T R A N S C R I P T

LEGISLATIVE COUNCIL ENVIRONMENT AND PLANNING COMMITTEE

Inquiry into Climate Resilience

Macedon – Tuesday 3 December 2024

MEMBERS

Ryan Batchelor – Chair
David Ettershank – Deputy Chair
Melina Bath
Gaelle Broad
Jacinta Ermacora
Wendy Lovell
Sarah Mansfield
Rikkie-Lee Tyrrell
Sheena Watt

PARTICIPATING MEMBERS

John Berger
Ann-Marie Hermans
Evan Mulholland
Rachel Payne
Aiv Puglielli
Richard Welch

WITNESSES

Natalie Egleton, Chief Executive Officer, and

Sarah Matthee, Lead, Climate Solutions, Foundation for Rural and Regional Renewal.

The CHAIR: Welcome back to the Legislative Council Environment and Planning Committee's hearings into the resilience of the built environment to climate change here in Victoria. Welcome to representatives from the Foundation for Rural and Regional Renewal.

All the evidence that we take is protected by parliamentary privilege as provided by the *Constitution Act 1975* and the Legislative Council standing orders, so the information you provide during this hearing is protected by law. You are protected against any action for what you say during the hearing, but if you go elsewhere and repeat those same things, those comments may not be protected by this privilege. Any deliberately false evidence or misleading of the committee may be considered a contempt of the Parliament.

All evidence is being recorded, and you will be provided with a copy, a proof version of the transcript, to review following the hearings, and we will publish the transcripts on our website.

My name is Ryan Batchelor. I am the Chair of the Environment and Planning Committee and a Member for the Southern Metropolitan Region. Welcome. I will let committee members introduce themselves.

David ETTERSHANK: Thank you, Chair. David Ettershank, Western Metropolitan Region.

Sarah MANSFIELD: Sarah Mansfield, Western Victoria Region.

Wendy LOVELL: Wendy Lovell, Northern Victoria Region.

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

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

Rikkie-Lee TYRRELL: Rikkie-Lee Tyrrell, Member for the Northern Victoria Region.

John BERGER: John Berger, Member for Southern Metro,

Jacinta ERMACORA: Jacinta Ermacora, Member for Western Victoria Region.

The CHAIR: If you are able to both state your name and the organisation you are appearing on behalf of for the purposes of Hansard, then I will then invite you to make an opening statement.

Natalie EGLETON: Excellent. My name is Natalie Egleton from the Foundation for Rural and Regional Renewal.

Sarah MATTHEE: And Sarah Matthee, Foundation for Rural and Regional Renewal.

The CHAIR: Over to you.

Natalie EGLETON: Thanks a lot for having us. It is an area, as we will discuss, that is pretty alive in our world. For those of you that do not know about FRRR, we are a national philanthropic foundation that was established in 2000 through a partnership between the Australian government, philanthropy and business. The intention of FRRR is to essentially act as a backbone for giving to regional Australia.

Since it was established in 2000 and through hundreds and hundreds of partnerships, we have distributed just over $200 million to about 15,000, 16,000 initiatives and counting. Demand has been growing. We have developed a fairly significant level of reach and insight throughout what is now almost 25 years of giving into regional Australia. Natural disasters have been a pretty big part of that, as many of you would know, and a climate resilience lens to that is becoming increasingly important.

As far as Victoria goes, in the last financial year we made 364 grants to not-for-profit organisations, totalling $9.1 million, out of a national pool of about $25 million, so a fairly significant portion is going into Victoria. At least 50 per cent of that is in a disaster resilience and climate solutions perspective, I suppose.

Sarah Matthee leads the Climate Solutions portfolio and has been with FRRR for over six years now, leading significant parts of our work, including the bushfire response in 2019. She will add to what I say throughout this discussion.

FRRR deal with about 2000 applications a year. Whilst we distribute something like 1000, we receive about 2000, so that also gives us a level of insight into what local communities, typically quite small communities in regional, remote, and rural areas, are asking for and the types of things they are interested in supporting.

A lot of people talk about FRRR as loving halls and loos. We fund a lot of community infrastructure, and it tends to be what we are well known for. We spend a lot of our time trying to explain why that matters and why that is important.

Melina BATH: Could you say that one again? What was it?

Natalie EGLETON: Halls and loos.

Melina BATH: Lovely. Thank you. Most needed.

Natalie EGLETON: Most needed – so as you will be well aware, particularly those that cover regional areas, community infrastructure is far more than just a building. They are enabling places that enable people to come together to invest in their own social capital, their resilience, and to be safe in times of crisis. Often in smaller and more remote places there are limited services or few services, and community facilities in particular play a critical role in enabling those services to be provided, whether that is through digital telehealth, whether it is through visiting services or whether it is through training and events. So they are far more than just places for holding parties or community events. And of course, when times do get tough and natural disasters occur or drought really hits in regional towns, those facilities really become the critical place that most things are leveraged from.

