

TRANSCRIPT

LEGISLATIVE COUNCIL ENVIRONMENT AND PLANNING COMMITTEE

Inquiry into the 2022 Flood Event in Victoria

Melbourne – Wednesday 11 October 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

WITNESS

Dr Faye Bendrups, President, Victoria SES Volunteers Association.

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, an all-party committee of the Parliament looking into the October flood event. We will be providing a report to Parliament, which will include recommendations to the government. Please ensure that mobile phones have been switched to silent and that background noise is minimised.

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

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

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

At this point I will take the opportunity to introduce myself, and committee members will also introduce themselves to you. My name is Sonja Terpstra. I am the Chair of the Environment and Planning Committee. I am also a Member for North-Eastern Metropolitan Region.

David ETTERS HANK: Welcome. I am David Ettershank, Deputy Chair, and I am from the Western Metropolitan Region.

Samantha RATNAM: Good afternoon. Samantha Ratnam, Member for Northern Metropolitan Region.

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

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

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

Wendy LOVELL: Hi, Faye. Wendy Lovell, Member for Northern Victoria Region.

Ryan BATCHELOR: Ryan Batchelor, Member for Southern Metropolitan Region.

The CHAIR: Thank you all very much for those introductions. So now it is over to you to make your opening remarks. You have got 10 minutes to make your opening remarks, and then after that it will be over to committee members to ask you questions. If I could please get you to state for the Hansard record your name and the organisation you are appearing on behalf of, if any. Over to you. Thanks, Faye.

Faye BENDRUPS: Thank you. Faye Bendrups, Victoria SES Volunteers Association. I thank the committee for the opportunity to appear today. The Victoria SES Volunteers Association is an association that has been around for 40 years and has always advocated for and represented the interests of SES volunteers.

First I would like to acknowledge all of the communities across Victoria who have suffered the devastating floods of 2022 and the individuals who continue to experience the devastation and loss, some of whose lives may be changed forever. I would like to acknowledge, secondly, the volunteers who worked to assist those communities, and that includes those in the formal sector, such as SES volunteers and CFA volunteers, but also what we might term the informal volunteers, members of the community who helped.

There are a couple of things I would like to address in my opening remarks. One is about an after-action review. One usual feature of large-scale emergency events is that there is an after-action review held in order that lessons can be learned and continual improvement made. Usually where all agencies and communities have been involved a multi-agency review is held. In the case of the 2022 floods Emergency Management Victoria decided not to hold a multi-agency review, and in a sense this parliamentary inquiry is the only forum where multiple voices from diverse backgrounds and interests can be heard. In the case of the Victoria SES there were some local reviews held, but these were limited and selective and were not open to all volunteers who wanted to make a contribution, and I have referred to that in the submission. Without a full and open review how can a complete picture be gained about all aspects of the event? One of the issues identified in this event is around information gathering, for example, so a complete and accurate picture is essential in order to understand the full complexity of what happened. We know that in every major emergency things are chaotic and unpredictable, but that does not mean that we should not try to work out how to do it better next time. The improved safety of our communities – that is what we are here for.

I would like to refer to a couple of aspects to do with information, local knowledge, safety of volunteers and communities and community engagement in particular. Who do volunteers work for? Well, they are trained and coordinated by an agency, but they are here for the community. In multiple surveys over many, many years, that is the prime motivation people put down: their first reason for doing it is to assist their local community. They not only assist those local communities, they are from those local communities. They are not strangers; they live in those areas. They have social ties, housing, employment and schools, and they have knowledge of local conditions. Every review, white paper, royal commission, investigation et cetera refers to the value of embedding local knowledge into planning, preparation, response and recovery. On paper amongst all of the different agencies in the sector it all looks good; the policies look good. But still volunteers are not always included in the formulation of plans or trained in the highest level of incident management. Consultation has declined in recent times, particularly this year, in 2023, when Emergency Management Victoria disbanded the volunteer consultative forum, which was set up to be a voice to government from the volunteer perspective from people on the ground – expert people on the ground. That was disbanded without any consultation or advance notice.

