

TRANSCRIPT

LEGISLATIVE COUNCIL ENVIRONMENT AND PLANNING COMMITTEE

Inquiry into the 2022 Flood Event in Victoria

Shepparton – Wednesday 13 September 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 Shane Sali, Mayor, and

Peter Harriott, Chief Executive Officer, Greater Shepparton City Council.

The CHAIR: Good morning, everybody. I declare open the committee's public hearing for the Inquiry into the 2022 Flood Event in Victoria. This public hearing is for the Environment and Planning Committee, 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 respect 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.

All evidence that is 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.

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

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

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

Wendy LOVELL: Wendy Lovell, known to both of you, Member for Northern Victoria.

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

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

The CHAIR: All right. With that, I will invite you to make your opening remarks. If you could please keep those remarks to 10 minutes – I will give you a 2-minute warning as we approach the end. We have got a big schedule to get through today, so I want to make sure we keep things on track. Could you also please just state your name and positions for the Hansard record. Over to you.

Shane SALI: Very good. Thank you for the opportunity. It is good to have you here. I am Shane Sali. I am the Mayor of Greater Shepparton, and Peter Harriott is here with me, who is the Chief Executive Officer of Greater Shepparton City Council. We are all well aware of why we are here. We obviously were faced with the largest flood event that we have experienced in living memory last year in October, and from our perspective we are here to share not only our experience but some things that we would possibly do differently if we were faced with that challenge again. I definitely will not take up the 10 minutes; I think it is important that we get some questions from you as well, and that will probably open up to that free-flowing conversation –

The CHAIR: That is what we are here to do.

Shane SALI: yes – which is what I am hoping to go through.

I think, as a starting point, I could not be more proud of our community. I think that is one thing that I want to get on the record straight up. We were faced with this flood quite quickly. I know the rivers were full and our

catchments in all aspects were full. Although we were possibly anticipating a flood of some sort, no-one probably expected to face what we did last October. We reacted really quickly. Our community spirit was like no other, and I think what I have learned through this period is that those that are on the ground in local government that are connected to community like no other are the ones that definitely should be given the tools to help lead these types of emergency responses – obviously with the support of higher levels of government and other emergency services as well. I think in particular where we are sitting here and, more importantly, in Mooroopna as well, the community came together and were heavily impacted. Probably our hardest-hit community was here in Mooroopna as well, so it is a vulnerable community that obviously was impacted here.

When we talk about ‘building back’ we often hear ‘build back better’. What does that mean? Does that mean if we are faced with this challenge again that we expect those that were impacted would just get impacted again and they would be better for the experience? No, I would not have thought so. I think it is about how we minimise the risk on those households that were impacted, and what options are available. Some of those things Peter Harriott will go through as well.

I am proud to say we filled up over 200,000 sandbags. I think it was an amazing community effort. We bought in, we reacted quickly and our recovery as well was of quick action. We are still facing those challenges now, but I guess when we look at it now and the water recedes and we move on, the really hard conversations need to start around: what would we do differently? How would we communicate with arguably the largest multicultural community outside of metro Melbourne? Multiple languages – English is not the first language of many. All the information is often provided in English. How do you get that to those most vulnerable that cannot speak English in a timely fashion when you have got water raging down the river that is going to inundate our community?

Our flooding submission, which some of you may have already seen, Peter Harriott will go through a little bit more and expand on the operational component of what we conducted at Greater Shepparton City Council. I have to commend Peter and the team on what they did there as well to bring the council group together to be able to liaise with higher levels to help support our community. I might hand over to Peter, and he can expand and then we look forward to any questions.

Peter HARRIOTT: Good on you, Shane. Thank you. Obviously the October flood was a big event. It was shorter than COVID, but it was in some ways much more intense. From council’s point of view, we had to transition from business as usual to a full emergency mode, and that involved 100 per cent of our staff, and then we had to transition back. We came out of the flood and there were a whole range of supports still required, but 95 per cent of the community wanted to get back up and going. So there was a challenge in itself, just to get back up and going whilst continuing the response.

We do live in a beautiful area. We have the Goulburn River come through between Mooroopna and Shepparton. We have the Broken River come through and the Sevens Creek. Nearly every waterway in northern Victoria comes through Shepparton, which makes it such a beautiful and appealing place. We live with rivers and we live with a flood plain. I think that is important to distinguish – we have got to acknowledge the flood plain as well as the river, and the flood plain is much wider than the river.

That takes us to planning. Planning is so important. Development post 1990 has been protected by a very strong planning regulation and planning scheme. If there is a message coming out of today: we need to support planning schemes going forward, and the key to that is for the flood studies that are prepared by the catchment management authority, supported by council, are critical to getting the data accurate. Prior to 1990 – it is all about legacy properties that have not been protected by the planning scheme, and we need to do something about it so that when the next flood comes along we will be better prepared and we will be more efficient in response, because we will have the learnings from this committee review here, our own internal learnings and all that sort of stuff. That is great. But it is still going to be a big response, and the relief effort is going to be as big. So we need to reduce the workload, and the best way to do that is through some form of buyback scheme, we believe.

We will touch on the flood studies and all that in greater detail as we go. I do need to note that the federal government and the state government were very good in relation to support – more than very good – and have followed that up with funding. The federal funding and the state funding that have been placed here, not only

during the floods but after the floods for road repairs, for infrastructure repairs and for staff support, have been very, very good.

The council's role is significant in the flood. We had personnel in the incident control centre 24/7 for long periods of time. We had our own municipal emergency coordination centre at the council, effectively running 24/7. As I said before, we effectively had to shut our council down to provide the emergency response, but we had fantastic support from right across the state. We will talk about a whole range of things, including sandbagging. Communication – Shane touched on that. Animal control – it is often underestimated, animal control, and the importance of animals to people and their mental health when their animals are suffering. We found that, and we put a lot of time into that. The emergency relief centres were the toughest environment, no doubt about it, and resource-intense, and the mental health strain on everybody there; the occupants, the staff – the support was incredible, so we will go into that in a little bit of detail.

The clean-up was big, and we are sitting in a control centre for a big clean-up. The Mooroopna Football Netball Club, what a great job they did over a particular weekend, and that was just great for the support to the community, to see that the community were helping themselves. There were other people there that could help out, not only all the ADF and state government and council support and community support, but it was actually football netball clubs that were really getting behind it, which is fantastic.

