

TRANSCRIPT

LEGISLATIVE COUNCIL ENVIRONMENT AND PLANNING COMMITTEE

Inquiry into the 2022 Flood Event in Victoria

Melbourne – Wednesday 6 December 2023

MEMBERS

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David Ettershank – Deputy Chair

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WITNESS

Jaelyn Symes, Minister for Emergency Services.

The CHAIR: Welcome back to the committee's public hearings for the Inquiry into the 2022 Flood Event in Victoria. Welcome, Minister.

I will read out this obligatory statement: all evidence taken here is protected by parliamentary privilege as provided by the *Constitution Act 1975* and the 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. You will be provided with a proof version of the transcript following the hearings. Transcripts will ultimately be made public and posted on the committee's website.

Now, despite the fact you know us all, I might just get people to introduce themselves for the benefit of those following along at home. I might start on the screen.

Gaelle BROAD: Gaelle Broad, Member for Northern Victoria. Hello.

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

Sheena WATT: Sheena Watt, Northern Metropolitan Region.

Samantha RATNAM: Samantha Ratnam, Northern Metropolitan.

David ETTERS HANK: David Ettershank, Western Metro.

Wendy LOVELL: Wendy Lovell, Northern Victoria.

The CHAIR: Ryan Batchelor, Southern Metro and Chair of today's proceedings. Thank you for joining us. We now invite you to make an opening statement of up to 10 minutes.

Jaelyn SYMES: Perfect. Thank you so much, Chair, and good afternoon, committee members. I would like to begin by acknowledging traditional owners and paying my deep personal respects to elders past, present and emerging, and I extend that to any Aboriginal Victorians who may be joining us today.

I have prepared a bit of a statement, and I found it quite rewarding to revisit. It was obviously a traumatic experience for many people in Victoria, but being minister and getting to know so many people through this tragedy is something – I am truly honoured to be in the position of Minister for Emergency Services, because it is the people that make this portfolio one of the best portfolios in government. I did enjoy reflecting on the experience, and obviously it is still ongoing and will be for some time. I want to express my sincere thanks to the many, many people who have given their time and service to assist the response as well as clean-up and recovery from the event. As we know, it has been more than 12 months since the flooding event, and there are many inspirational people I have met along the way.

I would particularly like to acknowledge the incredible efforts of the Victoria State Emergency Service volunteers as well as volunteers and personnel from other agencies and local governments who have provided support during the emergency and beyond. As the committee have already heard, this event was a significant one in scale, occurring over 13 weeks and impacting 64 of Victoria's 79 local government areas. One of the benefits of a parliamentary inquiry is the opportunity for anyone impacted to contribute. And I know you have heard from – I think close to 200 individuals have verbally contributed to this inquiry as well as many other submissions, so I do want to thank you as committee members for your interest, for your empathy and for your worthy work. I acknowledge that it can be challenging listening to those stories, and I want to thank you for the way you have brought yourselves and conducted yourselves in that manner.

The event resulted, as you would have heard, in the destruction of thousands of homes and caused widespread damage to infrastructure, farms and public land. Over 4000 residential buildings were impacted as a result; 1709 were left uninhabitable. Over 12,000 agricultural properties have been impacted. It also tragically resulted in the deaths of two individuals, and I would like to take the opportunity to express my condolences to the families of those individuals.

As someone who has personally experienced their house being inundated with muddy waters, in 1993, I am familiar with the long-lasting physical and emotional impacts of a flooding event. We as a government and an emergency management sector have evolved and learned, and because of continual improvement the response and the recovery of this event far surpasses the experiences that my family had way back when. But we do acknowledge that there is always more to do, there are better ways of doing things and we always take the opportunity to learn. I do look forward to the committee's views on exactly that in the coming months as you examine the issue and you report on what we have come to know as the most recent disaster in Victoria. I know you will draw on many expert witnesses and those with real lived experience.

As you are well aware, the response to the event was significant and complex, and as such required combined response across multiple different agencies. VICSES was the primary responder, with volunteers contributing over 400,000 hours of services during the event. Numerous other agencies played significant roles: CFA, FRV, FFMV, VicPol, Shep search and rescue, Life Saving Victoria, Ambulance Victoria, ESTA, fisheries came along as well and the ADF, as well as interstate emergency services agencies. Together they responded to over 20,000 requests for assistance, undertook 1500 flood rescues, deployed 1.5 million sandbags and worked tirelessly to ensure communities were kept informed and that their emergency needs were met. ERV, so Emergency Recovery Victoria, which is our government-established dedicated recovery agency, has also been mobilised since the onset of the event. They established the flood recovery hotline to connect individuals to available supports. They have run the vital clean-up program, dealing with over 2500 registrations, overseen the delivery of more than 6900 secondary assessments to determine the impact on local communities and provided support to more than 2000 people in relation to their temporary accommodation needs. As of today, there are still 118 people that remain in an emergency accommodation program.

Across a lot of communities, such as Rochester, Maribyrnong, Echuca, Shepparton and Seymour, there remains significant recovery and rebuilding challenges, and like me, you will have heard from witnesses in relation to the complexities of some of these matters. We know that recovery takes time, and that is why we will continue to work with the communities to understand what they need and respond accordingly. The local recovery hubs are a really good initiative. It is a place where you can get real-time support, and what we know is that some people are only seeking support for the first time 12 months after the event, so having a local recovery hub is a really good way to ensure that people can get the help when they need it – not necessarily the experiences during the emergency, it can be sometime after. That is the experience of the amazing staff that are in those hubs.

I thought it might be beneficial, for the committee, to provide a brief overview of my role and responsibilities during emergencies. As the Minister for Emergency Services I am responsible for ensuring that the state has effective emergency management arrangements in place to support Victorians in responding to and also recovering from emergencies. I work with agencies to ensure that they have the resources and equipment to undertake the important work that they do for the community. It also means ensuring that we have the right legislative and policy frameworks, such as the *Emergency Management Act*, to support and empower agencies to do what they need to do.

Importantly, as you would appreciate, I am not responsible for making operational decisions about how Victoria's emergency management agencies respond to particular emergencies. Under Victoria's emergency management arrangements, the responsibility for operational decision-making sits with our key emergency management officials, including the emergency management commissioner and the chief operational officers of Victoria's emergency management agencies. Under the state emergency management plan, cabinet's or a subcommittee of cabinet's role is state strategic governance, making decisions and providing strategic direction to the emergency management sector. It is also an important information-sharing exercise to share operational awareness to fellow ministers, it is a way of ensuring that we are delivering a whole-of-government response and it is also an important insurance function that I have an important role in.

Last year the seasonal outlook identified a high likelihood of significant rainfall. To ensure I had the confidence in the system, I participated in a flood exercise at the State Control Centre in September, prior to the event. The exercise was designed to test and practice the sector's readiness, their response and relief arrangements in a flood and involved two state control team meetings. I also did a similar exercise just recently for fires. The flood exercise was scarily accurate in almost predicting what we underwent. It was just an exercise, but obviously their experience in knowing what is likely to happen is an important way to test for when it does, and that is exactly what happened in this instance.

As minister I also have an important role in communication, including informing the public via media on the latest intel and how best to be safe. On Tuesday, a few days before the significant rainfall event, I was involved in a statewide press conference at the State Control Centre with the head of VICSES, the EMC, the Premier and the bureau. There was significant rainfall forecast, and we asked communities to prepare – to give confidence that our agency stood ready.

A lot of work is done also behind the scenes with my office in conjunction with the Premier's office. They are on the phone to local MPs, to councils and to Commonwealth counterparts to ensure everyone is looped in, and we have access to on-the-ground valuable intel. We also work with councils to understand their most pressing needs. I acknowledge that sometimes it gets very confusing for councils, and we do want to make sure that we are offering as much support as possible for them. That is why EMV particularly works hand in glove with councils in relation to their immediate emergency needs and also recovery and interaction with the Commonwealth, particularly in relation to the DRFA.

