

TRANSCRIPT

LEGISLATIVE COUNCIL ENVIRONMENT AND PLANNING COMMITTEE

Inquiry into the 2022 Flood Event in Victoria

Seymour – Thursday 14 September 2023

MEMBERS

Sonja Terpstra – Chair

David Ettershank – Deputy Chair

Ryan Batchelor

Melina Bath

Gaelle Broad

Wendy Lovell

Samantha Ratnam

Rikkie-Lee Tyrrell

Sheena Watt

PARTICIPATING MEMBERS

John Berger

Ann-Marie Hermans

Joe McCracken

Evan Mulholland

Rachel Payne

WITNESSES

Cr Fiona Stevens, Mayor,

Brett Luxford, Chief Executive Officer, and

Kellie Massouras, Flood Recovery Manager, Mitchell Shire Council;

Cr Laura Binks, Mayor,

Amanda Tingay, Director, People and Governance,

Rachael Frampton, Acting Director, Community and Planning, Strathbogie Shire Council; and

Cr John Walsh, Mayor, and

Peter Bain, Manager, Sustainability and Assets, Murrindindi Shire Council.

The CHAIR: Good morning, everyone. I declare open the committee's public hearing for the Inquiry into the 2022 Flood Event in Victoria. This public hearing is for the Environment and Planning Committee, an all-party committee of the Parliament looking into the October flood event. We will be providing a report to Parliament, which will include recommendations to the government. Please ensure that mobile phones have been switched to silent and that background noise is minimised.

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

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

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

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

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

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

Rikkie-Lee TYRRELL: Good morning. I am Rikkie-Lee Tyrrell, Member for Northern Victoria Region.

Samantha RATNAM: Good morning, everyone. Samantha Ratnam, Member for Northern Metropolitan.

Melina BATH: Melina Bath, Member for Eastern Victoria.

The CHAIR: Great. Well, with that, I will now hand over to you to give your opening remarks. Could I ask whoever is speaking to please state your name and the organisation you are representing for the Hansard record, and I will also give you a 2-minute warning as we approach the end of your time for this session. Over to you.

Fiona STEVENS: Thank you very much. I am Fiona Stevens. I am the Mayor of Mitchell shire. Thank you for the opportunity to present before this important inquiry and to hear the voice of the community. We

sincerely appreciate the fact that you have brought proceedings to us, which gives comfort that you truly value our input and also provides the opportunity for interested and impacted locals to attend if they are up to it. My challenge is to do justice in sharing a complex and catastrophic event and ongoing impacts that have occurred over the last 12 months in about 10 minutes. To assist, I will only speak to a couple of key issues. But in doing so, I ask: if you have not already, please make time to read our submission. It contains 35 recommendations and significant details. Please request any additional information that may be of assistance to you. I would also like to highlight that you will hear from our neighbours Murrindindi and Strathbogie, who will speak to many shared concerns, common and relevant to the three shires. I wish to state that we support their views on those matters if I do not speak to them.

A very brief snapshot of Mitchell shire: our southern boundary is Beveridge and Wallan, and to the north, Seymour and surrounds. We extend east and west, and there are five major towns, primarily along the Hume Highway, and several smaller townships and smaller rural communities. We are a growth council, with the southern section in the urban growth boundary and the centre and the north also growing but identified as heavy rural. We have many waterways following through our shire. It is made up of three wards – the south, central and north. Our population currently sits at 50,000 and is expected to be 180,000 within the next 20 years.

The future of Mitchell is highly challenging. We have significant disadvantage in the north; under-servicing throughout; a massive road network, both sealed and unsealed; and ageing and crumbling infrastructure whilst trying to provide best planning practice for the growth demand, taking on responsibility for an additional 50 million assets every year. Our community was heavily impacted by COVID and was locked down more than elsewhere because of our proximity to Melbourne. We have a history of severe impacts and challenges from disastrous events of multiple fires and flooding.

The event of 2022 – Seymour was the first major town to be impacted by the October 2022 floods. Over three days, 166 millimetres of rain fell within the relevant catchment areas. The Goulburn River at Seymour peaked at 8.26 metres in the early hours of Friday 14 October. The flooding rose significantly and faster than expected, to a much higher level than predicted, with the alarming and perilous changes occurring primarily throughout the night. As such, the community were caught totally off guard. They were not prepared for the speed and the height, and the incorrect and unreliable previous and inconsistent predictions – delivered at irregular intervals and not sticking to the times that they said they were going to announce them – resulted in distress and confusion. Council activated the relief centre at Chittick Park sports stadium in Seymour at 4 pm on Thursday the 13th. Within the first 24 hours 150 people attended the centre. The centre remained open for seven days, with many residing there, including travellers who were caught up and stranded and who stayed in their caravans parked in the car park. A number of domestic animals also had to be accommodated.

Ultimately more than 254 homes and businesses were flooded above floor level. Hundreds of kilometres of roads were significantly damaged, with more than 50 roads closed during the event and for a considerable time thereafter. The cost of the roads alone was in excess of \$3 million. Sixty-seven community facilities were damaged. One in particular was a regional sporting facility close by, Kings Park, which is home to 19 community groups. It was completely inundated. Two heritage buildings were majorly impacted, with community user groups such as the historical society, arts society, visitor information centre and spinners and weavers losing significant documents and private artworks and equipment. The Vietnam veterans walk precinct and outdoor swimming pools were totally inundated also, requiring major and extensive costly repairs.

The primary business area in the middle of town was inundated with over-floor flooding or cut off so that businesses could not be accessed or operated. The economic impacts are obvious. The 24-hour police station for the area was inaccessible, unless by boat, and the underground level was totally flooded. Two major riverfront parks were totally destroyed, with hundreds of trees uprooted. Many were huge 100-year-old red gums. Wildlife was lost. Infrastructure was damaged by water and debris. When the water receded, these prized riverfront parks looked like ghostly, abandoned and totally destroyed battlefields. Those I have mentioned are only a snapshot of the total impact to our community and what they suffered. Even from this small account, the massive extent of the impact to people's lives, both financially and mentally, is obvious.

I will speak to our response, relief and recovery challenges. Whilst the Seymour community rallied to support each other, there were some significant challenges around the response, relief and recovery. Bureaucratic red tape delayed urgently needed assistance and authorisation for actions. Our community was in crisis and did not understand this. They were frustrated and angry and were caused more distress when we could not act swiftly.

It was our community who first took action. It should not be up to them, and there are significant risks that go with that. The ADF were not activated until days later, and they are 10 minutes up the road. This is no criticism of them; it is the process that is flawed and desperately needs reviewing.

Mitchell Shire Council's submission to this committee highlights 35 recommendations, which if implemented, would fundamentally transform future events by supporting community resilience, ensuring place-based responses to events and enabling better post-disaster support to communities, councils and others. I would like to take this opportunity to briefly highlight some of the key issues we feel need to be resolved. We had a remote ICC – incident control centre. The lack of a local, Seymour-based incident control centre was a serious failing. A local crisis deserves locally focused response and coordination. Without an ICC on the ground locally, the speed and focus that we needed meant our urgent needs were not being met, and as things progressed, the transition from response to recovery was severely delayed and compromised. The community deserve better.

Along with this, the inability of the ICCs to allow remote access is totally unacceptable in this day and age. It placed yet another unnecessary, time-consuming pressure on council. It was extremely difficult to try to tap into and to ensure that our voice could be heard at a time when it was imperative that we could be heard. We were madly trying to manage a crisis in response, and they were preparing for an event that had not even yet hit. Our priorities and stages of crisis were poles apart, and as such, we were competing in an unequal environment. This lack of knowledge and the need for an ICC in Seymour has perpetuated the community belief that Seymour was significantly forgotten.

