

TRANSCRIPT

LEGISLATIVE COUNCIL ENVIRONMENT AND PLANNING COMMITTEE

Inquiry into Climate Resilience

Aireys Inlet – Wednesday 23 October 2024

MEMBERS

Ryan Batchelor – Chair

David Ettershank – Deputy Chair

Melina Bath

Gaelle Broad

Jacinta Ermacora

Wendy Lovell

Sarah Mansfield

Rikkie-Lee Tyrrell

Sheena Watt

PARTICIPATING MEMBERS

John Berger

Ann-Marie Hermans

Evan Mulholland

Rachel Payne

Richard Welch

WITNESSES

Martin Gill, Chief Executive Officer, Borough of Queenscliffe;

Pete Mercouriou, Senior Sustainability Officer, Greater Geelong City Council;

Robyn Seymour, Chief Executive Officer, and

Chris Pike, General Manager, Placemaking and Environment, Surf Coast Shire Council; and

Sue Phillips, Executive Officer, Barwon South West Climate Alliance.

The CHAIR: I declare open the Legislative Council Environment and Planning Committee's public hearing here in Aireys Inlet into climate resilience in Victoria. The Environment and Planning Committee is an all-party committee of the Legislative Council of the Victorian Parliament looking into climate resilience in Victoria and will be providing a report to the Parliament, which will include recommendations to the government.

Could everyone please ensure their mobile phones are switched to appropriately silent functions and just to minimise background noise – there is a bit of echo in here and the microphones will pick all of that up.

I begin by acknowledging the traditional owners of the land we are meeting on here today and pay my respects to elders past and present and acknowledge any Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people joining these proceedings.

Welcome to anyone who is in the public gallery or who is joining us online. And – more of an issue for those in the public gallery than online – could all members of the public watching please be respectful of proceedings and remain silent at all times.

For our witnesses, all the evidence that we take is protected by parliamentary privilege as provided by the *Constitution Act 1975* and the provisions of the Legislative Council standing orders. Therefore the information that 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 the Parliament.

As you can tell, all evidence is being recorded. You will be provided with a proof version of the transcript following the hearing. These transcripts will ultimately be made public and posted on the committee's website.

My name is Ryan Batchelor. I am the Chair of the Environment and Planning Committee and Member for the Southern Metropolitan Region in the Legislative Council. I might ask my fellow committee members to introduce themselves. I might start with the Deputy Chair.

David ETTERS HANK: Hi. I am David Ettershank. I am the Deputy Chair of the committee, and I represent the Western Metropolitan Region of Melbourne.

Sarah MANSFIELD: I am Sarah Mansfield, Member for Western Victoria. This is in my electorate, so it is very nice to be here.

John BERGER: John Berger, Member for Southern Metro.

Gaëlle BROAD: Hi. I'm Gaëlle Broad. I am the Member for Northern Victoria.

The CHAIR: And online we have –

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

The CHAIR: Thanks for joining us, representatives of some local governments in the area. What I might ask you to do for the Hansard record is if you each individually state your name and the organisation you are here on behalf of, and then we will invite you to make some opening statements. We might start at this end of the table and work our way down.

Chris PIKE: Thank you, Chair. Chris Pike from the Surf Coast Shire Council.

Robyn SEYMOUR: I am Robyn Seymour from the Surf Coast Shire Council as well.

Sue PHILLIPS: I am Sue Phillips from the Barwon South West Climate Alliance.

Pete MERCOURIOU: Pete Mercouriou from the City of Greater Geelong.

Martin GILL: And I am Martin Gill from the Borough of Queenscliff.

The CHAIR: Wonderful. We will give each of you about 5 minutes to make an opening statement into the organisations and then we will go on to questions. I do not know who wants to start. I do not know if you have decided who is going to go first.

Martin GILL: We just met each other this morning.

The CHAIR: I find that very hard to believe.

Robyn SEYMOUR: Thank you very much, Chair. Welcome to Aireys Inlet. We are really happy to host you in the Surf Coast shire. I would like to also begin by acknowledging the traditional owners of the lands on which we are meeting today, the Wathaurong people, and pay my respects to elders past, present and emerging and thank them for their incredible care for this amazing place that we are meeting on today.

Chris and I are keen to give you a bit of an overview and tell you a bit of a story about Surf Coast shire. Climate impacts on the Surf Coast are quite significant. We have had a climate emergency corporate response plan since 2021, which was really a community-led initiative. This is something that is very important to our community, and looking at how we build resilience and respond to our climate challenges is something that is very important to us as an organisation and also our community. This is a really great inquiry with lots of opportunities to think about how we ensure that we have the data that we need; that we are looking at the policies at a statewide level, which will help us ensure that we are responding in a coordinated way; and that we have the funding and pathways to ensure that we are able to deliver at a local level the responses that are needed. So that coordination between the federal government, the state government and local government and that partnership approach I think on an issue this significant are really important. But to take you through at a more local level from our perspective, Chris is going to talk to you a bit more about our context.

