we want to make sure that it goes to the people that need it the most. Besides that, we are open to provide that to owner-occupiers in a rental-landlord scenario. In our pilot we also did do a couple of DHHS properties, so we are open to all options. But in particular we want to support rental households, and we found that we did not get any rental households in our pilot, which was a disappointment to us and which just showed us that we need to do more work on engagement, because essentially they self-disqualified themselves, thinking they would not be eligible. And there is that disconnect between landlord and tenant, which makes getting those homes done a little bit more challenging.

Wendy LOVELL: Are you aware of Homes Victoria doing this themselves on their properties?

Dan COWDELL: I am not specifically across the work of Homes Victoria myself.

Wendy LOVELL: That is DHHS – or DFFH, whatever they call themselves. I was housing minister between 2010 and 2014, and we actually had this in place for people who had a medical condition. We would upgrade a portion of the house so that there was a cooler space for those people. I would be really disappointed if the current government has discontinued that program, because it was very, very valuable to people.

Dan COWDELL: If I can comment on that, I believe we had three, possibly four – in our trial – DHHS properties. They certainly did not have an adequate, efficient air conditioner, as such. There was work needed to be done in those homes, and insulation and draught proofing was a big focus on those properties. But I am happy to provide further detail on that, if you would like that.

Wendy LOVELL: It would be interesting if you could find out if the department are doing it or not. The electric homes program – what were the barriers to that? We are hearing a lot about the cost of upgrading switchboards et cetera for people to go to fully electric homes. I am just wondering if you came across those sorts of barriers.

Dan COWDELL: It does come up. What I would say is in our electric homes program we are largely seeing households that can afford the upgrade costs and cover that themselves going through our program, so it is not reaching the lower income homes.

Wendy LOVELL: Do you have an average cost?

Dan COWDELL: It really depends on what people do. Some people are coming through the program and just doing one upgrade, so maybe they are just putting solar on or just upgrading their hot water to a heat pump.

Wendy LOVELL: They are not going fully electric.

Dan COWDELL: Not necessarily at all at once. Our encouragement to the community is just to start. Get one thing, and one will lead to the next and to the next. But we do have some homes that will go and do the whole raft of upgrades to completely get off gas. Initially we found the barrier is, again, the trust barrier, and that is just I think not knowing which installers will do a quality job. So the way we run these programs is we bring a panel of providers that we have done our due diligence on to the community. We overcome that trust barrier in that way. The other thing is just huge confusion on what technology: ‘Should I get a heat pump? Should I get a solar hot water service? What size solar system do I need? Is induction the way to go?’ There is all of this confusion around what they actually need. We have designed a program to provide education that addresses some of the common concerns and questions that come up, and I think it has been quite successful because of that. We do still have some homes, unfortunately, where we come across a challenge around the switchboard, or the main supplier to the property may not be adequate to fully electrify. I do not have firm numbers on that, but my sense is that somewhere around 10 per cent of people that come along to the program events end up at least needing some sort of an upgrade to their switchboard. There are others that then need quite a cost-prohibitive mains upgrade to the property, which is very difficult to do. But for the most part, at least in the Geelong region – it may be different for other more regional areas – the switchboard and the single-phase main supply of 40 amps or 63 amps, which is pretty common in most homes, is enough to electrify their homes.

The CHAIR: Thank you. Dr Mansfield.

Sarah MANSFIELD: Thank you. Thank you for appearing today. I think I am one of the only ones on the panel who is probably very familiar with the work of Geelong Sustainability and the Climate Safe Rooms program. I guess I want to focus a bit more on some of this work around electrification of homes. It is great that Geelong Sustainability has come in and filled that information gap and support gap for people. You mentioned in your opening statements that there is confusion for people around energy efficiency standards – what to do, what is available. I am wondering if you can expand on what that means in practice for people. You said people come to you with a lot of those questions. What are the barriers to people being able to just electrify their homes more easily?

