

TRANSCRIPT

LEGISLATIVE ASSEMBLY ENVIRONMENT AND PLANNING COMMITTEE

Inquiry into Environmental Infrastructure for Growing Populations

Melbourne—Wednesday, 31 March 2021

(via videoconference)

MEMBERS

Ms Sarah Connolly—Chair

Mr David Morris—Deputy Chair

Mr Will Fowles

Ms Danielle Green

Mr Paul Hamer

Mr Tim McCurdy

Mr Tim Smith

WITNESSES

Ms Brooke McKail, Manager, Policy and Research, and

Mr Ben Latham, Policy Advisor, Climate Equity, Victorian Council of Social Service;

Dr Jennie Mills,

Dr Ken Winkel and

Dr Manasa Saripalli, Doctors for the Environment Australia.

The CHAIR: Hi, everyone, and welcome. Thanks for taking the time to speak with us this afternoon. Just before we begin with introductions I need to say a couple of words, so if you just bear with me. I advise that the sessions today are being broadcast live on the Parliament's website and rebroadcast of the hearing is only permitted in accordance with Legislative Assembly standing order 234.

Thank you very much for joining us here at the public hearing this afternoon for the Inquiry into Environmental Infrastructure for Growing Populations. On behalf of the committee I acknowledge the traditional Aboriginal owners of this land, and we pay our respects to them, their culture, their elders past, present and future and elders from other communities who may be joining us here today. I again also extend a very warm welcome to members of the public and media who may be watching us here today. This is one of several public meetings of the Environment and Planning Committee that we will be conducting to inform ourselves about the issues relevant to the inquiry.

Before we begin I need to point out a couple of things to you all. All evidence taken today will be recorded by Hansard and is protected by parliamentary privilege. This means that you can speak freely here without fear of legal action in relation to the evidence that you give. However, it is important to remember that parliamentary privilege does not apply to comments that you make outside this hearing, even if you are just restating what you said here today at the hearing. You will receive a draft transcript of your evidence in the next week or so to check and to approve, and corrected transcripts are going to be published on the committee's website and may be quoted from in our final report.

I am sure everyone is well versed in Zoom, but can I just remind everyone to stay on mute unless you are speaking, just to minimise that interference that I think we know all too well. The best way to kick off these meetings is that committee members introduce themselves first and then I will jump over to the witnesses to introduce themselves and who they are representing today. Then I will ask the groups to do a quick 5- to no more than 10-minute presentation to the committee. Then members will ask you some questions. My name is Sarah Connolly, and I am the Chair of this committee. I am also the Member for Tarneit. Tarneit is in Melbourne's outer western suburbs and in one of the fastest growing corridors in the country. Will? It has happened again, Will. We have got Danielle Green. I think Danielle can hear us, but she is just struggling to get off mute with the device that she is on. Danielle is the Member for Yan Yean and also our wonderful Parliamentary Secretary for Sport.

Mr FOWLES: I am back. I am just going to go without the headphones and say I am Will Fowles. I am the Member for Burwood in the middle-eastern suburbs. Thanks.

The CHAIR: I am going to throw over to Brooke and Ben from VCOSS first.

Ms McKAIL: Hi. Thank you so much for having us today. I am Brooke McKail. I am the Manager of Policy and Research at the Victorian Council of Social Service.

Mr LATHAM: Ben here. I research climate equity at the Victorian Council of Social Service.

The CHAIR: Fantastic. We have also got with us the Doctors for the Environment. Ken, do you want to start?

Dr WINKEL: Yes. Hello. Ken Winkel from the Doctors for the Environment. I sit on the state committee and the special interest group for biodiversity. In my day job I work at the University of Melbourne School of Population and Global Health.

The CHAIR: Manasa?

Dr SARIPALLI: Hi, I am Manasa. I am also one of the members of Doctors for the Environment. I am one of the junior doctor members on the committee, and as my day job I work at St Vincent's Hospital.

The CHAIR: Great. Jennie?

Dr MILLS: My name is Jennie Mills, and I am on the Victorian committee of Doctors for the Environment. I am a retired GP who has had a background in community health, amongst other things.

The CHAIR: Fantastic. Does the team from VCOSS want to start with a presentation? If you have a PowerPoint slide, feel free to share. If you do not, do not stress; many people do not. We would be happy just to hear your thoughts about your submission and maybe a bit of a summary and anything else you would like to add.

Ms McKAIL: Thank you. We do not have a presentation, but we do have a few remarks and we will kick off with that. Again, thank you so much for having us here today. I would like to acknowledge that I am joining today's hearing from the sovereign and unceded lands of the Wurundjeri people of the Kulin nation.