Part of our argument and I guess our case to this inquiry is about really thinking about the way we can invest in community infrastructure through a climate resilience lens. Much of the community infrastructure in small rural towns, as you would be well aware, is cared for by local community committees who are volunteers who are often charged by local councils – if it is not owned by the local community, it will often be a council asset that has been delegated to the community to care for and to maintain the upkeep of. Most of these facilities are aged. Many of them were postwar builds. They are not fit for the climate that we are facing into now. We receive significant requests for solar panels for energy independence and security, water security, upgrades of kitchen facilities –

Melina BATH: Toilet facilities.

Natalie EGLETON: lots of toilet facilities, disability access – inclusive access is incredibly important – and also climate control, the hotter and the colder extremes. When we think about ageing populations, we have people who are increasingly vulnerable to heat stress as well as other extreme weather events, so having places where they can both participate in activities but also go to during times of crisis that are fit for purpose is really important.

Many, many communities in rural areas are just struggling to keep up, and many, as we know, are being affected by disasters and by other climate-related shocks, whether it is even a severe storm or whether it is even the heatwave which I think we are looking into as we go into our summer season. The extremity of the heat that we are experiencing is pretty – probably unprecedented is not quite the right word, but it is going to place enormous stress and enormous strain on these places.

We are interested in the perspective of making community infrastructure safer and more climate resilient but also appreciating that they are just buildings and that we need to invest in the social resilience alongside the physical built infrastructure, because it is people who make those places run and it is people in places, and particularly rural and remote areas, that need those places to serve them. And we need the leadership to be

strong within communities. We need their social capital to be strong so that they can activate facilities and really mobilise their communities using the assets within their places, and that really requires side-by-side investment. Often initiatives that we fund will include things like co-designing around the future of community facilities, and that might even be things like investing in the op shop in Rochester, which we funded recently. That might just seem like a shop, but it is actually far more than a shop, and it really provides a huge, really special place, as you would know.

So it is thinking a bit more broadly about what assets and what community facilities actually encompass – it is not just the hall, it is not just the loos, it is actually a lot of different places. And when we put community and community leadership and social capital within communities at the centre of designing for infrastructure, we start to see different types of facilities being used for different purposes, and it broadens the perspective about what to invest in and how and where communities actually go and how they use built infrastructure. But it also means that we are investing in capability and self-generation within regions, which is fundamentally needed, because we cannot all be everywhere all the time and government certainly cannot be everywhere all the time. And we really see more innovation evolve in terms of how local places can be strengthened and how the built environment can serve a different future for our regions. We can share lots of different examples about how communities are doing that, but that is kind of what I mean by the investment in the social capital and the built environment – investing in the social capital and social resilience so it will actually lead to better design and better use and better amenity, as well, of the built environment. I think they are probably the key points that I would make.

The other part, as many of you would know, is most of the funding FRRR provides is not large; $25,000, $30,000 tends to be about the average. Sometimes the projects are much bigger if we are thinking about a whole build of something, but often the community can get so far and just need a bit more to match or to leverage. Much of the work that happens, particularly around community assets, is volunteer driven, and a huge amount happens through volunteer labour. The extra funding is often for the parts that they just cannot do themselves. I think it is important for that volunteer labour to be recognised and for the pathways for particularly small communities to be made available to them in ways that are feasible. They are kind of bite-sized chunks that they can take on and manage. Many of them cannot take on a half-a-million-dollar grant and manage a huge project with huge amounts of compliance, but they can do five $20,000 grants over a few years – bite-sized chunks that they can really take carriage of and at the same time have a lot of agency over making their places safer, knowing that they are more resilient. The size of the funding I think is helpful to have a perspective of, particularly in government terms and thinking about the types of grant programs that might be available to them.

Finally, just thinking about risk and protection of communities, the government has got a really unique opportunity to think in a cross-portfolio way. When we work with communities who are affected by drought, who are affected by flood, who are affected by fire and who are dealing with energy transition projects, that is the same experience for communities, and I believe you would know that. But when they experience multiple policies and multiple funding systems and multiple funding programs –

Wendy LOVELL: Government silos.

Natalie EGLETON: It is experienced as a silo, but it is essentially the same work for communities. It is the same purpose. It will have the same kinds of outcomes, obviously with different ramps in terms of whether it is really tilting into energy or whether it is tilting into fire. But essentially investing in the built environment is one that has such a cross-cutting potential, and it can actually, from a policy-setting perspective, do that work of reducing silos. We would really encourage some further exploration of what that could look like and the way that government can actually work a bit differently for communities and with communities.

The CHAIR: Beautiful. All right, I might kick us off. You are obviously, as you said, involved in building a lot of halls and loos, so you have got a lot of experience in community infrastructure. We know that particularly in times where the resilience of communities is tested through disasters, they are becoming more frequent – and we heard evidence today that the local community around here was dealing with fires and floods on the same day – and more intense. How important is this sort of community infrastructure that you do a lot of work on for communities' ability to withstand those pressures? And how does that community infrastructure need to be adaptable to the changing circumstances that are facing it? What are some of the lessons that you might have

for us in making recommendations as to how that type of community infrastructure can be better used in the future?