Data is big in an emergency, so the secondary impact assessments and going in and collecting that is important. We need better systems in that regard. The natural environment is often overlooked, and I think we are seeing that at the moment; you know, a big impact on the natural environment, but there is not a lot of talk about how we repair and not a lot of funds available to repair the natural environment. We have got Victoria's heritage river, the largest river; it has got scours, it needs repairs, it needs protection, so we can talk about that. Drainage is obviously big, so there has got to be a review of our drainage infrastructure and pumps and those sorts of things. Levees always get a run. We have not used levees as a flood mitigation strategy since 2000, and we have seen the problems when levees are built: they protect some, but they always impact others, so we do not have that as a first-call strategy.

The CHAIR: You have 2 minutes.

Peter HARRIOTT: Thank you. Rural levees and Loch Garry are a big issue for our rural community here. The rural levees exist in no-person's-land, so we need to have a conversation about that.

I will conclude by going back to my comments at the start: it is so important that our planning scheme is updated regularly, our flood studies are updated regularly and there is an efficient process through government for that to happen. Those flood studies have got to be corrected for climate change; we are at various states in relation to that, and right across the state, we have got to be on common ground. But also I have got to address these issues that are pre-1990, and that is the way we will reduce the workload. You know, the sandbagging frenzy that goes on in any sort of crisis is interesting to observe, but I really do not want to go there again. I want to reduce the amount of sandbags that we need to get out, and the best way to do that is through a buyback scheme. I think I will pull it up there.

The CHAIR: Great. Thank you very much for those opening remarks. Ms Lovell, over to you for the first question.

Wendy LOVELL: Thank you. Peter, you mentioned the fact that the river runs through our two communities of Shepparton and Mooroopna; one of the biggest impacts was not having a second river crossing that was above flood level. I wonder if you might just expand for the committee on the impact that it had, particularly on this community here in Mooroopna, and how we could overcome that.

Peter HARRIOTT: Thanks, Wendy. That is the big question, isn't it, it is the big betterment question. It divided Shepparton and Mooroopna, it divided our emergency response, it divided our hospital, which was critical. You might know – Wendy, you certainly know – that the original hospital was here in Mooroopna but it was shifted, in the 1970s I think it was, to higher ground, but that put it in Shepparton. The health and medical response in an emergency is so critical, so Matt Sharp had to ensure that he had staff on this side of the river and staff on the other side of the river. He had to coordinate out of Kyabram and Shepparton. It just made it very difficult, and he has got a big operation anyway in Shepparton that needed to continue; he needed staff to get across, and he just could not get staff to get across. So there is that issue. There is the emergency response

in itself. We had to have a separate emergency response on either side of the river. But it was not just separating Shepparton and Mooroopna; it effectively separated northern Victoria, because the bridge at Murchison was effectively out, and that is 40 kilometres to the south. Forty kilometres to the north is McCoys Bridge. That was out. Both were considered to be structurally damaged for a certain period of time, so it was from Nagambie through to the Murray. The whole northern part of Victoria was absolutely divided.

The solution to that is an appropriate high-level flood-protected second crossing. We have been working on this for 20 years. It is known. The planning scheme has reserved the route; the route has been determined. The federal government even allocated the money to do it. At the time the estimate was thought to be \$260 million. \$208 million, the 80 per cent federal funding, was allocated through Damian Drum, who was our local member at the time. The business case has been done by the Victorian government. That has been lodged with the federal government. Shane in particular and the council have been lobbying the federal government and the state government to get this project up and going, but it is a difficult project. It is now a much bigger project. Cost of construction has gone up; it is more like a \$1.5 billion project now. But it is essential to protect Shepparton and Mooroopna to ensure communication and passage in the whole of northern Victoria.

Wendy LOVELL: Thank you. Also, you mentioned buybacks. I was just wondering if you could elaborate on the number of buybacks you anticipate would be needed in this community and the areas that you think that they are needed in.

Peter HARRIOTT: Yes. As I have said, I think buybacks are really the best way to ensure that we do not spend a whole heap of money on these operational emergency response costs. So we have just got to shift houses out of flood-prone areas onto higher ground. We have high ground here, and we can do it. Queensland and New South Wales are doing this. So we have spoken to Murray Watt, the federal minister in relation to this. We have spoken to Brendan Moon, the head of the national emergency management authority, who is coordinating those responses in Queensland and Northern Rivers in New South Wales. They are big billion-dollar schemes, half funded by the state and half funded by the federal government. So we have spoken to relevant ministers here in Victoria about that.

We know from our flood modelling and our maps that there are around about 600 houses that go underwater in a one-in-100-year flood. Now, October 2022 was not a one-in-100. A 12.3 measurement on the Shepparton gauge is the one-in-100; we got to 12.1, but it was still a significant flood. So what is the size of our ask, Wendy? That is a good question. Ideally it would be 600 houses and whatever figure that works out to be, and that is in the hundreds of millions of dollars. So if you add our request with other townships in northern Victoria, other areas that have been flooded, you are looking at a similar package, a billion-dollar package, to what they have got in New South Wales and Queensland. But I know times are tough and we have got to spread money, so we can stage that and get the most flood-impacted houses out of those flooded areas first and then do this over a number of years. So we are quite happy to talk about a staged approach.

The CHAIR: I will just move to other committee members. We can come back around.

Wendy LOVELL: I just want to thank Shane, though, for his leadership and the other councillors during the floods. Shane, you really stood up and were a great leader in this community. But also other councillors like Cr Brophy with the sandbagging effort and everything – it was a tremendous response by our local government.

Shane SALI: Thank you.

The CHAIR: Great. Mrs Broad, question.

Gaëlle BROAD: Thank you very much. Thank you both for coming today. Your submission is excellent. It is very detailed, so we appreciate all the efforts you put into that. You have talked a bit about the bridges – I was certainly interested in that – but just drainage infrastructure, is there an estimated cost for implementing the necessary upgrades to things like drainage, penstocks and pump infrastructure in the worst affected areas to enhance resilience against flash flooding and mitigate the impacts of that potential riverine flooding? If you could just talk a bit about that.

Peter HARRIOTT: Yes, look, it is in the tens of millions of dollars to do an appropriate upgrade of drainage and pumps. That will be a program that is rolled out over a number of years. We do have drainage strategies, but they are being updated and upgraded at the moment. We have moved to address some immediate

issues by ensuring we have got portable pumps available on standby in our depots for this sort of event. We had great support through Goulburn Valley Water and Goulburn–Murray Water in relation to that sort of infrastructure, and their staff were very important in that regard as well, so it was a real team event, the drainage response. I guess the community do see that the flood comes and then goes, and they see the water still pooling when there is a shower of rain soon after and the drainage does not handle it all – we have not fixed the pump that was washed out because of the intense flood. So drainage is so important, and getting it right, but it is a big task and it is going to take the long term. There were some other components to your question that I do not think I have quite answered.