I am sure the committee has already heard of the many benefits that green space can provide local communities with things like exercise, connecting with nature, social inclusion and meeting up with friends and family. We know these things were particularly precious for all of us during the COVID-19 lockdowns and made a huge difference to community health and wellbeing. We also know that trees improve air quality by filtering out pollutants, which is becoming more important as congestion grows and density increases. But I think the main reason for VCOSS's participation in this inquiry today is to stress that there are Victorians who are missing out. 135 000 Melbourne households have little or no access to parks within 5 kilometres of their home, and it is low-income families who fare the worst.

Low-income households are less likely to live near green space, and when they do unfortunately their local park is more likely to be run down and poorly maintained. In general it is the established I guess leafier suburbs with more private green space that are more affluent and therefore are often unaffordable for struggling families. In effect what that means is that how much you earn determines and contributes to how fresh the air you breathe is; it influences whether you have a local playground to take your kids, a nearby park to kick a footy in or an accessible space to meet with family or escape the heat. VCOSS is strongly of the opinion that equity and socio-economic disadvantage should be a major factor in decisions about new and upgraded green space. Low-income suburbs and those with already poor access to parks should be at the top of the list. Growth areas on Melbourne's fringe, like Werribee, are areas of particularly high need. Communities where density is high and people are less likely to have their own private backyards and green spaces—for example, around public housing towers—are also significant priorities for us.

The impact of extreme heat needs to be considered, especially as our summers get hotter and heatwaves more common. Low-income households in Melbourne are more likely to live in urban hotspots where temperatures can soar. Basically this is the result of a lot of concrete and asphalt but not much green space, and that contributes to what is known as the urban heat island effect. Local government areas like Brimbank, Melton and Casey on the outskirts of Melbourne are some of the worst affected by the urban heat island effect. Also, according to VCOSS's 2019 poverty mapping and spatial analysis, those local government areas have among the highest rates of poverty in the state, so there is a clear correlation there. These LGAs are about 7 degrees hotter than the coolest LGA, which is down on the Mornington Peninsula. What this means is that the risk of extreme heat is borne heaviest by people who cannot afford air conditioning or to modify their homes or do not have the big leafy backyards where they might be able to escape that heat. But there are some simple solutions around environmental infrastructure that tackle this urban heat effect. Trees provide shade and cooling and can give families and vulnerable people in our hotter suburbs some much-needed respite. Green space creates cooler, safer and livable environments, and an added benefit—households will even save money on their energy bills.

Tree cover is consistently dropping across Victoria and we urgently need to reverse this trend. We need to focus on the areas where heat hits hardest and where people are most vulnerable to heat. Heat vulnerability has been measured across Melbourne and is one way to prioritise the location of future green space and urban tree cover. We also recommend planting trees along thoroughfares and streetscapes for pedestrians and cyclists to create

shaded cool routes. People who do not own a car or have to walk, cycle or catch public transport during heatwaves can limit their exposure to extreme heat through cool routes.

It is not just about where the green space is; it is also important to think about how it is designed and what it is used for. At VCOSS we advocate that parks should be free and accessible to everyone. They need to be safe and inclusive for children. We know the benefits of playgrounds and outdoor spaces for children's development and social connection and for older people and people with disability, and I know you would have heard that earlier today with the National Ageing Research Institute appearing. Women and gender-diverse people in particular, we know, will not use public space if it does not feel safe for them, if it is not well lit; and for large families space to hold family gatherings and celebrate events would be just as important as, I guess, the sporting ovals or facilities that we sometimes think about when we think about community facilities. Well-designed public space can foster greater inclusion and enhance social cohesion. Communities themselves should be empowered and resourced to plan and enhance local spaces. They know best what their community needs. They are also the people that care the most about their community spaces—about maintaining them and enhancing them and building them appropriately for local need; because they are the people that use them, they are the ones that care the most.

I would also like to add that community gardens are a wonderful addition to public green space. There are community gardens being run by community organisations, including VCOSS members, all over the state. They depend on funding and access to land, which is not always easy to secure. There are some really fantastic examples, including of community gardens established around public housing properties that are not only improving access to nutritious and affordable food for those families and households but also teaching people about growing their own produce, improving food literacy and encouraging residents to come together and socialise.

So to wrap up, it is fantastic that the Victorian government is committed to more parkland and green space, and there are great programs out there like the pocket parks program, but we again call for a focus on equity in decision-making around these programs and planning. Green space should be made available to those who need it most, and that means prioritising the communities with the least access and the suburbs that are the hottest. Thank you for your time, and I look forward to answering any questions that you might have.

The CHAIR: Thanks, Brooke. I think we would all agree, having looked at both submissions from everyone here today, there are a lot of similarities in some of the things that you have brought forward and you have discussed which I think are extremely important, so I agree this inquiry is really important and could not come soon enough. Hopefully the recommendations that come out of it will help address some of these issues. I am going to throw over to a presenter from Doctors for the Environment Australia. Who has got that lucky job?