Natalie EGLETON: The short answer is: incredibly important, essential. It is vital. We are here time and time again, and Sarah has brought along a report that we have just published following the Black Summer bushfires, which we can share with you. For smaller rural communities, usually that community asset is the only place for them to gather. It serves many purposes through the year, but when something happens it is the only place for the relief efforts to be coordinated from, for people to shelter, for all of the support and even beyond that in terms of the longer-term recovery. From that purely technical-response perspective, it is absolutely vital. It really serves a lot of purposes beyond that as well, in terms of being able to accommodate all of the volunteer emergency services.

We provide a lot of funding for kitting out of crockery, tables and chairs. For a lot of communities, after a fire they will come to us and say, 'We had no idea what we needed until we needed it. We needed three times the number of chairs, we needed them to be stackable, we needed tables that we can fold up and fold out.' We need lots of dishwashers, because they have realised that all of the families were washing dishes for all of the emergency services personnel when they needed to be looking after themselves and their families. That kind of knowing what you do not know is really critical, and I think we can probably do some work to prepare communities better and to have a bit of an inventory of 'This is kind of what you need. This is what your facility is going to need if something happens and you suddenly have hundreds of people, sometimes thousands of people, gathering in this place'. I think the importance of it cannot be overestimated.

To my earlier comments about the standards of a lot of these buildings, they are barely up to code. If you think about what they are made from, they are often timber, or certainly not the straw bales that we just heard about. That might be a new area to explore. They often are very draughty. They are not safe for people to be evacuating in a lot of the time. Single-glazed windows, poor insulation – a lot of them are made from materials that we just would not use anymore, like asbestos. There are often issues with asbestos containment after disasters, and you cannot have people in a place that has got exposed asbestos. The issues just come in waves.

Water security and energy supply is the other one. If we are looking at how to improve these places, there are some fundamental things about enabling them to be standalone operations, so not relying on grid, not relying on mains water supply et cetera and having backup pumps. We fund a lot of pumps for water supply to be maintained during emergencies. It is just thinking about all of those core requirements of buildings around insulation, glazing, external cladding materials, landscaping around them and having independent energy and water supply – they would be things that would place every community in a far better place.

The CHAIR: Sure. Thanks very much. Mr Ettershank.

David ETTERSHANK: Thank you, Chair. Thank you for a really interesting submission and for coming in today. A lot of what you have raised in your submission seems eminently sensible and readily understandable. There is a reference I just wondered if you could elaborate on for us. Towards the end you talk about how FRRR suggested:

> … that the Victorian Government considers in more depth:
>
> - the inter-relationship between nature-based solutions and nature-based mitigation with social and built infrastructure resilience …

Can you just explain to me what that means?

Natalie EGLETON: Nature-based solutions are a logical concept but probably not mainstream, or have not been terribly mainstream as far as thinking about disaster mitigation goes. We typically do a levee or we typically build something in hard infrastructure to mitigate. Nature-based solutions suggest that we can use nature and that we can learn from nature to mitigate, so it is thinking about ways the water flows, thinking about plant species, thinking about whether it is fire-retardant planting et cetera. It is really working with nature rather than trying to fight nature, and thinking about even building supplies, as we were hearing earlier, and using nature in a way that we can tap into the natural assets that are protective within nature. And that cannot be done alone obviously; it needs to be done in conjunction with building and planning design and thinking carefully about location and placement of infrastructure et cetera. Those intersections present a really strong opportunity particularly thinking about, from our perspective, those community assets. And particularly in more

rural and remote locations, often they might be surrounded by risk. So if we cannot remove that risk and if we cannot build a levee and if we cannot build essentially all of the protective factors in with infrastructure, what can we do through an environmental lens and what could we do to consider the landscape differently and consider how it can be used to an advantage? And that will be different in every place, so I cannot tell you exactly what they might be.

Sarah MATTHEE: If I can give you one example, we made a grant in Tasmania a few years ago to Dolphin Sands, where the community had been through a fire and wanted to replant their area with more fire-retardant materials in terms of planting and vegetation. A few years later a fire then went through and they saw a dramatic difference in the fire spread, and that was just one community group undertaking a range of volunteer hours and activities from that perspective. I think we have also seen – and you will have all seen – examples of First Nations approaches to cool burning and so on as well, just to augment those examples.

David ETTERSHANK: Terrific. Thank you. Thank you, Chair.

The CHAIR: Ms Lovell.

Wendy LOVELL: Thank you. And thank you for everything you do in regional Victoria. FRRR is often the go-to place for grants for many of our communities. I am just wondering, when you have your grant rounds, do you specifically target areas after a disaster for offering grants that are to upgrade infrastructure and things and for the additional incidentals you mentioned, like chairs and tables et cetera? Is there some sort of program that you have for doing that?