Gaelle BROAD: Yes, just at the moment, I guess, what is next for that process? How do you start that process of reviewing the drainage and what is needed? You talk about millions of dollars, but is there any work that you have got in train to look at that?

Peter HARRIOTT: Yes, it is to look at the strategies and look at the longer term over the whole municipality so that we get our priorities right and we are not just spending money in the wrong areas. It is to look at the immediate issues that we know about – Lenne Street in Mooroopna, for example, and those sorts of things; it is to look at our penstocks in the culverts that go through the levee banks. For example, down at Murchison we have got culverts that go through the levee banks there that have old sluice gates that leak and that sort of thing, so they are a priority to ensure we get down there and maintain them well or replace them with new infrastructure. That work is going on right now, as is a survey of our levees for just basic knowledge of knowing where they are, whether they are at the right level, what their integrity is and what the issues are with pipes going through, and it is generally with the pipes going through them that we have the issues, so a lot of work is going on in this space right at the moment.

Gaelle BROAD: I appreciate you talked a bit about levees, and I guess it is different to other areas and what we have heard too. It has not necessarily been your first thing, but are there any specific changes or improvements that the council believes should be made to the Loch Garry operations? If you could just talk to that for a bit.

Peter HARRIOTT: Yes. I did participate in a Loch Garry operating rules review recently, but it is largely a Goulburn–Murray Water responsibility, so I would not like to speak for them. But the rules have already been changed. There was a reasonably quick response there, with Goulburn–Murray Water forming a committee involving community members from Bunbartha and the Loch Garry area and including council as well. There were a number of meetings to talk about the fact that the rules as they stood during October did not allow for the operation of the loch in a suitable time. A feature of the flood was that it came up very quickly. Normally we get plenty of time here, but in October 2022 it came up very quickly, and with the current rules that were available then that required a 24-hour period between getting to a certain level at the gauge at Shepparton and the time you take the panels out at Loch Garry, it just did not work. So that has been reviewed, and for the big floods we do not have that 24-hour waiting period anymore, but I would not like to go into more detail than that, because that is a Goulburn–Murray Water specific issue.

The CHAIR: Thank you. We will come back around. Ms Bath.

Melina BATH: Thank you, Chair. Thank you, gentlemen, for being here. There is nothing like coming to country and recognising the valuable work that community members do in conjunction with council in times of crisis, and you certainly faced that. We have heard that with Rochester and Echuca as well, and I am sure we will in Seymour tomorrow. I want to just take you back to compelling cases: when we write submissions, when we write our end-of-committee report, we need to understand the vitality of issues. You have talked about the Peter Ross-Edwards Causeway being closed. I want you to talk about the economic impact that had. You have got in Tatura and Mooroopna big dairy, and you have got processing on the other side in Shepparton. What economic impact did that make, and then also – it would have been a natural consequence – what would be the impact on farmers in that community not being able to get that freight across? Can you quantify that?

Shane SALI: The dollar component – but yes, absolutely. We saw firsthand the way the water came up and what an impact it had in cutting off the Peter Ross-Edwards Causeway there. A big portion of Shepparton and the industry were effectively untouched. East Shepparton and parts of that were not impacted by the floods. It was effectively, as you would say, business as usual for those people there, but what it showed was that once the causeway was closed, there may as well have been floodwater there. It completely shut down both cities.

The connectivity from an east–west perspective highlighted how important from an economic perspective it is not only for the Goulburn Valley and in particular Greater Shepparton but, as Peter highlighted, more broadly for the state of Victoria. There was even a point where, as the floodwater moved further north and was blocking other areas, this causeway was used as a national east–west connection point as well once the water started to recede here. From a dollar perspective, I do not think we have got the dollars, but major industries were calling me at times, and I know Peter as well, to say, ‘What is happening? How quickly can we get this causeway open?’ We effectively had to shut down our operations, and in particular those that required the ability to get across the causeway and head either north or south.

Melina BATH: Thank you.

Peter HARRIOTT: Yes, look, we are doing some work on this, and it is in the hundreds of millions of dollars – a big flood like this has on your local economy. We had crops damaged, particularly in the Undera area. We had cattle losses and sheep losses. We obviously had businesses just smashed, particularly through here in Mooroopna. I will give you one example.

Shane SALI: Just milk tankers obviously could not get into properties either as well. Milking obviously would still take place, but they could get the milk out.

Melina BATH: So farmers were letting their milk go?

Shane SALI: Just let it out, yes.

Peter HARRIOTT: I will give you one example of a business, and I am sure they will not mind me mentioning this. Gouge linen operate here in Mooroopna. They provide cleaning services for a lot of the hospitals and other areas, including the Shepparton hospital. They could not get clean linen to the Shepparton hospital for days and days and days, and that had a big impact. Okay, it is a financial impact to a business, but –

Melina BATH: It is a health impact for the hospital.

Peter HARRIOTT: it is a much bigger health issue.

Melina BATH: On that, you mentioned that there is funding for stage 1, allocated through Damian Drum at the time – \$260 million sitting on a budget line from the federal government and needing state government 20 per cent matching of the 80 per cent from the feds. I understand the transport minister Catherine King is reviewing regional allocations. What is your council doing – we have heard the importance of it – to advocate for the stage 1 bypass? What are you doing actively post floods?

Peter HARRIOTT: The \$208 million in the federal budget is caught up in the 90-day review through Minister King’s office. Shane and I have been to meet Minister King and have had the conversation. We have also met with the relevant Victorian ministers and continue that conversation.

Melina BATH: Is that Minister Shing as well?

Peter HARRIOTT: Minister Allan.

Melina BATH: Allan, transport.

Peter HARRIOTT: We will speak to anyone about it, as I think all ministers would know. Even the Premier – we will speak to the Premier about it. Shane, do you want to touch on any of that?

Shane SALI: Yes. I mean, obviously, as Peter mentioned, a power of work had been done before the flood event. But, dare I say it, the flood was probably the biggest piece of advocacy that we could use. That was something that we highlighted when we met, not too long after the flood event, with Minister King. Clearly she mentioned that it would be obviously sitting within that 90-day review, and no doubt we are expecting some detail on what that looks like now. There has also been a clear message as well that the funding is currently sitting within the federal component – obviously a bucket of money. We want to make sure that still stays, but we also need the state to acknowledge that this is a priority project for them as well.

Melina BATH: Has there been money allocated initially – \$10 million?

Peter HARRIOTT: Yes, \$10 million was allocated to finish off the business case and to do an intersection project. That is there. As part of our strategy, we have offered a solution to spend the \$208 million. Even if it is too big of an ask to get the additional funding, there are some legitimate projects that could happen right now that are associated or part of the bypass.