Chris PIKE: Thanks, Robyn. Welcome to Aireys. You are in the Otways. It is an incredibly bushfire-prone location. It would not surprise you. We have got the history of Ash Wednesday, with loss of life and property and the trauma that ensues from that kind of event. More recently we had the Wye River fires in Colac Otway shire but impacting this area in 2015, and we know the risk is increasing. We have had a dry winter. We are facing a high fire risk summer this season. One of the interesting things that we have been grappling with in the last couple of years is the calibration of fire danger ratings at a national level, which is fantastic. But what we are going to see is a greater incidence of extreme- and catastrophic-rated days, and there is a fair bit of ensuing disruption to services and activities during that period. If there is a fire in this landscape, the Great Ocean Road will close. Communities will be evacuated – they will have to shelter in place – and facilities like this one you are sitting in today will become even more important. We are in the Aireys Inlet hall, and we have spent a fair bit of money – both council's investment, grant funding and donations – to improve the resilience of this facility. More investment is needed to improve its survivability. Of course facilities like this are not just about a place of survival but the role that they can play following an event, where they are centres for relief. They are just part of a community trying to establish a sense of normality again. The Surf Coast, interestingly, on a regular night would have 42,000 people. That doubles on a peak overnight period. Then if you add daytrippers in, you are doubling that again, so you are getting to 200,000 people. If I connect you back to that prospect of the Great Ocean Road being closed, with an inconsistency in the application of fire danger ratings or a lack of awareness within the community about what they really mean, the scenario is pretty frightening.

Others will talk to you about coastal erosion and sea level rise, so I will just touch on that briefly. We have had a fatality from a cliff collapse near Bells Beach. We have got Australia's first permanent beach closure up the road in Anglesea. Here in Aireys we have got the Painkalac Creek just down the hill, where we are trying to understand the flood risk from a combination of storm surge, coastal erosion, tidal inundation and then riverine flooding too. I really want to highlight a flood study of the Painkalac we have just commenced, funded through

the state government through the Victoria's Resilient Coast program, working with the catchment management authority and working with the Great Ocean Road Coast and Parks Authority basically to understand what those impacts are, how they combine and what that means for our work in the future. These kinds of funding programs have a consistently applied framework for assessing and managing the hazards and understanding what we are dealing with so we can make evidence-based decisions to drive our investment. The challenge here is, when we have all got constrained funding, where we best spend that money. So we would welcome funding on programs like that into the future.

Like many other councils, we have experienced increasingly unpredictable weather events. We had six weeks of storm events in 2022. Many other councils were far worse hit than this one was, particularly with severe flooding – \$3.5 million worth of infrastructure damage in this area. Just last month we had an extreme wind event – another \$100,000 there. But it is also the flow-on impacts on our everyday work. We have got a three-month backlog that our arborists now have in their proactive space because we are dealing with that wind event from last month.

Then, lastly, we are like a lot of councils where our drainage infrastructure is ageing, and with those more intense downpours that is really being challenged. There is nothing like those downpours to really reveal where your infrastructure is ageing and cannot cope with these changing weather patterns. We saw an aged care facility in Anglesea evacuated with residents displaced for months back in 2022, and then of course the cost of damage there. So we are investing in proactive work to understand how our catchments are functioning now. That is costing us just under \$100,000 for some catchments in the Aireys and Anglesea area. We need to do that across our townships before we even get to the point of understanding where we might need to spend money in improving infrastructure.

The CHAIR: If I can bring it to a close there.

Robyn SEYMOUR: Just to wrap up then, you will have heard from Chris that there are lots of challenges that we have got, so making sure we have got a really coordinated approach is really fundamental. Ensuring that we have that national data that flows down to the state and to the local level is incredibly important. Then thinking about that policy coordination and what that means from a planning perspective is incredibly important in terms of how we respond. And then thinking about the way we partner to ensure that all of our assets are resilient, that we are preparing for the sorts of weather events we have, whether it is here or up on the Murray, and having the flexibility in those funding models is incredibly important to make sure we are setting our communities up to be able to be resilient and cope with the kind of weather events that we are starting to experience on a regular basis. Thank you very much for having us at the inquiry.

The CHAIR: Thanks, Robyn. Martin, I might go down your end of the table.

Martin GILL: Thank you. We have got a very similar story to the Surf Coast, but at a different scale. We are the smallest local government area in Victoria, as you all know. We have a population of 3000 during the year and 17,000 over summer. We are surrounded by water on three sides. We have a different scenario in terms of the data. We were lucky enough to be involved with the City of Greater Geelong in a CSIRO report from 2016 called *Our Coast*, which did some modelling for inundation through storm surge and sea level rise out to, I think, a 1.1-metre sea level rise. Then that was, I guess, given some depth in the last 12 months with the Port Phillip coastal hazard assessment.

What we are faced with that we know specifically is about 1100 homes out of the 2900 homes that are going to be subject potentially to inundation through sea level rise and storm surge by about 2080 or 2100. How we build resilience for that is something that we are turning our mind to and how we actually work with our community who have that knowledge is something we are trying to turn our mind to, given that we previously had tried to introduce a planning overlay for our local community, which I think Geelong successfully did in the last two years. Our community pushed back very heavily against that because of the impact on property prices, so unfortunately we did not proceed with that.

I think it is probably also worth mentioning that our community, in association with council, also put together a climate emergency response plan in 2021, so that is now part of our core council planning and council business. There are certainly lots of things that we are doing in terms of what the community can do: mitigating potential emissions through solar installation, those sorts of things, but the big gap for all of us and particularly for

council is the infrastructure and the coastal infrastructure. As recently as the storms in September we lost three or four beach access points, which will have an impact on our local amenity but also our tourism this summer. We have just had to find some funds to make sure that the surf lifesaving club can get their equipment on the beach for this summer. So things sort of roll on, and that is happening increasingly.

Just the final point, I guess, is we are not dissimilar to all local governments around how we deal with rain events in our stormwater systems. We do a bit of planning and have got lots of legacy infrastructure. As you would all know, the asset renewal financial gap is quite significant, so we are quite limited in terms of the investment we can make annually to make sure that we remain financially sustainable.

The last point I would make is that I do not think you can talk to local government about building resilience without also starting to think about things like rate capping and how funding comes to local government. One of the more successful funding streams through COVID, for instance, was from the local roads and community infrastructure funds where every local government was guaranteed some money. It was very clear what that money should be spent on, but it meant we could program annually to do works around local roads and community infrastructure. If you are looking for ideas, I think something in a similar vein through climate resilience would be a good starting point. Thank you.