I think that the committee has touched a little bit on the appropriateness of VICSES as the lead agency for flooding events, and I do want to take the opportunity to unequivocally confirm my confidence in VICSES as the control agency and primary responder agency for flooding events as well as storms, earthquakes, landslides – I have had them all since I have been Minister for Emergency Services – and tsunami warnings as well. During this event and countless other emergencies VICSES and their amazing volunteers have demonstrated their tremendous dedication, capability and capacity.

The CHAIR: One minute.

Jaelyn SYMES: One minute? Throughout the event last year VICSES volunteers did work tirelessly to strengthen flood defences, evacuate communities and respond to requests for assistance. They developed the state emergency management subplan as well as assisting with preparations of six regional and 45 municipal emergency management flood plans. They have prepared 140 local flood guides to provide information about flood preparedness to at-risk communities and delivered public communication campaigns such as – I am sure you have heard about them – 15 to Float and the Be Flood Ready campaign in relation to 'Bag it, block it, lift it and leave'. In the most recent state budget I am very pleased to have committed over \$32 million for funding for VICSES, including some facility developments, equipment and capability upgrades and other initiatives. They are an amazing organisation. I have been incredibly honoured to meet with many, many people from SES, and the reception that they receive from the communities that they support is also very impressive.

As I said, the experience was hard. We are still in recovery in a lot of areas. We know that that is a long-term proposition. The ES portfolio is relentless – it is challenging – but it is the people that certainly make it worth it. I am in your hands in relation to any topics you would like me to cover today.

The CHAIR: Thank you. Wonderful. Members of the committee will have about 10 minutes – probably just a little bit under – each. I might start. You mentioned an exercise that you undertook on 19 September, so a month-ish before the floods. Can you tell us a bit more about that exercise and exercises like that, who participates and how they work? And then we will probably get into lessons.

Jaelyn SYMES: Yes. This one was the first one I participated in as Minister for Emergency Services in the formal capacity in which we did. It is designed to mimic real life as much as possible. It is at the State Control Centre in their large meeting room with representatives from a variety of agencies. We basically role-play, effectively, what is going to happen. I worked with, at the time, the emergency management commissioner Andrew Crisp to run through a flood exercise. We had seen the experiences of New South Wales and Queensland. Having grown up in regional Victoria and having experienced floods – the once-in-100-year floods or once-in-25-year floods were kind of due, I was feeling. I wanted to make sure that I knew exactly

what would happen in relation to that, and I think the agencies appreciated being tested and run through as well. Not that I doubted their preparedness, but I wanted to see it firsthand. So there was a combination of reasons as to why that particular one was chosen. A lot of time in planning it and creating the real-life – you know, where the water is going to go and the maps and all this stuff. You get a whole pack on the day, and everyone is around the room, from all of the emergency services agencies, the information coordinators – all of the people that you would expect to be at a State Control Centre – and away you go. We simulated two state control team meetings. They are what happens each morning of an emergency in real life.

The first one considered the flood readiness: we were given predictions from the flood analysts and the bureau were involved in relation to ‘This is what is likely to happen.’ That is where you test awareness, evacuation measures, things such as council relief centres – are they ready to go? – school closures, road closures and the like, and everyone sort of tests all of that. The second state control meeting was in relation to relief activities once the event had peaked. During a normal event, state control team meetings are usually around 8:30 each morning, and they are chaired by the rostered-on state controller. Having lived through the real-life ones and the simulation one, we take them very seriously and they very much mimic real life. As I said, it was unfortunate that this one turned out to be a reasonably accurate prediction of what was going to happen. But you have the opportunity to take the time in a practice to ask questions and make sure that everyone can move as agilely and as quickly as possible when it happens: understanding who the key people are, what the lead responsibilities are, the types of issues that could emerge and talking through what, as I said, community evacuations look like, what kind of key messages are going to be best. Is there a community impacted that has members that might require different types of communication? Are there any vulnerable cohorts you need to think about, like aged care homes and the like? All of that is talked through. For me, I walk away going: ‘We’ve got some pretty amazing people in our emergency services who are so experienced and experts in their field.’ So I have full confidence after that event that we could respond to a flood. And as I have said, we have just done a fire one in the last couple months, hoping it does not come as true as the flood one did.

The CHAIR: Indeed. Reflecting back on that experience, what do you think the key lessons that you drew from that exercise were that you then got to implement in real life?

Jaelyn SYMES: People in emergencies rely on communications and information. I think, as you would appreciate – particularly us as local members – that is what we are used to. We know that community want information, they want to know what to be able to do and what the risk is, and they want to have the confidence that there are state government agencies that are prepared but also able to respond in the event that that happens. So I think the key take-out is making sure that everyone is lined up, ready to go. As I said, I am very confident that our agencies have those measures well in hand, but it is always good to test them, and retest them, time and time again.

The CHAIR: You talked a little bit just then about the importance of communications and information flow from the centre, I suppose, out into the community. What did you do in October in terms of communicating? What is your role in a setting like this, and what did you do in October to communicate with the public?

Jaelyn SYMES: As the forecast became more and more concerning in relation to the impending weather and the impact that might have on communities, we had regular briefings at the State Control Centre. The activation of risk at the centre goes up as it becomes closer and closer to an event happening. My particular role in relation to communications was, a few days out, to do a press conference with the EMC, VICSES, Tim Wiebusch and the Premier to explain to the community that we were expecting extreme weather and that we were expecting flood impacts in a range of areas across the state. So our message to the community was: ‘The agencies are prepared. We need you to be prepared.’ Asking people to download the app is something that we continually repeat – asking people to check on their neighbours and asking people to prepare their properties but also to know what to do in the event of a flooding incident in their neighbourhood. And I think probably the message that we unfortunately just have to continually repeat is not to drive through floodwaters. We see time and time again that people do not recognise the seriousness of the danger of entering water in their vehicle. It puts you at risk and indeed emergency services personnel who are called on to respond to your actions. So they are the key messages that we regularly repeat. ‘Download the app’ and ‘Do not drive through floodwaters’ are generally the two most common when it comes to preparing for floods. We did that a couple of days out to make sure that people understood the seriousness of it. It was a conscious decision to involve the Premier. And you still have people asking the question: ‘Are you sure this won’t be a fizzer?’ We wanted to make sure that people knew the serious risk that the state was about to endure.

The CHAIR: Great. I might leave it there and go to Ms Broad.

Gaëlle BROAD: Thank you. And thank you, Minister, for attending the inquiry today. It would be good if you could get your colleagues to turn up at inquiries too. You mentioned councils needing support from EMV and that the process is ongoing. But we have heard from Gannawarra Shire Council that they have been required to provide extensive evidence, including newspaper clippings, Bureau of Meteorology warnings and Facebook posts, to provide that evidence of flood damage. Why is this required when the flood impact is just very clear?

Jaclyn SYMES: It is a great question, Ms Broad, and it is one that I know frustrates councils. The arrangements and the partnerships with the federal government can be complex and can be frustrating, and I am certainly on record having expressed concerns about that in the past. When it comes to the evidentiary requirement, that is set by the federal government, and I have made advocacy advances to the federal government in relation to those matters. I agree with you in terms of if there has been an impact, you generally know, but some of the evidentiary requirements that are then needed would be: 'Well, was that damage prior to the event?' So there is a balance for the federal government, I guess, in terms of the level of evidence, without being too much of a burden, to ensure that there can be the flowing of funds for local councils to be able to do what they need to do in relation to recovery. They can be hard to navigate, and that is why we work very closely with councils. We have Emergency Recovery Victoria certainly helping them to streamline the process as well as officers from ERV, and as a state government, recognising the difficulty, we wanted to help them not have to wait too long, so we provided advance payments. I think we have got around \$48 million of advance payments that have gone to councils to ensure that they had immediate funding so that they could do clean-up activities on their land and manage public land restoration of community services that we expect would be eligible under the joint federal and state funding arrangements. I guess some good news is that the federal government have indeed acknowledged that it can be cumbersome. It does not necessarily work for everyone. It is frustrating for both state and local councils, and there is a review of the DRFA that is due to report in April next year. So that is some of the feedback that they have been given.