Dan COWDELL: I think people are engaging in our program in all different stages. Some come in with a clear understanding that they want to upgrade this item, and that is great – go ahead. There are others that are right at the start of the journey and they have not done any work understanding what is required, so we have added the option to actually have a home assessor come to their home and do an energy audit. So you get an expert walk through your home and make an action plan for you, which is great in giving specific advice. In our information sessions we try and give general advice, and we get people probably 80 per cent of the way there of the steps and stages that you might like to go through. We also have recorded a range of webinars and made them available. We have found the education pieces really key, but people are engaging in it from all different stages and knowledge bases. I am an electrical engineer and I still get confused about it, so it is a very complex, challenging space. But I think that what we have found is that a lot of people just do not know the first thing, and often it is just getting started, and once you do one thing, your journey has started and you will progress from the next to the next as your budget allows, as government rebates come about et cetera.

The challenge is it is a really technical space. A lot of the suppliers and companies doing this sort of work like to talk in technical terms as well, and we have got to boil it down to the really simple things that everyone can engage with. That is why we have tried to simplify the language and the way we talk about the types of upgrades in the program. I do not know if that answered your question or not.

Sarah MANSFIELD: Yes. I guess where I am going with it is: what more could be done at the state government level to make some of these processes easier for people? I guess there is the education part, but there is also just: what does all this mean? How do you go about it? I think for a lot of people it is up to them to initiate this idea of, 'I think I want to make my home all electric.' What could be done to help the shift to all electric across the state for more people, and what role could the state government play to make that easier?

Dan COWDELL: I definitely think an increase in education and support, and perhaps the SEC may be able to move into that space in a bigger way, but we will see where that goes. I actually think it might come back to regulation and setting better standards in the first place – so the fact that our homes have been allowed to be built in this way. It is coming back to: are there ways we can increase the minimum standard and continue ratcheting star ratings up in homes? I am really supportive of the no new gas connections policy, but I think in terms of rental as well, making sure the rental standards for energy efficiency include getting off gas, and then over time they could progressively include solar and battery storage, so there is that resilient piece of being able to continue to supply your home with battery storage if the power goes out in an emergency. So I think there is a raft of work, but as I said in the opening statement as well, each community is different. To me it does come back to funding community organisations that are on the ground and kind of have their finger on the pulse as to what their specific community needs so they can deliver initiatives that will create that impact for the local community.

John BERGER: Thank you, Chair. And thank you, Dan, for your appearance this morning. I am interested to hear a bit more about the climate-safe rooms. You mentioned the efficient split systems that have been put in place with some solar applications. Have you gone the next step and had a look at battery storage in terms of being able to continue on that safe room not only during the day but at night-time as well?

Dan COWDELL: I would have loved to do that in our pilot program, but funding constraints meant that the battery just was not possible to fit in the works of what we did. We spent, as I said, about \$8000 per home, and about half of that was the solar system upgrade. But what I have found about the way most of the households use the home is they are home during the day. When they are having those heat wave periods – a couple of 30, 40 degree days in a row – often they are able to switch the air conditioner on while the sun is shining and make direct use of the solar, which is excellent, but then of course when it goes into evening and night-time they are having to pull that energy from the grid to continue powering that. Although the solar has already saved them

lot of money during the daytime, it is not giving them the saving through the night, and it definitely does not give them any power backup if there is a blackout. That would be a huge step to add resilience to our program. At this point we have not included it in the works of the program, just because we are already constrained around funds with what we can and cannot do, and some of the battery upgrades, the costs of doing that are at least the same amount as the solar system again, if not more, and there are no government rebates available on those batteries at the moment to help bring that cost down.

John BERGER: Thanks.

Dan COWDELL: Thank you.

The CHAIR: Ms Broad.

Gaelle BROAD: Thank you very much for your contribution and being here today. I am just interested – I guess Geelong is a very rapidly growing area. It is still classified as regional, but the state government had a significant cut to the Growing Suburbs Fund of 90 per cent over two years, which has an impact on local infrastructure and what can be developed. Can you just talk to what it is like being in an area that is developing at the rate it is? I know there are not many trees in the area in some of the suburbs that I see. But yes, speak to some of those challenges.