The CHAIR: Thanks, Martin. Pete.

Pete MERCOURIOU: Just briefly, I will throw back to the climate emergency plan of Surf Coast, and the city of Geelong also has one. There are about 41 local governments across Victoria who have declared or acknowledged a climate emergency. With those climate emergencies they usually have an associated action plan, most of which do not have additional funding attached to address any of those actions and deliver those actions. Fundamentally, that is a significant issue when you are competing with budgetary constraints across the board, like a lot of local governments. A lot of the climate resilience work falls into our sustainability team or the environment team, where we are having to discuss climate resilience with our infrastructure teams, who may not really comprehend the significance, for example, of Geelong experiencing two one-in-50-year storms within 10 years of each other, and having to then talk to the emergency management services team and understand from our perspective how often they are now going out to clear drainage. What is the cost of that? What is the benefit–cost to actually doing preventative work versus doing a consistent clean-up more frequently?

There is a huge conduit between all these departments, but getting that on the table and talking collaboratively to address this always comes back to the one thing: a lack of budget to address some of the works that are required. Geelong's stormwater drainage system is already under pressure with a lot of overland flooding. Compounding that, the planning team – the place-making team – are having to build another Ballarat, or the size thereof, in the next 15 years, with the number of homes being earmarked. So we have got competing priorities where we need to develop these areas for new homes and new residents while it is business as usual for our stormwater infrastructure team as well. Their budget is not changing, which is not allowing us to address, you know, the elephant in the room – that is, more pressure on our stormwater drainage facilities because of increased rainfall and frequency.

From my perspective, that is kind of where we are at. Competing priorities at council for a limited budget will always be an issue. So, yes, we have to lean on groups like the Barwon South West Climate Alliance to fill in that gap when it comes to research. But I note a lot of the members are even struggling to pay membership to that climate alliance in order to do that work. There is a glut there. I have got plenty of ideas about how to address that, but I will not go into detail. That will be enough for me for now.

The CHAIR: Thanks, Pete. Sue.

Sue PHILLIPS: First of all, I would like to also pay my respects to the Wadawurrung people and also say that the Barwon South West Climate Alliance works across the lands of the Wadawurrung, the Eastern Maar and the Gunditjmarra people. We recognise and respect that country has always belonged to First Nations people and it was never ceded. We are also grateful for the care and stewardship that they have given to all living things for over 40,000 years. We are hopeful of opportunities to work more closely with our First Nations people so that we can face the challenges of climate change in the Barwon South-West region together.

We are a formal alliance of organisations that have come together across Barwon South-West to collaboratively work on climate change challenges. Together with seven other Victorian greenhouse alliances, we cover 70 of the 79 municipalities across the state, but unlike most of the other Victorian greenhouse alliances, our members do not only include local government, they also include Barwon Water and Wannon Water, Deakin University and the two catchment management authorities – and I understand Corangamite CMA will be appearing before you today. We have the second-largest local government in Victoria, the smallest local government and the only borough in Victoria as our members. While I am here today with three of our members, I would also like to acknowledge that Warrnambool City Council, Golden Plains shire and Colac Otway shire are not here today, and I encourage the committee to seek further opportunities to engage with these members, because their input and expertise will differ significantly from our members here today.

As Surf Coast shire have covered – and also the other councils – climate challenges for our regions are vast, including environmental issues such as coastal erosion, planning for sea level rise, heatwaves, increasing numbers of hot days and nights, flooding, biodiversity, environmental protection, ecological management, waterways, potable water supply and also the ever-present threat of bushfires. It is not if but when we will be impacted by this. I live in Aireys Inlet, and that is what we all believe to be the case. While the Barwon South West Climate Alliance supports and works on adaptation, we stress that mitigation is a critical response to climate change. We need to accelerate that transition to zero emissions, because the need for rapid emissions reduction has never been greater than it is today. Without mitigation, adaptation remains an important element but only a bandaid trying to cover an ever-growing wound and an increasingly unachievable task. We will pump a lot more money into it too: for every dollar we spend on mitigation, we are going to be spending a lot more dollars on adaptation.

Barwon South West Climate Alliance members work to build community resilience to climate change through providing services, programs, assets and infrastructure. Our members oversee water supplies and in the face of climate change are looking towards their own asset resilience for decentralised water sources and climate-independent water. Protection of natural resources is an increasingly challenging issue which the CMA will focus on today.

As a young alliance we are making initial inroads into working with our First Nations people on climate change. We have got minor funding at the moment for a project with the Wadawurrung to discuss joint climate issues, and we will be looking forward to progressing that. We urge the committee to work directly with our recognised Aboriginal parties of the region and our First Nations people of the Barwon South-West as part of this inquiry. We have also received state and regional priority partnership funding to undertake an analysis of climate change impacts on community assets that our six local government members own. We are painfully aware that the approximately \$245,000 of funding will barely scratch the surface of this work, and it will be very high level. We will have six detailed business studies or case studies that come out of it – so six pieces of infrastructure and assets that we can actually do work on.

We submitted as part of the Victorian Greenhouse Alliances submission, and we joined with the VGA in asking for a more harmonised approach to climate change mitigation and adaptation across all levels of government – so all working more closely together, from local government to state, including statutory authorities, and to federal, embracing a multilevel governance approach to climate change to streamline policies and approaches and remove fragmentation. Funding support and efforts would then be more cohesive and unified to achieve more targeted outcomes. We have limited time; we have limited money. So we need to be as targeted and as strategic as we can, and working together is one way to do this.