They are also doing round tables, I think they are calling them – getting out into places around the country that have been impacted by previous disasters and hearing from the experiences particularly of councils in relation to their experiences of accessing the funds that they need. As you would appreciate, often after all that hard work they get the money, but it is a bit of an effort for them. I want to make their job as easy as possible, and I am hoping that the outcomes of the review will recognise that as well.

Gaëlle BROAD: Well, it is pleasing to hear there might be light at the end of the tunnel, because it seems to be a lot more onerous than what they have experienced in the past. Now, you mentioned the finance and I guess payments being made in advance – because this is a big issue. What strategies does the government intend to implement to alleviate the financial gap experienced by small rural councils such as the Gannawarra Shire Council, which faces a certified estimates total of \$9.15 million and a 70 per cent cash advance resulting in a substantial \$2.74 million deficit? How will you work to resolve those issues?

Jaclyn SYMES: Look, those councils that obviously have been brought in under the DRFA, which allow councils to be eligible for reimbursement from the combined efforts of the state and federal governments. As we have just talked about in a previous question, it is the federal government's criteria that has to be met for those reimbursements. But we certainly have put the advance payments in. We have also allocated \$35 million to council in relation to some of their other activities that they have needed to undertake. We acknowledge that they are on the ground helping the community, and we really want to support them in that, so there has been an allocation of \$22 million for community recovery officers and also to establish those important community recovery hubs that I talked about. In addition, state supports have helped councils coordinate clean-up and kerbside waste collection, and that was \$150 million that the councils did not have to be responsible for. And we have also funded councils to undertake the impact assessments, which can go some way to helping them meet those evidentiary requirements under the DRFA. We will continue to work with councils in relation to their infrastructure needs in relation to other programs that government have.

Certainly, as you would appreciate as well as Ms Lovell, communities do not necessarily care which fund the money comes from in relation to their needs, but if they have been impacted by the floods, I always think that that is reason for perhaps priority in relation to some of their needs under other programs, and that is something

that I always look for when I am advocating under other programs, whether it is regional development or sport, for example.

Gaelle BROAD: Thank you very much. Now, I know you mentioned the landfill issue, but on the ground it took several days for the exemption of the landfill levy to be granted, which delayed the disposal of waste from properties. So do you have a plan to address that and expedite that process in future?

Jaclyn SYMES: Look, it is always a balance between what is safe to do and when. With the flood emergency, obviously it was ongoing for 13 weeks, so standing up the response looked different in each community as the water moved. In relation to the clean-up program, it was one of the first visible recovery support programs that we had. It was a \$150 million program. It was activated only days after water receded in Maribyrnong and Rochester. Local crews were on the ground supporting those clean-up activities. To date crews have removed, my notes say, over 11,955 tonnes – I think we can just say 12,000 tonnes – of flood debris, and the work certainly complemented council responsibilities to ensure that waste was removed.

When I was addressing I think Mr Batchelor's question just in relation to ministerial responsibilities – we have a subcommittee of cabinet that is convened for emergency purposes, and we were meeting daily in relation to that. Issues such as waste disposal – not only were we ensuring that we were getting contractors in there, the Minister for Environment was quick to act in relation to the waiver of the waste levy so that there were hopefully not many barriers for people being able to do that.

Gaelle BROAD: There were certainly delays in Rochester I guess with the Johns Lyng Group. It took them several weeks to aid in the clean-up, but by the time they arrived most houses had already been cleared. So yes, are you confident, like in future – obviously that is requiring a cabinet to kind of meet daily, but are there processes in place for that to roll out much quicker in future for places like Rochester?

Jaclyn SYMES: Well, my experience of Rochester in the days after was, yes, a lot of people got in and started doing their own clean-up and did not wait for the contractors. The advice that we would provide people is that it is okay to clean up your own properties, but you should wait till it is safe to do so. And some of the risks involved in cleaning up your property that has been subjected to water inundation are of course electrical concerns or just the general health concerns of the contaminated water, for instance, and the like. So it is a balance between making sure that people are safe in relation to their clean-up activities – but the more that we do this, the quicker our networks are. We know the contractors that we can go to quickly to ensure that they get to communities as fast as possible, but this was a large-scale event, and a lot of people were required to respond as timely as possible.

Gaelle BROAD: Have I got much time left?

The CHAIR: Fifteen seconds.

Gaelle BROAD: I did want to raise the grants issue and the challenges with that – people needing immediate invoices, delays because they cannot afford to make the payments now, it takes a while for water to go through – but I would be interested in your thoughts on the grants process and how to streamline that in future.

Jaclyn SYMES: For businesses?

Gaelle BROAD: For businesses and also I guess there was having to be registered for GST, which put some people out of it as well – primary producers. So yes, just your thoughts on the grants process. We have heard a lot of negatives from some and appreciation for the assistance from others.

Jaclyn SYMES: Do you want me to –

The CHAIR: Yes, yes. Go for it.

Jaclyn SYMES: Okay. I would like assistance to be rolled out to businesses as quickly as possible, and I think that you might remember that is why the state government did not wait for the federal government agreement in announcing \$5000 available for basically any impacted business, and we did not require a lot of evidence at all. I acknowledge that the next stage, to get the larger amounts which were activated under the DRFA in conjunction with the federal government, was more onerous, but there is sometimes a reason for that.

You have to get a balance again between, unfortunately, getting the help to people that need it and have endured the impact, but what we also know is that unfortunately some people act fraudulently as well. So you have got to balance the appropriate management of grants. You want it to go as quickly as possible to the right people in as streamlined a way as possible, and we are always looking at how we can do better in relation to that. But that is why we went really quickly with the immediate funds, and we have helped businesses. Particularly small business support has helped businesses with the additional support that they may have needed in relation to the various impacts that they have had.

The CHAIR: Dr Ratnam.

Samantha RATNAM: Thank you, Minister, for your commitment to emergency services and recovery and the evidence today before us. We have heard evidence throughout this inquiry that the Victorian government did not ask the inspector-general to conduct an incident review of the 2022 October flood event because of this parliamentary inquiry, but this inquiry was only resolved to commence in February 2023. So between October 2022 and February 2023, why didn't the government commission the review that they could have asked the inspector-general to do within that intervening five months?

Jaclyn SYMES: I might take some time just to go through the various ways that you review emergencies, and I think the only issue that I have with the way you framed your question was that I did not ask the IGEM to not –

Samantha RATNAM: Not do it.

Jaclyn SYMES: No, no.

Samantha RATNAM: You just did not ask him to do it. Why didn't you ask him to do it?

Jaclyn SYMES: Because it was his advice that he should not, and so –

Samantha RATNAM: He provided advice in that intervening five months that he should not do that inquiry?

Jaclyn SYMES: Correct. That is right. And I understood that his evidence to this inquiry confirmed that. His advice was that it was not required, and as you would appreciate, I take the advice of particularly someone such as Tony Pearce, with 40 years experience, pretty seriously. I certainly have had conversations but took his advice in relation to that matter. There are several ways to review and inquire in relation to your experiences of events. In relation to this event, we implemented – it is pretty cool, actually – the lessons management framework, or the EM-LEARN framework as they call it. So when you go into the State Control Centre and you are talking to people that are dealing with which aircraft are going where, where the risk is to wildlife, where the volunteers might be fatigued and need back-up support, you also have people that are sitting there constantly monitoring and evaluating and adding the lessons learned – reviewing from the start of it.

