

TRANSCRIPT

LEGISLATIVE COUNCIL LEGAL AND SOCIAL ISSUES COMMITTEE

Inquiry into Food Security in Victoria

Melbourne – Wednesday 21 August 2024

MEMBERS

Trung Luu – Chair

Ryan Batchelor – Deputy Chair

Michael Galea

Renee Heath

Joe McCracken

Rachel Payne

Aiv Puglielli

Lee Tarlamis

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WITNESSES

Therese Watson, Advocacy Officer, Strategic Growth and Advocacy, Greater Dandenong City Council;

Kass Halastanis, Social Policy and Projects Officer, Knox City Council; and

Marshall Benson, Senior Social Policy Officer, Maribyrnong City Council.

The CHAIR: I declare open the Legislative Council Legal and Social Issues Committee's public hearing for the Inquiry into Food Security in Victoria. Please ensure your mobile phones have been switched to silent and that background noise is minimised.

Before we continue, I would like to begin this hearing by respectfully acknowledging the Aboriginal people, the traditional custodians of the various lands we are gathered on today, and pay my respects to their ancestors, elders and families. I particularly welcome any elders or community members who are here today to impart their knowledge of this issue to the committee. I would like to welcome all the public watching via the live broadcast, and I would like to welcome our panel today from the councils: Maribyrnong, Greater Dandenong and Knox City.

I just want to quickly introduce my committee members: to my right, the Deputy Chair, Mr Ryan Batchelor; to my left, Mr Aiv Puglielli; and joining us shortly will also be Dr Renee Heath.

To the panel, regarding the evidence you will impart to us today, I just want to inform you that all evidence taken is protected by parliamentary privilege as provided by the *Constitution Act 1975* and further subject to the provisions of the Legislative Council standing orders. Therefore the information you provide during this 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 thing, those comments may not be protected by this privilege. Any deliberately false evidence or misleading of the committee may be considered a contempt of Parliament.

All evidence is being recorded. You will be provided a proof version of the transcript following the hearing. The transcript will ultimately be made public and posted on the committee website.

Also, I would like to quickly introduce our other committee members, who are joining us via Zoom: Mr Lee Tarlamis and Ms Rachel Payne.

Rachel PAYNE: Hello. Thanks for having me.

The CHAIR: Just for the record, could you please state your full name, your position and the organisation you are with. Marshall.

Marshall BENSON: Marshall Benson, Senior Social Policy Officer, Maribyrnong City Council.

Therese WATSON: Therese Watson, Advocacy Officer, Strategic Growth and Advocacy, Greater Dandenong City Council.

Kass HALASTANIS: Kass Halastanis, Social Policy and Projects Officer at Knox City Council.

The CHAIR: Good morning, welcome and thank you for coming in this morning to give evidence. I understand the committee have already got your submissions from the councils, but I do ask you to make opening statements, if you wish, before the committee proceed with any questions.

Therese WATSON: I have one.

The CHAIR: Please.

Therese WATSON: Thank you. The Greater Dandenong City Council thanks you for the opportunity to provide the information today to the Legislative Council. Greater Dandenong is a culturally diverse community in Melbourne's south-east suburbs, with over 150 nationalities, and home to one of the largest populations of refugees and people seeking asylum. Greater Dandenong is the number one municipality on the SEIFA scale for disadvantage, and one in five in our community live below the poverty line. Community-based

organisations are seeing increasing numbers of people requiring food relief due to the cost-of-living and affordable housing crisis. Data collection conducted by council showed 67 per cent of food relief recipients within the municipality had been receiving food relief for more than one year. Greater Dandenong is the service centre for the south-east, which means that people who come to Dandenong for other services such as housing also seek food relief while in our municipality.

We continue to welcome new refugee arrivals on a weekly basis, applying more pressure to a system under strain. 1326 have arrived in the south-east in the first half of this year. We also have a number of people seeking asylum from legacy caseloads without income support or work rights requiring continuous support. The solutions to food insecurity lie in helping people out of poverty alongside activities that would be considered directly associated with food security, such as regulation and protection of agricultural land and regional approaches to food relief. We advocate for policies to support the right to housing and healthy, culturally appropriate foods regardless of the ability to pay. Council believes with three levels of government working together with and alongside the community, we can achieve the results expected of us. As a short-term strategy we welcome the recent funding rounds to neighbourhood houses and community organisations for food relief. We would like to see this expanded and continue over the next few years. This would provide relief to the community while medium- and long-term goals could be established.