I will quickly touch on a few things our members have raised. A lack of spatial climate data and understanding of granular climate risk has resulted in organisations undertaking this work individually, with no clear guidance for climate risk registers or similar. Members are concerned that even in modest scenarios, rainfall run-off shows significant increases in the six years to 2030, emphasising that more needs to be done as soon as possible, and they would benefit from the state taking a stronger funding and supportive role in this space. Insurance is and will become an increasingly difficult issue to deal with for our members and our communities. The state has the opportunity to work with the insurance industry ahead of this becoming a statewide crisis, and we would welcome this.

Transport is one of the key sectors of emissions in the Barwon South West, and in this area particularly food, infrastructure services and tourists travel widely across our region, covering significant areas with limited

public transport options and a virtually non-existent EV-charger network. New infrastructure is needed to support this, and climate alliance members cannot address these issues alone. State leadership is urgently needed in this region on this.

We are in a state of climate crisis, and the need to work in a coordinated fashion, all aiming for the same outcomes, is critical. We are at the tipping point, if not already beyond, for the 1.5 degrees of warming, and all action needs to be focused and deliberate. In this state of worsening climate impacts I take the liberty to close by borrowing from the language of the Wadawurrung people, and I close by saying, 'Nyatne, baa globata' – thank you and take care.

The CHAIR: Thank you, all, for those opening statements. We have probably got about 5 minutes each for questions, so we will just take it in turns in blocks of time. I am going to go first; that is the benefit of being the Chair.

I want to ask a bit about the intensification of weather events and the consequences of that. It is no secret that it rains and gets hot in Victoria, but what has been the impact of more intense rainfall and more intense heat patterns in local communities? I might start with you on the Surf Coast.

Robyn SEYMOUR: In our community we have really seen our drainage networks not working in the way that we need them to given the intensity of the weather events. Chris was talking earlier about the weather event we had in 2022 where we had an aged care facility that was flooded, parts of Aireys Inlet were flooded and we had landslips. Our drainage network was not set up for the regularity and the intensity of the sort of weather events we are having. That is one of the challenges, so we have started doing some drainage studies to say what our drainage network needs to look like to respond to these kinds of weather events. A challenge will be how we prioritise our asset renewal versus upgrading our assets.

The CHAIR: Talk me through those drainage studies. How long do they take, what sort of outcomes are you getting from the study and where do you hope that leads to?

Robyn SEYMOUR: Part of what we are trying to understand is if we get these more intense weather events, where are the deficiencies in our drainage network and what upgrades would we need to do to address those issues fundamentally and then from that obviously there are opportunities to develop business cases to look at how we would fund that through our budgets or if there were other funding streams available to address that. That is part of that challenge around how we start to set our communities up to be much more resilient to the level of weather events that we are getting, particularly those rain events.

Also heat is a massive challenge, although in the south-west we tend to get perhaps less of the intensity, but the fire risk that comes with that is obviously incredibly real. As Sue was saying, anyone who lives in any of these coastal towns knows that it is not a matter of if, it is when. Seven hundred houses were lost between Lorne and Anglesea in Ash Wednesday, and there is a huge amount of work and effort that goes into that in a very coordinated way with both state agencies and with local government and community around preparing for summers and the potential risks associated with fire in this region.

The CHAIR: Martin, I just wanted to touch on briefly, while I can, you mentioned you were having the loss of infrastructure, the loss of access points to beaches. Talk us through what is causing that, what the response of the borough is and how the community is reacting.

Martin GILL: What is causing it is storm surges. What we have been predominantly noticing over the last four or five years is the storm surges are higher and more intense. The most recent storms in September and early October had water at levels we had not previously seen and also water starting to come up into some of our urban areas. But in terms of the infrastructure, it is mainly that infrastructure that you would all recognise: beaches, rock revetments. In our case we have got some historic seawalls that are all getting damaged or slowly getting damaged. Our rock revetments, for instance, are starting to slide into the water. Our historic seawalls are being undermined because the water is getting under them – little things like that. What we have probably noticed is this year we have had to start to think about what our focus is. So this year we have decided with the resources we will have, we will do the patrolled beach – beaches that are patrolled to make sure that the equipment can get onto the beach. As you can imagine, that takes a bit of work.

The other infrastructure that we are really conscious of is the end of our stormwater infrastructure and how that is interacting with areas. As you all know, we are also seeing the increase of the groundwater in conjunction with the increase of the sea level. So we are now in a position where for a lot of our infrastructure at the coastal edge and around those 1100 homes that will go under, our infrastructure is interacting with groundwater more often and also we are getting water up through that infrastructure. We are just sort of starting to see signs of that, but that is where we are mainly seeing it.

The CHAIR: Mr Ettershank.

David ETTERS HANK: Thank you, Chair. And thank you so much for coming along today. It is really appreciated. I would like to ask a question, if I could, about your views on how adequate the Victorian planning system is in terms of adaptation and preparing for climate change and your thoughts as to, if it is not adequate, how it might be more proactive. Perhaps we could start with Geelong and then the Surf Coast.

Pete MERCOURIOU: Yes, it is a really good point. At the moment it has evolved to be suitable for today. Whether it is adequate in 10, 15, 20 or 30 years from now, that will happen on its own accord, I suppose. But one of the sticking points in working with stat planners currently is making room for street trees, and that is a real equitable decision there as to whether new estates can actually have street trees, because it is competing with telecommunications and other infrastructure underneath nature strips. So bringing trees to the forefront of that conversation is yet to happen but starting to happen. You are building these new estates and you cannot have canopy trees, so that in itself is not a climate-resilient action at all. If you are building these new estates, which now with the new construction code which just got released last year you are building to seven stars, that is excellent. It probably should have happened about seven years ago. There is no gas in these estates either; however, still existing infrastructure is connected to gas. For lot of homes in the northern parts of Geelong, which are very hot parts of the area, those street trees which the new estates might be getting do not exist in those areas, so that is inequitable. So delivering that across the board is going to be a challenge. From the planning scheme, pulling trees into the foreground at the beginning and having those conversations with infrastructure is highly important, particularly when we are talking about climate resilience.

