

TRANSCRIPT

LEGISLATIVE COUNCIL ENVIRONMENT AND PLANNING COMMITTEE

Inquiry into the 2022 Flood Event in Victoria

Rochester – Wednesday 23 August 2023

MEMBERS

Sonja Terpstra – Chair

David Ettershank – Deputy Chair

Ryan Batchelor

Melina Bath

Gaelle Broad

Wendy Lovell

Samantha Ratnam

Rikkie-Lee Tyrrell

Sheena Watt

PARTICIPATING MEMBERS

John Berger

Ann-Marie Hermans

Joe McCracken

Evan Mulholland

Rachel Payne

WITNESSES

Leigh Wilson, Chair, Rochester Community Recovery Committee;

Elizabeth Trewick, Principal, St Joseph's School and Rochester Community Recovery Committee; and

Tracie Kyne, Lake Eppalock Working Group, Rochester Business Network and Rochester Community Recovery Committee.

The CHAIR: Good morning, everybody. I declare open the committee's public hearing for the Inquiry into the 2022 Flood Event in Victoria. This public hearing is for the Environment and Planning Committee, a bipartisan committee of the Parliament looking into the October flood event. We will be providing a report to Parliament, which will include recommendations to the government. Please ensure that mobile phones have been switched to silent and that background noise is minimised.

I would like to begin this hearing by respectfully acknowledging the Aboriginal peoples, the traditional custodians of the various lands we are gathered on today, and pay my respects to their ancestors, elders and families. I particularly welcome any elders or community members who are here today to impart their knowledge of this issue to the committee or who are watching the broadcast of these proceedings. I welcome any members of the public in the gallery and remind those in the room to be respectful of proceedings and to remain silent at all times.

All evidence taken is protected by parliamentary privilege as provided by the *Constitution Act 1975* and provisions of the Legislative Council standing orders, therefore the information you provide during the hearing is protected by law. You are protected against any action for what you say during this hearing, but if you go elsewhere and repeat the 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 Parliament.

All evidence is being recorded and you will be provided with a proof version of the transcript following the hearing. Transcripts will ultimately be made public and be posted on the committee's website.

Now I will just take the opportunity for committee members to introduce themselves. My name is Sonja Terpstra. I am the Chair of the Environment and Planning Committee.

John BERGER: John Berger, Member for Southern Metro and a participating member.

Wendy LOVELL: Wendy Lovell – I think I am known to most of you – Member for Northern Victoria Region.

Gaëlle BROAD: Gaëlle Broad, Member for Northern Victoria Region as well.

Melina BATH: Melina Bath, Member for Eastern Victoria Region.

Sheena WATT: Sheena Watt, Member for Northern Metropolitan Region.

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

The CHAIR: Thank you very much. Now we will begin our first session, and I will invite you to make your opening comments, but if you could just keep your opening remarks to perhaps 5 to 10 minutes to ensure that committee members then have plenty of time to ask you questions. Over to you.

Leigh WILSON: Thank you. It is my pleasure to welcome you here to the community of Rochester today. So to the committee chair and the committee members, my name is Leigh Wilson. Forgive me for being a little nervous.

The CHAIR: That is okay.

Leigh WILSON: I am third generation from this town. I have spent eight years in council and two years as mayor. I was part of the community recovery committee from the 2011 floods. I have participated in most of the flood mitigation studies since that event. I have been a member of a state-based organisation for several

years. I have been a local committee member on a variety of groups for many years. Like many others, I did not evacuate over the weekend of the flood, and this, I think, is my story and comments that I have to share.

It is 313 days since the flood. The best information that we have to hand is that there were 988 houses that were flooded over floor. Now, that work has been done by Rochester Community House. If it was not for them, there would be no other agency that would know how many houses were flooded over floor. The waste that was removed in the early days, the debris and clean-up from the houses – this is prior to Christmas over a period of two months – exceeded 500 B-double loads of waste. If you parked all of those trucks end to end and you drove past them on the highway, it would last for 7 kilometres. Forty-eight hours is the notice we had from the level of flooding to the peak of the flood. One government employee was on the ground on the Sunday morning, the day the floodwaters started to recede – one government employee. Zero was the attendance of ambulance employees in and immediately around the Rochester area in the immediate lead-up to the event, over the weekend of the event and for the first week post event. Zero is the confidence the community has that if we were to experience another event in the near future, there would be any change to this response.

The Campaspe is a very interesting river. It can flood from an event above Lake Eppalock, and it can flood from an event below Lake Eppalock. We are all very practical people. We all realise the impacts of climate change and that we should expect greater frequencies of storm events, and I think in the evidence that will be provided over the course of today – it is like the saying ‘All roads lead to Rome’ – that you will find that everything links back to mitigation. If we had sufficient mitigation, we would not be here today. From the level of accuracy that we had with the weather forecast from the Bureau of Meteorology and then how that was disseminated down to the ground, we experienced for the second time in 11 years projections of flooding well below what we experienced. In 2011 we experienced flooding 500 to 700 millimetres greater than projections, catching most people off guard. In this event it was somewhere between 200 and 300 millimetres higher than what was projected. Now, the thing to note is that in this community we are experts, and unfortunately, it is very difficult to tell experts what to do. We are experts because of our learned experience from that 2011 event. That is why many did not leave. Many knew what the levels of a 2011 event would be. Many knew they were safe, and they were wrong. The accuracy of that forecast is what is incredibly important. The response to the disaster is incredibly important. The local agencies – that is, volunteers on the ground – do not have sufficient capacity on the ground to respond to such an event. They were let down by their superiors – and that was in the form of requests for additional support, which just never came. What is very sad about that is that I had participated in so much of the work for the 2011 event that I was incredibly confident that we would have that support, and it failed. Why it failed is yet to be discovered. But with the sufficient level of mapping of our community – and we knew that it was going to be something similar to the 2011 event; we actually ended up with something much worse. To sit here before you today and say that we had less of an emergency response to a greater event than what we knew we had in 2011 – words cannot describe how I feel.

The emotional and mental impacts on the broader community cannot be stated enough. The trauma from the event and how that impacts the daily lives of our community cannot be stressed enough. That impacts how they communicate with their insurers, how they communicate with their builders and how they navigate through such a complex rebuilding program. There is still so much pain in our community today. We struggle for data, we struggle for agencies to share information and we will continue to struggle for a long time to recover. I could tell you plenty of sad stories about individuals around town. I will try to contain it to the high level, where some of my experience lies, and try and paint that picture. We have experts in their respective fields sitting on both sides of me today. I welcome any questions. Thank you.

The CHAIR: Thank you very much. Do either of you also want to make a contribution?

Elizabeth TREWICK: Yes.

The CHAIR: Sure. Elizabeth, over to you.

Elizabeth TREWICK: Thank you. Thank you for the invitation to address this parliamentary inquiry into the 2022 flood event in Rochester. I am Elizabeth Trewick, and I have the privilege to lead St Joseph’s School and to be the education representative on the community recovery committee since the week after the flood.

Today I would like to address several matters. The first one is of the utmost importance. It is an issue that we cannot overlook, and that issue is the wellbeing impacts of flood events on our children. In October 2022 our

children's worlds were turned upside down as their safe and familiar environment became submerged in water. The October flood event brought with it chaos, fear and uncertainty, all of which can leave lasting scars on a child. The aftermath of the flood event has exposed our children to a range of stresses, including displacement, loss of possessions, separation from family and friends and the disruption of routines. It is a disconnection from their community as they knew it. These factors have led to a heightened sense of vulnerability and anxiety, which has at times left our children struggling to make sense of the world around them.