Melina BATH: Complementary to it, yes.

Peter HARRIOTT: Yes, and they could happen right now. They are intersections at either end. They are not the crossing, but they are preparation for what could happen.

Melina BATH: I have got loads more, Chair, but I respect –

The CHAIR: We will come back around, yes?

Melina BATH: Thanks.

The CHAIR: Ms Tyrrell, question.

Rikkie-Lee TYRRELL: You mentioned here resource sharing with other councils through an emergency situation. Just a question regarding insurance, because I am not a CEO and I do not know how that works: if you are to borrow a pump from another shire and it gets damaged in your shire, will that be covered still? The same goes with personnel. I am just wanting to know if it is going to have an impact further down the track if something like that happens or if we need to change it so that they are covered.

Peter HARRIOTT: Yes, that is a good question. I do not know the detail, but we certainly have not had any problems or resistance in that area. The individual council would have their own insurance, so the item of equipment would be covered either way. If there was damage, we could potentially claim it through either the federal or state government. We have not had any issues in that regard. So it is an interesting question, but I would have to come back to you.

The CHAIR: You could take it on notice if you need to.

Rikkie-Lee TYRRELL: Yes, because I just feel that if something were to happen and they could not claim that, that would be another cost to the council that you cannot afford.

Peter HARRIOTT: No, good question. In relation to, generally, support from other councils: it has been absolutely fantastic. And it is not just locally. We all tend to help ourselves locally, but with some of the environmental health assessments that were required of the damaged properties, we have had environmental health staff from all across the state. So a big thankyou to every council that has helped – building surveyors from all across the state, coming from as far as down the Western District and Gippsland and metro Melbourne. Local government really pulls together in an emergency. It is a really positive aspect.

Rikkie-Lee TYRRELL: Okay. That is good.

The CHAIR: Dr Ratnam.

Samantha RATNAM: Thanks so much for your presentation and being here today and your written submission as well. Back on the theme of the transport links, because that came through quite strongly in your submission: do you know of any audit that has been done on a comprehensive area, whether from a statewide or kind of a regional-wide perspective, on transport links in and out of flood-prone and other disaster-prone areas? If not, do you think that is something that could capture some of the issues that your municipality is experiencing?

Peter HARRIOTT: Yes. Good question. The answer is: no, I know of no document that has studied that or documented that. We have the northern Victorian freight study and all sorts of transport studies, but they generally look at situation normal and assess traffic volumes and where they are going and all that sort of stuff. But a specific study to look at the problems when there is a flood – yes, I think that would be a great idea.

Samantha RATNAM: It might be something we pursue actually. Just back on this question around the disaster and emergency management response, your submission speaks to the areas that you were responsible

for, emergency relief centres et cetera, and you made some recommendations as well about communication and engagement. In our prior hearings we heard quite a lot about the coordination of the state and local disaster emergency response systems. I would really like to hear about your experience. What worked well for your municipality, and what were some gaps that you would recommend we address, particularly at that state and local coordination level?

Peter HARRIOTT: Yes. I will start with the positives, and it is mostly a positive story here in Shepparton. I think Wendy touched on Shane being out there, doing his social media thing; I think that worked very, very well. It was direct and there was no waiting; everybody knew what was going on almost immediately. But from the incident control centre, having our staff in there 24/7 – I mean, we were there, we were communicating. So Ray Jasper and Peter Bell, who were the heads of the centre – there was nothing we needed. We had direct access. There was a regular update every 3 hours, and that was when all the issues were raised and all the coordination of the responses was divvied out. So we got a –

Samantha RATNAM: Could I ask, is that SES and Emergency Management Victoria – those are the two bodies there?

Peter HARRIOTT: Yes, that is. That is Ray Jasper, SES, and Peter Bell was –

Wendy LOVELL: CFA.

Peter HARRIOTT: CFA, thanks, Wendy. And they were all up at Numurkah Road, in a centre there. That was the hub of activity and intense – and every 3 or 4 hours, I think it was, we would just collate the issues and they would distribute the workload and we would get our work, and it would all be relayed back to our municipal emergency coordination centre at Welsford Street. We had a team that was just on the phones, doing whatever, to do that. So we felt that the communication was excellent, and if we heard anything from the community, we knew where to go and we would get a response.

I know it will not be 100 per cent and there will be examples out there where people felt that they did not have access or did not know where to go to get an answer. That is a little bit about communication during the event; it is a bit about communication now. It is about all this communication prior to the event. We actually had a session in the showgrounds – I think it was on 1 October, just before the event – to promote the risk of flood and how to be prepared and all that sort of stuff, and we got very low turnout. That is just the problem – when you are outside of an event, it is very hard to educate and get people prepared.

Samantha RATNAM: Was that a council-run event, or was that SES?

Wendy LOVELL: SES.

Peter HARRIOTT: It was a joint-communicated thing. We have the classic SES, CFA, council – everybody. Guy Tierney is always there from the catchment management authority. So they are good.

I think Shane mentioned the CALD community. Yes, we have got to acknowledge that we need to do better in that regard. We need to have closer links with the ethnic council and work out what that looks like. I do not know that it is just a dozen different interpretations of a pamphlet; it has got to be more than that. It has got to be direct contact, it has got to be face to face. You have got to have people in the community, leaders or representatives, that can come forward and get round the table, because emergencies are intense periods of time and it takes conversations on a regular basis, not just handing out pamphlets. So we will work on that.

The 1800 number – I understand the benefits of centralised coordination through a 1800 number in a big event. That is probably necessary. It did go down, and one of the criticisms was that it took half an hour or more to get through. I tested that myself, and it took 26 minutes to get through. So we elevated that, and I think this is the important thing: as long as you have got the structures to elevate issues through to and you get a response, then it works. So we elevated that and it was not too long; I retested the 1800 number and more staff had been put on the other end, and there was a 26-second wait. So, yes, there were issues. I believe most were resolved, but we have communication issues we need to work on, and the CALD community is one of those.

Samantha RATNAM: Great. Thank you so much.

The CHAIR: Thanks, Dr Ratnam. Just a question: I understand that there is the Homes at Home program that is rolling out, and there is some work being done on the housing taskforce as well. Are you able to talk us through what is happening there at the moment?