Another example of our lack of importance was when, despite being first impacted, our community was not included in the Homes for Homes program until after Shepparton. Our community was left out of the \$16 million housing taskforce. Our council has not been included in any betterment funding opportunities, and many of our community have still not been able to return to their homes, with 75 homes still vacant. One of the saddest things was that members of our community were forced to leave Seymour to find temporary accommodation. Communities make people stronger, and forcing them to leave their support networks only made the event even more traumatic. As if they had not suffered enough, we sent them in this crisis away from their comfort and their support networks. It is not unreasonable to expect equal and fair treatment during an emergency and recovery. However, Seymour strongly feels that our crisis and our needs were ignored.

Finally, an underinvestment in our volunteer services means that the ability to fulfil the role was significantly hindered despite all our volunteers going above and beyond. Mitchell Shire Council had to step up and support the SES in doorknocking and in phone calling to cover for this underinvestment. Other roles were taken on when the allocated or legislated service was unable to do so, such as registration of evacuees when the Red Cross could not attend the initial event. They attended days later.

The CHAIR: You have 2 minutes.

Fiona STEVENS: This is not a criticism of them; it is to highlight the flaws of the current system. The impacts of the flood were exacerbated by the pre-existing challenges this community faces. Seymour is one of the most disadvantaged townships. Despite this, there is a serious lack of local services, particularly mental health and wellbeing. The recovery hub, which we speak in today, has provided a coordinated space to help build resilience and recovery. However, this is not permanent. Once it closes, we will be forgotten again. Funding needs to be delivered so infrastructure can support the community to build resilience.

In conclusion, please find time to read our council's submission. It will significantly assist you and inform you of our important decisions ahead. Please take note of our 35 recommendations – I have not had a chance to speak to them all. Please note that we support a number of mutual concerns with other presenters, particularly around the management of the Eildon Dam; ICC failure; late or poor messaging, or no messaging at all; the inability of stakeholders to perform their allocated roles due to under-resourcing and underfunding; responsibilities needing to be clarified; significant funding for training allocated; increased gauges on tributary waterways; and increased funding to all stakeholders to give a genuine chance of effective and genuine emergency planning and response.

Please understand this event happened nearly 12 months ago. The water is gone, but the distress and the disruption to our community remains. The work of this committee is extremely important. It is for all of us to reflect on and learn from the October floods, and I hope that your report will be the first step forward to

ensuring that future events are handled to an extremely high and effective standard and do not cause the heartbreaking significant harm this one did. Thank you for listening, and I am happy to answer any questions.

The CHAIR: Thank you for those opening remarks. All right. Who would like to go next?

John WALSH: You go next.

Laura BINKS: Thank you, John. Hello. I am Laura Binks, and I am the Mayor at Strathbogie shire. I too would like to acknowledge traditional owners. Strathbogie shire sits across Taungurung and Yorta Yorta country, and the knowledge of First Nations people I think is so important to how we manage our landscapes. We really welcome and cherish our working relationship with those communities.

Strathbogie shire was one of the first municipalities that was impacted by the 2022 October floods, with over 200 millimetres of rain falling in the Strathbogie Ranges, which was falling onto a really wet, already very full catchment that had experienced a much higher average of rainfall for a couple of years, really. We were just in a really wet time. On the same day, we had Euroa with a major power outage across the township for more than 6 hours due to a fallen tree across the town's electricity feeder. So before we got the flood, we were already without power for over 6 hours. We experienced the Hume Freeway being closed in both directions, which made access to the community obviously quite difficult.

I probably should give you a bit of an overview of our shire. We expand from right on the border of Seymour – just the other side – all the way up to between Violet Town and Benalla, plus south and north as well. We have this really broad area. Both the Goulburn freeway and the Hume Freeway run through us. We go from the ranges right out to the flats, where we had that more creeping flooding experience as well. We have this real difference of experience right across the shire.

With the rain falling into that catchment in the Strathbogie Ranges, the Seven Creeks peaked at Euroa at 543 metres in the early hours of Friday 14 October, so a similar time to the Goulburn peaking in Seymour. As per the Goulburn and the experience down here, the flooding rose faster than expected and to a much higher level than predicted. The community were not prepared for the speed and the height, and the combination of inconsistent predictions delivered at irregular intervals resulted in quite a lot of confusion amongst our community. As well as the Seven's catchment rising we had the Hughes Creek rising in Avenel. We did not have very much information on that catchment, and those flood warnings were initially a lot more irregular and we certainly had a lot of distress in the community in Avenel because we were not able to get the information as to what was happening in the Hughes Creek catchment. It created quite a lot of distress within that community. Then further along we had the Goulburn coming through the communities – Tabilk and obviously Nagambie, which was really heavily impacted.

Council received 262 calls to report water over the road and trees down during the flood, with officers working around the clock responding to calls for help. We also know that our local SES received over 200 calls in that initial period as well. Council opened a relief centre in Euroa from 7 pm on Thursday the 13th and a relief staging area at Avenel for displaced residents who could not get to Euroa because, as I mentioned, the Hume was closed, as were other minor roads. We had 20 people attend across the two sites, and the Euroa relief centre remained open until Saturday, 16 October at 10 am.

More than 40 homes were inundated and more than 100 homes were impacted across the Euroa, Avenel and Nagambie area. More than 27 community facilities were impacted, over 10,000 hectares of farmland was devastated and more than 80 primary producers required assistance and financial supports. However, I know from personal experience that far more people in our agricultural industry were impacted. I have had many, many residents talk to me and say that they just did not access the assistance because they have tried in the past and they find the process incredibly challenging and difficult. I know farmers with destroyed fences that have just paid for it out of pocket because the stress in that time frame to actually go through the processes required was too burdensome for them.

During the October flood event council officers provided updates almost hourly through our website and social media channels. We text messaged and even did letterbox drops. This led to an increase in our social media reach of more than 175 per cent during October 2022. I would say that this response was led incredibly efficiently by our team at council through us sifting through the information that we could gain, either through

the Bureau of Meteorology updates or other sources that we were able to access, and we had not just council officers but also councillors sharing the information that we had when we had it available to us.

We have hundreds of kilometres of roads that have been damaged, with more than 25 roads closed, during the flood. Businesses across the region were shut down, some for the foreseeable future. Council has worked with 20 businesses across our shire who have been adversely impacted. More than 200 roads across our shire need repairs, with many roads unable to be navigated safely without significant reductions in speed. In fact we are still seeing the impacts coming to light as those road networks dry out and we are getting more landslips and more sinkholes in our road network. The impact was so damaging, especially in that period, immediately after and into the Christmas period, that council was forced to enact a force majeure closure on our road management and tree management plans, because we were not able to keep the roads or the trees to the standards required under those two plans. On top of that we had 136.42 tonnes, or 593 cubic metres, of flood waste collected at our transfer stations, and we are still getting inquiries relating to flood waste now.

Communities within Strathbogie shire galvanised through this event, with more than 150 people attending initial recovery meetings immediately after the events. We had our first community recovery meeting on Saturday 16 October. I think the thing to note that is quite different about the experience, I guess – I know you have been further out on the flats – is that where we were, we had the experience of the flood coming through very quickly, very heavily. And then the water was receding and we had the clean-up of the mess and people were able to – it was again safe – travel on roads, albeit at greatly reduced speed. But we were in action – the work of our officers and fellow councillors – in that time. We basically had a week where no-one was stopping because the floods moved on, and you had to get into action, into the recovery response.

The community want answers. They want to know what is happening, where the opportunities are and where they should go for the information. The community showed a strong desire and willingness to support one another, often finding innovative solutions to solve problems, address gaps and provide assistance. This was particularly evident in communities that were well planned and had clear flood plans and responsibilities in place. Council continues to deliver recovery services across the municipality.

The adequacy and effectiveness of early warning systems is something that we would like to raise. In the lead-up to the October flood event, council's emergency management team was watching the early forecast data from the BOM closely. This information ensured council was on the front foot, an example being that we had hired and installed portable generators at potential emergency relief centres before the rain hit.