More needs to be done creating a strategy using frameworks that promote diversity, equity and inclusion, acknowledging the links between poverty and food insecurity. Understanding food insecurity is one need that requires addressing in relation to poverty, part of a larger system of supports. Solutions require place-based community development at a local level and regional and state strategies alongside initiatives already being funded through state and federal governments. We are committed to working with state and federal government, business, philanthropists, the broader community and importantly, the voice of lived experience. We have a saying in Greater Dandenong that poverty is everyone's business, therefore everyone needs to be part of the solution, so we thank you for the opportunity.

The CHAIR: Thank you, Therese. Kass.

Kass HALASTANIS: Thank you. Thanks for the opportunity. Knox City Council's submission draws very strongly on the local experiences of food relief providers. Our council has convened the Knox food relief taskforce, which has been in operation for almost two years. Through the taskforce we have engaged over 35 food relief providers and shared their issues with you in our submission. Significant to our municipality is the fast-growing increase of food relief provision. It has doubled in the number of cooked meals being provided to local community members over the past two years, and the number of food pantry parcels that have been distributed is five times more than the level it was two years ago. So for our local community members investing in local solutions is paramount.

We have trialled, through our council's significant contribution, a food distribution hub in Wantirna. That has been the game changer in our local area. Most of the food relief providers in Knox are accessing food from our local food hub. It is currently operated by Outer East Foodshare. That has been a significant change to access to fresh food and pantry parcels for our 35 food relief providers in the municipality. Our submission highlights the investment required by state government for these kinds of local solutions, and we emphasise that strongly in our submission.

Local community members continue to face hardship. The financial difficulties related to the cost-of-living crisis at the moment are now seeing in the local area a fast-growing number of employed people accessing food relief. We are seeing a fast-growing number of employed people now accessing homelessness services.

Local solutions for us are clearly related to stronger investment from state government in local infrastructure for food hubs and investment in service coordination. Investment needs to be directed not only to food relief providers for access to fresh food but wraparound services for holistic approaches. We hear from our food relief providers consistently that people presenting for food relief are presenting with complex issues and the volunteers who provide the food relief are not equipped to respond to their wider issues. We highlighted this in our submission. Thank you.

The CHAIR: Thank you so much, Therese and Kass and Marshall. I will open up with a few quick questions before throwing to our committee panel. I know you and local members have mentioned that

employed people are accessing food relief now. Just from all three councils, what have been your observations in recent times about the types of residents who are actually accessing and requiring the food relief, whether it is a single-income family or a family where both are working. I just wanted to see about the percentage just after COVID – I know COVID was a different situation – compared with now, so roughly in about a two-year bracket. Has there been any increase? And what are the percentages of the types of residents actually accessing or requiring the assistance?

Marshall BENSON: I cannot give you the precise figures about the split between the type of resident, whether it is a family or a single person or employed or unemployed, but anecdotally there is a mix of people – young people, families, elderly. The data shows that the number of people in Maribyrnong over the last sort of five years needing assistance with food relief has doubled at least from around 5 to 7 per cent to 15 per cent. The estimated need when 5 per cent of residents were requiring assistance was around 200 tonnes a year of food, so we can again estimate that it has at least doubled.

The CHAIR: Thank you. Therese?

Therese WATSON: Again, I do not want to quote exact figures. We did a study after COVID in November 2023, and we surveyed 9000 receivers of material aid. Of that, the majority were Australian residents, the second were Afghan community, and then it broke up quite evenly amongst other different communities within Dandenong. Single parents were very high on the list, and our larger families – our families that have six or more children – were very much on the list as well. For us, singles are the worst off in our community in terms of the cost of living and food relief, then families and single parents.

Kass HALASTANIS: We conducted a survey of food relief recipients in September of 2023. The findings highlighted to us that of those recipients 56 per cent were accessing food because their Centrelink payments were insufficient to cover the rent, food and bills. We also had a significant number – a third – of food relief recipients accessing food relief because their wage was insufficient to cover the rent, food and bills. We can also share that one-quarter of the survey respondents had a disability and needed help with daily activities. About a third were living in private rental.