Samantha RATNAM: Continuous monitoring.

Jaclyn SYMES: Continuous monitoring and continuous improvement. They do an evaluation focusing on all of the activities from the start. It is actually invaluable – me, trying to reflect on what was I doing this time 13 months ago, they are doing it in there at the time. I think that is a really good model, and I think it is world's best practice.

In relation to the thematic review that the IGEM can do, he did form the view that that type of review was not called for in this matter. As I said, I take his advice seriously. If he had said that he would like to have undertaken one, that would not have been something that I would have stood in the way of. He also has own-motion powers, so he did not actually need me to request it anyway, but we have these conversations regardless. There have been a lot of people looking at this. EMV are undertaking the real-time monitoring and evaluation approach, but they are also looking at the long-running nature of the event. They have had 30 hot debriefs. They have looked at 4000 observations. They have 441 insights that allow the lessons again to be taken forward by agencies into the future. When you have an event, there are a number of ways to learn from it, to record it, to evaluate it.

Samantha RATNAM: So were you satisfied that that framework was in place? Were you satisfied with the competitiveness of the existing review process?

Jaclyn SYMES: Yes, I am, and I think you received some evidence also from Emergency Management Victoria in relation to – you do not want to burden your agencies with having to respond to numerous inquiries. But the whole-of-government submission and the evidence at this inquiry, that takes people away from their day-to-day activities. Recent weeks have demonstrated that we are having fires and floods and things at the same time. Yes, evaluation is vital; duplication is something you should avoid.

Samantha RATNAM: I might move to my next question, if that is okay.

Jaclyn SYMES: I am satisfied with the advice I received.

Samantha RATNAM: Thank you very much. So 14 months since the event, even through the course of this inquiry, evidence has been provided, even from Melbourne Water. We are no closer really to working out how the flood modelling, for example, at the Maribyrnong failed to predict the rapid rise in levels downstream. I understand and appreciate your role is to help support the community during the event and in the aftermath; I am setting that bold delineation. A question for you, however, is: are you concerned that we do not have clarity around this potentially really important preventative work, making sure our models are right, making sure the parts of the government that have oversight into ensuring that we are doing as much prevention and prediction as possible are as robust as possible? Do you have any concerns around that in terms of us being able to prevent the worst human impacts of disaster? Have you formed a view in the last year about that?

Jaclyn SYMES: I think continual flood mapping exercises to future-proof the state are very important. We know that climate change and urban development can change the nature of an event.

Samantha RATNAM: Are you confident that work is happening? It might be by your colleagues and other parts of government; it is a whole-of-government response. But given that you are picking up the aftermath and picking up the pieces of an event, are you confident that the front end is sort of holding up and doing its job given the evidence we have heard through this inquiry and the uncertainty that still remains over particularly modelling by Melbourne Water around Maribyrnong?

Jaclyn SYMES: In relation to futureproofing and betterment and the like – I assume you have received this evidence – the Disaster Ready Fund received a lot of applications from Victoria, and they were in relation to projects related to floods in particular. If the committee would like it, I have got the full list of successful projects specifically related to flood research and preparedness. This is a fund from the federal government, and we were fortunate to receive nearly \$5 million with co-contributions from our government as well as delivery partners. There are things such as flood studies for various council areas, flood mitigation projects, infrastructure projects and levee upgrades. So there is a particular fund that is all about ensuring that we are well placed to understand what might happen and prepare for worst-case scenarios. Flood modelling is really important, and we want to make sure that people have those as up to date as possible. They are not sexy announcements when you go, ‘Grant recipients – they get to do some work on a study’, but they are really important, and there is a lot happening around the state in relation to that, which I can leave with the committee.

The CHAIR: That would be great.

Samantha RATNAM: Just a question on the DRFA scheme, following up from what was asked previously – currently the scheme does not allow for building back better in Victoria. However, the Queensland government has managed to negotiate changes which allow for some futureproofing of rebuilt infrastructure. Are you advocating similarly for changes to this scheme to allow, for example, for flood-prone bridges to be rebuilt to be more flood-resistant?

Jaclyn SYMES: Yes. In relation to betterment, 14 of the most severely impacted councils are receiving money for those types of projects – resilience for essential public assets, like roads, bridges and footpaths that were damaged in the floods. We know that it is best to build back better. We know that that is something that we are having conversations with insurance companies about, because if we can make the state more resilient, we are not having to revisit and do the same thing again and again. So there is a program for betterment. It is also –

Samantha RATNAM: Are you advocating for the federal program to do it more readily?

Jaclyn SYMES: The review will look at issues such as that.

Samantha RATNAM: Great. Excellent. And one question – if you do not have time to answer it fully, I am happy for you to take this on notice. We have heard through evidence, particularly from community members and people in volunteer positions in rural and regional Victoria, there were frustrations about what they perceived at times as centralisation of the response. People were saying the model of the response is right – they feel like the model is correct in terms of who is responsible for what – but things went wrong with implementation. Key people who should have been around the table and consulted felt left out and without the info they needed to provide to their neighbours and their community. Is the government or are you inquiring into how this can be improved in the future? Many people were saying they were not involved, for example, in a post-incident debrief but they had valuable lessons from being on the ground. Are you looking into how they can be improved in the future?

Jaclyn SYMES: Always. I spend a lot of time talking to people that have been directly impacted, and I value everyone's contributions and their suggestions.

The CHAIR: Thank you, Dr Ratnam. Ms Watt.

Sheena WATT: Thank you, Minister, for being here. I know that this being our last day there are lots of previous submissions that we have discussed. And thank you to Ryan for asking my questions about the exercise – that is what I was particularly interested in.

The CHAIR: The Chair's prerogative.

Sheena WATT: Yes, that is what you get. I wanted to ask about once the flood actually started. I am keen to understand: what is your role as the Minister for Emergency Services, and how do you in fact get your information?

Jaclyn SYMES: It is a good question. It is one of the first things you ask when you get in this role, because you do not want to get in the way of people that are really experienced and really good at what they do. You want to add value.

Sheena WATT: I say that as someone who has previously been in the emergency coordination centre, so I understand and appreciate that. Thank you.

Jaclyn SYMES: Yes. For me, I try and put myself in situations so that people do not have to repeat themselves. We had the state control team meetings every morning, and I would join those so that I could listen to all of the agencies and their experiences. You would tap into the regional ICCs who would give on-the-ground advice about what was happening in those particular areas. It just meant that particularly the emergency management commissioner or Tim Wiebusch did not have to repeat what they had heard to me. You drop everything. I think we were in caretaker – like, 'What election?' I was focused on this event and doing the best I could to support our agencies and communities in relation to how they were responding. As I have said, I do not have operational decisions, but I do have important functions that support operations.

The key things I did were work with agency heads to amplify community messaging in terms of press conferences, and I did a lot of radio and spoke to a lot of local journos. Obviously, a lot of the impacted communities have country papers and a lot of them have social media platforms and the like, so we were ensuring that we were talking to as many people that could get out messages as possible.

It was really important to hear from local MPs and what they were experiencing on the ground and also CEOs and other community members to escalate issues to the SEC or indeed to broader government in relation to if there was somebody that was having a problem accessing a hardship payment and the like. You would find these people on the ground when you were out and about. What else did we do?

Sheena WATT: I might just ask then about other ministers –

Jaclyn SYMES: Yes, that is a good idea.

Sheena WATT: and how you then worked with other ministers, because there were in fact other ministers very much indeed affected by the flooding event. Can you talk about what sorts of structures exist around supporting other ministers that need to know the information, similar to you?