The CHAIR: You have 2 minutes.

Laura BINKS: Okay. Thank you. That went quickly. We were doing things in advance to try and ensure that we had that lead-up.

I think the thing that is really significant in Strathbogie shire is we have one SES unit, which is located in Euroa. It has a small number of active members and it is expected to cover townships including Nagambie, which is over 45 kilometres away, Violet Town, Avenel, Longwood and Strathbogie. We know that they were called out to all those regions. We also had the CFA stepping up and assisting the SES to help fill the gaps and distribute sandbags and assist as much as they could. The local knowledge was incredibly important in this event, and we could not have done the work without the work of the volunteers, I guess, as council.

Like Mitchell, the remote ICC that has been spoken about – we were told we were going to get one. We never got one, and then we had to rely on the one based in Shepparton, which seemed to have a focus perhaps on the flooding that was yet to occur rather than which was happening in our region right at that time – so there was just a bit of a gap in that. We also had the experience of the Hume regional emergency management team meetings that were ad hoc, with little consistency or communication regarding future meetings and the BOM intelligence. So we just did not have, I guess, that consistency and comprehensive data that we could rely on to be able to know what were the best moves for us to make. As a result our officers stood up and did incredible work to ensure that our community was safe and we were doing the best we could for our community.

There is more which you will have read in our submission, and I encourage you to read it again. We did ensure that our submission was very close to the terms of reference, but there are some items that I think are really important. The importance of volunteering – I know that was not part of the submission, but we know the importance of volunteering, especially in our communities. We need better support for that happening – to be

able to have these people enacted in emergencies. Multi-agency data sharing – that was a massive challenge for us. We had to collect data and then we had the Fire Rescue Victoria collecting data, and we could not share that data. So those opportunities – we need to have a central service. Betterment – we have been speaking about it for years.

And then emergency preparedness: as a councillor, as the Mayor talking to people – we were putting out warnings a week before the flood hit – we were getting criticised that we were overreacting. And then in the aftermath I had numerous people tell me, ‘Well, we just didn’t think it’d be that bad.’ I think there is a real gap between the preparation that we do for bushfire and then what we do for flood and storms. I think there is a real opportunity to have flood emergency kits and to have people really thinking about ‘What do we do?’ We know that you are not meant to drive in floodwaters. People still do it. Most of the calls our SES team – they are a few more in number now, but at the time they were about a team of 10. They were calling people who had driven into floodwaters, and it is just the most inappropriate thing for them to be doing in the midst of an emergency. So I think there is a real opportunity for –

The CHAIR: I am going to have to pull you up there, sorry.

Laura BINKS: flood emergency preparedness.

The CHAIR: We will read the submission. Sorry about that, but I thought it was important just to hear that. Over to you, your opening remarks – and I will give you the 2-minute warning as we get towards the end of your time. Over to you.

John WALSH: Thank you very much, and thank you for the opportunity to present to you today. I am John Walsh, the Mayor of Murrindindi Shire Council, and with me today is Peter Bain, who is the Manager of Sustainability and Assets. Unfortunately, our Acting CEO Andrew Paxton has fallen ill and is unable to join us.

Pertinent to today’s discussion, the eastern boundary of Murrindindi shire starts at the foot of the Lake Eildon dam wall. The Goulburn River then runs west through the shire between mountain ranges, with numerous valley tributaries like Rubicon River, Acheron River and the Yea and Murrindindi rivers all contributing to the Goulburn River flows. At or near the confluences of each of these tributaries there are townships like Thornton, Acheron and Yea, and along the river valleys there are farms and caravan parks and smaller localities like Molesworth. The immediacy of the dam wall and the potential for flash flooding along the tributaries mean that our time to react to flood events is measured in hours, not days or weeks, as was the case for communities further downstream.

Leading up to 12 October there had been consistent, higher-than-usual rainfall on already-sodden land, and all creeks and rivers in the area and Lake Eildon were rising. In the first week of October council had been given a briefing on SES and other emergency services and their preparations to mitigate flooding should heavy rain continue. The emphasis was on the establishment of an incident control centre and the roles of each of these services and local government. The presentation provided what turned out to be an unwarranted level of confidence that we were ready for what might happen.

The high rainfall meant that Goulburn–Murray Water were exceeding their planned filling curve, and to create an air space for further expected rainfall Goulburn–Murray Water were releasing water at 12,000 megalitres per day, just below the minor flood level on the Goulburn. Water in the tributaries was rising rapidly. Again, by 12 October, flooding along the valleys was starting to occur, because water was backing up from the junctions, as the Goulburn was running at capacity because of the releases out of the dam. Later on 12 October Goulburn–Murray Water reduced the outflows to try to reduce the pressure on the tributaries and allow some water to escape. Rain continued to fall, with isolated storms in Lake Eildon’s catchment and in the hills to the south of the Goulburn, so that by the late afternoon of 13 October Goulburn–Murray Water started to rapidly increase the outflows of the lake above the flood level, which reached most downstream farms and townships during the night.

There was no system in place to warn residents along the river of the changed outflows, and many were caught unawares. Across the shire, roads were being cut and the problems with the ICC started to emerge. Because of the flooding, the shire’s emergency management liaison officer could not get to the ICC, which would normally be the place he would go to, and as the ICC had no online communications, there was no way to allow remote

access to emergency briefings. Attempts were made to use mobile phone links, but this proved unsuitable for coordination meetings. Emails became the normal means until road access was restored.

The ICC, the Bureau of Meteorology and Goulburn–Murray Water were blind to the problems along the tributaries, because most have no flow gauges nor telemetry links. Advice of changes to Lake Eildon release rates above 12,500 megalitres per day were only passed on by Goulburn–Murray Water to the bureau, as the bureau are responsible for producing weather-related emergency warnings. The inherent delays caused problems as people tried to recover or feed stranded cattle, not knowing when river levels would change. It is essential that flow gauges are installed, with telemetry links to provide access to up-to-date data. Ms Beer, who will be talking to you later, will enlarge upon this in her submission.

The local community radio UGFM proved one of the more effective means of keeping the community up to date, because it was basically setting up a shire-wide telephone chain so that locals could phone in details of issues and then through UGFM they would be rebroadcast. So it was in that way only that we had a means to keep people advised. It appears the ICC was inadequately staffed, as requests for help through the ICC fell on deaf ears – very much the same as both Mitchell and Strathbogie have brought out.

Murrindindi was ignored and left to fend for itself. By way of example, a request to Emergency Management Victoria on 24 October, nearly two weeks later, for assistance to help fill sandbags to protect Thornton, which was still under threat because of the high outflows from the dam, was denied, with the claim that the threat was not immediate and paid staff are not usually tasked to help with private assets. This was a township. Officers were left feeling that Murrindindi had been abandoned for the larger municipalities, resulting in council having to deploy staff to perform SES activities and plead for community volunteers, who thankfully came along but were unaffiliated with any agency and at the peril of inadequate risk assessments and liability cover. Again, as has already been mentioned, the feeling was that the ICC was totally focused on preparing for what was coming to Shepparton, which is understandable, but there must be a realisation that they should also be able to cover current activities and emergencies.

Goulburn–Murray Water and the Bureau of Meteorology and SES should jointly provide timely release volumes and better early warning of potential flooding when Goulburn–Murray Water releases water from Eildon. An emergency warning was released through the VicEmergency app, but this did not specify the release volume and only reached those people who proactively monitored the app.

What is needed when releases exceed 12,000 megalitres per day or above the minor flood level is a notice to the SES of the actual projected megalitres per day that are going to be released and for an urgent text message to go out to everyone within the catchment. Goulburn–Murray Water should also publish that information on their Facebook account and push it to the local emergency broadcaster and SES units. There appeared to be some reluctance to do this because it was feared that if false expectations were raised and not confirmed by the regulator – in this case, the bureau – somehow or other Goulburn–Murray Water could be sued down the track. So we are trading off the potential to give early warning with the fear that perhaps the issues might not come to fruition and then someone is going to get blamed for unnecessary stock movements or something like that. This is the fear that was being projected at the time.