Martin GILL: Can I add just one thing to that – I think the Victorian planning system has made some strides in preventing people from living in the places where they are most at risk. So the bushfire management overlay was a good tool and the significant inundation overlay is a good tool. What tends to happen, though, is that they are quite – not blunt, but they are quite pure processes, and then what tends to happen because developers and property owners get involved is that slowly some of those quite strong controls get undermined because of the need to deal with other things in the economic or planning systems.

David ETTERS HANK: What sorts of things are you talking about there?

Martin GILL: Certainly the imperative of housing affordability, and making developers who have a strong presence and know how to work through planning schemes and planning law – to work to sort of expose those gaps in the system. And we as a state rely on growth. I am sure all of us in coastal areas would have noticed, and the growth in Torquay, for instance, is a good example. It is one of the fastest growing places in the state because it is an attractive place, but it is also one of the more risky places in its proximity to bushfire areas, proximity to coastal areas and those sorts of things. So we are always trying to – the planning system has some tools, but it is not the planning system that necessarily does not apply the tools in the way that they could be more effective.

David ETTERS HANK: Okay. Thank you.

Robyn SEYMOUR: I think that is good. I think the other piece in there is really understanding what the data is telling us about what the future is looking like and how we start to bring that into the planning scheme as part of the consideration. I think fire is a really good example of where we have started to do that, and that has been really helpful. But I think when you think about what Martin is talking about, around the future of Queenscliffe, there are parts of our shire where flood risk and inundation are potentially problematic. Starting to think about what that means for the future of our planning scheme I think is really important – and getting some guidance from the state government around how to apply the planning decisions in relation to that data. We know that the data is always maturing, as we understand, and things are shifting quite quickly. It is really hard from a state government perspective to bring some of their very contemporary data into some of the planning

schemes, but that is really helpful for us in terms of then how we apply the planning system in our municipalities.

The other thing is there was a piece of work, the Hansen report, on planning for a safe climate. I think there are some good recommendations in that report that could be considered as part of the future work and opportunities in this space to improve our planning system's ability to manage and respond to the environment that we now find ourselves in.

David ETTERS HANK: Excellent. Thank you.

Sue PHILLIPS: Could I just quickly add something?

The CHAIR: Yes.

Sue PHILLIPS: Given that we need to really have transformational adaptation, building climate change into the planning scheme is really critical. The recent work by the state government to build that into the *Planning and Environment Act* through the *Climate Change and Energy Amendment (Renewable Energy and Storage Targets) Act* – I am obviously reading that – is really great. We received our invitation yesterday to comment on the ministerial direction and guidance on that, so that is fantastic. I echo what Surf Coast shire has said about the *Climate Change & Planning in Victoria* report. I point you to the Victorian Greenhouse Alliances submission, which has detail on where it sees some of the gaps in planning, and I would urge you, if you have not already met, to meet with the Council Alliance for a Sustainable Built Environment, who have a significant amount of knowledge in this area around climate change, built environments and sustainable development.

David ETTERS HANK: Thank you.

The CHAIR: Ms Broad.

Gaelle BROAD: Thank you very much for appearing today and for some submissions too. I am just interested: you talked about how 41 councils have action plans in place, and we have got 79 councils across the state. I am hearing about CSIRO – you have done studies with them as well – and our state funding to do some studies. Just on that, can you have an open conversation about what it costs for councils to undertake their own planning process. How long does it take to come up with these action plans? Are there any ways that you think there could be more efficiencies in that, or do you need to sort of tailor it by local council? If you can just talk to that funding of strategies.

Martin GILL: What we found was that we could do a plan, but then the plan also had other plans that we had to do around data, which Surf Coast mentioned, or around getting that deeper knowledge about how we might mitigate. So for us the preparation of the plan itself was reasonable, and we had a lot of community support, but as we mentioned earlier, once you get that plan in place where is the funding then to do the detailed work? It is probably pretty similar to what we are doing with our coastal and marine management plan. We have got a really good set of policies that allow us to create a plan, but then to implement it we struggle to resource it. We recently had a quote to do a little bit more work around the CSIRO report that we did. That was to just ground-truth it, to add a bit of sophistication to it, and that was about another \$150,000. That is just for our coast and a little bit of Geelong's coast, so if you sort of roll that out.

Gaelle BROAD: Yes. Can you speak from Surf Coast's perspective too, because I did see in your strategy that most things say 'underfunded' or 'subject to funding.' But yes, what has that process been like?

Robyn SEYMOUR: I think Martin has covered it quite well in that broader sense, but one of the things that we are trying to do internally at Surf Coast, because the impacts of climate change touch every element of our business and every element of our involvement with community, is to work to really try and understand that and our risk exposure and reorientate the whole organisation around that to understand what that means for us financially and how we get the allocation of our funding in the right areas given the new context that we find ourselves in. That is challenging. I mean, everyone is resource constrained – state, federal and local. We are very resource constrained, and so we only have a finite amount of dollars that we can work with. We have a vast number of services that we deliver to support our communities and also our environment. So how do we reorientate the organisation to ensure that we are operating efficiently and effectively to respond to the new context that we find ourselves in?

