

TRANSCRIPT

LEGISLATIVE COUNCIL ENVIRONMENT AND PLANNING COMMITTEE

Inquiry into the 2022 Flood Event in Victoria

Echuca – Thursday 24 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

Cr Rob Amos, Mayor, Campaspe Shire Council, and Chair, Murray River Group of Councils;

Pauline Gordon, Chief Executive Officer, and

Shannon Maynard, Director, Emergency Management, Campaspe Shire Council;

Cr Charlie Gillingham, Mayor, and

Geoff Rollinson, Chief Executive Officer, Gannawarra Shire Council;

Cr Dan Straub, Mayor, and

Lincoln Fitzgerald, Chief Executive Officer, Loddon Shire Council; and

Ann-Marie Roberts, Greater Bendigo City Council, and

Luke Ryan, Mount Alexander Shire Council, Northern Victorian Emergency Management Cluster.

The CHAIR: 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 I 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. 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 that is being taken today 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 posted on the committee's website.

I will just take the opportunity to introduce myself and for the committee members to introduce themselves to you as well. I am Sonja Terpstra. I am the Chair of the Environment and Planning Committee, and I am a Member for North-Eastern Metropolitan Region.

John BERGER: Good morning. My name is John Berger. I am a Member for Southern Metropolitan.

Wendy LOVELL: I am Wendy Lovell, and I am one of the members for Northern Victoria Region. There are a few of us on here. As you would be aware, there are five members for each region, so we have multiple on this committee.

Rikkie-Lee TYRRELL: Thank you. I am Rikkie-Lee Tyrrell, Member for Northern Victoria.

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

Gaelle BROAD: Gaelle Broad, Member for Northern Victoria.

Samantha RATNAM: Morning. Samantha Ratnam, Member for Northern Metropolitan Region.

The CHAIR: Thank you. In a moment I am going to hand over to you to make your opening remarks. I have got a bit of a running sheet to go down. When you begin your opening remarks, if you could please just state your name and the organisation for which you appear. I will give each of you, the groups – I have got Campaspe, Gannawarra, Loddon, Northern and then Murray River – 10 minutes. It is up to you who wants to speak – whatever – but there is 10 minutes per group. With that, I will hand over to Campaspe shire as the first cab off the rank – 10 minutes – and please just state your name and the organisation you are appearing on behalf of.

Rob AMOS: Thanks, Chair. Good morning, Madam Chair and the rest of your committee. Welcome to the Campaspe shire. On behalf of Campaspe shire, thank you for travelling to our shire and for the opportunity to make this presentation to the flood inquiry public hearing. My name is Rob Amos. I am the Mayor of Campaspe shire.

The 2022 October flood event was the worst experienced by the Campaspe shire communities in more than 150 years. Of course this was not the first time our communities have sustained devastating losses from floods. The 1993 and the 2011 flood events also caused significant and widespread damage but not to the same scale of the 2022 event. In fact there are some key things around the 2022 event that made Campaspe's experience a little different to the experience of other municipalities. For instance, the Campaspe shire had an emergency relief centre which was open for 35 days. The normal time frame for a relief centre is around seven.

The Victorian government established the Elmore village at the time of the flood, and this was closed by the government just last week. It provided temporary homes to around 350 displaced residents from Rochester, and even now around 50 per cent of the Rochester residents are still not living back in their homes. Today, some 10 months post the event, Campaspe shire continues to be both in relief and recovery, as we deal with the myriad of challenges of the disaster aftermath. A flood event of the magnitude of the October 2022 flood has provided us with many important insights and learnings to take forward. While these are fully detailed in our submission, I will now talk to some of the key issues that made the disaster even more challenging to address for everyone.

Lack of role clarity and accountability: during the emergency there was a lack of clarity around the different roles and responsibilities between the Victorian government, Emergency Management Victoria, Vic SES and the council. This lack of clarity not only led to confusion and misunderstanding in the community, but it also fuelled community angst and directed blame for decisions made towards the Campaspe shire, when these decisions were made by other authorities. When these authorities were given the opportunity to take ownership of these decisions, they did not. The decision to establish a temporary levee in Echuca – where it was located and the size of that levee – was not made by the Campaspe shire. This is an example of clarity in the community about who performs what role and who makes decisions during the emergency response phase of a disaster. This became a divisive issue in the community and put council in the firing line.

As we know, VICSES is the lead agency for flood emergency response, and local government's role is predominantly emergency relief, delivered through emergency relief centres, and other activities. This role delineation is not well understood by most people in the community. As was widely reported in the media, the Echuca levee became a highly contentious issue, particularly for those residents who lived on the so-called wrong side of the levee and who, despite all warnings and advice, decided to stay in their homes. The question became: how do you support these residents who are now living in an evacuation zone which council officers are not permitted to enter? This high-profile issue ultimately led to the ambush of our then mayor on a live national television morning show. This experience proved to be a turning point in dividing the broader community.

What is needed moving forward is an education campaign by all levels of government to inform the community of the roles and responsibilities of each agency in times of an emergency – not so blame can be appointed but so there is an understanding in the community about who is responsible for what – and more communication and accountability from the government about decisions they make as part of an emergency response effort. Further to this, there is need for clear planning around temporary levees and broad communication so that there is wider community acceptance and understanding of temporary levees, when they would be required and who is responsible for their placement and ultimate repatriation post the event.

The SES volunteers do an incredible job on the ground, but the SES as an organisation is severely under-resourced. If the SES is not able to provide support to residents who elect to stay in their homes when directed by authorities to do otherwise, then perhaps evacuations need to be policed and enforced. I am now going to pass to my CEO Pauline Gordon to talk about the staff.

Pauline GORDON: Good morning. I would like to just talk about our council staff here in Campaspe and the lack of resourcing. More than 40 per cent of Campaspe Shire Council staff were directly impacted by the flood. Those who could showed up every day to support the community, many juggling multiple roles and working for days on end fatigued and without adequate breaks. During the event, which lasted many weeks, our staff performed a myriad of roles, including but not limited to liaison in the incident control centre in the division command centre and setting up, maintaining and monitoring the pumps across the shire, which were everywhere, and that was 24/7. We actually had library staff out on the pumps with some of our outdoor people. I think it is worth noting that people had multiple roles. They were clearing drains,; closing roads and ensuring roads stayed closed – even when people took down the signs on the roads to get through, we were putting them back up again; maintaining road access where possible and where it was absolutely an emergency; and animal management – we forget about the animals during floods, but that was certainly a role of council to support them.

We established and maintained the relief centre for 35 days. That was 24/7 as well, so we were trying to rotate staff from across the organisation in those roles. We also established a temporary service centre for all agencies in Rochester when we were able to get in, which was about two or three days after the actual flood. We managed the equivalent of 30 years of waste in 60 days in our waste facilities. We sandbagged our critical assets. We began the secondary impact assessments. We started damage assessments of all the critical infrastructure. I was just going to say there were about 33 bridges that I remember hearing of at one stage. We responded to community requests across the municipality from very anxious and distraught residents as well. They needed that support and information.

While the state government staff were rotated every five days, as they should have been – I need to point that out; we are not saying that they should not have been – our staff did not get a break. Because of the sheer scale of the event and the urgent and wideranging need to support residents in multiple communities across the shire, there were simply not enough council staff to factor in shifts and breaks. While our broader council community across Victoria – we are all here today together – reached out to offer support by way of sending staff to assist, many councils were also impacted and had limited resources.

Council also, despite the devastating impact of this event, had to continue to deliver normal services, including our libraries, which we reopened as soon as we could. Our maternal and child health had to keep going, as did our child care – for which we had to get the buildings back and operational or find alternative facilities – waste collection as well as many other services relied on by our community. We were simply stretched beyond our limits. What is needed is a mechanism and a process that mobilises external personnel to augment a council's workforce in times of disaster.

The CHAIR: You have 2 minutes, Pauline.

Pauline GORDON: Thank you. Whether that is through the defence force or trained government staff, this is the only way that council staff can continue to support multiple impacted communities while also looking after their own wellbeing at the same time. I am now going to hand over to Shannon Maynard, who is our Director of Emergency Management at Campaspe.

Shannon MAYNARD: Thank you, Pauline, and good morning. I am going to talk to some data-sharing issues that were experienced across the event. As mentioned by both Leigh Wilson and Amanda Logie in yesterday's hearings, the difficulties we had in accessing Victorian government data that was gathered from impacted residents caused a raft of problems for council and the community in terms of managing the follow-up processes, such as building matters and determining rate relief eligibility. Not long after the event the Victorian government conducted impact assessments with some residents, but the information was not readily shared to council. Because of this, council did not have the information it needed to make important decisions and support residents to the best of its ability. Subsequently no-one told us that the valuer-general was going to use this impact assessment data for the valuation process, so we had to send our teams back into Rochester and surrounding areas to conduct another round of impact assessments with residents. This was extremely difficult

to do because already traumatised people had to go through the same process they had already gone through with the government. As most people were not living in their flood-impacted homes, particularly in Rochester, when we called them they were very suspicious of council's assessment teams. Most people did not understand why they had to repeat the information they had already provided, and some people thought that our assessment teams were either potential scammers or looters. As highlighted yesterday, council is recommending the establishment of dedicated assessment teams who would gather information immediately following the disaster. The data gathered by these teams should be accessible to all approved agencies, including council. I am going to pass back to Mayor Rob Amos.

Rob AMOS: I will just close if you like.

The CHAIR: Thirty seconds, yes, thank you.

Rob AMOS: As stated at the outset, the October 2022 flood was the most traumatic and devastating event of its kind in living memory in the Campaspe shire. All levels of government must now do everything in their power to take heed of the lessons learned and work together in finding solutions and taking action to better prepare and mitigate against the severity of any future flood events. Our community is depending on us. Thank you.

The CHAIR: Thank you very much for those opening remarks. I will now call on Gannawarra shire to make their opening remarks, and if you could both please state your name and organisation for Hansard and limit your opening comments to 10 minutes. Thank you.

Charlie GILLINGHAM: Thank you, Madam Chair. My name is Cr Charlie Gillingham. I am the Mayor of Gannawarra Shire Council. Thank you for allowing us here today. We have some similarities with Campaspe but are not all the same – the 2011 flood was quite a little bit worse than this 2022 flood. A lot of people were impacted. Prolific growth of crops and other vegetation held the flood up, so we did have plenty of time, or enough time – around 12 days – to prepare for a flood of this nature. There are a lot of new residents in the area since 2011, and they were a bit unsure of what to do and how to manage the flood, so they were relying on a lot of local knowledge. I believe local knowledge is best, and we have certainly got some great people in our community – flood wardens or that type of thing – that actually helped our communities get through these types of events. Following on from 2011, I think the ring levees that were a part of the infrastructure after the 2011 floods – ring levees around houses to protect the individual houses – were a great thing. We need more of that going forward.

We did do some flood infrastructure works following the 2011 floods, but, as hopefully you have all seen in our submission, we do have a number of recommendations for further works and we do have three or four key infrastructure-type projects that we certainly would like to see happen before the next flood gets here.

With the SES, they certainly are under-resourced, as has been mentioned. A lot of people went to our Gannawarra shire and local CFA for support. We have some great people within both those organisations that have been in the community for a number of years, and they certainly know how floods move and how the water moves through the area. You may not be aware, but we still have floodwater in Gannawarra shire 10 months on; there are still plenty of people that cannot get to their properties because of standing floodwater. That is another issue that we will talk about later, how we can get that standing water out of our community.

I think it has been a disaster for some people – a lot of new residents, as I said, in the area – and hopefully we can come up with some solutions to prevent this type of thing impacting our communities as much as it has in the past. Now I will hand over to our CEO Geoff Rollinson.

Geoff ROLLINSON: Thank you, and thanks for coming up and listening. I am Geoff Rollinson, Chief Executive Officer of the Gannawarra shire. I have been a council employee for over 30 years and have seen multiple floods – minor, moderate, major and catastrophic – and I think that is important to understand in this review. Gannawarra is in the unique position that we are on an active flood plain and our communities do know flooding. They experience flooding not so much on a regular basis, but when you get events such as this it is a different kettle of fish completely. Gannawarra is unique in the fact that we have got the Avoca River to the west, the Loddon River up the centre, we have got the Pyramid Creek and we have got the Murray River to the north. The Avoca River picks up all the floodwater out of Charlton, Logan and Avoca districts, and the Loddon River picks up the water typically in that Maldon, Cairn Curran, Laanecoorie and Bridgewater area and comes

on through. The Pyramid Creek picks up the bulk of the Bendigo water across the Patho Plains and Kow Swamp, and of course we have got the Murray – everyone knows what the Murray does.

It is a very flat terrain. The first thing you will notice when you come to Gannawarra is it is very flat. We have got about a one-in-18,000 fall from Kerang to the Murray River, and typically, as Charlie indicated, we have five days notice, so we can prepare for a flood event. We know what is coming at us. It is typically 12 days from Laanecoorie to Kerang, five days from the Avoca, from Charlton to Quambatook, so we know what is happening. Pyramid Creek is a little bit difficult; it is an unregulated flow, so we have to rely on local knowledge in that space. The Murray River has a major impact because of the flat nature of the terrain, so the Murray River actually pushes back. For those in the room, we have got about a 2-metre fall from Kerang to the Murray, which is about the height of that doorway which I am indicating behind you. That is how flat it is, so a rise in that river will push back up those watercourses.