The SES in our local area is the lead agency in a flood event, but on 13 October their officers were told too late about the drastic and sudden increase in the release volume. In an event like this, council's local flood management infrastructure, such as culverts, detention basins and wetlands, are unable to cope. Like most across the country, they were designed for pre-climate change storm intensities, and the storm that hit the broader catchment was well above the one-in-100 level. The consequence is that council and the state lost other important infrastructure like roads and bridges through uncontrolled overflows. Our damage bill is looking like \$25 million to \$30 million, and this does not include repairs to roads damaged by the rain but not directly flooded.

It is contended that Goulburn–Murray Water did not give a sufficient weight to its responsibilities regarding flood mitigation, and Mr Meggitt of Goulburn River Trout will cover this issue in more detail later. But the focus of Goulburn–Murray Water to run up the lake so high in winter and spring was a clear contributor to the outcome. However, since we made our original submission, it is pleasing that a review of options to change the Lake Eildon filling curve to allow greater available airspace to reduce the risk of flooding is presently being undertaken.

The necessity of releasing water in pulses ignored the downstream consequences of such actions, from erosion to inundation. Sudden surcharges along a watercourse will always result in bank erosion, with sediment, vegetation and other debris being caught up in the flows, which only compounds the events. The major example of that in our case was the heritage bridge at Acheron – the Breakaway Bridge has been severely damaged and will probably take time and cost millions to repair. Meanwhile the community is split in two.

Finally, the bank erosion has reduced the level at which releases and river flows will cause minor flooding, as demonstrated last January when recently replanted pastures were again inundated and farmers lost money through that despite releases being then below what was previously the normal flood levels. So a review of this management process is direly needed.

In summary, if I may, we need greater emphasis on flood mitigation in the management of the Lake Eildon water levels, we need flow metres and telemetry links for all the tributaries into the Goulburn, we need improved communications with backups for emergency management teams, and flood recovery funding needs to be provided to also provide long-term resilience.

The CHAIR: Thank you very much. Thank you all for those opening remarks. Now it will be over to committee members to ask you questions. We have a long period of time for that, and I am sure there will be lots of questions. Over to you, Ms Broad.

Gaelle BROAD: Thank you very much. Thank you all for presenting today. I think what is helpful to keep in mind is that if there was just one of your councils with an event like this, it would be significant, but this is just such a huge disaster across such a big area. So I just want to recognise the impact on each of your communities and really appreciate that.

I guess just at a higher level, there are so many different areas, and one of the questions that was raised at the hearing yesterday was ‘Who’s in charge?’ In an event like this, who is in charge? As far as councils go, with your relationship with state government, a number of your submissions point to a bit of confusion and the need for an MOU to be signed to have things. I guess I am thinking of warnings, the emergency relief centres, the training of volunteers, where to access those warnings, the data sharing, getting a recovery officer and betterment funding. Is there any sort of plan in place that you can go to to get that direction, or is that something you would like to see developed?

The CHAIR: Sorry, do you want each of them to answer that?

Gaelle BROAD: I guess yes.

The CHAIR: If you could direct your question to who you want to answer, that would be helpful. Who wants to start?

Kellie MASSOURAS: I am happy to start.

Fiona STEVENS: I apologise; I did not introduce my team. I have my CEO Brett Luxford and manager of recovery Kellie Massouras.

Kellie MASSOURAS: Good morning. In Mitchell shire we have the municipal emergency management plan, which has a number of subplans that relate to each of the major risks within our shire. We also have a number of documents that run across our agency partnerships from that MEMPC. We also have internal documents that help guide us and give us a brief to and standard operating guidelines in order to respond. It does come back to the need for the incident control centre to be in place to help facilitate all of those plans and documents.

Gaelle BROAD: Okay. You certainly spoke to the incident control centres not being in your areas and not having that online access which would have really helped with that communication. But can you talk just briefly to one of your submissions? It mentioned the Queensland model and how it is quite different. I guess it enables the betterment funding.

Kellie MASSOURAS: I will just refer to our notes. I will not be a moment.

From what we have been able to look at from research across the states in relation to betterment, Queensland have changed the model considerably due to the number of incidents that they have had over the last few years. They are actively and proactively looking at making sure that infrastructure is in a better state before these incidents occur. That way we know that it will help the community recover quicker by having that access and egress and being able to communicate and connect with each other a lot more quickly. Particularly in relation to climate change, we know these events are going to happen more and more, and the more sustainable approach we can have to our infrastructure the better it will be.

Gaelle BROAD: That was definitely very clear across your submissions. I really appreciate that. It is just interesting that this event unfolded at the same time the government was going into caretaker mode with the state election. Then there is the Christmas break, and I know a lot of the team are based in Melbourne. Do you have any comment on that? Did that hinder the process at all?

Rachael FRAMPTON: Yes. Our submission spoke to that in particular. We had significant issues around gaining clarity around funding guidelines and requirements. There were then significant delays in actually getting money through to councils. And being such a small council with such a small ratepayer base, we do not have slush funds to delve into to try and get us through those periods, so we were really cognisant that anything we delivered needed to be paid for somewhere.

Our submission also spoke to how our community wanted our tips and our transfer stations open on the Saturday. We did not have staff to open them. We did not have an accessible route to get there. But they had all of their stuff in trailers out the front and we did not know whether there would be any waste levy fee charges or there would be any remuneration that was provided through the state at that early stage. While we understand everything happens very quickly and it was still unfolding in some municipalities, our community was well and truly ready to drop things off at the transfer station, which is fantastic on one side, but then we simply had to say, 'You need to just wait until we get some guidance.'

We were very fortunate to get a small amount of funding through the Council Flood Support Fund, but that did come a period of time after without any real guidance on how to use that. Being such a small shire, we wanted to make sure we utilised that money as best we could depending on the guidelines, because we did not want to waste it on something that potentially was going to be funded somewhere else.

The CHAIR: One last one, then we have got to move on, because there are six of us and 45 minutes left for this session.

Brett LUXFORD: Sorry, can I just add to that one a little bit? It was at the same time that Bushfire Recovery Victoria was transitioning to Emergency Recovery Victoria too, so there was that transition of not only caretaker provisions but also the change across to a new agency. Covering off on the point that our event had occurred and we were trying to get the recovery happening and the response happening when the event still had not occurred elsewhere, I think trying to deal with that from a state perspective across the multiple local government areas and the wide geographic area was a challenge. I think, as some of the presenters have said, we felt a little bit left behind.

Gaelle BROAD: Yes, okay.

Fiona STEVENS: May I just go back to one of your initial points, please? The clarity of roles and responsibilities and authorisation is critical in moving forward with this, because there was confusion. The other thing that goes with that is there has to be appropriate funding to make sure that they are trained to perform their respective roles and that they have the staffing and the ability and the equipment to do it. The example of the Red Cross having a legislative requirement for evacuations and yet they did not have the ability to perform that role – that is not a criticism of them, it is just that if we embed someone into this process, we have to know that they are able to perform that role. Thank you.

Gaelle BROAD: Thank you. My last question before we go around – planning was mentioned by a number of you, and the need for better investment in that and the mapping. I have heard from locals that trying to go through insurance and get evidence of that is very difficult. Hydrologists have been employed privately, and people cannot share information. Is there a need for a hydrologist to do a plan for an area to streamline that and make it easier? What are your thoughts?