Natalie EGLETON: We do, yes. We run lots of different grant programs, but the staple is our small grants program, which is always open. Communities can apply to that quarterly. It has a stream called Prepare and Recover, and that is specifically to support communities to prepare and recover.

Wendy LOVELL: Right. You touched on the infrastructure and the way that it brings communities together, and we just heard from the Barmah community prior to lunch. Their big ask is a levee, but their second-biggest ask is a community gathering place. They have nowhere to gather. They have the meeting room in their CFA, which would hold maybe 20 people maximum. I can remember one flood meeting in 2017 in a pub, where everyone was like this, but there is no real community infrastructure there. Again it is a community that has very hot temperatures, so a cool space in the summer for older residents would be good. So if you ever get an application from Barmah for a community meeting hall, please support it.

Natalie EGLETON: Okay. Send them our way; happy to have a chat with them.

The CHAIR: You are lobbying for them, Ms Lovell.

Wendy LOVELL: Yes.

Melina BATH: That is excellent lobbying. Well done.

Natalie EGLETON: And that is a very good example, because there are communities that do not have appropriate meeting places, and having shelter from heat is actually, as I said earlier, becoming a real issue. Having air conditioning running in your house, particularly if you are on a farm and you might have blackouts et cetera, is a real issue as far as some of those older farmhouses that also are not well insulated and might have been built post war et cetera. It gets really hot in them, and ambulances are not going to get out there if somebody has an issue with heat stroke.

Wendy LOVELL: Do FRRR do anything towards the mental health of the region? Could you just talk a little bit about that?

Natalie EGLETON: We have one targeted program called In a Good Place. It is a grant program. It runs nationally. It also has a farmer stream, so it has one stream that is funded by a collection of different foundations that are particularly interested in agricultural communities. Those grants are running twice a year. We have got a round opening in February. They are up to $20,000. It is one of our most oversubscribed programs, which is quite unsurprising. We are offering I think $300,000 a round. It is not a huge amount.

For the scale of the issue, it is actually quite difficult to raise funds. I think the slightly different point of that program is that it is focused on early intervention and is focused on non-clinical approaches. We all know regional communities. It does not really go down well if you sit down and try to talk about mental health, but if you put on a barbecue, have some information available and have someone speaking about things that they have experienced, people will turn up and open up a little bit more. So it is that kind of thing that we fund, or it might be mental health first aid for the local Rotary club, the men's shed and helping out local community groups to be better equipped and that kind of thing. That tends to be a point of difference, but I would say a lot of the money goes to the pointy end of the spectrum instead. It is quite difficult to get money into that preventative space, even though there is plenty of evidence that it is more effective in regional areas.

Wendy LOVELL: Yes, absolutely.

Natalie EGLETON: But yes, that program is open. We would welcome conversations. Whilst that one is targeted, most of our grant programs can support mental health and wellbeing initiatives, so it does not really matter. We say at FRRR there is no wrong door, so a community can come to us with their idea, and we will figure out where they are best placed funding-wise.

Wendy LOVELL: Thank you.

The CHAIR: Ms Ermacora.

Jacinta ERMACORA: Excuse me – post chest infection. Thank you very much. I am from a very tiny small town, so I understand exactly what you are aiming to do. I think it is great having philanthropic organisations that fill the gaps where some communities are not able to access government funding or need catalyst money. Do you find that sometimes your approval for something becomes a catalyst for further funding?

Natalie EGLETON: Yes, that is quite a big part of the story. Sometimes we are the part that finishes it and sometimes we are the part that starts it, increasingly so. This is not a Victorian example but a pretty significant success story after the Black Summer bushfires – in Narooma, so not far up the coast in New South Wales, we supported a very small development association to do a feasibility study for a mountain bike track as part of the economic recovery and the social recovery. Our $25,000 unlocked $4.5 million dollars in funding for that community.

Jacinta ERMACORA: Wow!

Natalie EGLETON: Yes. They said that because it enabled some of that feasibility work, without that they would not have been able to leverage the other funding, which was a collection of government grants and corporate funding.

Sarah MATTHEE: And even the Rochester op shop example that Natalie spoke to before – that is a $25,000 grant for planning and design so that they then have the plans and the information they need to frame up what the opportunity might be that then makes it more suitable for a government grant or a larger grant elsewhere.

Jacinta ERMACORA: You are heading into my other question in a way too – do you find that sometimes your role is to assist with helping communities get organised around a need as well? I think you might have mentioned that earlier, but I might not have heard it.