The CHAIR: Thank you. That pretty much leads on to my next question. What I want is for you to give us a breakdown basically from that. What do you think are the main drivers? We heard previously with cost of living that housing was an issue and people had to choose after housing costs what to do, whether to pay for food or heating et cetera. Being a large family or a single parent – you did mention one-third were private rentals. What do you think were the main drivers that moved them towards accessing the relief and assistance?

Marshall BENSON: For Maribyrnong council, in the research we have done there are several interconnected factors. There are three or four. So economic challenges – the obvious ones are the combination of rising living costs, inadequate wages and unemployment rates, which clearly amplify the financial strain on households. There are the environmental pressures, things such as climate change and extreme weather events which threaten local food production and agricultural sustainability, and of course these environmental challenges impact the availability, quality and reliability of food supplies, further exacerbating the issue. There have been supply chain disruptions, most clearly during and following COVID, which have led to shortages, price increases and logistical challenges in distributing food to residents. And the dominance of large supermarket chains has marginalised local farmers and reduced consumer access to affordable, locally sourced food. The last one was around urban development. We have seen rapid urbanisation and urban sprawl across Maribyrnong, and that continues to diminish the available agricultural land, limiting local food production opportunities. This loss of agricultural space further restricts the potential for developing sustainable food systems and exacerbates the issue of food security for residents.

The CHAIR: Thank you, Marshall. Therese.

Therese WATSON: New arrivals – the fact that you are a refugee and you are establishing a whole new life in our community. The cost of housing is an absolute joke. We do not have any affordable housing for a single person. We do not have social housing stock for large families, so there is a real distinct gap in that space. It is also about culturally appropriate food for our community. Coles and Woolworths are trying to do some; they have some. But the prices at Coles and Woolworths are so much more expensive than if they went to

somewhere like Dandenong Market to buy fresh fruit and vegetables. But they cannot always – particularly for food relief, they do not get their culturally appropriate food that they require.

There is a sense of shame for our community too about going to food relief and actually asking for help, so they wait until they are really in dire straits. There is sort of a delayed help seeking. So by the time they get to a material aid agency for that food relief, all the other problems have piled up on top of each other, and then we cannot save them. We have a saying in Greater Dandenong at the moment, ‘Please pay your rent, pay your mortgage and pay any of your bills as best you can, and then we will try and work out food for you,’ because if we lose their home, we have got nowhere for them to go.

The CHAIR: Thank you. Kass.

Kass HALASTANIS: Certainly the cost of purchasing food is a significant driver. Seventy per cent of our survey respondents highlighted that they were unable to afford to buy food in the past 12 months, and that is a significant driver. In terms of housing, the lack of affordable housing is a significant issue. The Council to Homeless Persons report in April indicated that the Knox council area was in the top 10 of local government areas where employed people were seeking homelessness services, and in metropolitan Melbourne we are in the top five. So the lack of affordable housing, the low numbers of social housing available in the local area, is another significant driver. Over half of our survey respondents were accessing food relief for the first time in the calendar year of last year, and over half of them again said that they would be accessing food relief indefinitely.

The CHAIR: Thank you. I will move on to my committee members. Deputy Ryan.

Ryan BATCHELOR: Thanks, Chair. You have mentioned the food relief services that you run and the ways that you are trying to support your communities. What do you think some of the biggest barriers are to the effectiveness and expansion of your services? What are the biggest challenges you face, and how might we recommend ways to help you overcome them?

Kass HALASTANIS: Most of our food relief providers in Knox rely entirely on volunteers. One of the biggest issues faced by food relief providers is that our volunteers are now themselves facing financial hardship, with large numbers being forced to return to work. They rely on the volunteers to be able to use transport, access fresh food and deliver that back to the food relief agency. Transport is another significant issue, so the lack of transport vehicles to be able to collect and distribute food is another major barrier for our food relief providers. I mentioned earlier that the volunteers that work in the local agencies are not well equipped or skilled to respond to the more complex issues that are presenting. People are presenting for food relief; however, they are sharing with the local agencies some of the other major barriers that they face.

Ryan BATCHELOR: So you are seeing your food relief services as being a touchpoint for a broader set of social support services that might need to be available?