We are doing a lot of work to really try to understand what that looks like, whether it is our asset renewal program and maintenance program or whether it is the work that we do around ensuring that our facilities are resilient. It is the materials we use on our roads and the drainage network. Are they fit for purpose now and into the future? What do we do around our planning and our heat island effect and planting trees to make our communities more resilient? How do we get that investment right to ensure that we are adapting to the new context and are setting ourselves up for success?

I think one of the things that we know is that a huge amount of funding currently goes into the response, and that resilience piece and setting us up to be able to operate more effectively in our new context actually needs more of the investment. Rebalancing that at all levels of government is really challenging, but it is fundamentally and strategically really important to ensure that we are adapting to the new context that we find ourselves in. We know, for example, that the federal government has put 97 per cent of their funding into disaster responses and 3 per cent into the resilience piece in terms of their levels of funding. That has shifted a bit. It is now, I think, about 13 per cent of funding going into the mitigation and the rest into the response. But the more we start to get a better balance in that space, for all of us at all levels of government, the more capacity we will have to set our communities up to be able to be resilient in the context that we now find ourselves in.

The CHAIR: Thanks, Ms Broad. Mr Berger.

John BERGER: Thank you, Chair. Thank you all for your appearance this morning. Robyn, I think this question is directly for you, if you like. The committees that you spoke about that you are putting together – can you just unpack that a bit for us as to what issues they are looking into and whether there are community involvements with these committees?

Robyn SEYMOUR: We have a range of things that we are doing in terms of our response to climate, and we have a very passionate community in this space as well. One of the priorities of council is definitely around enabling our communities to take action and be involved in that, and so we look for opportunities to do that. Would you like to speak to some of the work that your teams are doing in that space?

Chris PIKE: Yes. We are working on two levels. A lot of work is happening internally, which I will not touch on – Robyn's earlier point and Pete's about needing to get ourselves coordinated internally, which is a task in itself, and the governance associated with that. Externally, typically the work with the community has focused around the bushfire risk. There is a long history of that here, and you really see the community mobilise when there is an incident. Humans respond to crises. Wye River is a good example. The longer the time between an event and the current day – human nature is to kind of forget. There is a hard core within communities. Sue spoke as a resident as well as a professional here. There is that recognition that there is that threat there.

I think it is the weather pattern related changes that are lagging locally. The environment is the most precious thing we have here, and one of the things we are facing up to is the protection of human life and safety rubbing up against what might have a detrimental environmental impact. We see that tension playing out here locally. So that is with the people who are mobilised locally, and then the average person is grappling with the fact that their garage driveway might get washed away with these events or that things in their garage are getting flooded. I have personally had phone calls with disgruntled members of the community who think it is the authorities' job to prevent water coming onto their property. A big aspect of working with communities here, at all levels of government, is the adaptation that needs to occur within communities to understand what is associated with a changing climate and what they have to bear the cost of, if you like, as an individual in dealing with the impacts of the change. And that is a real work in progress. I do not think the community is anywhere –

John BERGER: So how are we planning for drainage networks in the area, given that – if you take last week for example, we would have had 35 mil of rain. That is not too bad; over a day you can sort of cope with that. But get any more in a shorter space of time and it is very difficult to deal with. So in planning, what is the model that you look at to say, 'Okay, what do we look for? Is it 100 mil? Is it 150 mil?' And over timeframes – what is the modelling that fits?

Martin GILL: At the moment our system is probably for about a one-in-five-year event, and we have now noticed that that is not up to the standard. So it is retrofitting the system to say, 'Well, can we cope with a one-

in-20-year or a one-in-100-year event?’ – which would go to the time and amount. I think that is what we are all speaking about in terms of that planning. The system not only has the pipes underground but has its overland flows as well. For instance, what we are noticing is that we have probably not invested as much underground because we thought the overland flow paths could help us manage it. But they are not doing that anymore, because water is running through and going into properties and things like that. So we have got to upgrade the infrastructure so it copes better, and then that goes back into that conversation about renewal of assets and the way, especially when we are talking about the federal assistance, we have not had a philosophy of ‘build back better’, we have always had like for like. As local government now we cannot do that with our core infrastructure. We need to build back better.

John BERGER: Okay. Thanks, Chair.

The CHAIR: Thanks, Mr Berger. If I can encourage everyone: project. It is very hard to hear behind you, so do not be afraid to use your voice. Dr Mansfield.

Sarah MANSFIELD: Thank you. Thank you all for appearing and for your evidence. Something that struck me, probably particularly with the City of Greater Geelong and Queenscliff but all councils, is that you have all got climate emergency declarations or acknowledgements and you have got action plans but there seems to be a disconnect between the actual actions and the action plans, particularly in terms of funding. It was mentioned in the case of the City of Greater Geelong. There is not really the funding there to back up that action plan, and it has not been embedded in every part of the organisation. The Borough of Queenscliff – you have got this acknowledgement of a climate emergency but then a decision around flood overlays and integrating that into the planning scheme that really seems at odds with that declaration. What can be done, do you think, at least at a perhaps council level, to better integrate the urgency and lift the priority of climate response within the work that you are doing as council, and is there anything the state government can do to assist with that?

Martin GILL: I might as well get into trouble. I think the *Local Government Act* has attempted to make climate response something that is core business, but the language is not strong enough. I think that is where we all turn to, the *Local Government Act*, so how does the Act help us? It helped the politicians that we were still dealing with understand that this is not a priority, or this is not the number 4 priority, or this is not something we can put aside – that it has to actually be core business. That is a big change, but legislation always helps.