Dr MILLS: That is essentially me, to start off with at least, so thank you very much. It is very nice to be included in this impressive line-up of people who are discussing these matters with the committee, and Doctors for the Environment is very grateful for the opportunity. We are a volunteer organisation of medical doctors drawn from all quarters of medical practice and from all specialties, and you have got a bit of a feeling for that in who is on the call today. Doctors for the Environment endorses the World Health Organization position that health should be an important consideration in all public policies. We are probably going to go over many of the issues that have already been raised, but we want to emphasise them once again from a health perspective, and because we are DEA, also bring in the environmental and sustainable components of that as well.

There are many synergies in this area where one could say that health is involved. The inquiry is likely to, we hope, assist with biodiversity, deliver economic benefits and contribute as it does to improving mental and physical wellbeing, and one hopes if active transport is able to be promoted more successfully, that might reduce vehicle use and thereby also reduce greenhouse gas emissions. I am not going to really develop too many thoughts in this small time because most of the areas that we wish to cover have already been alluded to, but we did want to talk about the equity issues as well, briefly about heat stress and slightly about the importance of giving walking a higher status and priority for funding.

In terms of equity, the issue that we would like to emphasise would be the way in which there is a gradient of health and illness across the socio-economic gradient. The Australian Institute of Health and Welfare showed in 2016 that diabetes was 2.6 times more prevalent amongst the lowest socio-economic groups compared with the highest, and that primary heart disease and stroke were 2.2 times higher for the lowest groups. Many other

things come in and have a similar pattern, so it is important to realise that economic disadvantage plays an important role in terms of where people start in terms of their health states.

Of course it is not only socio-economic status that we are concerned about, disability and cultural diversity are also impediments to improving health and wellbeing. If we are talking about the opportunity though for exercise, which is what we are most interested in, in a sense, in terms of environmental infrastructure, we would have to say that awareness of how important exercise is for health is actually quite low. The Heart Foundation did a study asking people about their attitudes to exercise, and 75 per cent of them did not realise that exercise played an important role in improving their prognosis for heart disease. It is not only heart disease that exercise can help with. There is very good evidence to show that you get better control if you are someone with non-insulin-dependent diabetes. There is good evidence to show that dementia is improved. In terms of cancer, in some instances prognosis is improved, fatigue is improved and you get reduced adverse side effects in many instances, so exercise has a lot to offer in terms of health and wellbeing. But awareness of the importance of it does need to be improved.

The reasons for people participating in exercise or being reluctant to participate in exercise are really very complex, I would venture to state. Often the social norms do not encourage it, it may be affordability, and of course access to green open spaces and facilities is also important. The *Active Victoria* report in 2017 found that 60 per cent of Victorians were not meeting the current Australian recommendation to have 2½ to 5 hours of moderate exercise in a week. That is even worse for children and only slightly better for older people, so there is a lot to consider where exercise is concerned and health and wellbeing.

The facilities that are available are very important in that respect. I think that consultation can play a very important role in trying to sort out some of that. When I was preparing the submission for Doctors for the Environment, I did not read comprehensively across the municipal meeting minutes or through the reports, but I was impressed by the range of them, I have to say. One of the municipalities that I did look into was the City of Greater Dandenong, and what struck me about that was that it is very low on the socio-economic scale—down the bottom in fact. It has a high incidence of cultural diversity and a high incidence of people with a disability, and they have a very low proportion of green open space, but what was striking by contrast as well was that that they are making strenuous efforts to consult. They have had several consultations. They were about to launch into quite extensive consultation last year when the COVID lockdown hit. They were going to do that face to face, but they did it more remotely. But even now they have another consultation going. I do believe that consultation is one way to help people engage and also to help sort out some of these attitudes that act as an impediment to where environmental infrastructure can be improved and why people do not use it or are reluctant to use it.

Moving on a little bit, I did want to say a little bit about heat stress, but Brooke has already talked about it. We, as doctors for the environment, want to endorse as well that it is one way in which some of the effects of climate change can be mitigated. We are only too well aware that heat-related illness has a significant morbidity and mortality, but it is usually dubbed the silent killer and the threat is underestimated. If we look back to COVID, I think it was fortunate, in a way, that the COVID lockdowns occurred during the cooler months. I shudder to think, really, what might have happened if they had happened over the summer, the previous summer, when the temperatures were extremely high.