Natalie EGLETON: Yes, it is a good way of framing it. Yes, sometimes that might be us funding the actual coordination work, the planning work. It might be workshops, it might be bringing in some facilitation support or it might be bringing in some experts to help them think through their options. Part of the Rochester grant includes some input from the Resilient Building Council to look at how to set up that new build through a resilience lens and thinking about that building having a lot of resilience kind of dividends in it. A lot of other work that we do, particularly around our not-for-profit capacity-building initiatives, is really strengthening the capability and capacity of local not-for-profit organisations, which is enabling them to do their work better. We have a place-based program called Investing in Rural Community Futures, which has just been delivered in eight New South Wales communities and we are about to launch into three Victorian communities. That will run for five years with a combination of funding, facilitation support and targeted capability development,

whether that is around governance, strategy planning, risk management et cetera, as well as embedded evaluation. That initiative in New South Wales has been a really huge catalyst for those communities, and many of those were affected by disasters both during and after that funding, and those that had been supported to get organised, using your words. Essentially part of that program is a road-mapping process where the local not-for-profits collectively identify and agree on their priorities as a sector that are going to strengthen their work for their communities. Those that had gone through that process were far more ready when those fires happened and were able to leverage significant investment for their priorities rather than having that done to them. The funding of getting organised is really important, and it is a space that philanthropy is fairly well and uniquely placed to support.

Jacinta ERMACORA: Would you say that place-based community strengthening is a key element in climate change resilience?

Natalie EGLETON: I think it has to be. I think it really has to be, because whilst the data tells us about the risk and we know that there are different profiles in different regions, that tells us we need bespoke solutions and bespoke adaptation measures for different regions. I think the challenge is getting more granular. We tend to be able to work at a fairly regional level, but getting closer to a place-based approach is really challenging, and that is where I think philanthropy is well placed – because we can kind of work in the spaces that are a bit harder to reach, and we can complement and really I think augment the work that local governments are doing and that others at that regional level are doing. I have a bit of a fear that 'place-based' is becoming a bit of the new buzzword, so we need to be mindful of what we mean and kind of agree. I think communities are getting a little bit worried about all these place-based approaches. But really when it is done well it is about a community within a defined footprint, that it agrees is its footprint, deciding and really designing solutions that are right for their context and having I guess the systems around them being able to support that. I think the other part about place-based can be that it should all be determined by local community. I would say that is true, but also there is expertise that needs to be brought in to support their thinking and their understanding of their risks and the opportunities.

The CHAIR: Thank you.

Jacinta ERMACORA: I hope it is not used willy-nilly as a buzzword, because that phrase has been around for probably a couple of decades, but I hope it comes back as being more focused on as a great tool.

Natalie EGLETON: Agree – and it is really community development 101. It is just good practice, as long as it is done in the right way.

The CHAIR: Mrs Tyrrell.

Rikkie-Lee TYRRELL: Thank you. Earlier on – I hope I wrote this down right, because you were saying a lot really fast – you said social resilience needs improvement in regard to climate resilience. Do you remember saying that?

Natalie EGLETON: I am sorry for speaking so quickly.

Rikkie-Lee TYRRELL: That is okay.

Natalie EGLETON: I think my point would have been that we need both social resilience and built infrastructure resilience.

Rikkie-Lee TYRRELL: Yes. So in regard to the social resilience, how can the state government assist with that?

Natalie EGLETON: Partner with FRRR? That is probably, to be honest, one of the most effective ways. Look, funding into community leadership is always a really strong starting place, supporting the anchor organisations, the neighbourhood centres, progress associations – you know, really thinking about those in and of community led organisations, because, whilst they might not form the social capital and social resilience, they are enablers of it and tend to be the places where that is held and where that is catalysed.

I think grant programs are a really good thing for community groups, because the process in itself of applying for a grant can actually develop capacity. In our grant programs we pay attention to who is involved and who is

not involved in a project; we make it really clear that we want to see cooperation, coordination, collaboration – whichever part of that spectrum make sense for the community at the time and for the project – and that partnerships are a key part of that. And just requiring and requesting that process actually strengthens social capital and social resilience, because it requires lots of different conversations, it requires leveraging of networks and it requires thinking creatively about how to address something when you might have five different ideas around the table. So grant programs can be really good as long as they are not too onerous and as long as they are fit for purpose for communities and if they are targeted towards those sorts of things that strengthen networks, strengthen leadership development, strengthen local community organisations and volunteer-run effort – and there are probably a few others that you could add to that – and actually invest in community infrastructure. The small towns fund – it is probably not the right name – the Tiny Towns program is a really good program. That really does have all of those parameters around it. But I guess the other part is making it accessible and right sized for communities that do not have the resources or are not necessarily great at applying for funds or telling their story.

Rikkie-Lee TYRRELL: Beautiful. Excellent. Thank you.

The CHAIR: Thank you. Mrs Broad.

Gaelle BROAD: I guess just leading on from that, I was interested to read in your submission about the community leadership programs in Victoria, because the Victorian government withdrew funding for that program. I was at a graduation ceremony last Friday night at the Loddon Murray, and they were really putting onto past graduates to really help with keeping this program going. What do you see as being the strength of a program like that? With climate resilience in mind, are there any particular projects that you have seen done well? And I guess we look at recommendations, so would you be recommending to government, from what I have said, to establish or re-establish similar?

Natalie EGLETON: Yes. those community leadership programs have been around for a long time, and they are all a bit different depending on who is running them and who is involved with them, obviously, but the template itself is pretty solid. I will say whilst it is always a shame to see funding withdrawn or discontinued from something, there are pockets of innovation happening in some of those community leadership programs as a result of that that would not have happened if they did not have to fight for their survival. So there is always a bit of: how can you stimulate innovation well, and how do you get these sorts of models and platforms to really do what they have got the potential to do?