Pete MERCOURIOU: I think you are right with that. Historically, local government serviced property and now it is more service to people, and that is still not really explained, I think, or even acknowledged or debated. As a consequence there are a lot of questions as to some of the work that we do within these climate change action plans – is it core business of local government? And going to the *Local Government Act* as well as the *Climate Change Act*, it really is. Not only that, a lot of the work is addressing climate risk in all those actions, really, from a mitigation point of view and an adaptation point of view. So the problem is not not being able to achieve the actions necessarily, it is more about being able to achieve them on a grander scale.

With the resourcing at city of Geelong, there are 1.8 staff specifically working in this space, but there are other people in the environment department and the waste that are also doing those actions. So it is about drawing out the type of work that they are doing and trying to find a cross-section which can actually achieve more by communicating across teams. That is more of an operational thing. It is definitely doable, but it is more about: can we do it faster, can we do it within the timeframe of a net zero target by 2035? That is the sort of question that we have internally that we are trying to overcome, but fundamentally even the question around why we are doing this continues to come up, and that should be put to bed really so we can proceed and progress.

Robyn SEYMOUR: Can I add something from a local government perspective?

Sarah MANSFIELD: Yes.

Robyn SEYMOUR: We have a whole lot of things like the Barwon South West regional climate adaptation strategy, which is a really good strategy and talks to the holistic approach we need, where there is that strong partnership between local and state government through a range of bodies. I think about water security in this region – we know that is a real challenge. We are doing I think some really good work with Barwon Water around recycled water and the capacity of our stormwater to help ensure we have really high quality recycled water in our region that can be used for high-value agriculture in the Thomson Valley, and potentially Barwon

Water have aspirations to extend that water grid right around Geelong to be able to service Golden Plains as well as Geelong and then back further into the Surf Coast hinterland. In terms of thinking about the environment that we are in, where we know this region is drying, where water is becoming more scarce, some of those broader strategic approaches and how we work with state government to secure some of the fundamentals that we need, like water, are really important. So those adaptation strategies and ensuring that they are supported by state government and resourced by state government and how we work together to deliver on those outcomes I think strategically are really important.

Sarah MANSFIELD: You also mentioned some work you are doing internally as an organisation to embed some of those principles in your climate change response plan. Can you describe some of that work?

Chris PIKE: I mean, it starts at the top. You need your executive team, all of the leaders in any level of government, to be committed to that being not just another priority in a list of 10 or 12, which is very easy in a diverse business like ours, but at the very top. Therefore we have established an executive committee, so you do not have the situation where you have your specialists in the sustainability climate action space in a pocket of the organisation who feel like they are pushing it uphill. Actually, from the top you can lead coordination across your asset management, across your emergency management, across your business as usual and your open space maintenance, and it is not a quick process. So we are on our own journey. This is why the data from the state is so important. This is where you do not want 79 councils with the best intentions trying to collect information, develop frameworks. That is the role the state can play, and we are in that process at the moment of getting ourselves organised, because we do not have the resources to spread across everything. I could go on, but that is the essence of it.

The CHAIR: Thanks very much.

Sue PHILLIPS: Can I just quickly add I think the state also has a leadership opportunity and role here. Part of the reason that local government is finding it difficult to embed this across the organisation is that there is a lack of cohesion – it is very, very much improved from what it used to be – between government departments on how they address climate change. Climate change and climate risk are not seen as the same as financial impetus and financial risk, and until it is changed at a higher level we are going to continue to struggle at a local level to get that uptake. It is not an easy ask, but I think it is one that we really should be working towards so that there is really good cohesion across state government.

The CHAIR: Thanks very much. Ms Bath.

Melina BATH: Thank you very much for being here today – and apologies for not, but I am listening intently. The Surf Coast and Queenscliff boroughs both spoke about storm surges and coastal erosion, and I think you, Martin, spoke about seawalls. I am interested from that perspective in what barriers local government and communities are facing when it comes to upgrading infrastructure. In this case I am interested in infrastructure along the coast. What do you need and what barriers are you facing?

Martin GILL: Sorry to repeat ourselves, but I think resourcing is the key thing. Sometimes the barriers are things that we do not plan for. For instance, we actually were successful in getting a state grant to extend a fence at a place where we have got some severe erosion, a dog beach. We had got our cultural heritage permits, we had got our MACA consents and we had gone through all the permits, and one week before we started a storm came and took away the original fence. Above and beyond the kinds of barriers around resourcing there is also the expectation that we replace and do these things in these spaces, but maybe we have shifted now and that is not really an option. I do not think we have got to the maturity where we can start to have that conversation with our community that we cannot provide all these services in these environments, because in effect we will spend \$150,000 replacing a fence that will get swept away again in two years. I think that is a barrier now, how you bring that community along with that conversation about amenity and service.

Melina BATH: Thank you. To follow up on that one, my Eastern Victoria Region holds the other part of the coast, and I know Inverloch are having a terrible time at the minute because they have had storm surges and their surf lifesaving club is in danger of going under. The cape-to-cape resilience project is out there. Some of the conversations that are being had with government departments are about retreat, and I want to understand your perspective. Do you think your communities would adequately cope with that as a state government directive? How would you need to assess what is fair for your communities, and how would you bring the

community along? What are the best options internationally or in Australia? How are you assessing that, and how are you negotiating with government? What are some of your impediments there?

Martin GILL: I am not sure how to answer that question, to be honest with you. I think it is a really good question and it raises a really important topic. But I do not think we have even started to go into that space, fundamentally because I think emotionally our community could not cope with that conversation and we do not have the sophistication or even the data to be able to have that conversation with them. But the property values in the Borough alone are over \$23 billion, so if you are talking about 1100 properties and asking people to retreat, they are not going to walk away without compensation. We are talking about prohibitive actions, so what else do we do? That is a really vexed question.

Melina BATH: And I guess from that – thank you, and anyone else can jump in. I was not endorsing it, I was saying: are communities ready for it? Or what else can you ask us to ask of the government that you would need about options?