We very much endorse the idea that greening in all capacities, and in particular extending and preserving the tree canopy, is incredibly important. I am very impressed that there is quite a lot of data available in that respect, which I had not been aware of before I started looking into this matter. The fact that there is a lot of extensive urban heat island mapping and that the RMIT Centre for Urban Research has developed the heat vulnerability index, which is a combination of poor health, economic disadvantage and access to green space—they have got a kind of combined assessment of those factors and they apply it across the local government areas. I do not know that there is a great deal more I want to add about that at this stage. One of the things that I think I rather liked was the comment from the Australian Heart Foundation, which was about place-making. I think that place-making and the aesthetic component of what greening and trees can do—the comment was that it changes a route from a place to a destination—are important for encouraging people to get out and be more active in their environment.

Moving on, then, to talk about active exercise, in Victoria the studies would say that walking is by far the most popular non-organised physical activity—that 51 per cent of people, when asked about their daily activities, say they walk, 14 per cent say they jog or run and 12 per cent say they cycle. As doctors, we know that incidental

walking is an important strategy for maintaining good health, and we try to encourage it. But, on the other hand, walking is not measured by the Victorian institute survey that looks at transport. Walking is neglected. It has a low status. It is kind of considered routine and it tends to be a little bit neglected in terms of funding. It is given a low priority and it tends to fall through the cracks, I think, a little bit, so there may be some merit in asking whether or not it could have dedicated funding or a governance component from that point of view.

Just to sum up in terms of the things that struck me when I was looking at some of the data for this submission: I was very impressed by the wealth of expertise that is available for councils and other groups if they want to use it. There has been an immense amount of research done. There are some very skilled people on the case, I think, and some municipalities in particular—I mean, I do not really want to single out municipalities, but they are important in terms of getting local communities more active and more involved—have definitely taken up the opportunity to use the skills that are available. For example, I was particularly impressed by the Greening of the West project. There are 23 groups collaborating there. Several municipalities are working with each other. They are involving the community, industry groups, the universities, Parks Victoria, VicRoads. They have involved Indigenous groups. I mean, I do not know how well that collaborative management is going, but I do think that range of expertise and input has a great deal of merit.

Building awareness of the health benefits of exercise for physical health and mental wellbeing is a shared task, I think: public health campaigns, doctors during their consultations, schools, urban planners, councils and many other people too. It is a shared task and community consultation, as I mentioned before, I think is important to help foster engagement by individuals and help build a sense of community.

I just wanted to finish by saying or reminding everyone that Melbourne in the past has been the world's most livable city and it is still vying for this accolade—I think we are not quite there at this point—and I think it is very impressive that the government is undertaking this inquiry with a view to the future. We doctors are very strong about prevention, the role of prevention, and the idea of taking proactive steps is one that we very much endorse. So thank you very much.

The CHAIR: Thanks, Jennie. They were two great presentations. I am going to jump to the first question. I think it is really something most people will want to talk about. I am really passionate about tree canopy and urban shade and I know, Doctors for the Environment and VCOSS, you have talked about the urban heat island effect. It is certainly something that can be seen out in Tarneit and Truganina. I am keen to sort of just really explore what is the crux—what does state government need to do to address this issue. I want you to hit us with your recommendations. I want to get them on record—start listing them off.

Ms McKAIL: I am happy to kick off, if you like, and I will throw to Ben in a moment. Look, I think for us there is a range of things around tackling the urban environment. One of the things that we were talking about earlier was that this thinking about environmental infrastructure is broader than just parks, but also thinking about the streetscapes and car parks and how we can plant trees and build the tree canopy in the other spaces around our buildings. I think that is something that is important to us.

Ben, did you want to talk about the Shadeways project? I think that is one that we have talked about before.

Mr LATHAM: Yes, sure. Shadeways is a really interesting app that RMIT was developing, I think, basically looking at using tree canopy cover to shade thoroughfares to public transport just to stop people from being exposed to heat when they are walking and cycling and things like that. So basically this app integrates with Google Maps to find shaded routes to different places.

What else I think about is how tree canopy each year seems to keep decreasing across almost all local government areas. I am not sure about the specifics of planning, but if there could somehow be targets to reverse that trend, and requirements, state government and local councils could set themselves targets to increase that tree canopy. I think we have all walked through suburbs and streets where there will just be no trees on the verge or anything like that, so I think setting targets and providing that funding to just start getting planting would be really useful on streets to shade households, but also looking at schools, car parks and all of those really hot urban areas as well.

The CHAIR: Do not be shy—Jennie? Ken?

Dr MILLS: I am uncertain as to the role of the developer contribution and the way in which the Victorian government can influence what happens at that level and the way in which private green space can be

influenced. I mean, some councils have the Gardens for Wildlife program. I think education somehow comes into it.