As Charlie indicated, in the October 2022 event we had 140 megalitres coming over Laanecoorie weir, and in my view this was a manageable event in the Loddon – much more different circumstances for those on the Campaspe and the Murray. We had 190,000 to 210,000 megalitres back in 2011, a much greater impact. As I said before, the old saying in Gannawarra is ‘For water to rise an inch it’s got to run a mile,’ and it does, and that is where the difficulty comes with levee banks. You will hear consistently that there are 4000 kilometres of levee banks in Victoria. About 2000 kilometres of those levee banks sit within the Loddon shire and the Gannawarra shire. They are strategically and vitally important, those minor rural levee banks, to people living on an active flood plain, and that needs to be acknowledged.

The other thing just quickly in relation to this particular flood event is connectivity. As the state government and rural communities – I just want to make that definition between regional councils and rural councils – as our rural communities are living on a flood plain in rural Victoria, connectivity is vitally important. When a flood comes down through this part of the world it slows down. We are not days, we are months, and communities are disconnected for a month. In this example our community was disconnected from Swan Hill for, I think, a period of about four weeks – I stand to be corrected on that. I am not encouraging people to drive through floodwater – that is not what I am saying whatsoever – but there was about 10 inches of water across the Murray Valley Highway and the community was disconnected. That meant that a trip to get produce or products into Kerang was 2½ hours, which is akin to me going to Calder inbound to get my milk and bread, so that connectivity was a major issue.

Trapped water – as Charlie indicated, we had water trapped out on the flood plain, and our communities, to actually enter back into their properties, were hindered by water trapped within the flood plain and ability to pump that water off.

As far as early warning systems go, the reliance on state government or agencies to connect to our community using the internet is at a loss, because around 30 per cent in Gannawarra – between 30 and 40 per cent of our community – are not connected to the internet. It is important to understand that then when you turn around and go into a recovery sense and you are asking people to then apply online for grants and support, in the case of Gannawarra we are a small community – only 10,500 people – but you have immediately discounted 3000 members of the community.

The resourcing, as our other councils have touched on – given the duration of the flood event, what you get is burnout. What happens is that, with all good intention, the emergency agencies struggle to continue the momentum for this duration of time. They are good for the first bit, but they do tire rapidly. The other thing in relation to the actual emergency event is the relocation of the ICC. I know it is with good intent that they follow the flood down, but it does not make sense to be moving the ICC to within the course of the flood plain.

The CHAIR: You have got 2 minutes.

Geoff ROLLINSON: My suggestion would be that it actually stays in Bendigo, where it is accessible. It is not in the flood plain, and the ICC remains in a major regional centre where it can be adequately resourced and you are not putting people in the path. You would not do it for a fire, clearly.

In relation to the Victorian flood plain strategy – and hats off to North Central Catchment; they have reviewed the documentation there, which is a great document – things such as rural levees are not really acknowledged. Standing water, or trapped water, on the flood plain has not been addressed in the flood plain strategy. The

hypersaline lakes – my recollection is that about 1 litre of hypersaline water will impact and damage about 10 to 15 litres of fresh water, not that floodwater is that fresh, but you still do not want that hypersaline in there as well.

The other thing is the recognition of significant cultural heritage. When these events are underway and there is a flurry of activity to protect communities, it would be good to know where the significant cultural heritage sites are.

The other thing is, as far as future works, I think it is important that we actually look at that connectivity, community and how we actually manage the floods as they come through the floodway. As Charlie indicated, we have had a lot of great work done post 2011 through the natural disaster resilience funding. One of the major issues is we can get the funding, but then trying to get the permission through state government – DELWP, DEECA – to undertake the task, they are not on board I will say. My advice would be: where there is defined community benefit with safety mitigation infrastructure, there are some rules around how you actually put this levee bank. An example is Robinvale –

The CHAIR: Sorry, you have 30 seconds.

Geoff ROLLINSON: where it took them nearly five years to build the bank. We have suffered the same with Quambatook, where we got the funding to put up the levee bank, the protection work, and then had to have the fight with DELWP to put it on the land. Thank you very much.

The CHAIR: Thank you very much. I know there is a lot to get in in 10 minutes and it goes very quickly, but thank you very much for those remarks. Next is Loddon Shire Council. Over to you – 10 minutes. If you could state your name and the organisation you are representing, for the Hansard record. Thank you.

Dan STRAUB: Thank you, Chair, and thank you to the committee for the opportunity. My name is Cr Dan Straub, Mayor of Loddon shire, and I am joined by Loddon shire CEO Mr Lincoln Fitzgerald. We do share similar circumstances to our other shires that have presented already, but we all still face very unique challenges moving forward. This morning I want to bring a few issues to light here.

In regard to insufficient notice of flood warnings coming down our river systems, we were severely impacted, in particular at Newbridge and Bridgewater, when notification upgrades of the Riverina flood came through around 8 am in the morning when there was already water knee-deep and flooding through the Newbridge recreation facility, and at 10 am the water was up to the eaves of the main pavilion. If you have read the Loddon shire submission, you have seen some pretty damning photos there. There were repercussions moving down towards Bridgewater, as the town was inundated later that day. Both towns, despite years of advocating for mobile tower upgrades, had very limited phone reception, further inhibiting communications and alerts being issued in times of emergency. As we have heard, this is not an isolated problem.

We have also been talking about and discussing recommendations around the need for flood gauges on inflows into our major reserves. The Laanecoorie reserve upstream of Newbridge has a capacity of 8000 megalitres, and two larger water reserves with much greater capacity, being Tullaroop and Cairn Curran, flow directly into the smaller Laanecoorie reserve. At the peak of the flood in October last year the Laanecoorie reserve was spilling 145,000 megalitres, passing over the weir each day. Understanding inflows is vital at these times. We have also had discussions around responsibilities of monitoring these water reserves. We believe that the responsibility should be beholden to the water authorities with the expert advice on those areas, not local government, who do not manage waterways of this type.

We have continued to face further issues with our recovery programs, making mention of the disaster recovery funding agreements between state and federal governments. The lack of trust in local government is slowing down the recovery process. We need the trust of the state and federal governments to let us get on with the job and get on with our core business of rebuilding and reconnecting our communities. The burden-of-evidence requirements are unrealistic and very problematic, but I believe Mr Fitzgerald can speak to that later. Other issues in our financial modelling indicate that Loddon's funding gap is more than one year's income from our rates and charges, which is unachievable for the rebuild. Because of the need for timely flood repairs and the bureaucratic application of the DRFA, or the disaster recovery funding arrangements, council has reallocated funds from Commonwealth local roads and community infrastructure programs to repair flood damage. Most of our councils utilise this funding to improve their services such as libraries, community centres and

recreational assets, and in effect this means that Loddon residents and other municipalities will miss out on services and improvements that other municipalities enjoy because of the funding system failures in the response to the floods.

We have also had issues in the flood response with our emergency management frameworks. The scale of this event was so large that the emergency management framework failed. We saw ICC communication breakdowns, which caused problematic issues in providing efficient services from council to act in the best interests of our communities. Locally, there is no capacity in the SES to coordinate the response, and therefore local response leadership was transferred to the CFA under the joint arrangements. The CFA provide great leadership, but in some cases local CFA captains were not aware of arrangements between CFA and SES and were therefore unaware of their authority to act in consulting with the incident control centres. Better support is needed for our volunteers. As the event unfolded, council often found itself in the position of providing response-type services without approval as the incident control centre and management team became uncontactable. The state and national scale of this event seemed to have overwhelmed their capacity to maintain control of the situation. On more than one occasion council was contacted to provide detailed updates on the flood situation indicating impacts and locations, which is out of our remit. A multi-agency review is needed to understand how we can better respond in the future. We have been informed that the Emergency Management Victoria will undertake a departmental review but there will be no larger review of the overall response. Because the event overwhelmed the system, there are issues for council in recouping the cost allocated with the counter-disaster operations. This continues for Loddon and for other municipalities impacted, has potential to put continuous pressure on budgets and can jeopardise future delivery of services and projects for our communities.

I would also like to mention that our neighbours to the west, Buloke shire, were also drastically impacted by the flood event of October 2022. I believe they have submitted a submission to the inquiry but unfortunately did not get a chance to present to you today. They do suffer again unique challenges moving forward, and I wish that Buloke can, like all of us, continue in their recovery efforts and have their voices heard. Thank you.

Wendy LOVELL: Hear, hear.

The CHAIR: Lincoln, did you want to add anything?

Lincoln FITZGERALD: Yes. My name is Lincoln Fitzgerald. I am the chief executive of Loddon shire. Just very quickly I would like to touch on the post-event impact. We are some 10 months on now. We have completed about \$2 million worth of work at Loddon shire, and as you will see in our submission, there is \$36 million in essential infrastructure. Now, these time lines are pretty unacceptable to our community, and we would love to see more trust in local government to do what we do, which is build roads and bridges. So \$2 million worth of work has been completed today. By the end of the year we will have completed about \$4 million under the immediate restoration works program. Again, that is simply not enough, and it is not fast enough, so we need better arrangements between the state and federal governments to be more flexible with how we get things moving. Loddon shire produces \$1 billion worth of agricultural product. We need to get that to port. We need to get that to where it is consumed. Connecting communities is actually one of the most important things.

On top of that \$36 million, we have also got \$8 million worth of our own infrastructure that we have had to fix: sporting pavilions, halls, caravan parks and so on and so forth. These are really important. Again, we have lost \$2.7 million in tourism productivity over the flood period. Our communities are hurting because we are simply taking too long. Our rates and charges income in a single year is only \$12.7 million, so when I start talking about \$36 million in damage to essential assets and then a further \$8 million worth of damage to what are called non-essential, it is a very daunting task for us.

While I am also talking about \$2 million worth of work that has been completed to date, while we have put the submissions in for funding approval, none of those have actually been approved, so I do not know if I am actually going to have approval for that or if Loddon shire council ratepayers are going to have to pay those bills. Again, we need faster action on submitting these applications and having them approved, and that goes right across this region. I think I will leave it there. Thank you, Chair.

The CHAIR: Thank you very much. Next on the list we have the Northern Victoria Emergency Management Cluster. Could you please state your name and the organisation for the Hansard record and opening remarks of 10 minutes. Thank you.

Ann-Marie ROBERTS: Thank you. Thank you, Chair and members of Parliament. I am Ann-Marie Roberts from the City of Greater Bendigo, and this is Luke Ryan from Mount Alexander shire council. We are here representing the Northern Victoria Emergency Management Cluster, which is made up of five councils: Mount Alexander shire, City of Greater Bendigo, Campaspe Shire Council, Loddon shire and Central Goldfields shire. We are also looking from a perspective across Loddon Mallee region, and we are coming from more of an operational emergency management practitioner point of view.

As you have heard today, the floods surged across quite a diverse landscape, leaving lasting marks on the community, the people, the infrastructure, the environment, the economy and treasured cultural heritage sites. These floods have told a story of resilience and unity across our region but have also carried heart-wrenching loss throughout the region. I note the floods actually spanned months with the response and relief processes, and we have years of recovery ahead of us. The floods were awe-inspiring for some as the landscape transformed into its natural beauty, but they also caused significant stress and profound sorrow. Amidst this, Loddon Mallee did unite and the communities and agencies did collaborate in support, preparation and response, all while facing the media frenzies and political attentions and promises, managing the clean-up and navigating the unknown.

Over the last five to six years we have weathered a barrage of disasters of fire, flood, storm and pandemic – often off the back of prolonged droughts that have impacted communities already. I note, as local government emergency management staff, we do work across the state to support one another in all these incidents, so we are deployed in and out of different local government areas.

We have experienced countless evaluations and reforms throughout our sector, with advocacy, inquiries, reviews and research, and often the same issues come through: the scarcity of both human and financial resources within the emergency management space for local government and across the sector; the need for a comprehensive, multi-hazard and multi-agency approach to managing disasters; insufficient community engagement and preparedness; deficiency in managing risk profiles and the current climate impacts and the mitigations that go with that; and the absolute dire need for capacity and capability building across the emergency management sector as a whole.

Local government plays a vital role across all phases of emergencies. This encompasses the readiness for our diverse and evolving communities, so we are preparing all the time in and out of events. We are navigating complex management systems that we sit outside of on a day-to-day basis. However, we play a lead role in the life of recovery long after the operational side of an event has been stood down. Beyond the impact of an event and the disbanding of the operational systems, the local government commitment endures. They sustain long-term recovery, grappling with outcomes from on-the-fly decisions made under duress, and amid the aftermath they actually bear the financial brunt of damages, hastily implemented systems and often-undervalued insight. I will hand to Luke just for a moment to share some of the other reviews that we have undergone.

Luke RYAN: Thanks, Ann-Marie. Thank you, Madam Chair and members of Parliament. I am Luke Ryan. I am part of the Northern Victorian Emergency Management Cluster and Mount Alexander Shire Council, which also received some major impacts from the flood event.

As Ann-Marie highlighted, local government are pivotal in emergency management, encompassing preparation, response and recovery. In 2017 the Department of Environment, Land, Water and Planning issued the *Councils and Emergencies Position Paper*, outlining councils' integral role in Victoria's emergency management system. The purpose of the position paper was to provide a comprehensive overview of the emergency management responsibilities and activities that councils undertake for betterment and to identify risk and develop strategies through municipal emergency management planning committees. The paper identified councils undertake 94 emergency management responsibilities before, during and after emergencies. Although I can say that it feels like it probably doubled throughout this flood event. This can be attributed to our multifaceted duties in interacting with communities, agencies and experts. However, the significance often goes unrecognised due to current systems and structures and inadequate resources and support. The councils and emergencies project phase three, implementation, unfortunately has been put on hold.