Dan COWDELL: Yes, certainly. We have got slated in Geelong a huge growth corridor heading out towards Ballarat, and it is expected to be the size of the population of Ballarat as well, in my understanding, so we are continuing to grow. I lived in one of the new growth suburbs for a number of years, Armstrong Creek, and we moved in before the houses were built, before the infrastructure was built. There were no community facilities, there was no supermarket, any of that work, so when I think of climate resilience and emergencies that could happen due to bushfire or heatwaves, power blackouts et cetera, the infrastructure is just not there to support the vulnerable households. There is just literally in those new growth areas not a place of refuge where you can go if the power went out to stay cool even if your health depended on it, so that is a concern. Some of the suburbs – you are absolutely right about the tree canopy and growth all over the city and the developers. I believe the City of Greater Geelong have got an urban greening strategy, and they are working to improve that, but certainly some of the suburbs around Corio and Norlane have very little shade, and so the heat island effect can happen there as well. The thermal mass of all the concrete that we have heats up over time, and then that just radiates and creates a really – it is like living in an oven, essentially, during those hot days. So yes, I imagine it is an ongoing challenge, but again perhaps it is an area of policy and law that the inquiry can look into as just to what can be done to support local government to improve the infrastructure and planning so that they can really move forward to provide the facilities and infrastructure and services needed to help with climate resilience for our community.

Gaelle BROAD: I am just interested too – you talked a bit about the climate-safe rooms. I think you said it is about \$18,000 a room or something to upgrade?

Dan COWDELL: It is \$8000 per room in terms of the capital works, and then on top of that you have to coordinate the retrofits and so on, yes.

Gaelle BROAD: Okay. I guess it was needing \$18 million you mentioned for a thousand homes. In regional Victoria, where I represent, there are a lot of older homes. A lot of landlords are finding it difficult to upgrade homes to the new standards, which do impose a number of requirements. Can you talk to what the most affordable ways are to improve a home? I guess we want to ensure that there are enough homes for people to rent, but yes, it is getting that balance right.

Dan COWDELL: Yes, definitely. In terms of energy efficiency upgrades that are going to improve the thermal comfort of the home – that is essentially what we are trying to do, make sure we are comfortable in heat waves – the most low cost way of doing it is always draft proofing and insulation. It seems really simple and it might be back to basics, but draft proofing in terms of putting in some door seals and window seals, sealing up gaps and cracks and putting draft covers on top of exhaust fans – very simple retrofitting – can be done by relatively unskilled trades. That is very cost-efficient to do. You can put a draft seal on a door for about a hundred dollars, and that is a good-quality one that will last a long time. The next thing we normally do in our hierarchy of retrofitting is insulation. It just provides that buffer, slowing the heat gain or heat loss. You can normally upgrade the ceiling insulation by putting an extra layer over the top of what is already there. There is

not necessarily a need to remove what is in place unless it is quite badly laid or badly damaged. And then there is adding insulation under the floor if there is not any and under the floor is accessible. That is always the place to start, and I feel like that is probably an area of funding and a government program that has been given the least attention since the failed federal government program that no-one really wants to go and touch since then.

Melina BATH: You mean pink batts.

Dan COWDELL: Yes. I was not going to say it, but yes, pink batts. Certainly there is a whole industry around retrofitting. We need to retrofit our homes at a tremendous scale to improve comfort and resilience and reduce cost, but I think people are looking for an incentive to do it and certainly low-income households need support to do it.

The CHAIR: Ms Bath.

Melina BATH: Thank you. Thanks, Chair. Thank you very much for your care of humanity and the work you are doing there.

Dan COWDELL: Thank you.