Kass HALASTANIS: Yes. In fact one of our largest food relief providers in Knox has commenced a service where they are delivering cooked meals to homes. Apart from providing food to respond to immediate need, they are offering that service as an opening for people to be able to support and address any other issues that they present with. This particular food relief provider in Knox provides holistic services. They are underfunded, again relying strongly on volunteers, but partnering with other local community organisations to provide other additional services.

Therese WATSON: Not dissimilar – transport for our organisation is an issue. Foodbank have a hub in Dandenong which covers the whole of the south-east, which is a very large area. Quite often our agencies do report they go and they cannot get any food because it has been taken. It has run out by the end of the day. There is the cost of that food – the food that they must purchase off Foodbank – and then there is the free food. Since COVID, donations for our organisations are down, so they are really struggling to get donations to be able to purchase that food.

I think there is an opportunity lost with food relief, because it is often the first touchpoint for a person seeking help and the food relief agencies are not equipped to deal with that. Our volunteers do not know how to do referrals. They are not qualified to do that. There is a need for someone to fill that gap in our community between the food relief and getting them to an organisation that has the mental health services and other

comprehensive social work services that are required for many people, and culturally appropriate as well. We have a shortage of bicultural workers on the ground to be able to speak with in language and be culturally appropriate in that work. For us there is a really big gap there culturally.

Ryan BATCHELOR: Can I just unpack the transportation issue a little bit. Is it the lack of appropriate, and number of, vehicles, or is it petrol costs?

Therese WATSON: They just cannot afford vehicles.

Ryan BATCHELOR: Transportation is a big word – it covers a lot of things. Do they not have enough trucks? The trucks are not big enough? It costs too much to run them? Or all of those things?

Therese WATSON: All of the above, I think. I have a consortium of agencies that I work with, and I have been working with them for the last six years. One of our agencies has a large truck, and they go around and they quite often pick up food for other agencies and we collaborate together. They have the truck. The cost of that driver for the truck – the person is an asylum seeker, and one of our issues is underemployment for our refugee community, a lot of part-time work and so forth. A lot of our paid staff in the food relief space are part time or casual workers, so they do not have that security for themselves at the same time, so there is that. And then agencies just do not have the capital to be able to buy a van that they might need to go and pick things up. There needs to be more collaboration around who has what and how we work together, but unfortunately a competitive environment has been created for funding and different things and as things get more and more strained, people are less and less likely to collaborate, so it is a bit of a struggle on the ground at times to say, ‘Hey, come on. Let’s just all work as neighbours and help each other out.’ That is just the strain that they are experiencing at this point in time.

Kass HALASTANIS: In the case of our municipality, it is the distance also that volunteers need to drive to collect food. In Dandenong there is the Foodbank facility that is available, but for many of the volunteers that provide food relief in Knox, that distance to access that food is much longer. We have, as I mentioned earlier, our pilot food hub in Wantirna, which is much more accessible for our local volunteers. So the distance to collect food is another issue for municipalities like Knox that do not have a Foodbank hub in their local council area. That has been a significant change, which is why in our submission we highlight very strongly that investment in smaller regional food hubs is going to be paramount in making food distribution much more accessible and efficient for our food relief agencies.

Importantly, though, for Knox, the food hub that is being piloted in our local area has been instrumental in collecting and distributing food in our immediate municipality, but it has now extended its reach to our neighbouring municipalities – to Maroondah and Yarra Ranges – so it actually presents a solution to that collection and distribution not just in our immediate municipality but to our neighbouring municipalities with whom we collaborate quite strongly.

Ryan BATCHELOR: Thanks, Chair.

The CHAIR: Marshall.

Marshall BENSON: The food relief services in Maribyrnong face very similar challenges. Just to add to Kass and Therese’s comments, the honest truth is that funding – sustainable funding – would provide an immediate return on investment for government in terms of impact. But also, when we think more strategically around things like the wraparound services and a systemic approach, there are things like expanding related initiatives that would also help residents, such as farmers’ markets. We run a My Smart Garden program, which enhances accessibility of fresh, locally grown products for local residents. Other things, such as supporting urban agriculture initiatives – we have the Footscray community garden where unused public land is then repurposed and converted into public spaces. There is a food literacy program that could be run. Also incentivising things like sustainable practices in the sense of providing grants for local businesses that source products from local producers, akin to Merri-bek’s zero waste to landfill initiative. And the other bit around that relates to services is that community engagement and support. Darebin had their successful food hubs model, so organising community workshops and forums to engage citizens works well in terms of food security planning and implementation. We think that could also assist.