To address this, there is the need for a shift in perspective and support. Councils' roles in community resilience and climate change adaptation are expanding, which challenges positions balancing emergency responsibilities with regular functions. Inadequate resourcing constrains the capacity to keep communities safe, informed and supported. The obligated roles of municipal emergency management officers and municipal recovery managers are unsustainable without proper tailored training. The reliance on one or two individuals, or in some cases – for example, Loddon and Central Goldfields – having one person to share an emergency management responsibility for two councils, to handle council emergency management duties and enhance internal capacity in legislated responsibilities is unsustainable. This is especially true as the effects of emergencies escalate due to climate change. Many of these officers are overburdened and at risk of burnout. Many are leaving the sector.

While councils are not in the lead response, they are pivotal in preparedness, mitigation, relief and recovery. These roles are paramount and require focused attention to mitigate concurrent disaster impacts. I am happy to speak more on that, and I will take the time – particularly with our learnings from before, during and after which we have from Mount Alexander – if there are any questions later on.

Ann-Marie ROBERTS: Thanks, Luke. We are resource-limited but we are creative and adaptable and we fiercely do champion our communities, and across the Loddon–Mallee region we do support one another collectively. During the floods I had a really unique role that evolved fairly authentically in the response and the need, initially from our cluster council but stemming further to our region. I was the emergency management liaison officer at the Bendigo incident control centre. This role is usually for a day or two, but this expanded to eight weeks, which had significant impact on our organisation but was also an opportunity to offer support across the region. Initially it did support from our cluster councils, but it expanded further. The reason for this regional lens simply was because of lack of resources and capacity for each municipality to provide an EMLO and have the skills and depth of knowledge within this space to be able to manage that. The role was a vital conduit into the operational side of the event, supporting municipalities to navigate the complex nature of the event and have continuity and support and access into the ICC. Equally, the role provided significant local and community perspective on issues into the control centre and became a significant part of managing relief and recovery throughout this.

Another example was the Bendigo relief centre. In Bendigo we did not have a significant amount of people needing to evacuate, but what we saw across the region was the need to support people to leave early, to have some options. In Loddon, for example, we had some people come in because all their family members were flooded. That relief centre was open, again, for 16 days, and that had people from Gannawarra, Campaspe shire and Loddon shire and some from Bendigo and further afield as well; we had some people from Swan Hill shire.

The CHAIR: You have 2 minutes.

Ann-Marie ROBERTS: Thank you. We need to look at how these are fit for purpose and management of these things. The significant role local government plays in disasters commands some attention, and the responsibilities and demands need a thorough grasp of what they are asking of us and the expectation. There needs to be some recalibration of response agencies in their established doctrines and ethos to ensure that we are all working as one agency. What are the lessons we have learned? What if we did streamline and merge and harmonise the shift from reactive emergency management to a proactive model emphasising risk reduction, collaboration and a cohesive national and state strategy? This would shift and cultivate strength and resilience in this changing landscape that we face.

We look at financial resources. We have the municipal emergency resourcing program, which has been going for about 13 years. There needs to be an urgent review of the MERP funding, which currently provides limited funding to 64 councils to support their emergency management roles and responsibilities. The MERP funding must be overhauled and expanded to include all 79 councils and provide sufficient funding to employ at least one full-time equivalent person across municipalities.

Training and capacity building across the entirety of the sector: local government is often the poor cousin, so we sit outside of the EM structures but we are expected to step up, meet our legislative responsibilities and act as an agency in this space. We need to ensure that our traditional response agency ethos is kept up to date with the changing communities, the vulnerabilities, the concurrency of events. Waste management is massive. This is something that can be solved right now; there needs to be an establishment or a state or national emergency

waste management planning group. And legislation actually needs to support on-the-ground operations and have a lead agency.

We have spoken about emergency management reviews. Volunteer management: councils are faced with spontaneous volunteers all the time.

The CHAIR: Thirty seconds.

Ann-Marie ROBERTS: Disaster Relief Australia – a great agency. Can we utilise this to manage these volunteers? Legislation and reviews: in legislation it is a requirement to review and debrief after a larger event and review our flood plans, our fire plans. This has not occurred, which actually, 10 months on, has put everyone at risk and in harm's way. This must be done, and these are things that we can do now to support into the future. Thank you.

The CHAIR: Thank you very much. Do not worry, you will have plenty more time to talk to us when we get to ask questions. So there will be lots of time. This session does go till 12:30. Now, Rob, I have got you down as speaking on behalf of the Murray River Group of Councils, so over to you. Just state your name again for the record.

Rob AMOS: Thank you, Madam Chair. Rob Amos, Mayor of Campaspe shire, but also my role here is the Chair of Murray River Group of Councils. The Murray River Group of Councils comprises six councils, which are Campaspe, Gannawarra, Loddon, Mildura, Moira and Swan Hill. But as Mayor Straub has said today, I think, Buloke are not part of the group but they have the same sorts of issues. It covers over 47,000 kilometres, a significant portion of the northern Victorian flood plain of the Murray River and its tributaries. Since 2006 we have worked as a united front to advance the region's advocacy priorities on behalf of the 165,000 Victorians who live in the region. The diversity of our region means different local governments can be in different emergency phases of response, relief and recovery at different times. Indeed a single municipality could be in all three phases at once.

The October flood was an event unlike any other we had experienced before. It behaved differently to previous floods, even those of similar magnitude. With water storages across the basin at, near or above 100 per cent due to three yearly La Niña cycles in a row, the October event caused unprecedented flooding and devastation across the Murray River Group of Councils region. The significant role climate change will continue to play in changing the frequency and severity of natural disasters means we will potentially see more floods like the 2022 flood. Extreme climate is the new normal, so our thinking, decisions and actions about what it means to be disaster ready need to evolve in line with this reality. So too the financial investment the Victorian and Australian governments put into supporting councils, water authorities and other stakeholders in mitigating against the increasing disaster impacts and strengthening community resilience needs to increase.

I am going to go through the viability of warning systems. Communication problems were also experienced with respect to warning systems. Flood warning experiences varied greatly across the Murray River Group of Councils regions, not only from municipality to municipality but within council areas, depending on the type of flood experience that was had. The region experienced fast-rising riverine flooding, quickly inundating towns such as Rochester and Newbridge, with little warning and inaccurate height predictions. Further downstream, the slow rise and long duration of flood plain inundation with the Murray River floods at, say, Swan Hill and Mildura were overall better predicted.

Residents have reported to councils they felt uninformed on the local progress of the floodwaters and what they should do to prepare and protect themselves and their properties. Some residents reported that floodwaters surrounded their properties without any or with little warning being received. Lack of reliable information on what the expected impact would mean meant that some residents were underprepared and isolated, in some cases with animals, for prolonged periods of time. Digital connectivity and mobile reception are a major barrier to accessing reliable and up-to-date information in rural communities, and this is exacerbated in an emergency situation. The VicEmergency and VicTraffic apps as well as their websites also played a significant role in the confusion experienced by the public and council staff. In fact, Kerferd Street in Echuca is still listed as an SES sandbag site on the VicTraffic website today. Data was at times inaccurate and slow to be updated and was difficult to decipher. At times, rather than the emergency apps providing reliable access to factual information, social media became the go-to source of information for residents who were anxious for up-to-date information.

I will talk a little bit more about funding delays and timing – red-tape associated – as explained by Mr Fitzgerald. Having to fund the repair of damaged assets puts enormous pressure on these councils, particularly as they must continue to fund their business-as-usual service requirements at the same time as fixing those critical assets. The evidence required to support funding applications to repair damaged assets is onerous and time consuming. While it is understood that this is public money – and we do understand that – councils already deliver multimillion-dollar projects for a living. This is what we do – roads, critical infrastructure for our communities. So making us jump through significant hoops to access funding only adds to the pressure and anxiety and further drains council’s already limited resources. It is vitally important that the state and federal governments understand the flow-on impacts of these funding complexities, because in the end it is the communities that bear the brunt of these protracted processes. As Mr Fitzgerald said, getting goods to market is a very, very strong example.

It is also a stark reality that councils are going to be out of pocket to some extent with the repairs of damaged infrastructure. The DRFA only cover critical infrastructure, and while insurance covers other assets such as buildings, councils still need to pay insurance excesses, and many other damaged assets, such as walkways, are not covered by funding streams or insurance. Access to betterment funding via the Commonwealth–state disaster recovery funding arrangements is also vitally important for councils. The current funding arrangements only allow for like-for-like replacement on damaged critical infrastructure. This means that assets can only be restored to pre-flood condition, which has already shown to either fail or not be able to effectively withstand an event of the magnitude of the 2022 flood. A commitment by the state and federal governments to provide this betterment funding would be a strategic investment by the governments because assets would be better protected against damage from natural disasters into the future. This would also reduce the risk liability for councils by ensuring that assets are not repaired to pre-flood condition which may not be up to the current standards, which is a common thing when we touch an asset: ‘Whoops, it needs to come up to standard.’

Multiagency debrief – I will talk about that again. There are many insights and experiences from the October flood event that we need to learn from so we can all do better next time, but we do not know when that next time will be, so there is an urgency to conduct a multiagency debrief on the disaster led by the Victorian government. This flood inquiry should be the formal review process of the event for the emergency management stakeholders. What is needed is a structured and robust debriefing process for all stakeholders to get together to thoroughly explore what has happened, why it happened and how it happened for each component of the flood response and then plan collaboratively how to improve upon every aspect of the emergency management process for the future. This would be a major benefit to all emergency services, councils, government stakeholders and ultimately the community.

So in closing today I have highlighted some of the key areas of concern to those councils who make up the Murray River Group of Councils. We want to work together, take the learnings of the event and implement the necessary changes that assist in mitigating future risk. On behalf of the Murray River Group of Councils I thank you for the opportunity to speak today.

The CHAIR: Thank you all very much. All right, now it is over to questions, and again you will all get plenty of time to continue to help us understand your experiences. I might just go first cab off the rank, and I have been writing notes and hopefully will get some questions and really helpful answers. I guess the thing for us is we have got to write a report and we will be making recommendations to government, so to be helpful to us I always ask witnesses: what are your top three? We might start with you, Rob, in your role at Campaspe shire but also in your other role for the Murray River Group of Councils. So if there were three things – your top three that you think should absolutely change or that we could do better – what would they be?

Rob AMOS: I think number one would be the funding arrangements. While the disaster was a terrible event, we generally got through it, but there are still a lot of people struggling.

The CHAIR: So do you mean emergency disaster relief funding for individuals or for councils? Can you unpack that?

Rob AMOS: No, I am talking about the council funding. This is from a council perspective: getting that funding quicker and easier so that we can get our communities back on their feet.

The CHAIR: And is that streamlining the process for you guys or just a quicker turnaround, or both?

Rob AMOS: The word that we use is ‘trust’. As we have said, we get funding from both state and federal governments ongoing, and we use the example of the Roads to Recovery funding. We use the local roads and community infrastructure funding. That funding is given to us as a council, and they say, ‘You do this on an ongoing basis; we don’t want to hear about how you’re going to do it, just go ahead and fix what you need to do or build what you need to do.’ We then come to, and I am sure Mr Fitzgerald can talk further about this, such detailed requirements – photos every few hundred metres, the maximum claim being \$500,000 – and this just drags out this process. We do not call it ‘fixing roads’ anymore, we call it ‘reconnecting our community’. We need our communities to be able to get back on their feet.

The CHAIR: So is it onerous?

Rob AMOS: It is just –

The CHAIR: Is it ridiculously onerous?

Rob AMOS: I will pass to Mr Fitzgerald.

Lincoln FITZGERALD: It is. Lincoln Fitzgerald, Chief Executive of Loddon. The evidence burden is totally unrealistic. You have to have evidence prior to and after the event. In Loddon’s case we have got 4800 kilometres of roads, for goodness sake. How do we have pre photos of that length of road, and what does a photo tell you? If you have had a flood event and you have lost all the fines out of your gravel, that means that road is going to fail. A photo does not show you that you are missing the fine particles in your road that gave it integrity. If you cannot demonstrate that through photos, then you are asked for all this other evidence, secondary evidence. It is all of your maintenance logs – how long since it has been resheeted, proof of the plant and equipment you are going to use, and on and on and on and on it goes. You are asked to put them together in packages, and they are sent off. Now, the Department of Transport and Planning is assessing those, and they are still dealing with claims from 2021. So as I said earlier, we have submitted them. We have had to do the work to get the roads reopened, but we actually do not know if we are going to get the money back. So we are writing blank cheques here, and it is very distressing when we are running such financially tight budgets –

The CHAIR: So you are looking for certainty and a quicker turnaround and those sorts of things.

Lincoln FITZGERALD: Absolutely.

The CHAIR: So that is one; I asked for three. And do not worry, you will all get plenty of opportunity to contribute to this. So funding arrangements and a better, more streamlined, less onerous process – what else? I am looking for two more things.

Rob AMOS: Yes. I think during the flood event the cooperation between the emergency services and councils could certainly have been better. And that goes to, as Ann-Marie was saying, things like funding councils properly so that we can have properly trained staff from our side, being able to understand whose role is what, how we work together –

The CHAIR: Clarifying roles.

Rob AMOS: Yes, role clarification. That would be another one. It is very hard when you ask me –

The CHAIR: Look, can I say too, with these questions, if you feel that you cannot answer them, you can provide answers to us on notice as well. So if you want to supplement any of your answers today, you can certainly do that.

Rob AMOS: The third one I will talk about is the warnings and information that came out. That was totally inadequate. If I go to VicTraffic – I gave the example, the craziness – it is still on the website today that there is a sandbagging site and the road is closed in Kerferd Street in Echuca.