I will refer to a bit of information gathering to do with the Maribyrnong floods. The data first released by the authorities, by EMV and SES, for days reported that around 245 properties were affected. The reports remained in the system, and particularly in the media, for a long time. Even through to halfway through this year, nearly a year later, some existing media reports were still referring to ‘some hundreds of properties’, ‘200 properties’, ‘245 properties’. While it is just a figure, it is important, because council in their submissions have reported 512 or 525, but residents groups who have been doing their own audits have counted 600 or so. There is a big difference between 245 properties being affected and 600 properties being affected, not to mention thousands of residents who are affected, and their families and further networks, not just the people whose houses were inundated. Because if the figures are not correct, there is no way of understanding the scope and the scale of the event or being able to contextualise and conceptualise what that means for the people affected. By continually underestimating the scale of the loss, residents feel that their experiences are devalued, that the true scale of the event is lost and that there is no accuracy around then what response, development, mitigation and recovery can be.

One of the things that in the emergency services we work on all the time is community engagement. In the Maribyrnong flood, for example, of last year on 14 October – that was too late to engage the community; 4 am on Friday 14 October is too late. Community engagement really needed to begin not even on the week of the floods, when there were a limited number of SES doorknocks. They took place on I believe one day with four people, two SES staff and two SES volunteers, who were not from the local area. That happened one day prior, leading up to the flood. But community engagement needs to be almost a whole-of-life process where people have an understanding and learnings over many, many years and repetitively about their exposure to risk and how they might handle themselves in an emergency. In the previous session, I noted, Theo Pykoulas from the Maribyrnong council was referred to. And just as a sort of counterfactual, I suppose, what happened last year was too little too late, but if we think about what could have happened or what actually has happened in the past – this is not imagining what might happen but what has happened in the past – I will just run through a couple of things to do with community engagement.

One of those was that in 2013, so 10 years ago now, the Maribyrnong council developed, under the direction of Theo Pykoulas, a groundbreaking community engagement program which developed up a profile of each

property that would be exposed to over-floor flooding – did a generic chart of each of those properties but with the individual address with all sorts of information on it and all sorts of advice as well on the back, laminated so that people could keep it on their fridge, delivered in a plastic pink folder so it would not get lost and damaged. But that was for every property that was at risk of over-floor flooding in the Maribyrnong township.

The local SES Footscray unit, of which I am a member, conducted that doorknock in 2013, but it was not just ‘We’ll go and knock on people’s doors’, there was an enormous amount of planning that went into it. There were letters sent out to residents in advance to notify them that this doorknock would be happening and if they needed to seek further information. There were planning meetings held. The SES, our local unit, rehearsed the logistics of what we had to do. We walked all of the streets to time how long it would take – all these kinds of things. At that time I think we had eight different languages spoken in the unit, and the Maribyrnong area of course has a huge CALD population with many languages spoken, and some of the people do not speak English as their first language. So we always had some advantage in having eight languages spoken within the unit and would be able to engage in a meaningful way with the residents who did not speak English as well.

There was the actual doorknock that happened on the day. There was a follow-up sheet for people to feed back to council what they thought of the doorknock, along with the pack of information they got. They received the local flood guide, a hard copy of it for themselves. They received instructions on how to do sandbagging. That is the cover letter. They received an emergency toolkit brochure. They receive the booklet that is the home emergency plan and so forth. So in other words there were a lot of resources they received that gave them a lot of information in their hand as well as speaking directly to people by the SES volunteers who were doing the doorknock.

That program I believe won an award for community resilience. It was extremely effective, but it has not been conducted since. Now, almost every year since, we have talked about, ‘It’s time to do another doorknock. It’s time to do another doorknock’ – not the doorknock that is at 4 am when you actually have to evacuate your house, the doorknock that would –

The CHAIR: I am sorry, Faye, but your time for your introductory remarks has expired. So perhaps we will now turn to questions from members, and I will perhaps go first. Thank you for your opening remarks. In your submission you say Victoria should consider a whole-of-catchment approach to flood management and mitigation. Can you unpack that for me, please?

Faye BENDRUPS: Well, it is pretty simple that rivers flow through multiple shires and municipalities and so forth, and each municipality has a different committee that deals with its emergencies, its municipal emergency management planning committee. So they are all different. So what might be planned on one side of the river – let us say Maribyrnong township. One side is the Maribyrnong council; the other side of the river is Moonee Valley council. They have not got the same plan, they have got their own separate plans. The river is going straight through them, and it comes of course from further up towards Mount Macedon and then flows down towards the bay. So all the different councils and requirements and needs of all the different areas should be coordinated into one plan for the whole of catchment. The river is not going to flood in one part of it and then not the other.