One of the most immediate concerns has been the trauma that our children have experienced during and after the flood. They witnessed the destruction of their homes, schools and neighbourhoods, which in turn led to feelings of helplessness, fear and, for some, survivor guilt. Some were evacuated from their homes, surrounded by water in the dark. The distress caused by the experiences has manifested in a variety of ways, such as nightmares, sleep disturbances and changes in behaviour affecting their overall emotional and mental wellbeing. We have daily routines established, and we re-establish them as often as the children need it. For some children our teachers' toolkit of responses is assessed daily as their needs present. A second concern is the significant impact that the flood has had on the education of our children. These impacts can be both immediate and long term, affecting various aspects of a child's educational journey. Let us put that on the back of two years of COVID.

The October flood led to the closure of three schools due to the damage to school infrastructure. This disruption to the regular learning schedule forced children to miss out on valuable classroom time. Floodwaters damaged school resources, meaning that when the children did return to learning, access to materials was limited. The government provided opportunities to apply for funding to replace some of these materials, which was at a time when families were concerned about where they were going to live and how they were going to rebuild their homes. Staff at St Joseph's supported families to apply for this funding, meeting them at the recovery centre and communicating with the agencies providing this funding.

The October flood forced families to evacuate their homes, which led to temporary and, for some, long-term displacement. Some of our children changed schools, which disrupted their social connections and educational continuity. For St Joseph's school, 20 children were enrolled in schools away from Rochester, and they have not returned to Rochester. Our school buildings were devastated by the flood, leaving classrooms and facilities unsafe and unusable. The need to find temporary learning spaces was paramount as families needed to return to work and indicated that they needed somewhere for their children to be five days a week. Rochester schools were overwhelmed with the generosity of schools in Elmore and Bendigo, which opened their doors to our children.

After only three weeks our children returned to school, but not as they knew it, before Friday 14 October, when they were together. But the adults in their spaces were trusted and familiar, and they were with their friends.

The CHAIR: Two minutes, Elizabeth.

Elizabeth TREWICK: St Joseph's students in foundation grades 1 and 2 travelled for 900 minutes over 30 days to and from Elmore, and students in grades 3, 4, 5 and 6 travelled for 2700 minutes over 30 days to and from Bendigo. But before any learning could take place, it was crucial that we recognised and addressed the emotional, psychological and developmental toll that the flood inflicted on our children. Staff were supported to respond to the children's stories and to help them return to normal functioning.

In the beginning we built their learning days around routines so they knew what they needed to do and when. Our children needed predictability and manageability, and they needed meaning in their life. The routines and structures in place to welcome the children each morning and farewell them in the afternoon were considered and monitored on a daily basis, because most of the Rochester children were displaced from their home, their school and their sporting venues. Even something like their swimming pool, which was destroyed by the flood, still has its future in question. Our children needed to know that they could get through and how that was going to look.

Ten months post flood the rebuilding effort continues. It is an immense and arduous task that is presenting a myriad of physical, emotional and economic challenges. It is a process that has required patience and resilience and a commitment to futureproofing St Joseph's school so we are better equipped to handle future flood events. As a result of the flood event, we are noticing that most children are struggling with emotional regulation. Some

are having difficulty forming and maintaining healthy relationships, and we are concerned about their coping mechanisms as they face challenges into the future.

The CHAIR: Thirty seconds, Elizabeth.

Elizabeth TREWICK: Our children are the future of Rochester, and rebuilding not only involves physical structures but also the social fabric of our community. Thank you for your time.

The CHAIR: Thank you. Tracie, please, 5 minutes, if you could.

Tracie KYNE: My name is Tracie Kyne. I am the daughter of 86- and 82-year-old parents who currently are homeless due to the floods and forced to live with our family. I am a wife and a mother of four children, president of the Rochester Business Network, a member of the flood mitigation committee and a marriage and funeral celebrant who sadly performed the funeral service of Kevin Wills after he tragically lost his life in the October 2022 floods. With all these hearts today, I speak on behalf of the business network, shopfronts, home-based businesses and agribusiness. Thank you for being here today for this crucial inquiry into October's flood crisis, which has devastated our region, affecting the lives, homes and businesses of many within our community. As we convene to examine the aftermath of this catastrophic event, it is imperative that we acknowledge and understand the profound and lasting impact it has had on the people in this area.

In the face of impending disaster our local businesses worked tirelessly and selflessly to protect their assets, even as floodwaters approached. Many were separated from their families as they sought to defend not only their livelihoods but their homes as well. Tragically, despite their best efforts, most of them lost that battle – and their homes and their businesses – in the flood.

The clean-up has been a strenuous and heart-wrenching process. Businesses took weeks, some months, to reopen their shopfront premises, and some remain closed even now, 10 months down the track. Others have been forced to close permanently due to a reduction in income, with two-thirds of the community having been relocated to other towns and cities. The emotional and financial toll is still very present, with most businesses still requiring improvements to their buildings and many home-based businesses operating from caravans. In the midst of cleaning up after a disaster and feeling utterly overwhelmed, our community was faced with a ridiculous amount of time and paperwork required to apply for recovery grants. These bureaucratic hurdles seemed insurmountable at a time when immediate action was needed, and people were grappling with loss and devastation. We urgently needed government assistance on the ground to help complete these applications, to alleviate the strain and to provide tangible support when it was most crucial. The disconnect between immediate needs and the cumbersome process only exacerbated the crisis, underscoring the necessity for more efficient and empathetic assistance during such trying times. Many people just threw their hands in the air and did not apply at all.

Our farming sector has suffered significantly, financially and emotionally, causing incredible anguish within our rural community. While they have been eligible for \$70,000 in financial assistance, this amount pales in comparison to the actual damage sustained. To illustrate, I would like to use the example of a farmer just to the east of Rochester, where the damage topped \$700,000. Their insurance has increased by \$25,000, reaching an exorbitant annual cost of \$45,000, which they simply cannot afford. Consequently, they have opted to go without insurance. They say they cannot go through a flood again – that they will walk off the farm. The entire country needs our farmers. Ironically, before the flood and even now, these farmers are not even covered for flood damage. It is a harsh reality that no farm can insure itself against such an event. This disparity between the actual risk and the available insurance coverage amplifies the difficulties encountered by our farming community –

The CHAIR: Two minutes, Tracie.

Tracie KYNE: highlighting the pressing need for immediate action. As we move forward with this inquiry, let us not lose sight of the real and human cost of this disaster. We must work collaboratively, responsibly and with empathy to ensure that the proper measures are put in place to assist those affected and to prevent such devastation in the future.

Climate change is an undeniable issue casting a shadow over our future, with the promise of more severe droughts and worse floods that will no doubt impact our businesses, homes and farms. These environmental

challenges not only threaten our physical surrounds but also cast a profound impact on mental health within our community. The anguish and stress brought on by these unpredictable weather patterns present an enormous issue that demands ongoing support and care. As we grapple with the aftermath of the October floods and anticipate future challenges, we must recognise that our rebuild process will continue for years to come.

The CHAIR: Thirty seconds, Tracie.

Tracie KYNE: Today Leigh, Elizabeth and I have spoken about emotional loss, mental health issues, slow build responses and climate change. Many have also mentioned the need for warning systems, flood recovery and flood responses, but all this can be fixed easily to reduce the risk of future flooding, whether that be a much larger dam or water release mechanisms at the dam wall, which would also support the needs of our businesses, farming and residential properties. I trust this inquiry will lead to decisive action to ensure that our community does not suffer through a flood of this magnitude again. Inaction is not an option, as it would inevitably result in more devastation, a scenario I am confident the government does not want to see unfold, especially if it leads to future loss of life. Thank you so much.

The CHAIR: Thanks, Tracie. Thank you all very much for your opening remarks. We will now move to questions. Ms Bath, a question from you.