The CHAIR: Which authority? Because I am not sure which –

Rob AMOS: VicRoads, I am assuming.

The CHAIR: It is a VicRoads website, is it? Or is it an app? I do not know.

Rob AMOS: It is both. It is a website and an app. It is called VicTraffic, yes. And it is designed so that if a road is closed, you know, if you are planning a trip somewhere, you will go around –

The CHAIR: Yes, I know what you mean now.

Rob AMOS: Our main road is Ogilvie Avenue – so that was a small example. A larger example is Ogilvie Avenue was closed for about a day, which cut off the two sides of the town. That showed as closed for weeks and weeks and weeks. So when people were planning to come up here, they would see that that was a road closure, and instead of coming directly up here they might have taken kilometres and kilometres of a trip to get here.

VicEmergency – while the VicEmergency app is quite good, when there is so much going on you open the app and there is this mess of colours on your screen that is very hard to decipher, even to the stage where just a couple of months ago we had another high water event with the Murray, literally a couple of months ago, and there was some minor flooding below Torrumbarry and towards Barham. If you looked on the app, there was just yellow everywhere saying that there was a ‘watch and act’ on this. This affects us not directly from an emergency point of view but from a tourism point of view, because we are seriously trying to recover. People who are in Melbourne open their app and there is just yellow everywhere saying stuff is going on. ‘See you later. We’re not coming.’

The CHAIR: They are not going to go. Yes, that is right.

Rob AMOS: So I think the electronic warning systems from a digital point of view need to be reviewed to work out, number one, how they can look better –

The CHAIR: Perhaps in real time –

Rob AMOS: but you are right, how they get updated in a better way.

The CHAIR: A better real-time kind of situation. I want to ask you as well – I am going to ask all of you these sorts of questions anyway, and I apologise to my colleagues, but there will be plenty of time for you guys – in terms of emergency plans, because I know you talked about evacuations and that perhaps some evacuations need to be forced, what was your experience from a council perspective? If there were evacuations, did individuals have emergency plans themselves? Were they prepared for these events? I think what people are saying is people knew there was a flood coming; the difference was how big. Did you find that individuals had done some early preparation work around making decisions about ‘If there is a flood coming, I am getting out’ or ‘What do I need to do?’ You may or may not be able to answer that, but what was your experience there? Also, is there an overarching plan for the town or the municipality about what to do and where to go – that kind of disaster planning? If you could unpack that, that would be great.

Rob AMOS: I would suggest that some people did and some people did not, and that is a normal thing. Some people had plans.

The CHAIR: Did they follow them?

Rob AMOS: Well, some did and some did not. Again, I use the perfect example of: I was a volunteer firefighter for 12 years. I actually worked on the flood on the Campaspe River in Echuca. We worked about a 14-hour shift to stop some houses being flooded. We failed; the river overtook us. There were all the homeowners there. I went up to them, and I said, ‘It’s time for you to implement your plan.’

The CHAIR: ‘What plan?’

Rob AMOS: ‘What plan?’ And they were on the river. That is not uncommon. From an emergency point of view also, if an area is considered an evacuation zone, it is how that is managed by, again, the agencies that need to manage evacuations. Shannon, did you want to add to that?

Shannon MAYNARD: Yes. Thanks, Mayor Amos. My name is Shannon Maynard. I am the Director of Emergency Management here at Campaspe Shire Council. I think what we see is a real disparity between the way fires are managed and the way that floods are managed. For people who leave evacuation areas, there is no enforcement in terms of ‘Leave – and if you leave you cannot come back in’ versus the way fire is managed.

There is a massive disparity in this event. I think what we saw particularly in Rochester was that a large number of our residents had been through floods before and said, 'Well, we didn't flood last time, so we probably won't flood this time.' I think a lot of their plans were: 'We're actually probably okay.' We saw a significant rise in the floodwaters and many more people impacted. There were plans in place, but certainly people were not prepared for the magnitude of this event. We at council now – our role as part of our resilience efforts will be around better planning for residents to take some ownership over their own plans moving forward.

The CHAIR: Great. I might just ask you, Charlie, if I can: you were talking about how some people had built ring levees around their properties and that, but I am interested to know what impact that then has for the displacement of water and how it impacts the flood plain. Is there some kind of analysis that council does on an ongoing basis to look at that?

Charlie GILLINGHAM: The ring levee, following the 2011 flood, is just a levee around a single house. The impact is minimal on the flood and on neighbours and all that sort of stuff. It certainly protects the house, the building, that is there. In our submission you might read that some houses that actually did have ring levees still got wet because they did not enact their plan, I suppose, of blocking up pipes and stuff like that. And as I mentioned, a lot of new people in the area had no idea about what a flood means and looks like.

The CHAIR: So was your experience similar to what Rob was saying, that some people knew that there could be floods coming and some were completely unprepared? And also with levees, I am hearing some levees are better than others, right? It depends on how they are built and how effective they are. Some will fail and some will be effective. Is that accurate?

Charlie GILLINGHAM: Yes, that is true. There are plenty of levees out there that are built to a proper –

The CHAIR: Standard.

Charlie GILLINGHAM: structural standard, yes. And for others, as we have just seen recently with the bit of a scare we have had in the last month or two with the high rivers, a lot of the levees have been put back by landowners, and no-one knows how good they are. A levee breach could impact dozens and dozens of landowners downstream. That is one thing we will talk about later: levees, ownership, maintenance – all that sort of stuff.

The CHAIR: Yes. I think that has been an issue. We went on a bit of a tour this morning to have a look at some levees as well, and that was certainly something that came up. I will just go to my next round of questions. Your top three – what would your top three be? Again, we have got to write recommendations. Short, sharp, succinct: what are your top three that we need to take back?

Charlie GILLINGHAM: I certainly agree with Rob regarding funding. Post flood we have got 308 roads identified in a bundle of 13 packages, I think they are. We have done 10 roads 10 months on – that is all that we have done, 10 roads out of 308. Back in 2011 we completed all our road work in 15 months, you know – \$25 million worth of works done in 15 months. There is a lot of difference there. So funding is very important.

Rob did mention the clarification of the role between the agencies, which is important. I think, like I mentioned before, the local knowledge – we have got some great local knowledge within our shire council and within our local CFA. People that have lived in the area for a long period of time actually know who to go to to get that correct information, so we need to make sure the information is reliable and correct so that everyone is fully informed about what is going on.

Another thing I would like to mention is the flood mitigation projects. I am pretty sure we identified the Murray Valley Highway back in 2011. So there are some no-brainers out there that we feel should be –

The CHAIR: Prioritised?

Charlie GILLINGHAM: Yes, prioritised. We have probably got three or four that I think we would love to see built before the next flood gets here; that would be great. That would help with the connectivity between two major towns, Kerang and Swan Hill, and it would also help with some of the houses that were inundated. As you are probably aware, when a levee breaches – they are earthen levees – if the water keeps flowing, it just keeps eroding and eroding, and –

The CHAIR: And then it all just fails, yes.

Charlie GILLINGHAM: Yes. So that water is flowing out for weeks and weeks and weeks, whereas if we had a fixed-crest weir, a concrete structure, you could just take the peak off the flood and then you could stop that and those people would be able to get back into their houses a lot quicker.

The CHAIR: And in your shire, do you have a disaster management plan, an overarching one, that also interacts with the town in terms of like, if something is completely flooded, where you go for, say, pharmacy supplies? I mean, it may not be your role, but is that something that you have had to consider before? It may not be. Again, did you find that people were prepared, in a way, or not prepared? What was your experience?

Charlie GILLINGHAM: Well, we have certainly got a plan. Back in 2011, similar to last year's flood, once we realised that we were in a little bit of a problem, a lot of the elderly left the area. We did have an evacuation centre set up in Swan Hill so those that were impacted could go to Swan Hill and get accommodation.

The CHAIR: So there was early notification that something was coming, and people needed to get out?

Charlie GILLINGHAM: Yes. But a lot of people like to stay back, you know. Out of the 4000 people in Kerang, half of them at least would have stayed back to help. A big shout-out to all our community that actually did all the sandbagging and stuff like that. It was amazing.

The CHAIR: Yes. Awesome. All right, I will move to Loddon shire now. What would your top three be? Do you agree with what been said, or is there something else you want wanted to draw attention to?

Dan STRAUB: The top three priorities I think have been covered with great detail from Mayor Amos and also Mayor Gillingham. We do also want to add a full review of the 2016 *Victorian Floodplain Management Strategy*, in consultation with the community and local government, is required, and the review needs to carefully consider the resource capacity of small rural councils. Flood warnings are another key aspect, not just for our riverine floods – we encountered numerous troubles with our irrigation systems as well – and whether there are some avenues for better preparedness on our major arterial channel networks through to the backbone. I think that top three is very consistent across our partnership municipalities.

The CHAIR: Awesome, thank you. Ann-Marie and Luke, your top three – would you agree with what has been said? Do you want to add anything?

Ann-Marie ROBERTS: Yes, look, we would agree, but I guess from a practitioner and an operational side as well, one of our priorities across the state with our colleagues is around – we have currently got emergency management reform happening at the moment – looking at broadly that emergency management structure in Victoria and nationally so that there is not the disparity between fire and flood and every other pandemic. So aligning those systems so that they are more reactive and responsive but also supporting training capacity building across local government and the agencies. Often it is that local government have to step in and support the agencies, which we do and we do willingly, but it is I guess bridging that gap between the agencies' and local government's roles, being that we are in there long term. That does encompass clarity of roles and responsibilities – what is our legislative role, what is the capacity that we do have – and to understand that consequence management when an incident is running and there are decisions made, understanding what that long-term consequence and impact is on the community, so really looking at those roles and responsibilities. That also encompasses training. You know, we sit in this structure – let us be part of that. There are parts of the municipal planning committee that used to be legislated. That is now being removed as a legislative role, so it is an opt-in if you have this, which you could speak to, Luke. It has undervalued that system.

Luke RYAN: It has. It has been taken out as an obligation there, for example, and we have got flood committees as well that are localised and are very important to plans. To have these taken out of that legislation, it is not taken seriously enough by other agencies now and has left it, so I hate to see what we are going to be like in the fire season. It is really important that we have these in legislation and supported at a local level, because the relationships that you build from that and the lessons learned from these floods that go into that – and we need more support through to our VICSES to go and review these plans. None of these flood plans have been reviewed because there is a lack of resources and staffing et cetera that are in that paid personnel, so that is certainly very important.

Ann-Marie ROBERTS: Probably another priority for us within this space is how we manage climate change and the risk and the mitigation and the concurrency of what we are seeing. We have come off the back of significant fire straight into a pandemic before that recovery was done, straight into floods, and we are seeing the brunt of that now and the fatigue in the community, fatigue in agencies and the fatigue across things. I think it is about collectively what focus on mitigation are we doing into the future? We have got things that we need to do now to manage events as they come, but actually as a collective how are we looking forward to move from just a reactive approach that is very ineffective in its costs – it is very costly – to how we can manage risk reduction and resilience within our communities? And if I can, I just wanted to make a bit of a note on an earlier comment about preparedness and the level of preparedness for people. It is really interesting. It is a really challenging space to work in for people to be planning, but again a priority for us in local government is that we do a lot of resilience and preparation within community but it is a whole-of-agency approach, so we advocate through the NDIS around having emergency preparedness planning within systems to support vulnerable people. We want agencies on board to ensure that they understand the priority for people in those vulnerable categories, for example, disability, aged, disconnected, so that there is not just a reliance on an agency to get that messaging out, but it is supportive –

The CHAIR: A partnership approach, yes.

Ann-Marie ROBERTS: Yes, it is person centred. There are some programs around which often get funded short term but then there is no ongoing, so there is a CFA program at the moment. There are lots. That is a really vital thing. But I think one thing that did evolve over these floods, and I have got the privilege of seeing it in the control centre, is we start with a very flash-flooding reactive response and people know what is coming, but we knew as it travelled through the region that we needed to change the messaging for that preparedness, so we needed to enable people to make a decision to say, ‘I’m going to leave early and this is where I’m going.’ Gannawarra was an interesting one. Knowing that Kerang was going to become an island, there was messaging to say, ‘If you are able to be sustained for 14 days, have a go, but these are options. These are the options that you need to consider,’ so that evolution of messaging was really – it did not support everyone, but at least there were times that people knew what to expect. I think that communication to community and having that –

The CHAIR: The evolution of the messaging.

Ann-Marie ROBERTS: Yes.

The CHAIR: And specific to some particular communities.

Ann-Marie ROBERTS: Yes.

The CHAIR: Now, I know my colleagues are busting with questions, so I am going to have to move on. I will throw to John Berger for the next question. John.

John BERGER: Thank you, Sonja. Thank you very much for your presentations and appearance here today. I want to talk about role clarity and warning systems, but before I do I just want to relay a story that happened yesterday in Rochester. One of the presentations was from a chap that had an army background, and he was looking through a military lens as to some of the ideas that might come to the fore in terms of role clarification and warning systems. Rob, I might put this question to you, because you are a representative of the group. What would an ideal model, in your view, look like for the roles of people in those particular scenarios? And do you think that the military, with their strategic and critical thinking, might have a role to assist in putting some of these things into place?

Rob AMOS: That would have been Cam who was presenting to you yesterday, who I know very well – and I had 10 years in the army reserves, so I understand these systems as well. I do not think that is a military role, but that does not say we could not take some of their systems.