The CHAIR: And just on community engagement, what sort of things have you yourself participated in at a local level around community engagement? Have you driven some of those things or participated, just in terms of your role as the President of the association?

Faye BENDRUPS: Previously another role I had was as controller of the local Footscray unit, and I am very passionate about community engagement. In 2015 I received an Emergency Services Foundation scholarship to study emergency response in Peru, primarily earthquake and tsunami response. What they do have that really interested me was a whole-of-nation approach to disaster and emergency management. What they do is each year they run drills and scenario exercises for the whole of community – it is actually the whole of nation – all on the same day. Four times a year they will run whole-of-nation exercises. Schools do an extra four – they do eight. It is a fantastic program. It is at a much lower skill level than what we are required to do for SES, because we are having to meet national quality frameworks, standards and all sorts of things. It is much more like, I suppose, building wardens, who might have a little bit of training. But what it means is the whole of community not only is engaged and educated but they practice, practice, practice and rehearse, so that when an event does come – a major disaster – they are not having to think about what to do. They have practised it; they know what

to do. In the local unit, I did propose when I came back from that research trip and fed the information back through the sector that what we could do is something similar but not as complex, but we could do it street by street. We could have what used to be in civil defence days, for example, flood wardens from one street to another. We could still do that. We could have, and we did develop up within our unit, a series of safety games for children so that we could run those with the local community or with local schools, and those safety games were interactive, experiential learning projects that students could get involved in.

The CHAIR: Sorry, the clock is going to run down. I just want to ask you one other thing. In your experience – because obviously you have been out doorknocking as a volunteer and those sorts of things when an emergency has happened – have you found that people are prepared or have prepared an emergency evacuation plan, like given pre-thought to the fact that they might have to evacuate, or are they in complete shock when they are being doorknocked?

Faye BENDRUPS: Mostly very few. If we are talking about the doorknock that happens when the emergency is happening: no, in shock and do not know what to do. If that is the middle of the night and you have been asleep, you do not even know what is happening.

The CHAIR: But they are not pre-planning then, are they?

Faye BENDRUPS: No. Even when you are being doorknocked – a lot of people in Maribyrnong, for example, did not hear the doorknock. It was 4 am – they did not hear it.

The CHAIR: But they had not given pre-thought to the fact that they might be receiving a doorknock or maybe needing to get out.

Faye BENDRUPS: No, because during the week leading up to the flood, in the case of last year, for example –

The CHAIR: Sorry, the time has expired. I apologise for that. Mr Ettershank, over to you.

David ETTERS HANK: Thank you, Faye, for your very thoughtful submission, and I was very sorry to hear about the harassment you have experienced since then.

Faye BENDRUPS: Thank you.

David ETTERS HANK: I take on board everything you were saying about the need for a long-term approach and continuity of education and community engagement, but I actually just want to focus particularly on the events of the evening of the 13th and the morning of the 14th. I am just wondering if you could share with the committee your perception as to: what was the viability or the appropriateness of the SES response on the evening of the 13th and into that period as the flood peaked on the morning of the 14th?

Faye BENDRUPS: The SES were called to assist in the morning of the 14th. The local units – that is when they were called to assist. What had gone on before that was, I believe, inadequate, because most of the assessment of the scale of what was coming was put out through both the State Control Centre, the media reports and so forth as being: within the township, the Anglers Tavern might be affected, and up to two or three houses. If we compare that to what actually did happen, and even imagining what might have happened, based on historical knowledge of previous floods in other times – not only the 1974 flood but many other floods before that – there is no way that that could have been an accurate prediction of what might happen. So in a way, not only referring back to the previous issue of residents being in shock and woken up at 4 am, they were not aware that that might be happening to them because what they had been told was that nothing much is going to happen; it might be the tavern and a few neighbouring houses.

David ETTERS HANK: Was the SES sort of pre-positioning or preparing for the fact that it could actually be worse than what was being predicted?