The CHAIR: Thank you. Aiv, do you want to start questions?

Aiv PUGLIELLI: Thank you, Chair. Good morning. Just to pick up quickly, Marshall, when you say ‘sustainable funding’, that is beyond year to year, right – that is ongoing long-term commitments?

Marshall BENSON: Yes. While we all appreciate the \$2.5 million in the budget that was for community houses, yes, sustainable, long-term funding.

Aiv PUGLIELLI: Sure – just to be very clear for the report at the end. You are here representing three different councils from across the state. In all three of your submissions in some form you have recommended that the state government regulate supermarket profits and essential groceries or that legislative measures need to be taken to address price gouging by the major supermarkets; specifically in the case of Dandenong, make food more affordable by allowing the Essential Services Commission to regulate supermarkets – ESC could set maximum profit margins on essential grocery items; Knox, welcoming the passage of the supermarket industry Bill, a Greens Bill that has just been through the exposure draft stage, bringing the supermarkets under the coverage of the *Essential Services Commission Act 2001* and also establishing a commission on prices and competition to examine prices and price-setting practice of industries; and then for Maribyrnong, again, enabling the Essential Services Commission to monitor and regulate supermarket prices and profit margins for essential grocery items. It sounds great to me. Why is it important that these steps are taken by the state government?

Kass HALASTANIS: Our local experience and what we are hearing from all of our food relief providers and our community members in responding to our survey last year, it clearly spells out to us that the prices at supermarkets are far too high and people simply cannot afford to purchase there. So offering local solutions, perhaps through local farmers – in our neighbouring municipality in Yarra Ranges we have food producers and food growers. Being able to access food in the local area that is not determined by supermarkets would allow our local community and our food relief providers to potentially access much cheaper food. We are hearing really clearly that the prices set at supermarkets, people simply cannot afford. Seventy per cent of our survey respondents clearly articulated that that was a significant barrier.

Aiv PUGLIELLI: Thank you. With respect to the major supermarkets, do you think that there should be an obligation that the food that they are providing to Victorians is affordable, and do we think that the supermarkets are fulfilling that obligation?

Kass HALASTANIS: There certainly ought to be an obligation, but are they fulfilling that obligation?

Aiv PUGLIELLI: At least from what you have heard from your residents, do you think that is the case?

Kass HALASTANIS: Absolutely not. They are not fulfilling that obligation, and that is an obligation they ought to be fulfilling.

Therese WATSON: I think if we look at a ‘healthy food basket’ – Monash Health quite a number of years ago put a cost on a healthy food basket, and I believe that that cost has gone up exponentially. I do not want to state figures here because I do not want to get it wrong, but if we had a healthy food basket with those basic necessities that everyone needs to be healthy and they were regulated, then people could afford food. To be able to go and buy eggs or milk or bread and the basic stuff that we need, I mean, it is in our report – the cost of milk has gone up by X per cent and this has gone up by X per cent over the period of time. And wages have not gone up with that. There has been an increase in Australian services benefits, but it has not kept up with CPI over the time, so people in that space are behind the eight ball, and then with minimum wages and people underemployed in our community they just cannot afford the basics a lot of the time.

Aiv PUGLIELLI: Meanwhile profits increase.

Therese WATSON: Profits increase, and I know large companies have to bow to their investors and make profits, but how much profit does one company actually really need?

Aiv PUGLIELLI: Hear, hear. Something that also came up earlier – Kass, you mentioned investment in local solutions. Do you think the state government should be investing directly in non-private sector operated – we heard about social supermarkets yesterday or community supermarkets – community options to provide competition to the major supermarkets in your communities?

Kass HALASTANIS: In the Knox area we are part of an outer regional food dialogue, which involves Maroondah council, Yarra Ranges council, Knox council and DFFH as part of this discussion. One of the solutions that is being proposed but does need to be investigated more carefully is whether our local producers, particularly those in Yarra Ranges, can work with our food relief providers and our local councils to provide some innovative local solutions around the provision of food, whether that be through local farmers' markets or whether that be through open supermarkets that are much more affordable for local communities. But certainly the local economy and the local food producers in the outer-east area ought to be explored in a lot more detail. We can see that there would be opportunity, but that requires a lot more investment.