John BERGER: I am thinking more of their thinking rather than practical –

Rob AMOS: Yes, that is right, so take some of their thinking. It is very structured, and the scenario is the same in Rochester as it is in Seymour. I always said in the army if you were posted to Perth or to Darwin or to Adelaide, the Q store looked the same – everything was the same. They had a whole system in place. It does have to be adaptable because different areas will have different things: some will be on a flood plain, some will

be in valleys. Down Macedon way the flooding would be different, so there does need to be different thinking, but certainly far more structured thinking is not a bad place to be.

John BERGER: But if you have too much flexibility, is that where the confusion then arises?

Rob AMOS: Possibly. That is right. But the systems I have come from and worked with, if they are structured, everyone knows what to do.

John BERGER: Thank you.

The CHAIR: Ms Tyrrell.

Rikkie-Lee TYRRELL: Thank you, Chair. My question is for the Gannawarra shire. You said that there was still standing water on the ground. How long does that usually hang around after a flood?

Rob AMOS: You can have a go.

Geoff ROLLINSON: Yes. Thank you for the question – Geoff Rollinson, Chief Executive. It can last for up to 12 months just depending on the weather that occurs following. It is about a timing issue. Back in 2011 the issue with that water, given that that was a January flood event, was the arbovirus threat. Following the 2000 flood event there was Murray Valley encephalitis – and apologies if I pronounced that wrongly – detected in the Gannawarra shire. The standing water became a threat to the community through a health impact. That is one of the bigger issues. Answering your question, it can last there for up to 12 months, and it needs to be pumped away. That is the issue: it is stuck. It is trapped in that active flood plain.

Rikkie-Lee TYRRELL: Okay. So my next question, following on from that, is what are the solutions that you think are possible to get rid of it?

Geoff ROLLINSON: So the solution is within the Victorian flood plain strategy. It needs to be recognised that standing water is an issue in this northern part of the flood plain where water becomes trapped out on what is an active flood plain, and that needs to be acknowledged as well, so therefore these predetermined locations. In 2011 we actually had to barge pumps in. We had to manually get them off these barges effectively and winch them on – a very precarious situation and a very dangerous set-up. We had to barge fuel in to keep the pumps operating to pump the water out.

What I would be suggesting is that a study be conducted, that you acknowledge standing water as an issue in the northern flood plain, and that when you have a known event – and this is the benefit of and the curse with Gannawarra – you know what you are going to get. Once you know you have over 140,000 megalitres coming out of Laanecoorie, you know – you can predict fairly well – what is going to occur, and then you would put the mechanisms in place to remove that standing water, as opposed to dragging the stuff through the flood to get it there. In the case of where this water has lain, which Mayor Gillingham indicated, you would have 15 days from once you know what is occurring at Laanecoorie to drive in quite easily and place and crane these things into position. Or, in the event of 2011, if the Murray is in fact not in flood, then you have got the ability to then put infrastructure in place – gated infrastructure – to actually just open it up and just let it go into the Murray.

Rikkie-Lee TYRRELL: Okay. Thank you. Thank you, Chair.

The CHAIR: Ms Bath.

Melina BATH: Thank you. I have got a booklet of questions right here. First of all, I just want to thank you all in your respective roles. We have heard – and we can see behind you there is a large audience – the impact that this has made on your communities but also on your personal lives. You are professionals, you are doing a job, and I note that local member Peter Walsh is here. People look to the council and local members for answers, and sometimes you do not have them not because of your own fault but because there is not that information, there is not that communication. So I wanted to thank you and all your staff, if I could put that on record.

I would like to talk about mental health issues. We heard about this yesterday in Rochester. One of the members there said that they had mental help support really quickly and that it was a bit slower coming from

council. You might like to start, Rob. Were there hold-ups? What did that look like? If you could re-paint that scenario, what sorts of mental health triage and support would you like and how fast would you like it?

Rob AMOS: Thanks for the question. I might pass that to my CEO if that is okay.

Melina BATH: Good. Pauline, we would love to hear from you.

Pauline GORDON: Pauline Gordon, CEO of Campaspe. Thank you so much for the question. I was sitting here and wrote it down as the fourth priority if we were allowed four, and I am nudging my Mayor. Mental health has been a massive issue right across all of our shires and still is to this very day. We simply cannot get enough mental health workers or support, or where we can, we do not actually get the funding. For example, Echuca Regional Health I know for a fact has available on hand now some staff that can come on board, but we have not been able to attract the funding for them. So as the Murray River Group of Councils, we have been advocating fairly hard for them to receive that funding. It certainly is not a council role other than in programs that we might be able to also deliver, and we are trying to attract funding for that as well.

Melina BATH: From government?

Pauline GORDON: Yes.

Melina BATH: We are state members of Parliament here, so we will look with that lens. So you need the funding, you need that direct line, and also – I am asking the question – in terms of contracts I would think it is very hard to attract good mental health triage supports if you have only got a six-month contract. Is that something you want to make a comment on?

Pauline GORDON: Thanks for the question. I certainly would not be able to answer that question myself. I would anticipate, though, like any local government staff, that the health services would need to offer a longer contract period for their workers.

Melina BATH: Is it warranted? Do we need mental health support in this area?

Pauline GORDON: I am looking at my colleagues, and they are all nodding; I am thinking the whole room is nodding. It is the greatest impact on our community. And we have not spoken about our farmers today, but if we need to really talk about wellbeing, I know the farm gate program, which was previously funded, was a huge success, where workers were actually going out to the farms. We have a harvest coming up, and when we were talking before about getting the funding for our roads, they are watching that with interest – that their roads are going to be fixed. So all of this impacts on the day-to-day wellbeing of our community and the issues that they are facing as families, as employers. Our businesses are closed down. They actually need support for the mental wellbeing of themselves and their workers. This is across the entire region.

Melina BATH: Thanks, Pauline. This question might dovetail. We have rural financial counsellors that are based in our communities. It might be – just literally brain flying here – worthwhile to put those mental health counsellors alongside or incorporate them into that, and that might be a model that we should look at in terms of recommendations. Thanks, Ann-Marie.

Ann-Marie ROBERTS: Sorry, I just wanted to add in there too the challenge with some of the services throughout this is understanding what is available and how quickly it can be deployed and then linking it, so understanding structures that exist already in the quiet times, in the peace times, and planning for that to then know that they will be activated. During the control centre, day three in there was a federal minister who came in, and the conversation was about mental health and the impacts it would have across our region. So it was flagged very early on that mental health was going to be a significant impact of this coming off the pandemic, droughts et cetera. One of the challenges within council operationally is understanding what is available, how to activate it and how to link that in and then to deploy that out.

We are fortunate in the City of Greater Bendigo we have a lot of resources, but as soon as you go out more broadly it is even just the distance that people are travelling and the accommodation that is needed – the long-term support. So it is that continuity of understanding what is available but also having state plans, understanding state government structures or other agencies' structures in what is available and what funding can be deployed. As part of the preparation for local government for an incident, as we are leading up, getting

the weather updates, what is likely to occur, some of these systems need to be activated at that preparation point, ready to deploy out when we have got DFFH sitting in relief and ERV sitting in recovery, and it is having those minds ready to activate, deploy and simplify some of those systems out into particularly the smaller regional areas that are harder to get things out and about into. That is just an observation and something that we would support operationally in councils and communities to support mental health.

Luke RYAN: Yes, 100 per cent. I do totally agree with that too. There is a lot of focus in the relief stage on mental health, but we have noticed with our communities that are impacted that there are stages when they hit; they just want to know that they are okay. So we are getting that. We do have opportunities for funding through the hubs program with ERV. But you do have to stipulate then and there again what you are putting in for in an early delivery plan. So yes, we do need more support with that around here and probably further opportunities. The further you get out from Melbourne, the harder those resources are to get in.

Melina BATH: To access, and therefore that longevity of tenure.

Luke RYAN: Absolutely.

Melina BATH: And quality. Lincoln.

Lincoln FITZGERALD: Can I please just add a little bit to that. We have local health services who are providing this service, and they have not been funded one cent.

Melina BATH: So there needs to be additional funding for those local in situ services who the community know.

Lincoln FITZGERALD: Yes, that is right – the people they know and trust. If you parachute people in, they are there for three months or six months and then they are gone. And mental health and wellbeing is not a short-term thing. Our local health services need more support to deliver that service. People trust them, and they provide an amazing service.

Melina BATH: Activating those and funding through those, rather than hovering – no matter how good the service is. So funding through that. Chair, could I ask another question?

The CHAIR: Last one. We have got an hour.

Melina BATH: I have got heaps, but anyway.

The CHAIR: We will come back around.

Melina BATH: We have done mental health. I want to go to structural improvements and mitigation and go to levees. I come from the hill country down in South Gippsland, so it is good education for me. It is really important. I want to understand. I think you, Charlie and Geoff, were talking about ownership and maintenance, and I know the *Victorian Floodplain Management Strategy* of 2016 – I have got it in front of me – talks about levees on Crown land and who is responsible and the weathering. I think it just sounds like a very big headache, and I want you to unpack your wish list for your community on this – levees.

Geoff ROLLINSON: I will kick off if you like. Geoff Rollinson, Chief Executive. As I indicated earlier, given the nature of the flood plain, which is very, very flat terrain, you have got levee banks that are only maybe a foot high – I am showing my age with my using imperial measurement of course – and levees that are 7 foot high and higher. They are of mixed materials, and they have served our community well over the years. Understand once again that we are on an active flood plain, so floods are not unusual occurrences. But I really want to make the differentiation between a significant flood event and a major flood event. We have had a number of major flood events; we have had very few significant flood events – 1909, 2011 and 2022. These levee banks have held well during those events, but when you get a significant flow they are breached. Now, one of the major differences between 2011 and 2022 for Gannawarra was the significance of the event.

What occurred post-event, and we will go to mental health, was a recovery process where the then state government got in, worked cooperatively with Goulburn–Murray Water, who are the experts in building banks – that is their business, building channel banks – and worked with the CMA and restored the 50-odd breaches that were in the system then. That gave our community some sense of resolve that they were protected from

every flood event. If there was a minor event or a moderate event – as I said before, for water to rise an inch it needs to run a mile – our community were protected for every other event, discounting these significant events. Number one, that was important to get our community back to some sense of recovery and some sense of normality, for the health and wellbeing of our community and to enable them to start to earn an income, remembering that this is a farming community. They have annual crops, so they had to have that annual rotation. This is where it is important that the state government and the Commonwealth understand the importance of flood mitigation infrastructure.

Now, the issue back in 2011, post-event, and with the document that you are referring to, was they said there should be a beneficiary-pays system of ownership as well. When you are dealing with such a flat flood plain, it could be that, as an example, the person at the end of the table is the abutting owner who has the levee bank. However, if that breach occurs it will subsequently flow down through each of your properties as it makes its way down to the Murray River. That is very difficult to understand, hence the reason it has not been enacted. There was a recommendation that perhaps councils should pick it up.

Melina BATH: Yes, that is what I wanted to explore. What is your opinion?

Geoff ROLLINSON: My opinion is no.

Melina BATH: I figured that might be a leading question.

Geoff ROLLINSON: My view is no. I think the challenge around levee banks is going to be an infinite challenge. What needs to be acknowledged is their importance within the flood plain and the ability to go in and repair these levees as quick as you can post flood to a pre-flood condition. Moving forward the challenge will always be: these levee banks are sitting on either private land or Crown land or an undefined reserve of some context. Yes, certainly a study could be undertaken to define better where they are, because following this event there are a number of what we call illegal levees, which were levees put up in haste, which have impacted the flood plain. There has been removal of irrigation infrastructure through the irrigation connection program, and that was what our mayor Charlie was indicating earlier – that some of these properties now are impacted that were not impacted in Gannawarra in 2011, because the channel infrastructure is no longer there. So there needs to be a review I guess of the flood plain to determine, and with lidar mapping and so on now it is a lot simpler than it was in the past. We know what has been removed, but in relation to the ongoing maintenance it is a very, very difficult question. There is no silver bullet for this question. The silver bullet, post flood, to get our community back to some sense of normality or recovery is to get in there and repair those breaches, using known contractors like Goulburn–Murray Water, with the oversight of North Central Catchment Management in our case, to a predetermined flood condition, and on we go with life.

Melina BATH: Very lastly, Chair, for the moment: who pays for that? Is that a grant process? You said in 2011 there were 50 restored breaches. Someone has got to pay for it, so that is where the argy-bargy fight will be. What do we need to recommend the state government do?

Geoff ROLLINSON: You would need to recommend that state government repair them.

Melina BATH: Repair or pay?

Geoff ROLLINSON: Pay, as part of the flood recovery process. Similar to the road repair, we need to get our communities back as quick as possible to some sense of normality. As was indicated earlier, back in 2011 I repaired and connected our community again, 15 months post flood. With a much larger flood event this time around, out of 308 roads I have repaired 10 – not good enough.

Melina BATH: Thank you.

The CHAIR: Ms Lovell.

Wendy LOVELL: Thank you. Levee banks was going to be my first question, but I will just ask a follow-up question on Melina's. The responsibility for the funding of the repair of the levee banks last time – who covered that, and who do you think should be responsible for covering that?

Geoff ROLLINSON: As I said, the 'beneficiary pays' process is too hard to work out in our particular case in Gannawarra because when there is a breach, the breach could be 10 kilometres away from where your

affected property is. So when you are saying that we need someone to actually fund this and the beneficiary needs to be identified as to who pays, you cannot identify them, because there could be multiple properties.

Wendy LOVELL: But it is not just private properties either. It is local government roads, it is state government roads and it is state government infrastructure like hospitals, schools and everything.

Geoff ROLLINSON: Correct.