Peter HARRIOTT: The housing taskforce was important to set up soon after the flood, because housing was critical. We had emergency housing. We even took people down to Mickleham to the facility down there. We utilised caravan parks. Friends and family were important, as usual, and the state government has invested in a facility here in Mooropna that provides a great service for at-risk communities, so that caravan park is just about up and going again. On top of that, Homes at Home is a project where caravans are placed on the property to allow people to stay on their property in reasonable comfort, I guess – a caravan is a caravan – but still be close to their property, and I think that has got a lot of benefits. That mental health benefit, the security benefit – I know some vacant properties are having trouble with vandalism and that sort of thing, so being on your property is always a good idea. It is just one aspect of a whole range of solutions in the housing solution, but the broader issue I guess is the lack of stock of affordable housing, the lack of stock of land available for housing. That is a bigger statewide planning issue that not only flood-impacted communities are going through, but nearly every regional city or council in Victoria is going through. Somehow, we have got to free up more land and make it available for housing so that housing is more affordable.

The CHAIR: You mentioned in your earlier response to Dr Ratnam that there was a community event. We had the SES, CFA and council try and encourage people to come and engage around flood risk, and you said it was poorly attended. Do you think that people generally do not see flood risk in the same way they might see fire risk? What do you think could be done further to highlight to people who live either in flood plains or flood-prone areas that it is a serious risk? Were you aware of whether individuals had an emergency evacuation plan for floods? Often people talk about having preplanned – if there is going to be a bushfire that they have already got a plan, and the only decision they need to make in that crisis is to follow their plan. You may not be able to answer this question, because obviously you are the council, you are not individual people, but are you able to highlight any instances of where you think people really did not appreciate the risk and did not have plans?

Shane SALI: I just want to touch on that, because when that event did take place in early October I did have a few people that did attend and called, and one of the things I just wanted to make a point of before we have to wrap up is probably the greatest challenge that I have seen come out of this is the community expectation across local government, state and federal. What is local government's core responsibility through these emergencies? When that information session took place, I had quite a few people call me saying that there is an expectation that council should now be providing sandbags for anyone who wants them – well, how many? Where do we start? Where do we get that direction from? How do we make sure? We had people that wanted sandbags to build, effectively, levee banks. We wanted people that wanted sandbags to protect their homes. That is probably something that was a bit challenging. But we have had these follow-up community sessions now post the flood event, and they have been –

The CHAIR: But individuals – I am really interested in whether people are appreciating the risk at an individual level.

Shane SALI: The risk was people would look out their front window and not see water and think they were not at risk and then could see water and think, 'It's time to go,' but it was too late. So that is where it is the saying 'You don't have to see it to know that you're at risk.' I guess you are always better off for the experience that you go through, and we saw that with the community sessions that we went through. There was a really good, strong attendance, and people are well aware of what would possibly have to take place if we are faced with this circumstance again. But yes, there were those circumstances of the connection points being heavily impacted, so although you might have been able to get on your front lawn, that is as far as you could go. So I think those individuals would see things a little bit differently. But that is what Peter has spoken about – how we make sure we do not have those individuals in that circumstance again.

Peter HARRIOTT: There is greater awareness now, obviously, because we have just gone through a big flood, and as we are going out to the community again, you know, there is better recognition. The community meetings have been interesting in themselves. But I guess one strategy for making individuals more aware is to get these maps out to the community and just make it quite obvious to people. I know you cannot quite see it, but if you are a red dot, you know, you need an emergency plan. You need to go onto the Goulburn Broken

catchment management portal and look at your house. You can find your house there, and it will tell you whether you are high and dry like that one or you are in a power of poop right there. And it has got the detail; it tells you how far underwater your floor will go. If you see that and you understand that, I reckon you are going to be switched on and you are going to be prepared.

Now, the SES, when they come round, and the CFA, when they come with us and do these community meetings, talk about preparedness and individual preparedness and having a plan, and they have oodles of information on how to prepare a plan. They have model plans, and they have little packages that have –

The CHAIR: I have one myself actually for Melbourne. So yes, I am aware of them, but I am interested to see it.

Peter HARRIOTT: Yes, all sorts of stuff. So we are promoting that as much as possible. But I think if people could understand this portal as much as possible – I know we are working with the catchment management authority to make sure it is up-to-date and we have got some funding to redo the floor level surveys to make sure we have got everybody there – I think that is as good as anything.

The CHAIR: Obviously, people move in and out of towns as well, and I do not know what the turnover is generally. But often you will find that people who have been here a long time know and appreciate these risks a little bit better than, say, someone who has maybe just been here for six months or 12 months. So how do you think we could continuously improve that process? Also, you mentioned CALD communities: what do you think would, I guess, be really good to increase those messages? Are you working with community leaders from those CALD communities, and what sort of strategies do you think might help?

Peter HARRIOTT: Well, we are working with the ethnic council and leaders in those communities. As I said before, I think it is identifying the leaders and having regular face to face. It is an issue because people move, and as you just mentioned, what do we do with people that come into the community, whoever they are? I mean, we do not have an induction for everybody who comes in.

The CHAIR: No, of course not.

Peter HARRIOTT: I do not know, Shane. Perhaps it is a more regular awareness of floods – it is an annual thing that we do.

Shane SALI: I think it is just maintaining those connections with key community people. We often said through the flood event that, you know, you did not need to be a mayor or a CEO or have a badge of any sort to take that leadership. There are always people that are out there willing to help, and I think in this circumstance we needed to react quickly. Nothing was ever going to be a bad decision, because we had to act quickly, and those community members, the ones that stepped up, probably just needed that sort of approval from us to go do their thing. But everyone has got connections in different ways. Going through formal processes can sometimes delay things. You can get bogged down in little bits and pieces. You just need community people on the phone, getting to those – in contact – and saying, ‘Hey, you’ve got to go.’

The CHAIR: Yes, sure. And one final question. You mentioned animals when you were talking earlier. Can you walk us through – obviously council has some responsibility in regard to animal management of domestic animals, so how did you find that experience? What worked well? What could have been improved? Did you have the facilities you needed to presumably capture animals if they were loose? If people were evacuating and had their animals, what was the experience like with the evacuation centre? We have had similar comments made in Echuca about animals and evacuation centres. What do you do when you have got animals running around evacuation centres?

Peter HARRIOTT: Horses, goats, donkeys, cats and dogs.

The CHAIR: Yes, it could be anything. It is not necessarily just domestic animals; it could be anything.

Peter HARRIOTT: We had a fellow come from Yarrawonga – so it was not only our area; Yarrawonga is a river dweller – and he brought his two cats with him, so we looked after his two cats. What we found was that it was highly emotional, this aspect, much more than what I thought. There was another example of how we got fantastic support from our other councils for the rangers that came here, and we realised it was a big workload.