Melina BATH: Thank you, Chair. It is a privilege to be here today. My electorate is Eastern Victoria Region. In 2021 Traralgon was flooded, and that was a flash flood insofar as they had very, very little warning. In fact the warning to evacuate occurred about 4 hours after the peak of the flood, so it is a different situation, but I just wanted to share with you that I have an inkling of the devastation. There were 300 buildings – homes – inundated there, and community assets. So thank you for giving us the honour of being here today. There are multiple questions, and I do not think we will get through nearly enough of them. But my first one goes to Leigh. You spoke about the response – or the lack of response, we will say – from HQ in Melbourne, SES or ICC or the like. I want you to expand on that. At the end of the day, we need to hear from you what we collectively, Parliament, need to advise the government to change. We need your good advice on how this can be improved. So the first question is to you, Leigh.

Leigh WILSON: Thank you. To my knowledge on the ground, and this was from knowing all the people concerned – small community, we know each other – SES got down to two volunteers over the event. Volunteers had to make a decision to go home and protect their own property and their own families, and it got down to two volunteers. That was backed up by the local CFA, and approximately 80 per cent of the CFA members had their homes inundated while they were out helping the community. The CFA have that greater structure, so immediately the local CFA units come in to backfill and to help. At the SES level – and they are the lead agency on the ground – I know they were putting in requests for additional support, and we had less support in a greater event than we did for that event back in 2011. Because I was at my house and I was watching the vehicles get around, I could see what was going on. I was in communication with a lot of people. Somewhere between the communication coming out of Rochester and between the ICC at the state level –

Melina BATH: There was a disconnect.

Leigh WILSON: information got fed up and then nothing came out of it. I understand there were multiple events happening across the state. There was not that response and significantly not that response in the context that in the lead-up, the planning, we know what is going to happen to our community. We know the extent. So that could be planned and put in place prior, and that fell over as well.

Melina BATH: So has headquarters – I am just calling them headquarters, those Melbourne-based headquarters of SES and VicEmergency – come up and debriefed with you and worked out from your point of view where they went wrong or where the disconnect was? Have they come up and sat down with you, the community?

Leigh WILSON: No. There may have been some informal discussions but no formal process that I am aware of.

Melina BATH: So a recommendation would have been: directly after, there should have been a debrief.

Leigh WILSON: There should have been a debrief after.

Melina BATH: But there should not have been the need for that level in the first place.

Leigh WILSON: No, absolutely not.

Melina BATH: So better communication and what that looks like, strategies around what that looks like –

Leigh WILSON: Yes, correct.

Melina BATH: And if you want to provide any additional discussion on that, that would be good. Even post today, if you want to provide those sorts of steps, that would be useful. I am conscious that we do not have a lot of time, so please do not –

The CHAIR: I can come back around. Maybe one or two more.

Melina BATH: Sure. The next one: Tracie, you spoke about flood mitigation. At the end of the day, we are here to hear about what needs to happen so it does not happen to this extent again. Lake Eppalock I think you mentioned in your submission. Do you want to unpack about – it is a big topic – the spill level or the mitigating effects?

Tracie KYNE: Look, I can certainly talk on that, but the flood mitigation committee will be talking next after us, so they will explain a lot more about that than me, other than to say we can talk about early warning systems. We can talk about the response from the government or the army or whoever has come to our town. We do not need any of that if we get this dam right, and that is what we need to do. That is what the government needs to start looking at – to get that dam right – because if we can get that water released as it should before a major rain event, that will solve our problems.

Melina BATH: And this has been part of that flood mitigation group?

Tracie KYNE: Correct.

Melina BATH: Okay. Can I go on, Chair? One more – over to Elizabeth, thank you. Thank you for suffering and supporting your students and your school community. It was very devastating for them and their learning. You spoke about resources, and child psychology is a really important issue. On a practical level, from your school rebuild, what sorts of futureproofing do you need from the infrastructure of a school to mitigate such devastation on a physical level?

Elizabeth TREWICK: Honestly, to knock us down and to build us high. I have looked at lots of different school plans over the last 10 months – to sit high and have an undercover play space, a bit like an underground car park.

Melina BATH: A Queenslander.

Elizabeth TREWICK: A Queenslander. The water would go through, you would hose it out and they would be fine. In October I was preparing to go on a school camp as the water levels rose. My husband said to me, ‘Have you got a flood plan?’ I said, ‘No, I’m sure someone will tell me what I need to do.’ But as that day went on, the SES put out a great visual, so I used that. They talked about minor levels, moderate levels and major levels. At the same time, I had a staff member call in sick, so I then had to get on the bus to go to camp and not take my car as was planned. I set up a plan for the staff so that I could manage it remotely that if it hit minor levels, we were to look around to see what we needed to lift. If it hit moderate levels, we were to lift the first drawer – everything out of the first cupboard. By the time I got home at 2 o’clock on the Wednesday, we were lifting the second drawer. Word was just coming through. I was getting phone calls at 9 and 10 o’clock at night on the Tuesday. ‘Did you have a plan? What were you getting from the community?’ I was just getting, ‘There’s a lot of water coming.’

Melina BATH: In terms of the cost of the lift, have you done any preliminaries: that is the solution, but –

Elizabeth TREWICK: No, not at this stage. We are still trying to open out all of our buildings. At this stage we need to restump one of our major buildings, and so we are going to put concrete slabs in. Buildings of ours that had concrete slabs were open in eight weeks. We are still 10 months trying to get to that.

Melina BATH: Sure. Thanks, Chair.

The CHAIR: Ms Lovell.

Wendy LOVELL: Leigh, you spoke about the ICC. The ICC was Bendigo, wasn't it? Can you tell us just how effective the ICC was and what better response you might have expected from the ICC.

Leigh WILSON: I think you have got the immediate lead-up, and I keep painting that picture. They know what the extent of flooding is going to be, and there was not that immediate response on the ground in the lead-up and the preparation. It is a terrible phrase to use: it was almost like a Kumbaya moment – everybody will do the right thing. Well, that is not what happens. The community here were spectacular, whether that is the informal organisations, a cluster of businesses working together, neighbours helping each other out, the local SES, local CFA, local VicPol – excellent. Council's resources were stretched. There is no secret around that. They did not perform admirably, but they did what they could with their resources. The information was being fed up, but we were not seeing the presence on the ground. There were no helicopters in the air. There were no heavy vehicles coming into town to assist. We literally had a phone network going of contacts to chase extra sandbags. Volunteers were coming in from the neighbouring communities to help. There was not quite zero government presence. There was a small number of local government presence, but it was just our community. And then it only got worse.

To go through the Friday night when the water peaked, and it is only CFA trucks that you were seeing getting around, and then after that it was farmers coming in with tractors with a trailer on the back. They were going in with telehandlers into people's front yards. We had people climbing into the buckets; they could load them onto the back of those tractors. We had people in tinnies, in little fishing boats, going around rescuing people. What is the level of risk for those if there was a fatality? That is what we resorted to. I have been told, I never heard, but I have been told there were helicopters overhead at one stage. I have not been told.

And then we move into that first week of the recovery – that very first day, it is a Sunday, when the water levels are safe enough to walk into the CBD. I left my home. Now, my home is on the west side of Rochester, and it is well over a kilometre from the river, and our house – we only just survived. We had about 120 millimetres to go. And our old house is built up high. I came into the centre of town to check my wife's shop that was badly flooded, check on other shops, and just like 2011 I knew there would be a lot of people about, so I will go down and we will start doing the things we need to do. There was me and a local VicPol member – that was it – at 7 o'clock on that Sunday morning. That is when it really painted the picture of the extent of what had gone on. That first week it was us here on our own, and we watched Chinook helicopters fly overhead to Echuca. You have no comprehension of seeing people getting around for three or four days in the same clothes – no ambulance, no medical. The police – the ones that were working – had done countless hours back to back. Our local organisations were trashed, the businesses were trashed, not knowing where people were. And there were no government people here to help. Local government – council – had so much going on; it is hard to criticise them. Could they have done better, could they have done more? Yes, but with what? Plenty of their staff were flooded as well. We needed state assistance – it was not here. Not here – the hurt.