Jaclyn SYMES: The most formal way for communicating with other ministers is through the state emergency management committee. That is a subcommittee of cabinet. Obviously it is pretty agile, and you need to be nimble in an emergency, so you pick up the phone at any time. But the formal way of communicating is to have state emergency management committee meetings, and they began on 16 October. The membership is Premier, Treasurer, me, Minister for Police, Minister for Health, Minister for Education, Minister for Government Services and the ministers for energy, environment, children, water and agriculture.

Sheena WATT: It is pretty significant.

Jaclyn SYMES: It is the largest subcommittee of cabinet, and you would appreciate why. It is because we have to prepare for and respond to emergencies, and we are the government decision-making body in relation to that. So we would have those nightly, where we could debrief on community needs. It would always start with me and the emergency management commissioner giving an update on the latest impact and where the communities most at risk at that point in time were and also in relation to recovery efforts and the like, and other ministers could share their issues.

In the early days there was a lot of emphasis on DFFH and the Minister for Housing as well, just in relation to support for temporary accommodation. It is basically a good opportunity to see if there are any gaps and make sure that the departments and ministers are aware of them so that they can fix them as quickly as possible. One of the issues – I think it is a little bit similar to one of the issues that Ms Broad raised – was that we were getting so many applications for hardship payments that we were concerned that we did not have enough staff to process them, so VPS through the SEMC process were able to request additional support staff from across government to help with the processing of those applications so that people could get them as quickly as possible. They are examples of the types of real-life things that we would resolve as a ministerial group.

Sheena WATT: You mentioned that you visited a number of communities. How else was it that you used to find out what was happening on the ground, apart from information out of your briefings? I am sure that not everything is covered there and there is some on-the-ground intelligence that might not come through the mechanisms otherwise. Talk to me about how you find out information supplementary to your briefings.

Jaclyn SYMES: Yes. Look, I got around as much as I could. Starting with how I sort of started my response to your first questions – my advice to any member of Parliament is: rock up, go and see the relief centre in your community if your community has been impacted. Ms Lovell is well experienced in this. We have a unique position as MPs to have access to solving problems for people on the ground. You do not often know about these problems unless you get out there and talk to people. If you walk into a relief centre, you will find someone that needs help in navigating something. I do constantly. When you are out with the Premier, he walks around with a notebook and takes people's names and phone numbers down and gets people to fix their problems if we can. You do not necessarily hear about some of those issues at the control centre, because they are dealing with an emergency, obviously –

Sheena WATT: Large scale.

Jaclyn SYMES: a large-scale emergency. But getting out onto the ground, talking to those people that are either impacted or indeed helping people – you get a lot of intel from the Red Cross volunteers at the relief centres. They know everyone; they know who is vulnerable. They know who predominantly might need the most help, and I think my experience at relief centres is that everyone goes there first and the people that are left are the ones that need the most help, because generally people that go there are straight in the peak of an emergency. Then they can work out going to a friend's place or knowing how to access supports. Emergencies uncover issues that probably existed before an emergency in people that have difficulty in seeking support that they need. So getting out on the ground, making yourself available, listening to people that are dealing firsthand with people – local councils are fantastic in emergencies. They are the ones that are operating the relief centres. They know their communities. And I have got to say I find local MPs really good in emergencies as well. There is no politics in emergencies. Everybody is just wanting to help their community, and I find that quite rewarding.

Sheena WATT: More time?

The CHAIR: A minute and a half.

Sheena WATT: Oh, okay. Perhaps I will come back, then, if that is okay.

The CHAIR: Yes, no worries. Ms Lovell.

Wendy LOVELL: Thank you, and thank you, Minister, for appearing. It is good to have ministers here. Minister, under the emergency management arrangements there is an incident action plan for each area that is developed by the incident control agencies and approved by the incident controllers. That sets out the directions for the response to the incident by the emergency management team. Emergency management teams meet daily, and they have minuted meetings. There are also regional control teams that have the physical control of the floods. They meet daily and have minutes. Then, in addition to that, there is a regional emergency management team that meet daily and have minutes.

Jaclyn SYMES: During an emergency.

Wendy LOVELL: Yes, during the emergency. Then over and above all of that there is the state emergency management team that meet at the State Control Centre and have meetings and have minutes. I am just wondering, to give the committee a better understanding of the extent of the event and also the adequacy of the response to the event, if you would be willing to release to us each of the incident action plans and the minutes of all of those meetings.

Jaclyn SYMES: I might take that on notice. I am more than happy to give you as much information as I think I can give you. A 13-week event, daily minutes from meetings – I will take some advice on that. I do not have them. I have not asked for them. I sit there and it gets elevated – all of the information – up, so it is very valuable for that information to be had. One of the hesitations I have is that you want people to ensure that they are not hesitating in any of the record keeping that they are given. I do not know. It is not a request I consider reasonable for me to make, but I am not necessarily ruling it out for the committee.

The CHAIR: Why don't you give us your reflections, then. If we need to further consider it as a committee, we can.

Jaclyn SYMES: Yes.

The CHAIR: I agree there are some questions we have got to consider more deeply about what is appropriate and what we can digest as well.

Jaclyn SYMES: I am not here to hide anything, but you have asked for copious amounts of information. I will see what I can get you.

Wendy LOVELL: If you could see what you can give us, that would be great. I think it would give us a better understanding of the extent of the event and also the response to the event.

Jaclyn SYMES: I guess I would probably question too: I am not the holder of those minutes. Have you asked the previous witnesses who have prepared those minutes what they think about that suggestion?

Wendy LOVELL: I guess we could have asked the SES or someone when they were in. But it is just something that has come to light for me in the last couple of weeks, so it is something that I am asking you as the person responsible for all of those agencies.

Jaclyn SYMES: I will take it on notice. But it is operational information gathered and communicated for a particular purpose, and it is not something that I have previously sought to obtain in my capacity as minister. However, I do acknowledge that I have been in the room listening to that information, and it is particularly valuable. But it is just people's experiences of what is happening in real life, and I would have thought that you have got plenty of witnesses that have given you that evidence already for the purposes of your inquiry.

The CHAIR: We have certainly had a lot.

Wendy LOVELL: We will move on. As a local Member for Northern Victoria as well as in your ministerial capacity you would be very aware of the closure of the causeway that divided the Greater Shepparton community and meant that communities on the west of the river – Mooroopna, Tatura, Undera, Ardmona et cetera – had no access to hospitals or other emergency services, and you would also be very aware of the advocacy of the Greater Shepparton community for a second river crossing that is built above flood level. I am just wondering what advice you have received about the ongoing dangers to the Shepparton community and also the risks to statewide freight movements, industry and jobs if a second river crossing is not built above the flood level in Greater Shepparton.

Jaelyn SYMES: In relation to road closures that is not a responsibility of the Minister for Emergency Services, as you would appreciate, and VicRoads obviously do a good lot of work in ensuring that people have the information that they need in relation to road closures and the like. We were particularly concerned about GV Health as well as some other health facilities, namely Euroa Health, in relation to the inability of staff to get to and from, which is why we activated some of the available aircraft to transport essential workers to ensure that, mainly, people could go home and rest that had been working without being able to be relieved by replacement staff, because people were isolated and unable to get there. When roads are closed, again they are types of issues that are ventilated at SEMC in relation to making sure that people can get essential supplies – not just workforce but medications, food, petrol and the like – for isolated communities.

Wendy LOVELL: Okay. As Attorney-General and also emergency services minister I would imagine that you have been concerned about the conduct of some of the insurance agencies in dealing with people who have been flooded and also the ongoing availability of insurance being offered to many communities. For instance, in Rochester there was a blanket ban on any insurance for a very long time, which meant that people could not sell properties, because people could not buy properties. They could not get a loan from the bank without being able to insure the property. Have you as Attorney-General been involved in any negotiations with the insurance industry to ensure that they are dealing with people fairly and also that there is going to be ongoing availability of insurance to all of these communities?