Aiv PUGLIELLI: Thank you.

The CHAIR: Thank you. Rachel, a question please.

Rachel PAYNE: Chair, thank you. Thank you to all who have presented today. Your information is really helpful and valuable in making recommendations to government. I think I would also just like to acknowledge a lot of the local initiatives that are really responsive and creative that you have all discussed today. In my own personal experience, I have been to the Noble Park Community Centre quite a few times, and I think that there is so much being done that is allowing people to have that accessibility. One example I would add there is the accessible garden beds for people who are living with disability – having raised garden beds for wheelchair accessibility – and I do applaud you for some of those initiatives. Going back, something you have referred to in each of your submissions is sustainable funding and investment from the state government in these local initiatives and infrastructure. Can you just talk us through what work has been done in this space and what needs to be done and where you see sustainable funding would facilitate that?

Marshall BENSON: For Maribyrnong the work that has been done in this space is mainly around advocacy. Our food and equality network, which was set up a few years ago, meets regularly with community houses and internally to workshop what sorts of solutions we can implement within our means. But we have to work within our means is what I am trying to say. So we are sort of limited with the tools we have at our disposal to effect that.

Therese WATSON: I guess we see food relief as a 'have to have' because there is a human right to food. I want to see sustainable funding or funding for initiatives that help people out of that cycle of dependence – education, employment and other programs. For our community in particular, learning the English language, there are a lot more barriers than for a lot of other communities. We are establishing a new life here and it takes time. For us in Dandenong the solutions are in local place-based initiatives that work alongside the communities and co-design work with the community, with our different cultural groups, trying to really understand the problems from their perspective and what they need to get themselves out of that cycle of dependence. Not a universal program that tells them what they have to do or need but programs that actually really listen to the community and what they have to say about their needs and how they get from A to B. I think our community is ready. They want it so badly, but people are not listening to them. They want to move – they do not want to be where they are. They want the best lives for their children.

Rachel PAYNE: Yes.

Therese WATSON: The solutions lie in local place-based collaborative work, participatory work and people just all coming together and really listening to the community. Let them come up with their solutions, because they have got them.

Rachel PAYNE: Yes, it makes sense, and it does break down those barriers of accessibility, as you mentioned earlier. Great. Thank you.

Kass HALASTANIS: Just to add that, I think in working with the food relief providers and speaking with local community members, it is clear that a lot of the local food relief providers can spell out what the solutions are. They know what it would take to solve some of these issues. So sustainable funding needs to really be directed towards facilitating partnerships between food relief providers and local agencies. We do hear and talk a lot about, for example, providing culturally appropriate food solutions. We know from our experience in Knox we do have culturally appropriate food relief providers, and being able to invest in the kinds of partnerships that would facilitate better collaboration and better coordination between our ethno-specific food

relief organisations and the mainstream food relief organisations would be a really exciting opportunity to address some of those issues.

Additionally, in Knox we have the second largest representation of First Nations people in the eastern metropolitan region. We also know that if we tapped into some of the solutions that are offered by First Nations people in the outer east with partnership development with larger food relief providers and with other organisations, community-based organisations, again there would be really innovative approaches, but 12-month funding is not going to allow for that. Twelve-month funding is really a bandaid on a bleeding wound. It really does not facilitate long-term innovative solutions. So sustainable investment in local, place based – I think we are all sharing the same views here. We know our communities can pretty much come together and solve or present some solutions to some of these important issues and complex issues, but there is no investment.

Marshall BENSON: If I can also just quickly add that the scarcity in sustainable funding means that there is no long-term planning and we rely more and more on volunteers and well-meaning part-time workers. Sustainable funding would allow us to think strategically and plan strategically about how to deliver the best solutions in the best ways – culturally appropriate ways or most efficient ways – and provide people with that certainty, not just in terms of service delivery but also production and the logistics around the food security framework.

Rachel PAYNE: I mean, we could talk all day on this, and this is a topic that I am really interested in. But also the positives of that create community and connection and obviously better health outcomes, so it is an investment in our communities. Thank you for your time today.