Peter BAIN: Just some examples from us – a lot of private assets were lost. A lot of people in Murrindindi have access across small creeks, most of which is Crown land, and they have lost their private bridges. They are not included in any recovery arrangements, and there is now a state government issue with accessing them across Crown land, as an example. Now they are caught up with the fact that they cannot access their properties and they cannot rebuild their bridges. They are in this process, and we are trying to help them through that at the moment. But going back to the other point, within a week we were rebuilding lost bridges because we had 40 families stuck on the other side and they had no support. There was no-one from any state agency that was able to support them, so we had to pay for our contractors to do temporary works to give them access so that we could bring food and medicine to them. That is an example where councillors wore the costs of the process.

Brett LUXFORD: I think if we start down the line of a discussion around insurance, it will take us into a really challenging space.

Gaelle BROAD: There is another inquiry on that, so that is fine.

Melina BATH: There is a federal inquiry going on.

Brett LUXFORD: Is there? It is a really challenging space for everyone involved. We have got one person who received their insurance payout, and it may not be enough. Their next-door neighbour did not because of a different interpretation as to how the floodwaters came up – was it storm damage or was it terrestrial flood? It is a really challenging question.

The other question you raised about planning is a really interesting one. There are a number of flood studies that have been done, and trying to get them into the planning scheme is a really challenging piece of work. It takes councils anywhere from 18 months to two years to get a planning scheme amendment into the planning scheme, which comes at a significant cost. There are still a lot. I am not sure how many there are, but I know of two within our municipality that have been undertaken that have not made it into the planning scheme yet. And there are a number across the state. There is a real need for support from state government to get that up-to-date flood mapping into the planning scheme so that communities are aware.

Gaelle BROAD: Like a statewide approach?

Laura BINKS: Yes, definitely.

Brett LUXFORD: A statewide approach, yes.

Laura BINKS: And we have got the similar experience in Strathbogie. We do not have up-to-date flood mapping, so you are relying on data that is out of date. You have got this other stuff sitting there waiting to go in, but because it is not adopted there is this hesitation to use it as the correct data. Just going on from what Mayor Stevens was saying about the agencies and who is responsible – and you mentioned it, Gaelle, at the start – when we have a disaster of this scale, I mean, I contacted federal and state ministers trying to get support from the ADF because we were so impacted in this area. Normally we will help each other out, travel down the road and help our neighbours, but because of the broad impact we were so short on personnel to be able to step up and assist. We just kept being told, ‘No, you’re not significant enough to warrant getting the ADF’ – basically that they could go elsewhere. You just sort of feel like you get left out. So I think it is that sense of, when we have disasters of this scale: what is our response and how do we ensure that communities, be they small 40-household communities like we saw in Murrindindi and in Strathbogie – Kirwans Bridge is a classic example, completely isolated with the bridge and the road network, where we were boating out supplies to that community, council was, to ensure that people had supplies, because they were completely cut off and isolated. It is complex, and I think there is absolutely an opportunity for some better processes to be in.

The CHAIR: I might just ask a question. John, I was interested in your comments around flow gauges and telemetry. Can you just unpack it a little bit for us? Has there been a change to some of those things? Or has it always been difficult? I am talking historically. What is your experience about what might have been there in the past and what is there now? I know you said pretty clearly what you think needs to happen, but I am interested to see: has there been a change or have things been maintained or not maintained? What is the scenario that you are aware of there?

John WALSH: First off, overall it has been neglected for some time. Off the top of my head – one of the other speakers later who was there would be able to give you fine details and numbers – certainly in the areas of the Yea River there are gauges there that have not been working at times. There are no gauges on a couple of the other rivers. This was all brought out about eight years ago when the Murray–Darling Basin plan was first mooted. It was highlighted there that some of their plans would be dependent on having flow gauges and understanding the water that was coming down these tributaries, and they undertook at the time to install such gauges, but it has never happened. So I do not know whether the state was anticipating that the other authority would be doing it and so it has fallen through the cracks, but now we really need to start focusing on that and get the detail.

The CHAIR: You said that was part of the Murray–Darling Basin plan, was it, at the time?

John WALSH: Yes, at the time.

The CHAIR: Right, yes. And you just think that there has been some –

John WALSH: It is essential because their plan basically – not to the same extent – necessitates the flooding of areas along the Goulburn to create a surge further downstream to have overbank flows into wetlands. Now, of course we are dead against that. But the extent of flooding – they had no idea, because they did not know what was coming down the tributaries, which would make it even worse. So it was at that time they said they would put in meters to be able to get the proper data to understand what the impacts would be. As I say, it has not happened.

The CHAIR: It has not happened. Does anyone else want to supplement that?

Fiona STEVENS: I would just like to reiterate, if I could, that that is a very key thing for us as well, because our tributaries close to the township considerably added to our dilemma, and they are unmetered, so it is an unknown.

The CHAIR: And have they always been unmetered, or is it a similar situation to what is being talked about here, that there were things in the past that –

Fiona STEVENS: My understanding is: always unmetered.

The CHAIR: Always unmetered. Thank you. Laura, I just want to talk to you. I was listening to your discussion around preparedness and plans and those sorts of things. There is a bit of a theme through this inquiry. We are hearing that people are a little bit unprepared in terms of thinking that a flood can be just as damaging, if not worse, than a fire in a lot of respects.

Laura BINKS: Yes, absolutely.

The CHAIR: So are you finding that people were also grappling with the information that they were being told and their preparedness to actually get out early as well – so it was a bit like ‘I’m struggling to process what’s actually being told to me’? Then also, on the back of that, did people have their own individual plans to evacuate?

Laura BINKS: Yes, I think that is a really interesting point. From my experience and speaking to meteorologists at the BOM, there is almost like this different response to flood. Rain is not like smelling smoke in a fire. We do not have that same visceral response of ‘Gosh, I need to get moving. I really need to enact something.’ Rain happens regularly when we are not in a drought, so there is a different response to it. There is almost like, I do not know, just an acceptance, or it does not have the same sense of emergency that a fire has. I think it is a combination of our senses physically but also the work that we have done as a society to understand the impacts of this, and despite having seen what happened in northern New South Wales and Queensland previously there was still not that same sense of ‘Actually, this is really going to happen to me right now, right here, and we need to do it.’ Whilst staff worked really hard to get the message out along with the SES and the CFA in our region to have people understand ‘You could be impacted. You need to evacuate, and if you can’t evacuate then please don’t drive through floodwater’ – those sorts of problems.

Then there is also this, how would you describe it, almost touristic element of people wanting to go and check out the floodwater, which became really problematic in some of our townships as well – you know, if you have

got a four-wheel drive ute or something or you live a little bit further away from the impacted area. We had people driving in, skirting around our 'Road closed' signs and 'Road closed' signs thrown in ditches, and there was a bit of that interest or human element of just checking it out to see 'Is it really as bad as what they're telling us?' That was definitely a problem we had, and we know that that led to people getting stuck in floodwaters and the sort of impact that that had.

I was just talking to the head of our SES, Georgie, in Euroa after the event around 'Do we need to develop something like a storm and flood kit and plan?' – you know, 'Do you have a bunch of the sacks and sand that you could use to fill them, and do you know how to stack your bags so that you're actually doing it properly?' We had bunches of people trying to protect their assets and their homes but then not stacking them correctly in that brick stack or not putting up the plastic. In the end they thought they had done it right, but they had not. I think there is absolutely an opportunity for some more work in that area – you know, simple things like the sewerage and toilet systems. You do not think about these things unless you have experienced them.

The CHAIR: And that is an important point. I think when floodwaters rise there are horrible, revolting things that get mixed in with the floodwater, and you really do not want to be in it at all. You want to avoid it at all costs. But also do you think people are not appreciating the risks? Even though you might be able to stay in your home, you might get cut off for a number of weeks, and unless you have got a generator perhaps to provide you with electricity, heating, clean water or food, you are really going to be in trouble.

Laura BINKS: Medication is another.

The CHAIR: Medication. So were people appreciating those kinds of forward plans or not, and how long did the water take to recede?