Jaelyn SYMES: There is a lot in that question. First of all, it is not in my capacity as Attorney-General that I have any particular role to tell insurance companies how to behave. Insurance is one of the biggest issues that people raise after emergencies, particularly in floods. I reflected earlier on my personal experiences of being flooded in 1993 as a 14-, 15-year-old kid. My parents have not had flood insurance ever since. My brother does not have flood insurance. A lot of people in Benalla do not have flood insurance, because it is, frankly, just unaffordable.

Wendy LOVELL: In Rochester they could not get any insurance at all – not just flood insurance, any insurance.

Jaelyn SYMES: When it comes to the issues about insurance, the minister with the state government responsibility I guess or more appropriately placed to have these conversations is the Assistant Treasurer. He and I have met with the Insurance Council of Australia. I wanted to bring to them again some of that experience on the ground. When we were talking to the people that I was talking to Ms Watt about, we were hearing stories which I guess you have received evidence on in relation to people being confused about whether to take payouts or get the insurance company to undertake the repairs and people feeling pressured in relation to those issues. It is something that is always on the agenda at the national ministers meeting, because around the country we are concerned about the difficulty for people of obtaining insurance. There is a general understanding that insurance companies cannot operate if they take on risk that means that they cannot pay out premiums, so we understand the business model of insurance companies can be challenging. It is why we look at the betterment funding, and when we make those investments we make sure that we are having conversations with insurance, particularly the Insurance Council of Australia, who are the overarching body – they are not the retailers – to make sure that they are factors that can be considered in relation to premiums and policy availability. It is a very complex space.

As I said, I have heard of practices that have been concerning, like policyholders being pressured to take lump sum payments and then they go and try and procure their own tradespeople and they cannot do the work for the amount that they have been paid out, and that is a concern. Then you have those who have gone with the insurance company waiting for the repairs, and you are on a very long wait time because of the shortage of trades. I am hearing these concerns. It is an issue that I raise through my ministerial networks. Obviously it does

sit more at the Commonwealth level, and there is a federal inquiry into insurance responses to the major floods claims of 2022. It is not just Victoria that have these concerns.

I think future insurability is a big concern. We have seen it in fire-impacted areas. It has certainly impacted the storm-impacted areas of June 2021. Ultimately it is outside my scope of responsibility as Minister for Emergency Services, but we do put as much pressure as we can on the insurance council to ensure that companies are behaving appropriately. In Rochester in particular, through intervention, the Insurance Council of Australia encouraged companies to go and meet with people in person, and a lot of people had greater success in one-on-one meetings with their insurance providers. Some were better than others, and those that were not so good we reported back to ICA saying, 'Can you help them do better?', and we saw improvements through that intervention.

The CHAIR: Thank you, Ms Lovell. Mr Ettershank.

David ETTERS HANK: Thank you for coming along today. It is much appreciated. I have a couple of questions. Can I first of all say obviously unbounded respect and gratitude to all the volunteers who participate in these processes and to the staff and management of the agencies, who do an extraordinary job. That said, a number of us here are feeling a slight disconnect between the evidence we have received from the SES and EMV, for example, and that which we are getting from the local residents and the SES volunteers association. I guess I am focused here particularly on the Maribyrnong catchment, being my backyard. That disconnect included, for example, on the evening of the 13th and going into the morning of 14 October SES volunteers who clearly had no idea what was going on in Maribyrnong in terms of where the floods were, and I am sure you have seen this in the media as well. SES volunteers who simply were not provided with updates were pointing people in the wrong direction and did not know where particular resources were. I am wondering in hindsight, particularly given your comments about having war gamed this in advance, how do you think the committee should understand those different views?

Jaclyn SYMES: Well, I think that is your job, isn't it – to speak to as many witnesses as possible? That is part of the reason for your inquiry, and I really like parliamentary inquiries' accessibility for people to come and have their say. I think that is a really good function, and I know that many people have come and given their real-life experience of on the day and afterwards. I cannot comment on a disconnect of witnesses that have appeared prior to me, but I concur with your opening statements, that VICSES and the volunteers that underpin them are an amazing organisation. We could always do with more volunteers. I think one of the concerns I had from the feedback that I received was that many people, particularly in metropolitan Melbourne, thought that VICSES volunteers were paid staff of the government, so when they were questioning why there were not more of them, it was like, 'Well, we would love more – it is a volunteer organisation.' I hope that one of the benefits – like a positive – of a traumatic event such as this is people reflecting on maybe they have got some spare time to give back to the community in a volunteer capacity. I know that VICSES are always welcoming of more volunteers, and that would be a great outcome of this, I think.

David ETTERS HANK: Okay. Perfectly valid – that is why we are here, to try and resolve those things. We talked before about the inspector-general's role, and when Tony Pearce was here he actually said to us that any inquiry that he would undertake would be based on his powers under the Act and that requires him to be instructed to do that inquiry. Is that consistent with your understanding of the Act? In other words, he does not do inquiries of his own volition.

Jaclyn SYMES: He has got own-motion powers.

David ETTERS HANK: He does have own-motion powers?

Jaclyn SYMES: Correct.

Samantha RATNAM: He said he is able to. I looked at the transcript. I can see that.

The CHAIR: Yes, he did.

David ETTERS HANK: All right. There are obviously some further tensions that will require further investigation.

Jaclyn SYMES: Yes, I will get you a run-down of that, if you like. But as I have been minister he has done own-motion inquiries before, so I can point to some examples for you, I can follow that up to you.

David ETTERS HANK: All right, thank you, that would be great. I appreciate that. A number of agencies who came here, particularly some councils and some of the relief agencies, expressed concern about the fact that the SES was not doing a post-event joint agency debrief, and they cited that as a major concern to them, that they felt that they were not involved in that. Does that seem appropriate to you? I think Tim Wiebusch said, 'We are just one running from one high-pressure situation to another.'

Jaclyn SYMES: Yes. As I sort of touched on I think with Dr Ratnam in relation to reviews, there are a couple of different ways of doing it. I think people get a bit confused about after-action reviews and multi-agency reviews. So the after-action review – as a lead agency VICSES is responsible for after-action reviews. I am advised that 13 VICSES unit-level after-action reviews were conducted, with two regional after-action reviews and one statewide after-action review on community engagement. Also, the SES feed into that lessons unit on a daily basis during the event. A multi-agency review is not SES, that is EMV, and they can look different each time depending on the type and duration of event. So for this event EMV undertook the real-time monitoring and lessons that I went through earlier to ensure that all of the experiences can be drawn on for future events. That was taken due to the long-running nature of the event. They had 13 weeks of effectively real-time evaluation, which is probably the same amount of time as it would take for a one-day event evaluation, for example, but what that did was ensure that all agencies were involved at the time. As part of that there were 30 hot debriefs during the event, so that is directly talking to emergency management personnel in real time. So there are a range of ways that our emergency management system evaluates and ensures that they can do better each time. And in addition for this event we have got you guys looking at this.

David ETTERS HANK: Okay. I am just conscious of time, so I might just drop that one for the moment. I guess if you could put your first law officer hat on for this question, perhaps –

Jaclyn SYMES: I have only got one hat, haven't I, today?

David ETTERS HANK: Melbourne Water is a funny beast in that it is the catchment management authority, it is also a water retailer and it is also, uniquely, a referral authority for planning applications. None of the other catchment management authorities have those other two functions, so it brings together a very powerful entity. We have heard a lot, and in the Pagone report – and we were talking to the good judge before – there were some pretty awful decisions made by Melbourne Water with regard to, for example, the Rivervue Retirement Village. I am not sure if you are aware of that, at Avondale Heights, where –

Jaclyn SYMES: I am aware of this. I am just struggling to work out where you are going to go with it for me.