One example, in answer to your question, that I think is a watching kind of brief in terms of what it could achieve is the Goulburn Murray Community Leadership program. They have been doing a lot of deep thinking about how to serve their community. Obviously they have just been affected by floods not too long ago and they are still in that recovery, they have had significant amounts of drought over time and they have got a lot of industrial change around growing, producing and workforce et cetera and all of those kinds of big structural issues.

For me, the role of a committee leadership program is about how you mobilise people in a region to tackle those challenges, because they will keep coming and they will keep on getting more complex and potentially intersecting, and there will be disruption undoubtedly within all of those. Ultimately, you need people in local regions who can solve problems, who can innovate and who can do really adaptive work. You need them to be able to do that collaboratively and collectively, and you need them to be able to build the next generation behind them to come as well. In the absence of something like a community leadership program, there is a risk that that happens in a really ad hoc way, that you do not have that coordination and that you do not have a vehicle to create a shared vision. When these community leadership programs work well, that is what they have got the potential to do.

In the Goulburn Valley region, they are now looking at establishing kinds of action hubs – that it is probably not what they call them, but that is essentially what they are. So rather than delivering a leadership program, having alumni that go out there and do some nice things and come back every now and then, they are actually charging them with carriage of bringing on the rest of the community and hosting hubs where they can develop localised action, essentially, and then develop initiatives and priorities that they can then go and seek support for, whether that is money, whether that is people or whether that is skills. It could be lots of different things. We have just provided them with a $25,000 grant to get that going, and I think it will be a really interesting

model to watch. Given their footprint is quite large – and many of them in Victoria do cover quite a few LGAs – there is a bit of potential there in terms of how they might then provide more of a catalytic role rather than a programmatic activity role and more of a 'How do we mobilise the people power in our region?' I think that there is something there.

They are really important, and I worry about what would happen if they were not there. How do these ideas get off the ground? How do people find each other? I mean, something else will emerge, but we have got architecture there that is pretty good, so I think we should continue supporting them.

Gaelle BROAD: I am just interested, because you are national. Building back better we have heard a lot about and Victoria perhaps does not do it or does it very differently to other states, and we do not have that arrangement in the disaster recovery funding arrangements. But what are you seeing in other states that is working well when it comes to building back better? What difference do you think that would make in Victoria?

Sarah MATTHEE: Some of the things that we have seen are everything from roads through to community halls, and it goes on. I think I have seen examples of roads where they are only funded to build back to the status quo of what was originally there, and so many people say 'There's a missed opportunity here' or 'The same thing is going to happen exactly again'. I think the opportunity around building back better is to make sure that we are not facing the same impacts again and again.

I think with community halls, through all the effects that Natalie was mentioning before, in terms of knowing that we need energy security, there have been a number of solar panel and battery applications that we have been getting so that there is energy independence. There are a number for mobile booster towers and power for those around telecommunications that we have been getting. The accessibility of toilet facilities and air conditioners – like, it just goes right through in terms of all of the community assets. Then I think we see that playing out right down to the locations that are chosen for the community assets too. Often in terms of their land values they might be of less value, and so they can be subject to things like floods and so on. That means that they are more susceptible.

We are seeing that play out in a number of different ways in terms of building back better, but I think whenever we are looking at recovery works and preparedness, the status quo is almost the baseline. It is the, 'What can we do? What are we going to need in 20 or 50 years that we can be ahead of the game on?'

Gaelle BROAD: Do you want to add anything?

Natalie EGLETON: Just that building back better is not enough – I actually do not think building back better is enough. I kind of feel like that is a bit of a – not to be unfair; it is obviously an almost impossible task in terms of what we are building back for. But what we have known and seen over the last few years is that when we have built things back better they still have not been able to withstand, a lot of the time. Really investing in capability for understanding future risk is probably what we need, because our modelling so far has not met the reality. That is not our expertise, but that is something that I think – in every flood in particular we thought that we had just built back better, and then it kind of surpassed. I was in Lismore last week, and that is still sitting with me pretty significantly. The state of the streets in that town is just a bit hard to fathom.

Gaelle BROAD: Are you speaking about Rochester?

The CHAIR: Lismore.

Natalie EGLETON: That was Lismore. I am thinking of Rochester, because Lismore and Rochester – there are people in those two communities connecting with each other, and it is not a dissimilar kind of story in terms of how to build back better for something like that, and you almost cannot. So the set of questions needs to be considered: what are we building back for? What does the future look like? What does safety look like? Because there are certainly places that are just not safe, and that goes for bushfire as well.