We knew about sandbagging, we knew about levees and pumps and all that sort of stuff, but it really highlighted that this was a big area with a big impact on people's lives. We needed to address it. What didn't we have? We did not have sufficient space at our animal centre out at Wanganui Road. That needs a redevelopment, a big redevelopment. We had temporary facilities at our relief centres, and they seemed to work well. The people that came there appreciated being able to be with their animals at the time. So lots of lessons learned there. Before we do finish, I would like to talk about food relief, if that is possible.

The CHAIR: We have just got Sheena with one more question. But we have got time.

Wendy LOVELL: You have got half an hour to go.

The CHAIR: You have got another half an hour. So did you want to add any more on animals?

Shane SALLI: Oh, have we? I thought we were only here for 45 minutes.

The CHAIR: Obviously when we are thinking about evacuation centres, things like where people put their animals is something that could be considered looking into the future.

Peter HARRIOTT: A lot of the farmers obviously switched on to this and shifted their stock from one paddock to another or they had someone else they could agist with, but a lot of them got caught out, and that added to the economic impact I talked about before.

The CHAIR: Yes, sure. All right, Ms Watt.

Sheena WATT: Hi. Well, I was going to go to domestic animals – perhaps the wildlife arrangements. You mentioned in your submission, on page 6, about the greater coordination required for injured wildlife and whatnot. Can you clarify council's role in the general coordination around wildlife rescue and what was happening in that space? Or is it more around domestic –

Peter HARRIOTT: It was more about domestic, but I think we are just highlighting that, along with the environment in general, it is often overlooked. We do not know where to go, apart from ringing a number, to get people available to go and rescue animals and that sort of thing. We are just saying it is one of the issues where we need to do better.

Sheena WATT: Yes, okay. So wildlife and domestic –

Peter HARRIOTT: Yes.

Sheena WATT: recommendations there. Perhaps it is worth giving a moment to talk about food relief.

The CHAIR: Yes, and then we can go back around.

Sheena WATT: I can come to my question after that, because I understand that is a big part of the response and recovery, and I am interested to understand it.

Peter HARRIOTT: We found during COVID that food relief was an enormous issue. It was similar during the flood. It was in part centralised, coordinated, through the 1800 number and the Red Cross and what have you, but there always is a local component, as Shane has been mentioning. I have just got to recognise the efforts of our local community to assist in the food relief, whether that is finding food, distributing food –

Sheena WATT: Is that existing organisations or folks that have just sort of stepped up to be part of that?

Peter HARRIOTT: It is a combination. It is usually existing organisations, such as Lighthouse and FoodShare, and there will be others that I apologise for leaving out, but they are two of the key ones that usually come together. The FoodShare facility is so important. I know they are redeveloping, and they have got donated land through a local businessperson. It is so important that it is redeveloped not just for the day-to-day critical work that they do but for in an emergency that it has an emergency capacity. So we have been working with them to see if we can ensure that they do have some additional funds there to have that emergency capacity as well. But, yes, those organisations come together and they do sort of take over that component. That is fine because their expertise is great and they have got connections with the community, and that works well.

But they always need support, and that is an example where the local FoodShare could have some additional dollar support for a better facility.

Sheena WATT: I assume there is still the existing need – before the event – for these organisations, and that still, I assume, needs to be met for those that are from non-affected communities. As you said, Shane, there are those that have business as usual, and life goes on. And then on top of that is obviously the emergency response, so that is an enormous amount of pressure.

Peter HARRIOTT: It is a daily and it is a weekly demand, food relief, in any community, but particularly in Shepparton and Mooroopna.

Sheena WATT: Okay. So there is a range of investments that are being made to enhance the capability of food relief?

Peter HARRIOTT: There is. I just want to highlight it and indicate that there are some great organisations in our community that really come together to provide that solution, but we always need the state-coordinated response as well and the packages coming in. We are a multicultural community, so we often do not have quite the right –

The CHAIR: Culturally appropriate food.

Peter HARRIOTT: Thank you. That is a bit of an issue, but I think we are getting better at that.

The CHAIR: All right. Thanks, Ms Watt. Ms Lovell.

Wendy LOVELL: Just before I ask my question, just on the food parcels, we were also lucky to have the Shepparton Search and Rescue squad, who were actually out risking their own lives on the floodwaters to take food parcels, which were I think Foodbank ones that had come up to their shed, to people who were stranded. That filled a void while Foodshare could not get into their facility.

Peter and Shane, I want to talk about communication and particularly warnings. We know that the feedback from the community has been very much that the warnings that were coming through on the VicEmergency app were very confusing, and they were still coming four days after the floods to evacuate Shepparton – it was to evacuate the whole town. I remember some of the people at the relief centre telling me that initially they had people turning up saying, ‘We’ve sandbagged, we’ve got some belongings and we’re here to say stay.’ And when they said to them, ‘Where do you live?’, it would have had to have been a biblical flood for their house to be flooded, so they were sent home. That was very confusing even to not so much our multicultural community but just our general community. How do you think warnings can be better communicated and more targeted? I remember council – it might have been in the 1990s or early 2000s – set up their own text messaging. Probably after the 1993 flood, it might have been, they set up a text messaging thing where they could communicate with locals. But then after the bushfires when the statewide text messaging was set up, I think council went away from theirs. Could that statewide text messaging be a better tool for communication than just general messaging through the VicEmergency app?

Peter HARRIOTT: This is a difficult one, isn’t it, Wendy? In an ideal world there would be a centralised state system that could send out a text to everybody and give them absolutely accurate information. Yes, that would be great, and we are probably heading there with the rapid improvement in technology. It sort of goes back to: we have got to ensure that individuals are resilient and knowledgeable themselves. If they have got that information in front of them and they know that the river gauge at Shepparton is going to be at that level on this date, it is all they need to know. It can be confusing, and it can be misleading to have broad information going out. When you get that evacuation thing that goes out and it covers that broad area, I do not need to evacuate in Kialla Lakes, for example.

Wendy LOVELL: You are cut off from town.

Peter HARRIOTT: Although people observing this from outside would think, ‘I’m in Shepparton. I’m in that area where we’ve got Broken River going around here and the Goulburn River going here. I’ve got a floodway going through there.’ Surely that person has got to get out – well, no.

The CHAIR: But if you are cut off, though, how do you survive? I think that is what you are talking about, not appreciating the risk.

Peter HARRIOTT: I guess, yes, there could be improvements. What they are I am not too sure, because it is not only sending a text out. The ABC are used, and they do a great job.

The CHAIR: The emergency broadcaster.