And I am a lucky one – house not flooded. Half of my family members' houses were flooded. Mum is 83 in a caravan. How was your morning? Every story is very emotive here, and I am trying to keep out of the personal side of things. But we have no confidence. I have no confidence. I have spent a good chunk of my life working with and in local government and working with state organisations, and I am very angry and very disappointed that we were let down. Things have to change. Everyone is scarred in this town.

Wendy LOVELL: Thanks, Leigh. Tracie, the support grants – you talked about the inadequacy of the amount for some of the farmers and businesses. Can you tell us a little bit about the problems in applying and the length of time before any money came through? I know I called into Portwine's to see them out at the joinery in February or March, and they still had not received their grant. They were really struggling. So could you just expand on the necessity for more timely support.

Tracie KYNE: The issue we have had from a business point of view is that some small businesses that are not GST-registered were not eligible for a lot of grants. For businesses that were eligible that were registered for GST, the paperwork they had to go through to actually get that funding – huge red tape to jump through. For our agribusiness farmers, they have had to spend the \$70,000 to then apply to get it back, and in some

instances they were not eligible for the \$70,000 they had just spent. We have had instances where farmers cannot even afford to spend the \$70,000 to get the money back. They are the issues we have been grappling with. Apart from the mental health, the stress and the anguish of them going through the process of cleaning up and maybe not having the product to sell, just going through that red tape to apply for grants has just not been possible.

Wendy LOVELL: I know that the neighbourhood house were really good in assisting people, but was there any state government assistance? Was consumer affairs on the ground helping people to apply for these grants?

Tracie KYNE: No. And community house have been amazing, absolutely amazing, but they are also under enormous pressure as well – enormous pressure.

Wendy LOVELL: Yes, I witnessed that firsthand.

Tracie KYNE: Can I also add to Leigh's comment about help on the ground. We did see the army come into town, and they kept driving. That was heartbreaking – really heartbreaking. We sort of thought, 'What do we have to do when we've got 988 homes underwater?' I know Echuca had some, but nothing like 988, which was over 90 per cent of our population.

Wendy LOVELL: Thank you. Elizabeth, you spoke about kids being evacuated in the middle of the night, their displacement, some families not returning and their difficulties in maintaining relationships. A lot of them will be suffering from PTSD and obviously struggling with their mental health. What support has been given to St Joseph's and the other schools in town to assist those children?

Elizabeth TREWICK: Wendy, that is a really interesting question. Because St Joseph's is a Catholic school, the education department do not work with us. I got a phone call the Thursday before the water hit from the education department just wanting to know what we were doing, because their principals were asking that they be given permission to close their doors on the Friday, and I just said to them that we were closing the doors. Catholic Education Sandhurst trusted their leaders on the ground to make the call.

We have had great support from Catholic Education Sandhurst but not enough. We have not heard from the government at all as far as mental health for our children goes. I have been successful yesterday in managing to attain corporate funding to bring the Resilience Project to St Joseph's for next year, and we are about to start a Dogs Connect program, all of which we have had to do and source for ourselves. I am fairly confident the only thing that the other two schools have received, as we have, is the student wellbeing funding boost, which for us was a \$15,000 grant. Leigh has been helping me canvass the education minister to bring forward the mental health in primary schools funding that is being rolled out across the state in the next few years. At the minute it is in a pilot phase. Our region is not due to receive the funding for the first time until 2025. My request is that we need that and we need that now, if not 2024. That will enable us to have a wellbeing person on the ground five days a week, which is what we need.

Wendy LOVELL: Thank you very much.

The CHAIR: Are you done?

Wendy LOVELL: Yes.

The CHAIR: I might just ask a question, if I can. Leigh, when you were saying about there being no government help on the ground, can you unpack that a bit more for me? What does that mean? So who was here? And what were your expectations – because I noticed you said earlier that a lot of the SES volunteers, because they are locals, were impacted themselves. So can you unpack what government help was here and what was not?

Leigh WILSON: Yes. So my experience is based on the first couple of days. I was primarily in the CBD area working with some businesses – my wife's premises and other premises – just on that initial clean-up, and then I was spending a good bit of time at the temporary recovery centre that was established by community house. But in that area we had some fleeting assistance mostly over the phone from Campaspe Shire Council just encouraging several of us from the previous flood – 'You know what you're doing, just keep doing it. What help do you need?' But then the manpower was very, very short behind that. So apart from that, VicPol

then had an increased presence on the ground primarily around security to the community, understanding so many people had dispersed from the town. I mentioned that we had no ambulance here, and that was very apparent. And me and a couple of others, we worked with one of the local doctors to get his medical clinic operational for providing that first-aid support. So when the clean-up starts, it is the local community getting together, local contractors in particular, to start going into people's houses. We know what we need to do – start getting the furniture out, carpet.

The CHAIR: Things out, yes.

Leigh WILSON: So I know from my work with community house that they were already making contacts to government agencies to get people in on the ground to start – and this is all the culmination of a few days.

The CHAIR: So when you say 'to get people in', what were you expecting or what did you want to see? What resources did you actually want to see?

Leigh WILSON: We needed the human resources here to assist with the clean-up.

The CHAIR: Right.

Leigh WILSON: So when we look at something like the supermarket, it was absolutely devastated. Overwhelmingly their staff left town, and the staff that were available were trying to work between helping at the supermarket and cleaning up their own properties. And after several days we did have 10 members of the ADF come here, and they were providing some assistance. And those 10 members came in with a structure where you only needed to talk to one person and then they were able to undertake work and go from there. That was several days into that first week, but outside of that there was no other formal assistance. Where is that important? It is important for coordination. We are balancing between adrenaline, stress and trauma, and we are trying to coordinate things on the ground – and then things start to fall through the cracks.

The CHAIR: So it sounds like you needed physical bodies as well; you needed people on the ground.

Leigh WILSON: We needed physical bodies. I go to that scenario of coming back into the CBD area on the Sunday morning when the water was starting to recede. I was the only person around, and I started to contact some of the business owners and send them photos of their properties so they had an understanding of what to prepare for. There was no-one around. The previous time – by that stage we had 100-plus people in the CBD area. The community had its resilience – and this is the thing; we have this resilience – to enact that recovery, and we were able to help each other. But we experienced anywhere above 70 per cent of the population just were not here – were gone.

The CHAIR: Dispersed, yes.

Leigh WILSON: And you do not know what to expect: 'Are we going to be finding bodies in properties? What are we going to find?' Then when we were looking around –

The CHAIR: It is highly unpredictable, right? That was the thing that added another layer: it was unpredictable.

Leigh WILSON: That is absolutely my frustration. It is the trauma of knowing too much, knowing probably where things should be and then that gap. We were not seeing people in fluoro vests getting around. We were seeing some local tradies trying to do their bit, local contractors doing their bit, but there was not that coordination.

The CHAIR: Coordination.

Leigh WILSON: That went on for well over a week, and then we started to get an extra little bit of an inflow. It was everything from government agencies helping to process paperwork, which was a bit of a battle, but then the Commonwealth came in. I know it is not state, but the Commonwealth came in. But early on we had volunteers sitting there on their laptops with a mobile phone – because we had no NBN, no phones – processing people's paperwork to start getting claims underway. People lost everything. They were going back to their homes and walking out with a couple of bags of belongings. That was it. There just were not the boots on the ground.