David ETTERS HANK: Okay, well, as the good judge noted before, there is every possibility that arising from that there will be some significant litigation, because basically we saw flood levels approved by Melbourne Water or involving Melbourne Water that were below historic flood levels, and a whole lot of people had their properties destroyed as a result of being able to build in what was previously below the flood line.

The CHAIR: But we are not aware of any at the moment, are we, just to be clear?

David ETTERS HANK: There are 47 units that we know –

The CHAIR: But we are not aware of any litigation on foot?

David ETTERS HANK: Oh, no, no.

The CHAIR: I am just conscious of not straying into areas that we do not want to go –

David ETTERS HANK: Judge Pagone flagged the fact that that this was quite probably an area of litigation.

The CHAIR: Possibly.

David ETTERS HANK: A possible area of litigation. It is interesting that just recently Melbourne Water has now started, because all planning applications in Maribyrnong have to get the approval of Melbourne Water, to require those applicants to sign an indemnity that preserves the interests of Melbourne Water against future suit. I am wondering if you would have a view on whether it is appropriate that catchment management authorities should be so carefully sort of protecting their legal interests in that way and using their powers?

Jaclyn SYMES: I would ask for directions from the Chair in relation to the appropriateness of the question (1) for your terms of reference, but (2) you have flagged potential litigation. As Attorney I get asked a lot about every law and my views, and it is a space that is not appropriate for me to make comment on in the vast majority of circumstances, and in this issue you have asked about an agency that has got no reporting lines to me as Minister for Emergency Services or Attorney-General. I think you have couched your question in a legalistic-type view for my views as Attorney General, and I do not think that it would be appropriate for me to comment.

The CHAIR: I think if we wanted to ask questions about what Melbourne Water is doing, we should have asked Melbourne Water or the relevant minister. I do not think the Attorney-General is in a position to answer questions about what they may or may not do, given we do not have any of that on – there is no evidence there are any proceedings in any case.

David ETTERS HANK: No, but there is evidence that they are requiring indemnities to get planning approvals.

The CHAIR: Then we should ask Melbourne Water about that.

David ETTERS HANK: Yes, that is a conversation, but I am conscious of my time.

The CHAIR: But your time has expired. Ms Ermacora.

Jacinta ERMACORA: Hello. I have really enjoyed listening to your responses, Minister. We have looked into broad aspects of your role and then we have looked at response and relief, so I just want to move to the recovery kind of topic. Starting really broadly, what role does Emergency Recovery Victoria play in emergency response, and how did it support the flood recovery?

Jaclyn SYMES: Thanks, Ms Ermacora, for your question. There is so much in this portfolio, so it was difficult to work out exactly what you guys would be interested in, but we have not talked much about the role of Emergency Recovery Victoria. They are a really good organisation, reasonably new for government, and came out of the experience of previous disasters and recognising that emergency response, relief and then recovery were probably too much for one agency whose expertise really was in the here and now of an emergency. We really wanted to have a tailored approach to recovery. We originally started with Bushfire Recovery Victoria as an agency, which then evolved into – its name was really just catching up with reality actually; it was not as though Bushfire Recovery Victoria was confined to bushfires. They certainly were helping communities impacted by the storms in June 2021. But we did change their name, again, fortunately, just before the floods. There were too many predictions that were leading towards this disaster, I have got to say. Initially they were set up for bushfire, but they evolved to become a multidisaster-type recovery agency.

I guess underpinning the work they do is an understanding that recovery is best led by the needs of the community and what the community recognise as their priorities. So it is their job to work with communities about identifying what they need, help them navigate bureaucracy and help them in any way they can to ensure that the right help goes to the right place at the right time. Their remit is to lead and coordinate state and regional recovery, so they do that on behalf of the Victorian government and they do that via a range of programs. Some of the ones that are worth highlighting are that they coordinate the secondary impact assessments, which is really important for councils particularly in seeking to demonstrate the impact and their ability to be reimbursed from particularly the federal government in conjunction with the state government on their repairs. ERV also operate the flood recovery hotline, which was really important as a single port of call for people to be connected with the information and caseworkers if they were in need of that level of support. That hotline triaged more than 10,000 calls during and after the event. They also coordinate and initiate the clean-up program. That commenced within days of the event and ensured that councils could be supported in collecting and disposing of flood debris. The one that I probably saw more of on the ground than any of the other programs was their temporary housing and emergency housing support. More than 2000 people were at hotels,

motels, the Centre for National Resilience and the Elmore village in relation to needing housing support because of their house being inundated with water. So they are a really important organisation. They follow disasters, and they have people in situ working with councils as well as ensuring that government is as easily navigated as possible.

Jacinta ERMACORA: Very good. It sounds like it has been really good to carve that off as a separate entity to focus on, because they are different activities. So just drilling down a little bit further, can you talk us through how the recovery package was designed and how it is progressing?

Jaclyn SYMES: Yes. Again, we really try and respond to the needs of community. We certainly have an idea, based on previous experiences, of what people are going to need, but we also can be agile in relation to ensuring that we can work with particular needs of communities. We are unfortunately getting quite a lot of experience in this regard since the establishment of ERV and its precursor, just in relation to the amount and frequency of emergencies that we have had thrown at our state, so we know that clean-up is very important. We know that fee rebates to give people the ability to clean up themselves are something that people want really quickly. We know that business and community sport require funding to ensure that they can get back up on their feet as soon as possible. We know that these are important for whole-community recovery. Like when you are a small country town and so many people have been impacted by floodwaters, sometimes getting your local bowls club or your footy club back on their feet sooner rather than later can send a positive message to the whole community that people are there to support their recovery. Primary producers – they get hit. I think of my time as former agriculture minister as well. If it is not drought, it is fire or floods, and understanding their unique needs and ensuring that processes for support for our primary producers is as streamlined as possible is really important. Small business relief we talked about earlier. School and student support was a part of the package of support for this event, including TAFE support as well. I think there was close to \$70 million in relation to ensuring that there was less disruption and there was available support for students. Legal assistance – \$8 million to support impacted individuals and communities. Our CLCs do an amazing job, but as we have discussed today, whether it is insurance or problems with tradespeople or indeed problems that have been exacerbated because of the disaster, legal assistance is just so vital in a recovery sense. Then there is all of the support that we give to councils. I have indicated my support for councils; they do an amazing job. Ensuring that we can embed people in their offices in the roles of community recovery officers and indeed people to staff the regional recovery hubs is just so important so that you can provide an accessible service for locals in the early days and in the long term. The job of those recovery hubs is to do themselves out of a job. When they come to government and say, ‘We think we’ve got to everyone,’ that is when they are no longer needed. But they do a really good job.

Jacinta ERMACORA: Fantastic. Specifically, how does government provide support to communities and councils, and also, if you want, how long do you expect recovery support to continue?

Jaclyn SYMES: I think, as I left off on the previous answer, support should be provided until it is no longer needed. My experience in the 2019–20 bushfires – so coming up to close to four years now – is that we are only just paring back some of those supports, because communities have told us that they are okay now and want to get on to the next stage of their recovery, which is a recovery that is less aided by government support agencies and the like. We are certainly not there yet in relation to flood recovery. Councils are the ones that are often left with all of the issues after the water subsides, so we do want to make sure that we are there supporting them, not only in their support services for the community. But they are the ones that need help in restoring their essential assets as well as the continued recovery initiatives that they want to deliver.