Faye BENDRUPS: Not to my knowledge. I am not working in the State Control Centre, so I am not sure of everything that went on, but I do know that as far as my local unit was concerned, they had pre-positioned some boating units and some boat operators – rescue operators – at our unit too, but they had not alerted the unit. I was very concerned on the morning of Thursday the 13th. I am no longer the controller of the unit, but I rang our controller on Thursday the 13th saying, ‘Shouldn’t we put out an email to all our members saying, “Come

on, look, let's all be on standby because we don't know what's going to happen. Let's all get on standby"? Because we had not received any communication to put us on standby. Well, okay, on the one hand a lot of the work in emergencies is reactive, because until something happens we are not called out, but at the same time we have always had a, I suppose, practice of being prepared in advance. So the controller made a few phone calls and checked higher up the chain and so forth, and eventually an email was disseminated, but I had already drafted one, and there are a few things like that. I had also spoken to the local police earlier in the week, who had rung me because I had been a member of the municipal emergency management planning committee for 10 years, and the people on the committee did know me and understood the experience that I had. I had received phone calls on, I think it was, 7 am on Thursday morning, the 13th, asking, 'Where's the control point being set up?' which I had no knowledge of, and our unit was not notified of that either.

David ETTERSHANK: And that was ultimately in Dandenong, wasn't it?

Faye BENDRUPS: Sorry?

David ETTERSHANK: That was ultimately set up in Dandenong, the main control for the incident, not at Sunshine.

Faye BENDRUPS: Correct. Sorry, there are two. I will just clarify that: the incident control centre was set up at Dandenong instead of Sunshine, which is in most of the planning for these kinds of events – it is in the plan to set it up at Sunshine. The control point for a local response is something that is set up. Sometimes it is mobile; sometimes it is in a place. It eventually was set up in the community recovery centre.

David ETTERSHANK: Right. And in terms of – my time is up, so I will leave it there.

The CHAIR: You are self-chairing, there, Mr Ettershank. Well done.

David ETTERSHANK: That is all right.

The CHAIR: Ms Bath with a question.

Melina BATH: Thank you very much. Thank you to the volunteers. Thank you for the depth of your work and knowledge and all of our wonderful SES volunteers. I am concerned – in your submission it worried me that you feel that you have been 'bullied and ostracised', I think are the words in there. I want to understand: where is that coming from? Is it between volunteers and volunteers, or is it from more of a top-down, staff to volunteers – could you explain briefly what is happening there?

Faye BENDRUPS: I think it is both. It can exist between volunteer and volunteer or staff to volunteers; it is both. As an association in 2021 we ran a very detailed survey about culture and conduct in SES for both volunteers and staff, and that came up with some disturbing findings. There were 345 different cases of some serious harassment, some serious matters even that were criminal, and that was referred to VEOHRC. There has been engagement with VEOHRC since that time, and VEOHRC have made recommendations. SES has, I think, begun to implement and make those changes, but that does not automatically stop people's behaviour overnight or their kinds of attitudes.

Melina BATH: How is the lead agency, VICSES, actually working with the volunteers to diminish this both from their ranks and internally in your ranks?

The CHAIR: Perhaps maybe in relation to the terms of reference too, Ms Bath.

Melina BATH: It is in the submission, yes.

The CHAIR: Okay.

Melina BATH: And volunteerism – we hear all the time the importance of volunteers. Clearly in a flood event, volunteers have been pivotal to supporting community, both in the emergency situation and then recovery, so speak to that. Thank you.

Faye BENDRUPS: It is concerning that when we asked for people's comments to feed into this report, many, many volunteers offered that commentary, saying, 'Please, I don't want my name mentioned and I don't

want to be identified.’ Now, some of them were from the regions, and in small country towns it is much easier to identify people, so people were concerned that they would be bullied. So I think it is really the principle of having open, frank discussions in order to improve and in order to ensure that some failings may be improved in the future. We cannot do that if we do not have the opportunity to have those open, frank conversations, and if people then have a mindset that says, ‘I’m not going to say anything and rock the boat because I will just get sort of thrown out’ –

Melina BATH: Thank you. We hear about continuous improvement, and we have heard today that the regional manager denied Maribyrnong council from having a whole-agency debrief, which is again concerning when this is coming from the SES. What was the reason given for the disbanding by the emergency management commissioner of the volunteer consultative forum?