The CHAIR: Yes, okay. Just another question as well, and you may not be able to answer this; you might only be able to speak to your own personal experience. Is this the first kind of natural disaster event that you have personally experienced? If it is or it is not – either way – had you considered how you might respond in a natural disaster? Did you have a plan and say, ‘I’ve made all these decisions before an event happens so that when it does happen I know what I need to do’, on a personal level? And do you know if other people had similar thought processes around that?

Leigh WILSON: I do have a good understanding around that. I was here for the 2011 event, and so we went through that. My wife’s business was flooded back then too. We had a plan around her business – and I will break that down a little bit more – from our home; we were at the same home. Once again my opening comments were around, ‘We’re experts. We went through this 2011 event, and we knew what that level was.’ The accuracy of the bureau’s forecast – if it had been a 2011 event, a lot of businesses would have been saved and a lot of homes would have been saved because of that acquired experience and knowledge. And whether we had formal plans or whether they were just something sitting in the back of our minds –

The CHAIR: More like formal plans, yes.

Leigh WILSON: Some people have gone to the trouble of having the formal plans, and a lot of people did execute those plans as far as preparing their businesses – putting stock up, those sorts of things. For other people at home, they evacuated; they took the notice and evacuated. Our house was very high, very safe. I was very confident. Towards the end of that night when the water was coming up and I thought I had made a really bad mistake, we were at a point then where we would not have been able to leave. But I am one of the few who kept everything, probably because I have gone through all of the process, from the 2011 flood. I have got my grab bag. I have got some things in the grab bag: we have got our passports ready to go and our insurance ready to go; we have got some things there ready to go. We made a decision far too late, so then we stayed in place. Many people were caught out because their area had not flooded in 2011 or in white settlement history.

The CHAIR: So it was a first for them.

Leigh WILSON: A first for them, so that is where a lot were caught out. So it is very hard to be judgemental on a lot of people not evacuating when there was not a threat – it is acquired experience. From a business point of view – and there were several people including Tracie’s son – we had a cluster of businesses. We all worked together very well to coordinate a uniform approach to protect our businesses. I stayed in my wife’s business. We had pumps and we had all sorts of things amongst the cluster of our businesses. I only left my wife’s business when the water outside was 100 millimetres higher than the floor in her shop and it was becoming a risk to me. At about that level was where we would have been fine; we would have saved the majority of businesses in the CBD – the supermarket, the pharmacy, so many businesses. The water kept rising, and I was not getting information from the bureau or other agencies. I was getting phone calls and text messages from our local network of people saying, ‘This is far worse than we have ever experienced,’ and farmers upstream saying, in that chain of information, ‘This is far worse. This is far worse.’

The CHAIR: It was unprecedented, wasn’t it?

Leigh WILSON: It was absolutely unprecedented. But keep in mind from when we have accurate information, to be prepared – we have got 48 hours and it is at the peak – a lot of decisions have to be made. And what is compounding the issue right now, with the 300-plus caravans people are living in, are the man-hours involved. They are people’s homes now. The man-hours involved to move 300 caravans while you are trying to do everything else – we are on the precipice. If we should have another significant rainfall event, we are on the precipice of immediate disaster again. This is why there has been advocacy around creating some airspace within the lake. The immediate threat of mental harm is here. It is valid. You can feel it, you can touch it and you can talk to people; they will tell you. Then there is the immediate threat that if we have that significant rainfall event, it will just spill because it is at capacity. We have no faith in the bureau’s accuracy. They have got it wrong in these two significant events. They have only got to get it a bit wrong in the next event and we will have flooding – we will have immediate flooding.

The CHAIR: All right. Thank you. I am conscious there are other people that might have questions as well. And I might just say to committee members: if you feel that you have got other questions that you have not had a chance to ask today, we can also provide questions on notice. So that way if people feel they have not had the

chance to ask you a question or want something answered, we can give you those later and get you to answer them as well. Mr Berger.

John BERGER: Thank you for your appearance today. I had some experience in the 2011 floods with people that I know up here. Leigh, I just want to take you back to the predictions again and where you see the trigger points are into the future if these events do come this way again. Is the community aware of what those trigger points are or where they might sit and how you would then react?

Leigh WILSON: A lot of work has been done by local agencies, including the SES, being the lead agency on the ground. And for every floor height, theoretically every floor height in town, the levels have been shot to the Australian Height Datum. We now have metered height level readings from the bridge here in the centre of town. That was an outcome from 2011. And by the way, Campaspe Shire Council had to agree for the funding and the maintenance of it even though it benefits the bureau's forecasts and everything else. So there is a large amount of local knowledge now as to what that means with the flood predictions.

I think the problem is this has set a whole new datum point. Historically, we have minor, moderate and major flood events. For the major flood events now, we really have major and then extreme and then greater again, so this has reset the bar. So there has been a tremendous amount of work that has gone into informing the public. How much they take on board themselves is another matter, but largely the public is very well informed. We have got good mapping and we understand the extent of the flooding, but once again, this was so much greater that it was sort of the tipping point for the bulk of our community.

John BERGER: And can you expand a little bit more on the warning systems that lacked in that particular event?

Leigh WILSON: So typically how it works here is we will have a town hall meeting. So there was a town hall meeting three days out before the event saying, 'Get prepared. We've got something major coming.' And then the next night it was: 'This is what we know is coming – to the best of their knowledge, 2011 levels, maybe 100 millimetres higher.' What we were experiencing was probably 300 millimetres higher, and in a very flat terrain that extra couple of hundred millimetres makes a big difference. The river was 2.6 kilometres wide; that is the town. It was the width of the town. So the methodology for that is the bureau is doing its forecasting, and it is working through the agencies to do its predictions of what that means. Now, some X factors in that: during the flooding we have had some upstream gauges fail, so that does not help those extra predictions. In the outer regions of the Bendigo area in some of the catchment there are large amounts of urban development. I do not know the extra increase of inflows from that area – or faster inflows, run-off – and what that means for us. What I can say is that every event is different, and it really comes back to the rainfall pattern and where it falls in the catchment. But where we have a full lake, a full reservoir, unable to release water in a quick means, then it is just purely uncontrolled spill. For those people that like their numbers, we had something in the vicinity of over 100,000 megalitres of water come through our town in a 24-hour period. The river can handle 20,000 megalitres a day before it causes evacuations.

John BERGER: Thank you.

The CHAIR: Ms Watt.

Sheena WATT: I just have a question about medical help, if that is okay. Thank you, all three of you, for being here. I have a background in health, and I just want to know about the medical response.

Interjection from gallery.

Sheena WATT: Hi. Can you hear me now, folks? Hi. I am very interested to hear about the medical response. I was, quite frankly, shocked to hear about the ambulances, and then you talked about the pharmacy and how the pharmacy was affected. Can you talk to me about medications, the medical assistance and the long-term re-establishment of health and the good health of people when it comes to that?

Leigh WILSON: Certainly. Our local health provider, Rochester and Elmore District Health Service, was flooded. During the last flood event they had to evacuate because they lost power, and the power ran the pumps. The pumps were for fire services, and that is the reason they were evacuated. This time around it was flooding. Our aged care facility and our immediate medical response was flooded –

Sheena WATT: My next question was about the aged care community.

Leigh WILSON: so they had to evacuate. They had really good plans, and they did a power of work. The staff, effectively, were making decisions to do their job and accompany patients to leave the area while their homes were being flooded.