Wendy LOVELL: So there are a multitude of beneficiaries and that funding question is complex.

Geoff ROLLINSON: As an example, in Gannawarra we have two levees that we are responsible for. The Kerang township levee, which was indicated before about the island of Kerang, is a 17-kilometre ring levee effectively that runs right around the Kerang township. In the town of Quambatook we have got a levee bank that goes for about 2 k's that actually protects the township of Quambatook from flooding. They are the responsibility of council, where there is a defined community benefit, and going forward we are reviewing and looking to construct a levee bank with natural disaster resilience funding or disaster-ready funding to protect the town of Koondrook. That too will become – once it is constructed – council maintained, owned and operated and go on our books. That will become our levee bank. But the broader rural community – as I said before, there are about 4000 kilometres of levee banks in rural Victoria, approximately 2000 of which sit between Loddon and Gannawarra. There is no way that the community or council could afford to take on ownership and responsibility and ongoing maintenance for that extensive network.

Wendy LOVELL: Thank you. Everyone mentioned early warning systems, and we certainly heard a lot of this in Rochester yesterday – that people did not feel that the warning systems served them well, that the warning systems failed. Gannawarra, you talked about 40 per cent of your people not being connected to the internet, so not having access to apps and things like that that we tended to rely on. I have to say personally I found the EMV app useless: we were still getting messages to evacuate Shepparton four days after the water had receded. I am just wondering if you could all expand on early warning and what you feel is necessary – how it can be better done for your communities next time. I would like an answer to that for me from the councils.

Geoff ROLLINSON: Geoff Rollinson – I will just kick off because we were at the bottom end, I guess. For us, local knowledge – the North Central Catchment Management Authority, the local knowledge actually plays well. In the case of Koondrook-Barham, there was a panic that went through because there was a flush coming down the Murray. This evacuation warning went out, but we knew that it was not going to happen. All you have in a flood event is credibility. You only have your credibility. Once the community sees through a message that is incorrect or blatantly wrong, you will lose your credibility. As Mayor Amos has indicated, when it is saying a road is closed and it clearly is not, then the whole credibility of your system goes down. Likewise, de-escalating is just as important as escalating. Once the road becomes open or something changes, it needs to de-escalate just as it needs to escalate.

The issue that we came across – as I said before, we have got 12 days notice from Laanecoorie to Kerang. We have got five days in the Avoca. We use a rule of threes – or three days – for the Pyramid Creek. And we use a rule of 12s – a 12-inch rise at Echuca means a 1-inch rise at Barham. What we were getting was that it was going to be the same flush all the way through, so the 12-inch rise at Echuca was going to mean a 12-inch rise. I know people like to think that water runs flat. It does not – it runs on a wedge, it runs downhill. As it came through all the chokes all the way down the system water would dissipate off into New South Wales effectively. There just needs to be credibility and there needs to be a conversation between the agencies, particularly with that local knowledge, linking back into the North Central Catchment Management Authority in our case, to just reassess, reconfirm – is this right, because I need to keep my credibility at all costs here. I need to be credible in what I am sending out – do not panic it out. If you are even unsure, go to the local councils – if the resources are there – to ask, 'Does this sound right to you?' and then push the button.

Wendy LOVELL: Echuca.

Rob AMOS: Yes, thank you. There is always going to be the case where the event is bigger than what we thought it was going to be. Is the BOM going to get it right every single time? Probably not. But I think I am going to go with what Geoff has said – the warnings got better as they went down the river, which is again always the way it comes through. But the credibility around the information is the critical part of it. If we get it

wrong, as you would have heard in the hearing yesterday – the amount of people that said, ‘I don’t trust them anymore. I don’t trust the BOM anymore.’ That would have been very common. That is what we have been hearing for months and months: ‘We just don’t trust that anymore.’ Around that credibility, I think, is where we need to do work. As I said, Ogilvie Avenue, which is our main road in here – we would pass that back to get that taken off. I do not know where it went.

There are two parts to this. I look at: is someone being really conservative? They go, ‘I’m really not sure so I’ll just leave the emergency evacuation warning’ – or the whatever it is – ‘up.’ I do not know. Or is it that there are just not enough people or personnel there to actually manage that process. Is it like, ‘It’s there but we’ve got so many other things to do, we don’t have time to properly manage that part of the process’?

Wendy LOVELL: Regardless of whether it was accurate or not – Rochester felt that it was not accurate. But the actual transferring of the message to the community is an important part of it as well, and if you are relying on EMV’s app, I think you said yourself you go on there and you go, ‘My God, it is just a blur of colour.’

Rob AMOS: I think information does get out, as they would have said. We have said in our report, I think, there were over 700 homes knocked on in Rochester. That information was out there, and people made their decisions. I do not think that is unique to this disaster, though; I think that is a very common thing across disasters full stop. Is that something we need to work on, how do we build trust with our community, whether that is through councils or whether that is through the emergency services to say, ‘When we tell you something, perhaps take it seriously’, I do not know the answer to that, so –

Wendy LOVELL: In bushfires we use text messages for people to evacuate. We heard yesterday that post the disaster in Rochester they have been using Coliban’s text messages to get messages out. Do you feel that that would be a better way of informing communities it is time to evacuate or plan to evacuate?

Rob AMOS: We certainly do. And we actually requested that several times – to have the capacity to do that – and we were told that we could not have that capacity. Coliban Water had that capacity, and they were putting text messages out saying ‘The water is not safe’ or whatever. I think the reasoning behind it was we do not want to send too many text messages to people, and I sort of get that –

Wendy LOVELL: It is easier than doorknocking.

Rob AMOS: Yes, absolutely. And you know, the problem we had – you put messages on Facebook or on the different social medias and so on, but if someone is just working all day doing stuff, filling sandbags and flicks past their feed, by the time they look at it when they are having a beer at 7 o’clock at night it has gone, whereas everyone who gets a text message pulls it out and has a look at it. I think that system should be looked at and how that system can be better utilised. I think that is a far better way than relying on people to look on an app. I know it can ping on your app and all that, but our phones ping all day long with all the stuff we do these days. But that text messaging – I think people got their ‘Boil your water from now on’ and started boiling their water, so it was those sorts of things. I think that perhaps needs to be investigated.

Wendy LOVELL: Loddon?

Dan STRAUB: I will pass this one to Mr Fitzgerald –

Lincoln FITZGERALD: Lincoln Fitzgerald, chief executive. I think there are several issues here. The first one is the information that is available is so varied. At Echuca it is measured above sea level as to what that height is. At the Laanecoore reservoir it is measured in metres from the weir base. People do not understand. ‘What the heck does that mean?’ That is the first issue.

The CHAIR: I do not understand either.

Lincoln FITZGERALD: If we do not get it, how does the community? That is the first issue: it is inconsistent. The next part is the location of the gauges, and the categories. If I use the Laanecoore weir again, a major flood, the impact of that can be that nothing gets flooded – it does not make its way up into our parks and things through to what happened last October. When an alert gets issued for a moderate or major flood, people do not respect what it is because it is just noise. They have seen it come up the week before and nothing

happened, so why is this one any different? Coming back to Geoff's point, there is a difference between a major and a catastrophic flood, so those categories are actually in need of a bit of a review.

The last one is the location of the gauges. After the last flood the responsibility for gauges was passed to local government. It makes no sense at all because we have no expertise in water management, in even understanding them. To install a gauge is about \$50,000, and there is probably a \$10,000 cost every year thereafter, so that is really hard. And where Loddon needs the gauges is actually in the two municipalities next door to us, and Geoff needs one at Gannawarra that is in Loddon shire. There is no coordination here around where these gauges are located, how the data is actually made available and so on and so forth.

There is still that problem even around the flood studies, and this relates to your question around levees as well. There is no combined approach to understanding floodwaters – doing a flood study that actually takes in the whole catchment rather than saying, 'Loddon shire, you can do one, and then Gannawarra, you do one as well.' Our flood study will probably tell us to send more water down to Gannawarra faster. Is that actually a good outcome? It needs a coordinated response.

Wendy LOVELL: A catchment response, yes. Interesting. Last question: I am interested in unpacking the Echuca temporary levee and the decision that was made around where that would go exactly. I saw that interview with Chrissy, and I felt it was terribly unfair on her. Can you just give us some more information? Who made those decisions, and why was it left for council to actually sell that decision to the town?

Rob AMOS: That is a very good question. Thank you. I do not know. The short answer is decisions for temporary emergency levees to be put in place – they might come and ask us about something or whatever the case is, but the decision is made by the control agency. A decision of that size I am assuming would make its way all the way back to Melbourne, I would have thought, to the SCC.

Wendy LOVELL: It definitely was not made by the Campaspe shire?

Rob AMOS: Correct, and there were decisions around why it was made and the heights that it was put at, and that was taken on advice from different experts and so on. But it certainly was not made by the Campaspe shire.

Wendy LOVELL: So why was it left to Campaspe shire to sell that to your community?

Rob AMOS: Because, I think, it was bad press and people do not want to own bad press. That is unfortunately a human reaction. Again, why don't people do things? I cannot put words in other people's mouths about why they made certain decisions. We tried very hard to refute that that was ours, but once that interview had happened it did not matter what was said – it just did not matter what was said – and we are still dealing with it today.

Wendy LOVELL: Yes, and very unfairly.

Pauline GORDON: Pauline Gordon, Chief Executive Officer. I think the other fact is our role, as we understood it to be, was to operate the relief centres. So in terms of this lack of role clarity – and I think that is really what it is – about who authorises a levee to go in versus council's role, I am unable to send staff behind levees because we are not an emergency service. Our role is in relief, so we were encouraging people to come out from behind the levees. And I think this goes back to the earlier conversation about how fires are mandated and floods are not. The capacity of local governments to service people in floods is quite evident, but we need to get that role clarity for future disasters to make sure that the community is aware of all the support agencies' roles in these matters.

Wendy LOVELL: Thank you.

Rob AMOS: Can I make a comment there, please. We have probably all seen the footage of a fire zone where the police have a roadblock up on a road and there is a police officer manning that roadblock. A husband and wife will be on one side – because there are no enforced evacuations; you choose. That is a law in our state, so that is fine – that is what the law is. But if you leave the evacuation in a fire, you are not allowed to go back. So you see the examples of husband or wife passing the groceries to husband or wife across the roadblock – that is all okay, because neither of them is crossing the line – whereas that was not enforced. People were being

assisted backwards and forwards across the evacuation zones and therefore expected services to still be provided.

The CHAIR: All right. Thank you. Dr Ratnam.

Samantha RATNAM: Firstly, thank you so much for the work you do in an ongoing way for your communities but particularly in relation to these kinds of disastrous events. You have certainly carried the load, and we can hear that through both your submissions here today and also the weight of your submissions. Thank you very much for the very detailed submissions you have provided to the inquiry. They are going to provide a really thorough basis for us to work on our recommendations.

I just want to take up a couple more points that perhaps have not been canvassed as much, but I agree with the questions that my colleagues have asked. Firstly, in relation to planning, a number of you in your submissions talked about what kinds of planning reforms and changes were needed in the context of an increased likelihood of climate disasters, whether that is floods or fires or other types of weather events. I was wondering if anyone would like to expand on some of the recommendations you have made in your submissions around a statewide approach to flood inundation through the Victorian planning framework? I think Campaspe and Gannawarra both made recommendations, but it is open to anyone who would like to speak so that we have got that front of mind in terms of what systemic reforms in the planning system we need to prevent or mitigate disasters.

Shannon MAYNARD: Thank you for the question. And sorry – Shannon Maynard, Director of Emergency Management with Campaspe shire. There certainly are planning controls in place that seek to minimise impacts, and they work on one-in-10-year, one-in-100-year floods, those sorts of numbers. Anything built new should come with some level of protection. In this case we saw that even those requirements just simply did not meet what the water did. That does need to be looked at. What we are seeing now is there are urban flood zones, where houses have been severely impacted. If they are now demolished, people cannot rebuild back in those. The planning scheme now particularly prohibits those people rebuilding, but we do not have an option for those people. They are now stuck with useless properties that have no value. But we currently have not looked at things like buybacks. The estimates of this damage – I think they are state government estimates – are around \$2 billion that the state has spent. Should we not be looking at things like raising properties and restumping properties so that they are more resilient to damage moving forward? We have to make a decision about being able to rebuild. People are faced with a horrendous decision around, ‘Do I want to go through this again, and does the planning system actually cater for that?’ What we are seeing is that people are building back like for like, because that is what their insurance scheme allows them to do; it does not build in betterment, so it does not raise properties higher.

That concerted effort that needs to be made, and not just relying on individual flood plans but across the board, on the planning requirements. They can be quite onerous, and it is just striking a balance. If you told a resident now that they would have to rebuild but we would actually be adding a \$100,000 cost because the planning requirements had kicked back in, that would be devastating to those residents. So council is often stuck in a really difficult position of having to enforce these planning schemes as they sit, with those added requirements, which would be insurmountable to some people because their insurance would just not cover that. It is really tricky, but we do need to look at it holistically as a system to better protect our residents and make some decisions about whether some people should go back into those areas. Should we be talking about buyback relocations? Should we be talking about the ability to just do a massive lift of properties so that they are Queenslander-style homes so that the water can flow underneath?

Luke RYAN: Yes, look, thanks Shannon. Luke Ryan, from the Northern Victorian Emergency Management Cluster council. I tend to agree with that, there does need to be a shift in focus to mitigation. We talk about levees et cetera; the hundreds of thousands of dollars that go into levees – I know in certain areas in my patch that you could have spent \$100,000, and we will save five homes from ever flooding again just by lifting them up on stilts, so it is really important that we do look into that. We have got some really good local programs happening at the moment around climate resilience and adaptation and change, so I think it really needs to be researched further.