The CHAIR: Thank you, Rachel. Lee.

Lee TARLAMIS: Again, I just want to add my [Zoom dropout] contributions today as well. It has been really invaluable. It has covered a lot of areas. I know there has been a lot of discussion around place-based initiatives that are co-designed around food literacy and things like that. I am aware of a number of the initiatives particularly around Greater Dandenong. Rachel touched on the Noble Park Community Centre's accessible garden. There is the Maralinga Community Garden, and there is also the program that is being run with AMES and Wellsprings at the AMES facility where they are trying to grow that.

I am just wondering whether there is more that can be done around that food literacy and education. I know in a previous iteration I spent a lot of time with the local Benevolent Society doing home visits for people, and one of the things that we found was people were buying packaged food that was working out to be more expensive, because they did not have that experience in terms of cooking meals to make food go further. I wonder if there is more that can be done in that.

In saying that, I am cognisant that many of the organisations that provide food relief and assistance are being called on to do a lot more with a lot less, so is there more that we can do in that space around those community gardens and educative programs? I am also conscious of the point that was made by Therese earlier and how it is a big step to come and ask for food relief, and we are seeing more and more people from not necessarily lower socio-economic backgrounds coming for food relief. When they do take that step, if you have not got somewhere that can have that holistic approach to connect them up with other providers, you miss that opportunity. Is there more that we can be doing in that space in a more coordinated way?

Therese WATSON: Definitely. Just to give an example for the City of Greater Dandenong, we were approached by L'Oréal – they are in South Dandenong. They were putting in a biodiversity garden in their car park, and they approached us at council and we were able to connect them with three or four different organisations that provided food relief, and so there are now a group of women that are going to that garden. L'Oréal paid for it, built it, did everything. They are gardening, they are learning those skills, there are classes associated with it. They are getting the produce from the garden, and then they are able to go and share it with their community. So there is an opportunity for businesses in South Dandenong, particularly for us, where they do have spaces where they can put in more biodiversity gardens and that kind of thing, and you link the education around food to that.

Another comment I would like to make: recently we had Foodbank come with their Farms to Families markets, which are fabulous, but they had pumpkin. Our Afghan community do not eat pumpkin; they did not know

what to do with this pumpkin. So at North Dandenong Neighbourhood House, Golsum, one of the women there, did classes on learning how to eat pumpkin, how to cook pumpkin, what you do with pumpkin. It is a small thing, but it creates that cross-cultural connection, and it actually educates the community at the same time.

There is an educative piece that we need to do around healthy eating, and I know in our submission we mentioned food labelling. You need a degree to read a food label these days, and our community needs something really simple on the food label like you have on washing machines and stuff, with a dial on it that says 'healthy' or 'not healthy' or something so you can really easily tell that something is of value to you and so you are not wasting your money on things that are not nutritionally good for you.

Kass HALASTANIS: We have a couple of examples in Knox of food relief providers who are doing just that. They have coordinated training programs, but they do not necessarily call them food literacy programs. One of them, for example, Foothills Community Care, has a community education program directly targeting young women who are survivors of domestic violence, and it provides a point of social connection for them and empowers them to rebuild their lives over cooking and teaching them how to make their dollar stretch and extend their small budgets to cover meals for their families. That is one really powerful example in Knox. Another one, Feed One Feed All, is a food relief organisation in Knox who are a supplier of cooked meals. They are now designing a program where they will be teaching various community groups how to cook on a low budget. So we have some really good examples coming through Knox, and certainly, again, it is an issue of investing, because these programs are also run by volunteers.

Marshall BENSON: Yes. I agree with those comments. More can always be done. Maribyrnong have looked at food nutrition programs through community houses, schools and libraries, for example, and whether or not and how we can engage the community through those areas to improve their literacy and education in this area.

Lee TARLAMIS: Thank you. I am just conscious of time, so I might leave my questioning there.

The CHAIR: Thank you, Lee. Thank you very much. Time has caught up with us, so thank you so much for your submissions and your time today giving evidence. I understand all the councils have been doing quite a workload to assist your constituents in the area covering food relief. We got your submission relating to education, seed-planting programs and your advocacy for sustainable funding; thank you so much for your time. We will take that into consideration regarding our recommendations down the track as well, so thank you.

Witnesses withdrew.