Laura BINKS: Some were and some were not. Because we are in that ranges-to-flatlands area, we had a mix. We had people I know that could not get out of their home not because of floodwater but because their road was washed out from the really heavy rain and they did not have a four-wheel drive. They live on a dirt road. It is not a requirement that you have a four-wheel drive to live on a dirt road.

The CHAIR: So they are stuck.

Laura BINKS: They are stuck, yes. Down to Kirwans Bridge, one of the more isolated communities, and also homes if you are on farmland that is in those flood plain areas, we were certainly doing the best we could to deliver to people that we knew were isolated. But then again it is this data-sharing thing, right, so how do you know who are the people that need the support? And just a few months –

The CHAIR: And I think that comes back to having an overarching plan, but again these are catastrophic flood events. I just want to ask either of your organisations if you have got anything you could supplement on that particular question.

Kellie MASSOURAS: I would like to add something, please. Particularly in relation to this post-COVID-19 world that we are living in, the communities are message-fatigued, so when the messages are going out they are not necessarily understanding. Coupled with economic crisis in their environments – and for Seymour it is a vulnerable community to start with – it is extra noise in what is happening in their lives for that day. Plus there is increased reliance on digital messaging as well. We know that in those rural communities that do not have TikTok or digital access it is more difficult for people to do that. Plus there are high rates of digital illiteracy in our communities as well. So it is going back to the old systems of connecting the community and that messaging, such as councils have.

The CHAIR: Perhaps radio as well.

Kellie MASSOURAS: Yes.

The CHAIR: Did you want to add anything there?

John WALSH: Well, there is also the fact that there seems to be a divide between people who have come into the area more recently and those that have been there for some time. We had the classic case where a few farmers advised their whole community along the Goulburn in the Whanregarwen area that things were looking bad: 'Get your cattle to higher ground.' Because it had not come from an official source and was not something

that they could see on a piece of paper or get through social media but had come via almost old-fashioned email, quite a few of them took no notice of it, because they said they had not got any warning from Goulburn–Murray Water. Yes, they knew rain was coming, but, you know: ‘Everything’s fine.’ They were the ones who on the night of the 14th were trying to swim cattle out and do all sorts of weird and wonderful things just to survive.

The CHAIR: Right. And just one quick question for each of you, because I know my colleagues want to ask other questions and we are going to run out of time. For each of you, just very quickly: do you think the community has an expectation that local councils play more of a role in these sorts of events? Whether that is right or wrong is neither here nor there, but I am hearing really interesting stories and impressive stories of councils stepping up and really providing a lot of help and response. Do you all think that that is effectively what is happening, that people have an expectation that councils play more of a role in these events? We will start with, perhaps, Strathbogrie.

Laura BINKS: I would say, for the lack of a more coordinated response, yes. Whether that is, like you said, right or wrong, I think there is definitely a role for council to play. But I think what becomes really challenging is understanding that a flood event or a storm event is so different from a fire. There was real confusion as to who was the lead agency. We were not making decisions on our network based on our employees, we were being –

The CHAIR: Role clarity is kind of a separate thing and needs to be resolved, but certainly there is a role to play.

Laura BINKS: Yes, absolutely. There is absolutely a role to play, but it is about having that support, especially when we have an event of this scale.

The CHAIR: That is right. Fiona or Kellie?

Fiona STEVENS: I think it is education that we need to look at. We are part of the community. We are the closest government to our community, so they look to us to answer all their problems. and we would gladly like to be able to do that. But yes, I think it is something we need to look at so that they have an understanding of what we can actually assist them with and then direct them to the areas that they need if it is beyond our influence.

The CHAIR: That clarity.

Fiona STEVENS: Yes.

Brett LUXFORD: Sorry, can I just add to the Mayor’s comment there. I think there is an expectation that councils are stepping up to play a key role in these emergency events. Are we actually resourced enough to actually do that? I think if you look at our relief centre, which was in our basketball stadium, which is connected to our gym, which is connected to our sporting complex, we had to have lifeguards on duty 24 hours a day so that people could go in and use the toilet, just because the toilet is within the gym, within the pool area, and is a facility that people pay a membership for to go to the gym. So we are not really often resourced enough to deal with those expectations that are coming through as well.

John WALSH: I would reiterate that. The community expectation is that when things go wrong, despite all the abuse otherwise, they come straight to council to find out what is going on. They will know that the SES is there to help individuals, but when they are looking at an area-wide problem: what is the council doing?

The CHAIR: They will come to you, yes.

John WALSH: And that is the first port of call. Then we start directing them to where things are.

The CHAIR: Great, thank you. I am sorry, I will have to go to my colleagues now. Ms Tyrrell – question.

Rikkie-Lee TYRRELL: Yes. You talked about waste before. Did you take that into consideration before the floods came? And going on from that, have you had to employ more people to deal with the influx of waste since, and how long is that going to take?

Rachael FRAMPTON: We actually reallocated people. We do not have the luxury of employing extras necessarily, so we actually allocated some staff to our transfer stations, but there is also a high level of regulation around who can and cannot work at transfer stations. So we actually tried to increase our existing staff hours to cater for that need, but our issue is then how we resource that ongoing. We are still in a position where this week I received another inquiry in regard to flood waste, and we cannot actually provide any support for that. They have missed the boat, so to speak, because the waiver finished a couple of months ago.

It is challenging, and it is challenging to do that off the bat. I think in terms of pre thinking, we knew that there would be an increase in flood waste, but we were actually focusing then on how we were actually going to reopen them because all the roads leading to them were closed. We were trying to balance up all of those things to potentially provide a service as quickly as we could. We actually only operate our transfer stations on set days. We have actually got a number of them across the municipality, so it was how we can share our resources out to all the flood-affected communities in an equitable way as well.

Rikkie-Lee TYRRELL: Thank you.

Amanda TINGAY: Just to add onto that, as the Mayor explained earlier, in our community the flood event was quite quick. You know, we peaked at the sevens out at Hughes Creek, and then 5 hours later the water had receded so community was ready to step into action for recovery. As soon as we went to our community recovery meeting, it was like, 'Where's the waste going to go?' And we were waiting for confirmation from the state about what money and what support there would be, and I think with the caretaker period, that obviously slowed things down. If that could have come more quickly and we could have given our community answers more quickly, it would have taken away some of that angst that we were seeing on the ground, because our community were jumping into action. They were getting hard rubbish out ready to be collected, but it was like, 'What's the process going to be?'

Rachael FRAMPTON: Just on that, there was also a challenge with – I know that the state stepped in and provided a service through Johns Lyng; however, there were a number of limitations regarding that service, in that they could not actually go onto anyone's property. And if you are a rural property, your house might be 2 kilometres down the road, so they had to figure out a way to move all of their waste to the kerbside. We do not have kerbsides in a lot of our areas, either, where they could safely manoeuvre their vehicles, so we were also left with gaps in the service provision that the state thought was a great solution but practically on the ground did not quite work like that.

Brett LUXFORD: From our perspective – I think our colleagues have touched on a fair bit – I will call out to the Seymour Football Netball Club in this space, who really stepped in very early and coordinated their football players and the local tradespeople with trucks to pick up the waste. The challenge was, where do they take it? I think, as the Chair indicated, a lot of the waste is waste that is contaminated, significantly contaminated with a whole range of different things and maybe a mix of asbestos – a whole range of things that are in that – and we were lucky at our Seymour resource recovery centre at that stage we had a bit of a hard stand area where it could all be dumped until we could then understand from the state what the arrangements were for tipping. That went on for a significant period of time, and I think, similar to Strathbogie, we had to open our resource recovery centre on a number of days, and when we did not have staff, we had to bring staff in or reallocate them to allow that service to happen until the state's program kicked in with Johns Lyng.