I can only make the presumption of the risk to staff, under occupational health and safety, that led Ambulance Victoria to exit the area. But then there was no backfill, so we had nothing over the weekend of the flood. I am aware that agencies on the ground – volunteers on the ground with experience – had requested ambulance assistance and were unable to get any, so once they stabilised a person, they evacuated that person via police vehicle. I am very much aware that we had no presence on the ground. Then in the immediate several days after, being safe in town, I personally went and visited my doctor. I hunted him down to find out where he was. Fortunately, his clinic had not been flooded, and we were able to get him to start providing some services there. As days went on, staff from the hospital were able to go in there and work out of the clinic to start providing some of that first aid. But if it was not for the trained volunteers on the ground here, we would have had zero first aid for several days.

Sheena WATT: Okay.

Wendy LOVELL: How long did it take the army to get here?

The CHAIR: Sorry, hang on.

Sheena WATT: I just have some questions in regard to recommendations about the first aid and first response and what we need to do to improve that.

Leigh WILSON: Clearly the SES and the CFA personnel have some pretty advanced levels of training, and some of them do actually work in paramedic-type fields. That was what we had. So it was the locals that were here because of the events that were here. We had no higher tier or higher structure. Also, to talk about the pharmacy, the pharmacy here and the pharmacists, with their learned experience from the previous flood – they had been through that – enacted their plans. The business was flooded, but they minimised the risk and the loss of stock, and because of their experience with triaging off the back of COVID, on day one of the flood recovery they were operating.

Sheena WATT: Day one – okay. That is quite extraordinary.

Leigh WILSON: Yes, they were operating. Now, I am aware, and I do not really want to talk ill of larger businesses, but when we talk about small businesses and we talk about the big chains – we have the big chain in Echuca, the big box pharmacy stores. With the risk to their staff to turn up, they closed. They closed. We could not get scripts. Echuca was functioning. Echuca did not get flooded, by and large, and they closed. Our local pharmacy here was flooded for the weekend. The first day they were able to get into it, they were open. Then they proceeded to track down their customers as best they could, and they were packaging prescriptions, they were finding them and they were taking medications to them.

Sheena WATT: Look, I know that there are other questions, and we might circle back if we get a chance.

The CHAIR: Yes, and I think we will have time to circle back around, so we will do another lap. Mrs Tyrrell.

Rikkie-Lee TYRRELL: Okay. Thank you, Chair. You mentioned that businesses have shut down. Do you know exactly how many or roughly how many?

Tracie KYNE: There have been three shopfronts close due to lack of people through the door. As I mentioned, two-thirds of our community left town. We have had three close their doors.

Rikkie-Lee TYRRELL: Yes. Right. That will lead on to my next question: how many businesses are still working towards getting back to pre-flood standard that you are aware of?

Tracie KYNE: One hundred per cent.

Rikkie-Lee TYRRELL: One hundred per cent? And do you have a figure of the economic loss to the community yet?

Tracie KYNE: No, I do not.

Rikkie-Lee TYRRELL: Do you know when we might be able to see it projected?

Tracie KYNE: No idea. It would have to go into the billions.

Leigh WILSON: We have requested Campaspe Shire Council to work on the economic recovery plan and tease out more data. I think what you need to understand as well is that a lot of people do not feel comfortable talking about how things are. There is that mental approach of resilience and, 'We're okay and they're not okay.' So it is more complex.

Tracie KYNE: The tragic part of all of this is: if our community was not as resilient as it is, we would not be where we are today, inasmuch as two-thirds of our homes probably back up and running and our businesses operating from their front doors. It would not be happening. It is disheartening to hear government members say that our community needs to be more resilient. I do not think that is possible.

Rikkie-Lee TYRRELL: No, I do not think so either. With the local volunteer services, you said that the CFA and the SES units were the main force in helping everybody. Do you know how many volunteers actually man these brigades, so that the rest of the committee here has an understanding?

Leigh WILSON: In my understanding, SES volunteers sit between 10 and 12 people, and the CFA – I am hazarding a guess, but I think their numbers are somewhere between 30 and 40.

Rikkie-Lee TYRRELL: Okay.

Tracie KYNE: Can I also mention that we have got local businesses, earthmoving: Nichol Trading, Ward Bros, even Dwyer's earthmoving – they all brought trucks into town to move debris from the nature strips of our homes. If not for them –

Rikkie-Lee TYRRELL: Exactly.

Tracie KYNE: And they lost hundreds of thousands of dollars paying employees and were not reimbursed for that rubbish removal.

Rikkie-Lee TYRRELL: That is okay. Thank you. I would also like to put into account with our committee that back in the old days when I was a member of the fire brigade I was also a member of the SES, so we might see volunteers manning both stations. So we can chip down that number a bit more as well. Thank you.

The CHAIR: Thanks, Mrs Tyrrell. Dr Ratnam

Samantha RATNAM: Thank you, Chair. Good morning, everyone. Apologies for being late this morning. I am just going to ask one question. I am happy to circle back because I missed some of your testimony earlier, so pardon me if you answered this in your opening statement. From the lessons and everything you all have experienced, and particularly the things that have gone wrong and could go better next time, do you all feel like you have had an appropriate place to channel that feedback and those lessons so that we are prepared should unfortunately there be another event? Is there a place to channel all of this insight?

Tracie KYNE: Can I answer that? I feel like we have channelled many recommendations. We are not being heard.

Samantha RATNAM: Okay. You do not feel heard.

Tracie KYNE: We have strongly requested that we get that dam to 90 per cent capacity so that in the event of another rain event it can capture some of that water. From a Rochester residents' point of view, that romantic sound of rain on the roof actually brings anxiety to every community member in our town. The puddles that your children play in actually represent to us the flood that came through our town. There are so many things that trigger anxiety and sadness within our community because of the things we have experienced, and it is so

hard to understand that unless you have experienced it yourself. What we need is to be heard and to be understood and to be taken seriously when we say, 'That dam sitting at 100 per cent now is frightening for all of us, and we need that dropped.' This time last year before the flood it was sitting at 50 per cent. Who would have thought that a major rain event would have created what it did last year? So we need to be taken seriously. We need gates in that dam wall to release water when the BOM tells us we have got a major rain event coming. Let us get rid of 10,000 to 20,000 meg a day. We talk about the environmental impact of using water that way – it is a waste. But what is the environmental impact on our community – not just property, not just land but the mental health of our community members? It is enormous – enormous.

Samantha RATNAM: Thank you very much.

The CHAIR: Did you want one more? I will come back.

Samantha RATNAM: Yes, that is all right.

The CHAIR: Ms Broad.

Gaelle BROAD: Thank you. I just want to acknowledge you guys are all representing the community, and what I have witnessed in Rochester is very unique. It is incredible the strength and the resilience that you guys have shown, and just the number of submissions that have come from this area has been amazing, so thank you for that, and the response that I saw with that tight-knit network right at the start was crucial. This committee is listening to you and very keen to put forward recommendations, so I guess I am keen to hear from each of you what those recommendations would be. You have touched on mitigation, and Leigh, you talked about people on the ground. I am interested, is that to get more people helping clean out the houses, fill in the insurance claims and fill in the grant claims – what types of recommendations are you keen to see from us with this final report?

Tracie KYNE: I think from the business network, agribusiness and residential home owners, we want something done to that dam. Whether that be a larger dam, whether that be – look, we are not experts in dams, but we want something done there, because the flow-on effect from that will be that we protect our community from future flooding. We talk about having people on the ground and having help with rebuilds and all of that – we can eliminate all that with work done on our dam.

Elizabeth TREWICK: I think, Gaelle, I would like to add to that too, that when I talk with the education lens, we have three schools in town and they come under different departments, so to speak, but our children play sport together and our children play together, so when it comes to recovery our children should be considered as one, not an us and a them factor. I think as somebody sitting in a space supporting children and their families, we need to be considered a community of education people, not 'these schools and this school'. I think that is a really important message.

Tracie KYNE: Yes, that is really important.