Faye BENDRUPS: Well, there did not seem to be anything like a reasonable reason, other than –

Melina BATH: Was it a useful thing to have, this consultative –

Faye BENDRUPS: It had been there since 2015. It had fed into various projects at EMV, including a project called the three Vs – the values of volunteering, volunteerism and volunteers – as well as developing up the volunteer statement, which was signed and agreed to by the Premier and all the different heads of agencies and so forth back in 2015. It had set the strategic priorities for volunteering in Victoria. It had done surveys to do with home emergency planning. It fed into a whole thing.

Melina BATH: But there was a lot of positive work coming from it?

Faye BENDRUPS: There was an enormous amount of positive work from the committee, but the commissioner said earlier this year that EMV wanted to look more broadly at including consultation with other groups in the sector. It was sort of like, well, that is okay, of course everyone needs to be consulted, but whether you throw out what you have already got that has been really valuable in order to do that did not seem to make any sense to the people.

Melina BATH: Well, has there been a replacement?

The CHAIR: I am sorry, Ms Bath. Your time has expired.

Melina BATH: Answer on notice if there has been a replacement for that –

Faye BENDRUPS: No.

Melina BATH: There has not been? Thank you very much.

The CHAIR: Mr Batchelor, if we could go to a question from you.

Ryan BATCHELOR: Thank you, Dr Bendrups. It is great to have you here, and your submission. One of the things that strikes me in this area, and I raised this with the planning people earlier, is that a lot of the information that is provided in planning schemes to people looking to move into or purchase within flood-affected or flood-prone areas can be a little bit obtuse and technical. I am really interested in the work that you just showed us earlier about essentially what appeared to be a house-by-house breakdown of what the risks were. Who produced those materials in the past, when were they produced and who were they given to? If you could just give me a bit more information about that.

Faye BENDRUPS: They were devised by Theo Pykoulas from the Maribyrnong City Council at the time in conjunction with the council and with the local SES unit, and they were solely for that council at that time, but I do believe some other councils looked at them to use them as a model, but I do not know whether that has been done anywhere. But certainly it is a great model that could be standardised. Another thing that often happens with great ideas is that they are terrific, they work once, but they are not standardised or systematised, so they need to be brought into, ‘Well, this is the best practice. This is what we really need to do.’

Ryan BATCHELOR: And what sort of information, based on your experience in dealing with people who have been affected by emergencies, do you think is important that they know about weeks, months and years in advance of that occurring that could be communicated through something like those materials?

Faye BENDRUPS: There is no question about that. All the research, anywhere you look, says that not only long term but also in any of the plans and any of the response, if the community is involved and informed and part of the process, it makes it more effective. All the research shows that.

Ryan BATCHELOR: And who do you think in a levels-of-government or agency sense would be best placed to take a leading role in ensuring that occurs?

Faye BENDRUPS: Well, that is a bit difficult to say, because each of the agencies currently has a responsibility to undertake community engagement.

Ryan BATCHELOR: If I was a member of the community, I reckon it would be better if I had a single source of information coming to me –

Faye BENDRUPS: Absolutely.

Ryan BATCHELOR: rather than having three or four different agencies telling me slightly different pieces of information.

Faye BENDRUPS: Exactly.

Ryan BATCHELOR: From a user perspective, who do you think is the best coordination point, information and dissemination point for locals to get that kind of information?

Faye BENDRUPS: Well, personally – and this has not been in any way discussed; this is my personal opinion – it needs to be at the level that is closest to the community, and in terms of agencies at the moment that is council that might be closest to community, but it needs also to be community-driven.

Ryan BATCHELOR: One hundred per cent, but you think it is something that local councils who have areas that are affected by emergencies could usefully better communicate both the risks and then what the best course of action would be if a one-in-100-year event were to happen every five or 10 years?

Faye BENDRUPS: I do agree with that, because also all the different agencies have – the amount of information is overwhelming. There is too much information. We go to the ABC website, the SES website, the CFA website, the BOM website, the whatever it might be, and there is too much to sift through, so we need to have something that has got more clarity.

Ryan BATCHELOR: Do you think as a result of that people occasionally might say there is just too much and switch off?

Faye BENDRUPS: They switch off. Not only that, but there are a lot of people – again, this refers to Maribyrnong – that with the diversity of that community, not everybody is literate in English. Many people in refugee communities and so forth are not literate in their own languages.

Ryan BATCHELOR: Just in the last 5 seconds, was that material produced in languages other than English, do you know, back in 2018?