Fiona STEVENS: I think the other thing is the community saw it as an urgency to start cleaning up, and we are bound by red tape. The community were extremely distressed and frustrated, saying 'Why aren't the council doing this? Why aren't the council acting quicker?' But as was mentioned, our tremendous community stepped up and started. But is not their role and responsibility, and this goes back to what we are talking about, about who is accountable for what. They can be a partnership with us, by all means, in performing that role, but it fell on them because we were not able to act quickly enough. Eventually we all came to the table together and worked well, but without them we would have been delayed even further.

Kellie MASSOURAS: It is also worth noting that the incident control centre, if we had had it activated locally, we could have fed the urgent need around waste up through that and the response could have been much quicker.

Peter BAIN: From Murrindindi's point of view, we had zero support from the state contractors, so we ended up collecting all of the waste ourselves. We operate our own landfill and we still have licensed cells leftover from the 2009 bushfires. So we were able to take all that rubbish and waste and contaminated material and process it ourselves, but the issue was that is a fairly expensive burden on us and our community, and we did not really recover that cost directly. We bore all of that. For the same reason the community would say, 'Well, I can't have this material sitting out there in front of my house for three weeks. You need to do something about it.' You know, vermin and all sorts of things were happening, and we were able to process it. We are fortunate in that we have our own landfill.

The CHAIR: Ms Lovell.

Wendy LOVELL: I am interested in the incident control centre. Certainly it is a bit of a theme that has come through at a number of the hearings that not having a localised incident control centre was detrimental to those areas. We certainly heard that from Rochester and Echuca. Although we heard evidence in Echuca also that an incident control centre should not be in the middle of an emergency; it has to be removed from the emergency. Again here we hear from three councils that not having a localised incident control centre limited your ability. Yesterday we heard from Shepparton that having the incident control centre in Shepparton was very advantageous to them, and they were able to elevate things very quickly.

The problem we have is the same problem we have with our SES volunteers. Their homes are being inundated at the same time as they are trying to help the community. Council staff are having homes inundated – you are trying to step up. We also have most of our catchment management authority and Goulburn–Murray Water staff in the incident control centre, and they all live in flood-affected areas as well. So we have limited resources. Also people need to be able to get home. You had Goulburn–Murray Water staff and Goulburn Broken catchment staff down here. They would not have been able to get home once the floods moved on to Shepparton. But the nature of floods is they move on, so they were here, and then everyone started planning for Shepparton. As soon as they had hit Shepparton, Shepparton was forgotten; it was all about Echuca. That was certainly the experience we had with the media as well. I am just wondering how you feel incident control centres could be better done, given that we do have those limited resources to move staff around at that time and limited staff available as well. I was devastated to hear from one of you that there was no ability for you to remotely link in via Teams or something to briefings –

The CHAIR: I think perhaps we are going to run short of time. We need a question, please.

Wendy LOVELL: I am just interested in hearing how you think they could be managed.

John WALSH: I will kick off on that one. Basically, the whole idea of an ICC is good. I recognise not everyone is going to have an ICC sitting on their back doorstep; it is going to be remote. But the key to it is to have sufficient communications to support it, and to have – and they try to – a level of local knowledge within the ICC. If that local knowledge, as did happen with us because of the floods, cannot get there, then it becomes even more important to have proper communication and support, because in this day and age, whilst it is not perfect, we have got Teams, we have got Zoom or whatever. We know how to use that now, and the ICC should have that as standard equipment. The one that was set up did not, and that led to increasing the problem.

Fiona STEVENS: I would like to reiterate those comments. We had the capability to establish an ICC in Seymour. The CFA headquarters has the capacity to do it. Maybe if that had been set up while we were at the early stages, that would have been of benefit to our neighbours as well, because we were all in it together. Murrindindi had already been hit, we were being hit and Strathbogie were being hit, so we would have that local knowledge and the knowledge of the resources and what was required. Shepparton was in a completely different stage of this whole experience. They were preparing for the flood while we were responding to the flood, so there were options available. And as the Mayor for Murrindindi has said, wherever it is set up, it must have the capabilities for remote access. That is key – and they did not.

Rachael FRAMPTON: Yes, I just want to echo that, absolutely. We were informed that there would be a remote ICC, and it never eventuated. For many of us our roads were completely cut off, and had we had a remote ability, we could have then tuned into BOM briefings. In the ICC there is usually a series of at least 10 to 12 meetings that occur every single day, right from a morning briefing, lunch et cetera, BOM at 1 o'clock.

We were not party to those conversations at all. There were no invitations going out for those, and there was a lack of understanding in who was actually controlling those, so for us that was really disappointing.

Peter BAIN: I should say that in Murrindindi in Alexandra we have a large ICC, which is run by forest fire management. It is really for bushfires, but it is fully equipped and it has all of the things. It is the same here in Seymour; there is a fully equipped facility. So it was a management decision of the controllers, which is SES, to locate it in Shepparton. We have staff that live in Mitchell, so it is not an issue for us to sort of say, 'Hey, can you go to Seymour because we need to keep contact?' It is a bit difficult to send people to Shepparton.

Wendy LOVELL: Just a second question, and this is particularly to Murrindindi, about your locality to the Eildon Dam and the difference in the Eildon Dam these days to what it used to be when we used to store water for irrigation and a lot of it was used every year, creating airspace: the legislation requires Goulburn–Murray Water to have the dam close to capacity by 1 October, and there is no requirement in legislation for flood mitigation. What are your recommendations for perhaps alterations to the management of the dam and the legislation going forward given that the dam now stores significant environmental water as well as irrigation water?

John WALSH: Yes, it is a very complex issue, we are well aware of that. But fundamentally we need to be more flexible on the rules that are there to allow the operators to properly assess the current conditions. Having had three years of high rainfall and people not using their full allocations for irrigation and being allowed to carry them over – which is, again, an interesting concept – has meant that there are more years when the lake is going to be quite near the top. It means then that there is greater risk that a recurrence of this type of event is going to occur. It is a classic case where, in order to provide a lower risk elsewhere – that is, have water available immediately whenever one wants it – the risk is being transferred to a group that gets no benefit from that arrangement, and so the risk is coming back on the local communities.

Again, there seems to be a reluctance because we get into the wonderful world of water being a commodity and the cost of changing agreements and contracts, but when you look at that cost compared to the cost we are now facing as a community right across northern Victoria, I think it needs to be looked at far more closely. Part of the modelling that is going on at the moment is to look at what level we should have it at. At the moment the aim is to get it to 100 per cent by October, although in the past year it was November and I think this year they are still looking at November because of the status of the rainfall. But what level should we get under what weather circumstances? The initial feeling was we should try to get an airspace so that they only aim for 90 per cent, but it might be lower, it may be tolerable or a little bit higher – that is what the modelling is going to show. I know this year there was a great reliance – and it may prove okay – on the fact that we are coming into a drier period, an El Niño, and consequently we will not get the rainfall that we got last year from here on in. However, history shows back in 1993 in an El Niño year there were sudden downpours and we got flooded then, so it is a matter of looking at the risks right throughout the whole system and then saying, 'Well, given our experience, given it's more likely under climate change for these things to be more frequent, then perhaps we should be looking through the legislation to give flexibility and a lower target at this time of year.' Out of that will come some costs, but I think that cost would be way less than what we are facing now and are likely to face in the future.

The CHAIR: Ms Bath.

Melina BATH: Thank you. I have many questions and little time, so we will see how we run, folks. Thank you very much for being here and for your work in your communities. I remember you said before, Laura, that emergency management briefings were ad hoc. A quick question to all of you: have you had or been offered any sort of Melbourne-based multi-agency EMV or SES briefings so far, post the floods?

Rachael FRAMPTON: A debrief?

Melina BATH: Yes. So have you had a debrief?

Rachael FRAMPTON: That is an ongoing issue that we have been raising through our Hume REMP – that agencies felt there was a lack of debriefing. As the SES are the lead agency, they are responsible for the coordination of localised debriefing and then potentially bringing that together. I think they felt that this inquiry was happening, so they did not want to create a dual process. However, we are saying 12 months after the event that we still have not had an opportunity –

Melina BATH: This process operates separately to that process.