Leigh WILSON: From my perspective, I participated in just about everything there could have been to work on from the 2011 event. I was part of the Neil Comrie review, and so going into this event I felt with the warnings we had, okay, I was confident, 'We're going to be helped through this. Yes, it's going to be bad, we've got a lot of work to do, but we're going to be helped through this.' So I was completely shattered when that myth broke. It did not happen, and I do not have, and I struggle to find, that confidence that anything will change. This is what we rely on you for, to help us change these things.

But on the ground, it is such a large level of trauma that you cannot take the community out of the recovery, because we are here anyway. We are going to be here, and you need that local knowledge, whether it is finding somebody, an address, whatever that may be. It was several of us just simply with our contacts in our phones that were able to start pulling things together – the community house, Tracie, Liz. Liz rang me: 'Is it safe to come back into town to go to the school to have a look?' It was our network, and what we needed was that high level of government support to – not just some 'Road closed' signs, not just a bit of police presence, but we needed that coordination and backup to allow us to do that a bit more intimately on the ground, but we needed that high-level backup.

Right from the very start we flagged mental health will be our single biggest issue, and we still do not have a mental health plan. There are a lot of mental health service providers and there are a lot saying what they will do, but there is no plan. There is no broader coordination. There are meetings. Who, if this all goes wrong, loses their job for not doing that? That is a question that will never be answered, because nobody wants to put their hand up, but on the ground that is what impacts us, every single person. Could more people on the ground help us? Absolutely, if the population were not here. Could it be coordination? Absolutely. Could it be people helping to fill out paperwork? Absolutely. Could one government employee walking the CBD area do an assessment of every single business right then and there – and the ATO classifications are all there; all the business classifications are already sorted out – and get a little bit of paperwork off each person and get that ball rolling? Absolutely. What is the result of not doing that? Countless hours of business owners trying to put information together, all online – in our first week, we did not have the internet. Everything was online. The phone service was getting very poor. Our ability to respond, the trauma – many business owners have not even attempted to put in applications for financial assistance, because it was getting too hard. Some fell through the cracks; we are still trying to find help for them. One person – what one person could do. Then you have got one person maybe able to help members of the broader community.

We have only known in the last few days the total number – our best guess – of homes flooded over floor in those first couple of weeks. Several of us locals – and this is a mistake that I feel bad about – could have walked the street and we could have identified, from the front yard, where those houses were. But we chose to help people.

The CHAIR: Melina.

Melina BATH: Thanks, Chair. Thank you very much. I want to drill down into the comparison between the 2011 flood and the 2022 flood. My understanding is – I am ignorant, and I am assuming some of the members of this committee will be ignorant and that you will have an understanding – North Central CMA, post that 2011 flood, conducted a Rochester flood study and there were recommendations. I think it was actually Peter Walsh, the former water minister, who funded some of that –

The CHAIR: Nice shout-out.

Melina BATH: Yes, and welcome to Peter, who is in the audience today. There was a recommendation from that about – and I am going to use the L-word, the ‘levees’ word – levees in Rochester. I am reading an article from the *Weekly Times* about how you were the mayor at the time and there was a survey that came out from the Campaspe shire inquiring into whether the community wanted these levees as per that recommendation from the report. Can you unpack that for us to share what was going to happen with those levees and why the community said, reading this, 90 per cent? Is that accurate? Do you want to unpack that, please?

Leigh WILSON: Yes. The flood review started with broad community engagement of every conceivable idea that members of the public and the agencies may have had that might help to mitigate floods. At a higher level, we had come off the back of the millennium drought. That was just very fresh in our minds. That was the first time Lake Eppalock had filled since the millennium drought, and then we had a flood. In our minds at the time the consensus was, you know, ‘We’ve just had the drought. We’re not going to worry about talking about what we can do at Lake Eppalock because droughts are a thing.’ The consensus was, for many people and many experts, that the event we experienced in 2011 was the biggest in our living –

Melina BATH: Out of the box.

Leigh WILSON: Yes, the biggest in living memory, and in our lifetime – 25, 40 years – we are not going to see anything like that again. But what we are really preparing for is a higher frequency – because of climate change – of lesser events, which would threaten a lot of houses. So the mitigation was looking for everything we could do downstream. That is my best recollection of that process. It broke down into what we could do. A lot of things were dismissed earlier on by the simple return on the investment, and then it came down to what can be done around town by the use of works and measures. So levees – once the water gets to town, what can we do?

There were two main proposals of diverting water away from around Rochester through existing flood plains. The path out to the west was spread over too big an area; it was a massive area and it would be very slow-

moving water. There is a natural breakaway that moves out to the east which goes through some of our neighbouring farming communities very close by, where the water went this time – that is where the water does go. Works and measures to control the greater flow of water through there more quickly – that, on paper, would yield a fairly big mitigation response.

That worked its way through council, and by a process of elimination that was the thing that council went to, and it went to the community. Every household in Rochester had the opportunity to vote as to whether they supported it or not. In my recollection around 72 per cent of the public of Rochester said they did not want to do that. They did not want to flood out, effectively, their neighbours to save themselves.

Melina BATH: Thank you. It was good to see that there was an assessment done, and then I guess the community had that control over whether it went forward, or various measures went forward. Thank you, Chair.

Another one I have is in relation to the 2011 to the 2022 recovery grants. Tracie, you mentioned that the time to apply for grants at the moment is cumbersome and to get tangible relief is cumbersome. If you can recall, what worked in 2011? What was there in 2011 that is not there now? What are some of those impediments that are there now that you did not get?

Tracie KYNE: Funnily enough I was not involved in small business in 2011. I was not on the Rochester Business Network back then. I was a PAYG-employed person. Other than repairing the businesses we had – our house did not even flood back then. I cannot speak on 2011. 2022 – I think we have already discussed how cumbersome that has been and how support from the government to actually walk business to business would be a benefit.

Melina BATH: Yes, sure.

Leigh WILSON: If I may – and these are the pros and cons of being in a small community – during 2011 I was the president of the chamber of commerce at that time.

Melina BATH: You have had many hats, Leigh.

Leigh WILSON: Yes, yes – opening comments about many years in community groups. The process was paper based back in 2011. It was a very straightforward application process. It was very easy to navigate. Yes, it did require obtaining quotes – similar sorts of processes – but the turnaround time was much quicker than what we are experiencing now. I do understand that this is a statewide approach – it is much bigger – but when you have got such a similar impact, surely some things could be streamlined. I have sat in a room with Dan Andrews, and we said to Dan – the Premier – about one particular business here that had to demonstrate that they were flooded over. They were basically on the front page – photos on every national newspaper and state newspaper – and they were getting asked by a public servant, doing their job, ‘Were you impacted?’ They had lost their business and lost their house. One person in town – what that one person in town can do to know what is going on is the world of difference and just removes so much pain.

The CHAIR: We have got more questions, I am sorry.

Melina BATH: Thanks, Chair.

The CHAIR: I am going to have to move us along because I am conscious of time. This session will end at 10:30, so I want to make sure that everyone gets their questions in. Tracie, I just want to ask you – but this is for all of you, though: there is a very strong view that you all have that Eppalock should have a flood mitigation role. I understand that the department, DEECA, is currently doing a study about that to determine that. But at the moment they do not, and it is the strong view of the community that it should have a mitigation role. Is it correct? Do I understand it correctly?

Tracie KYNE: Correct, yes.

The CHAIR: Okay. The other thing you are saying is that you kind of need bodies on the ground quickly to respond to some of the clean-up mechanism, and then I guess the process of applying for grants et cetera should have been a bit more streamlined. And perhaps because you did not have the technology and everything was down, you cannot go online to apply for something if you do not have the –

Tracie KYNE: That is right.