Faye BENDRUPS: Yes, it was.

The CHAIR: Thank you. Dr Ratnam with a question.

Samantha RATNAM: Thank you, Faye, for, firstly, your incredible contribution over many, many years and all the insight and wisdom you have brought to your submission and your evidence here today. I just want to pick up on a couple of things you raised in your submission as well. You mentioned in the submission that in the past SES volunteers were continually educated about flooding and did training exercises. What do you think has stopped this from happening? Is that your experience, that that has been stopped from happening?

Faye BENDRUPS: I think that is quite a difficult question to answer, because while I might say it is all about leadership, it is up to whoever, for example, in our local unit is the local controller – that is the leader of the unit – and the team that they get around them in terms of someone to do the training and someone to do operations. That leadership team will work out and devise what they need to do for the year's program, for

example, adhering to certain requirements that they have with SES training. They will work it out. We did work out that we wanted to do exercises on the river in our boats. We did work out that we wanted to physically go down and look at what they call the 'candy poles', the coloured flood markers. We did work out that we would be familiar personally and physically with the area.

At the moment by contrast, for example, most of our experienced members of that unit have left. We have all new recruits. Many of them do not even know where the Maribyrnong township is, and they do not know anything really about what happened in the flood last year. And yet me and another experienced former head of training in the unit have offered to take training to give them history, to give them information, to take them on walks, to engage with the local community, and that has been refused. There are other things that we have done where we have talked about some of the other resources that we can use in terms of community engagement, some of the tools that we have in our unit, and with the new leadership team coming in some of those materials have been thrown out. So again, they obviously did not realise the value in some of those resources. It does depend on sometimes the local leadership team, who may not have all the information, who may not have the experience, who may not realise that this worked in the past and should be continued – but they might not have that information or have that understanding.

Samantha RATNAM: Thank you very much. That is really useful. My understanding is that Emergency Management Victoria is planning on using public servants as a surge workforce, and I understand that your organisation would rather see volunteers upskilled. I am interested in your perspective on what kind of impact you think that is going to have on future emergency situations if that change occurs. What would you ideally like to see?

Faye BENDRUPS: This was an idea that no-one supported from the VCF, the volunteer consultative forum. Why? Because we already have a highly skilled workforce in SES, CFA, AV, St John, Surf Life Saving, the coast guard – all the different disciplines that feed into emergency response. The problem in maintaining that workforce is to do with retention. We keep recruiting in because people keep leaving. We need to retain all of those skills. There is nothing wrong with the skill level of the existing workforce, but they are not being trained up into what we call IMT roles, incident management team roles, that run operations in an ICC. There are a few who have come through a particular training program, and they can move into those roles – very, very limited numbers. Who is running the show? It is the people who have always run the show, instead of bringing in those people who have knowledge on the ground of what actually does go on when things are in crisis – bringing them into those leadership positions. There is just not enough who are being trained up. So that is one thing. The –

The CHAIR: I am sorry but your time has expired on that session. Ms Lovell with a question, please.

Wendy LOVELL: Thank you, Faye. Thank you for your submission. I was just wondering if you could give us an understanding of the structure of the SES statewide. We know the CFA, although it is a volunteer-based organisation, have a chief and some deputy chiefs, and they have a large middle management that is seconded back from FRV – so a big presence in regional offices right throughout the state. What is the structure of the SES?

Faye BENDRUPS: It is similar but smaller. There is a bit less than 200 paid staff, public servants, who are doing all that management side of things, and – it depends each year; it changes – between 4000 and 5000 volunteers on the ground spread around the state in about 152 units across the state. So it operates in the same way, but it is much smaller and it is underfunded. It has never been funded to take account of the expectations of the community and what is required in these major emergencies, and that is not accounting for future emergencies, as we all know, with climate change – about things being more complex, compounding and more frequent and so forth.

Wendy LOVELL: Yes, also significantly less volunteers.

Faye BENDRUPS: Quite right.

Wendy LOVELL: One of the things that we have been hearing from some submissions is that they are questioning whether SES should be the lead agency in an emergency like this, because of their structure being so much smaller than other agencies. We know that our volunteers on the ground – I know my brother is involved with the Shepparton Search and Rescue Squad, so it is the same thing as SES but just under a different

name. When they have to go out and doorknock, they are trying to sandbag their own houses but they are also trying to fill sandbags and sandbag for those who cannot sandbag themselves. So they are extremely busy at that time. How do we better resource them to be able to do that, and do you think SES should be the lead agency? I am interested to hear your view on that.