I live in Maldon, just up the road, and I am on our local planning for the future of housing committee, and there has just been a huge swathe of land taken off the table for planning because it is just not safe. There is no way that Maldon can meet future population demand with its current heritage overlays, population and size, but safety came first. So there is just that question: 'What are we building for?' And in our local case it was, 'Well,

we're building to keep people safe, and we just can't build in those places anymore.' That has consequences for compensation for the people who own land there and thought that they could be subdividing and selling for housing developments et cetera. I guess my challenge to the question is: sometimes it is not about building back, and sometimes it is about thinking entirely differently about what we need in the future – not a helpful answer.

The CHAIR: It is very good. Dr Mansfield.

Sarah MANSFIELD: Thank you. Probably just further to that, in the work that FRRR does, how do you take some of those things into consideration in the grants that you offer? Building back better potentially – I do not know if the second part that you were talking about there, about potentially even considering whether it is appropriate to build back better, is something you can even start to take into consideration, but as an organisation how do you deal with those questions?

Natalie EGLETON: That is a really excellent question. It is a frontline consideration when we are looking at grants. A challenge is we often do not have the information to make an educated decision, so we rely on local council, local planning, the recovery plans, and we rely on the authorised information to say whether that is continuing to be a place. Certainly when we are investing in community facilities in relation to emergencies, we validate or verify whether it is an official place of last resort or whether it is an official evacuation centre, and if it is and it has got the other ticks, we are comfortable to keep supporting it, knowing that it is still in a high-risk area et cetera. Where it is not, we probably take a risk-averse lens and probably will not invest too heavily. But again, it is that difficult line between a community saying, 'This is what we've got, and there is no alternative, and we want to make it as safe as we can' – and our sense of responsibility that if we are supporting something to be developed that should not be, there is a kind of moral obligation there and probably a legal obligation to a degree. So we try to inform ourselves and make decisions based on known information and authorised information, and where we do not have that we will probably steer clear.

Sarah MATTHEE: Sometimes it is asking enough questions of community groups and applicants so that we get a sense of some of those uncertainties, and sometimes it is suggesting to them that a different grant application might be a better fit, to do a feasibility study or to get a consultant in to map out what their options are so that that becomes the more valuable piece of work in some ways – to look at what the right options might be, make some of those considerations, have some community conversations and then either come back to us or to another organisation or to government.

Natalie EGLETON: There is de-risking in that process. It is hard.

Sarah MANSFIELD: Yes. In your submission you observed that some of these community facilities like community halls are increasingly being given to community groups to manage and run and be responsible then for maintenance, renewal and all that sort of thing. With infrastructure like that, where do you think the role of governments, whether it is local or state government – where do think it is more appropriate for that responsibility to lie, to manage core community facilities like the one centre that people can gather in?

Natalie EGLETON: I can tell you that around all of our grant committees there is a frequent question of: why is government not funding this? Why is community needing to raise money for what would be deemed an essential service for a town? So I think it is a really live question. It is the same for emergency services. We receive a lot of funding requests from volunteer emergency services for things that you would imagine would be the responsibility of government – quick-fill pumps, things that literally enable them to act and do their job.

Having said that, I think the spirit of community volunteers having carriage of and responsibility for the maintenance of the facility is not an unreasonable thing, but it does come down to what are the reasonable boundaries of shared responsibility. When it comes to the conditions we are now facing and the kind of climate challenges and the pure scale of the work that needs to happen to bring these facilities up to standard, I think there is probably the need for government to do more and to get really clear on those boundaries between what community is best placed to do and what a volunteer committee is best placed to do versus what a government is best placed to do.

The expertise in building codes et cetera does not typically lie with a volunteer committee, and if it does, you are lucky you have got people who know. But for many it is just an overwhelming task. Fifty years ago it probably was not like that; it was probably pretty manageable. It might have been a lick of paint every now and

then, a bit of an upgrade to something. These are major overhauls now that these communities are managing, and they are big projects and there is a huge amount of risk and compliance involved. So I think that where the compliance and risk settings sit and where those sort of more commercial elements of these facilities sit government probably needs to walk alongside a bit more strongly. Obviously, local councils are very stretched and there are very good reasons that they are delegating that, and in some cases they are selling those assets altogether and communities are buying them. There are increasing numbers of communities that are owning those assets themselves, which brings a whole other level of accountability. But yes, I think there is a real opportunity to think a bit differently about that.

Sarah MANSFIELD: Thank you.

The CHAIR: Thank you. Ms Bath.

Melina BATH: Thank you. Thank you so much for the work you do. I think you have got little wings on the back there, or big ones and a halo, because you are doing amazing work for our rural and regional communities, which are near and dear to my heart. Just on the grants, when you suggested that there were grants for pumps and things, is SES an example?

Natalie EGLETON: CFA.

Melina BATH: CFA, SES, those sorts of things. Thank you. I have got quite a lot of questions, and some wonderful ones have already been asked about the community leadership program, which was on my list. Can you paint a quick picture – FRRR in Victoria: how many personnel do you have working for you, roughly?

Natalie EGLETON: In Victoria we have – so I am hesitating because not all of our staff in Victoria only work in Victoria; we are dispersed across the country. I have got a total of 40 head of staff across country. We have got people dispersed around the country; we have probably got around a dozen in Victoria.