The CHAIR: Yes. So short and sharp, just make it very simple and quick for us: what are your top three things – apart from those two things that I have just mentioned, which were obvious – that you think have to and must change?

Tracie KYNE: For me – I will do one if we do one each.

The CHAIR: Yes, perfect.

Tracie KYNE: To see the army drive through our town and keep going to Echuca was devastating for all of us.

The CHAIR: So army response that is here – local.

Tracie KYNE: Yes, army response. We can ship them off overseas to help with natural disasters, but we cannot deploy them to our towns.

The CHAIR: Okay, so army response in Rochy, yes.

Tracie KYNE: Yes

Leigh WILSON: Surety of funding and continuity of funding. We had mental health services offering one-month contracts to employees. You cannot secure an employee for mental health services with a one-month contract. We need long-term plans. Mental health, recovery and funding for council for infrastructure. There needs to be surety –

The CHAIR: I get it, yes.

Leigh WILSON: And it needs to be in place quickly so everybody can get on with it.

The CHAIR: And just before I ask you for your third one, do you think that the town itself could do well with having an overarching emergency plan so that in the future everyone knows what their role is, because that has not happened yet, has it? You do not have that yet. Okay, so like you said about coordination –

Leigh WILSON: The recovery component, yes.

The CHAIR: Yes, okay.

Elizabeth TREWICK: Mine would be wellbeing and a focus on recovery for our services, for our health, for our education space. We have talked about business. We have touched on health.

The CHAIR: Recovery.

Elizabeth TREWICK: It is about when the water hits, what happens to our most vulnerable – our youngest and our oldest?

The CHAIR: And it is also about moving forward, though –

Elizabeth TREWICK: Absolutely.

The CHAIR: because you have been really good at labelling what has happened, but how are you going to move people forward? So talking about, ‘All right, we’ve got a plan now to help people recover,’ because you can keep talking about that, but you are not going to move forward and recover. So how do you then move people forward? That sort of thing, yes.

Elizabeth TREWICK: Absolutely, yes.

The CHAIR: Great. Mrs Tyrrell, a question.

Rikkie-Lee TYRRELL: Yes. Leigh, earlier you mentioned that the gauges upstream had failed. Can you please explain that a bit more in depth?

Leigh WILSON: So my understanding is that for at least one or two of the gauges upstream the water was higher than the gauges, and effectively that was it, they stopped broadcasting.

Rikkie-Lee TYRRELL: Okay.

Leigh WILSON: Yes. And so the importance of that is then that final understanding or the opportunity to give the best projection of heights on the ground. A lot of work was done to get that mapping correct, and so once they lose that, then it is just best guessing here.

Rikkie-Lee TYRRELL: Okay. So you would suggest new gauges, bigger gauges.

Leigh WILSON: I would suggest a complete overhaul. The mapping, everything needs to be redone and recalibrated to a new understanding.

Rikkie-Lee TYRRELL: Thank you.

Tracie KYNE: When you have got the likes of a farmer upstream who rings and says, 'Our star pickets are underwater; you need to get out,' we need backing systems better than that.

Rikkie-Lee TYRRELL: Exactly. Thank you.

The CHAIR: Ms Lovell.

Wendy LOVELL: Like all of you I was flood affected as well. I was more fortunate than many people here in Rochester, but it was both my sheds and underneath my house. I was displaced for about 10 days, but I have gone home. But like all of you, I lived that fear every day this winter as we have seen more and more rain and been checking daily the Goulburn–Murray Water website storage levels. I note that today Eppalock is at 100.3 per cent.

Tracie KYNE: Correct.

The CHAIR: Is there a question.

Wendy LOVELL: This time last year it was 55.96 per cent, so I understand your nervousness about Eppalock. As Leigh would know, I was in town here on 19 and 20 July. I had meetings with some of the recovery committee scheduled for the afternoon of the 19th that had to be rescheduled because Minister Shing came to town and there was a meeting with her. The next morning I spoke at the community breakfast, and the anger at that meeting was absolutely palpable. I was just wondering if you could expand on what your ask of Minister Shing was and what her response was and what needs to happen to Eppalock?

Tracie KYNE: The request to Minister Shing was to decrease the dam to 90 per cent capacity. Her response was that will not be considered. There was no discussion. There was no hearing why we wanted that, and that was devastating. She commented that Rochester lives on a flood plain so we should expect things like this and that our community should be more resilient, and that is the biggest insult I think we have ever received as a community.

Leigh WILSON: If I may answer, and it is a little bit different – I was incredibly disappointed. We were very respectful. I do not believe any argument we may have had would have influenced a different outcome. But if I can respond by saying, my concern is –

We are acknowledging that climate change is the threat. We are going to see an increasing threat. And if we cannot find a way forward to help mitigate it for us but at some stage we see Millionaires Row on the coastline get hundreds of millions of dollars spent to protect their coastline from increasing water heights and climate change, are we less than money?

The CHAIR: Our final question is from Mr Berger. Like I said, if committee members do have other questions, they can submit them on notice. So please do not feel like you have missed out. John.

John BERGER: Leigh, I just wondered whether you can update us on how the recovery program is going. I took some tours of the streets this morning and noticed there are a bunch of containers and skips and people living in caravans, effectively camping on their front yards. How are they going?

Leigh WILSON: It is very slow. I think initially we were thinking it might be two years to get overwhelmingly the population back in their homes. It is certainly going to be three years or longer.

John BERGER: Is it a lack of trades, resources, or is it insurance issues?

Leigh WILSON: There is some lack of trades, but we are getting a bit more information on that. Some trades have some surplus capacity and others do not. There have been some complications around shortages of building materials. We have had delays in building information resourcing – so that is building permits and planning permits. These things can be worked through as time goes on. But I would like to describe that if you think of a bell curve, and we are on the uptick of the bell curve, maybe even if everything aligned, the stars aligned, we might not have been able to do a real lot as a society to help that uptick – get more people in their homes. But we can certainly influence the peak and the trough on the other side and shorten that time frame, and that is our obligation.

Tracie KYNE: And 10½ months down the track our house has not started in its repairs, and there are issues with insurance.

The CHAIR: I just want to expand on your interactions with insurance companies. What has that been like?

Tracie KYNE: Again, it is not being heard, and it is the threat of going to AFCA, where ‘We might get something done. We’ll get back to you by the end of the month.’ And that has happened for 10 months now.

Leigh WILSON: Assessment happens pretty quick. Insurance delays – for the average person they have only got to flutter their eyes, and then it is another two weeks or another month. Scopes of works are incompetent at best – missing entire rooms. A lot of people out of despair are just taking whatever it is and just agreeing with it. The building outcome for a lot of people, if they are navigating through the insurance program, is not necessarily the best outcome. They are having substandard results. For those that have navigated and get through to a payout, if they are not astute enough, they are taking payouts insufficient to deliver the necessary repairs. For those that can work through that and navigate and get a good payout, then they are waiting for builders. We are also moving into a new phase of ‘Is everybody able to rebuild?’ We have got a lot of people that have just got their houses gutted. They have taken their payout. They are putting their house on the market; they are leaving town. This sets us up for a dynamic shift in our social make-up of a reasonable percentage of owner-occupiers to potentially a greater influx of landlords – opportunistic landlords – and that could lead to a dramatic shift in our socio-economic make-up. So we are moving into unknown territory.

The CHAIR: Well, given it is 10:27 I think we might wrap up this session. I just want to thank you all very much for coming and giving your evidence today. I know it has been incredibly difficult for you, all of you, and so please make sure that you reach out and get the appropriate support if you have found this particularly challenging. I know there is information around Lifeline. I know the council is doing a great job providing mental health support. So I know it has been very challenging for you, and we thank you all very much for giving us your time today.

Witnesses withdrew.