Faye BENDRUPS: Well, the agencies are designated as the lead agencies because of their expertise. Again, when a major incident happens, an incident control team is set up in an incident control centre, and the people with the expertise should be running that. But at the same time there is also: the training that is provided for incident controllers at the highest level means that you might be a CFA person and your expertise is fire but you have also been trained up in running the incident under what is called our AIIMS system – the management system – so you should be able to take charge of any incident that falls within that. Of course it helps if you have got the specific knowledge about that particular disaster that helps you with a better understanding, but nevertheless anyone trained up under that system – under the AIIMS system – at that level with that training should be able to run the incident. Now, an incident will depend then on the leadership and decision-making at the top. So the volunteers, the people on the ground, cannot do anything until they are activated – until they are called out to come and help – but those decisions are made from the top down. So again, there is also that approach in all the agencies, which is a command-and-control model that depends on everything filtering from the top down, not feeding from the bottom up. And yet research and many, many other kinds of jurisdictions and different places continually talk about this exchange of knowledge, which should always be top down plus bottom up coming together.

Wendy LOVELL: Yes. I wonder whether some of these people who are saying that think the volunteers are actually running the show rather than the trained incident controllers. We were very fortunate in Shepparton to have Ray Jasper, and he was supported by Peter Bell from the CFA, both extremely experienced incident controllers.

Faye BENDRUPS: Yes.

Wendy LOVELL: I am also interested in the bullying, and you mentioned the inquiry that went off to VEOHRC –

The CHAIR: I am sorry, Ms Lovell, but your time has expired. Ms Tyrrell, over to you for a question, please.

Rikkie-Lee TYRRELL: Okay, thank you. I noticed when we were doing our hearings in the north there seemed to be a lack of volunteers. In your unit, do you find it hard to attract volunteers?

Faye BENDRUPS: No, we do not find it hard to attract them, we find it hard to keep them.

Rikkie-Lee TYRRELL: Why are they leaving? Are they saying why they are leaving, or is it just a matter of things?

Faye BENDRUPS: There are many reasons why they leave. One is perhaps, when people come in, they do not necessarily have a full picture of what is going to be expected of them, and then what is expected of them is this: you have got your home, family, work and you have got a whole lot of other interests. You usually come in with hobbies and sport as well, but they usually disappear because you have not got time after you join one of the emergency agencies. But you are expected to do training once a week. You will do weekend training as well because there are other courses you have to go on that are not covered off once a week. You might then have to do other extra courses, sometimes midweek – it depends – to start gaining your skills. You will be asked to go on call-outs, so you might be rostered on, depending on the system that each individual unit uses, for a week at a time, 24/7. You have got a pager on – it just goes off all the time. You are at the mercy of the pager, going out to help the community. There is a whole range of things (a) that you have to do, but (b) then there are hurdles which are, ‘Oh, I want to get chainsaw-qualified, but I can’t get on the course because SES hasn’t got enough money to run enough courses, or the providers are not there that are available, so I can’t get on a chainsaw. So I’ve been sitting in this unit for nearly 12 months. I haven’t done much. I’ve been out on the truck once, and I haven’t upskilled myself.’ So there are a range of factors why people are not retained. Another one of course is cultural. It is to do with, you know, do people feel welcomed? Do they feel acknowledged? Are they recognised for what they do right from day one when they come in? Again, some units will do this really well because of their great leadership from the volunteer perspective. Other places are all going to be different,

every unit that you go to, and other ones will not manage that quite so well. So if people are not happy, they are not going to stay; if people do not feel they are being acknowledged, why would they stay and give up all their time? If people are not advancing through their training and feeling a bit useless and under-utilised, it is another dissuader.

Rikkie-Lee TYRRELL: Okay. So what percentage do you see come and go within 12 months?

Faye BENDRUPS: I believe the last SES report said something like just under 30 per cent, but that does not account for people who are still on the books that might have disengaged, are not attended training, no longer go on call-outs, are on suspension – or on leave, we call it – which they can be for 12 months. So there is also a gap there. It is not just that we have got X number of operational people on our books; we have got X number of operational people on our books, minus the ones who have disengaged, gone on leave, do not really attend, do not go on call-outs.