Martin GILL: I think a really good example is last year when the Port Phillip coastal hazard assessment was released. There was a bit of a flurry of information but then it went silent, and what would have been good for the local government sector in that case was if the state said, 'We're going to take carriage of this; we're going to get a group of people together, and we're going to start to think about how we implement what we've learnt from this fantastic data.' And part of that is going to be having a really difficult conversation with our community about what it means and the choices that the community will need to make about things like retreat or special services charges and things like that.

Pete MERCOURIOU: I would just add insurers.

Martin GILL: Yes, sorry – insurers.

Pete MERCOURIOU: Insurers are substantially increasing the level of insurance for those households, as much so in the hills around Monbulk area due to trees falling over as well as what we are talking about right now. They may not have a choice in the matter. It might be taken out of the hands of local government entirely. If you cannot insure your home or you cannot afford to pay that insurance, that might happen with natural attrition there. So it is something else to consider when you are talking with community about all these issues.

The CHAIR: Thanks, Ms Bath. Mrs Tyrrell.

Rikkie-Lee TYRRELL: Thank you, Chair. My apologies for rocking up a little bit late. Sue, when you mentioned public transport you really caught my attention, because we have not had the opportunity to address that yet. No doubt you have had a lot of time to ponder what would be the most suitable public transport to provide to the demand, because I am sure that the demand would fluctuate with seasons and the weather is also a fluctuating thing here. I grew up on the coast in New South Wales. Also, addressing the infrastructure, so the current infrastructure that we have and any new infrastructure we might need: can we just dig into that a bit more, please?

Sue PHILLIPS: Could I take the conversation away from public transport slightly to transport in general? We have a real lack of ability to have a lot of electric vehicles in this region at the moment. There is no electric vehicle charging network – or an insignificant one – as such, and local government have often stepped into that space, but it is not necessarily something they can continue to do. And some of our smaller shires cannot even go there; it is just too much money for them to even put in one charger. I would also call for the state government to apply common sense when looking at location of chargers. We understand that there have been some limitations imposed by the marine and conservation Act as to where we can put chargers – electric chargers cannot go in the same sorts of locations as petrol stations are in, which makes no sense. So I think we need to be from a state level really considerate of the needs of the community and what does actually make common sense.

On public transport in the region, I will not go into that specifically. I will let my local government colleagues touch more. But there is very limited public transport. Most infrastructure around here, for example, is you either carpool or you get the bus or you drive yourself. Most people drive themselves, which is why that electric vehicle charging network is so critical to moving into a more adaptive future. Trains – obviously the train ends at Geelong, and there was discussion around extending that to Torquay, which would not have just benefited

the residents of Torquay, it would have benefited a lot of people all the way up the ocean road and would have changed the face of some of our tourism too. We have a lot of vans and buses of tourists coming through here all the time, and living in areas with the lighthouse just here, it is absolutely packed. It is packed with cars and loads of tourists. They come up, look at the lighthouse and leave, and there is no option for them because the public transport is really limited. I will just stop at that and hand it over to local government.

Martin GILL: There is a regional integrated transport strategy that was put together by the G21 alliance over the last two years with funding from the Department of Transport and Planning, and input. It is a really good document, and it really talks about congestion and all the way through to how to have greener and cleaner public transport. We will forward that to you.

Rikkie-Lee TYRRELL: That would be lovely. Thank you very much.

Robyn SEYMOUR: I think the G21 strategy is a great option. In terms of broader infrastructure, your question about broader –

Rikkie-Lee TYRRELL: Yes. What might be needed in the future? We were talking about buses before. I am thinking: how many bus stops are there along the way? If there were more buses coming to the area, would we need more bus stops? And I was thinking of the train line. Where would that go to work best with the natural ecosystems here – because they are really fragile – and where would you put something like that? Have you thought of those things?

Robyn SEYMOUR: Yes. I think there are opportunities from an environmental perspective to have cleaner mass transit options. It was great to see yesterday an announcement in this region of more trains coming to Geelong and also an increased service of V/Line trains to Warrnambool on weekends, which is great. That is really welcomed, because that is a really important service for our broader communities. Then there is thinking about, from there, what are some opportunities for rapid transits using clean energy – maybe smaller buses to Torquay and then down the Great Ocean Road. I think there are opportunities for that. We have seen an upgrade in bus services in Torquay just this year, which has been great, but as our population grows –

Also, thinking about how we ensure that we are providing people with a good alternative to getting in their cars from some of those hubs like Torquay or some of our communities along the Princes Highway to Warrnambool for the train services is great. And then there is thinking about the Great Ocean Road and what that looks like – whether it is the tourism buses or whether it is the V/Line buses that come down here – and how we service these communities and do that in a way that is sustainable and ensures that we are supporting our local economies in that space too. We know that the tourist buses that come down are not supporting our local economies and contributing.

But from a public transport perspective, thinking about the connections, for example, between Lorne or Apollo Bay back into Geelong, so people can access health services, education and broader services, is really important and thinking about the scheduling of that. There is the connection to Colac, because most people who work in Lorne do not live in Lorne; they cannot afford to live in Lorne. They live in Geelong, Armstrong Creek, Torquay. They travel in every single day because of the challenges around affordable accommodation. So thinking about how we support people to move between those communities efficiently from a public transport perspective is really important.

Rikkie-Lee TYRRELL: Thank you very much.

The CHAIR: Thanks very much. Chris, Robyn, Sue, Pete and Martin, thanks very much for coming in today. We really appreciate the evidence that you have given. You will be provided with a copy of the transcript to review in about a week or so before it is made public. With that the committee will take a short break.

Witnesses withdrew.