Peter HARRIOTT: Emergency broadcaster. But again, it is very broad information that goes out that you hear, and you think, 'Okay, well, what does that mean in detail to me?' You have always got to go somewhere else to get more detail, particularly in a flood. Now, if it is a fire, they will give you the roads. They will say, 'If you're on this road or that road, you need to evacuate.' But flooding is a bit different, and that is where I think you need to educate yourself. You need to build your knowledge and you need to understand these systems that are already in place, and they are your best backup, as well as your flood plan and all your emergency equipment that you have got in place. But if a big flood is coming and it is going to go to this level, you will already know what you need to do.

Wendy LOVELL: As we know, the portal was very difficult to access during the flood and people had not concentrated on the fact that it was even available until then, and even now we are going to have a whole lot of our community who are elderly, who are not computer-literate or who do not speak English who are going to have a lot of difficulty in actually accessing that information. So you do need to still have warnings as well.

The CHAIR: Anything else? Or I will move on to Gaelle.

Wendy LOVELL: Yes. The ICC here worked particularly well, and something that has come through from some of the other areas is that they did not feel perhaps as informed as we were here in Greater Shepparton. Do you think having the ICC actually in a community is advantageous?

Peter HARRIOTT: Yes, absolutely. I know that they cannot be everywhere and if they have got to do this regional thing and if they are going to shift and follow the river, follow the flood all the time, that that is difficult. But it was great having it here in Shepparton and being able to go up there, and as I said before, Ray and Peter did a fantastic job.

Wendy LOVELL: Yes, they certainly did, and Guy too. I was in the ICC every day. I think our ICC worked really well.

Peter HARRIOTT: Guy was critical.

Wendy LOVELL: Congratulations to everyone involved.

The CHAIR: We are going to have to move on. Ms Broad.

Gaelle BROAD: Thank you. I think there have been very interesting insights there. But I guess just with the early warnings – you talked about people being aware – you had a little bit more time perhaps than other areas we have been to, like Rochester, where they get very sudden flooding. So you have got a little bit more time. They were told incorrect information, I guess, like they were looking up maps and their area would not be flooded, whereas it was a lot higher than what was predicted. So I guess I heard, talking to locals here, that it was very sudden, the increase; it crept up on people. So did you get accurate information about the level of flooding in a timely manner?

Peter HARRIOTT: Yes, absolutely. The catchment management authority, the Met Bureau, yes. And it transferred into our existing documents. The water went where we thought it was going to go. It went to the height that we thought is going to go to, and in the ICC it was critical. Everybody was like bees to the honey pot around Guy's information and the whiteboard that he was presenting and information about levels. And it is not only about the river levels, it is about watching the flow down the river. If you go to the graphs that actually show where it is peaking in Murchison and down here in Shepparton – if it is down here, you know that it is so many days it takes to get down here. So you have got to watch those graphs as well, and that information was all there and all available and worked really well.

Gaelle BROAD: And can I ask too just, I guess, the size of the council, because you mentioned staff and you mentioned getting extra support for staff too during that period from state and federal governments. But I guess I think of other, smaller councils that have much smaller staff. But can you talk about that side of it – the staffing arrangements? Because it is a huge demand and turnover of staff. What extra support did you receive? And also if you could talk to the ADF and I guess your thoughts on their involvement in the recovery.

Peter HARRIOTT: Yes. So staff – with the likes of Aquamoves closing down, our stadium closing down, not being able to get out and cut grass and that sort of thing, basically we had staff available to put to the emergency response. But having said that, the emergency response was big and needed a lot of staff. So to put people in 24/7 at the ICC and to continue a MECC 24/7, you had to have rotation. But the relief centres were the big task, particularly having one at Tatura and one in Shepparton. That work was difficult, so we had to just keep rosters up and keep rolling and rolling, but we had great support from other councils that wanted to come in. There was a coordination through the MAV at one stage – that seemed to work reasonably well. We just had people ringing up that wanted to come. It is intense, it is long, it is tiring and it is mentally draining, but what else do you do? It is an intense environment. You have just got to keep rolling it over.

There were stages where we had people break down and say that this is too much. I should have identified that earlier; internally we should have identified that earlier. But we responded very quickly to that and made sure that staff had the right resources. You cannot underestimate how intense some of this work is, whether it is the local search and rescue out doing difficult work, backed up by us out there at night-time when some others do not want to go there – that is difficult and risky work – or you are in a relief centre where there is a mix of people that do not normally mix and it can be quite intense.

The backup from the Victorian police was absolutely superb. They came from all over the state. For long periods of time they were away from their families, and I spoke to a lot of them. The way they handled difficult people was absolutely commendable. The calmness and the respect that they gave to people in difficult times, who were acting probably not quite appropriately – they could not have done a better job.

The CHAIR: Great. Thank you. Ms Bath.

Melina BATH: Thank you, Chair. Has Greater Shepparton City Council had a formal, multi-agency debrief from Melbourne-based Emergency Management Victoria or Melbourne-based SES? Have you had a formal debrief with them post floods?

Peter HARRIOTT: Well, several. We have got our recovery committee established, and that has brought a whole range of people together to work on what the next 12 months looks like. We have met with Mariela Diaz and her team to talk about how it played out.

Melina BATH: When was that, Peter?

Peter HARRIOTT: I have not got the exact dates.

Melina BATH: Last year? This year?

Peter HARRIOTT: Both, yes. They have been up on many occasions to talk to us about how it went, lessons learned and improvements for the future, as well as just continuing to deal with the issues that are rolling out.

Melina BATH: Yes, it is interesting, because when we went to Rochester they said we were the first – we will call us Melbourne-based; we are independent parties and members of Parliament – Melbourne-based people that had come to talk to them and listen to them, so it is interesting that difference. Can I go to –

Peter HARRIOTT: Sorry, we have certainly been proactive in going to them and asking them to be here.

Melina BATH: Great. I am sure those communities have too; they have been really waiting for it. I am glad you have had those connections because it is really important to share the information that you have learned. In your submission you talk about – I want to go back to infrastructure – the McCoys Bridge in the north and the Murchison Bridge in the south. I understand during the floods that the load was minimised, so it was virtually just cars and units rather than transportation of ag and the like – milk trucks. You have mentioned that. What do

you need from government, from grants, to upgrade those connections so that post floods you have got a quicker back to normal? What do you need? What is your ask?

Peter HARRIOTT: Well, the Murch bridge is a very old bridge – you have just got to have a look at it – and it has been hit several times. It is a steel truss bridge; it has the trusses down either side and it has got the members across the top. Every now and then a low loader will be carting a backhoe or something and the hook of the backhoe will hit the top of the bridge, and you will see the dints in it. Apart from that, they were concerned about the foundations. You see the water that comes through Murchison, and you stand on that bridge when it is high level and you wonder how that thing ever survives.