Rachael FRAMPTON: Correct – to come together is not good enough. So we have been pushing that as agencies, and in particular I know local councils also felt hard done by when there was a review done at a pre-season preparedness briefing for the fire season this year in January; it was pushed so late because it was meant to occur when the floods hit. They had all agencies and various stakeholders represented except for local government, which we felt was a failing of an opportunity –

Melina BATH: Odd in the extreme.

Rachael FRAMPTON: to learn.

Melina BATH: Thank you. Thank you very much. I do not want to cut you off. Yes, go on.

Kellie MASSOURAS: Can I also just ask: we were offered and attended almost like an event overview from the Bureau of Meteorology, the Goulburn Broken Catchment Management Authority and Goulburn–Murray in regard to –

Melina BATH: Not SES or EMV?

Kellie MASSOURAS: And SES as well. But it was not an after-action review, it was purely a discussion on the event as it occurred.

Melina BATH: Okay. Define the difference there. Murrindindi?

Peter BAIN: Yes, we attended the same event.

Melina BATH: Thank you. The next question is, and this is to Mitchell – and thank you all for your submissions and your recommendations; they are really good – in relation to, going back a little bit, the Seymour flood levee bank project. We had a bit of a wander around, Wendy, Gaelle and I, and Annabelle Cleeland, the local member, and chatted to the locals. It was a stage 1 project, I think, going back a few years. There was some federal and state government funding on the table, and I think council may have helped with \$3 million as well. I understand from talking to the locals that that was not implemented – that is, the flood levee banks around the town were not created. Can you explain why? This is not a gotcha moment at all, it is just to seek to understand what the feeling was – if you had any advice as to why that did not work. And would you be prepared to revisit it in the future? Is that something in terms of flood mitigation?

Fiona STEVENS: In a couple of minutes – I do not know how we can do justice to this.

Melina BATH: That is right. You can provide an extended answer if you like.

Fiona STEVENS: We do have reports and information we are more than happy to provide. I think the key thing to this was that that conversation took place over a number of years, and we were in a moving world during that time period – climatic changes, all sorts of changes, economic changes for the shire et cetera. But extensive research was done into that particular matter. Many reports were called for, because we are not experts on floods, we are not experts on flood mitigation. The problem was that some of the information that came over that time period we were challenging because the locals were telling us one thing and the experts were telling us another thing. So there was a lot more information that was called upon, and this is what I mean – it was an evolving process. There was a major creek, Whiteheads Creek, that was not even considered initially, which is a relevant tributary to this whole discussion.

Cutting seven years of investigation, almost, into a very short moment, council decided with all of the information that was provided to them not to proceed with this project. Our report, which was made public to the community on 29 June 2020, speaks to a number of attachments and reports that we considered at that time, and the recommendation of the staff at that time was that we cease to pursue future planning, development and delivery of the Seymour flood levee project given the scale, complexity and risks involved in the delivery of the Seymour flood levee project. It instructs the acting CEO to terminate all funding agreements between council and Victorian state government and federal government relating to the planning, design, acquisition of land and construction of the flood levee project and officers to prepare a report outlining the implications for the

Seymour structure plan associated with this resolution and publicly advise the community of this resolution. So that was when the decision was made, and there are many, many reasons as to why.

Just to explain the funding, there was an amount of money that was provided by state and federal. The figure back at the time was just over \$5 million – \$5.5 million. Fourteen-plus million dollars had to be found because the total project, even back then – and these figures are speaking to 2019 – was a \$20 million project, and that did not include the ongoing life of the project: maintenance et cetera, et cetera. I am happy to give more information on that particular one.

Melina BATH: Thank you; that would be great. When you think about future floods and mitigation, what is that process and would you revisit it? It sounds like it is a bit of a no at this point.

Fiona STEVENS: Yes. There was significant risk, which is spoken to in the reports as well, and I think you will see that there are certain issues with levees throughout even this experience.

Melina BATH: We are learning that from people as well. Thank you. Going to Laura, you mentioned of course that you want roads and road maintenance. We have heard that before, very much so. Disaster relief recovery grants – we also heard in Echuca from the councils in that capacity that it is very onerous to apply. Is that your experience as well? Have you got a good news story, or is it fairly challenging for you and your team?

Laura BINKS: Yes, it is challenging. I would say it is additionally challenging for a shire the size of Strathbogie just given that really tight budget we run. We had to pull a whole lot of our capital works projects just to be able to respond to the flood. Then we are hoping to get funding for these things, and for a lot of those things we may get 100 per cent, we may not. We might get 20; we might get 50. It is a massive adjustment, and that is a really challenging thing to manage at our scale. We do know that the process is onerous. We have got over 2500 kilometres of road network and 521 bridges and culverts. We have got lots of creeks and rivers and little waterways in our network. If they are requiring before-event photos of these things, we do not have them. There is no way. So it is challenging.

Melina BATH: So a message via us to government? We are going to send a message to government. What do you want? Same with Murrindindi – you might have one too.

Laura BINKS: We need to get more practical and simplify, I think, that process. We understand it is public money and there needs to be a level of rigour applied to it, but it also has to be reasonable.

Melina BATH: You deal with public money all the time.

Laura BINKS: We do, yes. Applying for state and federal money sometimes feels like we are trying to pull one over you, and that is not the case. We are just trying to get the best outcome for our communities.

Peter BAIN: The state grant, the initial one, has been the only relief that we have had, and we have not received any federal. Even though we have got lots of packages of work in there, that has not come through yet. That has been the best thing, to not tie it up so we can do those immediate works. That has been of great benefit to us initially, because it takes some time, as you can see. We have been working on this for many months to try to dot all the i's and cross all the t's and get knocked back for \$120 worth of things.

The CHAIR: Dr Ratnam.

Samantha RATNAM: Firstly, thank you all for your excellent submissions, being the support system that you are for your communities and really great evidence today. Just picking up a theme that has emerged through both your written and your verbal submissions today, you have all highlighted issues with communication and coordination and sometimes with warning systems as well. I am interested in whether you think the model is right and just was not implemented as well as it could have been or you think the model of that coordination, communication, early warning and preparation needs a rethink. Is it the model, or is it the implementation?

Kellie MASSOURAS: I would like to start off with that one. The model is very robust, but the way it was actioned and our ability to roll it out according to plan was a challenge.

Laura BINKS: And I would say for a shire of our size, resourcing was a huge challenge. We had all our executive team, many other managers and all sorts of people working around the clock just to be able to keep up with the demand in that sort of environment.

Samantha RATNAM: Okay, that is useful to know. Thank you.

John WALSH: As I said before, I think the model is fine, but it is the resourcing and the inherent lack of communications to keep the model working together.

Laura BINKS: And it is the opportunity for that flexibility, being able to have that remote access to the ICC. We cannot all travel to Shepparton or we cannot have a staff member there that is providing that feedback, just because we have only got 125 staff members.

Peter BAIN: Plus the model relies a lot on the expertise of the other agencies, so the BOM putting in their information. If the BOM is blind to what is actually happening because they do not have the rain gauges, they cannot see it, so it is not an issue, remotely, even though I am standing up to my knees in water and saying, 'I think we need some resources here.' That is the issue. It is not backed up by the technology.

Samantha RATNAM: Thank you. That is really useful to know, because it will help us home in, in our subsequent hearings when we are talking to government agencies as well, on what improvements can be made. Just because we are running out of time I will not ask another question, but once again thank you for your submissions. I think they have really highlighted the interplay of more frequent climate change disasters, disadvantage that might be already within communities, institutional access to resources and how all of that needs to be considered with the future that we are confronting, so thank you very much.

The CHAIR: All right. Thank you all very much for coming and presenting your evidence to us today. We really very much appreciate you coming in and making the time to speak to us, so thank you.

Witnesses withdrew.