Samantha RATNAM: Thank you very much for that. Campaspe, you mentioned in your submission, one of the recommendations is that the state reinstates catchment management authorities as determining referral

authorities under the *Planning and Environment Act*. Could you just spell that out a little bit more so that is front of mind for us?

Shannon MAYNARD: Sure. So that was a change where those authorities were determining authorities. It is now optional – we do not have to necessarily take on board their comments, or that referral authority. Reinstating them back into that system would effectively allow a bit more rigour in us then saying, ‘Look, that referral authority has said no, and so that’s the reason why you can’t undertake that development’, rather than being a guidance. It would be something that we would be able to have as better grounds to refuse permits, so I think that is certainly what that point was getting towards.

Samantha RATNAM: Do you know much about the background to why that was changed?

Shannon MAYNARD: I do not, I am sorry. I would have to take that on notice.

Samantha RATNAM: Okay. I might look into that. Great. Just one follow-up question if I may – thank you very much for that, and we will certainly be looking at the planning reform side as well. Slightly changing tack, but I was wondering – you mentioned before as well of course there was huge loss and devastation right across the board, focusing on the loss of wildlife and animals, and that is also going to farming stock et cetera. Has there been a good stocktake and account of the scale of that damage, the loss of wildlife and/or farm animals, or does that need to be done, basically?

Lincoln FITZGERALD: It looks like you are looking at me. We rely heavily on Agriculture Victoria to provide that detail, and they have done actually quite a good job in the very early stages of getting into contact with a lot of our farmers. As you will see in our submission, there were over 3500 head of stock losses. I cannot answer the question regarding native animal losses as well. It was a significant impact, and even coming back to the mental health side, when you lose \$100 million worth of cropping and you lose your animals that you care for on a daily basis, that has a huge impact on the wellbeing of our farmers as well as the financial impact.

Wendy LOVELL: That stock loss, sorry, the 3500 – are they just talking purely about animals that maybe drowned et cetera? Yesterday we heard from David Christie about his herd standing in the water – you know, mastitis, stuff like that – and him having to send them to the abattoirs. Are they included in the stock losses, or is it only the ones that drowned?

Lincoln FITZGERALD: No, this was in the very early stages. This is losses –

Dan STRAUB: I could probably add to that too. As Mr Fitzgerald mentioned, there were 3500 initial stock losses. If you are looking at a regional perspective, Loddon makes up about 15 per cent of the region but had 75 per cent of the stock loss and \$100 million damage to crops initially in the first few weeks of analysis. But going on those stories, Ms Lovell: flyblown sheep and lambs, ewes lambing in floodwater – and we are very dairy-prominent; there are a lot of intensive dairy farms with cows calving that time of year too. So a lot of those stock losses go unidentified where calves were getting lost initially in the floodwaters whilst calving was taking place, so that number could easily be doubled or tripled. It is just too hard to tell without individual numbers from individual farmers.

Wendy LOVELL: Yes, absolutely shocking.

Rob AMOS: Can I just add something to that as well, please – and this is from a mental health point of view: our farmers really care for their animals. They are really important to them, and it added stress to farmers that they were underwater, they could not get anywhere and that they had their animals who were calving, lambing. Their feet were rotting in the paddocks. They were having to go out with their rifles and euthanise animals. That is highly distressing to the farmers when they are having to deal with those sorts of things as well. And we know that farmers do not reach out for that help. Not all but a lot do not reach out for help.

Wendy LOVELL: Absolutely.

The CHAIR: Sorry, Dr Ratnam, you have still got the call to continue.

Samantha RATNAM: Thank you. That is fine. I am happy to come back if there is another round.

The CHAIR: Thank you.

Melina BATH: Could I just quickly check –

The CHAIR: Well, we have got Gaelle to go first.

Melina BATH: So advanced warning – what helps?

The CHAIR: Logistically, though, if you have got how many head of cattle, how are you going to –

Rob AMOS: Yes, and if your whole farm goes underwater, it is very difficult.

The CHAIR: It is impossible. Gaelle, question.

Gaelle BROAD: Thank you.

The CHAIR: Will you finish, Dr Ratnam?

Samantha RATNAM: Yes. That is fine. I will come back if there is more.

The CHAIR: Yes, we will come back around if there is time.

Samantha RATNAM: That is fine.

Gaelle BROAD: Again, I guess I echo my colleagues here just in appreciating your contributions, because your submissions were very detailed and I think provide very useful recommendations moving forward. I think, yes, levees were certainly something of interest to me, and just at this point in time there are still a number of strategic breaches. So are there any moves at the moment to fill those by the state government?

Geoff ROLLINSON: Geoff Rollinson, Chief Executive. Basically, the landowners have given up, and they have undertaken repairs themselves at questionable standard. So they have got off their backsides. They thought there was not going to be any assistance forthcoming. We have been 10 months in. We have gone through another spring. We are in the typical flood season now, and they were not willing to wait for assistance from state or Commonwealth, which was forthcoming in 2011, and they have gone through and thrown material back in some of the holes. There are a couple still open, but they have basically given up on state and federal government support.

Gaelle BROAD: And it seems, I guess, a common issue amongst rural councils. You have got a massive land area – 44 per cent I think of your landmass covered by floods – and yet your rates, as you were mentioning, certainly nowhere near cover the extent of the damage. I guess I am keen to come back to that question of the assistance that you are getting from funding under the federal and state at this point in time. There is a whole lot of detail. You have to do over 90 applications, I think, and just the time frames that you talked about – two years. What do you need to change now – because this report will not be until June next year? What needs to happen now, how much funding have you had support-wise and what changes could we see or do we need to see?

Lincoln FITZGERALD: Lincoln Fitzgerald, Chief Executive at Loddon. The federal and state arrangement is the disaster recovery funding arrangement. The problem with this fund is that there is a dual audit. The state government do all the work in terms of assessing the applications we put forward, and usually they would bankroll the work. Then the second stage is the state have to recoup their share of the funding from the federal government. If they do not have sufficient evidence, the federal government will not reimburse the state. So of course the logical thing from a state government perspective is to put all that burden of evidence onto local government to say, 'Give us more and more evidence because we're worried we're not going to get reimbursed by the federal government.' Now, what that means is we are fumbling around trying to get so many records – and I talked about those earlier, so I will not repeat all of that. But it is just a bureaucratic nonsense, quite honestly, when we are just trying to do our job: rebuild roads that are clearly damaged by floods, connect our communities back in and get that stock to port or wherever it needs to be. So there is an issue with that.

As I said earlier, we have put in our immediate restoration works claims. We have delivered \$2 million of works. By the end of the year we will have delivered \$4 million. We do not have confirmation that that money will be reimbursed. We will get some of it back, we know that, but we do not know how much – maybe 80 per cent, maybe 100, maybe 50. I am writing blank cheques. The next stage is the 'restoration of essential public

assets' category, and we have about \$32 million remaining to claim in that. All of those applications have to be in by 30 June next year. We do those in packets of about \$500,000, because if we put that package in, they might question two or three of them because of evidence and so on. That means the whole package is held up. So the process and the evidence – the state government staff doing this work are just doing their job. They are trying to apply the guidelines and follow the rules, but the rules are broken. We need a way to cut through all of this red tape and actually get the funding flowing so we can reopen roads. We have had our lowest ever score on our roads from our community satisfaction survey – and they are correct. More than 10 per cent of our roads are damaged at the moment, and we cannot clearly tell them when they are going to be fixed. That is an issue; that is a real issue.

Pauline GORDON: Pauline Gordon, Campaspe. If I could just add on to Lincoln's comments, Campaspe have \$38 million of roads to repair. We have currently repaired \$8 million of that for the very same reasons. I think what we need to also acknowledge is small rural councils do not have the same number of engineers that metro councils do. We need to divert our energies into repairing the roads, getting them up and going. We are concerned about harvest, as we have all talked about, and that those roads are open. So we are going to have bigger problems unless we get in there and fix these roads. Geoff spoke about how last time those roads were fixed within 15 months. We have only completed \$8 million worth of roads. We have got a massive way to go, and what is holding us up is the bureaucratic red tape.

Geoff ROLLINSON: If I may – Geoff Rollinson, Chief Executive. The burden of seeing it go well back in 2011 is the burden that I carry now: seeing how poorly it is being done. It is a very heavy burden to carry, because the emphasis has gone away from the community and more to the asset. In our example, we had a 1000-head dairy farm, and the milk tanker company was refusing to go in there to pick up his milk. So here is the farmer who has been impacted. He has managed to get his herd through the flood event. He has got it going again, and then along comes winter and he cannot get his produce to market. This road only carries 56 vehicles a day. It is not a major thoroughfare, and this is the problem. In 2011 the first roads I repaired were paddock access. The second lot of roads I repaired were the main carriers, because the need to get our rural communities reconnected back to market was vitally important to get that annual harvest going, get rid of that mental health and anguish and get our communities back to some sense. That has been lost this time around. This time around the focus is on the asset and the ownership, it is not on the community. It needs to be the community first – restore our community and let us squabble about it later on. That is the way it needs to go. We need to change our mindset. It needs to go back to the community, number one, the asset, number two.

Wendy LOVELL: Have your assets further deteriorated –

The CHAIR: Sorry, Wendy, Ann-Marie wanted to say something on that just before, and I am going to go around again, so please just wait. Ann-Marie.

Ann-Marie ROBERTS: Thank you. I do not want to expand on that side of it, but I think it is worth noting that while all of that is a reaction and a response out of this event, as well as that, local governments are preparing for what is next. We are coming into a potential fire season. Just to note that the funding that we have for our staff, which is often external funding – those same people are going through managing that DRFA process. They are doing the community engagement and preparedness and working with agencies as to what is next. Often the challenge in funding is the recouping of it, but it is a snowball effect that is continually happening. We have the same resources, but everything spikes up. We had not recovered from the pandemic; we still had programs running from that. We had not recovered from the fires. So this is a snowball effect, this is a reaction and a response and recovery from the event, but we are also instantly into that mode of preparation, relief, improvements, looking at things like fit-for-purpose centres for relief centres.

I know this is just slightly off it, but across our region in that two-month period there were 35 relief centres open across our region, some for a day and up to 35 days. So we have got infrastructure that is impacted, but we are also relying on that infrastructure to protect our people, to support our people, and often that is impacted as well. So it is that constant snowball effect, and those resources, not just financial but personal resources, are the same people backing that up day in, day out. I think it is just worth noting as well that these are the financial constraints we are under all the time. I have got a contractual job at the city. It is funded partly. Loddon is the same. The MERP funding is due to finish up in June 2024, and for many it is unknown. So then that causes stress as well. So I think it is all relative to the snowball effect that every event has on local government and the

community, and it does shift away from just getting those infrastructural changes done and it moves away from the impact that has on community and where we see it.

Gaëlle BROAD: Just one further question, I guess: waste. You talked about the huge amount of waste. Can you just make a comment on where that is at and what support you have had?

Rob AMOS: I am happy to talk a little bit about that, and I think Ann-Marie had a bit to do with our preparation for waste back when it all started. Waste is still a thing. You would have heard yesterday some people are only just getting their insurance now. What happens is they get their insurance, they build a house to go in and they pull everything apart, so another whole lot of waste is happening. But during the event, as we said, there was, I think, 30 years of waste in 60 days or something like that. It was absolutely incredible. We had a temporary waste facility set up at our Mount Scobie site, which was fantastic. But we have two other permanent waste facilities. One is at the north of our shire and one is at the south. One is for green waste and one is for landfill. Both those sites service not just our shire, they service a whole lot of shires – six, I think, different shires from way, way, way away. There are quite long roads into those sites, and they are council roads and they are gravel roads. They went underwater and were underwater for a long period of time and were not accessible. We would recommend that the state take over those roads – they are not just a Campaspe shire road, they are regional sites that get used – and build those roads to a standard where if there is a flood event, because we know waste is so important to get rid of, these sites are not cut off for weeks on end. So that would certainly be a recommendation, that the roads to these waste sites are taken over and then improved. There will be more engineers in the room than me who understand what would need to be done so that those roads are accessible even during a flood event.

The CHAIR: All right. Did you have anything further?

Gaëlle BROAD: I have got lots of things, but I think we have to go around again.

The CHAIR: I was just going to say we have got 20 minutes left in this session, and I know just about everyone is going to have more questions. Can I get an indication? Does everyone here have more questions?

Wendy LOVELL: Just one more.

The CHAIR: Hang on, Wendy. Gaëlle, you have got more. We have all got more. Let us start with you, Wendy.

Wendy LOVELL: Okay. I am interested in unpacking the roads thing just a little bit further. We all know that when a flood affects a road it also affects the base of the road, so it is not just a pothole that needs to be fixed, it is quite an extensive repair. Has the wet weather this winter, because you have not been able to repair your roads, further deteriorated your roads? And you talked about like-for-like funding; that is only putting them back to where they were. I am interested in the cost of the burden of proof on local government. Also, what is a better way to do it? Would it be better if you just said, 'We've got X kilometres,' and the state gave you so much funding per kilometre, and then you would be able to prioritise that spending? Do you have suggestions for a better way to do this?

Lincoln FITZGERALD: I will start with this one. Lincoln Fitzgerald, Loddon shire. There are quite a few questions in that, from my perspective, and things that I would like to respond to. The first question was around betterment. At the moment we are building back like for like under this program, which is just ridiculous, because we have rebuilt some of these assets in 2011, 2018 and now we are rebuilding them after 2022. Once again, because betterment was not a part of the package, we are using our own funds and putting off the library upgrades and things like that. Instead of that we are putting culverts in. So there is an issue with betterment.