Melina BATH: Thank you very much. The state government has just put out an announcement – I am interested to understand the nature of your relationship with the state government, because this is our inquiry on the Victorian government – about regional partnerships and that 67 new people have been appointed across the nine regional partnerships. Is FRRR a member of any of those nine regional partnerships?

Natalie EGLETON: No, we are not.

Melina BATH: No? Has there been any engagement about why, or are you just waiting for the call-up?

Natalie EGLETON: I would welcome a call, but we have not been engaged. I think early on when it was first introduced we went around to a few of the forums but not the members or representatives.

Melina BATH: In terms of the Victorian government as a partner or non-partner, explain the relationship that FRRR has with the Victorian government.

Natalie EGLETON: To be honest, 'episodic' would probably be the best description. We have had some partnerships over time that have been multiyear. Following the 2009 Victorian bushfires we worked with the Victorian Bushfire Appeal Fund, which sort of ended up sitting with DHS or its version then. That was a fairly long-term program, and we managed, in the end, in the vicinity of $4 million in grant funding. We have just distributed the last of that funding to those communities in recovery.

We had a partnership some years before that related to the establishment of community foundations. Victoria is fortunate to have quite a few community foundations – place-based philanthropic vehicles. So FRRR essentially incubated the start-up of those foundations with some government funding and enabled their formation. Now most of them are off and running.

Those are the sorts of partnerships. They have been far more targeted and tailored. We have just partnered recently in the background of a project with DEECA on some nature-based resilience case studies.

Melina BATH: Sorry – DQ? Give me the acronym again.

Natalie EGLETON: DEECA.

Melina BATH: Oh, DEECA. Thank you. I thought it might have been the Department of Queensland or something. No, right – DEECA. Gotcha.

Natalie EGLETON: No, because I get them all mixed up.

Melina BATH: No, you are fine – so do we. So, is that – just give me a flavour of that – similar to NSW or Queensland or WA, or is it different? Are there stronger ties? And what sorts of recommendations – I'm seeking your feedback on that.

Natalie EGLETON: As a national foundation our strongest relationship has historically been with the federal government. We run a number of regular programs that we deliver on behalf of the federal government, such as the Future Drought Fund –

Melina BATH: NEMA is it?

Natalie EGLETON: NEMA, yes. We have delivered some bushfire and disaster preparedness and recovery funding, COVID recovery – there have been quite a few at the federal level. At the state level, I would say NSW and Victoria are the only states we have had actual partnerships with where we delivered programs together. They have also been episodic, to be honest. NSW has been related to COVID recovery. We delivered a grant program for them targeting some smaller regions and not-for-profit organisations that were carrying a lot of the relief load within their communities. We supported some operational capacity building support for them. And then Victoria has been, as I have said. The other states we have not had particular partnerships with.

Melina BATH: Thank you. Do you see that there is becoming more weight given to those fundamental things like SES equipment? Do you feel like the weight has been shifting, or is there just more and more interest or requirement or – I will not say burden – request for these very important basic things, like loos, halls, and now pumps? Do you see a greater need – I guess I am shifting onto you – or has it always been there?

Natalie EGLETON: I do not know if the need is changing but the capacity of the volunteer effort is probably reducing. People are tired, and the ability to keep raising money in their communities – there is a lot of donor fatigue. There is a lot of volunteer fatigue and general community fatigue. So getting a grant is proving to be a slightly easier than –

Melina BATH: Hard work and long coming.

Natalie EGLETON: Hard work, but if they get $20,000 in one go instead of having to do lots of things and if that $20,000 enables them to buy something straight away rather than having to fundraise and go and ask all their mates, that is a better deal.

Melina BATH: My time is up, but I am going to put something on notice, and the Chair is just going to give me a tiny bit of leeway.

The CHAIR: Always, Melina.

Melina BATH: Thank you very much, Chair. I am interested in the profile. You mentioned sometimes it is at the start – the seed funding to get that business case up for something like the fabulous Rochester op shop – and sometimes it is at the end. Could you provide to the committee – if not now, in writing – the profile of where you sit in funding? If you are building a new toilet or a new hall, how much has come from community? How much has come from the feds? How much has come from the philanthropic partners that you have got? Would you mind doing that?

Natalie EGLETON: We can do that on notice, yes. We do collect leverage data – so for every dollar we grant, how much the communities have put up.

Melina BATH: Could you provide that too? I do not think you have it in your very excellent report.

Natalie EGLETON: We do have that number. I can tell you it has gone down significantly over the last few years, as a leverage factor, which speaks to my comment about volunteer fatigue and fundraising and donor fatigue. There is just not as much going in. The dollar request is going up.

Melina BATH: Thank you very much.

The CHAIR: Natalie and Sarah, thanks so much for coming in today and for your presentation. I really appreciated it. You will be provided with a copy of the transcript to review, probably in about a week or so.

With that the committee will take a short break.

Witnesses withdrew.