Melina BATH: Let us have our broader hat on. This is Geelong Sustainability, and you are looking for a thousand homes at \$18 million. Can you explain to the committee how it could be rolled out across other regions? For example, eastern Victoria, northern et cetera. What would government need to know and what would need to be set up there as well in addition to the funding? Then my second question on that one is about how you target and get the right candidates, as in the right homes and the right people. I just mean: how do they come forward and know about it?

Dan COWDELL: Yes, excellent questions. I absolutely think it can be scaled and should be scaled across the state, if not across the nation. We are working now on the next delivery of 10 homes to set up the processes and procedures and systems so we can deliver it as efficiently as possible with the least amount of coordination resources needed so we can try and stretch whenever funding is received as far as possible and support more people. I think there are a number of considerations. There are other organisations in other communities like Geelong Sustainability that would be excellent candidates to upskill and lead this type of work. But the other area of consideration is: are there the trades and the skill sets needed, particularly in the more regional areas, to be able to deliver this at a scale? That is a question more broadly around that industry of retrofitting homes.

Melina BATH: Workforce.

Dan COWDELL: The workforce to do it. Being a sustainability group, we want to see local jobs for this sort of work and would not want to see a program that is happening in regional areas where the jobs are going outside –

Melina BATH: Being outsourced from Melbourne et cetera.

Dan COWDELL: Correct. So I think that jobs pathway is really important. The need to support community members I have seen across a number of communities. We have also done similar programs in Camperdown and a couple of small townships, Lismore and Derrinallum – I think I said that wrong – and we found similar need. So there are certainly needy people wherever we go. It is just a matter of how we adequately fund this work, the capital upgrade works, and how is it delivered effectively.

Melina BATH: Yes. Sorry, keep going.

Dan COWDELL: I was going to answer your question about –

Melina BATH: Candidates or homes.

Dan COWDELL: Candidates. Our recruitment methodology has been to work with the community care departments of the local councils and their carers. It does not necessarily have to be councils – it could be other community service organisations that are providing home care packages or Commonwealth home care, ageing-in-place services. We briefed their community care workers on exactly what we were looking for in terms of participants who were qualified for the work, and they were able to directly find the participants that they knew

of in the cohort of households that they were servicing that would benefit the most from it. For us it was that easy process of having that partnership to bring forward those candidates, and I think without that they would not have heard about the program. So it does need that connection, yes. I would say on a national or state level, obviously, you would have to have some very clear, rigorous criteria.

Melina BATH: Thank you. Following up, Ms Lovell just spoke about how, in her time, there was a government department which was doing this work. I feel like you are forensic in your analysis and needing to carry this out to the maximum value to the home. Do you see that there could still be a partnership with government, or if government takes over is there just a lot of waste and bureaucracy et cetera? Do you think there is a vulnerability or, no, a benefit in local small organisations having that task?

Dan COWDELL: Well, I guess we are doing it because no-one else is at the moment.

Melina BATH: There is a need there and you are filling that need.

Dan COWDELL: There is a need that we are trying to fill, and that is the approach that we have taken with a number of our strategic initiatives. It is trying not to overlap on the work that is already underway. So I would be really pleased if a government department took on that work and had a focus on that work. There is no shortage of causes and work and issues that we need to work on in our community. I do think that, like always, there is the question of efficiency of delivery, and being a smaller organisation, we are quite nimble and able to deliver programs quite effectively for the funding we receive.

Melina BATH: And do you have to report back on accounting for your funding, for transparency?

Dan COWDELL: Yes. Any of our government-funded programs are always audited as part of the acquittal, and our annual reports and financial reports are made publicly available on our website.

Melina BATH: Value for money.

Dan COWDELL: Yes, absolutely. I would love to see more community organisations like us doing the same work, and I know there is the ambition to do so. It really is just around the funding and capacity needed to make it happen.

The CHAIR: Dan, thanks so much for coming in today. We really appreciate the evidence you have given. You will be provided a copy of a transcript to review in the coming week.

With that the committee will take a short break.

Witness withdrew.