The CHAIR: What do you think about—taking, Brooke, your point, about low-income, poor areas—when we are planning understanding that the new sort of greenfield sites and the developments are probably likely to flow on to be that where there are the fringes, say, you talked about Werribee, but early on in the planning process putting things in place so that we are thinking about already an area that lacks tree coverage, to put it simply, but is also low socio-economic? We have just spoken to the Heart Foundation—bad statistics. Do you think that very early on in the planning process these are the sorts of things that should be identified and planned, I guess, for the many, many thousands of families that are going to move there that will end up with what it is now?

Ms McKAIL: Yes, absolutely. I think it needs to be a priority in planning from the early stages. I think, too often—and I am not a planning expert—when we talk planning we are talking about buildings, we are talking about, I think they call it, grey infrastructure, but actually green infrastructure, environmental infrastructure, needs to be just as important a consideration in that early planning and in particular, as you said, in those new suburbs and the areas where we are going to see high population growth and in the areas where we are kind of infilling and increasing density, which we all recognise in a growing city is something that needs to happen, but we need to be really thoughtful in building these requirements into planning.

I think the other thing for us—and, Ben, you talked about targets—and something that is always a bit of a concern for me is if that target is around, for example, a need for a particular amount of green space per person, that is not going to be equal across the city, I guess. So in areas where people have less access to their own private green space or if they are living in high-density housing, then their need for green space is going to be different to the needs of someone who has their own private backyard or lives in a leafier suburb where there is that established kind of tree canopy. So the targets that we put in place need to be adaptable to the needs of different communities and reflect the diversity of the communities across Victoria.

Mr LATHAM: Yes, I think you are right in thinking about these new suburbs. I think we do not just want to build housing out there but we want to create really strong communities, and part of that is making sure that there is access to parks just to build that sort of social infrastructure around these new housing developments too. I think too Jennie might have mentioned Greening the West, which is a really great program out in the western suburbs of Melbourne. I think that they have set themselves a target of making sure that every household has access to a nearby park within a certain distance.

I am not sure exactly what that is, but when we are thinking about planning and certain requirements and targets I think that could be another thing to consider as well—not green space across the whole area but making sure that every single household actually has one within walking distance. I think those requirements would go a really long way to making sure that people have access to green space and parks.

Ms McKAIL: Just maybe one final thing from me—and I am probably going to throw to Ben again. We were talking earlier; I know that Penrith has had some success in actually reducing the urban heat island effect quite significantly through concentrated action—and a couple of degrees is something that is quite meaningful change.

Mr LATHAM: Yes. It is kind of interesting as a case study, western Sydney, where I think last summer there were some suburbs that might have hit about 50 degrees during heatwaves. But yes, they have just been planting as many trees as possible; I think there might have been a target for 1 million trees across western Sydney or the entire city. But I think some sort of ambitious plan like that would be fantastic, and it does not even have to be trees. I think there were also some car parks that were building walls next to them with greenery and vegetation just to cool down those really hot areas of concrete. So yes, trees are important, and parks, but I think there are also some other innovative ways to cool down these really hot suburbs.

Dr WINKEL: Can I make a couple of comments? I was keen for the committee to look broadly I guess and connect the dots. So with *Biodiversity 2037*, the April 2017 memorandum of understanding on nature and health and people between the health department and the environment department really aimed or aspired to have a whole-of-government approach to connecting nature and health, and that really should be the number one overarching principle by which all development activity is measured. Whether it be from small, local possibilities through to larger state government infrastructure, we need to think about how this investment or

this proposal addresses nature and health, improving nature and thereby improving health. It gets back to the Indigenous ethos of 'Healthy country, healthy people'. If you do not use this yardstick and you use a financial or narrow economic yardstick, then you are undermining that principle which the government has articulated across its plans and which is really going beyond the social determinants of health to the fundamental ecological determinants of health, which underpin all of our society and all of our infrastructure.

Therefore I would also ask the committee to think more broadly in terms of our environmental infrastructure, including clean air, clean water and our forests that feed into the water supply of Melbourne. We cannot have health in Melbourne unless we have got healthy forests in the Yarra Ranges. We want to remove that insanity of old-growth logging, because the great mountain ash trees are some of the world's greatest carbon sequesterers. You cannot have healthy people without having healthy forests, and of course the government has aspired to reduce the CO₂ output.

So you need to bring together these things and also think about, in terms of green canopy, green infrastructure from the smallest possible scale, streetscape scale—promoting reduction in bitumen and concrete, increasing green on the footpath and increasing or facilitating access particularly in low socio-economic areas for greening of their very, very local environment to empower and to give agency to those communities to build green exposure spaces on the very smallest level—which can transform the feeling and also the temperature gradient on streetscape-level approaches, as opposed to thinking across municipalities and purely the tree cover. Green cover can go from, as Ben was saying, innovative growth on walls and promoting plant boxes on the street level to the larger scale, cross-municipality aspiration for tree planting.