The other part of this is that there was actually a small betterment package announced last week of up to \$1 million for the most heavily impacted councils. Now, we have got about \$1.2 million worth of betterment projects identified. However, because of the funding guidelines, they are pushing more things into that betterment program, so it is going to be drastically underfunded. As an example, if you have got a 50- or 100-metre stretch of road and it has got potholes all over it and a few areas you have got to dig out and the road has got deformation in it, so the base has failed, you will be funded to fix the potholes and the dig outs but not to reconstruct the road, which everyone knows just needs to be done because it has failed. The burden of evidence is such that even though we build roads every day, we have got to go and find an independent engineer to come

out and tell us what we already know. It is so obvious. The betterment program is dramatically underfunded at the moment. It will build resilience for the future. It will keep those roads open. And it can be simple things – more culverts or concrete aprons. We are not talking about big flashy things, but these things will actually keep those roads open and save money in the longer term. So betterment is a major issue.

We cannot claim the costs associated with all of the collection of evidence and preparation of the application. We can claim for project management, but it is never going to stack up. You know, I have pulled off my senior accountant. He works full time on flood claims. I have got a director full time on flood restoration. None of that is claimable, and they are trying to essentially do multiple jobs. Pauline from Campaspe earlier talked about the number of engineers. We are struggling to get enough staff to actually do this work, so it is all hampered. I have gone on and on about the evidence burden. It is over the top.

Geoff ROLLINSON: That is the same for us in Gannawarra. Geoff Rollinson, Chief Executive. Similarly, these are low-volume roads. You asked about cost. There is a road that goes into this dairy farm, as an example. It is a 1000-head dairy farm, and the milk tankers are refusing to go there. The road was inverted. It was washed into a creek, basically. Once again, we have been through this before. We quickly came up with a design that we would do typically for the Roads to Recovery program, just with our engineering group: 'This is what we will do.' We went to the DTP. They said, 'No, we don't trust you' – these are my words – 'We need you to go off and get a geotechnical report.' We went out for an RFQ, request for quote, for a reputable geotechnical firm to come through and do a design for us on this particular road that carries only 56 vehicles a day. They came back to us after about five weeks with an \$8000 bill to tell us that the design that we had in the first place was the design that they would recommend that we do. And the issue here is – the money is one part of it. It is the time, the duration, the mental anguish that is then passed on to 'How do I get my milk to market?' – this level of trust. Others might talk about the secondary impact assessments that were done. When the evidence came around, they said, 'We'll undertake the roads. We'll let you know what you need to provide to DTP for evidence.' We provided that to DTP. DTP said, 'There isn't enough information in this particular documentation. You need to go back.' We said, 'They're your assessors that you appointed to do this work for us.' So they went back and they said, 'Well, hang on. It wasn't in our scope to provide that information.' So once again we have lost time and we have got information that is not required. We had to send our own teams out. We had to do our dip-ins every 100 metres. But the whole while the community are thinking, 'This is council holding up the problem.' It is not fair.

Luke RYAN: Not to mention they kept on changing the guidelines, because I actually do this for the community recovery side of things as well. We were not informed properly –

The CHAIR: When you say, 'They changed the guidelines,' who are 'they'?

Luke RYAN: Well, the governing body. I guess through the state government with EMV. It could be DTP. Guidelines were changed through the DRFA with little notification of what that was. Other issues there too are breakdown of plant costs – they are saying now that you can claim plant costs, but they want a breakdown of fuel, mileage and the rest of it. Actually undertaking that is really exhaustive, long work.

The CHAIR: Dan and Rob.

Dan STRAUB: Yes, thank you. I just wanted to add, to make sure it is noted, that with our collective partnership – and sorry, Mayor Amos, for speaking on Murray River group's behalf, but this message has been consistent for the last nine months at least – we are 10 months on now. This message has been consistent for the last nine months to relevant ministers in Canberra and relevant ministers in Spring Street, yet we are still talking about the issues because there has been inadequate activity taken to work through these concerns. And again we are talking about it today. It has been consistent. I think we have been very clear with recommendations and our message on how this could work better for us. I think it is just time to get on with it.

The CHAIR: Okay. Rob.

Rob AMOS: And the frustration is that when Minister Watt visited pretty soon after the flood hit, that was one thing that he talked about extensively – we need to build things back better when we build them back, and we went, 'Wow. We're going to come out of this.' I have got to be honest, from a council point of view there was a lot of hope with that. That then slowly started dwindling away. It got to the stage where we stopped talking about betterment because we just wanted money to fix our roads. That is how it got. As Mayor Straub

said, we have spoken constantly. It felt like we were negotiating the state and the federal governments. It felt like local councils were trying to get the state and federal governments together to talk about the situation. That is not how it should work.

Pauline GORDON: Pauline Gordon, Campaspe. Just to add to that, I think our dilemma is understanding why other states can actually do betterment and receive the funding for betterment and Victoria cannot. That would be something we would really like to know the answer to.

The CHAIR: What states in particular are you talking about?

Pauline GORDON: Queensland.

The CHAIR: Yes. Any others?

Pauline GORDON: New South Wales. That would be great.

The CHAIR: Ms Bath.

Melina BATH: Thanks, Chair. Thank you. I am interested in Gannawarra shire. Charlie, you mentioned ring levees around homes – dwellings. I understand that in 2011 there were grants for those ring levees. Is that something that you feel would be of benefit to Gannawarra shire now, post 2022?

Charlie GILLINGHAM: Yes. Charlie Gillingham, Mayor of Gannawarra. Yes, certainly, ring levees are a great asset for our community, and we certainly could identify numerous households that would benefit from ring levees. It is a fairly low-cost job to do, putting a ring levee around a house. I think after a few years you would not even know the ring levee is there once it is grassed over. Yes, that is a no-brainer.

Melina BATH: Thank you. No-brainers sometimes need to go on record, though. The other issue is around levee banks. I know there has got to be a balance here, but I understand that Loddon, in your submission, point 2.5, you talked about a levee bank around part of Boort township and that there were requests for extensive permissions and the like. I understand that there were some cultural heritage requirements there that ended up being so onerous that they were preclusive and there is nothing being done. Could you speak to that?

Dan STRAUB: Yes. Thank you, Ms Bath. That is true. Council has been seeking permission following the 2011 flood to construct a ring levee around Boort to protect Boort's township and community and has proceeded to come up against lots of hurdles and roadblocks. I could probably lean on Mr Fitzgerald to elaborate on some more detail, but it has been a long, drawn-out process. We are just getting some communications happening now, but this could have already been mitigated prior to 2022.

Melina BATH: How do we strike the balance between respecting cultural heritage et cetera and getting stuff done?

Lincoln FITZGERALD: Thank you for the question. It is a really challenging issue. Essentially, because we have not had a well-constructed permanent levee in place, on two occasions now we have constructed temporary levees to mitigate against flood. So those levees have a higher probability of failure during the event. We have more flooding. They are not in the correct place. So we are building them and then demolishing them in the hope that we can build the permanent one. Trying to find that balance is a huge challenge. There is no correct answer, because every site is so different as to what the cultural heritage requirements are. They have their own characteristics. It is just a huge challenge to be in a position where we have known that we have needed a levee bank there. We have got the funding sitting on the table, but we are just battling to get through all the requirements because we are crossing Parks Victoria land, DELWP land, VicRoads road reserves and then our own land, and we are next to a waterway. So it is just an intense thing to try and line up all the different government departments, get the permits in place and get on with it.

Melina BATH: Sure.

Shannon MAYNARD: And perhaps if I can add – Shannon Maynard from Campaspe. So what we see is a raft of what we call illegal levees pop up, and if they are successful in mitigating at least some damage, it is very hard to undo that with community sentiment. They have said, 'Well, it worked. So those five properties have been saved because of that levee. You can't undo this.' Of course we do not understand the impact

downstream of those levees – so need a really well-planned, cohesive study on where levees should be placed to maximise, with an understanding of what those levees will do as a cumulative effect. Residents are filling the void because it is not well planned and it is not well executed. So we do have levees that are just not functional and should not be there but we will fight tooth and nail to keep. So it is a collective that needs to occur, and it needs to be well planned out and thought out.

The CHAIR: It sounds like there is no magic solution.

Shannon MAYNARD: No.

The CHAIR: And I think it is Dr Ratnam's question before around planning and particularly houses: do we need to consider building up rather than flat? Because from what I am hearing there is not one answer, and it is really complex. Would that be a fair assessment?

Shannon MAYNARD: I think so. Levees are not a magic bullet in all circumstances. Temporary levees get built, and what we have seen, particularly in Torrumbarry, is a community that led, built and maintained their own levee, which crossed a whole raft of council areas – it crossed a road. Then how to undo that – with significant community angst when the rivers were still high. For us to get the road back open, we had to dismantle the levee, but also then there was the lack of ownership – so who actually sanctioned that – and then the repatriation work. We are talking \$400,000 or something in that vicinity – for people who have had fences destroyed and it has gone through – and then a lack of clarity about who is providing that support post that. So we are still trying to undo some of these issues.

The CHAIR: Yes.

Melina BATH: Chair?

The CHAIR: Last one.

Melina BATH: Yesterday we heard about sandbagging machines from people in Rochester. We also heard about Lake Eppalock – its spill. So at the risk of opening up a very big Pandora's box, I have I guess a really functional question about sandbagging. I think it may have been Gannawarra that had sandbags. Or was it Campaspe? And the cost of it – it was not a great deal of cost. But they were just saying it would be useful for Rochy town.

Rob AMOS: Machines, you mean?

Melina BATH: Yes.

Rob AMOS: Yes. We ended up using concrete trucks – so we filled up concrete trucks with sand, and they would reverse their thing. I think we did have some sandbag machines in town, and what we found was that when the sand got wet, those machines failed. But the brilliant community, and it was the community who came up with the idea, said, 'Why don't we use concrete trucks?' So the concrete trucks would go and get loads of sand, load it in, and then they would spin their drum and so –

The CHAIR: Sorry – Ann-Marie.

Ann-Marie ROBERTS: Can I just add to that too. You know, sandbagging is an issue, and there were lots of times throughout this that there have been so many sandbags put in places where they were not needed. And then there is this whole challenge of getting the resources to and fro, and I think this comes back to the review of plans. Often as municipalities we do reflect back on our flood plans and where impacts are known so that we can plan ahead of time around sandbagging and what it looks like. Even though we cannot always predict the level of water that is coming, for example, we still refer back to those documents. So there is the imperative nature of reviewing those plans, looking at flood studies, looking at where the levees are and how that changes watercourses and looking at cultural heritage sites – because I think that sometimes is an afterthought. Those flood plans are really crucial to us knowing where we deploy initially for our assets but also community assets, which then supports and guides the community and agencies as to where to start with sandbagging.

At the other end of it, the clean-up of sandbags is horrific – the disposal of it, the waste, more waste and more waste. You know, we see hessian sandbags initially, then we see shopping bags and plastic bags, and then the

long-term impacts of that sandbagging are a challenge. So I think again it comes back to reviewing plans, knowing that on the get-go in our preparedness: 'This is where we're going to start with the sandbagging. This is how we're going to do it. This is the level we are going to.' If the defence force, for example, are deployed in, they are very structured. We can then say, 'This is where we need it; this is what we need to do,' and deploy that in. So, sandbags are a massive issue, not just having some infrastructure to support that, but it goes much broader into the plan and knowing that in the preparedness phase and understanding the impact of where the water is coming from.

The CHAIR: Luke.

Luke RYAN: Can I just say that we would have had 40,000 homes without power if it was not for one of those sandbag silos. We had to contract that in. We had to put sandbags around the power station in Castlemaine – the substation that electrified around 40,000 homes, not just in our area but it also went through the Central Goldfields and Hepburn areas as well. We asked for that through funding. They are about \$6000 each, and we got knocked back on funding to get some simple infrastructure. That was coming from the community and was what they wanted. Not fluffy programs – they wanted simple things that were going to reduce the risk for them. There needs to be more thought in that as well.

Rob AMOS: I will just finish, if you would not mind, with that. What we have done at Campaspe as well, we have looked for some strategic sites where we can use – I do not know the technical term – plastic retaining walls that can be deployed. I think the statistic is two people can deploy around 100 metres of these plastic walls in about half an hour, and so they are far less manpower-intensive. At the end there is no waste. There are some restrictions around them going around corners. They need to be laid on a –

The CHAIR: Flat –

Rob AMOS: Well, not only flat – it needs to be concrete or bitumen. You cannot put it on grass.

The CHAIR: They have got limitations.

Rob AMOS: They have limitations, but also in places they will have a place. Again, we have been successful with some funding for that. I think as Luke was saying, the funding around those types of things – for example, one of our areas is the town hall and service centre in Rochester, because we know how important it is that after a flood the shire can come in and provide services straightaway. You would have heard that intensely yesterday. That has been identified as a strategic site where we will – and we have not got them yet; they will come through – be able to deploy those plastic levee walls around that site, and hopefully when it is up, at the end we can then come in and just go 'Right' and put our people in ready to go.

The CHAIR: All right. Well, that brings us to the end of the session. Thank you all very much for the very detailed and considered evidence you have provided to us. It has been an incredibly useful session this morning. Of course if this has raised any difficult issues for you, please do feel free to reach out to Lifeline or other mental health supports. Thank you again for coming. We will conclude it there.

Witnesses withdrew.