Melina BATH: It is old and worn out – is that what you are saying?

Peter HARRIOTT: It is old and worn out, and the causeway here is at too low a level, so that is the issue with that. And McCoys Bridge: I think if you have a look at that too, you would wonder – that is a substandard bridge for the Murray Valley Highway.

Melina BATH: So advocacy – what have you done in relation to that?

Peter HARRIOTT: Well, we have been working on these bridges for 20 years, trying to advocate for improvements.

Melina BATH: Upgrades. Thank you. That is great. Thanks very much.

The CHAIR: Ms Tyrrell.

Rikkie-Lee TYRRELL: I cannot quite find the figures of how many houses and businesses or vital infrastructure were impacted by the floods. Do you have that there?

Peter HARRIOTT: We do, and instead of quoting figures now I will provide that information. Our assessments went to thousands – there were probably 4000 or 5000 assessments we made – and they are all impacted to varying degrees. If you are talking about water over floor level, there are probably 300 or 400 of those. So it is a mixed bag, and we have got detail in relation to that which we can provide.

Rikkie-Lee TYRRELL: Okay, thank you. Are any of the dwellings still uninhabitable or out of use?

Peter HARRIOTT: Yes.

Rikkie-Lee TYRRELL: Do you have the figures available on those as well?

Peter HARRIOTT: They would be in the hundreds.

Rikkie-Lee TYRRELL: Okay, thank you.

The CHAIR: Dr Ratnam.

Samantha RATNAM: Just to follow up on that one, would you be able to provide us with any estimates you have or data you have around how many people are living in temporary accommodation?

Peter HARRIOTT: Yes.

Samantha RATNAM: That would be excellent. Just one further question following up on what was asked before about predictions around flood levels, my understanding is that your predictions for flood levels appear to have been a bit more successful than other places, and I am interested to interrogate so that we can learn the lessons for other areas as well in terms of thinking about our recommendations. Do you have a sense of why this was? My understanding is that you updated your flood mapping recently as well. There is a question about resources to do that updating work for other areas, but do you agree with my assessment that it worked well – it was good predictability from your analysis about flood levels?

Peter HARRIOTT: Well, I will comment, but I am nervous because I know Guy Tierney is in the background.

Samantha RATNAM: Okay. I am getting you into trouble.

Peter HARRIOTT: It all starts with good gauging. If you have got the gauges down the rivers all the way from Seymour all the way through, in the Broken as well as the Seven Creeks, you have got a network of gauges that are accurate, up-to-date and all connected. That is a good starting point, and that tells you how the water is moving as well as how to understand the rainfall and where that is working, through the bureau of course and their modelling. Then it comes to the flood model that you have for your river systems in your area and how you have converted that to your maps based on all that river-gauge information – where the water is going to go to and what depth it is going to go to. In that regard I think we are very well serviced, and the Goulburn Broken Catchment Management Authority has got good systems. But it all has to be transferred into flood strategies then, and they are the ones that need to be updated on a regular basis and converted into the planning schemes so that we ensure that development going forward and currently is still facing the flood plain, not facing the river as it used to, and we can protect it so we can still live in this beautiful environment that we live in and get the benefit of all the water in the rivers flowing through and the red gum and grey box forests but we do it in a safe manner and we do not do it and incur all these additional resources when the rivers do their thing.

Samantha RATNAM: Could I ask a quick follow-up on that point related to planning, because you make some interesting comments in your submission around that – around pre-1990 and then the need for the post-1990 to really respond to these increased disaster events: have you all got the capacity to do that local planning scheme work and preparation? Obviously you have been thinking about it. What stops you at a local level from doing that planning scheme work to hopefully prevent new development in some of those riskier areas? Or is there an interaction? Because I know there are some complex planning mechanisms at play here.

Peter HARRIOTT: I think we all appreciate there is a skills shortage in the nation, in the state, particularly in regional Victoria in relation to planners. We just do not have the staff to do the work.

Samantha RATNAM: Right. Okay. That is interesting.

Peter HARRIOTT: This is critical work that just cannot be delayed because it is so important in an emergency to have all of that done. We are arguing that there should be state support to bring all these studies together – not only support but that there is consistency across the modelling and in the treatment and that these amendments are made to our planning schemes in a rapid manner and do not take the years and years and years that most planning scheme amendments take. These need to take priority.

Samantha RATNAM: So rapid, systemic and statewide – for consistency – would be your overarching recommendation. Thank you very much for that. Thank you.

The CHAIR: Ms Watt, a further question?

Sheena WATT: Thank you so very much. I just wonder about sandbagging. You mentioned it in some of the earlier questions. Do you have any system improvements or clear recommendations about the way that sandbagging should be managed, from your perspective?

Peter HARRIOTT: We do. Sandbagging sort of brought the community together, in one way.

Sheena WATT: It came out very strong in the previous hearings as well.

Peter HARRIOTT: It was 24 hours – people were there at all times of the night, the community just pitching in. It had that real benefit of bringing the community together, but it is a frenzy that I do not really want to go through and I want to minimise. We have purchased some better sandbagging equipment to allow us to do rapid sandbagging.

Sheena WATT: Okay.

Peter HARRIOTT: You put a truckload of soil into the machine and then you get all your bags underneath it, and it just goes bang, bang, bang, instead of shovels and all that sort of stuff.

Sheena WATT: You have that?

Shane SALI: Yes, we have got that. But people power – you need that still. You need the people there to put the sandbags in the boots, and you have got a lot of emotional people. When they get to that collection point for the sandbags, they are unaware of how many they need, and obviously us managing limits. It was a 24-hour operation.

Peter HARRIOTT: We are better prepared. We have got, I think, 40,000 sandbags on this side of the river and 40,000 on the other side. When we go around to the community, we do talk to them about, ‘This is one of the things that you could do yourself. They’re \$1 each. If you need 20 or 30 sandbags, perhaps get them and put them in the shed in a secure spot so that they do not deteriorate – but check on them after five years. If they need to be replaced, go and spend another dollar per sandbag and get ready so that you don’t have to make that mad dash and be on the phone saying, “How can I get another?”’

Sheena WATT: Did you have any sense of readiness beforehand?

Peter HARRIOTT: Limited readiness, very limited.

Sheena WATT: Okay. Thank you.

The CHAIR: All right. Look, I have no further questions, but I know my fellow committee members have many, many more questions for you. I am aware that our next group of witnesses has arrived, so what I would like to suggest is that if there are any more questions, committee members can put them on notice to you and then you can provide a response as well. Thank you very much for providing your evidence today. We really appreciate you coming along. Thank you very much.

Witnesses withdrew.