And of course as part of that, I would again make the connection to the biodiversity plan of emphasising that green infrastructure should be emphasising indigenous species, resilient for the future, as opposed to rapidly growing, convenient but non-indigenous species that may not have a very long life span. Those long life span trees provide biodiversity and support for our flora and fauna generally. So I encourage the committee to think broadly about what it is that environmental infrastructure really represents. Thank you.

The CHAIR: Thanks, Ken. I am going to throw to Will.

Mr FOWLES: Thanks, Sarah. A couple of things. Thank you both for your submissions. I think it is probably a reasonable synopsis to say that we are in a high degree of furious agreement as between VCOSS and Doctors for the Environment and probably this committee. You have raised a number of matters that I think are important, but I wanted to explore two in particular. The first was in relation to community gardens, which is more a VCOSS thing. Do we know much about the positive equity impact community gardens have made, and are there things that the state government, as opposed to local council, can be doing to encourage the creation of new community gardens or encourage their uptake or usage?

Ms McKAIL: Yes, sure. I will kick off and then hand to Ben. I think in terms of the benefits of community gardens there are lots of things we know anecdotally and from our members in terms of community cohesion, in terms of, you know, people being outside, in terms of that sort of broader question of food security, so not just providing that kind of immediate need for someone who might be in financial crisis but also building people's knowledge about food, about nutritious food, about food growing. There are lots of benefits there, but I suspect there is some research that we can pull out and provide to you after this hearing that would be useful, so we can certainly take some of that on notice.

Mr FOWLES: Yes, please.

Ms McKAIL: In terms of what the state government can do, I guess the thing that comes to immediate mind for us is the vital role that organisations like neighbourhood houses play and community hubs play in bringing people together to identify these needs to maintain gardens. I think they are organisations that are always struggling, they are organisations that have limited capacity—groups like neighbourhood houses. So I think there is a recognition and a role that the state government can play in strengthening those really local small community-based organisations that lead and foster this work, that have their connections to their community. They are often based near public housing towers or they are based in low-income communities, so they really have that reach to be able to enable these kinds of projects that have the great outcomes.

Ben, was there anything that you wanted to add around community gardens?

Mr LATHAM: Yes. Like you, I do not think I have come across any quantitative data yet on community gardens, but I think we can definitely have a look into that. What comes to mind are some of the examples that our members have given us. I think in Dandenong there is a community garden run by the Southern Migrant and Refugee Centre. They have got a program for older people from culturally diverse backgrounds to use the community garden, and that is home to the cooking program, where people will cook dishes that are significant to their home country and share that with the community and talk about their culture. I think it is a wonderful way to share experiences about culture, but then there is also obviously that access to fresh and nutritious food and then also the mental health benefits of connecting with community and the therapeutic benefits as well as gardening and being connected to nature.

In terms of what that the state government can do, I think I would probably echo what Brooke is saying: a lot of these community gardens are run by organisations, so if they could just have extra funding to be able to actually resource these programs. That could be physical things like actually providing seeds and building materials and things like that to construct the gardens with volunteers, or even just to have staff members to run education classes. Often a real benefit of these gardens is that if you link them in with educational programs, people can then go back to their own backyards and then plant and grow their own food as well. In terms of planning too, perhaps there could be requirements for new green space to have areas for community gardens, but again, I am not sure about the state government's role in terms of that.

Dr MILLS: Can I just ask a question as to whether there is any role in terms of schools being involved—you know, school gardening projects—and whether that is part of the remit of the government, or is it a bit remote?

Mr FOWLES: No. That is absolutely something we could consider. I do not know to what extent the department of education directly encourages garden programs in schools. I know there are a couple of specific garden programs, one of which was a branded exercise, I think Stephanie Alexander—yes, right, everyone is nodding; good, I got that right—so there has certainly been some stuff in that space. But yes, we could make some recommendations about expanding that. I do not know how readily accessible that is going to be to people who are not members of the school community, but I think, broadly speaking, community gardens are a good thing and ought to be encouraged as much as possible.

Dr MILLS: I am not sure how relevant this is, but I grew up in Coburg in a period of time when people had front yards and back gardens and so on, and they did not go in for trees—and it is still the case. Whenever I go back there I am still very struck by how few trees there are. I live in a very leafy suburb, and the contrast is quite striking. I just feel that many kids do not grow up with their hands in the soil or watching someone grow something, and so—

Mr FOWLES: Yes. So the equity and greenness correlation point has been well made I think in both of your submissions in terms of that connection to one's food. I think you raise a very good point, Jennie, and I am sure we will have some things to say about that in our final report. But if I can use the phrase that a farmer mate of mine used, he said, 'You all know your accountant, you know who your doctor is and you know who your dentist is, but hands up here if you know who your farmer is', and you are using them each and every day. It is something I think that, broadly speaking, people have become a lot more aware about food supply chains, what they are eating, where it comes from, whether it is subject to synthetic insecticides and herbicides and the like, and that is all good, but I agree that there is almost certainly an inequity correlation on that matter as well. When it comes to the CERES of the world—that is, C-E-R-E-S—and like organisations, I think, whilst they have a focus on providing within their own communities, I suspect there are many at the lower end of the socio-economic spectrum who simply cannot afford to access food that is more local, more nutritious, organically grown and the like. Brooke.