As I said earlier, we are advocating for changes to the DRFA to avoid as much as possible the burdensome administrative measures. Ms Broad brought to your attention the complaints about the evidence. That is certainly something that I have heard loud and clear as well, so we are certainly working with councils to help advocate for that. We are working with councils in relation to betterment activities. They are committed to wanting to not just build back as it was, but build back so that if water comes again they are going to have resilient assets that actually do not need that level of repair. So that is really important work. To date, we have allocated more than \$35 million for clean-up, and we know that that is not only important for a variety of reasons – for safety, visual aesthetics – but it can help mental wellbeing and recovery as well. When you see debris still piled up, it can have a pretty negative impact on your community morale.

The CHAIR: We are out of time. I might go to Mrs Tyrrell.

Jaclyn SYMES: Sure.

Jacinta ERMACORA: Thank you.

Jaclyn SYMES: Thank you, Ms Ermacora.

Rikkie-Lee TYRRELL: Thank you, Minister Symes, for showing up today. First question: do our emergency services have a desired quota of volunteers they wish to fill in order to be at substantial operational efficiency?

Jaclyn SYMES: Oh, that is an excellent question.

Rikkie-Lee TYRRELL: And that is one I just came up with.

Jaclyn SYMES: You have asked it broadly across the board. I think if you asked our emergency services agencies, they would always welcome more volunteers. I guess if you look at the CFA, they have never had to draw on their full complement of operational volunteers, but in pockets we have got concerns where we have got shortages, definitely. VICSES, like all volunteer organisations across the board, across the country, across the world, have seen a decline in their numbers, but they are really doing some innovative ways to attract new members. I think what you will see when you visit SES units is obvious diversity. There are a lot of women in the VICSES. And particularly in the Melbourne units they are really doing a lot of work to attract people from diverse backgrounds as well, from different cultural backgrounds, and are having various successes in relation to that. I know that the new brigade in Fawkner, I think, has a sign out the front that they sometimes put in different languages in relation to trying to attract new volunteers. We as a government certainly want to do everything we can to support their volunteer attraction and retention activities. A lot of them have got waiting lists, and some we would like to have more on their waiting lists. I think if you asked them what their optimum number is, I do not know – I think they will always just say more.

Rikkie-Lee TYRRELL: More. So that would lead onto my next question: is there a potential for a campaign to attract more volunteers that the government could provide?

Jaclyn SYMES: Well, we do support agencies in relation to their attraction activities. A lot of it is at the local level, so you will have community events – I tell you, one of the busiest places for emergency services that I saw recently was at the Melbourne show. The amount of interested people that were lined up – not just the fire truck, which is normally where the parents are dragged to, but the SES boat had a line as well. You pull out the shiny trucks for the kids, but it is a great opportunity for the volunteers and management to speak to parents about the opportunities to volunteer or get involved. I think also continuing to have those conversations where you do not need to be the person that is going out in the boat or getting on the truck – there are many roles that people can play to support our emergency services organisations. Yes, I think forums such as this – I always encourage my local papers and social media community groups and the like to continually talk about the need for supporting our volunteers and reducing any barriers for people to join.

Rikkie-Lee TYRRELL: All right, thank you. During the flood event, before I was an elected member, I was called upon by the Echuca community because of the lack of sandbags. They were in a panic trying to find sandbags. I managed to get hold of Mr Quilty, and he got hold of you.

Jaclyn SYMES: He texted me, yes.

Rikkie-Lee TYRRELL: Yes, he did, so I thank you personally for the prompt action that you showed the community. My question is, though: are we prepared for the next flood event, to make sure that we have substantial sandbags available to those communities immediately? Are they stored in those communities?

Jaclyn SYMES: Yes, look, it is a good question. Sandbags in that event were at record levels, so 1.5 million sandbags were used in that event. Echuca did experience a shortage early on, but we worked across the national level to ensure that we could access supplies from around the country. We got a lot of supplies from Bunnings, I understand, and the ADF had supplies as well, so we managed to deploy them to where they were needed. I think that that experience certainly demonstrated to me that we need to ensure that as a nation we have got good stockpiles of material that are required for events. We were even talking about sending planes to other countries

to secure supply if we needed them – that is the level that we were talking about. It is on the national agenda to make sure we have got the resources we need.

In relation to where they are deployed, the SES strategically placed their sandbag equipment, the filling machines that probably have –

Rikkie-Lee TYRRELL: The stations.

Jaelyn SYMES: stations. And there was that response to risk as well. As you would appreciate, we knew that it would take some time for the water to make its way to Mildura. We were able to ensure that Mildura was ready in relation to the sandbagging that they needed to protect a lot of houses. I actually saw firsthand some houses that were protected by walls and walls of sandbags and pumping and the like for a week or more while the water was sort of stagnant. So, yes, I think based on this experience we need to make sure that we are ready to go next time, and we have taken steps in relation to ensuring that that is the case.

Rikkie-Lee TYRRELL: Okay. Very good, thank you. Now, Mr Ettershank did try, I think on a slightly different angle, to ask this one question, so I am going to ask it my way.

Jaelyn SYMES: Did I answer him?

Rikkie-Lee TYRRELL: Yes, I am a little bit more direct. So we have heard from many different agencies, including the CFA, SES and community groups, that there was no chain of command for them to get clear factual information to pass on to locals. How can this be done better? I think you have addressed that. My question is: has it been addressed now? Will we not see that issue in the next flood event?

Jaelyn SYMES: I think, coming back to my description of what my job is, my job is not to be operational command. It is not for me to deploy resources or personnel. That would be incredibly inappropriate. I do have the ability to ask questions, particularly when I get feedback from communities that have concerns. I do play a role in ensuring that I obtain information as quickly as possible for me to send out at a higher level, and I use the resources of government to do that. I think the specific question you have asked in relation to the flow of information from levels of command is more appropriately put to our emergency services personnel, who have responsibility for ensuring that flow of information.

I reckon I would preface that with just a personal reflection. Sometimes people have different views about what they think the community should be told. We have to respect the way the operations are to run, because if you just send out all information that is not coordinated, filtered or tested, you can end up with inappropriate alerts or information that is premature or turns out to be wrong. It is not a precise world that we live in, particularly with floods, because predicting water levels and where it is going to rain is exactly that – it is prediction. They are pretty close, and we are going to get better. Technology, innovation, flood mapping, research – we are going to get better and better at this. I trust the command leadership – they have been amazing to work with – but I think it is always important to ensure that we are listening to the experiences of people on the ground. A lot of what they tell us we are blind to in the State Control Centre, which is why continual conversations are really important, and learnings and experiences, as you have articulated, are something that everyone should take on board. But I accept that we can always do better. That is human nature. We should always look to do better. But I cannot comment on how the chain of command works in the way that you have framed your question, because I think that that is not a role for me.

Rikkie-Lee TYRRELL: Okay. Were you aware of the lack of communication prior to this questioning?

Jaelyn SYMES: Do you want to give me an exact example?

Rikkie-Lee TYRRELL: An example?

The CHAIR: We are out of time, so if you could just be really quick.

Rikkie-Lee TYRRELL: Oh, we are out of time.

Jaelyn SYMES: Because I would not like your comment to imply that there is a general problem of information dissemination.

Rikkie-Lee TYRRELL: Yes. So local CFA members were not told of what was happening. There was no communication between them and SES or them and council, so there was a break in communication. That is what I was about –

Jaclyn SYMES: Where and when?

Rikkie-Lee TYRRELL: At Echuca.

Wendy LOVELL: Or Echuca village.

Rikkie-Lee TYRRELL: Echuca village, yes. That is a prime example – we can discuss it later.

Jaclyn SYMES: Okay.

Rikkie-Lee TYRRELL: Yes.

The CHAIR: All right. We might leave it there. Minister, thank you very much for your evidence today. You will receive a copy of the transcript for review before it is published on our website. And with that the committee will take a short break.

Witness withdrew.