Rikkie-Lee TYRRELL: Do not take offence, I am just going to call them ‘stagnant members’ because they are sitting there and they are not doing much – are these stagnant members, in a flood situation, of use when there is an emergency at all? Are there things that they can do?

Faye BENDRUPS: Well, the ones who might be on leave would not be called, because they would not be part of the pager system and they would not get the notification; they would not be called. The ones who have been maybe disengaged or unenthusiastic might not come either, because they have disengaged and they have lost interest in really why they were doing it in the first place. Others might. In fact last year on Friday the 14th at one point in the morning I was triaging lots of phone calls and inquiries and communicating back to SES staff and all sorts of things over a 2- to 3-hour period, and I had former members of the unit, who were no longer with the unit, ringing me saying, ‘Faye, we want to help. We know it’s chaos down there; we want to help. How can we help?’

The CHAIR: I am sorry, Ms Bendrups, but your time has expired. Mrs Broad, with some questions, please.

Gaëlle BROAD: Thank you very much. It has been really informative, and it is a very informative submission. Just to quote from page 19, it states:

It appears that VICSES underestimated the scale of the event, failed to adequately warn the local community and gave misleading public advice which put people and property at risk.

Those are fairly strong words. Looking at recommendations of this inquiry – I know Wendy touched on it – would you be recommending the SES still be the lead agency for future flood events, or is there a better way?

Faye BENDRUPS: Obviously, SES make some of their decisions based on – and you know, you can always kick the can down the road – other agencies’ data and so forth, which was inaccurate and wrong, but there were other decisions that were made that could have been made differently. That will not be found out in particular and how that decision-making occurred unless there is a review or an investigation into how the decision-making occurs. So I cannot in any way say SES should not be in charge of anything, and SES is not an amorphous kind of mass that takes charge; it is people who take charge. So it is also dependent on the people who are in those positions, those individuals who are in those positions.

Gaëlle BROAD: Yes. I mean, it certainly was a big ask. It was 63 local government areas impacted; you have got a staff of 200 and then a lot of volunteers. Speaking of those volunteers and the training, I have heard about some of the backlogs, people waiting a long time; can you speak to that? How long are people waiting? How often are these courses run, and is there a shortage of people that provide the courses?

Faye BENDRUPS: Well, that is all completely random. Sometimes the courses are not run, because there has been a lack of a provider to run the course. Sometimes it is because the provider has charged a fee that is too expensive for SES. Sometimes it is because there are glitches in the paperwork that mean someone is eligible but they are not forwarded on to get onto the course; you know, there are a whole range of reasons. And I suppose SES is allocating some of the responsibility for training back to the units as well so that within the unit you can be trained up to a certain extent, but that puts more pressure back on volunteers to be the trainers for everything. They are already being the trainers in their unit for various things, and to try to ask them to keep on doing more, more, more means there is just so much more pressure put back on the volunteers.

Gaëlle BROAD: I have heard about waits of up to six years. Have you heard of something similar, or what is your experience?

Faye BENDRUPS: Yes, there are many, many instances where people have said, 'I've been applying for this course for three years, four years; I still haven't got on it.'

Gaëlle BROAD: That is interesting. And interagency training – you talked about CFA, SES; can you just speak to that?

Faye BENDRUPS: Well, if you think about last year in October, that was leading up into normal fire season, so we need peak capacity for fire responders during the fire season. But if they have been exhausted in October or a period of months responding to the floods, which many of them were across Australia – the CFA volunteers were fantastic, but if that workforce has already been exhausted and fatigued by working on floods for a couple of months and then they have to go into a fire – luckily last year it was a quiet fire season, but it does not look like it is going to be this year. That is just chance, not good planning – that is just chance – so we need to have the surge capacity. We need to be able to work together, but most of our training is separate and different. That goes for all sorts of things – there is supposed to be an RPL process where you can apply to have your existing qualifications recognised and so forth. Sometimes that does not work even within SES. For someone coming from Queensland SES to join Victoria, their courses are not recognised in Victoria.

The CHAIR: I am sorry, Dr Bendrups, but your time has expired. I just want to thank you very much for coming in and providing your evidence to the committee today.

Witness withdrew.