Ms McKAIL: Just to add something very brief to what you just said, I just wanted to flag that the Victorian government during COVID set up a food relief task force that is just getting off the ground and that was really looking at that kind of crisis response to food. VCOSS is a part of that task force and is really enthusiastic about it taking on a broader role in terms of food security and long-term strategic thinking around food security. I think there is potentially a mechanism there as well for government thinking about these kinds of issues around exactly the ones that you were just talking about there.

Mr FOWLES: Yes. Sorry, we sort of got sidetracked in the food discussion, which is a very good and important discussion. In a nice bit of circular stuff from today, Doctors for the Environment quote Professor

Billie Giles-Corti in their submission. Professor Giles-Corti actually received an award from the town and country planners—their annual award—who were submitters earlier in the day. I wanted to flag two things. One, I wonder whether the secretariat might reach out to Professor Giles-Corti, because I think she has a lot to say on some of these topics. She, I think, draws a correlation between mental health, socio-economic disadvantage and open space. Can you expand on how that looks at the coalface for medical practitioners? Can you point to anything in terms of presentations—I am certainly asking for qual, not quant here—or what people say about the importance of green space, particularly if they are from those more disadvantaged socio-economic groups?

Dr MILLS: Ken, I do not know if you want to—I am not quite sure. Well, I mean there is a bit of a fashion at the moment for actually making green prescriptions to try and encourage people to make that link for themselves. And there is quite a lot of—

Mr FOWLES: Sorry, can you explain that for us—a green prescription? Is this where you prescribe your patient to go for a walk?

Dr MILLS: Yes.

Mr FOWLES: Right.

Dr MILLS: That is it. There is even quite a lot of evidence that just exposure to greenery—some hospital studies show patients recovering better, having a better outcome, a better prognosis, if they have a green outlook. It does not even have to be that active component; even if it is passive, it can have a beneficial effect. So that is quite impressive in its own way. But of course in this setting we are talking about the physical benefits as well that accompany exercise in green space. There is a wealth of documentation about that, Will, actually. I am not quite sure if I have missed some link—

Mr FOWLES: No, no. I was just interested—and I apologise; it may have been in your submission, but I cannot recall what your areas of speciality are—to the extent that any of you are general practitioners or are involved in the mental health and space, can you perhaps share with us your sense of how important green space is for the mental health and wellbeing of your patients?

Dr MILLS: No. I am retired at this stage, so I would not like to speak too authoritatively about that.

Dr WINKEL: If I can get back in, certainly I had a little to do with the Department of Environment, Land, Water and Planning's work on healthy parks, healthy people. I know there were a number of literature reviews undertaken there examining this very question—what is the data concerning whole-of-life health benefits of nature?—so certainly I can send you some reference material on that. But I really want to jump in, following up on what Ben said and following up on what you have said there, Will and Jennie, about the opportunity you have to really put forward and resource a program in nature prescriptions. There is an emergent wave around social prescriptions in medicine, seeing that non-pharmacological approaches can be really powerful, and they can be across all kinds of diseases for health and promoting resilience. Certainly we saw the health benefits of exposure to nature during the COVID lockdown. Kind of a SaniKey to sanity was going for walks, gardening and having some engagement with nature. The program idea, which had been quite supported by the department of the environment under the healthy parks, healthy people program, of nature prescription has not been operationalised anywhere. I know in Scotland and the UK there has been quite a push to operationalise the idea of a nature prescription. And I would broaden beyond what you just talked with Jenny about—a nature prescription can be very diverse, from activities as a group or by yourself in the garden, all the way to so-called forest bathing. And so we know—

Mr FOWLES: Forest bathing, did you say?

Dr WINKEL: That is right. So that has originated in Japan, where they have a great relationship with nature. And there has been a lot of work quantifying the health benefits, mental and immunological, of exposure to natural spaces. You can go for meditative experiences and guided walks through to active exercise programs or horticultural therapy in natural spaces. Recently work has been done to suggest 2 hours a week really starts to give you significant overall health benefits that span the mental to the physical—that is, restoration, coming back from some stressful situation, and the idea of instauration, the idea of strengthening health and wellbeing, strengthening physical activity. So a lot has gone on here. I urge you to look at codifying, formalising and resourcing a program in nature prescriptions so that doctors like Jennie in general practice can

actually give a specific precision prescription that is individualised to this patient, knowing that in the national parks, in the parks, there are resources that fit—provide horticultural therapy, gardening therapy and different programs—which address that gradient of 2 hours nature exposure per week for health and wellbeing benefits.

Mr FOWLES: Well, you have certainly hit in talking about mental and immunological matters. They are probably the two most publicly considered parts of medicine at the minute, so I am sure we will be able to draw on some of that for our report. Manasa, did you have anything to add on those matters?

Dr SARIPALLI: Hi, Will. I am not currently working in general practice myself, but working on the submission I read some very similar things written by these doctors about the benefits of just having exposure to green spaces, whether that be just knowing that they exist and knowing that you have access to them—that knowledge in itself was actually beneficial as well. I guess the question here is about access, so if you are wanting to promote participation in activities that promote good health, such as exercise, you need to provide environments where people want to be and want to actually engage in these activities. That is I guess what we are trying to create—an environment that really fosters good habits and really promotes them as well. There is plenty of evidence to show at the moment in papers nationally, as Ken has talked about, but there have also been local case studies by separate universities looking at the degree of participation and its relation directly to green spaces and then by extension the impact that that has on mental health and physical health, and as we both know those are interrelated so it is hard to sort of separate them out in themselves.

Mr FOWLES: Sure. I am conscious that I have had a lot of your time. Thank you all. Thank you, Sarah.

Dr WINKEL: I might just jump in with one last comment. I think some of that work was Jonathon Kingsley at Deakin University, and now at Swinburne, on the role of gardens in building resilience particularly for marginalised communities. But I would also urge the committee to think about the massive expenditure every year by the health department on infrastructure, so there is an opportunity here to meld things where we have new hospitals that are built for generations and what principles of strengthening environmental infrastructure are incorporated into hospital and health clinic design. The whole idea of biophilic public health is emerging, and I urge the committee to be incorporating or recommending incorporating into standards for new hospitals and new health facilities elements of biophilic design that bring the power of nature inside so that patients and staff can reduce stress and build resilience to promote health.

Mr FOWLES: Sorry, Ken, I will just play the dummy again—I will pretend that this is for Hansard's benefit—but 'biophilic'?

Dr WINKEL: It is the idea of love of nature, which is—

Mr FOWLES: Love of nature; so that is b-i-o-p-h-i-l-i-c?

Dr WINKEL: Yes. So this was an idea that was articulated particularly by the entomologist EO Wilson which reflected an intrinsic affinity or desire to be in and around nature and animals and plants by humans. Particularly in New Zealand they have been starting to operationalise in public health the idea of that affinity for nature, the health benefits of nature, and to bring it into the mainstream of public health, including hospital and clinic design that actively says we need exposure to sunshine, natural rhythms, sounds of nature, sights of nature for speeding healing and stress reduction, as much for staff in health facilities and environments like that as for the patients themselves.

Mr FOWLES: I think we could all reflect on times we have been in hospitals with those white walls and fluorescent lighting and kind of felt the healing power drain out of us, even as we have paced the corridors.

Dr WINKEL: I can send you a review paper out of New Zealand on biophilic public health.

Mr FOWLES: Awesome. Thank you. Thanks, Chair.

The CHAIR: Thanks, Will. We have just had Paul Hamer join us. Paul is the wonderful Member for Box Hill. Paul, were there any questions of the group based on their submissions that you might want to raise? I know you have missed some of the conversation, but if we have already talked about it and got it on record, we will let you know.

Mr HAMER: Thanks, Sarah. Sorry I could not join you for most of the conversation. Based on your submissions and the members who are present, I am sure it was a very detailed discussion. No, I do not have any questions.

The CHAIR: I do not have any other questions of the group. I think it has been a great discussion. You have certainly touched on many things I feel quite strongly about that have formed part of many conversations that we have been having over the past couple of weeks. Are there any sorts of closing remarks that you would like to make to the committee, anything that you think we have missed? Silence. Forever hold your peace.

Dr WINKEL: I guess I would just reiterate the big-picture perspective: we are all dependent on the ecosystem services of nature. That is in many ways ignored when we plug into the silicone and we shut the doors and we disconnect from nature. So if the committee could think broadly about the possibilities, as we have kind of mentioned, like resourcing prescriptions for health, incorporating standards into hospitals and giving biophilic design a real meaning and forward-looking investment, as well as thinking about the surrounding clean air, clean water, dependent on our forests, on the Yarra River, to benefit generations to come. Thank you.

The CHAIR: Thanks, Ken.

Committee adjourned.